

# Schools, Social Capital and Children of Color

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In Mr Young's class I'll get detention in a minute! In Mr Mica's you get a check [1] and you stay after class. If you get two checks you have to pick up trash, the third check is a referral. (Roy, seventh grade student)

## **Introduction**

This article examines the role that social networks and protective agents play in developing and accumulating social capital among children of color. The ethnographic study on which the article is based looks at the ways children write a narrative of resistance within contradictory cultural norms, which offer, on the one hand, a space for teachers to become protective agents who build students' capacity to decode cultural signals, to develop a strong racial and cultural identity, and to cope with stressful borders and institutional barriers. On the other hand, schools offer this very same space that can be used to reproduce and perpetuate inequities and injustices.

To explore this duality, I examine the social dynamics behind the discipline statistics provided by referrals issued to students when expelled from the classroom and sent to the counseling office. I first describe the social context that creates the educational environment where social capital is generated and/or denied. This dynamic usually starts with the application of detention as the initial step. If the offense is considered serious and merits the intervention of the school's administration, a referral is issued. In most cases referrals are also considered the last resort available to adults in schools to address an out-of-control behavioral situation. The intent of most referral practices is corrective, not preventive.

Second, I document the complexity of power, resistance and normalizing issues through the role that language, cultural discourses—expressed via standing up, and talking back, and reputation—and social networks play in the process. I look at these issues within the larger context of an institution that has reformed itself, and that shows many of the features characteristic of the new schools created throughout the USA over the last decade of the twentieth century.

This article is divided in three major parts: the theoretical framework, the methodology, and the report.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Social Capital*

*Social capital* in this article describes individual and group capacity to negotiate social borders and institutional barriers. This capacity is developed over time through social networks and the intervention of protective agents. It is capital in the sense that capacity accumulates and can be transported and exchanged in similar ways to economic capital. It is social to the extent that such accumulation can only exist and have currency value within the context of social networks (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

Social capital is different from human capital in that the latter refers to skills and knowledge an individual or group possesses and bring into the labor market (Smylie & Weaver Hart, 1999). Social capital is also different to cultural capital because the latter refers to cultural markers an individual or group ascribes to or is associated with. Such associations are mediated by class structures, which, in turn, frame the relationships that give form and content to capital accumulation—both social and cultural (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) attribute to schools a central function as social agents that reproduce ‘common schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action’ (p. 196). The authors use the term ‘habitus’ to describe all these transportable, durable, and systematic thoughts, perceptions, understandings, and predispositions embedded in an individual’s identifying characteristics. Teachers, Bourdieu and Passeron argue, are simultaneously the most highly finished output of the reproduction system and key agents for sustaining and nurturing such reproduction. Schools’ contradictory ethos of relative ‘autonomy and dependence on the structure of class relations’ (p. 194) makes them vital collective social agents to reproduce habitus, and very reluctant to change.

*Socialization* functions as the most central mechanism through which social capital is negotiated, grows and accumulates. Socialization occurs within the context of cultural norms, codes of power, and predispositions—beliefs and values. I use the notion of socialization as a process, not as an end, and as a space where groups and individuals negotiate their social positions. Such negotiations are based upon those groups’ and individual’s own social capital differential. This definition assumes that individuals utilize the resources their social networks might provide, particularly those involving relations of power. In other words, groups and individuals carry certain habits, understandings, skills and knowledge as markers of their social status, which in turn mediate their social position.

Racialized children and youth build social capital when they learn to negotiate their positioning within and across racialized groups, as well as with mainstream society. Such learning involves the development of an identity that nurtures itself, from knowing and embracing one’s own racial identity, understanding that of others, and being able to live and strive in the mainstream, dominant society.

In his discussion of socialization that carries social capital, Stanton-Salazar (1997) says:

[minority children and youth's socialization] must be understood not only in terms of effectively decoding mainstream institutional settings, but also in terms of the development of various abilities to participate effectively in multiple cultural worlds. Key among these is the ability to cope effectively with institutional and environmental forces that threaten to compromise their human development and their life chances. (p. 22)

Adults play a central role as facilitators of the socialization processes, such that, Stanton-Salazar asserts, youth and children see their life chances seriously increased or diminished, depending on the degree of support 'protective agents' (p. 25) provide.

*Protective agents* are those individuals who have some institutional authority (e.g. teachers, school leaders), and the potential to play counter-hegemonic roles. It is precisely this potential role, Stanton-Salazar argues, that can allow racialized children and youth to acquire social capital. As Katz (1999) asserts, 'The teacher-student relationship, like other social relationships, has the potential to contain social capital. In the context of school, the relationship is productive—that is, it has social capital—if it yields student learning and achievement' (p. 813). Katz argues that adults can provide access to learning and achievement, thus to social capital, only when teachers are capable of combining high expectations and care.

Stanton-Salazar indicates that coping plays a critical role in the process of social capital formation. He defines coping as 'problem-solving capacities, network orientations, and instrumental behaviors that are directed toward dealing with stressful borders and institutional barriers' (p. 26). In most cases, coping is understood as resiliency, which tends to place on children the core agency for developing the problem-solving capacities to succeed in school, leaving out the responsibility of institutions and protective agents [2].

Thus, it follows that for racialized youth and children, learning how their own and others' culture functions should enable them to cross back and forth across the different stressful borders, and engage institutional barriers more successfully. For Stanton-Salazar, this learning takes place within networks. From these networks youngsters build their chances for successful bicultural socialization. Social networks operate in and around commonalities such as friendship, language, race, culture, and country of origin (Chavez, 1990, 1992; Miller, 1996).

Social networks operate in schools as collective agents that help or hinder students in negotiating social status and identity. These social networks glue sets of friendship groups, and intersect with other social networks in rich and dynamic social hubs that serve as spaces for continuous and multiple socializing processes. These processes take physical form during classroom work, in the halls during passing periods, in the yards and cafeteria during lunch or physical education, as well as in the street and neighborhood after school.

### *Normalizing, Resistance, and Conflict*

From the moment a child enters school s/he is subjected to an intense socialization

experience—from dress codes, to norms regimenting life in the halls, laboratories, and classroom work. At the core of this dynamic lies a dichotomy of normalization and resistance. Normalization in this article means the institutional efforts aimed at imposing the hegemonic belief and value systems, aesthetics, style, and linguistic forms upon all members of the school community. Normalizing is the driving force of the adult–child relationship, molding the behavior of both actors—particularly that of the child—to conform to a culture of compliance (Foucault, 1977).

