

©2017

Eliot James Graham

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

“IN REAL LIFE, YOU HAVE TO SPEAK UP”:  
THE CIVIC SIGNIFICANCE OF NO-EXCUSES CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT  
PRACTICES

By  
ELIOT JAMES GRAHAM

A dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School - New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Graduate Program in Education

Written under the direction of

Beth Rubin

and approved by

---

---

---

---

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May, 2017

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“In Real Life, You Have to Speak Up”:

The Civic Significance of No-Excuses Classroom Management Practices

by ELIOT JAMES GRAHAM

Dissertation Director:

Beth Rubin

The neoliberal focus on the “achievement gap” as the sole measure of educational inequity has contributed to the proliferation of “no-excuses” schools and practices based on the belief that they raise test scores for low-income students of color. This study challenges that conception of equity, asking instead how no-excuses classroom management—highly regimented behavior management techniques increasingly common in schools serving urban youth—impact students’ development as *citizens* who might act to combat the structural inequalities that frame life in their communities. Drawing upon practice theories of identity, I use ethnographic methods to examine how the day-to-day ways teachers restrict, guide and respond to students’ behavior shape students’ civic development. My findings highlight three major themes: students’ perceptions of institutional authority, relationships to their communities, and sense of self-efficacy or “voice.” Students wanted teachers to use their authority to insist upon safe, respectful environments where learning could occur, and to address misbehavior in ways that were supportive rather than punitive. However, they often experienced school rules as arbitrary and overly restrictive, and rule enforcement as punitive and unfair. Despite their critiques of school rules, students commonly identified themselves and one another as “good kids”

or “bad kids” based on whether they tended to get in trouble, and they mirrored school discourse that framed success as an individual endeavor requiring separation from others. Finally, students were immersed in an institutional environment that emphasized the value of compliance and often penalized outspokenness; consequently, though some students chose to “speak up” anyway, they were aware that doing so came with substantial risks. I suggest that these experiences tend to encourage students to view institutional authority as unresponsive and unfair, to be wary of association with others in their community, particularly those who are struggling, and to regulate and repress their own voices in order to comply with institutional expectations and achieve “success.” Furthermore, while similar patterns may be found at many schools serving low-income students of color, I argue that certain features of the no-excuses model make such outcomes particularly likely. Ultimately, these findings challenge the notion that no-excuses practices promote educational equity. They also highlight the need for teachers and scholars to attend to “classroom management” not simply as a means to the end of academic learning, but as a complex pedagogical task with social-emotional, racial and civic significance.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my dissertation chair, Beth Rubin, and committee members, Thea Abu El-Haj, Sigal Ben-Porath, and Dan Battey, for their valuable thoughts and feedback. Thank you also to the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation for supporting this work.

My unwitting co-researcher in this project was my wife and best friend, Meera Mohan-Graham. She has been with me since its conception, and—despite her professed desire to stay far away from academia—willingly talked through my early formulations, listened to my infinite stories about the kids, offered me feedback on presentations, read a significant chunk of my writing, supported me through my confusion and insecurities, and exhibited significant patience with the general extent to which this project has taken over my life. I am, as always, grateful for the opportunity to share the most important parts of my life with her.

This work would not have been possible without the staff, kids and parents who gave me their time and their trust without expecting anything in return. Thank you first to the staff at “JWJ charter school” for allowing me into your community, and for sharing your thoughts, questions and concerns. I hope it is clear that the critiques in the following pages are directed at problematic patterns that extend far beyond this particular school, and should not be understood as full or fair portraits of any individual staff members. Your hard work in the service of children is deserving of our respect. Thank you also to the parents who gave me permission to spend time with their children, and who took time out of their busy schedules to share their insights and experiences with me. Finally, and

most particularly, thank you to the young people who helped me understand “what it’s like to be a kid at JWJ charter school.” This is for you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Literature Review.....	7
Chapter 2: Methods.....	51
Chapter 3: Setting & Participants .....	83
Chapter 4: Conceptions of Institutional Authority.....	123
Chapter 5: Classroom & Community Relationships.....	159
Chapter 6: Student Voice .....	188
Chapter 7: Impact of the No-Excuses Model.....	237
Conclusion .....	272
References.....	279
Appendices.....	290

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1: Conceptions of Citizenship.....	38
Table 2.1: Research Participants.....	61
Table 2.2: Interviews & Focus Groups.....	66
Table 2.3: Research Questions & Methods.....	71
Table 3.1: Bowdoin Teachers .....	104
Table 3.2: Focal Students.....	106

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1: Transition Rules Poster .....	92
Figure 3.2: ROAD Poster.....	94
Figure 6.1: Behavior Chart created by Sixth-Grade Teachers.....	190

## INTRODUCTION

“I think they want us to sit down and be quiet, but in real life you have to speak up.” – Shanya, sixth-grader

Educational equity for low-income children of color is often conceptualized exclusively through the lens of the “achievement gap.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, policies and practices which are thought to raise achievement on standardized tests, including “no-excuses” practices such as setting and enforcing strict behavioral boundaries, are considered equitable and successful interventions, worthy of imitation. However, while “sitting down and being quiet,” may make certain types of teaching or learning easier, it is unlikely to enable intervention in the structural inequalities that underlie differential academic achievement. As Shanya explains above, “real life” requires the ability to “speak up”—to question authority, to advocate for one’s community, to ensure one’s voice is heard. If schools are to play a role in creating a more equitable society, they must prepare young people in marginalized communities not only to achieve academically, but also to act civically. Only civic action, not individual achievement, can address the persistent structural inequalities that shape life in low-income communities of color. Consequently, this study directs attention away from academic achievement, asking instead how the highly regimented behavior management techniques used by no-excuses schools impact students’ development as *citizens*.

Preoccupation with the academic achievement of traditionally underserved groups has been used to justify many recent educational policies, including increased standardized testing and the proliferation of charter schools and networks in urban

---

<sup>1</sup> The “achievement gap” has also been referred to as an “opportunity gap” (Diamond, 2013) or an “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006). These terms better reflect the historical, structural and cultural inequalities that create differential educational achievement.

districts. For example, President George W. Bush explicitly linked standardized testing and other aspects of NCLB with the need to close the achievement gap (Labbé, 2006). More recently, in *Race to the Top*, 40 points—8% of the total—were allocated for: “[e]nsuring successful conditions for high-performing charters and other innovative schools,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2). Overall, discourse on educational equity has become intricately entangled with a neoliberal push toward viewing education as a private good best pursued in a consumer-driven, business-operated market place (Labaree, 1997; Lipman, 2011).

Notable among neoliberal solutions to educational inequality are charter schools. While charter schools are actually highly variable (Carpenter, 2006), those charters that purport to close the achievement gap have in certain ways come to represent the movement (Carr, 2013). Wilson (2009) notes:

Among these ‘gap-closing’ schools, one broad approach, frequently called ‘no excuses’ schooling, appears to dominate. The Knowledge Is Power Program [KIPP] network of schools is the exemplar, but this approach is proliferating in other networks, including Achievement First and Uncommon Schools, and in stand-alone schools, many of which aspire to replicate themselves in coming years. (Wilson, 2009, p. 1)

The successes of KIPP and other no-excuses schools have been extolled in popular media accounts, including appearances on *Oprah* and *Sixty Minutes* (Whitman, 2008), in the *New York Times* (Tough, 2006), and in the documentary *Waiting for Superman* (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010). Academics and policy makers have also taken note, as evidenced by the multiple inquiries into replicating no-excuses schools and methods (Fryer, 2011; Lake, Bowen, Demeritt, McCullough, Haimson & Gill, 2012; Wilson, 2009). Consequently, no-excuses charters have had an impact on educational thought, policy and practice which far exceeds their small—but growing—share of the public education

“market.” Ellison (2012) asserts: “KIPP is a manifestation of commonsensical understandings now dominant in the USA about the educational challenges facing its struggling student populations and the educational policies and practices required to overcome those challenges,” (p. 551).

Included in these “policies and practices” are the behavior management methods common to no-excuses charters which are now making their way into traditional public schools serving similar populations (e.g. the No-Nonsense Nurturer® Program, CT3, 2015). Students’ behavior is highly restricted; students are required to be silent for much of the school day, to pass from class to class in silent, single-file lines, sometimes even to sit in certain postures and direct their eyes only on the teacher. These structures are enforced through systems of rewards and punishments, with “bad” behaviors resulting in demerits or deductions, while “good” behaviors earn merits or scholar dollars. While such systems have generated substantial criticism, proponents argue that they create a safe school environment and open the doors of academic success to students who are otherwise likely to fail. The perception that these schools have raised achievement on standardized tests serves for many as justification or even as proof that their methods are not only effective, but worthy of emulation.

However, defining educational equity by test scores—or even by a less narrow measure of academic achievement, such as college attendance—is insufficient. Such a conceptualization reduces equality to the individual provision of access to a middle-class lifestyle. It fails to include consideration of individual or collective access to political power, to the tools that would make it possible to address structural—not simply individual—inequality. Yet low-income students of color in urban areas live in a world



fundamentally shaped by institutional racism and historic disinvestment in their communities (Rothstein, 2014). Despite a rhetoric of equality following the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s, inequality in the United States is widening, and low-income communities of color in particular face unequal opportunities and outcomes in regards to housing, employment, health care and education (Berliner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rothstein, 2014). Differential academic achievement is the result, not the cause, of such problems.

The realities of structural inequality mean that we must construct a definition of educational equity that extends beyond test scores, one that considers *civic* as well as academic preparation (Levinson, 2012). Thus, this study examines how no-excuses behavior management practices impact what I am referring to as students' civic orientations: their conception of institutional authority, their relationship to their communities, and their sense of self-efficacy or voice. Without the willingness to question authority, the ability to work collectively with others, and a belief that your opinions and actions matter, challenging unequal social structures is difficult if not impossible. This list of civic orientations is not meant to represent a comprehensive or universal conception of citizenship; instead, it refers to a type of engaged, critical citizenship scholars have argued is particularly relevant for young people living in marginalized communities (Rubin, 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Given the widespread claim that no-excuses schools constitute an *equitable* intervention, it is critical that we understand the relationships cultivated in such schools between students and our unequal society.

I begin in chapter one by considering what is known about no-excuses schools, classroom management, and the relationship between schooling practices and civic development. Despite the significance of no-excuses schools, most of the existing research focuses on the question of their “effectiveness” as defined by test scores, while in-depth qualitative research on their practices, and especially on classroom management, remains limited. Research focused on classroom management overall follows similar pattern; most studies focus on “effectiveness” as defined by the presence or absence of disruption, with fewer studies on the social emotional or civic consequences of management approaches. Amongst researchers who are concerned about the relationship between classroom management and equity, the question of authority is particularly contested, with some scholars advocating authoritative approaches while others urge a democratic approach. Finally, though schools have long been considered central to civic development, research examining the link between such development and day-to-day practices is limited.

Chapters two and three describe the methods, setting, and participants of this study. Chapter two focuses on my methodological approach, including theoretical framework, research questions, data collection, and data analysis. It also addresses my positionality in regards to how my background and experiences impact my perspective, how I interacted with adults and children within the school, and how I was able to position myself as a “non-sanctioning” adult (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Chapter three provides significant context for the study by describing the school and focal students in detail. In order to present a holistic picture of the focal students, I describe each of them here prior to their later appearances in more analytic contexts. I also

describe the history and current practices of the school. Describing the school's practices, in addition to providing context, has analytic significance. Current descriptions of no-excuses schools fail to distinguish between them; however, my data reveal that this school did not take up all no-excuses practices evenly. This raises questions as yet unaddressed in the literature about how the practitioners at a given school impact the way no-excuses practices are actually implemented on the ground.

Chapters four, five, six and seven present significant findings and interpretations of those findings. Chapter four offers an analysis of how students experienced and perceived classroom management practices and their relationship to authority in the school. It considers both why students were sometimes supportive of adult authority in the school, and larger patterns in students' critique of how authority was exercised. Chapter five focuses on how school practices shaped students' relationship to one another and to their communities. Chapter six explores the role of student voice in the school, and suggests that students learn important civic lessons from when and if they can "speak up" in school. While certain school practices encouraged student involvement, most day-to-day discourses seemed intended to get students to internalize a predetermined set of beliefs and values rather than to engage in real conversations. Finally, chapter seven describes how school practices were impacted by the no-excuses model and the no-excuses network the school was a part of, sometimes despite the desires of individual practitioners. It considers the question of whether practices that encourage students' civic development may be incompatible with a no-excuses model.

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **“No-Excuses” Schools**

#### **Overview**

The term “no-excuses” was coined by Samuel Casey Carter (2000) to describe schools that refuse to “make excuses” for the academic failure of low-income children of color. Carter profiled the principals of 21 schools—including two KIPP schools—whose students score at or above the 65<sup>th</sup> percentile on national tests, despite coming from predominantly low-income backgrounds. Consistent with Carter’s original use, many no-excuses schools explicitly identify themselves as dedicated to closing the race- and class-based achievement gap, which they refer to as “the civil rights issue of our time,” (Achievement First, 2011). They understand their students as coming into school with multiple disadvantages—what the Uncommon Schools Network refers to as an “opportunity gap” (Uncommon Schools, 2011). Thus, the guiding principal for the founders of these schools is that, “[s]tudents who enter [middle] school significantly behind grade level don’t need the same good education that most American middle-class students receive; they need a better education, because they need to catch up,” (Tough, 2006, p. 10). It is the school’s mission to do whatever it takes for students to “climb the mountain to college” and thereby achieve success.

The descriptor “no-excuses” is a point of contention and is not necessarily embraced by schools themselves. For example, though schools in the KIPP network are often used as representatives of this classification, at least some do not identify with the

term. Despite this resistance, the term has gained traction in both popular and some academic publications; a recent article in the *New York Times* defined a “no excuses philosophy” as “the notion that poor children are best taught in highly regulated environments,” (Bellafante, 2017). My use of “no-excuses” here refers to charter schools that are explicitly dedicated to increasing academic achievement for low-income students of color, and that use a particular set of practices to achieve this goal. Such practices include significantly increasing the amount of time students spend in school by extending the school year, the school day, and occasionally even the school week (Angrist et al., 2012; Carter, 2000). Principals focus aggressively on hiring the “right” teachers, monitoring their work, providing them with feedback, and even firing them mid-year if their performance falls short of expectations (Angrist et al., 2012; Carter, 2000; Ellison, 2012; KIPP Foundation, 2011; Lake, et al., 2012; Mathews, 2009; Whitman, 2008). Students are tested frequently, and their scores are used both to evaluate teachers and to make adjustments in order to meet the needs of students (Angrist et al., 2012; Carter, 2000; KIPP Foundation, 2011; Whitman, 2008). No-excuses schools explicitly embrace college as a goal for all students, and may reinforce this idea through practices such as naming student homerooms after specific colleges (Carter, 2000; Seider, 2012; Whitman, 2008). Most significantly for this study, no-excuses schools focus intensely on prescribing, regulating and responding to student behavior, as will be discussed at greater length below (Lake et al., 2012; Seider, 2012; Whitman, 2008).

While I am not aware of any research that has attempted to estimate the total number of no-excuses schools, it is safe to say that their numbers are both significant and growing. As of the 2016/2017 school year, charter schools overall enrolled an estimated

3.1 million students, which is six percent of the estimated total public school enrollment for that year and almost three times as many as a decade earlier (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). In their study of charter management organizations (CMOs), Farrell, Wohlstetter and Smith (2012) noted that:

[I]n the past 5 years, there have been between 51 and 96 new CMO schools each year, with an average growth rate of 12% annually; in urban centers, including New Orleans, Newark, Los Angeles, Chicago, Oakland, New York City, and Washington D.C., CMO-run schools make up more than one third of the charter market... (p. 500)

Though Farrell et al. do not address how many CMOs nationwide can be described as no-excuses schools, many of the CMOs they go on to discuss follow the no-excuses model. More directly, in a study by Angrist, Pathak, and Walters (2012), *two-thirds* of the Boston-area charter administrators included in their data set “identif[ied] somewhat or fully with No Excuses,” (p. 4). Some no-excuses schools are part of charter networks or charter management organizations (CMOs) such as KIPP, Uncommon Schools, Achievement First, Democracy Prep, Mastery Charter, MATCH, the SEED schools, or YES Prep, while others are “mom-and-pop” charter schools that follow the no-excuses model (Wilson, 2009).

### **Why No-Excuses Schools Matter**

No-excuses schools are significant because they are widely perceived as doing what few other schools are: closing the achievement gap and providing educational opportunities to low-income children of color. James Peyser (2011), a managing partner for city funds at NewSchools Venture Fund, notes that by 2008 CMOs had received at least \$500 million in private philanthropy. While not all CMOs are no-excuses schools,

Peyser goes on to state “the highest performing CMOs in the NewSchools portfolio tend to be those that have embraced a ‘no excuses’ approach,” (p. 37). His comments reflect the substantial support—both monetary and otherwise—these schools have received. Farrell and her colleagues (2012) comment that there has been “dramatic federal support for the replication of high-quality charter schools,” (p. 501). While this support also reflects a broader neoliberal shift toward shifting educational problems outside of the public sector (Lipman, 2011), it is difficult to imagine the charter school movement gaining so much momentum without glowing narratives such as those in *Waiting for Superman* (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010), which rely heavily upon stories of amazing achievement by KIPP and similar schools.

Are no-excuses schools truly closing the achievement gap? Certainly, there is data indicating that *some* no-excuses schools achieve much higher test scores than the district schools their students would have otherwise attended. For example, the three Boston charter schools profiled in Seider’s (2012) study serve student bodies in which nearly 90% of students are Black or Latino, and two-thirds are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. However, all three schools achieved standardized test scores comparable to those in wealthy suburbs, and one school is among the highest scoring in the state. Angrist et al. (2012) compared urban and non-urban charter schools to one another, and found that “No Excuses charter schools generate ELA and math gains that are  $0.18\sigma$  and  $0.27\sigma$  larger than the effects of other charters,” (p. 17). They write, “[t]he results reported here contribute to a growing body of evidence documenting the effectiveness of No Excuses practices in various contexts,” (p. 2). Macey et al. (2009) cite eight studies of KIPP schools that *all* conclude that KIPP significantly raises student achievement on

standardized tests. One of these, a report by the Education Policy Institute (EPI, 2005) examined changes in normal curve equivalent scores on the Stanford Achievement Test over KIPP students' fifth grade year. Normal academic growth on this test is actually a zero point difference; however, scores of roughly 1,800 KIPP students across twenty-four schools showed average increases of 10.1 and 11.5 points in reading, 10.9 and 9.1 points in language, and 17.4 and 11.6 points in math<sup>2</sup>. The researchers concluded that, "KIPP schools post substantially greater gains than what is considered normal," (p. 7). Another study compared forty-nine new fifth-grade students in a KIPP middle school to peers at district schools who were individually matched to them in terms of gender, free- or reduced-price lunch status, ethnicity, and test scores from the previous year (Ross et al., 2007). They found that, "although KIPP:DA and control fifth graders had virtually identical means on all fourth-grade pretests, the KIPP:DA students demonstrated significantly higher achievement on 4 out of the 6 fifth-grade tests," (p. 158).

However, there are also numerous critiques of these successes. In particular, numerous researchers have investigated the question of whether charter schools in general and no-excuses schools in particular serve a different student population than surrounding public schools. Welner (2013) describes twelve types of strategies used by charter schools to shape the population of students they enroll, including no-excuses practices such as longer school days, grade retention, and strict discipline, which can impact both which students enroll and whether students choose to stay. Kahlenberg (2012/2013) suggests that KIPP schools benefit from unusually motivated students and parents, attrition of weaker students, unreasonable teacher workloads, and higher funding

---

<sup>2</sup> Averages are reported separately for those groups who retested in the spring of fifth grade vs. the fall of sixth grade.



as compared to district schools. Though research on these criticisms is still limited, there is reason to believe that no-excuses schools may serve somewhat different population of students than comparable district schools. For example, Angrist et al. (2012) argued in a working paper comparing different charter schools that students in urban charter schools have slightly higher baseline test scores and are less likely to be in special education or English as a second language programs than students in public schools. A working paper by Nichols-Barrer, Tuttle, Gill and Gleason (2012) based on data from twenty-two KIPP middle schools similarly found that these schools serve lower percentages of ELL and special education students than the districts in which they are situated, though they noted that these percentages remain significantly higher than national averages. Nichols-Barrer and his colleagues also examined student mobility data from twenty-two KIPP middle schools. They found that while attrition rates at the KIPP schools were not meaningfully different than at nearby district schools, the “late arrivals”—students who enrolled in later grades to replace students that were lost—were significantly different. Specifically, these students were less likely to be male and more likely to have higher test scores relative to their peers. However, they note that, “the best available evidence suggests that KIPP produces its largest impacts on student in their first year at KIPP—before selective replacement could possibly have any effect,” (p. 22). In contrast to these results, Baker (2010) concluded that “a significant portion of the apparent success of schools like North Star [part of the Uncommon Schools network] is a) attributable to the demographically different population they serve to begin with and b) attributable to the patterns of student attrition that occur within cohorts over time,” (para. 13).

It is not possible to resolve—or even fully cover—the debate over the legitimacy of the high test scores achieved by some no-excuses schools within the confines of this document. However, as I argued earlier, the *belief* that the no-excuses model is successful is significant. As Lake et al. (2012) point out in their report on the effective practices of Charter Management Organizations, “[s]ome districts are already experimenting with strategies similar to the practices of high-performing CMOs, and these new initiatives could inform future policy and practice,” (p. 49). Similarly, Angrist and his colleagues (2012) note that in 2010, Massachusetts relaxed the cap on charter schools for districts scoring in the bottom 10% on the state test, with preference given to providers who have demonstrated previous success. KIPP in particular “has achieved a prominent place in the popular discourse of education reform and has had a profound influence on other *no excuses* charter school models,” (Ellison, 2012, p. 569). Thus, it is important to better understand the practices of these schools, and the implications of those practices.

### **Focus on Student Behavior**

No-excuses schools have been described by both scholars (Goodman, 2013) and journalists (Whitman, 2008) as deriving their classroom management philosophies from Wilson and Kelling’s theory of broken windows, which essentially suggests that if small problems are corrected quickly, big problems are unlikely to occur. Other explanations suggest that requiring silence or insisting on a narrow range of behaviors saves needed time, communicates high expectations, or simply constitutes explicit teaching of skills that middle-class students learn instinctively (Lemov, 2010; Seider, 2012; Tough, 2006). Whatever the reason, these schools carefully regulate students’ speech, actions, and even body language.

In *Teach Like a Champion*, Doug Lemov (2010), former Managing Director of Uncommon Schools, describes how to teach students appropriate classroom conduct through the use of the acronym *SLANT*, which stands for: *Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer questions, Nod your head, and Track the speaker with your eyes*. This acronym originated with KIPP (Tough, 2006) and spread to others charters; Whitman (2008) describes its use in a stand-alone charter, and it also appears in a teacher-training document by MATCH charter schools<sup>3</sup>. Goodman (2013) notes that Mastery and Young Scholars have different acronyms serving the same function. In the hallway, students are taught “how to walk from class to class: silently, with a book in hand,” (Whitman, 2008, p. 37). The three no-excuses middle schools in Seider’s (2012) mixed methods study also require students to walk between classes in silent, single-file lines, as do the three KIPP middle schools in Macey et al.’s (2009) qualitative study. Finally, both Lemov (2010) and MATCH emphasize the importance of 100% student compliance 100% of the time. According to their philosophy, tolerating anything less than one hundred percent begins a slippery slope in which, ultimately, fewer and fewer students follow directions.

Systems of rewards and punishments are used to reinforce desired behavior and punish misbehavior. For example, students who behave appropriately may earn “merits,” “KIPP dollars” or “scholar dollars,” (Coats, 2004; Macey, et al., 2009; Seider, 2012; Whitman, 2008). Students who behave inappropriately—even by repeatedly slouching or tapping a pen—face punishment. Some of these punishments are of a rather standard variety; for example, students may lose “scholar dollars,” earn demerits, or face detention. However, others are more extreme, including having to wear their uniform

---

<sup>3</sup> A colleague of mine received this document from a MATCH school as part of an interview process in 2011.

shirts inside out (Lack, 2009), being relegated to time-out areas with names such as “the Dugout” (Ross, McDonald, Albert, & Gallagher, 2007, p. 154), or having to “attend ‘base camp’ during the school day in which where [sic] privileges such as eating lunch with peers are taken away,” (Macey et al., 2009, p. 235). Whitman (2008) relays a story in which, “KIPP Academy conductor Jesus Concepcion had every student in his 180-pupil orchestra stand silently for two minutes in a sweltering auditorium during an after-school rehearsal because one member of his orchestra looked at him disrespectfully,” (p. 262). It is unlikely that all no-excuses schools make use of these more extreme disciplinary methods, but all of them *do* create a powerful disciplinary environment—which Goodman (2013) and Ben-Porath (2013) describe as a “totalizing environment”—through intense regimentation of students’ behavior.

Needless to say, these methods have garnered some harsh criticism, as well as occasional praise. Lack (2009) writes, “the social climate at KIPP is imbued by a distinctly capitalistic and militaristic ideology,” (p. 136) and later, “by consenting to the notion that the school should mirror the existing power relations of larger society, Feinberg [KIPP co-founder] candidly condones the existing social inequalities and the maintenance of the status quo,” (p. 140). Lack goes on to argue that instead of being cultivated as independent thinkers and agents of social change, KIPP students are being taught to obey authority and to look to individual choices, not social structures, as explanations for poverty. Lack concludes that, “[i]n spite of its ostensibly noble goals of closing the racial achievement gap and sending all of its students to college, the KIPP movement is inherently undemocratic because of its unabashed endorsement of capitalist and militaristic values,” (p. 144). Whitman (2008), on the other hand, applauds the

“paternalistic ethos” of no-excuses schools. However, his praise generates a description remarkably similar to Lack’s (2009):

By ‘paternalistic’ I mean...a highly prescriptive institution that teaches students not just how to think but how to act according to what are commonly termed traditional, middle-class values. [...] These paternalistic schools go beyond just teaching values as abstractions; the schools tell students exactly how they are expected to behave and their behavior is closely monitored, with real rewards for compliance and penalties for noncompliance. Students are required to talk a certain way, sit a certain way, and dress a certain way. Even minor infractions are not tolerated. (p. 3 – 4)

Interestingly, both Lack (2009) and Whitman (2008) note that KIPP founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin balk at the description of KIPP’s practices as “militaristic,” and both authors feel that the word is accurate, though Lack intends it as a critique while Whitman uses it as praise. Both also feel that the type of discipline used in no-excuses schools is not unrelated to the population these schools serve. Lack criticizes this form of discipline as racist and classist, suggesting that white, middle-class parents would never accept this sort of treatment for their children. Citing Brown (2003), he writes, “while a culture of privilege and freedom pervades the schools of the wealthy in the U.S., a culture of discipline and militarism suffuses the schools of color and the poor,” (p. 141). Whitman agrees; he just doesn’t believe it’s a problem. He comments:

I was amused to find that many middle-class parents...thought the need for rigorous, authoritative schools for disadvantaged adolescents was all too obvious, even when they sent their own children to less traditional institutions. I myself attended a private, progressive Quaker school... It was an outstanding school and provided a first-rate education. But decades later, having spent time in urban schools as a reporter, I can see that a progressive pedagogy would have been ill-suited to many inner-city schools. (p. 4 – 5)

The positions articulated by Lack (2009) and Whitman (2008) represent the extreme ends of an unresolved conflict over the implications of the classroom management practices of no-excuses schools. Advocates suggest that these techniques

provide important levels of support, structure, and security for students; detractors argue that such high levels of control are unhealthy for children (Goodman, 2013). However, there are virtually no empirical studies focused on no-excuses classroom management. One of the few is Golann's (2015) ethnographic study, which examines classroom management at a no-excuses school with an eye toward the development of cultural capital. Though the staff at the school hoped to prepare students for college and future success, Golann argues that their practices, "had the paradoxical effect of producing worker-learners—students who monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority—rather than lifelong learners," (p. 108).

As the perceived successes of no-excuses schools and practices prompt their expansion, it is increasingly urgent that we understand the myriad impacts of these practices. Yet, as the review of the literature below will demonstrate, research on classroom management in general holds few answers to such questions. To gain an understanding of the impact of management practices that extends beyond simple measures of effectiveness, a sociocultural perspective is needed—but this perspective remains underrepresented in the literature.

### **Classroom Management**

Drawing from Evertson and Weinstein (2006), I define classroom management as encompassing all "the actions teachers take to create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social-emotional learning," (p. 4). Though often associated with *discipline*, I consider the two terms to be overlapping, but distinct. First, discipline and particularly studies of discipline often focus on school-level responses to

misbehavior, such as detention, suspension, and expulsion. Though these responses may begin at the classroom level, they do not remain there, taking them outside the realm of classroom management. Second, while discipline refers primarily to consequences for misbehavior, classroom management is a far broader task, including cultivating positive relationships, providing both guidance and freedom, and working to combat bias and injustice. As Evertson and Weinstein (2006) write:

classroom management has two distinct purposes: It not only seeks to establish and sustain an orderly environment so students can engage in meaningful academic learning, it also aims to enhance students' social and moral growth...From this perspective, *how* a teacher achieves order is as important as *whether* a teacher achieves order. (p. 4, emphasis original)

Evertson and Weinstein's description suggests the importance of the non-academic lessons—social, moral, and civic—that classroom management practices teach children.

Unfortunately however, research on classroom management offers almost no insight on *what* lessons children learn from “how a teacher achieves order.” In general, Evertson and Weinstein (2006) find that, “few researchers focus explicitly on classroom management or identify themselves with this field,” (p. 3). Similarly, Hoy and Weinstein (2006) note:

[W]e found a surprising lack of research on the connections among teachers' beliefs about classroom management, their actual management practices, and the academic and social-emotional outcomes for students. (p. 210-211)

Of those researchers who *do* focus on classroom management, many are concerned primarily with identifying effective management techniques. Others consider the role of student authority in the classroom, or the significance of race and class. However, there are very few studies of classroom management that might be considered sociocultural in nature, by which I mean studies that attend to local systems of meaning-making and

identity construction inherent in classroom relationships. The idea that classroom management might impact students' civic development is particularly unexplored, as demonstrated by the omission of civic growth or civic outcomes in the quotations above. While some scholars, especially those advocating "democratic" classroom management, suggest that certain approaches might provide benefits in terms of students' civic learning, there is very little research that explores this relationship directly.

### **"Effective" Classroom Management**

Much of the literature on "effective" classroom management conceptualizes the purpose of classroom management as creating an environment in which students might most accurately and efficiently learn a given body of academic knowledge. For example, in contrast to the definition provided by Evertson and Weinstein (2006) above, Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, and Sugai (2008) define classroom management as being "comprised of three central components: maximized allocation of time for instruction, arrangement of instructional activities to maximize academic engagement and achievement, and proactive behavior management practices," (p. 351). They conducted a literature review in search of effective, "evidence-based" classroom management practices; a practice was considered "evidence-based" if it was supported by at least three studies that used an experimental methodology. Measures of effectiveness included decreases in off-task or disruptive behavior, decreases in transition time, increases in engagement, attentiveness, productivity, on-task behavior and compliance, and increases in correct responses and academic achievement. Also included in some studies were increases in self-esteem and in pro-social behaviors such as friendliness, helpfulness, cooperativeness, and conflict resolution.



This conceptualization heavily emphasizes teachers' ability to shape and control students' behavior, thus ensuring that students will do the right thing. In his classroom management book for teachers, Canter (2010) writes, "[u]nless and until [teachers] stop students' inappropriate talking, [they] will never establish a classroom environment in which students recognize that they have to do what [the teacher] want[s] versus what they want," (p. 74). Similarly, Fred Jones (2000) offers a program of classroom management that relies on prevention, rewards, and consequences. For these researchers, classroom management simply consists of the tools teachers use to keep students on track. If the students are on track, the tools are likely to be good ones.

This relatively narrow definition of effectiveness yields certain recommended methods. The literature review conducted by Simonsen and her colleagues (2008) revealed five "*critical features* of effective classroom management: (a) maximize structure; (b) post, teach, review, monitor, and reinforce expectations; (c) actively engage students in observable ways; (d) use a continuum of strategies for responding to appropriate behaviors; and (e) use a continuum of strategies to respond to inappropriate behaviors," (p. 353, emphasis original). These features are consistent with those recommended by Jones (2000) and Canter (2010) in their classroom management textbooks for teachers. For example, Fred Jones (2000) advises emphasizing structure in the classroom through seating arrangements, procedures for common tasks such as passing out papers, etc. He also describes a pre-determined sequence of responses to students' inappropriate behavior, as well as a detailed system of positive reinforcement teachers may put into play. Canter (2010) discusses narrating students' positive behavior as a way to reinforce that behavior.

Other classroom management researchers, some of whom will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, make similar recommendations. In a review of research on classroom management in secondary schools, Emmer and Gerwels (2006) note that effective teachers are explicit about behavioral expectations and create procedures for students to follow. Case studies by Monroe (2009) and Bondy, Ross, Gallingane and Hambacher (2007) also emphasize the importance of teachers' clarity around behavioral expectations. Based on a study of student teachers' successful management strategies, Zuckerman (2007) suggests that having a pre-determined sequence of responses to students' inappropriate behavior helped engage or re-engage students after a discipline problem.

Overall, there seems to be ample evidence that practices such as those outlined by Simonsen et al. (2008) are effective at keeping order. This research would seem to support many of the management techniques used by no-excuses schools—and indeed, Doug Lemov (2010) includes similar recommendations in *Teach Like a Champion*, a book which both documents and has helped to spread no-excuses classroom management practices. However, Simonsen et al., Jones (2000) and Canter (2010) largely neglect the contextual factors—such as the culture of the school—in which such practices are taking place, though Simonson and her colleagues note that additional research is needed in this area. Additionally, these researchers are able to offer us little insight into the impact of different management practices on students' development. In their review, Simonsen et al. cite one study in which high levels of structure resulted in less “pro-social” behavior and had no impact on independent task persistence. While they comment, “[a] balance between teacher-directed structure and student independence may be necessary,” (p.

357), they make no further mention of such concerns, not even when addressing the need for additional research. Such omissions limit the ability of this body of research to aid in our understandings of the larger implications of classroom management practices.

### **“Democratic” Classroom Management**

In sharp contrast to the more utilitarian approach reflected above, some researchers have questioned the broader impact of seemingly “effective” classroom management practices on students. Kohn (1995) argues that disciplinary structures based on rewards and punishments “can buy a short-term change in behavior, but they can never help kids develop a *commitment* to positive values,” (para. 6, emphasis original). Echoing Kohn, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) criticize “behaviorist” classroom management techniques in which “motivation is typically reduced to the individual’s attempt to satisfy immediate needs or desires, and rewards and punishments are used to induce the motivation to pursue desired ends and reduce the motivation to carry out undesirable behavior,” (p. 8). Toshalis (2010) contrasts, “mainstream pedagogical literature that frames the classroom as something to be ‘managed’” with those that “understand teacher-student dynamics in relational terms and scrutinize classroom interactions for the ways they reveal cultural, gender, racial, ethnic, and socio-economic hierarchies,” (p. 184). In place of such methods, Brantlinger and Danforth (2006) argue for “[p]erson-centered classroom communities with shared leadership [in which] rules are constructed jointly and students know that the classroom belongs to them,” (p. 171).

Schimmel (2003) conducted a critical analysis of school codes of conduct. He concluded that most of them “share four characteristics that undermine their legitimacy,” (p. 18); specifically, they are (1) “restrictive, ambiguous, and unexplained,” (2)

“authoritarian and illegitimate,” (3) “legalistic and poorly taught,” and (4) lack collaboration and are perceived as unfair. Instead, Schimmel advocates for an approach he terms “collaborative rule-making,” in which rules are more broadly discussed and negotiated, and students are taught about their rights as well as their responsibilities. Schimmel describes positive consequences he believes could result from such a program, including more positive attitudes, improved rules, increased self-discipline, and development of citizenship skills.

Unfortunately, scholarship on democratic classrooms is composed of much more theoretical work than empirical research, and what research does exist tends to either focus primarily on curriculum and pedagogy (as opposed to classroom management specifically), or to examine specific programs that include a person-centered or democratic component. Freiberg (1990, 1996) and Freiberg and Lamb (2009) urge greater student involvement in the running of the classroom, writing, “[a]lthough we teach about democracy, we rarely practice it in our schools and classrooms,” (Freiberg, 1996, p. 36). They report that use of a program called Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline decreases the amount of time spent disciplining students, increases available instructional time, increased test scores, and increased students’ sense of ownership in classroom. Similarly, Denton (2003) and Grandmont (2003) describe case studies of high schools that implemented more democratic disciplinary structures. Grandmont reported on the effects of a program called Judicious Discipline, which included reducing student misbehavior and improving teacher and administrator relationships with students. Denton conducted a qualitative study focused on the effects of a democratic committee made up of both students and teachers, which reviews and

modifies the student code of conduct. He found that the committee did increase students', administrators', and teachers' senses that discipline at the school was fair, though its impact was limited by lack of knowledge about the committee among uninvolved students and staff.

Teachers have also written about their experiences in more student-centered classrooms and schools. In his recent book, *Role Reversal*, Mark Barnes (2013) describes how he was able to improve both student learning and his life as a teacher by scrapping most of the typical accouterments of schools, including classroom rules. Smith (2003) discusses his experiences teaching at a charter school that uses a democratic governance system. Both cite significant student buy-in as one result of these more distributed authority structures.

Overall, this research is strongly suggestive of the positive results of democratic or person-centered classrooms. Ironically however, these researchers have not actually moved very far from definitions of effectiveness put forward by Simonsen et al. (2008)—their support for democratic structures relies heavily on evidence that the school or classroom functions more successfully, with less need for disciplinary interactions. Even for researchers like Schimmel (2003) who are explicitly concerned with the impact of management on citizenship, the connection is assumed, not investigated. Though these scholars advocate for more democratic management structures, they are unable to illuminate the effect of these or other practices on students' civic development.

### **Authority or Autonomy?**

The studies cited above highlight a particular tension—that between teacher authority and student autonomy. While researchers such as Simonsen and her colleagues

(2008) seem to be stressing the importance of the teacher's control of the classroom, Brantlinger and Danforth (2006) urge greater student control. This tension is at the heart of the conflict around no-excuses practices, and indeed of conversations about management practices in general. Certainly teacher authority is sufficient to achieve an efficient and orderly classroom, but as soon as classroom management is conceptualized as having a socializing impact, questions about student autonomy come up. How much is enough; how much is too much; what are the impacts of different proportions on kids of different ages? What *is* the relationship between teacher authority and student autonomy in the first place—are they simply opposite ends of a spectrum, or do they have a more complex connection?

Emmer and Gerwels (2006) provide an apt illustration of the lack of clarity around these questions. They cite a series of studies revealing two “best” types of teachers; while both “best” types are high on leadership characteristics, only one is high on characteristics related to student responsibility and freedom. Emmer and Gerwels advocate for a balance, suggesting the importance of providing appropriate levels of autonomy while also arguing that the most effective teachers create and enforce rules and procedures that are explicit, specific, and concrete. However, what an “appropriate” level of autonomy is and what the implications are of providing it or not remains largely unaddressed by current research.

While empirical research on such a balance is limited, Walker (2009) and Goodman (2010, 2011, 2013) are able to offer us somewhat greater insight. Goodman emphasizes the importance of sharing authority with young people in the classroom as a potential antidote to alienating schools and alienated students. However, she does not

view student authority as antithetical to teacher authority; instead, she argues that “[s]trong missions embraced by students make it possible for schools both to exert high levels of authority and to distribute that authority amongst students,” (2010, p. 230). Drawing from Weber, she conceptualizes authority as “power constrained by legitimacy,” meaning that teachers only truly have authority—as opposed to power—when that authority is perceived as legitimate by students. On the flip side, student freedom is made possible only through limits that provide the opportunity to make choices and consider meaningful alternatives. Thus, authority must exist as an interaction between power and freedom.

Goodman’s conceptualization of authority and freedom as interactive instead of opposing forces was born out in a pilot study I conducted in the spring of 2013. In that study, three teachers described their practice as highly authoritative with little room for student agency; however the fourth teacher, while at least as strict as the others, also provided substantial space for student authority. Significantly, this teacher was noticeably different from the others in both her descriptions of students as people and in her descriptions of student behavior. Though the study was too small to be conclusive, the results suggested to me that teacher authority can act as a necessary support to student authority.

Walker (2009) extrapolates from Baumrind’s parenting model to describe three types of teachers: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. These types are differentiated from one another along two dimensions – the amount of *control* and the amount of *nurturance* offered by the teacher. Authoritative teachers are high on both control and nurturance. They provide students with significant amounts of structure, but

they also explain the reasoning behind their rules, and their practice is mediated by sensitivity to students' needs and capabilities. Authoritarian teachers are high on control, but low on nurturance. They may enforce similar boundaries to authoritative teachers, but are less warm and less responsive to students. Finally, permissive teachers are high on nurturance, but low on control. In her study of three fifth grade math teachers, Walker found that students in the authoritative teacher's room exhibited both high levels of engagement and high levels of academic achievement. In contrast, students in the authoritarian teacher's room did well academically but "used avoidant, ego-protecting learning strategies," (p. 126), while students in the permissive teachers' classroom were engaged but their academic gains were much smaller.

Neither Walker nor Goodman provides evidence of how classroom management styles might impact students' identities or teacher social-emotional or civic lessons; Walker examined academic engagement and achievement, while Goodman's work is largely theoretical. However, their work does strongly suggest that the style of authority that teachers embrace has significant implications for students. Goodman in particular is highly critical of the classroom management practices of no-excuses schools. Though she recognizes that "[r]ules can indeed be protective," she argues that, "alone, rules do not offer worthwhile ends or the means to pursue them; indeed, unrelenting stringency may quell desires and shrink aspirations," (2013, p. 95). Her work suggests that children's belief in their own ability to be good, competent people who make responsible choices is eroded by being in intensely controlling environments (Goodman, 2013; Goodman & Uzun, 2013). Additional research is needed, however, to test, build upon, and elaborate the foundation Walker and Goodman provide.



## Students' Perspectives

Research on students' perspectives on classroom management also supports a balance between teacher and student authority. In general, students are in favor of rules, and want teachers who are able to enforce those rules. "Students consistently cite the importance of setting limits and enforcing expectations, and they have little respect for teachers who are unable to achieve an orderly classroom environment. How that order is achieved, however, is critical," (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006, p. 210). In other words, *what* those rules are and *how* they are enforced makes a big difference.

Based on his ethnographic work in two Swedish primary schools, Thornberg (2008) found that students distinguish between four basic types of rules: relational (e.g. treating others with respect and kindness), protecting (e.g. not running in the halls), structuring (e.g. raising one's hand to speak during a discussion), and etiquette (e.g. not wearing hats at school). While students are in favor of the first three types, they often perceive etiquette rules as arbitrary, and even as "an expression of *adults' disrespect of children*" (p. 421, emphasis original). In students' minds, etiquette rules serve no discernible purpose--they prohibit behaviors that do not harm or disturb anyone. Many students also cite examples of teachers themselves not obeying etiquette rules. In consequence, these rules are not internalized by students, and are likely to be disobeyed if students think they can get away with it. The only reason to adhere to them is to avoid punishment.

Students are also critical of teacher's enforcement of the rules. Thornberg (2008) writes that students decry unfairness and inconsistency in enforcing the rules, such as teachers punishing some students more than others for the same behavior, punishing the

wrong person, or punishing an entire group. In a study based on survey data from Australia, China, and Israel, Romi and his colleagues also found that students respond negatively to group punishment (Romi, Lewis, Roache, & Riley, 2011). Lewis (2001) found that students respond better to what he termed “relationship-based discipline” than they do to “coercive discipline.” Relationship based discipline includes the use of discussion, non-directive hints, positive recognition, and involvement in decision-making around rules and consequences, whereas coercive discipline relies on aggression (e.g. yelling, sarcasm, humiliation) and punishment.

Some of this research has considered how students’ response to classroom management style impacts what students do in the classroom. In their review of the literature on student perspectives, Hoy and Weinstein (2006) conclude that students make *decisions* about compliance partially on the basis of whether a teacher is a “good” teacher, meaning that the teacher: (a) has caring, positive relationships with students, (b) is able to exercise firm authority without being overly rigid or punitive, and (c) creates engaging lessons. Lewis’s (2001) survey-based study suggested “a strong connection between discipline strategies and the development of student responsibility,” (p. 317). Roache and Lewis (2011) found that various aspects of relationship-based discipline were correlated with communal responsibility, engagement, and connectedness to school. In contrast, students who experience more coercive discipline tend to act less responsibly in class.

Lewis’s (2001) and Roache and Lewis’s (2011) work points to a connection between classroom management style and a sense of membership in and responsibility to a classroom community, both of which have potential civic undertones. Though these

studies did not include broader consideration of civic dispositions, nor can they speak to whether the sense of responsibility students develop might continue into the future, they are suggestive of a connection between classroom management and civic development. Indeed, Lewis (2001) postulates that, “without changes to the discipline approaches used by some teachers the impact of instruction in democratic values may be impeded if not nullified,” (p. 317). His comment underscores the need for research that better illuminates this relationship.

### **The Significance of Race**

Understanding the implications of classroom management practices may be particularly urgent in schools and classrooms serving high percentages of students of color. There is a substantial body of literature documenting racial disparities in school discipline, particularly for Black students.<sup>4</sup> Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) and Blake, Butler, Lewis and Darensbourg (2011) both conducted quantitative studies which demonstrated that Black boys (Skiba et al., 2002) and Black girls (Blake et al., 2011) experience rates of office referral that are much greater than their same-sex White peers. A report by the Advancement Project (2010) concluded that, “racial disparities in school discipline are getting worse, as the use of suspensions and expulsions for students of color has increased since the passage of NCLB, while it has decreased for White students,” (p. 5). Most recently, a report by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014) documented the national and ongoing nature of such disproportionalities, which begin as early as preschool.

---

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, research on racial discipline disparities in other groups is extremely limited. What research exists suggests disproportionate discipline for Native students as well, while results for Latino students are mixed (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Thus, though no-excuses schools serve significant populations of both Black and Latino students, discussion here is primarily limited to Black students’ experiences.

Is the discipline gap simply a reflection of students' actions? Research suggests that it is not; while Kelly (2010) found that schools serving a predominantly Black student body *report* more misbehavior, Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) write that, "there appears to be a notable paucity of evidence that could support a hypothesis that the racial discipline gap can be explained through differential rates of misbehavior," (p. 62). In other words, while teachers and school staff clearly *perceive* more misbehavior on the part of Black students, there is no evidence that their behavior is significantly different from that of White students. Instead, studies emphasize that Black students are generally referred for reasons that are highly subjective, and that play into racialized and gendered ideas about behavior (Blake et al., 2011; Ferguson, 2001; Skiba et al., 2002). For example, Blake and her colleagues concluded that "[m]any of the behaviors that Black girls were cited for seemed to defy traditional standards of femininity and closely paralleled the behaviors of stereotypical images of Black women as hypersexualized, angry, and hostile," (p. 100). Ferguson's (2001) ethnographic study found that teachers and school staff tended to perceive and react to the behavior of ten-, eleven-, and twelve-year-old Black boys as though it was intentional, malicious, and in need of remediation to prevent future criminality. In line with these findings, Diamond (2013) noted that in a survey of Black students' perceptions of school, the students responded positively to everything *except* the fairness of school discipline.

The studies cited above suggest that race is a significant factor in determining which students are viewed as being in need of discipline. Kelly (2010) found that "White teachers are more likely to perceive behavior problems among Black students than are Black teachers," (p. 1261). Similarly, Skiba et al. (2002) suggest

“cultural discontinuity or misunderstanding may create a cycle of miscommunication and confrontation for African-American students, especially male adolescents... Teachers who are prone to accepting stereotypes of adolescent African-American males as threatening or dangerous may overreact to relatively minor threats to authority.” (p. 336).

Thus, it would be reasonable to view with skepticism the practices of no-excuses schools, given that they impose a highly disciplined environment on students who are predominantly Black and Latino.

However, some researchers (e.g. Ballenger, 1999; Delpit 1995, 2012) have also suggested that children respond differently to management techniques based upon their cultural background,<sup>5</sup> and the style recommended by many of these researchers is sometimes used to support no-excuses practices. For example, Ballenger, an experienced preschool teacher, details the classroom management difficulties she had when she first began to work with classes of Haitian children. Techniques that had served her well for years had no effect on the children, who she describes as cheerfully ignoring all her instructions. Inspired by Delpit’s (1995) book, *Other People’s Children*, Ballenger (1999) began to study the Haitian teachers’ approach to working with the children, and to incorporate many of their techniques. Though she notes that Americans often think that Haitians are too strict, and that she herself had been resistant to the techniques of the Haitian teachers because she believed they were scaring the children, she ultimately found that imitating some aspects of their classroom management style greatly improved both the effectiveness of her management and the children’s sense of safety and comfort in her classroom.

---

<sup>5</sup> Here, I am using “culture” not as a stand-in for race or ethnicity, but to refer to what Pollock (2008) calls a “group,” in this case specifically a group of people who may engage in similar child-rearing practices and communication styles.

Ballenger's experiences are congruent with the arguments of a group of researchers who advocate a "culturally relevant" or "culturally responsive" style of management practiced by teachers characterized as "warm demanders." Irvine and Fraser (1998) describe warm demanders as both caring and authoritative, providing a "tough-minded, no-nonsense, structured and disciplined classroom environment," (para. 2). More specifically, Bondy and Ross (2008) define "warm demander" as "a teacher stance that communicates both warmth and a nonnegotiable demand for student effort and mutual respect," and argue that it is "central to sustaining academic engagement in high-poverty schools," (p. 54). In their study of three effective elementary school teachers, Bondy, Ross, Galligane and Hambacher (2007) found that all these teachers were explicit about their expectations and that they linked these expectations to consequences. Two of the three teachers even delivered a formal consequence within the first hour of the first day of school. Monroe (2009) conducted a case study on four teachers who had closed the discipline gap in their classrooms. Though she does not expressly refer to the "warm demander" model, her results support aspects of that model. Specifically, she found that these teachers followed a number of practices that reduced the subjective nature of choices around disciplinary action, including a "conscious efforts to demystify and set forth a common understanding of behavioral boundaries" (p. 338).

In line with Ballenger's (1999) experience, Ware (2006) points out that "[t]his model of firm discipline is often misconstrued by people who lack a cultural sensitivity or emic perspective into the authoritarian style of parenting in the African American community," (p. 452). However, far from being repressive to students, Bondy et al. (2007) emphasize that the warm demanders support academic achievement, whereas

“[i]nconsistent teachers fail to support achievement motivation. This is a particularly salient point for young, White, female teachers who have been socialized to speak softly, to be nondirect, and to be nonassertive and may therefore be perceived to lack authority by African American youth,” (p. 345). Bondy, Ross, Hambacher, and Acosta (2012) connect warm demanders’ strictness to cultural ideas of caring, particularly “[b]eliefs in students’ ability to succeed, responsiveness to students, and refusal to give up on them,” (p. 423).

However, while strong teacher authority may be emphasized by those who advocate the “warm demander” approach, this is not necessarily inconsistent with incorporation of student autonomy. The teachers in Bondy et al.’s (2007) study did not simply hand down rules to the students; rather, all the teachers engaged students in *thinking* about the expectations, and one teacher worked with students to develop expectations and consequences. In a study of first-year teachers’ attempts to develop the warm demander stance, Bondy, Ross, Hambacher, and Acosta (2012) write that warm demanders are cognizant of inequality, and thus “define[d] the purpose of warm demanding in terms of goals broader than school achievement (i.e. making sure students had the knowledge and skills they needed to be responsible citizens),” (p. 443). They go on to argue “teachers may come to view warm demanding as a moral imperative that defines their approach to teaching rather than as a collection of strategies to achieve student compliance,” (p. 444).

As mentioned earlier, advocates of no-excuses schools sometimes identify their practices as consistent with the warm demander model. Lemov (2010) encourages teachers to be both warm and strict in a description that sounds highly reminiscent of the

culturally responsive style described above. And yet, do no-excuses schools allow room for the development of student agency? Do students within those schools perceive their disciplinary practices as empowering, or limiting? Without research into no-excuses management practices, and students' perceptions of those practices, whether no-excuses schools are perpetuating racial discipline disparities or responding to students' backgrounds—or some combination of the two—remains an open question.

Overall, the literature on classroom management supports a combination of strong teacher authority and room for student agency. However, there is little research on the consequences—including the civic consequences—of a given authority arrangement in the classroom. Simultaneously, research on the experiences of Black students highlights the ways in which discipline and classroom management intersect with racialized expectations and cultural norms. All of this research strongly suggests the significance of classroom management, but none of it is sufficient to answer the questions raised by the highly regimented classroom management practices that are increasingly common in schools serving low-income students of color.

### **Schooling and Citizenship**

Self-government requires far more than voting in elections every four years. It requires citizens who are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, are involved in the political process, and possess moral and civic virtues. Generations of leaders, from America's founders to the inventors of public education to elected leaders in the twentieth century, have understood that these qualities are not automatically transmitted to the next generation—they must be passed down through schools. Ultimately, schools are the guardians of democracy. (Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, & Smith, 2011, p. 6)

As the above quotation illustrates, free public education has long been considered vital to maintaining a healthy democracy, and numerous scholars consider preparing



young people for democratic citizenship to be a significant and necessary function of schools. Shields (2011), for example, contends “[s]ociety has a right to expect that its public schools will graduate students who can effectively participate in civic life and shape the common good,” (p. 52). This function falls to schools partially because, as Edelstein (2011) points out, “[t]he only institute that can provide opportunities to cultivate democratic experience—not for elite groups, but for all children and youth—is the *school*. No other system involves the entire young generation,” (p. 128, emphasis original). Kymlicka (2001) concurs, adding that “[s]chools are not the only, or even the primary, forum for learning citizenship, but they are, I believe, indispensable,” (p. 293).

