The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School

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Abstract

No recent reform has had so profound an effect as no-excuses schools in increasing the achievement of low-income black and Hispanic students. In the past decade, no-excuses schools—whose practices include extended instructional time, data-driven instruction, ongoing professional development, and a highly structured disciplinary system—have emerged as one of the most influential urban school-reform models. Yet almost no research has been conducted on the everyday experiences of students and teachers inside these schools. Drawing from 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork inside one no-excuses school and interviews with 92 school administrators, teachers, and students, I argue that even in a school promoting social mobility, teachers still reinforce class-based skills and behaviors. Because of these schools' emphasis on order as a prerequisite to raising test scores, teachers stress behaviors that undermine success for middle-class children. As a consequence, these schools develop worker-learners—children who monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority—rather than lifelong learners. I discuss the implications of these findings for market-based educational reform, inequality, and research on noncognitive skills.

Keywords

discipline, behavior, hidden curriculum, urban school reform, noncognitive skills, charter schools, no excuses

One rainy January afternoon, I sat with Alexis, a bright, outspoken eighth grader at the urban charter school where I was conducting fieldwork.[1] She was at school with a few dozen other students who had accumulated too many behavioral infractions to participate in that day's snow tubing trip. A student at Dream Academy since the fifth grade, she reflected on her experiences:

> I didn't like it 'cause I was so young when I came here and it was strict. It still is strict and I didn't like that. They were just so picky. Like they were asking me so much . . . 'cause they want to get us to college but that's not how they be acting in college. In college they are—they're not strict. In college, you can do whatever you want so this is a college preparatory school so we should be able to do whatever we want but we're not. So, technically it's not

a college preparatory school because you're not prepping us for college—you're disciplining us, like you don't have detention in college. You don't have to wear a uniform in college. You don't have to walk in straight lines in college.

Alexis echoed her classmates' complaints about the school's constant surveillance of their behaviors, but she also recognized that the school was trying to help her achieve upward mobility. Thus she could say, "Our school is so terrible," and then add, "I mean, it's a good school." Yet,

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following the school's logic, she questioned whether the school's behavioral practices would prepare her for college, identifying a contradiction between the school's prescriptive practices and the flexibility of the college environment. When I asked her how she knows what college is like, she explained, "I got to do my research"; plus, she was forced to talk to her stepsisters, who were college students.

In this article, I explore how a new model of no-excuses urban charter schools is preparing its students for college; specifically, I focus on the skills and behaviors that students learn through no-excuses disciplinary practices. Based on 18 months of fieldwork in one no-excuses school and interviews with 92 students, teachers, and administrators, I argue that students, in many cases, are taught to monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority rather than take initiative, assert themselves, and interact with ease with their teachers.

This study has important implications for theory and practice. First, in my literature review, I clarify the role of cultural skills in social reproduction. Second, I update Bowles and Gintis (1976) for the postindustrial economy to reveal a more complex process of socialization. Instead of producing workers to sustain industrial capitalism, I argue that schools produce worker-learners to close the achievement gap. Third, I identify a new, unintended, consequence of market-oriented educational reform, demonstrating how a focus on accountability and choice produces a no-excuses approach to achievement that discounts potential costs to students' well-being.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND URBAN SCHOOL REFORM

Over the second half of the twentieth century, a wide array of reform efforts were introduced to improve urban education in the United States. Among the most notable were the desegregation of schools under *Brown v. Board of Education*, federal Title I funds for high-poverty schools, and a number of research-based reform models, such as James Comer's School Development Program, Ronald Edmonds's Effective Schools movement, and Robert Slavin's Success for All. Yet, there is little evidence that these reforms have produced their intended effects (Miron and St. John 2003). Urban schools continue to face problems

of high absenteeism, poor-quality instruction, school safety concerns, and low academic achievement.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 established a market-oriented approach to solving educational problems. Accountability discourse has cyclically emerged throughout U.S. education reform, but recent educational trends toward privatization and marketization have strengthened this focus (Mehta 2013). Increasingly, schools are implementing market reforms, like performance incentives, high-stakes testing, school choice, teacher evaluations, and the closing and restructuring of failing schools. Yet, despite these reform efforts, racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps remain sizeable (Jacob and Ludwig 2008), and charter schools, on average, produce no better student achievement outcomes than do traditional public schools (Carnoy et al. 2006). Moreover, there is evidence that accountability policies have had a number of unintended consequences that harm low-income minority students, including a concentration on teacher-directed instruction and low-level skills, an attenuated curriculum, marginalization and exclusion of low-performing students, and teaching to bubble students on the cusp of proficiency (Booher-Jennings 2005; Darling-Hammond 2007; Lipman 2003).

Against this backdrop, a group of urban charter schools seems to be defying the odds. In the past decade, no-excuses schools have emerged as a possible solution to closing the achievement gap. There is no official list of no-excuses schools, but the label *no excuses* has been used to describe a group of high-performing urban charter schools, including KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Achievement First, Uncommon Schools, Mastery, Democracy Prep, and the Harlem Children's Zone Promise Academies. These schools share several distinguishing features, such as an extended school day and school year, frequent student testing to inform instruction, an intensive process of teacher selection and development, and a highly structured disciplinary system (Dobbie and Fryer 2011b; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003; Whitman 2008). Evaluations that compare students selected and not selected through these schools' lottery admissions processes have found that no-excuses schools significantly increase the academic achievement of low-income minority students and, in some cases, have closed the achievement gap in math (Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2009;

Angrist, Pathak, and Walters 2011; Dobbie and Fryer 2011a, 2011b). These evaluations, however, do not typically distinguish between the different components of the no-excuses model, not all of which may be beneficial for student success.[2]

In particular, educators are concerned that the behavioral system in no-excuses schools may undermine students' identities, self-confidence, and ability to make decisions (Ellison 2012; Goodman 2013; Lack 2009). Often described as militaristic, no-excuses schools set clear and precise expectations for student behavior, dictating how students dress, enter a classroom, walk up the stairs, show attention in class, organize a binder, and pass in papers (Goodman 2013; Lake et al. 2012; Whitman 2008). Using a "broken-windows" logic (Wilson and Kelling 1982) adopted from policing, teachers "sweat the small stuff," punishing a head on a desk or a wrong-colored sock, in contrast to most urban schools that "pick their battles" (Whitman 2008:21).[3] No-excuses teachers rely on an extensive system of rewards and consequences; for example, students receive merits or scholar dollars for showing positive behaviors and demerits, detentions, and in-school suspension for not following expectations (Goodman 2013; Lake et al. 2012). No-excuses schools also emphasize schoolwide consistency in setting and enforcing behavioral expectations (Lake et al. 2012).

