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Teachers Closing the Discipline Gap in an Urban Middle School

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This study focuses on student discipline as related to the perceptions, work, and backgrounds of effective Black and White teachers. The article expands current knowledge by reporting findings from a case study of 4 teachers (2 African Americans and 2 Whites) employed in an urban, predominately African American middle school. Interviews, field visits, and documents were analyzed according to guidelines created by Miles and Huberman (1994) and collectively point to four themes: (a) learning-based perceptions of student behavior, (b) the role of preservice teacher preparation, (c) the influence of remembered teachers and teacher mentors, and (d) outreach efforts to students' parents and families. The study's implications for future scholarship and practice are considered.

Keywords: *school discipline; effective teachers; urban schools; middle schools*

Discipline is a widespread concern in public schools throughout the nation. Routine support for this claim is found in public opinion polls (Bushaw & Gallup, 2008) and data collected from educators (Public Agenda, 2004). Although ongoing interest in school discipline has facilitated a growing body of empirical and conceptual literature (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Rong, 1996; Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982), researchers have devoted particular attention to urban schools (Brown & Beckett, 2006). To date, social scientists have documented a consistent tendency for Black and African American¹ students to be reprimanded and punished more frequently and severely than other groups (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Notably, disparities between Black and White students hold true even when young people are engaged in the same or similar

Author's Note: The author thanks Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Jerome E. Morris for their comments on an earlier version of this article. Please address correspondence to Carla R. Monroe, PhD, The University of Georgia, 514 Boyd Graduate Studies Bldg., Athens, GA 30602; e-mail: crmonroe@uga.edu.

actions (McCadden, 1998). Zero tolerance policies have exacerbated racial variations, as well as imbalances marked by socioeconomic status (SES), gender, placement in special education, and English language proficiency (Civil Rights Project, 2000; Reyes, 2006). Often called the discipline gap, inequities in school punishment exist in virtually every major school system, particularly as related to student race and gender (Applied Research Center, 2002).

Scholastic attention to the discipline gap is not new as researchers have highlighted both the magnitude and persistence of the problem for decades (Skiba, 2001; Taylor & Foster, 1986). In 1975, for example, researchers with the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) released the seminal publication *School Suspensions: Are They Helping Children?* in which the authors discussed racial differences in school punishment among other findings. Analysis of data from the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) found that 67.9% of the 2,862 school districts included in the OCR data had higher suspension rates among Black students than White youths. The report also states 27% of Black students were suspended three or more times, whereas the rate among White students was 11%. CDF survey data also suggested that racial disproportionality was particularly problematic in secondary schools as the suspension rate for Black students was 12.8% as compared to 4.1% among White students. Morris and Goldring's (1999) later examination of magnet and nonmagnet schools in Cincinnati, Ohio extends knowledge about connections between race and discipline. Overall they found that

. . . African American students, despite school type, are much more likely than White students to be disciplined: one for every three African American students in magnet schools, and a little more than one disciplinary action for every two African American students in nonmagnet schools. Disciplinary actions involving White students, on the other hand, were one for every eight White students in magnet schools, and one for every three White students in nonmagnet schools. (p. 64)

Although African American pupils enrolled in nonmagnet schools were subject to disciplinary action more frequently, the authors did not uncover a statistically significant difference between magnet and nonmagnet institutions (Morris & Goldring, 1999). Skiba's (2001) findings on discipline in 19 urban middle schools echo and build on Morris and Goldring's (1999) results. In addition to corroborating the racialization of school discipline, he found that race appeared to override forces stemming from socioeconomic status and writes that "although poverty status and race both place students at additional risk for being disciplined, low socioeconomic status cannot be used to explain away racial differences in referrals, suspension, or expulsion" (p. 179). Skiba's

conclusion underscores the continued saliency of race in public education and supports the need to learn more about the intersection of race and discipline in urban middle schools. Moreover, there is a need to understand how student gender contributes to elevated discipline rates among Black students (Monroe, 2005; Taylor & Foster, 1986).

Presently, most research is clear that Black students' "school transgressions" seldom fall within grave or dangerous categories such as weapon possession (Skiba et al., 1997). African Americans, rather, tend to be sanctioned for subjectively defined actions or behaviors that may be resolved by skilled practitioners or other school figures. Although researchers (e.g., Ferguson, 2000; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Hanna, 1988) have used qualitative approaches to elaborate angles of school discipline, the dearth of scholarship on effective teachers' work with urban students of color is striking. Such a void in academic scholarship is surprising given the centrality of teachers' roles in citing and resolving disciplinary moments. Paradoxically, absences appear to be most prevalent in secondary contexts where, according to some statistics, the majority of disciplinary problems exist (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Existent insights into teachers' voices are generally auxiliary benefits derived from broad studies of teaching practice such as Ladson-Billings' (1994) well-known study *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. As a consequence, empirical studies tightly focused on teachers' approaches to student discipline are both timely and fundamental to closing the discipline gap. Studies inclusive of racially diverse participants are especially needed to add balance and dimension to social science research.

With this in mind, the purpose of the current study was to explore the issue of student discipline in a predominately African American middle school through the lenses of effective classroom teachers. The following research questions guided the study: (a) What perceptions do effective African American and White teachers hold of student behavior in an urban, predominately African American middle school?, (b) How do such teachers approach student discipline in their classrooms?, (c) What factors account for such teachers' perceptions and professional practice?, and (d) What similarities and differences exist among such teachers? The study findings accent how and why effective teachers minimize behavioral problems in their classrooms and limit demographic disparities in student sanctions.

