

Schooling in segregated America

Confronting our beliefs about poverty and discipline

School practitioners often assume kids from low-income backgrounds belong to a distinct and dysfunctional culture.

By **Edward Fergus**



Dating back to *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Mendez v. Westminster*, and other landmark court decisions of the mid-20th century, civil rights advocates have prioritized efforts to desegregate school systems and ensure the equitable distribution of educational resources.

However, the civil rights struggle has always focused not just on passing laws and securing resources but also on challenging the beliefs that underlie segregation and worsen its effects. And the more researchers have learned about the psychology of racial discrimination, the more obvious the need to tackle certain biases that continue to be prevalent among educators, resulting in deficit-based thinking (Valencia, 1997), low academic expectations for particular students (e.g., Clark & Zygmunt, 2014; McKown & Weinstein, 2008), and misguided claims of “colorblindness” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Boutte et al., 2011; Fergus, 2017).

An additional form of bias — poverty-disciplining belief — has received somewhat less attention from equity advocates, but it appears to be quite common in schools. Poverty-disciplining belief is the assumption that poverty itself is a kind of “culture,” characterized by dysfunctional behaviors that prevent success in school (Fergus, 2016). In effect, it pathologizes children who live (or whose parents lived) in low-income communities. And while it doesn’t focus on race per se, it is often used as a proxy for race and to justify racial disparities in disciplinary referrals, achievement, and enrollment in gifted, AP, and honors courses, as well as to justify harsh punishments for “disobedience” or “disorderly conduct” or “disrespect.”

By way of illustration, consider a meeting I had recently with a superintendent whose district, according to my analysis, gives disproportionate numbers of suspensions and disciplinary referrals to Black students. As I explained to him, the local data are consistent with a robust body of previous research showing that whatever their free or reduced-price lunch status, Black students tend to be singled out more often than White students for such punishments (Skiba et al., 2002), which suggests racial bias on the part of some educators.

But such disparities don’t necessarily imply bias, he argued, as he showed me a spreadsheet he had compiled. “I’m a former math teacher,” he said, “so I feel very comfortable doing relative risk ratios.” His data revealed the same pattern as mine: In his district, rates of suspension were significantly higher for Black students, independent of family income. However, he offered a very different explanation: “See, these kids are poor, and do you understand how poor kids behave? . . . they have their pants sagging, use inappropriate language, and just don’t care about school.”

In that moment, the superintendent provided a clear window into his thinking. As he saw it: 1) whatever their family income level, Black kids are “poor,” 2) poor kids behave in dysfunctional ways, and 3) such behaviors can be corrected by suspensions and disciplinary referrals. In short, he assumed that students from historically low-income communities are prone to specific mannerisms, speech patterns, and actions that prevent their success in school, and which are best controlled by way of punishments.

EDWARD FERGUS (eddiefergus@gmail.com; @eddiearcia) is assistant professor of policy, organizational, & leadership studies in the College of Education at Temple University, Philadelphia, Penn. He is the author of *Solving Disproportionality and Achieving Equity* (Corwin Press, 2016).

In their book *Disciplining the Poor* (2011), Joe Soss, Richard Fording, and Sandford Schram explain that over the last 20 or so years, social welfare policy (beginning with the Welfare to Work programs of the 1990s) has been dominated by the notion that low-income individuals' "civic incorporation can be achieved only by forcing the poor to confront a more demanding and appropriate 'operational definition of citizenship'" (p. 5). In other words, many policy makers have assumed that the best way to help people escape poverty is to *discipline* them. If they cannot succeed in school, hold down a job, stay sober, save money, and otherwise behave as good citizens, it isn't because they lack opportunities, supports, and resources. Rather, the theory goes, it's because their community has instilled in them certain behavioral and psychological dispositions that prevent them from helping themselves.

Assumptions about poverty, culture, and biology

The belief that poor people are in need of discipline rests, in turn, on a highly debatable premise, the idea that the economic status of a community determines the value of its cultural practices: The poorer the community, the more impoverished and dysfunctional its culture; the richer the community, the more culturally refined it must be.

That's hardly a new idea; elites in every society tend to assert the superiority of their chosen customs, norms, and behaviors. But in recent decades it has been given an academic sheen, beginning with the cultural deprivation theory (also known as the "culture of poverty" argument) of the 1960s, which maintained that the low academic performance of racial and ethnic minorities stemmed from their deficient cultural practices (e.g., Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965). Supposedly, parents in certain cultures tend to suppress the development of linguistic, cognitive, and affective skills their children need to succeed in school.

For example, the sociologist Celia Heller (1966) argued that the cultural practices of Mexican-American families work against them in the United States. "This type of upbringing," Heller asserted, "creates stumbling blocks to future advancement by stressing values that hinder mobility — family ties, honor, masculinity, and living in the present — and by neglecting the values that are conducive to it — achievement, independence, and deferred gratification" (pp. 34-35). Further, these deficient cultural norms are passed on from one generation to the next, argued Oscar Lewis (1961), who claimed that low-income Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans self-perpetuate a culture of poverty that promotes violence, political apathy, and an inability to defer gratification. These cultural practices, according to Lewis, are embedded in children's behavior by the time they are six or

seven years old and continue even if the economic status of the community improves.

