

# Understanding the discipline gap through a cultural lens: implications for the education of African American students

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African American students are disciplined at rates that are disproportionately higher than Black students' statistical representation in public schools. Coined as the discipline gap, racial and ethnic disparities are present in virtually every major school system across the United States. Because African American students seldom share the cultural frameworks of their teachers, the overrepresentation of Black students on measures of school discipline may, in part, be a function of cultural mismatches in the classroom. This article contains a synopsis of what is currently known about the discipline gap, and sets forth suggestions to address the issue. Recommendations focus on the roles of culturally responsive discipline, teacher recruitment and cultural immersion experiences. Irvine's construct of cultural synchronization serves as the article's interpretive basis.

## Introduction

Educational inequities based on student race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) are well documented. Most research involving African Americans paints a dismal portrait of their schooling experiences in comparison to other groups. One of the most disturbing trends to emerge from empirical research is the disparity that exists in school discipline. The discipline gap, or tendency for African American students to be sanctioned more frequently and severely than their peers, is present in virtually every major school system throughout the United States (Civil Rights Project, 2000; Gordon *et al.*, 2000; Johnson *et al.*, 2001; Applied Research Center, 2002). Qualitative studies further indicate that inequities are most pronounced among low-income and male students, even when youths are engaged in identical

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forms of perceived misbehavior (Rist, 1973; Gouldner, 1979; Emihovich, 1983; McCadden, 1998). The breadth and regularity with which such disciplinary patterns exist support the need for ongoing scholarly attention to the problem.

In recent years, some school officials have accepted the daunting challenge of closing the discipline gap. For example, in 2001 leaders in the Seattle Public Schools made a public commitment to end racial disparities in discipline by 2005 (Denn, 2002). Similar efforts have been documented in other locations around the country (Keleher, 2000; Denn, 2002). Realizing this end, however, requires that educators have a sound understanding of current research findings on school discipline, and factors that contribute to unequal student treatment.

This article contains a synopsis of what is currently known about the discipline gap in US K-12 public schools. For educators committed to democratic aims, the exploration of African American students' experiences offers the greatest promise of eradicating disparities, as Blacks are the group most likely to be overrepresented on institutional measures such as suspension and expulsion. The joint consideration of previous conceptual and empirical scholarship highlights compelling reasons why cultural incompatibilities between teachers and students may be a primary source of ongoing inequities. Working within Irvine's (1990) conception of cultural synchronization, I offer recommendations for how educators may alter their professional orientations and practices to address the discipline gap.

### **The culturally grounded nature of misbehavior**

Although explanations for school failure vary, scholars in the field of multicultural education generally agree that cultural constructs are a significant explanatory factor among low-income students of color (Banks & Banks, 1995). For example, educators often view parenting practices in low-income Black communities as pejoratively different from trends found among middle-class Whites (Hale-Benson, 1982). Many researchers argue that such alternative views create conditions for differential student treatment that systematically marginalizes non-mainstream students (Delpit, 1995). Situating the discipline gap within the intersection of teachers' and students' cultural norms may shed insight into both the persistence and prevalence of the problem. Moreover, a firm scholarly grasp of the dilemma's conceptual overlay offers a useful starting point for identifying classroom-based solutions.

### **African American students: outlines of a cultural framework**

Hilliard (2002, p. 89) has observed that 'culture is nothing, more nor less, than the shared ways that groups of people have created to use and define their environment'. Despite the learned and fluid nature of culture, social scientists have identified marked distinctions based on race and ethnicity. Irvine and York's (1995) investigation of cross-cultural learning styles is particularly useful in this arena, as the work provides a functional understanding of traits common in many African American communities. Broadly, their review of research suggests that physical

movement, animation, spontaneity and displays of emotion are valued forms of nonverbal expression. In naturalistic settings, culturally based traits are demonstrated as exuberance, playful aggression, and exaggerated forms of bravado (Kochman, 1981; Hanna, 1988). Research by Anderson (1990, 1999), Canada (1995) and Majors and Billson (1992), among others, further suggests that Black males often reflect rhythmic and confident interpersonal styles, display distinctive forms of dress and body ornamentation, and so forth. Pasteur and Toldson (1982) reached similar conclusions although their work did not reflect major gender distinctions.

