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## ARTICLE

**The Knowledge of Good and Evil: Black Students' Church-Based Funds of Knowledge Concerning School Discipline**

Ashley Woodson

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**Introduction**

Studies of school discipline in the United States almost universally report that children of color are disproportionately subject to disciplinary action, specifically disciplinary action that removes or excludes students from the learning environment. Considerable focus has been afforded to the effect of this phenomenon on the educational outcomes of Black children, who routinely experience discipline in rates higher than their representation in the school population. The disproportionate discipline of Black students has been called the *discipline gap* (Gregory & Mosley, 2004; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Monroe, 2005). In articulating the implications of the discipline gap, scholars point to a variety of academic, social, and moral costs, including the loss of instructional time, effects on Black students' performance and persistence, and a speculated relationship with the school-to-prison pipeline (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba, Simmons, Staudinger, Rausch, Dow, & Feggins, 2003). Research has been devoted to the continued examination of the structural forces that result in disciplinary disparities. However, structural analysis of the discipline gap has been complemented by efforts to understand the lived experiences of Black students and the resources they use to understand themselves in relation to systems of school authority. Within the past decade, greater attention has been afforded to the perceptions Black students hold concerning their role and the role of their teachers in evaluating disciplinary policy and determining behavioral outcomes (Dunbar, 1999; Ferguson, 2001; Howard, 2002; Roderick, 2003). Through this and related research, it has become evident that the disciplinary beliefs and practices within Black communities contribute to how Black students construct meaning about discipline in school settings.

School discipline is generally understood as the myriad ways that schools attempt to manage student behavior in relation to worthwhile educational ends (Adams, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 2003). It is further assumed that students should conform to the presumably objective, "effective and equitable" systems of school culture and discipline (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). Failure to conform to these systems has previously been regarded as a problem with individual students, or with students' familial structures or cultural backgrounds (Carter, 2008; Yosso, 2005). In contrast to positioning discipline as a neutral process, critical education scholarship has suggested that disciplinary practices be understood as normative strategies employed to promote and maintain the functioning and well-being of households and communities, and the development of enduring social relationships (Gonzalez, et al., 1995). Discipline and the contextual understandings associated with how it is conceived and enacted develop in relation to communities' respective "funds of knowledge," or the social and intellectual resources developed through particular histories and social locations (Gonzalez, et al., 1995, p. 448). As a result, how expectations of dress, speech, behavior, and aptitude are managed in schools is in constant discourse with how they are managed in students' communities. Viewing disciplinary strategies as cultural practices, embedded with meanings derived from particular contexts, allows us to better understand and potentially improve how we participate in these practices (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Monroe, 2005).

Frameworks embracing diverse funds of knowledge indicate that useful information can be derived from common community practices (Foster, 2005; Gonzalez, et al., 1995; Yosso, 2005). When examining Black students' experiences with and interpretations of school discipline, religious settings are a context of interest due to their historically and empirically supported central influence within Black communities. Mattis and Jagers (2001) observed that religiosity and spirituality are defining features of African American life that warrant increased attention in the development and maintenance of social relationships. As the first historical institutions to address the social and educational needs of Black people in the Americas, Black churches<sup>[1]</sup> remain the first site of formal instruction for many Black children throughout the country. Studies of the role of church in students' schooling experiences have indicated a positive correlation among church involvement, higher formal educational attainment (Brown & Gary, 1991; Walker & Dixon, 2002), literacy development (Higginbotham, 1993), and civic participation (Raboteau, 2004). Church involvement is also related to the development of coping strategies useful in navigating academic contexts (Barrett, 2010; Haight, 1998; Utsey, Bolden, Williams, III, Lee, Lanier, & Newsome, 2007).. Black spirituality has also been cited as playing a role in the development of Black educators' and administrators' teaching philosophies and practices (Alston, 1999, 2005; Callendar, 1997; Dantley, 2003, 2005; Foster, 2005). Building on this research, the Black church is suggested as a site through which to explore "the dense and reciprocal social relations" through which "funds of knowledge" are transmitted, transformed, and utilized (Velez-Ibanez, 1995, p. 265). The church that served as the site for this study is also positioned as a "safe haven,"

which Pearmain (2005) described as locations characterized by the “profound experience of welcome and inclusion” and “the sustained experience of acceptance” (p. 280). Safe havens provide significant opportunities for “feeling free and safe,” and facilitating fun and games, as well as being spiritual spaces for reflection and connection that encourage spontaneous expression. They are structured by firm ground rules and shared values, maintain consistent structure over time, and provide a sense of belonging within a community (Pearmain, 2005, p. 281).

This paper explores Black students’ lived experiences of school discipline through the stories they tell about getting into trouble. These stories were shared in a church setting, with hopes of accessing a safe haven and encouraging a narrative performance grounded in the forms of cultural and spiritual capital that are meaningful to the students within the church context. One purpose of this study was to develop greater insight into the funds of knowledge through which Black students interpret and respond to rules, discipline and authority at school. A secondary objective is to examine the relationships among cultural background, social needs, and perceptions of authority, and to offer recommendations toward re-envisioning the purpose and philosophies of school disciplinary practices. To begin, I outline critical race theory and phenomenology as the methodological framework for this study. After describing the community and church in which the study took place, I explore the stories my co-researchers<sup>[2]</sup> share about their school communities, their teachers, the forms of discipline they encounter, and their racial identities. I argue that these stories have implications for the questions we ask about discipline and the disciplinary strategies we employ in our classroom communities. Informed by literature across disciplines theorizing how race and culture inform schooling experiences, I conclude by recommending how the stories of my co-researchers might inform our philosophies of school discipline.

