INVISIBLE RESISTANCE: BIPOC GIRLS & GENDER-EXPANSIVE YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE RESISTING SCHOOL PUSH OUT

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ABSTRACT:
This article explores that girls and gender-expansive youth who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in foster care resist oppression in schools. Research demonstrates that this population is disproportionately impacted by systemic oppression which contributes to poor academic outcomes. The child welfare system, largely operating on gendered and racialized stereotypes, targets women of color, resulting in higher rates of foster care involvement for girls and gender-expansive youth. In schools, the same stereotypes are used as reasons to surveil and punish youth, channeling them into juvenile detention. However, BIPOC girls and gender-expansive youth in foster care are rendered invisible in school discipline literature. This paper, adapted from my dissertation, utilizes observations in K-12 education to explore youth resistance to hegemonic power structures in school, and illuminates the importance of leveraging positionality when supporting youth. While my research is ongoing, this piece demonstrates that youth in foster care are made to protect themselves in school in ways that are deemed unacceptable, and subsequently criminalized. Ultimately, this work indicates the need for both school reform and structural social change to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

KEYWORDS: foster care, school-to-prison pipeline, school discipline

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INTRODUCTION

School-to-prison pipeline scholars, who explore the movement of youth from schools to detention, largely agree that girls and gender-expansive youth, such as transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary individuals, are excluded from research and literature (Meiners 2011, 550). Consequently, these populations are excluded from resources aimed at supporting youth who are frequently targeted by formal exclusionary school discipline, such as suspension and expulsion, or who experience more subtle forms of punishment and push out. While increased research on the effects of school discipline on Black, Indigenous boys of color (BIPOC) has, justly, resulted in increased programs and resources supporting boys' education, few resources exist for girls and gender-expansive youth in the same racial and ethnic demographics. Even fewer resources exist for youth in foster care, the majority of whom exist at the intersection of multiple oppressions and are frequently perceived to be problematic due to cultural stereotypes and misinterpretations of their behavior. As such, this population is often alienated and isolated from the school community, and faces extensive barriers to success in school. This academic landscape, and my personal experience as an educator, inspired me to explore these issues further, employing counternarratives to investigate the ways that youth in foster care experience, and resist, punishment, exclusion, and push out.

The following piece, adapted from my dissertation, utilizes observations from my time as a Foster Youth Liaison at a small school district in Los Angeles. Through these observations, I explore youth resistance to hegemonic power structures in school and illuminate the importance of leveraging positionality when working within oppressive systems to stand in solidarity with youth. These observations illustrate that youth consistently find brilliant ways to assert their autonomy and protect themselves in systems that seek to control and stigmatize them. Ultimately, this work indicates the need for dramatic cultural shifts to put an end to the school-to-prison pipeline for BIPOC girls and gender-expansive youth in foster care.

BACKGROUND

BIPOC girls and gender-expansive youth are highly impacted by educators' implicit bias, zero-tolerance discipline practices, and school collaboration with the criminal justice system. Statistics show that in recent years, Black girls, in particular, have experienced a considerable rise in suspension rates. The Department of Education reports that during the 2011-12 school year, Black boys were suspended four times more often than white boys, while Black girls were suspended six times as often as their counterparts (Crenshaw, Ocen and Nanda 2015, 18). Meanwhile, very few studies have been done, exclusively, on the disciplinary experiences of trans youth, as most do not disaggregate by specific LGBTQ identities despite their unique experiences. Even so, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health reports that LGBTQ youth are 1.25 to 3 times more likely to experience expulsion, interactions with police, and conviction in court (Palmer and Greytak 2017, 167). Furthermore, a 2013 Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey reports that 46 percent of Black LGBTQ

youth, 44 percent of Latinx LGBTQ youth, and 47 percent of multiracial LGBTQ youth experience exclusionary school discipline, compared to 36 percent of white LGBTQ youth (Palmer, Greytak and Kosciw 2016, 26). The situation is even more complex for BIPOC girls and gender-expansive youth who are also involved in the family regulation system.[xiv]