How do schools impact students’ civic development? In exploring the answer to this question, I begin by discussing the various ways scholars have conceptualized both citizenship and civic learning. I will then discuss the troubling reality that political power and civic engagement are distributed unequally in this country, particularly along the lines of race and class. Given this reality, I argue for the importance of research that uses a sociocultural frame to understand how locally and culturally constructed meaning systems impact students’ civic development. I end by discussing the three civic orientations that are the focus of this study, and explaining why each has potential civic significance.

### **Conceptions of Citizenship**

There is an enormous amount of scholarly writing on citizenship, spanning the fields of philosophy, political science, and education. While it is not possible to do a comprehensive review of all this literature here, it is necessary to note that conceptions of citizenship vary. Abowitz and Harnish (2006) reviewed thirteen years worth of texts on

citizenship and citizenship education, and identified seven frameworks for conceptualizing democratic citizenship. They offer the following “simple but comprehensive” definition of citizenship:

Citizenship in a democracy: (a) gives membership status to individuals within a political unit; (b) confers an identity on individuals; (c) constitutes a set of values, usually interpreted as a commitment to the common good of a particular political unit; (d) involves practicing a degree of participation in the process of political life; (e) implies gaining and using knowledge and understanding of laws, documents, structures, and processes of government... (p. 653)

However, as Abowitz and Harnish go on to describe, different strands of thought understand the membership, identity, values, participation, and knowledge enumerated above very differently. For example, civic republican conceptions of citizenship emphasize patriotism, unity, and service, while liberal conceptions of citizenship emphasize the rights of the individual and the need to question authority and to push for inclusiveness and equality. Critical conceptions of citizenship, which include feminist, cultural, reconstructionist, and queer discourses, are similar to liberal conceptions in allowing for a more critical perspective of the nation, but may emphasize collective agency and cultural identity over individualism. Transnational conceptions of citizenship question the very idea that membership and identity should be defined primarily by the nation-state, emphasizing instead a more global sense of community and the rights of all human beings.

Similarly, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe three major conceptions of citizenship that arise specifically within educational contexts, and which they argue have significant political implications. These include personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizenship. Personally responsible citizens “do their part” by volunteering and paying taxes, participatory citizens take an active role within

community and government structures, and justice-oriented citizens critique structural inequality and work for social change. The chart below summarizes what civic action looks like within each conception, what sorts of educational activities support each vision of civic action, and the underlying political assumptions about how to address social problems.

**Table 1.1: Conceptions of Citizenship (as described by Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)**

Conceptions of Citizenship		Civic action	Educational activities	Political assumptions
	Personally Responsible	Demonstrates personal responsibility (e.g. votes, pays taxes, obeys laws); contributes to the community through volunteering and community service	Character education programs, service learning	Social problems will be solved through individuals making good choices
	Participatory	Participates in or leads collective efforts to impact society, often within existing structures (e.g. political parties, government offices, community organizations)	Learning how governments or organizations work; gaining skills in participating in such organizations or organizing collective efforts (e.g. public speaking)	Social problems will be solved through collective work
	Justice-Oriented	Analyzes underlying causes of social problems, particularly those related to inequality; works collectively to fight for systemic change (e.g. through spreading information, protesting, etc.)	Learning about and critiquing social, political and economic structures; considering different perspectives on contentious issues; examining social movements	Social problems will be solved through understanding and challenging their underlying causes

This study is centered on what I refer to as “engaged, critical citizenship.” This conception combines participatory and justice-oriented citizenship, highlighting the need for young people from marginalized communities to be able to both critique unequal social structures and to participate in working for change. While critiquing and

challenging inequality is undoubtedly important for *everyone*, my discussion here focuses specifically on low-income youth of color because that is the population served by no-excuses charter schools. Thus, in considering the broader question of whether the sort of education provided by no-excuses schools is likely to contribute to greater social equality, it is necessary to consider whether their students are being prepared for the sort of civic engagement likely to lead to that outcome. Furthermore, Rubin (2007) argues that for these students, who often perceive a “disjuncture” between the democratic ideals of the United States and their lived experience, opportunities to critically analyze inequality and to participate in speaking and working for change may be especially important (Rubin, 2007; Rubin & Hayes, 2010). Given that Westheimer and Kahne (2004) found in their study of civic education programs, “programs that champion participation do not necessarily develop students’ abilities to analyze and critique root causes of social problems and vice versa,” (p. 264), a focus on both engagement and critique is essential.

This study also echoes Westheimer and Kahne (2004) in explicitly rejecting personally responsible citizenship. Though they agree that personal responsibility may be individually desirable, they contend that it is not inherently about democracy and go on to warn that “there are some indications that curriculum and education policies designed to foster personal responsibility undermine efforts to prepare both participatory and justice-oriented citizens,” (p. 264). Therefore, while literature reviewed below will include scholars who explicitly or implicitly endorse personally responsible citizenship, participatory and justice-oriented conceptions will be most relevant to this study.

### **Conceptions of Civic Learning**

Scholars who are concerned with civic education typically discuss three different aspects of civic learning: civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions. Torney-Purta and Vermeer (2004) refer to these as the three “strands” of civic competency, suggesting that they are mutually dependent and reinforcing. While different conceptions of citizenship will lead to differences of opinion about *what* knowledge, skills, and dispositions are important (as illustrated by the chart in the previous section), most scholars agree that all three are essential in order to cultivate effective civic participation (Kahn & Westheimer, 2003; Murphy, 2004).

**Civic knowledge and skills.** Civic knowledge and skills, though in no way simple, are the more concrete of the three. Civic knowledge encompasses the ideas and information a person would need to know in order to be an effective political participant in society. Information about current political actors and ideas, understanding of the structure and function of government, historical knowledge, and even pertinent information about economics or geography could all be considered important pieces of civic knowledge (Boston, 2005; Jamieson et al., 2011; Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004). Civic skills are defined as “the abilities necessary to participate as active and responsible citizens in a democracy,” which could include “speaking, listening, collaboration, community organizing, public advocacy, and the ability to gather and process information,” (Jamieson et al., 2011, p. 16).

Many researchers who are interested in the knowledge and skills aspects of civic learning focus on the academic curriculum: both what is taught, and how it’s taught. Jamieson and her colleagues, for example, point to “[n]umerous studies have shown that knowledge gained through courses in civics, history, economics, the law, and geography

increase a student's confidence in and propensity toward active civic participation," (p. 17). Niemi (2012) argues for the need for more civics courses that focus on contemporary issues and political figures. In addition to covering important topics or information, teaching methods also have a significant impact. One particularly commonly cited practice is classroom discussion of controversial topics. Hess (2009) argues that such discussion is critical to developing important skills in speaking and listening, and in cultivating tolerance for diverse viewpoints; her position is supported by Youniss (2012). Martinson (2003) also advocates for discussion of controversial issues, as well as for making subject matter relevant and including consideration of the role of mass media and technology. He views these three actions as necessary in order to engage students in civics-related classes. Jamieson and her colleagues note simulations of democratic processes as effective classroom tools. Finally, Levine (2012) argues for the need to develop civic-related standards, pedagogy, and assessments in order to increase classroom practices known to promote civic participation.

Some scholars also consider activities outside the classroom, such as service learning and extracurriculars. Youniss (2012) cites research showing that participation in school organizations, such as school government, is a significant predictor of adult involvement in voluntary organizations. Jamieson et al. (2011) include participation in extracurricular activities and student participation in school governance in their six "proven practices" to improve civic outcomes. Boston (2005), Jamieson et al. (2011), and Youniss (2012) also cite community service as a vehicle for developing active citizenship in students. Boston, for example, describes service learning as having the potential to

“transform civic education (education about being a citizen) into civic engagement (education while acting as a citizen),” (p. 19).

**Civic dispositions.** As many scholars have pointed out, however, knowledge and skills are insufficient if young people do not also develop *civic dispositions*: the beliefs, feelings and self-conceptions that lead to productive civic participation. While different conceptions of citizenship can lead to very different lists of civic dispositions, many scholars emphasize a sense of investment in and ability to influence what happens in the public sphere. Kymlicka (2001), for example, discusses four civic dispositions or “virtues”: public-spiritedness, civility and tolerance, a sense of justice, and a sense of loyalty or solidarity. Similarly, Jamieson et al. (2011) include “concern for others’ rights and welfare, fairness, reasonable levels of trust, and a sense of public duty,” (p. 17) in their list of civic disposition. Finally, Shields (2011) describes civic character as “a disposition to consider the common good and to work toward it in collaboration with others,” (p. 52).

Some of the practices discussed above, such as community service or classroom discussions of controversial issues, are understood to develop civic dispositions as well as civic knowledge or skills. For example, Hess (2009) describes class discussions as cultivating tolerance in addition to developing the skills of public discourse. Research that is *primarily* concerned with civic dispositions (as opposed to knowledge or skills) often focuses on specific programs intended to develop citizenship or character. Seider (2012), building on Shields’ (2011) framing, conducted a mixed-methods study of three schools dedicated to developing students’ character, one of which he describes as focused primarily on civic character. This school taught character education classes which “seek

to deepen students' understanding of community and their investment in contributing to the communities of which they are a part," (p. 170). It also engaged in practices such as involving student council in school decisions, and assigning students to do projects with community organizations. Seider links these practices to a small but statistically significant increase in students' self-reported courage over the course of a school year as compared to a school that does not emphasize similar values.

Kahne and Westheimer (2003; see also Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) conducted a rather more exhaustive mixed-methods study of ten civic education programs. For some of those programs, they "documented statistically significant increases in students' ability and desire to understand and act on pressing social needs, in their willingness to devote time to addressing those needs, and in their confidence in being able to act on their beliefs," (p. 57). The successful programs they profile had three major commonalities: First, they promoted democratic commitments through assisting students in critically examining social problems and controversies, and then providing students with real experiences in making positive change. Second, they promoted democratic capacities through teaching important skills and knowledge, and engaging students in real-life projects. Third, they promoted students' connections to others with similar goals through connecting students with communities and role models.

### **The Civic Empowerment Gap**

While scholars have expressed general concern with the issue of whether schools are successfully preparing students for citizenship (e.g. Jamieson et al., 2011), an area of particular concern is what some have termed the "civic empowerment gap," (Levinson, 2012). This term refers to the disparities in civic participation and political power,



documented in an extensive body of research, between those who are racially and/or socioeconomically privileged, and those who are not (Cohen, 2010; Levinson, 2012). For example, Jamieson et al. (2011) report that “[e]ligible minorities vote at about two-thirds the rate of their white counterparts,” and “[f]amilies that make above \$75,000 per year are twice as likely to vote (and six times as likely to be politically active) as families that make below \$15,000 per year,” (p. 15). While some measures of civic knowledge or participation have been critiqued as biased, Cohen’s (2010) work, which examined a much wider array of potentially political activities, still found significant differences between young people of different races. Furthermore, there seems to be little reason to doubt that political power is unevenly distributed on the basis of race and class. To offer one example, after examining potential correlations between graduation rates for White or African American students and policies related to improving education, Hartney and Flavin (2013) concluded, “policymakers are unequally responsive to the demonstrated educational needs of White and African American students,” (p. 10). Describing economic differences in self-reported voting rates, Berliner (2013) asserted, “[i]n effect, voters in families reporting incomes of \$75,000 and higher are legislating for those in the lower income brackets,” (p. 204).

Though there are doubtless numerous reasons for these disparities, one area of concern is students’ experiences in school. The reality that America’s schools provide a separate and unequal education to students on the basis of race and class has been well documented in the literature (e.g. Kozol, 2005). One consequence of this is significant disparities not only in educational quality overall, but in the access to class discussions, civic content, and extracurricular opportunities that have been described as important for

civic preparation (Ben-Porath, 2013; Levinson, 2012). However, of at least equal concern should be the broader context of those academic experiences (or lack thereof). Low-income youth and youth of color often arrive at school with very different experiences, identities and relationships to the state than their White, middle-class counterparts (Abu El-Haj, 2007, 2009; Rubin, 2007). Additionally, as I described earlier in this chapter, their in-school experiences are often characterized by discipline and control grounded in racial stereotypes. Such treatment, which Levinson (2012) characterizes as “civic microaggressions,” conveys powerful civic messages. Gillborn (1992) argues that clear racial disparities in school discipline position Black students as second-class citizens, less entitled to basic rights such as a free education. Ben-Porath (2013) considers the potential impact of students’ experiences in no-excuses charter schools on their development of civic virtues. She describes such schools as “totalizing schools” because their minute regulation of students’ behavior coupled with their extended schedules mean that their students “experience strong external control over their actions for a significant part of their lives,” (p. 118). Based on some observational data as well as existing knowledge of the common practices of such schools, she goes on to contend that students in these environments have no opportunity to develop civic virtues, explaining: “The opportunity to develop agency, to learn to see oneself as a contributing member of society, to understand oneself relationally in positive terms, these are all minimized by the strict controls and limited, structured interaction and forms of expression in totalizing schools,” (p. 123). Her argument highlights the need to look beyond academic content and extracurriculars, in order to consider what we might call the “hidden curriculum” (Jackson, 1968/1990) of civic learning. However, to do so requires considering civic

learning through a sociocultural frame. I turn now to how scholars using such a frame have conceptualized civic development.

### **Sociocultural Understandings of Civic Development**

Scholars who draw on sociocultural approaches often conceptualize civic development through the lens of civic identity, considering how broader contexts and local practices interact in the construction of such identities. For example, Abu El-Haj (2007, 2009) found that for Arab American and Palestinian American youth, global, national and school cultural contexts intersected to shape how they thought of themselves. Experiences of discrimination and of racial/religious profiling reinforced the idea that being American was incompatible with being Arab and/or Palestinian, leading students to emphasize a difference between “*being* Palestinian and *having* U.S. citizenship,” (2007, p. 292). In other words, these young people differentiated between the legal status of citizenship and their own sense of belonging in describing their identities.

Rubin (2007; see also Rubin, Hayes, & Benson, 2009, and Rubin & Hayes, 2010) also concentrates on the significance of students’ day-to-day experiences in shaping civic identity. She argues that students’ experiences of congruence—“the sense that one’s immediate civic institutions are working for one’s benefit”—or disjuncture—“the sense that one’s immediate civic institutions are not looking after one’s best interests” (Rubin & Hayes, 2010, p. 353)—have a powerful effect on how students engage with and understand school-based civic education. Students who experience congruence may develop a strong sense of self-efficacy, but are also at risk of becoming complacent about civic problems due to their sense that there *are* no problems, unless their classes

encourage broader awareness of injustice and ongoing challenges. In contrast, students who experience disjuncture may be profoundly motivated to make change, but may also feel cynical or overwhelmed. Rubin and Hayes contend:

Students in [settings of disjuncture] need academic and emotional support. They also need the opportunity to make a structural analysis of inequality and injustice, to understand the larger forces behind their community's problems. And, perhaps most importantly, they need opportunities to be heard, to present their findings—particularly through expressive and creative means..." (p. 373-374)

The research described above demonstrates the immense significance of racial and ethnic identity, experiences with discrimination, and school culture in shaping civic learning. Furthermore, it suggests that in order to better understand civic development for low-income youth of color—and thus the “civic gap”—we must account for these factors. In this study, I draw from sociocultural understandings of civic development as well as from work on the civic gap and on civic learning more broadly in order to examine how students' day-to-day experiences with classroom management impact their development of what I refer to as civic orientations.

### **Civic Orientations**

This study concentrates on three civic orientations that I argue are key to engaged, critical citizenship: students' conception of institutional authority, relationship to their communities, and sense of self-efficacy. Though similar to how other scholars have described civic dispositions or civic identity, I refer to these as civic *orientations* because of their relational character. Below, I briefly explain why I see each as pertinent to young people's civic development.

**Conceptions of institutional authority.** There is substantial evidence that conceptions of societal institutions as fair, inclusive, and responsive—or not—impact

young people's likelihood of civic engagement. Rubin (2007) and Cohen (2010) both warn that students who have experienced injustice and discrimination are vulnerable to becoming discouraged or politically alienated, which in turn leads to decreased likelihood of political participation. Furthermore, it is likely that students' experiences at school help to shape such conceptions. A survey-based study conducted by Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill and Galloway (2007) examining the relationship between students' civic beliefs and commitments and their conceptions of their teachers and communities. They found that students' perceptions of teachers as respectful and fair were positively correlated with civic commitment and belief in America as a just society, leading them to suggest, "it may be through youth's relationships with proximate authority figures that diffuse support for the polity develops," (p. 428). Significantly for the present study, this correlation was even higher for youth of color than for white youth. Flanagan and her colleagues conclude:

"the kinds of public spaces our schools and communities provide and the behavior of adults in those settings communicate to the younger generation what it means to be part of the body politic and to what extent principles of inclusion, fairness, and justice figure in that process." (p. 428 – 429)

**Community relationships.** As Westheimer and Kahne (2004) point out, willingness and ability to participate in *collective* efforts is central to effective civic engagement. For young people from marginalized communities in particular, Levinson (2012) argues that the unequal distribution of power in our society makes, "learn[ing] how to magnify their voices through collective action," (p. 188) particularly critical. Further supporting the civic significance of community relationships, Cohen's (2010) Black Youth Project, which combined a nationally representative survey of Black, White and Latinx youth with in-depth interviews, revealed that Black youth who believed that

what happened to other Black people will impact their own lives “a lot” were 24 percent more likely to have engaged in some form of political participation. More broadly, Flanagan and her colleagues (2007) also found that students’ civic commitments were positively correlated with their perceptions of their communities as trustworthy, inclusive, and able to work together to solve problems. Finally, if students are to pursue the systemic change that is central to justice-oriented citizenship, they must understand the struggles of their communities as having structural, not just individual, causes. For all of these reasons, students’ conceptions of others in their communities (whether school, neighborhood, or diasporic) are potentially significant.

**Sense of self-efficacy.** Finally, Jamieson et al. (2011) argue that “[a]n important bridge between dispositions and actions is self-efficacy,” (p. 17). In other words, action is predicated on a belief that one’s actions are worthwhile, that they might make some difference. This argument is bolstered by Cohen’s (2010) data, which found that sense of political efficacy had a significant relationship to whether Black youth participated in online political actions such as sending an email or writing a blog. Rubin (2007) found that for students whose experiences with discrimination and inequality caused them to view societal institutions as unfair, their sense of self-efficacy was critical in determining whether they embraced an active versus a passive stance toward civic participation. I argue that the place of what I term “student voice” at school is fundamental to developing this sense of self-efficacy in relationship to societal institutions. Students’ opportunities to speak up and participate, as well as the way their contributions are received, convey powerful messages about their place in societal institutions and their ability to be heard.

Abu El-Haj (2007) points out that “[a]s the primary institutions through which immigrant youth encounter the state, schools play a key role in shaping citizenship and democratic participation,” (p. 309). It seems likely that this argument could be extended to most young people, and indeed, the literature on schooling and citizenship suggests that schools do make a significant impact on students’ development of civic dispositions as well as civic knowledge and skills. However, there has been virtually no research exploring the relationship between *classroom management* and civic development, despite ample evidence that potentially racialized experiences of classroom management characterize the schooling of low-income students of color. Research which *does* examine this relationship is sorely needed, especially at a time when some of our most vulnerable students are experiencing management practices which Ben-Porath (2013) suggests could undermine civic goals. In the next chapter, I describe the theoretical framework and methods with which I approached investigating this question.

## CHAPTER 2:

### METHODS

This ethnographic study focuses on the significance of no-excuses classroom management practices for students' development of key civic orientations: students' relationship to their communities, conception of institutional authority, and sense of self-efficacy. In the literature review above, I argued that these orientations are particularly significant in enabling participatory and justice-oriented citizenship for students in settings of disjuncture (Rubin, 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In this chapter, I describe my approach to investigating how students' civic orientations are impacted by classroom management and authority relationships in the school. I begin by outlining a theoretical framework that allows me to take into account both larger societal structures, such as race and class, and local contexts and meaning systems. I then detail the methods of data collection and data analysis I used to explore the relationship between students' day-to-day experiences in school and their developing civic orientations. Because I understand civic orientations as contextually specific and as developed through social practice, as students negotiate who and how to be in institutional contexts, this question is best investigated through ethnographic methods, including participant-observation as well as formal and informal interviews. Such methods allowed me to get at the meaning students make of their experiences in a no-excuses school.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Schooling and Inequality**



Given that this study is focused on a type of schooling which is exclusively directed at a marginalized group, specifically low-income children of color, it is necessary to consider how schooling as an institution has traditionally intersected with societal inequality. A substantial body of sociological and anthropological work has demonstrated that schools often act to reproduce social hierarchies. Structurally, schools in low-income areas are often under-funded, and may be poorly managed (Anyon, 1997). Anyon (1980) describes how both pedagogy and behavioral norms at low-income schools emphasized obedience and rote, procedural work, in contrast to the independence and creativity cultivated by schools serving middle or upper class children. Drawing on Marx, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that such practices prepare low-income students to accept positions of subordination in the class hierarchy.

Culturally, schools typically reward norms and expressions practiced by dominant groups, which come to stand for merit, value, intelligence, etc., (Bourdieu, 1986; Weininger, 2005). The expressions of nondominant groups, including patterns of speech and dress as well as ways of relating to authority, are misunderstood or denigrated as denoting poor character, lack of academic ability, or lack of investment in education (Carter, 2005, 2008; Lareau, 2011). Even well-intentioned teachers may act to perpetuate inequalities; psychological researchers such as Tatum (2003) and Sue (2003) explain how broader cultural messages around race are absorbed by everyone—whether white or of color—and acted upon unconsciously.

All of the above scholarship suggests that it is not so easy to escape from the larger hierarchies that structure our society. Even as no-excuses schools explicitly embrace an equity-based mission, structural and cultural forces may come into play in

ways that reinforce unequal outcomes. Attention to the workings of such forces provides an important theoretical backdrop for this study. Simultaneously, it is crucial to also attend to individual agency and the construction of local meaning systems. Without such “wiggle room,” the ending would be predetermined; it would not be worthwhile to suggest, as this study does, that the individual practices of a school might make a difference, whether positive, negative, or some combination of the two. In the following section, I explain how localized social practice might be understood as shaping students’ identities in ways that are both individually and civically significant.

### **Practice Theories**

In this study, I am assuming that the daily practices people engage in, and the meaning they make of those practices, shape who they are and how they think of themselves. Furthermore, I am suggesting that while the identities formed by these daily practices are certainly not static, they do impact what people are likely to do both now and in the future. In making these assumptions, I am drawing both on practice theories of identity, and on the concept of the “hidden curriculum.”

The term “hidden curriculum” was originally used by Philip Jackson (1968/1990) in order “to reveal how schools latently transmitted and reinforced various attitudes and behaviors,” (Hlebowitsh, 1994, p. 339). The concept suggests that pupils learn a great deal more in school than what is directly taught. In this way, it is similar to earlier ideas put forward by Dewey (1938) as well as to theories of practice elaborated by Lave and Wenger (2001). In these theories, learning is bound up with experience, with what students actually *do*. And as Dewey writes, “[i]t is a great mistake to suppose, even tacitly, that the traditional schoolroom [is] not a place in which pupils [have]

experiences,” (ch. 2, para. 3). In other words, young people’s civic experiences are not exclusively, or even predominantly, made up of those times when they engage in discussions or participate in community service. Rather, they are experiencing being a member of a community and encountering a government institution every hour of every day that they are in school. It seems unlikely that those experiences, and the meaning students make of them, have no impact on students’ development of civic orientations. In particular, how students relate to one another, the way their behavior is governed, and the degree to which they have opportunities to share authority are likely to be significant.

Practice theories more thoroughly elaborate the relationship between identity, practice, and context. According to practice theory, identity is bound up with what we *do*. In these theories, “the self is treated as always embedded in (social) practice, and as itself a kind of practice,” (Holland, Lachichotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 28). However, this is not meant to suggest in a literal way that our actions determine who we are. “Practice is, first and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful,” (Wenger, 1998, p. 51). Thus, it is the *meanings* ascribed to our actions, both by others and by us, which shape our identities. In the context of this study, that means that it is not what students do and don’t do in school, but the various meanings they ascribe to their (in)actions that are important.

This meaning-making activity must be understood as an agentic act that is nonetheless influenced by context and interaction. Meaning is always social, and thus identity construction is always social (even when we are alone). However, this does not mean that we simply take on identities generated by the social world. Instead, practice theories emphasize identity formation as an interactive process:

[W]e do not just make meanings up independently of the world, but neither does the world simply impose meanings on us. The negotiation of meaning is a productive process, but negotiating meaning is not constructing it from scratch. Meaning is not pre-existing, but neither is it simply made up. Negotiated meaning is at once both historical and dynamic, contextual and unique. (Wenger, 1998, p. 53-54)

Thus, meanings and identities that are salient to students *will* be influenced, but will not be *determined*, by societal meanings associated with (among other factors) their race, class, and gender. They will also be influenced, but not determined, by local cultures such as that of the school, and by meanings and identities suggested by significant others, such as teachers and peers. Holland and Lave (2001) suggest that these “culturally and socially constructed discourses and practices of the self...differentiated by relations of power” should be “conceived of as living tools of the self—as artifacts or media that figure the self constitutively, in open-ended ways,” (p. 28). In other words, identities and meanings offered by media, school, peers, etc. (e.g. trouble-maker, successful student, tough guy) comprise the resources drawn upon by individuals in interactions with themselves and others. While these interactions are “differentiated by relations of power” they are also “open-ended” in the sense that *how* an individual might use the resources at hand in a given interaction is undetermined, and thereby open to improvisation.

Just as our identities are neither entirely self-determined nor entirely socially determined, but are constructed in interaction between agency and structure, those identities are neither entirely fixed nor entirely malleable. In practice theories, “‘sites of the self,’ the loci of self-production or self-process, are recognized as plural,” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 28). We are not the same person across all contexts, but are responsive to local meaning systems and to being positioned by hierarchical power relations.

Simultaneously, we accumulate a history of past experiences, interpretations, and ways of

responding—what Holland, Lachichotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), and Holland and Lave (2001) refer to as “history in person.” Wenger (1998) writes: “[t]he temporal dimension of our identity is critical...As trajectories, our identities incorporate the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present,” (p. 155). In other words, identities shaped in one context may be carried forward and partially or fully re-created in another. This aspect of practice theory is particularly important for this study, because it suggests that civic orientations students do—or do not—develop as children in school may carry forward into the future, incorporated into the type of person those students understand themselves to be.

Holland and her colleagues (1998) refer to the multiple social arenas in which our identities are shaped as “figured worlds,” which they describe as “socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others,” (p. 52). Figured worlds include storylines with predictable plots and roles, and the inhabitants of a specific figured world understand themselves and others in relation to those stories, even if they do not adhere to them rigidly. These meaning systems are maintained through what are referred to as *artifacts*: “aspect[s] of the material world that [have] a collectively remembered use,” (Holland & Cole, 1995, p. 476). They are “the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful,” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 61). They may be actual physical objects, such as desks and planners, or they may be discourses and ways of speaking. Artifacts suggest certain ways of being and understanding, and repress others.

In line with this framing, and with the argument made in the literature review above, this study will focus on the figured world of one no-excuses charter school, the meaning students make of the way their lives in school are structured, and who they understand themselves to be in that context. In order to gain access to such meaning-making activity, it is necessary to both witness it and to be able to inquire about it. The methods involved in this are described below.

## **Methods**

### **Setting & Participants**

This study took place in a no-excuses charter school in a small urban area in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The school, which I refer to as James Weldon Johnson (JWJ) Charter School<sup>6</sup>, was originally an independent community charter; however, it was taken over by College Bound Academies (CBA), a no-excuses charter network, due to its persistently low test scores. This take-over involved replacing the principal and most of the staff, and instituting common no-excuses practices, including an extended school day and school year, requiring students to transition from class to class in silent, single-file lines, and the use of a system of rewards and punishments called a “paycheck” that determined eligibility for school trips. The year of my research was the third year that the school had been part of CBA. It served 366 students in grades four through eight. Fifty-five percent of these students were Latinx and forty-three percent were Black (the remaining two percent was made up of four White and two Asian students). Approximately 90% of students were classified as economically

---

<sup>6</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

disadvantaged. In chapter three, I describe the school and its behavioral practices in much greater detail.

My primary participants were the sixth-graders of the “Bowdoin” homeroom<sup>7</sup>. Students within a given homeroom stay together for the entirety of the school day, from the moment they arrive until just before dismissal. Sixth-grade was chosen in conversation with the school principal, who identified it as the grade level at which students start to struggle more with the behavioral expectations of the school. The choice of Bowdoin out of the three sixth-grade homerooms was largely arbitrary, although I opted not to observe the supported class, which included all sixth-grade students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs). This class stayed with the same two teachers for the majority of the day, and I wanted the opportunity to see students with a wide variety of teachers in order to observe differences and similarities in how teachers approached the task of behavior management and how students responded. Seemingly through coincidence, it turned out that Bowdoin contained almost all of the sixth-grade students identified by staff as having significant behavioral challenges.

In order to explore students’ experiences more deeply, within Bowdoin I chose seven focal students. This was intentionally a diverse group, including both males and females, both African Americans and Latino/as, and students who were often, occasionally, and seldom in trouble. Though no student can “represent” her/his gender, race, etc., it is clear that socially significant categories such as race and gender impact both how individuals see themselves and how they are likely to be treated by others (Sadowski, 2008; Tatum, 2003); therefore, choosing students who varied from one

---

<sup>7</sup> Though many no-excuses schools name homerooms after the alma mater of the homeroom teacher, homerooms in this school were all named after local colleges and universities. As with other names, I have changed the names of homerooms in order to protect the confidentiality of my participants.

another along these dimensions made it more likely that I would hear a variety of perspectives. To more fully set the stage for my findings, I describe each of the focal students in much greater detail in chapter three. When these students participated in focus group interviews with me, I asked them to choose friends to bring to the interview. This resulted in seventeen individual Bowdoin students participating in at least one interview or focus group, though most participated in two or three.

Other participants included eighth-grade students and one high-school student who was a graduate from the school. Eighth-graders are significantly farther into adolescence than sixth-graders and consequently have somewhat different perspectives; additionally, eighth-grade students at this school have two of the most experienced teachers, and are also allowed a modicum of greater freedom. As with the sixth-graders, I focused most of my observations on a single eighth-grade homeroom. This homeroom was chosen in conversation with one of the eighth-grade teachers, who described it as representing the greatest diversity in terms of students' behavior and relationship to the school. I ultimately conducted focus group interviews with twelve students from this homeroom. Using the same approach as with my sixth-grade participants, I created these groups by choosing four students who seemed different from one another along numerous dimensions (particularly gender, race, and relationship to the behavioral norms of the school), invited them to participate in an interview, and then allowed them to choose two or three friends to include in our conversation.

The high-school student, Elena, was the older sister of one of my focal sixth-grade students. She had attended the JWJ prior to the take-over as well as during the take-over year. Subsequently, she attended high school out of district, at a predominantly



white, suburban school, in which expectations for behavior were significantly different than at JWJ. These experiences made her perspective particularly interesting to me. Though I was interested in speaking to additional graduates of the school, getting in contact with both them and their parents (in order to secure parental consent) proved prohibitively difficult.

While this study is primarily focused on students' perspectives, teachers, administrators, staff and parents are also important social actors within the world of the school and within individual children's lives. Though I hoped to interview the parents of all my focal students, I was unable to get in touch with one of them and two others were not comfortable speaking to me in English (to my regret, I am not fluent in Spanish). However, I was able to get in touch with other parents of Bowdoin students, and interviewed six parents in total: four parents of focal students, and two parents of other Bowdoin students. Three of these parents were Black and the other three were Latina; all were mothers. Of the three Latina parents, two had grown up in the U.S. and one was an immigrant who primarily spoke Spanish, but was assisted in our conversation by her daughter. Finally, I was able to interview twelve members of the school staff. This group included six sixth-grade teachers, two eighth-grade teachers, a temporary dean of the school, the school social worker, the director of student life, and the principal. The chart below summarizes my research participants.

**Table 2.1: Research Participants**

Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bowdoin homeroom sixth-graders, including 7 focal students</li> <li>• one eighth-grade grade homeroom, including 12 students who participated in focus groups</li> <li>• 1 graduate of the school</li> </ul>
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6, including 4 parents of focal students</li> </ul>
School Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 sixth-grade teachers</li> <li>• 2 eighth-grade teachers</li> <li>• 4 other staff, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ temporary dean</li> <li>○ school social worker</li> <li>○ director of student life</li> <li>○ principal</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this study began in August of 2014, when staff returned to the school for professional development, and ended in June of 2015 (though I returned to the school one year later for member-checking interviews). Data collection procedures included participant observation in a variety of settings, focus group interviews with students, individual interviews with students, staff and parents, and document collection.

**Research Questions.** Data collection for this study was guided by four overarching research questions:

- 1) What do classroom management practices and student behavior look like in JWJ charter school?
  - a. What behavioral norms are kids expected to follow in the school, how do school staff frame those norms, and how do they respond to instances of student ‘misbehavior’?
  - b. How do students respond (compliance, resistance, etc.) to instances when staff discuss or enforce those norms?

- c. Where do students have opportunities to exercise choice, responsibility, or authority in the school?
  - d. How are these practices impacted by JWJ's status as part of a no-excuses charter network?
- 2) How do students interpret and respond to these classroom management strategies?
- a. Which rules and practices do students agree with, and which do they object to?
  - b. What reasons do students give for agreeing or disagreeing with those rules and practices?
  - c. How do students view their relationship with school staff?
- 3) How do students view themselves and each other?
- a. How do students describe themselves? How do they believe they are viewed by others?
  - b. How do students describe and understand their classmates?
- 4) How might students' school experiences shape their civic orientations, particularly in light of students' positions as people of color in a low-income, urban area?
- a. When do race and class seem to be salient factors in student talk or classroom interactions?
  - b. How do students describe their neighborhoods and communities?
  - c. How do students respond to problems or unfairness, both within and outside of school?

- d. How do students talk about larger social issues (e.g. immigration, police violence, etc.)?

The table at the end of this section illustrates how my data collection procedures mapped onto my research questions.

**Participant observation.** I conducted a total of 273 hours of participant observation, and was present on 68 out of 189 school days for the 2014/2015 school year<sup>8</sup>. Participant observation began with staff meetings and staff development in mid-August, prior to students returning to school. I selectively attended sessions and meetings devoted to school culture and behavioral systems, and also had a few opportunities to observe informal planning time and to speak casually with staff. Additionally, I attended JWJ's version of back-to-school night, which is called Parent University. There are several Parent University sessions, which are divided across different evenings; I attended two, one for parents of new students and one for parents of sixth-graders.

From students' return to school in August until mid-April, I essentially became part of the Bowdoin homeroom, and nearly all my observations and experiences in the school happened alongside this group of students. The first week of school at JWJ is called Conduct College, and is devoted entirely to reviewing and practicing behavioral routines and expectations. During the week of Conduct College, I was at the school every day for the entirety of the school day, arriving around 7:30 in the morning and leaving at about 4 in the afternoon. Subsequently, I visited the school two to three days per week for several hours at a time. I varied my schedule systematically in order to spread my observations across various classes and times of day, regularly observing breakfast,

---

<sup>8</sup> These numbers do not include hours spent conducting interviews or focus groups, nor do they include days I went to the school *only* to conduct interviews.

morning and afternoon homeroom, math, reading, lunch, P.E., social studies, science and community circle. I also observed Spanish, Art, and Health, though students had these classes less often, and a combination of logistical difficulties and strategic choices resulted in far fewer observations of these classes. Finally, I followed students into various other settings, mostly within but occasionally outside of school. I observed groups of Bowdoin students who were pulled out to work with the reading specialist, the English Language Learner specialist, and the school social worker. I accompanied Bowdoin students to school assemblies and other special events, on a field trip, and to after-school clubs. I walked home with one student—a distance I estimate at about 1.5 miles—and attended another student's basketball game.

Outside my experiences with the Bowdoin homeroom, I attended two parent events and two meetings of the student council. (I would have preferred to observe the student council more regularly, but they met only once per month, and it was a significantly into the school year that I even discovered the existence of the student council.) Starting in April, I also conducted strategic observations with eighth grade students. Some of these observations focused on activities specific to eighth-graders, such as the eighth-grade legacy projects. Eighth-graders worked on these projects in committees that met periodically during morning homeroom, starting in the last few months of the school year. The other observations focused on one eighth-grade homeroom. Just as I had with Bowdoin, I shadowed this homeroom through various parts of their day over several days, observing morning and afternoon homeroom, community circle, math, science, social studies, P.E., and reading. The purpose of these observations was to note in any differences between sixth-graders' and eighth-graders' experiences, to

identify students to participate in focus group interviews, and to give those students a chance to become familiar with me.

During participant-observation, I made “jottings” based on my observations and on informal conversations with students and staff. These jottings focused on times when behavior was especially salient, documenting how teachers give directions and respond to misbehavior, how students respond to correction, instances that students violate behavioral expectations without being caught, etc. At times, I made efforts to capture classroom exchanges as fully as possible; in other moments, my focus was on providing an overall feel for a class or activity while capturing the most relevant details. To avoid forgetting important details or becoming overwhelmed by the amount of information, I largely followed Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw’s (1995) recommendation that beginning ethnographers “[leave] the field after three to four hours in order to begin writing field notes,” (p. 40). On some days, I conducted several straight hours of observation followed by leaving the school to write up my fieldnotes. On others, I alternated an hour of observation with about an hour of writing, simply retreating to the teachers’ lounge or an empty classroom. Though not always possible, I found that this allowed me to write the richest fieldnotes and also had the benefit of allowing me to remain at the school for most or all of the day.

**Interviews and focus groups.** I conducted multiple rounds of interviews and focus groups with Bowdoin students over the course of the school year. I also conducted focus groups with eighth-grade students, and individual interviews with staff, parents, and one graduate of the school. The table below provides an overview of these interviews and focus groups.

**Table 2.2: Interviews & Focus Groups**

Participant Type	Total Participants	Interviews	Focus Groups
Bowdoin Students	16	11 <sup>*</sup>	4 initial <sup>*</sup> 4 final
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Students	12	-	4
Graduate	1	1	-
School Staff	12	13 <sup>**</sup>	-
Parents	6	6	-

*\* Due to time constraints, these interviews and focus groups were often carried out over multiple sessions. This resulted in 9 initial focus group sessions, and 17 individual interview sessions.*

*\*\* I interviewed the principal twice, resulting in 13 interviews but only 12 participants.*

I began this type of data collection by conducting initial focus groups with Bowdoin students; this occurred from early October to early December. As described previously, I identified four students as possible focal students, invited them to participate in an interview, and then allowed them to choose who else would participate with them. My intention in doing this was to make the students as comfortable as possible, especially given that I am significantly older than them and that they did not know me very well at that point in the year. This resulted in sixteen Bowdoin students participating in at least one focus group conversation.

My objective in these initial focus groups was to get a sense of what the students themselves considered salient, important, etc. Consequently, while I drafted questions I hoped would get at topics I was interested in, conversations in these focus groups were highly open-ended and involved multiple unplanned follow-up questions on my part (Patton, 1990). I also revised, added and discarded questions based upon how previous focus groups had gone. Overall, these focus groups concentrated on their opinion of the school overall and school rules particularly, whether they had seen or experienced sometime unfair in school, and how they thought problems like that should be handled. A sample interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

In order to avoid disrupting school activities, I conducted these focus groups during lunch, which only allowed us twenty to twenty-five minutes. As a result, each initial focus group took place over two, or in one case three, of these sessions. Rather than scheduling these sessions back-to-back, I conducted the first session with each group of students before cycling back through. This provided me time to revise questions and follow up on emerging issues, and also allowed me opportunities to cultivate relationships with students over time. An unintended consequence of this was that in three cases, a student participated only in the second session of a focus group, having missed the first session for logistical reasons. The first session with each group of students took place in October or November, and the second in November or December.

After conducting all the initial focus groups, I began to conduct individual interviews<sup>9</sup> with students. I interviewed a total of eleven students; this number includes my seven focal students, plus four additional students who asked to participate. Most of these interviews took place over two 25-minute sessions, though in one case I spoke to a student for nearly an hour and a half. A primary objective in these interviews was to get a sense of who students were, how they thought of themselves, and what their lives were like. Some questions also focused on how students thought about different school rules, and how they would respond to problems or unfairness. As in the initial focus groups, these interview were open-ended. An individual interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

Over the course of the year, I also interviewed school staff, including six sixth-grade teachers, two eighth-grade teachers, a temporary dean, the school social worker, the

---

<sup>9</sup> Some of these “individual” interviews actually included two or three students, though students would take turns answering the questions. This occurred in cases where students specifically requested to bring a friend.



director of student life, and the principal. There were other school staff I hoped to interview, but while they generally were willing, they were unable to find the time. The duration of these interviews varied, and was largely determined by the demands of the school schedule. Most interviews took between 25 and 50 minutes, though in two cases I met with teachers multiple times. I interviewed the principal twice, the first time for about an hour and the second time for nearly two hours. These interviews focused on their views and experiences regarding students, classroom management and school structures. I also added questions specific to the particular staff member; for example, I asked teachers that had been at the school prior to the CBA take-over about that experience. A sample staff interview guide can be found in Appendix C.

Students helped me to get in touch with their parents, and I was able to interview six parents over the course of the year. These interviews varied in length from 20 minutes to nearly two hours. I had two purposes in these interviews: first, to add context to my understanding of students and their lives, and second, to get at parents' perspectives and experiences with the behavior management structures of the school. A parent interview guide can be found in Appendix D. I was also able to get in touch with one graduate of the school, who was the older sister of one of my focal students. I spoke with her for over an hour, asking what it was like what College Bound Academies took over JWJ, which happened in her eighth-grade year, and how her experience at the suburban, predominantly white high school she currently attended compared to her experience at JWJ. Her interview guide can be found in Appendix E.

At the end of the school year, I conducted focus group interviews with eighth-graders as well as final focus groups with Bowdoin students. The purpose of these final

focus groups was to investigate students' thought about civic issues more directly by asking, for example, what could be done to change "unfair things" in the world. Focus group interviews with eighth-graders incorporated both these questions and the most productive questions from my initial focus groups. These interviews lasted from 40 minutes to over an hour. The final focus group interview guide can be found in Appendix F, and the eighth-grade interview guide can be found in Appendix G. These interviews involved a set of supplementary materials: a copy of the JWJ School Pledge which students recited each morning, and a set of pictures I asked students to choose from when responding to the question about how to change unfair things. These materials can be seen in Appendix H.

**Document Collection.** Finally, in addition to the above data sources, I also collected documents, including pictures and raps created by students, behavior-related documents such as the Chill Out form and paycheck, documents sent home to parents, programs for school events, class syllabi, and worksheets from individual lessons. These data sources supplemented my understanding and description of school procedures and values, and student perspectives. One particularly valuable source of written data was forms created by classes of students during the "student retreat." The student retreat (which I unfortunately was unable to attend and only found out about afterward!) was a concerted effort made by administrators at the school to understand students' perspectives on behavior management practices at the school, including CRT ("community reengagement time," essentially detention), community circle, silent transitions, after school clubs, and uniform policies. With their homeroom classes, students either filled out a feedback form or wrote an open-ended letter to Ms. Azikiwe,

the principal, explaining changes they would like to see made to these practices. I was able to obtain these forms/letters for eleven homerooms. Reading these offered me valuable insight into whether some of the views expressed by Bowdoin students were widely shared throughout the school.

Table 2.3: Research Questions and Methods

QUESTION		TYPE OF DATA COLLECTED	FOCUSING PARTICULARLY ON...
1. What do classroom management practices and student behavior look like in JWJ charter school?	a) What behavioral norms are kids expected to follow, how do school staff frame those norms, and how do they respond to instances of student 'misbehavior'?	Documents such as class syllabi, Chill Out forms, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Descriptions of behavioral expectations</li> <li>➤ How teachers/administrators correct, chastise, or otherwise intervene in students' behavior (outside of academic correction)</li> <li>➤ The extent to which students are complying or not complying with behavioral expectations</li> <li>➤ Times students might "break the rules" without getting caught or chastised</li> <li>➤ Times students are offered choices</li> <li>➤ Times students participate in the running of the classroom by completing tasks, offering insight, etc.</li> <li>➤ References by school staff to expectations and pressures related to compliance with a no-excuses model/network</li> </ul>
	b) How do students respond (compliance, resistance, etc.) to instances when staff discuss or enforce those norms?	Observations of Bowdoin homeroom: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• during summer orientation</li> <li>• in classrooms</li> <li>• in the hallway during passing time</li> </ul>	
	c) Where do kids have opportunities to exercise choice, responsibility, or authority in the school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in the cafeteria,</li> <li>• during school assemblies, etc.</li> <li>• as students arrive at and leave school</li> </ul>	
	d) How are these practices impacted by JWJ's status as part of a no-excuses charter network?	Interviews with school staff	
2. How do students interpret and respond to these classroom management strategies?	a) Which rules and practices do students agree with, and which do they object to?	Observations in locations listed above  Interviews & focus groups with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ How students respond to teacher correction</li> <li>➤ How students talk about the behavioral norms of the school</li> <li>➤ How students talk about teachers' interventions in student behavior</li> <li>➤ Times students attempt to help others or intervene others' behavior (students or teachers)</li> <li>➤ Any differences in the above between groups of students (e.g. within Bowdoin, between 6<sup>th</sup> &amp; 8<sup>th</sup> graders, etc.)</li> </ul>
	b) What reasons do students give for agreeing or disagreeing with those rules and practices?		
	c) How do students view their relationship with school staff?		

Table 2.3: Research Questions and Methods, cont.

QUESTION		TYPE OF DATA COLLECTED	FOCUSING PARTICULARLY ON...
3. How do students view themselves and each other?	a) How do students describe themselves? How do they believe they are viewed by others?	Observations in locations listed above	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ How students describe themselves and their future</li> <li>➤ How students believe they are viewed by school staff</li> <li>➤ How students describe others, particularly descriptions of students who get in trouble vs. students who do not</li> </ul>
	b) How do students describe and understand their classmates?	Interviews & focus groups with students	
4. How might students' school experiences shape their civic orientations, particularly in light of students' positions as people of color in a low-income, urban area?	a) When do race and class seem to be salient factors in student talk or classroom interactions?	Observations in locations listed above  Interviews & focus groups with students  Interviews with parents & school staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Incidents in which students or teachers reference issues of race or class</li> <li>➤ Incidents in which the context of students' lives intersects with their perspectives on school practices</li> <li>➤ Parents' perspectives on school practices, their communities, and what they want for their children</li> <li>➤ School staff's descriptions of students</li> <li>➤ School staff's perspectives on behavior management practices</li> <li>➤ Students descriptions of their communities, institutional authority outside the school (e.g. the police), and larger social issues (e.g. immigration, police violence)</li> <li>➤ Students' descriptions &amp; opinions about whether/how to respond to unfairness</li> <li>➤ Any comparisons or parallels suggested between within and out-of-school contexts</li> </ul>
	b) How do students describe their neighborhoods and communities?		
	c) How do students respond to problems or unfairness, both within and outside of school?		
	d) How do students talk about larger social issues (e.g. immigration, police violence, etc.)?		

## **Positionality**

This study is focused on the experiences and perspectives of middle school students, and my results prioritize a view of the world through their eyes. However, I am an adult in my thirties, not a young adolescent. My background is also differs from those of my student participants—unlike them, I am white, grew up in a lower-middle class Southern family, lived in a pseudo-rural area, and attended suburban public schools. Thus, it was necessary for me to carefully consider both my relationship to the students and how my own perspective might influence my interpretations of my findings.

From the beginning of my participant observation at the school, I was careful to present myself as what Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) refer to as a “non-sanctioning adult.” Drawing from Mandell’s (1991) concept of the “least-adult,” they write: “Debra Ausdale, who did the classroom observations, made a conscious effort to play down or eliminate the researcher/adult role and to remain nonauthoritarian and supportive in her interactions with the children,” (p. 40). They report that, “Debi [Ausdale] convinced both the children and the staff that she was ‘not a teacher,’” (p. 45) as evidenced by the fact that the children in their study would openly engage in behavior in front her that they attempted to hide from other adults. Similarly, I consistently emphasized through both words and deeds that I had little or no authority, despite my adult status. When I spoke to the entire school staff about my project prior to the beginning of the school year, I said that I was happy to help if possible, but that I could not intervene in students’ behavior because of the sorts of questions I was investigating. When I introduced myself to the Bowdoin homeroom, I explained that I was not a teacher and could not get them in

trouble. I had students call me “Mr. Eliot” instead of “Mr. Graham.”<sup>10</sup> I dressed more like a student than a teacher when I went to the school by wearing polo shirts instead of button-up shirts, sat in empty student desks in classrooms and among the students during lunch and assemblies, walked at the end of the line when students went down the hallway, and even participated in PE activities. I was also careful, especially at the beginning of the year, to never give directions or express an opinion.

Staff seemed to understand and respect my position. The students may not have understood or trusted my explanation at first, but within the first month of school, they realized that “misbehaving” in front of me invoked no reaction. Initially, some students would glance at me if they did something they knew was against the rules, and a few directly asked, “You’re really not going to do anything?” or “You can’t give CRTs?” Early in October, my field notes describe students throwing paper airplanes across the room while the teacher’s back was turned. While Talia, one of the students who was particularly interested in whether I *really* couldn’t give punishments commented, “You know Mr. Eliot can see you,” no one seemed to feel that this was relevant any longer. Eventually, students seemed to view me almost as a sort of adult sixth-grader, and some of them were tickled by having me do things like complete the same worksheets they were working on. Ms. Azikiwe, the principal, remarked that she was surprised and impressed by how quickly I seemed to just blend in with the students. Most of the teachers ignored me, though Ms. Campbell, Bowdoin’s homeroom teacher, made an effort from the beginning to include me. At one point, while giving students a lecture about their behavior, she used me as an example, saying, “Mr. Eliot *refuses* to walk in a

---

<sup>10</sup> This may not have made a difference in the end; many students probably thought that “Eliot” was my last name. I originally intended for them to just call me “Eliot,” but a teacher said she thought many parents would be uncomfortable with their children calling an adult by his first name.

straight line, he *refuses* to tuck his shirt in, please take that Eliot kid out of my class.”

Additionally, the fact that I often operated as though I were a student instead of an adult was helpful in shaping my own perspective. Sitting through classes with students, I experienced the frustration of boring lessons, the unexpectedness of certain consequences, and the desire to talk to someone or ask a question when I wasn’t technically supposed to.

Simultaneously, I was still an adult, and both students and teachers occasionally took advantage of this fact, even though they generally treated me as irrelevant in matters relating to behavior. Students sometimes tried to leverage the privilege that came with my adult status, asking me whether I could take them out of class when they were upset, or whether I could take them upstairs during lunchtime when they were supposed to be having silent lunch. Once, to my great surprise, a student attempted to get me to resolve a conflict related to a game they were playing in PE. Some teachers also made use of my position as an adult, generally by asking me to escort one or a few students somewhere. In my efforts to be of help to both students and staff, I did at times act more like an adult. I helped students with academic work if they wanted it, though I did not redirect them if they were off task. I regularly took one student, Arnold, out of homeroom to read together in an empty classroom. Arnold was struggling significantly, and I hoped this would help him. Eventually, this grew into a group of four boys who worked on science projects that I provided for them. However, whether we could go each day remained contingent upon acquiring permission from their homeroom teachers.

In addition to the twenty-plus years that separate us, a major difference between the students and myself is that I am white, while all of my young participants were Black



or Latino/a. This required awareness on my part of both how I perceived them and how they perceived me. On my part, I have accumulated about fifteen years of work becoming aware of and combatting my own biases and prejudices, including racial prejudice, which I believe is foundational to my ability to cultivate awareness around the significance of race in my own interactions with the students and in the school overall. At least as significant, I developed close relationships with many of the Bowdoin students, particularly my focal students. These relationships allowed me to see them as full and complex people, for whom race, class and gender were significant but not defining. My relationships with students also made me aware of times when I suspected school staff were viewing students through a stereotypical lens. Though this was not true of all staff, some teachers and deans in the school occasionally spoke to students as though they were unusually inclined toward irresponsible and negative behavior. These moments were jarring to me because I understood students as people who were thoughtful and invested in school, and whose misbehavior or silliness was often the product of being a *child*.

I was mindful of how students and their parents might perceive me as a white man, particularly during interviews. Because I was concerned that my race might make them hesitant to directly identify race and racism as salient issues, I sometimes brought these topics up myself (Patton, 1990). I also tried to equalize power relationships between parents and myself by emphasizing that I valued their perspectives as experts on their own children. The fact that most if not all students and parents *did* talk about issues related to race and racism, revealed some highly personal information, and offered criticisms of the school suggests to me that I was at least somewhat successful in helping them to feel comfortable. I also at times was able to use the differences between us as a

strength by positioning myself as someone who knew very little about their experiences and thus needed them to explain things to me.

## **Data Analysis**

**Compiling and Organizing Data.** Data was compiled and organized using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis program. All fieldnotes were typed up and uploaded into Dedoose; interviews and focus groups were transcribed, and those transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy and then uploaded into Dedoose.

