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Using Double Consciousness as an Analytic Tool to Discuss the Decision Making of Black School Leaders in Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Abstract

Given that Black students are more likely to be suspended from school than their White counterparts, researchers, educators, policymakers, activists, and parents have forced national attention onto the need to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). A perspective that needs to be further explored is that of district and school leaders who have the challenge of making leadership decisions that influence the STPP. In this article, we take the position that district and school leaders must be provided tangible solutions to dismantle the STPP for Black students. Thus, we use Du Bois' (1903) notion of double consciousness as a conceptual lens to examine the STPP and the dilemma Black school leaders face in dealing with disciplinary infractions. We then present a case from the second author's experience as a

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practicing school leader to explore how school leaders are often presented with complicated choices when it comes to making decisions that potentially send a student into the STPP trajectory. Due to the fact school leaders are rarely provided tangible solutions for disrupting the STPP, we provide recommendations for school leaders on how to disrupt the STPP.

Keywords: Black school leaders, school to prison pipeline, double consciousness

Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Education's (DOE; 2014) Office of Civil Rights (OCR) two-year investigation of the Minneapolis school district (MSD), Black students were "considerably overrepresented in all of the district's disciplinary actions, including out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, administrative transfers to other schools, referrals to law enforcement as well as detentions, Saturday school, and community service or restitution" (para. 4). In response to DOE mandates, Superintendent Dr. Bernadia Johnson, a Black woman, has led the MSD in making considerable efforts to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). These efforts have addressed the unfair disciplinary, suspension, and expulsion practices imposed on Black students (Post, 2014) and have brought increased attention from the media, policymakers, school districts, and scholars.

During the 2010–2011 and 2011–2012 academic years, the OCR reported that while Black students comprised 40% of enrolled students, they received 74% of the district's disciplinary actions. Specifically, they received 60% of in-school suspensions, 78% of the out-of-school suspensions, and 69% of law enforcement referrals (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Moreover, Black students were disproportionately disciplined for "disruptive, disorderly or insubordinate" behavior and subjected to 73% of the administrative transfers to different schools for disciplinary reasons (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

The investigation results led to an agreement between the OCR and MSD to address the unfair disciplinary actions. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), "the agreement requires the district to comprehensively assess the racial disparities in its administration of discipline and take steps to ensure that discipline is appropriately and equitably applied to all students" (para. 8). As a part of the agreement, the superintendent's office now oversees the suspension and expulsion of Black students for non-violent offenses. Because "the district's exclusionary discipline practices (including out-of-school suspensions) began as early as kindergarten," the superintendent has called a moratorium on school suspension for kindergarten and first graders (para. 7). Johnson has also reduced and redefined the role of school resource officers in schools (Matos, 2014).

The unfair disciplinary practices in Minneapolis represent a mere snapshot of what is happening nationally, but the investigation raises a number of important

questions about the STPP and the roles of policymakers, and district and school leaders. Namely, how do policymakers, and district and school leaders contribute to the STPP, and what are their roles in dismantling it? The decision making process of defining and enforcing disciplinary infractions is very complex for district and school leaders who have obligations to multiple stakeholders with different roles, responsibilities, motives, and interests. This reality begs the question: who are the stakeholders that district and school leaders have to consider in the decision making process? Further, how do they impact district and school leaders' decisions? How do school leaders determine appropriate disciplinary action when they are rarely, if ever, present during the situations that result in disciplinary action? Should school leaders automatically take the word of the teacher over the student? What type of professional development should district and school leaders participate in to assist them in their decision making for disciplinary infractions? What is happening at the school level that requires district administrators to take an active role in disciplinary practices? Lastly, how does being a Black school leader complicate these decisions, given that their decisions could send Black children into the STPP?

With these questions in mind, from our experiences as current and former schoolteachers and leaders, we posit that district and school leaders can serve as key stakeholders in dismantling the STPP. However, in scholarly conversations about the STPP, researchers often present large amounts of data without providing any direction or resources for preparing district and school leaders to dismantle the pipeline. Scholars have focused on local, state, and federal policies (Flannery, 2015, Heitzeg, 2009, NEA, 2016); Black students' experiences (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Grace, 2016; Morris, 2012; Polly, 2013); and examinations of teacher education programs and teachers' role in unfair disciplinary practices (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Unfortunately, Black district and school leaders (superintendents, principals, vice principals, and/or disciplinarian designees) are often not given much attention in the literature related to the STPP. Furthermore, district and school leaders are not provided tangible solutions they can implement in their own practice to address this problem.

