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**Attitudes and Actions:
Conflict Within the Classroom and Disciplinary Outcomes**

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Abstract: This article examines disciplinary practices at a suburban high school in Kentucky. Statewide data shows a pattern of overrepresentation of some subgroups, particularly African American students, Special Education Status students and males, but qualitative observations in this study suggest that the problem originates within the classroom at the referral level based upon combinations of students in any given class, the teaching philosophy of individual teachers and his or her personal level of tolerance for misbehavior, rather than any overt system of discrimination at the administrative level. This article also gives consideration to the possibility of cultural mismatches between student and teacher, and whether differences may exist between African American and white educators in their management of underperforming or misbehaving students. Providing context from qualitative classroom observations and insights gained from interviews with the educators, this article briefly reviews selected disciplinary data from the participating high school and presents an argument that while statewide patterns indicate over-representation of some subgroups, caution should be given to interpretation of the numerical data and should be analyzed with consideration given to the demographics found within individual school districts.

Keywords: Cultural Mismatch, Overrepresentation, Discipline, Defiance, Disrespect

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ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS: CONFLICT WITHIN THE CLASSROOM AND DISCIPLINARY OUTCOMES

INTRODUCTION

In the Spring semester of the 2010-11 academic school year, I began a year-long ethnographic research project in the area of Social Inequality and Sociology of Education. In particular, I wanted to know why some students find themselves a frequent visitor to the detention or In-School Suspension room while others are happily engaged in sports and clubs, seldom if ever finding their actions closely scrutinized. A "common-sense" answer might say that it is simply a difference in the students themselves: their attitudes and personalities that cause the difference. Sociology, however, moves beyond common-sense assumptions to empirical research which can add valuable insight into social conditions that might otherwise not be readily apparent. It is true that some students "get into trouble" more than others, but understanding *why* and *how* this happens can only come from sociological inquiry. Moreover, the answer may have as much to do with the educators and the process of education as with those being educated. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the processes used by teachers, guidance counselors and administrative personnel within the high school setting to determine when a student has passed the educator's final latitude of acceptance of misbehavior.

This qualitative research project involved the participation of a variety of educators and administrators within a densely populated high school in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. As with any ethnography, because this project was carried out at only one institution, it cannot be generalized to all students and teachers within the state or the nation. It does, however, provide insight into understanding how differences in the disciplinary outcomes are related to the educators' perceptions of the students, regardless of the social characteristics of the student in question, and to how differences in the decision to make a referral are tied to the personality and teaching philosophy of the teacher. Rather than simply demonstrating through statistical evidence that some subgroups are overrepresented in disciplinary actions, this study sought to explain what may cause that overrepresentation to occur in the first place through direct observation of the interactions between educators and the students. A critical argument will be made that for this particular school, while overrepresentation was found among the minority students, the males and the special education students, ample evidence exists from the observations that this overrepresentation is not an intentional nor discriminatory process, and that it originates at the referral level within the classroom rather than as an outcome of administrative decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the academic literature focuses on the pattern of overrepresentation of racial minorities and lower socioeconomic status students as well as the male gender. A twofold gap exists in the literature: (1) addressing *how* this overrepresentation occurs, and (2) addressing the decision-making process in general, regardless of the student's social characteristics. This project sought to rectify this gap in the literature by teasing out the underlying processes through which educators decide when and how to administer sanctions for misbehavior. Quantitative data does not reflect actual events in the classroom that may lead up to a child being referred out of the classroom for punishment at the administrative level. Because of this, it is not clear whether minority students and other subgroups are

misbehaving at a higher rate, or if the teachers' perceptions and expectations may be influencing how quickly those students are sent out of the classroom for misbehavior. As noted by various authors, including Lareau and Horvat (1999) and Ferguson (2001), it is possible that some students (specifically middle class whites) are given special consideration by the school administrators while black students (who are more likely to come from a disadvantaged background) are not given the same consideration. This qualitative study addresses this gap in the literature.

Skiba, Michael, Nardo and Peterson (2002) note that minority overrepresentation in disciplinary patterns has been a consistent finding in social science research. Skiba, et al. (2002) document this pattern in a literature review of various research studies published between 1979 and 2000, relying on state, regional and national data sets (see, e.g. Children's Defense Fund, 1975; McCarthy and Hoge, 1987; Skiba, Peterson and Williams, 1997 and Wu, Pink, Crain and Moles, 1982). Studley (2002) documented that in four of the six largest school districts in California, African American students had higher suspension rates than any other racial/ethnic group during the two years of data analyzed. Mendez, Knoff and Ferron (2002) reviewed data from Florida's second largest school district and found African American boys had higher suspension rates than any group. The Civil Rights Data Collection ("CRDC") results were published in 2012, which indicate a continuing discrepancy in discipline based on race. Specifically, African American students represented 18% of students in the CRDC sample, but 35% of students suspended once, 46% of those suspended more than once, and 39% of students expelled. Additionally, discrepancies in outcomes were found by the CRDC based on both race and gender of the

students. Twenty percent of African American boys received Out-of-School Suspension, compared to seven percent of white boys, while eleven percent of African American females received an Out-of-School Suspension, compared to three percent of white girls (CRDC, 2012). In more recent research, Skiba, Homer, Chung, Rausch, May and Tobin (2011) once again document the ongoing pattern of minority overrepresentation in both office referrals and in disciplinary outcomes, including Out-of-School Suspensions and expulsion. Losen, et al. (2015) report that nationally, during the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years, 16% of African Americans were suspended, compared to 7% of Latinos and 5% of whites. Martinez, McMahon and Treger (2016) discuss the over-representation of African Americans in office referrals, placing the problem within the framework of both critical race theory and social-ecological theory, noting that teacher thresholds for misbehavior have been found to be related to classroom context in addition to the likelihood of implicit bias.

