THE REGULATED ENVIRONMENT:

PROPOSAL FOR AN INVESTIGATION OF

DISCIPLINE POLICY AS SYMBOLIC ACTION

A Thesis in

Educational Theory & Policy

by

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ABSTRACT

Many urban charter schools are known for their “no excuses” approach to discipline, which Goodman (2013) termed the “regulated environment.” This integrated set of policies is characterized by continual monitoring, broad regulations, and elaborate systems of reward and punishment, along with a culture that emphasizes individual accountability. The study proposed here asks how students make sense of the regulated environment. The regulated environment is conceptualized as symbolic action, whereby the effects of the policy are mediated by the interpretations of social actors (Rosen, 2009). This ethnographic research will involve immersion as a participant-observer in a middle school for one year; triangulation between multiple sources of data will help ensure validity. This investigation has practical implications for educators and policy-makers concerned about discipline and equity, as well as theoretical significance to understanding how individuals construct the meaning of symbols in their environment.
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Introduction

After seventh-grader Demetrius Smith was expelled from KIPP Philadelphia Charter School (“Knowledge is Power Program”), it took him only a few months at another school to decide to reapply to KIPP. He was willing to recommit to the school’s strict discipline because, as Smith explained, “If I didn’t go to KIPP, I’d probably be… running the streets. KIPP changes people” (Gervasio, 2009). Many contemporary education reformers, such as Michelle Rhee (Peterson, 2010) and Bill Gates (Riley, 2011), would heartily agree. Arne Duncan, for example, has praised KIPP for helping students “who didn’t really have a good work ethic to become extraordinarily successful” (Peterson, 2010). Supporters proudly highlight students like Demetrius Smith as examples of the transformative power of KIPP, demonstrating that the school molds under-achievers into successful students.

Even critics agree KIPP has the power to “change people,” but contend that such changes actually disempower students. Many education advocates argue that rather than nurturing an authentic work ethic, KIPP “students have primarily been taught to be compliant” (Thomas, 2012; emphasis in original). Other critics claim that KIPP methods harm students’ self-esteem: the program, says one, is “all about breaking down their [students’] will” (Klonsky, 2013). Likewise, Deborah Meier described a visit to KIPP where she observed that “the children seemed to have internalized their shame” (Meier, 2013). The growing chorus of critics has raised the volume of the debate, with both sides fiercely arguing that KIPP deeply affects its students.

How, then, does KIPP change people? The key is a unique model of discipline, which constitutes the core of the educational program at KIPP and many other urban charter schools. The “no excuses” philosophy demands that students meet high behavioral expectations and be held accountable for their choices. Goodman (2013) was the first to conceptualize the structure
of this new discipline model, which she termed “the regulated environment.” This integrated set of policies is typically designed by administrators in the charter management organization and implemented with moderate uniformity in schools throughout the network; within each school, the policies are applied school-wide, with little variation between teachers. According to Goodman (2013), the regulated environment is characterized by near-constant surveillance of students; regulation of a wide scope of behaviors; elaborate systems of reward and punishment; and “derogation of students by adults.” In addition, schools that employ the regulated environment typically emphasize teaching performance character rather than moral character education¹ (Tough, 2012).

Although the “no excuses” style of discipline is rapidly spreading, no empirical research to date has examined this new model. Discipline has been extensively researched to improve the efficacy of classroom practice (e.g., Emmer, Evertson, & Anderson, 1980) and to inform policy (e.g. Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker, Sheya, & Hughes, 2014), but the extant literature narrowly portrays discipline as a mechanical process with universal meaning. Instead, the intense controversy surrounding the regulated environment reflects the contested meanings of a symbolic act, and thus indicates the need for a new approach to the study of discipline policy.

**Purpose of the Study**

In order to understand students’ experiences in and understandings of the regulated environment, the proposed study draws on theories of symbolic action. The symbolic action framework, complemented by elements of phenomenology and postmodernism, conceptualizes policy as rhetoric laden with socially constructed meaning. With this framework in mind, the

¹ Performance character refers to traits that facilitate achievement but have no inherent ethical dimension, such as persistence. Moral character, on the other hand, refers to traits that tend to promote ethical behavior toward others, such as empathy (Lickona & Davidson, 2005).
primary research question is as follows: How do students make sense of the regulated environment? Here, the unit of analysis is the interaction between the student and the regulated environment. This question targets both the students’ perspectives on their environment and the means by which they construct those perspectives.