In this article, we take the position that knowing data trends is not enough; district and school leaders must be provided tangible solutions to dismantle the STPP for Black students. To unpack this complex issue, we first explore the literature on the STPP with a focus on its development. We then examine zero tolerance policies, factors that contribute to Black students entering the STPP, and how the STPP adversely impacts Black students. Then, we use Du Bois' (1903) notion of double consciousness as a conceptual lens to examine the STPP and the dilemma district and school leaders face in dealing with disciplinary infractions. We present a case from the second author's experience, as a practicing school leader, to explore how policymakers, and district and school leaders are often provided limited options when it comes to making decisions that could potentially send a student into the STPP trajectory. Last, we provide recommendations for district and school leaders on how to disrupt the STPP.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The term *school-to-prison pipeline* (STPP) “refers to the collection of policies, practices, conditions, and prevailing consciousness that facilitate both the criminalization within educational environments and the processes by which this criminalization results in the incarceration of youth and young adults” (Morris, 2012, p. 2). In other words, it is the process of tracking traditionally racialized and minoritized student populations (e.g., Black, Latino, and students with disabilities) out of educational institutions, directly and/or indirectly, into the juvenile justice system and subsequently into the adult criminal justice systems. It adversely impacts Black students and has had a significant impact on their academic and social trajectory in society, school, and classrooms throughout the United States.

For instance, although Black students only represent 16% of the national student population, they comprise 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students who have experienced a school-related arrest (OCR, 2014). According to the same OCR report, 20% of Black males were suspended from school during the 2011–2012 school year. This percentage was higher than that of any other racial/gender group. While Black males have been given much attention, Black girls have also been impacted by disproportionate disciplining in schools. Moreover, as noted by Morris (2012) and Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda (2015), Black girls have been given limited attention in scholarly and popular conversations about the STPP, which is concerning given they are the fastest growing population represented in the juvenile justice system.

As previously stated, the ramifications of this phenomenon extend far beyond the classroom and can derail young Black students’ lives, putting them on a path to incarceration. Therefore, concerned stakeholders must ask the question, how and why are Black students disproportionately removed from school? While other articles have covered many of the reasons in great detail (e.g., Fenning & Rose, 2007; Morris, 2012; Noguera, 2003), for the purposes of this article, we focus on the impact of zero-tolerance policies. These types of policies create an environment where Black students are at greater risk for being placed into the STPP trajectory.

Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools

Scholars have asserted that one of the mechanisms through which the STPP operates is the concept of zero tolerance, which started in the legal system in response to anti-drug enforcement initiatives (Cerrone, 1999). For the purposes of this article, zero tolerance is defined as the “philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Taskforce, 2008, p. 852). Starting in the early 1990s, many school

districts transitioned from a gradual application of disciplinary sanctions to zero tolerance approaches to address students' wrongdoings. In particular, the *Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994* served as the foundational policy from which zero tolerance policies were developed. Along with its subsequent reenactment in 2002, the Gun-Free Schools Act mandates states that receive federal funding must require local school districts expel students who are found in the possession of a gun on school property for at least one year (Polly, 2013). Federal policies and state laws such as the *Gun-Free Schools Act* were established to reduce school violence particularly in suburban and White schools to ensure a safe environment where students can learn and prosper. However, in practice, these policies are far more prevalent in urban school settings where Black and Brown students are more likely to attend. Cerrone (1999) argued in her analysis of the *Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994*:

These laws have the potential of imposing strict and harsh punishment upon school children who are not dangerous and who will only suffer detrimental results from a full year expulsion. In addition, and perhaps more irksome, is that these laws do not prevent school violence. (p. 133)

While zero tolerance policies were originally implemented to cease gun violence in schools, many school districts have adopted a zero tolerance philosophy toward all disciplinary actions, even those that do not involve guns or violence.

One particular issue with the adaptation of zero tolerance policies is the premise that they are race neutral. As several scholars have argued, race plays a central role in the development and implementation of zero tolerance policies (Cregor & Hewitt, 2011). For instance, Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, Mary, and Tobin (2011) found in their analysis of 364 elementary and middle schools that Black students were two to three times more likely than their White peers to be referred to the office for behavioral issues and, therefore, more likely to serve an out-of-school suspension. This study and others (e.g., Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Grace, 2016) found that Black students are often punished more harshly for minor infractions. We contend that there are several dynamics that contribute to this issue. In the section below, we focus on Black students' referral into special education and the cultural clashes that occur due to the lack of diversity in the schoolteacher workforce.

