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SHORT COMMUNICATION

BLACK MALE DROPOUT: RACIAL DISPROPORTIONAL SCHOOL DISCIPLINE LEADS TO INCREASED PRISON POPULATIONS

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Abstract

Yearly in Mississippi, a precariously high percentage of African American male students disappear from the educational arena before graduating from high school. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey, Mississippi's poverty rate is 19.7 percent, the nation's highest poverty rate. African Americans make up 37.8 percent of the total population in Mississippi. Of this percentage, 32.7 percent live at the poverty level. When the data is condensed, 27.8 percent of Mississippi's children are born at or below this level and lack the necessities to achieve academically. These students face inadequate health and mental care, substandard housing, and low early literacy skills. As a result, these students bring challenges to classrooms. These challenges often lead to behavior problems that hinder their achievement and affect both teachers' and students' instructional well-being. A decade ago, Mississippi had the sixth-highest out-of-school suspension rate in the nation. In a report given by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR), Mississippi school districts have one of the highest suspension rates for Black students in both in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension. This fact explains why Black students received 75 percent of the total suspensions or three times more than their peers. This paper explores the dropout challenges that Black males face in acquiring their high school diplomas. It provides insight into the challenges that these students face and the link between high suspension rates and high dropout rates. As a result, the paper examines the connection between the dropout rate and our prison population.

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Introduction:-

In 2018, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 2.1 million students dropped out of high school, which means one student every 26 seconds or 7,000 per day. While the overall dropout rate decreased from 2006 to 2018, male students' percentage remained higher than female students (NCES, 2020). Research conducted by the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2010) revealed that only 47 percent of Black males enter the 9th-grade graduate. During the 2015-2016 school year, 2.7 million suspensions were given. While this number was less than

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the previous two years, the number of student referrals to law enforcement agencies on school grounds or school-related activities increased. Black students accounted for only 15 percent of that academic year's student population. However, of that population, black students accounted for 31 percent of those law enforcement referrals or arrests (Balingit, 2018). For several decades, scholarly investigations of school discipline have consistently determined patterns of overrepresentation for Black males. This research reveals a discipline gap wherein Black males' responses to behavioral problems were met with harsher disciplinary measures than other racial and ethnic groups (Shirley & Cornell, 2012). There is an overrepresentation of Black students, particularly Black males, in the population of students who are suspended and expelled from school because of existing zero-tolerance policies, according to studies (Hattar, 2018; Moore, Sanders, Bryan, Gallant & Owens, 2009).

As the significant gap in graduation rates between black and white counterparts continues to grow, the Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project (Connley, 2014; Kearney, Harris, Jacome, & Parker, 2014) reveals distressing statistics about the prison risk and challenges that Black males face who do not complete high school. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights cites that Black students are three times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts. While Black students only comprise approximately 16 percent of the public school population, these students receive 32 percent of the in-school suspensions and 33 percent of out-of-school suspensions. Sadly, this disparity begins in preschool. While states, such as Mississippi, have the lowest graduation rates of 51 percent or less, it has one of the highest suspension rates for black students, particularly black male students. In a study conducted by the Lives in the Balance (2020), Mississippi rates first in most punitive interventions given to students under the age of 18. According to Smith and Harper (2015), "Black students are disproportionately suspended, expelled, and referred to the criminal justice system by schools. The overuse of these punishments and their disproportionate use on students of color are serious problems that we have to address right now"(p. 2). School personnel must focus their attention on the equalities school discipline to address the achievement gap.

Causes of Suspensions:-

Although many students conscientiously decide to discontinue their educational path with little or no adult objections, the fact should not be ignored that not all African American male dropouts are intentional. Many do not possess the mental ability to keep pace with their peers due to academic rigor that results in low-grade performance. Besides, many encounter unresolvable issues with school personnel. Across the nation, frequent suspensions, expulsions, and arrests for minor offenses contribute to an epidemic that plagues schools in the form of the school-to-prison pipelines. These occurrences disproportionately affect students of color who possess a history of neglect, poverty, or intellectual disabilities, focusing on African American males. Heitzeg (2009) elucidates that the school-to-prison pipeline repercussions school leaders who criminalize minor disciplinary infractions via zero-tolerance policies. Consequently, students are criminalized through the juvenile justice system and/or the adult criminal justice system. For many, school becomes synonymous both literally and figuratively with the jail.

African American students, especially males, are disproportionately affected by harsh discipline policies and practices in Mississippi (Advance Project, 2013). African American students made up half the student population. However, they received almost 75 percent of the out-of-school suspensions, making them over three times more likely than Caucasian students to receive out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). While nationally, there have been decreases in the Youth advocates and civil liberties groups libel actions that push schoolchildren out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems as "school-to-prison pipelines." U.S. data collected across several states illustrate the link between punishment and school-related arrests, thereby confirming that the racial disparity in incarceration begins with the school-to-prison pipeline (Cole, 2020).