Fenning and Rose (2007:548) advocate the need for a study "to examine the ways in which school personnel invoke discipline procedures for students perceived as troublemakers or as threatening classroom control." Since that time, Skiba (2015) has considered this "ground level" approach, interviewing teachers and principals to gain insight into those decision-making processes. Skiba (2015) cites examples of inconsistent actions by school personnel, such as a teacher who spoke of the need to build strong relationships with students, but who was later observed sending an African American boy out of the classroom for calling out an answer without raising his hand. The present research, likewise, addresses the need for such an approach:

interviewing and observing to determine if actions are speaking louder than words.

The possibility also exists, but is not well-settled in the literature, that the race, social class or gender of the teacher may impact the treatment of the students. Evidence of this ongoing question can be found in the work of Ferguson (2003) and the work of Foster (1993). As noted by Ferguson (2003:461), there is a "controversial but common assumption that teachers' perceptions, expectations and behaviors are biased by racial stereotypes." This common assumption of bias typically revolves around white, middle class teachers of minority, lower-class students. However, Ferguson (2003) notes that the differential treatment experienced by lower-class minority students do not appear to always be tied to differences in the race of the teacher and the student. Quoting the experience of one African American teacher, "Paula," in a study by Cabello and Burstein (1995), Ferguson (2003:482) provides support for the notion that teachers of any race may be overburdened by the demands of some subgroups of students and thus treat those students differently:

> The first thing I knew was that they were just BADD. I know part of the problem was myself because I was saying things that I probably shouldn't have said because they got me so upset and I wasn't able to handle it. . . . I felt that being black I would automatically know more, and so forth, and in ways I think I do, but [the training program she attended] has helped me to understand things from many perspectives. . . . Black teachers who have been in different programs. . . haven't got this cultural awareness and I know that because they're so negative. . . . A lot of them aren't culturally sensitive to

> their own culture. (Ferguson, 2003:482, citing Cabello & Burstein, 1995:289-290).

Michele Foster (1993) paints a somewhat different picture, arguing that, historically, African American teachers have been depicted as unsympathetic and out of touch with their students. For example, she accepts the validity of Dee Ann Spencer's 1986 interviews with fifty teachers, but notes that only one of those interviewees was an African American teacher. Foster (1993:393) shows that Spencer (1986) depicted that single African American teacher in an extremely negative manner:

> Despite Valerie's own poor background, she always blamed parents for children's problems and had little sympathy for the poor. . . .Valerie's animosity toward the poor reflected her own frustrations at having to teach in a school not far from where she grew up – in the same cultural milieu (Foster 1993:383, citing Spencer, 1986).

Foster (1993) contends that this is the image that many have come to accept as the typical African American teacher. To counter this image, she presents evidence of interviews and in-depth studies of eighteen African American teachers who clearly defy this stereotype and are seen as exemplary role models for their students. Ultimately, the question of whether African American teachers, who may or may not come from the lower social class themselves, show differential treatment, either positive or negative, toward their lower-class minority students is an issue that remains open and unsettled. Likewise, whether white, middle class teachers consciously or unconsciously engage in discriminatory behavior toward lower-class, minority students is also a

matter of debate. Townsend (2000) suggests that white teachers may be unfamiliar with African American mannerisms, which may lead to interpreting their interactions as combative. Vavrus and Cole (2002) also document classroom student-teacher interactions that indicate cultural mismatch and racial stereotyping based on violations of expected linguistic codes of conduct. Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson and Bridgest (2003) found that walking with a pronounced "stroll", often characteristic of African American movements, was associated with stereotyping by the teacher, and that this stereotyping occurred regardless of whether the student was African American or white. It was not the *race* of the student, but the *action* associated with a race, that led to the biased assumptions. Martinez, et al. (2016) note that African American males are overrepresented in office referrals, and are more likely than white students to be referred for subjective offenses such as disrespect or loudness. Accordingly, office referrals may be a combination of overt misbehavior and teachers' understanding and interpretation of their behavior. The present study provides evidence that addresses these concerns.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION AND RECRUITMENT METHODOLOGY

Kentucky's public school system is predominantly white, with only 21% of students belonging to a racial or ethnic minority group, divided equally between African Americans and all other groups combined. Over 60% of public school students in the Commonwealth qualify for Free or Reduced-Priced Lunch. Statewide data (Kentucky Center for Safe Schools, 2007-2008 through 2015-16; Legislative Research Commission, 2016) shows significant gaps in disciplinary actions and outcomes based on race, gender, special education status and social class (as measured by Free and Reduced Price Lunch status). Disciplinary outcomes represent the final disposition of office disciplinary referrals that originate most often at the classroom level, although some infractions originate in the hallways, stairwells, cafeterias and elsewhere on school property. Data from the Commonwealth is divided between Board violations and Law violations, and both sets indicate continued disparities in violations and in outcomes (KCCS, 2015-16; LRC 2016). Board violations include infractions such as bullying, harassment, defiance and disrespect, truancy and possession of tobacco and look-alike drugs. Law violations, by definition, are illegal acts such as vandalism, assault, and possession of drugs. In both data sets, African Americans, Special Education students and students receiving Free or Reduced-Price lunch were significantly more likely to be referred to the office for a Board violation or a law violation than whites, non-Special Education students or students who pay full price for their meals (KCCS, 2015-16; LRC 2016). It is possible that the discrepancies shown in the state data with respect to disciplinary outcomes are occurring at such high rates in schools that are atypical for this state (the large, urban areas), that it makes the issue appear to be institutionalized, without giving consideration to the wide variations that may be found across schools. That is, larger and more urban school systems with a higher percentage of racial minorities, special education students or students lower in measures of socioeconomic status may discipline at such high rates that it makes it appear that the problem is systematic. For smaller schools where only a small percentage of students are identified as minority status or special education status, even slight variations in disciplinary decisions will lead to significant

discrepancies in percentages, and is not, in and of itself, indicative of discriminatory practices.