Entry Points of the STPP and the Dilemma for School Leaders

When examining how the STPP operates, it becomes apparent that there are several entry points that disproportionately impact Black students. The first is the frequency with which teachers refer Black students to special education classrooms. Many parents have made this observation anecdotally, but it has also been documented empirically. Ford (2012), for example, found that Black students are overrepresented in special education classes and underrepresented in gifted education programs. Moreover, Black students are two to three times more likely than White students to be given an *emotionally disturbed* label (Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

While special education classrooms should be a place of understanding, empathy, and specialized instruction, Black students who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities are highly likely to be suspended from school. For instance, OCR data shows that more than 25% of boys of color and nearly 20% of girls of color with learning disabilities receive out-of-school suspension (OCR, 2014). These realities negatively impact students by stigmatizing them and limiting their access to specialized instruction. Consequently, frequent suspension primes students for the STPP as they become more and more disengaged from school. This connection raises two important questions: Why are so many Black students being referred to special education classrooms, and why are these students not receiving the care and specialized instruction their diagnoses require by law? These questions cannot be answered without examining the contributions of teachers.

In U.S. public schools, a stark reality is that the teaching workforce is predominantly White and female (Davis, Frank, & Clark, 2013; Goings, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Given that students of color collectively make up a majority of the student population in U.S. schools, scholars and policymakers have urged school districts to diversify the teaching workforce (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Bristol, 2015; Lewis & Toldson, 2013; US Department of Education, 2016). Researchers support a diversified workforce because White teachers tend to approach Black students from a deficit lens (Ford, 2012), which leads to cultural clashes and misunderstanding between White teachers and Black students. In the end, many Black students develop reputations for being disruptive and end up on the STPP trajectory.

In Grace's (2016) qualitative study, which explored the experiences of Black males who were expelled from New Orleans schools, she found that a majority of the participants believed their teachers held negative expectations about them as Black students. As one participant, Malcolm, stated, "A lot of teachers feel like [black males] won't be anything" (p. 79). These types of deficit perspectives affected the way teachers viewed and interacted with students. In a more general sense, the deficit perspectives many White teachers carry into classrooms prime them to perceive Black students' minor behaviors, such as talking during instruction, as a sign of disrespect, which often results in their being removed from class. Inversely, Black teachers are less likely to remove Black students from class for minor behaviors and more likely to refer them to gifted programs (Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty, & Redding, 2016). It is clear that a diverse teaching work force is beneficial to Black students' ability to thrive in the classroom, thereby avoiding the STPP.

In discussions about the STPP, scholars often explore the student experience or the teacher perspective. What is missing from the literature, and what we find to be critical, is an exploration of the role of school leaders. Though they are typically absent from the classroom, school leaders are directly involved in the complex and often unclear decision making process that can enter Black students into the STPP. School leaders have the important task of considering school culture, district policies and politics, and student history when making decisions that could potentially

remove students from school. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, school leaders should make efforts to start relationships with students before they come in contact with law enforcement and/or enter the juvenile justice system. Without a constructive preexisting relationship, it is hard for school leaders, who typically are not present in the classroom, to accurately judge the student's character and intent. They are left with nothing more than the teacher's report, which may come from a deficit perspective.

School leaders are in a challenging position when it comes to meting out discipline because they are forced to make decisions that all parties may not agree with. They may feel stuck between the parents and the teachers, working to strike a delicate and fair balance between the two. Moreover, as Black school leaders, these decisions become more complex as they must work within an education system that is inherently designed against the interests of people of African descent (Shockley, 2008). Thus, in the section below, we describe this dilemma in decision making using Du Bois' (1903) notion of double consciousness as a metaphor to explain the complexity of school leaders' decision making process. Then we present a case from the second author's experience as a current practicing school administrator.

Double Consciousness: A Metaphor and Conceptual Lens for Examining District and School Leaders Decision Making

In his seminal book *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) coined the term *double consciousness* to describe how Blacks have had to navigate both their African and American identities and the psychological implications of this potentially irreconcilable process. He describes Blacks' struggle to view themselves from their own unique perspective while also thinking about how Whites intentionally misrepresent and misperceive Blackness. Du Bois explained that:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others . . . One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

Similar to Banks and Hughes' (2013) study of how Black males with learning disabilities navigate their double consciousness in the college environment, we utilize Du Bois' notion of double consciousness as a metaphor and conceptual lens to explore how Black district and school leaders are often met with conflicting ideals when making decisions that potentially position Black students to enter the STPP.

Double consciousness describes how a Black person can have multiple competing and contradictory identities that make it difficult or nearly impossible to have a collective and integrated identity. Du Bois (1903) describes double consciousness

in the context of how racial and class identities functioned in the United States. If we expand this concept, in an academic context, consciousness could refer to and encompass social identities such as race, class, gender, family (e.g., mother, father, sister, brother, etc.) and professional identities (e.g., former teachers, administrators, etc.). Together, these identities and the contexts in which they evolve impact how Black school administrators see themselves, make decisions, and think about how others perceive them.

