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Zero Tolerance and the Impossibilities of Discipline--Findings from the Field

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Abstract
At School James, a high-poverty, high-minority inner-city elementary school in the Midwestern United States, a highly detailed system of rules and punishments is supposed to control students. The official rationale underlying this system of zero-tolerance discipline is to create environments conducive to learning. In practice, however, the meticulous system of rules, rewards, and punishments fails to achieve the desired levels of control and the realities at the school are dominated by disorder. My research sought to explain this failure and explore the consequences it has for this already marginalized student population. The present article outlines how the design of the disciplinary system makes its success impossible and ultimately dooms it to fail. While a sizable body of research addresses the negative consequences of punitive and exclusionary discipline that has come to characterize many American schools, a discussion of disciplinary under- or non-enforcement is all but absent from the literature. The mere existence of the minutely defined rules and harsh punishments that characterize zero-tolerance discipline does not mean these actually *are* or *can be* implemented as intended. By analyzing the *failure* of punitive discipline, my study addresses an important gap.

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Zero Tolerance and the Impossibilities of Discipline – Findings from the Field

> International human rights law recognizes that children should be taught in a safe and nurturing school environment that supports their social and emotional, as well as academic, development. School discipline is an important part of this vision and should present an educational opportunity to teach children…punitive, zero-tolerance approaches to discipline violate the rights of children to an education directed toward their full potential…
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> -- Human Rights Watch (HRW) in a statement to the Jackson (MS) Public School District
> (Farmer and Sullivan 2008)

Disciplinary systems are designed to control. At School James[1], a high-poverty, high-minority inner-city elementary school in the Midwestern United States, a highly detailed system of rules and punishments is supposed to control students. 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. The official rationale underlying this system of zero-tolerance discipline 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" (APS Code of Conduct[2]). In practice, however, the meticulous system of rules, rewards, and punishments fail to achieve the desired levels of control and the realities at the school are dominated by disorder. So many students violate the various rules so frequently – and often simultaneously – that individual transgressions blend into each other and make it difficult to determine when one transgression ends and another begins. Like background noise, rule transgressions are always present in the hallways, stairwells, and classrooms. My research sought to explain this failure of discipline and explore the consequences it has for this already marginalized student population. The present article outlines how the design of the disciplinary system makes its success impossible and ultimately dooms it to fail.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Foucault's theory of discipline

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) describes discipline as "a specific technology of power" (194) that controls in order to achieve its objective of producing obedient bodies that are docile and useful. In Foucault's theory, disciplinary control is implemented through a focus on detail, "meticulous regulations," and the "supervision of the smallest fragment of life and body" (140). In disciplinary systems, everything is observed and everything is punishable, even the "slightest departures from correct behaviour" (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 (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" (187). On the other hand, disciplinary power relies on rewards and punishments. Rewards create an incentive to behave in the desired ways (180). Punishments, in turn, are supposed to deter imitators, correct the offender to prevent repetition, and restore the power imbalance created by the offense (pp. 93, 98, 123). Consequently, punishments function in a way that creates "a little more interest in avoiding the penalty than in risking the crime" (94). Moreover, punishments have to be inevitable; without exception, they have to follow the offense

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as a "perfect certainty" (95). This certainty is crucial to disciplinary success and Foucault emphasizes that "[n]othing so weakens the machinery of the law than the hope of going unpunished" (96). With reference to Bentham's panopticon, Foucault argues that eventually, 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" (pp. 201, 203).

The punitive turn in American school discipline.

There is little doubt that disciplinary systems are a necessary feature of schools. Schools need rules to create and maintain order because teaching and learning cannot take place in a climate marked by chaos. In addition, schools need rules to ensure the safety of their students, teachers, and other staff members. However, in recent decades, public schools in the United States have increasingly been criticized for the particular ways they try to keep schools safe and create environments conducive to learning. An extensive body of research illustrates how discipline in the nation's public schools has become more formalized and more centralized, mandatory minimum punishments better known as zero-tolerance policies have become ubiquitous, and the number of suspensions and expulsions has increased dramatically as a result (Ayers, Ayers and Dohrn 2002; Losen, D.J., Gillespie, J. 2012; Schoonover 2009; Skiba, R. J., Rausch, M. K. 2006a; Skiba, R. J., Rausch, M. K. 2006b). Security technologies and personnel previously reserved to the field of criminal justice have become standard features of public schools (Devine 1996; Hirschfield 2010; Kupchik 2010; Kupchik and Monahan 2006). As a result of these developments many American schools now look and feel more like prisons than educational institutions.

Among the most prominent scholarly criticisms of contemporary American school discipline are the "discipline gap" and the "school-to-prison pipeline" (American Civil Liberties Union n.d.; Gregory and Weinstein 2008; Kinsler 2011; Wald and Losen 2003a; Wald and Losen 2003b). While discipline gap refers to the gross overrepresentation of black and other minority students, especially boys, in exclusionary punishments, the school-to-prison pipeline suggests that punitive school discipline places students on a trajectory towards incarceration – also a trend that affects minority males at higher rates than other student subgroups (Advancement Project 2010; Skiba, R.J., Simmons, A., Staudinger, L., Rausch, M., Dow, G., & Feggins, R. 2003).

Underlying much of the literature on the punitive turn in US schools is the assumption that stricter and more punitive discipline is actually *put into practice* as intended and, more or less, does what it should: surveil, detect, capture, and punish. Discussing the negative consequences of suspensions or expulsions, for example, necessitates that students were not only *caught* committing an infraction but that they were actually *punished* for it. Similarly, criticizing ties between schools and criminal justice authorities implies that misbehavior was seen, confronted, and punished. However, long before students get arrested by school police, suspended, or expelled, there are various types of lower-level punishments they face that shape their perceptions of discipline and the relationships with their teachers. In fact, such rule infractions and the lower-level punishments they entail are much more ubiquitous than incidents leading to suspension. In addition to the underrepresentation of such comparatively minor forms of punishment, a discussion of disciplinary under- or non-enforcement is all but absent from the literature. The mere existence of minutely defined rules and harsh punishments does not mean these actually *are* or *can be* implemented as intended.

By analyzing the *failure* of punitive discipline and the consequences of this failure, my research addresses an important gap in the literature. My study suggests that the frequent

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experience of disciplinary under- or even non-enforcement plays at least as important a role as *actually* being punished. Students often interpret such inconsistencies as arbitrary or unfair which serves to undermine the legitimacy of rules that thus remain unenforced and ultimately also the legitimacy of those charged with their enforcement (Tyler 2006a; Tyler 2006b).

METHODOLOGY
Research Design
      The purpose of this study was to explore the failure of discipline at School James and explain how this failure came about, how it affects the moral and social education of the school's high-poverty, high-minority student population, and what role the disciplinary failure plays in socializing this student population into a society marked by social insecurity and mass incarceration. To achieve this objective, this study addressed two main research questions: (1) What internal and external factors contribute to the failure of discipline at School James? And (2) What does this failure mean in light of the socializing function of schools and their societal mission to prepare students for work and citizenship? To answer these questions, I used a qualitative research design theoretically informed by a broad interactionist perspective and the new sociology of childhood, and methodologically informed by constructivist grounded theory as described by Charmaz (2014). This article presents one of the two main internal factors my study identified: the observation that the structure of the disciplinary system itself makes its success impossible.

