

## Cultural Considerations in School Discipline of African Americans (USA)

C. Northington Purdie  
William Paterson University, USA

### Abstract

*The division of America's non-White subcultures into four broad racial categories (i.e., White, Hispanic, Asian and African American) is artificial and serves to minimize specific characteristics of enormous diversity. Moreover, this division does not take in to account the cultural distinctions lent by factors such communication, social interactions, and cultural predilections. These dimensions of diversity can influence differences in classroom behavior and the ways in which teachers implement discipline. Despite a common nationality, socially acceptable behaviors, beliefs and sources of motivation can vary greatly. In order to be an effective classroom manager and educator of African American students, these factors must be taken into account before class rules, rewards and consequences are conceptualized.*

### 1. Introduction

An understanding of culture can facilitate effective classroom management. A lack of understanding can cause educators to penalize students for exhibiting classroom behaviors that actually facilitate the learning experience for them. The uniqueness of the United States as a country is its demographical diversity. The demographical variety creates a fusion of subcultures that continuously define the national distinctiveness. Each of the subcultures acknowledged by the 2010 U.S. Census, (white, African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Pacific Islander etc.) combined with the cultural distinctions of religion and socioeconomic status (which, it might be argued, constitutes a

culture in and of itself) bring unique behavioral characteristics, rituals and tendencies. [1] Differences in communication, learning styles, and interpretations of body language therefore, are inevitable. Misunderstandings in professional scenarios are commonplace necessitating the need for cultural sensitivity training and multicultural education. Research indicates at this is also true in the public school classroom.

### 2. The Problem

According to the most recent census, African Americans comprise 12.9% of the overall population. [1] This is a relatively small percentage, yet African American students are disproportionately disciplined with detention, suspension and expulsion from school. In an examination of classroom discipline in the United States Losen and Skiba point out that in African Americans at 6% suspension compared to white students (roughly 3%). The students who are routinely suspended from school, tend to be considered the lower achievers. It would appear therefore, that students who are excluded from school for days at a time are the ones who need the structure of the school environment the most. [2]

The offenses that African American students are also routinely penalized for often reflect the behavior and natural tendencies of the subcultural. According to a meta-analysis conducted by the National Education Policy Center for example, teachers tend to disproportionately penalize African American students for minor offenses such as: excessive talking in class, and disrupting the class. One of the cited disruptions was referred to as

"excessive noise" which when described, referred to talking and calling out during a lesson without raising their hands. Losen suggests that these behaviors lend themselves to subjective judgment on the part of the teacher. [3] Such subjectivity can be guided by influences such as prior experience, lack of knowledge of the subculture, or bias from social stereotypes. It is therefore conceivable that a lack of understanding of the educational requirements of the African American subculture can cause teachers to unfairly penalize students for exhibiting the very behaviors in class that facilitate learning.

The styles of communication that enable students to affirm, question and understand concepts are misunderstood and frequently penalized in mainstream U.S. schools. Teachers who are unaware of the implications of their African American students' "excessive noise" may well be the instigators of the high dropout rates and lack of investment in education.

### **3. Cultural Distinction: Call and Response**

An example of the cultural distinctions that can influence communication can be observed in traditional African-American churches. During the sermons (in primarily Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal congregations), there is a tendency for the parishioners to talk back to the preacher. This call and response format is unique to the African American church and it is almost expected, to the extent that when the audience is too quiet, the minister might comment on it. He or she might say things like, "somebody say Amen!" To which the audience enthusiastically responds in kind. It is also a common occurrence for parishioners to spontaneously stand while the minister is preaching in order to affirm or agree with what is being said. Moreover, during the sermon, the church musicians even play music to punctuate the clergy-person's key points. To an outsider, this might appear rude and disrespectful to the speaker. Quite the opposite is true.

