

School-Imposed Labeling and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Symbolic Violence on the Bodies of Boys of Color in One “No Excuses” Charter School

L. Trenton S. Marsh



Abstract: Historical, socially constructed notions of Black and Latino masculinity, mis/labeled behavior, punitive policies (e.g., suspension) and practices (e.g., school-imposed labeling) lead to disproportionate rates of dropout in urban US schools, continued involvement in the criminal legal system, and a limited participation in society. This article argues that school-imposed labeling—affixing a category or descriptor on a student to signal a shorthand message to others about a student’s academic ability and behavior—is symbolically violent (Bourdieu). By examining unofficial labels, punitive structures, and teacher perceptions of labeled students, I explored school-imposed labeling as a form of “normalized” practice that impacts Black and Latino males who attend an urban charter school with a “no excuses” orientation.

Keywords: boys of color, charter school, labeling, school-to-prison pipeline, symbolic violence, teacher perceptions



Punitive exclusionary policies and approaches to student behavior in traditional public schools do not create safer learning environments for students and staff members (Mayer and Leone 1999; Nance 2016; Nickerson and Martens 2008). In actuality, these policies facilitate the school-to-prison pipeline: a pattern of harsh punitive and often exclusionary disciplinary policies executed by school personnel and in-school police that leads to high rates of permanent dropout for students, as well as involvement in the criminal legal system (Terenzi and Foster 2017). These patterns disproportionately impact students of color overall, and Black and Latino males in particular, especially through school-imposed labeling. Labeling is an evaluative mechanism that creates a heuristic for adults about students’ academic capabilities, behavior, and the like. As an educational practice, school-imposed labeling is embedded within the fabric of schools. But labels are used to signal a shorthand message about a student, and these can quickly



become permanent to “distinguish who is included and who is excluded” in schools (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2010: 52). For students of color, particularly males, the practice of mis/labeling often has lingering negative effects (Abidin et al. 1972; Fairbanks 1992; McNulty and Roseboro 2009).

I have written previously about the practice of labeling as a form of violence against males of color and the effect of those school-imposed labels on teachers’ perceptions (Marsh 2018). Here, I critically engage with how the practice of labeling can create a connective tissue to establish an unspoken pattern of punishment—the school-to-prison pipeline—that affects Black and Latino males’ trajectories both inside and outside of school. The setting is a high-achieving public charter school with a “no excuses” philosophical orientation that presupposes that Black and Latinx students (and their families), who reside in homogenous, low-income communities, are in need of a teaching and learning approach that is narrowly predefined and teacher directed, and offers little room for student voice, creativity, and autonomy. The primary research question is, how does school-imposed labeling affect how Black and Latino male students are viewed, interacted with, and treated in one “no excuses” public charter?

School-Imposed Labeling as Symbolic Violence

Pierre Bourdieu ([1986] 2001) introduced the concept of symbolic violence, which draws attention to the tacit forms of supremacy that appear to be normative. Specifically, symbolic violence is the everyday social and cultural habits that do not involve bodily force but are maintained over unsuspecting subjects. Accordingly, in the context of schools, labeling is not recognized as a form of violence towards students; rather, the practice is accepted as necessary for students’ learning. In many schools, the labels are used to justify services that are intended to assist students with perceived (or real) learning challenges (Taylor et al. 2010). But school-imposed labeling can come with a price (McNulty and Roseboro 2009). Black and Latino males in particular may find themselves under constant assault from teachers who fail to recognize or willfully ignore that they may hold deficit perspectives that result in lowered expectations. The social psychologist Nilanjana Dasgupta (2004) contends that school-imposed labels can manifest skewed conceptions of self, particularly for Black and Latino males, as they begin to see themselves through the eyes of others.

