Designed to Control, Destined to Fail? Disciplinary Practices at an Inner-City Elementary School in the United States

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Introduction
Disciplinary systems are designed to control. In *Discipline and Punish* (1995) Michel Foucault describes discipline as ‘a specific technology of power’ (p.194) that controls in order to achieve its objective of producing obedient bodies that are docile and useful (ibid: 138 and 211). At School James, an inner-city elementary school in a high-poverty neighbourhood in a large city in the Midwestern United States, a highly detailed system of rules and punishments is supposed to control students. The official rationale underlying this disciplinary system is to create the ‘best teaching and learning environments possible’ and ensure that students do not ‘compromise their futures through bad behavior and disrespectful practices’ (PSA Code of Conduct). According to Foucault (1995: 140), disciplinary control is implemented through a focus on detail, meticulous regulations, and the ‘supervision of the smallest fragment of life and body’. In disciplinary systems, everything is observed and everything is punishable, even the ‘slightest departures from correct behaviour’ (ibid: 178). On the one hand, disciplinary power relies on a ‘network of gazes’ – a permanent state of ubiquitous surveillance mutually applied by individuals on each other (ibid: 170). Underlying Foucault’s panopticism is the idea that ‘[i]t is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection’ (ibid: 187). On the other hand, disciplinary power relies on rewards and punishments. Rewards create an incentive to behave in the desired ways (ibid: 180). Punishments, in turn, are supposed to deter imitators and correct the offender to prevent repetition (ibid: 98 & 123). Consequently, punishments function in a way that creates ‘a little more interest in avoiding the penalty than in risking the crime’ (ibid: 94). Moreover, punishments have to be inevitable; without exception, they have to follow the offence as a ‘perfect certainty’ (ibid: 95). By building a ‘house of certainty’, individuals take ‘responsibility for the constraints of power’, simply as a result of the possibility of being...
supervised (ibid: 202). Eventually, Foucault argues, when the individual controls himself and ‘becomes the principle of his own subjection’, the ‘surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action’ (ibid: 203 & 201).

All of these elements – attention to detail, rewards, punishments, and constant surveillance – are part of the disciplinary system at School James. Various rules minutely regulate almost every conceivable aspect of students’ appearance, conduct, interactions, and movement. Nonobservance of these rules leads to punishment, ranging from verbal reprimands, to suspension, expulsion, or even arrest. All of this is to be achieved through constant supervision of students throughout the day. In fact, the entire disciplinary system at School James rests on the idea that the meticulous definition of behaviour in terms of what is permitted and what is forbidden, controlled through ‘preventive supervision by [teachers] being visible and present’, will cause students to subject themselves to the constraints of the disciplinary power (PSA State of the District, 2009-2010: 54). In addition, rewards are intended to incentivize the desired forms of behaviour, while even small infractions are to be met with punishment. However, the everyday reality at School James deviates substantially from this disciplinary theory.

Drawing on my doctoral fieldwork at School James and Foucault’s theory of discipline, I argue that the school’s disciplinary system ultimately fails as a result of the inconsistencies created by the detailed regulations that are conceived to ensure its effectiveness. Instead of producing environments conducive to learning, the disciplinary system frequently produces the very types of ‘bad’ behaviour it ostensibly tries to prevent. As a result, the disciplinary system not only falls short of achieving the desired levels of control, it also creates tensions between students and teachers who are subjected to its constraints in their daily interactions.

Following an outline of the school’s demographics and a brief review of the relevant literature, I contrast the school’s disciplinary theory with the everyday reality at School James in the main part of this article. In the last part, I discuss the failure of the disciplinary system and place this failure in the broader context of influences children face in their peer and neighbourhood cultures, where violence and other forms of behaviour the disciplinary system defines as ‘bad’ can be valuable resources. To ensure anonymity of all research participants, I use pseudonyms to refer to people, locations, and institutions. The city that
School James is located in will be referred to as ‘Midwest City’ and the public school authority responsible for the school will be referred to as ‘Public School Authority’, or PSA. Official references that would reveal the location of my research have been anonymised.