### **Critical Race Theory, Phenomenology and the Discipline Gap**

Descriptive statistics of the discipline gap reveal a correlative relationship to race, suggesting that the phenomenon cannot be understood external to discourses of the ideological and structural roles of race in shaping the nature of inequity in education. Thus, to better understand the conditions that create and perpetuate racial disparity in discipline practices, a theoretical framework is needed that accounts for the social ontological role of race in determining social status, framing institutional relationships, and shaping interpersonal expectations. Critical race theory (CRT) requires that the material implications and personal experiences of race and racism be in the foreground in qualitative research (Bell, 1991; Carter, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005). The theory is generally described through tenets reflecting the core constructs and commitments of the framework. Foundational to CRT is the argument that racism is *endemic* to American society (Delgado, 1995), which implies that racism consists of common and ingrained patterns of interaction that afford power and privilege to some social groups at the expense of others. This tenet is extended to argue that social hierarchies based on race play a role in establishing access to resources. As such, a second tenet of CRT argues that possessing Whiteness is analogous to possessing property (Carter, 2008; Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999). Whiteness affords authority, value, and entitlement to the pursuit of self-interest and self-defense that other social categories do not. By identifying race as a constitutive category of social life, CRT allows us to explore how these social hierarchies manifest as relationships of power and privilege within education. In explorations of the discipline gap, these tenets suggest that Whiteness provides certain benefits within disciplinary systems, while Blackness results in certain deficits. A third tenet of CRT is the critique of liberalism, which encompasses a challenge to theories of social life that discount or bracket the explanatory power of race and racism in research (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Delgado, 1995). Denying the significance of race in the evaluation of policy and pedagogy perpetuates inequitable outcomes. Racial phenomena like those of the discipline gap will only improve if educators acknowledge and attend to racial histories and experiences. A fourth tenet of CRT concerns the epistemological value of marginalized knowledge, called “counter-stories” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Funds of knowledge, the similar concept of community cultural wealth, and expanded notions of cultural capital are components of marginalized knowledge rooted in social interaction, shared history, and experience (Villalpando, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Counter-stories contribute to more holistic representations of the human condition and the methods that can be employed to equitably improve it. In alignment with this tenet, CRT argues that Black students’ experiences with discipline provide a valuable and necessary perspective that informs understandings of discipline more broadly.

The lived experiences and material consequences of race transcend disciplinary boundaries and benefit from inquiry through multiple methodological paradigms (Solorzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005). For this study, phenomenological research methods were chosen for their emphasis on the importance of personal perspective, and the potential for developing insight into individuals’ motivations and actions (Denzin, 2009; Moustakas, 1994.). Phenomenology is “the study of lived, human phenomena within the everyday social contexts in which the phenomena occur from the perspective of those who experience them” (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 121). As it has been used to guide qualitative research in education, phenomenology maintains that human knowledge is comprised of the tacit, embodied meanings residing in lived

experience, and argues for the primacy of reflection upon experience in understanding social reality. The methodology is primarily concerned with accessing individuals' lived meanings, and seeks to represent through discursive means "what exists in the world" for study participants as they go about their everyday living (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Stories of lived experiences reveal essential features that appear across stories and constitute how school discipline is seen and understood by the students. Together with CRT's call to explore "the experiences and responses of those whose stories are often distorted and silenced" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36), phenomenology is an effective vehicle for exploring the lived experiences of discipline from the Black students' perspective. These philosophical approaches to research can be used to highlight the individual, cultural, and social factors that contour the discipline gap.

## Context of the Study

The state of Michigan is no exception to the sociological trend of the discipline gap. In the mid-nineteen nineties, the Michigan Advisory Committee (1996) to the United States Commission on Civil Rights reported that, while representing only 10.8% of the total school population, Black children accounted for 27.2% of suspensions. More than a decade later, the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan (2009) published a report entitled "Michigan's Throwaway Kids: Students Trapped in the School-to-Prison Pipeline." This report documented continued disproportionate discipline towards Black students in the majority of the school districts examined. In Michigan, the most consistent problem in most of the school districts examined was the disproportionate discipline of students of African descent. Demographics specific to the city of Saginaw, where this study took place, were included in this report. While the discipline gap proved smaller in Saginaw than in Ann Arbor, a city currently under investigation by the ACLU for its school discipline practices, it is still evident. Black students represent a little over 70% of the student body, but approximately 75% of suspensions, compared with White students who comprise about 15% of the student population and less than 10% of suspensions.

Saginaw is a former manufacturing center with a little over 300,000 residents. As of the 2000 U. S. Census, the population was 47.02% White and 43.26% Black, demographics distributed throughout a predominantly White west side and predominantly Black east side. From 2002 – 2010, the Federal Bureau of Investigations listed Saginaw as the most violent city *per capita*, with violence defined as murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. While Camden, NJ earned this distinction in 2011, Saginaw remained second on the list. Despite attempts by community leadership to rhetorically reinvent Saginaw as *Saginawesome*, the moniker of *Sagnasty* remains popular among urban youth in the area. Based on the air-brushed t-shirts featuring the term, *Sagnasty* seems to reflect regional and racial esteem, akin to representing the *Dirty South* in reference to one's cultural origins or stylistic influence. Being from *the Naw* remains a point of pride, despite the uncertain sociopolitical and economic fate of the city. Local churches have been integral to developing responses to this uncertainty and serve as the most stable cultural institutions in predominantly Black areas of Saginaw. One of the largest is Triumphant Church, with 1,300 members on the church roster. In addition to Sunday morning worship, the multi-million dollar facility houses various prayer meetings nearly every weekday, youth programs on Saturdays and throughout the summer, a housing foreclosure counseling agency, food banks, basketball tournaments, concerts, the occasional farmer's market, and the occasional wedding. Triumphant Church was of particular interest for this study due to its children's ministry, renowned throughout the denomination for the effectiveness of volunteer recruitment, rigor of staff training, and the caliber of religious and social activities facilitated by the congregation throughout the year. In 2009, Sister Q, a newly appointed director of children's ministry, initiated the process of writing the first volunteer training manual and discipline code. Sister Q expressed that the code of discipline was not a new approach, but an explicit rendering of practices founded in preexisting spiritual commitments. This new focus was integrated throughout the three-tiered children's ministry, which includes a nursery for infants and toddlers, a structured service that runs concurrent to Sunday worship for youth from kindergarten to age twelve, and additional classes held in an upstairs loft for teenagers and young adults.

## Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the church-based funds of knowledge used to interpret and respond to school discipline. The primary method of data collection was the phenomenological focus group, used to "elicit and validate collective testimonies" and to "give voice to the previously silenced by creating a safe space for sharing one's life experiences" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 54). The use of focus groups allowed for the in-depth exploration of perceptions and attitudes that offered insight into Black children's experiences with school discipline. As Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2008) argue, the focus group can be an empowering vehicle of data collection because it decenters the authority of the researcher and allows participants to connect and share experiences in a nurturing context (p. 383). Nineteen Black third grade students were divided into two groups by random lottery, comprising one group of ten and one group of nine. All of

the co-researchers had White teachers at school. The focus groups took place over six months. For four months prior, throughout, and two months following the facilitation of focus groups, data were also collected through participant observation and individual interviews.

Data were collected until I was able to develop a broad contextual base for understanding my co-researchers' experiences, as well as narrowed, detailed narratives within these experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and read in full to gain a holistic understanding of the experiences of my co-researchers. Data were then organized and analyzed to develop individual textural and structural descriptions of these experiences. Units of meaning relevant to the research questions were isolated and clustered according to commonality in order to construct meaningful statements about individual experiences of the phenomenon. Invariant themes across individual experiences were used to construct composite textural and structural descriptions, which were then integrated into presentations that captured the essences of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). These descriptions were presented during the last interview as summary descriptions of the experiences shared and observed over the course of the year. It was my intention to honor the role of my co-researchers by extending their participation through the co-construction of findings. The objective of the study was not generalizability, but transferability, the identification of themes that might aid in other contexts or frame future research.

## Results

Yosso (2005) argued that centering the research lens on the experiences of people of color in critical historical contexts bears the potential for revealing accumulated assets and resources within their communities. This study was conducted in order to identify these assets and resources, and the insight they might provide into Black students' experiences of school discipline. The meanings my co-researchers derived from their experiences of discipline can broadly be captured and described through three themes: (1) the nature of racism in the lives of participants; (2) the politics of negotiating self-expression and emotion; and (3) evaluating authority and legitimacy in learning environments. While effort was given to constructing presentations that afford as complete a view of the intended meanings as possible, I agree with Moustakas' (1994) argument that

the essences of an experience are never totally exhausted. The fundamental textural-structural synthesis represents the essences at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon. (p. 100)

Due to the contextual nature of phenomenological research, at times I complemented the voices of my co-researchers with relevant findings in the literature to expand the theoretical basis for research transferability.

### Theme One: The Nature of Racism in the Lives of Co-Researchers

Third grade often corresponds to the end of the series of social and cognitive developments that bury imaginary friends and slay the monsters hiding in the closet. Life is still structured by multiple unseen forces, however, benevolent and otherwise. Race is one such force, and it permeated how my co-researchers defined and presented themselves in school. The stories shared by my co-researchers indicated that their personal histories, knowledge, and beliefs were informed by the social reality of race—specifically understandings of Blackness—prior to the study. As an historical identity, Blackness was in many instances immediately related to the context of education. All but two of my co-researchers described early experiences viewing the black-and-white photographs of Ruby Bridges, Elizabeth Eckford, or the police dogs and fire hoses turned on young protestors during the 1963 Children's March. As a cultural identity, Blackness often emerged as a barometer of how not to be: what not to wear, what not to listen to, or how not to speak. Further, nearly every co-researcher communicated an instance in which unfair treatment in comparison to a White student was experienced, public humiliation, punishment, or silencing for failing to appropriately switch linguistic codes. Still, their hesitancy to employ the term *racism* was noted on multiple occasions. Through continued discussions, it became evident that they thought of racism as explicit acts of violence or harassment.

*Ashley: Okay, so what is racism?*

*Deja: Racism is when someone is mean to you because you're Black.*

*Joshua: Or when somebody calls you a nigger.*

*Marlon: That's why Dr. King gave the "I Have a Dream" speech. To get rid of racism.*

*Ashley: Really? Did it work? I mean, was he able to get rid of racism?*

*Marlon: Yeah.*

*Ashley: Why do you think that racism is gone?*

*Marlon: We can go to the same schools as White kids. And we can drink at their water fountains.*

*Deja: The president of the United States is Black.*

*Joshua: Barack Obama.*

*Candace: I don't know if racism is over all the way. I think that sometimes there is racism, because Black people get treated worse than White people.*

*Mackenzie: But slavery is over. Black people used to have to be slaves, and now we don't.*

*Marlon: And the police can't just walk in your house and kill you because you're Black. That happened before.*

*Deja: Yeah, but I bet White people don't have to say I'm sorry. They can just make you slaves and then say "Okay, bye." And everything is supposed to be fine.*

*Ashley: What do you mean, Candace, that Black people get treated worse than White people?*

*Candace: Sometimes when I watch the news with my mom, she tells me that things are racist.*

*Ashley: What do you think racism is?*

*Candace: There was a White mother that killed her daughter and buried her somewhere, but she didn't go to jail. But if you're Black and you do anything, even any little thing, they will put you in jail for the rest of your life.*

