ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE
Analytic Models and Policy Options

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Five central questions help frame this discussion of school discipline, discipline policies, and policy alternatives. First, what are the purposes of discipline policies—why do they exist? Second, who determined discipline policies? Third, what is the content of discipline policies? Fourth, how is discipline policy implemented? Fifth, what is the political-educational context of discipline policy? If we understand these things we will understand what alternatives make sense.

The purposes of discipline policies as they are established and operate in schools are primarily oriented toward maintaining order. Moreover, they help maintain a kind of order that preserves professionals' rights to control the organization of schooling and the patterns of interaction that occur in schools. In this way, they help socialize young people into relatively conforming postures consistent with nonparticipatory, obedient, and passive future roles in our political system and economy.

Who determines discipline policies? It seems clear that discipline policies are *determined* by school managers and educational leaders. For the most part, these powerful people are a special kind of adult—they are professionals—they re-

496

ceived special training and/or are seen as experts in caring for and providing services to our young. As a result of professional training, they have particular prerogatives and privileges in making and implementing public policy. They also are by and large white and male, especially the higher up they are in the managerial system.

What is the content of discipline policy? To a certain extent the *content* follows the purposes and people who do the determining. We should expect the content to reflect, at least to some degree, the cultural norms and standards of people who are adult, professionals, and by and large white and male. We should not expect the content to reflect the moral standards, educational goals, lifestyles, and cultures of people who are nonadult, nonwhite, nonmale, and nonprofessional. Discipline policies also focus on a relatively narrow spectrum of behavior in schools, behavior that might threaten educators' definitions of order. Discipline policies generally do not focus overtly on educational principles, nor on the prerequisites for order as experienced by the young, the poor, and other low power groups.

How is discipline policy implemented? Discipline policy is implemented by teachers and administrative officials, usually with a great deal of discretion. The discretion educators exercise is not just individual in nature, it is socially patterned discretion. This discretion supports current patterns of power, and the prevailing culture of those people who exercise control.

What is the organizational context of discipline policy? We would like to try to establish that context below by emphasizing the political and educational issues we think are really at stake in our nation's schools. Some of these issues undergird basic school problems, of which discipline is a symptom. This is not to say that discipline is not an appropriate and critical concern, but that we need to look at the political and edu-

cational context within which any particular set of discipline
policies and/or problems rest.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES
ON SCHOOLS AND DISCIPLINE[1]

There are several different ways we can begin to look at
schools and problems in school discipline. Alternative assump-
tions about school purposes, what holds them together, and
what they are like make a great deal of difference. Our own
ideas of the way things are have profound effects on the kinds
of variables we look at, on the conceptions of social justice
and educational practice with which we operate, and certainly
on our notions of appropriate remedies or solutions for any
problems.

Some people look at the nature of social systems and the
nature of our society or community through a *consensus* set
of eyeglasses. Here the world operates, or ought to operate,
in a natural social harmony. According to a consensus view,
Americans agree on the basic goals of society and basic norms
or appropriate ways of behaving and carrying on our lives.
Conflict is seen as unnatural, a result of mistakes or errors.
According to this view, the basic "glue" that holds organiza-
tions together is trust. We need to trust one another to do the
things we promise to do, and to treat each other with respect
and dignity. Rules and regulations are seen as reflections of
our common values and norms, as guides to the good life. In
this view, schools generally promote equality of opportunity
and help overcome the inequalities of birth that exist in this
society. Pluralistic values and styles are cherished in schools
and, in fact, schools are seen as instruments for integrating
diverse cultural traditions into an overarching normative
consensus. Relations between different groups are open, with
the school encouraging cross-class and cross-race friendships

and teamwork. Educational authorities generally are trusted to make wise decisions that benefit all school clients/consumers.

