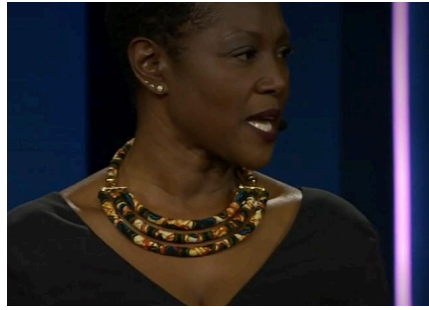




Why Black Girls are Targeted For Punishment at School and How to Change That

Monique Morris

When I was in the sixth grade, I got into a fight at school. It wasn't the first time I'd been in a fight, but it was the first time one happened at school. It was with a boy who was about a foot taller than me, who was physically stronger than me and who'd been taunting me for weeks. One day in PE, he stepped on my shoe and refused to apologize. So, filled with anger, I grabbed him and I threw him to the ground. I'd had some previous judo training.

00:38 Our fight lasted less than two minutes, but it was a perfect reflection of the hurricane that was building inside of me as a young survivor of sexual assault and as a girl who was grappling with abandonment and exposure to violence in other spaces in my life. I was fighting him, but I was also fighting the men and boys that had assaulted my body and the culture that told me I had to be silent about it. A teacher broke up the fight and my principal called me in her office. But she didn't say, "Monique, what's wrong with you?" She gave me a moment to collect my breath and asked, "What happened?"

01:17 The educators working with me led with empathy. They knew me. They knew I loved to read, they knew I loved to draw, they knew I adored Prince. And they used that information to help me understand why my actions, and those of my classmate, were disruptive to the learning community they were leading. They didn't place me on suspension; they didn't call the police. My fight didn't keep me from going to school the next day. It didn't keep me from graduating; it didn't keep me from teaching.

01:51 But unfortunately, that's not a story that's shared by many black girls in the US and around the world today. We're living through a crisis in which black girls are being disproportionately pushed away from schools --- not because of an imminent threat they pose to the safety of a school, but because they're often experiencing schools as locations for punishment and marginalization. That's something that I hear from black girls around the country. But it's not insurmountable. We can shift this narrative.

02:22 Let's start with some data. According to a National Black Women's Justice Institute analysis of civil rights data collected by the US Department of Education, black girls are the only group of girls who are overrepresented along the entire continuum of discipline in schools. Black girls are the only group of girls who are overrepresented all along the way. Black girls are seven times more likely than their white counterparts to experience one or more out-of-school suspensions and they're nearly three times more likely than their white and Latinx counterparts to be referred to the juvenile court.

03:08 A study found that people perceive black girls to need less nurturing, less protection, to know more about sex and to be more independent than their white peers. The study also found that the perception disparity begins when girls are as young as five years old. And that this perception and the disparity increases over time and peaks when girls are between the ages of 10 and 14. Believing that a girl is older than she is can lead to harsher treatment, immediate censure when she makes a mistake and victim blaming when she's harmed. It can also lead a girl to think that something is wrong with her, rather than the conditions in which she finds herself.

04:14 Black girls are routinely seen as too loud, too aggressive, too angry, too visible. Qualities that are often measured in relation to nonblack girls and which don't take into consideration what's going on in this girl's life or her cultural norms. And it's not just in the US. In South Africa, black girls at the Pretoria Girls High School were discouraged from attending school with their hair in its natural state, without chemical processing.

06:28 We should be building out policies and practices that keep girls connected to their learning, rather than pushing them away from it. It's one of the reasons I like to say that education is freedom work. When girls feel safe, they can learn. When they don't feel safe, they fight, they protest, they argue, they flee, they freeze. When schools become locations for healing, they can also become locations for learning.

07:30 So what does this mean for a school to become a location for healing? Well, for one thing, it means that we have to immediately discontinue the policies and practices that target black girls for their hairstyles or dress.

07:47 Let's focus on how and what a girl learns rather than policing her body in ways that facilitate rape culture or punish children for the conditions in which they were born. This is where parents and the community of concerned adults can enter this work. Start a conversation with the school and encourage them to address their dress code and other conduct-related policies as a collaborative project, with parents and students, so as to intentionally avoid bias and discrimination. Volunteer at a school and establish culturally competent and gender responsive discussion groups with black girls, Latinas, indigenous girls

and other students who experience marginalization in schools to give them a safe space to process their identities and experiences in schools.

09:10 The Columbus City Prep School for Girls in Columbus, Ohio, is an example of this. They became an example the moment their principal declared that they were no longer going to punish girls for having "a bad attitude." In addition to building -- At this school, they're trying to respond to a girl's adverse childhood experiences rather than ignore them. They bring them in closer; they don't push them away. Girls are arriving at school increasingly ready to learn because they know the teachers there care about them. That matters.

11:21 Our schools should be places where we respond to our most vulnerable girls as essential to the creation of a positive school culture. We should be able to support her intellectual and social-emotional well-being whether her shorts reach her knees or stop mid-thigh or higher. If we commit to this notion of education as freedom work, we can shift educational conditions so that no girl, even the most vulnerable among us, will get pushed out of school. And that's a win for all of us.