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## Can You Hear Us Now? Engaging Young African American Voices in Urban Communities and Schools

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CAN YOU HEAR US NOW?  
ENGAGING YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN  
VOICES IN URBAN COMMUNITIES  
AND SCHOOLS

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**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study will examine the impact of zero tolerance policies and school discipline practices on the educational experience of African American students, with a concentration on students who reside in urban communities. The objective of this study is to engage the perspectives of African American students about the impact of school discipline on their educational experiences. This study will examine factors that contribute to African American students entering the “school-to-prison pipeline,” and explore the role that suspensions and expulsions play in increasing the likelihood of students entering the juvenile justice system. The data collected in this study will identify the resources students believe should be available in their communities to support their future success. The data from this study will be used to analyze educational experiences and to discover effective intervention practices to attenuate the school-to-prison pipeline.

*Keywords:* African-American, youth, student engagement, urban communities, community involvement, discrimination, critical civic praxis, *Rethink Discipline Legislation*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Does it take a village to raise a child? This traditional African proverb endorses the ideology of an entire community working collaboratively to provide support and garner the necessary resources to assist youth in reaching their aspirations. It is critical, however, to assess the practices of the village that raises the child. Research suggests that it is paramount to consider the role communities play in the educational trajectories of African American youth, with special consideration to those who reside in communities with diminished or absent resources. Indeed, community resources such as church affiliations are pertinent when exploring what resources may be available to support students in urban settings (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Numerous factors may contribute to the probability of African American youth entering the criminal justice system, as opposed to completing secondary studies and attaining admission to a post-secondary institution.

This qualitative study examines risk factors associated with an increased likelihood of African American students entering the school-to-prison pipeline, such as disciplinary policies in K-12 public schools, lower teacher expectations, lack of quality instruction, limited involvement in school settings from residents in the community, and limited access to community resources. These combined risk factors negatively impact the future of African American youth. The use of excessive suspensions and expulsions early in their education and the disproportionate rate of punishment in schools for minor infractions drastically increase their odds of entering the juvenile justice system. To address this reality, this study proposes an exploration of the resources and support systems available to youth. Through the engagement of youth voices that were barred from K-12 public schools, their perspectives will offer an in-depth view of zero tolerance policies and other disciplinary practices that impact the lives of students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA) of 1994 was written to promote safer school environments through the prohibition of

students carrying weapons in schools and on school grounds (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2016). Under the GFSA, students found with firearms were subject to automatic expulsion, leading to difficult consequences for those who were denied an education. The fact that incarceration is a much more common experience for African American youth than for white youth poses a catastrophic threat to the African American community. Research suggests that there is a demand for African American men in the prison industry, as shown by the predicted number of inmate beds, based on the evaluation of student behavior by the age of four (Barbarin, 2010). This leads Barbarin (2010) to assert, “[t]he prison industry thrives on a steady supply of African American males, who account for 10% of all youth, but 60% of incarcerated youth under the age of 18” (p.1).

The process of many African American youth entering the criminal justice system is described as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” This phrase describes how students, primarily students of color, are deliberately funneled into the prison industry through a series of practices that begin early in their education, through the overuse of discipline in schools. As a result, there are disproportionate numbers of students behind bars as opposed to behind desks; for the African American community, this is extremely problematic.

Research also shows that African American students have been highly represented in the school-to-prison pipeline and constitute the predominate race in incarceration facilities, as compared to other racial groups. The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (2016) reports, “[n]ationwide, African-Americans represent 26% of juvenile arrests, 44% of youth who are detained, 46% of the youth who are judicially waived to criminal court, and 58% of the youth admitted to state prisons” (p.1). This alarming statistic reveals the stark reality that threatens the future of many African Americans, who may be predisposed to a life that leads to destruction, incarceration, and hopelessness.

With excessive suspensions and expulsions early in education, African American student needs often go unaddressed, and the overuse of punishment for infractions that could have been resolved by alternative methods are often left unexplored.

