Getting Rid of Troublemakers: High School Disciplinary Procedures and the Production of Dropouts*

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This paper examines the routine disciplinary procedures of an inner-city high school. The analysis shows that school policies and procedures encourage disciplinarians to use suspensions, transfers, and involuntary "drops" to "get rid of" students they deem "troublemakers." The indicators disciplinarians use to identify "troublemakers" are the same factors that, according to educational research, place students "at risk" of dropping out. Because a disproportionate number of urban black and Hispanic students come from circumstances that interfere with attendance and attention or produce behaviors school workers define as insubordinate or disobedient, routine disciplinary practices that exclude "troublemakers" may be a mechanism through which the school helps perpetuate racial and class stratification in the larger society.

Questions about schools and stratification have been addressed at both the macro- and the microlevel and from the full spectrum of theoretical perspectives (Karabel and Halsey 1977). Although the dominant research tradition has looked to the characteristics of students or their families to explain patterns of school performance and subsequent occupational placement, a significant and growing body of scholarship has underscored the role played by the organization of schools and the practices of school personnel (e.g., Anderson 1982; Cicourel and Kitsuse 1977; Connell et al. 1982; Corcoran 1985; Fine 1991; Rutter et al. 1979; Weis, Farrar, and Petrie 1989). Both lines of research, until quite recently, have focused on differences between college-bound students and those who move into the work force after graduation. However, since the mid-1980s, resurgent interest in urban poverty has directed attention to high school dropouts and to the factors that distinguish them from graduates (Ekstrom et al. 1987; Fine 1986; Hahn and Danzberger 1987; Morrow 1986; Peng 1983; Rumberger 1983).

Dropout research has found that a disproportionate number of inner-city Hispanic and black students leave school before graduation and has identified a series of factors that place such students "at risk" of dropping out: students are least likely to complete high school if they come from a low-income background, are frequently absent or truant, have a record of school disciplinary problems, are failing classes, and are overage in grade (Borus and Carpenter 1983; Ekstrom et al. 1987; Peng 1983; Rumberger 1983). Dropouts are also more likely to feel alienated from school and less likely to get along with their teachers (Wagenaar 1987). According to one conventional interpretation of these data, students become discouraged with multiple experiences of failure and walk away from school (see Finn 1989); hence a proposed solution to the dropout problem has been to convince "at risk" students to remain in school and to support them in their struggle to graduate.

Although this goal has become the publicly stated objective of many urban school districts, experience as well as research teaches that other pressures can subvert such ideals (see

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1. For a critical discussion of "at risk" see Margonis (1992).
Fine 1991; Kozol 1991). This paper examines some of those countervailing forces. Specifically, this paper analyses the routine disciplinary activities in an inner-city high school and shows that these policies and practices encouraged school workers to “get rid of” students deemed to be “troublemakers.” Significantly, the indicators used to identify “troublemakers” were the very “risk factors” that emerge in the research on dropouts. The exclusion of “troublemakers,” sometimes explicitly against their wishes, calls into question precisely why such students are “at risk.” Are students at risk because they truly cannot or will not finish school? Or, are they at risk because school personnel label their behaviors or attitudes as troublesome and, on that basis, encourage their departure from school? Answers to these questions can help us understand the role schools play in perpetuating social inequality.

**Discipline and Dropout**

As previous scholarship has noted, the category “dropout,” as employed by school districts and educational researchers, often includes “pushouts,” “stopouts,”2 and those who fail academically, as well as disaffected students who decide to leave (Fine 1991; Hahn and Danzberger 1987; Morrow 1986). The number of students who leave via these routes is unknown since these paths to early school withdrawal are masked in the official statistics. Yet, in at least one study, as many as a quarter of the “dropouts” reported that they were discharged coercively (Fine 1991).

Recent scholarship has raised questions about how student characteristics interact with institutional practices in producing dropouts (Farrell 1988; Fine 1991; Miller 1988; Pittman 1986; Toles, Schulz, and Rice 1986; Weis, Farrar, and Petrie 1989). Even though research has begun to examine how school environments produce truancy, academic failure, or disobedience, the relationship between these student behaviors and dropping out is either ignored or treated as essentially unproblematic (Fine 1991, is a notable exception). Little has been done to examine how schools selectively label and respond to student actions.

The fact that African-American students experience a significantly higher rate of school suspension than do whites (Hahn and Danzberger 1987; Yudof 1975), as well as a higher dropout rate, underscores the importance of looking at disciplinary procedures. Recent findings seem to refute charges of racism in the use of suspension, but research in other institutional settings gives us reason to remain skeptical. When a student’s past disciplinary record, grades, and demeanor are taken into account, neither race nor socioeconomic status explains the type of disciplinary action taken by school officials (McCarthy and Hoge 1987). Parallel findings emerge from research on juvenile court dispositions (Cohen and Kleugel 1987; see also Empey 1982; Tittle 1980); however, the way certain youth come to police attention in the first place and the factors that influence police decisions to take official action—in other words, to construct a “prior” record—is connected to race and class (e.g., Morash 1984; Sampson 1986). We need to question, therefore, how school workers construct the records that “explain” suspensions. We need a much clearer understanding of how grades, demeanor, and prior record are linked in practice to suspensions, since a record of suspensions increases a student’s “dropout” risk.

