"My Momma Wouldn't Give Me to the Count of Three": A Sociological Response to Philosophical Critiques of the No-Excuses Approach to Schooling

Amy J. Shelton

University of Tulsa

INTRODUCTION

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in the US in 2001 and the subsequent emphasis on standards-based accountability, the black-white achievement gap has been a leading topic of conversation among educators, policy makers, and philosophers of education. Reformers have searched for educational alternatives for underserved students, and the introduction of "no-excuses" charter schools has seemed to hold promise. There is no definitive list of "no-excuses" schools, but all of the schools commonly included under this label have the same distinctive features: 1) high academic expectations; 2) strict rules and discipline; 3) extended in-school time; and 4) targeted interventions for struggling students.[1] The Knowledge is Power Program, or KIPP, was the first no-excuses charter school, and in the past twenty years many urban charter networks, such as Uncommon Schools and Success Academy Charter Schools, have modeled themselves after the KIPP approach. No-excuses school leaders maintain that poverty, color, and previous achievement do *not* determine destiny. Any student who "works hard" can "get smart," a familiar slogan in the KIPP network. Students are taught to have a mindset that makes "no excuses" for poor performance, and many of these schools explicitly teach traits such as "grit" and "self-control" that have been positively correlated with academic achievement.[2] In addition, most no-excuses schools set the goal that *every* student will go to college.[3] These emphases are certainly not unique to no-excuses schools, but they are noteworthy in communities in which schools have historically had low expectations for student success.

While few would argue against the notion that schools should express faith in student potential, the approach these schools take to achieve their results has raised much controversy in recent years. Sigal Ben-Porath states that these schools depend upon a "highly rule-ordered and regulated environment," — one she describes as "totalizing."[4] Indeed, in a typical no-excuses school transitions from one room to another, one subject to another, or one part of a lesson to the next are tightly regulated. Often, students are expected to walk silently in the hallways, in a straight line, with their hands at their sides. Inside the classroom, whole class procedures are implemented to ensure every student is on task and focused. For instance, a procedure such as "cold call" — in which a teacher presents a problem or question to the entire class and then calls upon a student to answer — holds all students accountable to visually keep track of the teacher, to mentally engage with the problem or question at hand, and be prepared to give an answer and a justification for that answer.[5] And the behavioral expectations of these schools go beyond tight transitions and whole class procedures. They also include norms for speaking, dressing, and acting. It is common

for no-excuses schools to have strictly-enforced uniform policies, for example. In addition, at many of these schools, students are explicitly taught how to sit when in class, how to pay attention, how to talk, and how to interact with adults.[6] This "systematic behavior engineering" is of great concern to Ben-Porath, who considers a totalizing approach to be in conflict with the civic role of schools.[7] She notes that some school leaders have expressed the goal of removing strict controls once they have been internalized, but she is concerned that this seldom happens.

Meira Levinson offers similar critiques of the no-excuses approach. She contends that enforcing such strict expectations demonstrates great mistrust toward students and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: students lack opportunities to prove themselves trustworthy and to cultivate responsibility.[8] In contrast, it appears that successful middle- and upper-middle-class children are not expected to act in school in the way that low-income students are told they need to act in order to be successful in life. If you step inside a school serving middle- or upper-middle-class families, you will likely find it to be much less monitored and controlled.[9] Levinson is also concerned about some of the particular norms enforced in no-excuses schools. She agrees that "dominant" cultural capital is "structurally more empowering" and acknowledges the instrumental value of teaching students how to codeswitch, or to move between dominant and nondominant forms of speaking, dressing, and acting depending on the context.[10] However, she is concerned that KIPP and other no-excuses schools expect students to "assimilate" too completely to white, middle-class norms, and thus to deny their racial identity in order to participate in our democracy.[11]

Ultimately, Ben-Porath and Levinson are concerned about the civic implications of being schooled in such an adult-controlled environment. Levinson purports that schools should help students analyze power relations and construct empowering narratives for themselves. Schools should also give students opportunities to practice being citizens. Both Ben-Porath and Levinson suggest that one of the most civically empowering pedagogical practices is an open classroom climate in which students have the opportunity to talk about topics that matter to them, to present controversial ideas, and to consider and respond to the perspectives of others.[12] This will allow students to develop important civic virtues, such as (a) the ability to reflect on ideas, (b) the motivation to participate in a democracy, and (c) tolerance and respect for diverse perspectives.[13] In contrast, many no-excuses classrooms use what Levinson refers to as the "hub-and-spoke pattern," in which the teacher controls the conversation and speaks between each student turn.[14] Some no-excuses schools do have structured opportunities for student discussion and debate, such as in a weekly ethics class.[15] However, one hour a week in an otherwise adult-controlled environment may not be sufficiently empowering, particularly for students whom Levinson points out already lack a sense of efficacy.[1]