For educators, an acute awareness of one’s own socioeconomic background is particularly important for White females, as they comprise more

than 80 percent of teaching professionals in the field of education (US Bureau of Labor 2008a, 2008b) and predominantly come from middle- to upper-class backgrounds (Feistritzer 2011; Hodgkinson 2002; Landsman and Lewis 2006). Because of these teachers' socialization and normative reference group (i.e., White, middle-class) (Rist 1970), what they value in classrooms may perpetuate philosophical assumptions that harm students, especially boys of color. Additionally, school-imposed labeling is most often coupled with an educator's or a school's evaluative processes that result in the designation of categorical diagnostic terms that have an effect on a student's placement in a school and their future learning environments. The school-imposed label may also dictate the type of classes students will be suggested to enroll in.

Disparate Outcomes for Black and Latino Males in Schools

Black and Latino males are more likely to be unjustly victimized by the mis/labeling processes that occur within school (Noguera 2003a, 2008), even while attending spaces largely serving students of color. An example of this is when predominantly White, middle-class female teachers who are unfamiliar with the communication styles, behavioral norms, and values that may be exhibited by their Black and Latino male students simply regard the students' actions as deviant or insubordinate. A mis/label can negatively affect Black and Latino males' school reputation. For example, disciplinary infractions such as suspensions: in some large urban districts, schools were found to have suspended one-third or more of their Black male students in a given year (Gregory et al. 2010; Losen and Skiba 2010). In the end, student suspensions (1) increase the likelihood that students will drop out by 15 percent, and (2) significantly increase their chances of interacting with the criminal legal system (Rumberger and Losen 2016).

The "No Excuses" Approach and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

In the past several decades, a rapid increase has occurred in the number of public charter schools and students in attendance throughout the country, particularly within urban communities (Frankenberg 2011). One such charter model that has become popular in Black and Latinx communities is the "no excuses" approach. Some school choice proponents view these types of charters as a valuable solution to close what is seen as the "achievement gap" for many Black and Latinx students and their affluent or middle-class White and Asian peers (Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2011; Angrist et al. 2013; Davis and Heller 2017; Dynarski 2015; Finn and Wright 2016). "No excuses" charter

schools routinely apply rigid discipline that frequently results more students receiving school-imposed labeling, which leads to suspensions and ultimately attrition (Fergus 2016; Zollers and Ramanathan 1998). Yet, virtually no studies interpret school-imposed labeling as a form of symbolic violence that provides connective tissue towards the school-to-prison pipeline. This is an important gap in urban education policy as the practice of school-imposed labeling is viewed as normal and innocuous.

Conceptual Framework

It is impossible to discuss masculinity of boys of color in US schools, especially for Black boys, without revisiting the savage history of race in the United States. The historical lineage for the Black male precedes his forced arrival to North America, as racism and White supremacy was firmly established in the thinking of White people before the transatlantic slave trade (Akbar 1991). Patricia Collins points out that false labels projected onto Black men combined “violence and sexuality [and] made Black men inherently unsuitable for work until they were trained by White men and placed under their discipline and control” (2005: 56). In turn, notions of men of color possessing unregulated bodies that need punitive treatment and control have steered the construction of Black and Latino masculinity in the context of US schools. In the present day, a White, majority-female teaching force that is often unsure how to control Black and Latino male bodies in their classrooms reify problematic deficit frameworks about Black and Latino males’ character and ability to communicate. These frameworks have also contributed to the regular presence of police officers in US schools, particularly in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color (Parker 2014). Consequently, boys of color are excessively caged through school-imposed labels associated with deficiency or “at risk,” and inadequately represented in those linked with academic achievement and overall schooling success (Fergus et al. 2014).