This raises the question of whether African American students are truly afforded an equal opportunity to receive a quality education. There are stark differences between races in the number of suspensions and expulsions, and how discipline is applied. It is a much more common experience for minority youth, including those with disabilities, to be barred from schools and/or arrested, as opposed to Caucasian youth who commit similar infractions and are disciplined far less stringently (ACLU, 2015). Common infractions for which many African American students may be punished include offenses such as attending school out of uniform, and minor acts of insubordination (Anderson, 2015).

Promising new legislation in the State of Michigan, titled the *Rethink Discipline Legislation*, goes into effect August 1, 2017, and encourages the use of “restorative practices” in K-12 schools, with suspensions and expulsions serving as a final resort for students (Student Advocacy Center, 2016). Under the guidelines of the *Rethink Discipline Legislation*, factors such as student age, disciplinary history, and disability must be considered before a student is suspended or expelled from school (Student Advocacy Center, 2016). This is an important initiative, as administrators are encouraged to thoroughly investigate the charges and the student’s history before punishment is applied. The objective of the *Rethink Discipline Legislation* is to reduce the frequency of suspensions and expulsions in K-12 schools.

### ***Education Implications***

Despite the existence of research and the general awareness of the challenges faced by many African American youth, solutions to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline have been few. Studies report an increase in the factors that exacerbate student misbehavior, such as a lack of early literacy, lack of quality preschool settings, low teacher expectations, and poor curriculum. These factors increase the odds of African American youth entering the juvenile justice system, rather than succeeding in secondary and post-secondary institutions (Rashid, 2009). These factors must be considered when examining which school practices, policies, and beliefs negatively impact the quality of education for the African American youth who are most at risk. It is also important to consider the various

economic and discriminatory experiences African American youth may encounter; a specialized alternative to traditional education may be more suitable for such students, rather than standardized classroom instruction (Rashid, 2009).

It should be recognized that no two students are identical academically. A recognition of the unique learning styles and areas of strengths and weaknesses among students is imperative. Unfortunately, a personalized approach to education is rarely available to most students. The failure to develop a “group specific” instructional model that reflects the cultural values and socio-economic challenges faced by African American students early in their education threatens their educational success. In addition, students are often keenly aware of the educational conditions they are subjected to, which might result in their increased feelings of vulnerability and hopelessness.

Research shows that African American high school students are displeased with the lack of cultural discernment displayed by educators in their schools (Baiyee et al., 2013). Instances in which students felt unsupported subsequently led to an unenthusiastic attitude towards education, accompanied by feelings of exclusion. Some African American students felt disenfranchised, compounding their feelings of frustration and uncertainty, due to seemingly unjust discipline policies.

### ***Zero Tolerance Policy Implications***

The adoption of zero tolerance policies marked a sweeping shift in educational policies across the country. Zero tolerance policies, along with the enactment of the 1994 Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA), have resulted in an increase in students being barred from schools at alarming rates. Despite the overarching goal of zero-tolerance policies and the GFSA to create safer school environments through mandatory expulsions for weapon and drug violations, students of color have been adversely impacted, resulting in their being suspended and expelled at disproportionate rates.

Though many educators utilize zero tolerance policies to justify excessive suspensions, these policies and practices have not demonstrated any substantial improvement in school safety. The detrimental impact of excessively suspending students is often

disregarded, and the fact that zero tolerance policies can be viewed as the preface to a life of incarceration for many African American youth is ignored. Rudd (2014) states, “[a] 2009–2010 survey of 72,000 schools (kindergarten through high school) shows that while Black students made up only 18% of those enrolled in the schools sampled, they accounted for 35% of those suspended at least once, while 46% of those suspended more than once represent 39% of all expulsions” (p. 1). Despite African American youth accounting for a small percentage of students enrolled in K-12 schools, they have been shown to have the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions among any racial group.

Upon examining age groups, pre-school children—and in particular, African American students—are significantly impacted by the application of harsh disciplinary policies, and are suspended at soaring rates. Klein (2016) states, “[s]uspensions are disproportionately handed to black preschoolers, who are 3.6 times more likely than white children to receive out-of-school suspensions, according to the Civil Rights Data Collection” (p.1). A racial factor is present in school discipline, putting African American students at a disadvantage. With a path of suspensions trailing a student throughout their entire K-12 experience, they are deprived of quality instruction, which often leaves them unprepared for higher education.

