Reducing the Discipline Gap Among African American Students: Learning in Classroom Communities of Practice

Debra Mayes Pane
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: The author argues that learning in classroom communities of practice may reduce exclusionary school discipline practices and the discipline gap that disproportionately affect African American students. Communities of practice prioritize the social nature of learning as legitimate peripheral participation, encouraging community membership, social identity transformation, and synergistic relationships and spaces.

Exclusionary school discipline is the administration of punishment to disruptive students on the premise that isolation gives the perpetrator time to reflect on what happened, realize the error of his or her ways, and return to the same situation with a change of behavior and attitude. Exclusionary school discipline practices range from time-outs to office referrals, suspension, and expulsion. One of the problems with exclusionary school discipline is that the majority of students affected by the practice are African Americans. Since the Children's Defense Fund (1975) research on school suspension, studies of school discipline have consistently documented the disproportionality of African American students, particularly males, involved in exclusionary school discipline (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000). However, explanations for the disproportionality, which is termed the *discipline gap* (Monroe, 2006), are inconclusive.

Exclusionary discipline consequences are more frequent, harsher, and less congruent to the incident for African American students, particularly males, even though no evidence supports the claim that they are more disruptive than their White peers (Skiba et al., 2000). Skiba and colleagues (2000) found that African American students, particularly males, were referred to the office, suspended, and expelled for more disruptive behavior compared to White students. For instance, African American students were referred for more subjective reasons such as disrespect or excessive noise while White students were referred for more serious and objective behaviors such as smoking and vandalism. Results also indicated that significant racial disproportionality existed after controlling for socioeconomic status regardless of analytical method used. Racial and gender disparity appeared to originate at the classroom level as "systematic and racial discrimination" (Skiba et al., 2000, p. 16). Nonetheless, empirical research to explain racial and gender disparities in school discipline is nonexistent.

Few studies examine the social aspects of classroom interactions related to discipline even though misbehavior and discipline are main concerns of teachers (Public Agenda, 2004). Urban education literature does, however, explore the connection between classroom conflicts and disproportional representation of African American students in the achievement gap (Delpit, 1995; Milner, 2006). The effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy (integrating students' cultures into teaching and learning practices) with African American students who experience social and academic school failure is widely documented (Gay, 2000). Some scholars further conclude that teachers who are culturally responsive classroom managers organize and manage their classrooms with a culturally responsive "frame of mind as much as a set of strategies or practices" (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003, p. 275). The link between classroom

conflicts, academic issues, and marginalized students' cultural practices (i.e., behaviors) has also been studied from a critical sociocultural standpoint (Gutiérrez, 2008; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Conclusions suggest that African Americans, or any other marginalized group of students, are not the problem as suggested by exclusionary school discipline practices but that students' cultural practices are valued inequitably.

The author has found one study that explicitly explores social interactions and exclusionary discipline practices at the classroom level. Vavrus and Cole (2002) examined the "sociocultural factors that influence a teacher's decision to remove a student from the classroom" (p. 87). They studied how disciplinary moments, or "patterns of classroom interaction that often precede a suspension" (p. 89), are co-constructed or negotiated as social practice among teachers and students in moment-by-moment interactions. Results indicated that disciplinary moments vary by the sociocultural context of particular classrooms rather than occur as a series of events strictly defined in school discipline policy. However, no studies have been found that explore how to reduce the discipline gap for African American students by prioritizing social practice.

The author acknowledges that social practice and negotiations in classrooms entail cultural and emotional backgrounds and experiences of all participants and may implicate racial discrimination that permeates from the societal to the local classroom level, but these nuances extend beyond the scope of this paper. Additionally, the author acknowledges research that explains Black students' underachievement in school (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The author does not attempt to minimize these bodies of research but delimits the focus of this paper to how to transform conditions within classrooms to reduce the discipline gap for African American students. With these limitations in mind, the following question is addressed: How can learning in classroom communities of practice reduce the discipline gap for African American students? This paper explores how learning in classroom communities of practice may reduce the need for exclusionary school discipline practices and ultimately the discipline gap for African American students. The next section introduces the social nature of learning in communities of practice.

Social Nature of Learning

The social nature of learning can be understood through three interpretations of Vygotsky's (1986) zone of proximal development (ZPD), the first two of which are based on conventional views of learning that prioritize the transmission of knowledge and minimize the social nature of learning. In the first interpretation, teaching is explained as scaffolding, or slowly relinquishing initial explicit support given for performance of a task until the learner can perform the task independently. In the second interpretation, learning is explained as the successful merger of scientific and everyday (cultural) knowledge. In practice, African American students who are viewed as *excessively noisy* by the teacher are usually less successful in these independent task and transmission of knowledge scenarios.