I use resistance as group and individual contestation against such efforts, in an attempt to open alternative spaces for the belief and value systems, aesthetics, style, and linguistic forms of such individuals and groups considered at the margins of the hegemonic regime (Giroux, 1986; Giroux & McLaren, 1986). It also means the unarticulated, spontaneous response children engage in against what they perceive as an objectifying, unjust and punitive culture that denies their becoming subjects. Of course, adults also resist the same forces for similar reasons, although their response varies from that of children.

By simultaneously denying the hegemony of what they associate to whiteness, and affirming their own cultural norms, children of color attempt to create cultural spaces that presumably will sustain them as authentic beings (Fine *et al.*, 1987). It is within this very context that social conflict takes center stage in the socialization process.

Indeed, the actual physical encounter of people triggers socialization. Other than the workplace or public areas, schools serve as the space where racialized youngsters converge; they enter into ongoing intense contact, often disputing space, resources, and attention, both within and across their own groups (Noguera, 1996). Allport (1954), one of the earliest authors on contact theory, noted that competition exacerbates tensions among groups, and that the actual and perceived status that groups and their individual members enjoy in society determined the degree and type of their conflicts.

The notion that conflict is ‘lodged naturally in relationships’ (Lederach, 1995, p. 17) and, therefore, deeply embedded in social interactions (Charmaz, 1983) has permeated current theory and practice regarding conflict in schools. It follows that, on the one hand, relationships are the most crucial factor shaping the context where communicating feelings and thoughts takes center stage; on the other hand, any conflict should be resolved through those same means—relationships and communication.

Thus, Lederach proposes that elimination and control of conflict are impossible given the social nature of conflict itself. Although Lederach builds this theory from his extensive experience with interracial and ethnic conflicts within nation states, I find his work appropriate to schools for several reasons. First, the author argues that the transformative effect of conflict can be seen in the change of communication patterns among the implicated parties, which, in turn, change relationships and social organizations. School buildings frame intense, potentially transformative, and complex communication dynamics that often transcend the school itself. Second, social conflict also transforms perceptions of both oneself and the other. ‘In every instance,’ Lederach says, ‘[social conflict] raises a question about self-identity and

esteem' (p. 18). In this sense, schools become settings where students and adults shape one another's social identity. Finally, Lederach proposes a model that takes into consideration the paradoxical nature of conflict as a source of transformation, by suggesting an approach that elicits cooperation, wholeness and process.

## **Methodology**

### *Action Ethnographic Research*

The methodology used in this study is grounded in the notion that inquiry leads to change, and vice versa. I provided external support to the site where this research took place, coaching the school's leadership to implement organizational and programmatic change. This dual role—external coach and researcher—enabled me to 'see' and, hence, understand better what the participants (teachers and leaders) could not. From this external position I was also able to interrupt the normality of daily experience by providing feedback on different pedagogical, instructional, and organizational issues. This double role was openly negotiated with the leadership team, and explained to the rest of the faculty. However, my coaching role dominated most of my interaction with the faculty, except when I conducted interviews, observed classroom practices, or requested specific data from either teachers or administrative personnel. And yet, the research and the coaching hats became one when I provided the leadership and faculty with key tabulated and organized data, or offered technologies for managing change, and made available literature on institutional change. Following such interventions, the process of searching for answers, formulating actions, and carrying these through their implementation certainly offered me rich and abundant data.

For instance, I provided data back to teachers and administrators in the form of statistical tables and interview transcripts to be used in professional development workshops. This job opened up a space for me to conduct research on an ongoing basis in this school. Thus, the production of knowledge became a collective and situated endeavor with a dual purpose of learning and changing.

Moreover, coaching mediated my constant crossing of class, gender, age and linguistic borders in my relation with adults and children. While researching, I constantly reminded myself of my position as an adult working for the school. I tried to understand children's utterances within the context of their own cultural norms and the specificity of the interviews, conversations, and general interactions. This meta-analytical awareness reduced the risks of misunderstanding the participants' context, and consequently producing the wrong conclusions. This disposition also provided me with the context to maintain a sense of humility. As Mishler (1986) states, '[T]erms take on specific and contextually grounded meanings within and through the discourse as it develops and is shaped by speakers' (p. 64).

The dual roles of coaching and researching presented, nevertheless, a very important challenge. My desire to register conversations and events in the most detailed way possible and to follow the implementation of plans was not always coherent with my role as external support. A key research concern was the extent of

my influence on outcomes, which led me to limit my interventions as much as possible. Hence, locating agency quite often posed some difficulties. Relying on Socratic methods to discuss the issues raised by the data, and therefore taking longer to arrive at conclusions and devise actions, took longer than desired at times. This fact, in a way, summarizes the type of dilemma action ethnography presented in this study.

### *Site*

The study took place at Huerta Middle, a sixth to eighth grade school with 500 students located in an upper middle-class neighborhood in San Francisco, California. According to the school district demographic data, the students' racial breakdown was as follows: 42% Latino, 26% African American, 12% White, 10% Other Non-White, and the rest Filipino and Chinese [3]. Due to the district's desegregation order, most students were bussed from the city's low-income neighborhoods.

### *Essential Question*

The essential question of this study was: in what ways does conflict between teachers and students mediate building social capital? I used this essential question to narrow the issues of teachers' and students' relationships in terms of social capital. I further developed a series of operational questions as a guide for focused classroom and meeting observations. This approach helped me to triangulate data generated by the different sources, which in turn allowed me to gain better understanding of the struggles of teachers and students about specific issues.

### *Data Collection*

The central unit of analysis was interpersonal conflict—which I analyzed as an event—across peer and authority lines. I observed and followed up events as they happened, particularly between child and adult, as well as between child and child. I documented such events in the classroom, the principal's office, the counseling office, the halls, the yard, the cafeteria, and physical education areas. I also documented as events the moments when adults talked about their individual and collective understandings of conflict and its ramifications, either individually or in small groups or whole faculty meetings.