This phenomenon however reflects the cultural distinction of a communication style, which is unique to African American people. The origins of call and response communication are African and have been part of American culture for centuries. During slavery for example, it was often necessary for slaves to deliver cryptic messages to each other in order to send warnings and other information beyond the understanding of the slave masters. When a student enthusiastically calls in class out without raising his/her hand in the traditional classroom, it is universally frowned upon. It is construed as an infraction of class rules. For the most part, it is not tolerated. Commenting to peers in the classroom about the lecture or assignment while the teacher delivers it is also discouraged. If overt acknowledgement of a speaker is the "default" communication setting then the tendency to prohibit feedback until it is called for requires adjustment for both teacher and student. Such enthusiasm however, could be encouraged within the constraints of an orderly respectful educational environment.

A perpetually quiet classroom suggests the absence of inquiry or class discussion. It has been established both nationally and internationally that cooperative learning and peer interaction can provide instruction that is equally as valuable as traditional lecture formats. Lively classroom discourse stimulates critical thinking and higher order cognitive skills. "The instructor's role is not to transmit information, but to serve as a facilitator for learning" [4] Cooperative (and collaborative) learning should therefore be the default setting of the class. Students should expect to interact with peers toward the acquisition of knowledge.

### **4. Cultural Distinction: "Excessive Noise"**

In U.S. history, there are examples of the tendency for African Americans to affirm situations, ideas and concepts in a demonstrative, conversational fashion. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, musicians began to respond to jazz solos and chord progressions with

rhythmic, nonsense utterances during the song. This was later called “scatting”. During concerts, audience members were also encouraged to respond to the band members at set times. An example of this is exemplified by the “conversational” scat style of jazz singer Cab Calloway. During the 1920’s, he encouraged the audience to repeat after him as he scatted the “lyrics” to his songs.

The sub culture that originated call and response, and scatting is also responsible for a phenomenon that has transformed contemporary music. Hip hop and rap artists have taken it to any even more complex level of communicative camaraderie. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there arose a tendency for disc jockey’s and others to play a song and rather than singing along to the lyrics, people would speak rhythmically and poetically to the beat of the music. They would often ignore the pre-established lyrics by muting the singers. Eventually, songs were created to showcase the abilities of artists to rap to the music. It would seem clear that this communicative distinction has extended from the subculture to mainstream culture. The public school classroom is a microcosm of mainstream culture.

Effective communication cannot exist in a cultural vacuum. Those who seek to effectively teach African American children would do well to remember this. Continuously penalizing students for talking does not cause students to talk any less in class. It does, however, provoke resentment and negativity toward the educational institution. The high school dropout rates reflect this as well. [3] Penalizing this behavior in the classroom is detrimental to a positive experience of school.

Instead, opportunities should be afforded students to use “talking” as an avenue toward enlightenment. Rather than penalizing students for talking in class for example, they should be given a curriculum-related subject about which to talk. Most core curriculum standards nationally have the requirement of oration as a benchmark. Assigning talkative students the requirement of appropriately addressing the

class therefore is in keeping with the most instructional objectives.

## 5. Cultural Distinction: Respect

In 1986, an African American hip hop group called Public Enemy introduced the word “dis” to the American lexicon that has since become an accepted and adopted word in most American dictionaries. “Dis” is short for disrespect, and it has insidiously become part of the everyday language of generation s x, y and m. The historical struggles of African Americans throughout the country’s history (E.g., emancipation of the slaves, the civil rights movement) center around the demand for respect and equitable treatment.

In a qualitative analysis examining the educational impact of White teachers on the achievement levels of African American students, researchers Douglas et al concluded that when students suspect that their teachers do not hold the structure of their families, their real efforts in the classroom and primary culture in general on the same level as their own they perceive that they have been disrespected. The experience of disrespect can engender anger, frustration, misbehavior, and even dropping out [5].

Students’ perception of the respect (or the lack thereof) from their teachers is one of the many factors identified by Douglas et al as a significant factor in underachievement. They point out that stereotype about African American children and the behaviors that reflect those stereotypes place an additional emotional and cognitive burden on students. In addition to achieving academically, they perceive that they are expected to act in ways that negate every stereotype against them. The challenge of proving the stereotype wrong, in addition to achieving academically can be burdensome. It is as if they carry the weight of all African American people on their shoulders in the classroom. Among the conclusions, it is stated that, “Teachers don’t think in neutral terms but according to or in terms of personal

frames of references.” (p. 57) It would seem necessary therefore to concentrate the priorities of teacher education on the fostering of objective and unbiased perceptions of students of all demographics [5].