**Theoretical Perspective**

Following the research tradition established by Cicourel and Kitsuse (1977), this paper investigates how routine administrative decisions and actions affect a student’s passage

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2. "Pushouts" refers to students who are forced to leave school. "Stopouts" refers to students who withdraw from school and then return.
through high school. Whereas Cicourel and Kitsuse looked at the counselor’s role in selecting students who will go on to college, this paper examines the disciplinarian’s role in selecting students who will be “dropped.”

The theoretical framework for this investigation borrows from both the labeling perspective in criminology, which itself is informed by both conflict theory and symbolic interactionism (Paternoster and Iovanni 1989), and the “negotiated-order” approach to the study of organizations (Maines and Charlton 1985). According to the labeling perspective, people in positions of formal authority—such as school board members or state legislators—define “deviance” through a process of conflict and negotiation with other interested players. Practices at the organizational level—in this case, within schools—determine whose behavior fits those formal definitions of deviance. Analysis of school practices draws on the negotiated-order approach to the study of organizations. That approach acknowledges that formal rules organize and define an agency’s work, but calls attention to the fact that workers’ informal, negotiated understandings determine the meaning and implementation of rules. Workers use and interpret the formal rules governing client interactions in ways that allow them to simplify their own work conditions; accommodate co-workers’ expectations or routines; and pursue their own, unofficial understanding of the agency’s proper goals (Lipsky 1980). Although research findings have been mixed, some labeling studies have concluded that the accused person’s class or racial status makes him or her more vulnerable to being officially labeled (Paternoster and Iovanni 1989).

Labeling theory also addresses the source of “secondary deviance” (Becker 1963; Lemert 1967). In some instances, labeling produces additional deviance by strengthening identification with and commitment to deviance. However, since the accused individual’s social, political, and economic resources shape the capacity to reject or mitigate the stigma of a deviant label, labeling may produce additional deviance merely by cutting off access to legitimate resources and opportunities. Alternatively, a social network which provides support and resources may allow an individual to renegotiate or disavow a deviant label (Paternoster and Iovanni 1989). Thus, the power and social resources attached to class and racial status may affect both the initial interpretation of a person’s actions and the consequences following from that interpretation.

**Methodological Approach**

A labeling or interactionist perspective calls for an investigation of the tacit, unofficial rules employed by school workers as they engage in routine organizational activities, and thus favors an ethnographic approach to research (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1977; Mehan 1992). Accordingly, this paper draws on qualitative data collected as part of a case study of DuBois High School conducted between the spring of 1984 and the spring of 1987; the bulk of classroom observation was done during the 1985/86 school year. (All names, including the school’s, have been changed.) Although I spoke regularly, throughout the study, to the school’s disciplinary workers and security staff, most of the material considered in this paper comes from two ten-day periods of intensive observation in the boys’ discipline office. The materials include written observations of daily disciplinary activities; notes on frequent in situ discussions with teachers, disciplinarians, nonteaching assistants (NTA), students, and a small number of parents; tape-recorded post hoc interviews with key players in a particular case of a “troublemaker”; and publicly available disciplinary documents generated by the district and the school. I did not have access to confidential materials in student records except in cases

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3. See Rist (1977) for an explanation of labeling theory’s utility in the study of schools.
where the materials were presented in a conference I attended or when a disciplinarian chose to show me a student file he or she thought I might find interesting.

**The Field Setting**

DuBois High was a troubled, inner-city school. Its all-black student body came from an area of a highly segregated northern city where half of the adults never completed high school (Bureau of the Census 1983), almost half of the school's students lived in poverty, and more than 60 percent had only one parent or guardian at home (school figures 1984). Many of the teenage girls had children of their own and most of the boys belonged to one of the area's five or six corner groups or neighborhood gangs.

In the decade before my study, enrollment at DuBois had declined steadily as many students in its catchment area found their way to city magnet schools or private or parochial high schools. Of the more than 1,600 students still on the school's roll, many came late, cut classes, or just did not attend. While I was there, as many as 400 missed school daily. Another 100 or more students arrived late. Two hundred or more students cut certain classes on a regular basis; perhaps as many or more skipped some of their classes on occasion.

Most of the students worked substantially below grade level. California Achievement Test scores for 1983 showed that while no student scored above the 85th percentile in reading, 53 percent scored below the 16th percentile and another 40 percent scored between the 16th and 49th percentiles. Records of school grades provided additional evidence of low achievement. Figures from the math department for the 1984/85 school year, for instance, showed that 74 percent of all tenth graders failed math. As a consequence of the widespread academic failure, each year the school retained in grade approximately a quarter of all its tenth graders.

Student disorder and disobedience figured prominently both in the public's perception of the school and in the school's self-assessment. DuBois frequently suspended a half dozen or more students each day; by the end of the year, more than a quarter of its students were suspended at least once, and many had multiple or serial suspensions.

Despite these facts, I did not encounter scenes of violence or chaos. Teachers did not complain of belligerence or open hostility; instead they talked about apathy, silliness, inattention, and poor attendance. During my months of fieldwork, I witnessed daily the essentially familiar scenes of high school life.

Students sent from class; picked up in the halls; or brought in by the police for truancy, misbehavior, or more serious misconduct all went to the discipline office, a crowded, first floor

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4. Although all of the students were African Americans, the faculty's racial composition reflected the metropolitan area's labor pool and thus included many whites.