Conceptual Frameworks

Social scientists often rely on cultural models to explain group variations in students' schooling experiences. Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and

Curran's (2004) conceptualization of culturally responsive classroom management and Ogbu's (1978) cultural-ecological framework embody many of the most commonly discussed reasons for the overrepresentation of Black students on measures of school discipline such as the need for cultural understanding (Irvine, 1990) and notions of oppositional identity development (Ogbu, 2003). Major tenets of each framework are discussed below.

Culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM). According to Dempsey and Noblit (1996), desegregation of public schools was characterized by cultural ignorance of majority group assumptions as well as African American communities. Because Black students often entered schools that inadequately understood (or disregarded) the power of cultural norms, some scholars became convinced that African Americans' disciplinary troubles were a function of cultural differences between Black students and White school figures. Such assertions are bolstered by the argument that African Americans and White European Americans operate from materially different cultural orientations (Hale-Benson, 1982; Kochman, 1981). Speech, for example, is one of the most documented ways in which the two groups may diverge as language protocol and meaning may not only differ but be in conflict (Bowers & Flinders, 1990). Mapping cultural behaviors onto lines of inequity, power, and privilege has led some scholars to conclude that variations between home and school frameworks create channels of marginalization for many students and ripen conditions for failure (Delpit, 1995).

Weinstein and her colleagues have taken steps to situate classroom management into the discourse on cultural conflict in education (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003; Weinstein et al., 2004). Their effort toward a conception of culturally responsive classroom management asks educators to consider five agents of importance. Teachers should first acknowledge the salience of their own cultural socialization rather than overlook and dismiss such forces as normative. Interrogating oneself as a cultural being can facilitate meaningful questions about how teachers' beliefs and decisions create and sustain forms of inequity such as the discipline gap. More important, teachers may be encouraged to modify or change ineffective techniques. The second pillar of culturally responsive classroom management is teacher knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds. Gathering deliberate and measured information about the lived and evolving journeys of the young people in their charge strengthens practitioners' grasp of students' motives and actions in the classroom. Teachers may especially glean insight into displays that may be misinterpreted as inappropriate conduct and unnecessarily penalized (e.g., ritualized insults). Teachers who have had few occasions to observe or interact with children whose cultures

differ from their own may particularly profit from this strand. Awareness of the broader social, economic, and political context is positioned as the third branch of CRMC. In Weinstein et al.'s (2004) view, school discrimination is a logical extension of inequities found throughout society. Undesirable outcomes resulting from race and socioeconomic stratification, for instance, may nurture pejorative impressions of low-income African Americans, thereby feeding troubled student pathways. The added problem of criminalizing Black males may contribute to ongoing gender differences within the African American community (Monroe, 2005). Teachers' ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate management strategies serves as the fourth leg of Weinstein et al.'s (2004) framework. Here, practitioners are directed to ask themselves three questions: Are my actions in accordance with equitable treatment? Does my classroom management "work"? and When should I cede accommodation to students rather than requiring youths to adjust to my expectations? Ideally, teachers resolve these questions by demystifying the reasons for their demands, honoring students' backgrounds, and building awareness of what young people stand to gain from classroom accommodation. Finally, Weinstein and her colleagues (2004) argue that educators should always be mindful that students shape classrooms in conjunction with their teachers. Heeding this call, teachers should be dedicated to building caring classroom communities. This final basis of culturally responsive classroom management has strong relevance for African American communities as constructs of care are cited as a core element of effective practice (Milner, 2006; Mitchell, 1998). Alternatively, an absence of care can invite alienation, disconnection, and resistance. Central features of culturally responsive models are supported by Ballenger (1992), Gordon (1998), Irvine (2003), and Monroe and Obidah (2004) although their work may not be presented as culturally responsive classroom management scholarship specifically.

Weinstein et al.'s (2004) decision to insert culture into the classroom management discourse is important and laudable. Their caution that CRMC "is a frame of mind, more than a set of strategies or practices" provides a way of thinking about culture and behavior that recognizes fluidity, agency, and dynamic interaction while avoiding impulses to essentialize culture (p. 27). Unfortunately, the model's proponents have devoted scant attention to how the framework informs gender considerations in school discipline and the complexity of its application in diverse classrooms populated by multiple cultural communities.

Cultural-ecological theory (CET). Ogbu (1978) conceptualized cultural-ecological theory as a lens through which minority student performance

may be explained². Ogbu's (1990) theory rests on a triadic structure of minority populations and suggests that academic outcomes are linked with normative values and behaviors developed as a product of a community's social entry into society³. Autonomous minorities (e.g., Mormons) are the least affected by their group status and may enjoy lifestyles analogous to their mainstream counterparts. Measures related to employment, educational options and training, and so on generally reveal little substantial or groupwide stratification despite encounters with personal and structural discrimination. As the second branch, immigrant (or voluntary) minorities' (e.g., Punjabi Indians) willing relocation to a society prompts the bloc to assess their lived realities according to a dual vision. On one level, leaving their home country may be consistent with historic arguments that life in a new nation is an improvement for immigrants' civic well-being. On another level, individuals may view their immigrant status as temporary and cling to the possibility of returning to their native country. Both mindsets may encourage persistence toward success as immigrants may rationalize that real and perceived benefits associated with life in a new country supersedes impediments created by discrimination. Caste (or involuntary) minorities (e.g., African Americans) form as the result of forced incorporation into society such as through slavery. Ogbu (1978) posits that caste-like groups suffer the greatest effects of oppressive systems because they are stigmatized as inferior within all human arrangements. The trenchancy of their underclass position is sustained by imposed forms of discrimination (e.g., restrictive hiring practices) as well as debilitating group norms (e.g., oppositional identity development). Ogbu hypothesizes that such actions prompt caste minorities to be seen through a prism of inferiority. Cultural-ecological theory may become manifest in schools through disciplinary problems, self-selection into low-ability level courses, and unfavorable perceptions of academics (Ogbu, 2003). Ogbu's (2003) study of an affluent Ohio suburb suggests that African American culture even hampers students reared in favorable socioeconomic conditions.