In spite of these concerns, little research has been conducted on the everyday experiences of students and teachers inside these schools (for exceptions, see Carr 2013; Seider 2012). Drawing from intensive fieldwork inside one no-excuses school, I am one of the first to examine the unintended consequences of no-excuses schools' disciplinary practices. Through this analysis, I also reveal an additional unintended consequence of accountability policies.

CULTURAL SKILLS AND INEQUALITY

Families transmit economic, human, and social capital to their children as well as a "tool kit" of cultural skills and habits (Swidler 1986). The past two decades have seen a growing recognition of the importance of cultural skills but less clarity on what skills are important, for whom, and in what contexts. In considering the consequences of how new urban schools are socializing students,

we must first specify how cultural skills relate to inequality. Part of the difficulty of this task is piecing together research across a number of disciplines on noncognitive skills, social and behavioral skills, and cultural capital (for reviews, see Bowles and Gintis 2002; Farkas 2003).

Bowles and Gintis (1976) were among the first to argue for the importance of noncognitive skills in social stratification. Their correspondence principle contends that schools, in reflecting workplace structures, teach working-class children obedience, deference, and punctuality to socialize them into working-class jobs yet teach middle-class students creativity, independence, and assertiveness to prepare them for the requirements of managerial positions. Studies have found that teachers' pedagogical and social control strategies vary by their students' social class backgrounds; teachers emphasize rule compliance and rote behavior with low-income minority students, but they emphasize expression, independence, and negotiation with students from more privileged classes (Anyon 1980; Keddie 1971; Wilcox 1982). For the sake of clarity, I label these working-class skills that emphasize conformity as *behavioral norms* and categorize these middle-class skills of self-assertion as *interactional skills*. Critical scholars argue that this differential teaching of behavioral norms and interactional skills—also known as the hidden curriculum—is one of the primary ways schools contribute to social class reproduction.

Recent research on cultural capital, redefined as a broad set of skills that helps certain social classes meet institutions' evaluative standards (Lareau and Weininger 2003), finds support for these assertions. Lareau (2003) observes that middle-class parents teach their children to be assertive, take initiative, and negotiate with authority, whereas working-class parents teach their children to hold back their opinions and defer to authority (see also Kohn 1969). As a result, middle-class children are better able than working-class children to customize interactions to their benefit, for example, by gaining additional assistance from teachers (Calarco 2011, 2014; Streib 2011) or by getting a doctor to attend to their concerns (Lareau 2003). "In a historical moment when the dominant society privileges active, informed, assertive clients of health and educational services," Lareau (2002:794) argues, "the strategies employed by children and parents are not equally effective across classes." For

Lareau, these interactional skills are symbolic; they are evaluated favorably in a particular time and place.

Research on noncognitive skills, in contrast, conceptualizes these skills as human capital (Farkas 1996). Moreover, this work focuses primarily on the value of behavioral norms rather than interactional skills; studies have found that attention, organization, effort, punctuality, and self-control, for example, are positively associated with students' grades, test scores, and earnings (Duckworth and Seligman 2005; Farkas 1996; Heckman and Rubinstein 2001; Jennings and DiPrete 2010; Rosenbaum 2001). Besides influencing teacher evaluations, behavioral norms can also increase learning (Farkas 1996; Jennings and DiPrete 2010). Whereas Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that behavioral norms socialize working-class children into productive workers, this research suggests that behavioral norms may also help students become more productive learners. In addition to producing docile workers, schools may also produce successful students, complicating the process of social reproduction.

Yet, in a postindustrial, global economy, interactional skills are increasingly important. The workplace has bifurcated into high-skill/high-wage and low-skill/low-wage jobs, and steady working-class jobs have been largely outsourced or mechanized (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2011). Behavioral norms might help students get through high school, but the types of skills needed for success in higher levels of learning and work become evident when students enter college. One of the most significant problems in higher education is the low rate of college completion among low-income, minority, and first-generation college students (Provasnik and Planty 2008). In addition to facing academic and financial obstacles, working-class students also confront difficulties in adapting to the college student role (Collier and Morgan 2008; Karp and Bork 2014). Even community colleges are much less structured than high schools, expecting students to independently manage their work, approach their professors during office hours, and assert their needs (Karp and Bork 2014).

Finally, interactional skills are critical to active citizenship. The ability to express one's opinions, advocate a position, and collaborate with others is foundational to participation in a democratic society (Gould 2011). Schools have long been viewed as critical to sustaining democratic society by producing thinking citizens. Although sociologists of education concentrate on individual mobility, Bowles and Gintis (1976) view school socialization efforts as consequential for the reproduction of class consciousness and the social relations of production. To incite social change, critical scholars argue that students must develop the skills to recognize and resist existing power structures (Giroux 1983; Willis 1977). The skills to foster academic achievement thus may be distinct from those required to enact social change.

School Site and Fieldwork

I began my study of no-excuses schools with a guiding research question: How do students experience and interpret these schools' highly structured disciplinary practices? In December 2011, I received permission to conduct an extended research study at Dream Academy, a no-excuses school in a medium-sized northeastern city. At the time of my research, Dream Academy was one of only four charter schools in the city, one of which had been placed on probation for poor academic performance. Opened in 2007, the Dream Academy middle school serves 250 students in grades 5 through 8, all selected by a random lottery process in accordance with the state's charter school laws. The school's student demographics mirror those of the city in which it is located: 84 percent of students receive free or reduced school lunch; roughly two thirds are black and one third are Hispanic. Like many other former manufacturing centers, the city faces problems of crime, concentrated poverty, and poor-quality schools—fewer than half of students graduate from the city's public high schools. In contrast, Dream Academy has been recognized by the state for significantly improving students' standardized test scores. In 2012 to 2013, the school had 250 students on its waiting list.

