

# *Expectations and Realities: Education, the Discipline Gap, and the Experiences of Black Families Migrating to Small Cities*

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## **Race and Social Problems**

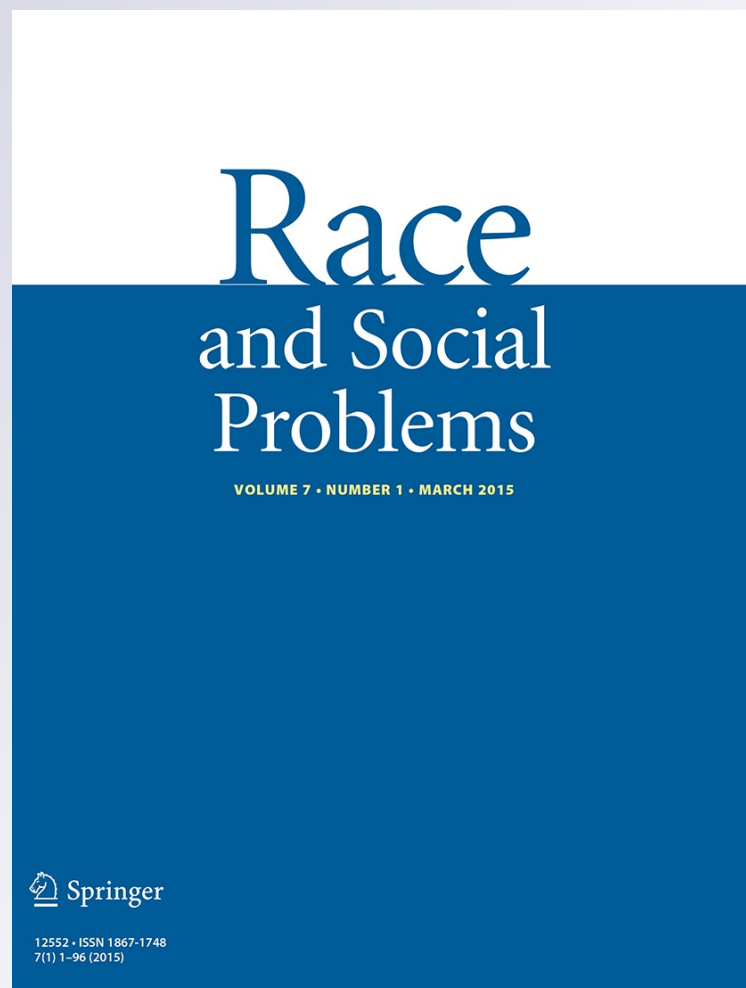
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# Expectations and Realities: Education, the Discipline Gap, and the Experiences of Black Families Migrating to Small Cities

Lawrence T. Winn · Maisha T. Winn

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**Abstract** In this study, the authors examine the narratives of two African American mothers and grandmothers and two youths who migrated from under-resourced neighborhoods in a large urban city to a smaller Midwestern college town in hopes of gaining access to safe neighborhoods, employment opportunities, and better educational experiences. Using phenomenological case study methodology, the authors were participant observers in two community groups that included a coalition of African American working class mothers and grandmothers and a network for black male youth ages 14–18. The findings in this study ultimately demonstrate how these youth and their families discovered even more racial disparities in their new residence. This was especially true in the areas of education and juvenile justice. Ultimately, the authors argue that the “new migration” has yet to yield the opportunities these families hoped to gain.

## Introduction

In her groundbreaking historiography of African American families who participated in the historic “Great Migration”—or the purposeful exodus of black people from their homes in southern cities and towns to northern and western

cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Newark, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Oakland—Wilkerson posits:

The people did not cross turnstiles of customs at Ellis Island. *They were already citizens* [our emphasis]. But where they came from, they were not treated as such. (Wilkerson 2010, p. 10)

Like immigrant families from outside the USA, millions of African Americans in the early part of the 20th century began moving from the south to the north (Drake and Cayton 1993). The U.S. Census Bureau noted that between 1910 and 1940, the Great Migration resulted in nearly 2 million blacks leaving the south in search of opportunities. During the Great Migration, blacks strategically and purposefully sought more security and a new way of living for themselves and their children. After the First World War and continuing throughout the 1970s, these families clung to dreams of owning property and more robust employment opportunities in a new land. Today, a new—yet smaller—migration is taking place for similar reasons. Big cities, like Chicago, Illinois, that African American families once coveted as greener pastures during the Great Migration are now losing African American families—or fragments of families—to smaller cities, like Madison, Wisconsin in search of safer neighborhoods, better jobs, and access to quality education for their children. These families are finding that this new environment does not always yield what they hoped, and this is especially true in the area of education. In the mid-1990s, Madison was considered “The New Promised Land” for many African Americans who migrated from Chicago (Mills 1995); however, recent U.S. Census Bureau data demonstrates that people are leaving Madison and returning to Chicago for reasons that have not been well documented (Milewski 2014).