The Research Site
      School James is a public elementary school in the inner city of Arcusia, a large city in the Midwestern United States. School James is one of over 60 schools administered by the district of Arcusia Public Schools (APS) and serves children from Kindergarten through the sixth grade. In the school year 2010-11, when this study was conducted, approximately 44 percent of the school's 390 students were black, 35 percent white, 13 percent multiracial, and seven percent Hispanic; about 85 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. At the district level, approximately 55 percent of the nearly 30,000 students at APS were black, 21 percent white, 19 percent Hispanic, and six percent were classified as "other." About 81 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Data Collection
      The fieldwork for this study was conducted in two phases in the spring and fall of 2010. Altogether, I spent over 60 full days at the school, participating in more than 400 hours of school time. I collected data through ethnographic observations, informal conversations, and extended, in-depth interviews with students. The primary focus of my research was on the children in three classrooms, whose daily routines I observed and accompanied: a fifth-grade classroom in the spring and two sixth-grade classrooms in the fall. The fifth-grade classroom comprised 11 girls and 14 boys between 10 and 11 years of age. Of these 25 students, 13 were black (four girls, nine boys), nine white (five girls, four boys), and three Hispanic (two girls, one boy). The two sixth-grade classrooms comprised 26 girls (14 black, 10 white, and two Hispanic) and 26 boys (14 black, 8 white, and four Hispanic) between 11 and 14 years of age. Inside and outside the classrooms, I observed what students did, what they said, their interactions with each other, and the way their teachers did or did not react to certain activities. I followed each class wherever they went whenever possible, doing what the kids did: I sat with them on the hallway floor as

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they waited their turn during bathroom breaks; I followed them through the hallways to Art, Music, Library Skills, and Gym class; I ate lunch with them in the cafeteria; and on the days that students were allowed to have recess, I accompanied them outside where I observed and talked to students and teachers.

In all my conversations and interactions with students I tried to avoid, as much as possible, to approach the kids from a position of authority. In the literature, this approach has been referred to as the "least adult role" (Mandell 1988) or the "least possible adult" (Thornberg 2008:420). These concepts describe a situation in which the social distance and difference between the adult-as-researcher and the child-as-researched are minimized to the utmost extent, especially regarding the position of superior authority adults otherwise occupy vis-à-vis children. I repeatedly emphasized that I was not a teacher and tried to avoid acting like one, for example by not reprimanding or trying to control students' conduct.

In total, I conducted over 60 hours of interviews with 50 students in grades 5 and 6: 26 girls (12 black, 11 white, 3 Hispanic) and 24 boys (16 black, 6 white, and 2 Hispanic) that were recruited from the school's fifth and sixth grade classrooms. Interviews ranged from 20 to 120 minutes in length, and several interviews were conducted in multiple sessions throughout the fieldwork. Initially, I selected students randomly on a volunteer basis. In line with the idea of theoretical sampling that is central to grounded theory, I selected subsequent interview participants in order to collect additional data relevant to my emerging theory (Charmaz 2014:192). This included students who frequently got in trouble as well as those who rarely or never did. All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide; all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. In line with grounded theory coding steps, the data analysis continuously focused and refined codes, eventually elevating them to the final concepts that reflect the core findings of this study.

FINDINGS: IMPOSSIBLE DISCIPLINE

The study's key finding presented in this article identifies the disciplinary design – more specifically, the disciplinary overregulation – as one of the internal factors that contribute to the failure of discipline. Designed to control, the disciplinary system is doomed to fail because the levels of supervision, consistency, and compliance demanded by its high degree of formalization are practically impossible and undesirable for students and teachers alike. The disciplinary system creates "impossible students" and "impossible teachers" who inconsistently follow and enforce the rules. Inconsistent rule enforcement destroys the certainty of punishment, makes disciplinary consequences seem arbitrary, personal, and unfair and creates "impossible punishments" which neither deter nor correct. Against this background, students grow antagonistic and resistant towards teacher authority and deliberately violate rules to "get back at" a rejected system and its disliked enforcers. Similarly, teachers grow antagonistic against students who demand constant disciplinary attention, leaving them frustrated and exhausted. Instead of relationships of mutual respect and trust, student-teacher relationships at the school are marked by reciprocal antagonism. The same disciplinary design that is supposed to effect order and control in theory, makes this impossible in practice: it creates a situation of impossible discipline.

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The disciplinary overregulation

The students in my study are subject to a multitude of rules and regulations: various rules regulate students at the levels of the school and classrooms; the code of conduct and dress code regulate student behavior and attire for all students in the district; the dress code alone is a 16-page pamphlet that minutely defines permissible and forbidden attire, including the color of socks. At the level of the school, 22 individual points detail the exact manner in which students are to enter and exit the school, move within the building, or interact with their peers. Any movement of student groups is to happen in a "straight silent line" and students are expected to have their hands behind their backs or in their pockets at all times. Students are only allowed to use the bathrooms at designated times, when the entire class goes as a group. In addition, each teacher has her/his own set of classroom rules. Throughout the school, teachers use a system of colored cards – blue, green, yellow, red, and white – to measure and track student conduct throughout the day. Each color corresponds to a different level of individual behavior. This system is set up in a way that allows teachers to track behavior from arrival to dismissal every day for each individual student in their class. Every morning, all students start out on "blue" which denotes "excellent" behavior and each time a student violates a rule, they have to "move their card" to the next color until they reach white, which is an office referral, where the principal decides about further disciplinary measures.

The daily disorder

In theory, all elements of Foucault's theory of discipline are part of the disciplinary system at School James: attention to detail, rewards, punishments, and constant surveillance. In practice, however, everyday realities at School James deviate substantially from this theory. The daily disorder is characterized by a steady flow of students who fail to adhere to the various rules that are supposed to control their conduct, movement, and interaction. Rule violations happen all the time, in all contexts and locations throughout the day, from student arrival in the morning to dismissal in the afternoon. In any five-minute time span throughout the day, at least one student is in violation of at least one of the vast number of rules. It is the *accumulation* of these ubiquitous rule infractions that primarily characterize the disorder at School James – the fact that someone, somewhere, is always breaking a rule. Even though the disciplinary system is designed to create "the best teaching and learning environments possible" (APS Code of Conduct) some days, no instruction takes place at all because students and teachers are preoccupied with disruptions.

Who is to blame for this daily disorder? For most teachers, the culprits are easily identified. After all, if students actually *followed* all the rules that are in place, if they *complied* with all the rules as intended, the disciplinary system would, in fact, be able to produce the order it desires. Indeed, this reading seems obvious and plausible. However, as with many social settings constructed and shaped by their actors and their always evolving agendas, the obvious answers are not always the ones that most adequately explain our observations. In the case of School James, locating blame exclusively in students is insufficient. It does justice neither to the disciplinary exchanges, nor to students' own experience of rules and punishments. Similarly, the blame cannot be squarely placed on teachers' shoulders – whether in their roles as enforcers of discipline, or in their roles as non-enforcers who do not care enough to confront infractions (Devine 1996).

Most students in most situations throughout the day follow rules only when they absolutely have to – that is, when they are directly watched by a teacher. Even then, compliance

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often only lasts until teachers are out of sight again. Sometimes, rule violations are treated like a game of cat and mouse with students breaking rules to see how far they can go. Other times, rule violations are acts of opposition, committed to communicate students' refusal to subject themselves to disciplinary expectations. For teachers, this constant need for disciplinary attention is as frustrating as it is exhausting: every one of the myriad of rules creates a possible offense which, in turn, increases the need to enforce all these rules several fold. The following sections illustrate how the same disciplinary design that is supposed to effect order and control in theory, makes this impossible in practice: it simultaneously creates "impossible teachers" and "impossible students" who can only live up to their own expectations by breaking the same rules they are supposed to enforce or comply with. Ultimately, the disciplinary failure is structural and a direct result of the design of the disciplinary system and its possibilities of implementation.