CET marked an important step in educational theory in that Ogbu rejected biological propositions and attempted to contextualize educational outcomes sociohistorically. Core elements of cultural-ecological theory, however, are undermined by historical evidence and a number of empirical findings. First, Ogbu's assertions fail to square with what is known about the African American community's historical orientation toward schooling as narratives authored by enslaved and freed people offer compelling reports of African Americans' keen desire for literacy and the impressive extents to which they went to secure learning (see Douglass, 1845/1988; Jacobs, 1861/2000). Later scholarship by Anderson (1988), Jones-Wilson

(1981), Kluger (1975), Williams (2005), and others underscore the centrality of education as a valued enterprise in the Black community. Secondly, Ogbu force fits cultural communities into a simplistic sorting system that eliminates space for exceptions, nuances, transitions, and variations associated with minority groups. For instance, accounts of Black success as reported by Morris (2002), O'Connor (1997), contributors to Irvine and Foster's (1996) edited book, and others is missed. Ogbu's distinctions are also made problematic by fluctuating conceptions of race (Omi & Winant, 1994) and reliance on correlations (Erickson, 1993/1996).

Methodology

Qualitative research designs enable scholars to document and interpret naturalistic phenomena from "the perspectives of those being studied" for the advancement of educational knowledge and practice (Merriam, 2001, p. 1). Case studies further provide a means of exploring a "bounded system" through the use of multiple data sources (p. 27). For these reasons, my inquiry with effective teachers' in an urban middle school adhered to case study guidelines set forth by Merriam (2001). All participant and school names are pseudonyms.

School Setting

Data were collected from Adams Middle School (AMS), a Title I institution located in an urban school system in a large southern city. The school enrolls 727 students (58% African American, 37% White, 2% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 1% American Indian, and 1% multiracial). Fifty-nine percent of students are eligible for the district's free and reduced lunch program, and 80% to 94% of students met or exceeded standards on the district's standardized tests during the year of the study. Adams was selected as a research site because the institution provided an urban, predominately African American context in which to study disciplinary issues.

Participant Selection

The school principal was informed that goals of the study were to (a) learn about student discipline in an urban, predominately African American middle school setting and (b) explore the perceptions and professional practice of effective Black and White teachers as related to student discipline. The sample

was delimited to African Americans and Whites in recognition of (a) the underrepresentation of Black teachers in research on school discipline, (b) the historical role of African American teachers in successfully educating African American children, (c) the need to understand journeys specific to White teachers given their overrepresentation in the profession, and (d) the value of analyzing findings across teacher race in the same school context. The principal was asked to nominate 4 teachers (2 African Americans and 2 Whites) for the study.

In selecting teachers, the principal based her nominations on her perception of practitioners' ability to promote strong outcomes in student learning and degree of familiarity with students' cultural backgrounds. She limited her selections to math and science teachers because of her research interest in teaching and learning in such classrooms. The 4 teachers initially selected agreed to participate in the study. Because I wanted to learn about teachers in a predominately African American context, field visits for each teacher were completed in the class with the largest number of Black students. All courses were average ability classes.

Participant Descriptions

Ms. Campbell was an African American woman completing her 5th year as a sixth grade science teacher. Her general science degree was from a large state-supported university in the South. The 31 students enrolled in her class included 1 biracial female (African American/White), 13 African American males, 12 African American females, 2 White males, and 3 White females.

Ms. Freeman, a White sixth grade teacher, was completing her 5th year of teaching⁴ and held degrees in political science and mathematics from a small, private college in the South. During the course of the study, she was assigned to a new academic team, causing field visits to occur in two separate classes. Field visits 1 to 5 were in a mathematics course that included 27 students (1 biracial male who was African American and White, 1 Hispanic female, 1 Hispanic male, 5 White females, 4 White males, 8 African American females, and 7 African American males). Field visits 6 to 10 took place in a social studies course comprised of 24 students (3 White females, 3 White males, 8 African American females, and 10 African American males).

Mr. Holley was a White male entering his 17th year of teaching mathematics. He earned degrees in mathematics and psychology from a small, private university in the South, a master of education degree from a large, private university in the South, and was pursuing a second graduate degree from the latter institution at the time of the study. Twenty-six

students were enrolled in his eighth grade math class (3 White females, 3 White males, 12 African American females, and 8 African American males).

Ms. Newman was an African American woman completing her 6th year as a seventh grade science teacher. She earned degrees in chemistry and biology at a historically Black university in the South and acquired a second degree in biology from a large, state-supported university in the South where she also completed a preservice teaching program. The 27 students in her class included 6 White males, 5 White females, 3 African American males, 12 African American females, and 1 Hispanic female.

Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Data were gathered from three sources—teacher interviews, field observations, and documents. Interview guides were designed to acquire information about the teachers' personal histories, professional backgrounds, perceptions of student behavior, and so forth. The questions were asked during semistructured interviews which created standardization in collecting interview data as well as flexibility in including follow-up probes. Each teacher completed two interviews and the conversations lasted between one and two hours. All participants answered each question and both interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The questions stemmed from interview protocols used by Monroe and Obidah (2004). The appendix contains a list of sample questions.

Ten field visits were completed in each teacher's classroom and lasted approximately 60 min each. All field notes were labeled with the teacher's name, date, time of the observation, place, and was assigned an observation number. Information in the notes described (a) the physical setting (e.g., classroom), (b) the study participants and other individuals who were relevant to a given field visit (e.g., students), (c) activities and interactions that transpired between my arrival to and departure from AMS (e.g., instructional lessons), (d) conversations (e.g., dialogue between teachers and students), (e) subtle factors (e.g., gestures), and (f) observer commentary (e.g., my perceptions of classroom events). All observer commentary was placed in brackets and each set of field notes contained notations of the time. Verbatim comments were identified with quotation marks and referenced the speaker. Each classroom visit was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Transcript dialogue was incorporated into the expanded field notes.