Verbal exchanges among African Americans often are characterized in parallel form. According to Smitherman (1977), Black speech may be organized into five categories: call and response; signification; tonal semantics; and narrative sequencing. Empirical studies reveal that cultural tenets of Black speech are manifest in variance in cadence (Heath, 1983), creativity and spontaneity (Delain *et al.*, 1985), and topic-associative style (Michaels, 1981). Taken together, a significant body of scholarship reveals that African Americans' uniqueness of expression holds true across the reaches of time and location in the nation (Hilliard, 1995; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 1995; Lee, 2001). Reflecting on the trenchant nature of Black student failure and learned cultural dispositions and behaviors, some scholars have posited that anti-intellectualism (McWhorter, 2001) and oppositional identities (Ogbu, 1990) are core components of African Americans' cultural make-up. Scholars who support these arguments hypothesize that Blacks, as a cultural entity, bear responsibility for their educational failure based on a collective ethos, as well as personal choices, which fail to value traditional avenues of success. Yet, such theories are highly problematic given their inattention to variations within the Black community (Irvine & Monroe, in press), inability to account for the consistency of African American educational success prior to desegregation (Irvine & Foster, 1996; Siddle Walker, 1996), and negligence in explaining similar findings regarding academic failure among low-income White and mixed race students (MacLeod, 1995). Rather, the systematic nature of Black student failure appears to reside, in part, with cultural incongruities between students and teachers.

### **The cultural face of the teaching corps**

Demographic distributions in the teaching profession stand in stark contrast to the backgrounds of students who attend urban schools. Although 68% of pupils in the nation's 100 largest school districts are youths of color, approximately 87% of all teachers are White (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997, 2001). Furthermore, as poverty encompasses a growing number of urban students, the vast majority of practitioners continue to identify their own socioeconomic upbringing as lower-middle and middle class (Children's Defense Fund, 1994; Zeichner, 1994, 1996; Gomez, 1996). Cross-cultural comparisons moored in examinations of race, ethnicity and SES are important as behavioral norms in middle-class and White

communities often differ significantly from standards found among low-income and African American populations (Shade, 1989).

Regarding verbal discourse, Kochman (1981) documented that the cadence, purpose and protocol of speech among Whites tends to function in opposition to norms found among African Americans. Whereas orality in Black communities is frequently marked by narration, demonstrative displays and opportunities for overlapping speech, analyses of White communities suggest that oral patterns tend to be linear, pragmatic and defined by turn-taking. Heath's (1983) exploration of language in two North Carolina towns further reveals that SES distinctions serve to reify cultural differences. For example, middle-class teachers in her study tended to pose instructions and commands as questions, such as 'Is this where the scissors belong?', rather than making direct statements (p. 280). Practitioners' reliance on indirect speech stood in contrast to directive approaches present in their low-income students' homes. Importantly, scholars such as Delpit (1993), Gordon (1998), Monroe and Obidah (2004) and others have identified direct and authoritative styles as core components of effective communication with economically disadvantaged Black students.

In addition to verbal discourse, social scientists have argued that non-spoken behaviors further imbue interpersonal interactions with meaning. Erickson (1993/1996) has identified factors such as eye contact, styles of dress, proxemics, body ornamentation and gestures as key communicative facets. As with spoken interactions, nonverbal norms for different cultural groups may be characterized by inconsistencies and sources of conflict. Both reviews of literature and empirical studies provide evidence that teachers identify student-directed physical movement (Everhart, 1983) and displays of emotion (Gouldner, 1979) as inappropriate behaviors in school contexts. Additionally, Black students' efforts to ready themselves for academic tasks through stage-setting behaviors, such as rearranging and checking learning materials, tend to be perceived as off-task behavior and procrastination by their teachers (Gilbert & Gay, 1989). Because low-income African American students seldom receive instruction from teachers who share their cultural framework, culturally based misunderstandings based on race, ethnicity and social class may serve as a powerful reason for present trends in the discipline gap.