*Ashley: So what do you think racism is?*

*Joshua: It's when being Black is bad, and being White is good.*

*Candace: Racism is the whole ways that Black people are treated differently, or wrong. It's how Black people just have unfair things happen to them.*

The examples my co-researchers provided of racism represent concrete forms of repression and subjugation that have and continue to affect the Black community. Candace's objection to some of her peers' conclusion that racism no longer exists suggests that ongoing racism is quantifiable in the form of racial disparity in arrests and sentencing. Joshua's reference to social hierarchies based on race reflects an understanding of intangible systems of White privilege, but such acknowledgements among my co-researchers were rare. Racism was generally understood by my co-researchers as direct acts of institutional and personal violence, such as enslavement, hate speech, and police brutality. It was difficult, then, to explain the psychological and spiritual effects of more subtle forms of devaluation or discrimination (Allen, 2010; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

For example, Elijah struggled to explain his observation of racial profiling in dress code enforcement. On the first day of school, he was asked to remove a shirt with a hip-hop record label's logo on it. His teacher referred to the logo as a gang symbol<sup>[3]</sup>. Elijah then expressed frustration that a White student was allowed to wear a shirt featuring rock artist Kid Rock on multiple occasions throughout the school year. A Kid Rock concert in Saginaw had previously generated controversy when some residents objected to his use of a Confederate flag as a stage prop (Kid Rock shouldn't fly the Confederate flag, 2011). In Elijah's mind, both articles of clothing promoted certain music artists, and relating his shirt to a gang symbol was unfair.

*Ashley: So why do you think that happened, Elijah? Why do you think Brian got to wear the Kid Rock shirt, but you couldn't wear the shirt your brother gave you?*

*Elijah: That teacher hates me. She just hates me and everything I try to do. So everything I do she says, "That's a violation. That's a violation." But I heard about Kid Rock and how he likes slavery. So if he can wear a shirt about slavery, that should be a violation.*

The disregard of, unfamiliarity with, or suspicion towards the daily experiences and cultural spheres that inform Black students' self-expression, such as hip hop music, results in a subtle yet incessant force that isolates some students while privileging others. This effect is amplified by the consideration that Elijah could not articulate the justification for his teacher's actions. Left to draw interpretive conclusions alone, Elijah was left to personalize the frustration or disappointment of his instructor. Other co-researchers projected such inconsistencies onto the perceived competency of the teacher. Consistent throughout these experiences, however, was commentary on the only observable differences between the co-researchers and their White peers: race.

Elijah's account draws attention to a recurrent theme across my co-researchers' experiences, how the silencing effect of cultural incongruence in disciplinary practices functions as a form of racism. The teachers' respective failures to recognize cultural differences resulted in the negative evaluation of behavior. Mackenzie felt "weird and uncomfortable" when her teacher commented on her "unique" hairstyle "everyday", but was reprimanded for not expressing gratitude for the intended compliments. Damon felt humiliated, or "put on blast," by his teacher's constant inquiries into the well-being of his ill older sister, because "it was nobody's business that she was even sick." When asked how they responded to their

teachers in these situations, I'm told some variation of, "I just don't say anything." While much has been written on Black women's hair and Black values of familial privacy, my co-researchers did not receive the benefit of sociological and historical literature. Instead, everyday, they serve as the first Black students to experience a particular offense or slight, and they experience it in silence.

## Theme Two: Negotiating Self-Expression and Emotion

This silence is not absolute, however. My co-researchers reclaimed their voices in creative and insightful ways. For example, stories of anger and embarrassment became humorous as they were recited and reinterpreted during our conversations. One source of this humor was caricaturing authority figures, specifically their teachers. When giving voice to these characters in their stories, my co-researchers tended to use a higher or more nasal pitch, over enunciated consonants, blinked excessively, and employed hand gestures that drew attention to the face and hair. Their teachers were often performed as oblivious or condescending, prone to answer their own questions and use plural first person nouns. This type of satirical performance offered insight into how my co-researchers felt they were spoken to by their teachers. The recognition that their teachers spoke differently, and the inclination to mock that way of speaking, revealed a shared awareness of and preference toward certain modes of self-expression. Just as the teachers' modes proved comical for the students' purposes, my co-researchers understood the modes of expression valued in their community as inappropriate to the school context. For many of my co-researchers, conveying emotions at school involved almost constant negotiation. As Jayla indicated:

*Jayla: If you're happy, you can't be too happy. If you're sad, you can't be sad for too long because then you're being disrespectful. Don't roll your eyes. Don't suck your teeth or smack your lips. If you're even excited or angry, you just have to keep being normal. Or you will get in trouble at school.*

An excerpt from a private conversation with Martin also highlighted this theme.

*Martin: I started doing this, and rapping. (drums a beat on the wall.)*

*Ashley: Oh, what did you say?*

*Martin: Like, Hustle, hustle, hustle hard. Hustle, hustle, hustle hard.*

*Ashley: That is exactly how the song sounds.*

*Martin: (smiles)*

*Ashley: So what happened?*

*Martin: She told me to stop banging on the table.*

*Ashley: Did you?*

*Martin: Yeah, but then she told me to stop singing.*

*Ashley: So you stopped drumming, but kept...*

*Martin: I wasn't singing anyway.*

*Ashley: I know, Martin. So you stopped drumming but you kept rapping.*

*Martin: Yeah.*

*Ashley: Why were you drumming in the first place? Why did you start rapping in class?*

*Martin: (shrugs)*

*Ashley: I think you do know. Think about it.*

*Martin: I don't know. I just did it because she was taking too long. I wanted to finish the paper so I could go to recess. She always helps me last, so...*

*Ashley: How does that feel?*

*Martin: It feels angry.*

*Ashley: Angry is a tough feeling. I get angry when my teachers help me last, too. So you felt angry, and she told you to stop singing. Then what?*

*Martin: Then she told me to stop moving my lips.*

*Ashley: Okay. Were you whispering?*

*Martin: Naw, just moving my lips like this. (raps quietly)*

*Ashley: So what happened?*

*Martin: She sent me to the corner desk. So I didn't finish but I still got to go to recess because she forgot.*

Ms. Perry failed to recognize that Martin was frustrated by his inability to complete his assignment. Rather than expressing disregard for classroom expectations, Martin's rapping served as a means to calm himself, refocus his energy and avoid the embarrassment brought about by his lack of knowledge. He then escaped his frustration and embarrassment by engaging in



a battle of wills with his teacher, a continued distraction from his inability to do the work. By drumming and rapping, Martin was self-validating, demonstrating his talent and overall worth to himself and his peers.