Dream Academy describes itself as a no-excuses school and adheres closely to no-excuses practices. For example, the school extends the school day and year, administers practice standardized tests five times a year, requires teachers to meet weekly with supervisors for feedback, and promotes college attendance as a goal for all its students. Teachers sweat the small stuff, using rewards and consequences to motivate behavior. For good behavior, students earn privileges, including seats, shirts, field trips, and immunity from group punishments. They also suffer

consequences for infractions, like loss of behavioral points, detention, and bench—a form of in-school suspension in which students are identified by their yellow shirts. The school staff is predominantly young and white; the majority of teachers are under 30 and several are Teach for America alumni. Mr. Bradley, the school principal, was 34; Ms. Williams, who transitioned from instructional dean to principal halfway through my observations, was 29.[4]

I began my visits to Dream Academy in March 2012, following around one eighth-grade class. For the 2012 to 2013 school year, I became a regular presence in the school, shadowing one fifth-grade and one eighth-grade class almost every school day, typically for four to five hours. Not even five feet tall, I looked not much older than the students, but as an Asian American, dressed professionally, and typing field notes on an iPad, I was an outsider to the students, who at first assumed I was planning to be a teacher there next year.[5] To help distinguish myself from the teachers, I came to an agreement with the school not to discipline students if I observed minor misbehaviors but to intervene only if children were at risk of harm. In time, the students recognized that I was not an authority figure but someone "writing a book" about the school. For example, at lunch, a student would start to censor herself because I was there, and another would jump in, "It's OK, she doesn't do anything." I remember being surprised when a student accused me of switching sides when I told her not to talk in the hallway.

My role remained primarily as an observer, but over time, I participated more, eating lunch with students, assisting them in class, tutoring them after school, accompanying them on school trips, and joining with teachers to take them to basketball games and movies. To better understand the teachers' perspectives, I also regularly observed teachers' one-on-one meetings with supervisors and weekly staff meetings. In addition, from August to December 2013, I conducted observations at Dream Academy's high school and the local community college where students took dual-enrollment courses. Finally, I solicited interviews from all students in the one fifth-grade and two eighth-grade classes I observed as well as one seventh-grade class that I did not observe. In total, I interviewed 58 students: 37 eighth graders, 12 fifth graders, and 9 seventh graders. I interviewed 38 girls and 20 boys; 42 were black, 14 Hispanic, and 2 Asian. Interviews usually took place during lunch in a private room, either individually or in groups of two to three, and lasted approximately 30 minutes. I also interviewed 34 teachers and staff, for one to two hours each; only two teachers were not interviewed. Interviews followed a semistructured format, and all except two were audio-recorded and transcribed.

To analyze the field notes and interview transcriptions, I first used an inductive approach (Charmaz 2011), generating hundreds of codes with the assistance of a qualitative analysis program. As I developed my analytic focus, I grouped these codes into broader categories, such as "choice," "consistency," "discipline," and "teacher development." For this article, I focus on categories related to students' experiences and understandings of the school's disciplinary system (e.g., discipline: "unnecessary," "unfair," "treated like kids," "not related to learning") as well as teachers' disciplinary strategies (e.g., teacher strategy: "act your age," "because I'm the teacher," "clear expectations," "giving choices"). In a separate paper, I discuss teachers' justifications of the disciplinary system and their conflicts in implementing it. Because of this article's focus on social class, I do not concentrate on racial and gender differences in students' experiences of discipline.[6] In other work, I address the surprising absence of race from teachers' discourse, given students' constant attention to race in peer exchanges as well as their intermittent accusations of their teachers as racist.

COPYING SUCCESS

Charter schools are public schools that are given greater leeway over their practices in exchange for greater accountability to their goals. These schools must meet the conditions put forth in their charter, or contract, which include benchmarks for student success. Since the passage of NCLB in 2001, all public schools are now held accountable for student test performance, but charter schools can be immediately closed if their charters, which typically run for three to five years, are not renewed by the local or state regulatory agency. This was the case at City Charter School, where Mr. Taylor, Dream Academy's executive director, first served as principal. On the first day of new-teacher orientation, Mr. Taylor, a genial black man in his early 40s, told the history of Dream

Academy, beginning with the story of City Charter School, one of three charter schools in the city that had closed in the past two years. Directing the two dozen or so teachers' attention to the overhead projector, he gestured, "It looked like this."

To the tune of "Welcome to the Jungle," the YouTube clip showed mostly black high school students pushing each other in the hallway, dealing drugs, and breaking windows. This was not City Charter School, he clarified, but the opening scene of *Lean on Me*, a 1980s movie about a failing inner-city school. "When I was principal of City Charter School, that kind of chaos reigned in my building under my leadership," Mr. Taylor explained. "We had regular fights. We had students who tried to burn down the school, students who brought weapons, teachers who would quit in the middle of the school year, teachers who would work for a month, even teachers who worked for half a day." Halfway into his first year as a principal, Mr. Taylor tried to quit twice but had his resignation rescinded. His troubles were not new. In 11 years, City Charter School had cycled through 13 principals.

For Mr. Taylor, this harrowing experience showed him firsthand the dismal state of urban education. It was a difficult year, all the more distressing because he knew his students were not learning; it was "educational malpractice." Having worked for more than a decade in education, he had imagined himself prepared, but he soon learned that college practices, where students take responsibility for their own learning, did not translate to an urban context. Sitting at his desk one day, he remembered visiting a successful urban school that used a no-excuses approach. Sending two of his staff to the school, he told them to take careful notes because "whatever they're doing, we're doing it." Within a year, his school transformed. He estimated that 80 percent of the changes his school made that pivotal year were cultural rather than academic—for example, having teachers escort students in straight lines through the hallway, greeting students at the door when they entered a classroom, and raising two fingers for silence. These cultural changes, however, translated into measurable, academic success: double-digit test score increases on the state test in every subject, every grade level.

"An important, I think, failure on my part . . . and on the part of many public schools is the failure to understand that the adult has to assert," Mr. Taylor explained. "If the adults want a certain outcome, the adults have to put in a whole series of structures that will lead to that particular outcome." From this experience, Mr. Taylor learned that urban schools need to be highly prescriptive in setting and enforcing behavioral norms to ensure achievement. Mr. Taylor told me how he learned not to conceptualize what might work for students but to copy what has actually worked. Needing to establish order and raise test scores, he implemented a school model that emphasized behavioral control.