Moreover, Black and Latino male students may not engage in what is determined as appropriate “politics of politeness” within a school where their teachers who are often female, and from a different socioeconomic background, are participating. Bourdieu ([1986] 2001: 3) posited that the unspoken “politics of politeness” institutionalizes forms of cultural capital “previously invested by the family” that maintain the hierarchies of social class. But when Black and Latino males do not convey these “politics,” they

can be seen as deviant. Their teachers seldom provide them with the support to successfully make the transition from home to school (Gay and Kirkland 2003; Ladson-Billings 1994) and instead confer a school-imposed label. Pedro Noguera concludes, “As [students] internalize the labels that have been affixed to them ... many simply lose the incentive to adhere to school norms” (2003b: 343). This process occurs both because they may be ostracized and may be compelled to socialize with others who have also been similarly mis/labeled (e.g., delinquents, problem students, and more). Noguera (2003b) further notes that schools’ disciplinary practices rely on some form of ostracism to control the behavior of students, a practice that is often used in the criminal justice system (i.e., penitentiaries).

School Site, Research Methods, and Analysis

Metropolitan City Charter Academy (MCCA)¹ was founded by Peter Johannesburg in 2004 and is in a large Northeastern US city. Since its inception, the network has burgeoned into 30-plus schools across six states, serving nearly four thousand students. I am exploring the concept of labeling at MCCA to illustrate how institutions that were ostensibly created as alternative schooling options to help the educate Black and Latinx students who live in low-income communities may actually have counter results. While the network’s mission is “to create citizen scholars for change,” the motto is “hard work is all you need to achieve at MCCA, in college and beyond.” One of the core tenets of the school narrative is “choice,” in that students possess full agency over their time, resources, and mind-set. Subsequently, all enrollees have been deemed agents of their time, resources, and mind-set and thus have been given the audacious responsibility to “choose” (or not) to be successful in MCCA’s “no excuses” context (Lemann 1999; Sacks 1999).

MCCA is comprised of 330 students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. Nearly 100 percent are Black and Latinx students, with roughly 90 percent being eligible for free/reduced lunch. The students come from families that identify as native-born African American or Latinx American or identify as first-generation Americans, as their families hail from West African countries, the Caribbean, and South America. Since being founded, MCCA has consistently served representative populations of students attending traditional district public schools in the city that are often underserved and underrepresented in charter school networks. These include stu-

dents who have a disability identified under the law and receive specialized instruction and related services based on their individualized education plan (19 percent) but fewer scholars who are English language learners (4 percent). According to a 2016 report from the city's department of education, MCCA is identified within its larger charter network as the "gold standard," as the site outpaces its regional peer schools in math and English language arts assessment scores. For this article, I focus on male students who were identified as "at-risk" by teachers and therefore were not considered high achieving.

During the 2015–2016 academic year, MCCA was comprised of 31 teachers and 10 nonteaching staff. In the seventh and eighth grades, where the study was focused, there were 22 teachers: 17, or nearly 80 percent, identified as White, and of those teachers, nearly 60 percent were female. Sixty-three percent of the teachers identified as either a current member or an alumnus of Teach for America.² Additionally, 75 percent identified as coming from a middle- to upper-middle class. The demographics of the teachers at MCCA mirror the current national K–12 teaching workforce (NCES 2012, 2015). I collected data for this study through an inductive, yearlong situated ethnography during the 2015–2016 school year. Purposeful observations in classrooms and semi-structured interviews were the primary data sources used. Interviews were conducted with 10 students—half who were identified by teachers as "ideal" and half "at risk"—and in this article, I focus on those deemed "at risk." I also interviewed 15 teachers for about 45 to 60 minutes each. Open coding (Rodríguez and Conchas 2008) of the observations, field notes, and interview transcripts led to the analysis of daily individual (teacher and student) practice, beliefs, as well as institutional influence concerning disciplinary actions.

Findings

Negative and often harmful labels persist in usage in schools throughout the United States (Gold and Richards 2012; Schulz and Rubel 2011; Taylor et al. 2010). MCCA is no exception. Its practices of labeling and punitive systems nurture the symbolic violence of Black and Latino boys, affect teachers' perceptions, impact students' schooling experiences, and further entrench students in the school-to-prison pipeline. First, I review three discipline systems at MCCA that support symbolic violence against the students.