### **Cultural conflict in the classroom as a foundation of the discipline gap**

Many researchers have speculated that cultural conflict precipitates school failure for students of color, particularly youths from low-income backgrounds (Byers & Byers, 1972; Nieto, 1999, 2000; Gay, 2000). Support for culturally based arguments surrounding school failure rest with implications of the culture of power, such as teachers' acceptance of their own frames of reference as normative (Delpit, 1995). Significantly, individuals who hold power are often unaware of the lines of privilege that result from their membership in the dominant group. In terms of classroom life, the culture of power extends to teachers' stated and latent expectations for student behavior on personal and interpersonal levels. The taken-for-granted nature of

cultural norms, particularly among teachers, has strong connections to the discipline gap.

On one level, the overwhelmingly middle-class White presence in the teaching corps has caused K-12 institutions to be heavily Eurocentric. Although researchers routinely cite state and district curricula, teaching materials and the like as examples of the culturally influenced nature of school life, teachers' behavioral expectations, rules and policies are closely aligned with norms found in White and middle-class circles as well. For example, many studies indicate that teachers identify elevated voice levels, self-initiated student speech, self-directed student movement, displays of emotion and pupil-to-pupil interaction as inappropriate classroom behaviors (Everhart, 1983; D'Amato, 1993/1996). Yet, these actions are associated with many communicative cornerstones of African American culture (Irvine, 1990). Students' behavioral success, therefore, is closely linked with young people's ability to decode implicit teacher expectations and cues. Thus, as Gouldner (1979, p. 85) noted, successful African American students must possess 'an almost uncanny grasp' of how classroom rules function.

On a second level, teachers who neglect to question why and how their disciplinary practices and beliefs are culturally based run the risk of misinterpreting student behaviors that are incompatible with their expectations. Although limited in scope and number, findings from existent research studies suggest that Black students are routinely disciplined for culturally based behaviors that are not intended to be disruptive. For example, Hanna's (1988) study of an elementary school in Texas revealed that teachers reprimanded Black students for their decision to engage in verbal and physical displays of aggression for amusement or self-defense purposes. Although student interviews revealed that the acts were not intended to be disorderly, the actions routinely elicited reprimands and punishments from their teachers. Weinstein and her colleagues (2003, 2004) documented similar findings. Additionally, Bowers and Flinders (1990), Irvine (1990) and Kochman (1981) have noted that Whites often interpret culturally based behavior such as overlapping speech, as rude or offensive conduct. Given that socially defined categories such as disrespectful behavior, rank among the top reasons for student disciplinary action (Skiba *et al.*, 1997, 2000), the cultural implications of the discipline gap are clear.

On a final level, teachers who overlook the salience of culture in relation to behavior may be likely to attribute forms of perceived misbehavior to negative intrinsic qualities among students or poor parenting practices. Examples include low levels of motivation and self-control, and inadequate home supervision. Because many teachers hold decreased expectations for Black students overall (Irvine, 1988), expanding practitioners' knowledge about culturally based behaviors is a central means of addressing the problem. Cultivating teachers' sense of cross-cultural competency may also raise their sense of efficacy and confidence in addressing student behavior, particularly among White teachers, who sometimes report being less comfortable in their roles as disciplinarians than Black teachers (Cooper, 2002). If left unaddressed, the systematic overrepresentation of low-income, male and Black students on measures of school discipline is likely to reinforce existing deficit views of these

students and their families. Raising teachers' cultural awareness of their students' backgrounds, therefore, is an important component of school success.