I collected data by shadowing some teachers and students, and conducting in-depth interviews with them. I kept careful field notes documenting all events observed. I assisted the counseling office with discipline data, participated in teams, and attended department and whole school meetings. The school reform portfolio, achievement data, and data system analysis were all important pieces of complementary data as well. Equally important, demographic data, school documents, and interview transcripts made it possible to draw a rich contextual picture of the school community, its struggles and successes.

### *Participants*

(1) *Student focus group.* I selected a six-student focus group from the discipline data. I chose students who tended to be in trouble (as shown by number of incidents involved) or who claimed membership to these students' social networks. I then narrowed this group to include diversity of racial labels, cultures, genders, languages, and academic performance. I did not include white students in this group since they did not appear in relevant numbers on the discipline data. The six students selected were of the same cohort:

Roy: Chinese American, considered a high performing student;

Chardnyse: African American, considered a low performing student;

Latoya: African American, considered a low performing student;

Tico: Mexican American, considered an average performing student;

Ali: African American and Mexican, considered a low performing student;

Dominique: African American, considered a high performing student.

(2) *Teachers' focal group.* Using data generated by the student focus group, the statistics on discipline, and other evidence (such as classroom observation), I narrowed down the faculty to a focal group of six teachers, plus the principal (Mr Angel):

Mr W.: left the school during the second year of the study; thus, data from his interviews, classroom observations, and other sources are not utilized as much.

Ms Vela: during the second year she lowered the number of referrals, but remained at the school.

Mr Mica, Mr Young, Ms Candy, Mr Andres P.: maintained the same trend in their referrals, and although Mr Andres P. nurtured a positive relationship with students, his referrals remained high.

### **Findings**

In this section, I first describe the social context that creates the educational environment where social capital is generated. Second, I document the complexity of power, resistance and normalizing issues that frame teachers' and students' daily experience. Finally, I discuss some key suggestions and issues the study raises.

#### *1. Context for Social Capital Production*

*Referrals.* Referrals, suspensions and expulsions are the only discipline incidents for which schools keep some paper trail. Data show that the reason teachers issue the majority of referrals is primarily due to what they call 'defiance' and 'repeated disruption.' Moreover, African American children are disproportionately referred—relative to their numbers—to the counseling or administration office. Latino children follow, although not at the same disproportionate level of the former.

TABLE I. Huerta Middle School: comparative referrals issued to sixth and seventh graders during October–March 1997–98 and October–March 1998–99 school years by type of referral

Incidents	1997–98:		1998–99:		% Change
	number of referrals	%	number of referrals	%	
1. Defiance of authority	132	32.0	228	57	+ 25
2. Repetitive Disruption	105	26.0	79	20	– 6
3. Verbal abuse	71	17.2	17	4.5	– 12.7
4. Fighting	69	17.0	39	9	– 8
5. Unprepared for class	21	5.0	21	5	0
6. Vandalism	3	0.7	0	N/A	N/A
7. Theft	1	0.2	16	4	+ 3.8
8. Weapons	1	0.2	2	0.5	+ 0.3
9. Unspecified	7	1.7	0	N/A	N/A
Total	410		402		

Table I shows that more than half of all referrals were issued for defiance and repetitive disruption during 1997–98, and instead of decreasing, the rate jumped to three-quarters the next year. During the same time period, referrals for verbal abuse and fighting, although important, dropped considerably from one year to the next. Given that socialization practices exhibit wide cultural variation (see, for example, Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Ochs, 1982), the fact that children receive referrals mainly because of defiance and disruption suggests that cultural, racial, and linguistic issues might be at the core of such incidents.

Table II compares sixth and seventh grade students from the 1997–98 to 1998–99 school years. It shows that about one of every two African American children received at least one referral during the two years. This means that the sixth grade cohort in 1997–98 who then became seventh graders in 1998–99 experienced a discipline culture that made them very high targets for referrals. Following African Americans are Latino students, who went down from 21% in 1997–98 to 15% in 1998–99, a total reduction of 6 percentage points.

In order to complement this portrait, I also looked at data showing who issued the referrals (see Table III). Only two out of the nine teachers who issued about half of all referrals were people of color, while the rest were white. These two teachers of color issued about 13% of the referrals, while white teachers issued the rest—34%. I did not study the remaining 53% of the referrals because they were spread among 20 staff members (an average of less than three referrals per person), and were therefore statistically irrelevant for this study.

It is illustrative that nine teachers issued about half of all the referrals during the baseline year (1997–98), while for the comparative year (1998–99), only five teachers did the same (Mr Mica, Mr Young, Ms Candy, Mr Andres P.) However, Mr Mica alone issued 27% of all referrals during the comparative year, which skews the results and confounds the analysis. Yet, if this individual teacher's amount is reduced to an average of 31 referrals, still the concentration of referrals issued (about

TABLE II. Huerta Middle School: comparative referrals issued to sixth and seventh grade students, October–March 1997–98 and October–March 1998–99 by race/ethnicity

Race/ethnicity	No. of 6th–7th grade students referred: 1997–98	6th–7th grades total population 1997–98 by race/ethnicity	% of students referred relative to the ethnic group	No. of 6th–7th grade students referred: 1998–99	6th–7th grades total population 1998–99 by race/ethnicity	% of students referred relative to the ethnic group
African American	52	102	51	40	76	53
Latino	32	149	21	22	143	15
Other White	4	43	9	12	41	29
Other Non-White	3	27	11	3	20	0.6
Filipino	2	6	33	1	7	14
Chinese	1	13	8	0	0	0

\* Source: Counselors' action records.

TABLE III. Huerta Middle School Academy: comparative referrals issued to sixth and seventh graders, October–March 1997–98 and October–March 1998–99 by teacher

Teacher's last name	1997–98 total referrals issued	% of total referrals	1998–99: total referrals issued	% of total referrals
1. Mr Mica	37	11	110	27
2. Mr Yong	33	9	36	9
3. Mr W.	25	7	OUT	OUT
4. Mr Andres P.	24	3	16	4
5. Ms Vela	22	6	2	0.5
6. Ms Candy	20	5.5	28	7
7. Ms B.	18	5	OUT	OUT
8. Mr L.	16	4.5	OUT	OUT
9. Mr R.	16	4.5	OUT	OUT
Total	191	46.58	192	47.5

Source: Counselors' action records.

50%) for the 1998–99 comparative year remains higher (six teachers) than the baseline year (nine teachers).

