

Teaching Disruptive Students: An Indictment of Colorblind Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract: Teacher education programs do not sufficiently prepare White teachers to work with Black and Latino students in disciplinary alternative schools. From a critical race theory in education perspective, prepared White teachers are aware of their own ethnocentrism and, subsequently, develop anti-racist pedagogy and curricula.

“We teach Black students to be disruptive in school!” a White female colleague explained across the dinner table to a White male. He was of the mindset that all Black students who were involved in suspension, expulsion, and the juvenile justice system deserved it. She expressed thoughts succinctly on how racism informs teachers’ decisions to use or not use exclusionary discipline with their Black students. Exclusionary school discipline is the act of removing students from mainstream classrooms and, ultimately, excluding them from mainstream education (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975). In the United States, exclusionary school discipline results in mostly Black students being removed from classrooms as a consequence of their disruptive behavior. This disparity is referred to as the discipline gap (Monroe, 2006). Yet, no evidence supports the claim that Black students are more disruptive than their peers (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000). Exclusionary school discipline often leads to the suspension or expulsion of Black, and more recently Latino, students to disciplinary alternative schools (Van Acker, 2007). Due to the negative impact on students of color, exclusionary school discipline is considered an oppressive educational practice and condition (Weis & Fine, 2005). As a result of their disproportional involvement in the discipline gap, students of color are also overrepresented in the achievement gap (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

Literature Review

Since Skiba and colleagues’ (2000) study, Vavrus and Cole (2002) examined the “sociocultural factors that influence a teacher’s decision to remove a student from the classroom” (p. 87). They studied how disciplinary moments, or “patterns of classroom interaction that often precede a suspension” (p. 89), are negotiated as social practice among teachers and students. Results indicated that disciplinary moments vary by the sociocultural context of particular classrooms. That is, disciplinary moments do not occur as a strict series of events presumably linked to violence. Instead, classroom discipline problems appear to originate from White privilege paradigms that support ethnocentric views of intelligence, behavior, and learning (Gutiérrez, 2006; McIntosh, 1997). Teachers’ decisions appear related to system constraints (i.e., district or state high-stakes testing mandates) and fear of the loss of control in the classroom (Noguera, 2008). Even though disciplinary moments are sociocultural negotiations between teachers and students, teachers ultimately have the power to decide whether to use exclusionary discipline or to create culturally responsive learning environments. White teachers’ particular ways of thinking about, acting, communicating, and presenting themselves to students of color

Pane, D. M., & Rocco, T. S. (2012). Teaching disruptive students: An indictment of colorblind teacher education programs. In M. S. Plakhotnik, S. M. Nielsen, & D. M. Pane (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 11th Annual College of Education & GSN Research Conference* (pp. 105-113). Miami: Florida International University. Retrieved from http://education.fiu.edu/research_conference/

appear to influence classroom and school discipline practices. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about their own and their students' race impact classroom instruction and student achievement (Blanchett, 2006; Delpit, 1995). Disrespect, disobedience, disorderly conduct, and fighting are the most commonly reported reasons that teachers write referrals to the office (Skiba, 2001). However, studies comparing cultural interaction styles show Black behaviors viewed as misbehaviors were not intended as such by the students. Instead, Black cultural humor, play fighting, and overlapping speech are discourse styles that use repetition, dramatic flair, "creative use of word patterns, and an overall playfulness in language usage" (Irvine, 1990, p. 101).

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) focuses on the teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers who use CRP recognize how racism and discrimination impact their students. They empower students holistically by building on cultural referents. They also help students make connections to their community, country, world, racial, and cultural identities. In a study investigating how White teachers and students of color negotiated classroom conflict during literacy classroom interactions, race interactively and influentially constructed social relationships, personal identity, and academic knowledge (Rex, 2006). In another study examining the influence of race and culture in "teachers' implicit theories about the causes of discipline problems" (Gregory & Mosely, 2004, p. 18), teachers blamed the school, student, and community for misbehavior. Most teachers' implicit theories were colorblind; they did not recognize culture or race as a confounding issue. Teacher education programs that encourage CRP influence teachers' mindsets and classroom outcomes positively (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Five essential elements of culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004) suggest: (a) recognition of one's own ethnocentrism; (b) knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds; (c) understanding of the broader social, economic, and political context; (d) ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate management strategies; and (e) commitment to building caring classrooms.