Moreover, within the school context it is critical to understand that the philosophical foundation of compensatory schooling and American schools is steeped in teaching Eurocentric norms while viscerally attacking any ideals that challenge those norms. Consequently, schools become spaces where Black children are expected to acquiesce to and assimilate Eurocentric norms. Thus, when Black students behave in ways that do not align with Eurocentric norms, the schooling system now dictates that Black administrators have to impose consequences (e.g., school suspension) on Black children. However, an important question to consider is:

Will teachers, principals, education researchers, parents, and other stakeholders ever understand that the complex ways in which Black children perform in schools (and in society to some degree) are part and parcel of a necessary defiance against educational content that is woefully inconsiderate of their cultural ontology? (Shockley, 2008, p. 6)

For Black administrators, their decision making around student discipline becomes complex as they too have to contemplate the question posed by Shockley (2008) while also knowing they are expected to impose consequences given their position. In essence, this tension captures Du Bois' (1903) notion of double consciousness where Black individuals have an awareness of a potentially irreconcilable twoness: African and American. Black district and school leaders' twoness revolves around their antithetical positions as faithful and compliant *agents of the system* and *agents for racially oppressed students*. Du Bois discusses the conflict Blacks experience in the United States as they struggle to reconcile their identities as Blacks and as American citizens who experience racial oppression because of their Blackness. The conflict district and school leaders face becomes even more complex for Black administrators who not only have to contend with their positions as agents for the system (e.g., school system and STPP) and agents for racially oppressed students, but also with their Blackness and the racism (both overt and covert) that persists in schools. For instance, school leaders have to contend with teachers who continue to espouse their belief that all students can achieve academically, but continue to engage in the "criminalization of Blackness" (Chandler, 2017, p. 207), where Black children are treated more as criminals that are in need of reforming than academicians.

In many ways Black school administrators are situated in schooling spaces that are anti-Black and as a result, Black children predictably become casualties. Ultimately, Black administrators are faced with the dilemma of positioning Black

students to enter or evade the STPP. To complicate matters, Black school leaders are products of the same anti-Black education system that systemically marginalizes and polices Black bodies. This raises the concern as to how Black school leaders can subject Black students to the same marginalization and oppression they experienced themselves as a student and professional especially knowing, Black students receive more frequent and severe disciplinary infractions than all other racial groups for similar offenses.

Black district and school leaders also have to figure out how do they continue to exist in a system that seeks to alienate and marginalize Black students. This also can be complicated as not all Black district and school leaders politicize their work or view their work through a race-conscious lens. Thus, when situations arise with Black children, they may potentially see and punish the behaviors of the child rather than examine the ways in which the students' mere Blackness positions them as hypervisible and susceptible to targeting from teachers. They face an irreconcilable dilemma in that as long as they serve as school administrators (e.g., agents of the system) then they will either be an agent for the student or position them to enter or become further entrenched into the STPP. As a result, Black children become casualties of the system that was designed for them to fail.

Using Du Bois' notion of double consciousness, we contend that race-conscious Black district and school leaders never aspire to or attempt to fully reconcile their identities as Black individuals and as administrators who contribute to Black students' entrance and further integration into the STPP. We feel these leaders' behaviors are often influenced by negative stereotypes, fear of judgment from both their Black and White peers, and the likelihood that their unfavorable actions can impact their job security. Wilson (2013) explains the unique opportunity district and school leaders have when it comes to interrupting the STPP:

School leaders have the power to influence and mitigate the effects of the pipeline by engaging in critical use of exclusionary policies as well as focus on collaborating with teachers on prevention and intervention to meet the academic and behavioral needs of students, particularly those who are marginalized and at risk. (p. 68)

Despite the power that district and school leaders possess, they are still constrained by the nature of their position, the school system, and the hierarchies therein. These circumstances can be difficult to navigate when district and school leaders' decisions counter or appear to usurp the school system's policies or recommendations. They can also lead to unsavory political ramifications for the decision maker. For instance, Dr. Bernadia Johnson, who we mentioned in our opening example for addressing school suspensions in MPS, has received backlash for her attempt to eliminate the disproportionality in school discipline. Peter Kirsanow, Commissioner of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, wrote a five-page letter to Dr. Johnson which cited her policy as "legally and constitutionally suspect" (Kirsanow, 2014, p. 1) and argued that her attempts to review all suspensions would "result in racial quotas

for disciplinary actions, with negative consequences for the learning experience of students” (Kirsanow, p. 1). These antagonisms can leave district and school leaders contemplating the following question: Should I make a decision that is in alignment with the school district’s recommendations and/or policy guidelines even if it is not in the best interest of the most marginalized and oppressed students?