Mr. Taylor was not alone in concluding that what works in urban education are rigid structures and hierarchical relations. Mr. Bradley, a white financial consultant who turned to education to do more meaningful work, had arrived at a strikingly similar conclusion. During his first year as a Teach for America teacher in the South Bronx, he "got worked pretty hard" by his students. Like Mr. Taylor, he lamented the fact that the school was a "really, really bad institution of learning." Similarly, he identified a turning point in his year. Desperate for a solution, he observed three teachers at his school who seemed to be actually teaching students; two had military backgrounds and one was a new Teach for America recruit. By copying their techniques, he learned to set "very, very precise" expectations for student behavior. Like in the military, he learned that schools had to break down students' bad habits and then build new ones. Although researchers argue that progressive methods may also effectively promote student achievement in urban schools (Nichols-Barrer and Haimson 2013), Mr. Bradley had never seen these methods work.

PRODUCING WORKER-LEARNERS

School leaders copied the no-excuses model because it had worked to raise academic achievement for urban students. Schools do more than develop academic knowledge and skills, however; they also transmit habits and skills that shape students for their future roles in society. I argue that, in many cases, the meticulous practices adopted by Dream Academy to ensure academic achievement have the paradoxical effect of producing worker-learners—students who monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority—rather than lifelong learners.[7] Although students resist school practices, drawing on their own cultural and social resources to shape their

identities (Willis 1977), schools play an influential and important role in forming particular types of students and selves (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

Not Trusted to Make Decisions

"If you don't put your name on your homework, you get a detention," one eighth grader complained. "If you are one minute late, you get a detention. If you breathe really hard, you get a detention. When we get too loud, they get mad." The myriad school rules that school leaders believe are necessary to ensure student achievement leave students with little room to make their own decisions or their own mistakes. On any given afternoon, the cafeteria is filled with students in detention who have violated one of the school's meticulous rules: refusing to lift a head off a desk, talking in the hallway, leaving a homework problem blank, chewing gum, getting out of their seat without permission, and the catch-all, disrespecting a teacher. Detention adds an hour of silence to students' already full schedules, which can include sports, after-school clubs, family and work responsibilities, and several hours of homework.

In particular, seventh and eighth graders complained that school rules make them feel treated like elementary school children. The hallway rules, which stipulate that students must walk with their classes in straight, silent, and forward-facing lines, are among the most detested. To students, these rules signaled that the school did not trust them to make the most basic choices, even as they, as one eighth grader put it, entrusted the school with their education. "I think we would be mature enough to be able to talk to our friends in the hallways," one eighth-grade girl argued. "Like we need to get maturity, too, as we grow older." Her friend concurred: "Our school's real small, so it's like, I want to know where they think we're gonna go—like we're gonna hop down the hallway. Like the classes are really right there."

Inside the classroom, teachers also set precise expectations for student behavior instead of trusting them to monitor themselves. In a typical exchange, Ms. Anderson, a white former Teach for America corps member, and one of the school's most effective teachers, narrated student behaviors one morning to her fifth-grade class:

"I need everyone to sit correctly in their seats," Ms. Anderson began as she entered the classroom. "Luis. Luis." He sat with his legs turned to the side. "David, I need you to focus and work." Turning to her co-teacher, Ms. Anderson thought aloud, "I'm getting a little nervous that during team time today, we're going to have to have a silent team time." A few minutes later, she changed her strategy from a threat to positive reinforcement. "Let's forget about who's talking and focus on our math drill like so many of our teammates are doing," she encouraged. "A lot of people are doing the right thing." Giving out a verbal warning, and then a detention, Ms. Anderson announced, "Brandon, that's a one, I'm sorry, a two." Gesturing to a girl slouched over, she continued, "Shaniya, sit up. Shaniya, sit up." Catching two students talking, she gave out two more warnings. "Micah, that's a one, stop. Grace, that's a one, stop." (field note)

Like Ms. Anderson demonstrated, teachers were expected to constantly scan their classrooms to ensure students were directing their full attention to the instruction. These frequent reminders helped some students stay focused, but for others, not having a sense of autonomy increased feelings of stress and anxiety (see Ryan and Connell 1989; Ryan and Deci 2000), which can have negative consequences for students' academic performance, motivation, and engagement (Goodenow 1993; Ross and Broh 2000).

During one lunch period, I sat with three eighth-grade girls who often found themselves in detention. The girls had little positive to say about the school, complaining that it cared only about its reputation and wanted students to look good so the school looked good. I tried to push them, arguing that their teachers worked hard to get students to learn. One girl conceded that she did learn a lot here, more than she might learn somewhere else. "But it's not worth the stress," she insisted. Pointing to her hair, she explained that it started falling out only after she came to this school. Her friends agreed. The school had recommended they see a therapist; one girl had already been tested and referred to the Big Brother, Big Sister program. Constantly being punished for their behaviors, these girls developed a negative attitude toward the school and their teachers, and their feelings of stress overshadowed any positive learning experiences.

Experiences of stress and anxiety were not limited to students who were frequently punished. Some of the best-behaved students also felt pressure to watch themselves, because they tried so diligently to be good students. Sydney, a quiet and studious eighth grader, experienced feelings of anxiety. She told me she was reluctant even three years later to reflect back on her first year at the school. "It was like I was freaking out the first year," she explained. "I just could not take the pressure in the beginning. I was so scared." She recounted how she would receive homework detentions after spending so much effort completing her assignments because she had forgotten to put her name on the header or accidentally skipped a problem. The school's homework rules of "neat, complete, on-time, and best effort," while meant to teach students skills like diligence, organization, and timeliness, led students like Sydney to feel overwhelmed by the pressures to perform. According to Ms. Scott, the biracial student affairs dean, kids who put pressure on themselves to be perfect do not always do well at the school. "[When] a teacher says, 'Tuck your shirt in,'" she explained, "it like devastates them or crushes them." Sydney said she eventually eased up on herself after her mother explained that everyone at school makes mistakes once in awhile.

By not trusting students to make their own choices, Dream Academy reinforces in working-class kids a "sense of constraint" rather than a "sense of entitlement" (Lareau 2003). Instead of learning to watch themselves, middle-class children learn that they are to be trusted, listened to, and taken seriously by those in positions of authority (Khan 2011; Lareau 2003). Researchers argue that this sense of entitlement helps middle-class students interact with authorities and navigate institutions, furthering their advantages over their working-class counterparts (Calarco 2011; Khan 2011; Lareau 2003).