**Demographic Composition and Methodology**
School James is an elementary school located in a high poverty neighbourhood in the inner city of Midwest City. In the school year 2009-2010, 454 students were enrolled at the school. The school’s ethnic composition was 39 percent black, 37 percent white, 20 percent multiracial, and 4 percent Hispanic in the same year (Department of Education, Midwest City). At School James, 83 percent of the student population was eligible for free lunch. This measure is widely used by public schools as an indicator for student poverty (Rausch et al, 2006: 12). My research was carried out over a total period of four months. I spent more than 50 full days at the school, conducting participant observation inside and outside of classrooms. I followed students through their daily routines, ate lunch with them, and attended the weekly school-wide assemblies. Additionally, I conducted in-depth interviews, interviewing a total of 26 girls and 25 boys, generating nearly 60 hours of interview material.

**Brief Literature Review**
In addition to Foucault’s theory of discipline, three bodies of literature are particularly relevant for this article. A growing body of research examines the use of surveillance techniques in public schools, particularly those located in urban areas (for example, Devine, 1996; Monahan et al, 2009; Kupchik, 2010). These scholars discuss how public schools, resulting from what Devine (1996: 1) calls an ‘ethos of fear’ in American society, increasingly rely on surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and the presence of security guards. Students in poor, inner-city schools, as Monahan et al (2009: 2) argue, are subject to more ‘invasive’ security methods than students in schools located in wealthier areas. Another body of literature addresses the so-called ‘discipline gap’ (for example, Gregory, 2008; Gregory et al, 2010; Monroe, 2005). These authors argue that African-American boys are disproportionately affected by exclusionary disciplinary punishments such as suspension or expulsion (Monroe, 2005: 46). In his 2009 study, however, Kinsler (2009: 5) shows that this ‘discipline gap’ can be explained by cross-school differences in punishment and ‘disappears entirely’ when suspension rates for black and white students are compared within schools. Nevertheless, much of this research relies on national statistics, and thus neglects the everyday interactions involved in disciplinary practices. Ferguson’s
(2001) ethnography offers such a micro perspective and discusses the identity construction of black elementary school boys against the background of being labelled ‘bad boys’ by teachers and experiencing different disciplinary treatment as a result. Finally, other research highlights that disciplinary practices perceived by students to be unfair can further reduce students’ willingness to comply with school rules (Wilson et al, 2001: 36; Arum et al, 2003: 159, 163). Similarly, in his study of Swedish elementary school children, Thornberg (2008: 51) finds that students are more inclined to follow rules they find convincing and instead “probably have a negative attitude towards [a rule] if they ‘do not see the point of [it]’”.

These works offer valuable insights for the understanding of disciplinary practices in educational settings. However, with regard to the specific situation at School James, gaps remain. Studies about increased control through surveillance are restricted to the more tangible aspects of control through technology and largely focus on high schools. They do not address the subjection of elementary school students to increased control through everyday disciplinary practices. Research about the ‘discipline gap’ mainly focuses on manifestations of disciplinary exchanges in exclusionary punishments, and does not address the contextual nature of such interactions. Moreover, in my research, I did not find that race and gender played such an important role as the literature on the subject emphasises. In this article, I hope to contribute to the understanding of school discipline by offering a more holistic perspective that draws on my analysis of the school’s disciplinary regulations, participant observation of two sixth-grade classes, each consisting of 26 and 30 children respectively and various school routines, interviews with students, and informal conversations with students and teachers.

‘Preventive supervision’ in Practice

The day at School James begins at 8:40 a.m. Most students walk to school in small groups with friends or siblings. Inside and outside the school, several teachers monitor the students’ behaviour in the mornings to ensure compliance with the arrival procedures outlined in the school handbook. Before they are permitted to enter, students have to line up outside and wait quietly. Students arriving between 8:40 a.m. and 9:05 a.m. can eat breakfast in the cafeterias located in the basement. Alternatively, after 8:50 a.m., students may wait in the gymnasium. There, they sit in long lines behind plastic cones arranged by grade levels, and are expected to wait quietly until they are allowed to go to their
classrooms when the first bell rings at 9:05 a.m. Several teachers monitor students in the hallway and make sure no one goes into the gym or upstairs before the designated time. The ‘positive school wide expectations’ outlined in the handbook, clearly delineate the correct behaviour for using the stairs: students may walk only on the right side of the stairs, in a ‘straight silent line’, holding on to the rail (Handbook: 8).