System of Shaming: Public Character Reporting

MCCA used a demerit system like US military academies (Ambrose 1966; Gerber 1943). Each morning when students arrived to school, they were automatically eligible to start the school day with \$100 Respect, Answerability, Involved, Sympathy, Eagerness, and Discipline (RAISED) dollar balance. If they arrived on time and did not get into trouble, the students were, in the words of teachers, “meeting expectations.” The RAISED values corresponded to rules that were supposed to regulate students’ behavior, which was also referred to as their “character.” And the rules had corresponding dollar values that could be deducted.

At the end of each trimester, MCCA employed character reporting as a disciplinary mechanism by publicly displaying the extent to which students had complied with behavior and character expectations. In the school’s main hallway, listed by students’ full names, we could see each student’s “character positioning” displayed precisely through their RAISED dollar balances. Students who had maintained at least 80 percent of their RAISED dollars were able to participate in enrichment opportunities at MCCA that included field trips, dining out, and special school-based privileges (e.g., invitation to school dances, participation in raffles, and more). But the boys who were assaulted with school-imposed labels at MCCA—most of whom were Black and Latino—did not participate in these activities because of their “negative character.”

Mateo was one such victim. Labeled in deficit and disparaging terms by teachers during interviews, by the end of the first trimester he had accumulated 276 RAISED character violations. In comparison, an unlabeled female classmate, Niyyat, who teachers considered an “ideal” student, had only six infractions during the same period. During this three-month period, the largest infraction for Mateo was missing homework, 55 assignments to be exact. During our interview, he spoke candidly about homework: “I don’t even do my homework. Homework does cause too much stress and I don’t really like stress—I’m not about that.” Mateo’s nonchalance is important. As he internalizes the various school-imposed labels that have been levied on him by teachers, as a result, he becomes a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Merton 1968) for the teachers. Mateo seemed to portray his “negative character” by also losing any incentive to adhere to any other school norms, like completing homework.

System of Silence (Hawking)

Before entering MCCA, a welcome sign atop the main stairwell thanked visitors for being interested in the school and stated one rule: “Silence is golden, please limit communication in the hallways.” While a visitor’s silence was momentary, once MCCA students entered the school it felt like their voices and bodies were heavily restricted. This silence was induced by what one teacher in an interview referred as “hawking.” Any time a cohort of students walked in their straight line or stood outside a classroom waiting to enter another room, at least three teachers were present. During an interview, one eighth-grade teacher talked about this hawking system: “[Students] are constantly tracking forward.” The teachers were strategically placed surrounding the students, watching every movement and listening for every instance of noise. One teacher stood at the head of the line, another on the side, and one more behind the students. This tactic of policing of students’ voices (and bodies) was of utmost importance. Akin to Foucault’s (1977) panopticon, the system of silence exerted control over the students’.

The monitoring of silence was intensified for teachers, particularly during transitions from the science lab to the theater room. During a professional development, I observed the science and theater teachers using policing words as they each expressed concerns about their logistical challenges. “There are blind corners,” Ms. Spradley and Ms. Graceland lamented to their colleagues when describing the distance between their respective classrooms. Ms. Spradley noted that one cohort had a “dicey transition” from period three to four and “that [all teachers] have to be aware of and constantly on top of [the students].”

System of Movement (Transition Steps)

Whereas schools serving students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds generally allow students to move throughout a classroom or hallway freely (Anyon 1980; Demerath 2009; Hayward 2000; Pope 2001), within MCCA, movement was restricted. Unless their teachers granted them permission, students were required to remain in their assigned seats. There were severe consequences (i.e., suspension) for a student getting out of a chair without permission. According to teachers, in the name of efficient classroom management, MCCA employed a two-minute, four-step cycle for whole group movements that aimed to “maximize student learning time,” “create consistency,” and ensure “scholars are set up for success.”