Others view the nature of society through a *conflict* set of eyeglasses. This perspective argues that social systems or schools primarily are organized on the basis of natural and enduring conflicts of interest and values. As a result, there is an ongoing contest over basic values and resources, between rich and poor, young and old, black and brown and white, male and female, and the like. According to this view, there are few clear goals to which we all owe allegiance, but people in different sectors of society, with differential access to wealth and privilege, have different goals and values and different resources with which to pursue their goals. Consensus is illusory or temporary: it is a myth that masks natural conflict and helps make everyone feel good. In the conflict view the basic glue that holds systems together is power. Power is generated by people getting together and collectively advancing their own interests. Each group must generate enough power to prevent other groups from oppressing them, because they cannot assume good will and trust would prevent that from happening otherwise. Rules and regulations are seen as guidelines made up by authorities in order to keep the system operating in the ways with which they agree, and in the ways that maintain their positions of power and privilege. In this view, schools generally promote and maintain patterns of inequality in the society. Since it is in the interest of powerful groups in the society to maintain inequality (or at least their own privileged positions), these groups make sure schools more or less overtly sustain and promote these patterns. Schools are seen to use racial and economic criteria to sort students into differential opportunities, and to maintain distance (and even antagonisms) between different groups through formal tracking and informal segregation. Minorities' cultural traditions generally are devalued, and are not utilized as contributions to dominant white and affluent standards and styles.

THE NATURE OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

According to the consensus view, disciplinary rules and regulations reflect commonly agreed-upon ways people should relate to one another. They represent the traditions of the community and its notions of appropriate and decent behavior. Disciplinary codes and regulations are seen to regularize justice and insure fair play, and to provide an orderly basis for the conduct of education. Part of the reason for codifying rules is so that everyone can see them and they can be administered evenly, not arbitrarily. Of course, there may be accidents: the consensus view makes it clear that there are times when rules do not work out fairly, but those are seen as errors in an otherwise just system.

From a conflict point of view, disciplinary rules and regulations reflect the norms of ruling groups and their attempts to socialize other people into dominant cultural patterns. They are not reflections of common norms; in fact, the greater the number and specificity of rules and punishments, the clearer it is that trust in institutional norms is failing and that coercion may reign. Thus, they are seen to represent the arbitrary exercise of power that seeks to keep some people in positions of privilege and other people in positions of disadvantage. Rather than provide an orderly basis for *education,* rules are part of the technology of *social control.* Such control is implemented further in schools through surveillance, private conferences and conversations about students, and informal informer networks.

EXAMPLES OF CURRENT POLICY

To be more concrete, it is useful to examine portions of the Detroit Code of Uniform Student Conduct.[2] In 1975, Judge Robert Demascio, who at that time was presiding over Detroit desegregation litigation, ordered the school board to come up with a code of school conduct. He and others assumed that desegregation would proceed more peacefully if there was a

clear code of student responsibilities that could be distributed to everyone in the system. The Detroit school board submitted a code that the Detroit Federation of Teachers called soft-minded and wishy-washy. Judge Demascio sent it back to the school board to be tightened up. The Detroit Federation of Teachers approved a revised version and Judge Demascio ordered its implementation in December 1975. Thousands of copies were distributed to students, parents, and educators throughout the system.

The code prohibits student behaviors such as "insubordination," "verbal abuse," and "disruptive behavior." But, to refer to our earlier question, *who defines* or *determines* insubordination, verbal abuse, and disruptive behavior? Whose values about insubordination are to be implemented? The answer to both is that educational officials determine when insubordination has taken place. What is insubordination? If one student were to ask another student to leave the room and the second student told the first to "stuff it" or "go to hell" the student would not be insubordinate, but offensive or obnoxious or even disruptive. If a principal told a teacher to "go to hell," the principal would not be called insubordinate either. Insubordination is reserved to describe the words or acts of people who have less power than others and who have violated the rules for how powerless people should behave toward the powerful. That is what makes them in/subordinate—anti/ subordinate. They have denied, in some way, the reality of their low power relationship. Thus, the students can be "insubordinate" to teachers, or teachers to principals—but not the other way around, and not to peers of equal status! Moreover, insubordination generally refers to verbal exchanges or symbolic gestures among people. Physical attack or abuse is not insubordination: it is violence. Why do people worry about a symbolic verbal challenge from someone who has little power? Educational officials must feel their ability to rule schools is fragile, and therefore often overreact to minor infractions and challenges, such as insubordination.