Finally, documents containing information related to policies, expectations, and decisions concerning student behavior were collected. Materials included the school handbook, the required behavioral contract for students, expectations and guidelines for students that were developed by the

teacher participants and/or their academic team, and forms used to document disciplinary transgressions as well as related correspondence. All data were collected during the first two 9-week grading periods.

Procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) guided the study's coding and analysis. I first created a list of start codes from the research questions, interview guides, and conceptual frameworks used in the study. Material from the three data sources were "chunked" and assigned a code based on the question or concept addressed. During the initial coding, I maintained a record of emergent themes and key ideas by writing marginal remarks on the interview transcripts, field notes, and documents. Next, I devised and applied pattern codes. Finally, I examined relationships among the findings and collapsed appropriate categories. A colleague check-coded each stage. I followed Reschley's (1997) criteria, as cited in Skiba et al. (2000), to identify disciplinary disproportionality.

Reliability and Validity

Efforts to construct a reliable study centered on documentation. An audit trail was created to chronicle key decisions such as the participant selection process; when and how data were collected, analyzed, and shared; and so on. In addition, the researcher kept copies of all written communication between herself and school personnel, completed a contact summary sheet after face-to-face and telephone interactions with the study participants, and stored copies of all audio tapes, transcripts, field notes, documents, and coding changes.

Specific to internal validity, the researcher documented her perceptions regularly; invited peer examination of the research design, data set, and findings; gathered data over time; identified findings through triangulation of multiple data sources; and completed member checks by furnishing each teacher with a copy of his or her interview transcripts and field notes. The teachers were informed, both verbally and in writing, of their right to offer feedback on the materials provided. Although the study's research design precludes statistical generalizations, I aimed to collect a detailed data set that provided sufficient information to understand the teachers' perceptions of and experiences with student discipline and assist researchers' judgments regarding transferability.

Key Findings

Four themes emerged from the data set. They were (a) learning-based perceptions of student behavior, (b) the role of preservice teacher preparation,

(c) the influence of remembered teachers and teacher mentors, and (d) outreach efforts to students' parents and families. Each area is discussed below.

Learning-based perceptions of student behavior. Although each teacher functioned within a context of behavioral guidelines set by the school district, institution, and in most cases, an academic team, they refused to adopt a prescriptive view of student behavior. Within their classrooms, rather, teachers uniformly relied on their perceptions of the degree and quality of student learning transpiring in judging whether students' actions were disruptive or inappropriate and merited a discipline-related response. Evidence of the strong emphasis on academics emerged in the first interview as seen in the following excerpts:

Ms. Campbell: Student disruption to me would be interruption of a lesson that's being given or talked about, interruption of students around the disruption . . . keeping them from completing the assignments, keeping them from focusing on myself, keeping them from . . . following directions. . . . disruption would be anything that prevents me from fully teaching a lesson and getting the full attention of my students.

Ms. Freeman: How do I define student disruption? I would define it as an act that stops the flow of class. . . . I talk to the kids about it. I say, "Ok. We're at a red light." And that's . . . my comparison, that when . . . I drive down [street name] to my home in [city name], I can either have a green light day and make it there in 7 minutes or I can have a red light day where I'm there in 15 minutes with all the stops. And so . . . with any kind of talking, or even if someone's drawing and is not taking notes, I consider that . . . a disruption because the class flow has been interrupted. And I sit there and say, "Ok, we're at a red light. Waiting, waiting." You know? Until someone says, "Oh right, I'm not doing what I should be doing."

Mr. Holley: Anything that takes away from the learning environment. I mean it can be as simple as somebody staring at the ceiling or obviously someone shouting out or behaving inappropriately in the room.

Although the broad descriptions articulated seemingly would capture an abundance of "disruptive" student activity, data sets for each teacher did not reveal extensive disciplinary concerns. The limited presence of student misbehavior appeared to be driven by teachers' perceptions of whether students were accomplishing and comprehending classroom tasks rather than whether students were following behavioral "rules" in a strict sense. Specific to the discipline gap, males of color were overrepresented on sanctions in two classrooms—a Hispanic male in Ms. Freeman's class and

Black males in Ms. Newman's class. Yet percentages of overrepresentation for each group were nominal at 1.6% and 0.89% respectively.⁵

Perceptions of student learning as a proxy for conduct are a critical shift from many educators' adherence to pedantic classroom policies and appeared to explain the general absence of the discipline gap. First, a reliance on learning indicators prevented teachers from confounding students' academic accomplishments with subjective disciplinary perceptions. Because each teacher was driven by measurable scholastic points of reference, the teachers were able to disentangle student actions that served as a barrier to individual or collective learning from happenings that did not detract from educational goals. Because many African American youths are disciplined for subjective reasons, the teachers' use of pedagogic guideposts minimized finicky or inconsistent behavioral sanctions that too often fall on Black students. This finding is largely absent from discussions of effective classroom management and school discipline.

Second, flexibility around traditional rules sensitized teachers to the unique personality and impulses of the class, particularly as related to pathways that cultivated success. Such knowledge of enrolled students enabled teachers to make informed, adaptable decisions that were consistent with the complex, dynamic nature of middle school classrooms. As a consequence, the teachers recognized that rigid expectations regarding talking or self-directed student movement may be inconsistent with encouraging youth engagement, community building, and content mastery. Pliable beliefs, particularly regarding student talk and physical activity, appeared to create a space to build on recognized tenets of African American culture such as community interaction and kinesthetic movement for learning purposes. Although Hale-Benson (1982), Irvine (1990), and others remind educators of these issues conceptually, this study charts the benefits of applying such theoretical knowledge and presents a contrast to prior studies in which teachers sought to contain such behaviors and, thereby, created conditions for battles of student resistance against teacher control.