In the classroom therefore, teachers should model the standard of respect that they would like to observe. Operating under the traditional maxim “don’t smile until October” is detrimental the establishment of the classroom as a community of learners. It behooves a teacher needs to be a human being from the first day of school to the last. Being human does not equal being a pushover, it does however, lend humanity to an educator. Genuine emotions are respected (even if they are negative); a teacher that appears non-genuine is eschewed. An emotionless teacher is perceived as a teacher that really doesn’t care. Disrespectful behaviors toward the teacher are often a result of these perceptions.

It has long been known that students with the tendency to act out in class tend to do so in order to fulfill a need (e.g., need for attention, revenge, power, etc.) [6]. Taking the time to understand these needs can clarify the reasons for misbehavior. This in turn, can inspire humane and innovative interventions. Mentoring troublesome students for example, rather than ignoring them can showcase a teacher’s respect for the students’ needs (however dysfunctional) and further establish meaningful relationships.

## 6. Cultural Consideration: Community

The concept of collectivism emphasizes the cultural tendency to operate for the good of the group rather than the individual. This resonates to Abraham Maslow’s humanistic theory of motivation in which the need for belonging focuses the desire to be accepted, fit in, and to perceive oneself as having a place in the world [7]. The circumstances under which African American became citizens of the United States necessitated a form of collective camaraderie and communication in order to meet, plan and

work toward emancipation from slavery. Even the use of the English language was (and is) customized with metaphors and phrases that are often understood by the collective only. This cultural propensity toward collectivism caused lawmakers to create laws prohibiting African Americans from congregating in public. Change agents began meeting in church congregations, clubs, lodges and schools.

It might be argued that popular culture; social media and the lack of a unifying cause have eroded the collective. However, the tendency to value belonging and community remains evident. In the absence of a unifying religious organization, role models and/or a persistent sense of oppression youth have resorted to other forms of collectivism. Gang membership reflects this tendency. Maslow specifies the work environment as a meaningful source of belonging and an organized collective. A child’s work environment is his school.

It is therefore incumbent upon the educators to create an environment that affirms and emphasizes a form of belonging and camaraderie. Educators need to consciously create a learning environment that acknowledges and respects the distinctiveness of its community. This acknowledgement should affirm the richness of variety that diversity can engender. The priorities of curriculum and achievement should reflect the needs of the populace.

Teachers can create a sense of community in the classroom by establishing *meaningful* personal relationships. A necessary first step toward this is becoming familiar with the neighborhood and community leaders. Introductions to parents should be made as soon as a teacher is appointed to a school. The inclusion of parental input is also essential to the establishment of a classroom collective. Effective relationships with parents can greatly facilitate classroom management as well. Email and an Internet website enable communication in ways that did not exist in the previous century.

Addressing students by name and deliberately making eye contact during conversations is essential. Class meetings are a proven way to encourage interaction between teacher and students. These meetings can be used to discuss ideas that would enhance the educational experience. Classroom management priorities can also be clarified during such venues. [7] One-on-one conferences between teacher and student can also facilitate community.

## 7. Conclusion

In order to be an effective, culturally sensitive classroom manager, an educator must believe that all students, regardless of cultural background or economic circumstance have the capacity to learn. The absence of this belief is reflected teaching objectives and expectations as well as personal disposition. Classroom expectations and assignments should challenge students of all levels to work beyond their levels of comfort. Specific standards of achievement should challenge students to realize their potential.

In a culture that prides itself on being a “melting pot” of cultures, ethnicities and religions, the one-size-fits-all approach to classroom management is inappropriate. Effective teaching involves incorporating interactional styles of teaching (peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher). Understanding the cooperative nature of “social education” and its efficacy can create a learning environment with fewer discipline challenges. The teaching of acceptable classroom behavior should reflect cultural sensitivity.

## 8. References

[1] U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Tables [2] PL1 and PL2; and 2010 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Tables P1 and P2.

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