The impact of zero tolerance policies also differs by gender. Research has shown a surprising difference in the experiences of African American boys and girls in urban communities. While it is much more common for African American boys to encounter racism in everyday occurrences than African American girls (Cooper, Brown, Metzger, Clinton, & Guthrie, 2012), evidence suggests that African American girls are more deeply impacted by zero tolerance policies than boys. Crenshaw, et al. (2015) state that, “[d]ata released by the Department of Education for the 2011–2012 school year reveal that while Black males were suspended more than three times as often as their white counterparts, Black girls were suspended six times as often” (p. 16).

The impact of zero tolerance policies is not gender exclusive. Suspensions lead to greater academic costs for African American students, beginning with lengthy suspensions, which are

often justified under zero tolerance policies. Hodson, Keith, et al. (2015) report, “[If] the average suspension is conservatively put at 3.5 days, we estimate that U.S. public school children lost nearly 18 million days of instruction in just one school year because of exclusionary discipline” (p. 1). The amount of lost time often results in students falling behind academically. Additionally, when students are barred from school for numerous days, they are more likely to become involved in dangerous activities that may result in negative consequences for their community. Research shows parallels between excessive suspension rates and an increase in dropout and delinquency rates, which presents a greater threat to society as well as soaring economic costs (Hodson et al., 2015). A great deal is at stake when students are suspended and removed from school. It is imperative to assess the role urban communities play in the education of African American students and how members of the community may promote positive outcomes.

### ***Community Implications***

The involvement of community resources such as churches, non-profit agencies, educational facilities, and thriving businesses is critical to the health of a community. The education of African American urban youth is heavily determined by the health of their community. As research has shown, communities that lack resources, accompanied by higher rates of crime, ultimately experience an increase in the likelihood of youth engaging in risky behaviors (Cooper et al., 2012). Research shows that young people flourish holistically in environments that are more conducive to learning (Cooper et al., 2012). In addition, when students are in a position to contribute to the well-being of their neighborhoods, they are more likely to do so as adults.

Interconnectedness between educators, school policies, and communities is of paramount importance in reversing the enduring impact of negative educational experiences among African American students. This study allows students to be the driving force in devising interventions to support their peers who are barred from schools. Research reveals that when students are aware of the policies and practices that often impact their future—such as zero tolerance policies—they can better self-advocate and improve their lives (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). This is known



as a *critical civic praxis*. Student participation in critical civic praxis provides them with exposure to and knowledge of the social justice issues that impact their lives. They learn how to properly exercise their right to be heard. Many thriving community-based organizations exercise critical civic praxis, which in turn allows participants to make conscious decisions regarding the important social justice issues in their lives (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). Critical civic praxis is imperative for students as they make informed decisions regarding their future. Therefore, another objective of this study is to increase the critical civic praxis of students, as they become a vehicle for the change they desire in schools, communities, and correctional facilities.

## METHODOLOGY

Four students from high schools in Southeastern Michigan were recruited to participate in this qualitative research study. Approval to conduct this study was obtained from Eastern Michigan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the summer of 2016. The sample demographics of this study include African Americans respondents ranging from 15 to 18 years old, both male and female, currently attending schools in lower-income communities. In addition, students who participated in this study had previously been suspended and/or expelled at least once during their education. With that in mind, this study aimed to analyze the unique experience of those who experienced suspensions and/or expulsions, and to evaluate the impact this had on their education.

Another purpose of this study was to analyze the role communities and community members play in the progression or regression of the participants' educational success. Through the use of one-on-one audiotaped interviews conducted during the Fall 2016 and Winter 2017 semesters, this study explored a wide range of topics with students including: (1) student perceptions and experiences of being suspended and/or expelled from school; (2) the ways in which schools and communities can support their success, (3) and how the incorporation of their ideas might improve school practices in the future.

