

One Boy's Suspension Points To Broader Inequities

By Abē Ross Levine

Three weeks into the school year, a period of significant readjustment following a year of learning remotely, Dr. Shadiatu Moustapha learned that her son had been suspended. Moustapha had been working with the school to support her son, Ahsan, who has a sensory processing disorder, which can make environmental stimuli more jarring. When she found out that Ahsan had been accused of assault, she was shocked.

“For my son to be suspended after three weeks of school... is not a failure on the child, it's a failure on the adults around him,” Moustapha said.

After speaking with the parents of the other students involved in the incident, they informed her that Ahsan had poked at his peers while mimicking a version of Duck Duck Goose. Ahsan was suspended again in his fifth week of school for grabbing his teacher's arm. Shadiatu was taken aback by how quickly Ahsan had been labelled and punished, and she disagreed with a recommendation to place him in an alternative learning program without adequate observation, including a [Functional Behavioral Assessment](#).

While her son's experiences were jarring, Moustapha has broader concerns about the way Black students are pipelined from schools into the carceral system. “Now that I'm dealing with this, the police are not the biggest issue. The biggest weapon is in the school system,” she said.

Research from the report [Disciplined and Disconnected](#) by the Center for Promise, a research center focused on enhancing student success, shows that nationally from 2015 to 2016, Black students were four times as likely to be suspended as their white students, and twice as likely to be referred to law enforcement. Meanwhile, In New York City, the largest racial disparities are seen in elementary and middle school where Black students are six times more likely to be suspended than white students according to the report [Stolen Time](#), published in 2018 by the New York Equity Coalition, which advocates for racial equity in schools.

Authors of [Disciplined and Disconnected](#), argue that exclusionary discipline, which includes in-school and out-of-school suspensions, directly impacts the suspended student as well as the learning environment overall. “Even when controlling for socioeconomic status, school type, and race, studies find that suspension has a significant and negative association with grades and test scores, especially during the academic year in which students were suspended,” the report's authors state. Advocates for alternatives to suspensions say more restorative approaches to discipline, which invoke dialogue and understanding, strengthen student ties to the community, while engendering trust rather than fomenting alienation and drop-out.

“We have to ask if students are being disciplined out of the learning challenges they’re having or supported,” said Brandon Brooks, an advocate for youth voice with the Solutions not Suspensions campaign, which seeks to end punitive discipline that leads to interactions with law enforcement and incarceration.

A 2018 report by the nonpartisan [Independent Budget Office](#), which examines issues affecting the New York city economy, found that school staff punish Black students more stridently than their peers for the same infractions, resulting in longer suspensions. Black students received longer suspensions in eight of ten categories reviewed in the IBO [report](#).

The categories included insubordination and reckless behavior, ranging to the more objective infractions of weapons and drugs possession. Black students missed up to twice the amount of school time as at least one other racial group, in three of the categories, including reckless behavior where Black students missed 16.7 school days on average in comparison to Asian students who missed 7.3 days.

Following national mandates to reduce suspensions under The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), an Obama era update of No Child Left Behind passed in 2015, The New York State Department of Education (NYSED) and the Board of Regents have called for greater accountability from schools to address suspension disparities. The ESSA earmarks federal funds and mandates that local school officials act to reduce “the overuse of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom.”

From 2012 to 2019 suspensions in public schools [decreased 53 percent](#), according to Department of Education data, due to policies of the Bloomberg and DeBlasio administrations, which sought to end suspensions for minor infractions. Researchers from the University of Michigan and Harvard found that these reductions correlated to improved test scores across NYC’s middle schools; the findings validated previous research highlighting school culture as a driver of academic success. While suspensions decreased overall, racial disparities persist.

Moustapha feels that there needs to be tougher oversight of charter schools, including Growing Up Green II Elementary School (GUGII ES), the school her son attended. As PTO president, she and other members of the parent teacher organization filed a complaint with the school’s board of trustees and later the NYSED alleging systemic racism, disregarding and bullying families, and undeserving children with learning disabilities. The principal at the time, Nancy Wong, stepped down after the complaint was filed.