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The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to understand how working class and working poor African American parents and youth from Chicago who moved to Madison, Wisconsin, experience racial disparities—with particular attention to school discipline policies—in their new environment. Our objective was to understand the points of convergence as well as the tension between participants' expectations of their new city and the realities they experienced with specific focus to education and school discipline policies. These families are part of the new migration from cities like Milwaukee and Chicago to Madison, Wisconsin, where they hoped to access a better education system and safe communities. Using participant observation and qualitative interviews with members in a coalition of working class African American mothers and grandmothers, Making Our Mark (MOM), and a youth-centered collective of teenage males, The BOND,<sup>1</sup> we seek to understand the dreams and hopes participants carried from larger cities and the realities they experienced in their new environment. Our study is guided by the following questions:

- What are the experiences of African American working class families who migrate from large urban cities to small cities?
- In what ways do their experiences converge and differ from their initial expectations?
- How do these new migrants navigate racial disparities in schools with particular attention to discipline policies?

We chose to focus on Madison, Wisconsin, because we believe that much of the focus in education research can be “urbancentric”—that is, there is a great amount of attention on racial disparities in large, urban cities, especially when considering school reform (Calloway 2014). However, racial disparities in non-urban communities can be equally as staggering as those found in large cities (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families 2013). Such disparities can be found in education, criminal justice, healthcare, and the workforce. Yet some African American families continue to receive messages that some smaller and seemingly quieter cities may yield more opportunities for their families. Like the men and women in Wilkerson's study, participants in this study also left neighborhoods and schools that were intensely policed and fraught with violence. However, they encountered symbolic violence in their new environment and in schools. And like families who partook in the Great Migration, the families in our study were presumably “already citizens” even though the

treatment they received from whence they came and where they settled often told them otherwise. Citizenship was tenuous even in their new environment.

African American families in our study may not have endured the brunt of southern Jim Crow laws, but their lives have become entangled in what Alexander (2010) refers to as the “New Jim Crow.” According to Alexander, mass incarceration in the USA has created a caste system in which African American males, in particular, are unable to participate as democratic citizens due to loss of rights from felony convictions resulting in probation, incarceration, and isolation. The culture of mass incarceration has seeped into public schools and the lives of families in this study who are often viewed as potential public enemies (Laura 2014; Nocella et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2010; Meiners and Winn 2011; Rios 2011; Losen and Skiba 2010; Meiners 2007; Skiba et al. 2002). This has been especially true for black and Latino boys whose struggles in American public schools are well documented in education research (Fergus et al. 2014; Howard 2013; Noguera 2009; Kunjufu 1985). Zero-tolerance policies, or policies “that may be accelerating student contact with law enforcement,” have led to disproportionate numbers of African American, Latino, and Indigenous youth being pushed out of schools and communities (Skiba 2014, p. 27). Participants in our study believed that they were removing their children and grandchildren from mis-education in the Chicago area public schools and neighborhood violence into a place where they might be viewed through a new lens of possibility. However, participants in our study are finding themselves enmeshed in the maze of zero-tolerance policies in a self-professed liberal and progressive city that is unsure how to be gracious to its new neighbors.

As equity-oriented scholars, we wish to move away from “damage-centered” research that often omits stories of resilience and the success of working class and working poor communities (Tuck 2009). Using a cultural-historical activity theory framework (CHAT), we seek to *historicize* (Gutierrez 2008) and *humanize* (Paris and Winn 2013) the lives of our participants by acknowledging and privileging the history of migration for African Americans as well as the ways in which African Americans have continuously struggled to be viewed as citizens in the context of the USA. CHAT invites theory to be practiced by “situating theory in the present, sociopolitical, and cultural-historical contexts” (Stetsenko 2014). CHAT, along with a “humanizing” approach to qualitative inquiry (Paris 2011; Paris and Winn 2013), guides our phenomenological case study methodology to seek out the agentive acts of African American working class and working poor communities including their desire to seek out coalitions that help them navigate racial disparities that impact their lives in schools and in out-of-school contexts.

<sup>1</sup> “MOM” and the “BOND” are pseudonyms.

## Methods

### Sites

We chose two neighborhood organizations in Madison, Wisconsin, in a working class and working poor community that is primarily African American that meet in community rooms in their apartment complexes. Participants in both organizations are African Americans who have relocated or migrated from large cities—primarily Chicago—to Madison. The first working group, MOM, is a coalition of mothers and grandmothers who gather to discuss issues around housing and more recently healthcare; however, their conversations started to focus on the education of their children and grandchildren as well as their experiences navigating tensions for these young people and learning how to advocate on their behalf. The BOND is a collective of African American boys ages 14–18 who meet to discuss a range of topics from politics, history, and popular culture. In addition to meeting in the apartment complex community room, they have “field trips” throughout the city. Our interest in understanding how African Americans experience migration from large urban cities to small cities along with recent policy reports on racial disparities in the state of Wisconsin, and Madison in particular, prompted our scholarly inquiry. Wisconsin ranked last (50th) in the USA for the well-being of African American children on indicators ranging from educational access to home life in comparison to being ranked #10 for white children (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014). During the 2010–2011 academic year, only 50 % of black high school students in Dane County—which houses Madison—graduated on time; 21 % of black students were suspended from school compared with 2.3 % of the county’s white students; and black juveniles (ages 10–17) were arrested at a rate of 6 times that of white juveniles.