Opinions Not Needed

On its website, Dream Academy explains its no-excuses philosophy as a commitment by the school to take responsibility for ensuring that all its students are prepared for college and refusing to make race, poverty, or previous school experiences an excuse for academic failure. Making no excuses means ensuring that learning takes place, regardless of whatever obstacles students

encounter. What this means, practically, is that school leaders and teachers must produce results: The immediate goal is student proficiency on the statewide assessment every spring; the more distant goal, never far from teachers' lips or hallway bulletin boards, is college. Yet for most, if not all, of the teachers who devote long hours to the school, their goals are broader than academic accomplishment. During one staff meeting, teachers gathered around large sheets of paper to list the reasons why they do what they do: "to change the future for our children," "to close the achievement gap," "to break the cycle of stereotypes," and "it's the most important civil rights issue of our generation."

Ms. Williams felt this keenly. Raised in the city, Ms. Williams described her own high school experience as "oppressive" and her teachers' expectations lowered for her because she was black. After working for Teach for America in an urban school—"the hardest thing I've ever done in my life"—she moved to Dream Academy to make an impact in her own community. Mr. Bradley viewed his primary goal as raising students' test scores, but Ms. Williams did not put achievement first when she thought about her goals. Rather, she wanted to develop students' voices so they could effect social change. "I think that it's important because the kids have to understand that their voice has power, right?" she reflected. "And ultimately when they understand that their voice has power and the ability to communicate and they can get things done, they will start to have bigger impacts and make bigger changes within—not just this school, but within the community." She made an explicit effort during morning assembly to teach students ways to more effectively communicate with teachers, for example, by using "I feel" statements. Although some students used these new tools to communicate, they learned different lessons from the school's disciplinary structures.

During the school day, students received few opportunities to voice their opinions. To maximize instructional time and keep students focused on their learning, the school stipulates silence during multiple points of the day, including homeroom, transitions between classes, the introductory Do Now exercise, and independent practice. Teaching is largely didactic, with student input solicited primarily in the form of short answers to questions. More advanced teachers integrated interactive activities into their lessons, but new

teachers—particularly, those struggling with student behavior—were encouraged to establish order before experimenting with more innovative teaching strategies. School leaders instructed teachers to have students work silently and independently when their behavioral expectations were not being met, because group work is more difficult to monitor. Order was seen as a prerequisite to effective teaching rather than a consequence of effective teaching. During their weekly professional development meetings, Ms. Anderson offered advice to a new teacher who was having difficulty getting her students to follow her directions. "You're pushing to do higher-level, advanced teacher things," she told her. "You have to crawl before you can walk."

Especially in the beginning of the year, when teachers were working to establish their authority, students could spend class after class mostly in silence. This led one eighth-grade girl to complain, "We're silent all the time. Silent even in clubs, silent in class, silent. Come out of the building, silent." Even when able to talk, Amir, a diligent fifth grader, learned he should talk only at specific times:

> Self-control is when you're able to talk, when you know to talk at the appropriate time. And it's important because you can get a really bad consequence and I do, I really show self-control because I don't talk at all in class and I talk when the teacher tells me when I have to talk or answer a question. And otherwise I don't talk in class.

In most schools, teachers instruct students to raise their hands, but they communicate that rules are more flexible through their actions (Calarco 2011; Mehan 1980). In contrast, students at Dream Academy were taught always to respond to rules in the same way. One homeroom teacher even came up with a contest in which students would be awarded a pizza party if they did not call out in class for an entire day. Students were given a clipboard to keep track of how many times they called out—the first day, they had 47 callouts by lunch. Researchers, however, argue that part of classroom competence is the ability to interpret different contexts and activate skills and behaviors at appropriate times (Mehan 1980). Instead of always raising their hands, middle-class students learn when to raise their hands, when to call out,

and when to approach their teachers for help based on their interpretation of the situation (Calarco 2011; Streib 2011).

Not all students at Dream Academy were silenced. The most popular students were a group of outspoken black girls. Aniya, the leader of this group, stood out in both stature and volume from the rest of her eighth-grade class. Unlike most students I spoke with, Aniya felt she could express herself in school: "Yeah, I have to. There's no, like, I can't, I got to. I'm going to. Like, you can't say I can't express myself. I'm going to express myself." Her tendency to speak her mind got her in frequent entanglements with her teachers, yet her assertiveness won her admiration from teachers and students alike. Still, Aniya viewed her assertiveness as a bad thing. "But, I mean, one reason I'm a leader is 'cause I was bad, you know, the people look up to people that's always bad," she told me. Her best friend, Keke, likewise learned that giving her opinion was the wrong thing to do in school. By the time Keke reached eighth grade, she found herself speaking out less frequently and avoiding detentions. At the end of the year, she won the most-improved-student award. She reflected on her change in behavior over her middle school years:

> I used to fight back or whatever because I don't . . . like to be told what to do. I want to be the leader. But sometimes I need to let the teacher be the leader 'cause they're the ones here before me and they're the ones taught what they are now teaching me. I don't like the way some people talk to me. . . . I like getting the last word so I will always fight back and give my opinion when it's really not needed.

Keke understood her talking back as a way to assert herself and show leadership, yet over time, she learned to step back and let her teachers step forward. Yet skills like assertiveness and initiative are increasingly valued in college (Collier and Morgan 2008; Karp and Bork 2014) and the twenty-first century workplace (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2011).

Angie, a former student at Dream Academy, provided students with a glimpse of the interactional skills students would need for college when she came back to speak about her experience as a first-year student at one of the nation's elite boarding schools. During the school's morning

assembly, she encouraged students to be open-minded because "they teach a bit differently at her school." She explained that the students at her school "teach each other" by sitting around a table and having discussions. "You learn different skills and you learn them differently, and they may think differently than you," she told the students. Although it took her some time to adjust, she liked having the opportunity to use her voice. "I love the method, I grabbed on to it. It makes you realize that your opinion matters." In contrast, at Dream Academy, she had not learned that her opinions matter.

