A Humanizing Approach to Improving School Disciplinary Culture

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Teachers, administrators, students, and families must ask themselves if a school's disciplinary policies and practices exist for the purposes of exerting power over their students or if they exist to foster positive and holistic human development. This article summarizes the steps that one school took to establish a culture in which everyone in the school community could respect, honor, and embrace the boundaries and ethics of the school's approach to discipline.

The frameworks mentioned here were primarily formulated to address teacher and administrative gaps in school-to-community communication and fundamental understandings of community expectations and norms regarding student behavior. Building on the notions of critical pedagogy and social justice leadership, efforts articulated here were enacted with the intent to create a space in which students and staff could experience their school as more safe and empowering (Brown, 2006; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Theoharis, 2007). As a member of the school's administration, I was privileged to be a part of the process.

Discipline policies at many U.S. schools enact varied institutional responses to student misbehavior, but studies show that Black and Latino students are more likely to experience harsh punitive consequences such as suspension and expulsion (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Monroe, 2006; Welch & Payne, 2010). Researchers note schools' use of metal detectors, I.D. cards, and an increase in armed, on-campus officers to address what is a perceived problem with school safety as contributing components to an atmosphere of "zero tolerance" that exacerbates racially disproportionate disciplinary outcomes for students of color (Astor et al., 2005; Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013).

In response to such outcomes, scholars have continued to advocate for the need for cultural relevance and responsiveness as a way to engage students in the schooling experience, build relationships with teachers, and help them make sense of their lives (Gay, 2003; Howard, 2012; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This discourse has led to a renewed interest in the issue of school discipline and the development of more humanizing disciplinary frameworks such as positive behavioral and intervention supports (Skiba, et al, 2002; Sugai & Horner, 2002) authoritative

discipline (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010), restorative justice (Hopkins, 2003; Karp & Breslin, 2001) and other practices and policies that critique a zero tolerance approach (Martinez, 2009; Stein, 2003; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riesenberg, 2006).

However, the quality of these frameworks is dependent on the fidelity and sincerity with which they are implemented. Without a grounding in a purpose and an environment that emphasizes ethics and practices that values students as developing human beings that need boundaries and respect, school discipline practices can manifest in destructive practices often as a result of a non-reflective, uncritical, institutional culture.

The Small Equity School

The Small Equity School (SES), a small urban high school with a strong social justice mission, reflects many of the struggles around discipline in its efforts to create a positive and empowering learning environment for students and staff. Located the San Francisco Bay Area, SES is known for its diversity and rich history of popular political involvement. It began in 2003 on the campus of a large public university and has since moved to its current setting in a diverse working-class community.

The student body is composed of about 280 students in grades nine to twelve. In terms of racial diversity, approximately 53% of students are Latino/a, 27% African-American, 11% Asian-American, 3% Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/American Indian, 3% White-American, and 1% multiracial. SES has the second highest proportion of students of color of any high school in the district, and over 85% of students qualify as low-income.

SES had a well-developed social justice curriculum already in place, a democratic decision-making structure, a college-readiness program, and a health center on campus that effectively provided counseling to students and connected them with critical off-campus resources. The social justice theme of the school and the corresponding ideologies held by staff upon hire set a foundation that, at the very least, discouraged challenges to ideas of equity, resistance, and cultural congruence. However, as supportive as these assets were, they were not enough to ensure that the school was a safe or healthy space for students.

Humanization

As the newer of two leaders in a dual-principal structure at SES, I was asked to take on the task of "re-culturing" (Barth, 2002) the space to address issues of habitual tardiness, disrespect of school staff, and an unsafe environment for students, which included violent conflicts, objectifying language, and bullying. While less than 25% of the school's population were African-American girls, 90% of the suspensions were African-American girls. The school also had experienced a consistent decline in test scores for the six years previous to the start of the efforts described in this paper. This culminated in the school having the lowest test scores of any high school in the district at by the time these coordinated efforts at "re-culturing" began.

