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Why Are “Bad Boys” always Black? 
Causes of Disproportionality in School Discipline and Recommendations for Change

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Curiosity about the crowd forming on the next block attracted me to the scene in time to witness Kevin’s arrest. I watched him struggle futilely against the police officer’s determined hold of his upper body. Kevin’s wincing expression was briefly visible as the handcuffs were placed around his restrained wrists. His body seemed limp and defeated as he was moved from the grassy plot into the back of the police car, sobbing. As the climax of the arrest slowly subsided, clipped thoughts and questions flooded my mind. Kevin was an eighth-grade kid from my school. I had never seen a 13-year-old in the back of a police car; definitely never anyone that young in police custody. Why? What happened? What now? Unfortunately, I had arrived too late to know how the arrest had been set in motion. Some of the other onlookers said that Kevin had tried to rob someone; others commented that the incident was drug related. As strands of truth and speculation shaped Kevin’s story, I turned and walked back to the school campus. He was in my second period class. I knew that I would learn the details of the story at work.

The form of notification soon arrived from the district office. Beside Kevin’s name were the expected words. Status: Suspended. Location: Juvenile detention. The document provided a crisp and matter-of-fact conclusion to the story. Yet, my own experiences with Kevin, coupled with observations by students and colleagues, raised complicated questions about the situation. Already struggling academically, what effect would Kevin’s incarceration have on his intellectual development? How would he readjust to mainstream society and school following his release? What life implications did juvenile detainment hold for a young adolescent, particularly a black male? Unfortunately, such questions surround the lives of many African American youths as crime continues to be a familiar component of the nation’s urban landscape.

I was a middle-school teacher employed in a large urban school district when the events related to Kevin’s arrest unfolded. I taught in a predominately African American institution in which some of my students were middle- and working-class and others were from decidedly low-income backgrounds. Improving student outcomes, both inside and outside school walls, was a shared institutional concern. Yet, young people such as Kevin symbolized the ways in which articulated goals frequently failed to become reality.

At first glance, Kevin’s predicament may appear to reside beyond the boundaries of the public education enterprise. However, numerous social scientists have identified compelling connections between students’ schooling experiences and negative outcomes such as delinquency (Noguera 2003; Voelkl, Welte, and Wieczorek 1999). Examinations of low-income communities further suggest that antisocial behaviors surfacing during adolescence often become a trenchant component of youths’ experiences across the lifespan, thereby heightening their likelihood of entering the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Simon and Burns 1997). Notably, studies conducted with middle-school learners have linked school disciplinary patterns with trends in delinquency and recidivism (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, and Hybl 1993; Skiba, Peterson, and Williams 1997). The present overrepresentation of African American males in the U.S. justice system (Wacquant 2000), combined with racial disproportionality on measures of school discipline (Applied Research Center 2002), provide compelling reasons for continued scrutiny of connections between the two areas.

Although previous studies have revealed powerful insights about the salience of culture, particularly race, in schools and society, few scholars have explored how culturally-based constructs relate to school discipline. In this article I expand on current research by examining...
factors that contribute to the discipline gap, or the over-representation of black, male, and low-income students on indices of school discipline. Whereas researchers commonly agree that cultural mismatches create conditions for systematic school failure, less is known about how societal forces may inform teachers' perceptions of African American student behaviors. There is a particular need to understand how and why teachers' views of these students, particularly males, mediate their disciplinary actions in the classroom. Specifically, how do images of African American men and boys in society at large relate to teachers' notions about effective disciplinary strategies based on student race and gender? Moreover, how do prevailing norms and practices in society at large influence the shape of disciplinary problems in schools? This article is grounded in a consideration of the criminalization of black males, race and class privilege, and zero tolerance policies as key forces in the genesis and evolution of the discipline gap. The article concludes with recommendations for how educators and policymakers should approach disciplinary concerns for middle-school learners.

**Why the Discipline Gap? A Synopsis of Research Findings**

Nationally, African American students are targeted for disciplinary action in the greatest numbers (Johnston 2000). According to quantitative reports, black pupils are statistically two to five times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts (Irvine 1990). Qualitative findings simultaneously indicate that teachers confine reprimands and punitive consequences to black children even when youths of other races engage in the same unsanctioned behaviors (McCadden 1998). Skiba et al.'s (2000) research further reveals that African Americans receive harsher punishments than their peers, often for subjectively defined offenses. Inequities in school discipline are most pronounced among boys (Ferguson 2000).