Deferring to Authority

At school, students develop expectations not only for how they should behave but also for how they should relate to authority. At elite boarding schools, students learn to be at ease with adults, which helps prepare them for leadership positions in which they will need to interact with different types of people (Khan 2011). At Dream Academy, students learn different lessons. Given few opportunities to negotiate or participate in rule making, students often find themselves at odds—rather than at ease—with their teachers.

When rules are ubiquitous, students become keenly aware of the rules and the processes by which they are enforced. Immediately after teachers issued a consequence, it was not unusual to hear a student protest: "What did I do?" or "It wasn't me!" At times, these reactions were aimed to provoke, but in many situations, students felt unfairly accused. Teachers made mistakes because they so frequently disciplined students. They called out the wrong student; failed to differentiate between talking, turning, or helping out a classmate; and seldom saw the whole story. Yet, in nearly all the classroom interactions I observed, teachers instructed students to defer to their authority even when students disagreed with the teacher's judgment.

The following field note provides an example of a classroom interaction in which a teacher dismissed students' protests:

> "This is not a playroom," Ms. Evans, a new black teacher at the school, scolded her 8th-grade class. "You won't want to be joining anyone in a 5th-grade classroom." She delivered a warning to a student who was

out of his seat and talking. When he tried to explain that he had just come in, she sent him out of the classroom. The girl seated in front of him spoke up to defend him, but Ms. Evans refused to listen. Her attention was now turned on a third student who had also drawn her last straw. "Bye, I'll see you tomorrow," Ms. Evans turned to her. "I'm in charge here. This is not your show, it's the Ms. Evans show when you come in here. End of conversation."

At the start of class, Ms. Evans had made an effort to treat the students as adults, inviting their input on how she could get them to follow the school's expectations. She resorted to taking an authoritarian role, however, when students continued to have side conversations. When students resist, the school directs teachers to more tightly implement the school's behavioral systems rather than to experiment with alternative forms of classroom management.

By dismissing students' concerns, however, teachers often turned a minor misbehavior into a confrontation. Students argued, elevating their consequence from a warning to a detention for disrespecting the teacher. Shariece, an eighth grader, described how students received more severe punishments for protesting:

> Say, for instance, you get in trouble and you got the freedom of speech to explain it, what you did, what you didn't do. When it came to Ms. Ellis, she didn't care, like, she'll go based on what she thinks she saw or heard and you wasn't able to explain what you actually did or said. And when you did try to explain it, she had this three-strike system: It was warning, points, and then detention, then call home. And if you tried to explain to her what you did, then she'll just put you on next strike, saying, "I know what I saw" or "I know what I heard." She assumed a lot of things.

In invoking the First Amendment, Shariece argued that her teachers' refusal to listen to her defense denied her the basic freedoms of speech guaranteed to the accused. Another eighth-grade student felt that teachers never wanted to hear the student's side, or "they'll listen to us and they still want to give us a detention." By not allowing students the opportunity to defend themselves,

teachers did not promote the development of students' civic skills, including the ability to question authority and express opinions.

The school leadership recognized the seriousness of this problem and tried to ameliorate it by instituting the "*w* sign," standing for "when can we talk." Students could raise three fingers in a *w* sign when they wanted to talk to a teacher about a disciplinary matter; the teacher was supposed to write a pass for the student to come back later in the day for a conversation. During my time at the school, however, the *w* sign did not provide an effective solution: Teachers ignored the sign, did not have free time to meet with students, or accused students of misusing the *w* sign. By trying to find a quick fix to this problem, the school failed to address the underlying power differentials between students and teachers or to give students a larger say in setting and enforcing rules.

By demanding that students submit to their authority, teachers tried to enforce schoolwide behavioral norms, but in doing so, they failed to develop in students other important interactional skills. Moreover, by increasing the distance between teachers and students, the school inadvertently made it more difficult for teachers to establish relationships with students, a key factor in classroom management (Marzano 2003). Sydney explained how it was not easy for students to relate to their teachers because they were so strict in class:

> 'Cause some teachers, in class, you're like, you're so strict, I don't want to talk to you. . . . I like fun people. So like in class, like the teachers always seem like the bad person and the criminal in our mind. It's not that easy to relate to the teachers or wanna talk to them at school. Like some teachers are really cool after school but in class [the students are] like, you're a psycho and I don't want to be near you after school so please do not come to my house, do not tell me to call you, do not do anything.

As Sydney observed, students formed different opinions about their teachers inside and outside of class. Teachers also spoke about how they were able to develop relationships with students outside of school, such as in after-school tutoring and on field trips.

The exceptions reveal the norm. Ms. Wallace, a white teacher in her third year at the school, was by far the seventh- and eighth-grade students' favorite teacher. When I told her this, she asked me if the kids had explained why they liked her. Students pointed to her energy, fun lessons, and positive attitude, but they most often emphasized how she listened to them and understood them. I asked her what she had done to foster this. She thought a minute, and then remembered how even in her first year of teaching, she would squat down, talk to students when they misbehaved, and pull them outside of the classroom. "I'd talk to them like I would talk to my friend, not like a kid," she explained. "I'd tell them, I'm not talking to you like you're a kid. Am I disrespecting you? Tell me if I'm disrespecting you because I want to know." She tried "really, really hard" not to talk down to students because they were younger and less experienced but, rather, to give them explanations and provide them with space to voice their opinions. Although Ms. Wallace also sweated the small stuff, she did not need to monitor students as frequently as other teachers, because students more willingly followed her directions. When students entered her classroom, they walked in silently, sat down at their desks, and began their work with a single direction from her.

Ms. Wallace exemplified the no-excuses' ideal of "warm/strict" (Lemov 2010)—she set high expectations for student behavior and learning yet also exuded care and concern. She described herself as aggressive, a common personality trait among the school's most successful teachers, yet she also showed empathy for her students. A troublemaker herself as a child, she believed her own experiences helped her understand why students act out and what they might need from their teachers. "What would I have needed to really be invested?" she asked herself. "What would I have needed to feel cared about? What would I have needed to feel respected and have respect for myself and to want to have this interest and motivation?" These questions guided Ms. Wallace in her approach to her students. In addition to speaking with students individually about their behavior, Ms. Wallace also engaged students by corresponding with them through personal writing journals, organizing impromptu class forums, and sharing her own experiences and struggles. Ms. Wallace thus provides an example of how to implement a no-excuses model while still giving students an ability to speak up and be heard. Yet Ms. Wallace's very exceptionalism demonstrates

how difficult it is for the majority of teachers to successfully implement the no-excuses disciplinary model. By default, most teachers become disciplinarians in students' eyes.