Although proponents of culturally responsive classroom management and cultural-ecological theory highlight racial constructs, albeit for different reasons, this finding requires supporters of both models to reconsider the importance of the teaching/learning relationship as related to student discipline. Whereas culturally responsive classroom management (Weinstein et al., 2004) is laudable for its fundamental incorporation of culture, context, and care, the framework does not explicitly engage the centrality of demonstrated learning behaviors in assessing student conduct. Cultural-ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978), similarly, places little emphasis on the

nature of classroom pedagogy when analyzing student behavior. Anchoring perceptions of student conduct to instructional outcomes appears to be a viable means of preventing behavioral concerns from superseding intellectual pursuits or clouding teachers' perceptions of whether student actions are in fact disruptive to the learning environment.

The role of preservice teacher preparation. Monroe (2005) asserts that "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" (p. 48). Although educators acknowledge the integral role of a highly qualified teacher in delivering powerful instruction, the study at hand sheds insight into specific professional characteristics that effective teachers possess, as well as their subsequent influence on discipline. Perhaps the most important shared features across the teacher participants were the indicators of their subject-area competency. All participants were content specialists who held undergraduate degrees in their respective instructional areas. One teacher, Mr. Holley, held a graduate degree and was pursuing a third advanced award at the time of the data collection. Furthermore, all teachers had obtained professional licensure for their subjects and grade level of focus. Content mastery was related to the creation of stimulating and engaging learning activities that diminished off-task behavior. Moreover, when distractions arose the teachers often drew on their subject-area expertise to transform such moments into pedagogical opportunities that redirected the class focus back to the assignment at hand. Building on—rather than chastising—off-task moments enabled the teachers to maintain class interest and enthusiasm, foster solidarity with students through humor and shared understanding, and segue to new topics. Given participants' grasp of their content areas, the teachers were well positioned to identify points in off-task moments to reenter the instructional conversation and push through their original lessons with ease. These teaching responses are a contrast to classrooms in which fleeting interruptions may eventually derail instructional time and teachers must struggle to reclaim their students' attention. Although in-field degrees and professional licenses are logical features of effective teachers, this finding raises awareness about their role in classroom discipline.

Yet content knowledge, of course, is insufficient for good practice. Teacher educators are well aware of the need to develop practitioner competency in a multiplicity of areas such as child development, assessment, and so on. Beyond holding degrees in their subject areas, each teacher graduated from a college- or university-based preservice teacher preparation program.

Completion of a traditional plan of study is noteworthy because the institutions participants attended provided systematic pathways toward successful classrooms. Participants' journeys included several critical steps. First, each teacher completed a student teaching practicum in a high poverty, culturally diverse school. Interview data indicated that student teaching placements in fact were the most common forum through which the teachers gained instructional experience with diverse students, particularly low-income African American children. Extended experiences in African American settings cultivated favorable images of students and led them to dismiss deficit-based stereotypes. For example, Mr. Holley recalled his student teaching experience in an inner-city school fondly stating that,

I student taught at [school name] in [location] in 1987 and it was an inner-city school, predominately Black, Hispanic, probably 98% minority. . . .

Researcher: . . . did you have experiences during that student teaching that shaped your views on discipline strongly?

Mr. Holley: You know . . . I didn't have discipline problems. . . . the day the teacher announced that I was going to take over the next day, a particular class, one of the boys looked at me . . . and said, "You're going to regret it."

Researcher: Oh really?

Mr. Holley: And it scared me to death because I thought, "Oh my gosh. What have I gotten myself into?" But as soon as he realized that I was there to help him he became my strongest ally. . . . he was like "Don't mess with Mr. Holley." . . . I don't really recall having a lot of problems that year.

Second, all participants voiced the belief that field placements and hands-on experience in diverse settings were most instructive in acquiring the skills needed for sound classroom discipline. Specific to the field practicum, participants acknowledged the critical role of well-selected cooperating teachers in providing the guidance and advice needed to teach in a high poverty, culturally diverse setting. In fact, cooperating teachers frequently broadened participants' awareness of effective techniques when participants' felt that advice offered by their college or university supervisors was inappropriate or unhelpful. As Ms. Newman stated,

I think a lot of times when you do student teaching, [college professors] want you to do everything by the textbook. . . . because [my university supervisor] would say, "All right, you have a child acting out in your classroom, you go next to them, pat them on the back and say, (*in a soft voice*) 'Ok. That's enough.'" But that doesn't work. . . . The kids would just destroy my classroom, you know?

As a result, Ms. Newman believed she “modeled” her cooperating teacher “more than anything.” When asked about differences between the cooperating teacher and university professor, Ms. Newman highlighted the teacher’s authoritative approach to addressing student behavior:

Researcher: . . . what was [the cooperating teacher] doing that was more effective in your eyes?

Ms. Newman: She was stern. Very stern. . . . very structured. . . . she was into, “If I say do it, then that’s what you need to do.” You know? “I don’t want to hear any talking back or anything like that.”

Acquiring practical experience in an economically disadvantaged setting that served a large number of African American students, combined with interaction from a strong cooperating teacher, appeared to be instrumental in the teachers’ decisions to accept analogous positions of employment. Modeling by the cooperating teacher, moreover, was an essential means of informing or supplementing the teachers’ understanding of how to run a productive class, particularly as related to disciplinary orientations that may be ignored or underappreciated in teacher education programs. Previous studies have not devoted close attention to teachers’ articulation of the connection between their preservice preparation and classroom discipline, at least as related to academic degrees, licensure status, and practicum venues.