5. These figures come from a report prepared by the school for the visiting committee of the association charged with evaluating the school for accreditation. For reasons of confidentiality, I cannot give the full name of this publication or of other reports issued by the school or the school district.
office divided into a small waiting area and four inner offices. Although they shared a physical space, girls' and boys' discipline was administered separately. Three disciplinarians handled cases involving boys and two disciplinarians dealt with girls.

The discipline office could go from complete quiet to the confusion of three or four cases without notice. In addition to the discipline staff, three or four nonteaching assistants, two district security officers assigned to the school, two city police officers assigned to the school, various teachers, one or two of the school's counselors, twenty or thirty students, and five to ten parents moved in and out of the office in the course of a day. The design of the office ensured little privacy or protection from the noise and confusion of other cases. Just inside the door to the office, a half dozen mismatched classroom chairs placed between a couple of battered file cabinets and a table scattered with outdated school notices formed a waiting area. But, since the partitions that separated the disciplinarians' offices from that area did not rise completely to the ceiling and were fitted with opaque glass, waiting parents and students could monitor much of the "private" conversation and activity; shouted comments or angry remarks made in one conference often intruded upon other conferences.6

Disciplinary Work

Within the school's bureaucratic organization, the discipline office staff's specialized tasks were to maintain files on the documented misbehavior of DuBois students, confer with students charged with rule violations, determine punitive actions to be taken against students, contact the parents of students who had violated school rules, and process the forms documenting disciplinary actions and protecting due process. Specific and extensive rules from the school district defined misconduct and outlined policies, procedures, and proper documentation for disciplinary actions.

The disciplinarian's responsibility, when a student entered the office, was to determine what the student had done, assess the seriousness of the offense, and take the appropriate disciplinary action. Most of the routine work involved either dealing with students who were late for class, caught cutting class, or accused of disrupting class, or meeting with students and their parents for the required conference following a suspension. Less routine, but still fairly common work involved determining punishments for students who were caught fighting; found in possession of marijuana; accused of theft, vandalism, or wall-writing; caught drinking alcohol; or charged with threatening a teacher. In rare instances, the disciplinary office handled cases involving a weapon, the sale of drugs, or violence directed against a teacher.7

Neither the formal description of disciplinary activities nor the rules and procedures governing the discipline office fully captured its operational practice. Disciplinary practice reflected the negotiated definitions, routines, and expectations developed among co-workers, and ongoing contests over work, authority, and responsibility within the school and between the school and parents. Disciplinarians relied on informally developed understandings about the discipline office's goals, the typical forms of student misconduct the office should handle, the types of students who normally caused trouble, and the standard strategies for dealing with misconduct (cf. Sudnow 1965, see also Waegel 1981). Within this context, official rules became a resource for workers to regulate the conditions of their work and to pursue informally identified goals (see Lipsky 1980).

6. The irregular tempo of activity in the discipline office made it difficult to gather accurate, quantifiable data on the number, type, and disposition of cases. Although I solicited staff members' help at one point, asking each of them to mark on a chart the type and disposition of each case they handled, I found their recordkeeping unreliable. Moreover, such records masked the very assumptions and decisions I sought to investigate.

7. National studies report that most high school suspensions are for nonthreatening behavior—defying authority, chronic tardiness, chronic absence, and use of profanity and vulgarity. Black students are suspended three times as often as whites (Hahn and Danzberger 1987:19).
To complete its work, the discipline staff interacted with teachers, NTAs, security personnel, administrators, parents, and students. Although school workers' jobs were formally coordinated, they frequently contested the boundaries of their authority and responsibility. Teachers, for example, negotiated their own strategies of classroom control—some taking a "hard line" allowing no deviation from formal rules, some using rules selectively to "contain problems" rather than to enforce obedience—and therefore made different demands on the discipline office (cf. Bittner 1967; Rubinstein 1973). Each student a teacher sent to the discipline office was, in essence, a test case of that teacher's authority. The discipline office's handling of the student determined whether the school's coercive power endorsed the teacher's definition of the situation or refuted it.

The nature of the disciplinarians' work meant the student's behavior was not interpreted in terms of its threat to one teacher's struggle for authority and classroom control. Instead, a student's behavior was judged in relation to the other students processed through the office. The staff was concerned with regulating and controlling its work, protecting its authority, and, most important, maintaining the institution's authority.

Because disciplinarians judged student misconduct with reference to the concerns of the school as a whole, they sometimes disagreed with teachers over what types of problems required the intervention of their office, complaining "this is something the teacher should have handled." In those instances, they typically took no action or very limited action against a student. In other cases, where the disciplinarian agreed with the teacher's assessment, punitive actions, especially severe punitive actions, were occasionally blocked by the principal. The principal shared their concern for the school's interests, but nonetheless had to evaluate both student behavior and staff authority within the context of complaints or pressures from parents and the district, or with regard to the school's public image.

Disciplinary Penalties

The sanctions available to the disciplinary staff were few. Beyond talking to students, and short of transferring or expelling them, disciplinarians could hold students out of class, contact their parents, or enforce one to five day suspensions. Disciplinarians rarely, if ever, contacted parents outside the context of a suspension. Official responses to misbehavior were, thus, limited in practice to either a simple reprimand, holding the student in the office until the next class period, or a suspension.

