

# ***PERSISTENTLY DISCIPLINED URBAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION AND "GETTING IN TROUBLE"***

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Urban middle school students of color are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary discipline, reflecting a discipline gap between White students and students of color. The discipline gap results in negative outcomes similar to those caused by the academic achievement gap. Although the discipline gap occurs at all levels of schooling, it becomes exacerbated at the middle school transition when all students are subject to exclusionary discipline more frequently than they were in elementary school. Some students experience repeated discipline events throughout the school year causing them to become persistently disciplined. Although persistently disciplined students are frequently subjected to discipline experiences, they are rarely asked their perceptions of these experiences. Drawing upon stage-environment fit theory, this qualitative study examines the experiences of 11 persistently disciplined urban middle school students of color to understand how they experience the middle school transition, how it adversely impacts them, and how it contributes to the rise in the discipline gap at this developmental stage. Findings suggest that peer "drama" plays a key role in derailing persistently disciplined students and attention to peer relationships will be required in successfully decreasing discipline events. Additionally, these students require rigorous content be made accessible to them by supportive teachers and through means that do not require the mastery of reading.

More than 2 million students in the United States were suspended out of school during the 2009-2010 school year (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Out-of-school suspensions, along with in-school suspensions and expulsions, belong to a category called "exclusionary discipline" because they remove students from class-

rooms. Educators' uses of exclusionary discipline have sharply increased as zero tolerance policies have proliferated (Fabelo et al., 2011). These disciplinary responses are not applied equally to all students. Instead, disproportionality exists between the number of White students and students of color who receive

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Middle Grades Research Journal, Volume 8(3), 2013, pp. 99–116  
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ISSN 1937-0814  
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exclusionary discipline, causing a “discipline gap” between these groups of students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Urban middle school students of color are the most likely to experience the disparities in educators’ uses of suspension and expulsion to discipline students (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Not only are Black, Latino, and Native American students excluded from school at higher rates than their White counterparts (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008), but middle school students are also disciplined more frequently than elementary and high school students (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Recent research suggests that students who transition to middle school in sixth or seventh grade experience a higher number of suspensions than those who stay in a K-8 school (Arcia, 2007). Increased disciplinary events occur at the transition to middle school particularly among students of color and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Theriot & Dupper, 2010).

While we know that being suspended or expelled from school predicts school dropout (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2013), we do not know what this process is like for students or how disciplined students make sense of their experiences. Though a handful of recent studies ask high school students about their experiences related to school discipline (see Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; McNeal & Dunbar, 2010; Sheets, 1996), voices of middle school boys and girls of color who compose the population of disciplined students have been omitted. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the disproportionality of middle school discipline by examining persistently disciplined<sup>2</sup> students’ experiences through their eyes in order to bring their perspectives to bear on reforming inequitable exclusionary discipline practices. This study answers the research question: How does the nature of these students’ discipline experiences change during the transition to

middle school? We specifically focus on how this transition impacts this particular group of students and contributes to the steep rise in the discipline gap at this developmental stage.

### ***APPLYING STAGE-ENVIRONMENT FIT THEORY TO THE DISCIPLINE GAP***

Drawing upon stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993), this study focuses on how changes in school discipline practices at the middle school transition adversely affect students due to the mismatch between students’ developmental stages and these practices. According to Eccles and Midgley (1989), when early adolescents transition to traditional junior high schools, their motivation is negatively impacted due to the lack of fit between their developmental needs and what the school environment offers them. While students frequently matriculate in schools called “middle schools,” which were reconfigured from junior high schools in the 1980s and 1990s in order to provide a more suitable learning environment for early adolescents, the majority of these schools—especially those serving urban students—changed in name only (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004). Contemporary middle schools continue to perpetuate a lack of fit between students’ needs and institutional structure.

According to stage-environment fit theory, middle school structure provides a poor match for early adolescents with regard to these six main areas (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Midgley, 1989):

1. **Middle school teachers tend to focus more on discipline and control than do elementary teachers.** This focus could stem from pressures related to having a greater student to teacher ratio, more (and more difficult) content to cover, less time to cover content, and a priority of teaching content over building relationships