The fact that some teachers decreased their number of referrals from one year to the next might mean that they either did not write as many referrals, the classroom conditions changed (e.g. improved classroom management, reduced class size, better alignment between teachers' skills and experience with the school's needs), or something else happened.

During the second year of this study, four disciplinarian teachers left, and yet their absence did not result in a reduction of referrals. In the year 1998–99, teachers known as more flexible arose as the new disciplinarians. Ms L., Ms P., Mr M., and Ms K. (see Table IV) issued numerous referrals, which allowed for the trend documented the year before to remain unchanged. This replacement process resembles Noguera's (1995) findings. As soon as students labeled troublemakers are expelled from school, the researcher found, others take their place.

The study at Huerta Middle School shows clearly how a small number of teachers issue most referrals affecting a widespread number of students. Referrals form a key piece of social capital formation in that the accumulated effect on children sent to the counseling office might have devastating results in terms of these children's social capital formation. In an attempt to provide a narrative of the human and social texture to add to the descriptive statistics listed above and detailed in Tables I–IV, I focused on the conflicts that led to detention as the first stage of the discipline system. Some incidents did not mean immediate disciplinary action (i.e. referrals, detention); nevertheless, they often were the prelude to harsher actions later.

Using the indicators so far described, I followed the details of classroom dynamics, since I believed these dynamics could lead me to understand the root causes of Huerta Middle's discipline culture. I turned my attention first to detention,

TABLE IV. Huerta Middle School Academy: comparative referrals issued to sixth and seventh graders, October–March 1998–99 by teacher

Teacher	1998–99: no of. referrals	% of total
Ms L.	31	8
Ms P.	26	6
Mr M.	13	3
Ms K.	13	3

and then to other interactions between teachers and students. In the following section I trace the micro-social dynamics as they took place through the detention process.

*Detention.* Detention takes place exclusively between the teacher and the student. Teachers assign detention to students much more frequently than they issue referrals. They can give detention to one student, a group of students, or the whole class. Although a district manual and the school's own specific policies regulating students' behavior exist, teachers apply this disciplinary action almost at their personal discretion. Detention usually means that a student remains in the classroom, or a specially designated place in the school, where he or she spends time either during lunch break or after school. The violation that led to the detention, whatever it was, did not in the teacher's view merit a referral. Lunch period is the most popular time for detention. Keeping students in a classroom (the teacher's or a 'detention center') during one of the most important socializing moments of the school day hits students where it hurts the most—not hanging out with their friends.

The public display of names on the board often escalates from an initial small problem between the teacher and a student to a full-scale confrontation. When a conflict escalates, it seems difficult to create the space for reflection and negotiation. Teachers wind up imposing their authority through detention time. Students appear to be quite fast to assign judgement value to this type of discipline, often reacting immediately in the belief that something unfair has taken place. Likewise, teachers might react to what they perceive as flagrant violations to both their sense of professional dignity and authority, as well as to the classroom's rules.

During a follow-up series of classroom observations, I witnessed many times Mr Mica's *sotto voce* style. He often said to the whole class, 'You're not listening.' But as children kept talking among themselves, or playing with the musical instruments, Mr Mica repeated the exact same words, in the exact same tone at least five times, 'You're not listening.' Then, with no hesitation he would write down several names on the blackboard. Predictably enough, every child whose name was on the board

would protest, and a shouting match would ensue in which students would ask for explanations as to why their names were on the board—some already with a check mark—and Mr Mica would defend his action. At the end of class, numerous names followed by three check marks would remain on the board.

Recalling a particularly difficult incident in Mr Mica's class, students from the focus group said:

*Roy:* He [Mr Mica] once sent us all out of class.

*Latoya:* I don't see why they [students] keep doing that. One time, I think two weeks ago, our whole class was being bad and stuff. I was sitting there, and he sent the whole class to the office. Mr Mica came cursing and yelling, like 'sit your asses down,' and then like Mr Angel had us to clean the whole yard, and we were like we didn't do anything.

*GA:* Why was that?

*Dominique:* Because we were being bad.

*GA:* What do you mean being bad?

*Dominique:* Throwing chairs and yelling, standing on the chairs and talking back, and jumping and bothering people.

*GA:* Bothering people?

*Roy:* 'Like [somebody] hitting your head with books and stuff.

*Chardnyse:* Do you remember why we had all that mess?

*Latoya:* Because he [Mr Mica] was giving everybody referrals.

*Chardnyse:* Everybody's name was on the board with three checks and stuff. Nobody would listen to him.

*Dominique:* Me and Chardnyse were sitting there and watching, and we were like—now what?

Students seem to perceive the writing of names on the board as a simple imposition of the teacher's will, which, in turn, provokes students' resistance. Once the student and teacher relationship is framed as confrontational, their relationship most likely will erode. When the teacher writes names on the board—as Mr Mica did—he is publicly letting students know they were caught violating classroom rules, and that they need to modify their behavior or a check mark next to their name will soon appear.

When teachers use check marks for every violation after the initial warning—as in the event retold by the focus group—discipline appears to the student as an arbitrary action. In situations where it is obvious to the student that the teacher has no other means of communicating mutual respect, or engaging them in meaningful work, discipline becomes a simple control technique that triggers the use of violent language among all participants. Students, at the same time, find in these moments an excuse to act out, to posture, and to exhibit their worst possible behavior in their intent to derail the teacher's efforts to teach, as well as to show off before their friends, and to do nothing else but to play at being 'bad.'

## *2. Power, Resistance, and Normalizing*

*Language.* The harsh treatment students from low-income households tend to encounter in schools—as opposed to the more polite and soft treatment afforded to middle-class and high-income students—presupposes that the only language they are able to understand is rough language. Additionally, this treatment presumes that their parents will do little or nothing corrective to protect their children from such treatment.

While these dynamics might instill subordination, they also trigger children's predisposition to resist. In other words, mistreatment fosters the perception among low-income children of color that teachers reject them and schools are hostile environments. Anyon (1997, p. 33) argues that in such social contexts, children learn to achieve failure. And yet, the author further explains, youngsters relate to the treatment they receive rather than to the teacher who subjected them to such treatment. In Anyon's study, all children 'said it did not matter whether you had a white or black teacher' (1997, p. 33).