A third goal of this project was to engage youth voices and perspectives in offering potential alternatives to zero tolerance policies. In addition, this study aimed to increase the participants' critical opinion of the zero tolerance policies that have affected their educational experience. The rich data from this study will be analyzed using thematic coding, a qualitative research method that allows the researcher to identify themes and patterns that emerge from the interviews. The themes that emerge from this study will be used to determine which experiences the students believe had a positive or negative effect on their education and community experiences.

The data have been analyzed with Dr. Celeste Hawkins, Assistant Professor of Social Work at Eastern Michigan University, and will be disseminated in the form of presentations and/or publications. The research findings will highlight and identify strategies on how to promote community engagement and support collaboration among school systems to improve student outcomes.

## **PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

The preliminary findings from this study reveal several themes based on experiences that were common among participants. These themes include: (1) experiences of bullying and exclusion; (2) the students felt their voices were not heard; (3) they felt a lack of support from school faculty, and (4) they hoped to see improved relationships between students and staff. This section includes narratives from all four participants discussing their experiences in school disciplinary practices.

### **1. Bullying and Exclusion**

Despite none of the participants directly stating that they were bullied, events occurred in their school lives that highly suggest they were, indeed, victims of bullying. The presence of bullying in each of the participants' school life created unsafe environments for the students. Each participant disclosed an instance of bullying that had a delayed response from staff. Additionally, students feared speaking with administrators regarding disputes with their peers, due to their fear of receiving punishment. Each account of bullying from students within this

study resulted in students taking justice into their own hands. These actions contributed to a chaotic and unsafe school environment.

The narrative of a 15-year-old female 10<sup>th</sup> grade student, whom we will call “Shantia,” is an example of the victimization that occurred, due to bullying that resulted in her expulsion. Her story was initially disregarded, until it began to spiral out of control. Shantia shares:

*(Chuckle) Yeah, okay, I was suspended. Well, I guess I was expelled the, well not this year, last year I got expelled ‘cause I had to bust this girl in her face. Ummm, so I mean, what happened was, it was a whole bunch of girls that was in VO Tech (VO-Vocational) with me and they kept messing with me all the time. So, like they put dye on my car, they put a candy bar in my gas tank, and you know, I had told on them, but because I couldn’t prove that, you know, I couldn’t prove it, didn’t nothin’ happen to them. Then when I busted her in the face they wanted to expel me. And I don’t understand that. I think that’s so stupid.*

An 18-year old 12<sup>th</sup> grade male student, whom we will call “John,” suggested that he was indeed bullied, but felt that he was unable to address his concerns with school faculty. This led to his expulsion for bringing an unloaded firearm to school. The student stated that he never intended to use the weapon to do any harm to another student, but instead intended to use it as a means of convincing other students to leave him alone:

*I was expelled in May of 2015, um, because a lot has happened during that time from me losing my dad...So after that, I was stuck in a place of depression and hopelessness state, and going through a lot of stuff even though I was playing football, doing the best I could, receiving all this attention on a college level, and people really liked me, and doing good things. Some people were jealous and envious of me. So, threats came my way. Seniors started feeling like I was mess-*

*ing with their girls. Then I heard on the seniors' last day, [which] was the next day, I was going to end up getting jumped. Long story short, I went home that night put a BB gun in my backpack, but it was empty, just in case anything happened. I would use it as a scare tactic but I think it went too far. Because the day before that I hadn't told my assistant coach, who is the building assistant because if I brought up something like that I would have been suspended from the team indefinitely. I did not want to risk that and so that's why I brought the BB gun, and they caught me with it and I got arrested and ended up expelled.*

John claims that he did not feel safe disclosing the threats he had received from students, and decided he had to protect himself. This narrative suggests that bullying often goes unnoticed by teachers and staff. Some students are afraid to speak with administrators about events that occur in their lives, even when the need is urgent. The student felt that bringing a firearm to school was the only way to protect himself, reflecting his lack of feeling safe and secure on school grounds.