Problem

The influence of CRP on teacher education programs encourages teachers to consider their own racial and cultural identity and how it shapes their approach to students and their teaching. However, the focus of CRP has been on lowering the achievement gap. CRP has rarely been considered extensive in light of disciplinary practices. CRCM focuses on managing classrooms with CRP but needs more attention. This study focuses on cultural misperceptions of teachers in light of disciplinary practices. The purpose of this study is to examine how race informs teachers' decisions to use or not use exclusionary discipline through the lens of critical race theory in education. Critical race theory (CRT), context, method, results, discussion, conclusion, and implications are provided next.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) provides tools for discussing how race, racism, and power are deeply ingrained in American schools and classroom micropractices. It addresses "race, power, language, gender, identity, class, and social structure in relation to the opportunities and legal rights of individuals and groups" (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 455). Five CRT tenets include: (a) counterstorytelling racial stereotypical discourse; (b) recognizing permanency of societal racism; (c) challenging Whiteness-related educational inequities; (d) questioning interests at stake; and (e) challenging colorblindness, neutrality of the law, and incremental change (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Context

A disciplinary alternative school in a large multicultural southeastern United States public school district was selected for the study because of the Black and Latino male student population who had been expelled from school for disruptive behavior. Dr. Jones, The School's White male principal, welcomed the prospects of the study because of a program, Positive Behavior Support (PBS), he had initiated two years earlier. PBS is a school-wide point system for teachers to assess students' behavior. Students who achieved sufficient points attended a weekly reward activity. A PBS poster hung on the front of the building, promoting The School's discipline philosophy. PBS charts were exhibited in each classroom to designate the location of the time-out bench (see Figure 1) and to document points earned by each student for good behavior (See Figure 2). Students had to follow 10 PBS rules in order to earn their points: be punctual, wear the school uniform, bring your own supplies, do not use electronic devices, keep your hands and feet to yourself, do not use profanity, participate fully in all class activities, do not create or cause disruptions through your language or behavior, give maximum effort in class, and do not leave your seat at the closure bell until dismissed by the teacher.

Method

Critical microethnography merges ethnography, critical social research, and discourse analysis to study daily classroom life with attention to broader societal structures, learning processes, and social and academic identity reproduction (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005). Critical goals involved studying what was being learned, for whose benefit. Micro- goals involved analyzing verbal and nonverbal language in the cultural, social, and political context. Ethnographic goals involved observing inside classrooms to gain an understanding of participants' cultural behaviors. The researcher selected 4 classrooms for the study—two teachers who frequently and two teachers who rarely used exclusionary discipline. Mr. Glass was a White male language arts teacher who most frequently used exclusionary discipline; 3 Black students and 1 Latino student participated. Ms. Gomez was a Latina language arts teacher who frequently used exclusionary discipline; 3 Black students and 1 Latino student participated. Mr. Frederek was a White science teacher who rarely if ever used exclusionary discipline; 4 Latino students participated. Mr. Jenkins was a White culinary arts teacher who never used exclusionary discipline; 2 Black and 2 Latino students participated. Data were collected in each classroom through 5 hours of video-recorded observations. A 20-minute segment of the most representative disciplinary moments in each classroom was burned onto a DVD. During the interviews, teachers explained what was happening and why as they watched the DVD from their classroom. Data analysis was performed using a multi-stage process from creating a primary record, locating possible objective validity claims, meaning reconstruction, and high- and low-level coding, to final reconstructive data analysis (for more information see Pane, 2009).

Results

Teachers discussed how the option of using exclusionary discipline in the school-wide Positive Behavior Support (PBS) environment influenced their classroom management techniques and responses. They also discussed their lack of previous experience with Black and Latino students in disciplinary alternative education before being hired to teach at The School. Each teacher developed his or her own classroom management techniques based on perceptions of both PBS and students' abilities and behavior. Ultimately, each teacher predetermined whether he or she would write referrals to handle disruptive behavior. Representative data from

teachers who rarely and frequently used exclusionary school discipline (referrals to remove students from class) are provided in this section.

Teachers Who Rarely Used Exclusionary School Discipline

Teachers who rarely used exclusionary school discipline had a greater understanding of (and blamed) the school and the system politics. For example, Mr. Jenkins said:

I think getting back to the whole thing about the referrals, since I've been out here, there can be a few problems with writing a kid a referral . . . first and foremost . . . we are here as his last . . . opportunity If we're kicking him out of our school, or even out of our class, which is almost the same thing, where are we kicking him to, what are we accomplishing really? Outdoor suspension . . . it's just any place but here.

Mr. Jenkins did not write referrals; he believed his role was to provide "clarification, for reference . . . as long as they're keeping themselves motivated on track, in a reasonable timeline, that's the goal really of vocational instruction, is to have them working as if it were a job."

Mr. Frederek voiced that "the administration and the teachers, it's like a hierarchy . . . it's not working together, everybody does the thinking for someone else it's a bureaucracy." He elaborated how this division impacted the referral system:

[Referrals are] all political . . . [the administration does not] really like them to be given out, because that information goes downtown and if it's a lot of referrals it looks good or bad on a school if there's a lot of behavior problems.