In another story, Candace shared the feelings she experienced after being reprimanded for attempting to help an admired paraprofessional:

*Candace: So I told her, very quietly, that her underwear were showing.*

*Jayla: What kind were they?*

*Candace: Red ones.*

*All: OOOO. (giggles)*

*Ashley: Then what happened, Candace?*

*Candace: She shushed me! I was trying to help her, and she shushed me.*

*Ashley: How did that feel?*

*Candace: It felt like, whoa! I'm trying to help you, and you go like shhh, shhh.*

*Deja: You can't help some people.*

*Ashley: Then what happened, Candace?*

*Candace: I turned and told Keisha that some people needed to buy bigger pants, if their underwear were showing. And Keisha laughed so loud that we both had to write apology letters to Miss Elizabeth.*

*Ashley: What did your letter say?*

*Candace: That I was sorry that I told her her underwear were showing. I will never try to help her again. I didn't say that in my letter, though.*

*Jayla: I wouldn't either. Just let her underwear and her bra show next time.*

Candace's directness was intended to help Miss Elizabeth avoid further embarrassment. By adding that she informed Miss Elizabeth "very quietly," she was defending her speech act as a well-intentioned gesture of concern. Candace emphasized her shock at Miss Elizabeth's perceived ungratefulness and the feeling that she was punished for being kind. Martin's story ended with the perception that his request for assistance was denied, and admitted that he doesn't "really ask for help anymore." Candace experienced rejection in her attempt to offer assistance, and insisted she would never try to help Miss Elizabeth again. In light of these feelings of embarrassment and detachment, and the inherent imbalance of power in the classroom, we are left to question if and how assistance might be given or requested in the future.

### **Theme Three: Evaluating Authority and Legitimacy in Learning Environments**

Because Candace is a capable peer leader and organizer, it was difficult to hear that she refrained after that incident from helping her teacher at school. She quickly handed out pencils, taking care to reclose the box before she handed it to me. She volunteered to do odd tasks, like arranging my paperclips in the same direction and setting my recorder in the center of the table. I asked her why she thought to be so helpful, and she responded:

*Candace: Because you need help, I guess... Plus, you should help people when they're trying to do good things, like you're trying to study us and keep us out of getting into trouble.*

The perception that I was doing good things was meaningful to Candace, and to my other co-researchers. They nudged one another in gentle reminders to exhibit their best behavior when I came into the room. They encouraged other students to listen to me when I was asked to read memory verses. Their stories of school experiences reflected this pattern as well. The instructions of teachers they perceived to be good were generally accepted outright or met with casual disregard. When my co-researchers' understanding of goodness and fairness were challenged by their teachers' actions, however, their evaluations of the teacher's characters and competency became increasingly critical. On issues where the ethical position of the teacher was in question, the words of the teacher were met with disdain or hostility. In a conversation about bullying, Deja led the group in insisting that all forms of disrespectful behavior were not punished equally by school authorities:

*Deja: I got in trouble once for pushing Emma for whispering about me. She was whispering about my mom, saying that I had two moms. I don't have two moms, but my mom has a girlfriend. So I pushed her, and I made her shut up. And Ms. Graves is going to say, "Remember when we talked about bullying?" I remembered, but what else am I supposed to do? Just let her whisper about my mother? So Ms. Graves says, "You can't control other people's behaviors." She says you can't control other people's behaviors, but she's sitting there trying to control my behaviors. And I can control other people's behaviors, because Emma did stop whispering.*



According to Deja, Emma was not punished for whispering about Deja's mother. The teacher's attempt to correct Deja was thus met with outright defiance. In expressing that Ms. Graves was "trying to control" her behavior, Deja insinuated that she was not under the complete authority of her teacher.

Elijah frequently complained that his teacher's disciplinary strategies were "unfair" and "messed up." In this story, he similarly challenged the legitimacy of his teacher's authority by refusing to accept a rule he understood to be arbitrary:

*Elijah: That's a stupid idea. Nobody is going to look up at the wall every time they're bout to do something or not. I'm not going to be like "Oh, I'm going to go sharpen my pencil. No, I oughta look at the wall and see how long the line is." I'm just going to get up and try to sharpen my pencil.*

*Ashley: What might be a better way to present the rules? How do you remember the rules at home and at church, Elijah?*

*Elijah: I don't know. I do not know. There isn't a really a way, really at all. There are some things you just remember better because you're supposed to. You're supposed to do some things, or else things just won't work, you know? At my house, if I mess up then who is going to take care of [my little brothers]? So it's important.*

*Ashley: What about at church? Every single teacher tells me that you are an incredible student.*

*Elijah: I mean, I guess its like when we say "Your word is in my heart so I don't sin." It's in me to be good.*

*Ashley: How would it be to, maybe, put the school's rules in your heart? To hide them in your heart?*

*Elijah: No. Those rules aren't for heart stuff.*

*Ashley: What's heart stuff Elijah?*

*Elijah: Heart stuff. Heart stuff. Heart stuff is... It's what is important for your heart and your life. And no school can teach you those types of things.*