A third interpretation (based on a critical social view of learning that prioritizes the social nature of learning and processes of social transformation) of the ZPD from activity theory (Engeström, 1987) is compatible with Lave and Wenger's (1991) *communities of practice* framework proposed in this paper. In this interpretation, the ZPD is defined as the "distance between the everyday actions of individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity that can be collectively generated" (p. 174) by negotiating conflicts embedded in everyday actions. Learning is not the overt individual results of instruction based on given cultural information, but a "relational understanding of person, world, and activity" (p. 51) viewed as sociocultural transformations in terms of continuous, evolving, holistic participation in communities of practice. This interpretation brings with it the teacher's understanding or

willingness to base learning on relationships amid social activity. Because the teacher prioritizes working together, the excessively noisy African American students will be more likely to fare well and get to stay in class. In this classroom, the teacher focuses on social transformation and encourages full membership in the learning community. Excessive noise is viewed, instead, as healthy resistance, participation in activities, and continual negotiation towards a more productive social identity. Resistance is viewed as transformations in and of communities of practice rather than misbehavior. Teachers who understand this view of the ZPD embody the notion that African American students in the discipline gap who are labeled as troublemakers because they seem excessively noisy will grow academically and socially in their classroom when given time and encouragement to participate with other students. Thus, learning involves the whole person in relationship to specific activities and social communities, which implies becoming a full participant through evolving forms of community membership in communities of practice. The communities of practice perspective is defined and explained in the next section.

Communities of Practice Perspective

A communities of practice perspective is guided by a critical social practice theory of learning (Freire, 1970/2000); the process of learning is defined as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), which encourages community membership, social identity transformation, and synergistic relationships and spaces (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

In LPP, learning occurs as situated activity in communities of practice. LPP indicates a shift away from theories of situated activity in which learning is a cognitive process inside one's head that can be deposited into an activity or situation, devoid of participation in the social world (Freire, 1970/2000). From this perspective, excessively noisy African American students in the discipline gap are encouraged to learn by negotiating to become full participants in the sociocultural practices of a particular community. The teacher views the African American students' excessive noise as what it is—animated dialogue that overlaps play fighting, cultural behaviors that are built on in a community of practice. African American students in the discipline gap, like any other students, can easily judge what it takes to become a full participant in the classroom, the likelihood of doing so, and how to proceed based on this knowledge. Learning as LPP is understood as an integral aspect of all activity that takes place anywhere at any time and is not necessarily caused by intentional instruction. In other words, people learn both official (Apple, 2000) and incidental knowledge and practices from the social organization of the community of practice as much or more than from instructional material or techniques.

The notion of LPP helps teachers understand the social organization of classrooms or schools as communities of practice with assorted forms of membership. LPP provides a context for exploring what people learn or do not learn with what meanings for identity production or reproduction. Learning occurs through the transformative potential of negotiated, often uncomfortable, interactions among members of specific communities of practice (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004). At first, excessive noise and dialogue overlapping play fighting may be hard for the teacher to deal with, especially if he or she is from a Eurocentric background. However, with increased understanding and use of LPP in the classroom, teachers more readily encourage students to resist and negotiate successfully during learning processes. As students' social and academic identities undergo transformation and resilience develops, the teacher's need for exclusionary discipline practices diminish. From an LPP perspective, student resistance, if recognized as an important part of the learning process by the teacher, is used to readjust the classroom structure to allow the student to negotiate success. For example, rather than excluding

African American students in the discipline gap for excessive noise, teachers can request or even require (counter intuitively) that students use overlapping dialogue and play fighting to dramatize how they understand a new concept in math or social studies class.

Community Membership

LPP is a three-pronged phrase that describes how people engage in social practice and learn through various aspects of community membership. *Legitimate participation* is about ways of belonging to, or forms of membership in, communities of practice. For instance, African American students who dramatize their understanding of a new concept with excessive noise belong to the classroom community of practice as learners. *Peripheral participation* suggests non-central ways of being located in the social world, referring to how "changing locations and perspectives are part of actors' learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36). The teacher who encourages (or counter intuitively requires the entire classroom community) African American students in the discipline gap to use excessive noise to dramatize how they understand a new concept in class is encouraging students to learn how to participate more successfully with the help of expert members of the community of practice. Students ultimately develop a different identity and form of membership at school; teachers reduce the need to remove students from class for excessive noise.