Students were routinely sent out of their classrooms for disciplinary infractions, yet there were no clear expectations about what was supposed to happen afterwards. These problems were not just individual mistakes; as routine elements of the school's culture they represented a collective ethic that demonstrated a low set of expectations for students (Landsman, 2004). These low expectations were also manifested in the lack of a clear structure for school discipline and a professional development plan that excluded any opposition to the staff and faculty's assumptions regarding students' cultural or community deficiencies (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Valencia, 2012). As a result, my communications with my school community framed our focus on social justice as a manifestation of ethics and practices that must first be *humanizing*.

Paulo Freire defines humanization as "the act of becoming more fully human" (Freire, 2000, p. 2). Freire identifies forces and mechanisms of oppression as instruments that interrupt the process of humanization, leading to what he calls "dehumanization," or the loss of one's humanity. In understanding this concept, educators interested in social justice must first contextualize their work as diametrically opposed to oppressive forces and mechanisms. Oppression manifests as threats from forces outside the body and within. As communities struggle with disproportionately high arrest rates, incarceration rates, and dynamics of school "push-out", they also may struggle with high rates of assault, homicide, and sexual harassment- forms of intra-group violence. As educators engage in efforts that seek to empower students to change their reality and improve their personal and communal situation, it is important that they recognize the dual threat of external and internalized oppression. With this in mind, in addition to helping students develop a structural analysis of oppression, teachers must locate the struggle against oppression as one that takes place in the consciousness of the student (Akom, 2006; Morrell, 2002; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Early notions of progressive education also identified educators' work as developing individuals for a larger purpose and saw the school as a space for social reform (Bohan, 2003; Reese, 2001; Cremin, 1959). John Dewey states:

> That the traditional schools have almost wholly evaded consideration of the social potentialities of education is no reason why progressive schools should continue the evasion…. the time ought to come when no one will be judged to be an educated man or woman who does not have insight into the basic forces of industrial and urban civilization. Only schools which take the lead in bringing about this kind of education can claim to be progressive in any socially significant sense. (Dewey, 1980)

Viewing education as a space for human development and approaching school discipline with the intent to provide a humanizing experience is an inherently progressive concept (Kohn, 2008; Covaleskie, 1994; Dewey, 1980). As a tradition, progressive education is a philosophy that informs an educational experience that prepares students more for democratic citizenship than for participation as laborers in a market economy (Dewey, 2007; Dewey, 2004; Reese, 2001). At its core, the early formulations of progressive education suggested that children and students be seen and prioritized as the focus of curriculum development and school design (Bohan, 2003; Kohn, 2008). Without exaggerating this idea, a humanizing approach to discipline focuses on the needs of the child as a developing, social being.

It is through the development of "discipline," Dewey asserted, that students would learn and continue to develop a sense of "self-direction." Discipline is an essential component of a functioning democracy and becomes the very characteristic that allows a citizen to exercise freedom through deliberate action and an awareness of the social dynamics in which they live. He writes:

> A person who is trained to consider his actions, to undertake them deliberately, is in so far forth disciplined. Add to this ability a power to endure in an intelligently chosen course in [the] face of distraction, confusion, and difficulty, and you have the essence of discipline. Discipline means power at command; mastery of the resources available for carrying through the action undertaken (2004, p. 135).

Creating a humanizing school disciplinary culture at SES meant being rooted in the desire to affirm students as powerful human beings from resilient and impactful communities. Our boundaries, expectations, and practices would reflect an acknowledgement that our students' families held the highest of hopes and expectations for their children. We began the process of creating a humanizing

space by (1) establishing a clear mission statement; (2) aligning our values to the mission; (3) establishing consistency in the discipline process; and (4) developing courage through staff and faculty ability to deal with confrontation.

Developing a Clear Mission Statement

Once a school's purpose of social, economic, political and cultural significance has been established and attendant values are agreed upon, school leaders must disseminate this agenda to students and their families with clarity, consistency, and courage. The Small Equity School developed a new school mission statement:

> We believe that a school for social justice should maintain a staunch opposition to oppression in both its conventional and internalized forms. We believe that we all must be held accountable in regards to our voice and daily action to uphold ethics emblematic of a proud struggle against the destruction of our communities.