As Elijah's assessment of the pencil sharpener rule and his school's capacity for moral education suggest, my co-researchers' held well-developed evaluations of both authority figures and learning contexts. Teachers were held accountable for their consistency, their determinations of right and wrong, and perceived concern for the best interests of the students. The types of knowledge presented in school were also subject to some scrutiny:

*Ashley: Well, what's the difference? What is the difference between what you learn at school and what you learn at church?*

*Jayla: There is a difference.*

*Ashley: Is there a difference?*

*Candace: Yes! At church, you learn about God's love. At school, you learn how to do things.*

*Jayla: When you're in school, you're just learning things about your everyday things. In church, you're learning about your soul. And everlasting life.*

*Ashley: Elijah?*

*Elijah: Church is about being a good Christian.*

*Ashley: Why is it important to be a good Christian?*

*Elijah: Because that's what God wants. Because we are His children, and he doesn't want us to sin.*

*Ashley: So what is school about?*

*Elijah: School is about...*

*Martin: School is just about learning things like your vocabulary words, or the Michigan lakes.*

*Ashley: Aren't those things important?*

*Martin: No.*

*Jayla: Yes, yes. But school still isn't about life!*

This account reveals that for my co-researchers, knowledge acquisition was not inherently perceived as beneficial. While church knowledge was always valuable, school knowledge was considered worthwhile only if it were related to the demands of daily life. For a majority of their school hours, my co-researchers attempted to discern which information was worth their attention. Multiple factors played into their final determinations, including concerns about the equal and consistent application of school policy and the relevance of the curriculum. If a person or lesson was deemed not credible, it influenced my co-researchers behavioral choices in relation to learning. While the social position of the educator within the classroom may be established, the legitimacy of the individual holding the position and the nature of that position itself were always in question. This is understandable: If certain actions presumably justify the exclusion of the child from the classroom, in many ways challenging their right to be a student, it is only logical that certain actions or inactions might serve to undermine the teacher's right to teach. My co-researchers were able to list such actions and inactions from their classroom experiences: lack of recognition for performance and effort, unjustified accusations, broken promises, violations of personal space or privacy, the use of disrespectful language or tones, appearing lazy or unkempt. Just as

misbehavior is subjectively determined, so is teacher credibility.

## Discussion

The value of referencing community funds of knowledge in interpreting and resolving disciplinary issues emerged repeatedly in the stories shared by my co-researchers, confirming previous findings about culturally sensitive discipline, social, and cultural capital (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Monroe, 2005). My co-researchers' employed silence as a political strategy, used humor to navigate the effects of their frustration, and reclaimed their autonomy by evaluating which teachers deserved their respect. All of these decisions reflected the "array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression," or, funds of knowledge (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). My co-researchers demonstrated how their funds of knowledge helped them cope with difficult situations at school, and maintain their personal and cultural identities. While the value of culturally sensitive discipline practices has been addressed in the literature (Monroe, 2005), this study offers specific insights derived from the experiences of my co-researchers toward reenvisioning school discipline practices and responding to the discipline gap.

While this study was limited to the experiences of Black students, its findings suggest considerations that could inform how school discipline is structured for all students. Specifically, the evidence supports arguments that the act of disciplining is subjective in both its imposition and interpretation. While critical inquiry has advanced our understanding of the subjective nature of discipline, discourse concerning discipline remains predicated upon linear conceptions of objective rule enforcement. Despite considerable progressions in our understandings of school discipline, exclusion and punishment remain the most common modes of punishment in public schools (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). My co-researchers' stories suggest instead that discipline be understood as a multifocal web of individual and collective negotiations of and responses to classroom authority, based on cultural judgment, emotional states, personal interest, and professional training. Similarly, what constitutes a *disruption* is a subjective determination, framed and interpreted through contextual, situational, and institutional factors, as well as by the actual and perceived effects of a behavior. As such, it might be useful to simultaneously conceive of disruptive behavior as meaning-making activity, or a vehicle for participating within and appropriating the norms of the classroom toward new uses, as well as symptomatic of complex personal and structural dynamics. Reflection on the themes and my time at Triumphant Church resulted in the following recommendations for educators:

### Envisioning school discipline as collective process

If she had the choice, Mackenzie would never have worn her hair in braids. She felt she was too old for the beads that her mother placed on the ends. She hated having her hair pressed, but her mother did not consider her Afro an appropriate hairstyle for school. This was especially frustrating for Mackenzie because her older sister, whose hair is naturally longer and straighter, was allowed to wear her hair down in a headband or simple ponytail to school each day. Mackenzie's teacher, likely unaware of the politics surrounding Mackenzie's hairstyle, complimented Mackenzie's braids almost daily. Instead of encouraging Mackenzie to embrace her braids, the constant attention angered her to the point that she refused to respond to her teacher's comments with the requisite thank you. This resulted in frequent confrontations.

*Mackenzie: So she says everytime, "When someone says something polite to you, you should say thank you, Mackenzie".*

The assuredly good intentions of Mackenzie's teacher demonstrated that we can't anticipate every instance in which we might silence, frustrate, or embarrass our students. In response to Mackenzie's story, I asked my co-researchers about their understandings of self-expression and etiquette. Mackenzie theorized why she didn't feel that *thank you* was an appropriate response to her teacher's comments.

*Mackenzie: In one part, it gets on my nerves everyday. In another part, I didn't do my hair so why should I say thank you for something I didn't even do?*

In response to Mackenzie's story, our group decided to stop saying thank you for compliments that we didn't appreciate. This renegotiation of social norms quickly became a game in which I sought to acknowledge aspects of skill or appearance that were personally meaningful to my co-researchers, and they eagerly taught me about their priorities and values. It was rewarding as a researcher to say goodbye to the mumbled, monotone "thank you" that seems to permeate adult-child discourse. We spoke to one another with renewed interest and sincerity. I learned that Marlon ironed his own pants in the morning, and Deja colored outside of the lines because she was inspired by a museum exhibit featuring abstract art.