- with students. Teachers at this level also have lower self-efficacy than elementary teachers in both teaching content as well as managing the classroom, which could also contribute to a hyper focus on student discipline (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).
2. **At the middle school transition, teachers use more whole-class task organization and rely less on the small group instruction that characterizes many elementary school classrooms.** Students are tracked into classes with others of similar ability and they are evaluated more publicly than in elementary school (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Students consequently experience increased anxiety and decreased attachment to school (Eccles, Lord, & Buchanan, 1996; Eccles & Midgley, 1989).
  3. **Students are required to perform lower level cognitive tasks than they are in elementary school.** Evidence suggests that many middle school teachers struggle to provide engaging instruction that students find relevant. Additionally, students are required to produce assignments more focused on completion than on mastery, particularly when they attend low-performing schools or are tracked into remedial classes (Balfanz, Ruby, & Mac Iver, 2002; Fahey, 2012; Haberman, 1991; Mergendoller, Marchman, Mitman, & Packer, 1988).
  4. **Teachers use higher standards to grade student work, and teachers emphasize performance, such as getting a high grade, over mastery of the material.** Middle school teachers grade student work more critically, resulting in decreased academic outcomes (Juvonen et al., 2004). Decreased grades and overall academic success result in lower levels of efficacy for students and less engagement (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). In addition, teachers' emphasis on performance over mastery is correlated with lower levels of self-regulation and student self-efficacy (Midgley, Middleton, Gheen, & Kumar, 2002).
  5. **Students experience a decline in the quality of student-teacher and student-student relationships.** The middle school transition requires students to have multiple teachers per day rather than one in spite of the fact that early adolescents require personal relationships with trustworthy adults. Larger class sizes and shorter class periods lead to diminished relationships not only between students and teachers but also within each classroom community (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989).
  6. **Teachers shift the locus of responsibility for learning from themselves to the students.** This shift in responsibility may accompany a decrease in teacher self-efficacy that results both from the classroom management challenges posed by early adolescents as well as the demands for delivery of complex content (Balfanz et al., 2002; Eccles & Midgley, 1989).
- This study focuses primarily on students' experiences with school discipline particularly as they transition from elementary to middle school. While students were asked primarily about discipline events, their answers reflect the lack of fit between their developmental stages, institutional circumstances, and educators' responses to them. Consequently, stage-environment fit theory provides a useful lens for understanding persistently disciplined students' explanations for why they get in trouble so much and what happens when they do. Previous research suggests that investigating this transition bears merit because the transition can lead to decreased motivation, self-esteem, and academic achievement (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Midgley et al., 2002; Roesser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Persistently disciplined students are at increased risk of these negative outcomes (Balfanz et al., 2013; Losen & Skiba, 2010).

### *Why Talk to Students?*

The existence of a discipline gap suggests the need for educational reform in the area of exclusionary discipline. Including student voice in any education reform increases the chances for that reform's success (Cook-Sather, 2002; Kennedy & Datnow, 2011; Levin, 2000). While few educational reform efforts include any students, virtually none include the perspectives of marginalized populations. Understanding these students' perspectives could be a first step toward engaging them in helping educators implement more effective strategies to meet the needs of all students (Cook-Sather, 2002).

A handful of studies have focused on disciplined students' perceptions of the discipline process and have demonstrated that student perceptions of discipline events vary greatly from those of the educators who discipline them (Collins, 2011; D'Amato, 1993; Thornberg, 2007; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Sheets (1996) interviewed 16 persistently disciplined urban high school students regarding classroom-based conflicts and found that students felt unheard. They felt that communication style differences between students and teachers (particularly students of color and White teachers) impacted conflict resolution. Brown and Rodriguez (2009) followed two 17-year-old high school students who ended up dropping out of school in order to document both the institutional and personal dimensions of school pushout. They discovered the role that academic and social alienation played in the process and saw that this alienation developed in part during discipline events. Attending to students' perceptions of discipline encounters, particularly in middle school when instances of exclusionary discipline rise, could help educators intervene in disciplinary processes that currently result in school pushout.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study draws upon an interpretivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998). The researchers first built

meaning with students during the interview process; and second during data analysis when the researchers used their own experiences and understanding to guide the process of making meaning from the students' descriptions, explanations, interpretations, and expressions. The researchers brought their own experiences of teaching middle school—and in the case of one researcher, exclusively teaching persistently disciplined students—to the interpretive process, which allowed for the researchers' own practical knowledge to inform data collection and analysis (Polkinghorne, 2004; Schwandt, 1994). However, while the researchers' perspectives informed rapport building with participants as well as the analysis of the data, conclusions were derived only from codes that were saturated with data slices coming directly from the students themselves.

### *Context*

This study focuses on students at Peninsula South Middle School<sup>3</sup> in the Southeast. Peninsula South is one of over two dozen middle schools in the district, which is in the top 25 largest school districts in the United States. Peninsula South has over 1,000 students and contains a magnet program. Twenty-four percent of its students are White but disproportionately compose the magnet program population. Sixty percent of Peninsula South students are Black, 5% are Latino, 4% are Asian, and 7% are multiracial. Fifty-five percent of the students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Middle schools in the district collectively have a 40% suspension rate (calculated as the total number of suspensions divided by the total enrollment), while Peninsula South has a 73% suspension rate. Though only 60% of its students are Black, 90% of suspensions are given to Black students.

### *Participants*

Students chosen as participants in this study had received two or more out-of-school suspensions before April of the 2010-2011

academic year. While the list of potential participants was a long one, this population of students is difficult to recruit and retain in research studies. With the help of the school administration, 11 students were recruited and retained through the duration of the study. Participants included four boys and seven girls and were all either Black or of mixed racial descent. Their grade point averages ranged from .29 to 2.71 with an average of 1.5. Collectively, the students had spent 74 days in in-school suspension and had been suspended out of school 41 times between September and April. Only two of them had collected more than five recorded discipline events in elementary school. Four of them had been assessed for special education services, but none of them had an active Individualized Education Program. Each student was interviewed four times with each interview lasting 40 to 60 minutes. In these semistructured interviews, students were asked about their experiences in each year of school, especially with regard to academic achievement, discipline, and relationships with teachers and peers. Additional data were collected from students' cumulative records. Students were also asked to illustrate particularly important experiences.

