

No Excuses to Sustain the Achievement Gap

Paragraph-long descriptions of off-task behavior, detention for incomplete homework, and earning the privilege of not sitting on the floor at lunch.¹ These are all policies employed by no-excuse charter schools, a subset of charter schools in urban areas with primarily Black and Latino students which employ strict scripts and disciplinary systems. The “no excuses” label for these schools come from the self-proclaimed “no excuses” that they afford students in spite of the lower socio-economic class and historically fewer resources for the students that the schools serve.² Two key terms are essential to understanding these schools. The first of these is scripts: highly rigid and detailed sets of rules that govern specific behaviors. The previously given example about a paragraphs-long description of off-task behavior is an example of a script.³ The second important term is cultural capital. This idea, originally introduced by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, embodies the knowledge, possessions, and recognition from an institution that one gains because of their social standing. This includes the “right” ways to act in certain social situations.⁴ But when and why did these schools start?

There was an effort beginning in the 1990s and early 2000s to bridge the achievement gap, which refers to the difference in academic achievement between groups of students.⁵ This movement was reinforced by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, which made it the federal government’s responsibility to close these gaps and by extension collect data on the gaps that still exist.⁶ The National Assessment of Educational Progress, a governmental organization which collects data on achievement gaps based on a variety of factors (race, gender, socioeconomic class, etc.) showed that in 2019-2022 there was still about a thirty-point difference in reading and math scores on standardized tests for Black and white students in charter schools nationally.⁷

Scripts attempt to teach the Black and Latino students' norms from white, middle-class society, and to give them the cultural capital to succeed in college, all in the name of closing the achievement gap. These scripts, though, are inherently controlling and oftentimes attempt to erase the cultural norms that students are taught at home.⁸ Moreover, there is little evidence that the types of norms (obedience to teachers, highly controlled environment) being taught at these schools translate to success in college.⁹ These schools have come under scrutiny because the scripts that they teach do not seem to serve the college-oriented goals that they attempt to meet and the erasure of home-culture that they may perpetuate, leaving scholars to question their worth.

¹ Joanne Golann, “Introduction,” in *Scripting the Moves: Culture & Control in a “No-Excuses” Charter School*, (Princeton University Press, 2021), 1-21.

² Golann, 5.

³ Golann, 5-6.

⁴ Grace Ramsey, “Cultural Capital Theory of Pierre Bourdieu,” Simply Psychology, last modified February 14, 2024, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/cultural-capital-theory-of-pierre-bourdieu.html>.

⁵ Golann, 4.

⁶ Sugrue, Erin. “The Teacher Wars: A History of America’s Most Embattled Profession. Dana Goldstein. New York: Doubleday. 2014. 349 Pp. \$26.95 (Hardcopy).” reviewing *The Teacher Wars: A History of America’s Most Embattled Profession*, by Dana Goldstein, *Educational Studies* 51, no. 5 (2015): 434–436.

⁷ “Achievement Gaps Dashboard,” The Nation’s Report Card, https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/dashboards/achievement_gaps.aspx.

⁸ Elise Trumbull, Patricia Marks Greenfield, and Blanca Quiroz, “Cultural Values in Learning and Education” in *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices*, ed. Belinda Williams (Alexandria: ASCD, 2003), 67-98.

⁹ Golann, 7-9.