Girls and gender-expansive youth who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in foster care are among the most heavily surveilled and neglected populations in public schools. Research shows that youth in foster care and BIPOC girls and gender-expansive youth are judged as deviant, troubled, and aggressive, stereotypes rooted in racism, and cisgender heteronormative patriarchy, especially when responding to perceived injustices (Romano, Babchishin, Marquis and Frechette 2015; Blake, Butler, Lewis, and Darnsbourg 2010; Snapp, Hoeing, Fields, and Russell 2015). These characterizations manifest in very real challenges in family regulation, criminal and juvenile justice, and public education systems. The family regulation and criminal justice systems have a history of patronizing women of color, as they are often viewed as unfit to care for their families within the norms of white motherhood (Brown and Bloom 2009). These systems then inflict strict surveillance, control, and punishment over BIPOC women by imprisoning them, and removing their children under the false premise that their children would be better off in foster homes (Brown and Bloom 2009, 158; Haney 2014; Saar, Epstein, Rosenthal, and Vafa 2015). Once involved in the family regulation system, Parents report feeling as though they have a target on their back; every mandated reporter they come in contact with knows they have been impacted by or surveilled by the system and are waiting to report the parent again (McMillan, Jihad, Washington and Grier 2021). Girls and gender-expansive youth, once removed from their families, are penalized for what these systems perceive as their personal shortcomings: their "failed" family lives, contentious attitudes and gaps in education due to the transient nature of juvenile justice and foster care (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda 2015; Wun 2014; Carpenter and Clyman via Villegas, Rosenthal, O'Brien and Pecora 2013).

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

Before I present my findings, I am going to situate myself and the context in which I came to this work. I consider myself to be a person of many privileges and although most of my professional and academic work centers youth in foster care, I have never been involved in the system myself. However, learned values and past experiences put me on a path to working with youth in foster care and to approach this work with a radical, social justice lens.

My family history is heavily marked by migration, struggle, and resilience. My paternal grandparents Mary Louise Woods and Antipatro Ocasio endured Operation Bootstrap, the Great Migration, and anti-Black racism while living in Chicago, IL. My maternal grandmother, Ofelia Palos, navigated Operation Wetback, the Bracero Program, and raised nine immigrant children alone in San Diego, CA. Despite having little formal education, Ofelia fought for bilingual education in a time when her children were being corporally punished in school for speaking Spanish. The generational trauma and resilience born out of traversing interpersonal and systemic racism, and finding ways to thrive despite it, has had profound impacts on the way I maneuver the

world. As a non-Black presenting bi-racial person, I believe I have a duty to be an accomplice to dismantling anti-Blackness and a responsibility to be in solidarity with the most oppressed in my community and around the world. My family ingrained these values in me as a child and my community gave me the tools to act on them.

I cut my teeth organizing as a student at UC Irvine (UCI) with Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan (M.E.Ch.A). Through the informal education I received in M.E.Ch.A, I became more aware of the injustices around me and involved myself in youth programs in neighboring communities. After college, I fell into working with youth in foster care by chance, but before long it became a passion. I found that despite the immense challenges facing these students and the subsequent resilience they demonstrate, their experiences remain invisible, both in mainstream and social justice education spaces. As I transitioned to graduate studies, using my platform to share my student's stories, to illuminate their struggles, ingenuity, and strength, became an important use of my privileged position.

Despite my good intentions, having never been in foster care limits my ability to relate to individuals with lived experience and often presents barriers to trust. This reality forces me to constantly reflect on my positionality, implicit biases, and the privilege that I bring to this work. Conversely, I am also moved to use my privileges to intervene when I see youth being harmed and to advocate for their needs.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Working with youth in foster care has been, simultaneously, immensely rewarding and incredibly draining. I love building relationships with young people and seeing them thrive in their ways. But, navigating bureaucratic school systems, more concerned with attendance rates and grades than the holistic wellbeing of its students, is mentally, spiritually, and emotionally exhausting. Much of this will be evident in Hannah, Brianna, and Maria's stories. The following narratives include occasions where I was able to successfully support my students, as well as occasions where I lacked the knowledge, and/or institutional power to make a change.

HANNAH

California has the largest family regulation system in the country, with 12 percent of the nation's youth in foster care, 35 percent of whom reside in Los Angeles County (Williams 2020; Kids Data 2021). A 2018 study of LA youth in foster care found that 19 percent of youth in care identify as LGBTQ (LA County 2018, 23). Of these youth, 5.6 percent identify as trans, an overrepresentation when compared to the 3 percent of trans youth in the general population, and 94 percent identify as youth of color (23). The intersection of diverse racial, gender, sexual identities, and involvement in family regulation results in significant disparities in treatment both on school campuses and foster care placements. Given these realities, Hannah, a brown, trans girl in foster care and a freshman at Monroe High School, learned first hand the importance of self-preservation when navigating school.

