

Disciplining Difference(s): Reproducing Inequalities through Disciplinary Interactions in Preschool

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Abstract

This article offers an expansive conceptualization and examination of young children's experiences of school discipline inequalities, which includes the variety of behavior management approaches (i.e., punitive discipline and positive discipline) that preschool teachers differentially use in response to students' behavior (e.g., noncompliance). I draw on data from ethnographic observations in three preschools (nine classrooms total) with different racial and socioeconomic classroom compositions. I find that teachers' varying approaches to behavior management for students from particular racial, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds (i.e., low-SES girls and middle-class black boys) contributes to children's hierarchical identity groups within preschool classrooms: "good kids" vs. "troublemaking kids." Specifically, the messages children at Imagination Center received from teachers' differential disciplinary responses to low-SES girls' behaviors, and the messages children at Kids Company received from teachers' differential disciplinary responses to middle-class black boys' behaviors, shaped their understandings of whom they should or should not associate with. The findings reveal how school-level disciplinary practices/cultures (e.g., positive discipline rather than punitive discipline) can help to alleviate disciplinary inequalities apparent in some preschool classrooms. Additionally, these data illuminate how preschool teachers' differential approaches to behavior management affect some marginalized students' experiences of discipline inequalities as early as preschool.

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