[Civil Rights Data](#) from the U.S. Department of Education shows that in 2017 only Black and Latino students, who comprised 82 percent of the student body, were suspended, resulting in 46 missed days of school. While disabled students comprised only 5.5 percent of the student body that year at GUG II, they accounted for over half of these out-of-school suspensions. Nationally, Black boys comprise 19% of students with disabilities, yet they account for 36% of suspensions according to data from Disciplined and Disconnected. “Students of color who are neurodiverse are not supported in the same way as their white counterparts,” said Brooks.

In the 2021 school year through November 4th, only two students have been suspended for a total of four days at GUG II, according to the school's principal, Tomi Okuyemi, who took over the post after Ms. Wong's departure. "We examine how all aspects of our organization, from staffing to curriculum to discipline, informs our work in becoming an anti-racist and anti-bias community," Okuyemi said. While she couldn't comment on any particular incident, she explained that a student is suspended only if prior behavioral interventions prove unsuccessful. Shadiatu responded to the statement, noting that of all the children in the school, her son was targeted for suspension.

"Ahsan's a six year old child and the terminology used against him was assault. A Black boy in this country at this time cannot be accused of assaulting anybody," Moustapha said.

The New York State of Education Department is currently reviewing the complaint filed earlier this year, and should return with a conclusion by January of 2022 according to Tia Keenan, a fellow PTO member who helped file the complaint.

For Moustapha, changes begin with schools including parent voices in guiding their children's education and as well as adopting alternatives to punitive discipline. She's been impacted by the events of 2020 that highlighted issues of racial injustice. "It's bothersome, especially watching what happened with George Floyd and Sean Bell," she said. Bell, like Floyd, lost his life to police violence in 2006. He was killed in Queens by undercover police officers who fired 50 bullets into his car, which they claimed he had used to strike a police officer on the scene.

Moustapha says her son is doing much better after transferring to a new public school where she's seen significant growth in his speech and learning. "Let it be known, all he needed was compassion, number one, communication, number two, and just understanding how to create [learning] strategies," Moustapha said.

Deeper Issues at Growing Up Green

Matthew Greenberg has said to me, we spend so much more money per student at GUG II neglecting to put that in the context of we have a high IEP population, so the state gives them more money for the students, right? Like that's mandated by law. And actually, that's part of Growing up Green's business plan, too. And. You know...it... Growing up Green didn't invent charter schools warehousing poor kids with IEPs and making money off of that. They didn't invent it, but but they certainly participate in it.

-Tia Keenan

“When you have a big voice, they like to show you their power,” she said, referring to the school administration.

-Shadiatu Moustapha

Cuts:

Returning to school during the pandemic quote from Shadiatu

-time adjust

-proper behavioral evaluation

Data from Stanford University's Educational Opportunity Project shows that increasing school resource disparities tied to racial segregation widens Black-White achievement gaps as measured by test outcomes. GUG II is on the southern end of District 28, which extends up to Forest Hills and Kew Gardens. Schools in the south tend to have majority Black and brown student populations, whereas schools in the north skew white.

“It's literally a Mason Dixon line,” said Forest Hills parent Atina Bazin, referring to the geographical racial divide.

In 2019, parents vociferously opposed a [Diversity Plan](#) put forth by then Superintendent, Mabel Sarduy. The stated goal of the plan was to have schools better reflect the diversity of the places where their students lived, to integrate schools. “Even though we are diverse as a district, many of our students from different ends never get to know and interact with each other,” Sarduy wrote in a grant [application](#) for the plan.

“If we’re going to be honest here, most families in Rego Park, in Forest Hills, are not going to put their kids on extensively long commutes for the pleasure of attending a subpar school. It just doesn’t make any sense,” said parent John Schaefer, according to reporting from [Chalkbeat](#). Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the district had only just begun an engagement process surrounding the plan, which had not yet to include any formal proposals.

Don’t wanna leave room for interpretation;

Notes:

Suspensions nearly ceased during the [pandemic](#), may return

Despite the overall reduction in suspensions, Black students and those with disabilities are disproportionately suspended. “We need to give children the opportunity to find resolutions,” Shadiatu said. “Restorative justice, restorative justice, restorative justice,” she said. Arguably, schools themselves need to go through a process of restoration in order to establish accountability across the board.