However, with hundreds of students arriving within a short timeframe, the mornings at School James are neither very quiet nor very orderly. Many mornings are characterised by tension and conflict. Some days, students argue loudly over unresolved quarrels, while others vociferously announce that they will ‘beat up’ another student because of a dispute during their commute to school. Alternatively, students loudly complain about the dress code, while a few individual students literally run away from teachers trying to enforce rule compliance. Even in the absence of such tension, the arriving groups of students actively socialize, sharing the latest gossip, talking or laughing loudly. The resulting deviations from the arrival procedures outlined in the handbook are met with various reprimands by the supervising teachers: ‘Slow down!', ‘Single file line!', ‘Walk on the right side!', ‘Hold on to the rail!’. In addition to these reprimands, mornings at School James are characterised by reminders about dress code compliance. To ensure that students ‘focus on instruction, not fashion’, PSA has adopted a district-wide uniform policy (PSA Dress Code). This dress code minutely regulates what colours, styles, and fabrics of students’ clothing are permitted. Hoods, hats, and other head coverings are strictly forbidden. All shirts must be ‘long enough to be tucked in at all times’ and all students are required to wear a belt (PSA Dress Code). The dress code is not very popular among students: many think tucking in their shirts looks ‘stupid’, and the requirement to wear a belt is especially frowned upon by many older boys, who prefer to wear their pants below the waist and without a belt. Consequently, many students enter the school building in the morning with their shirts untucked, carrying their belts in their hands, or with no belts at all. As a result, the supervising teachers continuously remind students that they are in violation of the dress code: ‘Take of your hood!', ‘Tuck in your shirt!', ‘Pull up your pants!', ‘Where is your belt?’. Thus, the days at School James begin with a plethora of reminders to follow the rules. In spite of this, many students simply ignore the teachers, knowing from experience that their chances of escaping down the stairs unscathed are high because the supervising teachers’ attention is likely to be diverted by other students. Even students seemingly obeying a teacher’s request often only wait until that teacher turns to another student in need of a reminder. Once attention has thus been diverted, students untuck their shirts,
put their hoods back on, or pull their pants below the waist again. By the time these students come back from breakfast, most of them are once again in violation of the dress code.

Such incidents are not limited to the mornings. The highly specified behavioural expectations teachers have to enforce in and out of the classroom include, but are not limited to, ‘off-task behaviour’, such as talking, yelling-out, playing, being out of the assigned seat, bothering others, not following directions, not working, throwing things, cheating, making noises, or drawing. Both in and out of the classroom other rules address the ‘disrespect of adults’, which includes talking back, arguing, defiance, attitude, lying, and leaving areas without permission; ‘disrespect of students’, such as using obscene language or name-calling, arguing, and teasing or bullying fellow students; ‘possession of forbidden items’, including gum, candy, electronic devices, notes, or rubber bands used to shoot paper balls – also known as ‘hornets’; and ‘aggressive behavior’, which includes threats, hitting, pushing, fighting, kicking, play fighting or wrestling (School document).

When measured against the idea underlying these highly specific expectations – that order only exists in the absence of such behaviour – I could indeed only describe the two sixth grade classrooms I observed as being in a near-permanent state of chaos. Whether they are talking, drawing, passing notes, reading cartoons, playing dice, or shooting ‘hornets’ across the classroom: at nearly any given time, between a quarter and half of the students in each class behaves in a way that – according to the rationale of the disciplinary system – requires intervention. Regardless of the question if things like ‘talking’, ‘drawing’, or ‘not following directions’ should indeed be considered ‘bad’, they become ‘bad’ in, and for, a system that defines them as such. And this disciplinary system stipulates that they are to be addressed and punished. Even in the classroom, where one teacher ‘only’ has to deal with 25 students, this is de facto impossible.

These examples illustrate that all the rules that are conceptualized to control student conduct and movement, essentially fail in practice because they cannot be enforced in their entirety. Through its meticulous attention to detail, the disciplinary system at School James creates an effectively unmanageable multitude of ‘bad’ behaviour simply by defining it as such. Thus, the sheer number of rules, paired with the large number of students on which they are to be applied, inevitably creates situations where the surveillance is ‘discontinuous in its action’. This creates structural inconsistencies in the
‘network of gazes’ and consequently in the ‘certainty’ of rule enforcement. A teacher that is busy enforcing the dress code or the proper stairwell procedure cannot devote attention to other students not following the rules. However, as Foucault (1995: 96) emphasises, ‘[n]othing so weakens the machinery of the law than the hope of going unpunished’. The examples from School James show that, in many situations throughout the day, this hope is turned into a near-certainty for students to go unpunished, and the disciplinary system essentially undermines itself.