The influence of remembered teachers and teacher mentors. Although the teacher participants discussed the impact of remembered teachers on their classroom practice, racial differences emerged with regard to how former teachers influenced participants. Ms. Campbell and Ms. Newman, the African American teachers, credited their professional orientations about behavior and discipline to interactions with family members, particularly individuals who were retired teachers.

Researcher: What kinds of experiences have you had in the past that influenced your views on discipline?

Ms. Neal: Discipline? I think my home environment. . . . I believe in discipline, I believe in structure. . . . I believe if an adult tells you to do something then . . . that’s what you need to do. I don’t believe in being disrespectful to adults. But I think . . . my home life has a lot to do with that. . . . My grandmother . . . worked for the [name of school district] and she used to always talk to me about how it’s very important for you to establish discipline and respect in your classroom.

Ms. Campbell echoed similar thoughts, stating that she entered teaching with fairly well-defined ideas about classroom discipline that were shaped by her mother and aunt, African American women who had taught for 30 years. As a function of familial interactions, Ms. Newman and Ms. Campbell both transformed personal narratives into useful professional guidance. Their perceptions and classroom decisions were reified by student teaching placements with African American women whose practice resonated with the lessons and advice conveyed by the participants' family members. Observational data suggested the inclusion of culturally specific disciplinary practices such as cultural humor and periodic use of Black dialect.

The two White participants, Ms. Freeman and Mr. Holley, recounted the impact of former teachers in their work as well. Yet their stories differed from the Black participants in that they traveled *institutional*, rather than *personal*, paths to become effective disciplinarians. Rather than citing family figures, both participants emphasized how institutionally affiliated individuals had shaped them as teachers. Mr. Holley partially traced his commitment to being a good math teacher to disappointing experiences during his own schooling, relating that

Part of the reason why I teach is because in high school I found that often the math teachers were coaches who were off-season; didn't have any business belonging in that particular classroom. Because when they weren't really sure what they were doing, that created some issues in the classroom by itself, and that's definitely one of the reasons I teach—is because I wanted to be someone who actually knew mathematics teaching mathematics.

He continued by discussing how observations of other teachers pushed him to develop classroom management competencies and gain a feel for what “works” with specific students.

Researcher: Do you have any special issues in this class that I'm seeing, students that you consider particular discipline problems . . . ?

Mr. Holley: . . . well there's Casey . . . she can be very loud, very obnoxious. She can constantly do things that irritate me. . . . I have to be very careful in how I deal with that because otherwise she will just blow up and . . . cause a huge scene. There are a couple of teachers in particular having trouble with her because they can't back off. . . . they can't relax and say maybe in a silly way, “Casey again.” You know, those kinds of things.

Similar to Paley's (1979, 1995) development in working with African American children, Ms. Freeman cultivated a mentoring relationship with an African American colleague whom she felt handled behavioral issues, among

other teaching responsibilities, successfully. Reflecting on their relationship, Ms. Freeman recalled that when she first began teaching at AMS she “got run over a lot” and “I just remember thinking, ‘now that’s someone I need to get to know.’ When you come to my class you’ll hear me doing a lot of things that I picked up from her.” Specific adaptations Ms. Freeman made included learning to use Black dialect and cultural humor as disciplinary strategies. Mr. Holley also engaged in humorous exchanges with his students although the interactions did not reflect elements of African American culture on his part.

From a broad perspective, there was relative similarity in the teachers’ *general* orientation toward establishing and maintaining classroom discipline. The 4 teachers shared an overarching commitment for students to have a firm grasp of classroom policies such as being respectful and a productive class citizen. Because loosely defined categories, including uncooperative behavior, account for a significant portion of disciplinary sanctions against Black students nationally, the teachers’ conscious efforts to demystify and set forth a common understanding of behavioral boundaries were significant. By making definitions of concepts, such as respect, explicit, the teachers’ appeared to eliminate room for alternative interpretations and views of amorphous concepts. On one level, rules clarification systematically made students aware of their behavioral boundaries thus reducing the need for students to decode implicit and taken-for-granted teacher assumptions in addition to forcing teachers to elucidate their own expectations about student conduct. Yet distinctions between White and Black teachers’ family and institutionally influenced journeys surfaced in *specific techniques* the teachers made use of to reach their ends. In the vein of practices documented among African American parents, Black teachers followed an authoritative approach. As Ms. Newman reflected,

I just let the kids know what I expect. . . . I’m not the nicest person at the beginning of the year . . . And I’m always, I’m constantly on them. “No don’t do that?” “No . . . you’re not supposed to do such and such.”

Simultaneously, Ms. Campbell jokingly described herself as “grinding” her expectations into students. Drawing on Vasquez’s (1989) work, Irvine and Fraser (1998) have called such teachers warm demanders.

White teachers, conversely, expressed limited support for authoritative approaches in their *initial* establishment of classroom discipline at the start of the school year. Ms. Freeman and Mr. Holley opted to approach this task via classroom-learning activities and acted as facilitators to guide students’ toward their vision. For example, Mr. Holley stated that

. . . the first week of school . . . I asked [students] to sit down and talk about the rules that [author of a book] established and decide if that is an essential rule for this classroom or just something that we ought to do, the polite thing to do.

Ms. Freeman similarly created a content-based behavior reward system to encourage student compliance. As the school year progressed, White teachers periodically reflected authoritative stances when *reminding students of or enforcing* their expectations.