## **2. Voices Silenced**

Students who are faced with potential punishment for an infraction may feel silenced and denied the opportunity to advocate for themselves. All four participants shared the experience of not being allowed the opportunity to share their perspective of what occurred during a dispute, whether it was with another student or a faculty member. A 16-year-old female 11<sup>th</sup> grade student, "Bridgette," states:

*Yeah, talking about something that happened a year ago, I wasn't even here so how does that not click in your brain that something is wrong here? So, she called down a friend that supposedly told, and the friend said I did tell, but he [the administrator] made me leave the room so I couldn't hear anything her and her friend were saying. I was like outside waiting in a chair by*

*his office. So, they are in there taking and then I think like after next hour they were done talking and he [the administrator] calls me in and said, "she said you said it, and you're suspended." I'm like, what? That's not even fair, how are you even not going to hear my story, but you heard both of their stories, that doesn't make sense to me, if there was a fight that happened before I was here and I still haven't heard about it, how am I suspended? I was like, I told you way before me and [name redacted] had problems.*

Bridgette's narrative is an example of an instance in which administrators appeared to be premature in their use of punishment. The above narrative led to the student feeling unheard.

### **3. Lack of Student Support**

The participants reported experiencing a great deal of pressure to conform to their peer group's behavior. This study revealed a student following the negative behaviors of their friends. A 16-year-old female student in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, "Charlotte," reports:

*This thing I realized is as you get older, people start to not care like...I remember elementary school teachers spent a lot of time with you...in middle school it's like, hmmm, you'll get it...then high school teachers are like, I don't give a dang, I'm getting paid anyway. I had a teacher tell me, "I'm getting paid for this anyway." I felt like, well, since you're getting paid for this, then peace.*

The narrative illuminates the importance of positive student-teacher relationships. The student also disclosed that she often skipped school and spent time with her partner smoking marijuana.

### **4. Desire to Build Better Relationships**

Students revealed that they want to build better relationships with educators, through open and honest communication about their lives, and the experiences of their teachers, especially in relation to school. John captures this sentiment by suggesting

that faculty should “keep it real” with students, which would promote the improvement in communication between students, staff, and parents that is necessary for student success. Students also provided recommendations as to what changes must take place to improve the educational experience for African American students who, under other circumstances, might be stigmatized or labeled as “disadvantaged.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative to analyze possible interventions to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. This is a social justice issue of great concern as many students continue to struggle academically, socially, and emotionally. Many students require additional support to gain better educational outcomes. The interviews resulted in recommendations about how they might be better supported. Bridgette states:

*Umm...I think in school there should be just maybe more ways for us to talk to adults about what is bothering us. It's just most of the time adults always feel they are right and they aren't trying to hear what we have to say. Like, they could be wrong and even lie on you, but nothing even happens. The students get the consequences, not the adults, and sometimes they are wrong. Like, I understand sometimes kids need to be put out of school, but... for talking back or not having a pencil and being sent out of class does not make sense to me.*

Participants felt student voices often received little consideration in decisions that affected them tremendously in school settings. Students felt it was critical to be included in those decisions. Students asked for more direct communication between staff and students, which could lead to the formation of healthier bonds. Participants also stressed that teachers and administrators often seemed to lack an understanding of the hurdles they were currently facing in their personal lives—factors which might be taken into consideration when expulsion is recommended for

incidents that could be better resolved using alternative methods. Participants stated that they felt more personal support should be provided to students within their schools, as well as in their communities. Shantia states:

*I wish there were more places to go in the community for after-school events or to just hangout. Like, in my community, there is a small community center, but hardly nothing for teenagers to do. There are some things after school to do, but you have to be interested in those things. I just wish staff could spend more time listening to what we are saying because we have good ideas. There is always something happening in school and there is just not a lot of time for staff to reach out to the kids who might be struggling or having trouble with other people who are being mean. It's like we are expected to just deal with stuff. I wish there were more places we could go after school and more ways we can talk about things in school.*

Students also suggested that training should be required for teachers to learn how to effectively resolve disputes among students, especially in instances of bullying. The respondents believed that too often bullying escalated because it was generally ignored by teachers, staff, and administrators. In addition, students recommended that faculty should be properly trained to interact better with students. Students reported that the teachers who took the time to get to know them and spoke candidly with them were often their favorite instructors. They felt supported, and believed that teachers took an interest in them as individuals.