**Rewards and the Idea of a ‘Punitive Balance Sheet’**

To reward students for ‘appropriate’ behaviour and create an incentive for all others to live up to the school-wide expectations, School James introduced the ‘Flying Falcons’ – a behaviour award awarded during the school-wide assembly held every Friday. Eligibility for this award is determined by several factors. One of them is a system of coloured cards that can be read as part of what Foucault calls the ‘double system [of] gratification-punishment’ (Foucault, 1995: 180). In theory, this card-system is supposed to create an incentive for students to behave ‘well’. Each student has a set of five cards – blue, green, yellow, red, and white – that are used to track behaviour throughout the day and week. Each morning, students start on blue, indicating that they have had a ‘good day’ so far. Every time they fail to meet the behaviour expectations, students move to the next colour. Students who remain on blue or green all week – green indicating that they ‘only received a verbal warning to maintain positive behaviour’ – are eligible to become a ‘Flying Falcon’. In practice, however, this behaviour award is unattainable for many students. According to the disciplinary system, every deviation from expected behaviour can be sanctioned by moving the card. Thus, two reminders in one day – to follow the stairwell procedures or stay on task, for example – moving the student to ‘yellow’, can make him or her ineligible to become a ‘Flying Falcon’. An extensive series of additional eligibility criteria further complicates the situation. Students not only have to remain on ‘blue’ or ‘green’ all week, they also have to complete all their work, be in compliance with the dress code everyday ‘without reminders’, have ‘zero strikes’ in their special area classes Music, Art, P.E., and Library, and ‘be present everyday of the week with no more than one tardy’ (Handbook: 9).

Each one of these criteria can be difficult to meet, even for students who rarely ‘get in trouble’. Particularly for those students, however, who alternate between struggling with the rules and refusing to follow them, this is practically impossible. In fact, in the two sixth grades I observed, 30 and 40 percent of students, respectively, never received this award.
in the three months I spent at School James. This is frustrating for these students and many of them ‘act up’ especially during the Friday assembly, either to disturb the award ceremony or to be removed from the gymnasium and taken to the office for the duration of the assembly.

Another ‘gratification-punishment’ system is used during lunch. To create an incentive for each class to follow the cafeteria-specific behaviour guidelines, their recess depends on their conduct during lunch. Essentially, students have to eat silently and – only when given permission to speak – talk in a ‘whisper voice’ audible only to the person next to them. To track compliance with these expectations, the cafeteria supervisor uses the five letters of the word ‘Pizza’, which she writes on the cafeteria’s blackboard at the beginning of each lunch period. Each time someone fails to follow the expectations, the whole class loses a letter. When all letters are gone, the class loses its recess privilege. In practice, the lunch supervisor already begins monitoring student behaviour in the lunch line. As a result, classes sometimes lose their recess privilege even before they arrive in the cafeteria. Once inside the cafeteria, a small group of students ‘misbehaving’ can cost the whole class their recess. As a result, recess generally only happens a few times a week.

The conditions for both rewards – the ‘Flying Falcons’ and recess – are difficult for students to fulfil. In practice, many students lose eligibility to become a ‘Flying Falcon’ in the first two days of the week. As a result, the incentive to behave “well” is effectively lost. The same is true for lunch behaviour. Sixth grader Malik illustrates the fatalistic attitude this can create, when he was asked to be quiet during lunch: ‘We already lost all our letters, we don’t need to be quiet anymore’. Neither one of these systems is designed to establish what Foucault calls a ‘penal accountancy’ and describes as an essential element for the successful implementation of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1995: 180). Without the possibility to balance out ‘bad’ deeds with ‘good’ ones, there cannot be a ‘punitive balance sheet’ (ibid.). Instead, the ‘gratification-punishment’ systems create a fatalism that frequently serves to produce the very kinds of ‘bad’ behaviour they were devised to prevent.

Punishments and the “House of Certainty”
In theory, every infraction of school rules is punishable. In fact, the system of coloured cards is specifically designed to show students that no trespass remains unpunished and to make it easier for teachers to sanction rule-infractions in a standardized manner. As the
examples above illustrate, it is frequently impossible to see all the rule infractions. There are too many rules to be applied on too many students, many of whom approach the disciplinary system as an obstacle course – each rule representing and obstacle to be overcome. In addition to not being able to see, however, teachers also often choose not to see all the rule infractions their students commit. The reasons for this vary.