In the section that follows, we present a scenario from the practice of the second author (a practicing school administrator) that highlights the dilemma school leaders face when making decisions that could potentially have adverse effects on a student’s life and/or educational opportunities.

The Context: Being a School Administrator at Wilson Middle School

Wilson Middle School (WMS, pseudonym) is a Title I (i.e., 93% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch) school whose population is 90% African American and 10% Latinx. As the assistant principal of WMS, I (the second author) hold the primary responsibility of managing discipline. It is a role that consumes a majority of my work day, but it also affords me the opportunity to engage with students and assist them in making better decisions.

WMS’s school district employs zero tolerance policies to address and reduce disciplinary code infractions such as fighting and high absenteeism. However, without addressing the climate and cultural issues—such as transiency among the student population, lack of diversity among the teaching staff, the constant turnover of building administrators and lack of parental outreach and involvement—these policies have not proven to be enough to make the school (and other schools in the district) safer nor have they increased attendance rates. Overall, the problems in the school have gone unaddressed as evidenced by the lack of a reduction in discipline referrals and stagnant student achievement.

Administrators at WMS are required to enforce the school district code of conduct when imposing consequences for misconduct or behavioral infractions. These infractions can range from minor disruption, such as calling out answers during class, to gross disrespect and continued willful disobedience such as using profanity, talking back and leaving class without permission. Additionally, the district code of conduct requires increased consequences for each subsequent offense. All serious infractions, such as weapon or drug possession and assault, result in automatic suspensions and/or referral for expulsion. As a school leader, a major conundrum I face is keeping safety first and adhering to policy while also providing a positive and nurturing learning environment that keeps students in school, where they belong.

While the principal is responsible for the building and entire student body and staff, as assistant principal, I am charged with maintaining the vision and mission of the school in accordance with the philosophy of the principal. When the leadership team shares the same disciplinary and education philosophy, it becomes possible to

craft alternative solutions that keep children out of contact with the juvenile justice system. However, as was the case with my first-year principal Mr. Scott (pseudonym), our disciplinary philosophies differed drastically. For example, Mr. Scott believed that zero-tolerance allowed for a safer school and was paramount in ensuring the school was a safe space for those who wanted to learn; however, my philosophy was more aligned with a holistic approach that emphasizes educating the entire child. In some cases this required equipping my students with strategies to navigate both their home and schooling environments, or in other cases, providing and/or connecting them to community or outside agencies with resources to assist them with their immediate needs. As a result of our philosophical differences keeping children in the building and out of contact with law enforcement was difficult. As a school leader with experience in various social and educational contexts (urban and suburban) it was apparent that suspensions and expulsions were disproportionately imposed upon Black students at WMS. However, because of the principal's insistence on following our district's zero tolerance policy, I, a Black woman who is passionate about supporting Black children, was often at a crossroads. In essence, do I do what is in the best interest of my principal and school system, or institutionally marginalized student? An encounter in the section below with my former student, Dan, highlights the complexities of a school leaders' decision making process, which could potentially disrupt or reinforce the STPP.

The Incident of Dan: How Policy Can Fail Students

Dan, an eighth grade Black male, had a disciplinary record for minor infractions such as being disruptive, talkative, and not remaining on task. He was not a bad or violent child, but he had a reputation as a class clown and teachers often expressed their difficulty with keeping him on task. Additionally, Dan, like other children at WMS, came from a neighborhood where disputes in the neighborhood (e.g., quarrels between families during non-school hours) would often spill over into the school; thus, community issues often impacted students' interactions at school.

During one weekend, Dan was involved in altercation with another Black student, James, in their neighborhood. After the fight, James threatened to bring his older cousins to the school to fight Dan. Throughout the day on Monday, students discussed the fight between Dan and James, but teachers asked them not to. Concerned that he might be "jumped" by James and his family, Dan attempted to express his concerns to his math teacher, Mr. Gee (pseudonym). However, when Dan brought up the incident in class, Mr. Gee demanded Dan either be quiet and sit down, or get out of class. Embarrassed and frustrated, Dan walked out of the classroom. As a result, Mr. Gee wrote Dan up for the infraction of leaving class without permission. Dan went to see another teacher, who then sent him to see me in the assistant principal's office.

With Dan gone, other students in the class informed Mr. Gee that they had overheard Dan talking about a knife. They reported that it was probably in his locker because he had shown it to another classmate on the way to school. Hence, another referral was made, reporting that Dan was in possession of a weapon on school grounds.