Ben-Porath's and Levinson's philosophical critiques echo the concerns of sociologists. Forty years ago, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis argued that the American school system is set up in such a way that it rewards compliance and submission, thus preparing students for low-skill, minimum-wage jobs, and effectively ensuring that the underclass remains the underclass.[17] Joanne Golann applies

this classic critique to no-excuses schools and claims that such schools socialize low-income and working-class children to become "worker-learners," who lack the assertiveness and initiative valued both in college and in the twenty-first century workplace.[18] Indeed, Scott Seider notes that at one particular no-excuses school that emphasizes civic engagement, a student's "citizenship score" is actually a measure of compliance with school rules.[19]

Hence, Ben-Porath and Levinson ask: *Have we focused on academic achievement at the expense of civic empowerment?* They are right to ask this question, and right to elevate civic empowerment as a primary goal in education. However, there is a layer of complexity to this issue that I believe has not yet been adequately addressed. It is not only educational reformers, funders, and school leaders who are responsible for the proliferation of these institutions. No-excuses schools have often been welcomed and embraced by the communities they serve and by the parents who enroll their children in these schools. In fact, sociological research suggests that parents and students may choose these schools for some of the very features that academics critique. Levinson herself writes: "High-quality social science research can unsettle philosophers' assumptions that their own reasons, values, and ways of being in the world are in some fundamental way universalizable to all 'reasonable' people."[20] In this article I offer insight into why the strict, no-excuses approach does not seem to concern African-American parents and students in the way it concerns academics. This is important for us to consider as we address the apparent conflict between the goal of civic empowerment and the value of culturally-responsive pedagogy. I conclude with questions we should ask as we move the dialogue forward.

No-Excuses Schools and Culturally-Responsive Teaching

Alexandra Boyd and her fellow researchers spent hundreds of hours in 12 KIPP schools and concluded that such schools are "not nearly as militaristic as critics, who may have never been inside them, fear."[21] In addition, my own research suggests that students at these schools are often given increased freedom as they advance into older grades, in preparation for the relative freedom of high school and college. Even if this were not the case for the majority of no-excuses schools, however, we must carefully consider whether the adult-directed nature of the no-excuses approach is in fact inherently disempowering. First, the extent to which authoritative teaching is good or bad with respect to civic empowerment seems to depend upon whether students perceive the expectations and consequences to be fair. Second, classrooms in which teachers do not demonstrate clear control may be disorienting for some students and may limit the effectiveness of a teacher's efforts to empower those students. Third, a strict, no-excuses approach is perceived by some students and parents to be more affirming of student potential — and thus more empowering — than a "soft" one. Let us consider each of these in turn.

First, the extent to which adult control is civically empowering or disempowering may in part depend upon perceptions of fairness. Constance Flanagan, whose work is cited by Levinson, found that student perceptions of teachers as fair, caring, and respectful affect not only academic motivation and achievement but also civic commitment:

> With respect to students' civic commitments, regardless of their ethnic background, youth were more committed to the kinds of public interest goals that sustain a democratic polity (serving their country, helping people in need, and working to improve race relations) to the extent that they felt their teachers were respectful of and fair to all students and insisted on students respecting one another.[22]

Flanagan found that fair and respectful teacher-student relationships also made students more likely to believe that America is a just society, an effect that was greater for students of color. Teachers serve as proxies for other political authorities in the socialization of children, and if the teacher-student relationship is marked by fairness and respect it contributes to a sense of efficacy. In such an environment, authoritative teaching may not be as detrimental as we think with respect to civic empowerment.

Second, classrooms in which teachers do not demonstrate clear control may be disorienting for some students and may therefore limit the effectiveness of a teacher's efforts to empower those students. Annette Lareau found that middle-class parents tend to use reasoning instead of directives when giving instructions to their children, while many low-income and working-class parents issue clear injunctions.[23] And Michele Foster, in her ethnography of a successful black teacher, notes that Ms. Morris "relies on her individual power — her personal reputation — not her institutional status to assert and maintain control over students."[24] Similarly, Lisa Delpit notes that, in black culture, a teacher has authority because she acts authoritatively, not because she is the teacher.[25] Delpit warns that a teacher who attempts to minimize the power differential between teacher and students may not be viewed as possessing authority in the classroom, and students will respond to her accordingly.