Firstly, teachers often ignore ‘bad’ behaviour because a consistent enforcement of the multitude of rules conflicts with their professional obligation to educate their students. When students receive their third reminder, they move to the red card and have to serve a ‘timeout’ in another classroom. The fourth reminder – white – means an office referral. This presents the teachers with a dilemma. Take for example, Labron, a twelve-year-old black boy with a long history of ‘behaviour problems’ at School James, or Logan, a 13-year-old white boy who came to School James at the beginning of the school year but has been aggressive towards himself and others several times since. Both boys are referred to the office or sent to in-school-suspension several times a week. If their teacher, Mrs. Gallagher, actually sanctioned the boys every time they violated a rule – as the disciplinary system demands – they would have to be removed from the classroom before lunchtime on a daily basis. Therefore, Mrs. Gallagher frequently decides not to ‘see’ that the boys have their shirts untucked, are talking, drawing, or throwing dice.

In another case, Mrs. Gallagher made a strategic decision not to ‘see’ many of Labron’s minor rule infractions because he wanted to play on the school basketball team. Labron is a good basketball player and was excited about joining the team – one of the few after-school activities he was interested in. But to be eligible, he needed to have a ‘decent’ behavioural record. Against this background, his teachers thought it would be ‘good for him’ to make the team and tried to help him by not ‘seeing’ many of his trespasses for the week preceding the first basketball practice.

Secondly, teachers also decide not to ‘see’ because students’ resistance frequently makes rule enforcements time-consuming and potentially challenges teachers’ authority. Reprimanded for a rule violation, many students try to negotiate: ‘But I don’t want to tuck in my shirt, it looks stupid’, ‘My shirt is too short, it won’t stay tucked in’. Alternatively, they deny having violated any rules in the first place. Asked to hand over a forbidden item to a teacher, a rubber band for example, the item quickly disappears in the students’ pockets or shoes. In fact, students have developed a technique that lets them pull their pockets inside
out, while hiding the rubber band in the fabric, allowing the student to claim ‘I don’t even have one – look!’ Thus, it can take minutes for the student to comply with the teacher’s request. The teacher could, of course, demand immediate rule compliance. But in practice, overly authoritative demands quickly escalate the situation. In either case, once a teacher has communicated her request for rule compliance to the student, she cannot withdraw from the exchange until her request is met. Doing so not only reduces the chances for compliance in similar exchanges in the future, it also carries the risk of damaging the teacher’s authority. Logan, for example, vehemently refused to hand over a rubber band to his teacher, because she ‘didn’t care all the other times’.

Whether it is for professional, strategic, or other reasons – not ‘seeing’ a rule infraction means not punishing it. The children experience such inconsistencies in the use of punishments as a flaw in the disciplinary system as a whole: some teachers punish certain behaviour while others don’t; some teachers only punish occasionally, others seem to focus their punishments on certain students; and yet other teachers essentially use punishments as an easy way to get rid of ‘troublemakers’. At some point, however, punishments are imposed. Teachers punish when students so obviously violate the behavioural rules that not punishing them could set a dangerous precedent for their classmates. Alternatively, teachers punish when ongoing ‘bad’ behaviour disturbs the classroom routine. But because punishments are used inconsistently, when students do get punished, they often feel ‘targeted’ and complain that the punishment was unfair. Labron, for example, got very upset when Mrs. Gallagher – who had already ignored a number of rule infractions all morning – finally moved his card when he would not stop talking to his friend. He loudly demanded to know why he had gotten punished, even though several other students were also talking. For Mrs. Gallagher, however, the ‘question wasn’t so much what I moved [his] card for, but rather: what all didn’t I move [his] card for’. The question whether or not a punishment is ‘objectively’ unfair matters little for the everyday interactions between students and teachers. Students, who see the disciplinary system as unfair, are less willing to comply with its constraints (Arum, 2003: 163).

Far from the ‘perfect certainty’ that Foucault describes as the basis for effective punishments, the various inconsistencies shake the “house of certainty” in its foundation. Punishments are supposed to be the inevitable consequence of an infraction, designed to
make individuals assume ‘responsibility for the constraints of power’. At School James, however, the only certainty in punishments is that there is none. Instead, the arbitrariness that characterizes punishments further reduces an already low willingness to comply with rules. It produces effects that are diametrically opposed to the intended functions of punishment, thus undermining the entire disciplinary apparatus.