The process started when an adult called for the first sequence (step 1) from the front of the classroom. Regardless of the location, during school hours, and when a group (from as few as two students to a complete class) had a destination, the commanded, four-step movement cycle could be enacted at the teacher's discretion. Students were expected to move in unison and in complete silence. While some students identified the controlled movements as "militaristic," the "transitions," as they were officially referred to at MCCA, were supposed to be consistent among classes and used by all teachers. On the surface, it would seem MCCA's disciplinary systems were collectively a series of innocuous procedures, which were meant to make positive changes as teachers suggested, "soft skills" that could be applied to students' future school and professional settings. But as an oppressive "no excuses" context with a new paternalistic orientation, these disciplinary practices attempted to fix and save students of color living in poverty by providing regulations to their voices, movements, and physical bodies (Foucault 1977). In the end, for labeled students, particularly boys, MCCA was not a place of opportunity; instead, it served as a site of oppression and limitation, not unlike the confines of imprisonment.

Limited Expectations and Perceptions of Labeled Black and Latino Boys from Teachers

During interviews, many teachers at MCCA shared their pedagogical approach was of one that promoted equity, fairness, and relationship-building with students. However, their articulated ideals were not evident in classroom observations or when discussing Black and Latino male students, particularly those who were reduced to a label at MCCA. In her interview, I asked Ms. Nayson, a White woman who was in her first year of teaching, why Emmanuel, a Black boy, sat in the back of her class, when empty seats were available in the front. Emmanuel would be a "repeater" whom Ms. Nayson was warned about having in her class. "He repeated sixth grade, seventh grade twice, and now he's in eighth." She continued: "There are a lot of behavior problems at MCCA, [and] he's like the ringleader of it all. A lot of kids look to him. He's in the back so he can't talk to anybody." While Ms. Nayson had not even taught in the school for one year, she had already been warned about those students who hold negative, school-imposed labels, regardless if the warning was warranted. Marked as a "ringleader," for a boy of color, this implied Emmanuel directed an organization of something ille-

gal or corrupt (i.e., gang or mob). The “no excuses” charter had a deficit view of him. Perhaps if he were White, his Whiteness would allow for different affordances. Perhaps he would be identified as a promising social entrepreneur and be recommended for the gifted and talented program, or perhaps viewed as a student leader who is able to motivate. This complex phenomenon represents what the historian David Levering Lewis (2015) summarizes as “Whites commit crimes, but Black males are criminals.” Instead of esteeming and fostering Emmanuel’s leadership as an asset and potential mentor, the racialized and gendered deficit-oriented assumptions were already engrained.

Mr. Durango, a White math teacher, also shared deficit-oriented perceptions of boys of color. In our interview, his perceptions were rooted in his support of “no excuses” as an ideological principle in urban education. By introducing Kenan, a Latino student whom Mr. Durango deemed was “at-risk,” he shared how he made meaning of “no excuses” as a classroom teacher. “Kenan has a language barrier; he’s a very apathetic kid. He has repeated sixth grade twice, seventh grade twice, and is now eighth grade and failed all his classes during the first semester.” For Kenan and others like him, Mr. Durango admitted, “I *know* something is wrong, but no excuses ... I want them to succeed ... And if I’m letting them off as eighth graders ... and when they get off to college they’re not prepared because they have been cut so much slack.” Mr. Durango dismissed Kenan’s context as normal and waged that he was an “apathetic” student who should be unaffected by life circumstances: Mr. Durango’s response mirrored the “adultification” of Black and Latino boys, a phenomenon when teachers and other school authorities see boys of color as adults instead of children (Ferguson 2000) and do not expect them to exhibit feelings and emotions. Mr. Durango did not consider the contextualized circumstances that Kenan faced on a daily basis might affect his academic, social, and emotional development and abilities. In his treatment of Kenan, Mr. Durango believed in equality, not equity. That is, equity would have required exhibiting flexibility for a student who may need different supports than what another student may need to be successful. But for Mr. Durango, a personalized curriculum for the labeled boys of color meant he was “cutting [students] slack.” He preferred to enforce a rule of “no excuses” that applied to all students, all the time. Even when students’ contexts at the very least, should warrant discretionary empathy from adults at MCCA, the boys could not escape these stereotyped impressions.