Although not specified in advance, additional questions may emerge over the course of the investigation, in response to data and ongoing analysis in the field (Fetterman, 1998; Spindler & Spindler, 1998). In particular, questions about the development of self-concept in the context of the regulated environment are anticipated to arise. It is hypothesized that students’ understanding of self is mediated, in part, by their understanding of the regulated environment. If evidence of such interaction is observed, questions about identity development would provide the opportunity for rich exploration of an additional dimension of students’ experiences of discipline. This would also be an important contribution to our understanding of the ways by which school may influence a student’s sense of self.

**Review of the Literature**

Discipline is a perennial concern (Kafka, 2011; Rousmaniere, Dehli, & de Coninck-Smith, 1997) that has generated a sizable body of research. Not surprisingly, the bulk of the literature consists of technical research with the aim of improving the efficacy of discipline policy and practice (e.g., Madsen, Becker, & Thomas, 1968; Emmer, Evertson, & Anderson, 1980; Brophy, 1983; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010). Recently, research on racial disparities in discipline has been in the spotlight (e.g., Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker, Sheya, & Hughes, 2014), and discipline policy has garnered renewed public attention (Shah, 2013). Finally, extensive quantitative research proves the strong relationship between disciplinary actions and outcomes such as graduation or arrests (e.g., Ekstrom, Goertz,
While valuable, this body of research does not fully address students’ experiences of discipline. However, a few studies have investigated students’ opinions of discipline practices. Bracy (2011), for instance, surveyed students’ perceptions of fairness and safety in a high-security school, and found that students feel like powerless subjects in the intensely securitized environment. Sheets (1996) examined disciplinary interactions as an example of cross-cultural conflict, in which white teachers perceived students as disrespectful and defiant and students of color perceived intentional racial inequalities in the application of discipline. Relatedly, Ruck and Wortley’s (2002) survey of students provides additional evidence that minority students have significantly different opinions on discipline than their white peers. Lastly, Pifer’s (2000) interviews with “problem students” revealed that these students found discipline policy to be inconsistently and unfairly applied; moreover, the students’ stories illustrated how some discipline practices damaged their relationships with faculty and attitudes toward school.

Though limited, these few studies confirm that students have thoughts and opinions on discipline, that discipline affects the student’s relationship to school, and that not all students share common perceptions and experiences of discipline. These studies provide the backdrop for this investigation. In the following sections, additional literature builds the foundation for the study proposed here. First, a small but growing body of literature on the regulated environment is reviewed. Next, literature on processes of identity construction during adolescence is considered as potential context for additional research questions. Finally, literature on policy as symbolic action frames the investigation. A brief overview of the research on each of these topics is provided in turn.

**Background: The Regulated Environment**
As noted earlier, Goodman (2013) conceptualized the new discipline paradigm at KIPP and other urban charter schools as “the regulated environment.” This integrated set of policies includes near-constant surveillance of students (e.g. monitoring students and recording infractions in hallways and restrooms); regulation of a wide scope of behaviors (e.g. sitting up straight, wearing make-up, or gossiping); and elaborate systems of reward and punishment (e.g. a token economy system or merit/demerit cards). The regulated environment also includes a culture that emphasizes individual choice and absolute responsibility. For example, the KIPP Philadelphia school handbook articulates their “no excuses” philosophy: “The basic premise of discipline at KIPP Philadelphia Charter School is that good things happen when an individual makes wise decisions and bad things happen when an individual makes unwise decisions. Therefore, everything that happens to a student, the good and the bad, is earned, and is a direct result of his/her behavior” (KIPP Appendix, 2012). Goodman (2013) asserts that in practice, this philosophy creates “student derogation by adults.” Finally, character education in the regulated environment typically emphasizes performance character (Tough, 2012), or traits that promote student achievement. To some extent, the nature of the regulated environment varies from school to school. For instance, variations at some schools include publicly ranking students or giving select students disciplinary power over other students, alterations that fit within the basic model of the regulated environment.

Although the details of implementation vary, the general model has spread rapidly in recent years. As the regulated environment becomes more common, the controversy around its

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2 The regulated environment is distinct from high-security schools (i.e. as described in Devine, 1996). The regulated environment first and foremost represents an educational philosophy, rather than policy primarily for security purposes. Additionally, the regulated environment is enacted by teachers, rather than security professionals; includes rewards as well as punishment and exclusion; and does not necessarily require technology such as metal detectors or cameras.
use has only intensified. Commentators have speculated endlessly on the meaning of the regulated environment and its impact on students. Yet they generally make a critical oversight: neglecting to ask students what the regulated environment means to them.