Legitimate peripherality involves relations of power and positioning of community members, implicating broader social structures (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For example, a teacher who reduces power relations in a way that the African American students in the discipline gap can move toward more full participation in a community of practice (i.e., dramatize knowledge) puts the student in an empowering position. Conversely, if these same students are held back, often legitimately from a societal perspective, from more fully participating in the community of practice or among communities of practice are in a disempowering, or powerless, position. For example, principals may require teachers to write office referrals for any type of disruption (i.e., excessive noise). On the one hand, teachers who are not allowed to encourage students to become full members of a classroom community of learners through negotiations (which may be excessively noisy dramatizations to some) are left powerless and disempowered. On the other hand, teachers who are not obliged to write referrals for disruptions (i.e., excessive noise) are free to encourage their African American students in the discipline gap to rise out of partial participation mode and become legitimate full participants in the classroom community of practice. Full analysis of situated learning as LPP means connecting peripheral participation to the legitimacy of and control over the social organization's resources (i.e., channel cultural behaviors to concretize and transform a learning community).

Social Identity Transformation

Learning is more than just involvement in new activities, performing new tasks, and mastering new understandings because these entities do not "exist in isolation but are a part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). Learning implies becoming a different person and necessarily involves the construction of identities, or living relationships among people participating in communities of practice, with possibilities facilitated by societal systems of relations. A relational view of the person and learning constructs whole persons with agency who define themselves in practice. For example, rather than labeling African American students in the discipline gap a priori as excessively noisy and disruptive, teachers who understand the LPP view of learning encourage their students to create new identities for themselves by engaging them in positive learning interactions. As a

result, students learn to use their cultural behaviors to continually, intentionally, and reflectively monitor their own engagement in the context of practice and trajectories of positive participation.

Because participation is the fundamental form of learning in LPP, the situated nature of learning extends beyond the immediate sociocultural context. Interrogations are made into how societal forces shape and are shaped by immediate contextual relationships, both reproduction and transformation of social identities as well as communities of practice, depending on paths, relationships, and practices claimed by membership. In other words, what happens in classrooms mimics what happens in society and what happens in society influences classroom practice. The relational emphasis between changing identities and membership in communities of practice makes it possible to think of continuous learning, official or unofficial, as a basic characteristic of communities of practice. Ultimately, teachers who reduce the need for exclusionary discipline practices within their classrooms reduce the need for the same practices outside of the classroom.

Synergistic Relationships and Spaces

LPP supports the sociocultural organization of classroom space into places of activity and distribution of knowledgeable skill via ongoing historically constructed, conflicting, synergistic relations among participants and processes of community production and reproduction (Gutiérrez, 2008). If African American students in the discipline gap engage in a classroom activity that invites them to be themselves yet work and solve academic and social issues together for the good of the classroom learning community, they experience what it means to become a knowledgeable, accepted member of a community of practice. Rather than developing teacher-student relationships based on conventional apprenticeship and views of learning, communities of practice encourage synergistic relationships of participation within and across various cycles of learning. "These cycles emerge in the contradiction and struggle inherent in social practice and the formation of identities" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 57). LPP learning is never a transfer or assimilation but rather a problematic, contradictory transformation and change implicated in each other.

Conclusion

Because learning processes are part of the collective, generative working out of contradictions in communities of practice, social cycles of production and reproduction of the future of particular communities implies spaces, even momentarily, of agreement (Engeström, 1987). Learning in generative spaces (Engeström, 1987) is more palatable and available to African American students in the discipline gap, leaving an historical residue of collectible physical, linguistic, and symbolic artifacts that are constructed and reconstructed in practice over time. LPP, framed in a critical theory of social practice, emphasizes the "relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 50). Meanings and communication are socially negotiated by people situated in the historical development of ongoing activity with others. Further, learning is viewed as "historical production, transformation, and change of persons. Or to put it the other way around, in a thoroughly historical theory of social practice, the historicizing of the production of persons should lead to a focus on processes of learning" (p. 51). LPP is a significant framework for viewing discipline based on its fundamental premise of engaging and including all, especially marginalized, members of society. Viewing disciplinary (or potential disciplinary) actions as negotiable social practices among the teacher and African American students in particular classrooms shifts our perspective and practices away from the need to use exclusionary discipline in school and society toward what is being learned socially and academically. LPP

provides a framework for challenging what could happen in future communities of practice to reduce and thus transform the disproportionality of African Americans in the discipline gap.

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