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“Hi, Mr. Johnson, I want to talk to you about Hannah, is this a good time?” I say as I move to sit down across from him at his desk.
“You know that’s a boy right?”
I take a deep breath, count to 10, and prepare myself to argue. Hannah just transferred to a new high school and is struggling to adjust. She faithfully attends my weekly group meetings for youth in foster care at the school, and while she is quiet, she is always quick to participate. I came to find out that Hannah is failing most of her classes and stopped showing up to PE altogether. I ask her to stay after one of our meetings and ask what is going on. Hannah tells me that she hates her classes, they are way too big, and that PE is the worst. Even though no one says or does anything to her and she has been given her own changing room, she is scared that someone will bother her for being different. She would rather walk around campus alone than go to class. Hannah tells me that she loves singing, and if her counselor, Mr. Johnson, replaced PE with choir, she would definitely attend class. When I suggest that she talk to Mr. Johnson about making the switch, she flat out refuses, but she accepts my offer to meet with him on her behalf.
I reply to Mr. Johnson, “No, *she* is not”
We go back and forth a few more times and Mr. Johnson becomes visibly agitated. I decided it’s not worth the argument.
“Well, whatever we think, Hannah uses she/her pronouns and she is having some problems with her class.”
Mr. Johnson concedes but continues to misgender her throughout the conversation. Mr. Johnson brings up Hannah’s transcripts only to see F’s next to each class title.
“Looks like we’ve done all we can for Hannah. If he doesn’t want to go to class, that's on him.”
He goes on to explain that the school has given Hannah all the accommodations they can; they gave Hannah her own special changing area for PE and switched her into a small class to help with her anxiety. Mr. Johnson becomes increasingly agitated and resentful of Hannah’s unique needs. Finally, he states that he is unwilling to accommodate Hannah’s request to move from PE to choir even though this class would fulfill the same requirement, has space for more students and would ensure that Hannah attends at least one of her 7 classes. Days after I give Hannah the bad news, I find her hiding from campus security behind a building on the very edges of campus. She doesn’t feel comfortable going to class. Nothing I can say will change her mind, and to be honest, I don’t feel particularly compelled to try.
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In my experience, students in foster care with unique needs are frequently treated like burdens and their behavior is rarely understood within the context of how they navigate the world given their race/ethnicity, ability, gender, or sexuality. In general, LGBTQ students are labeled as deviant and their behavior is regulated in ways that their cis and/or heterosexual counterparts are not. Youth expression of LGBTQ identity is frequently policed in schools to force conformity by banning rainbow-themed clothing and Gay-Straight Alliance clubs, penalizing students for public

displays of affection and wearing *supposed* gender-inappropriate clothing, and refusing to use preferred names (Palmer, Greytak, and Kosciw 2016; Palmer and Greytak 2017, 167). The excessive regulation of LGBTQ youth's existence creates hostile school environments which breed violence among students. A 2011 Human Rights Campaign national study found that 60 percent of youth surveyed had been bullied because of their gender expression, and many gender expansive youth report school as the location of their first experience with physical violence (Palmer and Greytak 2017, 164; Toomey, Card, Russel, Ryan, and Diaz 2010, 1582).

From my observations and interactions with Hannah, it is evident that she could expect nothing more than the lowest, most basic levels of safety and comfort at school. Legally, California Assembly Bill (AB) 1266, passed in 2013, mandates that trans students are allowed to use facilities consistent with their gender identity (Maryam 2014). In giving Hannah her own changing room, separate then those designated for, presumably cis, girls and boys, the school signaled to Hannah, and her peers, that it is acceptable to isolate her and treat her differently than other girls. Moreover, given the microaggressions I witnessed from Mr. Johnson, such as his refusal to use Hannah's correct pronouns, fixation with her gender identity, and frustration with accommodating her needs, it is unsurprising that Hannah did not feel safe talking to him on her own. Although to my knowledge, Hannah had not yet faced any physical violence, these factors created a hostile environment in which Hannah knew her safety could not be guaranteed. The fact that she felt safer wandering the school campus alone than in classes with adults who are supposed to support and protect her speaks volumes. While school staff frequently characterized her refusal to attend class as defiant and academically irresponsible, I believe it is more accurate to reframe her behavior as a self-defense mechanism to safeguard against potential violence and harm.