The impossible student

What appears to be an undifferentiated refusal to submit to disciplinary control is actually more than reasonable, from the kids' points of view, especially when it comes to breaking rules that they feel unnecessarily restrict their freedoms. In fact, most students do not reject rules per se, they reject the disciplinary overregulation. The all-encompassing restrictiveness of rules and regulations leaves them no spheres of permissibility. From the kids' perspective it is not just that everything is observed and everything is punishable, it is also that everything is *forbidden* – everything they care about, at any rate. The countless rules and behavioral expectations allow students no freedom to engage in any of the behaviors they enjoy or consider important. Deveron – disliked and feared by teachers for his role as notorious troublemaker, and approved and admired by his peers for these same behaviors – feels that school in general is "just lame, like, boring – there's nothing fun to do here!" Similarly, Lara describes school as "just boring, like all the rules and stuff." Everything that matters to them is either prohibited from the outset or depends on the leniency of teachers. Even social time during lunch depends on adult approval and while Keenan, who is new to the school, describes lunch as "a free time when you can talk and stuff," his interview partner Deveron immediately curbs this enthusiasm:

> You gotta understand, in this school, there's a time to play and there's a time to do business in – to do your work. (…) Get your education. And there's a time to play. And there's a time to do your business. Just like, like at lunch, it's – that's not really no time to play. It's like a time to eat but, it can BE a play time, if the teacher lets you, but, it's not no play time. Unless the teacher lets you.

Because recess is a "privilege" at School James that must be earned by the entire class's good lunch behavior and tied to so many conditions that it rarely happens[3], lunch is the only non-instructional time during the day where students can socialize – theoretically. But even here, they are only allowed to talk if the teacher "lets" them.

Students are not allowed to move through the building independently, they are never to be unsupervised or, as Lara puts it "We can't go anywhere by ourselves." Some teachers fear that if they let one student go, "then they all want to go," others predict that "if you let the kids go anywhere on their own, they'll go anywhere BUT where they're supposed to go," as a teacher suggests. Keenan summarizes his interpretation of the disciplinary overregulation in one concise statement: "At THIS school, you can't do nuthin!"

For many students, social interactions are the most important dimension of school: making and having friends, interacting with them, or having fun are among those things the kids like best about school. Keenan even emphasizes that it was the friends he made at School James

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that changed his opinion from a negative into a more positive one: "At first I didn't like it. I thought I didn't wanna go to this school. Then I met people, and now I like it." Because friends are so important to the kids' experience of school, they feel strongly about not being allowed to socialize with them. Many feel unnecessarily restricted by the lack of permissible opportunities to freely interact with their friends.

> Kids are supposed to talk a lot because if they don't, they're gonna to go crazy. (…) You're gonna have lots of questions in the world, questions that you really need instead of playing questions like "What's your height (compared to the teacher)?" because you know she's shorter than you. So that's why [my mama] said it's important to talk a lot. Because I tried it once, I try my best not to talk and then my head just start hurting all of a sudden and then my nose just start bleeding. I guess my brain was having a meltdown because I didn't get to talk and then I start talking, my nose stopped bleeding and my head stopped hurting.

Dequavius, 6th grade

> We really want to talk to our friends, but we never get the chance to. Because, the only place we get to talk to our friends is either at recess or the gym, and we never get to talk to our friends at all anymore, not that much.

Jerold, 6th grade

> It sucks. Because I think we should have like at least, like, get some slack, give us some slack. Cause we don't get to do anything. All you get to do is like sit there, be bored, watch the teachers instruct and all that. I mean that sucks! We can't even have free time!

Juan, 6th grade

While Jerold's comment reflects profound disillusionment, Juan suggests that the lack of permissible social interactions makes school boring. Dequavius even points out that not being allowed to talk it is unhealthy and inhibits children's chances to explore and learn about the world around them. Pam (6th grade) describes this prohibition as unreasonable and emphasizes that there is simply no need for this prohibition: "Some of [the rules] are unnecessary. (…) Like, no talking in the lunchroom. Come on, it's about the only sociable time."

Apart from the various no-talking rules, the dress code is among the most disliked rules of all. Students feel that it prevents them from wearing the clothes they like, forces them to look "stupid" or "lame," and keeps them from expressing themselves through clothing. In fact, eliminating the dress code is one of the most frequently mentioned changes students would implement if they could: "NO UNIFORMS!!!" Deveron emphatically responds when I ask him what school would be like if he could make it the way he wanted it to be. Searia says she would get rid of the dress code for students but force teachers to wear uniforms instead: "I'm gonna make them suffer just like us." Similarly, Keenan repeatedly complains that it is "unfair" that students have to wear uniforms but teachers do not. Especially the requirement to tuck in their shirts is heavily frowned upon, as Juela (6th grade) illustrates when she states "I hate tucking in my shirt, I HATE it. I look like a nerd, also." Similarly, her classmate Deveron emphasizes:

> I hate tuckin' in my shirt! (...) It's lame! (...) because you'll look like you a church man or something like that. But you'll look like a preacher. I don't wanna look like no preacher! Don't wanna look like a fag! (...) I look like a fag when I tuck in my shirt.

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Juela suggests that tucking in your shirt communicates a certain attitude to academic achievement that she would rather not be associated with because she connects it to a lack of coolness and popularity. Deveron underlines that this particular provision undermines his masculinity which he, like many of his peers, understands solely in heteronormative terms, and which, in turn, undermines the "bad boy" image he is working hard to cultivate. Most students agree that the dress code in general and especially having to tuck in your shirt does not correspond to the presentation of self they prefer to give. It makes them look "uncool," "unattractive" or simply presents a "wrong" self, a self that they should not be forced to present to others.

Students' attitudes towards the dress code ideally illustrate that they do not reject the rules per se, but the disciplinary overregulation.

> Uniform is weird because I get it if you're gonna wear a skirt way up to here or shorts, they're supposed to be shorts but you wear them to your knees all the way down to your feet with your shorts, like sagging. Whereas the girls that wear their shorts really high up. Stuff like that, and I get that. But why does it have to be of certain colors? You should be able to wear any kind of color. You shouldn't have to have a collar. It doesn't have to have stuff on it but it could still be a different color.

> Andrea, 5th grade

> I don't like [the dress code] (...) cause at my sister's school, we got to wear a pink collared shirt. They still have to tuck it in, but they get to wear a pink collared shirt, like it could be a striped shirt and stuff – as long as it have a collar. And I wish that we could do that here...

> Cenisa, 6th grade

> It would be okay to wear uniforms, but it would be better if we could wear any color shirt, as long as it has a collar on it. At some schools (…) we can wear any color shirt, we don't have to wear belts, and we don't have to tuck in our shirt.

> Breyann, 6th grade

Most kids agree that certain clothes are inappropriate for school, but they simply do not see the point of the uniform policy's particular and meticulous provisions. Juan, for example, agrees that it's okay to tuck in your shirt "if it's like big ol' shirts that you can untuck so, you do not have all that shirt under you." Similarly, he can see the point of having to wear a belt because it ensures that "we're not sagging, and so we won't have to see our butt, ehm, boxers, tighty whities." What he does not understand is why shirts can only be one of five colors: "We can't wear our shirts in like different colors, because we have to wear stupid uniform, it's messed up."