### Participants

For the purpose of this study, we sought community nominations for parent perspectives. The first author had access to community organizers because of his research on racial disparities in Dane County that resulted in a published report. Ms. Love and Ms. Ruby, both mothers/grandmothers from MOM, were consistently nominated as “pillars” in the community. Table 1 shows how many children/grandchildren Ms. Love and Ms. Ruby had in the public school system. The first author became a participant observer in the BOND in February 2013 and, for the purpose of this study, selected the two participants, Pryor and Chappelle, who at age 18 had the most years of experience in Madison public schools. Table 2 shows the complete list of the BOND participants, their ages, grade levels, and city

**Table 1** MOM (Making Our Mark) participants

Name	Number of children/ grandchildren in public schools	Grade levels of children/grandchildren in public schools	City of origin
Ms. Love	<i>N</i> = 2	Elementary High School	Chicago
Ms. Ruby	<i>N</i> = 4	Elementary Jr. High, High School	Chicago

**Table 2** The BOND participants

Name	Age	Grade level	City of origin
William	14	Middle School	Chicago
Kevin	14	Middle School	Chicago
Paul	14	High School	Chicago
Cedric	15	High School	Chicago
Chris	16	High School	Chicago
Eddie	16	High School	Chicago
Dave	16	High School	Chicago
<b>Pryor</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>Chicago</b>
<b>Chappelle</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>Chicago</b>

The focal students in our study, Pryor and Chappelle, are given in bold

of origin. All of the MOM participants’ children and grandchildren had been suspended at least once, and all of the BOND participants had been suspended multiple times.

### Data Collection

The first author was a participant observer in the BOND and collected field notes at the weekly meetings from February 2013–February 2014. The second author attended the BOND meetings quarterly and also collected field notes. Because the first author had more of a rapport with the youth in the BOND, the first author conducted qualitative interviews that were semi-structured with an open-ended protocol that invited narrative responses. All interviews were approximately 60 min in length and took place at community institutions or the community rooms in housing units. The second author attended MOM meetings, and the first and second authors co-facilitated interviews with MOM participants. Documentary sources such as the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) Code of Student Conduct as well as the District’s Behavior Education Plan (approved in March 2014 with plans for implementation in September 2014) were collected and analyzed.

### Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed for “significant statements” (Creswell 2007; Moustakas 1994). We



used horizontalization to organize significant statements into themes. This process allowed us to generate a textual description of how participants experienced their lives in Madison with a specific focus on their transactions with schools and school discipline policies and practices. Additionally, we conducted a discourse analysis of the MMSD's outgoing Code of Student Conduct and incoming new Behavior Education Plan. More specifically, we used Gee's (2011) building task questions such as "How is this piece of language being used to make things significant or not and in what ways?" (significance); "What sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?" (relationships); and "What perspective of social goods is the piece of language communicating (i.e., what is being communicated as to what is taken to be 'normal,' 'right,' 'good,' 'correct,' 'proper,' 'appropriate,' 'valuable,' 'the way things are,' 'the way things ought to be...')" (politics) (Gee 2011, p. 17–19).

### School Discipline Policies in Madison

Here, we take time to explicate current policies around school discipline in one of MMSD and juxtapose it with new policies that seek to dismantle the relationship between schools and punishment. We offer this analysis because participants in our study experienced the frustration over how school discipline policies and practices have been mapped onto their voices and bodies. This is an effort to provide the context for how the lives of participants in our study often collided with schools. On Monday, March 31, 2014, the MMSD Board approved new superintendent's Behavior Education Plan (hereafter referred to as the BEP). The BEP will replace the "Classroom Code of Conduct and Student Conduct and Discipline Plan" (hereafter referred to as "The Code").<sup>2</sup> Prompted by data like the aforementioned reports on racial disparities in Dane County, the new Superintendent Jennifer Cheatham and her team sought to respond to zero-tolerance policies that disproportionately impacted African American children. In The Code, 18 out of the 30 pages were devoted to "Behavior violations" organized from Level I to Level IV. Level I violations included "Behaviors that negatively affect the orderly operation of the learning environment," while Level IV focused on "Behaviors that significantly endanger the health or safety of others, damage property or cause serious disruption." For example, "throwing objects...or otherwise releasing any non-authorized object (including a snowball)" is considered a Level IV violation. Youth Court is also available in some of the schools to address offenses that take place beyond the school campus.

In an effort to respond to racial disparities in MMSD's schools, the District instituted Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support. Restorative justice practices, that is alternative responses to harm in which those who were harmed and those who caused harm are brought together to engage in consensus building in how to respond in a way that keeps both parties engaged, present, and active, were also introduced and implemented as part of a grant that the district awarded the local YWCA that counts "eliminating racism" in addition to "empowering women" as part of its mission. Through the grant, the YWCA trained students and staff persons in restorative practices and peacemaking/keeping circles to resolve conflicts between students and students and teachers. These circles could be used for offenses that did not involve weapons or drugs in lieu of suspensions and other forms of isolation.