Hannah and I do not have much in common, but I empathize with her instinct to take care of herself when no one else will. I was fortunate to build a good relationship with Hannah and when I would catch her wandering around campus, rather than chastise her, I would ask her to hang out in my office to talk, read, doodle, or, on a rare occasion, to do homework. While avoiding class is not exactly a behavior that is conducive to school success, I preferred that she be with a trusted adult instead of roaming campus alone. Our relationship allowed me to intervene on her behalf with Mr. Johnson and while, ultimately, this did not result in having her needs met I was able to use my positionality in my interaction with Mr. Johnson in a positive way. First, educators need to receive pushback from their colleagues when expressing transphobic sentiments or misgendering students. Mr. Johnson may never change his opinions, but with enough friction from fellow educators, he might change the way he talks about trans students. Additionally, as youth in foster care frequently have few adults to advocate for their needs, educators and youth must see that trusted adults are willing to advocate for these students. Conversely, given my position in the district, had I been better versed on the laws protecting trans youth, I would have had more leverage to ensure that Hannah's needs were accommodated, and I could have ensured that this particular school staff received additional training on these laws.

BRIANNA

Of the many challenges that youth in foster care face, one of the most prevalent is human trafficking, also known as the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC), which includes child sex trafficking, child pornography, and survival sex (Dierkhising and Brown 2018, 6). Traffickers frequently target youth who have experienced trauma, homelessness, or unstable living situations (Dierkhising and Brown 2018, 6). A 2018 LA County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) report found that from 2014 to 2018, a task force recovering CSEC survivors from LA city streets found that 85 percent of youth had prior referrals to the family regulation system (Fithyan, Guymon, and Wegener 2018, 6). The overwhelming majority of these youth were girls, 71 percent of whom were Black (Fithyan, Guymon, and Wegener 2018, 6). Survivors of CSEC are likely to have disruptions in their education, and can greatly benefit from reconnecting to peers and a school community to develop skills and relationships that support healthy development and reduce recidivism (Dierkhising and Brown 2018, 11). However, the combined stigma of being in foster care, and a survivor of trafficking, can cause immense barriers to academic success. Unfortunately, this is a reality that Brianna, a Black girl in 8th grade at Hoover Middle School, CSEC survivor, and expecting parent, had to face.

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I am sitting in the Hoover Middle School library with Brianna, who looks less than pleased to be meeting with me. This is the first time I am meeting her in person, but I am familiar with her case. This school year, Brianna has numerous school and housing placement changes, despite School of Origin Laws, which dictate that youth in foster care have the right to stay enrolled at any school they've attended within the past year, regardless of changing placement, to maintain a semblance of stability ("Foster Youth Education Toolkit" 2016, 19). Weeks earlier, when I was notified by Brianna's social worker that she would be coming to live within my district boundaries for the second time that year, I coordinated a meeting with Brianna and her stakeholders to determine if she would stay at her current school or enroll at the school closest to her new home, which she had already attended earlier in the year. Typically, in these meetings, administrators of the schools in question take the time to share any previous experiences with the student and the resources and support they can offer. This case was different. The Hoover Middle Assistant Principal, Ms. Charles, was adamant that Brianna should not return to campus, but she had no evidence to support this conclusion aside from a poor attendance record. However, Brianna decided she wanted to return to Hoover, and her stakeholders agreed, so regardless of the administrator's feelings, we had to let her enroll. Once Brianna had enrolled, I stopped by Hoover Middle to see how she was acclimating.

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When I call Brianna into the main office, she does not want to meet with me. As soon as I introduce myself, she walks out. Her special education case carrier catches her in the hallway and I watch them from afar, coaxing Brianna to meet with me while I eavesdrop on the front office staff gossiping about Brianna's contentious attitude and altercations she has gotten into in her short time back at the school. Finally, Brianna agrees to meet with me, and though hesitant, she is pleasant.

She shares with me that she is having trouble in school but that she is motivated to do well and is excited about participating in 8th grade promotion. We make plans for her to attend tutoring and set a date to check in again later in the month. While walking through the hallway on my way out of the school, Ms. Charles calls out to me,

"Hey Franchesca, thanks for putting an 8th grade prostitute on my campus!"

Confused, I turn back to her to find out what she means.

Ms. Charles goes on, "Oh you didn't know? Brianna is a prostitute and she's pregnant. She's been recruiting other little girls to be prostitutes too. That's what you put on my campus. That's OK though, we'll find a way to get her out of here."

I know Ms. Charles fairly well, and this response from her seemed out of character as she is typically caring and compassionate to her students. I attempt to talk to her further about the matter, but she brushes me off.