The Detroit Code also says students shall have rights to "Freedom of Expression and Publication, Dissent and the Right to Petition" grievances. This freedom of expression is limited appropriately by the laws of libel and concerns about risk to health and safety. But the code also limits this freedom by any threat to disrupt normal and orderly school processes. What is the meaning of dissent if it is not allowed to disrupt the "normal" process? Then it is no longer dissent; it is more like an appeal or a request for input. Moreover, what is the normal and orderly school process? There is an assumption in most codes that the normal and orderly process which schools enforce is good for learning and should be protected and preserved. What if it is *not* good for learning, but what if "order" exists as an end independent of educational growth? Ought it still to be protected and preserved? There is nothing wrong with orderliness, per se, but is it worth preserving at any cost? Suppose the order we have created in our schools can be preserved only by suppressing protest? What then?

The code says: "Students have the responsibility to participate fully in the serious business of learning." Nowhere in the code does it say that *schools* have the responsibility to participate fully in the serious business of learning. The point here is not to debate phraseology; disciplinary rules often have this unilateral component. The responsibility for appropriate behavior is laid unilaterally on one group in school and is not seen as a bilateral or multilateral contract among various groups. The code also remains unclear as to the meaning of full participation in the business of learning. One might even assume this is an open invitation for student involvement in school policy-making: of course it is not!

Students also "have the responsibility of showing respect for the knowledge and authority of their teachers." The code does not say that teachers have the responsibility of showing respect for their students. Once again—a unilateral process. What happens if students don't have respect for the knowledge and authority of their teachers? Should they show it anyway?

What if their teachers don't merit their respect? What should students do? The requirement that students show respect for teacher authority often amounts to training in passive and obedient acceptance of adult professionals' definitions of who should be respected, who has authority, and how others without authority should behave. Learning is confused with following orders; and order, rather than education or even honest response, becomes the school standard.

Finally, the code says, "The teacher's authority in his or her classroom is undermined when pupils discover that he/she has little or no administrative backing in discipline. Where a principal is unwilling or unable to support teachers in maintaining school discipline, the principal's superiors shall counsel with him/her and in the event his/her performance is not improved further appropriate actions will be taken." This does not reflect a concern for due process or fair play, but a concern to preserve the united front of authority against all challenges. It is a clear call for a coalition of adults against the young. How can any principal be fair in her/his actions toward students when that line appears in a code? When the principal knows that if he/she does not back up the teacher, the teacher can go to the principal's superiors, how can he/she ever decide a grievance in favor of students?

The sheer logistics of making concrete definitions for these terms, as well as cultural disagreements about their value/ disvalue, means the school administration has enormous discretion in deciding what behavior to prosecute and what behavior not to prosecute. Of course, this discretion always existed; but now we have a systemwide code that encourages and expands its breadth without significant definition, check, or accountability.

These quotations are from a grievously poor code. But the Detroit Code is no more infamous or bizarre than other codes around the country. Moreover, it has not been quoted unrepresentatively.

Underlying much of this discussion are questions about the meaning of "fair discipline," and of "equitable" or "just"

disciplinary rules and regulations. There is no argument about the necessity of rules or discipline for the effective operation of any social organization—schools included. But there is substantial question about the nature and purpose of school rules and their implications for various forms of discipline and disciplinary policy. Does fair discipline mean *fairness to all students* regardless of their racial, sexual, and class characteristics? If so, rules would have to reflect the pluralism of goals and norms that exists throughout the entire society. Rules could not assume there is a single norm for appropriate behavior that people of all races, sexes, classes, and ethnic groups should be expected to exhibit. Do most school rules reflect and promote culturally plural notions of good behavior? Does fair discipline mean *fairness to all people in the school* regardless of their status as young or old? If so, rules would reflect similar (not identical) citizenship roles and responsibilities for younger people as well as for older people, for educators as well as students. If rules are not solely an instrument of adult control, and if discipline is not solely an attempt to regulate and justify control of the young, then fair discipline would mean similar rules, enforcement procedures and punishments for adult violators of students' rights and organizational norms, as well as the reverse.