Some teachers of color explain that when they use rough language and treatment to discipline children, it is, in reality, a strategy to teach children of color the social skills they need to survive in a hostile society. As a Latino teacher referring to his students pointed out, 'If they're not tough, they'll suffer.' And yet, what teachers hope students know and are able to do is deeply linked to relationships (Krovetz, 1999). Aiding children to establish rich and meaningful relations is at the heart of social capital formation and the transmission of habitus. I asked Mr Albert, an African American English teacher, about his seemingly rough treatment of black students. He explained that he needed to show them how the system operates, because:

[Y]ou cannot just do whatever you want. You need to know better how the system works, go around it and push for your own interests. If you just go against the system it will smash you. (Mr Albert. Teacher interview series)

He recognized that he was harsher with his students of color, because otherwise 'nobody will teach them those survival strategies.' He argued that his goal was not to teach them to assimilate, but to be able to 'know better how the system works.' His understanding of teachers as protective agents involved inculcating traditional masculine traits more so than developing the sophisticated skills necessary for negotiating social and cultural borders and institutional barriers.

The thin line that separates teaching students to survive versus thrive, socially, culturally and academically, in contexts of diametrical power inequities represents a hard pedagogical challenge. Working from their first-hand experience, teachers of color bear, nevertheless, the burden of knowing the intricacies of negotiating their social and cultural subject position with the mainstream culture. And whether they accept it or not, inevitably teachers of color come with an added symbolic value to their teaching role. Thus, any disciplinary action carries the potential of being very influential in developing or hindering social capital formation.

Students seem extremely aware of and very responsive to classroom discipline

dynamics, and appear to have a keen awareness of the form and content of adults' body and oral communication (Lipman, 1998). Yolanda (a girl from Latoya's friendship network) poignantly recollected an event that led to her twelfth referral:

When Ms Candy lady was always telling me to shut up and I was like, 'you don't tell me to shut up. You can tell me to be quiet but you can't tell me to shut up.' And she goes, 'Now, you're talking too much.' I'm like, 'Now, *you* shut up.' Then she's like 'well you've got to go down to the office.' I'm like, 'well, I don't care.' Then she says, 'well go down to the office' and then she gave me a referral. (Student focus group interviews)

*Having an attitude.*

I was in the computer laboratory requesting an account for my word processing. The technology teacher, a white, middle-aged woman, sitting next to me is explaining how to log on. Some noise comes from one end of the room and she raises her head. We see a tall, thin, reddish haired, light skinned African American boy touching a girl. The teacher stands up and shouts from across the room, 'That was uncalled for. Why did you touch that girl? She was not asking for it! You have no right to interrupt her work and touch her body.'

Surprised, but quickly the boy protests, 'I didn't touch her!'

'I saw you! You touched her bottom!' The teacher insists. The student then retorts, his voice cracking at the end of the sentence, 'I only touched her back, that's it.'

'She didn't ask you to touch her bottom.' The teacher charges again, and walks toward the student while explaining how inappropriate his behavior was. Then she asks the boy, 'Who is your teacher?'

From one of the chairs, across the room, comes a loud answer, 'I'm his teacher.' A tall young white male stands up, turns to the student and says: 'What are you doing standing up there, Jamal? Sit!' He raises his voice a couple of decibels, and orders Jamal, 'Go to your seat, finish your work! You have no business walking in this room! You know the rules!'

The technology teacher comes back to me, explaining how to log on. I can't listen to her. I am observing the student. He moves slowly, looking to the floor in the direction of his seat, muttering, 'Bitch! Bitch!' He places an open notebook before him and tries to type for a while.

Minutes later, the phone rings, the teacher answers; then she talks to the group of about six students who are using the computers.

'I just got a call from a teacher who needs to use the lab. You know that a teacher's class has first priority. No more than four of you can stay here, the rest, I'm sorry, must go back to your classes. Let me count. OK, two of you need to leave and go back to your class.' And in the same breath, she faces two kids, and talks to one at a time—'You [Jamal, the student who got in trouble earlier] must go. You brought it upon yourself. I cannot

have you here. The student gets up reluctantly and does not want to leave; he asks the teacher many times, 'Why me?' He stays in the room. The teacher lifts the phone and threatens Jamal with calling the office and having him removed from the room. A girl (the same he had touched) gets up and comes to the boy and, nicely, whispers to him, 'C'mon man, just leave. She'll get on your case. Don't listen to her. Leave.' She takes the boy by his waist and gently pushes him out. The boy gets out.

I went out following the kid and talked to him in the hall. I asked Jamal if this was the first time he had gotten in trouble in the lab; he said yes, but that it was easy to get in this kind of situation in there. He had just been publicly humiliated and went to his next class, obviously upset. (Journal Entry, 11/16/98)

This vignette illustrates the transformation of an apparently innocuous incident into a hugely serious one. The tone of every utterance and the accompanying gestures expose some of the social tensions running deep between adults and youngsters. One such tension is the making of being a 'bad kid.' Students appear to carefully take their cues from the way adults relate to them. As soon as youngsters confirm their insights, they skillfully act out their being 'bad,' and teachers often confirm such assumptions. Children's own social and cultural baggage compounds these socialization dynamics and contributes to the undoing of their social capital.

Being 'bad' is directly linked to reputation and to attitude. As Tico (from the focus group) puts it, 'When I see the teacher is not listening to me, or when I know adults are judging me, it really gets me and makes me do the opposite' (Focus group interviews). Perceptions certainly become a reality when attitudes and behaviors feed into expectations created through unreflective practices, which feed back into behaviors and attitudes in an endless downward spiral.

It would not have surprised me if Jamal was in trouble at some point during the day prior to or after the incident described above. He had frequently been in trouble with other teachers, and seemed to attract scrutinizing attention from them much more so than any other student. During a follow-up conversation with the computer teacher, she asserted that wherever Jamal was present there seemed to always be trouble. The day of the incident documented above, the computer teacher knew about him and was alert to his movements in the room, and her assumptions were confirmed the moment she saw him touching the girl. There was no escape for Jamal. His classroom teacher, sitting nearby, witnessed the situation and seemed to have expected nothing but trouble from Jamal. When he intervened, it was to underscore the computer teacher's actions. Jamal is left to his own limited coping devices, and the support from his peers. No mediating process was available to clarify their respective understandings of the event.