### ***Data Analysis***

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all data sources were coded with HyperRESEARCH software. During data collection and analysis, stage-environment fit theory was used as a lens to determine codes and inform themes. The six components of stage-environment fit theory were used to generate an initial set of codes during provisional coding (Saldaña, 2012), which included: educator emphasis on control, educator investment in students, evaluation, instructional activities, other middle school differences, school failure, school success, student to student relationships, and teacher to student relationships. Codes were also identified after data collection and during analysis based on student responses, reflecting our interpretivist para-

digm, and themes were derived from saturated codes.

### ***LIMITATIONS***

This study has several limitations. Access to student participants was granted through school administration as mandated by the district's research policy. However, administrators were also the ones meting out discipline. When administrators approached students regarding participation in this study, students may have felt compelled to participate. Students may also have felt that they needed to portray administrators positively when talking to us, a possibility made increasingly likely since interviews were conducted in the conference room in the school's main office. To address the potential negative impacts of these limitations, students were asked to assent to participate at the beginning of each interview session and were interviewed over subsequent days so that trust between the researchers and participants could be developed.

### ***FINDINGS***

Participants consistently described the middle school transition as marking the beginning of their getting in serious and repeated trouble. They attributed this change to different reactions on the parts of middle school educators; boring curriculum; diminished relationships with teachers; and peer pressure and "drama." While these first three areas echo the predictions of stage-environment fit theory, this fourth area develops the theory in a way that incorporates struggles that particularly impact these persistently disciplined students.

### ***Teachers' Focus on Control and Students' Experiences of "Getting in Trouble"***

The transition to middle school has led to stricter and more official sanctioning of stu-

dents. Collectively, the students experienced 49 disciplinary incidents in all grades of elementary school. Those incidents included any recorded mention of trouble at the elementary school level regardless of whether the student was referred to the office or suspended. This same group of students had received 308 office referrals solely during the academic year that data were collected. Cynthia expresses, "I wish I could still be like in the third grade ... 'cause, like you know referrals? In elementary school, I had never got a referral." Dallas adds, "I didn't really get in trouble [in fourth grade] 'cause he [would] never write me up. If I got in trouble he [would] just talk to me outside." While elementary school discipline focused on classroom-based interventions between teacher and student, middle school teachers utilized office referrals as a preferred method.

Furthermore, the issuing of referrals seems to be more likely to lead to exclusionary discipline in middle school. As Dayron explains, "In fifth grade, you would just get a referral. They wouldn't suspend you. You would just have a referral on your record. But here you would get in-school suspension and suspended." While student behavior may have changed in response to peer "drama" and academic struggles, this study suggests that school-based factors contribute to the sharp increase in formal sanctions that lead to exclusionary discipline. For example, students frequently described a school culture in which leaving class and being sent out of class is a normalized response of both teachers and students when conflicts arise. The sharp increase in teachers' uses of office referrals suggests that removing students from the classroom is an acceptable, and perhaps even preferred, way to manage challenging behavior. Because classroom removal is normalized, these students seem to default to this method to resolve conflicts.

Four students in this study described leaving the classroom after they were denied permission to do so. In these instances, teachers did not allow students to use the bathroom or get a drink of water, activities that required

less formal regulation in elementary school. Though the teacher may have been attempting to protect class time by not allowing students to leave or by preventing them from being late, students interpreted these actions as unnecessary grabs for control that prevented them from having their basic needs met. Students had also been sent the message through having received so many office referrals that their presence in class was not important. So, rather than respecting the teacher's decision to prevent them from leaving, these students took matters into their own hands. Cynthia explains, "when [the teacher] tell[s] me I can't go to the bathroom, and I gotta go, I'll go to the bathroom. I'll go back to her class, 'cause that's math class and I gotta get my grade. But when I tell her I gotta use the bathroom, she'll [say], 'Nope, you're not allowed to use the bathroom. And I don't care if you walk out,' so I walk out."

Ironically, when students walk out of class, they are subject to exclusionary discipline as a punishment (see Figure 1). Jeffrey explains, "I got suspended from her again because she said that I could go to the bathroom but she didn't write me no pass or nothing." In Jeffrey's case, he says that the teacher gave him permission to leave but then changed her mind. Regardless of which version most closely describes what actually happened, Jeffrey's consequence was a suspension. He missed class and as a punishment, he missed more class, a consequence used far more frequently at the middle school level than in elementary (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Theriot & Dupper, 2010). Students described educators' uses of suspension as a consequence for tardiness or truancy as leading to further challenges including students' diminished academic achievement and school disengagement.