The specific language used in this mission statement highlights a few key strategies. First, the use of the word "we" is important because it creates a school community that acknowledges the socio-political, economic, spiritual, and mortal struggles of our families and our student's families. Second, this mission is not limited to students' academic success and college acceptance. Third, as a central premise of social justice education, members of the school community are accountable for their daily behavior. Finally, the mission omits a reference to students as it implies that these values are to be held by all who have chosen to be a part of school community—from custodians to directors. This is a key element of a transformative leadership approach—a clear vision that implies the need to model a set of ethics: "To change the culture requires that more desirable qualities replace existing unhealthy elements. Clear personal and collective visions are crucial for this enterprise" (Barth, 2002, p. 2).

Aligning Values to the Mission

After establishing and sharing a clear mission statement, it is important to align the values to the mission. These values have to be culturally responsive and should not be embarrassing or irrelevant to students when verbalized or shared with peers outside of school. They need to be easy to apply to the daily lives of students, thus enhancing their significance and the authenticity of the school as a viable learning space. In the SES, the values are connected to the specific mission of challenging

internalized oppression and holding community members accountable. The "RICH" values were articulated as follows:

1. Respect – Earned and given before received
2. Integrity – Your work, or no work. What's right is what is most difficult.
3. Courage – To stand up to/face your fears, and your peers.
4. Humility – You don't know everything—no one does.

A senior student talked about the new values:

> RICH! It was something you had to know. Then it turned into something to model. Then it was like, "Okay I can set values for anything in my life and for everything in my life." And this doesn't just apply in school.

The school values were presented first and foremost as values for dealing with the challenges of an economically and racially stratified social structure. This served to validate the values and help the entire community manifest them at all times. The school-community link was the beginning of a comprehensive approach to messaging about the school and making sure that each idea and ethic was connected to a practice that was in turn connected back to the vision. Establishing a clear connection between vision and daily practice was a critical step in beginning to build trust, which is essential for school culture change (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). The stated values were important in demonstrating the connection between knowledge earned at school and its utility in the community, and parents were also pleased that these values corresponded to community values.

The school's mission was put into practice in school assemblies, which provided communal instruction in accordance with our mission of challenging oppression and upholding our values. These forums for school-wide gatherings and messaging were important because they accessed the multiple learning styles present in such a large community. Activities included showing popular films and excerpts from musical selections and videos in order to simultaneously frame the school's purpose and strengthen a sense of identity. Using audio-visual media helped students move easily from a space of visual stimulation to a space of visual *and* mental stimulation when guided with purpose and engaging, contextualized readings and exercises. Assemblies were also used for traditional school announcements and performances, but the performance element was reduced to make time for these exercises and activities.

Consistent messages about the mission were reinforced in advisory (also known as a homeroom class). The advisory curriculum was altered to include a deeper exploration of the school's values and the ideological, socio-historical, and political context of the mission statement. For example, the school's values of respect and integrity were discussed within the context of liberation pedagogy and critical inquiry. The school's College Access Director commented on the approach, saying "it all helped me formulate a language around school change and how that can trickle down to student's development."

Consistency in the Discipline Process

Once the mission and values were solidified, school policies could be implemented that aligned closely with the values, and the nuances of the school's discipline process could be created and reinforced. New consistent discipline practices were implemented to provide more consistency and improve the school climate.

At SES, school leaders were historically concerned about the racially disproportionate suspension rate that reflected the national epidemic referred to as the discipline gap" (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Many students sent to the office who had committed an obvious offense to the community found it difficult to apologize. They found the idea of apology an indicator of weakness or a sign of eternal subservience.

The new discipline process was referred to as "Atonement or At Home-ment." It was simple. If a violation of school policy occurred that was non-violent in nature a student had the following options:

1. After a private conversation with the supervising adult that clarifies the nature of the violation and why it is unacceptable, the student can return to their daily schedule and make amends with whomever the adult identifies as suitable.

2. The student can request further clarification from the administrator about why what they did was a problem. This is also a time for a longer, more contextualized conversation about the purpose of the school in a socio-historical context and the value of the student in that vision. The student can also explain why someone else needs to atone in the situation. This includes students and teachers who may have unnecessarily insulted the student or instigated the incident.