A few days prior to this incident, Jamal's English teacher had sent him to the principal's office, where I had seen him. He was visibly upset, and desperate. All he wanted to do was to go back to his room and confront the teacher. Mr Angel, the principal, helped him to calm down, control his anger and understand what had happened. According to Jamal's story, the teacher had slammed his backpack on the

floor, taking it away from him and, after placing it in a cabinet, promised to give it back at the end of the day. Jamal wanted to know the state of his possessions inside the backpack, and wondered when could he take out one of his notebooks?

The teacher later confirmed Jamal's version of the story, but added that this incident took place only after he, the teacher, had requested all students to put away 'their stuff.' He wanted the tables and desks clean and ready for the next activity. The teacher saw Jamal with his backpack and after asking him to put it away he intervened and did it himself. 'What gets me is his attitude,' the teacher stressed. The dialectics between students wearing certain 'attitude' and teachers who avail themselves to define it undoubtedly frames the socialization of students thus labeled. During our session on attitudes, the focus group had this to say:

*GA:* Why did you get in trouble?

*Chardnyse:* I only wanted to go to the bathroom and she [the teacher] said 'no.'

*Roy:* I think that's 'cause of the way you act, like attitude, in class. It's not the work you do. It's, if you talk or you're quiet and do your work. That's not because of the color or nothing, it's 'cause the way you act.

*Dominique:* That happened to somebody else. She—Ms L.—people play in the hall and stuff, you know. When you really need to go to the bathroom, she won't let you go, 'cause she thinks somebody else is out.

*GA:* Do you think kids tend to get different treatment?

*Dominique:* Yes, in Ms L. I do goofy stuff and she gave me an 'S' [Satisfactory citizenship] but Minno got a 'W' [Warning] for doing almost the same thing. I play around more than him.

In a session just with Dominique and Ali, I asked her how she defined Ali. Without hesitation, she answered, 'he's black.' I probed a little further and asked:

*GA:* Why? Part of his family is Mexican. He speaks fluent Spanish and English.

*Dominique:* Well, 'cause he's got an attitude.

*GA:* What do you mean?

*Dominique:* He acts black.

*GA:* Can you explain? How do you see this?

*Dominique:* I don't know. He just has an attitude, like when he talk, the way he talk, or dress. He just does.

I then turned to Ali. I wanted to know how he would describe himself. I wanted to know his thoughts about Dominique's characterization.

*GA:* What do you think? Do you have an attitude? How do you act black?

*Ali:* If I get in a fight, if I have to handle something, I do it. I'm tall. Last time I was almost jumped on. In Rooftop, a jerk—Dominique knows him—a black guy. I talked that kid straight up. 'You know what,' I said, 'I feel sorry for you, 'cause that shows to me that your Mom don't work, you

don't work, you don't ask her for things. The only thing you know is to steal; that's the way you were brought up.' He didn't do nothing [to me].

In other words, Ali was able to deal with and come up clean from a situation that could have cost him at least a beating. Dominique did not describe Ali on the basis of his skin pigmentation, but precisely in terms of his capacity to stand up by himself. In other words, he has developed some coping skills and enough cultural capital to help him negotiate a very stressful situation. For Dominique, what makes Ali black is his attitude, which to her is something he wears, exudes; it is impossible to describe with words. His mere presence makes the point. For Ali, having an attitude is using body size, being assertive, and courageous.

Ogbu's (1994) and Ogbu's and Bianchi's (1986) research has shown that African American youth tend to establish oppositional dynamics to the mainstream, dominant culture, achieved through what the authors have called cultural inversion; for instance, the association of academic achievement to 'acting white.' It appears that cultural inversion is a mechanical response to resist the force of cultural norms foreign to one's own group's.

The experience of the focus group shows that such mechanical responses might also entail the enactment of a subject position. Carving a reputation and carrying it over time is a strategy to let adults and peers alike know that one is an authentic subject of one's own life. Talking back is a key element of this authenticity, and perhaps the most important strategy children use to weight their unavoidable presence within social networks. Talking back is mostly expressed through rough utterances and/or body language (e.g. glaring looks, posturing, physical action). In the words of author bell hooks (1989), talking back is considered among some African American communities to be a child's attempt at being equal to adults, born out of a female's sense of talking. Talking back, she notes, is a way to express one's opinions, sculpt one's own voice, to speak when 'one was not spoken to [as a] courageous act' (p. 6). In other words, youngsters build spaces within the adult world by inserting their voice in an adult-dominated discourse.

Youngsters' sense of fairness delineates events and individual behavior in very clear opposites. They leave few events in a gray area, and expect and hope for fair treatment everywhere; as soon as they sense a violation of this expectation, the impulse to resist is inevitable. When I asked why students talk back, Chardnyse put it this way: "cause he [the teacher] made him [another student] mad.' Then Roy rationalized the event in these terms:

When we say something to Mr Mica, he's just like, 'Get out of my class, you got a referral' or something like that. He wouldn't give you a chance first, and then say it. (Focus group interviews)

Talking back appears also to help youngsters both to preserve their dignity and to gain status within their friendship group. When children talk back they are sending the message that they are someone to reckon with. Talking back represents an explicit demand for respect from peers, as well as from adults.

According to the focus group, attitude and reputation are closely linked, and one

seems to feed the other; once reputation is created it is not only difficult to shake it off, but it affects the group as a whole. The reputation associated with an individual marks every individual in the friendship group, regardless of who they might be. In cases where a particular child does not exhibit the reputation's descriptors (which-ever these might be), adults still see them. Roy poignantly describes this issue:

[punishment] has to do with background and stuff. When you get a referral, teachers keep thinking you're bad. [After a] referral they keep thinking you're bad; even though you think you changed, the teacher thinks you're bad, so they're like stricter to you. You know that you changed, but the teacher thinks you didn't. People think you're bad, and they're stricter and mean to you. (Focus group interview series)

*Cultural norms.* Talking about her classroom experience Ms Vela, a language arts teacher, compared her current students to last year's:

Now my classroom experience is like day and night compared to last year's. I practically don't have black students, only four. I don't know why [I have these four students] but I think it is because they're really behind. Otherwise all my kids are English language learners. If I'd have more black kids, my classroom would again be as noisy as last year's. (Teacher interview series)

She seems to imply that her classroom is better behaved, or at least appears less noisy, than last year's almost exclusively because now she only has a few African American children. This assertion reflects an assumed understanding of cultural difference, since she equates being noisy to misbehavior, which presumably is a black attribute. The teacher generalizes her particular experience to the group; as Ogbu (1994) asserts, people of color are not judged as individuals, but as a group. Additionally, Ms Vela—a Filipino American herself—appears to have already accepted and internalized the belief that black children are loud and thus unruly, which in turn translates into being a group unable to learn and unwilling to behave according to the teacher's cultural norms.