The district's "Code Prohibiting Serious Student Misconduct" identified and defined the nine categories of misconduct that warranted suspension: (1) disruption of the school, (2) damage, destruction or theft of school property, (3) damage, destruction or theft of private property, (4) assault on a school employee, (5) physical abuse of a student or other person not employed by the school, (6) possession of weapons and dangerous instruments, (7) possession or use of narcotics, alcoholic beverages, and stimulant drugs, (8) repeated school violations, and (9) disruptive and/or offensive use of language (District manual on policies and procedures 1984).8

At DuBois High, an estimated 35.2 percent of the boys' suspensions were for "repeated school violations."9 That figure jumped to 63 percent with the inclusion of suspensions for which no specific reason was listed. Presumably, most unspecified cases were repeated school violations rather than some more specific and serious violation. A full 81.4 percent of the suspensions could be accounted for by adding the category "disruptive and offensive use of

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8. The physical education department also suspended students who were unprepared for gym class on three occasions. Those "one day" suspensions were not processed through the discipline office and are not a part of my report.

9. These figures come from the suspension reports compiled by one of the disciplinarians for the district. I selected three months, at random, from the 1986/87 school year and computed the percentages. These figures are compatible with my observations in the discipline office. The total number of boys suspended in those three months was 244.
language.” These figures demonstrate how heavily the discipline staff at DuBois, in accord with national patterns (see note 7), relied on suspensions to punish behaviors that threatened the school’s authority rather than its safety. The figures also emphasize the amount of discretion called for in disciplinary work. The issue of “labeling” enters when we examine how disciplinarians determine the definition of “repeated” violations and the instances when profane or obscene language warrants punishment.

The procedural instructions in the district manual for “repeated school violations” explained that the rule “basically... is aimed at those students whose conduct is consistently at odds with normal school discipline”; these were the students disciplinarians defined as “troublemakers.” The instructions went on to caution that a pupil should be suspended only when unacceptable behavior continued after all available school resources and services were tried or when an exceptionally serious act that warranted such action was committed.

Since the instructions did not define “available school resources and services,” the discipline staff, in practice, operated as if any “legitimate” case entering their office came there either because it was “an exceptionally serious act,” or because previous efforts by teachers, or perhaps counselors, had failed. Thus, beyond assessing whether “a teacher should have handled this,” disciplinarians made little or no effort to consider other school services.10

### The Social Construction of a Troublemaker

Conflicts over disciplinary practice arose because the definition of what constituted misconduct was itself problematic. Although the authors of the school’s rules identified the categories of punishable student behavior, they realized judgements about the meaning and seriousness of any particular behavior depended upon its specific social setting, the student’s intent, and the responses of others present. Understandably, some categories of misconduct, such as “disrupting class,” were necessarily vague or ambiguous. The immediate context of a student’s actions distinguished silliness or immaturity from insubordination or disruptiveness. Situational factors such as intent or provocation changed the meaning of an act. For that very reason, district regulations allowed disciplinarians considerable discretion.

10. Students had extremely limited access to any form of counselling. The few “guidance counsellors” in the school each had responsibility for hundreds of students and seemed to limited their “guidance” to brief conferences on scheduling or attendance problems. The only other counsellor I was aware of was a part-time drug counsellor from a private agency.
In practice, disciplinarians rarely questioned students about the details of their misbehavior or the reasons behind them. Instead, after identifying the charge against the student, they moved on to a series of questions about grades, attendance, previous suspensions, and, in some instances, the student's year in school, age, or plans for employment. A student's answers, rather than the particular circumstances of his actions, identified the misconduct's meaning to the disciplinarians. Only when a student's academic profile seemed to violate the disciplinarian's expectations would he or she inquire further about the charges against the student. They sought to punish "types of students" more than "types of behavior."

Whereas most students occasionally violated school rules, the proper role of the discipline office, as its staff understood it, was to deal with troublemakers who persistently disregarded the institution's authority. Information on grades, attendance, and prior disciplinary problems created a profile of the student's relationship to the school used to interpret the meaning of misconduct and the appropriateness of disciplinary intervention. Students who failed classes, played hookey, used drugs, or frequently troubled teachers with disruptive behavior were students who, in the minds of most school workers, did not belong in school.

The following example illustrates the use of questions to interpret the significance of a student's behavior:

Mr. Leary picked up the next file on his desk and called out, "Is Kenneth Watson out there?" Kenneth stood up and walked over to Mr. Leary's doorway.

Leary: "Kenneth?"

Kenneth: "Yeah."

Leary: "Sit down." Kenneth slumped into the chair in front of Mr. Leary's desk. In a combative voice: "I've got a pink slip here that says you were disrupting class. Talking. I thought we had this straightened out. Wasn't this straightened out?"

Kenneth: Muttering, "Yeah, I guess so."

Leary: "What do you mean, 'I guess so'? If it was straightened out, you wouldn't be here." He paused, looking down at the pink slip. "It says here you were talking in class. So what is this? I've got three others here for the same thing. Now what's the problem?"

Kenneth: "I don't know."