While the language and certainly the structure of The Code lacked the discourse of restoration, it did hint at MMSD's efforts to begin including restorative practices as evidenced by the section entitled "Instruction, Intervention, Consequence, Restoration." Restorative practices were the last step in "consequences" and therefore not always used as a way to disrupt in school and out-of-school suspensions as much as it was used to re-engage youth who previously experienced removal and isolation. Restoration was nestled among "community service, making amends, actions to repair harm, mediation, circle/conference, youth court, fix it plan or restitution" but quite possibly lost its potential being one of the last steps. In the BEP, there is a strategic and purposeful movement to use a restorative discourse or a discourse that acknowledges racial disparities in discipline and punishment in schools and communities and desires a scenario whereby all students have an opportunity to be civic actors (Winn 2013). Ideally, a restorative discourse would be supported by pedagogical practices. A restorative discourse requires a purposeful effort to keep all children in classrooms and school communities as opposed to seeing suspensions as an initial response to harm. This is particularly important because much of the language in zero-tolerance, which was certainly evident in The Code, is up for interpretation. When a violation reads that a student's actions may "cause or seriously disrupt" learning, studies show that black and Latino students' actions are more likely to be viewed as disruptive (Nocella et al. 2014; Meiners and Winn 2011; Gregory et al. 2010; Losen and Skiba 2010; Kim et al. 2010).

Participants in our study who you will hear from in the next section—and the mothers/grandmothers in particular—always found the rationale for their children/grandchildren's suspensions to be ambiguous.

In the BEP, MMSD posits that this document is a "shift in philosophy and practice with respect to behavior and discipline..." that seeks to "focus on building student and staff skills and competencies." Later, the BEP asserts it was

<sup>2</sup> The Code preceded Cheatham's appointment.

“designed to reflect a district commitment to student equity” citing “disturbing data” in national reports about who gets disciplined, for what, how much, and what is at stake for children who disproportionately experience punishment (Madison Metropolitan School District 2014). The BEP highlights three key factors in the data they consulted (1) African American students with “particular disabilities” were more likely to experience discipline; (2) Students who experience suspensions often repeat grades; and (3) Suspensions and expulsions are often precursors to entering the juvenile justice system. Language in The BEP is proactive with statements like “All students have the right to...”; “All parents/guardians have the right to...”; “All teachers/staff have the right to...” while intervention and discipline live side-by-side with restorative circles offered during “intensive intervention” or “short-term removal responses” signaling the district’s desire to make restorative practices one of the first responses as opposed to the last. These shifts are timely, yet it remains to be seen if the change in language will inspire a change in disposition, classroom culture, and overall school culture (Winn 2014a, b).

#### “All Our Kids are Getting Suspended”: MOMS Navigating Schools

Ms. Love and Ms. Ruby organized working class and working poor African American mothers in their community informed by a model Ms. Love learned about at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit in 2010. This organization, MOM, first started discussing issues like problems with landlords and mold in apartments; however, during their gatherings, the participants, according to Ms. Love, realized that “All our kids are getting suspended. Getting tickets. Getting diagnosed. I never heard of ‘bipolar’ until I moved to Madison.” During our interview with Ms. Love, she described why she left Chicago, “I came [to Madison from Chicago] to bond with my grandchildren.” Her initial reaction to Madison was, “It was like a little suburb” and found it “cleaner, quieter, and smaller” than life in Chicago. Like Ms. Love, Ms. Ruby was also recognized in the African American working class neighborhood they moved to as a person one could count on because of her ability to access resources and resolve problems. She moved to Madison seeking a more peaceful life after trying Evanston, Illinois first. Both of these mothers/grandmothers followed adult children to Madison and became their grandchildren’s advocates, while their adult children worked long hours. Initially, Ms. Ruby was excited that her grandchildren would attend schools in Madison where the reputation for public education was very strong. According to Ms. Ruby, “[African Americans] are told that the schools system is great, ‘It is such a great school system.’ It is better than some of the schools in Chicago or in

Milwaukee—true enough, I am sure—but it is not that great that I can shout over it.”

One of the first issues Ms. Love and Ms. Ruby encountered was that their children and grandchildren were categorized as struggling learners in the context of their new school district. For example, Ms. Love posited that her daughter was “advanced” in Chicago schools prior to arriving in Madison and “never in trouble.” However, when Ms. Love’s daughter entered Madison public schools in the fifth grade, she kept getting sent to the “time-out” room. “That’s not a good place...that’s not a place for my daughter,” Ms. Love asserted as she revisited her conversation with the elementary school principal. Ms. Love made the point that how she experienced her daughter at home and what the school told her about her daughter’s behavior were “two different stories.” Her daughter maintained that she was being held to a different standard than “other” children. Ms. Love explained to the principal “My daughter sees how you treat other children...you checked her off without telling me about it.” Ms. Ruby faced similar issues in her grandchildren’s schools in Madison. She argued that suddenly the teachers and administrators were seemingly unaware as to how to build relationships with African American students:

Ms. Ruby: Now one of my grandsons had problems with his middle school as a matter of fact a couple of my granddaughters had the same problems with the same principal...It is like she does not know how to deal with us African Americans. It seems like she will give another person a break but not our kids. She will not give them a break because they should know better. And I do not understand that. If [Black children] should know better then why should [white children] not know better?