Supporters argue that the regulated environment not only ensures an orderly setting for learning, but also teaches children from disorganized homes the mainstream, middle-class norms and values they need in order to be successful in college and the workplace (Mathews, 2009). David Whitman, for instance, commends “no excuses” schools for their innovative, kinder version of paternalism:

Above all, however, these schools share a paternalistic ethos supporting a common school culture that prizes academic achievement. By paternalistic I mean… a highly prescriptive institution that teaches students not just how to think but how to act according to what are commonly termed traditional, middle-class values. Much in the manner of a responsible parent, these schools tell students that they need an “attitude adjustment.” (Whitman, 2008, p. 3)

Whitman and other advocates argue that behaviors such as eye contact with a speaker, a firm handshake, and appropriate dress must be taught and reinforced as explicitly as the quadratic equation. The regulated environment provides the structure and culture to do so.

Critics are generally less concerned with the efficacy of the model than with the meaning and effects of the regulated environment – concerns succinctly captured by critics of KIPP who quip that the acronym stands for “Kids in Prison Program” (NYC Public School Parents, 2012). Goodman’s (2013) essay on the regulated environment claims that the model suppresses children’s individuality and strips them of their free will. As a result, she predicts that such practices are detrimental to children’s healthy moral and social-emotional development.
Specifically, she asserts that the teachers’ derogatory comments to students will foster “an impoverished view of self… self-disparagement, [and] the internalization of the negative views of others” (Goodman, 2013, p. 93-94). Moreover, Goodman argues that the regulated environment prevents children from developing their own internal moral compasses, instead encouraging slavish obedience to authority (2013). Thus, critics predict that the regulated environment stunts healthy development, even if it produces outward compliance with the rules.

Goodman and Uzun’s (2013) study of students at an alternative school illustrates some of the outcomes that critics predict – and some unexpected results as well. The researchers surveyed and interviewed students at a school that employed strict discipline, including some elements of the regulated environment, and hypothesized that students would resist the school’s repressive efforts at control. Instead, Goodman and Uzun found that “most students approved of the autocratic regime and disapproved of students having more of a school voice. Most have come to believe that they do not deserve freedom” (2013, p. 10). The researchers concluded that the students are not likely to develop a “stable responsible will” or “self-direction” in this environment (Goodman & Uzun, 2013, p. 15). In a way, these results challenge the claims of both supporters and critics of the regulated environment.

The researchers’ “considerable surprise” at their findings (Goodman & Uzun, 2013, p. 10) demonstrates why a new analysis of the regulated environment is necessary to more fully understand how students experience discipline. This study illustrates one possible way that students might construct an understanding of the self in relation to school discipline, although this explanation is based on Likert-scale surveys and limited interview data, and lacks observational data to show how this process develops in the regulated environment. In addition, the study does not present much variation between students, whereas prior research suggests that
students are likely to have different experiences of discipline. The study proposed here will extend Goodman and Uzun’s (2013) work by building a more comprehensive ethnographic account of the regulated environment. The combination of observations and interviews in this study will provide triangulation, allow for a greater range of student experiences to be exposed, and develop a more in-depth account of students’ experiences.

**School and the Construction of the Self**

As noted earlier, additional questions may arise concerning the development of self-concept in relation to the regulated environment. It is hypothesized that students’ interpretations of their school experiences shape their processes of identity development. As such, a full account of students’ experiences of discipline must take into account the students’ developmental characteristics in regards to identity. Given profound physical, cognitive, and social-emotional changes, processes of identity construction advance rapidly during adolescence. Adolescents become more self-reflective, capable of more abstract thought, and better at verbally articulating ideas about themselves and others (Harter, 2006). These developments make adolescents particularly strong subjects for a study of the development of the “self” in the context of school.

The self is widely conceptualized as a theory, how “I” understand “me” (Harter, 2012). This theory is cognitively constructed based on information from social interactions. Cognitive phenomenologist Dennett explains that the self results from a “process of self-description,” or the continuous construction of a narrative of “the acts and events you can tell us about, and the reasons for them” (1996, p. 156). The narrative that a student expresses, through words or actions, constitutes the “self-concept.” This self-concept has critical functions, including: motivation, by which a sense of self encourages the individual to pursue goals; protection, where a sense of self helps maintain a positive attitude towards the self; and organization, in that a
sense of self can “provide expectations, predictive structure, and guidelines that allow one to interpret and give meaning to life experiences and to maintain a coherent picture of oneself in relation to one’s world” (Harter, 2012, p. 13).