Students reject the disciplinary overregulation – not rules altogether. On the contrary, their comments suggest that they agree with the basic need for schools to have rules and are willing to accept some level of regulation and control. However, for them to willingly subject themselves to a rule, it has to make sense to them. Alternatively, students expect to be given a minimum level of decision-making power in return for the compliance that is expected of them. At School James, neither is the case. This gives rise to the large-scale noncompliance that is a direct response to the all-encompassing restrictiveness of the disciplinary overregulation. For many students, the trouble and punishment they risk when they break the rules is well worth it, considering the alternative of passively subjecting themselves to arbitrary, unfair, and unreasonable rules.

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The disciplinary overregulation leaves keeps students from engaging in activities they enjoy: socializing with friends or independently deciding what they want to do at any point throughout the day. That is, they cannot engage in any of these behaviors within the parameters of existing rules. Differently put, they can only engage in these behaviors by breaking the rules. Impossible students can comply with the rules and forgo what they deem important, enjoyable, or necessary; or they can reclaim illegalized freedoms by breaking the rules, always risking trouble and punishment as a result. In other words, impossible students can either subject themselves to an uneventful, boring school life devoid of social interactions and relationships with peers, or reject this subjection, break the rules, and face punishment. Many students regularly choose the latter. Especially when it comes to activities students claim as a matter of right, such as talking to friends, they do not see such rule violations as "bad" behavior – from their point of view, they are committing righteous indocilities.

When they get in trouble for such righteous indocilities, students reject punishment as petty, disproportionate, and unreasonable. Marshall, for example, complains that "this school is too strict and all. (…) Like if you talk or something, they write you up for it, and it takes a lot to get written up, not just talking. If you just talk, they write you up – the school is too strict." Similarly, Lara observes that her teacher last year

> (…) was nice, kinda. But if I did one thing, she'd always make me move my (card). If I was talking: move your (card)! And if I'd say: What did I do? Then she'd just say: Move your (card) again! So, I'm like "God"! (…) Like, if I'm talking, you'll have to move your (card).

Impossible students break the rules not only because they reject them, but also because this is the only way they can engage in any of the activities they deem important. The disciplinary power seeks to coerce student bodies into levels of silence and passivity that effectively render them invisible. Students meet these attempts head-on and counter them with the only power they have: the power to deny compliance. And while disciplinary theory stipulates the immediate and automatic punishment of each and every infraction, students are keen observers of their surroundings. As such, they are well aware that the numerical imbalance between students and teachers acts in their favor: there are simply too many rules this small number of teachers is supposed to enforce on a large number of students for teachers to be able to see each and every rule infraction, let alone confront it and mete out punishment. The disciplinary overregulation, the countless rules designed to control, not only create the impossible student, they also create the impossible teacher.

The impossible teacher
The impossible gaze. The disciplinary overregulation makes it impossible for students to act or present themselves in ways they deem important. Similarly, it is impossible for teachers to consistently supervise all the rules and see all infractions. This impossibility is best illustrated by the daily arrival of students, which stands in stark contrast to the expectations outlined in the school rules. The movement, the noise, dress code violations, walking up and down on the "wrong" side of the stairs, walking next to each other, trying to sneak into the gym or to the basement after the designated times: all this happens even though students know they are supposed to do the opposite and even though several adults are present to supervise them. Every morning, these adults are placed in strategic positions in a chain of Foucauldian "gazes" along the students' permitted paths of movement. At least three adults await students outside the back door, where students arrive, to ensure that children correctly line up by grade level and are quiet

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before being admitted into the school building. On entrance of the building, at least one person stands in front of the gym which is immediately adjacent to the back entrance to ensure that no student enters the gym before the permitted time. Two others stand by the stairwell closest to the back entrance to make sure students only go downstairs to the cafeteria and not to their classrooms before the designated time. Downstairs in the basement, at least ten additional adults are supposed to enforce the rules for hallway and cafeteria conduct.

However, the disorder that accompanies student arrival every morning underlines that even this very visible adult presence in the hallways and stairwells is unable to ensure a level of order close to that envisaged. Many students simply ignore the constant stream of reminders fired at them like volleys: "Tuck in your shirt!" "Take off that hood!" "Where is your belt!?," "Pull up your pants!" Students know 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 those who ostensibly obey 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.

The structural impossibility of consistently supervising rule compliance creates inevitable inconsistencies in rule enforcement: a rule infraction unseen is a rule infraction unaddressed and consequently unpunished. The kids' behavior suggests that they are well aware of this impossibility. Every morning during arrival, for example, I see students looking in the direction of the supervising teacher to check what her gaze is currently focused on. When the coast is clear – when students have ascertained that the teacher is busy dealing with another situation at the moment – they put on their hood, start talking, or run up the stairs to catch up with friends. Sometimes, it almost seems like a game students play, as if they come into the school without a belt, with their hoods on, or their shirts untucked, just to see what will happen. When nothing happens, I often see a smile on students' faces as they walk past the supervising teacher, knowing that they just got away with a clear rule violation. Whether as observers or as those committing the infraction, students tell me that they break the rules "when they (the teachers) aren't paying attention" (Juan) or when "the teacher's not looking" (Marc).

The structural impossibility of consistent supervision and the inevitable inconsistencies in rule enforcement to which it gives rise are produced by the disciplinary overregulation. Every single one of the various rules in place at the school also constitutes a possible offense, increasing the number of behaviors that must be identified and confronted as "misbehavior" if the authority of the disciplinary system is to be upheld. This has to happen consistently and reliably. In practice, this is not possible. Most rules specify a particular behavior, movement, positioning of the individual, not the group. It is not the class that has to be quiet when they move through the hallways, it is each and every student in this class who has to remain silent. Every single one of them has to have his or her hands behind their backs or in their pockets, have their shirts tucked in, wear their belts, have their pants pulled up, etcetera, etcetera. In the everyday disciplinary practice at the school, characterized by students skillfully rejecting and eluding the efforts to render them docile, this means that each one of the dozens of rules has to be applied on each one of the dozens of students. As a result, even one homeroom teacher practically faces hundreds of potential rule infractions, many of which are realized into actualities by kids committing righteous indocilities or communicating their opposition to a rule system they reject.

The daily disorder illustrates that all the rules that are conceptualized to control student conduct and movement, fail in practice because they cannot be enforced in their entirety.

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Through its meticulous attention to detail, the disciplinary system at School James creates an effectively unmanageable multitude of misbehavior. 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." (Foucault 1995:203). 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) emphasizes, "nothing so weakens the machinery of the law than the hope of going unpunished." (96). 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 undermines itself.

The undesired gaze. Situations in which it is impossible for teachers to see all the rule infractions are not the only source of inconsistency. In addition to not being *able* to, teachers also do not *want* to enforce all the rules all the time. Students do not only break the rules to reclaim illegalized freedoms or communicate their opposition to regulations such as the dress code. They also deliberately disturb class to challenge teachers, provoke a response, or express antagonism and "get back at" disliked teachers. Robert is one of those students who often engages in such deliberate disturbances. One day, for example, he keeps pushing his work papers off his table and onto the floor, gets up to collect them, puts them back on the table – only to push them right off again. This is not the first time he does something like this and Robert's behavior in these situations does suggest that he is trying to get attention – even if it is negative attention in the form of a reprimand. Alternatively, he likes to challenge his teachers and see how far he can push his boundaries before he gets in trouble. The teacher is well aware of this and tries hard to ignore his behavior. This time, it works: After several minutes of pushing papers off the table and picking them back up, Robert stops and starts working on his worksheet. Other times, the teacher is less fortunate. Another day Robert tries to engage Avondre in a conversation for several minutes, pulls on his collar, or tries to take his worksheet away from him while he is writing on it. When the teacher fails to address his conduct, Robert starts playing with a crate of books that is sitting in the middle of the table. Slowly and with obvious deliberation, he starts pushing the crate towards the edge of the table, inch by inch, until it finally falls off the table with a loud thud. He keeps looking over at his teacher, but when he realizes she ignores him, Robert gets up and walks over to the other side of the table, where the books are spread across the floor. He sits down on the floor to gather up the books he just knocked off the table a minute ago. He sits with his legs stretched out in front of him and very slowly, almost in slow motion, picks up book after book and sorts them back into the crate.