Leary: "Well, we already brought your mother in, didn't we?" Kenneth shook his head slightly, looking puzzled. "Yeah, you were present at the meeting." Mr. Leary looked again at the file.

"What class is it?"

Kenneth: "Math."

Leary: "How are you doing in it?" Kenneth shrugged. "Well, did you pass math in the last report?"

Kenneth nodded. "What grade did you get, then?" Mr. Leary shouted, clearly exasperated.

Kenneth: After a slight hesitation, "Two As and a B. I think I had an 89 for the last report and As for the ones before."

Leary: Visibly surprised. "You have As and Bs in math?" Slight pause, then. "You're in what, general math?"

Kenneth: "Algebra."

Leary: "Are you passing all your classes?"

Kenneth: "Yeah."

Leary: "Were you on the honor roll?"

Kenneth: "I don't know," still mumbling, still sullen.

Leary: "What do you mean you don't know! Were you in the lottery?"

Kenneth: He gestured over his shoulder in the direction of the main hallway. "That attendance thing?"

Leary: "No! We have one for grades, too. Didn't you go to the awards assembly?"

Kenneth: "Oh, yeah. I went to that. I got a slip. . .said to report. . .I didn't know."

11. McCarthy and Hoge (1987) found that school disciplinary sanctions were influenced by the student's past official record, grades, and "general demeanor in school." These findings suggest that the practices of the discipline staff at DuBois conform to those at other schools.
Leary: Quite frustrated, "Yeah, well I was there. I gave out the certificate and prize." He paused and looked down at the file again. "What does this mean, 'talking in class'?

Kenneth: Still mumbling. "We have these preclass exercises on the board. When I got that done, I end up talking."

Leary: "What, you have a problem to do when you get to class?"

Kenneth: "Yeah."

Leary: In a reasoning tone. "Well, if you finish up early can't you help out someone who isn't as bright as you, who has trouble in math?"

Kenneth: "He wants us to do our own work."

Leary: "Yeah, well, ok. That doesn't mean you have to talk. You make it sound like you can't control yourself. Why don't you do some studying for another class? A bright boy like you shouldn't have to go through all this. So what's the solution to this problem?"

Kenneth: "I guess I shouldn't talk in class."

Leary: "Alright. This is Mickey Mouse stuff." He paused. "You wait outside until the next period."

After Kenneth left the office, Mr. Leary turned to me and explained, 'Clearly a classroom problem. A kid like that can understand if you reason with him. It's not like some of the barely educable kids we see in here. The teacher—I don't know what the problem is—just wants to pass along the problem to us. We get a lot of that here. This teacher should just take him aside and talk to him, even if he has to do it every week'" (April 1984, italics added).

During my observation, three pink slips for disrupting class, a prior interview with a parent, and a sullen and uncooperative demeanor normally led to a student's suspension, a significant act in the creation of an official record. Disciplinarians typically did not ask students, "What does this mean?" Instead, they took "talking in class" as a known and unproblematic form of disruption.

In the case above, Mr. Leary began with the assumption that Kenneth, a student repeatedly sent to the office for disrupting class, must be a troublemaker. In the course of their interaction, however, Kenneth became a kid you could reason with; the talking in class became "Mickey Mouse stuff"; the whole problem became something the teacher should have dealt with. Each of these reconstructions occurred because Kenneth's grades altered the meaning of his behavior.

In most school workers' minds, students who received high grades demonstrated that they accepted the school's requirements and, presumably, acknowledged the value of the school's work. According to this reasoning, Kenneth obviously posed no challenge to the school's aims or operation—and indeed was one of its few success stories. Therefore, his talking in class, even if it recurred weekly, represented not a "repeated violation of school rules" but a problem with the teacher's ability to control the class.

**Parental Involvement**

A student's vulnerability to suspension, and to identification as a "troublemaker," may also depend upon his or her parents' ability to influence the actions of school personnel. As one NTA observed, "The only time you ever see a parent is when the kid is suspended and they have to come in." Indeed, according to district policy, "The primary purpose for the use of suspension is for the involvement of parents in the remediation of a problem." In interviews, disciplinarians confirmed this objective. Ms. Gordon, an NTA working as a disciplinarian, told me: "Suspension is strictly for communication. Not to hurt the student or punish the student." Both she and the others did, however, qualify that objective with conditions such as

12. The other purposes of suspension noted in the district's guidelines were: removing the student from the scene of difficulty, diffusing a situation when the final outcome is not yet assured, and displaying the school's dissatisfaction with the student's behavior.
“unless we can’t keep the kid in school because it was something serious or he completely defies authority.”

Although all agreed that suspensions served to bring parents into the school, the understanding among most school workers about what constituted “involvement of the parent in the remediation of a problem” challenged the claim that suspensions had no punitive intent. School workers expected parents to accept the school’s authority and to support its goals and practices. They expected parents to force their children to comply with the school’s rules. If parents suggested, through their words and demeanor, that they accepted the school’s authority and shared its judgement of their child, then disciplinarians interpreted “involvement” as “notification.” They informed the parents of the student’s misbehavior and, frequently, suggested strategies for controlling the student’s actions. However, if a parent either challenged the disciplinarian’s version of events or argued that the student was responsible for him or herself, “involvement” became more punitive in intent. One teacher explained how a student’s suspension would punish the parent and thereby encourage her to support the school’s efforts:

If you got to take a day off from work because of something your child has done, that’s going to make you put more pressure on him. If you can’t come up here, then you keep him home until you can come up here. He becomes your problem for four or five days. You got to worry about what he’s doing in your apartment or your house while you’re at work. Now you’re a little more concerned about this (Mr. Fisk May 1987).