The participating high school was a "typical" high school in this state (that is, suburban or rural, not urbanized; and predominantly white, matching the characteristics of the state population data as a whole), which allows the possibility of disparate outcomes described above to be explored. Because this was not a funded project, it was necessary to recruit a school system near my academic institution to minimize travel and other associated costs of the study. Four high schools in the geographic area were contacted for recruitment purposes, with all declining the invitation except the school which is now documented in this study. The school serves students throughout the county, which gives the school a great deal of diversity with respect to characteristics of the student population, a factor that was given consideration when recruiting schools in the area to participate. The research protocol approved by the University's Institutional Review Board requires confidentiality. All names are pseudonyms; no teacher, administrator or the school itself is identified through an actual name. Disclosure of demographic data of the school and surrounding community has been limited to avoid compromising the identity of the participating school district.

Following a school-wide invitation to participate in the project through a presentation to all faculty and administrative staff, a total of twelve classroom teachers agreed to participate, along with three administrators, two program coordinators and a guidance counselor. Observations were conducted typically two days per week, over the course of two semesters, working around the teachers' individual schedules of testing, activities and other school-related events.

The observations were documented in real time, through a process of shorthand note-taking that recorded the academic subject matter being discussed in class by the teacher, the teacher's interactions with students and his or her command of the classroom, as well as the actions of the students during the class period, including their comments, individual conversations (to the extent those could be overheard), their body language and the overall atmosphere of the classroom. To the extent possible, comments were recorded verbatim, but that was occasionally rendered impossible due to the overlapping conversations and chaotic environment of some classrooms. Journal entries elaborating on the experiences in the classrooms and informal conversations with the teachers were prepared immediately following the observation periods, typically in the library or elsewhere on the school premises.

Because the group of volunteers was self-selected, it is plausible and perhaps even likely that these teachers represent the "cream of the crop" of educators. That is, teachers who are willing to open their doors to a stranger for observation and possible criticism are the teachers who feel most confident in their abilities and do not feel they have to adjust their behavior for the benefit of the observer. Nonetheless, even if these teachers represent the best the school has to offer its students, the observations remain of critical import. Events that unfolded in some of those classrooms were shocking to one who was unaccustomed to the daily routines of the high school and it leaves open the question that if misbehavior occurred with regular frequency in the "best" classrooms, then what might be occurring down the hall? This study, however, can only address the events that were observed and place them into context with the disciplinary data that is available. While

twelve classroom teachers were studied during the scope of the project, the present article will focus on two English teachers, as the experiences documented in those classrooms provide a clear contrast between teacher perceptions, student actions and disciplinary outcomes. Observations made during this study that provide additional insight into classroom misbehavior and give consideration to other elements of the disciplinary process are documented elsewhere in the literature (Glass, 2014).

OBSERVATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Disrespect as a Problem

Junior and Senior English classes are sometimes combined into one single class for students who have fallen behind in their required English credits.   By placing these two levels together, students can be "fast tracked" into earning the necessary credits for timely graduation. However, a downside to this class structure is evident when considering which students are the ones who are part of a combined-credit course: students who have failed the standard course and who must now get caught up with their peers.   The failing students are often the ones who have behavior problems which leads to time out of the classroom thus compromising their ability to stay on track academically.   The failing students also tend to have more absences and tardies than their peers, which leads to academic downfall. The end result is clear: a combined English 3/4 class will be comprised of students with troubled backgrounds and absent any high achieving students who could help their struggling classmates or who might otherwise be able to spur the academic interests of their lesser-achieving peers.

One of the English 3/4 classes observed on multiple occasions is led by Ms. Greene, a soft spoken African American teacher who appears to be mid-fifties.   Ms. Greene is a long-term substitute at the school, and she is the third substitute this academic term for Ms. Yardley, who has taken emergency family leave during the Spring semester. Ms. Greene will stay with this class through the end of the school year. Each time I visit this particular English 3/4 class, it is extremely chaotic.   It overlaps with the lunch period, so the first thirty minute portion of this class is labeled as a study block; when the students return from lunch, the actual class period begins.   Study blocks, however, are still expected to be held in an orderly fashion, and Ms. Greene works, often unsuccessfully, toward this goal.

On one particular day in March, she calls one group of girls down three times for excessive talking.   Each time, they complain loudly to each other and to her, but they eventually settle down to do some bookwork.   During lunch, these same girls annoy another classmate, Jarod.   Jarod returns from lunch, very frustrated with the girls, and tells Ms. Greene that he's not coming back into class with them, that they've been talking too much all day.   It's evident that he is very agitated by their behavior although it isn't apparent that any of their actions have been directed toward him.

Ms. Greene tries to calm him down, using a soothing and patient tone, to no avail.   When he refuses to take his seat, Ms. Greene asks the girls to accompany her into the hallway so that she can get a better idea of what has transpired.   While she is speaking with the girls in the hallway, Jarod states, loudly, to no one in particular "I hate fuckin' bitches anyway."   Ms. Greene returns, and asks Jarod what he would like to do about the problem.   He requests to do his work in the hallway, and she allows him to move his chair out of the room where he remains for the rest of the class period.