Because school trends reflect currents of the national contexts in which they exist, core causes of the discipline gap are both internal and external to schools. In this section, I discuss three conditions that contribute to current disparities. They are (a) the criminalization of black males, (b) race and class privilege, and (c) zero tolerance policies. Each is discussed at length.

**Criminalizing African American Males**

Popular views of African American life are connected to threatening images with predictable regularity. Both media and scholarly portrayals of contemporary black life often highlight cultures of violence, drugs, anti-authoritarianism, and other social deficiencies. When confining attention to urban black males, threatening and criminal archetypes frequently ground their perceived existence, particularly in low-income environments (Canada 1996). Notably, unflattering prototypes tend to emerge from youths' efforts to assert their identities and protect themselves in disenfranchised communities (Anderson 1999). For example, in analyzing the relationship between self-presentation and power, West writes that

for most young black men, power is acquired by stylizing their bodies over space and time in such a way that their bodies reflect their uniqueness and provoke fear in others. To be “bad” is good not simply because it subverts the language of the dominant white culture but also because it imposes a unique kind of order for young black men on their own distinctive chaos and solicits an attention that makes others pull back with some trepidation. This young black male style is a form of self-identification and resistance in a hostile culture: it also is an instance of machismo identity ready for violent encounters. (1994, 128)

West's analysis captures a fundamental dilemma facing many young black males. Although attempting to assert self-affirming identities in adverse environments, behaviors among African American youths often fuel pejorative stereotypes that distinguish black males as troublesome and threatening. Grant (1988), Noguera (2002a, 2002b), and others have argued that negative views of black males largely emanate from environmental dynamics that circumscribe how young African American boys' identities are perceived both inside and outside their communities.

When examining research literature on school discipline, the criminalization of black males appears to provide a powerful context for the discipline gap. On one level, researchers widely recognize that teachers frequently approach classes populated by low-income and African American youths with a strong emphasis on controlling student behaviors. Custodial tendencies tend to be most pronounced with low-ability level and male students (Gouldner 1978). On a second level, practitioner responses to incidents of perceived misbehavior tend to reside at either extreme of the disciplinary continuum. That is, when disciplining African American students, teachers are likely to demonstrate reactions that appear to be more severe than required. Additionally, there is evidence that practitioners may devote little effort to addressing behavioral concerns in their infancy when nonpunitive techniques are likely to be effective (Emhoff 1983). Such tendencies are less likely to be true with white students.

Although many factors influence teachers' work, previous research has marked practitioner perceptions and accompanying expectations of youths as key mediating influences in their decisions concerning discipline (Bennett and Harris 1982). Many teachers may not explicitly connect their disciplinary reactions to negative perceptions of black males, yet systematic trends in disproportionality suggest that teachers may be implicitly guided by stereotypical perceptions that
African American boys require greater control than their peers and are unlikely to respond to nonpunitive measures. Although movements to address diversity in teacher education programs are useful means of heightening teachers’ awareness of racial issues, the trenchancy of the discipline gap suggests that education professionals insufficiently interrogate connections between generic perceptions of black males and their treatment in the classroom.

Race and Class Privilege

Educational expectations, practices, and policies reflect the values of the individuals who create them. As a consequence, judgments about student disruption are imbued with cultural norms. Because white and middle-class individuals occupy most positions of power in educational settings, decisions concerning behavioral expectations and infractions are set forth by a culturally-specific bloc. Largely ignoring the leading reasons for disciplinary referrals with qualitative research findings make the culturally-influenced nature of school discipline clear. For instance, Skiba et al.’s (1997) analysis of nineteen Midwestern middle schools revealed that disobedience, conduct, disrespect, and fighting were the most common reasons for teachers to write disciplinary referrals. Yet, empirical comparisons of cultural interaction styles indicate that teachers regularly interpret African American behaviors as inappropriate when the actions are not intended to be so (Hanna 1988; Weinstein, Curran, and Tomlinson-Clarke 2004; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran 2003). Examples include viewing overlapping speech as disrespect, play fighting as authentic aggression, and ritualized humor as valid insults.