**Preliminary Data Analysis.** As a first step in analyzing the data, I re-read all fieldnotes and interview and focus group transcripts. As I read, I highlighted sections of data that seemed particularly significant and made notes about my interpretations. I used mind-mapping software called *Mind Node* to create a visual depiction of emerging patterns. This allowed me to arrange and re-arrange noteworthy themes and illustrative pieces of data as I considered how different issues might connect to one another.

**Coding and Memoing.** Based both on my interview questions and on the themes that emerged from preliminary data analysis, I created a start list of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Many of these codes were descriptive and organizational in nature (e.g. student thoughts about rules), while others allowed me to check more systematically for themes that emerged during preliminary analysis (e.g. standardization). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to this early coding as “essentially a data reduction task,” which “facilitate[s] the retrieval of different segments of data,” (p. 35). I then coded all data using Dedoose. During this process, I added some codes and subcodes, though most significant codes were represented in this initial list. I also wrote memos based upon patterns or questions that occurred to me during this second pass through the data.

Finally, I noted evidence that seemed to complicate or contradict my initial interpretations.

**Analysis and Interpretation.** Wolcott (1994) emphasizes the usefulness of distinguishing between description, analysis and interpretation. He notes that *description* primarily answers the question, “What is going on here?” whereas *analysis* “addresses the identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them,” (p. 12) and *interpretation* addresses questions of meaning. In this study, description focuses on what students experienced in school and what they tended to say about it—patterns that were largely identified, though not fully confirmed, while I reviewed the data and created a final code list. Analysis moves beyond this to consider relationships between patterns, particularly the question of how school discourse and practices might have impacted students, if at all. Interpretation explores the potential civic implications of these patterns and relationships. These final phases of data analysis occurred in parallel with preparation for writing, as I considered how to organize my findings, and what analysis and interpretation was supportable by the data. For each major theme (e.g. community relationships), I selected codes that were relevant to that theme, and then reviewed all data excerpts from those codes (Weiss, 1994). At times, I created additional descriptive subcodes in order to allow me to more readily consider certain patterns; for example, within a code noting times students helped one another, I added a subcode noting times they specifically helped others outside their friendship group. This allowed me to make note of whether patterns occurred across data sources, or primarily from particular participants. It also allowed me to note disconfirming or complicating evidence, to consider relationships between patterns (e.g. how staff spoke

about students versus how students spoke about each other), and to consider alternative interpretations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Validity.** The validity of this research was assured in three primary ways. First, data for this project was of multiple types (observations, interviews, document collection) and came from multiple sources (students of different ages, various school staff, parents). This variety of sources and perspective provides an initial validity check in the form of data triangulation (Creswell, 2007). For example, while I am interested in how practices at the school shape students' relationships with one another, it is also likely that students' perspectives are shaped by their parents. Thus, asking students about their parents' views as well as interviewing parents directly allows me to consider both influences on students, rather than attributing certain patterns to the school alone.

Second, I intentionally sought out and considered alternative interpretations of my findings. As mentioned above, during coding I was attentive to possible disconfirming evidence. I also periodically discussed findings and interpretations with a colleague, further allowing the exploration of alternative interpretations.

Finally, one year after data collection ended, I conducted member checking with eleven students (including all seven focal students) and the principal, and had an informal member checking conversation with a teacher. Member checking with students actually took the form of three focus group interviews plus one individual interview, each lasting about 45 minutes. I created a list of descriptions representing what I thought students' experiences were like, and students went down the list, reading each interpretation out loud and discussing whether they agreed or disagreed and why. This member-checking handout can be seen in Appendix I. I spoke to the principal on the phone for an hour and

forty-five minutes. This conversation was structured more loosely using an interview guide (Patton, 1990), and focused on issues the principal was particularly well suited to address, such as the relationship between the school and the network. A visit back to the school in order to schedule member checking conversations with students provided an opportunity to speak informally to a staff member, Mr. Dunn, who was an eighth-grade teacher during my data collection year and had since become a dean. Mr. Dunn updated me on events at the school over the past year and responded to some of my initial interpretations. Unfortunately, though both Mr. Dunn and another staff member expressed willingness to meet me with again more formally, I was subsequently unable to reach them in order to schedule those conversations.

### **Presentation of Findings**

As I outlined in the introduction, the next five chapters describe my findings and offer interpretations of those findings. Chapter three is primarily descriptive, offering background information on JWW charter school and its inhabitants, particularly the focal students. Chapters four, five and six, which consider students' conceptions of authority, relationships to one another, and sense of voice, represent the core findings of this research. Each chapter includes descriptions of larger patterns, analysis of potential relationships between patterns, and consideration of the larger civic implications. Chapter seven extends beyond these core findings, exploring the potential significance of the no-excuses model in contributing to the outcomes discussed in the prior chapters.

In each of these chapters, I rely heavily on excerpts of data, especially quotes taken from interviews and focus groups, to illustrate larger patterns. My objective is to

create a vivid sense of how my participants, especially the students, thought and felt. As much as possible, I would like readers to be able to hear the voices of the young people in this study. Thus, it is worth a brief note on how I have chosen to represent my participants' spoken language in writing.

### **Grammar**

Many of my participants, whether Black or Latinx, speak a form of African American Vernacular English. Additionally, Latinx children or parents who speak Spanish as a first language may use nonstandard grammatical or syntactical constructions. I have refrained entirely from "correcting" their grammar to Standard American English forms.

### **Verbal Fumbles**

All of us make what might be called verbal fumbles, such as repeating a word, stopping in the middle of a sentence and then switching to a new thought, or using, "like," "uh," or other filler words. In considering how to handle this, I wanted to balance conveying a sense of how participants were thinking and speaking with offering a reasonable amount of clarity to the transcribed quotes. I have retained some verbal fumbles, especially when such fumbles seemed to indicate that the speaker was struggling with a concept. I also indicate lengthy pauses with ellipses. When a speaker made multiple verbal fumbles that seemed to have no significance, such as using "like" after every few words, I have left one or two while editing the rest out for clarity. If a participant began a thought, went on an irrelevant tangent, then returned to the original thought, I will often omit the irrelevant content; however, I always indicate when I have done so using bracketed ellipses.

## Pronunciation

While I am not attempting to portray participants' accents, I do use some nonstandard written forms that might be considered contractions, such as “‘cause,” instead of “because” and “kinda,” instead of “kind of,” when such forms offer a better sense of the sound and rhythm of participants' speech. For students' in particular, I believe it is especially important to be able to hear the childlike qualities in their speech alongside the often insightful or moving content.

I also use two different forms of “going to”: “gonna” and “gon.” It came to my attention that these two pronunciations may represent words with distinct meanings when one student used both forms within a single sentence. Having looked it up on a linguistics blog (Lieberman, 2005) and spoken with a colleague about it, it seems that “gonna” refers to possibilities that are uncertain, whereas “gon” is much more definitive.<sup>11</sup> Thus, choosing only one form or correcting either to the Standard English “going to” would remove meaning from the sentence.

---

<sup>11</sup> The precise difference between these forms may be more complicated than this; additionally, what I read suggested that linguists who study AAVE have not yet have come to a consensus. However, my overall argument that the two forms convey different shades of meaning holds regardless of the exact differences between them.

## CHAPTER 3:

### SETTING & PARTICIPANTS

While the preceding chapter offered an overview of the setting for this study, this chapter describes the school and the participants in detail. Doing so sets the stage for the findings presented in later chapters by offering both a context in which to understand events in the school and a holistic depiction of my focal students. This chapter also illustrates how no-excuses practices were actually taken up unevenly on the ground, despite monolithic depictions of no-excuses schools.

#### **James Weldon Johnson Charter School**

##### **History & Context**

**The Takeover.** James Weldon Johnson (JWJ) Charter School opened in 2008 as an independent, community charter school. It is located in Milltown, a small urban area in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Milltown was previously a thriving industrial area; however, like many cities, it has suffered from the decline of manufacturing jobs and white flight over the course of the mid-1900s. Census data from 2014 report a median household income of about \$35,647 and a poverty rate of about 30%<sup>12</sup>; 2010 census data report that 52% of the population identified as Black or African American alone, 33.7% identified as Hispanic or Latino/a (without regard to race), and 13.5 percent identified as White alone.

---

<sup>12</sup> A note on the census data indicates that their estimate of 28.4% is not comparable to other geographic levels of that estimate; however, I was unable to find additional data.



In March of 2012, the school was put on probation by the state Department of Education for, “failure to complete state mandated reports, dismal student performance, leadership concerns and high staff turnover.” Three months later, after failing to produce a remediation plan that was acceptable to the state, the JWJ school board voted to turn the school over to College Bound Academies (CBA), a locally based nonprofit charter operator. Ms. Augustine, a parent who was also a member of the original school board, told me that while some board members had wanted to simply close the school, she advocated for keeping the school open out of concern for the children who would be displaced if it were to close.

Several people who were at the school prior to the takeover suggested that there were some legitimate problems with how it had operated. Mr. Dunn, a teacher who had been at JWJ since 2010, explained during an interview that he had showed up at the school to drop off a resume, had an impromptu interview right then as his wife waited in the car outside, and was offered a job on the spot. He went on, “the thing about them hiring me like coming off the street, it kind of summed up, like, some of the things that were wrong—although I think it worked out with me—some of the things that were wrong with how the school was operated earlier.” Ms. Harold, who started teaching at JWJ in 2009, described students fighting in the stairwells and sometimes disappearing between classes, such that school staff had to launch searches for them.

When CBA took over the school prior to the 2012/2013 school year, they re-interviewed all the teachers. Many lost their jobs, and more either left or were let go in subsequent years. During my research, which took place during the 2014/2015 school year, there were three teachers remaining that had been at the school prior to the

takeover: Mr. Dunn and Ms. Harold, who both taught eighth-grade, and a fourth-grade teacher I was unable to interview. Both Mr. Dunn and Ms. Harold described the extreme stress of the re-interview process; as Ms. Harold put it:

They came in and we had to actually go through the whole interview process again. Do—get observed, do observations, the whole thing. Then we had to wait, and then one at a time we went in and found out if it was yes or no. And two-thirds got fired. It was a tough day.

However, both Ms. Harold and Mr. Dunn were generally positive about the changes that had occurred in the school as a result of the change in leadership.

The first year of what CBA terms the “turnaround” was a mix of positive changes and painful adjustments. Ms. Azikiwe, the new principal under CBA, described the community as enthusiastic about the prospect of the school improving:

We didn't have the same kind of opposition that they have in [a nearby city] around charters. This area, everybody was so excited to have us, and that includes the staff who were in the school before we got here. Our chances of being successful were greater, because people were like waiting to see what we could do to help. It was almost like you send medicine to an area where there's no hospital, and they're like, 'Yay, medicine!' They don't even care if the medicine gives them rashes, they're just like, 'But it killed my illness!'

Simultaneously, the change to being a CBA school was accompanied by the imposition of a highly structured disciplinary approach, as will be described in more detail below.

Ms. Harold felt that elements of this were necessary, and told me that the eighth-grade teachers had actually begun having students transition from class to class in silent lines the year prior, in an effort to prevent the significant behavioral problems described earlier. Ms. Azikiwe similarly explained the need to focus on imposing some structure, saying:

When we started here, there was like fights pretty much every single, every other day, there was a fight, and someone was breaking up a fight. The last conversation I had with the prior principal was in May or June of 2012, when the

kids were punching in walls. Literally punching in walls. That was the last conversation I had with him. That's the school we walked into. We walked in with this like, 'Got to get things under control so kids aren't doing that, so they can learn.' When you walk in with that frame, all of your work and your frame about your work is establishing a routine and order to things so that these things don't happen and so you can focus on what's really important.

At least some students and parents chafed under the new, highly structured approach.

Mr. Biondi, the high school placement specialist that started the first year after the takeover, told me that while they did not force any students out, there were some students who chose to leave. Ms. Harold confirmed, "the first year of takeover we lost a lot of kids after that because they couldn't do the whole structure thing." Elena, a high school student who was in eighth-grade the year of the takeover, also described students choosing to transfer out because of the stricter disciplinary practices. A group of parents got together and wrote a letter to the school board objecting to certain elements of how discipline was being handled at the school, ultimately prompting someone from the CBA central office to meet with them and explain the reasoning behind the policies. While I was unable to get a copy of the letter, Ms. Augustine, a parent who was involved in organizing other parents around writing it, described it, saying:

We wrote that letter and it was basically just talking about CRT [Community Reengagement Time, essentially detention]. At that time, kids were feeling like they were in military school and it was just that type of thing. It was requested there be an amendment to the CRT policy. We asked that they do something, that they give the kids who are not all that great an out.

The new disciplinary system did make the school a calmer and safer place, however. In contrast to the descriptions of daily fights before the takeover, suspension records from the year of my data collection reflect only three fights over the entire school year. Both students and teachers also talked positively about changes to school culture overall, although there's reason to believe at least some of those changes resulted more

from Ms. Azikiwe's personal approach to schooling than from the CBA disciplinary system. In her second year as principal, Ms. Azikiwe did emotional constancy training with the staff, and I did notice in my observations that returning staff were often—though of course not always—very emotionally level. Mr. Dunn described this as one change to his classroom management following the takeover, saying, “I used to yell a lot. Now, I project really loud a lot but I'm not, like, angry.” Elena also mentioned some changes that she liked, saying, “We did a bunch of cheers and chants and stuff like that – I loved that. And our class was always winning the little competition things, so that was also cool.”

In addition to the changes in culture and behavior management, Elena described her experience with the takeover as involving changes in academic expectations. Though she said she was upset by losing the teachers she had know and said that the strict rules were “a lot to get used to,” she went on, “But then on the other side, the flipside, when they did the A-Net testing and stuff, I did really well.” Reflecting on her transition from middle school into an out-of-district, predominantly white suburban high school, she said, “I feel like CBA, they did prepare me more than JWJ academically, because it was harder. I had to work harder in order to – I had to work harder for my grades.” Test score data show only slight improvements in the three years after CBA took over. However, Ms. Azikiwe pointed out that even though she was dissatisfied with their progress, in certain ways even flat data was a success. In the second year after the takeover, the school grew from 300 to 375 students. Additionally, yearly changes that made the state test more difficult essentially meant that, as she put it, “we've been hitting a moving target for three years in a row.”

**JWJ in 2014/2015.** In 2014/2015, the year of my data collection, JWJ was starting its third school year since the College Bound Academies takeover. Staff turnover at the school had continued to be significant; during professional development in August, Ms. Azikiwe asked everyone who had been with them since the first year of the takeover to stand, and only about ten or twelve people stood up. Ms. Azikiwe later told me that they had retained only about two-thirds of their staff just from the previous year, though she also explained that the transition from years two to three had a particularly high rate of turnover because there were a number of people who were struggling after the first year, but who they wanted to continue to work with. I observed several staff members leave during the 2014/2015 school year as well, including one of Bowdoin's homeroom teachers. Ms. Harold, discussing the rate of turnover between the first and second year, explained, "Some people left for personal reasons, some people left that just didn't like the system, some people didn't fit into the system and were told to leave."

Likely related to the "personal reasons" Ms. Harold mentioned is the length of the JWJ school day. JWJ opens its doors to students at 7:30 in the morning, at which point staff should already be in the building. Students eat breakfast from 7:30 to 7:50, at which point they transition to homeroom. Dismissal, which is also supervised by teachers and staff, begins at 4:00 and runs until 4:30. Tutoring and after-school activities, which are not required of either teachers or students, run from 4:30 to 5:30. Sitting in the teachers' lounge writing up fieldnotes, I joined a conversation with one teacher who was leaving mid-year. When I asked why she was leaving, she explained that she had an eleven-month old daughter and she was "missing it," because of the hours they had to work at the school. Based on my observations, the long school day also took a toll on students.

The students in the Bowdoin homeroom were generally bursting at the seams by the final class period of the day.

Standardized test scores from 2014/2015 indicate that 18% of the students in the school met or exceeded grade level expectations in language arts, and 14% met or exceeded grade level expectations in math. However, these particularly low numbers partially reflect the significant change to the statewide test made in that year; the previous year, 32% of students met or exceeded expectations in language arts, and 39% did so in math. Teaching practices at the school tended toward the traditional, although teachers also seemed to be making an effort to move toward more student-centered practices. Though students completed a good number of worksheets, they often worked in groups and also regularly did projects. All College Bound Academies schools had also adopted a new, inquiry-based math curriculum. The middle school curriculum director at JWJ confirmed my interpretation of these efforts, noting that student-centered teaching was more in line with the Common Core and that research indicated learning by doing was more effective than learning by someone telling you, “even though you and I somehow learned that way.”

It is important to note that while the academic outcomes at JWJ were not ideal, parents repeatedly identified it as the best of limited options. As Ms. Augustine told me after I asked why she chose to send her children to JWJ, “I went to public school my whole life. (sighs) The system and not all public schools, and I may have had a few good experiences, but I don’t feel like they prepared me well for college. We were like a family but it wasn’t a preparatory.” Similarly, Omari’s [one of my focal students] mother blamed the low quality of the local public schools for younger brother’s struggles once he

was able to transfer to a nearby suburban high school, saying, “So, of course he had to retake a lot of the classes that he failed or was withheld in his 10th grade year...so it's kind of like, he was damaged from the get go, from going to [the local high school], which damaged him.” The parents I spoke to had gone to great lengths to keep their children out of the public schools in the city, and more than one had made significant efforts to actually move just beyond the boundary of the city so that their child would be in a different school district. My intention in pointing this out is not to vilify urban schools or teachers, or to depict urban public schools as universally subpar. However, it is important to acknowledge both the difficulty of the situation parents and children found themselves in, and the needed service schools such as JWJ are providing, even if highly imperfectly.

### **School Structure and Culture**

**Building Structure.** Like many charter schools, JWJ is housed in a small building next to a church that used to be a Catholic school. The grades are divided up by floors, with the fourth and fifth grades on the first floor, the sixth and seventh grades on the second floor, and the eighth grade, plus one additional seventh grade classroom, on the third floor. The third floor also includes a room large enough to assemble one full grade level (about seventy-five students), which is used for Community Circle meetings. In the basement are the cafeteria, the art room, and the self-contained special education classroom. The gym, which includes a stage and is used for full school assemblies and other large events, is across the street from the main school building.

When CBA took over the school, they made a number of changes to the building, many of which reflect aspects of a no-excuses structure. They put blue and yellow tile

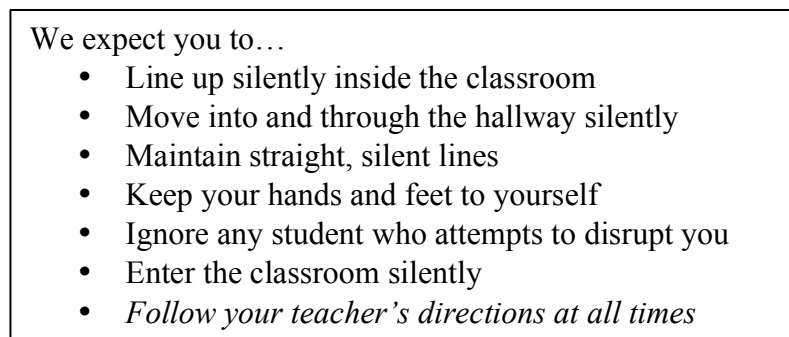
down in the hallways, blue on the sides with a strip of yellow running down the middle. During transitions, students are expected to stay on the blue tiles. They labeled the four staircases, one at each corner of the building, as either “up” or “down” staircases. Students are expected to use the correct staircase, though in certain situations, such as when large numbers of students are dismissed from the cafeteria to go up to their homerooms, staff directed classes to go up the “down” staircase or vice versa. Posters on each floor referred to the grade levels housed there by their college graduation year, for example, the “class of 2025” for the sixth-grade. However, I never heard staff actually refer to students this way. There were also posters reminding students of behavioral expectations, many of which will be discussed below. One such poster read, “PETS Y” in vertical letters, which stands for, “Please, Excuse me, Thank you, Sorry, You’re welcome.” In the meeting space on the third floor, a quote attributed to the class of 2022, the second eighth grade class to graduate at JWJ since the takeover, read, “I can’t tell you what my future holds, but I can tell you who holds my future.”

**The College Bound Academies Model.** As is typical of no-excuses schools, JWJ had elaborate systems, dictated by the College Bound Academies network, which were intended to encourage certain values, regulate students’ behavior, and offer rewards for desirable behavior and consequences for undesirable behavior. Though these practices fundamentally shaped life in the school, they were not always enacted exactly as envisioned by CBA. Additionally, as will be discussed in much greater depth in subsequent chapters, Ms. Azikiwe introduced a number of elements into the school that are *not* part of other CBA schools. In this section, I will describe school structures as they were *intended* to be—and sometimes were—carried out. In the next section, I will



describe actual practices at the school, highlighting differences between the network model and school practice.

Many practices at the school regulated students' voices and bodies through rules and forms of ritualized interaction. Students wore uniforms, which consisted of khaki pants or shorts, a JWJ polo shirt, tucked in, and/or a JWJ sweatshirt, a black belt, and entirely black shoes. Black JWJ sweatpants or shorts and JWJ t-shirts could be worn on gym days. Students were supposed to transition from place to place within the building in silent, single-file lines, escorted by a teacher. A poster on a classroom wall reminded students:



**Figure 3.1: Transition Rules Poster**

Students who talked in the hall were supposed to receive “CRT,” an acronym that stood for “Community Reengagement Time,” but was essentially after-school detention. The goal was for transitions from class to class to take no more than two minutes. Transitions to lunch were also supposed to be silent until the point that every student had picked up their food and was seated. How well students did this as a group (meaning, for example, the entire sixth and seventh grades) determined whether they had a talking lunch or a silent lunch. In class, students were expected to “SLANT,” an acronym common to many no-excuses networks that stands for, “Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer questions, Nod your

head, and Track the speaker with your eyes.” Telling students to “sit in SLANT” essentially meant that they should be sitting up with their feet under the desk and their hands folded.

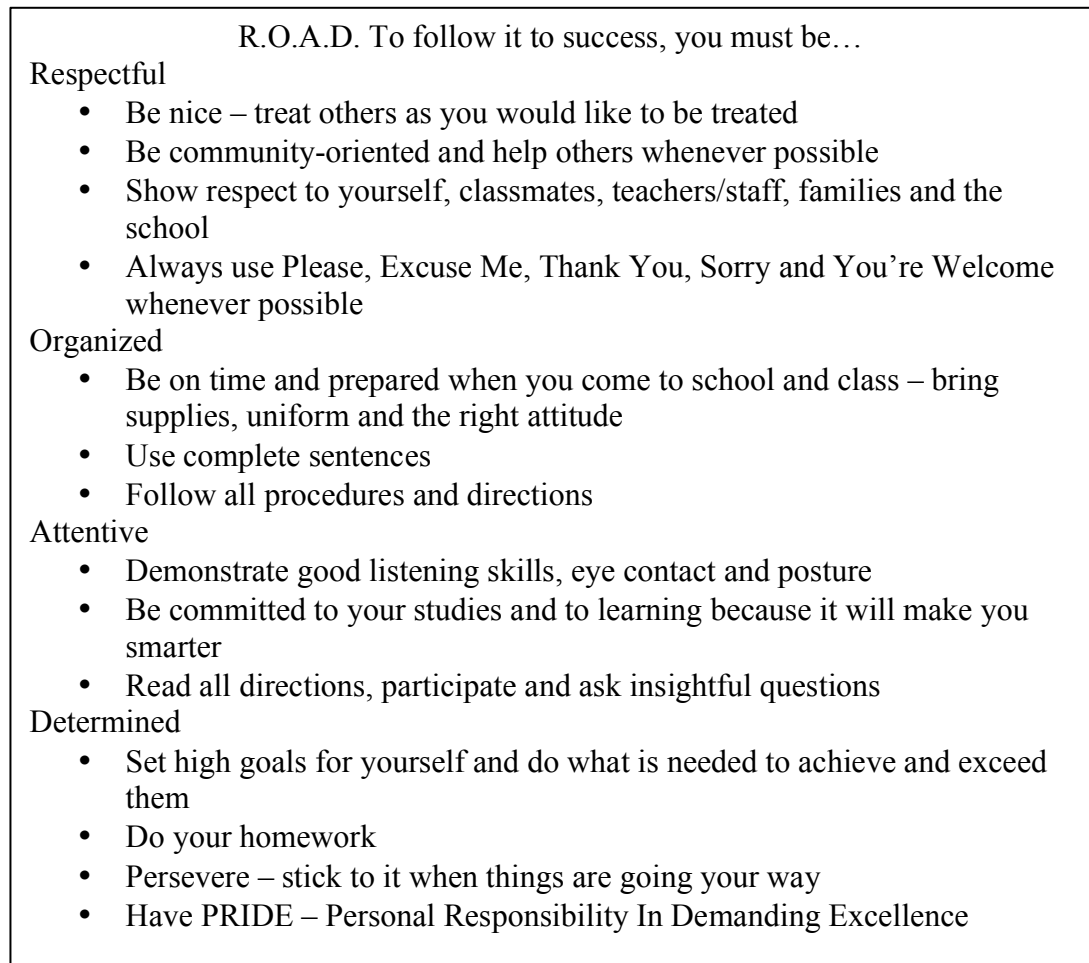
If students needed something during class, there were different hand signals that allowed them to communicate what they needed. Depending on how she held her hand, a student could ask to go to the bathroom, request a pencil, or indicate that she wanted to answer a question, ask a question, or make a comment. This is a practice recommended by Lemov (2010), who describes it as making the classroom more efficient. Students could also express agreement by sticking out their thumbs and little fingers while keeping the rest of their fingers folded, and twisting their hand from side to side, a symbol that confused me when I first saw it because it looks like the hand signal for “cool” commonly associated with suffers<sup>13</sup>. Occasionally, staff would tell recognize a student’s accomplishments by “shining on” him or telling his classmates to “shine on” him, which involved pointing their hands, with their fingers wiggling, at the student. Other ritualized recognition systems involved staff asking students to give another student, “10 quick claps,” “two claps, two snaps, and a ‘yeah, buddy,’” and other variations along the same lines. Staff also used clapping to request silence or get students’ attention. Though there were variations on this, the most common was the “five-two clap,” in which a teacher would clap five times, in a rhythm that sounded like, “Clap clap clap-clap clap,” and students were supposed to clap twice in response: “clap clap.”

More general behavioral expectations and values were communicated by the acronym ROAD, which stands for respectful, organized, attentive and determined.

---

<sup>13</sup> According to Wikipedia, this is actually a common greeting in Hawaiian culture, and can mean “hang loose.” If this is the case, it seems safe to say that it has traveled rather far from its original intention.

Embracing these values was supposed to help students be on the *road* to college. A poster read:



**Figure 3.2: ROAD Poster**

CBA schools used a behavioral system called a “paycheck” to reward desirable behavior and discourage undesirable behavior. School staff could award additions and deductions for students’ behavior; these additions and deductions were organized into categories based on ROAD: respectful, organized, attentive and determined. Students could also earn “scholar dollars” on their paychecks by being on time, being in uniform, etc., and entire classes could earn “ROAD steps,” as many as four per class period, for being respectful, organized, etc. Staff entered additions and deductions electronically using a

device called a “kickboard,” and any staff member could see any student’s total at any time. At the end of the day, students who were able to correctly report their total for that day earned an additional five dollars for keeping track. Each Friday, students received a paycheck that individually listed the additions and deductions they had received over the past week, how many scholar dollars they had earned in total that week, how many they had earned in total over the entire school year, and what their weekly average was.

Numerous rewards and consequences were associated with the paycheck. A student who received five additions (not five scholar dollars total) in one day was supposed to receive a shout-out. Once a student received four deductions, she was supposed to be sent to the Chill-Out Desk; at six deductions, she received a dean reset, and at eight deductions, she received a dean referral. The Chill-Out Desk was a desk in the back corner of each classroom, facing the wall. Its purpose as described by Mr. Forester, the director of culture at JWJ, was to give students an opportunity to self-correct without further disciplinary consequences. Students were supposed to sit in SLANT at the Chill-Out Desk, and to fill out a form that required them to reflect on their actions. Dean resets consisted of one of the deans removing the student from class for a few minutes, presumably for a conversation, and seemed largely supportive rather than punitive. If a student received a dean referral, the dean would determine a consequence based on the students’ behavior.

The primary reward associated with the paycheck was field trips. In order to be eligible to go on field trips, students had to have earned a certain weekly average on their paychecks, usually \$40. In the two years prior to my data collection year, field trip eligibility was determined by students’ year-to-date *total*; however, it was changed to an

average, calculated only over the period since the previous field trip, in an effort to provide students with behavioral struggles a clean slate in their efforts to earn trips. In addition to paycheck averages, students could not have more than three unexcused absences, more than three CRTs, or any suspensions in the time period leading up to the trip. There were also special trips and other rewards for students who had particularly high paychecks, good grades, and/or high test scores.

Finally, elements of the school were focused on encouraging and enabling students to eventually attend college. As mentioned above, posters hung in the school referred to students by their college graduation year, and ROAD is a reference to being on the “road to college.” Each homeroom was named after a different college. Field trips included trips to visit local colleges, where students took tours similar to the tours taken by high school juniors and seniors, visiting classrooms, dorms, and—most exciting for the sixth-graders—the dining hall. In addition to directing students to think about and develop familiarity with colleges, JWJ had a high school placement coordinator, who worked with students to apply to high schools other than the local district schools. While some students ended up in the local public high school anyway, many went to charter high schools or out-of-district public schools, and a few went to more prestigious private high schools.

**JWJ Practices.** Actual practice as JWJ charter school did not always align exactly with the CBA model or with the visions of no-excuses schools suggested by both sponsors and critics. In one simple example, students often supplemented their uniform with bright, vividly colored socks. I never observed a staff member comment on this, despite a statement to parents at the beginning of the year that socks should be

“moderately colored.” There were two primary areas in which actual practice at the school differed notably from “the model.” First, teachers did not always use the behavior management system as intended, and they also supplemented it with other forms of classroom management. Second, Ms. Azikiwe introduced a number of elements into the school that were not part of the model.

Almost every teacher I spoke to told me directly that the paycheck doesn’t work for some kids, and I observed almost every teacher use classroom management strategies other than the paycheck. Mr. Cassano, one of the gym teachers, told me directly, “I don’t give any additions or deductions, to be honest with you. None. How can I walk around with that thing [the kickboard] at all times when I’m interacting with the kids?” While Mr. Cassano was the only teacher who didn’t use the paycheck system at all, kids sometimes complained that teachers forgot to ever enter their additions or deductions in the kickboard, and Ms. Campbell, Bowdoin’s homeroom teacher, once expressed a feeling that other teachers were failing to award additions at all. While students could theoretically earn ROAD steps each class period if 80% of the class was behaving, I rarely observed teachers awarding ROAD steps.

Outside of the paycheck system, another element of the CBA model was that students were supposed to receive a CRT for talking during transition. However, the *only* staff member I ever saw give CRTs for talking during transition was Ms. Hower, one of the deans. In interviews, it was common for teachers to express some concerns about the amount of time students were required to be silent, even if they also supported the model for other reasons. Consequentially, while they would reprimand students or give deductions for talking, they stopped short of assigning CRT.

As mentioned previously, teachers also used numerous classroom management techniques other than the paycheck. My codes reflect as many as twenty-six<sup>14</sup> additional ways to direct or redirect student behavior, which I grouped into five categories: logistical, structural, social-emotional, verbal, and reward/punishment. Logistical approaches included reminding students of what they should be doing, clapping to get students' attention, or making students practice or redo a behavior they didn't do correctly the first time. Structural approaches included moving students' seats, linking behavior to grades, or imposing additional restrictions on students' speech or movement. Social-emotional techniques ranged from relying on one's charisma and personal power to leveraging positive personal relationships to taking a serious, angry, or humorous tone. Verbal responses included numerous ways staff framed and talked about student behavior, such as praise, reprimands, and threats of consequences. Finally, rewards and punishments other than the paycheck included loss of privileges, calling parents, assigning individuals silent lunch, and offering food like bagels or pizza. Essentially, these classroom management techniques look like what we might expect to see in almost any school. They are significant, however, because teachers' widespread need to rely on techniques other than the paycheck challenges the efficacy of the paycheck system. In a broader way, the variation in when and how staff used, or did not use, the "official" behavior management system endorsed by CBA demonstrates that while no-excuses schools are often discussed as though they all function similarly, local factors clearly impact how no-excuses practices are actually implemented.

JWJ also had a number of practices that were not part of the CBA model, most of which had been introduced by Ms. Azikiwe, the principal. One prominent example is the

---

<sup>14</sup> The exact number varies depending on what is considered a distinct response.

school pledge, which students recited every morning before homeroom: “Scholars are respectful, organized, attentive, and determined. Being a scholar is the first step to success. I will work hard to be successful. I will be a leader and not a follower. I will continue to make positive changes in my life. I will only succeed if I try. There is no limit to what I can accomplish. We are scholars today and leaders tomorrow.” This pledge was written by the first class of eighth-grade students to graduate after the CBA takeover as one of their “legacy projects.” Another example is the teacher-student meeting request form. Copies of this form were at the Chill Out Desk, along with the reflection form provided by CBA, and students could fill it out in order to ask for support if they felt that a teacher had been unfair or disrespectful to them. A member of the staff, usually the school counselor, would then meet with them, and might also facilitate a meeting between the student and a teacher, or occasionally between a teacher and an entire class. These and other practices will be discussed at greater length in subsequent chapters.

Finally, student performances were also a significant part of life at JWJ. Homerooms developed “chants and cheers” which they sometimes performed for the rest of their grade level at “Community Circle,” or even for the entire school at assemblies. Small groups of students also developed singing, dancing, and drumming performances for school assemblies and for the school talent show. Unlike many aspects of school culture, which pushed a particular vision of success, these performances were created entirely by students and thus typically emphasized music and dance routines from popular culture.

## **Participant Profiles**



## **Students & Staff**

The year of my data collection, JWJ charter school included 366 students and 55 staff members (including front office workers, the school nurse, etc.). Fifty-five percent of students were Latinx and forty-three percent were Black (the remaining two percent was made up of four White and two Asian students). Statistics from the Department of Education report that 93.6% of students were classified as economically disadvantaged and 14 percent were considered to have a disability. This report suggests that 0% of students were English Language Learners, though 55.4% reported primarily speaking Spanish at home.

I do not have demographic information on staff, nor did I know all the staff by name; however, from looking over the staff list, I estimate that 21 staff members were African American, 2 were Latinx, 2 were Asian American, and the remaining 30 were White. While African American staff members were clustered more heavily in non-teaching roles, including both deans, the behavior intervention coordinator and the school social worker, there were also African American staff members who were teachers or were in positions of leadership. Unlike no-excuses charters that are staffed heavily by Teach For America Corp members who are in their early twenties (e.g. Carr, 2013), most staff members appeared to be in their late twenties or early thirties, and several were in their forties or fifties. There were two current TFA members in the school: Ms. Ernest and Mr. Rosen. Ms. Ernest was an African American woman in her mid-twenties who had worked in as a bank manager prior to joining TFA; Mr. Rosen was a white, Jewish man with adult children.

The principal, Ms. Azikiwe, was an African American woman who grew up in poverty. She and her siblings were raised by their grandmother, who was unable to work due to disability, and so made do with \$500 a month plus public housing. She describes her grandmother as “push[ing] us extremely hard,” and credits her for her “two Ivy League degrees and an almost PhD.” Her African surname came from her husband, who is also African American but changed his last name after researching his family’s origins. Ms. Azikiwe taught English in urban public schools and a private school, and subsequently worked as a director of curriculum in a charter school. She entered teaching through TFA, though she described herself as “in TFA, but not of TFA.” During the year of my data collection, she was in her fourth year of a PhD program in Education at a prestigious local university. She had been a full-time PhD student for one year, but had dropped to part-time in order to take the job at JWC because she missed working with kids. As I will describe in greater detail in chapter seven, Ms. Azikiwe had a notably different vision of schooling than that suggested by the CBA model, and her leadership significantly influenced practices at the school.

### **Bowdoin Homeroom Students and Teachers**

Thus far, I have used the word “student” to refer to the children and adolescents who populated JWC charter school. However, from this point forward I will often use the informal word “kids” to describe these young people, especially those in the Bowdoin homeroom. This is an intentional choice that reflects two stances: First, for those young people in the Bowdoin homeroom, “kids” is a better reflection of my relationship with them than the more formal “students.” Second, “student” is a role while “kid” is a person. I am uncomfortable with the ways in which kids were reduced to students in the school;

even at events for parents and families, school staff would often say “your student” rather than “your child.” I use the word “kids” in acknowledgment both of their youth and of their wholeness, which I feel are important and which were often neglected in school contexts.

The Bowdoin homeroom started with twenty-four students, though over the course of the year one student transferred to a different homeroom, two students left the school, and two new students were added. The twenty-one students who were there throughout the year included seven Black girls, four Black boys, four Latina girls and six Latino boys. Some of these students had been at JWJ since fourth grade, while for others it was their first year at the school.

Bowdoin quickly developed a reputation as a class with significant behavioral struggles. In the first week of school, a staff member commented to me as we were entering the building that it’s interesting I ended up with Bowdoin out of all the sixth-grade homerooms because they are “off the chain.” In an interview a bit farther into the year, Ms. Grant, one of the Spanish teachers, said, “Excluding the kids with IEP's there's maybe one more significant behavioral issue in [another homeroom], and the rest of them are in Bowdoin.” The kids also reflected this to me in interviews. In their first focus group interview, Talia and Shanya asked me why I had chosen their homeroom, and then said:

Talia: It’s better to have us, because—

Shanya: We bad.

Talia: Exactly.

To some extent, the depiction of Bowdoin as a challenging class was a fair one. Several kids had notable behavioral struggles—something I perceived as having causes

ranging from boredom and lack of buy-in to grief over the recent death of family members. At times, keeping the class on task was like playing whack-a-mole, as in the except from my fieldnotes below:

Arnold turned to Justin (who had moved his seat back), and pointed to his screen, as though to communicate something. Ms. Campbell said, “Arnold, move to that back desk.” Arnold objected, “I wasn’t talking, I was pointing,” and turned back to Justin. Ms. Campbell, while sitting at her desk and looking at her computer screen, started to count: “One. Two.” Slowly, still looking at Justin, Arnold got up and gathered his stuff. Walking to the back desk (which was only halfway across the room) he said, “Can I sit over there?”, presumably referring to another spot, though I didn’t know where. Meanwhile, Oscar, who had been sitting and working on the cushion right next to Ms. Campbell’s desk, got up and tried to go sit the back desk. Ms. Campbell looked over and told him no, he couldn’t sit there. She said he was only moving there because she told someone else to sit there and he was trying to get attention; he had made his choice and now he had to stick to it. Arnold said, “You’re not listening to me!” and went back to his original desk. Ms. Campbell looked up, and said in a loud, stern voice, “*Arnold.*”

In addition to students with individual struggles, conflict and bullying related to romantic involvements, online exchanges, etc. created significant emotional distractions for kids.

Finally, Bowdoin had numerous students who were inclined to challenge rather than accept teacher reprimands and school structures. I argue that all these factors were exacerbated by school structures that did not provide students with sufficient support and opportunities to work through difficulties and to connect with one another. While I cannot fully explore or elaborate upon this here, my point is simply to say that teachers’ and students’ descriptions of their homeroom’s behavior were not entirely without basis.

Bowdoin was regularly taught by nine different teachers, listed in the chart below:

**Table 3.1: Bowdoin Teachers**

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>
Ms. Campbell	Math	White	13
Ms. Ernest	Reading	African American	0
Mr. Sullivan	Social Studies	White	8
Mr. Balkus	Science	White	*
Ms. Grant	Spanish	African American	6
Mr. Perez	Spanish	Latino	0.5
Mr. Cassano	Gym	White	8
Mr. Petkus	Gym	White	*
Ms. Monet	Art	White	*

\*I was not able to interview Ms. Monet or Mr. Petkus. I did interview Mr. Balkus, who had taught for several years prior to coming to JWJ, but I do not know the exact number.

Bowdoin's homeroom teachers were Ms. Campbell and Ms. Ernest, who also taught math and reading, respectively. Kids at JWJ have two periods of math and two periods of reading every day except Fridays, in addition to being in morning homeroom for forty minutes, so the Bowdoin students spent significant amounts of time with these two teachers. Ms. Ernest, as described above, was a young African American woman in her first year of TFA. Ms. Campbell was a white woman in her fifties with two college-age sons. This was her third year at JWJ; she previously worked at a Catholic school and another charter school. She described herself as preferring to work with low-income, urban parents rather than the affluent parents at the Catholic school where she originally taught, saying:

When you work in a wealthy district, they never allow you—most people, okay, 'cause some people aren't nice even though they have money—don't allow you to be on an equal playing field with them. [...] I like being able to work with parents, regardless of what their income is. Be on a level playing-field with them, and say, 'Our project is your child. What can we do? This is what your child needs, you think. This is what I think. Where can we come together and try to get the child where they need to be so that at the end of 6th grade they're ready to go on to the 7th.'

A few months from the end of the year, Ms. Campbell left the school. Ms. Azikiwe told me that neither her teaching evaluations nor her students' test scores were where they needed to be, and while she was still willing to work with Ms. Campbell, Ms. Campbell seemed to fear being fired and chose to leave instead. In the last month of the school year, Ms. Freeman, a young white woman I assume was a new teacher, though I did not interview her, took Ms. Campbell's old job.

Bowdoin regularly interacted with two Spanish teachers and two gym teachers. The two Spanish teachers were Ms. Grant, an African American woman who was an experienced teacher, and Mr. Perez, a Latino man who was new to teaching. Though the other grades in the school had only one of these teachers, they had split the sixth grade classes, meaning that Bowdoin saw Ms. Grant on Wednesday and Mr. Perez on Friday. The two gym teachers were Mr. Cassano and Mr. Petkus; both were White and both were returning teachers. Two classes of students often used the gym simultaneously, so while Mr. Cassano had responsibility for Bowdoin's grades, the two teachers often shared responsibility for running the class.

Finally, Bowdoin students who struggled behaviorally often interacted with several additional members of staff: Mr. Forester, the director of culture; Ms. Hower, the middle school dean; Ms. Douglas, the school social worker; and Mr. Williams, a member of staff who acted variously as a dean or as a substitute teacher. All four of these staff members were African American.

### **Focal Students**

As described in chapter two, I made an effort to select focal students who varied from one another in terms of race, gender, and how often they got in trouble in school.

Some also selected themselves in a sense, by being particularly interested in talking with me. A variation I did not anticipate was that some kids had been at JWJ since fourth grade, while others were new to the school that year. The table below lists basic demographic information for each of my focal students, including how long they had been at JWJ. In the subsequent sections, I offer a brief profile of each in order to present them as whole people, and to offer context for data in subsequent chapters.

**Table 3.2: Focal Students**

Student	Race	Gender	Year at JWJ
Estrella	Latina	female	1 <sup>st</sup>
Jamir	Black	male	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Jessica	Latina	female	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Mario	Latino	male	1 <sup>st</sup>
Omari	Black	male	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Shanya	Black	female	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Talia	Black	female	3 <sup>rd</sup>

**Estrella.** In the classroom, Estrella came off as quiet, serious and mature. She was a student who typically was mentioned when teachers were talking about kids who “do the right thing” behaviorally, and was the second-highest paycheck earner in the first marking period. She was also in charge of the “trackers” for all students in the classroom who were on behavioral plans (structures suggested by the school social worker that tracked individualized behavioral expectations and incentives for students who were struggling), meaning that she carried them throughout the day and reminded each teacher to fill them out.

Though she was in the sixth grade, she was thirteen years old. When I asked in an interview how she would describe herself, she said, “I’m tall” (though she can’t have been much taller than five feet!), and “I’m a little bit crazy.” Indeed, she did have more

gumption than most people might have thought. In an interview, she told me about a time that Ms. Ernest had assigned her lunch detention, but she hadn't gone:

Estrella: And the other time she gave me a lunch detention because of Jamir. He threw a pencil [at me], right? And he threw it two times. And then the third time I got it and like threw it back to him. And that's when she saw me and she's like, oh, Estrella, you got a lunch detention because you shouldn't be throwing things around like that. I'm like, he hit me first. And I got mad. When I get in trouble without like having the fault I get mad.

EG: Did you actually – you didn't actually have lunch detention though?

Estrella: No. I went away, I'm like I'm not going, so.

Though I would agree that Estrella more consistently followed the behavioral expectations of the school, she was also more easily able to avoid trouble when she did violate them. In the incident described above, she and her friends went on to tell me that Ms. Ernest always forgets when she assigns them lunch detention, so they don't have to do it, but that she never forgets with "the kids who talk a lot." Another time, Estrella was unable to get Ms. Ernest's attention in order to ask to use the bathroom, so she nudged another, more vocal student, who called loudly, "Ms. Ernest!"

Estrella's family, including her parents, older brother, and younger sister, were from Mexico. Her appearance was reminiscent of indigenous peoples, and she seemed to imply in an interview that her father speaks an indigenous language, though she called it "the old Spanish." Her parents had come to the United States when she was a baby, leaving her behind, and she didn't join them for several years. I suspect that her family may be undocumented, though I did not ask about this directly. In an interview, she said that the world isn't a fair place because "I don't have a passport because I don't have my papers, so I can't go to my country and see my grandmother."

**Jamir.** In contrast to Estrella, Jamir was one of the students in the class who seemed to have a reputation as a trouble-maker. Talking about the behavioral challenges



in Bowdoin, Mr. Cassano said, “I’m always dealing with Jamir. I’m always dealing with Kasy. I’m always dealing Arnold. Putting fires out, putting fires out.” Jamir was aware of the way teachers viewed him, as were other members of the class. In an interview, he pointed out, “There could be somebody bombing<sup>15</sup> on somebody, and what’s the first person they look at? People could be talking and bombing, who they look at?” His friend Omari confirmed, “They look at you.” He described these frustrations more thoroughly in another interview:

Jamir: I’m serious, they always think I’m trying to be funny. Like I be dead serious, I be telling a straight face to Ms. Ernest.

Chris: Most of the time, it sounds like you’re playing.

Omari: Yeah, it does.

Jamir: I know it sounds like it, but I’m not! Like, just like today—not today, Tuesday—she said, make a prediction about the hamburgers, and I said I think the gods are going to eat—I think Percy and them are going to eat the hamburgers. And that’s when, we was reading it, it said they eat the hamburgers, and I told her, ‘I was right! They are eating the hamburgers!’ and she said, ‘Oh, that’s not funny Jamir.’ I was being serious! Like I—my prediction was right, I was about to say that.

As reflected in the excerpt above, Jamir was invested in school and wanted to do well, but his intentions were often misconstrued by staff. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that Jamir was highly energetic, and consequently struggled tremendously with behavioral expectations that emphasized stillness and silence. Early in the year, Mr. Balkus asked a question during science class, and Jamir was so excited to answer that he actually sprang to his feet as he raised his hand. Mr. Balkus’s only response was, “You’re going to have to sit down and wait,” a response Jamir mimicked under his breath as soon as Mr. Balkus was past. A sensitive kid, he was noticeably upset by the way teachers responded to him. When I asked him how he would describe himself, he said,

---

<sup>15</sup> This was an extremely commonly used slang term. To “bomb on” somebody means to tease or make fun of them, either in a friendly way as mutual kidding around or in a more combative or hostile way (or sometimes both, as kids experimented with power and boundaries in their relationships).

“Sometimes I could be funny, could be dumb, but like, I’m not. Not like dumb, like...I still do my work...” Omari chimed in, saying that the teachers don’t take him seriously, and he went on, “Yeah, they don’t take me seriously. They think I can’t do it, but watch. It’s gonna be one day I’m gonna show ‘em. I’m gonna make ‘em cry.” Jamir was also sensitive to responses from his peers; he enjoyed attention from acting silly and making jokes in class, but was bothered by what he perceived as people staring at him and deeply concerned about the idea that others might be talking about him. His mother identified this as one of his challenges, saying, “He wants to be able to make people laugh and just not all the time do he know the balance of when and where to do those things.”

Outside of school, Jamir played football and worked at his uncle’s barbershop on Saturdays. His mother, Ms. Augustine, and his older sister, Elena, were both mentioned earlier in this chapter in relationship to the CBA takeover. When I asked Ms. Augustine to describe Jamir, she said:

My son, he is very helpful. Extremely helpful. He loves to help clean. He’s always trying to make sure he’s the one that cleans the house or works or something like that. He’s very helpful, even protective a little bit. He’s always making sure I’m good, that type of thing. [...] Jamir’s definitely a giver. Jamir, for Christmas, he went out—because he works at the shop, he went out and bought everyone Christmas presents.

Ms. Augustine was very involved in her children’s lives, but this had come at a cost in terms of money and security. She had Elena when she was sixteen years old, and for two years she worked long hours in retail, buying a house and a car. Then she described a moment where she looked in the mirror and thought, “Oh, I’m looking like my mom a little bit.” She explained:

You know, my mom had a, we didn’t have the greatest life. She was a single parent and sometimes she had to work overnight and, you know, work was before. We had to eat, she had to do what she had to do. So I’ve always had that in my

head. Even though a lot of times we kind of had to raise ourselves because of some of our circumstances. I've always had that in my head that if I ever have kids, I wanted to be engaged, I wanted to be in their lives. I wanted somebody to know what's going on with me [when I was a kid], because a lot of times no one did.

At eighteen, she left her relatively lucrative retail job, subsequently getting another job “working on the phones.” Though this transition resulted in their family facing very difficult financial times, she believed that the sacrifice was worth it, saying:

It's been about 10 years and I'm still on this journey. But making that transition, I left, I suffered long. I lost my house, the car. Ooh. [...] When I left, I really didn't have a solid plan but I wanted to be more involved in the lives of my children. That was the only plan. I didn't have a whole lot; I wanted to be more engaged with my children, and my church, I just wanted to be more...I wanted more. I wanted more for them and more wasn't money and more wasn't material, more was family and more was being involved and engaged and knowing them, I wanted to know them.

In addition to her family involvement, Ms. Augustine was deeply involved in the life of Milltown, volunteering, participating in community organizations and joining political campaigns. During the year of my data collection, she began a job at the Salvation Army that drew upon her work in the community while also providing her with greater monetary resources.

**Jessica.** Jessica initially struck me as quiet, and Talia, another focal student, once described her as “so boring” because she didn't talk. However, as I got to know her better, I realized that she was chattier than I had first thought; Jessica became a focal student partially as a result of the fact that she often spoke to me. She was also playful and extremely giggly. She once asked her classmate Chris about a picture of a manatee in a magazine he was looking at, and when he answered her, he called the manatee an “ocean cow.” This term cracked Jessica up, and resulted in five to ten minutes of her giggling and making “ocean cow” jokes. However, like Estrella, Jessica's moments of

playfulness were subtler and less likely to invoke comment or punishment from teachers compared to other students in the class.

Perceptions of Jessica as a “good” kid were likely reinforced by her appearance. Petite with long, straight hair, she still looked more like a little girl than like an early adolescent. She was Guatemalan, but had fair skin and brown hair, and could easily have been perceived as White. She was born in the U.S., but then sent back to Guatemala so that family members could care for her while her mother worked. Describing this experience, she said:

When I came to Milltown, I was still a baby. I was still a little baby like months old, and my mom, ‘cause she had to work, so she send me to Guatemala, where my family's from, for 3 years, and I grew up mostly with my grandma and my uncles and my aunts, ‘cause my aunt was still like 15, like really young. And my grandma used to take care of me and my uncle and my aunt used to take care of me and then when I came back here I didn't know who my mom was ‘cause I thought my grandma was my mom. So it was hard to get used to it.

When I asked Jessica how she would describe herself, she said, “I would describe myself as very descriptive when I write. And when I read my essays, I want it to sound organized, like if I took time writing it.” Jessica’s mother spoke limited English, so Jessica sat in on our interview and translated when needed.<sup>16</sup> When I asked Jessica’s mother how she would describe Jessica, she answered in English, “She is a really nice girl. She is a [really good] student. She likes to read and write a lot. So, she is happy in this school, so, and math. She is really...so-so at math, yeah, she need more practice, yeah, she needs to learn more.”

**Mario.** Mario was one of the students I was closest to, and one who from the beginning was very interested in talking to and spending time with me. Like Jessica, he

---

<sup>16</sup> I was able to find a fluent Spanish speaker to transcribe this interview; she was tremendously helpful in noting places where the gist of my question was lost, where Jessica added onto her mother’s answer, etc.

was also Guatemalan and also very fair-skinned. Behaviorally, he occupied a middle ground, getting in trouble sometimes without being permanently cast as a “troublemaker.” On one hand, Mario got involved in a lot of the sorts of activities that got him and the other boys in trouble, including playing around, tapping or drumming rhythms on the desks, and making complex origami weaponry (including a crossbow which fires tiny paper arrows a distance of several feet). During a particularly chaotic Spanish class taught by Mr. Perez, Mario was at one point sheltering behind his chair, holding his binder up as a shield, as Chris shot rubber bands at him. Additionally, unlike Estrella and Jessica, staff were more likely to perceive him as doing something wrong, even if he wasn’t. One day he complained to me that he had gotten CRT “for no reason,” and went on to explain that Ms. Campbell thought he was talking as they lined up to leave the cafeteria and referred him to Mr. Forester, who gave him CRT. Simultaneously, Mario’s paycheck average and grades were good enough that he was one of only three Bowdoin students to go on the Scholars trip. When I asked how he thought teachers would describe him, he said, “Playful. Um. Smart. Oooh, and I get distracted very easy.”