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Black women and girls are subject to a variety of controlling images, which are stereotypes designed to normalize oppression, that dictate their interpersonal interactions and how they navigate dominant society (Collins 2000, 69). Controlling images, such as the mammy, the welfare queen, and, most relevant to Brianna's story, the jezebel, has deep roots in slavery, under which Black women were portrayed as sexually aggressive to rationalize their sexual assault by white men (Collins 2000, 81). Contemporarily, images of the jezebel can be found in stereotypes of Black women as "hoochies" and "hoes," who participate in "deviant" female sexuality, such as sleeping with women, non "normative" sexual practices, or trading sex for money (Collins 2000, 81). Furthermore, in dominant welfare discourse, the jezebel is used to characterize Black, pregnant women who receive public assistance as irresponsible, and even entrepreneurial, about their fertility (Masters, Lindhorst, and Meyers 2014, 122). These stereotypes place Black women in direct opposition to the standards of white femininity, which favor docility, and obedience (Blake, Butler, Lewis, and Darnsbourg 2010, 91).

Controlling images are seen in school settings where Black girls are characterized as loud, hypersexual, confrontational, and manipulative (Morris 2016; Blake, Butler, Lewis, and Darnsbourg 2010, 100). Concurrently, Black girls are also adultified in ways that leave them with fewer opportunities to make child-like mistakes and fewer protections from adults (Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez 2017, 5). As a result, Black girls experience higher rates of victimization in schools, and when interacting with the child welfare system. Black girls make up 35.6 percent of girls who experience ten or more housing placement changes while in foster care, which impacts developmental progress such as memorization, focus, the ability to process information, boundary setting, impulse control, and the formation of peer relationships (Patrick and Chaudhry 2017, 1; Day, Somers, Baroni, West, Sanders, and Peterson 2015, 1088; Baynes-Dunning and Worthington 2013, 341). In comparison to their non-Black peers, Black girls report higher rates of sexual

harassment on school campuses, and their perpetrators experience fewer consequences (Tonnesen 2013, 5).

I never found out if any of Ms. Charles' accusations were true. Regardless, taking into account the historical context at play, this interaction demonstrates how educators employ controlling images to criminalize youth who have experienced trauma. The term "child prostitute" has largely fallen out of favor as children cannot consent to participate in sex work in the same way that adults may be able to (Saar 2014). Ms. Charles' use of the phrase '8th-grade prostitute,' when referring to Brianna demonstrates that she is viewed as an active participant in her abuse, and not allowed access to victimhood. Additionally, the accusation that Brianna was recruiting her peers to participate in commercial human trafficking, as unacceptable as that places her in the position of a villain, rather than a child who should have been afforded compassion, and space to learn from her experiences. Lastly, Ms. Charles' attitude in regards to Brianna's pregnancy is indicative of dominant viewpoints that characterize teen mothers, particularly Black teens, as careless, irresponsible, and undeserving of protection. This attitude does not take into account Brianna's autonomy and life circumstances that may have led to the decision to have a baby, as studies show that youth in foster care sometimes choose to have children at young ages to create the family and stable relationships that were not provided to them (Love, McIntosh, Rosst, and Tertzakian 2005, 13). Youth in foster care also identify their children as a source of motivation to reach their goals, while recognizing that there are some challenges associated with being a teen parent, such as the loss of social life (Love et al 2005, 13). Given the attitudes of school staff, it was clear that Brianna was being ostracized due to her complicated history and the school administration did little to hide the fact that they were actively pushing her out of the school community. Unfortunately, as is the case with many youths in Brianna's situation, she ran away from her foster home days later and never returned.

In Brianna's case, being a person who feels more comfortable keeping people at arms length myself, I identified with Brianna's mistrust of strangers. Additionally, given the difficult circumstances she has been put in, I would never have expected her to behave any different. As such, I felt particularly moved to use my position in the district to ensure that Brianna would be enrolled in the school where she felt that she was going to thrive, despite knowing that this would jeopardize my relationship with the school administrators. Ms. Charles was fully prepared to fight this decision, and the conflict would have kept Brianna out of school for days, or even weeks. However, given my relationship with Ms. Charles and given what little information I know about CSEC survivors, I missed a significant opportunity to help my colleague to better understand Brianna's situation, and ideally, encourage Ms. Charles to treat Brianna with more compassion. Additionally, while I informed my supervisor of this issue, I let the bureaucratic obstacles get in the way of coordinating additional training and technical support for school staff in this area.