Further, after learning that I was nervous about conducting the focus groups, all of my co-researchers began to say, “Good questions, Ashley,” after our conversations. Our new system of mutual validation can be discussed in relation to how discipline is structured at Triumphant Church. The discipline code was developed in relation to a shared set of spiritual values, embraced by the parents (who were asked to sign a copy of the discipline code at the beginning of each year), and understood as grounded in meaningful life lessons by the students. Naming and prioritizing what was valued in our immediate context, rather than importing social norms, proved an effective way of managing our interactions with one another.

Reflecting on this experience, I wrote in my field notes that it would probably be inappropriate and unproductive to label Mackenzie’s teacher as racist. But I wondered what recommendations could be developed based on her role as an authority figure in a racist system. Boykin (1986) argues,

we should recognize that racist individuals are not needed to maintain [systems of racial hegemony]. It doesn’t require malevolent people or malevolent intentions. Indeed, agents of hegemony can just as easily carry out their roles with the very best and sincerest of intentions. (p. 69)

Attendant to this phenomenon are “microaggressions,” the subtle, relatively innocuous behaviors that are “delivered incessantly[;] the cumulative effect to the victim and to the victimizer is of an unimaginable magnitude” (Pierce, 1970; p. 266). In attending to the nature of racism as it emerged in my co-researchers’ stories, we can think about microaggressions as the result of the personal and institutional barriers that limit our ability to hear and value the funds of knowledge that our students bring to the classroom. One way to do this is to *envision school discipline as a collective process*. Students enter our classrooms bound to social contracts in which they have little voice or control. Rather than imposing social boundaries that might denigrate community funds of knowledge, the process of disciplining should help students express and assess the behavior they would like to see in their classroom community, and harness collective knowledge toward promoting these behaviors.

### **Envisioning school discipline as reparative and restorative**

When Candace was chastised for embarrassing Miss Elizabeth after the red underwear incident, she felt that her role as a capable, informed, and concerned community member was disrespected. As she shared her story, it was evident that she considered that her knowledge of common sense and decorum had been suppressed. After Candace shared her experience with the group, I wrote questions in my field notes that I wanted my co-researchers to answer during our next conversation: *What do we do if we see someone’s underwear? How do we feel when someone talks about underwear? How can we help each other and respect those types of feelings?* Jayla’s sister gave birth before our next session, however, and in the excitement I never returned to those questions. Still, in alignment with envisioning school discipline as a collective process, we can consider the role of classroom community in responding to perceived offenses and offenders, in juxtaposition to having Candace write a private letter of apology.

A story with Damon offers further insight into how we can evaluate punishment with the best interest of the community in the forefront. The service leader asked the children to identify different forms of sin. Lying was among the top responses, as well as cheating and disobeying parents. Damon yelled, “Sex!” as loud as he could in between fits of laughter. When his response wasn’t promptly acknowledged, he threw his chair against the wall. A church deacon was called to remove a very emotional Damon from the gymnasium. Children who had witnessed Damon’s outburst disconnected from the service to talk among themselves, some laughing, others wondering why sex had been an inappropriate answer. Children who hadn’t seen Damon throw the chair were visibly confused and a little scared at the sudden presence of the deacon. Though the service leader attempted to continue the conversation, the room fell into an uneasy silence.

The devil is an easy scapegoat when things go wrong at Triumphant Church. However, when Damon whispered to me, “I guess I let the devil use me,” it suggested that he acknowledged his self-control as a relevant factor in determining behavioral outcomes. As an external agent of naughtiness, the devil is a helpful reminder that misbehavior does not necessarily reflect on the enduring character of the offender. This value of the person rather than the behavior was evident when Damon rejoined the group and the worship service stopped as an adult volunteer exclaimed, “Damon is back! Damon we missed you!” The group erupted in applause and a chorus of welcomes for Damon, who was escorted by friends to a seat in the front row. Unrelated to Damon’s return, but arguably relevant to funds of knowledge accessible to my co-researchers regarding discipline, the closing song for the day was gospel artist Hezekiah Walker’s “I Need You to Survive”:

I need you, you need me. We're all a part of God's body.

Stand with me, agree with me. We're all a part of God's body...

You are important to me, I need you to survive.

I pray for you, you pray for me.

I love you, I need you to survive.

I won't harm you with words from my mouth.

I love you, I need you to survive.

Encased in religious terms, the song affirms not only the importance of community, but also the importance of the relationships within that community. One challenge in exploring the utility of funds of knowledge, which are necessarily collective in nature, is the idea that discipline is primarily a response to individual action. For example, the perceived need to punish or exclude Damon might override the potential consequences to the community that this punishment might cause: the loss of Damon as a community leader, the continued confusion or fear of other students, or implicitly facilitating a culture of intolerance. Referring back to the red underwear incident, emphasizing Candace's individual act rather than Candace and Miss Elizabeth's relationship to one another and the classroom community prevented identifying a potential balance of the role and interests of all parties involved. When the individual or individual act is the primary target of discipline, relationships within the community can be sacrificed to exclusionary, embarrassing, or punitive punishments. When the community is viewed as primary, we are necessarily concerned with the well-being of the collective. One way this well-being might be promoted is through validating what community roles are and prioritizing the cohesion of the community. This suggests *envisioning school discipline as reparative and restorative*. Drawing strength from the concept of forgiveness, this recommendation requires us to interrogate the rationale and intentions of our discipline strategies. While the term *forgiveness* invokes religious considerations, I suggest pedagogical forgiveness as an acknowledgment of the theoretical merit of the self-fulfilling prophecy, and the active intervention in such cycles. Historically, discipline has been used to impose consequence comparable to the perceived offense. Instead, we could view discipline as a tool to facilitate learning that fosters self-validation, restores violated relationships, and mediates future conflict. Rather than depriving students of or excluding students from the community, we could promote behaviors that call for recognition and restitution, while simultaneously reaffirming the role of the person in the classroom.