Because of the allegation, an investigation involving security and Mr. Scott was required. Dan's locker, book bag, and person were searched in the presence of a building administrator. The halls were cleared and students were not allowed to leave the classrooms during the search. Dan admitted that he had the knife in one of his book bag pockets, but expressed that he did not intend to bring it to school. He explained that it belonged to his father, who had given it to him for protection around the neighborhood. Regardless of his reason for having it, Dan was held to the school district's code of conduct, which required the following consequence for such an infraction:

Confiscation, forfeiture to Police Liaison, Immediate parent Notification; suspension (home instruction) pending mandatory Administrative or Board of Education Hearing; subject to mandatory security/police search; Violence/Vandalism Report; Notice to Chief of Security, possible Expulsion.

As a result of the district's policy, Mr. Scott contacted the school resource officers, who are actual police officers, to confiscate the weapon. They handcuffed Dan and escorted him to the police car waiting in the front of the school.

The Decision Making Dilemmas

In this case, Mr. Scott made the decision to implement the school district's zero tolerance policy and ordered that Dan be immediately handcuffed and escorted to the police patrol car. However, because of my previous interactions with Dan and understanding of the context, I felt things should have been handled differently. I saw no need for Dan to be immediately handcuffed and walked through the hallways while his peers were present. Dan was not a violent person; they could have transported him after the halls had cleared and cuffed him immediately prior to placing him in the car. These are small differences that could have made a big impact on him mentally.

The desire for all school leaders should be to provide a safe, nurturing, inclusive, and engaging learning environment for all students and staff. When police become involved, it is obvious that safety is a main concern, but the other elements must also still be considered, especially when a student's academic future and record are concerned. Decisions should not be made blindly, without thought and consideration. For this particular situation, I contemplated the following questions:

1. How does Dan's arrest impact the climate and culture of the school?

2. How does Dan's arrest affect Dan, Mr. G., the rest of the 8th grade class, and the entire student body?
3. Do we have all of the details as to why Dan felt he needed to bring a weapon to school?
4. Why didn't Dan share his concerns with anyone? And if he did, why didn't they bring it to the attention of the guidance department and building administration?
5. If we knew about the altercation over the weekend earlier and warned the teachers ahead of time, could this situation have been prevented? Also, would Mr. G. have given Dan such a strict ultimatum when he expressed his feelings about the rumors during class instruction?
6. Now that Dan is removed from school, will he now be more susceptible to violence or danger?
7. How can we assist the family?
8. Has Dan lost trust in those who are, ideally, in place to assist and protect him (e.g., teachers, principal)?
9. Will Dan feel the need to take matters into his own hands now that he is in trouble for trying to protect himself?
10. Did the school fail Dan?

These are only ten of the perspectives I considered in this particular situation. As an assistant principal who firmly believes in partnering with families and community members to address the social and emotional needs of students, it is difficult, at times painful, to merely follow zero-tolerance codes of conduct without taking into consideration the context and specific circumstances of the student(s) involved. The way I would have liked to handle Dan's situation would have also maintained safety, but it would not have been a mere regurgitation of school district policy. It is the rigidity of such policies that forces administrators, even those who are culturally aware, to feed the STPP.

Implications of the Dan Incident

Dan's case is not unique to WMS. I certainly understand and experience daily how school administrators are presented with scenarios where they have to take a side, which, in most cases exposes Black children to some type of suffering. On one hand, not adhering to school district policy could potentially cause teachers to lose trust in you as a leader as they may not feel supported, which can then affect the morale of the school environment and cause teachers and students to doubt administrators' authority. On the other hand, adhering to school policies sometimes places good students at greater risk for entering the STPP. In addition, as a Black woman, I understand the realities that await Black children who become involved

in the criminal justice system; thus, the decision to remove a Black boy from the building in handcuffs is complicated and troublesome. In addition, for Black girls, as Crenshaw, Ocen, and (2015) note, they are just as “vulnerable to many of the same factors faced by their male counterparts” (p. 14).

Moreover, as a school leader, I cannot afford to be one-sided in my responses. I must consider all sides, placing myself in the shoes of the offender, victim, parents, teachers, colleagues, and supervisors. I must ask myself: what would I want/need to have happen as a mother, teacher, classmate, and school district? Will the consequence be a deterrent or will it exacerbate the situation? What will happen to the students next? Will the issue be settled/reignited in the community or can/will someone intercede to create opportunities for constructive communication? District and school leaders should consider all of these perspectives before making a decision. Unfortunately, many school leaders do not. As a caring and concerned school leader, I must accept the sobering fact that there are times where decisions that adversely impact the lives of Black students will have to be made, but not based on deficit perspectives that mischaracterize and stigmatize Black children. An even more disheartening reality is that as a Black school leader, reconciling these warring ideals of being an agent for the system and agent for the student can never be fully reconciled. In many ways, given the education system is steeped in anti-Blackness (Wun, 2016) our decisions are based on rubrics of behavior that will always negatively impact Black children. While these ideals can never be reconciled, that does not stop our attempts as Black district and school leaders to dismantle and challenge practices such as zero tolerance policies for the betterment of Black children. In fact, because of this complexity it is more critical that as Black school leaders we continue to fight.