She later explains to me that Jarod qualifies for Special Education based upon his behavioral history, but his parents have opted for him not to be formally identified to receive the services. She accommodates his needs to the best of her ability, and points out that it was the best solution, in her opinion, to allow him to work in the hallway. Had she insisted that he take his seat in the room, he would have continued to disrupt the class with his complaints, and had she sent him to In-School Suspension, then he likely would have not done any of the assigned work. She shows me his fully completed worksheet as evidence that she made the right decision. The question remains, however, for purposes of this research, as to whether Ms. Greene truly handled the situation effectively. On the one hand, she did accomplish two goals: first, she maintained classroom order by placing the offending student in the hallway, albeit at his own request; second, the struggling student successfully completed that day's work. On the other hand, she allowed a non-compliant student to dictate *what* he was or was not going to do, and *where* he was going to do it. This can send a message to other students that the teacher is not in full control of the classroom, and that they too could choose or refuse to comply with the rules.

Ms. Greene also teaches Senior English, a General Education class comprised of approximately twenty students, almost exclusively male. On every occasion that I visit this particular class, the room exudes a chaotic, almost frightening, atmosphere. The students have separated themselves into friendship groups, and conversation is never lacking in this room. Respect for Ms. Greene's authority is also lacking, as the boys challenge her at every opportunity. Although these challenges are done in a joking manner – "Ah, Ms. Greene,

don't make us do that!!" – more often than not, the students do their work slowly and continue to talk and banter among themselves throughout the hour. On one occasion, Ms. Greene became very frustrated with Josh, who had talked almost non-stop during the period. Even with her frustration level clearly shown on her face, she maintained her composure and quietly asked him if he was doing any work, to which he responded "You mean, right now? I did some work this morning." Ms. Greene responded "I didn't say this morning. I mean right now." This type of student response to this particular teacher was typical, and as the observations continue throughout the semester, the non-compliance of the students increase, especially as the school year (and Senior Year, for many) comes to an end. Although this class is a general Senior English course, the behavior of the students in this classroom is no different than the students observed in the remedial English 3/4 course.

Reflection and Analysis.

Had these types of situation been confined to a single or couple of incidents, or an experience typical of only the underperforming English 3/4 students, then an appropriate analysis would be that Ms. Greene was maintaining control of her class while making concessions at the individual level for the good of the whole. However, observations of both the lower level class and the "on-track" class continued to demonstrate that while her heart was in the right place – as was apparent through the many comments she made to me during break periods and later in her full interview – her lax discipline policy often led to a highly disruptive classroom atmosphere and was not conducive to truly effective behavior management. On another occasion, for example, rubber bands were being shot across the room by a male student, while

another repeatedly bounced a small rubber ball off the back wall. Both misbehaviors were simply ignored, although they were clearly disruptive. On yet another occasion, a student climbed over chairs to get to Ms. Greene's desk to ask her a question (rather than just walking down the aisle) and students were frequently seen using their phones and Ipods during video presentations. The issue of personal space sometimes manifested itself in her classes, as students were often seen touching and poking one another, and boys were seen playing with girls' hair, which would typically elicit loud complaints by the offended student, although this was more for "show" than out of any real sense of offense. "Ms. Greene, tell Chris to quit touching me!! . . . He's still doing it!!" These outbursts served to disrupt the entire class and flow of lecture or quiet work, yet they continued throughout the semester without being effectively quashed.

Eventually, as the school year comes to a close, Ms. Greene had managed to work with these students so that all have successfully completed the course. This was quite an achievement, given that one hundred percent of this class was comprised of students who were lagging academically. Despite the constant bantering, outbursts and displays of disrespect, Ms. Greene had achieved her goal of academic success among the students. In personal discussions, Ms. Greene left no doubt that she saw each child as a potential success story, and she was willing to work after hours, on weekends and during Spring Break to help each student meet the minimum course requirements even if that didn't necessarily translate into English proficiency. Nonetheless, the behavior of the students did not improve during the Spring semester, and they finished the year as unruly as when observations first began.

In contrast, other general English courses observed with Mrs. Black (discussed below), whose teaching style differed from Ms. Greene, were much more contained although some misbehavior was observed in those classes as well. This leads to the conclusion that the teaching style and teacher personality play a definite role in determining student behavior, in some instances more so than the academic level of the course. It also impacts the ability to analyze numerical data, as some teachers, such as Ms. Greene, try to work with the students individually rather than writing a referral to an administrator. To this end, then, the data is skewed because the referrals that are available for analysis are not evenly distributed across the offending students, but is more a reflection of a teacher's tolerance level of misbehavior. Teachers with less tolerance will write more referrals to his or her students, while other misbehaving students, such as those taught by Ms. Greene and who most certainly warranted a referral, may not receive a referral at all.

Lack of Motivation as a Problem

Mrs. Black has been teaching English courses at the school for eight years. She engages her students with a peppy attitude and is constantly in motion as she lectures her students, using elaborate gestures and body language to convey the ideas and storylines of the novels she uses in her courses. On more than one occasion, I note that her enthusiasm for the material is evident, and this often (but not always) serves to keep her students engaged in activities that are otherwise passive, such as listening to audio recordings. When she utilizes audiotapes, she often starts and stops the equipment to elicit comments and reflect on the events within the scene. Even with her high-energy, bubbly personality, she commands respect in her classroom, often

speaking sharply to students when they are off-task.