Although Mario’s behavior did not always conform to the behavioral norms of the school, in conversations he reflected a high degree of buy-in to those norms. In the first week of school, Ms. Ernest asked all the kids if they “deserved” to practice the fire drill—something they all wanted to do since it involved leaving the overheated school building, but which she hadn’t allowed yet because of their behavior. Almost all the kids called, “Yes!” but Mario said “No.” Mario was also deeply invested in his grades. One day at lunch, after Ms. Campbell had given the class a lengthy talking-to because so few of them had completed their previous night’s homework, I noticed that Mario wasn’t

eating. When I asked him about it, he teared up and told me he hadn't finished his math homework. He explained that he had forgotten about the second part, and was worried that it was going to affect his grade.

Mario had a sister in seventh grade and a brother in eighth grade. Both were also at JWJ; his brother Luis participated in one of my eighth-grade focus groups. He also had five-year-old twin brothers. His parents' jobs required them to be out of the house extremely early in the morning—his dad was a baker, his mother worked in a factory packing instant coffee into boxes—so he and his older siblings were responsible for getting the twins ready and dropping them off at the babysitter's house before school. Mario's biological father had left the family when Mario was young; he and his siblings referred to their mother's partner as "dad," and both expressed tremendous love and respect for him. Luis brought him up in an interview, saying:

Someone that I would consider a leader is my dad, 'cause he lived in Guatemala most of his life. His dad left him when he was little. Same thing happened with me, but you know, my stepdad, he's awesome. I consider him my dad, because he's been with me through hard times, and everything that I'm doing right now is thanks to him.

**Omari.** Omari also occupied a middle ground behaviorally, though for different reasons. He was quieter and less outgoing than either Mario or Jamir; however, he was friends with several of the kids, including Jamir, who tended to get in trouble a lot. I suspect that this, plus his identity as a Black boy, made teachers more likely to perceive him as doing something wrong. Though he did sometimes talk or make comments during class, he also regularly got in trouble when he wasn't off task; my fieldnotes include an instance in which he got a deduction for no reason that I could perceive, despite the fact that I was sitting with his group. When this happened, Omari turned to me and said,

“See?” He had commented to me in a recent interview that teacher often think he’s doing something when he isn’t. Simultaneously, things seemed to be going better for him as the school year went on. When I asked in an interview how he thinks his teachers would describe him, he said, “I think they would describe me as a good person, a guy with a good vibe, and positive.”

Omari’s mother confirmed that Omari was doing better in school later in the year, describing him as going from “straight F’s” in the first marking period to “making the honor roll, with more A’s than B’s,” by the third marking period. She later elaborated that he had written her a four-page letter explaining that he was acting up in school because he felt that she didn’t spend enough time with him and his sister. This seemed to largely be a consequence of her job: Omari’s mother worked seven days a week.

When I asked Omari how he would describe himself, he said, “I’m very nice, and active; I like to play basketball for a living.” His mother described him as “a lovable person, [with] a big heart,” who “can be sensitive at times.” When he was upset, he had a tendency to shut down, something both he and his mom described, and that I also witnessed at school on occasion. His mother also spoke proudly of his politeness and his respect for women, telling me a story in which a woman Omari held the door for at Dunkin Donuts said to her, “You have a good man right there, for him to be holding the door, you don’t see too many people who hold the doors for ladies. Especially, he’s young.”

Omari’s family had moved out of Milltown the previous year, something his mother had worked tremendously hard to achieve. Getting a mortgage so that she could

buy their new condo had taken her three years, plus the help of an attorney and a mortgage broker. As she described it:

It took me hell and high water for someone to give me a chance. Because when they see you as a young black woman, you don't get child support, because my kid's father is not on child support. And then they see me, you know, coming into a house by myself with two kids, no one gave me a chance. Everybody kept denying me.

The motivation for the move came from her desire both to get a better education for Omari and his five-year-old sister, and to avoid the risks that accompanied living in Milltown. Prior to the move, their apartment had been broken into. Apart from losing all their electronics, the experience eroded their sense of security. Omari's mother explained, "And at that point Omari was scared. He was to the point where he was sleeping with knives under there because he said, 'Well mom, I have to protect you all if somebody come in the house.'"

**Shanya.** Shanya was notable for being actively critical of and resistant to school behavioral norms. Early in the year, she was one of several kids who challenged the school policy on fighting: that you would be suspended, even if you were defending yourself. When I asked her if there are rules she knows she breaks sometimes, she responded, "Mm-hmm. Being silent during transition. Walking on the blue [tiles in the hallway]. Sitting in SLANT. Following ROAD. Using them little hand signal things. And that's basically all." She went on to explain in detail why each of these rules did not make sense. When I asked her if there were any rules she always followed, or that she believed were important, she thought for a moment, then said decisively, "No."

Though school staff often seemed to perceive her as simply argumentative, her critiques and questions struck me as both genuine and thoughtful. For example, Shanya



struggled throughout the year over questions related to what constitutes bullying, arguing that situations such as humorous teasing or mutual conflict should not count. During a small group conversation with the school social worker, Ms. Douglas, in which several kids were raising these sorts of questions, Ms. Douglas said they should move on, adding skeptically, “You all are talking like you’re gon stop.” Shanya replied, “I’m gonna try. I’m not gon make it, but I’m gon try.”

Though multiple experiences with Shanya suggested to me that she had a strong sense of ethics, she did not think of herself that way. When I asked her what people should know about her, she said, “that I’m not scared of nobody because I’m little,” and when I later asked her to tell me about ways she helps other people, she claimed, “I don’t help nobody,” despite the fact that I had witnessed her help other students multiple times, including kids with whom she was often at odds. Her personality was powerful and charismatic; my fieldnotes describe an incident in which she angrily banged her binder down into the bin in the middle of her group’s table, and another student, Gabriel, reached over and adjusted it so it would fit better. She stared at him without speaking for a moment, and he put it back the way it was. Another time, she told me about an argument with a teacher in which the teacher warned her that most kids don’t make it out of the local high school. Shanya apparently retorted, “Yeah, most. I’m gon make it. ‘Cause I’m like that.”

Needless to say, Shanya’s tendency to argue with teachers meant that she got in trouble with some frequency. She particularly struggled at the beginning of the school year, something her friend Talia attributed to the recent death of her cousin, saying, “Yeah, her little cousin had drowned. She was sad about it. And then when she come to

school, she don't want to do no work, like she was kinda depressed. She didn't feel like doing anything." However, she did not get in trouble as frequently as some of the other students in the class, including Jamir. Though she often talked in class, she also seemed somewhat serious about finishing her work (despite her claims that she never did homework). I observed her devise clever solutions to math problems and help her friend Talia with her science. Unfortunately, I don't know to what extent her intelligence was recognized in the school. She had failed a reading test that required students to read out loud for a minute, and graded them on how many words they were able to read; subsequently, she was sent out of the classroom during Spanish class for special help with reading. She was extremely distressed by this, initially refusing to participate in any of the activities. About two weeks later, she told me, "I don't have to go with Ms. Adams no more," continuing, "I told my mom I didn't want to go because it makes me feel retarded, and she said I didn't have to go." Upon further questioning, it was revealed that her mom had not spoken to anyone at the school about the situation, she had simply told Shanya, "just don't go" next time.

Of all the students I spoke to, Shanya expressed the strongest connection to Milltown. She said she wanted to continue living there when she grew up, and continued, "More people wanna move because they hear like a lot of gunshots and stuff. But that don't bother me, cause I like the way they sound." She explained that Milltown was not really as bad as some people thought:

Because it's like if you really actually like sit there and learn, like and sit there and watch what's going on and actually learn about how people is, and why people shooting and stuff, then you'll see why they be shooting. Most people shoot and rob cause they ain't got no money to feed their kids, and other people shoot and rob just to do it for fun.

A group project the previous year had required them to create something to help the community, and Shanya's group had designed a big building, which included a place for homeless people to sleep, a beauty shop "so people could have jobs," and a movie theater. When she grew up, she wanted to become a lawyer "for people who fell or who got hit by a bus," and devote half her paycheck to actually building that building and paying people to work there.

**Talia.** Talia was another student I formed a close relationship to over the course of my fieldwork. She seemed to be wrestling with her relationship to the behavioral structures in the school, at times making a concerted effort to comply while at other times raising some serious and thoughtful critiques. She sometimes closed her eyes or covered her face in an effort to control herself, and was the student who was most preoccupied by all the 'misbehavior' I was observing. However, in interviews she raised many of the same questions and critiques as Shanya. Her seeming buy-in may have resulted from a sense that her achievements or failures here could significantly impact her future. Unlike Shanya, who would have been happy to leave JWJ, Talia was clear that "I don't want to go to no public school."

When Talia did violate the behavioral expectations of the school, it was often a result of her being distracted by social interaction or drama, and subsequently laughing, commenting, or making angry retorts. Teachers also noticed her more readily the other kids because she had a very resonant, carrying voice. At the beginning of the school year, she got in trouble a lot, particularly with Ms. Campbell. In an interview several months later, she attributed this to grief at the loss of her aunt, who died three weeks before the start of the school year:

Talia: [My mom] said that she work so hard and there's no reason for me to be angry at the world and stuff like that. She thought I was angry. I was kinda angry.

EG: Do you know what you were angry about?

Talia: Because since my aunt had died, it was just kind of weird. Because when I talked to her, she seemed like okay. Then I felt when she died, it was just like everything changed, and stuff like that. [...] And then Ms. Campbell was always on my back. When I first came, she was on my back. I never had no chance to say what I actually thought because she was just always looking and staring. I felt like she would stare at me and watch me until I did something wrong so she could see it.

Talia was also reported by other students for bullying multiple times over the course of the year. Both her mother and Ms. Douglas told me that the previous year, she had been a victim of some fairly serious bullying, and had written a letter threatening to kill herself. Both felt that this year, she had decided, "I'm going to get you before you get me." Talia herself said:

Last year when people used to talk about me I really didn't like, say nothing, so it's like, this year, I'm like if you say something about me then I'm gonna say something back, like I'm not gonna keep nothing in or nothing like that.

However, with the acknowledgment that a significant proportion of kids' interactions were happening over social media, I did not ever see Talia engage in behavior I would consider bullying. Though she was involved in conflicts with other kids, she also did things I would consider both thoughtful and commendable, including seeking out another girl for the purpose of acknowledging and apologizing for a time she had secretly stomped on her backpack.

When I asked Talia to describe herself, she said:

I think that I am very caring for people. I think that I value everyone's opinions. Even though sometimes it might not seem like that, but, I do care about other people. It's just that I don't really show it that I care about people, but I do.

Her mother described her as mature and dependable, saying that if she needed something done, it was better to ask Talia to do it than to ask her sixteen-year-old sister. Talia told

me she likes to cook, and knows how to make chicken, hash browns, noodles, spaghetti, “and meatloaf, but sometimes it be burnt.” When I asked her where she might want to live when she grows up, she said:

I think that Milltown will be worse by the time I get older, but I will still live in Milltown. ‘Cause, when I go to my grandma's house, she lives in Hopsburg, so that's like further where the houses are on a highway. It's weird. I couldn't live where it's all quiet at night. I'm used to like hearing people yell or argue or something like that.

**Other Significant Characters.** There are three students who were not focal students, but who were so central to the life of the Bowdoin homeroom that it's worth describing each briefly here. The first, Arnold, was a very small and skinny Black boy who most teachers suspected had attention deficit disorder, though he had never been diagnosed. He struggled noticeably to engage in any academic work and I regularly worked one-on-one with him, taking him into an empty classroom to talk, read or work on an assignment. Behaviorally, he was all over the place, regularly talking and walking around the room. Teachers seemed almost to have put him in a separate category in their minds—they either ignored or tried to respond supportively to behavior that would have invoked reprimands or consequences for other students. In addition to his small stature, Arnold was childlike, a characteristic I suspect made teachers more inclined to be lenient or understanding with him. Once while Ms. Campbell was lecturing the class about their behavior, she said sarcastically, “Time flies when you're having fun.” Arnold replied earnestly, “It do?”, to which Chris whispered back, “Yes.” Despite his academic struggles and his immaturity, Arnold was smart. Ms. Douglas, the school social worker, told me later in the year that they had had him tested, and all his scores were average or above average. He also memorized more digits of pi than any other student in the sixth grade, a

feat that earned him the opportunity to “pie” a teacher. Though I do not know what might have caused it, I suspect that there was an emotional component to Arnold’s difficulties. More even than his early adolescent peers (many of whom were rather emotional), Arnold’s emotional responses could be overwhelming. He once completely shut down on learning that his class might not have gym that day, despite being outside the classroom with me and one other friend, doing an activity he liked.

Kasy was a Black girl who was often positioned as an outsider relative to the rest of the class. At one point, five or six students in Bowdoin got in trouble for regularly stomping on her backpack. Kasy regularly violated the behavioral norms of the school, though many of her actions flew under the teachers’ radar. She secretly walked on top of a low stone wall outside the gym, moved her desk in the classroom, threw away worksheets and family notices. At times she seemed to be trying to provoke attention, but far more often she avoided getting caught, which made me think her actions served a personal purpose, perhaps giving her a sense of power. Early in the year she showed me a “prank list” she had made of people she planned to take revenge upon. Though she usually liked speaking to me, at one point in the middle of the year she became furious with me for no reason I was aware of. This was resolved when I asked her if she wanted to bring a friend to come eat lunch upstairs with me (something I’d been doing with a lot of other kids in order to conduct interviews).

Finally, Oscar was a Latino boy who was often disruptive in class. He was the only student in the class whose behavior would sometimes annoy me; while other kids generally misbehaved out of anger, boredom or misunderstanding, Oscar seemed primarily motivated by attention. One day during social studies, he spontaneously got up

and started pushing a mop around the room while everyone was working. He would commonly do exactly what a teacher had just said not to do. His actions also exasperated other students; although he was Omari's friend, Omari agreed with Chris during an interview when Chris commented, "I hate when Oscar's dumb at the wrong time," chiming in, "It's annoying!" Ms. Douglas told me that Oscar had struggled the previous year because his mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer, but that she was better now; her explanation for his behavior was that his mother tended to spoil him. I did not get to know Oscar well enough to offer my own interpretation of his actions. I did observe, however, that he had moments of kindness in addition to his more attention-seeking behaviors. One day while everyone was standing in line, I saw him reach out and take a girl's books for her so that she could put a sweatshirt on. Another time, when a piece of candy Omari was tossing to him accidentally hit a girl in the face, he went over to Omari and told him he should apologize to her.

Having described the context, practices and people at JWJ charter school, I will now move on to consider the civic significance of what I observed there. The next three chapters will consider community relationships, authority relationships, and student voice at the school. In these chapters, I will necessarily prioritize highlighting larger themes and patterns over giving a full description of any single incident or person. However, I hope that the details offered in this chapter serve as a reminder of the full complexities of the school context, and of each student, staff member and parent who generously offered their assistance and perspectives in this work.

## CHAPTER 4:

### CONCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY

This chapter is the first of three in which I examine how students perceived discourse and practices related to behavior management, how those perceptions impacted students, and what the civic implications of school practices might be. In this chapter, I consider how students' viewed adult authority in the school. Researchers have found that young people's views of societal institutions are significant in determining their civic engagement, or lack thereof (Cohen, 2010; Rubin, 2007), and that such views are shaped by their experiences in school (Flanagan et al., 2007). This suggests that students' conceptions of and experiences with school authority are civically significant.

My findings demonstrate that students wanted adults in school to assert their authority in certain situations, particularly to make sure that everyone was safe and respected, and that learning could occur. However, they also experienced the more restrictive school rules as frustrating and nonsensical, and rule enforcement as unfair. While they responded well to redirection in the form of talking and support, they were enmeshed in a disciplinary system that emphasized rewards and punishments. Such treatment bears an unfortunate similarity to the "unfairness" in the broader world that students described at length. Overall, kids' experiences in school contribute to rather than mitigate a view that institutional authority is unfair and often does not operate in the service of people like themselves.

#### **Authority as Protective**



As I discussed in chapter three, JWJ was a distinctly calmer and more orderly place in the years following the CBA takeover. Kids in general appreciated this; as Steven told me, “I like this school ‘cause teachers are always looking. Like, once you hear something, someone yelling, the teachers come in.” Mario agreed, saying, “at my old school, there would be more fights than anything. [...] My brother, he got jumped at my school, and the security guards were there, and they didn’t do anything about it.”

In particular, students felt that behavior that disrespected or harmed another person should be taken seriously. For example, though I explained to students that I was not going to tell teachers about things I saw or heard, almost every student said that I *should* tell a teacher if I saw someone being bullied. Chris and Omari explained:

Chris: When it’s like major big deal, and nobody knows that the situation—so say if somebody—

Omari: Bullying.

Chris: —was making fun of somebody and the teacher never knew who it was, and you saw it, you could tell the teacher. It would make sense if you could tell.

Even Shanya, who was unremittingly critical and skeptical of school authority, said, “If it was like something really, really serious, and like somebody started crying from it, I think you should say something.”

Additionally, students were actually critical of times that they felt teachers hadn’t responded strongly enough to disrespectful or harmful behavior:

Omari: For real. Ms. Monet be on some stuff, like she be on some weird stuff. Like if you do something wrong, like bullying somebody, she gives you a deduction. (laughter) Like that day, Kasy sprayed something in my face, she was like, “Wha—how you do that, Kasy! That’s a deduction.”

EG: Wait, what do you mean, she should do something more, or...?

Omari: Like if you bullying somebody, she’ll give you a deduction.

Chris: In other classes, that’s like a suspension or a CRT.

It would be easy to assume that Omari's desire for a stronger response in this situation is based entirely on the fact that he was the victim of disrespectful behavior. However, Jamir offered the same critique even when he was the one who would have gotten in trouble. Describing an altercation he had with another boy, he commented, "I should have got expelled, I should have gotten suspended, but Ms. Monet said, 'Oh, that's a deduction.'"

In a powerful example of kids' concern for how others are treated, Talia once called Ms. Campbell on the phone to confess to stomping on Kasy's bookbag and tell her who else had been stomping on it. Significantly, Talia had poor relationships with both Ms. Campbell and Kasy, while the kids she was turning in were kids she hung out with, including her two closest friends. Describing what happened, she said:

I told Ms. Campbell, when she told me to call her, I called her. I told her who stomped on [Kasy's] book bag. I told her because it's not right for us to stomp on her bookbag. I just told her anyway. But I told her the main *three* people who will do it. I told her that me and Tescia and Shanya only did it once but we realized that it wasn't right so we stopped. But I didn't really feel like that I opped [snitched] on them. I just feel like that, they know that what they did was wrong.

Despite Talia's dislike of Ms. Campbell and many criticisms of her responses to kids' behavior, in this situation she supported her in using her authority to protect someone else.

In addition to concerns about respect and safety, kids sometimes expressed a desire for adults to respond to behavior that was inappropriate, annoying or disruptive to the learning process. One example of this occurred in May, during a week in which the kids received a series of special treats leading up to the state standardized test. At the end of the day on Friday the sixth- and seventh-graders got to watch the recent remake of *Annie*, which many of them were really excited about. However, there was also a

contingent of kids that kept talking, as well as a lot of boys that kept putting a beat under the music by drumming loudly on their chairs. Other kids became extremely annoyed with them, asking or yelling at them repeatedly to stop and to be quiet. Talia asked several times, “Can you guys stop please?” Victoria rolled her eyes, looking increasingly annoyed and eventually asking Ms. Ernest to make them stop. At one point, the whole seventh grade seemed to call out the sixth grade for being noisy—there was a sort of collective exclamation of, “Sixth-graders!” Though staff chose to relax behavioral expectations during this time, at least some students seemed to want someone to insist on behavior that would allow them to enjoy the movie.

In explaining some school rules, students would also explicitly reference the impact on other people. Jessica pointed out that when some people go to the bathroom, they, “play on their phones and they take forever. And then they get a CRT because they took 15 minutes in the bathroom or more.” When I asked if it was bad to play on your phone in the bathroom, she said, “Yes. Because a lot of other people want to use the bathroom, and if other people are playing on their phones that's just not fair.” Students were especially concerned about learning and doing well in school, and valued behaviors that were conducive to those outcomes. In discussing school rules he thought were important, Omari said it was important not to be disruptive during class, explaining, “if we’re being disruptive, then we won’t learn what we supposed to learn and then when it comes on the test, we won’t know what we’re supposed to do and then you get a bad grade which takes away from your grade.”

Overall, students valued the role of adult authority in insisting on norms such as kindness, respect and fairness. However, they also leveled serious criticisms of certain

school rules, and of the ways in which rules were enforced. I discuss these patterns below.

### **Rules as Nonsensical**

While students believed in rules that accomplished some worthwhile aim, they felt that many of the highly restrictive behavioral expectations at JWJ did not fall into that category. Instead, the school's behavioral system tended to emphasize conformity over meaning, and students were often frustrated by how rigidly their behavior was controlled in the school.

#### **Restrictive structures.**

As described in chapter three, JWJ had numerous rules that carefully structured when students could speak and how they could move through the building. Though there was some disagreement about specific rules, students in general were highly critical of these structures, feeling that they were unnecessary or even counterproductive. Shanya offered a broad critique of the various ways the school structured students' behavior:

Because it's like, if you walk in college, you're not only going to have to walk only on one side. Like you're going to have to walk down the whole hall, and when they tell you to walk on the blue, I walk on the other side of the blue cause what if there're like mad kids on one side of the blue, you're going to have to walk over and go around, and we do that a lot. And then I hate when we have to go up a certain stairwell, and it just doesn't make no sense. 'Cause in lunch, we go up any stairwell that she pick and that it just don't make no sense to me. And the hand signals? We got voices, I want to speak, I don't want to sit there and raise my hand and do hand signals and stuff.

Central to her criticisms is the seemingly arbitrary nature of the rules. As she points out, such behaviors are not applicable to other situations, such as college. Additionally, numerous situations require students to walk on the other side of the hallway or use a

different staircase, and but only the staff, not the students, are given the authority to make those determinations. She also resists the standardization of student behavior through hand signals, saying, “We got voices, I want to speak.”

In another interview, Talia and Shanya both criticized the expectation that students walk through the halls silently in single-file lines, saying:

Shanya: Like, in college, they don’t do that. If you talked in the hall, oh well, you talked in the hall. Like—

Talia: They should be more college-like here. Like—

Shanya: *Yeah*, we named after universities, we should be like a university!

Talia: ‘Cause the way they making it, like...tucking our shirts in, that’s not a problem, but when they like, talking about being silent in the hallways, then that’s not really gon benefit us in college, unless like, another class is learning then we just yellin’ in the hallway, but I think we actually know better than to yell in the hallway.

Again, they argue that this highly restricted behavior is not really good preparation for college, pointing out a contradiction between the emphasis on college that is characteristic of no-excuses schools and the behavior management structures used by those schools. While Talia agrees that it could be disruptive to yell in the hallway, she expresses a greater level of trust in students’ behavior than that implied by the rules, saying, “I think we actually know better than to yell in the hallway.”

Importantly, Talia makes a distinction between these rules and rules related to how students dress. Though many students took issue with aspects of the uniform and wanted more dress-down days, they also reflected a belief that dressing “professionally” was important. Estrella, for example, said that she agreed with having a uniform because “this make us look professional to any person that comes to the school, like, you know, to see us. And I would also not change it because, um – people, like in my old school, they made fun of people’s clothes.” In contrast, Estrella said she sometimes knowingly broke

the rule to be silent in the hallways if there was something important she wanted to say to somebody, though she was careful to stop after making her one comment. When I asked if she thought the rule about not talking during transitions was important, she said no, elaborating:

Estrella: Because I think people should be able to talk to socialize with other people.

EG: Okay. And you all don't get a lot of time to do that here, really, right?

Estrella: Yeah, we don't.

Distinctions such as this one highlight students' desire for rules to serve a purpose, and their belief that many of the highly restrictive rules, such as those governing silence in the hallway, are not only frustrating but unnecessary.

In addition to their skepticism around the need for silence in the hallways, some students criticized the expectation that they work silently in the classroom. Mario referred to this expectation as "crazy," explaining, "Because [if we can't talk to each other], we won't get to like...get help on our work." Similarly, Omari told me, "Like, sometimes, when Chris needs help, I help him, and then she says... that's a deduction. Sometimes, they don't even give out rules, like they don't say you can't talk or anything." Students were not always required to be silent during class; the use of pair or group work was not uncommon. However, the reasoning behind their critiques is noteworthy. While students undoubtedly wanted to—and did—talk to socialize and goof off, they also felt that requiring silence often hindered rather than supported their academic success. Mario elaborated on this, saying, "let's say he has a method, I have a method. And if we could like, combine our methods make it even easier. You understand?"

There was not universal agreement among students around exactly *which* rules didn't make sense. Omari, for example, once expressed some agreement with silent

transitions. He explained, “the more time we waste talking during transition, the more days we miss of lessons,” a reference to an explanation Ms. Azikiwe gave at a school assembly in the beginning of the year. A group of eighth-grade boys had a lengthy argument about whether this rule made sense:

Roman: I get it. I get why they’re doing it.

EG: You do?

Roman: Yeah, cause it’s preparing us for a different transition. From a public school to a charter school. That’s a big transition by itself. A CRT is a consequence for if you do something, not following the rules. So if you talking in line, you get a CRT, you gotta come to after school detention. So deductions, you get 8, you get a consequence, which means so don’t little simple things.

De’Quan: Besides that, I’m talking about walking in the halls silently. You don’t do that in high school and college.

Roman: Maybe they’re just trying to maintain self-control in the hallways.

De’Quan: Nah, they don’t let you try!

Roman: That is trying.

De’Quan: Not if they don’t give you a chance to try to walk in the halls by yourself.

Roman: We did have that chance. [referencing a brief period during which eighth-graders were allowed to transition on their own for the first half of the day]

De’Quan: Not the 6th grade and 7th graders.

Ráfe: They gave us more freedom or liberty since we’re the ones going to high school.

De’Quan: But still. Like, what they gonna learn the last year of they middle school like to transition on they own. So they don’t know what’s going on in high school.

Ráfe: I had this conversation with other people. So they expect us in high school to be walking in lines like a baby with the teachers holding our hands telling us where to go. So they expect us to do that over there and look like fools when the teachers expect us to know already where to go, where the next class is, what time to be, when over here they treat us like little toddlers, holding our hands in the line. They’re “go here go here, you can’t be” and then they expect us to like learn from that.

In this discussion, Roman’s arguments resemble comments school staff sometimes made about students needing to learn self-control and refrain from engaging in little, silly behaviors. In contrast, De’Quan and Ráfe contend that without freedom, students have no

opportunity to develop the self-control and independence actually required in high school and college.

While kids' opinions of specific rules differed somewhat, overall, kids still felt that many of the rules, especially those that severely restricted their behavior, didn't make sense. Even Jessica and Emma, who had no difficulty in meeting the behavioral standards of the school, were quick to proclaim, "We need freedom!" This is not to suggest that these structures served no purpose; certainly, Ms. Azikiwe's description of the school environment before the CBA takeover suggests that more structure or oversight may have been needed. However, the lack of buy-in around these structures is significant regardless of whether or not the structures were necessary. It suggests that kids' *experience* of institutional authority within their school involved dealing with rules that felt frustrating, unreasonable or even counter-productive.

### **Sweating the small stuff.**

The simple things that say in public school is a big deal here. So when you walk around the halls and talk in public school—here, it's a big consequence. When you stand up and go sharpen your pencil in a public school, teacher don't care. But here you get a deduction. So it's those simple things in public school that's way big here. – Roman

As Roman describes in the quote above, no-excuses classroom management involves "sweating the small stuff" by regulating even minor behaviors. One aspect of this approach involves stipulating when and how students talk and move through the building, as described above. Another involves monitoring and addressing small behavioral deviation in an effort to prevent disruption and insist on one hundred percent compliance. It is important to note that staff members did not always do this; as I will describe in chapter seven, Ms. Azikiwe criticized the "lockstep" practices of some no-



excuses charters and emphasized approaches and practices that deviated significantly from the no-excuses model. My observations suggest that staff members made choices about when to ignore students' behavior or loosen up on the rules, and the teachers I would consider most effective did this more often. Nonetheless, students (and arguably, teachers) still felt the pressure of staying within narrow behavioral boundaries.

One consequence of this pressure was that students were sometimes reprimanded for behaviors that were not intended to be disruptive, such as giggling loudly or sitting sideways in their chairs. Omari, for example, identified "laughing in class" as a rule he breaks sometimes. When I asked if he thought that rule was important, he told me "it's not really important," because "the teacher still teaches," meaning the laughter did not really disrupt the lesson. Omari's mother, who was generally positive about the school's strict policies, told me that Ms. Campbell had given Omari deductions for not sitting up straight in his chair, and said, "that's tedious to me. [...] Let's be honest, we as adults don't sit up straight in the chair." Students who were more energetic and physically active were particularly vulnerable to these sorts of negative interactions. In chapter three, I described an incident in which Jamir was so excited to answer a question that he leapt to his feet. Mr. Balkus responded disapprovingly, "You're going to have to sit down and wait," with the result that Jamir shifted from feeling excited to feeling angry and upset. Incidents such as this one are illustrative of the ways that school rules often focused on the form rather than the meaning of students' behavior.

Additionally, the pressures related to behavior impacted the overall environment at JWJ. In their descriptions of the school, students noted the difficulty of keeping their behavior within acceptable limits. When I asked what advice he would give to a new

student, Chris responded, “Be silent most of the time. Just practice being silent, just sit in a room.” Similarly, Roman and De’Quan advised:

Roman: Oh uh, I’d just tell ‘em, watch them deductions. Come in here ready, prepared.

De’Quan: Don’t, uh, try to be too active.

Roman: Yeah.

De’Quan: ‘Cause that gets you in trouble.

EG: You mean like physically active? Moving around?

De’Quan: Yeah, moving around and talking a lot and stuff.

Roman: (simultaneously) You need a lot of self-control.

At another point in the interview, De’Quan said in frustration, “this school trying to make you perfect.” The difficulty of meeting JWJ’s behavioral standards was exacerbated by the fact that students were at school for eight hours a day. During that time, they were monitored carefully and had very limited opportunities to speak or move freely. Though staff privately expressed concerns to me about kids needing unstructured time to just be kids, they also often responded with negativity or exasperation to misbehavior that was arguably almost inevitable. Jamir once quipped, “basically what it is, this is a prison,” to which Omari responded, “And we got watchers everywhere.” To a great extent, kids experienced this environment as repressive rather than supportive. Even as an adult observer who could come and go as I pleased, I often felt exhausted by the end of the school day.

Finally, efforts to ensure that *all* students’ behavior fell within these boundaries at all times sometimes derailed lessons rather than facilitating them. Mr. Balkus and Ms. Ernest, in particular, would sometimes stop teaching entirely as they attempted to address behavior, which in turn made the disruption worse as kids who had originally been paying attention became bored. Once when this was happening in Mr. Balkus’s class, Talia commented to me, “You might want to take some notes on this, Mr. Eliot.” I asked

her if she wanted to write some notes for me, and she wrote in my notebook, “Mr. Balkus continues to stop the whole class just because a group of kids. Deductions don’t work for most of the children.” Roman and De’Quan also criticized teachers for “stop[ping] the whole class just cause that one person was talking,” saying they had been told that teachers didn’t do that in high school, but, “here, kids interrupt the class, and it’s like, someone gonna rob a bank.”

In regards to both the larger systems that structured students’ behavior at school and the ways that (some) staff members responded to relatively minor behaviors, kids felt that they had to follow rules that had very little to do with outcomes they valued, such as learning or respect. Some students even felt these rules were counter-productive, preventing them from developing relationships with others, helping one another, or developing independence and self-control. Overall, this positions institutional authority as potentially arbitrary or nonsensical.

### **Rule Enforcement as Unfair**

Perhaps even more upsetting to kids than the ways their behavior was restricted at school were their experiences of being treated unfairly. Across groups of both sixth- and eighth-grade students, they leveled two major critiques of how rules were enforced in the school: they felt that people often got in trouble even when they hadn’t done anything wrong, and they felt that some people were treated better than others.

#### **“Getting in Trouble for No Reason”**

As the school year progressed and kids in Bowdoin began to know and trust me, they would sometimes come to me to express their frustration about their experiences in

school. One day during Spanish class, Mario moved over to sit next to me. After quizzing me on Spanish adjectives for a few minutes, he commented to me “Yesterday, I got a CRT for no reason.” I asked him what happened, and he said they had been lining up to leave lunch and Ms. Campbell had thought he was talking. He had to go talk to Mr. Forester, who gave him CRT. This anecdote is typical; every student I spoke to agreed that people sometimes get in trouble when they hadn’t done anything wrong.

Sometimes this resulted from the teacher mis-identifying who was talking; as Talia exclaimed in frustration one day during Mr. Balkus’s class, “You give me a deduction when it’s them over there!” Once when this happened to Arnold, he was so upset that Ms. Campbell allowed me to take him out of the room into an empty classroom across the hall. Once there, he typed up his story on my laptop:

When Arnold was walking in the hall coming from the book fair, he started to walk up stairs to the class. Oscar and Jamir started to jump up and down, started to act like they was falling then Oscar and Jamir fell in front of Ms. Hower office. Then Ms. Hower told all of us Jamir, Oscar and Arnold told us that we have to come in her office. Arnold tried to tell her that it was not him. But Ms. Hower did not listen so then Jamir and Oscar tried to tell her she said do not say nothing just call your moms and tell them that you are to have a mandatory meeting. Then Arnold said it again that it was not him. At the end Ms. Hower said if you get in trouble you will be suspended.

As reflected in this story, not only did Arnold try to explain to Ms. Hower what had happened, but Jamir and Oscar also backed up his story. However, staff were not always willing to listen to these explanations. Though Arnold was not ultimately suspended as a result of this incident, that outcome does not entirely mitigate his experience of being treated unfairly and not being listened to in the moment.

Students also “got in trouble for no reason” as a result of teachers misunderstanding the intent of their actions or the context of what had happened. Omari,

Jamir and Chris told me repeatedly about an incident in which Arnold's shoe fell off on the stairs and he went rushing past them to retrieve it. When Jamir and Omari moved to get out of his way, laughing because the whole incident seemed funny, Ms. Ernest told them to get back in line, and then Ms. Hower, who was nearby, heard Ms. Ernest, asked who was out of line, and assigned them CRT. As Jamir and Chris explained:

Jamir: [...] we move to the side, she says that we playing, but we was laughing 'cause the shoe fall off, and then he go thundering down.

Chris: And then he was like screaming, 'My shoe! My shoe!'

Jamir: He was screaming, right, that's why I was laughing. And we had to move aside before he push us down the steps and we fall!

Again, for whatever reason, the staff involved in this instance were unwilling to accept Jamir and Omari's explanation for their actions. As Omari told me:

"[Ms. Hower] kept telling us, 'be quiet, be quiet.' She called our moms. And my mom—she called my mom after school, and my mom said, 'Is there anything you want to tell me?' I said, 'Yeah, I got CRT for moving out of the way so a student could get their shoe;' she said, 'No, they told me that you were playing around and stuff;' I said, 'I even have a witness,' and she was quiet.

Ms. Hower's interpretation that Omari and Jamir were "playing around" was likely influenced by the fact that they laughed at the absurdity of the situation. As mentioned previously, laughing at the wrong moment was something students could get in trouble for, suggesting that it was commonly viewed by staff as a sign of misbehavior.

Students' intentions were also sometimes misconstrued when they were trying to work. Omari described a time this happened to him in Ms. Campbell's class:

Look look look, this is what happened. Remember when Ms. Campbell made me put my computer away. Oscar kept doing this to my screen, I said, stop, stop. And she was like, Omari, put your computer away—I didn't even doing nothing. That was him. And then she says still put it away. I'm like what? And then she get mad when I don't do my work. And sometimes when I'm thinking, she be like Omari, get to work. I'm thinking. Omari, get to work.

In this situation, Omari was actually trying to concentrate on doing math; however, Ms. Campbell assumed that his comments to Oscar meant that he was off-task. Similarly, he describes her as often telling him to get back to work when he's thinking. Mario and Chris also reported similar incidents, saying that as they leaned their heads on their hands or stared absently across the room while thinking about how to approach a question or problem, teachers would tell them to get back to work or accuse them of not paying attention. Roman and De'Quan described these sorts of misinterpretations as common:

De'Quan: Sometimes when you try to help people, they take it to a different way, like, somebody probably asked you a question about something important, and then you try to answer it, and then they start acting crazy and stuff like that.

EG: Wait the person acts crazy or the teachers act crazy?

Roman and De'Quan: Teachers.

EG: 'Cause they think you're talking when you're not supposed to be talking.

Roman: Yeah, they think we talking about something else, like, if someone asking for a pencil, and I try to tell 'em I don't have a pencil, and they catch me saying I don't have a pencil, they'll think I'm talking about something different.

As they point out, interactions that were actually about trying to understand classwork or borrowing a pencil—behaviors that reflect effort toward schoolwork—were often taken by teachers as evidence of the exact opposite. As I will discuss further in chapter seven, I suggest that while such misinterpretations stemmed partially from teachers' racialized views of students, they were also exacerbated by the no-excuses model's emphasis on "sweating the small stuff" by catching and responding to every minor instance of misbehavior.

Naturally, kids who seldom got in trouble told me fewer stories about "getting in trouble for no reason." However, they had other critiques regarding the fairness of how rewards and punishment were meted out. Estrella, Jessica, Emma and Arrianna criticized teachers for forgetting to enter their additions into the computer system, which they

believed was responsible for keeping all of them from going on the second field trip of the year despite their generally exemplary behavior. They were also frustrated by losing privileges when other students misbehaved (an issue I describe in more detail in chapter five), and agreed that some students were treated better than others (as I discuss below). Finally, when I returned toward the end of their seventh-grade year to conduct member-checking interviews, they agreed that “kids can get in trouble when they didn’t do anything wrong,” offering more examples of having experienced this themselves than they did in sixth-grade.

Additionally, students sometimes witnessed what they perceived as other kids being treated unfairly even if it didn’t happen to them directly. While it was unusual for Chris to get in trouble himself, he described instances in which his friends Omari and Jamir were treated unfairly. Similarly, Steven told me in an interview:

They gave Talia a CRT ‘cause she was like walking down the hall, right? ‘Cause I was going to the bathroom. I saw her. She went to the nurse. She was walking and Mr. Biondi stopped her and he gave her CRT for no entire reason. [...] She wasn’t doing nothing. She was just walking.

Though it didn’t happen to him, Steven saw another student receive a punishment for, in his mind, “no entire reason.” His perception of and concern with this incident are particularly striking in light of the fact that Steven and Talia had no relationship with one another other than being in the same homeroom class. Thus, he had no reason to pay attention to or worry about how she was treated other than general concern for fairness.

### **“Special Privileges”**

In addition to the widespread perception that punishments and rewards did not always line up with behavior, virtually every student I spoke to felt that some kids were treated better than others. When I asked Shanya, Talia and Tescia whether they thought

the world was a fair place or an unfair place, Tescia responded, “Sometimes,”  
elaborating:

‘Cause sometimes things are fair and sometimes things are not fair, because here in this school people...I don’t know how to say it, like, they’ll like...for the good kids they’ll treat them better, and they’ll treat the bad kids, like for a different example, and stuff. Like a bad behavior.

Here, Tescia seems to be trying to explain that “good kids” are treated better than “bad kids,” possibly because teachers are more likely to perceive “bad kids” as having done something wrong. Indeed, multiple other kids told me that teachers would respond differently to the same behavior depending on who did it. Roman, De’Quan and Ráfe offered a powerful example of this:

De’Quan: I had took Davi’s pencil—I ain’t gon lie, I took his pencil, ‘cause it was a nice pencil. (everyone laughs) So Ms. Hower and Mr. Forester, that’s when they started saying they were gonna suspend me and call the cops and all this other stuff cause I was stealin’.

E: They said they were going to call the cops?

De’Quan: Yeah!

Roman: Over a lead pencil.

De’Quan: That’s when Davi took my pencil, and I told Ms. Hower; she said “get a new one.” And like, yeah it wasn’t even fair cause they gettin’ mad ‘cause I took his pencil but then he take my pencil.

E: Does that make you think that it’s better to handle it yourself than to tell someone?

De’Quan: Yeah.

Roman: Yeah. Because it’s like, they not going to do anything if it’s a good person, somebody who’s always good and then do something bad, they won’t believe it.

Ráfe: They treat the bad people with bad reputations differently than the other people, but they really don’t see our side of the story.

De’Quan: And the good people do bad stuff too sometimes.

In this anecdote, Ms. Hower responds completely differently to De’Quan and Davi, even though what they did was the same. Furthermore, because De’Quan is a “bad person” with a “bad reputation,” they react to a relatively minor misdeed as though it was a serious crime. As De’Quan and Ráfe point out, school staff often don’t see “our side of



the story,” nor do they seem to notice that “good people do bad stuff too sometimes.” In a similar story, Omari told me, “Cesar, he hit me and I hit him back; Mr. Balkus was like yo, chill out man. I’m like, how you going to tell me to chill out, he just hit me first.” (To offer some context, Cesar was a rather serious boy who had the highest average paycheck in Bowdoin, and who sat next to Omari in science class. He was one of those kids who seemed like a tiny adult, and would sometimes tell his friends what to do in an effort to keep them in line. Although I didn’t see this incident, I can imagine Cesar smacking Omari on the shoulder or arm if he thought he wasn’t paying attention.) When I asked in surprise, “Cesar hit you?” Omari responded, “He always hits me. And then when I hit him back, oh, I get in trouble.” Like in De’Quan’s story, adults in the school seem either not to notice the “good kids” doing “bad things,” or not to take it as seriously.

The “good kids” were not the only beneficiaries of this differential treatment; some students with particularly significant behavioral struggles also received what their peers referred to as “special privileges.” Luciana, a girl who transferred out of Bowdoin early in the year because she was supposed to have been placed in the supported class, told me that she got CRT for wearing a necklace that violated the dress code, but that several girls in Berkeley had such necklaces and “they don’t get in trouble.” Arrianna and Jessica chimed in:

Arrianna: Yeah, Destiny has it and Ms. Hower said we can’t wear them, and Destiny wore it one time. And she saw her.

Luciana: I think they knew them longer.

Jessica: It’s cause like – students that misbehave, that go to Ms. Hower too much, they get like – they get special privileges sometimes.

Jessica, Luciana and Arrianna were not the only students to suggest that kids who get in trouble a lot also get special privileges. Many students in Bowdoin made this comment,

particularly in regards to Arnold, whose behavior was often all over the place. To offer one illustration, my fieldnotes from a social studies class in October describe Arnold as drumming on his desk, and later getting up making a circuit of the room, humming to himself, while the rest of the class worked quietly. Talia whispered to me, “See? Special privileges,” in reference to a conversation she and Shanya had had with me previously in which they complained that Arnold could misbehave without getting in trouble, but anyone else who did the same thing would get in trouble. Jamir, Chris and Omari made similar complaints numerous times. Chris an example of this unfair treatment, saying:

Jamir, when you were mad, remember when you got in trouble a lot. Arnold was calling out the whole entire time, he was talking too. And that’s when Ms. Campbell was like, “Arnold, shhh.” And then when you kept talking, she was like, “That’s a deduction. Come on, keep talking, I’m going to call your Mom.”

Arnold’s “special privileges” are particular noticeable and particularly upsetting in this instance, as Ms. Campbell seems to these boys almost to be trying to get Jamir in trouble while simply shushing Arnold.

Though of course Arnold *did* get in trouble sometimes, my observations confirm that teachers were often more lenient with him. I believe this stemmed from their desire to be responsive to his difficulties, which were significant, and students understood this to some degree. When I asked Talia and Shanya why they thought teachers were more flexible with Arnold, they responded:

Shanya: Because he go to Ms. Douglas and then he gotta wear that jacket to keep him calm that got all that weight on it, to keep him from going hyper, but that’s not right ‘cause that one time he kept calling out he didn’t get a deduction, but if anybody else call out they get a deduction.

Talia: Mm-hmm. I think it’s because, he probably has like, a problem or something like that the teachers know that he has, or something like that. Like ADHD, or something like that. ‘Cause he don’t never like sit down in one spot, and he stay talking and stuff like that. He don’t know how to like, just sit down and be quiet.

Similarly, Omari once described with great annoyance a time that Arnold kept touching and poking him, saying, “oh, I just wanted to turn around so bad and wanted to punch him. But I said nah, because he goes to Ms. Douglas, so I’m not going to hit him.” However, this understanding did not fully mitigate their sense of frustration either with Arnold’s behavior or with how teachers handled it.

A group of eighth-grade girls similarly described teachers being more lenient with some students than with others, explaining:

Angel: In math class when De’Quan and Roman act up. Sometimes, Roman be bothering De’Quan, so De’Quan would get in trouble for saying “get out of my face” or...you know, the usual.

EG: For telling him to stop bothering him?

Angel: She’ll give De’Quan all these deductions.

Keiara: And then when De’Quan bothers Roman, De’Quan still get the deductions.

When I asked why they thought their math teacher, Ms. Carney, did that, they had a vigorous discussion about whether it was fair:

Angel: Because she like Roman better.

Keiara: That’s how Roman listen. Maybe if she give him a lot of deductions, then he’s not gonna do the right thing, so. And De’Quan can still do the right thing. ‘Cause De’Quan can handle it, Roman can’t.

EG: Does that make it fair if that’s her reason, or it’s still...?

Keiara: Not fair.

EG: Angel, you feel like it’s just cause she likes Roman better? Because it kind of sounds like Keiara feels like she’s trying to help Roman.

Angel: She should be helping De’Quan too, ‘cause--!

Keiara: They follow after to each other. If Roman do something, De’Quan do something. If De’Quan do something, Roman do something.

Angel: No, look. She should be helping De’Quan too, ‘cause look. Every day in her class they rack up deduction, deduction, deduction. They both have four deductions in her class. Early in the morning. How do you get four deductions—

Teanna: In second period they’re gonna be at Chill Out.

Angel: And by the time Ms. Harold’s class, they only need one deduction for them to get to Dean referral, that’s already a CRT or ISS or whatever the case may be. So instead of helping just Roman she should be helping De’Quan too.

In this discussion, Keiara brings up an issue that likely informed some teachers' flexibility with some students: the reality that responding to certain kids with reprimands or consequences, far from moving them in the right direction, is going to cause them to shut down. However, central to the girls' critique is not that Ms. Carney is flexible with Roman, but that "she should be helping De'Quan too." Though other kids did not bring up this point directly, I suspect that this issue impacts their sense that teachers' accommodation of some students is "unfair." Jamir, Talia, Shanya and many of the other kids in Bowdoin may have been significantly less frustrated by Arnold receiving "special privileges" if they also felt that teachers responded to their behavior with understanding and support. Unfortunately, while some teachers did approach behavior management that way at times, such moments did not fully mitigate kids' sense of unfairness.

It's important to note that students did not feel as though all teachers were equally unfair, punitive, or unwilling to listen to them. When I asked Omari at one point if there are some teachers who will believe him if he explains what was happening when he gets in trouble, he said, "Mostly everybody, but Ms. Hower." In one instance that I witnessed and was able to ask him about later, Ms. Ernest put his name on the board because Oscar kept turning around and talking to him. Showing a level of self-restraint that many kids struggled with, Omari didn't get angry or argue with Ms. Ernest in the moment; instead, he went and talked to her later, and she rescinded his consequence. In another incident that I was able to ask multiple kids about, it seemed as though the whole class was going to be unable to eat the pizza they had previously been promised because Tescia and Kasy had gotten into a fight in gym just beforehand. While Mario shared my concern that they would all have to forfeit the pizza, Shanya told me, "I knew we were still gonna get pizza

because like Mr. Forester, he cool, he was gonna let us get pizza after he figured it out it was only like them two students who were fightin’.” Additionally, as I will discuss further in chapter six, students had certain staff members they would sometimes go to for help if they needed it. Though this was not always successful, it does reflect a certain level of trust in the adults in the building. Even Ms. Hower, who was widely criticized, once intervened with Ms. Campbell on Jamir’s behalf when he was being treated unfairly. Simultaneously, this did not fully mitigate kids’ overall sense of unfairness. While far preferable to a school environment in which adults *never* listened to students, students’ strong sense that it mattered *who* was enforcing a rule and how they saw the student involved arguably contributes to students’ sense of institutional authority as arbitrary and unfair.

### **The Importance of Moral Authority**

Thus far, I have explained that while kids wanted adult authority to create a safe, respectful environment for learning, they were critical of *how* that authority was exercised. I suggest that the concept of moral authority is central to understanding these responses. As I discussed in chapter one, authority can be understood as power plus legitimacy, where—in the case of teachers—legitimacy is conferred by students. I argue that students regarded teachers’ authority as legitimate when that authority was seen as being *in the service of worthwhile aims*, such as respect. In contrast, when teachers relied upon rewards and punishments rather than securing student buy-in, students were more likely to resist or resent teachers’ exercise of power over them.

### **Worthwhile Aims**

Talia explicitly criticized the school system for concentrating on the “little rules” rather than on what was truly important. In an interview, she told me:

In the beginning of school year, they give you a handbook before you come to the school. I read the handbook. I got bored so I just start reading it. When I read it, the little rules like the all black shoes, the uniform policies, if that really wasn't a big deal and if they didn't really make a big deal about it, I think that they should not really give a consequence or CRT for that. If you really disrespect and stuff like that, then that's when you should get like the most.

Talia articulates clearly that behaviors such as being disrespectful are what should be taken seriously, not small issues like violating uniform policy. Unfortunately, my observations in the school suggest, in line with Talia's critique here, that the opposite tended to occur. One example of this can be seen in my fieldnotes from October seventh:

Talia called out, “He said the n-word!” Oscar objected, No I didn't. Ms. Ernest paused, seemingly deciding what to do next, and talking started to break out. Ms. Ernest said, sounding somewhat angry, that she didn't know why there was talking when “it wasn't for anyone to talk about but me.” Talia said, “I'm sorry, I should have waited until you got over here.” Ms. Hower happened to enter the room about this time, and everyone quieted down substantially. Nothing further was said on this subject that I was aware of.

Here, Talia calls out because she believes Oscar has used a racial slur. While her overall affect made me think that he must not have done so in a particularly egregious way, it is still telling that concern over student talking overrides concern over the use of this word. Similarly, my fieldnotes describe another instance in which, as students crowded through the halls for dismissal, Talia exclaimed to Ms. Campbell that a boy from another class had called her “the b-word.” Ms. Campbell, preoccupied with trying to keep kids in the correct lines, did not really react. Talia spoke about this later in an interview, saying, “When [a boy] called me the b-word in the hallway, I told Ms. Campbell, Ms. Campbell's like, ‘okay,’ and then she just walked off. I'm like, so that's it, this is okay?” Both these incidents reflect the ways that larger concerns about learning or respect could

get shunted aside in the name of maintaining a certain level of order. This potentially had the effect of undermining the authority structures of the school, because students perceived school staff as putting a lot of effort into enforcing rules that “don’t make sense” while neglecting the issues kids actually felt were important.

### **Rewards and Punishments**

A similar sort of disconnect was seen in regards to how staff responded to misbehavior. Just as students valued rules that accomplished a moral aim, students responded very differently to moments when staff connected with them around *why* certain behaviors mattered than to times when staff threatened or enacted punishment. Talia and Shanya criticized staff members who imposed consequences without listening to kids, and contrasted this approach with an experience that had with Mr. Williams:

Talia: When me and Shanya got in trouble for laughing at [Arrianna’s hair], Mr. Williams didn’t do nothing, he was just like—

Shanya: He was like, “Don’t do that. It might be a mess, but don’t laugh at her. She might not even like it [her hair],” and then he turned into something that we were like, “Oh yeah, you right, you right.”

Rather than chastising or punishing them for their behavior, Mr. Williams helped Talia and Shanya consider the situation from Arrianna’s perspective. When he did this, they were able to agree with him that they shouldn’t laugh at her—a much more powerful outcome than if he had simply told them not to do it.

Earlier in this chapter, I described Talia’s decision to call Ms. Campbell on the phone to tell her which students had been stomping on Kasy’s backpack. Prior to Talia’s call, Ms. Campbell had given the class at least one lengthy talking-to about this behavior. Partway through this speech, she threatened consequences for those students that were involved:

I know exactly who you are, I know exactly what you have said, and I know exactly what you have done. Don't be foolish, don't think for a minute that someone doesn't see or hear what you do in life. Even when you use this (holding up the phone). When you use this, it can be traced. This is a baby computer. It can be found. Websites. It can be proven. There are cameras everywhere. This entire school perimeter—and you should know perimeter—has cameras around it because of the church. So whatever you do outside within this block area right here, you're on a camera somewhere. So if you think—you're being nasty out front, you *think* that you're getting away with it because there isn't anybody outside, you're wrong.

However, she then switched tacks, continuing:

I'm not telling these things to—It's not right, guys, forget being caught, forget being seen. If it was *you*, you would want me to say the same thing to the rest of the class. How would you feel, *how would you feel*, having to put your coat on when you know that your classmates have stepped all over it. On purpose. We all have bad hair days, we all have days when we don't smell too good, we all have days when we don't look too good. So if you think you're above that, I'm here to tell you you're not. It's part of growing, it's part of life. But that does not give you the right to squash the other person.

I suggest that this framing, in which Ms. Campbell emphasized empathizing with Kasy, was potentially significant in Talia's decision to call her. While Talia is clearly a deeply caring and thoughtful person on her own, she did not have a good relationship with Ms. Campbell at this point in the year, so the fact that she confided in her is notable.