Recommendations to Disrupt the School-to-Prison Pipeline

We presented the case above to explore the complexities of being a school leader and how analyzing systems of power is essential in making decisions that do not ultimately position students to enter the STPP. We believe school administrators currently play a key role in feeding the STPP, which means school administrators can play a key role in disrupting this path if they receive tangible solutions for implementing changes within their schools. While our list is not exhaustive, below are recommendations we believe are critical for school leaders to ensure they have the structures in place to disrupt the STPP.

Forging Relationships with the Students and Community You Serve Right Away. Not only are students’ academic needs important, but so are their emotional, psychological, and mental health needs. Stakeholders who work to create safe learning spaces for students must consider all of these needs in order to elicit the best academic inputs and outputs of our students. School leaders must be cognizant that students are connected to families, communities, and the cultures they exist

within. Do not simply view them as bodies in a school building, but as individuals with stories. Take the time to discover, for example, the important social, religious, and cultural events that occur in the community. How do neighborhoods differ? What are the dynamics? What are your students' living arrangements? Are they being raised by a grandmother, aunt, uncle or older brother? Have they experienced a recent tragedy, a loss within the family or community at large perhaps? See the school as a part of the community and the community as a part of the school. Addressing the needs of one without considering the other can be problematic for a school leader.

Identifying and Confronting Racism at All Costs. With the changing demographics in our schools and the influence of political and social constructs evident today, administrators must have a heightened sense of identifying and confronting any divisive language, practices, and actions that may be deemed racist. Students see violence manifested in their neighborhoods, televised news, and social media outlets, and this may spill onto our school campuses. School leaders must examine people, policies, and practices that may promote racist thinking in our classrooms, and be willing to confront and disavow such actions. Equally important school leaders must engage in the reflective work to ensure they are able to engage in the work needed to address racism in their school. As Horsford (2014) suggested, while discussing racism can be difficult, not addressing it “inhibits an education leader’s ability to shape and sustain a school culture that draws strength from diverse backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and concerns” (p. 124). Along with this reflective work, school leaders must cultivate the development of their staff’s cultural competence, promote cultural inclusion for all students, model respect for all, and engage in dialogue that challenges racism directly. The point is, the same zero tolerance that school leaders apply to students must be applied to racism in the school building.

Share and Be Upfront About Expectations For Instruction and Discipline. School leaders must ensure that instruction is guided by curriculum and state and federal content standards. This helps ensure that students are being equipped with the skills and competencies that will prepare them for college, their careers, and the global environment and culture we now live in. Instruction that is culturally relevant, rigorous, engaging, and exciting allows students to recognize a purpose for and their place in school. Moreover, work with teachers to understand that undesirable behavior is often the manifestation of poor classroom management techniques, mediocre teaching, and/or lack of effective lesson planning. Leaders should visit classrooms regularly to establish relationships with students and ensure quality instruction takes place. This also allows leaders to model the types of instruction teachers should strive for. Moreover, school leaders should consider teaching one course a year so that they not only have an understanding of instruction and discipline from an observational standpoint, but also having that knowledge from having direct experience as a classroom instructor.

District and school leaders should study the code of conduct for students, disci-

plinary policies, disciplinary consequences, and suspension and expulsion policies. It is important for district and school leaders to have a thorough understanding of the policies governing discipline and disciplinary sanctions. Discipline policies and sanctions must be clearly defined for district and school leaders, teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders. Additionally, it is important for district and school leaders to engage all stakeholders (e.g., community, parents, students, etc.) in policy development. The whole community should be on the same page about the policies governing discipline and disciplinary sanctions. There should be transparency and open dialogue between stakeholders, and district and school leaders about how to best address disciplinary infractions.