Irvine's (1989) review of cultural influences on Black teachers reminds the research community that Black educators have acted as "cultural translators and intercessors for black students, thereby directly contributing to their school achievement" (p. 51). Remembered teachers are often sources of their perceptions, motivation, and practice (Stanford, 1998). Although African American teachers' influence on the students in their charge is well documented, the findings from this study point to the expanded duties that Black teachers may assume as bridge builders and mentors for their colleagues.

The study also uncovers variations in how White teachers negotiate their work. Although all teachers, certainly, are molded by their institutional experiences, school life appeared to exert a special impact on the White practitioners in this study, and schools seemed to be the space where both White teachers deepened their awareness of what "works" in student discipline. Although the 4 participating teachers upheld analogous end goals, the consistency of White teachers' attention to school-based experiences and Black teachers' heavy consideration of family interactions was compelling.

Outreach efforts to students' parents and families. All teachers in the study viewed students' families as supportive resources. Each teacher made concerted efforts to establish and retain contact with parental figures such as by making regular phone calls, conducting home visits, and serving as surrogate parents. Ms. Newman, for instance, assisted parents by becoming an empathetic friend and helping with child care needs. She stated,

I guess I understand what they're going through and . . . I talk openly with their parents . . .

I let the parents know that I understand that it's hard, you're struggling, and I'm just here to help. . . . I have [students] come over for the weekend. I think I may have had maybe four or five girls last year to come over for the weekend. . . . In the past, there were two students that—I met them in the sixth grade and I followed them all the way through the eight grade—and so, they

would come home with me over the Christmas break. I've had one parent . . . from Africa, her mom died and she didn't have anybody to keep her kids—so I said, "Ok, I'll keep them for two weeks" and I taught both of them.

Teachers also made use of technology to communicate with parents and families. Mr. Holley discussed his use of technology extensively:

. . . I have created an email group for all of my classes. Every parent that has an email account I send home an email once a week, and I basically talk about what's going on in the classroom, what's going on at school, any important information that they need to know . . . I've gotten loads of feedback from the parents . . . in my Algebra class, in particular, I sent home a note saying that the kids are on the computers and being too social and not getting enough work done. Well probably every parent emailed me back saying, "Was it my child?." . . . So that's been a really, really good tool . . . the parents are really, really appreciative of it.

Researcher: They're appreciative but is it really making a dent in the behavior as far as getting students to-

Mr. Holley: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. All I have to do is mention to a couple of kids, you know, "I'm going to email your Dad today and boom" [snaps his fingers, indicating that students change their behavior] . . .

Although each teacher demonstrated a desire to strengthen relationships with students and their families, two participants felt that racial differences hindered their progress. Ms. Newman, an African American teacher, stated that her closest relationships were with students of the same race. In regard to White students she felt that "you just have to really . . . watch what you say sometimes. . . . It is taken differently . . . [but with] African American kids, you know, I'm just like their parents at home. . . . as opposed to the White kids . . ." When asked to elaborate on her views, she indicated that classroom discipline can be problematic in racially diverse classrooms because techniques that prove effective with Black students can be off-putting to their White peers. In addition to cultural differences in home-based discipline, Ms. Newman perceived that White youths held lower levels of respect for Black practitioners in comparison to White teachers. She continued,

. . . by me being an African American teacher in this type of setting . . . a lot of times [White students] have the idea . . . "This Black teacher doesn't know what she's talking about," or . . . they try to make you feel intimidated . . . And I think that comes from home . . . from their parents and listening to what [their] parents say.

In a related vein, Ms. Freeman felt thwarted by her perception of African American parents' preset ideas about White teachers. She reflected that,

I feel like a lot of times because [Black parents] see that I'm a White woman they don't naturally have that connection of—you know, I'm not sure what it is. If it's like a Mom thing and they can relate more [to Black teachers] . . . when I sit down and talk to [Black parents] they almost have a defensive [stance]. You know, "What's this White lady doing telling me about my son or daughter?"

Within their classrooms, both teachers thoughtfully modified their approaches to classroom discipline based on the student(s) and circumstances involved. Yet despite their reservation that racial factors constrained parent-teacher communication, neither Ms. Newman nor Ms. Freeman appeared to alter her approach to communicating with students' families. The teachers' comfort in making race-conscious adjustments with students but not parents may be indicative of inadequate instruction and guidance in tackling cross-racial interactions with parents, at least as related to classroom discipline. The teachers' decisions may also be motivated by discomfort or caution when interacting with specific individuals. Their colleagues, Ms. Campbell and Mr. Holley, did not express concerns about racial barriers with parents.

Implications and Concluding Thoughts

Teachers play a critical role in eliminating disproportionality in school discipline and previous tendencies to underexplore practitioners' voices and experiences have ill served the educational community. As researchers continue to build a robust knowledge base regarding school discipline, scholars may find the current study useful in understanding how teachers' perceptions and professional decisions intersect with theoretical propositions, professional preparation, personal experiences, and parent/teacher interactions. Specific to theory, the teachers in this study challenged deficit explanations for the discipline gap by demonstrating how educators' perceptions, attributes, and decisions mitigate perceived disruption and mute unfortunate outcomes that are associated with behavioral concerns (e.g., poor use of instructional time). The absence of race and gender inequities in two teachers' classrooms and minimal appearances in the remaining two participants' classes discredits contentions that disciplinary problems are concomitant with African American culture or that Black males present special behavioral concerns. Each teacher in the study, moreover, sought out and relied on parental support for their work. Although one teacher

(Ms. Freeman) did not always sense that she received Black parents' full backing, her observation sprang from her perception that Black parents may not share the same level of attachment and understanding with White educators as with Black educators. Ms. Freeman's views did not appear to be motivated by other reasons such as Ogbu's criticism of African American parenting practices. Moreover, her history of actively working to improve her teaching life may position her as someone who views communication barriers with parents as an alterable concern. Ms. Freeman's perceptions may have differed from those of Mr. Holley (also a White teacher) because of the difference in their years of teaching experience, nature of interactions with specific parents, and/or personal facility in communicating with families, particularly across racial lines. Ms. Newman's (a Black teacher) sense of skepticism as to whether White parents wholly supported her decisions also indicates that such teacher concerns are not specific to Black parents and White educators.

