Chapter 11

From the Schoolhouse to the Prison Yard:
Discipline Disparities in K–12 Public Schools – A Call for Transformational Change

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is intended to help others seeking answers to the disciplinary disparities that limit opportunities for communities and students of color. The chapter begins with a grounding in the historical context, then identifies current issues in discipline disparities, and concludes with a call for transformational change in public education. Education significantly sets the path for individuals; likewise, it affects the course of society in crucial ways. Disparities in educational experiences have compounding effects. Discipline disparities in K-12 schools are particularly impactful.

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A historical, contextual analysis of public education and landmark court cases is necessary to fully understand present day disparities in discipline amongst Black and Brown groups. From the devastating Supreme Court cases of Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896 legalizing segregation and Cummings v. Richmond County Board of Education in 1899 that legalized closing Black schools for financial reasons while White schools remained open to the unfulfilled promises of Brown v. Board of Education, left public education for students of color in tatters.

In 1957, the "Little Rock Nine", the first group of Black students to attend a federally mandated desegregated school, endured virulent hatred from White communities displayed through verbal and physical assaults. The federal government, also, utilized resources such as armed troops to support the efforts to resist integration of public schools. Institutions mirror the attitude and values of dominant groups. A deeper examination of disciplinary practices of the public education system to determine values and attitudes indicates a lack of basic regard of students of color due to disparities in school discipline, which has widespread detrimental structural and individual implications.

The story of Little Rock is a microcosm of the United States and its troubled relationship with equality in all systems of society, including public education. In the United States, students of color are disproportionately suspended and for lengthier time periods than White students. Recent research indicates that the school to prison pipeline is a stark reality. The findings show that the school-to-prison pipeline is poses substantial risks for students, particularly for Black and Brown boys (Camera, 2021).

In a prescient warning in 1965, Clark in Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power, admonished social scientists, teachers, and social workers for failing to engage and understand the conditions and experiences of poverty. Clark noted the lack of training for social scientists, teachers, or social workers to prepare them to understand and/or cope with or change the "normal chaos" of these marginalized populations. Clark cautioned that such a grave lack of preparation must be remedied, or dire consequences would be compounded.

To my knowledge, there is a present nothing in the vast literature of social science tree disease and textbooks and nothing in the practical and field training of graduates in social science to prepare them for the realities and complexities of this type of involvement in a real, dynamic, turbulent, and at times seemingly chaotic community. And what is more, nothing anywhere in the training of social scientist, teachers, or social workers now prepare them to understand, to cope with, or to change the normal chaos of ghetto communities. These are gray flex which must be remedied soon if these disciplines are to be calm relevant emphasis added to the stability in survival of our society (p. xxix)

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