Unlike Ms. Love, Ms. Ruby asserted that the principal was possibly “racist.” Ms. Love never mentioned the words “racism” or “racist” at any point during her interview. She simply conveyed that she worked harder at trying to understand the school district’s practices so she could support her daughter. For example, Ms. Love could see that the school was determined to get her to seek out a psychologist for her daughter because they thought she had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD:

Ms. Love	I said okay. We goin’ to do what you asked us to do...the principal said that when my daughter was in the fifth grade they saw AD or A-something
Interviewer	ADHD?
Ms. Love	We tried them pills and they didn’t work. All they did was make her sleepy. We went to the doctor and there wasn’t anything wrong with her

Between the 5th and 8th grades, Ms. Love's daughter was suspended twice for nonviolent and non-drug-related incidents, and after the second suspension, she was informed that her daughter would be expelled. Ms. Love hypothesized the school had to rescind their decision to expel her daughter because their decision was not supported by any of the school district's policies. She also expressed that she thought the school was surprised that she took the time to call the district office. The second key issue that MOM participants faced was the schools telling them their children and grandchildren had ADHD. Racial disparities in special education are well documented (Harry and Klingner 2006); additionally, there are data supporting the assertion that most children who experience suspensions, expulsions, and other forms of isolation are in special education (U.S. Department of Education 2014). Ms. Ruby encountered similar dispositions at her grandchildren's schools and theorized that the schools believed all African American children had ADHD:

Ms. Ruby: When [my grandson] was in middle school, [the school] had a crazy way of dealing with things. You *know* [African American children] all have ADHD—so they think. I don't think either of my grand kids have ADHD but that was what the school has diagnosed them as [having]. They would just let [my grandson] walk out class if he felt overwhelmed or felt like he needed to take a walk he could just walk out of class and take a walk. No! You don't give him any other privileges than any other child. He is not special...and he is not learning. I don't know if you are afraid of him or think he going to go off or what it is you know but treat him just like you treat everybody else.

The only time Ms. Love referenced racism or disparities was her retelling of an incident that involved a white male student who hit her daughter with a football. However, when her daughter retaliated, the school said she “damaged” him and it was a “Level IV offense” under the Code of Student Conduct. Ms. Love's tactical goal, now that her daughter is 15 and in a high school, is to be present at the school (“I'm up at the school. I'm on my point”) and make unannounced visits. After fighting to get one of her grandsons in a “much better school” in the district, Ms. Ruby found herself in the same scenario as his previous school. She was told that her grandson had ADHD and needed a formal diagnosis from a doctor. Again, her grandson was being disinvited from the classroom and encouraged to walk around to “get some air he needs” when what he really needed, according to Ms. Ruby, was to be in class learning like his peers. Ms. Ruby was gravely concerned that the schools promoted the practice of

isolation and removal. In her two grandsons' cases, teachers gave them the option to “take a walk,” which was equally as disruptive to their learning as an imposed dismissal by a teacher. Ms. Ruby started receiving more calls from the schools, and her grandchildren were being suspended multiple times largely due to their “attitude”:

Ms. Ruby: [The suspensions are] always because of attitude or something he said or done...always. And to me it never makes sense whatever it is. The majority of time it never makes sense. And then when you go to them to ask them about it they can't give you a reason that makes sense. They will show you something in [The Code] and will say, ‘The discipline code says that.’ But it also says dot dot but you forgot to read the whole sentence. Okay? I can read and I will read. They don't know how to talk to some of the parents I don't think. They try to treat them inferior. I know that I am not inferior to any of them...They did not expect me to go to the school or they did not expect for me call them back. And then when I really got to know them and they found what capacity I was working in—Oh, that was really a shock. Oh, what I am I suppose to be doing? Because I am the grandmother I should be sitting at home fiddling my thumbs I guess.

Ms. Ruby was aware that the school could have possibly stereotyped her in various ways; first, the school personnel seemed to be surprised that she was working in a leadership capacity as opposed to being a stay-home grandmother “fiddling” her thumbs. Next, she felt the school personnel underestimated how far she would go to understand school policy. Referencing the outgoing Code of Student Conduct, Ms. Ruby found that teachers often referred parents—especially parents of African American children—to this document when their children were being punished for particular behaviors and that the mere referral to the Code would end the conversation. For Ms. Ruby, referencing school policies only started the conversation because not only did she read the policy, but she interrogated the text and reminded teachers and administrators of their responsibilities. One of the prevailing issues with school discipline policies under the zero-tolerance regime is the arbitrariness of what is considered “disruptive” or *who* is considered disruptive. Many parents and guardians as well as the students themselves walk away from disciplinary hearings or punishments with the same feeling that Ms. Ruby encountered. Ms. Ruby took on her grandchildren's education with great passion because she knew how hard and how much their parents were working and the sheer amount of phone time and meetings at the schools would result in missed wages. These mothers/grandmothers



contrasted in that Ms. Love focused on how to navigate the system, while Ms. Ruby had ideas about how the schools could be strengthened.