In contrast to cultural-ecological theory, the culturally responsive classroom management model captured elements of the teachers' perceptions and experiences. Analogous to previous studies, teachers codified an ethic of care through high quality instruction as well as affiliations with and regard for children and their families. Some teachers further incorporated culturally specific strategies into their work and hinted how they connect their own socialization, particularly as former students, with disciplinary decisions. Although Ms. Newman and Ms. Freeman touched on overarching social forces during interviews, all 4 teachers' tended to offer localized perceptions and interpretations of race, gender, and discipline as related to their school, district, and local metropolitan context. Such tendencies raise questions about how "effective" teachers fit with the totality (or parts) of Weinstein et al.'s (2004) framework. Because the teachers did not engage the third branch of culturally responsive classroom management (i.e., awareness of the broader social, economic, and political context) to as great a degree as the four remaining parts, theorists should think carefully about how elements of the model may operate unevenly or be operationalized in different ways. In addition, the fundamental role that engaging teaching and learning practices claimed in limiting disciplinary problems should prompt theorists to devote increased attention to the instructional context of discipline.

In practice, teacher educators should think carefully about how to open dialogues about the gendering and racialization of school discipline. Conversations should broach theoretical propositions, the role of teaching practices in context, and the roles that relevant stakeholders should play in resolving problems. Teacher educators and professional development specialists may accomplish this task by balancing content on classroom management with insights on how student outcomes may be influenced by specific tactics,

underlying perceptions, and cultural socialization. Initiating such dialogues may enable teachers to ground their work in a socially conscious stance and approach behavioral concerns in productive ways. Moreover, such steps may stimulate an institutional commitment to ending disciplinary disparities that have become far too familiar in public schools. The intricacies of school discipline and teachers' work requires that the dialogue include voices from the total educational community such as parents, teaching and administrative professionals, policymakers, and students among others. Eliciting assistance from retired teachers who have worked in similar contexts may be an especially profitable way of extending practitioners' insight into urban classrooms.

Future researchers are urged to pursue additional studies on the discipline gap, especially as related to professional preparation and input from students and their families. The commonality of traditional preparation programs in the participants' journeys highlights the importance of well-developed preservice experiences in preparing educators to deal with behavioral concerns (e.g., placements in culturally diverse settings). In addition to traditional programs, studies should be conducted with teachers who have completed alternative certification programs—or entered teaching through other means—to understand similarities and differences between their pathways and traditional programs as well as to clarify additional ways that practitioners gain competencies with student discipline.

Involving parents and students in the drive to close the discipline gap may also produce guidelines for bridging racial and cultural boundaries when communicating with parents and learning to draw on family parenting practices. Studies are particularly essential for teachers working with children of color and in high poverty settings. Moreover, additional studies conducted with effective teachers, culturally responsive practitioners, and professionals of color would assist efforts to determine the transferability of the present findings. Thoughtful research on effective teachers in predominately Black contexts may increase knowledge about White teachers' journeys and correct simplistic interpretations of culturally responsive and African American teachers as merely heavy-handed practitioners. Conversations across racial lines are essential to uncover and move past real or perceived barriers that surround educational issues.

Despite the time that teachers spend with the students in their charge, few studies probe how teachers' think about student discipline, why they make various decisions, and what factors motivate their actions. The teachers in the present study accent practitioners' role in eliminating or minimizing gaps in school punishment among urban middle school students and bring to light the importance of teacher training and mentoring in the process. Educators with

a serious interest in enhancing classroom experiences and redressing disciplinary disparities should reach out to effective teachers to learn from their personal histories, daily practice, and professional orientations.

Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

1. Please describe your professional background—schools attended, credentials earned, years of teaching experience, preservice teacher requirements and experiences, years employed at AMS, grade levels and subjects taught, in-service responsibilities, previous employment.
 2. What do you consider to be “inappropriate” student behavior? How do you define student disruption?
 3. Tell me about your approach to student discipline. What “works” best?
 4. Are there special things teachers should know about behavior as related to student demographics (race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class)?
 5. Who has shaped you as a teacher? Do you have any mentors now?
 6. What kind of relationship do you have with your students’ parents/guardians and families?
 7. If you could change anything about your interactions with students and their families, what would it be?
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Notes

1. Although all Black populations in the United States do not self-identify as African American, I use the terms interchangeably throughout the article. My decision is supported by social scientists’ use of both terms in studies of school discipline and educators’ tendency to link both categories in public school data.

2. Although Ogbu’s work references global societies, my consideration of cultural-ecological theory is confined to the United States.

3. Ogbu (1999) also classifies minority groups as “voluntary minorities” and “nonimmigrant minorities.”

4. Ms. Freeman was entering her 3rd year of teaching in the United States. She previously spent 2 years as an instructor in the Peace Corps.

5. As noted in the subsection on Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Data Analysis, the study data were coded to note whether disparities in student discipline existed in each teacher’s classroom. Based on the Reschley (1997) standard as cited in Skiba et al. (2000), disciplinary action specific to Black males exceeded the criteria by .89% in Ms. Newman’s class. The percentage of overrepresentation in Ms. Freeman’s class was 1.6% for a Hispanic male. There was no evidence of racial overrepresentation among the remaining student groups for Ms. Newman or Ms. Freeman. I did not find race- or gender-based gaps in discipline in Ms. Campbell or Mr. Holley’s classes.

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