Students explained that out-of-school suspension led to lower grades because they missed class time. In some cases they were not allowed to make up the work they missed, and even if they could, they struggled to understand the new material being studied by the

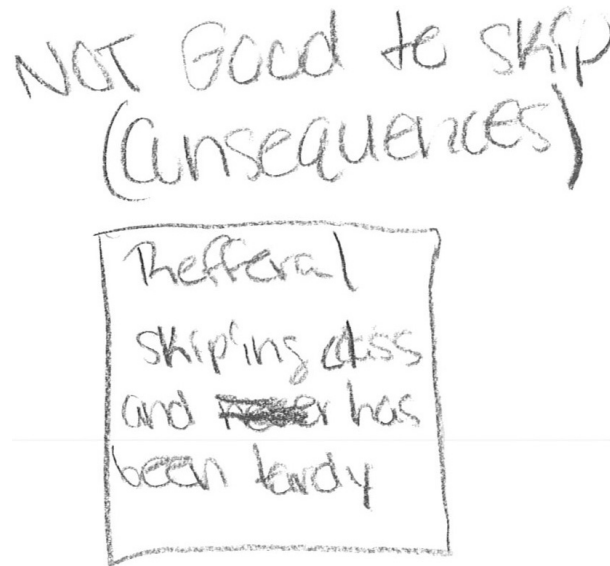


FIGURE 1  
Consequences of Missing Class: Jeffrey's Worst Memory in School

class upon their return from a suspension. Nichole explains:

I'm an okay student. Like I try my hardest even though I'm not in class all the time because I get sent out and I have [in-school suspension] and I get suspended ... I'm more out of class than I'm in the classroom, and I think that I become more ready to just jump in the lesson instead of just trying to ask too many questions right off. I try to teach myself first. And so at the beginning of the year I had As and Bs for two semesters until I started getting in trouble and that brought my grades really down, and right now I'm still trying to bring them back up.

Samantha confirms that exclusionary discipline has the same effect on her:

**Samantha:** When I get in trouble inside class and they'll send me out of her class or she'll write me a referral.

**Interviewer:** And then what happens to your grades?

**Samantha:** Oh they'll put me in [in-school suspension] or I won't do my work [in in-

school suspension] and then I get a low grade.

In Samantha's case, she is describing the impact of being placed in in-school suspension where she has the opportunity to do her work but does not complete it. Seven of the 11 participants had been retained at least once during elementary school and all four others had been placed on academic improvement plans due to low test scores, indicating that these students may need adult assistance to complete work. Even when given an opportunity in school to complete work during a discipline event, persistently disciplined students may not be able to take advantage of that opportunity without additional supports. For these students, exclusionary discipline perpetuated academic challenges that they already faced, further jeopardizing their academic success rather than teaching them to manage challenging behaviors.

Furthermore, discipline events seemed to heighten students' feelings of disengagement. Students felt demoralized when adults yelled at them or did not listen to their sides of the

story and presumed their guilt. These encounters seem to characterize students' overall feelings about their middle school experience. For example, Mikala describes her reading teacher's reaction to Mikala's entry to class each day: "Every time I can't never walk into the classroom without her saying nothing to me like she's got to say something like, 'Well don't come in my class loud' or 'Did you do your work today?' or something like that. She's always got to say something like that." Mikala feels that this teacher makes judgments about her and that the teacher's statements of those judgments get them off on the wrong foot each day. Mikala states, "that will just turn my whole day out." Jeffrey states that his discipline encounters make him feel bad about himself. He states:

I had skipped my class. It was when I walked out of my classroom and my teacher, when she ... wouldn't help me so I walked out. But like I said, you're not supposed to walk out of the classroom even if she not helping cause that's what's going to get you in trouble ... when I had got caught skipping, my principal, she had a talk with me, and I—I don't like being talked to by a principal because it makes me feel real bad. And I'm not a bad child.

Marcus reveals his negative feelings about exclusionary discipline in his drawing of one such event (see Figure 2). Although discipline events were used to correct student behavior and develop student-teacher relationships in elementary school, the nature of these events changed for these students. Middle school teachers resorted to the use of office referrals and exclusionary discipline rather than handling challenging behavior within the classroom context. Students were sent out of class, which led to lower academic achievement and further disengagement.

### ***How Middle School Instructional Strategies Contribute to Disengagement***

Participants also described a boring and difficult middle school curriculum. Students

favoured hands-on activities, few of which they experienced in middle school. Instead, work primarily consisted of textbook and workbook activities, which frustrated this population of students because many of them already struggled with reading. For example, though Marcus excitedly described the science laboratory in which his class raised mealworms in fourth grade, he now says that science is his most difficult subject. He explains, "[Science is hard] because some words, some words I never even heard before. You know, and I gotta keep going through the book, you know. I never find an answer like that." Marcus also enjoyed hands-on math lessons, such as when the teacher "would bring in like a bunch of stuff and, you know, he'd give us money or 'cause we was learning how to write checks and stuff." Marcus continues to receive above average grades in Math in middle school, but he does not speak of it as a subject that he enjoys.

Similarly, Dallas recalls the pleasure of reading Junie B. Jones chapter books in elementary school. He states, "I think I read eight of them." He demonstrated average standardized test scores in reading through the fourth grade but has failed each year since, perhaps due to lack of engagement and disillusionment with test-taking. This learner articulates his desire for engaging instruction within the context of a positive relationship with his teacher, such as when he describes his second grade experience:

[My second grade teacher] used to teach a lot of science, more science than anything, and she used to talk to me one-on-one every day, like every day. She was nice. She was—she was never really mad. She's a good teacher. [In Science,] we did a lot of experiments ... [I remember] the one was the soda and the Mento and they exploded ... I was excited.