Furthermore, in discussing the situation, Talia mirrors Ms. Campbell's empathetic talk, saying, "I feel bad for [Kasy] because I wouldn't want my stuff stomped on." In contrast, when Talia told me *in the same conversation* that Ms. Campbell had said she was "going to get suspended or something like that," she said, "But, I said okay because I didn't like Kasy." Talia expressed regret for stomping Kasy's backpack multiple times, including apologizing to Kasy directly. The only time she claimed she "didn't care" was when referencing consequences.



My observations also demonstrate that kids responded very differently when staff spoke with and listened to them than when they relied upon consequences. Ms. Ernest, who started out the year relying on the school's behavioral system and giving numerous deductions, later shifted toward calling students up to her desk and talking privately with them. Though these talks were so quiet that I could never hear what she said (something that likely contributed to their effectiveness, since she was protecting students' privacy), students generally approached her desk in slow motion, slouching and dragging their feet, but returned to their seats looking noticeably calmer and happier. A story Chris and Jamir told me about a time Ms. Campbell intervened in one of these private talks illustrates what students liked about them:

Chris: Jamir was with Ms. Ernest, and he was talking outside, and Ms. Campbell came out of nowhere: "I'm calling your Mom." And that's when Jamir was like – it was kind of funny though. He was like "Where'd you come from?" And the whole class started laughing, because, Ms. Campbell, she just popped out of nowhere. She was just walking down the hall casually, she just popped her head. Jamir: Look, it could have been a good day, but she gon say "I'm calling your mom." Look, look, Ms. Ernest was talking to me about how to be better, right. And Ms. Campbell looked at her, looked at me, came up: "I'm calling your, Mom." I said, "You just came out the blue!"

Notably, Jamir contrasts Ms. Campbell's approach—immediately invoking a consequence—with Ms. Ernest's, saying, "it could have been a good day" and that "Ms. Ernest was talking to me about how to be better." Such a difference is particularly significant for Jamir, who was noticeably upset by the negative interactions he had with adults at school. He seemed to view Ms. Ernest, at least in this moment, as trying to support him in being "better," while Ms. Campbell's threat to call his mom "came out the blue," as though she swooped in just to get him in trouble.

Shanya, Talia and Mario also made comments specifically suggesting that the imposition of consequences was not a helpful or supportive response to students' behavior. In the same conversation in which they praised Mr. Williams' approach, Shanya said that sometimes when they would get trouble, "Ms. Hower say, 'I used to be the same way,' but if you be the same way, like why you treat us like you never did this ever in your life?" Agreeing, Talia elaborated:

Ms. Hower and Mr. Forester and Mr. Sullivan, they all be like, 'oh, I used to do all that when I was younger,' but they treating us like they haven't did it before or something like that. Or they haven't made a mistake before, and I don't think that's right because if you understand why we act like that and you used to do it then what is the point of trying to give us all the consequences?

Talia and Shanya seem to want the opportunity to make mistakes and be corrected without such negative or punitive responses. In explaining why people shouldn't bully one another, kids sometimes said, "nobody's perfect;" Estrella, for example, said, "I tell everybody, that if they wanna judge me, they gotta be perfect. 'Cause nobody's perfect in this world, right." Talia's comment that these staff are acting like "they haven't made a mistake before" seems like a parallel critique, suggesting that staff are overly harsh in response to kids' mistakes.

In a separate interview, Mario said if he could change any of the school rules, he would change how CRT works, explaining:

It's not good, 'cause...they're giving you work, but the work is not that you learned it. Well, I don't know if it is, but like, they're giving you work, and, like, I'm always thinking like you're supposed to be talking about it. Like at my old school they would do detention but I never went, but once, and like, you only had to talk about what you did. And your mom had to come in for the detention.

Mario views the "work" kids have to do during CRT as busywork, saying that it's not work that "you learned," meaning academic work that would build on classwork, nor

does it give you an opportunity to talk about what you did. Essentially, the consequence has little value, as it is disconnected from anything meaningful.

Finally, kids' talk about the paycheck system is revealing. Omari often told me that he didn't worry about deductions because "it's just fake money." Instead, he said, "I just worry about my grades." Similarly, when Mario told me about getting silent lunch for no reason, his concluding comment was, "I just don't want to ruin my GPA." He was under the impression that behavior and getting in trouble might directly affect his grade. Ironically, while some might argue that systems like the paycheck have been put in place to support the behaviors needed for learning and academic achievement, the young people I spoke to already valued those outcomes; they did not need an intermediate incentive. Furthermore, though kids regularly did have strong reactions to receiving deductions, I suggest that it was the meaning behind it, and not the deduction itself, that led to such responses. For Jamir, for example, regularly receiving deductions seemed to symbolize that teachers thought poorly of him, especially because he regularly seemed to receive so many more deductions than other students. A story Mario told me is illustrative; once when I mentioned the principal, Ms. Azikiwe, during our interview, Mario chimed in, "One time she gave me an addition." When I asked what happened, he told me:

Because I was reading when we were supposed to. But I didn't know who she was, so I didn't care, I just put it down. And then they told me who she was and I was like "woah, I got an addition from Ms. Azikiwe!"

In this story, Mario transparently "doesn't care" about the addition itself. It becomes meaningful when he realizes that it came from Ms. Azikiwe, signifying that an important person chose to recognize his behavior.

My findings support the conclusions of other scholars (Weiner, 2006) that students, perhaps especially urban students, are concerned with what might be called moral authority. Essentially, students' acceptance of school authority is contingent upon whether that authority is in service to higher moral or ethical aims, including kindness, respect, fairness and learning. This makes students' feelings that institutional authority at JWC was nonsensical, arbitrary and unfair particularly significant. It suggests that the very systems put into place to control students' behavior might to a great extent undermine student buy-in, and thereby limit their own effectiveness.

### **Conceptions of Outside Authority**

How did students talk about institutional authority outside the school context, and how do their ideas compare to their experiences in school? Perhaps even more importantly, what is the role of school authority in light of students' broader social context? Students were keenly aware of unfairness outside of school, and offered multiple examples from the news and from their own lives. While students seemed to have a higher level of trust in school staff than in other authority figures, such as the police, they also drew parallels between unfairness within and outside of school. Ultimately, I argue that school staff needed to do more to combat students' experiences of unfairness in the outside world.

### **The World as an Unfair Place**

The primary way in which students discussed authority outside of school was by discussing the police. A few students referenced direct or indirect experiences with the police in Milltown; Mario and Cesar both talked about incidents in which their families

called in the police in response to troubling activity in their neighborhoods. Cesar said that after they called, “the cops came. But a little bit too late.” Similarly, Mario said of the Milltown police, “they’re kind of peaceful. But they’re little sissies. They’re cowards.” He told me his dad had called the police after some people broke into a neighbor’s house while the neighbor was away, but although the police came, they simply opened the door and called into the house, rather than actually going inside to check. Mario was convinced that because it was dark, the police were too scared to go in. Such perceptions contrast with students’ feelings that they were at least safe at school. Shanya also talked about the police coming after a drive-by shooting in her neighborhood. As I will describe in more detail in chapter five, she defended her neighbors’ decision to refuse to talk to the police or name the people involved, and carefully avoided their names during our interview as well. While she is arguably more distrustful of the police than Cesar or Mario, she similarly shows a relatively higher level of trust in adults in the school. Though Shanya did similarly express a sense of solidarity with her friends in the face of school authority, she also participated in teachers’ efforts to figure out who had done something at least once.

Far more common than personal experiences with the police was discussion of social issues, and especially of instances in which police officers assaulted or killed people of color. Mr. Dunn was the only staff person I saw discuss these issues with students; he devoted an entire class period to discussing the protests in Baltimore and the reasons behind them with his eighth-grade classes. However, kids sometimes brought up these issues spontaneously in conversations with me. On the third day of school, Steven commented to me that, “the cops are killing too many people.” Jamir, Chris and Omari

brought up the death of Eric Gardner, as did Mario. Additionally, Jamir, Chris, Omari and Shanya all talked about the police shooting a “little boy” who had what they variously described as a bb-gun or a water gun; while this seemed to be a reference to Tamir Rice, all were convinced that this incident had occurred in Milltown, though I was unable to find any corresponding media accounts.

I also asked all students, either in individual interviews or in focus groups, whether they thought the world was a fair place or an unfair place. Overwhelmingly, kids at JWJ viewed the world as unfair. Again, kids offered numerous examples of police violence in support of their answers, referencing Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Freddie Gray, Eric Gardner, and the incident in McKinney, Texas in which a teenage Black girl was thrown to the ground by a police officer. In addition to these fairly well publicized events, Estrella described an incident I was not familiar with, saying:

And then there's another one with a Hispanic. But he was coming out of the store, right? And it was at night, I don't know who was it, but they started hitting him – the police. There were like four of them, and then they came more, and hit him with a stick and like with the electric thing. And hit him just because he was Hispanic.

A few kids talked about poverty in their explanations. Luis, Mario's older brother who participated in one of the eighth-grade focus groups, included “the rich and poor, [and] the separation between them” in his explanation of why he sees the world as unfair, describing poor people as having to work hard to pay rent and care for their families while rich people “spend money like nothing.” Similarly, Steven said:

Sometimes it's unfair 'cause people are living on the streets, like they have no money but people that are rich and wealthy, they don't even care. If somebody's there and they're so, so poor, and they're asking for money, people just walk by them and go like this (turning his face away), and they keep ignoring them and that's not fair.

Many of the Latinx students also talked about issues related to immigration or to their families' countries of origin. Sometimes conditions in the United States looked better by comparison; Luis, Daniel and Juan spoke passionately about the opportunities afforded to them that their parents didn't have. However, students also described inequalities between the U.S. and Latin American countries. Jessica brought up the issue that, "Some people in America, they go to our – the Hispanic countries and they start doing their own company." Estrella and Arrianna said, "yeah," and Emma chimed in, adding that these companies, "[take] historical places that have been there for a really long time and they just destroy them." Estrella also felt that the world wasn't fair because: "Some people, they can't come up to the USA, right, like Mexicans or Guatemalans or like that, right? But then like the people that are born here, they can travel to our countries." In a previous interview, she had also asserted that "it's unfair for me because I don't have a passport because I don't have my papers, so I can't go to my country and see my grandmother." Students were also aware of the dangers people endured to get to the U.S. from Latin America, and the threat of deportation. Jessica and Emma talked about "La Bestia," the train people can ride up through Guatemala and Mexico, and about "coyotes" that will smuggle you across the border. Steven said that at a McDonald's near his house, police will stop Hispanic people "for no entire reason, and they ask for your ID," adding, "it's like racism." Jessica described seeing an old man "get deported from the country," saying, "he was crying and I was so sad."

### **The Role of the School**

These examples provide ample evidence that kids understood the world as a place where unfairness is common, especially for people like themselves who are Black,

Latinx, working-class, and/or undocumented. Given these powerful experiences, the role of school as an institution may not be so much to convince them that the world is fair as to convince them that fairness is possible in their own lives and that unfairness can be addressed. Roman directly suggested this role in an interview:

To me, um, it's like, Ms. Hower used this example at the beginning of the year when I went into there, because I got treated unfair. She was like "I'm going 90mph, but the dude in front of me is going 110, the cop let him go, but he see me and I get the ticket. And I'm going, 'I'm not going as fast as the other dude, like that's unfair with the cop,' but that's something you can't stop, because they both was in the wrong. You just got caught." So I can go out and I can rob a bank. Me and like three other dudes. And then we all run, and the cop can just get me. I try to tell them who that is but they, they can't really do nothing cause they don't have evidence for that person, and then that person wouldn't get any consequence, but I do. *It's way different out there in the real world than it is in here. But in school I want fairness because that's school.* (emphasis added)

In this example, Roman rejects Ms. Hower's justification that, essentially, life isn't fair, saying "in school I want fairness because that's school." Students wanted teachers and staff to act as caring adults who believed in and strove for values like fairness. Arguably, students' keen awareness that the world isn't fair, far from justifying unfairness at school, made it more frustrating and discouraging.

Unfortunately, as I have described throughout this chapter, students' descriptions of school authority do not depict it as fair, and students' experiences in school potentially reinforced what students might expect from outside institutions. Occasionally, students highlighted such parallels directly. Shanya argued that the world is unfair because "most people don't believe you when you're telling the truth and stuff, and then can't take like a joke or nothin' like that, and then they count everything as like something that it's not and take things too serious and stuff." When I asked if she meant in school or outside of school, she said "both." While her original answer made me think of times she talked



about teachers misinterpreting what she was saying or doing, the example she offered was that the police had shot a “little boy” because they thought his toy gun was real.

Similarly, Talia told me:

But the world, it's not a fair place because they look at Black people as like the kids that always doing something bad, and I think that's how some of the teachers think here. [...] Just because one Black person do something bad that don't mean that all Black people are bad. And that's why in Baltimore, what [the protesters] did was actually good.

In both these examples, Talia and Shanya see similarities between the unfairness at school and the unfairness in the outside world. Even if these sorts of school experiences are not primarily in forming their ideas about unfairness in society overall, they certainly do little to counterbalance those ideas.

### **Civic Implications**

At JWW charter school, kids wanted teachers and staff to help create a safe, respectful environment where learning could occur. They also wanted them to act with moral authority by insisting on respect and striving for fairness, even if the world outside of school often wasn't fair. When staff reinforced principles such as kindness and empathy, and demonstrated those values themselves by listening to and talking with kids, kids typically responded well to redirection. Unfortunately however, kids often experienced school as a place where rules were nonsensical or arbitrary, where rewards and punishments were meted out unfairly, and where their mistakes were met with judgment and consequences rather than support.

The impact of such experiences is perhaps exacerbated by their similarity to what often happens in the broader world to people who are Black, Latinx, working-class or

undocumented. Though most of my participants were not even teenagers yet, they were aware that issues like police violence and deportation impacted people who were very much like them, even if they had not experienced such issues directly. Cohen (2010) considers the implications of such treatment in an effort to explain why some young people, and particularly young people of color, practice what she refers to as a politics of invisibility. Data from her Black Youth Project reveal that 29 percent of Black youth and 43 percent of Latinx youth had engaged in *none* out of a list of twelve political acts (e.g. signing a petition) in the twelve months prior to the survey. Based on interview and focus group data, Cohen suggests:

I believe that significant numbers of black youth...have used the limited agency available to them to stay under the radar. These young people have chosen a politics of invisibility, disengaging from all forms of politics and trying to remain invisible to officials who possibly could provide assistance but were more likely to impose greater surveillance and regulations on their lives. (p. 196)

Though Cohen does not investigate school experiences specifically, there is reason to believe that students extrapolate from experiences with school authority to form views about institutional authority more broadly (Flanagan et al., 2007). Thus, the experiences of regulation and unfairness I describe in this chapter potentially encourage students to expect such treatment from societal institutions in general, which in turns makes them less likely to engage with those institutions.

As Rubin (2007) points out, the significance of such experiences may be exacerbated or mitigated by students' sense of self- or community efficacy in responding to them. In the next two chapters, I delve further into how students' experiences at school do or do not prepare them to understand and respond to unfairness. In chapter five, I consider the relationships kids were forming to one another and to Milltown. Such

relationships potentially impact the sense of solidarity and likelihood of engaging in collective action that are key to civic engagement. In chapter six, I examine the place of student voice at JWJ, considering how their participation was structured and their beliefs about how best to engage with school authority.

## CHAPTER 5:

### CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

In this chapter, I explore how school discourse and practices potentially impacted the relationships kids were forming to one another and to Milltown. As I discussed in chapter one, researchers have linked young people's civic commitments to their beliefs that people in their communities are trustworthy and able to work together, and that what happens to others in their racial in-group has implications for them (Cohen, 2010; Flanagan et al., 2007). Additionally, the ability to understand problems as structural rather than simply individual is central to justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Thus, there is reason to believe that the understandings of and relationships to others that kids were developing at JWJ are particularly significant.

Overall, discourse and practices at the school tended to frame success as an individual endeavor that requires separating yourself from others. I suggest that this is related to kids persistently describing one another as “trouble,” despite having many positive and helpful interactions. Additionally, although kids critiqued school behavioral norms, their relationships to those norms were nevertheless significant in determining both how they thought of themselves and how they were thought of by others. This was made particularly problematic by racial patterns in who was a “good kid” or a “bad kid.” Finally, while most kids wanted to help people in Milltown and elsewhere that were experiencing poverty, they were also understandably concerned with the level of crime, disorder and violence in the community, which many of them had seen or experienced directly. Lacking a structural understanding of these issues, many kids—with two notable

exceptions—simply wanted to separate themselves from Milltown. In total, these findings suggest a pattern of separation, rather than solidarity, and that school practices often encouraged this relationship.

### **Kids' Interactions**

School experiences are clearly not the only forces shaping students' relationships. Thus, prior to discussing how discourse and practices at JWJ potentially *did* influence how students' thought about themselves and one another, it is worth offering a brief overview of the sorts of interactions I was able to directly observe. As I described in chapter three, Bowdoin students had some significant behavioral challenges, both individually and collectively; thus, students often experienced academic pursuits being derailed by teachers' efforts to keep students' behavior within certain bounds. Additionally, kids' relationships with one another were somewhat tumultuous. They often referenced bullying by other students in the class, and though they did not always agree on what should constitute bullying versus conflict, they were clearly upset by some of their peers' behavior. Kids also had interactions outside of school, and particularly online, that impacted how they related to one another in the classroom. Talia and Shanya, for example, were friends with another girl, Asia, at the beginning of the year, but later on stopped speaking to her. They said she had used the school's bullying policy to get Talia into trouble following a mutual conflict, a story Jamir and Omari also repeated to me. From my own observations, Kasy and Iroquois were outsiders in the class, and both experienced bullying. Talia and Shanya seemed to consider Chris, Jamir and Omari to be

their friends, but the boys sometimes described them in interviews as “big bullies” who were always talking about them.

Simultaneously, my fieldnotes include numerous incidents in which kids were considerate of and helpful to one another, something not always reflected in their descriptions of their classmates. Kids regularly picked up one another’s stuff, checked on one another, helped one another with schoolwork and shared food. Though this occurred most often between friends, students also helped people they did not hang out with and sometimes did not even like. One day during afternoon homeroom, Ms. Campbell was “matching paychecks,” meaning checking to see whether kids knew how many scholar dollars they had earned that day; anyone who had kept track correctly received a five-dollar addition. Once she finished, Shanya checked, “Did you do Ashley?”, something that was notable to me because I had never seen Shanya and Ashley speak to one another. Similarly, Kasy and Arnold were regularly in conflict with one another, but Kasy still typed in Arnold’s password for him when he couldn’t log into the online part of their math curriculum. Kasy and Talia started out the year unable to even sit next to one another; however, as I described in chapter four, Talia still felt bad for stomping on Kasy’s bookbag. In addition to talking to Ms. Campbell about it, she apologized to Kasy directly. As she explained it to me:

I feel bad for her because I wouldn’t want my stuff stomped on. I told her yesterday, I was like, “You know what? I did stomp on your bookbag. But I didn’t mean to stomp on it. I intended to stomp on it but I didn’t want to because I realized that stomping on your bookbag doesn’t make anything better.” She said it’s okay, and stuff like that. She was like, “At least I know that you admitted it,” and stuff like that. I said okay.

Incidents such as these raise the possibility that students could understand and interpret one another’s behavior in multiple ways. While they had negative and hurtful interactions

with one another, they also had positive experiences, including moments when their peers exhibited what I would consider both thoughtful and ethical behavior. Yet their descriptions of one another, and particularly of students who were not in their friend group, tended to focus on the negative. In the following sections, I will examine how school discourse and practices may have contributed to this interpretation.

### **Other Kids as “Trouble”**

#### **Success as Individual**

School discourse and practices tended to frame success as an individual endeavor that required separating oneself from others. One clear example is the emphasis on silence within the school, which positions talking and connection as antithetical to academic achievement. Though it was not uncommon for students to work in pairs or groups, this was a privilege that could be taken away if the class got out of hand, not a necessary and valued component of learning. It was also highly unusual for staff to acknowledge and reward students for helping one another; though the “respectful” addition could be awarded for helping peers, and examples of students helping one another were plentiful, I observed a teacher recognize this behavior only twice. During a professional development discussion prior to the start of the school year focused on what sorts of behaviors could earn a ROAD addition, Ms. Campbell said explicitly, “I hardly ever gave R [respectful], it was the hardest one.” At times, students even got in trouble for helping one another. During my observations with Oberlin, the eighth-grade homeroom, I witnessed this happen, as described in my fieldnotes below:

At one point, Levi got up to help a guy at the table next to his (who I think was stuck on the pretest). He had tried just verbally telling him what to do, but it

hadn't worked. As I recall, the guy had been asking for Ms. Carney's help for sometime. Ms. Carney saw Levi, and said, "Levi, I don't know why you're talking to him." Levi said, "I was just trying to help him." Ms. Carney countered, "He's wasting time." Levi said as he went resignedly back to his seat, "No, I was just trying to help him." He sighed as he sat back down.

Similarly, when I asked Omari if he could tell me about ways he helps other kids at school, he responded, "Mm-hmm! When they're struggling, I help them, but I still get in trouble. Because I think we're supposed to be silent, but when I still help them, I get in trouble anyway, so I'm like, okay." Our conversation continued:

EG: Do you always get in trouble for that?

Omari: Mm-hmm. Most of the time.

EG: Have you ever explained that that's what's going on?

Omari: Yes.

EG: What happens?

Omari: They might take the consequence away or they just keep it.

EG: Is it random? Why do they keep it sometimes and why do they take it away?

Omari: I don't know.

Naturally, there were exceptions to these patterns. For example, during an observation in Mr. Dunn's eighth-grade social studies class, I observed him actively encouraging and praising students for helping each other as they worked on lengthy, individual projects. Ms. Campbell also sometimes told students, "we're a team," or "we need to come together and help each other out," when she was talking to them about their behavior. However, such instances were relatively unusual compared to the prevalent expectations that students ignore their peers and focus on their individual achievement. As Jessica pointed out, staff members would often say explicitly, "worry about yourself."

Rather than positioning other students as resources, staff tended to talk to kids as though their peers were likely to be a hindrance to their success. Early in the year, Ms. Campbell told students:



Okay, if someone in your group you *think* is talking too much or you *think* is holding you back, turn ‘em off (points to ears). I know it’s hard sometimes, but don’t let them take your power away; you’re letting them take your knowledge away.

Similarly, Mr. Petkus, who coached the school’s basketball team, urged Omari:

I’m telling you, you gotta do it. Who cares what all those other ones do. You gotta do it. Jamir can’t even think straight half the time, you got Ahmad quitting on me, you got Chris, he’s—I don’t think he’s serious, but, if you’re serious, you’re there.

This seemed to reflect the way (at least some) staff themselves thought about students.

During a private conversation with Ms. Campbell about Talia’s behavioral struggles early in the year, Ms. Campbell told me that another staff member had suggested “a couple things we’re going to try starting next week for Talia to try to bring out more positive and *separate her*,” (emphasis mine). In this comment, Ms. Campbell implies that the best way to support Talia’s success is to separate her from her friends, who are presumed to be contributing to if not causing her misbehavior.

Staff also suggested that failing to heed these messages and avoid other kids could land you in trouble. One day Arnold was extremely upset because Oscar and Jamir had been fooling around on the stairs, and the dean, Ms. Hower, saw them and thought Arnold was involved too. When he talked to Ms. Campbell about it, she said, “What did I tell you about standing near Oscar and Jamir in line?” Another time, Oscar kept trying to talk to Omari during reading class. Mr. Williams, who was substituting for Ms. Ernest that day, said to Omari, “If you let him continue to get you in trouble, that will be okay, but I just want you to know that’s on you.”

Kids’ talk about one another tended to echo these messages. Prior to homeroom on the first day of school, I was talking to Steven, who told me that he had a brother one

year older than him who was also at JWJ. I asked if his older brother gave him good advice, and he said his brother told him that if someone talks to him, just ignore them so he doesn't get into trouble. When I started conducting focus group interviews later in the year, I asked kids what advice they would give a new student. Again, many suggested staying away from other kids. Tescia, for example, said, "If the new student come, I would say stay away from certain people because they get you into some stuff that you don't wanna be in – like trouble and all that." Similarly, Arnold said he would advise a new student not to talk to anyone, "because the kids will get you in trouble." Shanya both echoed and actively rejected the expectation that kids ignore their classmates in an interview. When I asked her why she thinks some kids in her class get in trouble a lot, she said, "I think it's cause the kids that mostly get in trouble, like, all friends and can't nothing separate us. And then, one of us get mad, they're going to talk to the other, and we don't throw no shade so we just talk to each other." When I asked her to explain what she meant when she said, "we don't throw no shade," she elaborated, "We don't sit there and ignore them and stuff like that." Notably, ignoring one's peers when they're trying to talk to you is the exact response advocated for by school staff. While Shanya refused to do this, her comments demonstrate her awareness that such refusal violates institutional expectations and leads to getting in trouble.

### **Punishment as Collective**

While achievement was framed as an individual endeavor, Bowdoin students were regularly treated as a single unit in instances of misbehavior. Early in the year, a noisy transition through the hallways to lunch resulted in the entire class being assigned silent lunch for a month, though this was later shortened to two weeks. One day during

gym, when Bowdoin was competing against a fourth grade class in a game, Oscar kept running around and taunting the other class. Mr. Petkus took 10 points off Bowdoin's score and commented to the kids nearest him, "Talk to your boy there." I turned to Gabriel and asked if anyone in the class could stop Oscar from doing that; he broke into laughter and exclaimed, "No!" On Halloween, some treats Ms. Ernest had in a box near her desk were stolen. Despite not even knowing whether the thief was in Bowdoin or another sixth-grade class, Ms. Campbell took off her costume and told Bowdoin, "All celebrations are over now." Ms. Howers, who happened to be walking by, came in to find out what was going on; when Ms. Campbell told her, she responded, "Oh, we'll search everybody in here." Though they did not actually search the students, Talia told me that they had done so on previous occasions.

In smaller instances, staff withheld privileges due to the behavior of a few students. Ms. Monet, the art teacher, refused to take Bowdoin to the art room in the basement, instead bringing supplies up to their classroom on the second floor. Mario told me in frustration, "She said that we have to win it, and like—most of the classes have already gone; we're the only class that hasn't gone." Many students were passionately interested in the "chants and cheers" they got to create for their homeroom; however, as illustrated by the excerpt from my fieldnotes below, Ms. Ernest set group-wide standards for their behavior that essentially meant they never got to practice.

Ms. Ernest was trying to get the kids to be silent and sitting in SLANT so they could practice their chants and cheers. I was sitting next to Justin, who was silent and facing forward, leaning back in his chair with his hands clasped in his lap. Ms. Ernest kept checking the class, and then adding time to something, but I don't know what; she was saying, "That's five minutes. (checks again) That's six minutes." A kid said, "Justin," and Justin said, it's not me. Ms. Ernest called Justin out, telling him to put his hands on the desk, and saying, "You know you're trying to be defiant." He responded, "I'm not trying to be defiant." A moment

later, Ms. Ernest said to the class, “Now you’re talking. That’s seven minutes.” Justin hissed, “Chris!”

Rather than motivating students, teachers’ use of structures that punished the whole class for the behavior of a few people tended to create frustration and even conflict as kids yelled at those they thought were at fault.

Kids were keenly aware that the behavior of their classmates had implications for them. During a chaotic social studies lesson early in the year, Arnold exclaimed to me in distress, “If they keep laughing I can’t get water!” When I returned to the school to do member-checking interviews, all the kids agreed with the statement, “A lot of times, a whole class will get in trouble for something only a few people are doing.” Omari said in a focus group, “The thing I don’t like about Ms. Campbell is, when Talia screaming out here, why does she gotta turn it into a *class* thing? The class did not do nothing to you.”

As demonstrated by Omari’s comment, kids did recognize collective punishment as unfair. I mentioned in the previous chapter that for students like Jessica and Estrella, who rarely got in trouble, their perception that discipline at JWJ wasn’t fair was based partially on such experiences. Simultaneously, there is ample evidence that kids also blamed one another for creating problems. One day, as kids goofed around in the back of the classroom during social studies, Kasy said accusingly to Talia, “You’re going to get people in trouble!” Another day during science class, Mario was caught with an origami crossbow he had been constructing at Jamir’s request. As he walked up to give it to Mr. Balkus, he said it was Jamir’s, and added, “Yeah Jamir, don’t be giving me none of that bad stuff.” When he got back to his seat, he whispered agitatedly to Arnold, who was sitting next to him, “Jamir’s going to get us in trouble!” I argue that such comments

demonstrate the extent to which experiences of group punishment encouraged kids to see one another as sources of trouble, and to see affiliation with one another as hazardous.

Finally, some of the students in Bowdoin expressed the feeling that their class as a whole was holding them back. Estrella told me that her mom had planned to come to JWJ and request that Estrella be moved to another class, explaining, “Because this class – like is taking part of our education, to like learn. Because they’re like, always have something dramatic to do with everything. So like the teachers are more focused on them than on teaching us.” Chris and Omari expressed similar frustrations, saying:

Chris: It’s just aggravating and difficult because people just, they don’t –

Omari: They don’t know how to quit.

Chris: Yeah, they just don’t be quiet. And I’m just sitting there like, just shut up. And they’re just like no, and then they just keep talking. Okay...and then—

Omari: And that’s one of the reasons why we get in trouble a lot. That’s one reason we get in trouble a lot.

EG: You mean as a class?

Omari: Yes.

In these comments, Estrella, Omari and Chris blame their classmates for creating disruptions that repeatedly derail the learning process, and that bring trouble upon the entire class. While such remarks are grounded in reality—as I have mentioned, Bowdoin *was* a challenging class—they also reflect a particular *interpretation* of reality encouraged by school discourse and practices: namely, that success in institutional contexts requires separating oneself from troublesome others.

### **“Good Kids” and “Bad Kids”**

In the previous section, I described broad patterns in the messages kids were receiving about how to relate to others, noting that school staff tended to emphasize separation from one’s peers as key to success. However, kids were not simply

internalizing generalized messages about success and peer relationships; in contrast, they clearly applied those messages differently to different people. For example, when offering advice to an imaginary new student, most kids did not advise avoiding *everyone*, but avoiding “certain people.” When I asked how to know who to avoid or who was a “troubled kid,” as Mio put it, their answers referenced school behavioral structures: “talking when the teacher doesn’t allow you,” “not following the rules,” “getting lots of CRTs.” Similarly, in discussing Bowdoin’s identity as a “bad class,” Luciana and Estrella clarified:

Luciana: Bowdoin gets in trouble a lot, but it’s not *Bowdoin* that gets in trouble a lot—

Estrella: It’s some kids.

As reflected these descriptions, students drew distinct divisions between the “bad kids” who tended to get in trouble and the “good kids” who generally did not. In this section, I discuss how kids’ understandings of themselves and one another were formed by their relationships to the behavioral norms of the school. I also consider the significance of problematic racial patterns within those relationships.

### **Behavior-based Identities**

The behavioral system at JWJ was arguably the most significant resource for identity formation available to students. As I describe in greater detail in chapter six, opportunities for recognition based on creativity, athletic ability, or academic achievement were extremely limited. In contrast, prescribing, monitoring, and responding to students’ behavior was pervasive, and the paycheck system regularly provided kids with a numerical tabulation of their “goodness” or “badness.” Numerous rewards were associated with paycheck averages, and while paycheck averages themselves were not

technically public information, kids could freely observe who received additions, who received deductions or otherwise got in trouble, what others' end-of-day totals were during paycheck "matching" in afternoon homeroom, who was able to go on fieldtrips and who had to stay behind.

Consequently, kids' understandings of themselves and their classmates were heavily influenced by their relationships to the behavioral system. They regularly used the words "good" and "bad" to describe themselves and others, and these words were clearly a reference to their behavior at school. For example, one day early in the year, Ms. Ernest was matching paychecks in afternoon homeroom. Justin guessed that he had earned five scholar dollars that day, but he had actually earned ten. Upon learning this, he exclaimed in delight, "Ooooh, that's higher!" He then declared, "I'm a good boy now." Shanya, laughing, said, "You a good boy, Justin?" Similarly, Mario told me at one point that he just gets deductions when he's "bad," but that he's "not bad anymore." I asked what he meant by bad, and he said "not paying attention to the teacher."

Despite some students' claims that the trips were boring and that deductions were "just fake money," kids were clearly affected by how they were positioned within the behavioral system. An incident that occurred toward the end of the school year illustrates the emotional impact of such positioning. Ms. Campbell had left and been replaced by a new homeroom teacher, Mr. Hardy, who gave deduction after deduction during afternoon homeroom in an effort to enforce silence. Normally when the kids received their paychecks on Friday, they just glanced at them and put them into their backpacks; however, when they received their first paychecks after Mr. Hardy arrived, several were notably upset. Shanya defiantly got whiteout and started getting rid of the parts of her

paycheck she didn't like. She then offered the whiteout to Talia, who took it with a small look of triumph. Given that neither Talia nor Shanya seemed to get into trouble with their parents based upon their paychecks (Talia's mother told me she didn't usually even see Talia's paycheck), this action seemed primarily symbolic. Upset and angry at the negative assessment of them represented by the paycheck, Talia and Shanya sought to change it, even though such changes would have no impact on any future rewards or punishments. Their reaction demonstrates the significance that the paycheck and other behavioral systems held for even the most skeptical and resistant kids.

### **Relationships to Others**

These identities "good" and "bad" significantly influenced whether kids associated with one another, how they understood others' behavior, and even what they considered to be fair. In discussing their own and others' friendship groups, kids often referenced behavior as an organizing construct. Estrella, for example, contrasted Cesar with his friends, who she felt were trying to "act bad." Jessica, Arrianna and Emma agreed with her, saying:

Jessica: [Cesar's friends] always try to like hang out with the people who always—

Arrianna & Emma: Like, get into trouble. Trying to fit in.

Jessica: They're trying to fit in because they know that like people – how can I say it? They don't really hang out with them except for themselves. Especially Gabriel.

Their critique seemed to suggest that Cesar's friends are actually "good kids" like Cesar, but inauthentically try to "act bad" in order to fit in with the "bad kids." Similarly, Talia and Shanya also spoke about their friends in relationship to "getting in trouble." Talia noted that Chris was different from most of their "group," saying:



Talia: When it's like the group, Chris—he will be in it but then he not in it because he will be the one that will be like just sit there and just watch us.

EG: He's quieter, right?

Talia: Mm-hmm. Him, and...just him. Yeah, just him by himself. He just quiet. Everybody else just be all loud and stuff like that. So like, if we all get in trouble, [the teachers] will never think Chris would be in it. Chris hangs out with us but they wouldn't look at Chris like he look like he did something wrong. Even though he does hang out with us.

Observing that Chris is quieter than the rest of her friends, she goes on to remark that school staff tended to assume Chris hadn't done anything wrong, *even though* he hung out with the kids who often got in trouble. Her comment positions Chris as the exception that proves the rule: his difference from the rest of “the group,” and the fact that teachers didn't view him with suspicion, are noteworthy exceptions to a larger pattern.

Because behavior was an important factor in determining friendship groups, the “good kids” and the “bad kids” did not often interact with one another, and consequently did not know one another well. Estrella inadvertently offered a particularly powerful illustration of this reality when, in a focus group at least halfway through the year, she hesitated over Omari's name, saying: “And then that's when Omari – no – yeah, Omari – no – yeah, right? Wait, because I confuse their names. Yes, Omari.” While Estrella was new to the school that year, the lengthy school day plus the fact that homerooms remained together at all times meant that she had spent about forty hours a week with Omari since late August. In this context, her confusion about his name was striking to me.

The lack of knowledge about one another contributed to misunderstandings between groups of kids, and kids occasionally remarked upon this directly. For example, during an interview with Talia, I told her that some kids had said there was a lot of bullying at the school, and asked her why she thought they felt differently about it than

she did. Though it was actually Jamir, Omari and Chris who had said this, Talia seemed to assume it was the “good kids,” saying, “Because they don’t really talk to us like that. I bet you it was people like Mario and them. Like...like sometimes when people don’t feel included in things, that makes them feel differently.” In this conversation, Talia attributed the “good kids” misinterpretations of her behavior to them “not feeling included;” however, both she and others suggested different interpretations at other times.

One such instance occurred during an activity Ms. Douglas, the school social worker, was facilitating with Talia, Shanya, Jamir, Omari and Oscar. The activity was about “the Golden Rule,” and one question posed to the group was, “How do you think people will react to you when you do not follow the Golden Rule?” Jamir responded, “People will think that you’re a bad student.” Talia commented that she thinks Gabriel doesn’t want to talk to her because he thinks she’s mean, and Ms. Douglas said, “Yeah, so the quiet, kind of good kids might avoid you.” These comments again underscore the salience of behavior-based “good kid” and “bad kid” identities. Jamir’s use of the word “student” rather than “kid” or “person” is particularly striking, given that nothing in the activity had directed or restricted conversation to school-based contexts. Additionally, Talia indirectly suggests that her positioning as one of the “bad kids” means that the “good kids” such as Gabriel might perceive her as “mean” and try to avoid her. Ms. Douglas agreed that this could happen, using the term “good kids” even though Talia had not used it herself.

These comments by Talia and Jamir suggest that they felt some of the “good kids” didn’t understand them and perhaps thought poorly of them. Although kids across groups intentionally refrained from mentioning others by name and also said little about

classmates that they didn't interact with, there is some evidence that Talia and Jamir were right in their assessment. During a focus group interview, Mario, Steven and Mio told me that Mr. Perez sometimes forgets to hand out homework because "people are yelling," and went on to gesture toward a group of desks where Talia, Shanya, Tescia and Jessica sat, saying, "Jessica is the only one – the only girl there that's good." Similarly, when Mario complained to me about not being able to go to the art room, he went on to say that the class wasn't even that bad during that period because Ms. Douglas takes all the students that have "anger management problems." These descriptions reflect the tendency of at least some students to place the blame for some of their negative experiences at school not on the class in general, but on specific members of the class.

Students who were members of different "groups" also offered relatively simplistic understandings of one another. Talia, for example, once told me that working with Jessica was "so boring" because Jessica didn't talk; however, with her friends Jessica was both chatty and giggly. Reciprocally, when I mentioned during an interview with Estrella and Jessica that Shanya wanted to be a lawyer, and said I thought she'd be good at it because she likes to argue, Jessica countered that arguing with people was a bad thing. When I asked if it was always bad, she clarified, "[It's bad] when you make fun of people. When you argue with somebody, you have to know what you're talking about. You can't just say things like, um, 'you have ugly shoes' or something like that." Though she did not say so directly, her answer suggests that she saw Shanya primarily as someone who made fun of people. However, I once observed an interaction between Shanya and Jessica in which Jessica commented that she had put too much of this "stuff" in her hair and it looked "nasty," and Shanya responded, "it doesn't look nasty, it just

looks wet.” Similar to kids’ characterization of one another as “trouble” despite their helpful interactions, it is noteworthy that Shanya’s choice to reassure Jessica rather than tease her about her hair did not seem to change Jessica’s view of her.

Such misunderstandings were particularly problematic because of the ways in which they shaped how kids’ understood one another’s misbehavior. As I described in chapter three, Talia’s friendship with Shanya allowed her to understand Shanya’s early struggles as stemming from grief over the death of her cousin. Chris could be extremely irritable with Jamir’s misbehavior, but he also recognized times that staff seemed to just assume Jamir was doing something wrong. In contrast to these more complex conceptions, many of the “good kids” had little idea why some of their classmates misbehaved, suggesting that they did it to “show off,” to “try to be funny,” or because they didn’t want to change.

Perhaps most troublingly, these ideas about who was a “good kid” or a “bad kid” potentially influenced perceptions of fairness. While kids across the behavioral spectrum were critical of incidents in which they felt that rules were not enforced fairly, Estrella seemed to imply at one point that the standards should be different for different students. Jessica, Emma, Estrella and Arrianna were telling me that Ms. Ernest sometimes assigned them silent lunch but then forgot, so that they didn’t have to go. However, they said that she never forgot when she assigned silent lunch to “the kids who talk a lot.” When I asked if they felt like that was fair, they responded:

Estrella (assertively): I think it is fair, because some people, some people stop. Like when she gives us like – we stop and like the other ones, they keep like talking or doing all of those things, so I think it’s fair.

Jessica: And they’re always so dramatic about it. They’re always like, ‘ooh, my gosh – !’

Emma: And they always start screaming, like, ‘I didn’t do anything!’

Estrella's, Jessica's and Emma's responses strongly suggest that they believed that the kids who get in trouble a lot often brought it on themselves by choosing to continue talking, and by objecting and being "dramatic."

### **The Significance of Race**

This misunderstanding or disconnection between groups of kids, while not severe, is significant because of how frequently divisions based on behavior corresponded with divisions based on race. As has probably been noticeable in the examples offered in this chapter, the "good kids" tended to be Latinx, while the "bad kids" tended to be Black.<sup>17</sup> Disciplinary statistics from the school confirm this larger pattern: while Black students made up 43 percent of the total student body during the year of my data collection, they made up approximately 61 percent of in-school suspensions and 64 percent of out-of-school suspensions.<sup>18</sup> Within Bowdoin, there were of course exceptions to this: Oscar was Dominican and was infamous for his misbehavior, while Chris and Arrianna, both of whom had Caribbean heritage, were seldom if ever in trouble. However, of these three kids, only Chris was friends primarily with others in his racial in-group. Oscar tended to hang out with Omari, and Arrianna associated almost exclusively with the Latina girls. Thus, I suggest that it would have been easy for other kids to write them off as exceptions to an overall racial pattern of who was "good" and "bad."

---

<sup>17</sup> I should note that a person could of course be *both* Latinx and Black. However, this was not the case for any of the kids I knew personally, and as far as I could tell these identities were constructed as distinct categories within the school.

<sup>18</sup> I calculated this myself using two separate lists provided to me by the school: one of all students which included demographic information, and one of all in- and out-of-school suspensions that did not include demographic information. I report these statistics as approximate because the suspension lists included a small number of students not included on the list of all students, meaning I was unable to ascertain their race. However, these numbers were not large enough to change the overall pattern of disproportionality.

A comment Chris made during an interview is suggestive; when I asked him, Omari and Jamir if they ever thought their teachers were racist, he replied, “I never had that moment where I felt like a teacher was like that, because I’m actually pretty good.” This implies that his good behavior in class protected him from any negativity teachers could have associated with his Blackness. It also positions him as an exception to an overall pattern in which Black students are not “good.” In an interview with three eighth-grade Latino boys, Juan, Daniel, and Mario’s brother Luis, Daniel pointed out that, “the majority of the Distinguished Honors’ kids are Guatemalan. And like, I think there’s like three or four Distinguished Honors kids that, you know, are American or other nationalities. But the most is Guatemalan.” Significantly, he brought this up after talking about how other kids sometimes mess with his friend Juan, who was Mexican, by saying that he “jumped the border.” He said he stood up for Juan, saying, “I’d be like, so what? We jumped the border for a reason, and yeah.” Luis chimed in:

Like, a good way to see this is like, yeah, we all been through that, you know. But like, look at where we’ve got so far. Look at where we are in life. We’re not in the streets doing bad things. Even though we’re not from here, we’re doing our best to get our education, and do something good in life.

In these statements, Luis and Daniel both associate being Latinx or Guatemalan with educational achievement. Even more directly than Chris’s comment, their remarks suggest both that kids noticed the larger racial patterns in the school, and that their own conceptions of themselves accounted for and assigned meaning to these patterns.

That said, race was not a primary issue students brought up when they discussed their experiences in the school; instead, they tended to focus more on individuals and on the details of specific situations. I suspect that this is partially developmental. Most of the Bowdoin kids were eleven or twelve years old, an age at which, for many kids of color,

race is just starting to become a more salient aspect of how they understand themselves and their interactions with the world (Tatum, 2003). However, I suggest that as those understandings develop, they will be informed by patterns in the school that tended to position Black and Latinx kids very differently. This situation is exacerbated by school practices which portrayed success as an individual endeavor requiring separation from others, and thus provided few opportunities or incentives for students to develop connections with others who were in different racial and behavior “groups.” Thus, students were left with few resources for understanding one another, and particularly for understanding why some of their peers “act bad” in school.

### **Kids’ Relationships to Milltown**

Do the perceptions of and relationships with one another these young people are developing in school impact how they might perceive or relate to their broader community? Between the restricted amount of time I had to interview students and my focus on understanding the complex dynamics within the school itself, my ability to discuss this with students was limited. However, there are some indications that students’ relationships to their communities outside of school parallel the ways they relate to their peers in school. In particular, while students were interested in helping others, most wanted to leave Milltown. Additionally, some students seemed to understand Milltown’s problems in racial terms. I argue that just as practices at JWJ offered students few opportunities to develop a more complex understanding of their peers’ struggles, the staff’s emphasis on “choice” and general avoidance of structural inequality left most

students with few explanations other than personal failure to explain the problems in Milltown.

### **Community Service**

Similar to their relationships to one another at school, students described both themselves and their parents as trying to help others in their communities. Steven criticized people who just walk past homeless people and ignore them, and told me that he sometimes gives them money. Kasy described an incident in which her mom saw a woman digging through a trashcan outside McDonald's, and offered to buy her a fresh burger. During a "would you rather" activity in Ms. Ernest's class, in which students walked to one side of the room or the other to express their opinion, the vast majority of kids said they would choose giving \$10,000 to charity over have \$1,000 for themselves. Of all the students I spoke to, Shanya expressed the strongest sense of connection to her community. She was committed to the idea of actually constructing a building she, Talia, Tescia and another girl had imagined as part of a school project the previous year, which would provide services including a place for homeless people to sleep and a barbershop where they could have jobs. She told me during class once that she was going to become a lawyer, and when she did she would give half of each paycheck to that building.

Structures in the school encouraged this sort of service-based relationship. They had two school-wide "Days of Service," during which students did things like make sandwiches for homeless shelters, make toys for animal shelters, etc. Homerooms competed in food drives leading up to Thanksgiving. Finally, eighth-graders had to complete 20 hours of community service to walk at graduation. Ms. Grant described



these structures as a way the school took on the mission of preparing students for citizenship, saying:

Yeah, I definitely think that a fundamental responsibility of education isn't just like, "Okay, you need to know your numbers and alphabet," or whatever, but it's socializing students, preparing them for the world and to be responsible, contributing members of society. I think that involves community service, just really making sure kids are nice to each other, willing to help each other. And I think that we touch on that a lot, actually, with our model. You get a nod if you help someone else or...you know what I mean? So for example you get a respectful addition. The eighth-graders have a community service requirement. We do things like service days.

### **"Shooting and Robbing"**

While students' personal experiences seemed to motivate them to want to do things like help the homeless, they also spoke about crime and violence in Milltown. As mentioned previously, Omari's family directly experienced these problems when their apartment was robbed, and other kids had witnessed crime or violence in their neighborhoods. Mario described seeing a gang of boys breaking into someone's house, and said, "I don't know what happened after that. I just saw they got in, they had like a machete and stuff like that. A bat. I just got inside, I didn't want to get involved." Jamir told me someone had shot at him as he was walking down the street, and that he had run to his uncle's house.

When I asked students where they wanted to live when they got older, many wanted to move out of Milltown for this reason. As Mario said, "I want to live in a place where it's calm, not that much violence." Omari's mother had moved her family out of Milltown, and the fear Omari had experienced after his apartment in Milltown was broken into made him understandably happy that their new apartment was in a

neighboring suburb, which he described as a “really quiet” place where “nothing goes on.” Other students and parents were hoping to move in the near future; as Chris told me:

My dad said he really wanted to move out from Milltown because some stuff is getting too crazy. Because people get on his nerves because they just do really dumb stuff and they don’t...And there’s a bunch of houses that are old and raggedy, and there’s too many gangs around and he said that’s not safe for me.

Talia and Shanya were unique in saying that, despite Milltown’s problems with crime, they did not want to move away. As Talia explained it,

I think that Milltown will be worse by the time I get older but I will still live in Milltown. ‘Cause, when I go to my grandma’s house, she lives in [a suburb], so that’s like further where the houses are on a highway. It’s weird. I couldn’t live where it’s all quiet at night. I’m used to like hearing people yell or argue or something like that.

Her description suggests a feeling of connection to her city, despite her belief that it will be “worse” by the time she’s an adult. Shanya also asserted that she would continue to live in Milltown, and that she would run the “big building” described above so as to provide services to the community. In sharp contrast to many students’ concerns about crime and violence, she told me that hearing gunshots in her neighborhood didn’t bother her because, “I usually know who’s shooting and stuff.” Significantly, she went on to offer a nuanced explanation of crime in Milltown, explaining:

If you really actually like sit there and learn, like and sit there and watch what’s going on and actually learn about how people is, and why people shooting and stuff, then you’ll see why they be shooting. Most people shoot and rob ‘cause they ain’t got no money to feed their kids, and other people shoot and rob just to do it for fun.

She gave an example of a man who had once done a drive-by shooting down her street, explaining that it would have been wrong to talk to the police about it because the man had three kids and wasn’t able to get a job because he had been in prison once before. A young woman who took care of Shanya while her mother was at work had spoken to the

man afterwards, giving him some money but telling him that he had to stop shooting because he could have injured one of her kids, and because if he had gotten shot, his own kids would have been sad. Shanya said, “now he don’t come back on the street to shoot no more, he just come back to say hi and stuff.”

In contrast, a group of the Latino boys not only spoke much more critically about people in Milltown, but also couched their criticism in racial terms:

Steven: Not to be racist, but sometimes they think that like African Americans, they...sometimes don’t trust them when they go to the shopping mall sometimes because they think they mostly steal.

Mario: Yeah, but that's kinda true, like. Most of them do do that.

Cesar: Like in Christmas, some people last year stole stuff from each other.

Steven: No, that was just because they wanted it. It was on black Friday too, they started fighting for stuff, like TVs and stuff.

Mario: My neighborhood used to be all like, not so dangerous but...now the African American people have came and they’re not like...nice. They always have guns or something.

Steven: One time my mom had a garden outside and then they started throwing trash, like...on the garden ‘cause it’s mostly more people of African American live next to me. And then they started throwing garbage and stuff like water bottles, soda cans and like beer bottles and stuff.

Here, Steven, Mario and Cesar clearly articulate their belief that African Americans commonly steal, have guns, and throw trash on the ground. Despite their previous comments critiquing racism and expressing concern about police violence against Black people (which I described in chapter four), their day-to-day observations have led them to conclude that most Black people are not “nice,” and to blame them for the conditions in the low-income neighborhoods where they live.

The differences between their comments and Shanya’s are suggestive in several ways. First, the extent to which these students’ descriptions of Milltown parallel their relationships with other students is notable. Shanya, who asserted that, “the kids that mostly get in trouble, like, all friends and can’t nothing separate us,” also expresses a

deep sense of connection to her neighborhood, and believes that even serious events such as shootings should be dealt with by the people in the neighborhood, not by the police. This raises the question of whether the school's emphasis on individual achievement and separation from peers fundamentally contradicts Shanya's beliefs about how to approach life. Steven, Mario and Cesar's characterizations of African American people as ruining their neighborhoods parallel the descriptions many Latinx students offered of their Black peers, in which they described them as "rude," "troubled kids," and kids with "anger management problems." While I do not believe that these ideas about Black people were developed solely at school, they highlight the reality that school experiences tended to reinforce rather than challenge these stereotypes. Additionally, Shanya's explanation of why people "shoot and rob" demonstrates the potential power of having a more sophisticated understanding of the troubles facing high-poverty communities. Steven, Mario and Cesar, lacking this understanding, end up assigning blame to the predominantly Black people they perceive as causing the problems they experience.

Unfortunately, discourse and practices in the school provided students with little opportunity to develop a more complex understanding of the poverty, crime and violence they witnessed. At times, the school did reference racial or structural inequality; for example, their celebration of James Weldon Johnson, the school's namesake, included mention of the challenges he faced and his work as an activist. As I noted in chapter four, Mr. Dunn led his eighth-grade students in a discussion about the death of Freddie Gray and the subsequent protests in Baltimore, during which he pushed them to consider the larger context of the protests, including disproportionate incarceration rates and lack of educational and employment opportunity in low-income urban areas. However, Mr. Dunn

was the only teacher I observed have such a discussion. Far more commonly, staff avoided discussion of current issues and/or framed problems as the consequence of individual choice. This occurred even when, partway through the year, these issues directly impacted the day-to-day life of the school. Mr. Jerry, the school porter, lost his job in the middle of the year after being arrested. Talia told me that he was in jail for having a gun, driving without a license, and selling drugs. She said that in the morning before homeroom started, the dean and the vice-principal had told the kids that, “people make good choices and people make bad choices, and...he made a bad choice.” This brief explanation is a dramatic oversimplification of situations and concerns many students were at least witnessing, if not facing themselves.

### **Civic Implications**

Collective civic action requires a sense of connectedness to and solidarity with one’s community, however “community” is defined. In certain ways, kids *did* demonstrate this through their desire to help others. Additionally, as I discussed in chapter four, kids expressed concern for racism and “unfairness” experienced by Black and Latinx people in other parts of the world. However, I argue that their experiences at JWJ overall were not conducive to developing the sorts of community relationships that enable civic action.