> [M]any African-American teachers are likely to give directives to a group of unruly students in a direct and explicit fashion … By contrast, many middle-class European-American teachers are likely to say something like, "Would you like to sit down now and finish your paper?," making use of an indirect command and downplaying the display of personal power. Partly because the first instance is likely to be more like the statements many African-American children hear at home, and partly because the second statement sounds to many of these youngsters like the words of someone who is fearful (and thus less deserving of respect), African-American children are more likely to obey the first explicit direct and ignore the second implied directive.[26]

As both Lareau and Delpit note, some African-American children may not feel compelled to follow a teacher's indirect instructions, and as a result will likely be labeled defiant. Similarly, my own research suggests that some low-income, black students may have little respect for teachers whom they perceive as less authoritative, such as those who give instructions and then give *time* for students to comply. One young man I interviewed said: "My *momma* wouldn't give me to the count of three." Students may not respect teachers who do not communicate authority in the way authority is demonstrated at home, and a school setting that is more "strict," and in which instructions are given directly, may be more familiar and less disorienting for some of the students served by no-excuses schools. On the other hand, confusion around the authority status of the teacher may undermine teachers' attempts to cultivate civic empowerment because it may make some students less receptive to working towards their teachers' goals.

Third, a strict, no-excuses approach is perceived by some students and parents to be more affirming of student potential — and thus more empowering — than a "soft" one. Granted, Levinson and Ben-Porath do not advocate "softness" in teachers. However, a more democratic approach to teaching may be perceived this way by students. In fact, some black students may appreciate a teacher for the same "meanness" that liberal educators disparage.[27] Delpit notes that educators often view an emotional display as evidence that a teacher is "losing control," and thus most discipline methods encourage dispassionate enforcement of expectations and consequences. Many black students, on the other hand, may be receptive to emotional displays that are perceived as genuine. Michele Foster, Shirley Bryce Heath, and Thomas Kochman all point out that expression of emotion is viewed positively in the black community, as long as the emotions fit the circumstances.[28] Foster claims that a *lack* of emotion may in fact be detrimental:

> Responses lacking a sufficient emotional quality are likely to [be] read as non-caring. Totally unacceptable, however, is non-responsiveness. Ignoring students' behavior, especially if it is inappropriate, conveys a subtle, negative message that since teachers are unwilling to expend appropriate amounts of time and energy making students "do what is expected," they have little regard for them or their ability. Non-responsiveness is thus seen as the ultimate put down.[29]

These findings are in keeping with my research on the relationship between student perceptions of teacher expectations and the achievement of African-American males. Students reported that they would assume a teacher did not like them if the teacher ignored their misbehavior. On the other hand, they would assume a teacher truly cared about them if the teacher confronted misconduct and spoke to them directly about where they were at academically and what they needed to do to reach their potential. The students compared this directness to way they were spoken to at home.[30]

A study by Bruce Wilson and H. Dickson Corbett also supports the implication that many students of color interpret strictness as an expression of care. Wilson and Corbett conducted a three-year study in five Philadelphia middle schools, four of which were predominately African-American (86-100%). In year one, Wilson and Corbett interviewed 361 sixth and eighth grade students to better understand a student perspective of what makes a teacher a great teacher.

> Students did not want teachers to find excuses to not teach them, to leave a student alone just because the student chose not to participate, or to let students decide on their own to work or not. … They did not want teachers who expected little of them. … Instead, students wanted to be in classrooms where: The teacher "stayed on students" to complete assignments; the teacher was able to control student behavior without ignoring the lesson.[31]

Wilson and Corbett interpreted these responses to mean that the most respected teachers were "no excuses" teachers.[32] One student said a particular teacher helped him succeed by being "stricter" about his work and behavior. In fact, many students used the word "strict" to describe good teachers. Further interviews clarified that students had two things in mind, both of which were essential: strictness in requiring students to do their work, and strictness in not allowing other students to disrupt the class. One African-American student remarked: "One of my teachers really push kids to do work. She is the most caring teacher. She really want you to do work. Sometimes that make me mad but I still try to do the work. It nice to know

you got a teacher who cares."[33] According to this study, these students viewed the no-excuses approach as a caring one; and they grew in self-confidence as a result. Similarly, Foster notes that students often used words like "tough" and "caring" to describe the same teachers and tended to work harder for teachers who took a tough love approach.[34] No-excuses teachers communicate faith in the ability of students to rise above challenging circumstances in order to become their best selves. Surely this confidence on the part of their teachers helps students to develop a sense of personal agency, which can then be capitalized upon as teachers seek to cultivate civic empowerment as well.