When faced with behavior like Robert's, teachers can choose to either confront or ignore it. Since many teachers believe that students engage in this type of conduct for attention, they often choose the latter. When Robert throws various small objects across the classroom during Math one afternoon in response to being seated at a separate table as a punishment for yelling insults at someone when he entered the room, the teacher continues her lesson as if neither Robert nor the various flying objects were present in the room. After several minutes Kendyll loudly exclaims that "someone just threw a crayon" which forces the teacher's hand as she can now no longer pretend to be unaware of Robert's behavior. Her response to Kendyll's remark reveals her rationale for ignoring Robert: "Next time, just raise your hand," she tells Kendyll, "you just gave this person what they wanted – some attention."

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For many teachers, constantly reprimanding, scolding, or punishing their students does not correspond to their self-image. "We are so punitive," is a regular complaint a teacher voices in our conversations. One day, she tells me that she feels like a "behavior monster" when she has to constantly reprimand her students: "I don't want to be a behavior monster…I know if I enforce all the rules exactly the way (the principal) wants me to, there'd be total chaos here," she remarks. "I haven't taught a single lesson today, but at least my line is straight!" she cynically adds, underlining the dilemma she faces as an impossible teacher: The principal and the district administration expect all teachers to enforce all the rules consistently which is at odds with the teachers' experience that this produces arguments with students and quickly leads to "total chaos." At the same time, constant rule enforcement is time-consuming, and time devoted to disciplinary matters is time not devoted to teaching. In fact, many days at School James are almost entirely devoted to disciplinary matters and little or no instruction takes place. For one of the 6th-grade teachers I worked with, who is very passionate about teaching, this is a disheartening reality: "I can't teach. I want to focus on academics but I can't (…) there is no time" she sadly remarks one afternoon. To reclaim at least a minimum of these instructional dimensions of her teaching role, she – like many of her colleagues – often deliberately ignores rule violations in class. Even though the principal instructed her to "write down ALL the good and ALL the bad things" about the notorious troublemakers in her room, she confesses one day: "I didn't want to spend my whole day trying to write up everything so that I could actually teach, so I let a lot of things go today. I felt really good about myself at the end of the day because I actually got to teach."

Like impossible students who have to break the rules to engage in activities they value and consider essential to their self-image, impossible teachers have to break the rules to avoid being "behavior monsters" and creating "total chaos," but also in order to teach. The impossible teacher cannot teach without ignoring misbehavior. At the same time, she cannot ignore misbehavior without undermining the disciplinary system. In a system that operates on an unforgiving "if-then" logic and leaves no room for discretion, any discretion used represents a deviation from the expected procedures: If everybody always has to "be in uniform without reminders" (APS Code of Conduct), any student who is caught violating this rule and still walks away unpunished represents an inconsistency that undermines the disciplinary system.

These inconsistencies are homemade – they are built into the structure of the disciplinary system itself. Everything is exactly defined and spelled out in minute detail, with little room for interpretation. This is exactly what zero-tolerance discipline wants: a mechanistic, one-size-fits-all approach in which rules allow and forbid, students comply, and teachers enforce – regardless of the situation. However, the success of such a highly formalized and mechanistic disciplinary system depends on the consistency of rule enforcement; it depends on the Foucauldian "network of gazes" ensuring the "perfect certainty" of disciplinary enforcement (Foucault 1995:170; 95). As such, more rules necessitate more gazes, because every single one of the myriad of rules and regulations, prescriptions and proscriptions, also constitutes a possible offense. Every rule that has been codified – etched into disciplinary stone – becomes a rule that must be enforced consistently, lest the authority and power of the entire disciplinary system is jeopardized. At School James, the Foucauldian "hope of going unpunished" (Foucault 1995:96) is better described as a reasonable expectation and this, in turn, is the direct result of the lack of discretion permitted by the disciplinary structure.

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The impossible punishment

According to Foucault (1995), punishments are supposed to deter misbehavior, discourage imitators, and correct the offender to prevent repetition (pp. 98; 123). At School James, punishments do neither. In light of students' rejection of the disciplinary overregulation that leaves them no spheres of permissibility, coupled with the sizable gaps in the disciplinary net created by impossible teachers who – themselves products of this overregulation – either cannot or do not want to enforce the rules, many students are not deterred by the idea of punishment. The resulting perfect *uncertainty* of punishment gives rise to experiences of injustice which impede correction and rule internalization. In the absence of clearly communicated rule rationales, punishments punish only noncompliance, an entirely self-referential offense, which further hinders disciplinary learning. Finally, the logic of zero tolerance that permeates the entire disciplinary system means that many students are punished so frequently in ways they experience as so arbitrary and unfair, that punishments lose their power to coerce.

If nothing else, punishments are supposed to end the infraction: a teacher who finds students in violation of a rule punishes, lest the violation continues. At School James, punishments often do not even achieve this: Avondre has to sit in one of the time-out chairs because he was talking in class, but simply continues to talk as if nothing happened; Hailey and Robert both have to serve a time-out in class because they were caught passing notes, but continue to do so from their temporary punishment places, only briefly interrupted by the required change of location. According to Foucault, "[d]iscipline rewards simply by the play of awards, (...) [and] punishes by reversing this process" (Foucault 1995:181). Losing their talking privilege at the end of lunch thus clearly represents a punishment. However, such group punishments also fail to end unwanted behavior: One day in the spring, the lunch supervisor deems students "too loud," turns off all the lights in the cafeteria and makes them put their "heads down" on the table, expecting that this incapacitation will keep students from talking. But students simply continue to talk in spite of the punishment. Some kids simply ignore the instructions and do not put their heads down at all, others only lower their heads until they are hovering several inches above the table with their faces turned to the side. This way, they can still see their friends, and many actually continue to interact with their friends through quiet whispers or facial expressions.

Every time students continue to engage in behaviors for which they received punishment, punishments reveal themselves as powerless to alter behavior even temporarily and students demonstratively elude the disciplinary grip, allowing them to triumph over a rule system they reject. Foucault emphasizes that "[o]ne must punish exactly enough to prevent repetition"; punishments must create "a little more interest in avoiding the penalty than in risking the crime" (1995: 93-94). In the mind's imagination and the body's experience, punishments must be "bad" enough to make it too costly or painful to break the rules again or, ideally, to break them in the first place. From Pam's point of view, however, punishments are so "soft" that the opposite is the case:

> (The teacher) just lets you off easily. (…) She just makes you (move) your card. Like that's really gonna affect them. (...) [W]hen somebody does something bad, she just says, "Okay, go and move your card." I'm like: That's not really doing anything about it. That's just telling them (...): "Okay, go ahead, do it again."

For Pam, this observation also extends to more serious punishments, such as being suspended:

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> I really don't feel sorry when they get out-of-school suspension because, you know, that's just days off for them to play. Like Robert, I see him every day: every day he comes up to the school and he didn't come to school that day. Like one day I saw him walking out of the school. (…) With his book bag and no school clothes on. He just walked out – he walked to the doors and just walked away with his book bag on. (…) I think it's just a vacation for them.