When asked about his current science class, Dallas reported, "I don't like science. I don't know why." Furthermore, when asked to compare his second grade to his eighth grade experience Dallas articulates, "it was more fun and

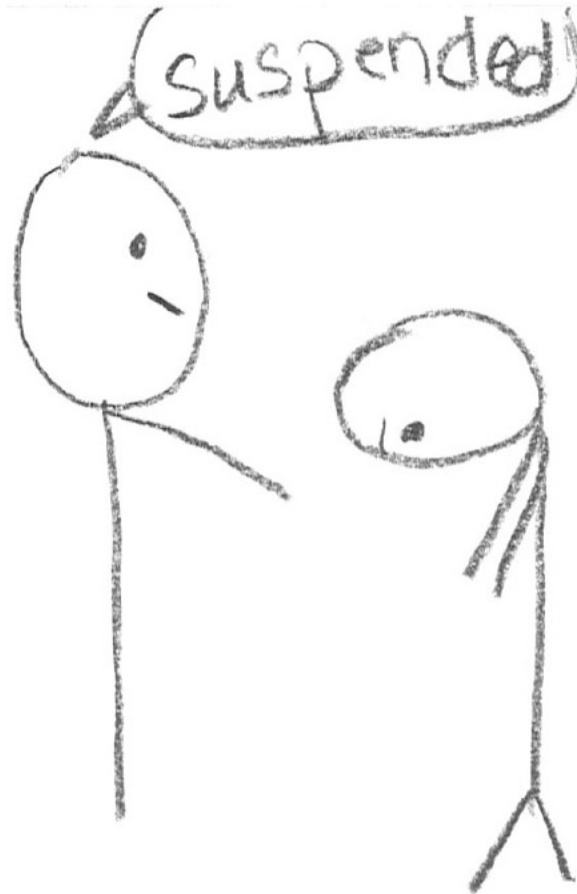


FIGURE 2

Marcus' Feelings of Dejection During a Discipline Event Resulting in Exclusionary Discipline

we used to do a lot of experiments and stuff. We don't do that here." Instead, Dallas gets punished for talking and excluded from class. The focus of the class has become the discipline rather than the content, which furthers his disinterest.

Participants gave a number of examples of the boredom they experience in their current classes and their longing for the instructional practices of their elementary school teachers. Although she currently states that she "don't wanna come to school no more," Haley excitedly describes her best memory of school as her second grade project of becoming "teacher for a day." She chose to do a lesson about John

Adams. She states that she was most proud of herself that day "because I was more confident and actually got up in front of the class because I'm like a real shy person and like I would just sit in the background but I got up and was more confident that day" (see Figure 3). However, of her classes now, she explains:

**Haley:** Some of it, in like some of my classes it gets like real boring and like we tell the teacher and they be like, "oh, we're going to, we're going to try and fix that," and then they don't never do nothing. You just keep doing the same thing and like the same routine and stuff.

**Interviewer:** Can you give me an example of a routine that's in one of your classes that you find boring that the teacher hasn't changed?

**Haley:** Like we come in and then like the work's on the board, like they'll try, they'll explain it and then you just, you got to do the work and then it's like the same thing every day.

**Interviewer:** What's the work like?

**Haley:** Working out of a book or in like your workbook.

**Interviewer:** So you find that boring?

**Haley:** Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** Is that typical for your classes or is that an exception?

**Haley:** Typical.

Students repeatedly gave examples of being bored with bookwork and desiring more interesting activities and better teaching. Mikala states that her least favorite middle school science teacher would "just come in and tell us to just look at the book and do the questions. She don't go up there and like teach us nothing. She wanted us to answer questions and just look through the book." Nichole similarly complains of her reading teacher, "she's not really a good teacher at all. She just makes us do bookwork. She don't ever like teach us on the board or nothing. We get these little books, that's boring, and you got the little books that go with the big book, and I mean that's not real interesting." Oftentimes, educators refer to these students as disruptive and as those who do not want to learn, but our interviews with these students reflect young people who very much want to learn and be engaged in class material but who feel that their teachers instead emphasize bookwork and controlling the class.

### *Needing Help in the Context of Diminished Teacher-Student Relationships*

The difficulty students had with a book-focused instructional style was compounded by their receiving less help in middle school

along with a deterioration of their relationships with teachers. Jeffrey would like his middle school teachers to know that "I need lots, I need some help and I don't, I don't like failing. I don't like to fail. And I'm a good student. And I would love for you to teach me." Jeffrey describes receiving help from the teachers he likes. However, he as well as other students consistently described not receiving the help they requested and needed in order to succeed. They point out that not receiving help occurs more in middle school than in elementary and it angers these students. Jeffrey once protested not receiving help from a teacher who would "go and help the other people and don't never help me. So I walked right out of her class, but that wasn't the right thing to do." As a result of walking out, Jeffrey received a referral that could have led to his being punished by receiving more time out of class. Haley attributes teachers' lack of help as being a result of their personal dislike for her. She says the following of her teachers:

**Haley:** It's like you could tell that they really, like they care, but they really don't care because like if you ask them something they'll just ignore you or go help somebody else. And it's like, you're like "I asked you a question and you wonder why I'm always getting upset. I asked you something because I don't understand but you're not helping me."