The relatively disadvantaged status of most parents vis-a-vis school workers meant that many parents received disrespectful and dismissive treatment.13 Parents had few, if any, social or political resources with which to challenge a disciplinarian’s actions. Freed from the constraints more powerful, higher status parents might have imposed, disciplinarians reverted to three tactics when they faced opposition from students and parents: (1) they denigrated the parenting skills of the mother or father; (2) they threatened the student with failure, arrest, or expulsion—frequently without the power or intent to make good their threat; (3) they explicitly denied any personal responsibility or concern for resolving the problem.

In the course of a reinstatement conference, Carl told Mr. Weis, “She [the teacher] seen me, I was coming out of the bathroom, but she closed the door and wouldn’t let me in.” His mother characterized this as an “involuntary cut.” Weis countered by repeating the rule, “If you’re late to class, you’re not allowed in class. It’s a cut.” The mother muttered something about knowing all about it since she’d gone to school, too.

Weis: “Perhaps if you talked to your son—”
Mother: “I talk to Carl every day... but I have to go to work. and sleep. I can’t watch him every minute. And he is sixteen...”
Weis (to Carl): “You want to go to disciplinary school? Or drop out?” (To mother): “Cuz that’s where he’s headed. We won’t take him for a third year in tenth grade. Not at seventeen. (Mother mutters something)
You have a complaint that you’re not getting serviced properly, there’s a principal... I really have a problem that you didn’t insist on getting his second report [card]. How important is education to you? I know if I had kids, I wouldn’t let them get away with that... unless you’re going to support him for the rest of your life” (March 1987, italics added)

Mr. Weis told Carl’s mother that he needed more responsibility and discipline at home. She claimed that her son acted responsibly at home, it was only when he came to school that he “acted like a fool.” During the course of this discussion, someone delivered Carl’s grades to Mr. Weis which showed he was failing all of his classes. After a few minutes of berating Carl for his grades, Mr. Weis said, “I have no time for this. I am writing here, ‘to be dropped from school at

13. The relatively homogeneous background of DuBois students prohibited a comparative assessment of how a parent’s race and class affected her or his treatment by disciplinarians.
age seventeen if there is no improvement in grades and attendance." So you'll receive a letter this summer, when we make our review." As they left the office, Mr. Weis turned to me and said, "All bluff." I asked, "You can't drop him?" Weis said, "Naw." "Will he get a letter?" I asked. He answered, "No."

Mr. Weis admitted to me that he was bluffing; but in such an example his threat's impact came less from his actual power to expel the student—which, informally, he could and had done—than from his presentation of the school as unforgiving and unconcerned. It was not, in fact, unusual to hear him say to a parent: "This is your problem. You'll have to deal with it. I'll readmit him, but—I don't mind. I'll keep suspending him. It's not my problem" (April 1984).

This posture by a school official seems likely to affect "secondary deviance," that is, the student's continued violation of the school's expectations. Mr. Weis has emphasized to Carl that the school has little stake in his success and a primarily negative vision of his social value and personal worth—the very conditions which may strengthen his hostility toward the school and to foster his commitment to the troublemaker role. Even if Carl does not want to adopt the troublemaker identity, Mr. Weis has made it clear that he will be treated as one, in any case. Moreover, as I have suggested above, it seems likely that Mr. Weis's easy rejection of Carl and his mother, and his willingness to push Carl out of school, is connected to their social position. A higher status mother might have been successful in her efforts to define Carl's behavior as an "involuntary cut" and to forestall his classification as a troublemaker.

Getting Rid of Troublemakers

The discipline office had two strategies to get rid of students identified as troublemakers. One was to transfer the student; the other to drop the student from the roll. Transfers were of two types: "regular" transfers, arranged when students moved out of the school's catchment area; and "disciplinary transfers," known by their code as "21s." Dropping a student from the roll required that the student be 17 years old. At that age, schooling was no longer compulsory and the discipline office interpreted this to mean the school no longer had to keep the student.

Typically, if a disciplinarian sought a regular transfer for a troublesome student, arrangements were made for the student to shift his or her legal residence to the address of a relative in another part of the district. This procedure avoided the paperwork and legal proceedings of a disciplinary transfer. In the following incident, however, Mr. Weis discovered he could get rid of a troublemaker who already lived outside the normal bounds of the school. Mr. Weis began a conference with John, a boy I had seen in the office on two previous occasions, by asking, "What's your address?" After questioning, Weis discovered John's address put him in another school's catchment area. Weis called John's house:

Hello, Mrs. Preston? . . . well you'll have to wake her up. This is DuBois High School calling. . . Mrs. Preston, this is Carl Weis. John has been acting up again. He refused to take off his hat and has been disruptive. I have five pink slips on him. Look, I don't know why he's here and not at Northern Heights to start with. . . . Yeah, well, I'm going to write up a transfer for him and get all his records together. You'll have to come down tomorrow and take him over there and enroll him.

