

# When White Educators Discipline Students of Color

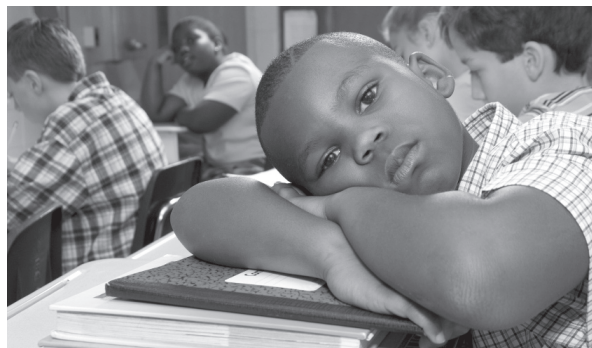
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In discussing the achievement gap, educators often talk about the need for relevant and representative curriculum for students of color. They discuss the need to recruit more educators of color. They also discuss power and the reality of white privilege. At my current school we hold “courageous conversations” to build a dialogue across boundaries of race. There is rarely a discussion, however, of white educators teaching, and needing to discipline, students of color. Why do we need to think about what happens when a white educator disciplines a student of color? For me the answer begins with what’s happening at my school.

Despite a wonderful diversity that is truly valued by the entire community, despite having a series of well-attended and well-received “courageous conversations” that involve staff and families in diverse and growing numbers, the majority of discipline reports I receive as vice-principal are for students of color, and this is in a school that is 55% white. Beyond the reinforcement of stereotypes that lurks behind these numbers lies another, very practical, point. When discipline works, by holding students accountable in a way that they feel is fair and aimed at helping them grow, those students are able to get back to work. When students get back to work, instead of resisting or shutting down, they are less likely to misbehave again or as often, and more likely to make academic progress. While ideally the staff of a public school would mirror the diversity of its student population, the fact is that most teachers who work with students of color in a diverse public school setting are white. As one of those white educators, I have long been encouraged to move beyond the notion of color-blindness, beyond the mantra to “treat all kids the same.” Given that a person’s race is an important part of his or her identity, this makes perfect sense to me. When I approach a student of color, being of different races is going to play a role, almost always unspoken, in our interaction. More recently, I have also been encouraged to think in terms of my own race, to think of my whiteness as a racial identity that confers privilege, rather than as the unacknowledged norm against which others are measured.

Many of my white colleagues may not agree with me, but I believe that one of the biggest obstacles for white educators to working success-



fully with students of color, especially in the area of discipline, is a fluid mix of guilt, fear, and anger that ebbs and flows within most white educators in our relationships with students of color and their families. Guilt, fear, and anger are often hidden unconsciously behind genuine good intentions, and sometimes evolve into a sense of powerlessness to “help,” which hardens into simple anger. While there is clearly such a thing as white privilege, it is unearned, because none of us chooses the color of our skin. Any thoughtful person who enjoys an unearned privilege is going to experience some guilt in the enjoyment of that privilege. As a result, white educators often try to convince students of color and their families that they want to “help”—“help” them achieve at a high level, “help” them achieve to the same level as the white majority. When and if that “help” fails to result in high achievement and positive behavior, though, guilt can easily give way to fear. It might be that the students of color who fail to achieve reinforce stereotypes that a white educator holds reluctantly and secretly, and fears will be discovered. It might be the fear of being misunderstood in the effort to hold students of color to a high standard, and of being branded a racist. How then, given the prevalence of color-blind thinking and white privilege, should white educators strive to work with students of color, both in terms of academics and discipline? Below are four simple ideas: focus on **goals**, use **baseline** measurements, share specific **data**, and give balanced **feedback**. When educators focus on goals for students as individuals, based on measurement of long-term improvement, within the context of a long-term relationship that builds over time, they may simultaneously acknowledge race and transcend some of its barriers.

When educators help students set **goals** for their development, they are accomplishing *(continued on page 27)*

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several things.

First of all, the interaction is completely student-centered. It is the difference between saying to a student, "I don't want you to disrupt my classroom," and saying, "I want you to earn a 1 or 2 for behavior, but today was a 4." Second, the goals suggest that the relationship is ongoing and has a future. When the student doesn't meet expectations for academics or behavior, then the discussion is about what happens tomorrow, rather than what went wrong today. This is expressed by saying to that same student, "Can you make sure tomorrow is a 1 or 2?" Third, long-term goals move the relationship away from the tense barriers of race toward the more rewarding and fulfilling relationship between guiding adult and receptive child. Finally, when measuring progress toward long-term goals, students may quickly experience some success and leave behind some of the lingering sense of unfairness. "Look at what you've accomplished this year. There are no 3s on your report card."

When student progress is measured against a **baseline** of the student's own past performance, and over a long time frame, we communicate to the student, "This is where you are now." This approach avoids a deficit model, and instead builds on strengths. It avoids comparing to other students, or dwelling on past failures or misbehavior. Once the baselines are established, then specific feedback on progress toward long-term goals may be shared with the student and family. Even if a student is doing very poorly, avoid sweeping generalizations such as, "He's doing badly in my class." Instead, share specific **data**: "His test scores have gone down from 75 to 50 and his homework has gone down from 80 to 40. I'm concerned because we set a realistic goal for this term of having his grade go up from C to B-."

Specificity is especially important in describing behavior where the specter of subjectivity, color-blindness, and white privilege come into play. Specificity communicates fairness and objectivity, sets out clear goals for students, and helps parents ally with the school in working with their children.

Describe the specific behavior in a nonjudgmental tone: "I asked him to take off his hat. He did, but put it back on a minute later. In the end I had to ask him to take it off four times." Parents are in a much stronger position when they can say, "Do your homework and keep your hat off in the classroom," instead of, "You've got to do better and stop having an attitude."

**Feedback** to students and families should be balanced between positive and negative, and presented within a long-term future perspective.

If a student doesn't respond to limits during class, for example, confront the misbehavior calmly and, whenever possible, privately. Avoid focusing on behavior that is not directly connected to achievement or the orderly functioning of the school. Avoid code words like "disrespect" or "attitude" which may communicate dislike to parents of color, and serve to cut off, instead of nurture, a working relationship. Instead, try to balance positive and negative feedback, always in the context of future development.

Given the burdens and challenges that students of color and their families carry in attending public schools, it may seem unfair to focus on understanding the struggles of a group of educators privileged by the color of their skin, and often unaware of the ways that they have missed opportunities to work successfully with students of color. As a practical matter, though, understanding these struggles has a potentially profound payoff for students of color, and for white educators. Educators, students, and parents who are comfortable communicating with each other, and believe that they are working together in a spirit of fairness and shared concern for children, have a much better chance of succeeding in working together to educate those children. We also have the opportunity then to be enriched by our differences, rather than confused or frustrated by the difficulties of our work together. ■

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