Discussion and Implications

In this article, I tried to explore the punitive structures that supported labeling in one “no excuses” public charter. I also examined the ways in which school-imposed labeling affects teachers’ perceptions of Black and Latino male students who were labeled based on previous academic achievement and/or behavior markers and how these students perceive their own schooling experiences. Labeling is a normative practice and a tacit mechanism of symbolic violence—which disproportionately affects Black and Latino males—and leads to exclusionary punitive approaches, which subsequently create a connective tissue for Black and Latino males to be entangled with the criminal legal system.

While the practice of labeling has become commonplace in schools, the effects of labeling is not normal, at least for Black and Latino boys, as they are disproportionately affected. As evidenced by these data, school-imposed labeling for Black and Latino boys can serve as a catalyst that leads to further punitive consequences in schools. In the United States, for example, 16 percent of all students enrolled in US public schools are Black, while 51 percent are White. Nevertheless, Black students are suspended and expelled at three times the rate of White students (OCR 2014). Additionally, Black students account for 31 percent of all school-related arrests when they make up only one-sixth of the public school population. In other words, there’s a one-in-three chance that every time a police officer leads a student out of school in handcuffs, that student is Black (Parker 2014). In an urban metropolis like New York City, for instance, the numbers are even higher. While Black students make up 27 percent of the student population, they account for 54 percent of students receiving long-term suspensions and 48 percent of students receiving suspensions up to five days (NYCDOE 2016). Noguera posited that the punitive disciplinary practices within US schools offer a striking similarity to the tactics used to punish adults in our larger society: “Those most frequently targeted for punishment in school often look—in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status—a lot like smaller versions of the adults who are most likely to be targeted for incarceration in society” (2003b: 343). Thus, school-imposed labeling, which can lead to punitive actions in school, can serve as a prologue for boys who will eventually become men targeted for imprisonment.

Every student enrolled at MCCA has a common experience in this “no excuses” school climate that regulates their voices and movements. Furthermore, when a student is bound to a school-imposed label within this

oppressive space, some male students' experiences are laden in symbolic violence. Take Patrick for instance. After repeating seventh grade at MCCA, he was optimistic about his eighth-grade year. In our first interview, he talked about an encouraging letter from a teacher that he read every day. She gave it to him during summer school, just before the academic year started. He described the content of the letter: "[Ms. Gray's] telling me that when I first started [at MCCA] I was so immature [and I turned in] to someone who is mature, who is smart and so outgoing." Yet Patrick's teachers at MCCA, including Ms. Gray, the teacher who wrote the letter, often remembered Patrick from his former school-imposed label: a repeater, or simply categorize him as "at risk." One teacher said Patrick was at risk because "he has been held back multiple times and is just starting to mature for middle school at age 15." Here, the teacher linked Patrick's previous retention with maturity, suggesting if only Patrick were mature earlier in life, he would not have been held back. Another teacher offered Patrick's at-risk label because "he does not follow expectations," while another teacher recalled his past behavior: "He used to try to escape when he hit a struggle with his academics [in seventh grade]."

With the exception of a few adults who discovered labeled students as asset-driven individuals, the students are seemingly not seen as fully human. School-imposed labeling is a form of school discipline that reinforces punitive structures and normalizes student behaviors or school practices that may not be naturally occurring with predominantly Black and Latino communities. Collectively, the labeled boys are only viewed, interacted with and treated by the preconceived mis/label that is oriented in a deficit framework. Further, the labeled boys shared in their entanglement with the systems of punishment at MCCA. Whereas teachers framed the systems as necessary for the safety and efficiency of students' learning, as evidenced by the data, these tactics lead to ostracization from normal school activities and further labeling (e.g., negative character) due to how teachers perceive students' based on the school-imposed labels that may predate their first encounter with students.