After John left the office, Weis turned to me and said:

14. Crespo (1974) found that a school's disciplinary responses to "skippers" (truants) did indeed lead to the amplification of deviance and, in many cases, encouraged students to drop out.

15. See Anderson's discussion of how "social selves" are constructed in social interaction; as he states, "a person is somebody because others allow him to be" (1976:38).
We didn’t solve anything. We just sent the problem along to Northern Heights. But we have to look out for ourselves. That’s the way it is—crazy system (April 1984, italics added).

Although this case was unusual in that the student already lived in another school’s catchment area, it was absolutely standard in intent. The goal of the discipline office, as Mr. Weis explained, was not to solve any problems a student might have, but to protect the school’s operation. Thus, in the case of another transfer, Mr. Leary confirmed Mr. Weis’s assessment of their goals. Mr. Leary escorted a boy and his mother out of the office and then sat down next to me. He explained:

Now that mother came in here, her son was suspended weeks ago for having a weapon, marijuana. Now she wants him transferred to Washington High. You know, for us, that’s fine. We get rid of one.

I asked if 21 transfers helped. He said:

They help this school. They don’t help the kid. But then, you can’t do anything with those kids, anyway (March 1986, italics added).

Transfers were, thus, seen as an important resource for the discipline office. If they could build a sufficiently strong case, they could get rid of a troublemaker, even if he wanted to remain in the school, through the use of a disciplinary transfer. Because district rules prohibited the use of 21s on students whose only offenses were cutting class or missing school, the disciplinarians took pains to document all other forms of misconduct on potential or identified troublemakers. Since they would be used for a 21, Mr. Leary stressed the importance of being detailed and complete when making out “pink slips.”

You don’t just write, “picked up for cutting class.” You write, “cutting class, ran away from officer, used abusive language,” all of which is true, but if you don’t write it down—or if there’s a disturbance in class, you write down, “shoved desks, said ‘fuck you’ to teacher”—you know, we’re not squeamish. We write down just what they say, “fuck you” or “fuck you white mother.”

Since the projected future or “career” of the forms influenced their form and content,16 the pink slips represent an important point at which discretion or “bias” can enter into the construction of an official disciplinary record.

Once disciplinarians filed the paperwork on a 21, a parent had to come in for a conference. The parent has the right to a hearing in the district superintendent’s office. If a parent does not want a hearing, he or she can sign a form during the conference transferring the child. The discipline staff and the principal work toward that goal, since all the paperwork goes to the district superintendent’s office for review when the parent wants a hearing. As Mr. Leary complained: “Then they mostly do nothing. Send the kid back. Decide he needs another chance.”

Student transfers were not the only means available to get rid of troublemakers. Another option used by the school was the informal expulsion of overage students. Although the state granted all students the right to attend public school until the age of twenty-one, it did not require attendance past the age of sixteen. At DuBois, school workers understood that to mean that they were not required to keep a student in school once he or she turned seventeen.17 It was not unusual, therefore, for disciplinarians to reason: “Look, he’s already eighteen and only in tenth grade. You know he can only stay in school ‘til he’s twenty-one. I don’t want him here. I’m going to talk to [the principal].” That logic also permitted the following scene. A police officer escorted four boys into the discipline office. The officer stopped at Weis’s door. Weis sent the boys into Leary’s office.

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16. See Meehan (1986) for a discussion of how the projected use of police records shape their form and content as well as for a discussion of how police officers infer the meaning or accuracy of a record.

17. In the official statistics for the 1985/86 school year, all but six of the 335 dropouts were categorized as “overage.”
The officer: Two with, two without IDs.
Weis: This one I don't know. He might be an adult. I don't know if he's a juvenile. This one's a student. Doesn't come in very often.

Weis asked the boy he didn't recognize how old he was. The boy said he was seventeen, went to DuBois, and was in tenth grade.

Weis: You don't go to DuBois. I just dropped you as of now. I'm not suspending you. I'm dropping you from school.

Weis said to the officer, in reference to the other boy who was younger:

You're going to leave the building right now.
Older boy: How many days suspension?
Weis: I just told him. Two months, three months, 'til his mother comes in (April 1986).

Although in this example the student demonstrated little interest in attending school, other students who did want to attend but who ran into problems with the discipline office were also subject to the informal expulsion of an "overage drop." In the following instance, Nicholas had missed most of his first period math classes because of familial responsibilities.

Weis: What're you in for?
Nicholas: Mr. Fisk suspended me cuz I missed his class.
Weis: Let me get your folder.

He left the office and returned with the folder. To Nicholas's stepfather he said:

As you are aware, sir, Nicholas was out of school and then let back in school. When he was readmitted, he signed a contract that he would attend school and behave himself. Right now, he's overage, still in tenth grade, not passing [one class]. I recommend dropping him.
Nicholas: That's only one class!
Weis: But that's enough. You are overage in tenth grade. You have to pass... .
Nicholas: Don't you want to know why I missed—
Weis: No reason is—you signed a contract.
Nicholas: I had to do something for my mother.
Weis: You're eighteen years old, third year in tenth grade, you have to set priorities. If that's to do something for your mother—you signed a contract that you would obey all the rules and attend all your classes. You know, we wanted to transfer you before. Do you have a relative in another neighborhood (March 1987, italics added)?