POLICY OPTIONS

Three principles stand out as guides to alternative disciplinary policies and programs. (1) We must think clearly about the kind of order we wish to maintain in schools. We need to be clear about whether the order is to be based on the coercive rules of the powerful or the mutual satisfaction and consent of governors and the governed. (2) We must try to avoid creating organizations that are even more oppressive, not just to the young, but to all who work with them. Our discussion so far has focused on the ways in which young people experience schooling, but teachers and administrators also often find

schools unpleasant and oppressive places in which to work. (3) We must treat discipline issues in the context of the political and educational apparatus of the school and community. Discipline policies fit within the general power structure and educational program of the school, and we must root our policy options in these realities or they will be fantasies— dreams (or nightmares) incapable of implementation.

RETRAINING EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

One policy option is to retrain educational administrators in the skills of organizational management and leadership. Most principals explain they were not chosen or trained for their jobs on the basis of management expertise or experience. As a result, many have little ability in running an organization, let alone a democratic and innovative one. We could try to increase educators' skills by supplying them with diagnostic information about the environment in which they are working, or about others' reactions to their policies. In the spirit of this article, we also could try to alter educators' ideologies and assumptions about the purposes of discipline.

Better school administration might increase students' own senses of satisfaction with what happens in school. It also might help lower the defensiveness, adversariness, and needs for control that so often mark the behavior of educational officials. A high degree of rancor and adversariness is not necessary; it usually is a product of isolation, misinformation, and inadequate engagement of the total institution in the discussion of its common life. It could be reduced.

A second option would be to retrain students to play active roles in the organization of schooling. For instance, we know —from research and our own experiences—that the most potent learning environment includes learning from peers. At the same time, most classrooms are organized in ways that deny and frustrate the possibilities of peer instruction and exchange. We could train students to teach others, to advocate their own interests in the overall direction and governance

of the school, and to generate discipline policies and programs that meet their own needs for order in education.

NEW SERVICES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Another option is to build a more supportive and intimate infrastructure of relationships among all people in the school. That may mean smaller classrooms, or creating schools within schools. It may mean using ombudspeople who will watch out for and support others who feel aggrieved. It may mean using counselors as advocates of youth rather than as therapists or junior principals. It also may mean working differently with the community, trying to mobilize community resources in support of educational innovations.

Generally, discipline policies focus on order and compliance and not on those school and societal conditions that often give rise to failure, frustration, and eventually disorder. This is a natural focus, since problems of disorder generally create the concerns that generate new policies. But in overlooking contextual and environmental conditions, the school ignores core realities of youth—especially minority youth—experience. Once again, the poor, the young, and the minorities are asked to obey and adjust to an unjust and disorderly environment. Problems of unemployment, poor housing conditions, inadequate recreational facilities, and neighborhood deterioration have serious effects on youth and affect their orientation toward school. If educators make meaningful attempts to address these issues, they may be able to forge more effective coalitions with youth. Even if wide-ranging community changes do not result, the coalition itself may generate new patterns of mutual support among youth and adults in school.

A MORE PLURAL CULTURE

Attempts to pluralize the culture of the school are shorthand for confronting the racial, class, sexual, and age biases of current school organizations. Communities involved with

school desegregation have generated many new efforts in multilingual multicultural curricula, staffing, procedures and norms, ethnic fairs, and so on. These programs try to make the school a home for people of different cultures, not just a colonial preserve of the ruling white, affluent majority. A number of studies and informal reports suggest that either or both the substance and administration of codes result in a disproportionate number of minority suspensions, expulsions, and other punishments. Thus, minority people suffer in extraordinary ways from unfair rules and from the unfair administration of rules associated with school discipline policies. Pluralizing the culture of the school means making sure rules, regulations, and disciplinary policies reflect and respect the cultures of all people in school.

MULTILATERAL POLICIES AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Disciplinary policies must deal with both student and faculty rights and responsibilities. The school must be seen as an institution where various people can be involved in designing and governing their own and others' behaviors. If accountability is not reciprocal, one class of people essentially is guarding another class, with lower-power groups unilaterally accountable to powerful groups for their behavior. That is a prescription for protest, disruption, and disaster. Everything we know about efforts to create a democratic society suggests that unilateral rules of behavior and unilateral divisions of power are, in themselves, demeaning and destructive.