The discipline rules and regulations examined in this study frame a socializing experience that hinders children's social capital accumulation. Some teachers operate their classroom as a place where 'no-no' regulates every move. No hats, no food, no chewing gum, no talking, no standing up, no answering the intercom. Few activities are left to chance. When 'no' rules are used as a management strategy, students inevitably try to break each of them, as Latoya illustrates in this event:

*GA:* How was the situation with Ms Candy?

*Latoya:* 'Cause I was walking to the garbage can to spit out a cookie and she was like, 'you're chewing in class, you've got to scrape the floor under the desks for detention.'

*GA:* So, she caught you.

*Latoya:* She said that 'cause Lahonda got one too.

*GA:* Who?

*Latoya:* Lahonda, this girl who's always chewing something.

*Ali:* Oh, yea, she's always eating, like she needs to eat. She probably has an eating problem.

This event suggests that what bothers Latoya is that not only she had to scrape the floors, but that she was unjustly punished as a result of Lahonda's earlier detention. When first Lahonda and later Latoya were punished, Ms Candy probably was seeking consistency in applying her 'no' rule. Yet if she had spoken to Lahonda prior to punishing her, the teacher might have had a better understanding as to why this child was chewing in class; then the outcome for Latoya's infraction would probably have been less severe. Ms Candy apparently fell into the trap of acting upon a snippet of reality to impose her authority. Latoya was left with no recourse to explain herself to the adult authority. Furthermore, the student was not provided with the resources that would have allowed her to understand what was going on. Thus, Ms Candy embarked on an unfortunate one-way trip—when a rule is broken, the person responsible must pay.

Authority mediates adults' power. It is only through the use of the position Ms Candy enjoys—as the one in charge of the classroom—that she asserted her control upon Latoya. Justice was not done for Latoya. Worse, even, imposing authority hardly supports a congenial and respectful relationship between student and teacher. Classroom dynamics forged on 'no' rules appear instead to trigger uncooperative and socially demeaning classroom practices. Mr JR., a well-liked math teacher, puts this issue this way: 'You don't get defiance if you're open minded. Kids will defy you if they don't feel respected, when they feel that something is not fair' (Teacher interview series).

'Power stems from the students themselves. Teachers have authority, not power,' Mr Angel, the Huerta Middle School principal, insisted during a professional development meeting. He suggested that learning and teaching is determined more by students' willingness to engage with the classroom material than by imposing administrative authority. When teachers have earned students' trust, they will let teachers do their job. Hence, respect will ultimately mediate power relations between students and teachers. Without this power—the power that comes from mutual respect—teachers are left exclusively in charge of delivering formal knowledge, using their formal authority to mediate classroom dynamics.

Recalling a stressful encounter in the halls, the students from the focus group had this to say:

*Latoya:* Mr S. is a strict teacher. I was walking the hall and he asked me to go outside.

*Dominique:* Yeah, me too. I was walking the hall. I wasn't feeling good and I was leaving the school. I had my pass and everything, and he was like, 'where're you going little girl.' I was like, 'what?' 'Where're you going little girl.' And I go, 'I'm leaving school.' And he was like, 'Go back, you can't leave the school.'

*GA:* What made you react like that?

*Dominique:* 'Cause he called me 'little girl.' He knows my name. And he was like, 'You go back, you're trespassing.'

Dominique expected to be called by her name and be treated personally, given that, according to her, Mr S. knew her by name. Instead, Mr S., an African American teacher, treated her in generic terms—‘little girl.’ Dominique also reacted against the accusation of breaking the rules. The teacher seemed certain she had no pass and, therefore, should not be allowed in the halls. Dominique insisted he never asked for the pass. Relating to students from an administrative authoritarian position is further complicated as a cultural norm when beliefs about teaching and learning take on a linear and simplistic route. Thus, the idea that no one has the right to disrupt another’s learning process is a legitimate belief. It becomes problematic, however, when teachers translate this belief into one of two classroom practices. Some teachers advocate for drastic discipline measures using ‘no’ rules—which has been reviewed in the previous section—and others for principle-based discipline.

Management by elimination apparently allows teachers to establish control and focus on teaching; ‘You just get rid of the troublemakers,’ Mr Mica declared. Indeed, getting rid of students takes different forms, from expelling to systematically pushing youngsters out of the classroom via referrals, detentions, or simply sending them into the halls. Harsh discipline approaches tend to be a one-sided process. On behalf of safety in the classroom, some teachers advocate for tactics such as ejecting disruptive students out into the halls, sending them to the counseling office, or isolating them within the classroom itself. In the latter case, students are not allowed back into the classroom to continue their work until the teacher so decides. Mr Young was very clear on this point. He said:

It is the ghetto kids who destroy the classroom. They don’t have the right to do it [disrupt instruction]. Get rid of the ringleaders, and you’ll get a better school. (Mr Young, Teacher interview series)

The ‘ghetto kids’ is a not so subtle code to designate low-income background African American and Latino children. Mr Young appears to imply two things in his remarks: first, that defiance and disruption very likely, if not exclusively, come from these youngsters; second, that the cultural connotations of defiance and disruption are exclusively his own. Teachers who oppose a punitive approach to discipline, on the other hand, worry about the effects of such policy on children. Mr JR summarized this concern this way: ‘I hear more and more the argument that we need to take the “troublemakers” out of school. People write referrals as a way to get rid of these kids’ (Mr JR. Teacher interview series).

Noguera (1995) demonstrated that punitive actions (e.g. expulsions or suspensions) against the ringleaders, or any student for that matter, do not work over the long haul, and tend instead to be detrimental to the relationship between children and adults. As soon as the ‘troublemaker’ leaves an empty space, new troublemakers take it over, as a revolving door phenomenon. Noguera (1995) suggests that approaches to discipline as social control not only interrupt learning but contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of distrust and resistance.