**Interviewer:** And do you think that they don't help you because of the way that they feel about you or do you feel like it's just a lot of students and they don't, they can't be everywhere at the same time? Or how do you make sense of that experience?

**Haley:** They just don't like me.

**Interviewer:** So you feel like they have a choice about who they can help and they don't choose you because they don't like you?

**Haley:** Mm-hmm.

These negative experiences with help-seeking reflect diminished relationships between teachers and students at the middle school

level. Although some students did describe having had positive relationships with some teachers in middle school, their fondest memories were of elementary school teachers. Dayron described how an elementary teacher went out of her way to reward students with high writing scores by taking them for pizza. Zimba says of her fourth grade and favorite teacher:

He always wanted us to try hard ... he'd talk with us and told us like, 'What's your favorite sport? What do you like to do? What do you want to do when you grow up?' ... when I was in the fourth grade, that's when I figured out what I wanted to be when I grow up because of Mr. Green. He helped me achieve that.

Just as students want to be engaged in instruction, they also desire close and caring relationships with teachers whom they need not only emotionally but also in order to succeed academically. Students experienced fewer academic successes in middle school and felt less connected to school and to their teachers, which contributed to negative interactions with both students and adults that led to disciplinary events.

### ***Instability, Impulsivity, Peers, and "Drama"***

These students felt overwhelmed by the transition to middle school not only because of their increased academic difficulties and diminished relationships with teachers, but also due to diminished relationships with peers. They repeatedly described social "drama," which pervaded their everyday school experiences and filled their academic lives with chaos. All of the students described the middle school transition as the onset of this drama. Haley states, "you're always going to run into, like, drama and then it just gets old and like to the point you don't even want to come to school no more." While they consistently viewed themselves as potentially successful students who wanted to do well, they described getting caught up in their emotional

responses to the provocation of their peers. In comparing the students from third grade to her current peers, Mikala states, "[There was] no drama ... respectful kids in third and disrespectful kids in eighth. Um, no fun time in eighth, fun time in third. That's, like, it."

Haley also feels nostalgic about her earlier relationships with peers. She says, "There's a lot of difference. Like everybody got along and stuff. We had fun. In kindergarten you was happy to go to school. And now it's like you don't want to go to school." Zimba states that students in middle school "don't like, know how to sit down. They all rough, and stuff and they—they act hostile." These new, negative attitudes among their peers led these students to become distracted at best and defensive at worst. Nichole, Mikala, and Haley all describe being surprised by peer dynamics that have led to conflict and say that they have been "sucked in" or provoked to fight in response. In Marcus' case, he sometimes has "a bunch of girls in my classroom, so, you know, they start stuff and I can't concentrate." While Marcus' distractions occur in class, transitions between classes as well as transitional times at the beginning and ends of class periods contained the majority of peer distractions. Samantha explains, "it seems like when I be around my friends or something, it's like I'll go to class late or when I go in class I don't be focused on my work and I'll be focused like outside of class ... it's like fun outside of class."

The organization of the middle school environment contributed to chaos that sometimes ensued during passing periods since students had to change classes every 45 minutes. The transitions between classes also presented other new challenges that students did not have to deal with during elementary school. Dayron explains, "In sixth grade it's more of moving around a lot like almost every period you have to move around and go to a different class. You got to worry about leaving stuff in your locker, not carrying a lot of stuff because you don't need a lot of stuff for each class." Marcus reiterated Dayron's concern about having trouble with his locker, needing to remember things,

and getting to class on time. Marcus states, “[In elementary school,] I usually put my book bag on the chair, you know, it be there when I have to leave. But now I put my book bag in the locker, I have to worry about getting to classes, you know. When I was in elementary school, one line, you know, everybody stay together. But now it’s different people around. I gotta get here, then here, then here. You know?” The organizational structure of passing period was too much for Marcus to handle successfully on a regular basis and being tardy created a major problem for him.

In addition to the struggles students had with meeting the social, personal, and academic demands of changing classes so frequently, they also struggled with understanding the expectations of all of their different teachers. Dallas states, “[Elementary school] was way different ‘cause I only had to deal with one teacher. Now I gotta deal with six, seven.” Dayron attributes his receiving of office referrals to this change. He explains:

Well I never really got as many referrals in fifth grade I guess because ... it was only like two teachers so I knew what to do in their class and what not to do in their class instead of just you know going to another teacher’s class and then they have different rules about stuff and then other people have different rules about stuff. I had two teachers that I knew the rules in their class. I knew what to do and I knew what not to do and I knew what I could do and what I couldn’t do.