A student should be able to complain about a teacher in the same way a teacher can complain about a student. Students who are not allowed to smoke find it absurd to sit and watch a faculty member smoking up a storm. Regardless of how you feel about smoking, the obvious difference is one of those grinding, demeaning realities that destroy good relations among people. Multilateral accountability can be aided by a decision-making system that decentralizes power and diffuses

it broadly among the teaching faculty and the student body.
To do so requires new skills in decision-making and new
images of a shared decision-making structure. We are not talk-
ing here about participation, input, advice, and counsel;
rather, we mean shared control of local decision-making by
all local parties. That includes shared student decision-making
about discipline policies, curriculum, staff evaluations, and
so on—at least significant steps in this direction.

Community monitoring is another component of multi-
lateral options. We already have developed the technology to
help community groups diagnose school disciplinary matters,
monitor progress on these issues, provide input to program
development, and perhaps even hold various parties account-
able for making changes. However, we operate most schools in
ways that ignore or deny this technology, that keep the local
community ignorant of internal conditions and that buffer the
professional educational apparatus from external inspection
and/or challenge. In so doing, we also deprive the school of
the tremendous resources of the community and frustrate any
possibilities of community-school partnership.

CHANGE TACTICS RELEVANT FOR
THESE OPTIONS

It does not seem enough for us to talk about policy options;
we must address the change tactics that might be used to reach
them. Two basic groups of change tactics we could explore
include: (1) consensus tactics that mirror the assumptions of
the consensus view of schools, and (2) conflict tactics that
mirror the alternative view.

Consensus tactics generally suggest an appeal to the good
will of senior educational officials. Essentially, they count
on managers ruling in the interest of all their clients. Making
requests, communicating openly, or sharing information with
managers means we assume they will act on it in productive

ways. Trust also can be built by meeting important people at cocktail parties, golf courses, workshops and retreats, or wherever people talk about what matters. The assumption is that by breaking down barriers of distance we communicate more and relate better with one another. Careful planning together, based on shared information about problems, should lead to new and mutually agreeable solutions. This approach generally assumes and tries to implement a rational, collaborative, problem-solving process.

Conflict tactics usually suggest you cannot count on interpersonal trust when genuine differences of interest and value are present. Rather, the low power group or oppressed community must generate enough power to balance the power of educational authorities. One way to do this is by making threats—credible threats that challenge authorities' capacities to rule or to maintain order: "If you don't stop doing X we will hurt you by doing Y." If threats alone do not work, they may have to be actualized in disruptions such as boycotts, strikes, and nonviolent demonstrations. When authorities are prepared to respond seriously, you can move into multiparty collective bargaining. Collective bargaining is different than problem-solving: problem-solving assumes that we can identify a common problem and reach common solutions; collective bargaining assumes fundamental differences that must be adjudicated and compromised so we can survive with one another.

The answer to the question of which set of tactics might work best depends in part on the overall perspective (conflict or consensus) taken. But in addition, it depends on the situation, as well as the resources available. For instance, if the school administration appears to be on your side and is prepared to advocate equitable disciplinary policies and forward-looking school programs, it makes sense to collaborate with them in a consensus approach. Even if you have minor disagreements this approach might work best. On the other hand, a conflict approach is likely to make the most sense if you and

the school administration have major and irresolvable disagreements, or if they are unwilling to negotiate or compromise with you. Your resources also matter: by and large it takes more energy, people, and money to threaten than to appeal. A group with few resources probably cannot afford to adopt a conflict strategy in the long term; they are more likely to be effective working from a consensus approach. On the other hand, a well-organized and powerful community movement, with effective coalitions among different race and age groups, may be able to demand change, and to back up their demands with the power to alter recalcitrant school leaders. A conflict strategy may fit their needs and resources much more adequately.

As we have noted at the outset of this article, each person or group's perspective on the nature of our society and our schools helps determine the policy options they prefer. They also determine our preferences regarding how new policies and programs can or should be brought about.

NOTES

1. The reality of social and educational life is not as neatly divided as the ensuing discussion may suggest. But these competing idea systems and diagnoses do exist and do affect our thinking and planning. Posed here as "ideal types," their comparison may help illustrate common approaches and suggest new syntheses and programs.

2. All quotations are taken from the code as published by the Detroit Public Schools.