Though JWJ did encourage concern for the community through their emphasis on service, they also framed success as an individual endeavor in which association with others comes with substantial risks. Staff talked to kids about their peers primarily as people who might distract them or otherwise hold them back. This message was

reinforced by the use of group punishment: the “misbehavior” of a few kids meant that an entire homeroom or sometimes even an entire grade level had to suffer negative consequences. While Cohen (2010) found that a sense of “linked fate” – the belief that one is impacted by what happens to others in one’s racial in-group – was associated with civic engagement, my data suggest that rather than cultivating a sense of solidarity, group punishment taught kids that being grouped in with others leads to poor treatment. Kids reflected these ideas when they described one another as “trouble” and their homeroom as “bad.” Estrella’s comment that “this class is taking part of our education” clearly associates her limited opportunities in school with her membership in the Bowdoin homeroom. Kids also helped one another despite, and occasionally even because of these factors; Shanya once told me that she does things like make sure other students are on the right page in order to avoid a confrontation between that student and the teacher that escalates and consequently affects the whole class. Nonetheless, these are powerful messages for students to take in regarding what is required for success in institutional contexts.

Furthermore, students’ understanding of themselves and others was significantly impacted by the school’s behavioral system. Identities were constructed in part through the experience of getting additions and deductions in class and of receiving a paycheck each week that tabulated those additions and deductions, as well as through their observations about which kids got in trouble in class, were assigned silent lunch or CRT, got to go on trips or had to stay back. This information was particularly powerful in shaping kids’ understandings of those outside their immediate friend group. As will be discussed further in chapter six, kids’ opportunities to bring their own experiences, voices

and perspectives into school was limited; consequently, if students didn't know one another personally, they had few resources outside of the behavioral system with which to construct an understanding of one another. This situation was compounded by the reality that Black students were more likely to be positioned as "bad kids," while Latinx students were more likely to be positioned as "good kids." Rather than making connections across racial differences—connections that may be particularly important if young people and adults are going to challenge structural inequalities that impact low-income people of color regardless of their racial or ethnic background—these dynamics encourage division, frustration and blame.

Students' discussion of Milltown largely parallels these in-school patterns. Though they wanted to help people who were suffering from poverty or homelessness, the crime in Milltown made most want to leave the city. Shanya, the student who expressed the most affinity to her neighborhood and community, was also the student who most vocally rejected the school's emphasis on separating yourself from others. Just as students had few resources to understand the misbehavior of their peers, they had few resources to understand the prevalence of crime and disorder in Milltown. In Milltown, as in the school, this led some students to associate Blackness with people who, as Mario put it, "[are] not like...nice."

While the school is not the only source of students' developing relationship to others in their community, it is certainly significant. As a societal institution with which students have extended contact, what they experience there is likely to shape their expectations regarding navigating between their communities and institutional contexts in the future. It is also a place where students spend lengthy periods of time with others who

may have very different racial or ethnic backgrounds, family structures, life experiences, etc. In largely neglecting to discuss structural issues while emphasizing choice as the source of success or failure, school staff inadvertently encouraged students to understand others' struggles by attributing them to poor character and racial differences. Overall, school practices contribute to a narrative that "bad" others make poor choices, that association with such people is risky and that success is achieved individually. Even given variation in how students respond to such messages, they are likely to hinder rather than help students' develop the perceptions of their communities that Flanagan et al. (2007) found were associated with civic commitment.



## CHAPTER 6:

### STUDENT VOICE

Scholars are respectful, organized, attentive, and determined. Being a scholar is the first step to success. I will work hard to be successful. I will be a leader and not a follower. I will continue to make positive changes in my life. I will only succeed if I try. There is no limit to what I can accomplish. We are scholars today and leaders tomorrow. – The JWJ Charter School Pledge

Central to engaged, critical citizenship is a sense of self-efficacy. In this chapter, I examine how discourse and practices at JWJ charter school impacted what I refer to as students' sense of "voice," a term that emerged in numerous participants' speech as a way of referring to the space that existed (or not) for students' perspectives and participation. The JWJ school pledge, which was recited by all students every morning, encapsulates much about the school's stance on student voice, including its contradictions. On the one hand, the pledge suggests an effort to share authority with students, as it was written by a previous eighth-grade class. However, it offers a definition of what constitutes a "scholar" – namely, being "respectful, organized, attentive, and determined" – that is not only fairly narrow, but was predetermined by the charter network. It also suggests that embracing these characteristics is the only way to be successful, and frames students as people who need to make "positive changes" in their lives. Similarly, institutional messages at JWJ emphasized the value of complying with rather than challenging institutional structures and norms. While some students resisted this message, all students were aware that speaking up in the face of institutional authority came with substantial risks—a concept they seemed to apply to "unfairness" outside as well as inside of school. Overall, discourse and practices at JWJ are more

likely to encourage passive, compliant “citizenship” than to cultivate the sense of voice necessary for critical civic engagement.

### **Emphasis on Institutional Compliance**

During member-checking interviews, all kids agreed with the statement, “In this school, the teachers think that one of the most important things for kids to learn is to follow the rules.” This reflects the reality that students’ daily experiences at JWJ tended to reinforce the value of compliance with institutional structures. Descriptions of “being a scholar” revolved heavily around behavior such as following directions, not getting in trouble, and completing schoolwork, and often positioned kids’ individual insights and contributions as irrelevant or even disruptive. Institutional rules were represented as unchangeable and outside the realm of debate, even when such rules neglected or contradicted kids’ beliefs, needs and experiences. Finally, compliance was portrayed as a necessary prerequisite for participation and success in school. I argue that while this type of education might prepare kids to *navigate* societal institutions, it does not prepare them to challenge those institutions.

### **“Scholarship” as Passive and Compliant**

**Characteristics of an ideal student.** One primary place the emphasis on compliance can be seen is in how staff discourses constructed the role of students in the school. Though no-excuses schools are dedicated to academic achievement, descriptions of ideal student behavior at JWJ did not focus on characteristics like creativity, imaginative problem-solving, or critical thinking. Instead, staff tended to concentrate on

behavior, particularly compliant behavior. To a great extent, kids reflected this discourse in their own speech about what it took to be a good and successful student.

During teacher professional development before the start of the school year, teachers got into grade-level groups with the purpose of norming what sorts of behaviors should result in additions or deductions from students' paychecks in each category (Respectful, Organized, Attentive, Determined). The sixth-grade teachers created the following chart:

	+	-
R	helping classmates addressing peers respectfully	Disrespectful: - rolling eyes - sucking teeth - cracking neck - bombing
O	transitions hand signals coming prepared	calling out out of seat whining
A	tracking following directions	not following directions side conversations not tracking
D	homework perseverance cooperation (e.g. with someone that irritates you)	not doing classwork apathetic, giving up, "I don't care" percent of class not handing in homework

**Figure 6.1:** Chart created by sixth-grade teachers listing behaviors that could result in additions or deductions in each category (Respectful, Organized, Attentive, Determined).

Virtually every positive behavior listed in this chart is a compliant behavior, such as using hand signals, "tracking" the teacher, and doing homework. The only behavior that comes close to representing a meaningful contribution to the classroom is "helping classmates;" however, as I discussed in chapter five, teachers often seemed to either not notice students helping one another or directly prohibited it.

While students were not present for the creation of this chart, activities during Conduct College [a week at the beginning of the school year that was devoted entirely to

reinforcing and practicing school rules and expectations] and throughout the year reflected the same themes. For example, the JWW student compact, which students read and discussed during Conduct College, said:

It is important that I work to the best of my ability. Therefore, I shall strive to:

- follow school rules
- refrain from violence and solve conflict in a peaceful manner
- attend school regularly, on time, and follow dress code as specified in the policy
- come to school each day with pens, pencils, paper...(etc.)
- complete and return homework
- observe regular study hours
- complete class assignments

Again the focus is on behavior, and specifically on compliance with institutional expectations. As the lesson on the student compact continued, a slide asked, “How does this make you a better scholar? How does this put you on the path to college? How do our core values reflect the student compact?” In these questions, scholarship and college access are explicitly linked to following rules, being prepared, and completing work. While attending school and doing homework are important for academic achievement, reducing academic achievement to such behaviors suggests that it is a product only of conforming to external expectations, not of one’s own curiosity, creativity, or critical thinking.

Teachers’ responses to student contributions also indirectly reinforced these messages. One illustrative example occurred during Community Circle in October, when Ms. Hower led the sixth-graders in an activity that involved working in teams to replicate a “robot.” When she debriefed the activity with them, she asked Jamir what he had to do in order to do his job (looking at the original robot); he went through several answers before arriving at “pay attention,” which appeared to be what she was looking for. She

emphasized that this was like a math problem, in which if you didn't pay attention to a little detail like a positive or negative sign, you could get the whole problem wrong. She urged the kids to pay attention to details as they were working, then dismissed them back to homeroom. In this instance, Ms. Hower was not interested in Jamir's genuine reflections, but in leading him to a narrow answer that would allow her to conclude with a fairly narrow take-away message related to academic work.

Similarly, staff brushed off or ignored significant questions or contributions students offered spontaneously. During a Black History Month activity, kids were writing short profiles of various famous African Americans to hang on the bulletin board. Shanya asked Ms. Ernest, "If Martin Luther King already changed the world, why do we have to write about these other people? Everything's always about Martin Luther King." Ms. Ernest replied, "Well, now you get to learn about someone else." When Shanya persisted, Ms. Ernest essentially said, "We're not having this conversation right now." Another time, Bowdoin was reading a poem by Rudyard Kipling that included the line, "If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too." Talia said out loud, "Why's it gotta say 'men'?" but no one responded. In passing over these questions and comments, both of which reflect critical thinking and awareness of significant social issues, Ms. Ernest positions them as irrelevant if not disruptive. In doing so, she devalues kids' contributions and reinforces the image of an ideal student as someone who passively aligns themselves with institutional expectations.

By and large, kids seemed to have accepted this definition of what constitutes a "scholar." On the first day of school, one activity asked students to list the characteristics of a model student. Despite the fact that this question made no specific reference to

behavior, the list constructed by students who volunteered to share their answers included sitting up straight, raising hands to answer questions, being quiet, working hard, being prepared, being a role model for others, being kind, and getting good grades. Similarly, on the second day of school, the kids responded to the question, “What can you do to be a productive citizen at JWJ?” Their answers included: “follow ROAD; be an honor roll student; try your best to achieve; get straight As; pick trash up off the ground, get good grades and don’t get in trouble; work hard.” While grades and academic achievement make an appearance on these lists, they seem to be associated only with being quiet, working hard and not getting in trouble, rather than with rigorous intellectual engagement.

**“They’re trying to change us.”** This narrow vision of an ideal student, which was constructed by staff discourses and taken up by students, leaves little room for students to bring their full selves into school. As constructed at JWJ, “scholars” listen quietly, follow the rules, and work hard. They do not offer alternative perspectives, create new ideas, and speak up for what they believe in. I argue that students’ awareness of their constricted role in the school resulted in some kids experiencing school as a place that was trying to change them.

Unsurprisingly, Shanya was the first student to bring this interpretation to my attention. When I asked her and Talia what they thought the purpose of school was, Shanya asserted, “I think this school’s to try to change us.” She elaborated:

’Cause if someone’s good, some teachers just don’t like the way they learn, they keep trying to change them and change them into a different person. Say if you don’t like reading, they gon keep on trying to make you read, read, read, read, read. And then if, say you a type of person that like to do gym, and like exercise and run and stuff, then they gon’ try to keep that away from you, so you change what you like.

When I asked Shanya and Talia what sort of person they thought the school wanted them to be, they replied “somebody successful” who “[goes] to college.” Similarly, when I asked Jamir, Omari and Chris if they thought the school was trying to change them, they all said, “Yes!” and Jamir added, “They trying to make us into scholars.”

An incident that occurred during Conduct College illustrates the sort of interactions that likely led some students to this conclusion. Students had just completed an activity that asked them to write personal mission statements, and Ms. Ernest asked Justin what he wanted to accomplish. He said, “Being me.” She asked what he meant by that, and he said, “Being myself. I don’t know.” She then asked, “What did some other people say?” He mentioned getting good grades and graduating. She asked him if he wanted to get good grades and graduate, and he nodded. Though Ms. Ernest may have perceived Justin’s initial answer as reflecting either an inability or an unwillingness to answer the question, it is nonetheless significant that her reply appears to direct him away from the goal of “being myself”—arguably a worthy goal for a middle-schooler—and towards school-sanctioned goals of getting good grades and graduating.

Not all students agreed that the school was trying to change them, or that it was a bad thing. In a later interview, Omari changed his answer when I asked again if he thought that teachers wanted to change him, saying, “Hm-mm (no). They just want us to succeed in life, and in school.” When I asked Steven and Estrella the same question (in separate interviews), both said the school wanted to change them “in a good way,” somewhat like how their parents might want to change them. Steven said the school wanted to make them, “be more respectful, listen more, behave more, don’t yell out. And make you more smarter.” Estrella explained:

Like, they wanna change us how we are. Some people when we behave bad they want us to be a better person by helping us and giving us all these things ‘cause I know they do this to help us in our lives. They say that this is not the real life, when we get older we gonna be in the real life, like it’s gonna be real. And we don’t have to take everything as a joke, ‘cause it’s not.

These answers suggest that students actually had rather similar views on how the school wanted them to be, but that some students accepted that these changes were important in order to achieve success. As with numerous other issues, Roman, De’Quan and Ráfe engaged in a heated discussion about whether these expectations were too rigid:

De’Quan: Ok. This school trying to make you perfect.

Roman: Not really. (De’Quan: Yes.) It’s trying to prepare you for your future.

Ráfe: *Black belt...black shoes...khaki pants....*

Roman: Like anybody else would. So what you—

De’Quan: Are you on our side or the school’s side?

Roman: I’m saying like, I see the school, I already know what the school is for now. You about to go to an interview, like they used to say. You gon go to the interview with baggy pants, messed up shoes, no belt, sagging your pants...?

De’Quan: That’s different, you know that already.

Roman: So what’s the deal here?

Ráfe: We’re kids now, we need to enjoy life.

Roman, like Estrella and Steven, viewed the structures and requirements at school as reasonable in order to prepare for the future. In contrast, Shanya, De’Quan and Ráfe felt that such expectations left them little room to be themselves or to be kids.

Regardless of students’ different opinions on school staff’s efforts to “change them,” their perceptions further demonstrate the emphasis on institutional compliance at the school. Students repeatedly named characteristics such as “be[ing] more respectful, listen[ing] more, behave[ing] more” as constituting a “scholar” and leading to success. Furthermore, the some students’ sense that they are expected to change themselves points to the extremely limited space for students’ voices, perspectives and opinions.

### **Institutions as Unchangeable**



In addition to constructing a definition of being a scholar that emphasized passivity and conformity, discourse and practices at JWW charter school portrayed institutional structures and expectations as unchangeable. This was powerfully demonstrated by numerous instances in which school staff presented complex issues as having foregone conclusions. Rather than leading students in wrestling with these topics, staff focused on reinforcing the importance of a predetermined set of rules, behaviors and values.

This pattern arose multiple times during Conduct College. Despite the tremendous allocation of time to focusing on behavior and relationships, none of the Conduct College lessons seemed designed for meaningful discussion or engagement; instead, conversations were either omitted entirely or devoted to explaining and justifying school policy. Two related issues that exemplify the lack of engagement with complex problems particularly well are fighting and bullying. Both these issues provoked some friction between the correct (and perhaps over-simplified) answer, as determined by the school, and kids' experiences and perspectives; however, rather than engaging kids' concerns, staff often treated them as something to be corrected, or even as a disruption. This positions such questions and concerns as irrelevant to the institution.

The issue of fighting came up repeatedly throughout Conduct College. On the second day of school, the kids were put into groups to create skits based on the parts of the student compact. My fieldnotes below illustrate the ways that this lesson both assumed a level of agreement about some behavioral expectations that did not exist, and ended up masking these differing opinions:

I sat with Gabriel, Kasy, and Asia, who were assigned to create a skit based on, "refrain from violence and solve conflict in a peaceful manner." Kasy asked what

that meant, so I walked her and Gabriel through it (Asia had not come over to the group yet) by explaining what “refrain” meant. Asia came over and joined the conversation, which focused around what she and Kasy considered to be the unrealistic premise of this tenet. Kasy said that her way of solving something peacefully was to punch someone. She said that her mom told her if anyone touched her, hit them. Asia agreed, saying that her mom said if anyone touched her to hit them with a science book (as she said it she chuckled at the joke about the thickness of science books). Kasy agreed, saying “This is the hood,” and thus there was no time to resolve things peacefully. Gabriel said that his mom told him he should tell a teacher. Kasy said, “You’re joking right?” He said no, and she repeated, “You’re joking right?” She and Asia pressed him: If someone hit him right in the face, he would just walk away and tell a teacher? He had braces—think how much it would cut up his mouth if someone punched him. He said that his parents would take him to the hospital. I thought they might be taking the word ‘conflict’ too seriously, and asked how they would solve things with a friend or a family member. They reaffirmed that they would hit them, with Asia offering stories about her twin (half?) brothers (two sets, one on her mom’s side and one on her dad’s) playing around but then hitting each other when things “got too real.” However, they threw a skit together in the last 30 seconds of work time which depicted two kids resolving a conflict over a pencil in a friendly way: ‘That’s my pencil.’ ‘No, it’s my pencil.’ ‘Let me see...oh, you’re right, it is your pencil.’

This lesson is premised on the assumption that kids already agree that “solv[ing] conflict in a peaceful manner” is both valuable and possible, yet this is clearly not the case for all students. I talked to both students and parents about fighting in interviews throughout the year, and while some did support the schools’ stance, others considered it unrealistic. Talia’s mom was particularly frustrated with the school’s emphasis on not fighting back, either physically or verbally, under any circumstances, asserting, “I’m sure there’s not one parent would tell their kids, that someone get in your face, just sit there.” She explained this stance, saying:

And the thing about it, is if you don’t protect yourself and the teachers are telling you don’t say nothing, when the teacher is not around, these kids are still doing the same thing over. For the kids, teachers can’t protect you the whole time.

Her statement alludes to the reality that at least some of the kids at JWJ spent a significant portion of their time without adult supervision. For young people who cook

meals, care for younger siblings and walk to school on their own, the expectation that reliance on adults can always ensure their physical or emotional safety is not realistic.

However, school staff were largely unprepared to engage the complexities of this issue with students. During another Conduct College lesson on bullying, the issue of fighting came up again. Mr. Cassano, who was teaching the lesson, emphasized that hitting people is not the answer, and Shanya asked, “What if they hit you first,” adding a few minutes later, “My mom said if somebody hit me I gotta hit them back or I’m gonna get in trouble.” Mr. Cassano seemed to be struggling to respond, saying, “We don’t want you to be punching bags,” but ultimately reiterating that they would get in trouble if they were fighting, even if they were defending themselves. There was a murmur of protest at that, and he said, “I’m not telling you not to defend yourself; it’s just the way it is.” In both this lesson and the one I described above, the teachers did not expect and seemed unprepared for differing student opinions on the issue of fighting. Additionally, Mr. Cassano’s response depicts institutional rules as not only outside the realm of debate, but as unchangeable. The realities of kids’ lives, including their parents’ expectations and the possibility that they might need to defend themselves against another person, are irrelevant to the institutional expectation.

Related to fighting was the issue of bullying. JWJ took bullying extremely seriously: there was an online form kids could fill out to report instances of bullying they had seen or experienced, bullying was addressed in multiple Conduct College lessons and school assemblies, and instances that staff considered to be bullying tended to provoke significant disciplinary consequences. This seriousness is admirable given the extremely negative impact bullying is known to have on young people. Furthermore, as I mentioned

in chapters four and five, most kids *did* tell me that there was bullying at their school and seemed to want this issue taken seriously. However, just as complexities around fighting were glossed over or ignored, school staff gave students little to no opportunity to participate in defining what differentiated bullying from other, potentially more acceptable, behaviors.

Talia and Shanya wrestled throughout the year with questions around what should be considered bullying. They argued that instances of mutual conflict were incorrectly treated as bullying by school staff, and blamed primarily on one person; for example, Talia frequently said that after she and Asia got into an argument, Asia would fill out the school's bullying form and Talia would get into trouble. As Shanya put it, "How you bully somebody else and somebody bully you back. That don't make no sense to me." They also felt that staff couldn't tell the difference between bullying and joking, explaining:

Talia: They don't know the difference because like, if you laughing while you's bombing [...] you talk to that person every day, and like, you're friends with that person, then ya'll just end up bombing, like—They shouldn't really actually write it down as bullying or nothing.

In a conversation with Ms. Douglas, Jamir raised a similar critique, asking, "Is bombing bullying?" and going on to explain that Talia sometimes calls him "nugget-head" and he sometimes calls her "forehead," but they both laugh when they do it. It's possible that this misunderstanding has a cultural basis; trading humorous verbal insults has been described as a characteristic of African American culture (Thompson, 2004), something Tescia's mom was potentially referencing when she reportedly said, according to Talia, "it's a difference between cracking on kids and bullying."

Yet the dialogue between staff and kids that could have explored this question did not occur. Lessons on bullying offered statistics, definitions of different types of bullying, and a chart explaining the consequences of committing each type. While they also used videos and stories to convey the emotional impact of bullying, as did the anti-bullying assembly, they avoided questions without clear right or wrong answers. When Shanya and Jamir brought up their questions with Ms. Douglas, she responded that even if it was bombing was intended as joking, it was “still not appropriate for school.” She then said, “Can we move on, because this is not a good use of time,” adding, “You all are talking like you’re gon stop,” in a tone of voice suggesting that she knew better. This reflects a focus on official definitions, policies and consequences, and on whether students’ behavior complies with those definitions and policies. Like the treatment of fighting and conflict, it renders students’ perspectives irrelevant in the face on institutional expectations.

In all these conversations, staff reinforced the message that institutional rules are unchangeable. They are not to be questioned, challenged, or even better understood, but simply to be followed. In doing so, they lost valuable opportunities for students to participate actively rather than passively in constructing and enforcing behavioral norms. Combatting bullying, for example, relies on the idea of “upstanding”—that an observer, rather than laughing or ignoring bullying, will step in on behalf of the victim (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Yet school staff did not encourage the type of student agency that would make this sort of intervention likely, instead urging students to “walk away,” “worry about yourself,” or at best “tell an adult” if there was a problem. This positions students as outside of and powerless in relationship to institutional expectations.

### **Compliance as a Prerequisite to Success**

A final way that school staff emphasized the importance of compliance was by positioning it as a prerequisite for achieving success in institutional contexts. Again, this was particularly notable during Conduct College because of the continual focus on behavior. During an activity on the first day of school, the kids were presented with a scenario in which a student had earned Distinguished Honors in two marking periods and scored at the highest level on the state standardized test; however, he had also had an out-of-school suspension for one day in 6th grade for cursing, and in 8th grade he was involved in a fight and called to an expulsion hearing. Ms. Ernest, who was facilitating the activity, then asked whether they thought he would get into the high school of his choice. Talia responded that he wouldn't because he wasn't following the rules, and because if you get expelled it goes on your record. An incident later in the week offers insight into why she answered that way: Ms. Lupin, the instructional support specialist, was leading a session about James Weldon Johnson, and became frustrated with Bowdoin's behavior. She lectured the class, telling them, "Mr. Biondi [the high school placement coordinator] takes students off his list not because of their grades, but because of their behavior," and offering the example of a previous valedictorian of an 8th grade class who she said was not accepted to his high school of choice because of a fifth grade detention. At the end of Conduct College, there was an assembly in which student representatives from each grade, who had been chosen by the faculty, gave speeches. Paulina, the representative from the sixth grade, seemed to encapsulate this message about the relationship between behavior and academic success when she said that

Conduct College is not everyone's favorite, but it's still important to learn the rules because "if you do what you want, you won't learn anything in school."

Compliance was also positioned as a prerequisite for voice. Shanya and Talia told me repeatedly that Berkeley, another sixth-grade homeroom, was treated better than Bowdoin because Berkeley had more of the "good kids" and the teachers liked them better:

Talia: And, I personally think that out of the whole sixth grade, all the teachers, they like Berkeley, because Berkeley, they get called for everything. Like, they don't never call Bowdoin or nothing like that.

Shanya: No, they – they let Berkeley get away with a lot. Like, one time, the whole class started singing songs and stuff during the middle of the class, and then they just got away with it.

As they describe above, they felt that teachers showed their preference for Berkeley by giving them more latitude to fool around and break rules, and also by calling them to perform their chants and cheers at assemblies. As I described earlier, the opportunity to develop and perform homeroom chants and cheers was a major way that students were able to have a voice in the school, and was extremely significant to many kids. After one assembly early in the year when Berkeley was called onto the stage, multiple kids in Bowdoin were incensed because they felt Berkeley had copied their chant. Over the year of my data collection, I saw both of the other sixth-grade homerooms selected to perform, but never saw Bowdoin have this chance (though there is the possibility that this occurred on a day I wasn't present). This positions Bowdoin's misbehavior as a potential reason to deny them full participation and voice in the school.

During interviews, teachers clearly described their efforts to teach students that opportunities to speak up or participate are contingent upon "responsible behavior." Mr. Balkus, for example, told me that he makes decisions about which students should be

allowed to do jobs like hand out or collect papers based upon who hands in homework consistently, saying, “If they're not going to hand in their homework consistently, they're not being responsible, so how can I see them as being responsible of making crucial decisions for the classroom?” Even more explicitly, Ms. Ernest said it was important for kids to understand that you have to show that you can follow the rules before you criticize them, explaining, “No one’s gonna hear your voice if you’re just doing whatever you want to.” Mr. Sullivan struggled with similar themes in considering his role as a social studies teacher in cultivating democracy, saying:

It’s not necessarily easy to... Kids want to have more freedoms but I try to also offer, when they request those things, to discuss: just what goes with that freedom? What responsibility goes with that freedom? You have to live up to your end of the bargain.

Seeming genuinely conflicted, he elaborated:

When they complain about things, and I've done this even before I talked about government, I say, “I will support you if you want to change something. I fully believe that you should. Do you understand? You're telling me that you want the uniform to change. You're going to have to get every single kid in this school on board. How are you going to go about organizing them? It can't just be you two that are complaining about it, that's not going to make any change. You've got to somehow get everyone together.”

Simultaneously, he criticized the kids, saying:

They don't understand that the democratic process isn't constructive if you're just complaining and yelling at the teachers and saying, “I don't like it,” or “No,” and talking back. That's not the democratic process. It certainly can be a part of it but it's typically not conducive to getting something done.

Notably, Mr. Sullivan declares that he will support the kids if they want to change something; however, he is preoccupied with whether their approach demonstrates “responsibility” or just involves “complaining and yelling.” Overall, while staff members such as Mr. Sullivan believed that kids should have a voice, they consistently positioned



this voice as contingent upon following the rules. They also seemed to view their responsibilities to kids as being primarily or even exclusively about teaching them to follow rules, not about supporting them in speaking up appropriately.

This emphasis on institutional compliance situates kids as people who must learn to navigate societal institutions, not people who might shape or challenge those institutions. This emphasis on navigating rather than challenging institutions was made particularly clear in a conversation Ms. Douglas had with Jamir, Shanya, Talia, Omari and Oscar. She met regularly with this small group of kids and they sometimes talked to her about their frustration with how teachers treated them. On this particular day, they had arrived especially agitated after an interaction with Ms. Campbell. Toward the end of their meeting, Ms. Douglas lost patience with them, saying, “Next week, don’t come in venting and whining. Come in with solutions.” Their subsequent interaction is described in my fieldnotes:

The kids objected, describing again what Ms. Campbell had done, but Ms. Douglas said she knew, and pointed out, “Even this morning, I was giving you the face, like, ‘she’s in her mode now.’” She said that when Ms. Campbell gets like that, they should know not to push it. She pointed out that all they need from her is their grade, adding, “She already has her degree.” Talia said that even though she had gotten a lot better, she felt like Ms. Campbell was always watching her, waiting for her to do something. Ms. Douglas cut in, agreeing, “She’s watching you guys, and she’s waiting for you guys to do something. You’re right.” She said that she’s had a lot of teachers that she didn’t like as a kid, and that when she was growing up, teachers could do worse things than they can now. But she knew that she had to get good grades, or she would be grounded, and wouldn’t be able to go out and play. Omari objected, “If the teachers treat us that way, why can’t we treat them that way?” Ms. Douglas reiterated, “Think about what’s more important, this conflict, or the grades you have to bring home to your parents.”

The advice Ms. Douglas offers here is helpful in dealing with circumstances *as they are*, which is undoubtedly important. For kids, and perhaps especially low-income kids of color, to navigate high school, college, and future jobs they will have to be strategic in

responding to unfairness. However, her advice in this situation as well as the larger messages in school discourse and practices prepare kids *only* for this sort of individual success within existing systems. They do not develop kids' ability to change these systems or to advocate for themselves. Furthermore, they do not affirm kids' sense that something unfair has happened, or support them in understanding why, arguably limiting even their individual achievement.

Overall, discourse and practices at JWJ focused on preparing students to comply with, or at best navigate, societal institutions. Compliance was depicted as central to being a "scholar," and thus to full participation and success. Students' thoughts, insights and even individual differences were positioned as irrelevant to an unchangeable set of institutional structures and expectations.

### **Encouraging Student Voice**

Despite the emphasis on compliance discussed above, there were a small number of practices at JWJ that were intended to encourage student participation and perspectives. In particular, students had certain outlets available to them for self-expression, including in official school contexts such as assemblies. Several structures also offered students some authority in the school, including the student government, the teacher-student meeting request form, and the student retreat. These practices did impact students' experiences at school, helping some students to feel that they did have a voice. Simultaneously, their efficacy was limited by the overriding emphasis on compliance, which tended to curtail students' opportunities to meaningfully impact school practice or challenge adult authority. This illustrates the conflicted position of student voice in the

school, highlighting contradictions which I argue in chapter seven are particularly significant to understanding the impact of the no-excuses model.

### **Self Expression**

At JWJ, students had various opportunities for what I'm terming "self-expression," by which I mean opportunities to express an opinion, represent themselves artistically, etc. In one activity in the first week of school, the kids filled out a reflection sheet asking where they wanted to go for trips and what they would like to see at the scholars auction (an auction attended by the two highest paycheck earners in each homeroom, in which they could use scholar dollars to bid on and purchase items ranging from books to a bicycle). During morning announcements and at assemblies, kids as well as adults could suggest a "shout-out," in which they recognized another student or staff member for something. In Ms. Ernest's reading class, the first activity of the period was sometimes a free-write. Since Ms. Ernest always took volunteers to read their free-writes out loud, kids often used these as a way of being heard on various issues. Kasy, for example, once read a poem she wrote entitled, "please stop bullying me." The rest of her class listened attentively as she read it, and several students applauded at the end. The same day, Shanya read something called, "James Weldon Johnson Charter School," in which she brought up a number of critiques, including saying that she gets deductions just for laughing and that they never get to go to Community Circle or practice their "chants and cheers." Ms. Ernest said she wanted to respond to some of that, and the class was able to have a brief discussion about these issues. Another day, Shanya's free-write said her head was hurting in "this hot room," and that she wondered if she could go to the

nurse, ending by asking Ms. Ernest, “could I?” Ms. Ernest smiled and said she could once everyone was finished.

As mentioned in chapter three, student performances were also a major part of life at JWJ, and many students were highly invested in these performances. Homerooms created “chants and cheers” about themselves, generally by changing the words to part of a popular song, and sometimes had the opportunity to perform their chants and cheers at Community Circle or at school assemblies. All school assemblies included some students as participants, and though many of their performances seemed to have been scripted by adults, there was also a talent show that consisted entirely of student-created work. The year of my data collection, the talent show was in its third year, and included 27 separate acts: two drumming performances, one rap, ten songs, and fourteen dances. One of the dancing performances was created by a group called “Bridging the Gap,” which was started by the elementary school dean and paired groups of fourth-graders with eighth-grade mentors. Students were exponentially more engaged in and excited about the talent show than in any of the other assemblies, clapping along to the music and giving numerous standing ovations.

### **Student Authority**

In addition to chances for self-expression, certain structures in the school were intended to share authority with students, offering them opportunities to contribute to running the school, and to report problems with other kids or even adults. Students contributed to many assemblies through performances and speeches, and two girls served as the “mistresses of ceremonies” for the James Weldon Johnson Assembly, which was devoted to remembering and taking inspiration from James Weldon Johnson’s

accomplishments. A number of kids volunteered to create chants for the Pep Rally that preceded the start of standardized testing, including Talia, Shanya and Tescia from Bowdoin. Ms. Howers took them over to the gym during homeroom to create a performance, which they did entirely without adult supervision or assistance. The text of their chant, which was meant to be performed to music from the song *Only*, was:

I never got an F  
 I never got a D  
 All my life man all As  
 If we did the 6th graders would have a lot of cupcakes  
 We so smart, we just read  
 We don't duck nobody but tape  
 Did my homework on a school night is our idea of an update  
 Hut 1, Hut 2  
 Big As, Big Bs too  
 We mess with them 6th graders who  
 don't tell others what they grades is

Eighth-graders in particular were given opportunities to share authority. Eighth-grade students often helped run morning announcements, giving reminders, asking for shout-outs, and even quieting everyone down. Eighth-graders also did “legacy projects,” in which all eighth-grade students were divided into groups and spent weeks working on contributions to the school. In the year that I was there, projects included painting a mural, creating a graduation video, and planning the eighth-grade dance. Previous eighth-grade classes had contributed the school pledge, mentioned above, and the school mascot. When I asked one group of eight-grade boys if they felt like they had a voice in the school, Daniel said:

I do think this school has like, they give you an option to be a big person. ‘Cause there’s a kid in [another homeroom], for getting good grades and all that, he’s very known throughout the school. And I know him because I’d be talking in Community Circle a lot. I’d be interacting with little kids, be talking to other kids in other classes. So you know, and I try to get on – well, I get on their fun side, so

that's how they know me. And Community Circle, that's like a perfect time, where you could show your talents, show your skills.

Beyond contributing in areas like school assemblies and community circle, three major structures in the school were designed to share authority with students: the student government, the teacher-student meeting request form, and the student retreat.

**Student Government.** Of these three structures, the student government was perhaps most restricted in its contributions. I wasn't at school on the day the sixth-grade had elections, and consequently I did not even realize that there *was* a student government for several months. Two student government representatives from each grade, plus an additional eighth-grader who served as president, met once a month during homeroom. Ms. Harold, the eighth-grade science teacher who ran the student government, explained the process of running for election to me:

At first they have to put an interest form in. An interest form with an essay. The interest form came first. Then you get back the packet. The packet had the essay, two teacher recommendation forms. The kids don't get it back. That went straight to me. Then they had to have a certain grade. They have to be passing everything. You don't have to be a rocket scientist. We understand that some kids – but you have to be passing everything. So we weeded them out, then we put them on a ballot. The kids all had to give a speech to their grade. Then their grade level voted on them. It was kind of fun.

The student government seemed to primarily help with school events and administrative tasks; for example, they were supposed to record uniform numbers from each homeroom after teachers wrote them on the boards outside their classrooms. They also helped to plan Kindness Week, and came up with the idea of doing a social media theme since a lot of bullying happens online. They did have the opportunity to raise concerns at meetings, and did seem to make some effort to bring student concerns to the attention of teachers or school staff. For example, at one meeting I attended, a student

brought up the idea of having dress down days on Fridays, and having students pay for it by bringing in real money to donate to charity. This is an idea I assume must have been floating around the school, because I heard about it separately from Talia. However, as I will discuss more below, Ms. Harold was not terribly receptive to these concerns. Nonetheless, Julio, Mario's older brother, brought up student government when I asked if students have a voice in the school, saying, "Some of us, yeah, especially the student government. They try to talk for all of us, not only for them."

**Teacher-student meeting request form.** The student-teacher meeting request form, at least in its conception, offered far more power to students. Forms were available in every classroom, and students could fill them out to ask for help if they thought a staff member had been unfair or disrespectful to them. Ms. Azikiwe, the principal, explained to me how the form was supposed to work, saying,

Normally, what we'll do is either schedule for Ms. Hart [the behavior intervention coordinator] to meet with the staff person and the student, or to do like a whole group thing, if the students think it's the entire class. If the teacher is—like the teacher's mean. Actually, we just did one because a student came and told me that he felt like Mr. Callanan [the eighth-grade reading teacher] gets too mad at them when they make mistakes. We did a talking circle with Mr. Callanan and the class, and they could tell him how it felt for them.

Students did not use this form tremendously frequently, and some students told me that when they did fill it out, nothing happened. Despite this skepticism, I did observe an instance in which Talia, Shanya and Asia, outraged at Ms. Campbell's failure to intervene when another student behaved disrespectfully towards them, worked together for fifteen minutes during homeroom to carefully and thoroughly complete the form, re-reading and editing what one another had written. The seriousness with which they approached this task suggests that the form did hold some weight in their minds, and gave

them a sense of being able to do something about what had just happened. Even if not perfectly executed, the existence of the form is a significant statement about kids' right to object to unfair or disrespectful treatment.

**The student retreat.** Finally, in the year of my data collection, administrators at the school organized what they called the “student retreat.” This provided a structured opportunity for students, in their homerooms, to provide feedback on several aspects of the school, including CRT, Community Circle, silent transitions, after-school clubs, and the uniform. While I was not able to observe this, I acquired copies of the feedback sheets later. Younger students filled out a form as a class, while some older students wrote individual letters on a topic. Ms. Douglas described the student retreat to me, praising it as a significant shift in how much student voices are valued at the school:

It was the first year. They'd never did anything like this. That's why I said I think they've made great gains, because before it was the mentality like teachers are up here, students are down here. We have teachers that say some mean stuff to kids, and kids are supposed to take it. [...] It really turned out good because I had to teach a couple of them. It was like, “Our concern is this. These are the three reasons why this is not good for us as students. Here are three solutions and why they will work.” Miss Azikiwe got letters from every class. And different classes had different topics. Elementary didn't have a topic that a middle school student might have. They all wrote the letter, then they were able to present them to the class, then Miss Azikiwe got them all. Let's see what they do with it...

Ms. Douglas's comments highlight the tension in the school between the desire to cultivate student voice, particularly on the part of certain staff members, such as Ms. Azikiwe, and the mentality that “teachers are up here, students are down here.” Structures such as the student retreat and the teacher-student meeting request form reflect sincere and significant efforts to respect students and honor their perspectives. Simultaneously, many aspects of school culture continued to emphasize compliance, and this limited the efficacy of such efforts.



### Limits of Student Authority

Despite structures intended to encourage student voice, the day-to-day discourse and practices at JWJ which stressed compliance and rule-following tended to limit how much authority students could actually exercise within these structures. Daniel, who I quote above as saying that the school gave students a chance to “be a big person,” continued his comments by warning:

Daniel: Yeah, and I think they give you a chance to speak out loud. Like, just don’t try to ruin that chance they give you. ‘Cause if you get like too much, then they won’t let you speak out, you know.

EG: If you do what?

Douglas: If like you do too much, and play too much, or if you waste that opportunity to speak out loud, they just kind of take it away, yeah.

EG: Okay, like from an individual, but not from everyone.

Douglas: Yeah.

His comments reflect the reality that many staff members were hesitant to give students too much authority, or to compromise existing rules and practices. For example, during one of the student government meetings, students brought up multiple questions, concerns and ideas, including the suggestion about having dress-down days on Fridays. As described in my fieldnotes below, Ms. Harold primarily responded to these comments by explaining why things are as they are:

After the update on Kindness Week, Ms. Harold asked if the kids had any concerns. (At this point, the copier started going. It was right next to me, so it became very hard to hear.) One girl said that some people were concerned about the bathroom. Ms. Harold, trying to clarify, asked whether she meant the rules about the bathroom, and she said, no, the actual bathroom. Ms. Harold said they couldn’t really change the physical structure of the bathroom. However, she said she would bring up something to her leadership team. Another kid said something about Pajama Day. Ms. Harold said that she had talked to Ms. Azikiwe and Ms. Murphy about it. I couldn’t hear almost any of this, so I asked Ms. Harold about it later. She told me that for several years, the kids had wanted to have Pajama Day for Spirit Week, but that Ms. Azikiwe was really not into it. She said she was concerned that it could get inappropriate, and that she also just really felt like kids should look professional. A girl said some people didn’t like the theme for the

dance, and Ms. Harold said 50 out of 75 people had voted for the theme (neon). The girl asked about glow-in-the-dark, and Ms. Harold said that was sort of the same thing. Finally, someone asked about dress-down days. [...] Ms. Harold told the kids (and reiterated to me later) that they might be able to get it for certain Fridays, but Ms. Azikiwe really felt like they should look professional at school.

This example suggests that the student government had no real power in the school.

Similarly, even if students filled out the teacher-student meeting request form, there was no guarantee that their concern would be addressed. Instead, what happened was ultimately dependent upon the decision of an adult in the building. Talia and Shanya told me later that when they and Asia filled out the form and turned it into Ms. Douglas, as I described above, Ms. Douglas told them that they couldn't really do anything because the student they'd had the conflict with was leaving. Ráfe expressed to me:

Ráfe: But then again they give us that little thing where "oh, if you have a problem, you can write it down." But then the person who ends up winning is the teachers. They use their position in school as like an advantage. Because they're a dean, they can do all these things to us. But we never get the opportunity to like, state ours.

E: Your point of view?

Ráfe: Our point of view and our opinions, 'cause like she's always the right one. She's always the one who's going to win.

Consequently, some students may have had little confidence in the form. When Jamir, Omari and Chris were talking to me about their frustration with various incidents that they perceived as unfair, I brought it up the idea of filling out the form. Jamir told me he had tried that, but it hadn't worked:

EG: There's like a paper you fill out, like a staff referral form or a staff request form, if you have a problem with somebody on the staff.

Jamir: Mm-hmm. I did that, remember? I did it!

Omari: Yeah, he did that one and they still didn't get the teacher.

EG: Who'd you fill it out for?

Jamir: Ms. Ernest, Ms. Campbell, Mr. Forrester, Mr. Williams, Ms. Hower.

EG: You filled one out for all those people?

Omari: Yes, and he still didn't get to meet with them.

Jamir: And I still got the CRT.

EG: And no one ever talked to you about it?

Jamir: Nope. They just said I get the CRT.

Overall, while multiple staff members wanted to encourage student voice and had created structures to do so, these efforts were in tension with—and ultimately overwhelmed by—a larger emphasis on compliance and a pre-existing vision of what a good school and a good student should look like. Elena, Jamir’s older sister who had graduated from JWJ and gone on to a suburban public school, told me, “I think you have a lot more of a voice,” at her current school than at JWJ, explaining that at JWJ:

I guess you kind of can say something but it’s like, you know, this is the way the school runs, so that’s it. You know, like that’s how the school runs and that’s really it, you know, so... I guess that’s the difference.

I will argue in chapter seven that the difficulty in cultivating student voice, despite intentional efforts to do so, resulted partially from certain aspects of the no-excuses model. First, however, it is necessary to further consider how the day-to-day discourse and practices at JWJ that encouraged compliance impacted students’ ideas and decisions about “speaking up.”

### **Student Perspectives**

How did these prevalent messages about institutional compliance impact students? While students such as Shanya explicitly challenged school expectations, many students also echoed ideas emphasizing quietness, rule-following and not getting involved. They understood leadership as primarily about making “good choices” and meeting institutional expectations, not about making your own decisions and following your own beliefs. They also understood “speaking up” in the face of unfairness as a risky endeavor that should be approached cautiously or avoided entirely. Such perceptions

strongly suggested that students were internalizing the ideas about institutional compliance discussed above, which position it as fundamental to achieving success.

### **“Leaders” as Rule-Followers**

One major place that such ideas appeared was in students’ definitions of leadership. The school pledge included the line, “I will be a leader and not a follower;” in final focus group interviews with both sixth- and eighth-graders, I reminded kids of this and asked them what it meant to be a leader. The majority of answers revolved around doing the “right thing” by doing well in school and ignoring the negative influences of other kids. For example, when I asked Omari, Chris and Jamir to give an example of someone who was a leader, Jamir immediately replied, “I can’t lie, I’ll say all the good kids.” Similarly, Estrella and Jessica offered the following examples of students they considered leaders:

Estrella: Well, first of all Cesar, because he always do his work and he don’t be like – because other friends, they’re like – they’re trying to act bad.

Jessica: Yeah, like they’re always talking.

Estrella: And he’s like the only one who like just pay attention to his work and finish first. And Emma because she will always do her work and she never be paying attention to anybody. And she’s quiet. And Jessica because she do all her work and she behave. And Victoria because she help me on everything.

These responses conflate leadership with ideas of “goodness” and “badness” that are related to compliance with school behavioral norms, such as doing your work and being quiet. Drawing this connection even more explicitly, Tescia answered, “It’s like, to do the right things and make your own—no, not make your own choices, but make the good choices instead of the negative.” Notably, she starts to say that leaders make their own choices, then corrects herself and says that leaders *don’t* “make [their] own choices;” rather, they “make the good choices instead of the negative.” These ideas clearly mirror

patterns in school discourse and practices described above, which value institutional compliance (making good choices) above student contributions and perspectives (making one's own choices).

Of course, kids' conceptions of leadership were not entirely determined by their experiences in school. In addition to good behavior, some kids considered influence on others as one aspect of leadership, although it remained entangled with "doing the right thing." After Jamir's response, Omari and Chris chimed in:

Omari: Chris. I think he's a leader.

Chris: Yeah, but sometimes I get off track.

[...]

EG: What makes him a leader? Why do you say Chris?

Omari: Because he always – he does the right thing. He doesn't care what people say. Like he tries to get other people on task.

Chris: A lot of times with Omari and Jamir. 'Cause sometimes they get off track, and I'm just like, 'be quiet,' so they don't think we're talking. And then, they end up listening, so they don't get in trouble. But the other people who were talking and didn't listen to me, they do get in trouble.

In his response, Omari suggests that it's not only Chris's good behavior that makes him a leader, but also the fact that he tries to keep other people "on task." Omari and Jamir seemed to have different ideas of how central this second quality is:

EG: Is it because he does the right thing that makes him a leader or is it because he like tries to get other people to – ?

Jamir: Because he does the right thing.

Omari: (to Jamir) Say both.

Much like Tescia, Jamir seems to feel that Chris's choice to "do the right thing" is *the* defining characteristic of leadership, while Omari suggests that leaders *both* do the right thing and encourage others to do the same. While eighth-graders were able to provide somewhat more complex articulations of this relationship, they also entangled doing the right thing and influencing other people, with the former potentially as the primary

characteristic. Josh described being a leader as, “not trying to do the bad things that the other kids are trying to do, and trying to make a difference in the school so that everybody can be encouraged by yourself so they can follow you.” Abril agreed, saying, “being a leader is being yourself and being good enough that other people would want to be like you, so that you can lead them.”

Most kids also acknowledged that it was possible to be a “bad leader.” Abril continued, “you can’t be a bad leader because then the people that follow you are going to be bad. So you have to be what you want others to be.” Roman asked me immediately, “what do you mean, ‘cause it could be leadership as a positive role or a negative role.” Other kids agreed that it was possible to be “a leader of the bad kids” once I brought it up. However, across all focus groups, descriptions of leadership were dominated by ideas about “doing the right thing,” “being yourself,” and helping others.

Only a few students’ definitions challenged the relationship between leadership and “good choices.” Though her friends Keiara and Teanna said that to be a leader, “You gotta encourage people to do the right thing,” Angel called herself a leader, arguing:

Because I don’t follow after nobody. If I choose to do my work I choose to do my work. If I choose not to do my work then I choose not to do my work. I don’t follow after nobody. I’m just myself, I don’t follow. ‘Cause there’s nobody in the school that’s like me, so, there’s nobody for me to follow.

In contrast to Tescia, Angel’s definition (to which Keiara and Teanna laughingly responded, “Okay, we get your point, Ms. Martin Luther King,”) is built on being herself and making her own choices, even if those choices run counter to school expectations.

Talia and Shanya directly critiqued the school’s definition of leadership, saying:

Talia: But, I don't get it because, if somebody doing something good, and then you doing something good also with that person, isn't that being a follower? So then basically you're not being a leader, you're being a follower?

Shanya: My mom said I can't follow after nobody, that's not good.

EG: Your mom said that?

Shanya: Yeah! And then she just be like, you can follow after this student. But the pledge said, "I'm not a leader," - I mean, "I'm a leader, not a follower," so then—

Talia: It defeats the purpose.

Shanya: Exactly! Of being good.

As Talia and Shanya point out, "doing something good" based upon someone else's actions and beliefs is "being a follower," not being a leader. They imply that this idea contradicts the basic premise of leadership, saying "it defeats the purpose of being good." Ráfe raised similar questions, saying:

That thing [the pledge] is weird for me. 'Cause whenever I read it, I go home and I start thinking over it, 'be a leaders and not followers.' Ok, so if you're a leader and everyone's following you, doesn't that make everyone else followers?

His remark implies a logical inconsistency in the idea that everyone can be a leader, perhaps especially in a context where the "right thing" is singular and predefined, meaning all these "leaders" should be behaving in the same way.

The challenges Shanya, Talia and Ráfe offer highlight the contradictions in urging students to be leaders while providing no real opportunities for leadership. Students knew they needed to "be good" and "do the right things," but were not permitted to participate in defining what was right. Thus, leadership became defined as successfully living up to someone else's vision of what was "good." Talia and Shanya argued that they should change the pledge, exclaiming:

Shanya: And then they be like, be "scholars today and leaders tomorrow," so—

Talia: (interrupting) We been scholars today, leaders tomorrow for like—

Shanya: Two years!

EG: Do you mean, you're ready for tomorrow to come, to be a leader?

Talia: I'm already a leader, so...it should be leaders today, and leaders tomorrow.

These comments reflect their dissatisfaction with their role in the school. However, they also reaffirm students' awareness of the emphasis on conformity to institutional norms and values as a desirable characteristic.

### **“Speaking Up” as Risky**

Shanya: [Teachers] call me like—like I speak too loud, or something. But if you don't speak up, you won't never get heard.

EG: Do you think they don't want you to speak up?

Shanya: I think they want us to sit down and be quiet, but in real life you have to speak up.

While students' definitions of leadership are suggestive, perhaps even more telling is how they actually responded to problems. In the interview excerpt above, Shanya reflects both her awareness of the institutional expectation that she “sit down and be quiet,” and her belief that “in real life, you have to speak up.” Most students, however, were not so quick to dismiss expectations of conformity and compliance. They understood “speaking up” as running the risk of punishment; consequently, many students recommended saying nothing at all or seeking help from an adult in order to avoid getting in trouble. When kids did choose to speak up, they tried to do so cautiously, employing various strategies to ensure that their voices were heard. At times, this required learning to regulate or even repress their own voices so as to avoid negative consequences.

**“Just leave it.”** Some students urged compliance with institutional expectations in order to avoid getting in trouble. When I asked these students how they would handle it if someone were bullying them, they emphasized seeking help from an adult, suggesting, “call a grown-up,” “call your Mom to scram him off,” or “report it to Ms. Hart.” Gabriel, for example, said that he had gone to the principal when a boy at his



previous school punched him in the face with no provocation. Jessica explained this strategy, saying:

“It’s better not to say anything [to the bully] because if you tell the teacher, um, the bully might be a snitch and say what you said to him. So it’s better not to say anything so he would get in trouble, not you.”

Her explanation clearly reflects her awareness that defending yourself by saying something back to the bully violates institutional expectations and can lead to “get[ting] in trouble;” thus, “it’s better not to say anything.”

If they simply witnessed bullying or unfairness, many students suggested it was better not to get involved at all. In response to a general question about what advice she would give to a new student, Deanna said, “I would just say, don’t be a follower. Just be a leader. Don’t like...if you see someone bullying someone, don’t do it with them. Just, try to stop. And stuff like that.” Her response is suggestive of the passivity involved in ideas about good behavior and “leadership” at the school, implying that the most positive choice someone could make in this situation would be to refrain from participating in bullying, as opposed to actively intervening on the victim’s behalf. Similarly, Talia told me that she could tell if someone was really bullying someone else, as opposed to just joking, but that, “I won’t say nothing, I’ll just look at it and just don’t say nothing cause I’m not trying to get into that.” When I asked her about this, she said that she was “a good kid,” but had previously “got[ten] caught up in a whole lot of things that I shouldn’t have been in.” She continued, “if you could actually see that somebody getting bullied, not supposed to say nothing really, unless that’s your friend or something like that.” Despite these suggestions, Deanna did say that she might tell a teacher if the bullying was “a big issue,” and Talia once spoke to Ms. Azikiwe about it when she heard a teacher

make an egregious comment to an eighth-grade boy. Nonetheless, their advice still implies that kids are “not supposed to” get involved if they can avoid it.

Students consistently referenced the risk of punishment in explaining their belief that it was better not to get involved. For example, when I asked Omari if he had ever seen an adult do anything that was wrong or unfair, he told me that sometimes he sees Oscar get in trouble for no reason, but that he can’t do anything about it because “they’ll be like ‘you’re instigating,’ so then you’ll get suspended or a CRT.” Similarly, Steven and Mio advised:

EG: So when someone gets in trouble but they weren’t really doing anything, what do you think that you should do? Should you talk to the teacher about it?

Steven: No, don’t do it –

Mio: She wouldn’t believe you. She would just give you the punishment too.

Steven: She’ll give you twice as much.

Jessica and Emma even used the same phrase as Omari in explaining their feeling that they can’t do anything about unfair treatment they witness:

Emma: Mr. Balkus said one time to Talia or Tescia or something, like, “If Tescia’s not about that life then you’re definitely not about that life,” and I thought that was just messed up. Because how are you gonna say that to a student?

[...]

Jessica: Also, like, you know how they give CRTs when you talk or when you go like that behind the back. Well, I don’t think it’s fair because one time the dean saw a kid go like that, and he wasn’t really talking and then he got a CRT and then he got yelled at and then he got a phone call. And I was like, how can you get a CRT if you didn’t even talk to the other person? I was like, that’s not fair. I think somebody should do something about it.

EG: Yeah. Did you try to do anything about either of those things?

Emma: No.