As observations within her classes began, she advised me that her students generally exhibited positive attitudes and good behavior with the exception of one class period. Observations in her various classes confirmed her description, as one class of students was generally less compliant than students in her other hours, although there was no difference in the academic level of her classes. This might most accurately be summed as "luck of the draw," simply the outcome of student assignment to that particular class period. Nonetheless, the type of misbehavior displayed by those students had a completely different tone than the misbehavior witnessed down the hall in Ms. Greene's room.

On one particular day in early May, I am seated in the classroom as the students file in. They take longer than usual to settle down, and Mrs. Black wastes no time raising her voice to tell them there should be no talking. Immediately after calling the class to order, however, two girls (one African American and one white), sitting rows apart, begin to discuss the film clip that is currently being used to supplement the novel they are reading in class. "Are we going to see the ugly girl again?" the African American girl asks. The white girl, who has evidently already read the upcoming portion, replies "No." "Good," the first girl replies, "She needed to be gone, she was so ugly." Mrs. Black gives the girls a sharp glance, but says nothing.

This class is small with approximately 16 students, five of whom are minority students, which is a large number of minority students for such a small class at this high school. The minority status of this classroom, however, does not appear to play a significant role in behavior, other than the

African American students are typically louder-voiced and more verbal with one another than the white students on every occasion that I visit this classroom (and which is a pattern that is demonstrated in many classrooms that I observe and in the corridors). One particular African American male is often seen sleeping throughout the period. On this day in May, he lays his head on his desk as soon as he arrives, and appears to fall asleep almost immediately. He is using his IPod headphones, and the music is audible to the students close to him and to me, three rows away. A few minutes after class begins, he raises up, stretches broadly, and his head makes a soft "thump" as it lands back on the desk. The body language of several students in the class makes it apparent that they are disinterested in the novel (The Great Gatsby). One white girl and one African American boy have their heads down, arms outstretched across their desk, heads turned to the side, appearing to follow along with the reading but clearly not enjoying the story.

Similar body language is seen across the classroom, including five white girls who sit in the back seat of every row. Each of these girls have their heads down, napping. (On this particular day, only two students appear to be fully engaged in the reading and the film clips, and both of those are Hispanic students). About one third of the way through the period, Mrs. Black has finally reached her limit with the lack of engagement. "Would all of our sleepers in the back get their heads up?" In unison, the five girls raise their heads and flip their hair. The African American male who has been sleeping the entire time raises his head, pulls his hoodie over his forehead and returns to sleep. By the time the class is half finished, the other African American male, who had been at least pretending to follow along, has also fallen asleep.

Reflection and Analysis.

This lack of interest in the material was a common theme for this group of students and this type of quiet noncompliance was observed on multiple occasions. It was much different than the unruly misbehavior observed in Ms. Greene's course, but it nonetheless represented a rejection of the authority of Mrs. Black to demand that the students pay attention and participate in the class. Also in contrast to Ms. Greene's insistence that every student is able to master enough material to pass was the attitude of Mrs. Black toward these non-participating students. I asked her about the continual napping in her room, and she replied: "Well, the girls back there, sometimes they pop up and comment, so I never really know if they are sleeping." Nodding to the seat occupied by the ever-snoozing African American, she noted "That one, he's failed for the year. He has some ridiculous grade in here right now, less than a ten percent. And that one," gesturing to the seat occupied by the other African American male, "he's not passing either, but his grade isn't as bad as the other one. So, sometimes I get them up, and other times I think, hey, you're sixteen or seventeen, you know you're failing, your parents have been contacted and they've seen your grades. It's up to them." Other groups of students observed with Mrs. Black did not seem to have the same level of disinterest; this may have been related to the particular mixture of students assigned to any given class, rather than related to Mrs. Black's teaching methods. Nevertheless, the observations in this particular classroom raise the possibility that Mrs. Black had different expectations for this group of students as a whole, or individually, as in the case of the failing African American. Based upon the series of observations, informal conversations and the formal interview,

however, there is ample evidence to suggest that Mrs. Black's choice to let the students make their own academic decisions did not mean she was unconcerned about the students; rather, she let them make their own choice as to what their class performance would be in anticipation of the adult roles they would soon assume. On multiple occasions, she was seen encouraging the students to ask questions and complete the assigned work. Her classes generally ran quite smoothly, with the exception of the occasional students who were out of their seat or students who showed up to class after the bell rang. The sleepers, although they were chastised for their behavior and told to sit up, did not disrupt the other students and it appeared that after Mrs. Black had brought them to attention at least once, sometimes twice, she typically ignored the behavior. Her decision to make the students responsible for their own academic success was echoed by other teachers during this study, as it was seen as a way to make the student aware of adult-like responsibilities and behavior.

These observations provide support for the assertion that classroom management style has a direct impact on student attitudes and disciplinary outcomes and that certain student-teacher combinations result in higher rates of referrals (Gregory and Weinstein, 2006; Gregory and Ripski, 2008). The data provided by the school indicates that Mrs. Black's no-nonsense attitude is echoed by her greater willingness to write referrals to students who are tardy or who are overtly misbehaving, even though she appeared to disregard the unobtrusive non-compliance witnessed in her classroom.