He understood the "flaw in the system" that caused him to rarely write referrals:

When you send a student to detention here and then you . . . sit down to write your referral, there might be hundreds others of issues in the classroom and then you write them up and then you send the referrals over there too and then you're supposed to get a copy too, but whatever happened to that referrals you don't know if it actually, sometimes it might not even be executed so you don't know.

Ultimately, Mr. Frederek believed his students would benefit if they stayed in class. He decided whether the "issue was . . . big enough" to write a referral. He understood that just one person can change the whole dynamics in the classroom and the interactions . . .

To be in this school for a longer period of time is not good. You shouldn't be, the purpose is to be sent back to your normal school.

Teachers Who Frequently Used Exclusionary School Discipline

Teachers who frequently used exclusionary school discipline blamed the student, family, and the school system. For example, Ms. Gomez said:

[Teaching here] is a battle, everyday is a battle. Everyday you know, I've got to come up with some way to trick these kids into learning something new that day because most of the time, they just fight me on it or they want to sleep or they want to talk or they just don't want to do it so but you know, I've gone through in the 3 years that I've been teaching, I've tried pretty much everything. I've tried bribing them, I've tried threatening them, I've tried babying them, anything that I can, sometimes with some kids certain tactics work, but with most of them, I still don't know how to get through to them.

She believed that her students "do what they do because they want attention. They don't care if it's positive or negative they just want that attention because they don't get it anywhere else." She wrote referrals when "they push[ed her] over the edge." She would go to the door and call for security, "because for those kids, they would rather be picking up trash or rather be sitting in an air conditioned room without anyone bothering them than sitting in the classroom having the

teacher riding them about doing their work.” Ms. Gomez believed, “I’d be pretty messed too if I dealt with half the things they’ve had to go through.” She elaborated:

And this school I think turned him [one of her prior students] in the opposite direction because now he is in prison. And I’m not sure how long he is going to be there for a while. And so you have these horror stories . . . we don’t know what they go through but you got to think about what they’re what they’re coming from. It’s like the school system just has the assumption that everyone has a perfect family that takes care of them and that nurtures them and that gives them all those basic needs and they are going to come here and do what they’re supposed to do but that’s just not the reality that most of these kids have.

Mr. Glass equated disciplinary issues with learning issues:

First of all, the students in this setting have been removed from, expelled from their regular school, so they obviously are coming here, not in a normal situation. They have had fights or they have been involved in drugs, or they’ve had problems with truancy, so they are students who have certain either emotional dysfunctionalities or learning differences, learning problems, and they are not motivated to come to school in general so they are restless in the classroom. They are students of to whatever degree of impulsivity.

He believed that his students did not “dream about going into higher education” like students in regular schools. He believed that “if they were able to develop more organized study habits and could understand normal behaviors in a classroom, they would . . . do fine in higher education, but they need practice in those types of behaviors.” He elaborated on why they come to school:

They come to socialize, they come to hang out, they do not come with a mindset to study, or to do conceptual academic work, they do not like it when [I] ask them to think. They love busywork or what I would call handouts that do not require them to do much more than fill in the blanks, copy material from the board that they consider, I did my work I should get an A or I should get a B.

Mr. Glass believed that his students were “not equipped because they won’t go to the library and get a personal copy of whatever we are reading in class, they won’t do homework.” He thought that their short attention spans was because “their mind wanders off and they may be thinking about sex or about drugs or why whatever they’re thinking about but it’s away from concentrating on the task at hand in the classroom.” He discussed the negative influences of many students’ family backgrounds. For example,

[he’s] got a lot of issues that make him the kind of clown type student that he projects . . . His overall demeanor is one of being a jokester, acting like a fool, and he’s earned very poor grades because he doesn’t care . . . I believe that his situation at home has caused a lot of his attitude problems, he is not a good student because he does not have the support that he could have or might have from a more stable home situation which is demonstrated here in his desire not to stay.

Discussion

Teachers in this study did not conduct CRP and did not possess all five essential elements of culturally responsive classroom management. None of the teachers recognized their own ethnocentrism as a factor in classroom decision making. The two teachers who frequently used referrals viewed students’ cultural backgrounds as deficient. The two teachers who rarely or never used referrals had some understanding of their broader social, economic, and political context. None of the teachers were familiar with culturally appropriate management strategies.