Research from Riddle and Sinclair (2019) indicated that African American male students are disciplined more often and are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers. African American male students classified as overtly aggressive were disciplined more than any other group (Horner, Fireman, & Wang, 2010). Such disciplinary actions increased the likelihood of black males being at a higher risk of negative life choices leading to involvement in the criminal justice system.

While Black male students received more discipline referrals, researchers have determined that once students were placed with same-race teachers, their classroom behaviors were rated more favorable (Downey & Pribesh, 2004). According to Strayhorn (2008), teacher expectations for African American male students are lower than those of other ethnic groups. Lowered classroom expectations create a differential treatment for students of color, including decreased praise and an increase in disciplinary actions, especially for African American males (Kim, Losen, &

Hewitt, 2010). While teachers and administrators have several options for providing disciplinary actions, most choose more severe punishments for Black male students than Caucasian students for the same offense. However, it can be concluded that contrary to the assumption that their discipline was merited, more often, the African American male students' behavior was no different than their Caucasian peers, thus linking the suspension problem to forms of bias and racial discrimination (Arends, 2019).

Effects of the Suspensions:-

Forty-nine percent of students entering high school with three suspensions on their record eventually drop out of school. When transitioning from elementary to secondary, African American male students' chances of suspension increase from 2.4 percent to 11 percent (Gee, 2013). Shifts in educational policy provide the immediate propulsion for the surge of children from school to legal systems (Heitzeg, 2009). Students who have dropped out or been involved in the juvenile justice system are more likely to have been suspended or expelled than their peers (Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, & Garcia-Vazquez, 2006). Several factors enable the school-to-prison pipeline in education that most negatively impact students of color, especially African American male students. These factors include increasing poverty rates and declining school funding, the resegregation of schools by race and class, and over-representation in special education tracks contribute to rising dropout rates (Barrington, 2019).

Living in poverty has a direct effect on the well-being of students of color. Many students of color face financial problems in their homes. Many have to take on adult responsibilities, such as becoming caretakers, gaining employment, or dealing with teen pregnancies. According to Freudenberg and Ruglis (2007), many students must consider the health of their parents. For this reason, many students of color leave school to assist family members. Additionally, African American male student's dropout rates are affected by approximately 20 percent of teen fathers dropping out nationally. Many parents who live at the poverty level raising Black male students, face learning at home disparity at a higher level than white parents (Bowman, Comer, & Johns, 2018). All these factors contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Conclusion:-

In acquiring their high school diplomas, African American males are faced with egregious challenges inside and outside of the classroom. This article aimed to critically analyze challenges associated with dropout rates among African American males in Mississippi. It provides further insight into some of those challenges related explicitly to challenges that these students face and the link between high suspension rates and high dropout rates. As a result, this paper looked at the connection between dropout rates and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Nationally, one and three African American males born in 2001 are in jeopardy of imprisonment during their lifetime. Due to increased suspensions and expulsions, higher juvenile incarceration rates are disproportionately represented among young people in juvenile detention centers or prisons. According to the ACLU (2008), the link between schools and the school-to-prison pipeline attributes to the increased reliance on local law enforcement rather than the school's teachers and administrators to maintain or provide discipline. The administration of school discipline is racialized; disproportionality a national crisis. It is important to proactively address racial imbalances in school discipline (Rudd, 2014). Educators must continue to speak in opposition to racial and ethnic biases in school discipline, ensuring that Americans better understand that the complete education system is out of balance until this problem is fixed.

Recommendations:-

To fully assess and understand the impact of racial disproportionality and disciplinary actions toward black males, future work with this target population must focus specifically on the dynamics of existing in a community that engages in various implicit and explicit biases. Aforementioned, black male students subjected to school disciplinary actions, such as out of school suspensions, run the risk of experiencing negative life outcomes. It is the recommendation of these authors, that educators, as well as administrators, be culturally sensitive to factors impacting African American male students daily. In order to improve the overall learning gap and create a conducive environment suitable for African American male students, teachers must be willing to develop a solid teacher-student relationship. School districts must be supportive in the restructuring of a learning plan addressing the needs of African American male students at risk for suspension and dropping out. This plan would require effort from both the teachers and the students. Although the relationship between racial biases, school suspensions, and

the school-to-prison pipeline remains problematic, we remain hopeful that future work will further spotlight the need to address disciplinary disparities and biases among African American male students throughout the United States.

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