In some cases, disciplinarian teachers might even exert peer pressure on those

colleagues they perceive as lenient. If a teacher becomes known as ‘too nice,’ some colleagues might see this as a sign of weak classroom management. As Ms Vela explains, ‘I don’t think giving kids referrals helps. Kids take them as revenge.’ She admitted to being pressured by some colleagues to be harder on children. As a result, Ms Vela ended up modifying her relationship with students, and by the closing of the year (1997–98) she had become harsher. ‘Last year I was paying attention more to the emotional and less to the academic,’ Ms Vela said, and continued, ‘I’d rather pay attention to the academic without forgetting that the emotional is crucial for kids. No affection, no academics. I gave to these kids love, care.’ And then she concludes, ‘Other teachers saw it as disorganization, chaos, because my kids would always be asking me things, and talking to each other. Other teachers who passed by my class would ask me to be more firm, and by that they meant giving more referrals’ (Ms Vela. Teacher interview series)

According to the focus group students, Ms Vela started the new school year (1998–99) tougher than the previous one. ‘Now she is more strict and stuff,’ Latoya admitted in an interview. Strict here means punitive, zero tolerance. For Latoya the message seemed clear—don’t mess with Ms Vela. However, as Table IV shows, by the end of the 1998–99 school year, Ms Vela fell out of the charts. She no longer issued referrals to her students, which might mean that since she had no African American and Latino students who were classified as fluent English proficient, the reasons for toughening classroom control disappeared. English language learners (ELL) students might have been closer to her cultural and racial assumptions and expectations in terms of discipline and classroom management.

Contrary to ‘no’ drastic rules, some teachers advocate for principle-based discipline. The faculty at Huerta Middle School, as a whole, for years pursued a comprehensive set of principles as a foundation of the school’s discipline policy. These were elevated to ‘standards’ and were collectively discussed, approved, and implemented. But as the data from Tables I–IV show, discipline problems continued as if punishment and not principles were the only approach teachers used to relate to their students.

It seems clear that the ‘no’ and the principle-based discipline exist in parallel lines. While most teachers formally agree with the latter approach, they still use the ‘no’ policy in their classrooms. Some who disagree publicly with the principled approach tend to use some of the ideas in their classroom practices. The uneven implementation of principle-based discipline raises the question of how consensual meanings and resistance are negotiated in practice. One wonders what issues take an underground, unspoken course that overrides, or seriously modifies, the formal, official process. For years the school has operated publicly as a principle-based school that has brought district-wide and even national recognition. Yet, at the level of the private, individual basis, principles tend to be interpreted in idiosyncratic ways. Reacting to the dissonant use of principles, Ms Terry discussed this very issue in a whole faculty meeting: ‘We need to standardize our standards,’ adding further, ‘[W]e need to talk so that we can build some common understandings as to what [these] standards mean to us, and how we apply them.’

## Conclusions

The adult and child social conflict paradigm at Huerta Middle School is characterized by the existence of a discipline culture that targets children of color—especially African American. As the data show, the dissonance between these children's modes of behavior and the adults' cultural norms sit at the center of social conflict. Teachers, on the one hand, interpret such behavior in ways that only lead to a clash with the students' own cultural positions. Students, on the other hand, tend to play with the expectations and power dynamics in ways that only exacerbate the negative impact on their capacity to build social capital.

Students know when a teacher has no idea how to handle the classroom, when a teacher appears as not caring. Once students know, they will usually behave accordingly, deploying all their skills to go around the teacher's behavior in a compliant mood. Students also clearly know when to actively or passively resist. In all of these cases, the result is that students fail to develop coping skills, overcome institutional barriers, or develop the sophisticated skills to negotiate stressful cultural borders.

Moreover, students tend to be framed by adults' preconceived racialized notions, defined as 'reputation.' In relatively closed social systems—like schools—the dynamics created by this framing more likely wind up perpetuating prevailing cultural and racial stereotypes. In this instance, teachers play the role of reproductive agents of the status quo by pushing students of color into subordinate roles and, thus, diminishing their life chances.

Teachers effectively play their protective agency role when they are flexible enough to understand the function that attitude, talking back, and reputation have in establishing status within social networks. This study suggests that many teachers of color believe that to survive as authentic cultural individuals, one must develop a toughness against mainstream culture. Yet, these same teachers tend to relate to children of color in a manner generally perceived as rough and abusive. The notion that adults of color know better than anybody else the specifics of the cultures of children of color, presents, as I have documented here, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these teachers can help children of color to build cultural decoding and coping skills that facilitate their development of a strong cultural and racial identity, all of which, in turn, translates into social capital. On the other hand, given their place as racial mirrors and their access to the child's deepest cultural, social, and emotional texture, teachers of color might imprint upon a child of color greater damage. As a result, children of color may fail to build social capital that allows them to engage the larger social and economic structures preventing them from increasing their life chances.

Conflict necessarily goes through the filters of race and cultural negotiation. Teachers address social conflict following their own biographies, which define their perceptions and beliefs about their agency as a reproductive force of the dominant status quo. For some, teaching compliant behavior equates to teaching students of color to normalize their behaviors and values according to the hegemonic discourse.

## Notes

- [1] Some teachers write a student's name on the board, which usually conveys a warning signal to a student violating the teacher's discipline norms. As Roy's story tells, by the time a third check mark is placed next to the student's name, a referral (a formal and official document) will be written. Then the student is sent to the counselor's office and from here to his or her home for the day. The student's parents must come to the counselor's office for a conference as precondition for the child to return to school.
- [2] The literature on resiliency touches on some of the issues raised by Katz. Authors such as Benard (1991), Kozol (1997) and Wang and Gordon (1994) provide frameworks for understanding how children are capable of developing resiliency, and the role schools—particularly that of teachers, parents and communities—can play in forging an environment that allows resiliency to prosper. Contrary to this tradition, Krovetz (1999) proposes the building of resiliency as part of an institutional culture.
- [3] This study kept the same racial labels from the official documentation, which mixes skin pigmentation, culture, and place of origin. 'Other Non-White' might not appear in official documents at state level since this category was created locally to name multiracial children.

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