IMPLICATIONS: PREPARING FOR COLLEGE

"Sweat, blood, and tears." This phrase echoed through Dream Academy's first high school graduation, first voiced by the class valedictorian and subsequently picked up by several other speakers. The class salutatorian spoke about how she had learned resilience at school, "how to make your struggles work." The school principal told the audience that students and teachers had spent 1,200 days working toward this moment. Getting to this point—a 100 percent college acceptance rate—is certainly an accomplishment. Yet, while students learned to persist and get through, they may not have developed the interactional skills to set them on the path to lifelong learning.

Ms. Indrigo, the high school's white college counselor, worried that students would not be able to handle the sudden freedoms presented to them in college, because they had not been given the opportunity to make their own choices in high school. "You know, I think partially it's their fault because they haven't learned to manage their freedoms but it's partially our fault because we don't give them any, so when we give them some, they go crazy," she reflected. "And so my biggest fear is that these kids are going to go to college and go crazy and like party all the time and not go to class." The high school juniors and seniors had already gotten a taste of college through a dual-enrollment arrangement at the local community college, where they took classes for both high school and college credit. While some students were doing well in the college courses, others were failing, not having developed the independence to take responsibility for their own work.

During one dual-enrollment math class I observed, the professor asked students if they had any questions on the homework. Only one student asked her to do a question on the board. "Did we discuss our friend BOB?" the professor asked the class. "Back of Book. You are now in college, we expect you to check answers in the back of the book yourself before class. Do a few problems and check." Unlike their high school teachers, she explained, she did not collect and check homework;

college professors assigned odd-numbered questions because those answers were in the back of the book. "We discussed how college students can have enough freedom to take responsibility for their own learning, right?" she reminded the students. "Yes," they echoed back. "If it's a game—not doing homework because I'm not collecting—it may not be the best game to play," she warned.

Students may still be able to develop interactional skills in college, even if they fail to practice them beforehand. In fact, one of the invited speakers at the high school graduation was a graduate from a no-excuses school. At age 23, Becky was a college graduate and a first-year Teach for America teacher—at a no-excuses school. Growing up poor, she told the students how by ninth grade, she felt burnt out but persisted by reminding herself that in four short years, she would be attending college. When she arrived at college, she sought all the help she could get. "I lived in my college professor's office," she told the students. Her experience demonstrates the importance of seeking out help in college but also shows that her no-excuses school experience did not prevent her from learning to take initiative. Although Becky was successful, the first study of college outcomes for KIPP schools found that only a third of KIPP students completed college within six years, a rate four times higher than the college completion rates of low-income students but well below the 75 percent goal KIPP set for itself, a rate on par with high-income students (KIPP Foundation 2011).

School leaders recognized that they are not teaching students the skills they will need in college, but they did not see a way to give students greater freedoms without compromising school order and achievement. Although the high school gave students more choices than the middle school, it continued to rely on the same system of setting constant, consequential, and consistent behavioral expectations, particularly when school culture seemed to be deteriorating. When I asked Ms. Stewart, the black high school principal, how to discipline students without deadening their spirits, she responded, "That phrase—'deaden the spirits'—really, it really hit home to me, because the kids are like, we're in jail; this is prison. They hated it, hated it, hated it." Her vision for the school—a yet unrealized dream—echoed the warm/strict approach embodied by Ms. Wallace:

> I have a vision for rigor; I have a vision for warmth—I want it to be a warm place. I

have a vision for high conduct and I have a vision—and this is what doesn't really always mesh well with no excuses—but I have a vision for the gradual release of structure. I want the kids to leave here at the end of 12th grade as young adults, and not as adolescents. And so I'm trying desperately to find the way to maintain our structure, and at the same time enable them to leave as young adults. . . . And that's the problem that I'm having, I don't know how to do that. Did you expect me to say I have so many "I don't knows"?

Ms. Stewart's desire to prepare her students to leave school as adults, without conceding school structures, points directly to the dilemma that urban educators face in ensuring academic success while also teaching students to be independent. She recognized the problem but lacked a solution. Students, on the other hand, wanted the school to at least give them a chance. One eighth-grade boy argued that the school did not know whether students would misbehave if they loosened structures, because they had never tried it. He observed, "That's like saying, 'oh, fish is nasty,' but if you never ate it before, you don't know."

DISCUSSION

At present, no-excuses charter schools are one of the most celebrated urban school-reform models because of their success in significantly narrowing the achievement gap for low-income minority students (Dobbie and Fryer 2011a, 2011b). Based on 18 months of fieldwork and interviews with 92 students, teachers, and administrators, I argued that these schools' highly prescriptive disciplinary practices, while arguably contributing to their academic success, have unintended consequences for students. As students learn to monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority, they are not encouraged to develop the proactive skills needed to navigate the more flexible expectations of college and the workplace (Collier and Morgan 2008; Karp and Bork 2014). No-excuses schools thus promote academic achievement while reinforcing inequality in cultural skills. These findings suggest that what works for academic achievement may not coincide with what works for students' success in later life stages.

This study updates Bowles and Gintis (1976) for a postindustrial society by demonstrating how a group of successful urban schools produces worker-learners rather than workers. Bowles and Gintis, in their influential study, argue that schools differentially socialize students for the workforce, teaching working-class students conformity, discipline, and punctuality but teaching middle-class students creativity, independence, and assertiveness. Nearly 40 years later, my findings echo theirs to a remarkable degree but also reveal important differences. Bowles and Gintis argue that teachers prepare working-class students for working-class jobs because of their low expectations for their students' futures. I found, however, that teachers' high expectations for their students' futures motivated them to emphasize behavioral control. In emphasizing working-class behavioral norms, schools aim to create an orderly environment to raise student test scores and promote social mobility. The teaching of working-class skills, therefore, is seen not as a pathway to the factory but as a gateway to college and the middle class. Yet, paradoxically, researchers have found that middle-class students successfully navigate middle-class institutions precisely because they do not conform to working-class behavioral norms; rather, middle-class students take initiative, assert their needs, and negotiate with authority (Calarco 2011; Lareau 2003).