### **Cultural synchronization: a blueprint for closing the discipline gap**

Researchers whose expertise resides in the field of contemporary African American education argue that low-income Black students are most successful when taught in culturally-relevant ways (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Hilliard, 1995). Irvine (1990) termed parallels between school and home environments as cultural synchronization. In her view, familiarity with students' cultural backgrounds enables teachers to draw on shared knowledge that honors students' heritage and preexisting knowledge. By creating inclusive classrooms, culturally responsive teachers decrease opportunities for student failure by operating in accordance with a mutually defined protocol of expectations. Moreover, their classroom pedagogy counters alienating influences, such as effects of White privilege.

Confining attention to classroom discipline, culturally responsive practitioners for African American students tend to reflect nontraditional styles. Irvine and Fraser's (1998) consideration of African American teachers as 'warm demanders' represented one of the first efforts to understand such teachers' disciplinary styles. They argue that many Black teachers work from a firm, no-nonsense orientation that frames their interactions with students. In practice, warm demanders often adopt stern voice tones, word choices and demeanors that clearly convey their expectations for student behavior. Although observers may characterize warm demanders' disciplinary styles as harsh, students and teachers within the Black community frequently view such actions as demonstrations of care and concern (Gordon, 1998; Ballenger, 1999). Subsequent efforts to explore the concept of culturally-responsive discipline have expanded earlier portrayals to include teachers' use of humor. For example, Monroe and Obidah (2004) found that comic interaction grounded in references to Black culture was one of the most common discipline tools present in their study of an urban African American middle-school classroom. Similar findings are documented by Irvine (2003).

Although vastly limited in number and scope, composite studies of culturally responsive teachers reveal that such practitioners function as determined, caring individuals whose disciplinary styles parallel approaches found in students' home environments. Unfortunately, school leaders often undervalue and marginalize teachers who ground their pedagogy in community-based techniques (Lipman, 1996, 1998). Yet, based on culturally responsive teachers' holistic success with African American students, particularly with regard to classroom discipline, educators would be well served to expand their vision of teacher excellence to recognize culturally responsive models. An implication of the shift to culturally responsive discipline may be that teachers learn to adopt disciplinary strategies that address inappropriate conduct in productive and meaningful ways and avoid techniques that invite negative outcomes associated with many traditional responses such as office referrals. Moreover, an intimate acquaintance with students' cultural frameworks

may enable teachers to recognize student behaviors that are not intended to be disruptive (Wentzel, 2003).

### **Suggestions for improvement**

Entrenched school practices are difficult to combat. Facilitating change is particularly challenging when confronting delicate issues such as race and ethnicity is required. Eliminating the discipline gap requires multifaceted solutions that are applied on structural and personal levels. Despite the complexity of the matter, however, there are several steps that practitioners and teacher educators may take to ease demographic disparities. Currently, three primary sources offer both practical and promising means to address the problem. They are valuing culturally responsive disciplinary practices, recruiting additional teachers of color and providing opportunities for immersion experiences. Each is discussed at length.

#### *Culturally responsive discipline*

Given existing knowledge about cultural norms across race, ethnicity and social class, contrasts in behavioral norms between teachers and students may provide fertile ground for misunderstandings that contribute to the discipline gap. Recalling Irvine's (1990) appeal for cultural synchronization in the classroom, adapting classroom practice so as to draw on the students' home environments appears to be a key step in closing disciplinary discrepancies. The provision of familiar and meaningful instruction enables teachers to recognize student actions that are not intended to be disruptive, and discipline students in ways that respect and affirm students' identities when required. Specific tactics cover a range of behaviors such as culturally based humor, firm reprimands and home visits (Brown, 2003; Monroe & Obidah, 2004). Based on limited empirical results, culturally responsive disciplinary practices appear to promote better student outcomes by addressing behavioral concerns in the classroom rather than directing students to administrators where they are likely to be subject to outcomes such as suspension.