3. The student can refuse to atone to anyone and be suspended. There is an in-depth discussion between the administrator, student, and any other party that would take place either before the suspension or once the student returns to school.

If the student's offense is violent in nature, there is an automatic suspension. For situations of a violent nature, students who were suspended for violence three times in two years would often be recommended for transfer out of the school. Students who presented a threat to the student body through the use of excessive violence or perpetual drug possession or conspicuous gang affiliation would also be transferred.

Confrontation and Courage

Initially, SES's plan for a new discipline policy that was grounded in the school's RICH values sounded ridiculous. The staff did not think that it would work or that it would reduce suspensions. However, the reduction in suspensions was not the primary goal. Instead, the goal was to teach students effectively and create a safe school environment.

Teachers and staff were asked to invest time and energy to study the history of the community they served and a commitment to learning different ways to engage students. For our staff and faculty, this meant consistently confronting students when they violated the community's expectations while also being apologetic when misunderstandings or mistakes occurred on their own part. As one staff member commented:

> You can look at a teacher who is being authoritative in a classroom, is managing the classroom, and is setting down reasons and giving consequences. I think a lot of people come from this youth development approach in social justice work where you see that as innately harmful to the child. I think that what our staff didn't have was a framework for what it meant or looked like to be an authority figure that didn't represent oppression.

A humanities teacher also commented:

> Like there was a student that constantly betrayed people's trust, assaulted someone in one of the classrooms, steals from his advisor, gets high with one of the teachers, and did all of these blatant violations of our community. We still had so many people advocating for him to stay at the school. Which is where I decided that, okay, this is a really significant paradigm where within I didn't see anywhere in that

> system where individual capability and responsibility, or ownership of your actions or any of that stuff was actually there.

Working with staff and faculty through consistent dialogue and reflective activities in and out of professional development sessions helped frame expectations for how staff can and should handle issues of student conduct in ways that still felt humanizing and supportive. Such work included standing with teachers as they conducted hallway conversations with students, having reflective conversations with teachers at the end of the school day regarding confrontations with students and how to handle them, and consistent and honest dialogue in staff meetings about what is and is not working for the staff collective regarding the school's disciplinary policies and procedures.

Identifiable improvements could be seen after three years of the new discipline policy. Between 2008 and 2011 SES experienced a dramatic reduction in suspensions, an increase in daily attendance, and increased test scores. School suspensions of African-American students decreased from 90% to just under 45%, and on average, fewer than 5 students out of an annual average of 42 suspended students were suspended more than once a year. Student attendance also increased each year. Daily overall attendance increased from 91% to 93% and attendance in classes or "instructional time" went up from 83% to 88%, earning the school a district award for improved attendance rates. Academically, the school experienced its first rise in test scores in seven years, with a net increase of 34 Academic Performance Index points over a three-year period.

Regardless of the quantifiable shifts in the disciplinary culture of the school, at the core of a humanizing environment are spaces and opportunities for healthy relationships that challenge students and staff alike to respect one another. In such an environment, boundaries can be upheld without guilt and flexibility can be institutionalized without the lowering of expectations. In the case of the SES, the creation of a mission statement, a related purpose, and aligned values was an important first step. The consistent and clear messaging that was infused throughout the school environment further reinforced the social justice mission to achieve a new disciplinary culture at SES.

Steps to Improving School Disciplinary Culture Using a Humanizing Approach

1. A clear definition and articulation of social justice that emphasizes humanization through high behavioral expectations.

2. A usable set of values established for the collective that is connected to the social justice intent of the school.

3. Clearly articulated consequences for school violations and the rationale behind each as it relates to the social justice mission (as opposed to the state's rationale for instituting the code).

4. Professional development on the diverse communities in the school and their histories of conflict, resistance, and success.

5. Clear and easy-to-understand systems and processes for handling disciplinary issues.

6. Professional development on techniques that engage, confront, and resolve disciplinary issues.

7. Consistent, community-wide messaging to all stakeholders regarding the social justice-oriented purpose of the school, behavioral expectations, and disciplinary processes.

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