DISCIPLINARY OUTCOMES

Misbehavior at this school was witnessed among racial and ethnic minorities and white students, and with both boys and girls. What happens to these students,

though, once they are sent out of the classroom? The academic literature indicates that within many school districts minority members and certain other subgroups are subjected to higher rates of disciplinary actions, specifically In-School Suspension, Out-of-School Suspension or Expulsion than other students. The typical student who is suspended or expelled is more likely to be from a lower socioeconomic group, in a special education class, male and a low-achiever (Skiba, et al. 2011; Gregory and Weinstein, 2008, Skiba, et al. 2002; Leone, et al. 2002; McCarthy and Hoge,1987 and Wu, et al, 1982). Moreover, racial disparities have been documented for over four decades, noting that African Americans were as much as three times as likely to be suspended as a white student (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Ferguson, 2001; Skiba, et al. 2002; Gregory and Weinstein, 2008; Gregory, Skiba and Noguera, 2010; Skiba, et al. 2011; CRDC 2012; Skiba, 2015, Losen, 2012 and Losen, 2015). The long-term consequences of repeated disciplinary actions are also well documented in the literature. Citing Gregory and Ripski (2008:338):

> Suspended students are more likely to have low achievement (Arcia, 2006), be retained (Civil Rights Project, 2000), receive future suspensions (Skiba and Noam, 2002), and experience dissatisfaction and alienation (Lovey, Docking & Evans, 1994). Moreover, suspended students are at risk for long-term negative outcomes. They are more likely to drop out of school, become involved in the juvenile justice system, and later be incarcerated (Baker, et al. 2001; Civil Rights Project, 2000).

Within this particular school, based upon the observations, behavior concerns were more pronounced in classes with low achievers and those which contained a large number of students identified as Special Education students. It did not appear that teachers or administrators were making any intentional decision to discipline any racial group or social group any more than others. However, as the teachers who chose to participate with the classroom observations were self-selected, and it is possible that teachers who see themselves as more fair and who are generally more confident in their teaching methods would have been the ones more likely to participant with this study. To the extent that some subgroups may be more likely to be referred to an administrator for punishment, this study suggest that this is related more to the actions witnessed within various classrooms where referrals originate and are thus an outcome of individual teachers' tolerance level for misbehavior, the teaching philosophy of the individual educator, the perception of the teacher with respect to the individual student or the collective class, and to a cultural mismatch between student and teachers.

The school provided disciplinary data for two months of the study, March and September. Because the emphasis of this study is qualitative, the discussion of the data has been limited. The school's total minority membership is currently just under 14%, consistent with percentages found in many rural areas of Kentucky. Referrals of minority students were somewhat higher than would be expected if their offending occurred at rates consistent with their percentage of the student body. In March, 25% of referrals were written to minorities, and in September, 33% of referrals were written to minorities. A similar pattern emerged when considering some (but not all)

disciplinary actions, and it must be remembered that some resolutions indicate a positive outcome for the student, such as phone calls to the parent or detention, both of which are mild outcomes, rather than a more severe punishment such as suspension. Minority students were overrepresented among the outcomes which could be viewed in this positive light. Cross-tabulation of data of Disciplinary Actions by Race did not support a finding of discriminatory behavior at the administrative level, nor did another layer of cross-tabulation, Violation by Race by Disciplinary Action. With respect to defiant behavior, an event which is often mentioned in the literature as one of the areas where minority students are overrepresented in the disciplinary data (Gregory, Skiba and Noguera, 2010; Monroe, 2005; Skiba, et al. 2002), it could be argued that in some cases the minority members received lesser punishments than the whites. In particular, a larger percentage of minorities were assigned to After School Detention (which can be construed as a mild punishment) and resolved through parent conferencing, while a larger percentage of whites were given In-School Suspension than minorities. At the same time, however, a higher percentage of minority students did receive Out-of-School suspension.

Overall, no evidence of any intentional discriminatory behavior at the administrative level emerged between white students and minority students. To the degree that minority students may be overrepresented in the disciplinary process, it is occurring at the referral level. This could be a result of social class differences more so than race, stemming from a cultural mismatch between students and teachers or the direct effects of poverty. Minority members are more likely to live in impoverished circumstances which oftentimes are a contributing factor in poor

academic performance and high levels of frustration (which may be expressed through defiance and disrespect), as noted by teachers and administrators alike.

For purposes of this research project, it was not possible to cross tabulate the data by socioeconomic status because the school's disciplinary data did not contain information on free lunch status of the students, nor was that data available on an individual basis to the administrators. Instead, reliance must be made on the social/cultural capital displayed by the student in their everyday interactions at the school to glean insight into his or her social class status. While it may be accurate to believe that a large percentage of the African American and Hispanic students at this school are at the lower level of the social class ladder, it is just as accurate that a large percentage of the impoverished student body are white. Many of those impoverished students, both white and minority, were seen in lower-level academic courses as well as being identified with special needs. It was in those classes that misbehavior was most pronounced and it was in those classes that teachers were continually struggling to manage behavior and return the students' attention to the academic material at hand.

Because many of the referrals may have originated in classes such as those, to the extent that some of those students may have been minority members, then it follows that minority members may eventually be overrepresented in the disciplinary outcome data. In and of itself, that should not be construed as an indicator of racial discrimination stemming from the teachers or the administrators, but as a result of (1) student apathy or student frustration, both of which may lead to displays of defiance or other disruptive behavior or (2) as a result of teacher frustration in which a single student may be the one called out for punishment

after a series of students have acted out in a short period of time (Vavrus and Cole, 2002). Moreover, the overcrowding of some classes, the mixture of students within any class, and the assignment of students to classes to which they may feel are not relevant to their future lives may exacerbate the misconduct and which are situations that are beyond the original control of the student.