Haley states that the increase in her number of teachers also reflects the increase in the number of each teacher’s students, which has negatively impacted her academic experience. She states, “You’re going from having like maybe one to two teachers and they like actually sitting down helping you, to having like six, seven different teachers and they got all these students.” She feels like the increase in the number of students teachers have results in them caring less in general, and more specifically in them caring less about her.

In the midst of increasing change in the school environment, students are also trying to navigate increased peer pressure and developmental impulsivity. Jeffrey describes the causes for his recent referrals in this way:

Every time I do something wrong, I don’t be thinking ... it’s like when you’re doing the stuff that you’re doing you don’t really think about it until the end when you get your consequences. But, like I be knowing that it’s not right I be just still doing it. I don’t know.

Marcus also explains that although he knows that he’s supposed to make a particular decision and those good decisions are the ones he used to make in elementary, he now will “go over here to the fun. You know, some of my choices changed.” Nichole similarly attributes her poor academic performance in middle school to peer influence that she is now trying to resist so that she can raise her grades. In a context of many physical transitions and an environment containing diminished teacher support and help, these students had difficulty negotiating social pressures and staying on track.

## **DISCUSSION**

Existing research suggests that persistently disciplined students particularly rely on educators’ simultaneous, successful implementation of care, curriculum, and classroom management (Kennedy, 2011; Kennedy-Lewis, 2012). In other words, these students succeed in classrooms where teachers do all three areas of practice well. When teachers only focus on, or have only mastered, one or two areas, such as control and curriculum, these students may remain disengaged because they yearn for the personal connection. Similarly, if teachers have positive relationships with students, but do not have a rigorous curriculum and engaging instructional strategies or consistent classroom management, students may like the teacher but they may not perform well academically or behaviorally. This study rein-

forces findings that professional development should target all three areas of practice, particularly with regard to middle school students. Students in this study echoed those in previous studies that support stage-environment fit theory's six areas of challenge that students experience at the middle school transition. Findings particularly highlight the salience of three of these challenges for persistently disciplined students and suggest changes that could be made at the classroom and school levels to better support them.

### ***Focus Less on Control and More on Curriculum and Care***

First, these students suffered from middle school educators' increased focus on control and discipline. These students not only received more sanctions in middle school but also spent more time excluded from class. These disciplinary consequences are used more frequently at the middle school level than in elementary schools even though students' experiences with these strategies predict further disengagement from school (Balfanz et al., 2013; Theriot & Dupper, 2010). Educators' responses to these students are likely to contribute to students' internalization of the idea that school is not the place for them, putting them on the same road to school push-out as Fine's (1991) and Brown and Rodriguez's (2009) dropouts.

Additionally, there exists a need to ensure that instructional and classroom management practices are culturally relevant. We will focus on instruction below. With regard to classroom management, teachers should examine the role that culture plays in their practices. The majority of office referrals received by the students in this study resulted from "classroom disruption" and "defiance," two classifications that are subjective in nature but that comprise most of the disciplinary referrals assigned nationally (Dupper & Bosch, 1996; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Teachers need to question their own assumptions about student behavior and view students through culturally savvy lenses

(Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). Preservice and in-service teacher education can help educators identify how culture and perception play a role in inequitable discipline outcomes (Milner, 2009).

### ***Use Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Kinesthetic Instructional Activities***

Second, students talked at length about the importance to them of an engaging curriculum but said that instead of being engaged, they primarily receive textbook-based assignments. As stage-environment fit theory predicts, students received less cognitively demanding tasks in contexts focused on completion over mastery. However, while students were bored with these types of assignments, they also repeatedly described needing help to complete them. Students particularly struggled with tasks that required reading. Though teacher interviews and classroom observations were not part of this study, other studies suggest that educators' responses to struggling readers leads to more emphasis on reading to access content rather than less (Valencia & Buly, 2004). However, these findings suggest that students need access to rigorous and engaging content that does not require advanced reading skills.

To ensure that curriculum is accessible to all students, teachers should know their students and the community well, and employ strategies that build on students' knowledge and assets (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Preservice and in-service teachers whose cultural backgrounds differ from those of their students can undertake a study of the community, interview students and parents, engage in community experiences, and seek wisdom from community representatives (Moll, Amanty, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005). Knowledge gained in such activities can help teachers use metaphors and frames of reference that are familiar to students and that appropriately scaffold their learning. Teachers also need access to professional development that can help them employ

kinesthetic engagement strategies that play to students' strengths and acknowledge the physical needs of early adolescents (Rychly & Graves, 2012).

### ***Demonstrate Care and Develop Positive Relationships With All Students***

Third, these students did describe diminished relationships with middle school teachers in contrast to their accounts of positive experiences with elementary school teachers whom they found to be especially supportive. Though these students challenged many of their teachers, they still relied upon, and valued, teacher support and assistance both emotionally and academically. Their descriptions of both effective and ineffective teachers echo those of students in previous studies who desire for teachers to understand them, allow them to start with a clean slate each day, and set clear and consistent boundaries while keeping them in class (Brown, 2007; Cushman & Rogers, 2008). These persistently disciplined students particularly rely upon teachers seeing past their challenging behaviors and believing that all students want to succeed.