Parents send their children to these schools because they think it is in their children's best interest. In the course of interviewing parents of students who attend a no-excuses school, I briefly explained that some in the academic community are concerned about the strictness of no-excuses schools and the fact that students of color attending these schools do not experience the same measure of freedom enjoyed by other students. I asked for an initial response from each parent, and all seemed somewhat taken aback. My interviewees pointed out that white students also attend these schools, and that expensive college prep schools also have "structure" (a word used instead of "strictness" by more than one parent). In their estimation, the "structure" of no-excuses schools provides invaluable preparation not only for college but also for the workplace, where respect and professionalism are expected. These parents seemed completely satisfied with their experiences at this school, and one mother suggested the critics are misguided at best.

When [students] come to school and they have to look a certain way and they have to act a certain way, it teaches them that they are not a product of their environment. Does that make sense, baby? It encourages them to get out of the system, it encourages them, it let them know that they have self-worth, baby, it does. It let them know that they're better than the projects they living in, they better than the crack cocaine that they see being passed out on the streets—you see what I'm saying? So for them to—so, I need to be on that platform telling these people, look, unless you all done walked a mile in these babies' shoes, ya'll can't tell none that they being too strict.

Conclusion: Authoritative Teaching and Teaching for Civic Empowerment

Levinson clearly desires to affirm the home cultures of students. She argues, for example, that while codeswitching is an invaluable tool for students — a form of bilingualism that allows students to make themselves understood in a variety of settings — dominant cultural forms must be *additive*. That is, they must be taught *in addition to* nondominant forms rather than in place of them. Similarly, she argues that students' home cultures should be affirmed in the presentation of historical counternarratives. She proposes that the most empowering narrative for black students may be one that acknowledges both the "original sin" of racism in American history, and the ongoing struggle against oppression and injustice made possible by the American founding ideals of liberty and equality. This narrative is consonant with those espoused by many black churches, media outlets, and educational institutions, and thus is culturally-responsive.[35]

Levinson does not advocate complete alignment with the home cultures of students or with the inclinations of parents, however; some parents of color may choose a separatist, Afrocentric education for their children, but Levinson does not think this is in the best interest of the child or of society. A civically empowering education would promote a double consciousness that presents students with a gateway into meaningful participation with the dominant culture.[36]

We must ask ourselves whether authoritative teaching presents a similar issue. Are parents misguided in embracing a strict, adult-controlled educational environment for their children, and, if so, who should communicate this to parents, and how? And if we advocate a less authoritative and supposedly more civically empowering mode of teaching, are we also prepared in the name of intellectual integrity to claim that the authoritative *parenting* style present in much of the black community is civically disempowering compared to a more democratic one? I am wary of embracing the former charge, because it seems to make the latter a logical necessity.

In addition, must we conclude that authoritative teaching and civic empowerment are mutually exclusive, or are there pedagogical practices that can cultivate civic empowerment while utilizing authoritative teaching, at least in some form? Perhaps future research should explore whether no-excuses schools have different ways of developing agency than the ones philosophers of education typically look for when they evaluate these schools. We must also continue to bear in mind the perspectives of parents, students, and educators of color as we form our pedagogical recommendations. This author calls for a response from philosophers, sociologists, and all others who seek to improve the ways in which America's schools cultivate civic empowerment.

1. Albert Cheng, Collin Hitt, Brian Kisida, and Jonathan N. Mills, "No Excuses Charter Schools: A Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence on Student Achievement," EDRE Working Paper 2014-11 (University of Arkansas), 1. This meta-analysis showed that students who attend a no-excuses school for even one year experience significant gains in math and literacy.

2. See, for example, Angela L. Duckworth and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Self-Discipline Outdoes IQ in Predicting Academic Performance of Adolescents," *Psychological Science* 16, no. 12 (2005): 939-944; Angela L. Duckworth, Christopher Peterson, Michael D. Matthews, and Dennis R. Kelly, "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 6 (2007): 1087–1101; Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: How You Can Fulfill Your Potential* (New York: Random House, 2006); James J. Heckman and Yona Rubenstein, "The Importance of Noncognitive Skills: Lessons from the GED Testing Program," *American Economic Review* 91, no. 2, Papers and Proceedings of the Hundred Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association (May 2001): 145-149; KIPP Foundation, "Character Growth Card," www.kipp.org/our-approach/character; Paul Tough, "What if the Secret to Success is Failure?," *New York Times* (September 18, 2011), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/18/magazine/what-if-the-secret-to-success-is-failure.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0; Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (New York: Mariner Books, 2012).

