How school systems make criminals of Black youth

June 18 2020, by Carrie Spector

Subini Ancy Annamma. Credit: Trina Baker Photography

As support for the Black Lives Matter movement has surged in recent weeks and anti-Black racism reading lists have flooded the internet, education scholar Subini Ancy Annamma noticed a particular issue missing from many of them: the role school systems play in making

criminals of Black youth.

So Annamma, an associate professor at Stanford Graduate School of Education (GSE), put together and shared a list of her own. "Education has a reckoning to do," she wrote, linking to dozens of books and articles about ways in which schools systematically perpetuate the criminalization of young students of color, especially Black boys and girls.

A former special education teacher in both public schools and youth prisons, Annamma is the author of the recent book The Pedagogy of Pathologization, which explores the construction of criminal identities in schools through the experiences of disabled girls of color. Her research focuses on making education more equitable for historically marginalized students.

Here, she talks about how everyday occurrences in school create a culture of punishment against Black students and what kind of interventions could support a change.

Why do you think the role of schools in perpetuating anti-Black racism has been left out of these discussions?

I think there are a couple of reasons. First, in some ways we're very protective of education—we offer it as the solution to everything. And if we're putting it forward as the solution to our problems, we tend to be really careful about critiquing it in the moment. We're afraid to say that it has to be examined and improved.

Another reason is that schools and teachers are under constant attack, or what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls "organized abandonment." We don't

want to blame teachers—they're not the most powerful actors in schools, and the disinvestment in education is very real. So I understand that people don't want to place blame on individuals who are working for the community. But many of us who are studying education are looking deeply at how this system actually reproduces criminality, how it constructs criminals out of young people of color and Black children in particular.

Can you give some examples of what that kind of criminalization looks like?

Beth Richie uses the term "prison nation" to describe America's commitment to overpolicing of Black and Brown communities. That constant surveillance and punishment is also evident in schools, and it wears Black and Brown students down.

Some of the most well documented examples are suspensions and expulsions, a very clear, exclusionary discipline in which we say, "You are no longer welcome here." Multiple studies link disciplinary exclusion to dropping out—or what others have better described as being pushed out—and future incarceration.

Some of my own research looks at enabling and debilitating practices in the classroom—ignoring white children when they act out, while punishing Black children for the same behavior. We just published a study focused on girls of color who talked about how, when they raise their hands, they get ignored or told to try harder. Girls of color who are trying to participate are getting debilitating responses, while white kids who are not raising their hands are getting more attention and rewards.

I'm not saying that not calling on a kid causes criminal behavior, but we are doing what Crystal Laura describes as isolating Black youth from

participating in the life of the classroom. When you're repeatedly raising your hand and told, "You're not trying hard enough" or "You're not listening," you're being met with a punishment mindset. Black youth are pushed away from classroom life, and their learning experiences become diminished over time.

In addition to this foreclosing of academic life and hyperpunishment through exclusionary discipline, youth of color are more likely to be hypersurveilled in schools, overrepresented in special education and referred to and arrested by police. These are all ways in which schools criminalize Black youth. Day after day, these things start to sediment.

How can teachers approach these situations differently?

Even as school systems are unjust, teachers can take back some of their autonomy in their own classrooms. They can refuse to criminalize kids in particular ways, refuse to institute certain punishments.

But it's also important to think about why kids do what they do. Behavior that we've often translated as a one-off, individual characteristic is actually about responding to systems of injustice. If your students are marginalized in multiple ways—because of racism, classism, sexism, cis-heteropatriarchy, ableism, xenophobia, linguicism—they understand the world in a way that you never can.

Educators who bring humility, who learn about the ways schools and society criminalize children, who refuse to partake in labeling and surveillance, who use ethnic studies and other critical curriculum in culturally sustaining ways—those educators can teach and act in solidarity with their students.

Of course, there are behaviors that aren't allowed in the classroom, but we need to understand where they're coming from. A lot of the responsibility for this current failure and shifting that understanding lies with teacher preparation programs. We need to support teachers in developing a critical consciousness, as Joyce King names it: one that understands the historical and cultural context in which their students are living.

What policies at the school or district level can support that?

One important example is getting police and policing out of schools. We need to stop pretending that security measures like metal detectors and K-9 dogs and strip searches—all of which happen in schools, whether or not they're legal—are actually making kids safer. Research has shown that when police are present, teachers and school officials will contact them for increasingly minor behavior, and security measures do not make schools safer.

Do you think we've reached a point where change is possible?

Racism is endemic—it's always going to reinvent itself in creative ways. Some people find that depressing, but I believe it relieves us from the pressure of having to eliminate racism in our lifetime. The goal is to intervene with an eye toward justice and abolition—always tearing down current iterations of anti-Blackness, white supremacy and racism, and believing there is a different way forward.

We all have places we can intervene. There are multiple ways that schools criminalize children and foreclose opportunities. We also need to address the ways schools reproduce inequities through standardized

testing, tracking—like Advanced Placement, gifted and special education—and problematic curriculum. There are many places to intervene, in education and beyond. We can intervene consistently where our expertise lies.

Provided by Stanford University