These findings reiterate the need to build teacher-student relationships using Noddings' (1988) "ethic of care," which places the focus of education on the enactment of care between teachers and students. Educators who adopt an ethic of care judge the morality of their actions based on how cared-about students feel rather than based on whether or not the educator performed his or her duty toward the student. These students pointed out their need to receive frequent assistance completing assignments, which is one tangible and immediate way that teachers can demonstrate care for struggling students (Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Wenzel, 1997). They also wanted teachers to listen to them and presume their innocence.

Because they did not receive care in the manner in which they required it, the students in this study did not feel cared for. In fact, they were often "adultified" by educators, meaning

that rather than seeing students' actions as reflections of appropriate human development, educators responded to students as though they were operating as fully developed adults (Ferguson, 2001; Morris, 2007; Murphy et al., 2013). Ferguson (2001) describes how adultification plays a role in Black boys becoming cast in roles of "bad" students while Morris (2007) describes its role in Black girls also being disproportionately disciplined, particularly by White teachers. Giving students and teachers opportunities, resources, and strategies to relate to each other as people outside of the traditional hierarchical roles of school could promote the development of an ethic of care in schools, particularly between White teachers and students of color.

### ***Develop Classroom and School Communities Through Empathy-Building***

The same manner of empathy-building that could benefit teacher-student relationships could also benefit student-student relationships. While stage-environment fit theory asserts the potentially diminishing nature of relationships between students at the middle school transition, findings from this study suggest that this topic especially pertains to the experiences of persistently disciplined students. These students repeatedly described the role of peer "drama," primarily occurring during classroom transitions and between classes, in derailing their best intentions to do well in school. While physical aggression resulted in disciplinary actions for almost all of the participants, they also described verbal and relational aggression as being part of their daily school experiences. Since aggression can play a pervasive role in the identity development of marginalized youth (Adamshick, 2010), these findings suggest the need for smaller classroom communities where students spend more, and more structured, time together with the supervision of a consistent and caring adult (National Middle School Association, 2003).

Creating school communities has shown promise in high poverty middle schools (Balfanz et al., 2002; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2004). "Schools-within-schools," or school teams or houses, in which a small number of teachers share the same group of students, reflect the middle school model as originally advanced by the middle school movement and currently supported by the Association for Middle Level Education (National Middle School Association, 2003). Keeping students together in teams can increase their sense of belonging as well as their loyalty to the well-being of the group.

Replacing exclusionary discipline strategies with those based on restorative justice principles can also encourage the development of empathy among students. Rather than separating students from the group and issuing illogical consequences for breaking classroom or school rules, restorative justice brings together all stakeholders affected by the behavior and promotes understanding among them (Bazemore & Schiff, 2010; Casella, 2003). Consequences for disruptive behavior are then determined by the group based on what is needed to restore the damage to the community that was done due to the behavior. Restorative justice strategies allow stakeholders to hear about the event from the perspectives of others, which can lead to mutual understanding that might prevent future anti-social behaviors (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001).

### ***Helping Persistently Disciplined Students Navigate the Middle School Transition***

These findings provide further evidence of the types of school structures and teacher dispositions needed to support middle school students, particularly those who are persistently disciplined (National Middle School Association, 2003). Specifically, these students articulate their need for caring relationships with teachers, a small school environment, challenging but accessible curriculum, and firm

but fair discipline. Findings also confirm Losen and Skiba's (2010) assessment that U.S. middle schools face an epidemic of educators' increasing uses of exclusionary discipline and its negative impacts, highlighting the need for more effective alternatives. This study relates middle school literature to school discipline literature through the perspectives of the students most affected by this epidemic to give specific details about how schools fail to meet the needs of persistently disciplined students. Implications suggest the need for preservice and in-service teacher education to:

- develop teachers' understandings of care to include the provision of help in the daily classroom context;
- promote teachers' ownership of the responsibility to foster a positive peer culture especially during classroom transitions;
- inculcate the need to listen to, and value, students and to presume their innocence and good will; and
- create viable, positive alternatives to office referrals and other exclusionary discipline strategies with a particular focus on restorative justice principals and techniques.

Future studies should assess the impacts of such interventions for persistently disciplined students, with a particular focus on how improving school-based practices can close the discipline gap.

### ***NOTES***

1. Critical race theory draws our attention to systemic inequities that are reproduced due to institutionalized biases based on the color of one's skin (Crenshaw, 1995). It is the color of one's skin that determines advantage or disadvantage, not one's ethnic background (Monroe, 2013). The discipline gap is one such systemic inequity in which students with darker skin get punished disproportionately more frequently. To recognize the issue of race, rather than ethnic background, as central to this problem, I use the term "White" to refer to students who phenotypically appear to be of European

descent; I use the term “Black” to refer to students who phenotypically appear to be of African descent; and I use the phrase “students of color” to refer to students who appear to be descendants of indigenous peoples or countries belonging to the Global South.

2. The term “persistently disciplined” describes the students that compose the small group of those who receive the majority of exclusionary discipline acts (Skiba et al., 1997).
3. All names have been changed and identifying characteristics masked in order to protect participant anonymity.

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