Social interactions substantially inform these cognitive processes of identity development, particularly in adolescence. Beginning in early adolescence, the self becomes differentiated across various social roles, then becoming increasingly integrated into one coherent self by late adolescence. In addition, adolescents increasingly compare themselves to others, particularly in valued domains such as athletics and appearance. Last, adolescents “demonstrate a heightened concern with the reflected appraisals of others” (Harter, 2006, p. 533), a process that psychologists call the “social mirror.” Although family members and peers play the most significant roles in identity development, respected adults and role models, including teachers, also influence the developing adolescent (Harter, 2006).

Socialization is also a key process in the model of positive youth development. As another perspective on the adolescent self, positive youth development focuses on how educators and other community members nurture the growth of important assets during adolescence (Perkins, Borden, Keith, Hoppe-Rooney, & Villarruel, 2003). In particular, students with a strong sense of agency, belonging, and competence have more meaningful and successful school experiences; moreover, these assets prepare youth for more positive outcomes throughout life. School experiences can promote or hinder the development of these assets (Mitra, 2004). Discipline interactions may be particularly impactful, in that they influence students’ sense of power, relationships with teachers, and feelings of competency in their role as student.

Thus socialization is a critical influence on identity processes during adolescence, and as the adolescent’s primary arena for such social interaction, school “begins to define individual
identity in ways that it has not before” (Elmore, 2009, p. 194). Schools ration status, establish what traits are socially acceptable and socially valued, and communicate expectations for their students – both positive and negative.

*Bad Boys*, a major study by Ann Ferguson (2001), demonstrates how discipline and other school practices construct black masculinity. In the early 1990s, Ferguson conducted observations and interviews of students, teachers, administrators, and parents about punishment in an urban public elementary school. While the greater part of the study presents the voices of teachers, administrators, and parents, the latter half of the book addresses “the meaning of school rules and the interpretation of trouble from the youth’s perspective” (Ferguson, 2001, p. 2). In this section, Ferguson examines the meaning of discipline to students that frequently receive punishment. She also analyzes the processes by which students make such meaning, drawing on Foucault’s concept of local or popular knowledges: “This knowledge and the structures in which it is embedded are the interpretive frames through which the kids make sense of encounters, practices, school rituals, curriculum, authority” (Ferguson, 2001, p. 133). Ultimately, Ferguson asks how punishment impacts Black students’ identity: “What lessons does Horace learn about self and school as he journeys from classroom to [the room designated for punishment]? How does he fashion selfhood within this context?” (2001, p. 164). These ideas and questions have informed and inspired this proposal.

This study will build Ferguson’s work in *Bad Boys* in a different context, with a different theoretical perspective. First, the context is new because the rationale and goals of the regulated environment are distinctly different from those of the disciplinary system at Rosa Parks Elementary School in *Bad Boys*. While the faculty and staff at Parks used discipline to “manage” or control students, supporters of the regulated environment describe it as a means to teach
students proper behavior and to develop character. As such, educators implementing the regulated environment construct a different meaning for their discipline actions and work to convey different messages to students. The regulated environment also differs in its structure, including a wider scope of regulations and greater extent of bodily control, greater uniformity of the policy throughout the school, and more sophisticated reward and punishment systems. Such differences in philosophy and structure mean that the regulated environment likely impacts students in different ways. Thus, the regulated environment is a new model that presents opportunities for new insights.

Second, the proposed study brings a unique perspective to school discipline. Ferguson centered her research on black male “troublemakers,” utilizing Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence to explain why some students make trouble and how students practice resistance. The proposed study seeks to capture the perspectives of model students as well as trouble-makers, in order to understand the various possibilities for making meaning in the regulated environment. In addition, while Ferguson focuses on interpersonal interactions, greater attention to policy will elaborate how the school environment structures those interactions. That is, a policy frame will illuminate the conditions for those interactions, including how the policy environment guides students and teachers toward particular interpretations of discipline.

Like Goodman and Uzun’s (2013) survey of students at an alternative school, Ferguson’s (2001) study demonstrates that school discipline can powerfully impact students’ engagement in school and even their beliefs about themselves. The sensemaking processes by which students translate disciplinary interactions into meaning are mediated by symbols. As these two investigations reveal, these symbols are socially constructed and impact different students in different ways. A symbolic action perspective, therefore, helps connect the adolescent process of
self-construction to the context of the regulated environment.

**The Problem: Discipline as Symbolic Action**

Both advocates and critics share a common foundational belief about the regulated environment – namely, that it has symbolic effects for students (Rosen, 2009). In other words, the policy does more than merely proscribe certain behaviors and assign punishments. The regulated environment also has a communicative function, whereby it conveys a particular set of beliefs and values to the student. Discipline policy is particularly rife with symbolism, as one of its major functions is to communicate beliefs about morality and society (Foucault, 1977; Goodman, 2006). As Ferguson explains in *Bad Boys*, “The punishing system is supported by nothing less than the moral order of society – the prevailing ideology – which simultaneously produces and imposes a consensus about a broad spectrum of societal values” (2001, p. 41). Opponents of the regulated environment generally critique the negative messages that they believe the policy implicitly communicates about the student himself. Supporters argue instead that the regulated environment communicates the belief that each student can meet high behavioral expectations. Hence, arguments on either side of the controversy recognize that the policy of the regulated environment serves as symbolic action.