Based on her observations, not even suspensions are treated as "bad" by those affected. On the contrary, Pam feels that they are actually rewarded by additional leisure time in which they can not only do fun things but also parade their indifference towards school rules by coming to the school despite being suspended, wearing regular clothes while all others have to wear the detested uniform. In fact, I was outside the morning this happened, observing the daily arrival: Despite being suspended, Robert came to school in the morning wearing his street clothes – a black t-shirt with a large print in the front and a pair of denim shorts. Although the supervising teachers outside the school may not have been aware of his suspension, his attire alone made him stand out like a sartorial sore thumb: not one piece of his clothing was in compliance with the dress code. In spite of this, Robert's appearance remained uncommented. As if invisible to any of the teachers present, he walked into the school, stood there for a few moments, turned around, and walked back outside. Not a single teacher addressed Robert in any way – neither inside nor outside of the school.

The idea that exclusionary punishments are more fun than penalty is supported by other students' accounts: When I ask Dontrall what he did in the sixth months he was expelled in first grade, he matter-of-factly responds: "Nothing. Just did some math problems that my auntie had gave me, a little math stuff, and all that. And then I just played video games." Cenisa tells me that she went to her dad's house to celebrate her step-sister's birthday when she was suspended for fighting. Other students recounting past suspensions happily report that they were able to sleep in or watch TV all day and "didn't have to do any work." In fact, over the course of my fieldwork most students suspended out of school are not given any assignments to complete during their punishments. Drowned out by infractions about as countless as the rules that create them, the need to provide assignments to those suspended is lost in the detail of disciplinary distractions.

Similarly, in-school-suspension (ISS), the most frequently used exclusionary punishment, has come to carry a decidedly positive connotation – especially for those most often punished in this way. When I ask Da'Quintin what happens in ISS, he describes it as mixture of boredom and exhilaration: "Nothing [happens], really. You just do work. (...) Sit there. (...) Well, it can be exciting actually, like, when people come in acting all bad and then you get all excited." More than once, Deveron tells me how "nice" it is in ISS and how the ISS supervisor is "very nice – he lets us sleep in there. I didn't do ANY of my work. The only thing we're not allowed to do is fight." Indeed, most days, when I walk past the ISS room, students are resting their heads on the tables and I rarely see anyone working. As much as the official job title of the ISS supervisor – "behavior adjustment facilitator" – suggests that some form of correction or change is supposed to be effected through in-school suspension, ISS is more adequately described as a holding center into which "disruptive" students are herded in an attempt to separate them from their peers but which is not designed to "better" or "educate" them.

Especially when students feel unfairly punished, they feel that they "might as well" break more rules. When the substitute teacher tells Deveron that she has "someone coming for [him]" because he allegedly cussed, which he vehemently denies, he walks to the back of the line and

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loudly yells "Fuck!" When another teacher reprimands this profanity, he shrugs his shoulders and says "If you already tell me I'm using foul language, I will say whatever I want!" Offering a similar rationale, Dequavius refuses to tuck in his shirt after recess because he feels unjustly punished for pushing Juela: "You didn't see her push me first?" he incredulously asks the teacher. When her only response is to ask him to tuck in his shirt, he replies: "NO! I'm already in trouble. I got in trouble for something I didn't do, so I won't do what anyone tells me!"

The disciplinary system defines so many behaviors as punishable that many students get in trouble so frequently that punishments effectively lose their coercive power. Students who, like Pam, merely witness that their peers constantly have to "move their cards," feel that this disciplinary sanction is too soft. Moreover, if every rule violation is punished – as demanded by the disciplinary system – this means that students quickly run the disciplinary course and reach the point at which the next consecutive punishment is an office referral. Alternatively, teachers frustrated and exhausted by their students' constant need for disciplinary attention frequently kick students out of class in an attempt to end arguments as quickly as possible. Alternatively, it is justified by highly ambiguous catch-all offense categories such as "insubordination," "defiance," "disrespect" or "failure to comply" which effectively can be drawn upon to defend any exclusion as warranted. In fact, not a day of my research goes by without at least one sixth grader being excluded from the classroom in in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or after being picked up by school police. Especially those students whose constant rule violations have earned them the reputation of "troublemakers" often spend more time away from class than inside. Out of the 46 days I spend at School James in the fall, Keenan is sent to a different classroom to "cool off" on at least three days and spends four days in ISS; Veshone spends three days in ISS and is absent from the school on three days due to disciplinary issues; Robert is sent to ISS on ten days, is suspended from school five times, and is picked up twice by School Police; and Deveron is sent to ISS on twelve days, is picked up by School Police once, and is suspended from school twice for a total of three days. The frequency of these punishments alone suggests that they do not correct students' behavior in any meaningful way – if they did, there would be fewer "repeat offenders."

In addition, many students do not view exclusionary punishments as the "bad" or "major" disciplinary consequence they are designed to be but treat them as a welcome experience away from regulation and work. Such punishments neither deter rule infractions nor prevent repetition or imitation. Such punishments do not correct, either: What are students supposed to learn from punishments they actually welcome, for infractions they often consider perfectly justified, without communication of rationales for either rules or punishments? Moreover, little if any disciplinary learning or rule internalization can take place if the design of the disciplinary system itself creates so many inconsistencies that punishments are experienced as selective, arbitrary, and unfair. But without internalization on the one hand, and the fear of punishment on the other, every disciplinary decision – the point at which a student decides whether to follow or break a rule – depends entirely on the certainty of supervision. In contrast to the panopticon which "arrange[s] things [so] that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault 1995:201) and in which "invisibility is a guarantee of order" (200), the only state that carries even a faint hope of being able to effect compliance at School James is the definite certainty of being seen. Students only follow the rules if they know someone is directly watching them: Surveillance only has a chance at success if it actually is continuous in its action. This "network of gazes" however, designed to ensure the "perfect certainty" of enforcement is exactly what is precluded by the disciplinary overregulation. At School James/APS, the same

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overregulation that is designed to tightly control students and create environments conducive to learning, makes discipline impossible and creates situations in which invisibility guarantees disorder.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Zero-tolerance discipline wants to send a message: misbehavior will not be tolerated and all violators will be punished relentlessly, no matter what. In the logic of zero tolerance, those who break the rules must be punished so swiftly and harshly that they refrain from breaking the rules ever again. Those who witness this treatment of violators will be sufficiently scared to refrain from rule infractions in the first place, lest they be subjected to the same treatment. Like a punitive panopticon, zero tolerance assumes that if "offenders" are only punished often and harshly enough, they will stop "offending" out of fear of the certainty of "painful" punishment. According to this logic, it matters little whether or not rules make sense or whether the offender understands or internalizes why the offense was wrong and triggered punishment. What matters is that punishments induce sufficient fear to cease offending. In practice, however, many students do not fear punishments because they do not (or no longer) regard them as "painful." On the contrary, those who are punished as well as those who merely witness the punishment of others view certain punishments as "fun" or entertaining. Alternatively, many students find the disciplinary overregulation more painful than the idea of punishment – especially knowing that punishments only sometimes manifest. But zero-tolerance discipline has reckoned not only without the proverbial hosts – students and teachers – on whom its own success ultimately depends, zero tolerance has also reckoned without the reality of conduct. One dimension of this reality of conduct is reflected in the fact that teachers can neither punish everything, nor punish everything severely. There would be "total chaos" if teachers enforced all the rules as intended, that is, if they punished each additional rule infraction with punishments increasing in severity. If teachers implemented the zero-tolerance ideology by the letter as expected, many students would complete the colored card course before lunch every day.

