Not Only a Pipeline: Schools as Carceral Sites

Connie Wun

In this article, I argue that schools operate as multilayered sites that do more than fun-nel students into prison or prime them for incarceration. Schools are part and parcel of a US logic of punitive carcerality, positioning Black and Brown bodies under constant observation and scrutiny through the school's architecture, policies, and practices. I examine the relation-ship that this logic has to Black girls and their experiences with school discipline, including their resistance to the conditions of schools as carceral sites.

Drawing from Black feminist theory (Richie, 1996) and critical prison studies (Rodri-guez, 2006), I collected data via participant observations and in-depth interviews at Founda-tions High School, located in northern California.[1,2] Based upon a qualitative study of 20 Black and Latinx girls and their experiences with school discipline, this paper focuses on three girls whose narratives exemplify the experiences that they and their peers have with school disci-pline and punishment.

1 Pseudonym

2 According to school records, in 2013–2014 the population was 22.1% Asian, 19% Filipino, 32% Latino, 7.8% White, 9% Black, 4% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and less than 1% Native American. The percentages are plus or minus points and do not need to add up to exactly 100%. They need to approach the totality with reasonable efficacy, which is the case.

The Carcerality of School Discipline

Although Foundations High School does not have metal detectors, the campus has only one entrance for approximately 4,000 students, is surrounded by approximately 12 security cameras, has eight campus security officers, and is located across the street from the city's police station. According to the girls' narratives, while all students are subject to surveillance, youth of color are more likely to be monitored and punished by school authorities.[3] Specifically, the girls' stories highlight the ways that school operates as a carceral site with racialized and gendered forms of policing and punishment.[4]

As a part of the US political, economic, and social culture, state institutions like prisons and schools are authorized to discipline and punish women and girls of color—specifically Black girls and women, including trans and gender nonconforming people of color—as a way to re-produce and reify structural norms, which (in part) are white supremacist, heteronormative, cisgendered, and patriarchal. Understanding US carcerality as a means by which bodies are en-closed and dispossessed, Sojoyner (2013) explained that schools have a long history of confin-ing Black bodies beyond and before the creation of the contemporary prison system. While all students are vulnerable to school discipline, the girls in this study felt particularly targeted and controlled but attempted to resist these conditions. Among a number of disciplinary mecha-nisms, they were subject to referrals, suspensions, and arrests.

Referrals and Constant Observation

Referrals, which do not typically result in student exclusion from the classroom, are the most common form of discipline at Foundations High School.[5] Victoria, a 14-year-old Puerto Rican and Black girl, shared her experiences with referrals:

> Victoria: He [her white male teacher] gets mad for everything, like if you're drinking Gatorade, he yells, "Put that away!" [I say] "What do you mean? I'm thirsty." You have out ChapStick®, he yells, "Put that away!"
>
> Victoria: I wait 'til I'm done using it [chuckles] then I put it away.
>
> C: What happens after that?
>
> Victoria: I get a referral.

3 In particular, Black girls shared that they often got into trouble for having "attitudes," a "smart mouth," or "talking back."

4 Sojoyner (2013) contended that these contemporary school discipline mechanisms and exclusionary practices can be traced to the strategies used prior to the 1960s to police and contain Black students in public schools.

5 Nineteen of the 20 girls in the study had been given referrals.

According to Victoria, she felt as though, compared to her non-Black peers, she was un-der perpetual observation and continually punished. Despite being subject to threats and disci-plinary actions, she insisted on maintaining autonomy over herself and her use of ChapStick® and Gatorade. Although referrals did not necessarily register as harsh forms of punishment, incessant surveillance was part of the girls' carceral experience.

Suspensions and Juridical Language

Girls from this study explained that their suspensions were for fighting, possession of drugs, or theft. Michaela, a 15-year-old Black girl, shared that one of the reasons she was sus-pended was that she was caught selling her free/reduced-fee lunch cards:

> Michaela: I got suspended for selling lunch cards… For "stealing school property."
> C: How'd they find out?
> Michaela: Um…they said they'd been watching me.
> C: For how many days?
> Michaela: Like three.

According to the school handbook, students are prohibited from selling or "pawning" lunch cards, which are identified as school property.[6,7] Given Michaela's limited family income, selling these cards could be construed as a crime of survival (Richie, 1996). However, using the language of the criminal justice system, the school criminalized Michaela's action, characteriz-ing it as a property crime against the school system.

Arrests and Criminality

The school handbook indicates that infractions such as weapons possession and assault warrant suspension, possible expulsion, and notification of the police. Carla, a 15-year-old Black girl, shared her experience with suspension and arrest: "I was in the locker room and I had seen this girl at the other end.…I said, 'Don't touch these lockers 'cuz I know them.'"[8] She explained what happened a

6 One of the campus security technicians explained that selling lunch cards was equivalent to "stealing the public's money."

7 Michaela did not discuss the fact that in order for a student to get lunch cards, the stu-dent's family must demonstrate financial need. Her mother is a single parent of three children and qualifies for the program. According to the 2012–2013 California Depart-ment of Education income eligibility guidelines for free and reduced-price meals or free milk in nutrition programs, a family of four must have an income of $29,965 or below to qualify for the program.

8 Carla explained that she did not want to get involved in what the other girl was doing, but did want to protect her friends'

few days later:

> The campus security came to my class.…And right when I got in [the office], they [the police] automatically said I was arrested for taking this, this, this. They read me my rights, said I had the right to remain silent. So I stopped talking.

As a form of resistance, knowing that she had been unfairly arrested, she refused to speak. She recalled that the police officers responded to her silence by saying, "We don't have to deal with your attitude." In response, the officers kept her in a cell until the evening, but were unable to charge her with a crime.

Conclusion

Rodriguez (2006) argued that schools have long operated as racialized sites of confine-ment for communities of color. Drawing from this, Sojoyner (2013) contended that US schools have historically (re)produced logics and mechanisms of carcerality that perpetually subject Black and Brown bodies to state surveillance and violence. Students from this study highlight the ways that being at school is like living under confinement: perpetually watched, criminal-ized, and punished (Wun, 2015). These forms of policing and carcerality are thereby normalized (Meiners, 2010).

In response to living under surveillance, the girls in this study insisted on enacting mi-croforms of resistance. Their narratives help us to identify schools as part of the US racialized and gendered logic of carcerality, where the girls were criminalized and punished, held under constant surveillance, and controlled. Under carcerality, they creatively asserted their agency and forms of resistance to maintain autonomy and possession of their bodies.

belongings.

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Connie Wun is the founder and director for Transformative Research: An Institute for Research and Social Transformation. She has also been the recipient of the National Science Foundation Fellowship, American Association for University Women Postdoctoral Fellowship, University of Illinois College of Education Postdoctoral Fellowship, and UC Berkeley Chancellor's Fellowship. Her work has been published in the *Berkeley Review of Education*, *Critical Sociology*, *Educational Policy*, *Educational Theory and Practice*, and *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*.