**When Punishments No Longer “Punish”**

When minor punishments, such as verbal reprimands or having to serve a ‘timeout’, fail to result in the desired behavioural improvements, the disciplinary system stipulates the use of more severe punishments, such as suspension. Some students, however, do not seem to consider these punishments as severe. Instead, several boys from Mrs. Gallagher’s class told me that they liked in-school-suspension (ISS) because ‘we don’t have to do any work’ and the ISS-supervisor ‘lets us sleep in there’. André, another boy from the same class, having enquired with his peers if it was ‘nice in there’, actually spent an entire day trying to be sent to ISS. He finally succeeded after he shot a ‘hornet’ directly at one of his teachers. His friend Labron is even more outspoken about using ISS for his own purposes. One day, he came to me and asked me: ‘Can you take me to ISS? I don’t want to be in here!’ When I told him that this was not possible, he said: ‘Well, then I’m going to act a fool now so I can go to ISS!’ In the end, this ‘acting a fool’, led to Labron being picked up by School Police because neither the teacher nor the principal felt that they could handle him anymore. Another day, he approached me with a similar request, only this time, he was enquiring about Tanner – one of his classmates who had just been suspended for charging at another student with a pair of scissors. Labron, who did not know what his friend had been suspended for, complained that he didn’t like his teacher and that he didn’t ‘want to be in [the classroom]’, right before he asked me ‘What did Tanner do [to get suspended], so I can do it too?’

When administrators feel that they can no longer ‘control’ a particular student’s behaviour – as in the case of Labron – they call PSA School Police, an official police department with extensive police powers. These students are picked up by a PSA Police officer and taken to the district’s reception centre. Short of expulsion, this is one of the most severe disciplinary measures available to the school. Again, however, students’ narratives suggest that they view this as neither severe nor something to be feared. Logan, for example, on his return to school the day after he was taken to the reception
centre, approached me with a big smile on his face said: ‘Man, I just got back from Juvy!’ – referring to Midwest City’s Juvenile Detention Centre. From other conversations with Logan, I learned that he knows the difference between ‘Juvy’, where adolescents are only sent on Court order, and the PSA reception centre. Nevertheless, he proudly shared this story with friends and teachers for several days. In a similar situation, Labron proudly told me on his return to school that he ‘went to jail on Friday’. When I asked what he meant by ‘jail’ and what it was like there, he described in great detail that he had gotten locked up in a cell with bars and a prison bed but that he wasn’t ‘scared at all’.

These examples suggest that some students no longer seem to fear certain punishments. Often discussed in the literature as a particularly harsh punishment (Gregory et al, 2010: 63; Kinsler, 2007: 1), some students instead view in-school-suspension as enjoyable. As a result, some students have completely undermined the idea of punishment, by appropriating it for their own advantage. Quite contrary to Foucault’s (1995: 94) emphasis that punishments are designed in a way that creates ‘a little more interest in avoiding the penalty than in risking the crime’, students like Labron or André have turned this logic on its head and made the punishment the incentive to commit the ‘crime’. Additionally, Logan and Labron have emptied one of the most severe punishments the school has at its disposal – essentially being arrested – of its intended intimidating quality. The boys successfully elude the grip of the disciplinary power by depriving this particular punishment of two of its essential functions. According to Foucault (ibid: 98, 123), punishments are supposed to correct the offender and deter imitators. Instead, the boys used the punishment to highlight their toughness and support their existing reputation among peers of being daring and without fear of consequences. Rather than fearing it, these students reinterpreted the punishment and used it as a positive identity marker.

Discussion and Conclusion
The disciplinary system at School James is officially in place with one eye on the present and the other on the future: it is supposed to created ‘the best teaching and learning environments’ and ensure that students do not ‘compromise their futures through bad behavior and disrespectful practices’ (PSA Code of Conduct). In practice, the disciplinary system undermines itself as a result of its own structure. It is further undermined by the interplay of teachers’ and students’ agency in handling the rules and punishments. The meticulous attention to detail that is designed to ensure the firm grip of the disciplinary power creates various inconsistencies that undermine this power. The resulting
environments are not conducive to learning. Instead, the disciplinary system creates tensions between students and teachers that negatively affect all parties involved. Students thought to be ‘troublemakers’ often show the very types of ‘bad behaviour’ the system explicitly tries to prevent – either because they can, or out of spite for an unfair system. Teachers, in turn, are put in ‘impossible managerial situations’ in which enforcing the rules consistently is at odds with their role as educators, while not enforcing them potentially undermines their own and ultimately the school’s authority (Devine, 1996: 205). Other students, too, are affected – either directly by their peers’ actions or because instructional time is lost to disciplinary issues.

