

# Research: More affirmation, less punishment to reduce harm to Black girls in school

May 20 2021, by Marcene Robinson

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

To improve the experiences of Black children in schools, particularly Black girls, a pair of researchers have conceptualized a new framework to help school leaders rethink anti-Black policies and practices, and help

Black children recognize and celebrate their cultural identity.

Through "motherwork"—a form of culturally responsive school leadership practiced by Black women [educational leaders](#) that identifies, protects and celebrates the cultural practices of students—the researchers propose new educational policies that repair relationships rather than punish. The policies also introduce curricula that reflects on the historic and current experiences of Black youth.

The use of motherwork in schools could have powerful implications for the educational experiences of Black girls, who are disciplined in schools at a higher rate than all other girls and most boys in every state in the United States, according to the National Women's Law Center. The punitive regulations are frequently applied subjectively, steeped in cultural biases, and mandate immediate suspension, expulsion or arrest, says Terri N. Watson, Ph.D., co-author of an article published this year in the *Journal of School Leadership*, and an associate professor of educational leadership at The City College of New York.

The conceptual article examines the challenges Black girls encounter in U.S. schools, as well as the actions taken by Black women to protect them through their roles as mothers, activists and school leaders.

"While the realities of Black boys are examined and challenged in and out of the schoolhouse, the experiences of Black girls, until recently, have received little, if any, attention. Black girls are overrepresented in school discipline data and in the school-to-prison pipeline," says Watson, also a distinguished visiting scholar at the University at Buffalo Center for Diversity Innovation.

In the article, she cites the example of an 11-year-old Black girl suspended for having braids, a hairstyle forbidden by the school's dress code policy.

"To be clear, we are not suggesting that Black women are the presumed caretakers of Black children within schools. We are, however, honoring the work that Black women have done within schools on behalf of Black children, with a focus on Black girls," says Gwendolyn Baxley, Ph.D., co-author and assistant professor of educational leadership and policy in the UB Graduate School of Education.

## **Teachable moments from the past**

In the article, the use of motherwork is explored in an analysis of the Oakland Community School, a school created and operated in the 1960s-70s by the Black Panther Party as an alternative for Black children whose needs were not being met by the Oakland school district.

Led by Black women, who played a central role in managing the school and designing its curriculum, the Oakland Community School fed students three meals each day to ensure their well-being, rejected standardized testing in favor of nurturing curiosity and critical thinking, and provided a curriculum that celebrated Black life. The [school](#) also avoided practices that criminalized Black children by having no security guards or detention spaces.

"While the racial identity of white children is affirmed and granted automatic access to various institutions and resources, Black children are tasked with assimilating and leaving behind their identity in order to gain access to similar resources," says Watson.

"Motherwork for Black educational leaders involves negotiating two competing approaches: Educating children to lose their identity and assimilate as a form of survival, or equipping children with the tools to challenge systems of oppression, which simultaneously puts them at heightened risk in schools where they are expected to be subordinate."

## Breaking away from the mainstream

While most research aimed at improving the experiences of Black students focuses on racial bias, few studies center on care and affirming identity.

School discipline policies should afford students an opportunity to explain themselves when mistakes are made, says Watson, as well as implement restorative justice practices that focus on repairing relationships rather than punishing children.

Curricula should also explore the historic and current lived experiences of Black youth and hone in on complicated conversations impacting their lives, says Baxley. Schools should deliver content focused on the Black Lives Matter movement and police brutality, while offering connections to past civil rights movements, she says.

"Mainstream curriculum rarely reflects the identities of Black children, nor does it authentically expose the true histories and lived experiences of Black people in the U.S. and across the African diaspora," says Baxley.

"Educational leaders must affirm Black children and see them not only for who they are, but for who they can and will be," she says. "They must consciously and intentionally speak life and love and act with empathy and care if Black [children](#), particularly Black [girls](#), are to thrive in and outside of the schoolhouse."

**More information:** Terri N. Watson et al, Centering "Grace": Challenging Anti-Blackness in Schooling Through Motherwork, *Journal of School Leadership* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/1052684621993085](https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684621993085)

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: Research: More affirmation, less punishment to reduce harm to Black girls in school (2021, May 20) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-05-affirmation-black-girls-school.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.