The central objective of zero-tolerance discipline is the elimination of disruption. However, a system that allows for every deviation from its strict and meticulous expectations to be defined as "disruptive," breaks butterflies on wheels and runs out of ammunition if and when it is implemented as envisaged: if zero-tolerance discipline is enforced as intended, "disruptive" students are removed so frequently and for often minor infractions that there is no "ammunition" left to address more serious rule violations. Alternatively, students grow indifferent to the damaging power of disciplinary bullets. At the same time, removing students can be a tool for teachers to reassert their authority, to put their foot down, and end a disciplinary exchange quickly. The disciplinary system explicitly allows for this, even expects this. After all, it is designed, first and foremost, to ensure compliance with all rules and protect adult authority from damage inflicted by "noncompliant" students. In a system in which most student-teacher interactions are carried out in disciplinary terms and in which negative reciprocity dominates most adult-child relationships, arguments triggered by rule enforcement students deem arbitrary and unfair quickly escalate into power struggles. In these power struggles, minor arguments become detached from the original disagreement, and arguments are carried out solely in terms of power and authority. When a disciplinary exchange becomes detached from the original "cause" it turns into a matter of winning, of asserting oneself, with students on one side and teachers on the other – both entirely convinced that their response is justified. Students "don't see the point" of rules or punishments and teachers who "have had it" or "just can't take any more

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defiance" (informal conversations) just seek to end the argument as quickly as possible. The surest and often quickest way to achieve this is by removing the student from class, something that is, after all, an explicitly permitted disciplinary response to "failure to comply." For teachers, it is a matter of putting their foot down, of asserting the remnants of authority via displaying the power to exclude. For students, it is when teachers resort to such disciplinary big guns that punishments most clearly reveal themselves as arbitrary and disproportionate.

Zero-tolerance discipline and the underlying get-tough stance are communicative, not educative. Zero-tolerance discipline wants to send the message of its own relentlessness, warning possible "offenders" of the certainty of punishment that awaits them. Zero-tolerance discipline does not seek legitimacy – it does not seek understanding or internalization of its rules and expectations. Zero tolerance seeks to effect compliance through the threat of punishment. However, foregoing rule internalization and legitimacy also means that coercion is the sole means to effect compliance. This is not only costly and inefficient, as Tyler (2006a) observes, it also fails to do justice to the reality of conduct. If everything is punished all the time, especially activities the kids consider "petty," this weakens punishment and thereby undermines the only pillar the disciplinary system rests on. The same is true for defining so many things as punishable that the perfect certainty of punishment is made impossible.

The ability of zero-tolerance discipline to create order depends on the successful implementation of its underlying assumptions: the assumption that it can "mechanize" discipline by automating punishment – that it can take out the elements of human agency and interaction – or forego the communication of disciplinary rationales because it assumes that it does not "matter" what rules protect – what matters is only compliance. In practice, it is these same assumptions that lead to disorder. "If students do not see the point of a rule, they probably have a negative attitude towards it. (...) [And n]egative attitudes towards too many school rules might easily undermine students' trust in teacher authority and the school's system of rules." (Thornberg 2010:600). From the point of view of moral education, this "does not appeal to students' reasoning, feelings and participation, but to authority and power, and it reduces morality to the valuing of obedience and respect for authority. This can hardly promote and empower students to develop democratic skills and more complex moral reasoning and understanding." (Thornberg 2006:91). This is exactly what zero-tolerance discipline wants: to teach students the "value" of obedience and respect for authority. In practice, this fails miserably. But this does not mean no moral learning takes place. Students learn creative ways to break the rules, avoid capture, or evade punishment; they grow antagonistic towards teachers as enforcers of unfair rules or as unfair enforcers of reasonable discipline.

Despite the absence of clearly communicated disciplinary rationales, students are expected to "own" the rules. Every infraction is treated as an active choice that students can and ought to be held accountable for. "Just remember: YOU make the choice!" the library teacher emphasizes. The art teacher tells Robert "You are choosing to break the rules" at the end of a heated argument in which the art teacher's own handling of the situation directly contributed to the escalation. Without a doubt, much of what is treated as "misbehavior" is, in fact, deliberate. As such, students do "choose" to break the rules. However, in a system predicated on compliance, this is the only veritable choice students have, the only arena in which they can exercise any autonomy at all. At the same time, the disciplinary overregulation seeks to limit students so much that they effectively have to break the rules to reclaim any of the freedoms they value. The disciplinary system creates "illiberal subjects (...) whose coerced actions are defined as active choices" (Coutin, Maurer and Yngvesson 2002:826), but skillfully obscures the

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coercive dimensions of its own undertaking, allowing that students be fully and solely held accountable for any "misbehavior" – discursively in the narrative of choice and practically as recipients of punishment.

Zero-tolerance discipline takes person and purpose out of discipline: rules must be followed because they are the rules, punishments must automatically follow an infraction regardless of context, and no matter how hard students may try to "make up" for "bad" behavior and regain their teachers' favor by proving their willingness to improve, this must not alter the punitive course. This alone is a recipe for disciplinary disaster. Add to this recipe the meticulous attention to detail that makes consistent enforcement impossible, renders punishments arbitrary and unfair, and creates "a little more interest" in *breaking* disliked rules than *following* them – because you "might as well" (6th-grade student) – the daily disorder is inevitable (Foucault 1995:94). Zero tolerance reduces discipline to an automatic, mechanized process that seeks to be as impersonal as it is unemotional. The reality of conduct, however, is deeply personal and loaded with emotions. When everything students value is forbidden, when even those who follow the rules are denied privileges as the result of group punishments, when not even teachers pretend that rules serve a purpose outside of teaching students uncritical compliance, emotions are often as negative as the relationships they inform. Students reject teachers as "mean" enforcers of an unfair system and accept only those as "nice" who let them "do" things or "let you slide with some stuff" (Lara). Students feel strongly about "mean" teachers: they think they are "stupid and boring" (Keenan), are "annoyed" by them (Marc), feel that they are getting them "in trouble on purpose" (Lara), "hate" them (several kids about the art teacher), or, when the antagonism is especially strong, as between Robert and the art teacher, they wish they were "dead and gone" (Robert). Conversely, teachers "have had it," "can't take any more defiance," or are "so tired of dealing with kids that don't comply."

It could, of course, be argued that a disciplinary system like the one at School James/APS does not need positive reciprocal relationships – after all, it seeks to effect compliance through coercion and punishment. Moreover, coercion and punishment are not conducive to mutual respect and benevolence. More importantly, they are not conducive to the experience of fairness in interactions with authorities (Tyler 2006a:380). As much as the disciplinary system rests on the assumption that relationships and legitimacy are unnecessary to "restore" order and "regain control of discipline" (local newspaper 2007), it is precisely this legitimacy that would offer a "cushion of support against the loss of legitimacy in response to receiving an unfair outcome" (Tyler 2006a:383). And unfair outcomes are all but inevitable in a system of impossible discipline. The very design of the disciplinary system obstructs the only dimension of the reality of conduct that would even have the power to neutralize the negative consequences of rules perceived as unfair, arbitrary, and overly restrictive: positive, reciprocal relationships in which caring teachers strike the balance between being "strict but nice" that Wilson and Corbett (2001) identify as immensely important (20). In fact, Wilson and Corbett describe the "quality of the relationship between inner-city students and their teachers" as a "phenomenon central to effective urban education" (88). For the students in Wilson and Corbett's study, "every action the teacher took was relational. It was all about relationships" (122). For the students in my study, this was equally true but largely manifested as negative, antagonistic relationships.