Notes:

The Department of Education invested \$47 million to support efforts to reduce suspensions in schools. (Chalkbeat)

[Board of Regents](#) implemented regulations towards requiring schools to reduce suspensions under ESSA

To Contact:
NY Equity Coalition
The Education Trust- NY

Morris, E., & Perry, B. (2016). The punishment gap: School suspension and racial disparities in achievement. *Social Problems*, 63(1), 68-86.

Shadiatu:

Ahsan's entire first year of school in kindergarten had been virtual, and given a sensory processing disorder, Moustapha knew that regular communication with her son's teacher would be critical for his success.

+pipelining
+retaliation
+

Dr. Shadiatu Moustapha says her son Ahsan, a six-year-old Black boy, was suspended early in his first grade year.

Moustapha's son has a sensory processing disorder, which can make environmental stimuli overwhelming. Returning to school was a significant transition for Ahsan, who had been learning remotely during his kindergarten year. Moustapha initially worked with her son's teacher on how best to support him but eventually she said she felt pushed out. "Although you heard me, they didn't listen," she said.

Ahsan was first suspended for assaulting other children. After speaking with the parents of the children involved in the incident, Moustapha learned that Ahsan was trying to play Duck Duck Goose and had poked another student. "Parents of the children who were 'assaulted' were extremely upset... offended for me and my family. The children were not hurt," Moustapha said.

Ahsan was suspended once more after grabbing his teacher's arm. Moustapha was baffled when she got a call from the principal about the suspension; when she had gone to pick her son up, the teacher told her that he had a great day, she recalls. While Moustapha believes that her

son was merely trying to get his teacher's attention, the incident report indicated that she required therapy. The principal, who voluntarily left the school after a D.O.E. investigation into parent complaints, also brought up a variety of other concerns about Ahsan including touching other students' clothing after touching his facemask.

Atina:

Despite differences in student demographics, racial bias is a constant across the district, according to some parents. Bazin, who resides in Forest Hills Gardens says that her daughter, Hana, stood out as a biracial Black girl. Black girls are 8.6 more likely to be suspended than white girls in New York City schools, according to research by [The New York Equity Coalition](#).

Beginning in Pre-K, Bazin's daughter told her that boys were hitting her, a problem that would continue through kindergarten and into first grade. Bazin said the teachers downplayed her concerns. Yet, when she pushed the issue, Hana's kindergarten teacher said that she was responsible for getting the other students riled up and said Hana was "a bit of a mean girl," and a "ring leader." Bazin claims that her daughter experienced [adultification](#) bias, whereby adults ascribe nefarious, adult-like intentions onto children's behavior, particularly children of color. Traits of Hana's that teachers previously celebrated including exuberance and astuteness were recast as aggressivity and cunning, Bazin said.

Hana regularly complained of stomach aches and didn't want to be in school. She was routinely sent out of the classroom to the nurse's office for crying. "They wouldn't tell us to come pick her up, but they would say she's really crying a lot. At that point, I was like, you guys are just suspending her," Bazin said. Hana wasn't ultimately suspended, but other parents accused her of bullying and vandalism.

Four mothers gathered complaints to bring to the principal at P.S. 101 School in the Gardens. They claimed that Hana had destroyed a desk and spit at other children. Though none of the complaints were substantiated, twenty of Hana's first grade peers were asked to write down any instances they could recall of being bullied by her. "I took huge issues with that way of investigating [which] has nothing to do with bullying. Even if you took all of their complaints en masse, which they did, it still doesn't rise to the level of bullying," Bazin said.

Notes & Thought Fragments:

At one point, another student threatened to shoot her.

In 2017, Black students made up only 3.3% of the school population, Latinos 17.6%, and white students 44%. The school reported only two suspensions (in school) that year, one Latino and one Black. Bazin moved her daughter from P.S.101 in Forest Hills Gardens, after being blamed for bullying other children.

Speaker 1: [00:33:23] She, in fact, has with regularity, been viewed as. Aggressive. Hostile. A ringleader. [00:33:45][21.6]

Perceived disability

Data showing segregation:

<https://queenseagle.com/all/755-city-schools-are-more-segregated-than-their-neighborhoods-report>