When asked what suggestions she had for addressing the miscommunication between the schools and families, Ms. Ruby began to talk about the need for more African American teachers. According to Ms. Ruby, if the district had more African American teachers, there was an opportunity for parents, guardians, and students to have allies at the school:

Ms. Ruby: I think there needs to be more African American teachers. Because hopefully they will understand where a child is coming from then the teachers that they have now. [Some teachers] don't think what the problem might be and [they] just judge and don't know what [they] are judging or why...I just think [teachers] should understand the kids more...how to talk [to them]...how to treat them. They don't even have African American history. How can you not have African American history? I don't understand that. How are they suppose know where they came from?

In many ways, Ms. Ruby alluded to the thought that, perhaps, if there were more African American teachers, she could rule out institutional racism and the targeting of African American children in schools for disciplinary and exclusionary practices. While Ms. Ruby critiqued the white teachers for treating African American children like “delicate flowers” who would wither if one pushed too much, she imagined African American teachers as being more sympathetic, investigative, learning what the issues were, and supporting students in moving forward. In what seemed like a brief moment of surrender, Ms. Ruby summarized the experience as “this is what they do here.” Ms. Ruby credited this new environment for her grandchildren's learning (“They do learn”); speaking (“They talk better”); and calm disposition (“Their attitude is different”). Ultimately, Ms. Ruby believed that some of the schools were better than many in large districts; however, she was not completely convinced.

In the next section, we turn to the perspectives of black youth who migrated with their families from Chicago to Madison, from the big city to the small city.

#### “There's Nothing Here for Us”: Youth Navigating Schools

BOND members, Pryor and Chappelle, both moved to Madison from Chicago and spoke candidly about their lives in Madison. Both boys were the only two BOND members who were bussed from their neighborhood to attend a high school in an affluent community that was a

popular location for university faculty's children to attend. Pryor agreed with most of his peers in The BOND and mothers in MOM that Madison was “safer” than Chicago:

Pryor: It is safer here but the police stay on you. The west side of Madison used to be a lot worse but I could still go outside and play. Not in Chicago. But in Chicago you get more love because there are more black teachers. Black teachers can relate to us. It seems like more opportunities out here but not really because they make it hard. You need an ID for everything. Blacks from Madison also act funny. Act like they don't want us to be here.

The notion of safety for Pryor focused on explicit dangers such as gun violence and gang rivalry. However, embedded in his assessment was the notion that there were other significant changes such as lack of opportunities and the absence of black teachers who could “relate” to black students. Acknowledging Madison's opportunities, Pryor asserted that identification was needed signaling a particular kind of system that had to be navigated with social capital and preplanning. Youth could not merely walk into a center and expect to engage in activities. Pryor also experienced isolation from blacks born and raised in Madison and believed they did not want blacks from Chicago in their city.

Chappelle had a slightly different perspective than Pryor; he argued that Madison was essentially the same as Chicago:

Chappelle: Nothing is different from Chicago. Same thing. Since Madison is smaller, it is easier to get into trouble. You get into trouble over the littlest thing. Chicago is way bigger. Chicago had more rec centers that stayed open later and open to all. You could hang out there and avoid trouble and messing around. Here you have to pay fees and get memberships like at the YMCA.

Both Pryor and Chappelle underscored the perks of big cities—more anonymity and more activities for youth around the clock. Again, the notion of membership was invoked in Chappelle's interview. He argued that there were fewer options for himself and his peers often resulting in “get[ting] into trouble for the littlest thing.” Chappelle echoed Pryor's acknowledgment of Chicago teachers:

Chappell: The schools in Chicago were better cause the teachers cared about us and treat us like kids. There were more black teachers...They taught us life skills. Black teachers in Chicago cared about us. They stayed on you and helped you along the way. They tell you when you are behind before it is too late and you can't pass.