Jessica: No. Because then I would get the CRT.

Emma: Then you would get in trouble, ‘cause they would be like, “stop instigating” or something like that.

Jessica: Or, “it’s the rules and you have to follow the rules.”

Jessica and Emma's indignation on the part of other students is noteworthy; Jessica even says explicitly, "I think somebody should do something about it." However, her desire not to get in trouble prevents her from being that "somebody." Like Omari, Jessica and Emma are aware that speaking up is considered "instigating" and that they are expected to "follow the rules."

Even when they experienced unfair treatment themselves, some students, particularly the "good kids," were hesitant to speak up. As I discussed in chapter four, these students were frustrated by teachers forgetting to enter their additions into the system and by suffering consequences when the entire class was punished for certain students' behavior. However, when I asked if they ever told the teachers that they forgot to enter the additions, they shook their heads, responding:

Jessica: No, 'cause then they'll be like—

Arrianna: They're gonna say, 'When did I give you that?' or something, then we'll feel like...mmm, just leave it. Just leave it.

Their responses suggest that they suspect staff members won't believe them and that approaching them could be risky, making it better to "just leave it." Similarly, when I talked with Estrella about the time Ms. Hower assigned all of Bowdoin silent lunch for two weeks, asking if she could have done anything about that, she said, "Well, I don't think I couldn't do nothing and I didn't did nothing. The only thing I did was follow what she said so we didn't got more in trouble. And that's it, I just follow what she said." Again, her comments emphasize the importance of following the rules so as to avoid even more trouble.

**Speaking up.** It is important to note that despite this advice, students often did "speak up." A few kids, such as Shanya, overtly rejected the idea that they would remain

silent in the face of unfairness. Once when Ms. Campbell told the class to read, she said, “I thought we was going to practice chants or something,” and then added, “That’s not fair.” When Ms. Campbell responded that she needed to learn that, “life’s not fair,” Shanya muttered quietly, “I’m never gon learn that.” Similarly, Roman proclaimed to me:

They listen to me, ‘cause they already know I’m all about fairness. If you gonna treat somebody one way, treat everybody else the same way, don’t try to switch it up. Every time it’s unfair, I just...I go right into it.

While Shanya and Roman seemed to have consciously decided to ignore institutional expectations in this area, students who were less critical or more cautious also sometimes chose to speak up. Mario told me, “I tried to stick up for Gabriel one time,” when Ms. Ernest thought he was talking, though he said that because Ms. Ernest knows they’re friends, “she thought I was just trying to lie to her to make him not get in trouble.” Emma, whose friends had asserted that it was better to “just leave it,” talked to Ms. Campbell about teachers forgetting to put their additions in, resulting in Ms. Campbell saying she would talk to Mr. Balkus about it. In a particularly organized example of speaking up, several kids told me that some seventh-graders were circulating a petition to be able to wear “joggers,” a different type of sweat pants, as part of the gym uniform.

Though most examples of speaking up that I witnessed involved emotional outbursts in response to perceived injustice, kids sometimes employed strategies in an effort to ensure that their voices were heard and they were treated fairly. Talia, who was often cast as the bully in confrontations with other students, regularly took screenshots of online interactions on her phone, explaining:

Sometimes they try to show Ms. Hower or something like that and they try to get you written up or something like that. They thought, “Oh Talia cursed at me,” but I’m like, “Oh, but you cursed at me first,” and then you’ve got a screenshot to show it because nobody’s not going to believe you if you don’t have no evidence.

Unable to trust how school staff would handle these problems, she took steps to provide “evidence” of what had happened. Students were also selective about which teacher or staff member to talk to. Jessica advised, “talk[ing] to a teacher that actually cares, like Ms. Hart,” and multiple students told me that while Ms. Hower would virtually never listen to their objections or explanations, Ms. Ernest sometimes would. Earlier in this chapter, I described Talia, Shanya and Asia’s use of the teacher-student meeting request form; after they filled it out, they waited to bring it to Ms. Douglas instead of handing it over to Ms. Campbell, who they suspected might not turn it in. Finally, in addition to talking to staff members such as Ms. Douglas, Ms. Hart and Ms. Azikiwe, students also sought help from their parents to deal with problems. Shanya regularly talked to her mom about problems at school, and told me that one time when Mr. Forrester said she was going to get suspended, “my mom said that I’m not getting suspended, and then she called my uncle and my uncle straightened it out that I’m not getting suspended over no dumb stuff.” When I asked Luis, Mario’s older brother, how someone should handle it if they get in trouble for something they didn’t do, he said:

I mean, it never happened to me, but it happened to my little brother. They pushed him and he leaned on the wall to support his balance. And he got in trouble. First thing he did, he tried to tell the teacher that it wasn’t him. But then, that ended up in even more problems. So then he told my mom. My mom came to the school, and they talked about it. And then, they solved the problem. So I believe that the first thing you should do is keep it in mind: Don’t try to argue with the teacher, ‘cause you’re never gonna be the teacher. They’re the one in control. They have more power than the student. So hold it in your mind, if you think it was unfair, talk to your parents, and then, try to talk to the principal, the dean, or somebody that’s in a higher level than the teacher. So they can find out what really happened, and that might calm down. It might just stay the same, but at least you’ll be able to argue with that, and not get a worse consequence.

His response illustrates the theory behind seeking help from an adult: the fundamental reality that the teacher is the one with the power, and that at JWJ, arguing directly with the teacher is likely to lead to even more trouble.

Because of the risks associated with arguing with the teacher, many students advised not saying anything in the moment, and then speaking individually to the teacher later. Abril, for example, said:

I think you shouldn't react, like in the moment. You should just let it go and then later talk about it with somebody to try to figure something out. But don't like—a lot of kids, they weren't talking and the teacher gives them a CRT, but then they talk back. So even if you had a chance of not having to go to CRT, you just lost it because you just talked back to the teacher and you don't know how to do it right. You can't be talking back to a teacher like that. I think you should just wait for the right time to talk.

Jamir's older sister Elena offered similar advice, saying it was okay to object if you were treated unfairly, but “there's a time and place” to do it. She also offered an explanation of why this might be necessary, saying:

And then the teacher is more like – you know, they're more grateful for you being... you know, being more passive and saying let's talk outside than basically embarrassing them in front of their entire class. So they're more appreciative and they're more inclined to listen. [...] Now that they're calmed down – because they've done yelled at the class now because they're all upset, but now that they're calmed down and they're listening they're like, oh, yeah, you're right, I apologize, I'll – you know, I'm go fix whatever I need to fix if I gave you a deduction or whatever, you know.

Here, Elena expressed the idea that the teacher is probably “all upset” having yelled at the class, and might also be embarrassed if a student engages them in a power struggle in front of everyone. Thus, kids need to consider such factors, stay calm, and talk to the teacher later.

However, aside from this reversal of what are arguably appropriate adult-child relationships, not all the adolescents at JWJ had the emotional reserves necessary to make

this sort of strategic choice. Asked what advice they would give to a new student at the school, Keiara, Teanna and Angel responded:

Teanna: Don't talk during transitions, stay out of trouble, listen to the teachers, don't talk back.

Angel: So it's like the school is strict, just don't—well act like yourself but just don't be disrespectful and stuff like that.

Keiara: Yeah, just don't argue with the teacher even if they wrong. Just don't argue, really (laughs), and keep your—what do they--?

Angel: Comment.

Keiara: No, they don't really care about comments, but... Keep your attitude to yourself. Just, you know, do a count or something, you know.

EG: So you can stay calm, you mean, do a count?

Keiara: Yeah.

Keiara's suggestion to "do a count" alludes to the difficulty of staying calm when teachers accuse you of doing something you didn't actually do. Indeed, later in this interview, two of these three girls said that despite their advice, they *did* argue back if they get in trouble when they weren't really doing anything. Similarly, though Daniel, Juan and Luis suggested seeking help from a parent or filling out the teacher-student meeting request form in these situations, when I asked what they actually did, Daniel replied:

Daniel: I have that problem in my family. It's that my family is like, if they start messing with you, we fight back. So that's like a role model thing is that always fight back when they're messing with you. But like, I kind of like chilled down for that. And I don't like to show teachers mercy, or like some...like I'm weakening down or something like that. So I kind of just get strong. But once I see the consequences getting bigger, then I just chill down.

EG: You say you don't like to back down, is that what you mean?

Daniel: Yeah, it's like I don't want to show myself as a small person. I don't want them to have control over me.

To Daniel, backing down and not saying anything in the moment not only contradicts how he's learned to be at home, but feels like showing himself to be "a small person."

Students at JWJ charter school responded very differently to problems depending on the individual involved and the specifics of the situation. Students such as Shanya and Angel were determined that, “I’m gon have a say regardless,” while others suggested that speaking up should be done cautiously or not at all, even if they were not always able to follow their own advice. However, two major themes emerge in all their responses. First, no matter how they chose to respond, students were keenly aware that speaking up came with substantial risks. Repeatedly, students cited the risk of punishment when discussing how to respond to a bully or whether to say something when they or others got in trouble for no reason. Second, students reflected a view of compliance as the most desirable strategy in institutional contexts. Shanya, who refused to learn that life is unfair, also routinely positioned herself outside institutional norms, rejecting in their entirety school ideas and messages about how to be successful. The majority of students, however, accepted the reality of their limited power at school, consequently advising approaches such as “doing a count” that enable them to avoid trouble by regulating their own responses. One day when I entered the cafeteria, I found Mario relegated to the silent table; when I asked him why he was there, he didn’t know. Though he was a generally outspoken person, on that day he simply went where he was told to go. These sorts of incidents strongly suggest that in order to succeed in school, students were learning a passive, compliant style of engagement.

### **Speaking Up in the Real World**

#### **Changing “Unfair Things”**



Did these lessons, which students were learning as children relating to adults, translate into idea about how to engage with institutional injustice in society as a whole?

As I discussed in chapter four, kids were keenly aware of unfairness in the world. As

Shanya and Tescia said:

Shanya: Martin Luther King learned and he watched and he listened but he still stood up for what was right. But he did not step out...like, he stepped out of his comfort zone and tried to change the world. But he already changed the world but I think the world just changed back.

Tescia: A few years later it was the same way.

Josh, an eighth-grader who was in Mr. Dunn's class during the discussion about police violence and structural racism, told me:

You know the Michael Brown case, and stuff? I think that's kind of unfair how the police officer can kill a person. And that happens a lot. Racism is still in effect; you see people in row houses, it's like a large percentage of Black. You see all of these nice, luxurious houses, and it's White people, mostly. That's kind of unfair because some people have minimum wage jobs and stuff. I just don't get it—in America, this? There is like a secret behind—a deep secret, that probably almost everybody knows—about what is really going on.

In final focus group interviews, I asked students what could be done to change “unfair things” in the world, providing them with a series of images to choose from (see Appendix H). Students reacted strongly to some of the images, often in ways that suggested parallels to their experiences in school. In particular, students struggled over images showing protesting and resistance. While such images appealed to them, they also worried about the consequences of such actions.

There were three images depicting acts related to public protesting: one showing people standing holding signs, one showing people marching, and one showing a man stomping on a police car. Though students had mixed reactions to the man stomping on

the car, they were generally enthusiastic about protesting in general. As Chris and Jamir said:

Jamir: I like this picture about Trayvon Martin. They gon keep this up until they get their freedom.

Chris: These three are good, the one with the marching.

Similarly, Angel asserted, referring to these images, “I would do something like this, if this come to Milltown.” Many students described these actions as a sign that people cared about what was going on. Jessica, explaining her selection of the images of marching and protesting as the best way to change unfair things, said, “because they actually worry and they actually care about how the – how racism affects them. Like how people aren’t able to get jobs now and they’re trying to fight.” Luis also praised this response, saying:

Because like here, they’re marching because they killed an African American. So this person, this is like a community. It’s like, if you’re going against, um, the government, because this is like your family, you know. Like the people you’re normal to, they’re your family. So you know you’re gonna take care of them. [...] Because they’re doing this to help, to show that we the people, can together, can make a change to the government and the world.

These responses speak to the emotional connection many kids felt to these issues, and their desire to speak up in response to injustice.

Simultaneously, several kids who praised these responses also raised concerns about repercussions protesters might face for their actions. Mario, examining these images, commented:

Mario: They're so tempting.

EG: What's tempting?

Mario: These people.

EG: What do you mean?

Mario: What if the police shoots them?

EG: Oh, you're worried that if they're doing that the police can shoot them?

(As the boys talk over each other, Mario asks several times, “What if they shoot them?”)

Mio: But the cop would go to jail if he shot them.

Mario: No, he can't because of what they're doing.

EG: You think that if the police would have shot this guy who was up on the car, that they would go to jail?

Mario: No, he wouldn't.

EG: Why not?

Mario: 'Cause he's the one that's jumping on the car, he's not supposed to.

EG: That makes it okay to shoot him?

Mario: Yes. At least Taser him! And if he doesn't...

Steven: 'Cause he's doing something that he's not supposed to.

Here, Mario and Steven suggest not only that protesting or stomping on a police car might provoke police violence, but that this violence *may* be legal since “he’s doing something that he’s not supposed to.” Estrella raised a similar concern after Jessica praised the images of people protesting, saying, “But that’s dangerous. Like if you go outside and then probably they’re like deployed and that’s like – yeah, they’re going to start shooting. Like that’s dangerous.” Josh actually said that he preferred the image of people standing with signs to the image of people marching, characterizing the former as more peaceful and explaining, “Because if it’s not peaceful, they’re going to shoot people with rubber bullets and I don’t want that.” In contrast, Estrella and Mario were still generally positive about protesting; Estrella even declared that she was not afraid of police, and that, “if they touch me and start beating me up, I will like hit him back. I don’t care if at the last I get like more hurt, I’m still going to fight.” However, kids’ concern about consequences is striking in its similarity to how they talked about unfairness at school.

It is also worth noting that a few students expressed skepticism that any of these actions would actually make a difference. As with many other issues, Roman, De’Quan and Ráfe argued extensively over whether protesting could actually change anything:

Roman: Nothing’s gonna change.

Ráfe: Things will change, either from—

Roman: What happened with Trayvon Martin? Everyone's protesting: justice, justice. What did he get? Nothing. The protesting is just a waste of your time.

De'Quan: That's why we said this. And that. (pointing to other images)

Roman: And it's gon make it worse, 'cause then the cops are gon retaliate.

[later, after discussing a finding that people with typically African American names on their resumes get called less often for interviews]

Roman: But you can't stop the racism. It's not like you can go to somebody and put a gun to their head and say, "hire Black people."

Ráfe: Look look look, ok, when people go out there and protest they don't know if there's going to be a yes or a no, they're not sure about it. But they're doing it for a reason, they're doing it to change something that they want. They don't necessarily know if it's gonna change, but they're doing it for a reason, they're doing it for a cause and a future. Be the change you want to see in the future, all right? So if you change now...

Roman: So look, you start protesting now, so the cops are all on everybody. The future, you start protesting, what's gon happen? It's just gon be a bigger consequence because they warned you before.

In this discussion, Roman makes multiple remarks that suggest it may be difficult, if not impossible, to change things. He cites the lack of justice for Trayvon Martin and his belief that you can't "stop the racism" or make people "hire Black people." Additionally, he warns repeatedly that resisting these injustices will provoke consequences, even saying that continuing to protest will result in a bigger consequence because "they warned you before."

What options remain if we cannot impact the injustices in the world? Roman selected a graduation image, representing education. He argued:

Look, put it like this. If you go to school, do what you gotta do, make some money, you'll be good. You can help other people, help the families, all that, you'll be a billionaire. But if you sit there and waste your time marching, that's a waste of time, you're not making money at that time.

Here, Roman sidesteps directly challenging institutions. Instead, he implies that educational success and money will allow people to insulate themselves and help others. Even more discouragingly, when I asked Abril whether the world was a fair place or an unfair place, she responded:

I think it's unfair, I think the world's very unfair. Not only what happens with, like—authority always has—Like let's talk police. Authority always has the advantage of getting away with things, like all of these people that are getting away with getting killed by cops. There is no justice anymore. There is no such thing as a fair case. I think the world was never a fair place. Back in slavery, back in the Holocaust, all those things. It was never a fair place. It was never fair. *But I think that's just the way it is, and you have to learn to live with it.* (emphasis added)

Despite Abril's clear knowledge of and concern about injustice, she frames it as inevitable, ultimately concluding, "you have to learn to live with it." Abril and Roman's comments here are notable in their similarity to the vision of success promoted by school discourse and practices, which positions students as passive and emphasizes learning to navigate systems as they are, rather than developing students as active participants with a voice.

### **The Protest**

A situation that arose toward the end of the school year threw the relationship between behavioral expectations at the school and broader lessons around civic engagement into particularly sharp relief. As Shanya, Talia and Tescia discussed protesting, Talia remarked:

Talia: We need to have that that here...like one day, like, all the kids in the school—

EG: Like a march?

Talia: All the kids would just walk to one destination.

For a few minutes, they veered away from this topic to discuss the various images, then Shanya reiterated, pointing to the picture of people holding signs, "We need this at the end of the school year." They began to plan an act of resistance, considering what exactly to do and when to do it:

Talia: I don't know where we gonna walk to.

Shanya: We can start, we can all come in here and then we could all just walk out the school and stand in front of the school and protest.

Talia: (quietly) Everybody walk outside the school...?

Shanya: Like...like you know how the kids at the church got uh...I think it was four of them, little girls, they got killed inside of a church, and everybody had to walk out the church?

Talia: Mm-hmm.

Shanya: You know how people be walking and marching around the corner, it should be something like that, but we not walking nowhere 'cause I don't feel like walking that far.

Talia: But how?

Shanya: We should just walk down the hallways and stuff like that. They can't stop the whole school.

Talia: They can't...and I know a lot of people who wanna do that, too.

Ultimately, they decided to refuse to re-enter the school building on field day, the second-to-last day of school. Shanya explained that, because it was the end of the year, the consequences the school could impose would be limited. Talia volunteered to tell the other students who walked home from school and to spread the word on social media. They asked me if I could get poster boards for them, and if I could pull them out of class to make the posters in secret (I did buy posters, but said I couldn't take them out of class).

Over the next week or so, word of this plan spread to other students. During my final focus group with Estrella, Jessica, Emma and Arrianna, Estrella brought up the protest:

Estrella: But we're doing this [pointing to a protesting picture] on Monday I think, right?

EG: I don't know. Is that happening? Are you all going to do that?

Estrella: Yeah, I'm going to.

EG: You're going to do it?

Estrella: I'm doing it because I don't like how they treat like us and everything – some teachers. And also I'm doing it because of the school, because now they're changing like the days to the school. Like Friday we come out at like –

EG: Yeah, Fridays are going to be long and Wednesdays are going to be short.

Estrella: Yeah, and I don't want that.

Emma hadn't heard about the protest, and Arrianna explained:

We're just going to stand out there. Like after field day, we're going to stand outside. But we don't want the teachers to know, because they're going to try to stop us. We're going to stand outside. Like, we're not going to go in the building, we're going to stand out there like MLK. And like, just stand out there for our rights.

Despite their previous hesitation about speaking up, all four girls expressed excitement about the protest, and said they planned to participate. Estrella said she was going to try to make signs that she could fold up and hide in her purse, then remove when they got off the buses from field day. They imagined what their parents would say; while Estrella and Arrianna thought their mothers would be upset, Jessica said, "Oh, my parents will be, 'I'm so happy, Jessica, that you're standing up for yourself.'" Emma, who wasn't planning to come to school that day, said she would try to get her mom to bring her to school for the protest.

Ultimately, however, Talia began to have second thoughts, and the planned protest never happened. The week before it was supposed to have occurred, she spoke with me in the hall, saying that she wanted to do it, but if the students refused to go back into the school, "that's leaving class without permission," and then if staff told them to go back in and they didn't, "that's defiance." While she was willing to face detention or suspension, she was afraid of being expelled from the school. I suggest that both the interest in protesting and Talia's eventual decision not to go forward powerfully illustrate the civic lessons students were learning at JWJ. At some level, their mutual experiences of being treated unfairly motivated them both to unite and to resist. However, they also understood resistance as a risky endeavor. The fact that Talia feared expulsion specifically highlights the idea, discussed earlier, that participation in JWJ was contingent upon some level of compliance with the school's discourse and practices. Given that

many students and parents also understood JWW as their only option for an adequate education, risking membership in that institution was a weighty proposition indeed.

### **Civic Implications**

The sense of oneself as someone whose perspectives matter, who has a right to speak up, and whose voice can make a difference is foundational to civic engagement. Levinson (2012) writes, “The positive association between an open classroom climate and desirable civic outcomes is probably the most robust finding in the civics education research literature,” (p. 192). Unfortunately, while certain practices at JWW charter school were intended to encourage student voice, what students heard and experienced on a day-to-day basis overwhelmingly emphasized the value of institutional conformity. Compliant behavior was arguably the most valued characteristic a student could possess, and compliance was positioned as a prerequisite for institutional participation and school success. Students’ opinions and perspectives were disregarded in conversations about institutional expectations, which were presented as unalterable. Though students critiqued school rules and sometimes argued angrily with school staff, they were well aware that negative consequences tended to follow on the heels of such behavior. Thus, they were strategic regarding how, when, and whether to speak up. To a great extent, this involved learning to regulate and suppress their voices in the face of institutional demands.

There is reason to believe that these ways of being will follow students into other institutional contexts. My data reveal that, though kids were incensed at the injustices in broader society, they also worried about the (very real) risks involved in protesting those injustices, sometimes in language that closely mirrored their ways of speaking about



school. Furthermore, few of their experiences in school gave them either the skills to approach such a challenge, or the confidence to believe their efforts might make an impact. Instead, students practiced modulating their voices so as to participate in institutions as they are, unfairness and all. While some students, like Shanya, seem committed to speaking up even in the face of institutional repression, these exact behaviors put them at greater risk of being marginalized or alienated from mainstream societal institutions; Talia's awareness of this reality is what ultimately dissuaded her from engaging in protest against the school. Overall, discourse and practices at JWJ charter school were far more likely to cultivate passive "citizens" who follow the rules than active, critical citizens who challenge institutional authority.

## CHAPTER 7: THE IMPACT OF THE NO-EXCUSES MODEL

To be honest with you, some of this isn't about individual people so much as it is about the narrative landscape of education reform, that there's so many people committed to these really quick results, and there's so many people looking for how those quick results can be achieved. [...] That's been some of the issue in general with sustainability of charter models, is that people are kind of taking this one-size-fits-all approach, not evaluating what that means because the numbers become more important than the qualitative experience of kids at school. I think we got caught in the middle of that. Everybody, our kids did, staff did, everybody was trying to figure out how to find themselves in a model that was becoming increasingly rigid because people, they needed their results. - Ms. Azikiwe

Over the three preceding chapters, I have described larger patterns in the discourse and practices at JWJ charter school that I argue tend to work against the development of engaged, critical civic orientations. Students experienced school rules as nonsensical and overly restrictive, and rule enforcement as unfair. Despite these critiques, they understood themselves and one another as “good kids” and “bad kids” in relationship to these rules. They also learned, even if some of them criticized or resisted such messages, that success in institutional contexts such as school requires separating yourself from others and regulating or even silencing your own voice.

It is possible, unfortunately, that these experiences are not so different from the experiences of young people at many traditional public schools attended predominantly by low-income students of color. However, I argue that certain characteristics of the no-excuses model make such outcomes especially likely. In this chapter, I consider the significance of JWJ being a no-excuses charter school that was run by a charter management organization (CMO). I begin by complicating the narrative of JWJ I have offered up to this point, describing ways that school staff questioned and even resisted

no-excuses practices. I then explore three characteristics of the no-excuses model – standardization and corporate structure, an intense focus on behavior, and a conception of behavior as measurable – that I argue fundamentally shape school discourse and practice in ways that tend to create the larger patterns I have described thus far. Finally, I return to the important reality that no-excuses schools are designed to, and do, serve *specifically* low-income youth of color, asking how the no-excuses model intersects with structural and cultural inequalities along the lines of race and class.

Before continuing, it is important to note that this study was designed primarily to investigate students’ perspectives, not to examine the relationships between school structure and teaching practice. However, JWJ’s status as a no-excuses charter school is central to this research. Thus, I draw upon the data I do have in order to raise questions and offer important, if preliminary, interpretations.

### **Complicating the Narrative**

Based on the findings I have discussed thus far, JWJ could be characterized as a rather oppressive environment. However, the school was not run or staffed by people who were hoping to keep kids in their place; in contrast, school staff at JWJ were by and large people who were working extremely hard in an effort to help kids. Thus, in order to understand how the no-excuses model potentially hindered these efforts, it is necessary to complicate the description I have offered thus far of what was going on at the school.

#### **Dedicated Staff**

In chapter three, I discussed the reality that parents chose JWJ because they believed, often with good reason, that it was the best of limited options. Students, parents

and staff described JWJ, after the College Bound Academies takeover, as calmer, safer and more academically rigorous than it had been previously and than the local public schools were. Omari's mom praised JWJ for having caring teachers, saying:

But you know what, another thing I can say about JWJ, they do have a group of teachers who actually care about the kids, and they're not doing it as a paycheck. And that's what I see it as. And you know too, like in the Milltown public schools I see a lot of people who was doing it as a paycheck. They don't really care about the kids.

Drawing from her experience both working in the Milltown schools and talking to parents through her job at the Boys and Girls club, she continued:

I can hear the parent's voice like, this is my kid's teacher, they don't care about my kid, they're just passing my kid along. They don't care, they just there for a paycheck. And I hear that all the time. JWJ, the teachers are there for them.

Similarly, when I asked Jessica and Estrella what advice they would give a new student, they said:

Jessica: Um, I think something that you might want to know about the school is that, it gives kids a lot of opportunities to like, fix their work.

Estrella: Mm-hmm.

Jessica: Because sometimes other schools, they just give them packets sometimes, and they just like... But this school, like, there's teachers who are like in tutoring, and homework club, that type of thing.

Though most students and parents had experienced frustration with certain staff members, virtually all also talked about staff members they liked and trusted. The number of students who either said they would or actually did deal with unfairness by talking to a staff member is testament to this.

In addition to being intrinsically valuable, these experiences are civically significant. Though far from ideal, if students felt *more* connected to societal institutions or *more* trust in authority at JWJ than they might have at the local public schools, it is arguably a net gain in terms of potential civic engagement. Additionally, educational

attainment itself is correlated with civic participation. Thus, to the extent that JWJ was enabling greater access to educational attainment, this also constitutes a civically significant contribution. This is not to justify or mitigate the implications of the practices discussed thus far, but simply to acknowledge the real world context in which JWJ operated. Its impact exists in that world, not in opposition to an idealized form of schooling that was not available to any of its students.

### **Questioning and Resisting No-Excuses**

Furthermore, staff at JWJ were not automatons who mindlessly enacted no-excuses practices. Staff opinions of the no-excuses structured varied, with some teachers telling me that the structured environment made it easier to teach, that they liked having a system that allowed them to respond to misbehavior, and that they liked that everyone in the school was on the same page in terms of expectations. However, staff also questioned or even resisted aspects of the no-excuses model. Ms. Campbell, for example, mentioned several times, even in front of the kids, that she's "not a fan of deductions." When I asked her about this in an interview, she explained:

Well, a couple of things. I believe in correcting a child. I believe in, if I was a parent, I believe in punishing my children. Okay? But, as far as a deduction goes, I just kind of see it like this, and it's my opinion. You have to borrow a pencil, okay? I'm supposed to give you a dollar deduction for that. So, that's going to cause you to say something to me. Which is going to cause you later, at the end of that week, if you forgot it 5 times, to have a \$5 check less than the other child. Now, the argument is, but the other child is prepared for school. Okay. So, at the end of the quarter, we have kids that did not make the trip. None of my homeroom made it to the trip. Some of them were by 36 cents. So, how many times do you have to pay for not having a pencil? [...] And I have to kind of watch what I say here, but—just how they come up with behavioral plans for students who don't quite follow the paycheck system. You can think of three or four boys in my class that, if I were to give them deductions for everything that they did, I wouldn't make it past 8:15. So, do I start the morning off arguing with that child? [...] So, you know, you try to follow the rules, but at the same time, it's like, look, how is this going to help this kid in the end?

Here, Ms. Campbell points out a number of ways in which giving deductions seems unproductive. While as both a teacher and a parent, she does believe in correcting and even punishing children, she is ultimately concerned with how those actions *support* children in correcting their behavior. She was skeptical that deductions achieved this; consequently, though she did use them, I also saw her use numerous other ways of addressing misbehavior.

While some other teachers thought that the paycheck could be a useful system, virtually every staff member I spoke to raised questions about the amount of time kids were required to be silent. For example, Ms. Harold, despite being generally supportive of the structure, noted, “I do wish that the kids had more of an outlet and more time where they can just have a little down time and talk. It's a very, very long day. It's a lot for some kids.” Mr. Dunn said of the silent transitions, “I appreciate the reason why,” but that he wouldn't choose that system himself, explaining, “I think that at some point, social interaction has to happen.” Ms. Ernest wondered whether the discipline system actually played a role in some kids' misbehavior, speculating that they “act up” sometimes because there are so many rules, and they want to “feel like they have that little bit of power.” Multiple teachers suggested that kids talked more during class because they couldn't talk between classes, something my observations tend to confirm. Mr. Sullivan, reflecting on the overall impact of the rigid structure on the kids, said:

There are certain things that we structurally do here that I don't see how we are setting them up for success. I think we are saying things like, it's going to make them successful, but how is it going to make them successful? I don't think the kids...the kids don't understand that either. [...] I don't know if it's because of the structure, but I don't feel like the kids love being here. I don't think they all hate being here. All kids are going to say, “Oh, I hate school.” But I don't think they love being here and it's really because it's very factory assembly line. Go from

here to here, and when you're going from here to here, make sure you are absolutely silent.

Significantly, Mr. Sullivan not only acknowledges that kids likely experience the structure as both deadening and incomprehensible, but directly questions the narrative that this structure is “setting them up for success.”

In addition to considering how structures like silent transitions impacted kids, some staff talked to me about how structures and expectations at the school affected their ability to do their jobs. Because of the silent, structured transitions, the times between classes and at the beginning and end of class that might have enabled more informal interactions between students and teachers were instead devoted to efficiently lining kids up, making sure they were silent, and escorting them to their next class. I asked teachers whether they felt that this structure impacted their ability to form relationships with students. Some teachers said they found other moments during the day to connect with kids, affirming the importance of those relationships and asserting, as Ms. Harold put it, “If you really want to get to know them, you'll find a way.” Others agreed that it was harder. Mr. Sullivan, who had previously taught at a “failing” public school in Hawaii, said:

I don't have the relationships with the parents I used to have, I don't have the ability to talk a little bit more informally because when I have down time I want to want to do this [gesturing at his grading]. I really don't want to deal with the kids. And it's not because I don't like dealing with the kids. It's because I've got to get this done, because if I don't, I'm in trouble.

As Mr. Sullivan points out, the combination of the highly structured day and the intense demands on teachers' time reduced not only the opportunities but also the time and energy many teachers had to connect with kids and parents.

Staff did not only criticize the model; they occasionally found ways to work around some of the structures they didn't agree with. As I mentioned in chapter three, virtually every teacher I spoke to told me they didn't give CRT for talking in the hallway. Ms. Ernest, Ms. Campbell and Mr. Cassano all said explicitly that they made an effort to give kids time to talk during their classes in order to compensate for the highly structured, silent nature of the school day. During Conduct College, I saw Ms. Campbell significantly depart from one of the prescribed lessons. Conduct College lessons were written by administrators and given to teachers to carry out; those that didn't involve direct review and practice of behavioral expectations revolved around topics such as delayed gratification. This particular lesson was supposed to focus on setting goals that were "SMART," which stood for, "specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely." However, as reflected in my fieldnotes below, Ms. Campbell took this lesson in an entirely different direction:

Ms. Campbell taught a session on goal setting. She commented that she had already taught it to Berkeley, and wanted to do it a little differently. Instead of having the kids set goals for themselves, as directed in the lesson, she started by having them set goals for their parents. They shared with a partner, and then some kids shared with the class. [...] Other kids had more serious goals: Luciana wanted her parents to live a full life; Asia wanted her mom "to live to see her son grow up" (I couldn't hear the context for this comment). Later, Ms. Campbell had the kids set a personal goal for themselves; she emphasized that she wanted it to be personal, not academic, and assured them that they did not have to share it. Once they had written something for themselves, she asked how they could support each other in achieving their personal goals even without knowing what they were. This became a conversation about how to support each other in general. She asked if any of them had ever done something kind for anyone else, and what they had done. Shanya shared that her aunt had lost her eight-year-old son the previous March, when he "died in the water," and that her aunt cried all the time now. She said she sometimes took care of her aunt's younger son to help her aunt. Ms. Campbell also talked about not doing things that bothered people, particularly when they were upset. Justin said that he doesn't like people touching him when he's upset, and Ms. Campbell did an exaggerated imitation of touching and bothering Justin to explain what people were not going to do. Then she said



that if that does happen, “Justin’s not going to say, ‘Shut up and leave me alone.’ Justin’s going to say, ‘I need a minute.’ What are you gonna say, Justin?” Justin repeated, “I need a minute.” Finally, Ms. Campbell gave them time to draw a picture (or write a poem or anything else) for someone as a gift, to brighten their day. She said, “Being kind to others is one of the most important things to me, for you.”

In approaching this lesson differently, Ms. Campbell completely changed the message it conveyed. Rather than a formulaic lesson emphasizing qualities thought to lead to individual achievement, it became a moment for kids to consider what they valued, to bond with one another by sharing personal stories, and to think about how they might support one another.

### **Walking a Tightrope**

This sort of resistance to the model was made possible by the principal, Ms. Azikiwe. In addition to valuing and actively soliciting teacher input, Ms. Azikiwe had a completely different vision of schooling than that embraced by the CBA network. She directly criticized some other “successful” no-excuses charters, saying:

A lot of those schools are also automated, like the kids are on autopilot, and that’s not what I want. I’ve gone in schools where it’s like, “Okay, we are now moving to the next component. You have three seconds to get up to the next component.” It’s really like twenty-five kids in a room, and they go (mimes holding a book up in the air, turning the page, and setting it back down on the desk). I don’t want that. That’s not my idea of what class should feel like. Yes, it should be efficient to move from one component to the next, but it shouldn’t feel like your kids are widgets, your teachers are widgets.

Though the proclaimed successes of no-excuses schools rest on test scores, she told me repeatedly, “I don’t care about test scores. I know they matter to people. They matter very little to me. They’ve mattered very little to me from the beginning of my career.” She critiqued other charters that have been “quickly, easily successful” with test prep, asserting, “I don’t believe in test prep under any circumstances.” Instead, Ms. Azikiwe

hoped to cultivate an environment in which kids were “owners of their knowledge” and teachers acted as facilitators instead of “stand[ing] at the top of the class...pour[ing] all of this stuff” into kids. Ms. Azikiwe was also responsible for the many school structures designed to cultivate student voice, including the eighth-grade legacy projects, the teacher-student meeting request form, and the student retreat. Reflecting on these practices, she said:

I think we are in a dangerous space in some ways, and I said this to one of my leadership team members. I said that I had no other choice about where to be. I’m like, “We are right on that line of structure and freedom.” Because I think that the idea of students having the ability to say someone, a staff member, was mean to me, and for there to be a process around that, and recourse—that, to me, is like an amount of freedom that I don’t think people are always comfortable with in schools.

As Ms. Azikiwe implies above, integrating her vision with the no-excuses model embraced by the network was difficult. A small but striking example of the tension between the two could be seen at the Chill Out desk, where a required, network-wide poster proclaiming, “YOU are responsible for your emotions,” was posted alongside copies of the teacher-student meeting request form. Ms. Azikiwe repeatedly described herself as walking a “tightrope” as she attempted to balance the need for order and her obligations to the network with what she described as “respect for kids.” Ultimately, Ms. Azikiwe resigned her position at the end of my data collection year. Talking about some of the reasons for her decision, she said:

I knew who our kids were and that some of the things that were being suggested—at the risk of sounding arrogant, I would say isn’t good for any kid, but I knew that it wasn’t good for our kids. You know, that wasn’t a popular opinion, and it wasn’t one that I think people [at the CBA network] were ready to grapple with necessarily. They had been convinced by what they had seen at the other charters, that operated very similarly, that these things were the answer.

Her comments here powerfully illustrate the conflict that at times seemed to be operating just below the surface at JWJ. While individual staff members raised questions about some of the practices they were being asked to enact, and Ms. Azikiwe herself became increasingly concerned about the impact of those practices, they found their choices and actions constrained by the charter network and by the no-excuses model. In the next section, I explore specific aspects of the no-excuses model that I argue contributed significantly to the outcomes I have described.

### **Impact of the No-Excuses Model**

Ms. Azikiwe's experience points to the difficulty, or even the impossibility, of creating a school that values student voice within a no-excuses model. Despite the fact that she specifically sought to cultivate student voice, she was ultimately stymied by the model and the network. In this section, I draw from Ms. Azikiwe's experience as well as from other data sources to suggest three characteristics of the no-excuses model that make the sorts of outcomes I have discussed in the previous chapters particularly likely. First, no-excuses schools follow a corporate model that emphasizes standardization and top-down control, closing out the voices of students, parents and even staff. Second, the no-excuses model focuses intensely on student behavior, which erodes relationships in the school community and increases both the likelihood and the significance of unfairness. Third, the no-excuses model frames behavior as a *measurable* construct that can be defined and quantified, a conception that leaves little room for gray area and focuses staff attention on superficial measures of compliance or defiance instead of on the principles that make rules meaningful.

## Standardization & Corporate Structure

As I discussed in chapter one, no-excuses schools all follow a particular model, which is increasingly viewed as representing *the* solution to the problem of depressed academic achievement in low-income, urban areas. Ms. Azikiwe discussed how this played out with College Bound Academies:

So when you take College Bound Academies, which was a new CMO, that models itself after other CMOs, pretty much what [the CEO] did was steal another CMO's manual and use that to start College Bound Academies. [...] Because [that CMO] had seen some great movement in test scores, all of what they were doing was taken as gospel.

As Ms. Azikiwe describes here, the no-excuses model almost takes on a life of its own as people increasingly embrace the belief that following the model leads to success. When another school in the network struggled to achieve the expected test results, the people at the CMO office claimed that this was because the model was not being implemented with fidelity. Ms. Azikiwe compared this to, “when you go into an experiment with a hypothesis, and you’re really going to get the data to confirm your hypothesis versus getting data to bring into conversation with your hypothesis.” No-excuses charter schools also draw heavily from the corporate world, as can be seen in their use of titles such as “CEO.” This structure, combined with belief in the no-excuses model, results in a top-down approach that emphasizes standardizing practice. As Ms. Azikiwe put it, “we've gone with this like one size fits all, that like you put in a paycheck and some yellow lines in a hallway, and that's going to get everybody in line.”

How staff approached their work, including how they treated kids, was significantly impacted by this top-down, standardized, accountability-driven approach. As I discussed in chapter six, Ms. Harold responded to most of the ideas suggested by the

student government by explaining why they couldn't happen; I suggest this reflected her own feeling of not having much room to maneuver. Similarly, in a conversation with colleagues during professional development, the elementary school dean argued that it didn't really matter how students saw her, saying, "I didn't set these rules up, but I'm going to hold you accountable." Just as she is "held accountable" to rules she "didn't set up," she is going to hold students accountable to rules that are outside the realm of question or critique. Staff sometimes referenced their own accountability structures even in front of students, as described in my fieldnotes from March:

Subsequently, Ms. Campbell said to the class, "You need to sit up straight. 'Cause that's what I'm getting hit on, right, students that are not following SLANT. 'Ms. Campbell, please follow SLANT.' Okay." Oscar called out, "Can I have a pencil?" Ms. Campbell replied, "We don't call out. 'Cause that's another slash on Ms. Campbell. We use hand signals."

Here, Ms. Campbell tells the students explicitly that she has to make sure they sit in SLANT and use hand signals because if she does not, "that's another slash on Ms. Campbell." This was not the only time Ms. Campbell told students that she could get in trouble for their behavior, nor was she the only staff member I heard make such a remark. Though Ms. Azikiwe wanted staff input and feedback, she noted that structures such as "get[ting] evaluated for return every single year" are "anxiety-producing," adding, "It was almost like, even if no one was over your shoulder, there was an over-shoulder feel because there was a specific formula we thought we were supposed to be following." I argue that this atmosphere made staff more likely to be punitive and controlling with students, and less likely to offer students opportunities for voice or freedom.

Ms. Campbell's comments above also reference the expectation that classrooms look a certain way, including students sitting in SLANT and using hand signals. Ms.

Azikiwe told me in an interview that some teachers felt stuck to the “I do, you do, we do,” form of teaching, another standardized approach. Both of these techniques are described in Lemov’s (2010) *Teach Like a Champion*. The experience of students who didn’t fit the mold in some way illustrates the emphasis on standardization particularly well. Ms. Douglas talked to me about working with teachers to get them to make modifications for certain kids; when I asked if teachers normally felt okay about doing this, she replied:

No. Absolutely not. I have to fight, crawl and scratch. For most of our kids I have to fight, crawl and scratch for our behavior kids and for our IEP students. I just think that they're just so misunderstood in this school. We have a very general, “Ehhhh” mentality around here. Not that that's bad. But I think we have a mentality that's like, “We're gonna do this by the book. I'm not straying from this book. This is a general ed. class, so you should be able to function like a general ed. student.” But I think that hurts a lot of our teachers and a lot of our kids, unfortunately.

As Ms. Douglas pointed out, she has to “fight, crawl and scratch” to get teachers to deviate from doing things “by the book.” Though that tension likely exists at many schools, I suspect that the emphasis on standardization and top-down evaluation at no-excuses school exacerbates it. As I mentioned previously, JWJ dealt with the needs of students with learning differences by creating one homeroom at each grade level that included all the students with IEPs, and then providing that homeroom with extra support in the form of an additional teacher for most subjects. Luciana, who had an IEP, was accidentally put into the Bowdoin homeroom for several weeks at the beginning of the school year; consequently, I met and was later able to interview her mother. She had been in public schools previously, and her mother was disappointed with her experience at JWJ. She told me Luciana’s grades had gone down, and that the teachers didn’t seem to be working with her as much, saying:

[When Luciana was at her previous school], we will meet and we will kind of reevaluate her situation so they could, I guess, address the IEP and change it. Either extend the time or add more help or whatever might be the case. You know, what do we need to do to fix it. And whatever was decided to do at the time, every single time it showed positive results. But since she's been in this school, that's not the experience that I have, and I wanted to know why. You know, can they tell me why, what's happening, blah, blah, blah. So we had a meeting and supposedly the findings of the meetings were that she will not turn in her homework, or she was not doing her homework, or she was not doing the schoolwork inside the school. But I don't know, to me there's some lack of communication between them and myself. And I know that she's been not doing what she's supposed to, but something else was missing or is still missing.

Here, while Luciana's mother is willing to acknowledge that Luciana has not been "doing what she's supposed to," she still feels that "something else was missing." Given Ms. Douglas's comments above, it is possible that teachers are not working with or accommodating Luciana in the ways they did at her old school. I suggest that this difference stems partially from the no-excuses emphasis on standardized, pre-defined ways of teaching and learning

In addition to emphasizing standardization, the top-down structure of the CMO also left little room for the voices of students, parents, or even staff. As I mentioned in chapter three, the first year of the CBA takeover saw some pushback from parents regarding the disciplinary structures at the school. Describing that experience, Ms. Augustine (Jamir and Elena's mom) told me:

That was a rigorous battle because the problem with the charter school is that whole network thing. So, it's not like you go to Miss Azikiwe or the principal or superintendent, you got to go through all those people in [the CMO office].

As Ms. Augustine points out, the corporate structure of the CMO made it more difficult for parent voices to even be heard. The parents persisted, however, demanding that the letter they had written be presented to the school board. Subsequently:

Ms. Augustine: ...they sent someone down from the headquarter type of thing to sit with us and speak with us and tell us how the research and why and all that stuff.

EG: When that happened, were they open to the concerns you were presenting to them, or did it seem like their goal was to explain to you so that you understood why they were correct?

Ms. Augustine: Yeah, it was one of those, and then we were supposed to continue to meet. It's been so many different things but it was one of those... 'Cause here's the thing, sometimes I back away because I don't want my motive to be taken wrong.

Though the CMO central office did send someone down to speak to the parents, the purpose was to "tell us how the research, and why, and all that stuff;" parents were not treated as experts on their own children or their own community. Continuing on, Ms. Augustine explained to me her concerns that, "after a while, they started looking at me as if I was like, the bad...not the bad parent but...it's like the here she go, changing our school type." Not wanting to overstep her bounds or develop a reputation that harmed her relationship with the school, she backed off somewhat. However, she continued to experience some frustration regarding what she perceived as the unproductive separation between the school and the community:

I really don't understand why they don't have a parent representative; I don't understand why they don't have a community representative. I don't understand why they don't have maybe even a teenage subcommittee. [...] I don't really see why we couldn't have been able to work together. If anything, it should have been like, 'Wow, let's see what your role is and let's see how we can incorporate that and grow our school.' But it was more like, 'we have our system.'

Ms. Augustine's experience powerfully illustrates both the top-down nature of decision-making at the CMO, and the impact of unquestioning belief in the no-excuses model.

Parents, students and community members were not treated as valuable resources or even as participants in a collaborative effort to raise children. When parents tried to get



involved, they were offered an explanation based on “research” of why practices in JWJ had to be what they were.

Ms. Azikiwe identified a similar pattern regarding how teachers and other staff were treated. Though she valued staff perspectives, organizing staff retreats and making an effort to make changes based on their ideas and feedback, she criticized the network for failing to incorporate “a more global picture of the voices that have to live within the model,” including students. Noting that her school was filled with professional educators, many of whom came in with master’s degrees and years of classroom experience, she described the network’s failure to “leverage the human capital in our buildings” as “the biggest missed opportunity.” Offering one example, she said:

I told [one of the executive directors] that we hardly ever use the paycheck and I don’t think we need the paycheck to actually like work with our kids. [...] But the thing is, I don’t know that it’s going anywhere.

Even in her role as a principal, her perspective was often disregarded; her conclusion that she was neither going to be able to shift the model nor enact the sort of education she believed in within it was foundational to her decision to leave. She felt that, “for some reason, there was just a lack of trust at the leadership level for the people who were doing the work.”

To the extent that these sorts of top-down, standardized practices are the norm at no-excuses schools, they are likely to encourage students’ perceptions that rules are arbitrary and that they are expected to simply “sit down and be quiet.” Staff who are expected to carry out rules and procedures that they had no role in creating and may not agree with are unlikely to be able to make those rules seem meaningful to students. Furthermore, the emphasis on standardization, which offers a single vision of a good

student, a good teacher, and a good classroom does not allow for the real variations that exist among students. Instead, a good student becomes narrowly defined as a person who follows the rules, and is thus able to fit within the constrained role students are allowed at the school. Perhaps most troublingly, commitment to the no-excuses model is valued above the voices of students, parents and even staff. This raises the possibility that making changes within a no-excuses model would be extremely difficult.

### **Intense Focus on Behavior**

No-excuses schools “sweat the small stuff,” focusing intensely on students’ behavior. As evidenced by the existence of structures such as Conduct College, in which academics are put off for an entire week while the entire school focuses on behavior, correct behavior is positioned not as something that might be negotiated alongside learning, but as a *precondition* for learning. Approaches to teaching reflected this: teachers sometimes restricted or threatened to restrict activities such as group work, labs, and use of computers in response to students’ behavior. Though these activities are more engaging and may better support learning, many (though not all) teachers seemed hesitant to risk the noise and movement that can accompany student engagement. Additionally, several parents complained to me that they routinely got phone calls about their child’s behavior, but didn’t learn that their child was failing a class until receiving the report card. As Talia’s mom said to me:

So to me, if they have your email, they have your phone number, they have your cell phone, your office number, if something is not going right why they don’t let you know ahead of time? They have emailed me or sent letters about all the things: “Oh, she disrespecting me and I pulled her out of the classroom.” And I don’t have a problem. I don’t have a problem that you call me for that, and I’ll be the one who tell you, “well, can I talk to her,” after they done talking to me. And I’ll pull her on her spot right there. But then on the other hand, well why didn’t you call me or send me an email when she was failing in your classroom or she

wasn't doing what she was supposed to? I mean it should be for the same thing, you call me to complain about her disrespecting you but then you didn't call me to tell me that she's not doing good in the class?

Talia's mom echoed the concerns of other parents, who didn't mind receiving phone calls about behavior, but understandably also wanted to know in advance if their children were struggling academically or not completing work. They didn't understand why they weren't receiving *those* phone calls, if teachers had time to call about behavior. Though it was not the norm, teachers occasionally even seemed hesitant to provide academic help to students if they thought they had been misbehaving. Early in the school year, Omari told Mr. Balkus, "I don't understand because some people are talking." Mr. Balkus responded that if Omari faced him at all times, "I'll show you the concern of helping you out."

Actions such as these on the part of teachers reflect a preoccupation with (mis)behavior, potentially at the expense of academics, that I argue is characteristic of the no-excuses model. Furthermore, I suggest that this preoccupation with behavior makes it much more likely that behavior and "getting in trouble" will define students' in-school identities. In chapter five, I described the ways kids in the Bowdoin homeroom tended to use behavior to define themselves and one another as "good kids" and "bad kids." Such an outcome seems almost inevitable when rewards and punishments based on behavior are ubiquitous and often public, while other resources kids might use to construct identities are largely unavailable. It was uncommon to see kids recognized for academic contributions or achievements; I actually did not know how well or poorly any of the Bowdoin kids were doing in school, nor who tended to excel at which subjects, unless they mentioned it explicitly. There were a few school events that recognized kids for

good grades or high test scores, but they were infrequent. School clubs or teams made almost no visible impact on the school; clubs were suggested by teachers and had limited attendance and duration, while the school basketball team was fledgling, some kids who played organized sports outside of school did not even try out, and kids could lose their place on the team based on their behavior. School performances such as the talent show were one of very few situations in which kids might demonstrate other strengths or facets of their personality. Otherwise, the identities available to kids at school were extremely narrow.

I also suggest that the focus on behavior tends to direct teachers' attention primarily to what kids are doing wrong, making instances of unfairness both more likely and more consequential. In *Teach Like a Champion*, Lemov (2010) writes, "There's one acceptable percentage of students following a direction: 100 percent. Less, and your authority is subject to interpretation, situation and motivation." Such an assertion reflects the emphasis in the no-excuses model on catching and responding to *all* misbehavior. I do not intend to suggest that this idea totally determined how staff at JWJ behaved, and I did observe teachers seem to ignore misbehavior at times. However, as I described in chapter six, kids consistently reported that teachers were hesitant to listen to their explanations when they "got in trouble for no reason." I suspect that this reflects a belief that allowing kids to get away with something cannot be risked. Thus, staff were vigilant for potential misbehavior, and unlikely to back down from their interpretations, leading to kids experiencing more unfairness. Furthermore, the system of rewards and punishments in place at JWJ, another product of the emphasis on behavior, makes teachers' mistakes more high-stakes, as they result in numerous consequences for kids.

## Behavior as Measurable

Finally, in addition to focusing on behavior, the no-excuses model frames children's behavior not as a complex human process, but as a *measurable* construct that can be defined and controlled. The very existence of the paycheck, which functions to tabulate students' "good" and "bad" behavior and represent it as a number, is demonstrative of this framing. Such a conception of behavior necessarily leads to rules that are restrictive and narrow, regulating students' voices and bodies in clear, observable ways. Ms. Harold brought this up in the course of explaining why school policy emphasizes silence instead of quiet:

EG: (responding to Ms. Harold) It's almost like it would be harder to ensure that all the adults in the building were being consistent if you had something subjective like 'quiet' versus saying something like silence.

Ms. Harold: Yes. Silence is easy. Silence, there's no sound. So if you're not silent, you're in violation. If you're talking quietly, what's quiet to you may not be quiet to me. What's acceptable to you may not be acceptable to me. Then you get the ambiguity there. I'm looking at the CBA end of it. In their eyes, this is measurable. With CBA, they're very...everything is always measurable. You walk into a class, 'Well, fifty-two percent of you kids were doing this and thirty-four percent of your kids were doing this, and...' Everything is all measurable. 'This amount of kids get this on the test, and this amount got this on the test. Therefore, this number...' Everything is measurable numbers. So I don't think that the ambiguity would work in their system.

As Ms. Harold explains above, ambiguity doesn't work well in a system that emphasizes clearing defining correct behavior with the goal of numerically representing compliance.

I suggest that this approach to behavior tended to focus teachers' attention on superficial measures of compliance or defiance instead of on the principles that make rules meaningful. In chapter four, I described the disconnect between how rules were stated and enforced at the school and students' desire for rules that accomplished some worthwhile aim. However, qualities such as kindness and respect are not easily defined

and measured. In some of the scenarios I discussed, teachers seemed to skirt around complex issues such as the use of racist or sexist language, dealing instead with the simpler matter of whether students were quiet and in line. In other situations, teachers reprimanded students for laughing or sitting sideways, even if that behavior was neither disruptive nor seemed to indicate inattention. Again, it is easier to universally enforce behaviors such as remaining quiet and facing forward than to allow for the ambiguity inherent in distinguishing between innocent behaviors and those that truly violate values related to respect and learning. However, doing so disconnects behavioral norms from their larger purposes, creating hollow rules that exist only for their own sake.