### Envisioning school discipline as an act of service

Reflecting on the perceived affront to her mother, Deja was proud that she pushed Emma. She regretted getting into trouble, but felt it was her responsibility to defend her family and her mother's relationship. When I asked her why she felt it necessary to push her classmate, she was visibly agitated as she responded:

*That's my mother. And I don't talk about her mother, and she shouldn't talk about things that she doesn't know about. She was lying, she was making fun of me, which is okay sometimes, but she was lying about my mom to do it. It's not okay at all. I shouldn't have pushed her, but I would push her again today.*

It is somewhat instinctive to act immediately and unilaterally on behalf of a student who has been physically assaulted. The teacher in this scenario was required to ensure Emma's physical safety, but might also have thought to validate Deja's sense of familial honor and respect. The determinations of what constitutes safety, assault, victimization, and self-defense are derived from diverse funds of knowledge. Deja certainly did not have the right to push another student, and the needs of that student should certainly have been considered. However, no form of misbehavior should revoke Deja's right to have her needs considered or limit her access to the forms of discipline that best serve those needs.

For Sister Q, serving the needs of the students at Triumphant Church required changes in volunteer demographics. Historically, children's ministry volunteers have been predominantly female. Sister Q shared that she intentionally began recruiting young men to join the staff at the time of her appointment, and by the time of data collection, male volunteers represented nearly one-quarter of the ministry team. In one of our first conversations, she indicated that the very presence of the young men was a form of behavior support. Many of her students lived in single-mother homes, and the male volunteers contributed to more gender-diverse representations of how teaching, learning, and worshipping are conducted. When a male student misbehaved, it was not uncommon for a male volunteer to quietly stand or sit next to the student. Often, this was all that was needed to resolve the situation, though my co-researcher Martin frequently needed a loving hand on the shoulder as well. The purpose of this practice was not to frighten or embarrass Martin, but to remind him of appropriate ways of being in the community. After a particularly trying day, he smiled and told me, "They should have sent me to my mama. But they let me stay." Being allowed to stay contributed to his sense of belonging within the ministry: "They like me here." This correlates with Gregory & Weinstein's (2008) finding that predictors of Black student trust in teacher authority included perceptions of teacher caring and the teacher's high expectations. As indicated, my co-

researchers had well formulated opinions regarding which authority figures were sincerely concerned with their personal and academic well-being. In making our concerns for our students evident, I suggest we could *envision school discipline as an act of service*. The concept of service-leadership has been applied to educational settings before, specifically in urban contexts (Alston, 2005). It refers to individuals whose leadership is grounded in helping rather than governing. Employing discipline as an outgrowth of our commitment to the personal and academic growth of our students, rather than as a means of enforcing order, may increase educator credibility and reduce student resistance.

## Conclusion

A growing number of scholars recognize the significance of the discipline gap and are working to detail its causes and implications. This study was intended to contribute to these efforts by exploring Black students' experiences with school discipline and how community funds of knowledge help to understand and potentially improve these experiences. The three themes that emerged from this exploration inform our understandings of the discipline gap's experiential consequences and frame a discussion of the evolving role of race in the interpretation of school discipline practices; the relationship between culture, self-expression and classroom status; and students' determinations of teacher and school credibility. They also illustrate how the church might prove a useful context for continued exploration of social and cultural resources. It is important to note that different churches will emphasize different aspects of cultural mores, a fact illustrating the importance of recognizing and utilizing the wealth of specific communities within broader social groups. Future research might emphasize other contexts from which funds of knowledge might be derived, teachers' cultural and spiritual funds of knowledge, and the effects of re-envisioning discipline in the classroom community.

While the discipline gap and the school-to-prison pipeline are not religious constructs, we can infer from relevant literature the spiritual effects that systematic exclusion, failure, and disassociation have had on students of color as members of learning communities. Though church is in many ways a religious and doctrinal space, spiritual capital is not necessarily associated with any one understanding of human spirituality. Instead, spiritual capital can be viewed as the resources and internal mechanisms that guide "human beings to make meaning for their lives, to establish purpose for themselves, to enter into connections or relationships with others, and serve as the facility for people to create through inspired imagination" (Dantley, 2003, p. 3). If we recognize the spiritual as a realm of meaning-making accessible to all students and teachers, albeit in personally and culturally mediated ways, we can derive from this space intentional dispositions and practices that nurture and empower our students as people and citizens.

## Notes

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## Notes

[1] I use *the Black church* as an umbrella term to refer to the countless institutions organized by Black people to promote the social and spiritual fulfillment of the Black community. This includes all places of worship, including Christian churches, mosques, temples, etc.

[2] I use the term *co-researchers*, synonymous with *research partners* and *co-inquirers*, to denote that the research process was a “cooperative enterprise in which everything was aboveboard” and “a participatory endeavor” in which the students were actively engaged in directing the direction of the study, the analysis and interpretation of the findings (Rogers, 1985, p. 13).

[3] The dress code at Elijah’s school states the following: “Any clothing, jewelry, symbols or other objects that may reasonably be perceived by a staff member as evidence of membership in or affiliation with a gang or detracts from a positive school climate shall not be worn” (Student Appearance Guidelines, Board of Education Policy No. 8240, 2005).