Contrary to the negative press Chicago Public School (CPS) teachers endured, the BOND members recalled their teachers and experiences in CPS with fondness and—we would argue—longing. To inform a student “when you are behind before it is too late and you can’t pass” seemed obvious, but it was not Chappelle’s experience in his new city:

- Chappelle White teachers don’t care. They let you get behind. They don’t teach anything engaging or interesting. They want you to act like them
- Interviewer What do you mean?
- Chappelle They want you to act white! Not me because I do me
- Interviewer What about the black teachers in Madison?
- Chappelle There were no black teachers at Beacon High School. Not even black janitors

Reflective of America’s teaching force, Madison’s teaching force is largely white and female. In her seminal study of successful teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1994) posits teachers do not have to share students’ cultural and ethnic heritage to provide academically rigorous learning opportunities for students; however, they should practice culturally relevant pedagogical practices (Ladson-Billings 1995). Most recently, Paris (2012) argues for culturally sustaining pedagogies to support the democratic engagement of multiethnic and multilingual youth in schools. Chappelle’s observation that his teachers in Chicago taught “life skills” mirrors historiographies of segregated schools in the south that served African American children. Siddle Walker (1996) argued that African American teachers in segregated schools set high expectations for their students, and it was the expectations that drove academic success in spite of being in substandard facilities. Conversely, Chappelle saw his white teachers’ interests in him as being conditional because their primary concern, according to Chappelle, is that black students act “like them” or “act white.” Chappelle’s declaration “I do me,” was an affirmation of his self-worth as well as a challenge that he had to change the core of his identity in order to receive the education that he was entitled to in American public schools.

We observed that the interview protocol asked about “experiences living in Madison,” and both Pryor and Chappelle started discussing schooling and education. When asked to discuss “problems black youth face in Madison,” Pryor invoked school again. According to Pryor, the primary issues for himself and his peers were “nothing to do” and “police.” He continued his concern that blacks who were established in Madison were ashamed of the black youth from urban cities:

Pryor: A staff member at Beacon High School<sup>3</sup> said, ‘You little black kids don’t learn—we don’t want y’all here.’ We don’t act like them and I’m not trying to fit in like them. [Blacks who move here join] gangs because there ain’t nothing to do. We need something out side of the box beside basketball. Teach me how to build something. I like building, I want to learn construction work.

Pryor implied that black youth were often confined to a monolithic vision of hoop dreams, and if they had any place in the school, it was on the basketball team; however, he had other desires. Sadly, joining gangs had become a past time for some youth as it gave them “something to do.” During one of the BOND sessions, members were asked if they had experienced suspensions. All of the boys’ hands went up that evening and then they asked a barrage of questions: “Do you mean recently?” “You mean beginning in elementary school?” “This school year only?” Their questions blind-sided the adult facilitators in the room because the nature of the follow-up questions indicated that not only had every boy around that table experienced suspension, but they had been suspended multiple times. It was often difficult for them to explain why they were suspended because they were not straightforward offenses like drugs or weapons but more for speaking out of turn or being “disruptive” in class. Pryor was forthcoming about being suspended:

Pryor: I moved here in 6th grade. I was suspended from eighth grade about 24 times. I was suppose to go to the private school for high school but the teacher suspended me for nothing so I could not attend. There were no black teachers at Beacon. I was not learning nothing interesting or new. I learn more from the streets. The white kids were cool but they don’t know.

Chappelle argued that the monolithic depiction of black youth as disruptive was visible in school and off campus:

Chappelle: [People in Madison] always think we are up to something no good. Most of the time they might be right but still they can’t stay on us for no reason. Also, there is nothing to do unless you get into trouble. Kids ride the bus for fun and get into trouble. Also discrimination. Whites don’t want us here. Like, my first day in Madison a white man said you are from Chicago uh? The way he said it and for him to say it was not cool. They don’t want us here in Madison.

Like Pryor, Chappelle also felt as if black youth were expected to change their personality and behavior in order

<sup>3</sup> All school names are pseudonyms.

to be considered a citizen. Chappelle posited that black youth from Madison had been taught “their” ways, or white ways, which helped them fit in more and, from his vantage point, secured their citizenship:

- Chappelle If you don’t act like them you can’t succeed in school  
 Interviewer Who are them?  
 Chappelle White people. Black kids raised here are taught their ways. So they alright

Chappelle did eventually get the black teacher he hoped for in “night school”; since he was not on track for graduation, he had to enroll in an alternative program:

- Chappelle I am taking night classes. Now I have a black teacher. Why now? Why night school I get a black teacher?  
 Interviewer What is he/she like?  
 Chappelle I like her because she is teaching me interesting things like street law. That makes it interesting. Its real life

While the struggle for the youth looks different than the parents, grandparents, and guardians, Pryor and Chappelle provide evidence that it can be complicated—at best—for migrant youth to negotiate their learning experiences. These youth feel the push and pull of being in a place that does not have the same kind of life-threatening dangers, yet they do not feel safe in the very place that is supposed to treat them with equity and an ethic of care that should not be reserved for particular kinds of youth. Safety in this context is debatable as is who gets counted as worthy of being protected.