Maria

Youth in foster care are expected to be parented by the family regulation system, a role it routinely fails, as its main function is to react to crisis situations rather than to nurture. Consequently, youth in foster care are more likely to face criminalization than their non-systems-

impacted peers. A young person living with their parents might get into an altercation with their sibling and get grounded for a week, whereas a young person in foster care might get into a fight with a sibling, or housemate, and have the police called on them by their caregiver (Wang and Kohn 2016). A study on delinquency in the family regulation system found that 40 percent of arrests of youth in foster care occur in a group home setting, where the threshold for police involvement is much lower than in a family setting (Ryan, Marshall, Her, and Hernandez 2008, 1096). Educators are active participants in the criminalization of youth in foster care, as these youth frequently lack biological parents to advocate on their behalf when altercations occur on campus, and stereotypes of youth in care as 'troublemakers 'converge with over-policed schools (Anspach 2018). In LA County, Black youth in foster care, in particular, are highly criminalized at school, with a suspension rate of 17 percent in the 2018-19 school year (Harvey, Whitman, and Howard 2020, 1). Consequently, youth in foster care constitute 28 percent of youth in juvenile hall (Harvey et al 2020, 2). Maria's story illustrates how easily these harmful stereotypes can lead to this trajectory.

Maria is a brown girl in 8th-grade special education classes at Wilfred Middle School, with nervous energy about her. She is easily distracted, energetic, charismatic, curious about the world around her, and has experienced home placement changes ranging in the double digits. At the time this incident took place, she was residing in a group home. Her energy and easily distracted nature often result in challenges to complete classwork and homework and I frequently help her frantically complete mountains of makeup work. Although I find Maria to be as pleasant as a young person in middle school can be, when I bring her up to Wilfred Middle School staff members, I am regaled with stories of her lack of discipline, and defiant, confrontational temperament. When I visit Maria at school at the end of the semester, I find her in a highly anxious state. While pacing around our small meeting space, she tells me that she lost her district-issued Chromebook, the second one this school year, and now she cannot borrow a new one until she pays the school $600 to replace the other two. Maria is close to tears and fixated on coming up with the money. I try to tell her that because she is in foster care, state law absolves her of any financial accountability for lost school property, such as books or computers. But, I cannot get her to calm down enough to hear me out. Instead, I go looking for the Assistant Principal, Ms. Chatsworth.

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I'm sitting in Ms. Chatsworth's office as she launches into a tirade the moment I say Maria's name. She believes that Maria did not lose the two chrome books, but is hiding them away and that Maria does not deserve a new computer unless she can produce $600. Despite explaining the rights of youth in foster care to school materials, Ms. Chatsworth is fixated on her suspicions and I cannot get her off of this subject. So, I try a new tactic and ask how Maria's schoolwork has been adjusted to accommodate the absence of a computer:

Ms. Chatsworth says, "Her teachers are supposed to give her everything in paper"
When I respond, "Maria tells me that this has not been happening. She says that she's been sitting in class for two weeks with nothing to do."

Ms. Chatsworth concludes, “Well, she wouldn’t have that problem if she wasn’t hiding that other laptop. We could solve this problem real easy if Maria wanted to.”

After realizing that getting through to Ms. Chatsworth is hopeless, I decided to let my supervisor handle the situation and return to Maria. I find her crying in the main office, still obsessing over the money. When she finally decides to go back to class, I tell her that I will take care of everything, and she leaves looking defeated and demoralized.

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In schools, BIPOC girls and gender-expansive youth are over-disciplined for behaviors that transgress the standards of white femininity and the gender binary, such as defiance, profanity, and dress code violations (Wun 2014). This becomes problematic for youth as reliance on zero-tolerance discipline leads many schools to utilize police to intervene in incidents that could be dealt with by school staff. As such, during the 2013-14 school year, BIPOC girls were arrested on school campuses at rates double their population size in the general school population, leading to higher rates of juvenile detention, especially for youth in foster care (Onyeka-Crawford, Patrick, and Chaudhry 2017, 3; Irvine and Canfield 2016).

Maria’s story illustrates the stigmatization of youth in foster care as delinquent, while little is done to take into account the circumstances which influence their behavior. Youth placed in group homes, like Maria, typically experience an average of seven previous housing placement changes and eight school changes, which impact their ability to build connections with peers and trusted adults (Boyle-Duke 2015; Sullivan, Jones, and Mathiesen 2009, 165). Examining Maria’s behavior in this context aids in understanding why she might struggle to meet her teacher’s behavioral expectations. Additionally, youth who receive special education services are typically perceived as being intentionally defiant, rather than having their conduct understood in the context of their neurodiversity, and the structural barriers acting on them (Erevelles 2014, 95). In response, punishment is frequently used as a tool to force conformity to normative standards of behavior (95).