While most K–12 teachers agree in theory with the principles of non-violence and safety in education, equity, and valuing students' voice and lived experiences, there is a mismatch in schools. Continued reliance on punitive school climate strategies like labeling is ineffective, harms students, and exacerbates inequities along the lines of race, socioeconomic, and gender. Schools and teachers should strive to support restorative practices. This requires a philosophical turn, away from punitive measures and

toward an adoption of the theory of justice, inspired by indigenous values, which is rooted in community-building practices. These practices emphasize creating strong relationships, holding each other accountable through communal dialogue, bringing all stakeholders together who have been affected by wrongdoing to address needs and responsibilities, and healing harms to relationships. This will also require teachers to strive for a cultural-sustaining pedagogy. Pedagogies must be more than responsive than treating students and their families diverse backgrounds as assets; pedagogies must support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge of their communities while simultaneously offering exposure to dominant cultural competences (Paris 2012). Efforts toward restorative justice and cultural sustainability require changing deeply seated teaching practices and school-wide disciplinary philosophies that can only be accomplished by disrupting normalizing discourses in the policies that inform safety, youth development, curriculum design, instructional routines, and pedagogies.

At the local level, more efforts by teachers to recognize and protect the humanity and dignity of Black and Latino males could start to address the symbolic violence endured by students. Teachers must be aware of their biases and their normative reference groups that may perpetuate and facilitate mislabeling of Black and Latino male students. Teachers must foster introspective critical reflection, which is a pedagogical process that seeks to explore teachers' microdecisions and how their and their students' racial/ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, and spatial location or any other minoritized markers may have affected those decisions (Anderson and Cohen 2015). Further, teachers must refuse school-imposed labels that dehumanize, and instead build a trusting relationship that demonstrates authentic care and love.

Black and Latino male students must also be encouraged to lead the dialogue about developing a truly safe and equitable learning environment. Enabling students to use their voices and lived experiences could empower students at MCCA. Foremost, publicly honoring students' words, even if different than dominant viewpoints, treats students as fully human. Additionally, if given a shared platform with adults, the students are able to tap into their best selves and express their truth to adults without reprisal, as many students view adults as an authoritative presence. The educators could embrace the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the students about their experiences with school-imposed labeling and the overall school climate. This space could also serve as an opportunity for educators to begin to understand

how Black and Latino males experience life outside MCCA. The students' lived experiences could serve as an instructive tool for teachers and administrators, leading to collaborations with students in the formation of pedagogical approaches. But, as I have offered elsewhere (Marsh 2018), this requires adults to have the courage to (re)imagine the acts of teaching and learning in the context of a "no excuses" site, as well as (re)imagine behavioral systems that incorporates, honors, and sustains students' cultural and linguistic competencies (Paris 2012). If schools are committed to creating affirming school climates with humanistic disciplinary processes, we must divest from punitive policies that ostracize students. In their place, we must invest in supportive programs and opportunities that include students' ideas in the creation and implementation processes. The young people who are most at risk of harm due to harsh disciplinary policies are uniquely situated to lead the dialogue.



L. TRENTON S. MARSH is an Assistant Professor of Urban Education in the College of Community Innovation and Education at the University of Central Florida (UCF). Prior to UCF, he served as a Postdoctoral Fellow in the National Center for Institutional Diversity at the University of Michigan, where he explored the experiences of students who participated in the university's Wolverine Pathways, an equity and inclusion initiative. His research and publications focuses on the lived experiences of students and families of color living in urban contexts to help inform equitable pedagogies, practices, policies, and processes in schools. Email: L.TrentonMarsh@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0002-2769-4167.

Notes

1. To maintain confidentiality, the school's name, as well as that of the city, district, and individuals, are pseudonyms.
2. Teach for America is a national nonprofit whose stated mission is to recruit, develop, and mobilize as many of our nation's most promising future leaders as possible to grow and strengthen the movement for educational equity and excellence. Its teachers—corps members, as they internally refer to themselves—are "mobilized" and placed as teachers in under-resourced communities (i.e., low-income urban and rural) for two-year teaching commitments.

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