As previously noted, to the extent that minorities are overrepresented in this school's disciplinary data, it appears to be originating at the classroom level. For example, referencing the category of defiant behavior during the month of March, approximately 73% of the referrals were given to white students, an underrepresentation, while approximately 27% of the referrals were given to minority students. If the defiance was not definite and overt, and instead was a matter of subjective interpretation, then this may indicate the problem of cultural mismatch: verbal intonations and body movement that is normalized within the minority community may be construed as defiance on the part of the white teacher (Skiba, 2011; Neal, 2003; Ferguson, 2001). This does not indicate any type of *intentional* discriminatory treatment directed toward an individual student or group of students, but instead points to the need to understand cultural differences and practices within the home environment that may carry over to the school. As the behavior continues, and the same students receive multiple referrals, then the punishment becomes more pronounced, leading to the gap in the data.

Similarly, the violation "disrespect to a school employee" provides useful insight into the nature of escalating consequences and the dangers of misrepresentation of statistical information. In September, the total number of referrals for disrespect to a

school employee was nine, four of which were minority student referrals and five of which were white student referrals. Among the five white students, one received Saturday school, two received detention and two received In-School Suspension. For the four minority students, however, the punishments differed: one received detention; two received In-School Suspension and the fourth received Out-of-School Suspension. A quick glance at only the percentages could quickly lead to the conclusion that minorities are being punished more severely. A higher percentage received In-School Suspension, and one was suspended from the school campus while no white students received such a harsh punishment. However, from a numerical standpoint, which may serve as a guide to the administrators, they saw an almost equal number of whites and minorities (5 to 4) and within each group a variety of outcomes were given: detention, In-School Suspension and Out-of-School Suspension. If the minority students receive more referrals over time, then for the minority student who received the Out-of-School suspension, his or her punishment may be warranted based upon utilization of the discipline matrix. White students, on the other hand, who may be more likely to have only a few or even no referrals on record, will be on the lesser end of the continuum of punishment. This does not, in and of itself, indicate any type of racial discrimination at the administrative level, regardless of the inferences that could be made from looking solely at numerical data. It is this concern that is addressed by triangulating the numerical data with qualitative research through observations and interview.

In contrast with the literature, which argues that "Educators' unwillingness to draw distinctions between severe and minor

offenses and the breadth with which zero tolerance approaches are applied appear to be primary sources of the problem" (Monroe, 2005:47; Skiba and Peterson, 1997), the conclusion from this particular school is that the teachers and administrators *do* make efforts to draw those distinctions, but within some classrooms, such as that of Ms. Greene, the teachers are being pushed to the limit of their ability to maintain order, or in other cases, an air of apathy, such as that witnessed in Mrs. Black's classroom, leads to disengagement from the educational process among students and frustration among educators. Interviews with those in charge of disciplinary decisions indicate that administrators attempt to give individual consideration to each student. However, if the Code of Conduct discipline matrix is construed as a form of "zero tolerance," meaning that as offenses are repeated and referrals are multiplied, then the corresponding punishment must also be increasingly severe, then it stands to reason that if minorities are given more referrals at the classroom level (which does appear to be the case at this school), and if the administrators are adhering to the discipline matrix, then those students will have correspondingly higher levels of more severe punishments, including both In and Out-of-School Suspension.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

One teacher who participated in the study made the following observation, demonstrating the intersections of race, place and socioeconomic considerations within the educational system. Not only do her words provide a good summation of the variables that play a role in misbehavior, but her choice of words also convey the sense that the teachers are at a loss for how to change the situation:

> I don't care what color you are, or where you're from, you're not going to disrupt this class. I don't know what makes the difference. They [the minority students] just seem to have more problems. Two or three of them in first period give me problems every day, but there is another African American boy in the class who never gives me any problem. Every student is different, I know. The African American kids that act out are from poor backgrounds, so could it be more of a socioeconomic thing, sure, but there are lots of poor white kids too. In one of my classes, there's this particular group of boys, and they are nice enough farm kids, but they talk too much and act out.

The classrooms where the most misbehavior was witnessed were General Education classes (not Honors or Advanced Placement classes), classes with large numbers of underperformers (such as students taking a course for the second or third time such as Algebra I or II or the English 3/4 class described herein) and classes with several students identified as eligible for Special Education services. Thus, the lowered academic expectations and the past social and academic history of those students very likely were contributing factors to their levels of defiance, disrespect and general misbehavior which led to the writing of referrals in those classes, regardless of the race or ethnicity of the student in question. Past research (Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005, Hanna 1988; Weinstein, et al. 2004; Weinstein, et al. 2003) supports the idea of a cultural mismatch between students and teachers; an argument could be made that this problem was found in the participating high school. For example, speech patterns and mannerisms which may differ based upon

racial, ethnic or social background may be viewed disparagingly by middle-class white teachers (Delpit, 1995; Townsend, 2000; Neal, et al, 2003; Gregory and Weinstein, 2008; Skiba, et al. 2011). Thus, given the large number of referrals which were written for defiance and disrespect, whether a cultural mismatch might be in operation at this school is a valid question. In many instances, the defiance and disrespect which were witnessed during classroom observations left little room for subjective interpretation (such as cursing at a teacher), other issues arose which became a matter of how the teacher reacted to body language, verbal intonations and speech patterns. Such issues are documented in the literature as differing between whites and minorities (Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 2001; Monroe, 2005). Increasing awareness of cultural differences should be a priority for school districts, particularly in areas where racial and ethnic minority teachers are not well represented, as was the case at this participating high school.