Limited racial and socioeconomic diversity in educational circles of power has inhibited professionals’ recognition of school disciplinary practices as socially defined constructs. Because prevailing beliefs and practices often proceed unchallenged, the culturally based nature of school discipline has remained an unquestioned component of school life. Moreover, structural oversights have facilitated explanations for disciplinary action that assign culpability to the children involved. Altering present disciplinary trends demands improved cross-cultural competency among classroom practitioners regarding behavioral norms in African American communities. Unfortunately, teacher preparation programs often fail to encourage candidates to expand their vision of culturally responsive pedagogy beyond academic material to include classroom management and student discipline. Teacher preparation and professional development programs that remain innocent community-based practices for African American students risk perpetuating approaches that have little relevance for pupils who are most at risk for disciplinary action.

Zero Tolerance Initiatives

Convictions that a stern approach to school discipline would curb inappropriate—particularly criminal—behavior have speeded the national growth and implementation of zero tolerance policies. In fact, a reported 94 percent of U.S. public schools have adopted such initiatives (Johnson, Boyd, and Pittz 2001). Yet, analyses of zero tolerance efforts indicate that the policies may be yielding unintended consequences to a greater extent than they eradicate inappropriate behaviors. The exacerbation of racial discrepancies currently ranks among the most serious concerns. 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 (Skiba and Peterson 1999).

What appears to be a more significant challenge, however, is educators’ general inattention to the value of working cooperatively with parents and communities to construct schools where disruption is minimized overall. Rather, by most accounts, institutional decisions concerning student behavior are reached in isolation of input from other relevant stakeholders. Even parental efforts to legally challenge punishments have failed to make an incision in rigid interpretations of the policies (Dohrn 2001). Although teachers lack the institutional authority to alter principals’ and policymakers’ decisions, practitioners should appreciate the power that falls within their purview: whether to write a disciplinary referral at all. Encouraging teachers to address behavioral concerns in their classes would be a significant stride toward lowering suspension and expulsion rates.

Recommendations for Middle School Professionals

Closing the discipline gap requires reshaping individual and institutional orientations and practices. This section contains four broad recommendations designed to guide middle-school educators’ efforts to address disproportionality.

1. Provide opportunities for teachers to interrogate their beliefs about African American students. Racial and gender stereotypes often undergird teachers’ interactions with students. As a result, many teachers, consciously or unconsciously, believe that boys present more disciplinary problems than girls, and that black students are more likely to misbehave than youths of other races. Because school structures seldom provide opportunities for practitioners to interact and observe alternative classroom environments, teachers’ perceptions frequently proceed unquestioned and may be crystallized by incidents that affirm preexisting stereotypes.

In-service professional development efforts focused on discipline should be designed to identify and critique teachers’ perceptions of students of color, partic-
ularly African American boys. Such workshops should be designed to attract a wide-ranging cadre of teachers from alternative school environments, and conducted by racially diverse facilitators. Enabling teachers to share their views and experiences in a multiracial environment provides opportunities for teachers to be exposed to experiences and approaches that may challenge marginalizing beliefs about African American youths. Moreover, these efforts are powerful means of encouraging teachers to recognize culturally-based behaviors that are not intended to be disruptive.

2. Incorporate and value culturally responsive disciplinary strategies. The field of education is replete with programs and approaches designed to elicit desirable student behavior, yet the disproportionate percentage of disciplinary action targeting African American students raises twin questions. With whom are these models successful? And why have they failed to reverse negative trends among culturally diverse students from high poverty backgrounds?

Many classroom and institutional disciplinary approaches suffer from a basic inattention to cultural context. Because common techniques and expectations are moored in middle class, white norms, numerous approaches fail to prove useful with students of color. In fact, many prevailing techniques are at odds with the very disciplinary practices to which many African American students are exposed, particularly low-income youths. Eradicating the discipline gap requires theorists, researchers, and practitioners to familiarize themselves with culturally specific behavioral norms, and incorporate culturally familiar behavior management strategies into their practice. For example, successful teachers of African American students tend to incorporate demonstrations of affect and emotion, as well as culturally based humor, into their interactions with students (Irvine 2003). Empirical findings further suggest that culturally responsive teachers are more comfortable in their roles as disciplinarians, less likely to write disciplinary referrals, and have stronger relationships with students and parents than their counterparts (Cooper 2002; Monroe and Obidah 2004).

3. Broaden the discourse around school disciplinary decisions. Despite provisions that permit school officials to address disciplinary concerns on a case-by-case basis, there is significant evidence that most organizational leaders elect not to do so. Rather, many administrators uphold narrow applications of disciplinary consequences. Consider a few of the following examples:

- In Ohio a fourteen-year-old student was suspended for giving Midol tablets to a classmate. The recipient of the pills was suspended as well and required to complete a drug awareness class.
- A Georgia middle-school student was suspended for bringing a Tweety Bird key chain to school on the basis that the trinket violated policies concerning weapons.