Some teachers, possibly as a result of working within this structure, used students' misbehavior as a justification for the strict regulation in the school. One Friday toward the end of the day, Mr. Sullivan was substituting for Mr. Cassano. Unable to find Mr. Cassano's lesson plan, he did social studies instead, showing part of a documentary about Confucius, and later starting a trivia game. The class was noisy and talkative, and Mr. Sullivan became increasingly frustrated as the period continued. At one point, he paused the video, saying, "This is exactly why we have very strict rules, we walk in straight lines... Just make it easy." He said that the typical reaction to their behavior would be, 'Okay, you guys are now silent, if you talk you get a CRT,' and commented that if it happened again, he would do that. He remarked, seemingly almost to himself, "Maybe it's not strict enough." Later, when continual talking had interrupted the game he started with the kids, he raised the same point again, as described in my fieldnotes below:

"Omari. Jamir. Raise your hand if you want more freedom here." The sound of talking continued. "Raise your—raise your hand if you dislike— This is exactly why it's the case, because I have people talking over me. Raise your hand if you don't like the amount of rules we have here." After a brief pause in which people

seemed to start paying attention, every hand in the class went up. “But counter to what you guys feel, that won’t change—actually more rules get implemented in society where people break the rules. We went over Hammurabi’s Code. There was over 200 laws. Simply because he felt like people needed strict rules, people had broken rules, so he made more, and they were stricter. That’s human nature. I don’t agree with the severity of them, but that’s how it works. If we continue to break rules, more get added in.”

Despite Mr. Sullivan’s numerous critiques of school structures, which I described earlier, in his frustration in this moment, he seems to conclude that kids’ misbehavior makes strict rules inevitable. The simplistic way that behavior is framed within the no-excuses model encourages such a conclusion. In this model, behavior can be defined, measured and responded to with a system of rewards and consequences; if the system is implemented correctly, misbehavior should be a rare occurrence. This conception neglects the true complexity of the reasons behind students’ behavior: that making mistakes and testing boundaries is a natural part of growing up, that the best classes can be hyper and distractible on Friday afternoon, that the rigidity of the system itself provides students with few outlets for their energy.

Finally, I argue that simplistic conceptions of behavior as easily definable and controlled by rewards and punishments, with the goal of achieving one hundred percent compliance, significantly reduced teachers’ ability to tolerate the messiness that accompanies learning and developing new skills. I described above the reality that most staff members at the school expressed, at minimum, concerns about the silent transition policy, and most did not give CRTs if kids talked in the hallway. Ms. Azikiwe told me explicitly:

The policy was really up in the air by the third year because I can tell you for certain, the culture team didn’t believe in it, but we also couldn’t figure out another means to get at if we’re held accountable to silent hallways by the CMO.

One effort staff did make to address these concerns was to offer the eighth-graders an opportunity to transition by themselves for the first half of the day. They still only had two minutes to transition (not a terrible burden, since all their classes were in a single short hallway) and they were still supervised by teachers, but they did not have to walk in lines and they were allowed to talk. In the second half of the day, when they would need to venture off the third floor in order to go to lunch or gym, they were expected to revert to silent lines. However, the experiment only lasted a little over a week. Unsure what had happened, I asked Mr. Biondi about this in an interview. He told me that they had lost the privilege because:

The afternoon, they did not change back. They had some warnings in the beginning, they had some silent lunches, and then just came to be flat out like – I saw kids who were never defiant before, just continuing straight on talking, even when I reminded them. That’s what it was. It was the afternoon transitions did not revert back to what they should have been. So they could show us that they had that control, to dial it back down.

Mr. Biondi’s explanation, and the fact that the privilege of transitioning by themselves was revoked *permanently*, not temporarily, when some students started testing boundaries suggests that staff did not view such boundary-testing and misbehavior as natural and inevitable parts of learning. Instead of staff working with students in an ongoing way around behavioral boundaries, students were asked to prove themselves worthy of freedom by demonstrating their self-control.

Overall, while students’ experiences are not entirely unique to no-excuses environments, the top-down structure, the emphasis on standardization, the intense focus on behavior, and the simplistic framing of behavior as measureable and controllable significantly increase the likelihood of such experiences. Cultivating student voice is difficult in an environment where decisions are dictated from above based on a model



that is understood as the only way to achieve success. Rules are structured not around values, but around measurable, observable behaviors, and compliance with these rules is the most observed and most highly regarded aspect of what students do at school. Consequently, teachers' energy is directed toward catching misbehavior, and students are left with few options but to understand themselves and others in relationship to rules, rewards and punishments. There is one additional characteristic of no-excuses schools that must be considered: the fact that they are intended specifically to serve low-income students of color. In the next section, I discuss how the no-excuses model intersects with that reality.

### **How No-Excuses Intersects with Race & Class**

There has been a tremendous amount of research, some of which I discussed in chapter one, documenting the ways in which schools reproduce inequalities along the lines of race and class. Though no-excuses schools are intended to equalize educational opportunity, my research suggests that JWJ was not immune from these larger societal patterns. In contrast, I argue that certain aspects of the no-excuses model play into stereotypes and unconscious biases staff may hold about low-income kids and parents.

### **Views of Kids, Parents & Communities**

As I described above, many of the teachers and staff at JWJ were committed to students and to their work. Some had specifically chosen to work in a school serving low-income children of color, either because they preferred the experience or because they were specifically concerned about inequality. As Ms. Grant told me when describing why she became a teacher:

I believe strongly that the problems in this country stem from disparities in education and obviously educational attainment. And I wanted to be a part of that, and so I joined TFA to close the achievement gap, which is, you know, that buzz phrase.

As I mentioned in chapter three, Ms. Campbell felt that she was better able to work with low-income parents than wealthy parents. When she talked about students' behavior, she regularly explained it by drawing parallels to her two sons. Others staff members simply needed a job, but then developed strong relationships with the students. Mr. Dunn told me that he had not originally wanted to work in an urban area because he was concerned that he would "put too much of [himself] into it." However, he said, "once I started, I knew it was the group of kids that I should be teaching." He felt that students responded well to him because, "They know I'm not going to let anything slide, but I'm still going to, you know, love them I guess." Indeed, I believe that Mr. Dunn did love the students. He was tremendously popular, and Elena, remembering her experience at JWJ, told me that she "love[d] Mr. Dunn."

Staff also made comments to me suggesting some degree of awareness of poverty and structural inequality. Ms. Campbell described many parents as "working two jobs, just trying to make it," with the consequence that kids took on numerous responsibilities at home. Ms. Harold told me a story in which she found out that a boy who was falling asleep during standardized testing had been up all night the previous night because there was a shooting outside his building. She said explicitly that before she took this job, she had "all these ideas about parents, that they must be bad parents," but she then realized that parents were doing whatever they could to keep their kids safe. Mr. Sullivan noted that there was a lack of partnership and trust between schools and communities, attributing this partially to the reality that, "these schools have failed the communities

over and over again.” While these teachers’ understandings are not perfect, it is important to recognize that their conceptions of students and families were multifaceted, not one-dimensional stereotypes. I suspect Ms. Azikiwe may have done some work with staff around their conceptions of kids and families; she referenced the issue of bias several times in interviews, and the staff members I heard express the most troubling views were all new the year of my data collection.

Simultaneously, even more experienced staff members clearly held some deficit-based views of students and families that were partially informed by stereotypes. Staff often assumed that kids were doing something worse than they were; for example, Talia and Shanya talked to me several times about an incident in which Justin got in trouble for calling Mr. Balkus, “oatmeal.” They said that staff repeatedly demanded, “What does oatmeal mean?” and they responded over and over again, “It’s a food.” Shanya explained:

[Mr. Balkus] thought oatmeal was like a racist thing, but it wasn’t, ‘cause he’s [Justin’s] always calling people kinds of food. ‘Cause he used to call me pop-tart, he used to call me tasty cakes, he used to call me every thing of food that there was.

In this incident, staff seemed inclined to assume that “oatmeal” is a pejorative slang term, not something silly said by an eleven-year-old. Similarly, kids often asked questions in class that I took as genuine, but that teachers brushed off as though they were being intentionally difficult or disruptive. In one example, Ms. Campbell was demonstrating how to solve a math problem on the board, and Omari asked, “Do we have to do that?” Ms. Campbell responded, “Do you have to pass math? No. You don’t have to do anything. If you want to pass math, don’t ask me about it yet.” Omari said, “I didn’t say pass math, I said do we have to do *that*?” making me think he had a question about some

aspect of the method. However, Ms. Campbell again responded, “No. And you don’t have to pass math either.” At other times, when teachers had gotten frustrated and were having serious conversations with the class, they simply refused to take any comments or questions at all.

Talia and Shanya were also upset at the beginning of the year by Ms. Campbell’s assumption that they “get beatings” from their parents. When I asked their opinions about why she thought that, Shanya suggested that “when she was little she probably got beatings.” Talia attributed Ms. Campbell’s assumption to the fact that Ms. Campbell had seen her cry after getting in trouble with her mother. Describing this incident, she said:

I think [Ms. Campbell thinks that] ‘cause my mom, because when my mom, she gave me that look like that. When we was in the office, she was like, “Oh, can I talk to her by herself?” She said something. She’s like, “You’re not getting your tablet back.” (I got it back anyway. It was three months later, but I got it back.) But she was like, “You’re not getting it back.” I was like, “Okay.” Then she was like, she works so hard and then I’m so bad at school like, I’m not supposed to do that, I’m supposed to be good and stuff like that. Then I was like, oooh. I felt bad because I knew that she wasn’t playing, like she was serious. I thought she was going to cry. And I felt like I embarrassed her. So I kind of like cried for her a little bit because I felt bad for her.

The significant aspect of this example is not only Ms. Campbell’s belief that students’ parents use corporal punishment. I suspect that for her, this idea grew out of a combination of stereotypes, previous teaching experiences, and her own experience growing up—what I know of Ms. Campbell’s age and background make it likely that even if her own parents didn’t use corporal punishment, it wasn’t anathema to her in the way it is to many upper-income White parents today. What is more significant is her assumption that Talia’s remorse was based in a desire to avoid punishment instead of in genuine feelings of guilt and empathy for her mother. This assumption was part of a

larger pattern I have mentioned in previous chapters: that teachers often seemed oblivious to kids' ethical thinking and concern for others.

In contrast to Ms. Campbell, many teachers grounded their interpretations of kids' misbehavior in a belief that parents were too lax. Mr. Cassano, talking to me in frustration about kids' behavior, said, "And I'm thinking to myself, this has got to be learned at home. You must talk to your parents that way." Similarly, though Mr. Sullivan wrestled with the highly structured nature of both teaching and discipline at JWJ, he said:

I do also understand the importance of a lot of these kids don't have the necessary discipline. They weren't instilled with that, that they can just push themselves to achieve no matter what or they can just come in, be focused, they can come in and not be disrespectful to teachers. I know part of that is that they just don't know how to do that. They just haven't seen that enough.

Mr. Dunn, though he did not seem to be referring to parents specifically, suggested that civic learning emphasizing the importance of "following the rules" was particularly important in an urban environment, saying:

I think it's almost, like, it's almost exposure to a more positive culture. And the heart of, like, any urban area, being a good citizen is not what you...not what you see the most of. And, you know, I think that those good citizens living in one area contribute to, like, safety. Right? If you're living in an area where everyone's a good person you're probably living in a safe area.

All these explanations draw upon race- and class-based stereotypes to frame students as people who are unusually lacking in values and self-control. As I discuss below, I argue that the no-excuses model encourages such views, thereby contributing to the preoccupation with order and compliance in the school, and the consequent silencing of students' voices.

### **"Built on Bias"**

In chapter six, I described students' sense that the school was "trying to change us," and associated patterns around compliance and foreclosed conversations. All of this made it seem as though teachers believed that their job was to fix kids, as though the kids would not have cared about school or known how to behave without aggressive teacher intervention. I suggested this interpretation to Ms. Azikiwe during a member-checking conversation, and she agreed, citing two issues that she felt exacerbated this relationship to kids: the pressures teachers faced to meet expectations by following the model and raising test scores, and her belief that the model itself is "built on bias."

**Standardization and assessment.** As I discussed above, teachers experienced high levels of evaluation and little sense of agency within the CBA network. While Ms. Azikiwe made a number of interventions in an effort to reduce this sensation, she could not change certain realities, including the fact that she herself was held accountable for implementing the no-excuses model and for achieving growth on standardized tests. Describing the first year after the take-over, she noted that teachers were very concerned with "double-checking to make sure they were doing it the right way," explaining that:

...[because] they were trying to please us—and I say us because I always represented the CMO unfortunately—it meant that they went out of their way to...If we had a complaint about kids talking too much in the hallways, then talking in the hallways was the new gun violence.

In addition to expectations around implementing the model, there was constant pressure to achieve more faster in terms of test scores. Though Mr. Sullivan was extremely critical of the focus on standardized testing at CBA, he also described himself as unable to escape that fear that taking any sort of pedagogical risk might cause students' scores to go down:

So...you hear things like project-based learning, we should be infusing that into the classroom, but I haven't seen the clear link yet that if we do that, that kids' test scores will still be okay. I fall into the trap too where those test scores are dependent on my success, like if I'm a good teacher or not. So I'm also afraid. I'm as guilty as the things I'm complaining about of not taking the chance and saying, "To heck with the scores, I'm just going to do things differently."

The constant evaluation and pressure to improve made it easy to feel discouraged. As Ms. Azikiwe reflected:

Particularly for people who are veteran in some way, that feel pretty confident with their own instructional abilities, they can feel very deflated very fast because everything is new and everything is like: we are not there yet, we are always working on something. So there are lot of places where you don't feel like you're winning, and when you don't feel like you're winning, it is very hard to feel passionate about your work because you are so busy trying to like—you're always feeling like you're playing catch up and you're so busy trying to catch up and learn the new stuff or do the new thing.

In this remark, Ms. Azikiwe captures a sensation I felt while I was in the school, and that I believe was passed onto students: a feeling that you're always behind, and nothing is ever good enough.

I contend that working under this sort of pressure compromised relationships between students and staff. In addition to arguably being emotionally depleted and thus potentially less capable of dealing with adolescents who were confused, needy, hyper or moody, it was easy for staff to blame students for the difficulties they were experiencing. In one example, Ms. Harold was visibly stressed after unexpectedly being called in to substitute for Ms. Campbell in the second week of school. She reprimanded Bowdoin multiple times for not being silent, at one point adding, "You're very behind as a grade."

Another day, during one of Ms. Campbell's lengthy talks, she said to the kids:

There are rules, right? And we have to follow the rules too. Every Friday we stay from 1:00 to 4:30, and the rules are reiterated by Ms. Azikiwe to us. We have to explain why there's a gap in our line, we have to explain why our bulletin boards don't have A-quality work on it. Put that pencil down. We have to explain why

our homeroom isn't on task, why our homeroom takes more than two minutes to get from one location to the other. What I am gonna say? Silly boy or silly girl doesn't want to walk fast? What am I supposed to say? I take the heat for that. Ms. Ernest takes the heat for that.

In both these situations, the pressures teachers were feeling seemed to result in an inclination to be especially frustrated by or even to blame students. Ms. Harold, who was certainly already stressed because of unexpectedly having to substitute during a period she had planned to use to get ready for a lab, suggests that children who are academically behind should know better than to talk during class. Ms. Campbell says directly that she and Ms. Ernest “take the heat” for Bowdoin’s poor behavior. Though some of her comments could certainly have been exaggerations, Ms. Campbell talked about what she was “held accountable to” multiple times over the year, leading me to believe that it was an accurate representation of her feelings. To offer one final example, I was not allowed to observe the kids during standardized testing, and dropped by Mr. Balkus’s room on my way out of the building. I commented to him that I thought the kids were a little stressed about the testing, and he responded, “I don’t think they’re as stressed as the teachers are.” However, my observations and conversations with kids confirm that many of them were feeling significant pressure. I argue that for Mr. Balkus and for many other teachers, their own frustrations and anxiety shaped how they interpreted students’ behavior, making them less understanding and forgiving, and more judgmental.

**“Turnaround schools.”** The no-excuses model is not generally framed as an approach to schooling overall; it is specifically intended for schools serving low-income children of color, primarily in urban areas. Because the CBA network operated by taking over failing schools, this type of school was referred to as a “turnaround” school. Ms. Azikiwe critiqued CBA for conceptualizing their efforts *only* in the turnaround context,



commenting to me, “I’ve been pushing a lot at the network around our long term view of ourselves, and why that long term view has to necessarily be tied to turnaround.” Later, she elaborated:

One of the biggest possible tension points I’ve had with the organization is a lot of the other schools that we’ve visited at the school leader level across the schools in the network, they’ve all been turnaround schools, and that frustrates me. Because, for me, I don’t want my school to be a good turnaround school. I want my school to be a good school. For me, I have no problem comparing or looking at a private school in [a nearby town], which is one of the wealthiest areas in the state, I have no problem doing that to figure out what might be better for my students.

Ms. Azikiwe’s experience suggests that people at the network level considered JWC’s status as a “turnaround” school serving low-income Black and Latino children to be a characteristic that *defined* what schooling practices would work best. It arguably implies some fundamental difference between JWC’s students and the (wealthier, whiter) children in elite public or private schools.

A concern Mr. Sullivan raised during our interview highlights similar themes.

Wrestling with questions related to pedagogy and curriculum, he asked:

Is project-based learning the answer completely? It might be. I just don’t know. I’m so far removed from being in those successful schools that I don’t have the teacher perspective on what that looks like. I have been requesting seeing, what does a school—let’s say in [a wealthy community], in a social studies sixth-grade classroom—how does it function and due to it functioning that way, how do the kids perform? [...] I could be a conspiracy theorist and think, “Does the charter school even want us to go to a traditional public school and watch them work?” Is it feasible? Is it even going to be put on a priority list or do I have to bring it up over and over again? I don’t know. I haven’t heard any word as to...I even brought this up to CBA, the upper echelon people, because they came last week to interview some of us teachers. They said they want us to increase literacy, they want us to use more project-based learning. That’s great, how do I do both of those and show me what that looks like.

Here, Mr. Sullivan reflects that he is “so far removed from being in those successful schools” that he struggles to even imagine what their practices look like. Seeming to

believe that such a question would be relevant to his students, he requests multiple times to go and see, but receives no response, and can't help but wonder whether on some level, CBA doesn't want such comparisons made.

I contend that both Ms. Azikiwe's and Mr. Sullivan's experience reflect the extent to which the no-excuses model is designed not just for turnaround schools but for turnaround students—the under-achieving and unruly young people that supposedly fill such schools. As I mentioned previously, Ms. Azikiwe explicitly articulated her belief that, “the model itself is built on bias.” Discussing her first year at the school and first efforts to implement the model, she explained how the emphasis on monitoring and responding to student behavior intersected with existing teacher preconceptions:

We learned while watching some of these things play out that if we didn't train teachers about how to discipline students in a way that is respectful of the student, then we get people yelling at people about paychecks. The problem is it took us a quarter to start to dig into that work and whatever issues the school had in that regard before we even got there, were further exacerbated by the paycheck and other structures. So if teachers had biases around race and class with their kids before we even entered, and then we come in with a paycheck and try to do it one hundred percent, then we're just pushing and confirming that it's their job to police kids and push them into submission.

Here, Ms. Azikiwe clearly describes how a structure designed to monitor students' behavior readily plays into racist and classist views of students as people who must be controlled. This is true not only of the paycheck, but of the no-excuses model overall. In emphasizing a pre-determined, standardized and narrow vision of student behavior, it positions students' inevitable variations in personality as behavioral deficits to be overcome. It directs teachers' attention away from the meaningful conversations that might have fostered cross-racial understanding, instead assessing them on their ability to

control students. The environment and relationships cultivated in this model are more likely to reinforce than to challenge race- and class-based biases.

### **Reasons for Concern**

My comments here are based on a single, ethnographic study. Moreover, that study was focused on examining *students'* interactions with and perceptions of their school environment; a full answer to the question of how the no-excuses model impacts teachers and teaching practice would require additional work. However, I argue that even my preliminary findings in this area are reason for concern.

As I have described at length both in this chapter and in chapter three, JWJ differed from what we might call the archetypical no-excuses school in some key ways. It was staffed by older and more experienced educators, including a substantial number of African American educators. Teachers had complex conceptions of the low-income people of color served by their school; while they certainly expressed problematic ideas about children and families, at times they also seemed to be reaching for a more racially and structurally aware understanding. Ms. Azikiwe actively worked with teachers around their conceptions of and relationships with kids. As a school leader, she actively questioned the no-excuses model, describing it as “at odds with a lot of what people wanted for our kids and for our school.” Consequently, she not only advocated for her school to the CMO, but also worked to adjust no-excuses policies around teaching and behavior.

It is both significant and concerning that despite these factors, kids still largely experienced school as a punitive and unfair place that required them to silence their own

voices. The focus on student behavior and the framing of behavior as measurable coupled with a top-down, standardized structure and an immense amount of pressure to raise test scores had profound implications for how teachers and staff interacted with students. Teachers were encouraged to view students as deficient and offered little time or resources to connect with them; in addition, teachers themselves were enmeshed in a highly evaluative environment over which they had little control. Leaving room for experimentation or less clearly defined behavioral norms seemed risky. Parents' and students' voices had no place in the model; thus, they were unable to contribute or make interventions in ways that might have impacted school culture. These findings suggest that the no-excuses' model shapes school discourse and practice in ways that make cultivating engaged, critical civic orientations particularly difficult.

## CONCLUSION

No-excuses schools and practices are often positioned as effective and *equitable* interventions in an unequal school system. They are intended to close the achievement gap and enable college access for low-income students of color, and the successes some no-excuses schools have had in raising standardized test scores are offered as proof that they are achieving that mission. While they are widely criticized in academia and have recently experienced some popular critique due to scandals around discipline practices, the broader narrative that paints charters in general and no-excuses schools in particular as saviors of the urban public school system is still largely intact.

This study casts significant doubt on such claims. First, it suggests that there may be significant variation in how no-excuses practices are implemented. Though some researchers, policy makers and philanthropists are interested in replicating and scaling up the aspects of no-excuses schools that make them “effective,” there is little reason to think that we actually know what is behind any successes such schools have experienced. Both teachers and students described JWW as calmer and more academically rigorous after the CBA take-over, suggesting that something had changed the school for the better. However, it’s simplistic to think that the highly structured behavioral expectations and the paycheck system were either necessary or sufficient to achieve such changes. My observations suggest that the least effective classroom managers actually used additions and deductions the most; Ms. Ernest’s classroom management became better over the course of the year as she shifted away from relying entirely on the paycheck. This finding calls into question the idea that such a system is an effective way to rein in students’ behavior. It may be that it was the consistency of expectations rather than the particular

(extremely strict) expectations themselves that was the key to some of the improvements the school experienced. While I think it would be excessive to suggest that there are *no* no-excuses schools have made *any* positive differences in students' school experiences, the reality is that we don't understand what about it "works." The belief that we do is leading to widespread implementation of practices, some of which may have significant negative outcomes, with little knowledge of their complexities or their consequences.

One such practice is the use of the highly structured, reward-and-punishment driven behavior management techniques that are the focus of this study. This approach has been variously justified as a "culturally relevant" or "warm demanding" style, as a way of cultivating a calm and rigorous academic environment, or even as explicit teaching of middle-class skills. However, the results of this study challenge all three of these justifications. Students' extensive critiques of both rules and rule enforcement at JWJ clearly distinguish their practices from the warm demanding that has been described in the literature as characteristic of effective African American educators. With the exception of certain significant instances, they did not view adults' exercise of authority over them as grounded in the caring, moral authority and racial uplift that are central to this style (Ford & Sassi, 2012). In relation to academics, while a certain degree of order is certainly necessary for learning, this research suggests that once order has been established, over-emphasizing structure and quiet relatively quickly begins to limit rather than enhance academic engagement. The pressure to maintain such an environment arguably makes teachers more reluctant to use student-centered strategies, such as class discussions and group projects. While teachers in JWJ did use such techniques, it is significant that they were being actively encouraged to do so and that they were not being

pressured by Ms. Azikiwe to maintain silent classrooms and use “I do, we do, you do” lesson structures. Even so, teachers often threatened loss of labs, group work, etc. in response to students’ behavior. Regarding longer term outcomes such as college and careers, behavior management practices at JWJ did not cultivate the independence, critical thinking and skills of self-advocacy that are key to success in these areas. Rather than being encouraged to wrestle with complex issues and take on leadership roles in the school, kids were rewarded for giving the expected answers and accepting the decisions of adults in authority. Such behaviors are the polar opposite of what is needed to excel in higher education and in most professions.

Overall, I argue that strict behavioral boundaries do not necessarily constitute “high expectations.” The formulaic behaviors required of students in no-excuses charters may be better than no expectations at all, much in the same way that worksheets focused on basic skills represent a step up from failing to teach entirely. However, just as truly rigorous learning makes students the owners and creators of their knowledge, high behavioral expectations must go beyond simply telling young people what to do and requiring them to do it. Truly high expectations would do exactly what the kids in my study valued: they would be based on meaningful principles and values, achieve worthwhile aims, encourage kids to engage with them and allow space for kids to make mistakes.

Finally, this study is premised on the idea that even if no-excuses schools do promote academic achievement, individual advancement is not sufficient to address inequalities which are built into the structure of our society. Such structures must be challenged directly, which means that students must develop views of institutional

authority, relationships to their communities, and a sense of voice that are conducive to such action. Unfortunately, my findings suggest that the no-excuses classroom management practices tend to work against this outcome. First, students across the board reported a significant lack of fairness at school based on their perceptions that some students were treated better or worse than others, and that the punishments they received, or rewards they did not receive, did not always correspond to their actions. If such perceptions impact their broader view of societal institutions, as research suggests they do (Flanagan et al., 2007), they are likely to inhibit students' future civic engagement (Cohen, 2010; Rubin, 2007). Second, school practices painted success as an individual endeavor that could be compromised by association with others, and students tended to mirror this discourse in their descriptions of one another, characterizing one another as sources of trouble. Such views are not likely to promote solidarity and collective action. In contrast, by inadvertently reinforcing separations between the "good" kids and the "bad" kids, school discourse and practices encourage a neoliberal view of success or failure as the result of individual choice. Inherently, such a perspective works against challenging the larger structures that contribute to the "choices" of both children and adults. Third, school practices did not encourage students to form their own opinions on difficult issues or to speak up for what they believe in; in contrast, they emphasized the importance of institutional compliance. At JWJ, "leaders" were people who ignored the negative influences of their peers in order to, as Tescia put it, "not make [their] own choices, but make the good choices instead of the negative." While some students rejected this message, all were keenly aware that speaking up came with the risk of



punishment. Such messages are far more likely to cultivate passive “citizens” who follow the rules than active, critical citizens willing to challenge institutional authority.

These findings are especially troubling in light of evidence that the no-excuses model makes such outcomes particularly likely, even when school staff questioned or actively resisted certain practices. The emphasis on standardizing discipline and pedagogy in accordance with the no-excuses model left little room for the voices of students or parents (or even teachers), positioning them as passive recipients, people who are acted upon instead of people who act. Simultaneously, the tremendous pressure to achieve results made deviations from the model feel especially risky. The requirement that teachers “sweat the small stuff” by focusing intensely on students’ behavior and implementing a system of rewards and punishments increased both the likelihood and the significance of unfairness. It limited the resources available to students as they constructed their identities, with the consequence that they understood themselves and one another primarily in relationship to the school’s behavioral system. It also played into stereotypes about low-income Black and Latino youth and hindered the formation of trusting relationships by encouraging staff to view students as in need of control and to respond punitively to their behavior. The behavior management model itself frames behavior and misbehavior as binary, clearly definable and measureable. Correct behavior can be specified down to the level of students’ posture; students’ total instances of right and wrong behavior can be tabulated and expressed as a number on a paycheck. This way of viewing behavior focuses school staff on superficial measures of compliance or defiance instead of on the complex task of guiding student behavior in accordance with the principles that make rules meaningful.

No-excuses practices do not represent the answer to unequal opportunity, or even to unequal schools. While *some* no-excuses schools may represent a step up from *some* traditional public schools, my findings suggest that no-excuses classroom management practices are far from upending social and educational inequalities. In contrast, they continue to position low-income Black and Latino children as second-class both academically and civically.

Though I did this work in the hope of helping to shift the dialogue around what constitutes equitable schooling, there are many questions that remain. My findings provide evidence for how the no-excuses model might shape practice, but by themselves they are not conclusive. Given the influence of this model on trends in urban education, it is necessary to further investigate this issue. Studies comparing different schools would be useful, as would studies focused particularly on teachers' experiences and how their practice changes in response to working in a no-excuses school. Additionally, this study demonstrates that classroom management and classroom authority relationships are far more complex than is often accounted for in educational research. This may be particularly true in low-income schools, where teachers often do not share students' backgrounds and may be especially prone to misunderstandings, bias and stereotyping, and students present both strengths and needs that are distinct from those found in middle- or upper-class settings. In short, the challenges many teachers encounter regarding guiding students' behavior in low-income schools are real. Educational researchers have a responsibility not simply to challenge the problematic solutions currently available, but to elucidate what a more equitable approach would look like. In investigating this question, classroom management must be understood not simply as a

means to the end of academic learning, but as an important process through which young people construct identities, build relationships, and develop as citizens.

## References:

- Abowitz, K. K., & Harnish, J. (2006). Contemporary discourses of citizenship. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(4), 653 – 690.
- Abu El-Haj, T. R. (2007). “I was born here, but my home, it’s not here”: Educating for democratic citizenship in an era of transnational migration and global conflict. *Harvard Educational Review*, 77(3), 285 – 316.
- Abu El-Haj, T. R. (2009). Becoming citizens in an era of globalization and transnational migration: Re-imagining citizenship as critical practice. *Theory into Practice*, 48(4), 247 – 282.
- Achievement First. (2011). Achievement gap and mission. Retrieved December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011, from: <http://www.achievementfirst.org/our-approach/achievement-gap-and-mission/>
- Advancement Project. (2010.) *Test, punish, and push-out: How “zero-tolerance” and high-stakes testing funnel youth into the school-to-prison pipeline*.
- Angrist, J. D., Pathak, P. A., & Walters, C. R. (2012). *Explaining charter school effectiveness* (Working Paper 12-11). Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Economics. Retrieved November 29, 2013, from: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2045678>.
- Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, 162, 253-276.
- Baker, B. (2010, December 2). Truly uncommon in Newark [web log comment]. Retrieved from: <http://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2010/12/02/truly-uncommon-in-newark/>
- Ballenger, C. (1999). *Teaching other people’s children: Literacy and learning in a bilingual classroom*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Barnes, M. (2013). *Role reversal: Achieving uncommonly excellent results in the student-centered classroom*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Bellafante, G. (2017, March 9). A brooklyn charter school looks past ‘no excuses.’ *New York Times*. Retrieved from [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/nyregion/brooklyn-charter-school-discipline.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/nyregion/brooklyn-charter-school-discipline.html?_r=0)

- Ben-Porath, S. (2013). Deferring virtue: The new management of students and the civic role of schools. *Theory and Research in Education*, 11(2), 111 – 128.
- Berliner, D. C. (2013). Inequality, poverty, and the socialization of American's youth for the responsibilities of citizenship. *Theory into Practice*, 52, 203 – 209.
- Blake, J. J., Butler, B. R., Lewis, C. W., & Darensbourg, A. (2011). Unmasking the inequitable discipline experiences of urban black girls: Implications for urban educational stakeholders. *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, 43(1), 90-106.
- Bondy, E., & Ross, D. D. (2008). The teacher as warm demander. *Educational Leadership*, 66(1), 54 – 58.
- Bondy, E., Ross, D. D., Gallingane, C., & Hambacher, E. (2007). Creating environments of success and resilience: Culturally responsive classroom management and more. *Urban Education*, 42(4), 326 – 348.
- Bondy, E., Ross, D. D., Hambacher, E., & Acosta, M. (2012). Becoming warm demanders: Perspectives and practices of first year teachers. *Urban Education*, 48(3), 420 – 450.
- Boston, B. (2005). *Restoring the balance between academics and civic engagement in public schools*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *The handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241 – 258). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Brantlinger, E., & Danforth, S. (2006). Critical theory perspective on social class, race, gender, and classroom management. In C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 157-179). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Brown, E. R. (2003). Freedom for some, discipline for 'others': The structure of inequity in education. In K. J. Saltman and D. A. Gabbard (Eds.) *Education as enforcement: The militarization and corporatization of schools*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Canter, L. (2010). *Assertive discipline: Positive behavior management for today's classroom* (4th ed.). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

- Carpenter, D. M., II. (2006). *Playing to type: Mapping the charter school landscape*. Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.
- Carr, S. (2013). *Hope against hope: Three schools, one city, and the struggle to educate America's children* [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
- Carter, P. (2008). Teaching students fluency in multiple cultural codes. In M. Pollock (Ed.) *Everyday antiracism: Getting real about race in school*. New York, NY: The New Press, pp. 107 - 111.
- Carter, P. (2005). *Keepin' it real: School success beyond Black and White (transgressing boundaries)*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carter, S. C. (2000). *No excuses: Lessons from 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools*. Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation.
- Chilcott, L. (producer) & Guggenheim, D. (director). (2010). *Waiting for Superman*. [motion picture]. United States: Walden Media & Participant Media.
- Coats, S. (2004). KIPP Academy Lynn. *Journal of Education*, 185(2), 11-18.
- Coffey, A. & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Cohen, C. J. (2010). *Democracy remixed: Black youth and the future of American politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Coleman, J. (1998). Civic pedagogies and liberal-democratic curricula. *Ethics*, 108, 746 – 761.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry research design: Choosing among five approaches* (Second ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- CT3. (2015). No-Nonsense Nurturer. Retrieved July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, from: <http://www.ct3education.com/no-nonsense-nurturer/>.
- Delpit, L. (2012). Warm demanders: The importance of teachers in the lives of children of poverty. In *Multiplication is for White people: Raising expectations for other people's children*. New York: The New Press. pp. 71-88.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflicts in the classroom*. New York, N.Y.: New Press.
- Denton, P. (2003). Shared rule-making in practice: The Jefferson Committee at Kingston High School. *American Secondary Education*, 31(3), 66 - 96.

- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education* [electronic version]. Retrieved from: <http://schoolofeducators.com/2011/12/experience-education-john-dewey/>
- Diamond, J. (2013, October). Despite the best intentions: The persistence of racial inequality in "good" schools. *Visiting Faculty Scholars of Color Series*. Lecture conducted from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
- Edelstein, W. (2011). Education for democracy: Reasons and strategies. *European Journal of Education*, 46(1), 127 – 137.
- Education Policy Institute. (2005). *Focus on results: An academic impact analysis of the knowledge is power program (KIPP)*. Online Submission.
- Ellison, S. (2012). It's in the Name: A Synthetic Inquiry of the Knowledge Is Power Program [KIPP]. *Educational Studies: Journal of the American Educational Studies Association*, 48(6), 550-575.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Emmer, E. T., & Gerwels, M. C. (2006). Classroom management in middle and high school classrooms. In C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 157-179). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Evertson, C. M., & Weinstein, C. S. (2006). Classroom management as a field of inquiry. In C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 157-179). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Farrell, C., Wohlstetter, P., & Smith, J. (2012). Charter management organizations: An emerging approach to scaling up what works. *Educational Policy*, 26(4), 499 – 532.
- Ferguson, A. (2001). *Bad boys*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Flanagan, C. A., Cumsille, P., Gill, S., & Gallay, L. S. (2007). School and community climates and civic commitments: Patterns for ethnic minority and majority students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(2), 421 – 431.
- Ford, A. C. & Sassi, K. (2012). Authority in cross-racial teaching and learning: (Re)considering the transferability of warm demander approaches. *Urban Education* XX(X), 1-36.
- Freiberg, H. J. (1990). Turning around five at-risk elementary schools. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 1(1), 5 – 25.

- Freiberg, H. J. (1996). From tourists to citizens in the classroom. *Educational Leadership*, 54(1), 32 – 36.
- Freiberg, H. J. & Lamb, S. M. (2009). Dimensions of person-centered classroom management. *Theory into Practice*, 48, 99 – 105.
- Fryer, R. G., Jr. (2011). *Injecting successful charter school strategies into traditional public schools: Early results from an experiment in Houston*. (NBER Working Paper Series.) Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Golann, J. W. (2015). The paradox of success at a no-excuses school. *Sociology of Education*, 88(2), 103 – 119.
- Goodman, J. F. (2010). Student authority: Antidote to alienation. *Theory and Research in Education*, 8(3), 227-247.
- Goodman, J. F. (2011). Working the crevices: Granting students authority in authoritarian schools. *American Journal of Education*, 117(3), 375-398.
- Goodman, J. F. (2013). Charter management organizations and the regulated environment: Is it worth the price? *Educational Researcher*, 42(2), 89-96.
- Goodman, J. F., & Uzun, E. K. (2013). The quest for compliance in schools: Unforeseen consequences. *Ethics and Education*, 8(1), 3 – 17.
- Grandmont, R. P. (2003). Judicious Discipline: A constitutional approach for public high schools. *American Secondary Education*, 31(3), 97 - 117.
- Gregory, A., Skiba, R., & Noguera, P. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 59-68.
- Hartney, M. T. & Flavin, P. (2013). The political foundations of the Black-White education achievement gap. *American Politics Research*, XX(X), p. 1 – 31.
- Hess, D. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. New York: Routledge.
- Hlebowitsh, P. S. (1994). The forgotten hidden curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 9(A), 339 – 349.
- Holland, D. & Cole, M. (1995). Between discourse and schema: Reformulating a cultural-historical approach to culture and mind. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 26(4), 475-490.



- Holland, D., Lachichotte, W., Skinner, D. & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Holland, D. & Lave, J. (2001). History in person: An introduction. In D. Holland & J. Lave (Eds.), *History in person: Enduring struggles, contentious practice, intimate identities* (pp. 3-33). School of American Research Press: Santa Fe.
- Hoy, A. W., & Weinstein, C. S. (2006). Student and teacher perspectives on classroom management. In C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 181-219). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Irvine, J. J., & Fraser, J. W. (1998, May 13). Warm demanders. *Education Week*, 17(35).
- Jackson, P. W. (1968/1990). *Life in classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Jamieson, K. H., Levine, P., McConnell, T., and Smith, D. B. (Eds.). (2011). *Guardians of democracy: The civic mission of schools*. Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.
- Jones, F. (2000). *Tools for teaching*. Santa Cruz, CA: Frederic H. Jones & Associates, Inc.
- Kahlenberg, R. D. (2012/2013). High-flying high-poverty schools. *American Educator*, 36(4), 8 – 9.
- Kahne, J. & Westheimer, J. (2003). Teaching democracy: What schools need to do. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(1), 34 – 67.
- Kelly, S. (2010). A crisis of authority in predominantly Black schools? *Teachers College Record*, 112(5), 1247-1274.
- KIPP Foundation. (2011). Five Pillars. Retrieved December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, from: <http://www.kipp.org/about-kipp/five-pillars>
- Kohn, A. (October-November 1995). Discipline is the problem—not the solution. *Learning Magazine*.
- Kozol, J. (2005, September 1). “Still separate, still unequal: America’s educational apartheid.” *Harper’s Magazine*, 311(n.1864), 41-54.
- Kymlicka, W. (2001). *Politics in the vernacular: Nationalism, multiculturalism, and citizenship*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Labaree, D. F. (1997). Public good, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1), 39 – 81.

- Labbé, T. (2006, October 5). Bush: No Child Left Behind closing achievement gap. *The Washington Post*.
- Lack, B. (2009). No excuses: A critique of the knowledge is power program (KIPP) within charter schools in the USA. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 7(2), 126-153.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3 – 12.
- Lake, R., Boewen, M., Demeritt, A., McCullough, M., Haimson, J., & Gill, B. (2012). *Learning from charter school management organizations: Strategies for student behavior and teacher coaching*. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
- Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lemov, D. (2010). *Teach like a champion: 49 techniques that put students on the path to college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Levine, P. (2012). Education for a civil society. In D. E. Campbell, M. L. Levonson, & F. M. Hess (eds.), *Making Civics Count: Citizenship Education for a New Generation*, pp. 37 – 56. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Lewis, R. (2001). Classroom discipline and student responsibility: The students' view. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 307-319.
- Liberman, M. (2005, July 3). I'ma [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageblog/archives/002281.html>
- Lipman, P. (2011). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Macey, E., Decker, J., & Eckes, S. (2009). The knowledge is power program (KIPP): An analysis of one model's efforts to promote achievement in underserved communities. *Journal of School Choice*, 3(3), 212-241.
- Mandell, N. (1991). The least-adult role in studying children. In F. C. Waksler (Ed.) *Studying the social worlds of children: Sociological readings*, pp. 38 – 59. Falmer Press: London.

- Martinson, D. (2003). Defeating the “hidden curriculum”: Teaching political participation in the social studies classroom. *The Clearing House*, 76(3), 132 – 135.
- Mathews, J. (2009). Work hard. Be nice. The roots and reality of the Knowledge Is Power Program. *Education Next*, 9(2), 28 – 35.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Monroe, C. R. (2009). Teachers closing the discipline gap in an urban middle school. *Urban Education*, 44(3), 322-347.
- Murphy, J. B. (2004). Against civic schooling. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 21(1), 221 – 265.
- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2017). *Estimated charter public school enrollment, 2016-17*. Retrieved March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017, from: <http://www.publiccharters.org/publications/estimated-charter-public-school-enrollment-2016-17/>.
- National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). *Back to school statistics*. Retrieved March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017, from: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>.
- Nichols-Barrer, I., Gill, B. P., Gleason, P., & Tuttle, C. C. (2012). *Student selection, attrition, and replacement in KIPP middle schools*. (Working Paper). Washington, D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research. Retrieved November 30, 2013, from: [http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/Education/KIPP\\_Middle\\_Schools\\_WP.pdf](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/Education/KIPP_Middle_Schools_WP.pdf)
- Niemi, R. G. (2012). What students know about civics and government. In D. E. Campbell, M. L. Levonson, & F. M. Hess (eds.), *Making Civics Count: Citizenship Education for a New Generation*, pp. 15 – 35. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Peyser, J. A. (2011). Unlocking the secrets of high-performing charters. *Education Next*, 11(4), 36 – 43.
- Pollock, M. (2008). From shallow to deep: Toward a thorough cultural analysis of school achievement patterns. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 39(4), 369 - 380.
- Roache, J. E., Lewis, R. (2011). The carrot, the stick, or the relationship: What are the effective disciplinary strategies? *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 34(2), 233-248.

- Romi, S., Lewis, R., Roache, J & Riley, P. (2011). The impact of teachers' aggressive management techniques on students' attitudes to schoolwork. *Journal of Educational Research*, 104, 231-240.
- Ross, S. M., McDonald, A. J., Alberg, M., & McSparrin-Gallagher, B. (2007). Achievement and climate outcomes for the knowledge is power program in an inner-city middle school. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 12(2), 137-165.
- Rothstein, R. (2014). The making of Ferguson: Public policies at the root of its troubles. *Economic Policy Institute*. Retrieved from: <http://www.epi.org/publication/making-ferguson/>
- Rubin, B. (2007). "There's still not justice": Youth civic identity development amid distinct school and community contexts. *Teachers College Record*, 109(2), 449 – 481.
- Rubin, B., & Hayes, B. F. (2010). "No backpacks" versus "drugs and murder": The promise and complexity of youth civic action research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 80(3), 352 – 378.
- Sadowski, M. (Ed.). (2008). *Adolescents at school: Perspectives on youth, identity, and education* (2nd ed.). Cambridge MA: Harvard Educational Publishing Group.
- Schimmel, D. M. (2003). Collaborative rule-making and citizenship education: An antidote to the undemocratic hidden curriculum. *American Secondary Education*, 31(3), 16 – 35.
- Shields, D. L. (2011). Character as the aim of education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(8), 48 – 53.
- Seider, S. (2012). *Character compass: How powerful school culture can point students toward success*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Simonsen, B., Fairbanks, S., Briesch, A., Myers, D., & Sugai, G. (2008). Evidence-based practices in classroom management: Considerations for research to practice. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 31(3), 351 - 380.
- Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *Urban Review*, 34(4), 317-42.
- Smith, M. (2003). Authentic student voice in school governance: Developing responsible democratic citizens. *American Secondary Education*, 31(3), 36 – 65.

- Sue, D. W. (2003). *Overcoming our racism: The journey to liberation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Tatum, B. (2003). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?: And other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books.
- Thompson, G. L. (2004). *Through ebony eyes: What teachers need to know but are afraid to ask about African American students*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Thornberg, L. (2008). 'It's not fair!': Voicing pupils' criticisms of school rules. *Children and Society*, 22, 418 – 428.
- Torney-Purta, J., & Vermeer, S. (2004). *Developing citizenship competencies from kindergarten through grade 12: A background paper for policymakers and educators*. The Education Commission of the States.
- Torney-Purta, J. (2002). The school's role in developing civic engagement: A study of adolescents in twenty-eight countries. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(4), 203 – 212.
- Toshalis, E. and Nakkula, M. J. (2012). The integration of motivation, engagement, and voice in student-centered learning. Invited paper for the *Students at the Center: Teaching and Learning in the Era of the Common Core* project, sponsored by Jobs for the Future and funded by the Nellie Mae Foundation. Retrieved from: [www.studentsatthecenter.org](http://www.studentsatthecenter.org).
- Toshalis, E. (2010). From disciplined to disciplinarian: The reproduction of symbolic violence in pre-service teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 42(2), 183 - 213.
- Tough, P. (2006, November 11). What it takes to make a student. *New York Times*.
- Uncommon Schools. (2011). The Opportunity Gap. Retrieved December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011, from: <http://www.uncommonschools.org/our-approach/the-opportunity-gap>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2009). *Race to the top program executive summary*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, from: [www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2014, March). *Civil Rights Data Collection: Data Snapshot (School Discipline)*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2014/03/four-new-civil-rights-data-collection-snapshots/>
- Van Ausdale, D. & Feagin, J. R. (2001). *The first R: How children learn race and racism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

- Walker, J. M. T. (2009). Authoritative classroom management: How control and nurturance work together. *Theory into Practice*, 48, 122 – 129.
- Ware, F. (2006). Warm demander pedagogy: Culturally responsive teaching that supports a culture of achievement for African American students. *Urban Education*, 41(4), p. 427 - 456.
- Weiner, L. (2006). *Urban teaching: The essentials*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.
- Weininger, E. (2005). Foundations of Pierre Bourdieu's Class Analysis. In E. O. Wright (Ed.), *Approaches to Class Analysis* (pp. 119-149). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Welner, K. G. (April 2013). The dirty dozen: How charter schools influence student enrollment. *Teachers College Record* [online], <http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 17104.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen?: The politics of educating for democracy. *American Education Research Journal*, 41(2), 237 – 269.
- Whitman, D. (2008). *Sweating the small stuff: Inner-city schools and the new paternalism*. Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.
- Wilson, S. F. (March 19, 2009). Success at scale in charter schooling. *Education Outlook*, No.3. American Policy Institute. Retrieved November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013, from: <http://www.aei.org/outlook/education/k-12/success-at-scale-in-charter-schooling/>
- Youniss, J. (2012). How to enrich civic education and sustain democracy. In D. E. Campbell, M. L. Levonson, & F. M. Hess (eds.), *Making Civics Count: Citizenship Education for a New Generation*, pp. 115 – 134. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Zuckerman, J. T. (2007). Classroom management in secondary schools: A study of student teachers' successful strategies. *American Secondary Education*, 35(2), 4 - 16.

### Appendix A: Sample Initial Focus Group Guide

- 1) Imagine you're talking to a kid who's about to start going to this school. What advice would you give them?
- 2) What should you do if you get in trouble for something you didn't do?
- 3) Should I intervene if I see someone break the rules?
- 4) Other kids say bullying is a problem in this school. Is that true?

## Appendix B: Individual Interview Guide

1. How would you describe yourself? What do you think are the most important things for someone to know about you?
2. What do you imagine your life being like when you're older?
3. What is your life like now? Can you walk me through a typical day for you?
4. How do you think the teachers here would describe you?
  - a. Do they understand you?
  - b. Do you think they want to change you?
5. How do you think the other kids would describe you?
6. Because I'm interested in rules, I'm curious how you would describe yourself in terms of rules and getting in trouble.
  - a. Are there rules that you break sometimes? Which ones?
  - b. Are there rules you always follow? Which ones?
  - c. Does it change depending on what class you're in? (Probe for examples.)
7. Do you think your parents believe the same things about how you should act as your teachers do?
  - a. What sorts of rules do you have to follow at home?
  - b. What happens if you get in trouble at home?



8. Can you tell me about a time another kid did something you thought was wrong, and how you handled it?
9. Can you tell me about a time that a teacher did something you thought was unfair, and how you handled it?
10. Do you think the world is a mostly fair place, or a mostly unfair place?
11. Some of the kids here who get in trouble a lot – why do you think they act the way they do?
12. Can you tell me about a way that you help other kids at school?

## Appendix C: Staff Interview Guide

- 1) Can you tell me a little bit about yourself—when you started teaching, etc.
  - a. What made you want to teach in an urban school?
- 2) Can you give me an example of how you feel like the behavioral expectations here impact you as a teacher?
  - a. Do you ever feel limited in terms of your ability to connect with kids
- 3) How would you describe the kids at this school?
  - a. How do you understand the struggles that the kids are dealing with, particularly in regards to behavior?
- 4) Can you give me an example of how you feel like the behavioral expectations here impact the kids?
  - a. Do you think the students need this high level of structure? Why or why not?
- 5) I'm interested in how kids might share authority in the classroom.
  - a. Do you think it's important for kids to see themselves as authorities, or as people who have a voice?
  - b. Do you think that it's important that kids learn to question authority? What should that look like?
  - c. How do you think that's playing out in this school? Are there specific places you see that happening?

## Appendix D: Parent Interview Guide

1. How would you describe your child?
2. How would you describe yourself?
3. Why did you choose to send your child to this school?
4. What do you think about the discipline at the school?
  - a. Probe about specific practices (e.g. earning behavioral “dollars”).
5. How does how teachers handle things at the school compare to what you do at home?  
(Probe for specific examples.)
6. Do you think your child has changed or been influenced by attending this school?  
How?
  - a. How do you feel about those changes?
7. I’m interested in the relationship kids develop to authority in school. What do you think that should look like? Do you think it’s important for your child to learn to question authority?

## Appendix E: Graduate Interview Guide

1. Think back to when Scholars Academies took over. What was that like? How did you respond?
  - a. Did that change for you over your time at the school? How?
2. Now think back to the transition to high school. What was it like to start going to such a different school?
  - a. How did your experience at PRCS prepare you, or not prepare you, for high school?
3. What advice would you give another kid who was about to start at your high school from PRCS?
4. Some of the younger kids I've interviewed feel like it's really important to stand up for themselves, even to teachers, but other kids feel like arguing with teachers could get them into trouble. What do you think about that? What advice would you give them?
5. Imagine that the school was starting a council of teachers and parents that would make decisions. Do you think it would be a good idea to include students on that council? Why?

## Appendix F: Final Focus Group Guide

- 1) From the JWW School Pledge: "I will be a leader and not a follower." Can you give me an example of a student you think is a leader? What makes them a leader?
- 2) A lot of kids have told me about things in school that they think are unfair, or should be different. How do you get people to listen to you about those things?
- 3) Do you think the world is a fair place or an unfair place? Why?
- 4) What image represents the best way to handle that?

## Appendix G: Eighth-Grade Focus Group Guide

- 1) Do any of you have younger siblings that you give advice to? What advice would you give to a new student starting at this school?
  - a. In particular, what should they do if on their first day, they get in trouble for something they didn't do?
  - b. What should they do if another kid is saying stuff about them?
- 2) Do students have a voice in what happens in the school? Where/how?
  - a. Should they have more of a voice?
- 3) From the JWJ School Pledge: "I will be a leader and not a follower." What does that mean?
  - a. Can you give me an example of a student you think is a leader? What makes them a leader?
- 4) Do you think the world is a fair place or an unfair place? Why?
- 5) What image represents the best way to handle that?

## Appendix H: Final Focus Groups Supplementary Materials

## JWJ School Pledge

Scholars are responsible, organized, attentive and determined. Being a scholar is the first step to success. I will work hard to be successful. **I will be a leader and not a follower.** I will continue to make positive changes in my life. I will only succeed if I try. There is no limit to what I can accomplish. We are scholars today, and leaders tomorrow.

## Pictures Related to Changing “Unfair Things”





## Appendix I: Member-Checking Handout for Students

What It's Like to Be a Student at JWJ

- 1) In this school, the teachers think that one of the most important things for kids to learn is to follow the rules.
- 2) A lot of times, teachers don't notice the good things kids do, like trying to help each other.
- 3) Kids at this school hear a lot more negative things about themselves than positive things about themselves. Teachers yell at classes or tell them they need to do better more than they tell them that they're doing a great job.
- 4) Kids think that some of the rules at this school don't make sense. But even when the rules don't make sense, they're still supposed to follow them.
- 5) Sometimes teachers aren't fair. Kids can get in trouble when they didn't do anything wrong. Teachers also treat some kids better than other kids instead of treating everyone the same.
- 6) It's hard for kids to get their voices heard, because they aren't supposed to argue with teachers. Even if a teacher does something unfair, kids aren't supposed to say anything.
- 7) A lot of times, a whole class will get in trouble for something only a few people are doing. One way to stay out of trouble to is avoid other kids and keep to yourself.

- 8) Kids think it's important for teachers to help everyone learn, and make sure everyone treats each other respectfully. They don't want teachers to just let everyone do whatever they want.
- 9) It works better when teachers listen to kids and explain why something is important than when teachers yell or give deductions.