John felt strongly about the lack of community presence and involvement in his school. He recommended that his local community and neighborhood should become more involved in initiatives that support education. He believes that schools should meet directly with families in churches and community centers, since so few parents attend parent-teacher conferences and School Board meetings. In his words:

*To me the school is the community. It's our job to go out into the neighborhood to get the parents. In this area, appearances are everything. It starts with the environment. They have the relationships teachers don't with their kids. So, it's up to us to go to them because they are not coming to us. So, we have to start the relationship with them [people in the community]. When we do that, bring in the community and neighborhoods. We give everyone the ability to change things.*

This student also recommended an increase in the presence of African American college students in high schools. John believes that it would be a great benefit for African American students to see people who look like them, come from similar backgrounds, and have succeeded academically, despite their circumstances. Students should have someone they can relate to, to guide them down a path of resilience and success. John strongly believes that African American high school students need to see college students of color giving back to the local community and serving as role models so that high school students will aspire to do the same as adults.

Next, John would like to see his peers have African American student-mentors from Eastern Michigan University (EMU), as mentors seem to be accessible and plentiful on EMU's campus. Despite EMU initiatives such as the Brotherhood Initiative and the Sisterhood Initiative, there is still a need for expanding connections and partnerships between the university and high schools in the neighboring districts. Participants in this study believe that everyone, including high school faculty members, students, parents, and even Eastern Michigan University, should be involved in a conversation that focuses on supporting African American students who experience challenges in school. Our goal is to end the school-prison-pipeline, and this conversation should include members of the local community, providing youth with more access to programs that promote positive outcomes for them. Students in this study reported a need for a program that caters to the issues teens face in the community. To this end, this study serves as a catalyst for that conversation.



## CONCLUSION

It was very interesting to examine the themes that were common in the responses from participants despite their different ages, different perspectives, and unique educational experiences. All four students experienced out-of-school suspension due to their response to bullying in school. The students felt they lacked protection from other students, and expressed a strong desire to be heard. They also shared their anger and frustration about their perception of having been mistreated in relation to suspensions and expulsions. Some students felt marginalized due to the decisions of authority figures in their schools. Therefore, this study urges an evaluation of the teachers, staff, and administrators who make decisions that could adversely impact the lives of those they discipline.

This study recommends a change in zero tolerance policies, both locally and nationally. The *Rethink Discipline Legislation* (2016) offers new protections to Michigan students by recommending that consequences for infractions have a positive impact on students, such as offering counseling, community service, and having students pay their debt to society in the form of restitution (Student Advocacy Center, 2016). These punishments are less harmful and promote restorative practices that should be enforced on a national scale.

This research achieved its goal of increasing the critical civic praxis of the students who participated. Students were involved in a social justice issue and raised awareness of how disciplinary practices impacted their lives. Through the engagement and incorporation of student perspectives, this study provided students with the opportunity to discuss experiences that have come at a great cost for them, their schools, and communities. Additionally, in consideration of their personal experiences, this study provided students with the opportunity to speak out against, and possibly advocate for change in policies that are unjustly enforced in schools. Students were also allowed the opportunity to suggest alternative remedies and offer recommendations to increase community involvement in their schools. The students were allowed to share their experiences with their peers in the

hope of increasing their engagement. John was a participant who felt a special obligation to encourage other students to resist peer pressure and become leaders.

The interviews resulted in a series of recommendations for disciplining students without disrupting their education. As the data collected in this study reveals, students often fall behind academically when suspended from school. Despite the state of Michigan taking steps to combat the school-to-prison-pipeline with the enactment of the *Rethink Discipline Legislation*, there are still far too many students who are at risk nationwide. This legislation offers new protections that could potentially help students stay in school, rather than being pushed out. The recommendations provided by the participants of this study, along with the enactment of the *Rethink Discipline Legislation* in Michigan schools, hold great value and promise in promoting positive student outcomes.

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