The two teachers who rarely or never used referrals appeared committed to building a caring classroom. In this study, the two teachers who frequently used referrals blamed the student, family, community, school, administration, PBS, or school system for students' suspension. Black and Latino student backgrounds were not considered when the teachers discussed students' (mis)behaviors, even in the classrooms characterized by rare or no exclusionary school discipline. All teachers omitted students' racial and cultural backgrounds in their explanations. A color-blind mentality existed in all classroom disciplinary decisions; race was invisible. Depending on how strictly teachers adhered to their (mis)perceptions about students' (mis)behaviors and who or what was to blame in their minds, exclusionary discipline outcomes differed. Mr. Glass's strict adherence to his preconceptions resulted in extremely passive and disengaged students during academic lectures; teacher-student relationships in this type of environment were so poor that students often skipped or competitively disrupted in order to get removed from class. Ms. Gomez's inconsistent threats and reactions to classroom problems resulted in extremely disruptive and competitive students who were unconcerned about what was being learned academically or socially. Teacher-student relationships were haphazardly based on the severity of the most recent reprimand or threat of referral. Mr. Frederek's classroom discipline was balanced with student input, discussion, and enjoyment about what was being learned; positive teacher-student relationships developed and more time was spent on academic learning. Mr. Jenkins's understanding of the political nature of suspension combined with classroom discussion, personality, and humor resulted in positive teacher-student relationships and regularly completed academic products and social learning.

Conclusion

Oppressive educational conditions are practiced racism. Racism is systemic in our society. Yes, we do teach Black students to be disruptive in school. The school-wide PBS sustained an oppressive educational atmosphere. As a result, the five tenets of critical race theory were missing. Counterstorytelling of racial stereotypical discourse did not occur. The permanency of societal racism was not mentioned. Whiteness-related educational inequities were not challenged. Whose interest is at stake was not questioned. Colorblindness, neutrality of the law, and incremental change were not challenged. Per CRT, teachers in this study gave color-blind, neutral reasons for how often, why, and how strictly they did or did not follow system rules and regulations about controlling students. They expected incremental, if any, behavioral or academic changes that are taken-for-granted by dominant members of our society and school systems. Although none of the teachers explicitly followed PBS as intended, classroom interactions were implicitly bound by the school-wide discipline philosophy. Two teachers who rarely or never used referrals questioned inequities but not in relation to racism. Teachers were primarily concerned about maintaining control of their classrooms; two teachers who rarely or never used referrals considered how suspension impacted their students negatively but not in relation to racism. As time spent on maneuvering exclusionary discipline consequences increased, academic substance decreased; no evidence of counterstorytelling was evident through the use of anti-racist materials and/or pedagogy. Teachers responded to classroom discipline problems or potential problems by doing what was familiar and comfortable for them. The teacher most familiar with his students' cultural and racial backgrounds (as a result of personal experiences) never used exclusionary school discipline. None of the teachers had been exposed professionally to disciplinary alternative schools or the Black and Latino students who populated them before being hired. Overall, teachers made classroom decisions as

they had been taught (or not taught) by the system, which did not address CRT or CRCM in disciplinary alternative schools.

Implications

The main implication of this study is that racism is legalized in the official rules of exclusionary school discipline and concretizes negative societal thinking about Black and Latino students. Teachers, who are mostly White and middle class, need to be specifically prepared to work with Black and Latino students in disciplinary alternative schools. This practice would increase equitability in education for all students. Both teachers and students suffer from the lack of purposeful anti-racist teacher preparation for disciplinary alternative schools. Anti-racist pedagogy rids the curriculum of the conviction of the superiority of White cultural or social norms. From this unjust and discriminatory omission, misinformed teachers get involved in power struggles in the classroom unnecessarily. The second implication is for disciplinary alternative schools teachers to rethink their implicit theories of Black and Latino students, their communities, and their cultural and racial practices. One-size-fits-all curricula produce failure labels that are continually adhered to disciplinary alternative schools and students who attend them. Teachers and their students would benefit from anti-racist discourse and pedagogy that questions persistent colorblind inequities in educational practices and conditions. Teachers and their students would benefit with race-conscious, equity-oriented humanist approaches that interrogate the sociohistorical, political and intellectual context of disciplinary alternative schools. Black and Latino students would benefit if their White teachers understood how to build on students' racial and cultural backgrounds to increase literacy learning opportunities in the classroom. Less time would be spent controlling behavior, fewer referrals would be issued, and fewer suspensions would result. Addressing the permanence of societal racism would benefit Black and Latino students who are impacted disproportionately by exclusionary discipline and low literacy levels. These suggestions may begin to reduce the extreme focus and exorbitant amount of time spent on controlling perceived disruptive behavior in all schools, but particularly disciplinary alternative schools and classrooms. Instead of being constrained by rules and regulations about controlling students' behavior, White teachers can be empowered to learn how to spend time on positive academic classroom interactions, increase all students' opportunities for literacy learning, and collaborate together for social justice. Subsequently, their Black and Latino students will learn to spend time in class differently too.

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Appendices



Figure 1. PBS chart to locate time-out bench.



Figure 2. PBS charts to document behavior points.