Create a School-Wide Advising and Disciplinary Plan for Teachers and Staff. In one of our former schools, the motto was, “School achievement is everyone’s business.” This motto set the expectation that all stakeholders (including teachers, office and custodial staff, and parents) had a shared responsibility in the success of the school as a whole and students were assured that they had access to caring adults in the building. This idea of increasing the level of involvement creates a more nurturing environment that both students and teachers can benefit from. In this same vein, it may be useful to create an advising program where teachers and staff are given small groups of 10–20 students (e.g., 10–20 students per adult) they can advise. This gives students the reassurance that they have a specific, caring person that they can consult about any issues they may have. Advisors can host daily check-ins that can help diffuse situations before they get a chance to explode. In addition, morning meetings may be useful to ensure expectations are established with students. This is the time where any outstanding issues can be addressed and resolved, setting the stage for teaching and learning to occur. In addition, putting programs in place to support student’s academic and social development sends the message that school leaders want to create an environment, which supports their academic and social strengths. Teaching social/emotional skills to handle various situations is imperative. New school leaders can address this by creating interventions such as restorative school discipline, peer mediation, and mentoring programs. Making these resources a part of the school culture will provide students with alternatives to undesirable behaviors.

Integrate Students’ Frames of Reference in All Policies and School Procedures. All students bring to the classroom their own experiences and ways of relating to the world through their unique lens. Oftentimes, schools omit the experiences students bring because they feel that they, the school leadership, know what is in the best interest of students. While a part of this may be true, students have their own thoughts and feelings on how they can contribute in an authentic manner based on what they know and have experienced. Leaders can tap into this resource and fully develop student potential, even creating leaders, by allowing students to bring their skills and talents into the classroom. For example, what better way to

examine the effectiveness of particular policies than to ask students about them? Moreover, school leaders can create a student conduct advisory board panel, which is a student body that hears discipline infraction cases in the school and provides a recommendation to the principal when students violate policies. Using this approach ensures students have a voice in shaping discipline outcomes in the school.

We strongly believe that districts and schools leaders need to create a culture of academic and social excellence by enthusiastically rewarding students consistently throughout the year. We have found that while Positive Behavior Interventions Supports (PBIS) is integrated as a school-wide support, there may not be complete buy-in from school stakeholders. From our experiences, if there is no support of this initiative from the district personnel, principals and teachers, this can lead to poorly developed programs and initiatives that are supposed to celebrate students' academic and social achievements. In reality, they have very little value if a solid plan of implementation is not in place. Students are perceptive; they can tell if their school really cares or not. This is why district and school leaders must enthusiastically and consistently celebrate students' academic and social accomplishments, especially the students who have regular academic challenges and behavioral infractions. They must learn that they can gain attention in better ways, so struggling students should be encouraged to reach for academic and social excellence. However, this encouragement will only be received if it comes from enthusiastic leaders and teachers who have shown they really care. This all starts with district and school-level leadership because the administration sets the tone for the teachers and staff.

Suggestions for Collaborations Among Researchers and School Districts

As researchers and practitioners concerned about Black students in the STPP, we have spent considerable time thinking about how to dismantle the STPP and what recommendations to offer district and school leaders. A major problem is that district and school leaders are not often formally trained on how to navigate the nuances of handling disciplinary problems that arise. For instance, most educational leadership programs do not offer courses on how to manage discipline. This means teachers and administrators come into schools and classrooms without the knowledge of how to defuse incidents, especially incidents between students and teachers. In this regard, we call for universities, school districts, and private schools to form partnerships to address the STPP by developing conflict resolution courses to better prepare leaders to effectively address discipline in the classroom (Raible & Irizarry, 2010).

In recent years, there has been a big push to improve the cultural competence of teachers (Keengwe, 2010), but very little focus has been placed on improving the cultural competence of district and school leaders. In most cases, district and school leaders are primarily in charge of improving teachers' cultural competence,

despite the fact that they lack the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to do so. We call for an increased focus on building district and school leaders' cultural competence because lasting changes starts from the top down.

For district and school leaders and teachers, professional learning opportunities must deeply explore their beliefs about and biases toward Black students and their responses to disciplinary infractions. Districts and school leaders and teachers must move away from the behaviorist model of discipline toward culturally responsive classroom management (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran, 2004) and restorative justice approaches (NEA, 2016; Schiff, 2013).

Concluding Thoughts

As concerned researchers, practitioners, and parents of Black children, we are deeply troubled by the current trends of Black students being sent out of classrooms, often for minor infractions. School leaders have the power to change this trend. While the opening example with the superintendent of MSD is an exemplary, positive case of how districts can stop the STPP, it highlights how school leaders must be given the autonomy and support to change these staggering statistics. Moreover, as Black district school leaders, the notion of having warring ideals (agents of the system vs. agents of the student) places added pressure when making decisions. However, if we want the discipline practices against Black children to dissipate, it will require a concerted effort. This piece is our attempt to engage in conversation with school leaders and schools of education that prepare school leaders to ensure that the disruption of the STPP becomes a priority.

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