It bears emphasizing that addressing student concerns in the classroom via inclusive techniques is an important means of providing students with the tools needed to be successful in mainstream society (Nieto, 1999) and enabling them to gain access to the culture of power (Delpit, 1995). When teachers successfully address disciplinary concerns themselves, they may help students avoid negative life outcomes that are associated with recurrent school disciplinary action. For example, numerous statisticians have documented a persistent correlation between disciplinary action and consequences such as drop out rates (Bowditch, 1993; Rumberger, 1995) and delinquency (Skiba *et al.*, 1997). Researchers such as Noguera (2003) and Wacquant (2000) have taken a further step of linking school discipline to patterns in the criminal justice system.

Unfortunately, few teacher education programs provide structured guidance in how teachers may implement culturally relevant disciplinary strategies in their daily

work. As a consequence, many well-intentioned practitioners often rely on strategies that have little relevance for low-income students of color. School administrators must expand their vision of effective classroom discipline to welcome the approaches of culturally responsive teachers. Institutional leaders would be well served to identify teachers in their schools who appear to be particularly effective with low-income students of color, and utilize these teachers in leadership and mentoring capacities. African American teachers have been shown to occupy such roles in relation to Black students (Mitchell, 1998).

### *Teacher recruitment*

As school districts nationally stand witness to increased levels of student diversity in public schools, teacher preparation programs are challenged to train candidates to be competent practitioners for youths whose cultural backgrounds will likely differ from their own. Based on previous findings, teacher educators' attendance to issues surrounding student recruitment may have a strong impact on perspectives and actions that influence disciplinary disparities.

Recruiting additional students of color to enter the teaching profession is one of the most probable ways to close the discipline gap. Sleeter's (2001) review of literature on preservice teacher programs for underserved students suggests that students of color tend to enter teacher training programs grounded more firmly in principles of social justice and equity when compared to their White counterparts. Specifically, Sleeter (2001, p. 212) notes that although students of color do not possess more pedagogical knowledge than their peers, some studies indicate that they voice 'a strong commitment to creating more just schools, helping children of color gain access to educational opportunities, and respecting diverse cultures'. In contrast, White teacher candidates often enter training programs adhering to colorblind philosophies (Nieto, 1999). Because students of color, in particular, tend to be attuned to issues of equity and antidiscrimination, these individuals may enter teaching with powerful beliefs regarding student behavior that influence their disciplinary practices in addition to their overall classroom pedagogy. As a function of their own upbringing, African American preservice teachers, particularly individuals from low-income backgrounds, may bring intangible cultural knowledge to their work that promotes cultural synchronization in the classroom. White teachers who have Black or bicultural frames of reference tend to have similar personal views and professional orientations (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Although they bring valuable knowledge and commitments to teaching, many preservice teachers of color are marginalized in their training programs. Delpit's (1993) research with students of color in education programs indicates that African Americans report feeling undervalued and frustrated by their White colleagues or professors. Their assessments appeared to emerge from a twofold basis. First, many African American students indicated that academic institutions confined scholarship of worth to mainstream theories, research and practices. In so doing, academicians failed to validate knowledge acquired through nontraditional means, such as personal

experience. Secondly, students of color often encountered defensive reactions when challenging long-standing sources of knowledge or accepted arguments in the academy. Delpit (1993) concluded that ongoing negative experiences for Black students result in a silenced dialogue wherein White professors and colleagues continued to adhere to alienating beliefs and practices and students of color developed a sense of frustration and futility concerning their program experiences.

Teacher educators must be cognizant of constructing programs that are not only designed to reflect a diverse student body, but offer welcoming environments that value a multiplicity of voices. When authentic dialogues occur across race, program participants may acquire new insights into cultural factors that undergird behavioral tendencies. Maintaining the integrity of multicultural teacher education programs requires ongoing monitoring of influences and social dynamics that may act as a barrier to transformative teaching and learning.

