

WHO BELONGS IN PLACES OF LEARNING

If you feel comfortable, close your eyes. Picture your ideal place to learn. Where are you? Who is there with you? Who is teaching? What do they look like?

Now open your eyes. Does this imagined place of learning resemble your educational experiences? Share with a partner the similarities and differences between your imagination and reality.

The fight for education justice navigates the gulf between the principle of education as a basic human right and the reality of how the quality of and access to education in the US changes depending on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and other identities. The following two texts, one biblical and one modern, explore the consequences of placing boundaries on education.

Consider the following definitions before reading the texts:

Punitive (*adjective*)

inflicting, involving, or aiming at punishment

Restorative (*verb*)

Having the ability to put or bring back into existence or use; to bring back to or put back into a former or original state

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 28a:2¹

The Babylonian Talmud is a compendium of Jewish laws, debates, and stories compiled in Mesopotamia during the early sixth century of the Common Era. Tractate Berakhot (Blessings) is focused on the different ways a person can express their faith during their lifetime². The section below concerns the transfer of leadership from Rabban Gamliel to Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya as president of the Sanhedrin, the rabbinic assembly in the 1st century CE.

It was taught: On that day that they removed Rabban Gamliel from his position and appointed Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya in his place, there was also a fundamental change in the general approach of the house of study as they dismissed the guard at the door and permission was granted to the students to enter. Instead of Rabban Gamliel's selective approach that asserted that the students must be screened before they could be accepted into the house of study, the new approach asserted that anyone who seeks to study should be given opportunity to do so. As Rabban Gamliel would proclaim and say: Any student whose inside, their thoughts and feelings, are not like their outside, i.e., their conduct and their character traits are lacking, will not enter the house of study.

The Gemara³ relates: On that day several benches were added to the house of study to accommodate the numerous students. Rabbi Yohanan said: Abba Yosef ben Dostai and the Rabbis disputed this matter. One said: Four hundred benches were added to the house of study. And one said: Seven hundred benches were added to the house of study.

Guiding Questions

- Why might Gamliel have put in place those policies as the head of the Sanhedrin?
- Why does the Talmud share this story? What lesson might they want future generations to learn from this situation and analysis?
- Where does Gamliel draw the boundary at which types of people should be included in places of learning? What boundaries do we draw in the US around our places of learning and education systems today?

¹ | [Berakhot 28a:2](#), translation by Sefaria

² | ["Introduction to Berakhot", The William Davidson Talmud, Sefaria.](#)

³ | Component of the Talmud that includes the rabbinical analysis.



“The Black Girl Pushout”: Monique W. Morris

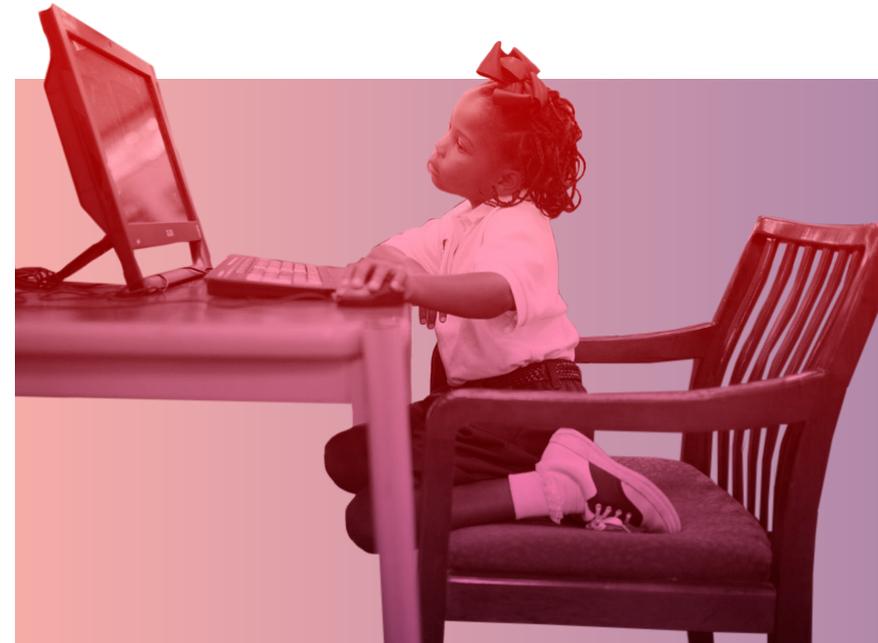
On Mar 15, 2016, The Atlantic’s Melinda D. Anderson interviewed Monique W. Morris, co-founder of the National Black Women’s Justice Institute and author of “Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools”⁴

Black girls are 16 percent of girls in schools, but 42 percent of girls receiving corporal punishment, 42 percent of girls expelled with or without educational services, 45 percent of girls with at least one out-of-school suspension, 31 percent of girls referred to law enforcement, and 34 percent of girls arrested on campus. Too often, when people read these statistics, they ask, “What did these girls do?” when often, it’s not about what they did, but rather, the culture of discipline and punishment that leaves little room for error when one is black and female.

Black girls describe being labeled and suspended for being “disruptive” or “defiant” if they ask questions or otherwise engage in activities that adults consider affronts to their authority. Across the country, we see black girls being placed in handcuffs for having tantrums in kindergarten classrooms, thrown out of class for asking questions, sent home from school for arriving in shorts on a hot day, labeled as “truant” if they are being commercially sexually exploited, and labeled as “defiant” if they speak up in the face of what they [identify] to be injustice. We also see black girls criminalized (arrested on campus or referred to law enforcement) instead of engaged as children and teens whose mistakes could be addressed through non-punitive restorative approaches.

Guiding Questions

- What are your initial reactions to the statistics Morris presents?
- How does Morris change the question of guilt in response to the data? Who becomes responsible as a result?
- In Rabban Gamliel’s time, education was not a right, as it currently is in the United States. Despite that, how do Rabban Gamliel’s policies echo within our current US educational system’s treatment of Black girls and young women?
- Is there a more inclusive and effective approach to education?
- How can these texts inform the way you approach volunteering for education justice?



Source: Brynn Anderson / Reuters