Maria’s energy and curiosity should have been seen as positive indications of her intelligence. Instead, these characteristics were met with irritation and punishment from Maria’s teachers and school staff, which informed their refusal to accommodate her technological needs and their willingness to penalize her for a mistake that is typical of a child of her age. These attitudes from educators communicate to youth that they are inherently bad and, therefore, disposable. Though this situation sent Maria into panic mode, she immediately began to strategize how she was going to come up with $600, planning to sell her belongings and borrow money from friends. Her ability to think on her feet when confronted with a crisis demonstrates that Maria has likely been forced to take care of herself for quite some time. While she should never have experienced that kind of stress, her reaction is emblematic of her intelligence and sharp-wittedness. While being in foster care should not absolve youth from being held accountable for their actions, the extenuating circumstances under which they live require more compassion and empathy from educators; without which they will continue to be isolated and pushed out of their school communities.

As group home staff, social workers, and special education case carriers are commonly overworked and understaffed, they can rarely respond quickly to urgent situations. Without someone to intervene on their behalf, like a parent would, youth in foster care are often left to navigate school alone, despite having many stakeholders involved in their case. If Maria had a parent to advocate for her, it is unlikely that the situation would have reached the level of severity that it did. I believe that Ms. Chatsworth's frustration over Maria's behavior affected her ability to treat Maria with the level of respect she deserved. Fortunately, because of the close working relationship Maria and I developed throughout the year, I was able to step in on her behalf. Once I turned my attention to Ms. Chatsworth to solve the problem, I leveraged my position as a district employee with knowledge of the legal school rights of youth in foster care and with direct access to an Assistant Superintendent, my supervisor, to have Maria's technological needs taken care of. Ms. Chatsworth and Maria's teachers were resentful, which, again, compromised our relationship. While this incident was solved without issue, I missed a clear opportunity to develop compassion and understanding among my colleagues, as it was clear that the school staff needed a more in-depth understanding of the laws protecting youth in foster care, and youth in special education.

CONCLUSION

These narratives demonstrate how BIPOC girls and gender-expansive youth in foster care are punished for threatening the status quo. However, these accounts also illustrate the ways that these youth, and no doubt others like them, resist marginalization and harm in schools by prioritizing themselves when adults around them deny them safe educational spaces.

While Hannah, Brianna, and Maria were identified by school staff as defiant troublemakers, all three young women demonstrate a drive to take care of themselves when no one else will. Black feminists have long valued the struggle to survive as a form of activism on par with confronting institutional power (Collins 2001). Through this lease, we can reframe all three students' actions as acts of resistance, where they claim their space in school, on their terms. Hannah's refusal to endure potentially harmful situations by avoiding class, Brianna's drive to succeed in school while pregnant and Maria's tenacious impulse to solve her money problems on her own, serve as confrontations to a dehumanizing school system that actively pushes them to the margins. Furthermore, we can reframe Brianna and Maria's attitudes, perceived by school staff as confrontational, as rational responses to harm. Black feminist activist Audre Lorde implores us to understand women of color's anger as a justified response to racism, uncontested privilege, and stereotyping (1981, 7). The constant surveillance inflicted on BIPOC girls, women, and gender-expansive individuals by the family regulation and public education systems are exhausting, and, legitimately, anger-inducing. However, youth who express their anger are read as out of control and met with discipline to force compliance to standards of behavior laid out for them by dominant society (Meiners 2007, 29). Through this lens, we can interpret Brianna and Maria's attitudes as resistance to oppressive behavior, and as reclamations of their autonomy.

Despite growing up in vastly different circumstances than these students, I see myself in each of these girls. As a teenager, I felt misunderstood as too inquisitive, too moody, too confrontational. I used my anger as a shield to protect me from hurt, especially when I did not have

the tools to communicate the challenges I was experiencing. I often wished that the adults around me would see beyond my attitude to try to understand the feelings underneath. As a result, I feel a certain kinship with students who are read as difficult by school staff and Audre Lorde's approach to navigating anger has become a guiding principle in my work:

> It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us, but our refusals to stand still to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment. (1981, 9)

Lorde reminds us that anger is not only a valid response to oppression but a tool of communication that should not be dismissed. Understanding this as an adult, developing meaningful connections with youth who are often misunderstood as delinquent has become an important aspect of my work. Consequently, I can draw from my personal experiences, and privilege, to intervene in disputes involving these students to bring compassion and alternative perspectives to the table, sometimes at the risk of professional relationships. While I tried my best to alter the outcomes of these situations, there were several missed opportunities as well, either due to a personal lack of knowledge or a lack of institutional power. These occurrences illustrate the need for both systemic and interpersonal changes in education.