### *Community immersion experiences*

Although publications evaluating the effects of cross-cultural immersion experiences are limited, well-designed programs appear to be a useful mechanism by which pre- and inservice teachers enhance their understanding of culturally diverse students. Generally, immersion programs are intended give pre- and inservice teachers a holistic exposure to culturally diverse students' lived experiences. Components of immersion programs include visiting students' homes, speaking with community leaders, visiting community centers, attending religious services, frequenting restaurants and so forth. Sleeter's (2001) review of community-based programs at the preservice level reveals that immersion experiences are correlated with positive self-reports regarding prospective teachers' learning, knowledge of students of color and tendency to incorporate culturally responsive practice in their work. Irvine's (2003) work with a professional development program for inservice teachers additionally suggested that authentic community experiences strengthened teachers' holistic understanding of urban students and how to best educate them.

In addition to other programmatic aims, professional development coordinators and teacher educators should create opportunities to direct teachers' awareness to cultural norms regarding nonverbal and verbal communication. Because misinterpretations of student behaviors have been shown to account for a component of disciplinary action (Hanna, 1988; Weinstein *et al.*, 2003), immersion experiences are a powerful venue for challenging culturally based misunderstandings. Observations of parenting practices and other adult-youth interactions may further allow teachers to expand their repertoire of culturally relevant teaching tools to include community-based disciplinary tactics.

### **Summary and conclusion**

The degree of cultural congruence that exists between teachers and students has a strong impact on trends in schools. Researchers have constructed an impressive knowledge base that underscores the need for culturally responsive pedagogy in

urban schools that serve African Americans (see Ladson-Billings, 1990, 1992; Teel *et al.*, 1998). For the most part, however, social scientists have confined their attention to the curricular implications of culturally responsive pedagogy. Inattention to other components of classroom life, such as discipline, has restricted scholars' understanding of its full application in schools. Broadening scholarship on the relationship between culture and classroom practice to include linkages to classroom discipline is a critical step toward closing the discipline gap.

Although individual school districts' efforts to end racial disparities are laudable, ameliorative efforts will likely prove fruitless if core causes of the problem remain unaddressed. Policymakers, teacher educators and practitioners must focus their energies on understanding cultural influences that shape behaviors and perceptions of disruption. Via teacher training programs and professional development efforts, practitioners must learn to interrogate themselves as cultural beings. Questioning implicit assumptions and expectations will highlight hidden and taken-for-granted notions that practitioners hold about student behavior. The process also serves to elucidate views that teachers have about culturally-diverse students whose behavioral norms differ from their own.

As Irvine (2003) has noted, differences matter; teachers must abandon norms that use White, middle-class standards as benchmarks of success. Rather, teachers must view and practice their work from a culturally relevant stance. Practitioners must understand cultural norms that regulate acceptable boundaries in students' cultural communities. Interacting with students in naturalistic settings and colleagues of color will enhance teachers' ability to differentiate between behaviors that are intended to be disruptive and actions with cultural roots. Moreover, such interchanges will allow practitioners to learn about disciplinary policies that students experience in their home lives.

White teachers currently account for the majority of all public school practitioners. In fact, some researchers place statistical figures at 87% (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). In contrast, students of color represent almost 40% of all students in the nation's public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000), with approximately 17% of this figure identifying themselves as African American (Sleeter, 2001). Despite their enrollment percentages in most urban districts, African Americans tend to represent the largest percentage of students who are targeted for school discipline. Considering these figures in light of what is presently known about social norms makes the need to develop a culturally competent teaching force clear. Teachers must be cognizant of the impact that their behavioral expectations and disciplinary responses have on the lives of their students. Based on previous research, I argue that purposeful attendance to the cultural context of perceived misbehavior is an encouraging means of closing the discipline gap.

### **Notes on contributor**

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