The conference established that Nicholas was a classic troublemaker. He had previously been dropped from school, and was overage, behind in grade, and failing a class. Mr. Weis wanted him out of the school. Since he could not initiate a disciplinary transfer on the grounds of cutting class. Mr. Weis explored his two other options: an "overage" drop pressed on Nicholas because he had violated the terms of his readmission contract, and a regular transfer based on the pretense that Nicholas had changed residence.

It is important to note that because he did not conform to all of the school's demands, the school workers focused on how to exclude Nicholas rather than on how to solve his problems or to work around them. As I learned from lengthy interviews with both Nicholas and his stepfather, Nicholas had tried to work within the system. As he told me:

I have this first period class and I'm supposed to be there at five minutes before eight. And I have to take my pieces to day care in the morning... . They live with me, and there's no one else there, you know, that could take them. It's inconvenient for my mother cuz she leaves so early. And their

18. Crespo noted, "students who do not find school rewarding are more prepared to consider missing it. In this sense, the tracking system provides the invitational edge to the activity of skipping" (1974:133). Students in lower tracks are offered less stimulating and less valuable educational experiences (Oakes 1985). We must remember, therefore, that the school bears some responsibility for its students' attitudes and behaviors.
mom is in Florida. So I was the only one that could take them. So I was taking them, and I wasn’t making the class. But I was bringing notes and stuff in to show them. . . . Mr. Fisk wouldn’t contact my mother or nothing. He just kept on telling me the notes aren’t going to do no good. . . . I talked to my mother at one time. And that’s when she told me she was going to try to work something out [about taking the girls to day care]. But at the moment to keep taking them. . . . You know, so that’s when I went to see the counselor. She told me to see [someone else], . . . he was absent two days I brought in the note. . . . Probably if I went to see [the counselor] earlier, I would have probably got help. But I didn’t know who to go to see. I thought he was the teacher, I was supposed to give the notes and all that to him. . . . [When I did see the counselor], she was saying there’s not much you can do, and everything. I could have got a roster change if it was like the beginning.

The school workers blamed his mother for putting Nicholas in the position of having to care for his sister’s daughters and blamed him for accepting that responsibility. Mr. Fisk explained:

Why should that responsibility become his? The parent has to take more active—why would you thrust that responsibility on your offspring if it’s creating problems in the school? . . . If he’s thrust into this situation and he knows it’s threatening his possibilities for graduation, for promotion, for passing this class, if he’s truly serious about passing, he has to lighten the load. And there’s only one load he can lighten. And that’s the supervision of this [niece]. So that means sitting down with whomever.

Mr. Fisk assumed that the solution to the problem involved “sitting down” with someone. Nicholas, therefore, was penalized for his mother’s inability or unwillingness to make his education the family’s priority.

Nicholas confronted a system which his parents had little skill in handling or power to influence, and which rejected his own efforts. Had he come from a middle-income family, it is likely he would have fared better. Not only would it have been less likely for such a family/school conflict to arise, but a middle-income parent would have had greater success in manipulating the bureaucratic requirements of the school system. As it was, Nicholas’s family circumstances allowed—one might even argue, encouraged—both Mr. Fisk and Mr. Weis to dismiss him as another troublemaker who did not value education.

**Being “At Risk”**

When I spoke to Ms. Riley, the vice principal of DuBois High, she was not “amazed” that 335 of her students had “dropped out” in the previous year. Instead, citing how many kids faced problems at home or on the streets, she was amazed that so many of them “made it.” DuBois High students who faced disruption, violence, substance abuse, or conflicting obligations to school and family were understandably distracted, uncooperative, or truant. Manifesting those symptoms of broader social ills, however, brought them into contact with the discipline office. There troubled students were rather easily reconceptualized as troublemakers. And troublemakers were readily seen as undeserving of the school’s services. This process is all the more disturbing when we consider that inner-city African Americans and Hispanics are disproportionately likely to suffer from such social ills. The activities of the discipline office, which routinely identified “troublemakers” and “got rid of” them through suspensions and involuntary drops, may be one important but largely unacknowledged mechanism through which schools perpetuate the racial and class stratification of the larger society.

Ironically, educational research has served to legitimate the actions of the disciplinarians. In a conference to reinstate a student following his suspension for poor attendance, Mr. Leary remarked:

I’m talking to you like a man. . . . this is a turning point in your life. You can go either way: follow the rules and graduate, or drop out of the whole school system. You signed this contract. I’m going to reinstate you.
But I tell you quite frankly, you got to get up, whatever you got to do, and get to school. I know, there's no doubt in my mind, [the principal] *is going to want to drop you*. *Not because he wants to be mean, but statistics prove it out* (March 1986, italics added).

Indeed, the statistics prove that students are most likely to "drop out" of high school if they come from a low-income background, are frequently absent or truant, have a record of school suspensions, are failing classes, and are overage in grade (Hahn and Danzberger 1987; Natriello 1986). But what is proven? Those factors are the very indicators that disciplinarians used to define troublemakers and that led to suspensions, disciplinary transfers, and involuntary drops. Although it is unwise to generalize from the findings of one case study, we can nevertheless ask: are "risk factors" correlated with "dropping out" because they are used routinely by school workers to expel students? If that is the case, then disciplinarians' daily activities play an important role in regulating social mobility.

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