IMPLICATIONS

Hannah, Brianna, and Maria's stories illustrate that stigmatization and isolation of youth in schools can be the result of structural violence which often manifests in the form of interpersonal harm. When faced with such barriers, these narratives demonstrate the nuanced ways that girls and gender-expansive youth in foster care subvert and resist the systems that seek to push them out of school, and attempt to find ways to thrive despite them. However, youth should not have to bear this responsibility alone. Instead, these narratives indicate the need for both short-term reforms, such as additional programs and resources and long-term shifts in society as a whole to address structural violence inflicted on systems-impacted youth, such as prison abolition.

Sociologist, Loic Wacquant describes schools as "institutions of confinement" (2001, 108), as they are frequently more concerned with preparing poor, Black, and brown youth for incarceration, low-wage work, and participation in underground economies, than shaping young minds (Meiners 2011, 550). Limited access to recess, sports, or extracurricular activities and reliance on surveillance mechanisms such as cameras, metal detectors, and school resource officers to impose control facilitates irritability, disruption, and aggression and prepares students' minds and bodies for institutionalization (Wacquant 2001, 108; Morris 2016, 83). Hannah, Brianna, and Maria's stories illustrate the unique ways in which Black and brown girls and gender-expansive youth in foster care are punished when they behave in ways that defy gender norms dictated by white femininity, and the gender binary, and do not have biological parents to advocate for them (Wun 2014). Scholar, Erica Meiners contends that the funneling of youth from schools to prisons requires a "both/and" approach, necessitating both school reforms and social change (2011, 550).

Some of the challenges that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline can be mediated by increased services for both educators and students, but I would argue that the systemic oppression rooted in public education can only be mediated by prison abolition. Conditions on school campuses would invariably improve if more school staff were proficient in trauma-informed approaches, and better educated on implicit bias and youth's educational rights. Students would also benefit from an increase in extracurricular activities, mental health services, and alternatives to suspension and expulsion policies. However, these services do not provide the paradigmatic changes necessary to alter the carceral foundations of public education which associates school safety for all with the punishment and exclusion of some (Meiners 2011, 559). Education research consistently demonstrates that educational opportunity and engagement are the strongest indicators of academic achievement, while alienation and low academic expectations result in higher levels of school discipline (Skiba, Arredondo, and Williams 2014, 553). Prisons, and school discipline, are concerned with addressing the issue of safety by removing those who have done harm from the community. However, in many cases, the perpetrators of harm are synonymous with the most undesirable, and therefore disposable, populations according to the social norms dictated by white, middle-class cis-heteropatriarchal dominant society (Meiners 2011, 560).

Prison abolitionists, like Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2020), contend that envisioning an abolitionist future requires us to understand that a safe community can only be created by changing the conditions under which harm occurs, not with additional state or interpersonal violence. Many abolitionists argue that violence stems from a lack of jobs, education, housing, and health care and that alienating individuals who cause harm by warehousing them in prisons does nothing to solve these structural issues (Kushner 2019). Similarly, criminalizing and alienating youth from the school community does little to address the structural challenges that students face, as can be seen from Hannah, Brianna, and Maria's stories. (Kushner 2019). As such, challenging mass incarceration through prison abolition are essential pathways to creating safer schools for all students. School disciplinary policies mirror mass incarceration policies, which are steeped in gendered and racialized stereotypes (Meiners 2011, 559). Only by shifting the paradigm away from punishment-based approaches to safety by abolishing the prison system can we move away from similar approaches in schools. Envisioning an abolitionist future gives us the freedom to envision approaches to harm and misbehavior that focus on strengthening relationships, such as restorative and transformative justice practices. However, these practices cannot just be another option on the menu in response to harm, right next to suspension and exclusion, as it exists currently, but as replacements to exclusionary discipline.

Hannah, Brianna, and Maria demonstrate that youth who live at the intersection of many oppressions, and whose lives are impacted by many systems, can fight and resist oppression in schools to thrive on their own terms. But, imagine what they can accomplish if they did not have to live with that burden? The abolition of prisons would require us, as a society, to shift our understanding of harm and punishment and would require us to surround youth with community, care, and compassion, rather than pushing them away.

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