3. Scott Seider, *Character Compass: How Powerful School Culture Can Point Students Toward Success* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012), 114; Tough, *How Children Succeed*, 50.

4. Sigal Ben-Porath, "Deferring Virtue: The New Management of Students and the Civic Role of Schools," *Theory and Research in Education* 11, no. 2 (2013): 111-128, 119.

5. Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014).

6. Tough, *How Children Succeed*, 87, 89.

7. Ben-Porath, "Deferring Virtue," 119, 122.

8. Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 177-179.

9. Ben-Porath, "Deferring Virtue," 123; Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 172-173; Tough, *How Children Succeed*, 89.

10. Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 12, 87-89.

11. Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 82.

12. Ben-Porath, "Deferring Virtue," 115, 122; Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 192.

13. Ben-Porath, "Deferring Virtue," 112-114.

14. Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 193.

15. Seider, *Character Compass*, 56-60.

16. Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 39-40.

17. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

18. Joanne Golann, "The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School," *Sociology of Education* 88, no. 2 (2015): 103-119, 108.

19. Seider, *Character Compass*, 188; see also Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 42.

20. Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 21.

21. Alexandra Boyd, Robert Maranto, and Caleb Rose, "The Softer Side of 'No Excuses:' A View of KIPP Schools in Action," *Education Next* (Winter 2014): 49-53, 50. It is important to note that the phrases "no-excuses" and "zero tolerance" are often (and incorrectly) used interchangeably in the popular media. "Zero tolerance," when used appropriately, refers to policies that have been adopted by public school districts since the passage of the federal Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994. This Act stated that in order to receive federal funding, every state must have a policy that allows for a one-year expulsion of any student found in possession of a gun on school premises. Many schools have added metal detectors and armed guards as part of their implementation plan, and Levinson is rightly concerned about the message this sends to students: "What do [students] think about as they're screened for weapons each day?" (Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 167). The editors of *Zero Tolerance: Resisting the Drive for Punishment in our Schools* contend that such policies have a detrimental effect on school climate because "the first casualty is the central, critical relationship between teacher and student"; William Ayers, Bernardine Dohrn, and Rick Ayers, eds, (NY: New Press, 2001), xii. Critics also argue that zero tolerance policies have a disproportionate effect on students of color, with black students being expelled and suspended three to five times more than white students. The zero tolerance approach eliminates the possibility of restorative discipline and the need for administrative discernment and instead poses a deceptively simple solution to complicated social problems. The no-excuses approach stands in stark contrast to zero tolerance policies, which were created to send students *out* of schools. The no-excuses approach claims that no student is destined to be a dropout. While zero tolerance is primarily about *punishment*, no-excuses is about a *mindset* that defines the students, parents, teachers, and administrators associated with these schools.

22. Constance A. Flanagan, Patricio Cumsille, Sukhdeep Gill, Leslie S. Gallay, "School and Community Climates and Civic Commitments: Patterns for Ethnic Minority and Majority Students," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 99, no. 2 (2007): 421-431, 429.

23. Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 159-160; see also Shirley Bryce Heath, *Ways with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 280.

24. Michele Foster, *"It's Cookin' Now": An Ethnographic Study of the Teaching Style of a Successful Black Teacher in an Urban Community College* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1987), 141.

25. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: New Press, 2006), 35-36.

26. Delpit, *Other People's Children*, 168.

27. Delpit, *Other People's Children*, 37.

28. Foster, *"It's Cookin' Now,"* 92; Heath, *Ways with Words*, 82; Thomas Kochman, *Black and White: Styles in Conflict* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 111, 115, 123, 126..

29. Foster, *"It's Cookin' Now,"* 133.

30. A study by Grace Carroll Massey et al. found that black students had the lowest grades and achievement but received the most praise. The authors write: "Low achievers, particularly black students, were allowed to delude themselves." Grace Carroll Massey, Mona Vaughn Scott, and Sanford M. Dornbusch, "Racism Without Racists: Institutional Racism in Urban Schools," *The Black Scholar* 7, no. 3 (November 1975): 10-19, 17.

31. Bruce H. Wilson and H. Dickson Corbett, "The Teachers Students Wanted," in *Listening to Urban Kids: School Reform and the Teachers They Want* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 63-64.

32. Wilson and Corbett, "The Teachers Students Wanted," 64, 65.

33. Wilson and Corbett, "The Teachers Students Wanted," 89.

34. Foster, *"It's Cookin' Now,"* 30, 67.

35. Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 136.

36. Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 82-84.