I also revealed an unintended consequence of market-oriented educational policies for low-income minority students. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* initiated a wave of market-oriented reforms that expanded school choice and accountability. In this report, the National Commission underscored the need for schools to develop problem-solving and critical-thinking skills to prepare students for an "information age" and a "learning society" (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). Thirty years later, President Obama's educational initiative, Race to the Top, reflects these same means and ends, encouraging the expansion of charter schools and accountability to promote higher-level skills, like creativity, entrepreneurship, and problem solving. I found, however, that the expansion of choice and accountability has led to the copying of a school model that produces test results yet limits the development of students' higher-level skills. Moreover, I found that this model has unintended negative consequences for some students' experiences in school, including increased stress, lower motivation, and strained relationships with teachers.

In differentiating between behavioral norms and interactional skills, I also add clarity to research on cultural skills. Recent research on noncognitive skills focuses primarily on the benefits of behavioral norms and neglects the importance of interactional skills in higher levels of schooling and work. Yet, on the other side, Lareau (2003) and others privilege interactional skills, overlooking how a "sense of constraint" may be reasonable and even beneficial in certain contexts. Future research should more carefully consider how behavioral norms and interactional skills are advantageous, for whom, and in what contexts. As an example, research on noncognitive skills should distinguish between the effects of leadership, creativity, and eagerness to learn from those of obedience, effort, and punctuality. Likewise, research on parenting might consider other child-rearing logics in addition to concerted cultivation and natural growth (Lareau 2003). Studies of upwardly mobile immigrant children, for example, describe parents who exert high levels of control to keep their children on track yet also foster strong ties to their families' cultural roots (Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008). These parents may provide their children with a sense of constraint and a sense of identity.

Can urban schools encourage assertiveness, initiative, and ease while also ensuring order and achievement? Is there an alternative to a no-excuses disciplinary model that still raises students' test scores? While no-excuses disciplinary practices may be *effective* in producing results, it is less clear that they are *necessary* to produce results. Although no-excuses school leaders largely agree that they cannot raise student achievement without implementing strict behavioral systems (Lake et al. 2012), the research evidence is more mixed.[8] Some level of discipline is a necessary prerequisite for learning, but it is unclear what the optimal level is. Discipline that is perceived as unfair has negative effects on student achievement (Arum 2005). Furthermore, urban schools that use progressive disciplinary and instructional methods also show promising academic results (Nichols-Barner and Haimson 2013). Expeditionary Learning schools, for example, use a project-based learning approach that encourages students to become "crew not passengers," and Montessori schools facilitate student-directed learning in a highly structured environment. These alternative models suggest urban schools might establish order in ways that

do not impinge so heavily on students' self-expression. More research is needed, however, to compare the effectiveness of these different disciplinary models for students' academic achievement and noncognitive skill development. Moreover, it would be illuminating to analyze the specific mechanisms by which disciplinary systems influence achievement. Disciplinary systems affect a number of mechanisms that differentially affect academic achievement, including instructional time, relationships between students and teachers, student and teacher engagement, and student and teacher retention.

For educators in no-excuses schools, I suggest a few alternatives. First, schools can experiment with more-flexible disciplinary practices. At Dream Academy, there was a reluctance to change rules for fear the system would implode. Yet it was not clear whether every rule was necessary for order. Allowing students more choice in their uniform, for example, or making homework rules less rigid might actually foster learning by decreasing students' resistance and perceptions of the unfairness of school rules. No-excuses schools could also put more effort into releasing structures as students progress through school, preparing them for the transition to college. Second, no-excuses schools could dedicate more time to training teachers to be warm/strict. Research on authoritative parenting supports the warm/strict model as an effective parenting style (Baumrind 1966), yet teachers often used overly controlling authoritarian teaching styles. Third, teachers and administrators could structure more opportunities for students to develop initiative, assertiveness, and reasoning skills through student-led activities, chants, debates, group projects, clubs, and advisories as well as through more unstructured time where students and teachers can freely interact. The KIPP schools, recognizing that their students faced difficulties in college, introduced character education into their curriculum to develop students' noncognitive skills. While these efforts point in the right direction, my study suggests that what students learn from school rules and social interactions may be more influential than what they learn from targeted lessons on character. Finally, I believe that schools are in a distinct position to learn from students and their families. If teachers and administrators committed as much effort to learning about students' families and neighborhoods as they dedicate to raising test scores or managing behavior, they might discover

new ways of instruction and management to get kids to and through college, and perhaps more importantly—as educators like Ms. Williams dream—prepare them to "be the change."

RESEARCH ETHICS

My research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Princeton University Institutional Review Board. All human subjects gave their informed consent prior to their participation in the research and adequate steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

1. All names in this study, including the school name, have been changed to protect the confidentiality of my subjects.
2. In a study of 35 charter schools in New York City, Dobbie and Fryer (2011b) argue that five factors— data-driven instruction, extended instructional time, high-dosage tutoring, intensive professional development, and high behavioral and academic expectations— account for nearly half the variance in charter school effectiveness. Dobbie and Fryer also find that the no-excuses behavioral approach (e.g., schoolwide behavioral rules, desk and backpack rules, and tracking the teacher) does not have an independent influence on academic achievement once they account for these five factors. This suggests that other elements of the no-excuses model may be more important for raising student achievement than the school's "sweating-the-small-stuff" approach.
3. The "broken-windows" theory argues that disorder increases crime rates. For example, if criminals see a broken window on a factory, they will be more likely to vandalize the building. If you fix the window, they will leave the building alone.
4. This arrangement gave Ms. Williams time to learn the ropes from Mr. Bradley, who was leaving to serve as the principal of Dream Academy's elementary school the following year. Ms. Williams did not make significant changes in the school's behavioral practices until the next school year.
5. I use quotation marks in this article when I typed what people said on my iPad or laptop computer as they were speaking.
6. I did observe variations by gender and race in students' resistance toward school rules, yet students shared similar experiences of feeling distrusted, silenced, and distanced from authority. One reason for the commonality of student experiences under the school's disciplinary system may be due to the school's emphasis on explicit expectations and consistent enforcement.
7. I thank an anonymous reviewer for proposing these terms.
8. See note 2.

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