As a result of the disciplinary overregulation, interpersonal exchanges at School James are dominated by negative emotions: when the angry impossibility of the impossible student meets the impossible teacher whose own impossibility – albeit of a different nature – is no less angry, reciprocal antagonism results, transforming disciplinary interactions into power struggles

exclusively negotiated in self-interested terms of winning and asserting oneself. Students left all but powerless by the disciplinary overregulation seek to win by employing the only power the disciplinary system has left them with – the power to deny compliance; teachers left similarly powerless by the immense workload the overregulation creates for them, seek to protect the remnants of their authority, by employing their only power in handling students unwilling to immediately and uncritically comply: the power to exclude. The disciplinary overregulation creates relationships dominated by experiences of injustice and unfairness, of selective and therefore "personal" rule enforcement which students seek to meet with similarly personalized retaliation and deliberate attempts to get back at disliked teachers.

Limitations

Perhaps the most obvious limitation in my study is the absence of data collected through formal interviews with teachers and other school adults. Although this was a deliberate omission guided by the design of this project as a child-focused study, in hindsight I believe that formal interviews would have provided an additional point of comparison and triangulation as well as allowing for a more detailed exploration of teachers' rationales.

Another characteristic of this study that – although not necessarily a limitation – should be noted, is the near-exclusive focus on negative examples. While this is owed to the study's focus on the *failure* of discipline, I do not mean to suggest that nothing ever goes "right" at School James, that all teachers, at all times, act in the ways illustrated. Nor does it mean that there are no situations in which "bad" students actually behave according to the rules. As such, the examples and illustrations contained in this study should be approached as ideal types – specifically selected to serve the purpose of this research – and not as a comprehensive portrayal of a singular objective "truth" of discipline at School James.

In addition, I did not systematically collect information about the relationship between over- or underenforcement of rules on the one hand, and race or gender on the other. This is not to suggest that no such relationship existed at School James, but it was not part of the original research design. Consequently, the data collected does not allow meaningful conclusions to be drawn about these connections.

Finally, much criticism has been directed at the "observer effect" in ethnographic research which refers to the idea that research participants act differently because the researcher is present: aware that they are being observed, their actions deviate from what is assumed to be their "real" conduct. Some critics of ethnographic methods even "assert that the presence of a researcher will influence the behavior of those being studied, making it impossible for ethnographers to ever really document social phenomena in any accurate, let alone objective, way" (Monahan and Fisher 2010:357). This also applies to my study and it would be naïve to argue that my presence did not influence the children's behavior, especially in the context of deliberate rule violations. But instead of downplaying these effects, I agree with Monahan and Fisher (2010) who argue "that the capacity of ethnography to shape the discourses and practices being observed can be considered a strength of the method. While outsiders may see the data as 'biased,' ethnographers should be prepared to argue that informants' performances – however staged for or influenced by the observer – often reveal profound truths about social and/or cultural phenomena." (358) This is also true for my study and was actively incorporated into my analyses.

A major benefit of qualitative research is the possibility to learn about the lives, views, and experiences of research participants first-hand, and work towards an in-depth understanding

of a particular setting, the people in it, and their rationales for acting (Charmaz 2014:33). At the same time, this strength of qualitative research is also one of its major weaknesses: sample sizes are too small to be representative and qualitative studies such as the present one can rarely be evaluated in terms of validity and reliability. However, as Charmaz (2014) points out, "grounded theorists seldom embrace these criteria." (13) The objective of grounded theory is not to increase the statistical generalizability of results (198). Constructivist grounded theory explicitly rests on the assumption that realities are socially constructed and co-constructed by researchers and participants in a research context. In other words, it does not assume the existence of an objective reality and as such cannot be evaluated in terms of its utility to discover or represent it "adequately."

CONCLUSION

At School James, hostility and malice take the place of care and respect. Where there should be a reciprocity of mutual benefit – with students acting in a way that would allow their teachers to offer them the gift of education – there is self-interest and strategic thinking on both parts. At School James, teachers and students alike primarily pursue their own agendas: they seek to foster their own interests, and protect themselves from harm. For the most part, these agendas are mutually exclusive. What students want is the opposite of what their teachers want and vice versa. Instead of trying to be "good," many students deliberately try to be "bad" because "being bad" serves as the behavior guiding incentive the official rewards fail to be: you can be *good* at being "bad" – the best even.

Interrogating Foucault's theory of panopticism, my study suggests that instead of being marked by more control and more surveillance, as indicated in the literature, disciplinary practices in contemporary urban schools are characterized by less control and less surveillance, to the point where teachers avert their gaze and abandon students "to one another's gazes" (Devine 1996:99). In line with Devine's observations, the Foucauldian "network of gazes" has "totally collapsed" at School James (97). This study also casts doubt on one of the main arguments of Foucault's theory of discipline, namely that discipline controls in order to produce obedient bodies that are docile and useful or that the ultimate objective of discipline is the self-regulating individual who has become "the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 1995:138,201,203,211). Discipline at School James/APS certainly aspires to render students docile and, regarding those who subject themselves to the system's passivity demands, can be said to successfully achieve this objective. However, it is at least questionable to what extent students are to be made "useful." Regarding the production of self-regulating individuals, the example of discipline at School James/APS suggests that this is neither possible nor desired. Discipline that merely punishes by exclusion does not correct or educate, it does not effect rule internalization or teach self-control. The disciplinary system is not designed to compensate for or correct the alleged deficits ascribed to urban students and their families, it is not designed to prepare students for full citizenship or active economic participation. The system of punitive, exclusionary discipline predicated on passivity and compliance is not designed to teach students self-control: it is "not intended to and cannot prepare [them] to function in the same society and the same economy" as their suburban counterparts (Orfield 1985:176; cited in Wacquant 2008b:86). This study shows that what students learn by practice and habituation (Wilson 1997) or, alternatively by those behaviors that the school and its teachers choose to ignore (Devine 1996) is that only those who immediately and uncritically comply with even the most arbitrary rules are treated as "good" and worthy of care, protection, and inclusion in the educational

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community – those who resist or oppose through the various forms of noncompliance are constructed as worthy only of punishment and exclusion. The latter group of students learns that they must take care of themselves, while the former practice and habituate levels of passivity that effectively render them invisible. My study illustrates the role of the school in sorting children into those who comply without resisting, and those whose resistance reveals them as ostensibly incorrigible and useless (Wacquant 2008a:8). And because the disciplinary system successfully obscures its own involvement in the production of resistance, it allows for any type of "bad" behavior to be constructed as an active choice of allegedly flawed individuals: the disciplinary system constructs students' "coerced actions (...) as active choices" (Coutin et al. 2002:826) in the present and prepares students for futures as illiberal subjects who cannot be governed liberally and therefore "must be governed in other ways" (Hindess 2004:28). Punitive school discipline policies and practices, informed by zero-tolerance rationales not only "violate the rights of children to an education directed to their full potential" (Farmer & Sullivan 2008) and undermine children's social and emotional development. Analogous to the "extra-penological function of the criminal justice system as instrument for the management of dispossessed and dishonored groups," this study suggests that urban schools play an extra-*pedagogical* role in the management of social insecurity (Wacquant 2001:95).

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NOTES

[1] All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

[2] All original documents referenced in this article are on file with the author.

[3] Of the 46 school days in my fall fieldwork, the two sixth-grade classrooms I work with only got recess ten and five times, respectively. Only on four of the 46 days, both classes got to go outside together.

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