Concentrating decisions about expulsions and suspensions in the hands of a few has restricted opportunities to raise concerns about troubling disciplinary procedures. Stated more plainly, the closed nature of school discipline precludes important stakeholders from questioning dubious reasons for suspensions and expulsions in addition to disturbing racial and gender patterns that accompany sanctions.

Flattening the organizational hierarchy by creating advisory boards for school discipline would be a useful means of closing the discipline gap on several levels. First, the board may serve as a means for monitoring demographic trends in referrals and highlighting discriminatory patterns that emerge. Identifying problems early in the school year would be a strong step toward preventing recurrent problems across the year. Secondarily, schools would structurally enable well-qualified individuals to provide important feedback on how to serve students’ and teachers’ needs most effectively. Urban institutions would be well served to select advisory members from well-regarded teachers as well as parent and community volunteers who are familiar with the school and its constituents.

4. Maintain learners’ interest through engaging instruction. A clear and logical correlation exists between student discipline and academic achievement. Throughout the nation, there is evidence that students who are disproportionately targeted for disciplinary action are the same pupils who perform poorly on most measures of achievement. For example, Skiba and Rausch (2004) analyzed the relationship between standardized tests scores and suspension and expulsion rates for students in the state of Indiana and found that schools with high out-of-school suspension rates had a lower percent of students passing the math and English/Language Arts section of the Indiana State Test of Educational Progress (ISTEP). The correlation held true even after the researchers controlled for poverty and the percentage of African American students enrolled. Correlations between discipline and achievement were strongest at the secondary level.

Student behavior is intimately connected to the quality of instruction in the classroom. When students are intellectually immersed in learning tasks they are less likely to engage in behaviors that detract from the instruction at hand. Ladson-Billings’ (1994) seminal study of effective teachers of African American students cited several pedagogical tools that teachers may use to guide their efforts. Among other findings, she noted that academic materials drawn from students’ home environments anchored teachers’ instruction and set the stage for inviting lessons
that students found relevant, meaningful, and affirming. Although not focused on classroom discipline specifically, Ladson-Billings’ research holds particular relevance for the discipline gap.

When students perceive that their lives and experiences are valued, they are less likely to engage in behaviors that express resistance against alienating school forces. Moreover, youths are provided opportunities to appreciate benefits gleaned from sharpening their scholastic skills and broadening their knowledge base. Additionally, relying on students’ intellectual capacity as a means of addressing discipline draws on intrinsic behavioral motivations—an approach that tends to be effective with low-income students of color (Noguera 2001).

**Conclusion**

Educators across the nation share a common dilemma. Research inquiries completed since the 1970s provide evidence that black males are disciplined with greater frequency and severity than their peers. The glaring persistence of such patterns challenges educators to approach their work with African American youth in new ways. Although many problems are connected to cultural mismatches between teachers and students, there remains a broader conversation to explore with regard to societal factors that provide fertile ground for the discipline gap. Based on prior scholarship, I assert that disproportionality in school discipline is in large part a function of macro-level problems such as the criminalization of black males and race and class privilege. At the school level, zero tolerance policies provide a conduit by which a significant percent of students are systematically removed from school for subjectively defined offenses. Unfortunately, few policymakers and school officials appear to weigh decisions to expel or suspend students against research evidence regarding the culturally influenced nature of school discipline or harmful outcomes associated with removing students from school, such as delinquency. Rather, most accounts suggest that school officials uphold rigid interpretations of zero tolerance initiatives.

Ending racial disparities in school discipline is a formidable responsibility. Yet, encouragingly, some school systems are taking strides to eliminate the discipline gap (Denn 2002). Growing evidence supports the view that school inequities involving African Americans are best addressed through race-conscious approaches at the teacher preparation and professional development levels. Providing opportunities for teachers to interrogate their own beliefs about student groups as well as culturally based expectations concerning discipline are powerful means of shifting present trends in disproportionality. To date, there is mounting evidence that culturally responsive teachers, particularly African American practitioners, play pivotal roles in promoting transformative outcomes among students. School systems would be well served to employ such individuals in leadership roles that enable them to mentor practicing colleagues as well as to have a voice in decisions concerning discipline.

Key words: classroom discipline, culturally responsive pedagogy, African American education

**NOTE**

1. “Kevin” is a pseudonym.

**REFERENCES**