## Discussion

So what do these stories from working class African American families who migrated from one large urban city to a small city tell us about their hopes, dreams, experiences, and discoveries? And how can we use these stories to think about revisiting school discipline policies and practices that continue to isolate particular youth? In these stories are themes of desire—not a static notion of desire but one that is fluid and liberating. Or, as Tuck (2010) offers, desire can be “smart” and “agentive.” From the mother/grandmothers’ perspectives, this new migration for working class African American families was a strategic effort to access high-quality education for their children and grandchildren and high quality of life. Ms. Love and Ms. Ruby imagined their roles as supporting their adult children in their parenting efforts. However, as Ms. Love and Ms. Ruby became increasingly involved with the schools and experienced racial disparities in discipline

policies and practices, they were motivated to find ways to reclaim the rights of black children in school contexts. As they collected their own data, they became more critical of the policies and their new city that was originally characterized as having the best of everything and definitely being “better than” Chicago. Ms. Love and Ms. Ruby asserted their citizenship and their rights as parents, grandparents, and community organizers. Ms. Love and Ms. Ruby dismantle stereotypes about African American parents—and single parenting in particular—and their reported stories demonstrate involvement in the schools and a keen interest in the academic experiences of their children and grandchildren. However, there is a mis-match in values and expectations that is vast and not easily bridged. Pryor and Chappelle amassed this mis-match in their narratives of their lives in schools and beyond. As consummate outsiders, they felt their options were limited. They could either be like their white teachers and black students who received a stamp of approval from white teachers or live in a monolithic box of what it meant to be black as well as what it meant to be an outsider from the big city. We wish to underscore that Pryor and Chappelle did not view education or being educated as synonymous with whiteness; they are black youth who wanted to be themselves *and* be viewed as worthy citizens in their schools and communities. They did, however, feel that in order to receive the education they needed to be successful that they would have to take on personalities, dispositions, and practices that they believed to be “white.” To be sure, when both Pryor and Chappelle were asked, “What strategies, skills or resources are necessary to ensure that you or other African American youth have opportunities after high school?” Chappelle responded, “Be friendly. Fit in with the whites. You can’t be you. I will always be me. I am not going to fit in.” Pryor had a similar response, “Be white. White is right. Be a good faker. They won’t accept you for who you are.” While these reflections can be characterized as being resistant to school and education, we posit that these youth are identifying tensions that are evident in the well-documented experiences of minoritized youth in American public schools.

These youth and their families are negotiating past and present realities in their new environment. By moving from a big city to a small city environment, this new migration led to the belief they would find better homes, schools, and quieter lives. While participants in our study did feel safer from the threat of physical violence, they had not imagined the struggle that would ensue in the education system that presented a symbolic violence in the form of suspensions, expulsions, and other forms of isolation. In a progressive move, MMSD is responding to local and national racial disparities in school discipline policies and practices in their implementation of the aforementioned BEP. The BEP

requires teachers to keep students in the classroom for incidents that in the past were addressed with referrals and sending students out. In the BEP, restorative practices will be implemented early and often including restorative conversations that will make an effort to reach youth prior to tensions rising or acts of harm being committed. In American public schools, most of the students causing harm have actually been harmed by the infrastructure of schooling. It is possible that through restorative conversations—that is conversations that are focused on “why” particular choices were made, the context for the choices made, and next steps for accountability—youth, their families, teachers, and administrators will actually take time to listen to each other.

West Oakland, California, and Alameda County have documented their use of restorative justice in schools and the ways in which they use this practices to resist zero-tolerance policies that have negatively impacted minoritized youth (Sumner et al. 2010; Kidde and Alfred 2011). A key factor in these two cases that can inform the work in Madison is the way schools in West Oakland and Alameda County utilize families in the process of supporting youth in being accountable for their actions and fostering a desire to be a part of the classroom and school communities. A case study in Cole Middle School in West Oakland found that suspension declined by 87 % with the implementation of restorative justice practices. This case study, which included participant observation, open-ended interviews, a questionnaire, and data from the Oakland Unified School District, found that “school-based restorative justice” should be “grounded in the norms, values, and culture of the students, school, and community” (Sumner et al. 2010, p. 3). Parents and guardians in this study indicated that they were made aware of concerns with their children early in the process, thus giving families an opportunity to create a community response that supported students. In Alameda County, a collective of stakeholders including their School Health Services and a nonprofit organization, Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth partnered in creating a guide for educators working with youth in classrooms and outside of classrooms including “intervention circles”; “peer juries”; and “restorative conferencing” (Kidde and Alfred 2011, p. 13). In both studies, families are a key component of working with students to develop solutions and create a system of accountability.

Like so many policy changes in schools, teachers often feel as if one more task is being added to their full plates. Teachers need support to do this work. Elsewhere, Winn argues for a “Restorative English Education” and ultimately a “Restorative Teacher Education” (Winn 2013). In a Restorative Teacher Education, preservice teachers learn how to use their curricular powers to keep their students present, engaged, and willing participants in classroom

communities. A Restorative Teacher Education invites teachers across content areas to integrate restorative practices into their content area by selecting readings, required experiences, activities, and other culturally *sustaining* (Paris 2012) practices that use students’ “funds of identity” (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 2014) to foster a rigorous academic setting. In sum, teachers would leave their preparation programs with restorative dispositions or a mindset that sending students out for incidents that do not involve violence or drugs is not optional. Addressing this work in teacher preparation programs is a long-term solution that can take some of the pressure off school systems to find time for teachers to be trained.

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