In my own research, I've found such beliefs about poverty and culture to be common even today among educators working in public schools (e.g., Fergus et al., 2014). For example, Table 1 illustrates the frequency of poverty-discipline beliefs among teachers, staff, and administrators across 11 school districts. Among the nearly 1,600 practitioners surveyed, nearly a third agreed (ranging from somewhat to strongly agree) that the values students learn growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods conflict with school values; more than a quarter agreed that such students do not value education, and roughly one in six believe poor kids lack the abilities necessary to succeed in school. In short, a significant percentage of school practitioners appear to believe that the values and behaviors learned in low-income communities conflict with those taught in school.

Increasingly, I've found also that educators are framing their assumptions about poor and minority children in terms borrowed from the biological and cognitive sciences, especially research into the effects of long-term exposure to lead paint, food insecurity, violence, and other environmental dangers, and a lack of exposure to certain positive influences, such as frequent reading time at home.

A prime example of the latter has to do with Betty Hart and Todd Risley's well-known 1995 study of vocabulary development, in which middle-income preschool-age children were found to have been exposed, at home, to 30-million more words, on average, than their low-income peers. In fact, more recent research suggests that the Hart and Risley study neglected to account for words spoken by multiple caregivers and bystanders, which led them to significantly underestimate the number of words kids from low-income families heard (Sperry, Sperry, & Miller, 2018). Still, though, the study is often cited as evidence of a cultural deficiency: If many poor kids arrive at school already behind in literacy development, then the blame must lie with the low-income community's values and cultural practices.

Similarly, in recent years we have seen an explosion of research into the effects of childhood trauma, and many educators have become aware that prolonged exposure to traumatic events — which tends to be somewhat more prevalent in low-income communities — is a leading contributor to various risky behaviors and negative health outcomes later in adulthood (Anda et al., 2008). Unfortunately, however, educators sometimes interpret this to mean that childhood poverty *itself* is a form of trauma.

Several times, I've heard practitioners use the phrase "trauma kids" to describe students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. And, in some instances, school practitioners have even gone so far as to argue that students' low-income status

TABLE 1.
Educator beliefs about students from disadvantaged backgrounds

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
The values and beliefs shared by those in disadvantaged neighborhoods tend to go against school values and beliefs about what makes up a good education.	17.1%	31%	16.6%	22.8%	8.7%	3.8%
Students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not value education as much other students	25.8%	33.8%	14.4%	19.4%	5%	1.6%
Disadvantaged students generally do not have the abilities necessary to succeed in the classroom	33.6%	35.8%	14.5%	11.5%	3.4%	1.2%

Source: The Disproportionality School Climate (DSC) survey, conducted by the author in 2012-13. The DSC was used to survey nearly 1,600 practitioners in school districts cited by various state education agencies for their disproportionate representation of Black and Latinx students in special education and suspension. The survey includes items that focus on perceptions of school level pre-referral and intervention processes, perceptions of race and cultural difference, teacher self-efficacy, expectations of student educational achievement, self-report of monthly academic and behavioral referrals, and perception of culturally responsive instructional practices. The mean response rate is 65%.

alone is sufficient justification for placing them in special education or remedial academic services. Recently, for example, when I visited a school to review its tiered approach to providing social and emotional supports, the principal shared with me their interpretation of a trauma-informed workshop they attended. Referring to kids growing up in poverty, the principal noted that “the research shows that the frontal lobe of their brain is being activated during their fight and flight mode and causes them to have smaller brains in the back of their head I think these kids need to be placed in a self-contained environment so they can get the necessary support.”

In short, not only do significant numbers of school practitioners believe that when students from low-income backgrounds struggle it must be the fault of their culture, but some practitioners are tempted to dress up that belief in “scientific” evidence about what it means to grow up in poverty. Supposedly, it is the nature of low-income families to expose their children to trauma and to deny them appropriate support for language development.

But in fact, mountains of research findings suggest that while poverty may put children at somewhat elevated risk for trauma and other negative influences on development, poverty is far from a deterministic condition (Spencer, 2006). If an individual student has trouble learning to read, behaving appropriately in class, or meeting other expectations, it is for complex reasons having to do with that individual and the specific people and institutions in their lives. It is not simply *because* they are poor.

Fixing our blind spots

Anthropologists often point out that cultures are slippery things — they are made up of shared sets of implicit and explicit values, norms, concepts, and rules of behavior that

are continuously evolving and being redefined by members of the group (Geertz, 1973). When outsiders try to pin down the nature of a particular culture, then, one has to wonder why they are so intent on doing so. What do they have to gain by asserting that, say, poor children are impulsive and disrespectful? Why are they pointing to race or economic class to explain why a certain group of students struggles to succeed in school? And who’s doing the pointing?