The academic literature (Foster, 1993; Spencer, 1986) also speaks to this issue of minority teachers and whether their interactions with students of color or lower social class status students differ from their white counterparts. As previously noted, one of the teachers who volunteered to participate in this study was a long-term substitute, a soft-spoken African American teacher named Ms. Greene. This teacher, who was observed throughout the spring semester when she was employed at the school, was witnessed to be an extraordinarily understanding and patient teacher, treating all students fairly and consistently. Nonetheless, she remarked that she was dismayed by the disrespect displayed by the students in the school, an attitude that was clearly at odds with her value system. Her dismay, however, did not negatively impact her treatment of the students; if anything, it appeared to strengthen her resolve to remedy the misbehavior through the process of reflection.

Ms. Greene confided to me that her son had attended an urban high school with a majority of minority students, and that she was always shocked, as a parent, by the attitude of the teachers at that high school. "You wouldn't believe the things you would hear them utter in the halls," she explained. Recognizing this pejorative attitude toward minority or lower class students and the damaging effects it can have on student morale, she explained that she made conscious attempts never to label a child as being incapable of success based upon their social location. Moreover, she remarked that it was her belief that the teachers and administrators at this school all took steps to ensure that did not happen. She explained that compared to the urban high school, the atmosphere at this participating high school was entirely different. "You don't hear things like that over here," she remarked. Her patience with the students, both academically and behaviorally, was remarkable. She held her students, even those who were underperforming, to a high standard, insisting that they were capable of succeeding. She sometimes shared their work with me, beaming with pride at their accomplishments. Her willingness to engage the students in conversation and forge a connection with them was always apparent even when the students were misbehaving which was common in her classroom. The academic literature (Gregory and Weinstein, 2008) suggests that this type of approach – her demandingness that they *can* do the work coupled with her efforts at relationship building -- should be very effective in gaining students' trust and earning their respect for her authority over the class.

Unfortunately, this process is made all the more difficult for Ms. Greene, as she was the third teacher in that particular classroom in the Spring portion of this project, a fact that she believed had significantly contributed to their poor behavior and academic performance. Her limited time in the classroom does not provide an adequate opportunity to determine how her teaching and disciplinary strategies would have worked, had she been with the students a full academic year or more. Whether Ms. Greene is representative of minority teachers in this school district, or in others across the state, is not known. At this high school, regularly-employed minority teachers simply were not seen; while the school employed minority administrative and custodial staff members, the primary educators were white. Therefore, increasing the racial diversity of the teaching staff could be seen as an area where there is room for improvement by the participating school district, combined with workshops that focus on cultural awareness.

CONCLUSIONS

This participating institution is faced with the same challenges that are rampant across our nation, and a critical analysis of the sources of defiance, disrespect, lack of motivation and the prospect of eventual attrition of those students must be undertaken, with a corresponding analysis of teacher perceptions, expectations and willingness to accommodate students from all walks of life. This study indicates that although the participating school does not appear to have any systematic discrimination present in its process of discipline, there is room for improvement. Administrators need to seek out seminars and workshops for their faculty that specialize in cultural diversity which will increase the teachers' awareness of both the obvious and the more subtle differences between white and minority students in their everyday behavior,

including common mannerisms and speech patterns so that behavior which is normalized in their home life is not misconstrued as defiance or other misbehavior by white educators. Likewise, increasing the racial diversity of the staff could help achieve this goal. Increased diversity and workshops alone, however, will not adequately address the full range of concerns that surfaced during the course of this study. Students must be held to high standards of accountability, regardless of background experiences, to minimize the chaotic environment that was witnessed during the course of this study in the lower-level and General Education classrooms. Students should be expected to "rise to the occasion," rather than teachers giving up on their chances for academic success by mid-year. This requires increased efforts toward academic success by both the teachers and by the students. Increasing the motivation and lessening the negativity among late adolescents, however, is not as easily accomplished as changing the teaching strategies and disciplinary methods of the teachers. Student concerns must be understood and addressed during the elementary years, prior to poor study habits, poor attitudes and poor academic performance having had an opportunity to become the norm. Thus, while this study originated at the high school level, its implications of the need for change are more far-reaching. It is possible to achieve these goals, although the current structure of the educational system across the nation (i.e., often overcrowded, underfunded and understaffed) presents significant challenges.

In sum, qualitative data provides insight that cannot be gained from quantitative analysis alone. Data often appears to indicate a systemic problem of discrimination, and while that may be case in some schools, it should not be the default

assumption. The inability of the educational system to effectively address these issues is summed up in the words of another English teacher at this school, and reflects the seriousness of the problem that must be addressed for all underperforming students, regardless of the students' race, ethnicity or gender.   Her statement serves as a warning to parents, school officials and anyone else who is interested in fixing our nation's educational system, and it underscores the necessity of swift change:

> [S]ome classes just don't seem to care. It's about their upbringing.   If a student is willing to tell a teacher to fuck off, then you know they're doing it at home. And the fact is, there's not much you can do about it. Just assign the work and accept the attitude. Writing them up doesn't do anything, In-School Suspension doesn't deter them. And then Saturday school, well, they don't show up for that either. After three detentions, the policy is Out-of-School Suspension, and they don't care. They didn't want to be here in the first place. It is truly a flawed system. The school is really powerless to do anything with those kids.

In light of her observations, it is clear that teachers must receive proper training in classroom management techniques and cultural competence. That, along with flexibility and the willingness to adjust teaching styles to speak to the individual learner, engagement of the student at an early age to foster good study habits and instill motivation, and a positive relationship with families and the community, can support the mission of the public education system to provide a solid foundation for the future of our nation.

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