If, however, as I have argued, these inconsistencies arise out of the highly detailed structure of the disciplinary system, the following dilemma arises: from the point of view of many teachers and the administration, the high level of detail is indispensable because the students are so ‘out of control’ that this is the only way that even a minimum level of order can be ensured. On the other hand, much of the ‘bad’ behaviour the disciplinary system tries to control only exists because the system defines it as ‘bad’. Arguably, there is nothing ‘objectively’ bad or harmful about not standing in a straight line or talking in the hallways. In addition, concepts like ‘defiance’ or ‘disrespect’ are open to subjective interpretation that can produce the very arbitrariness students perceive as unfair. At the same time, however, violence is part of the everyday reality at School James. During my research at School James, at least six fights happened between students in the two sixth grades alone, two of which resulted in physical injury. Other students were hit by ‘hornets’, some of them experiencing eye injuries as a result. This violent behaviour makes it difficult to create safe learning environments that all students can enjoy. And it is this violent behaviour that the meticulous attention to detail tries to forestall by controlling the contexts that give rise to them: if students ‘keep their hands to themselves’ and interactions between students are prohibited or restricted to a bare minimum, violent exchanges can be prevented – in theory, at least. In practice, however, violence continues to happen. In all its meticulous attempts to control, the disciplinary system at School James fails to acknowledge the ‘porous border between street culture and school culture’ (Devine, 1996: 89) and the constraints the ‘Code of the Street’ imposes on students. Respect can be a highly valued form of capital in poor, inner-city neighbourhoods, ‘especially when various other forms of capital have been denied or are unavailable’ (Anderson, 1999: 66). Fearlessness, refusal to obey authorities, and a ‘reputation for being willing and able to fight … is to gain respect among peers’ (Anderson, 1999: 67). Indeed, among the students
I worked with, it was those ‘troublemakers’ that the disciplinary system so desperately tries to control, who were most popular among their peers. Particularly for them, the school rules frequently present a dilemma: failure to respond ‘adequately’ to a provocation by another student can result in loss of standing in the peer group – reacting to the provocation risks punishment by the school. However, “when one is dependent upon others to a considerable degree for ‘survival’ within a particular social system, one will go to further extremes to present a self that conforms to the expectations of the others of importance within that system” (Rist, 2003: 41). As a result, even punishments no longer deter. The disciplinary system at School James produces a reality that precludes any confrontation of such behaviour that continues to happen in spite of all regulation. Neither violence nor any other ‘bad’ behaviour – however subjectively defined – is challenged in interactions between students and teachers. The ‘impossible managerial situations’ the disciplinary system creates, leave no room to confront student behaviour (Devine, 1996: 205). Instead, ‘bad’ behaviour is only delegated and managed. Additionally, the disciplinary system restricts permitted courses of action – for both for students and teachers – in a way that makes it difficult to develop the very reciprocal relationships that Weinstein et al describe as the *conditio sine qua non* for rule compliance (Weinstein et al, 2004: 33). In the absence of confrontation and reciprocity on the one hand, and ‘effective’ punishments on the other, any communication of the necessity of certain rules for an effective functioning of a school community is lost. The fragmentation of conduct effectively detaches the rule from its referent, from what it is supposed to protect in the first place.

The situation is complex, and it must not be left to the schools alone to resolve it. More research is needed to understand how students and teachers negotiate discipline in their everyday interactions and how this impacts on schools as places of academic and social learning. In addition to race and gender, class and location should receive increased attention as factors which disproportionately subject certain populations to punitive discipline: to what extent do poor, inner-city students face stricter disciplinary regimes than their suburban counterparts, and how does this affect their attitudes to schooling? My own doctoral research will further analyse this complexity at School James. Additional research should address other educational settings so that increased appreciation of the interplay of schools’ interests with those of students and teachers can help develop disciplinary environments that do justice to all parties involved.
Notes

1 The age of the 6th graders I worked with ranged between 11 and 14 years of age.

References