Rather than confront the possibility that they have allowed racial bias to influence their decisions about disciplinary referrals and school suspensions, the superintendent I described earlier assigned blame to an entire category of young people, asserting that “poor kids” dress, behave, and talk in inappropriate ways. Clearly, the superintendent has a blind spot, as do all educators who adopt a poverty-disciplining belief. In reality, poverty is a complex economic and social condition, in which trauma is common but so too is resilience, and so too are institutions (such as faith-based organizations, community centers, extended family structures, and sometimes schools as well) that protect young people from trauma and mitigate the effects of food insecurity, exposure to crime, and other dangers (Fergus et al., 2014).

The challenge for educators is to get over the habit of pathologizing entire populations of young people, as though the struggles of individual students could ever be explained merely by pointing out that they’re poor. We need to get it into our heads that poverty is not a deterministic condition; it doesn’t tell us anything about the ways in which any particular kid — from any particular race or ethnicity — will develop, the kinds of instruction they’ll need, or the level of “discipline” they require.

Further, given the inevitability of our own blind spots, we have a responsibility to seek out regular feedback on the racial and economic ecology of our schools. As Eduardo

Bonilla-Silva (2006) has argued, even if there are no out-and-out racists among us, racism is still often woven tightly into the social fabric of our schools, subtly influencing our assumptions about ability, intelligence, behavior, and more. That's why it's so important to conduct surveys of school climate and culture (also known as belief audits) that give students, teachers, and staff the chance to identify the biases they experience (for example, having to do with disciplinary referrals, dress codes, teaching assignments, and extracurricular opportunities) and prompt a closer inspection to learn more and decide whether and how the school should respond.

Finally, we need to confront our own tepid commitment to diversifying the K-12 workforce. To date, few educational leaders have opened their eyes to the ways teacher diversity matters to the work of cultivating a culturally responsive humanity, bringing greater knowledge to the instructional and curricular repertoire of our schools. Simply put, teacher diversity increases the likelihood that children will be seen and understood as individuals, rather than being viewed through the lens of cultural stereotypes (Waite et al., 2018). Yet, in the decades since *Brown v. Board of Education*, the racial composition of our K-12 workforce has become less and less representative of the diversity of our student population. As of 2011, Black and Latinx students comprised 40% of the nation's public school enrollment, and they are projected to comprise the majority by 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). However, the teaching force remains mostly White (81.9% in 2011) and increasingly female (84% in 2011, up from 69% in 1986).

Thus, while the last 70 years haven't brought us the integration of White, Black, and Latinx students (who've only become more segregated), we have seen a large-scale integration of White female teachers with Black and Latinx students. The implications of this trend have rarely been discussed, however, and very important questions have gone unanswered: Have we cultivated the tools to manage this massive project of integrating White teachers and students of color? How should we do so? Until we improve the diversity of our teacher workforce, and until our preparation programs figure out how to address the racial assumptions and poverty-disciplining beliefs of new teachers, it will be up to local school and district leaders to tackle this challenge. ■

References

- Anda, R.F., Brown, D.W., Dube, S.R., Bremner, J.D., Felitti, V.J., and Giles, W.G. (2008). Adverse childhood experiences and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 34 (5), 396-403.
- Bloom, B., Davis, A., & Hess, R. (1965). *Compensatory education for cultural deprivation*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and persistence of racial inequality in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Boutte, G., Lopez-Robertson, J., & Powers-Costello, E. (2011). Moving beyond colorblindness in early childhood classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 39 (5), 335-342.
- Clark, P. & Zygmont, E. (2014). A close encounter with personal bias: Pedagogical implications for teacher education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 83, 147-161.
- Fergus, E. (2016). Social reproduction ideologies: Teacher beliefs about race and culture. In D. Connor, B. Ferri, & S. Annamma (Eds.), *DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Fergus, E. (2017). Interrogating the White teacher and students of color integration project: Understanding the role of bias-based beliefs in disproportionality. *Theory into Practice*, 56 (3), 169-177.
- Fergus, E., Noguera, P., & Martin, M. (2014). *Schooling for resilience: Improving the life trajectory of Black and Latino boys*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: P.H. Brookes.
- Heller, C. (1966). *Mexican American youth: The forgotten youth at the crossroads*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Lewis, O. (1961). *The children of Sanchez*. New York, NY: Random House.
- McKown, C. & Weinstein, R.S. (2008). Teacher expectations, classroom context, and the achievement gap. *Journal of School Psychology* 46 (3), 235-261.
- National Center for Education Statistics (2011). *Schools and Staffing Survey*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.
- Skiba, R.J., Michael, R.S., Nardo, A.C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *Urban Review*, 34, 317-342.
- Soss, J., Fording, R., & Schram, S. (2011). *Disciplining the poor: Neoliberal paternalism and the persistent power of race*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Spencer, M.B. (2006). Phenomenology and ecological systems theory: Development of diverse groups. In W. Damon & R.M. Lerner (Series Eds.) & R.M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 829-893). New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Sperry, D., Sperry, L., & Miller, P. (2018, April 30). Reexamining the verbal environments of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. *Child Development*.
- Valencia, R.R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. Oxford, UK: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Waite, S., Mentor, M., & Bristol, T. J. (2018). Growing our own: Reflections on developing a pipeline for male educators of color. *Journal of the Center for Policy Analysis and Research*, 1 (1), 148-166.