As with any form of communication, the message of a policy is co-constructed by the social actors involved (Coburn, 2001; Weick, 1995; Yanow, 2000). In this case, the regulated environment is expressed through multiple symbols, including: speech (e.g. slogans such as “No excuses”); physical objects (e.g. a “paycheck” for good behavior); and bodily actions (e.g. the “SLANT” posture). Actors in the regulated environment actively and continuously construct the meaning of these symbols. In turn, “how various actors interpret or make sense of policies partly determines their consequences” (Rosen, 2009, p.268). In the regulated environment,
administrators and faculty intend to express the message that hard work leads to success. However, students may perceive a radically different, even opposing, message. Moreover, different students may construct multiple interpretations of the same policy.

To date, no empirical research has specifically applied a symbolic action perspective to discipline policy or attempted to uncover students’ perspectives on the regulated environment. The study proposed here will address this need, speaking back to the traditional literature and offering a new explanation for how students relate to the structures of school.

**Theoretical Framework**

Symbolic interactionism, a sociological theory with a robust ethnographic heritage, is fundamentally based on the belief that all “human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation” (Blumer, 1969, p. 79). Symbolic action research applies the key insight of symbolic interactionism specifically to the study of policy: “[T]he tangible effects of policies are frequently *mediated by* intangible cultural or symbolic processes” (Rosen, 2009, p. 268; emphasis in original). In the regulated environment, a student’s behavior in response to a disciplinary interaction is determined by the student’s interpretation of the interaction, including how the student understands the regulated environment and his or her self.

Students are engaged in two simultaneous meaning-making processes: the interpretation of symbols in the regulated environment and the continuous construction of self in relation to those symbols. This dual process is both bodily and cognitive, both shaped by institutional structure and open to human agency.

**Embodied and Cognitive Interpretation Processes**

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3 For a related example, see Weissbourd, Jones, Anderson, Kahn, & Russell, 2014.
First, experiencing the regulated environment is an inherently embodied process because modern discipline acts through the body (Foucault, 1977). According to Foucault, discipline is based on the invention of the body as an object that can be “manipulated, shaped, trained, [and] which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces” (1977, p. 136). This allowed for the development of a “policy of coercions that act upon the body,” or discipline (Foucault, 1977, p. 138). Students experience the “project of docility” through regulations on dress, posture and eye movement, and physical location, as well as the constant surveillance of their behaviors. Moreover, the continuous construction of self includes development of the concept and practice of an embodied self. Through bodily actions, students may identify themselves as a member of the school, may perform the role of model student, or may demonstrate individuality and resistance. Hence, the student’s interaction with the regulated environment is an inherently embodied activity, and the symbolism of the body becomes an important factor in both sense-making and self-making processes.

At the same time, the interpretation of the regulated environment is a cognitive process. Mead and Blumer argue that knowledge and values, including cultural beliefs and norms, mediate interactions between individuals, groups, and the environment (Blumer, 1969). For example, prior research has found that students’ level of trust in their teachers, perceptions of caring by teachers, and belief that teachers hold high expectations all influence their opinion of fairness in school discipline (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Importantly, some of these beliefs are related to a student’s race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (Delpit, 1995; Monroe, 2005; Sheets & Gay, 1996). The same cognitive resources are deployed in making sense of the self. For students, this means that the development of a self-concept involves thinking about the self in relation to the regulated environment. In sum, students synthesize beliefs, values, and
perceptions in order to interpret symbols (Coburn, 2001; Weick, 1995; Yanow, 2000). As a result, each individual constructs a unique translation of the regulated environment and a unique self.

**Agency within Structure**

These bodily and cognitive processes represent ways in which the individual exercises agency. However, individual agency is realized within the structures of the institution, including policies such as those that define the regulated environment. For any given structure or policy, there are an infinite number of possible interpretations and interactions. However, a policy is designed with the intent of engendering *specific* interpretations and interactions. Rosen explains that policies are crafted to “influence actions by shaping or reinforcing particular ways of interpreting and conceptualizing educational situations” (Rosen, 2009, p. 268). In this case, the regulated environment is meant to communicate messages such as “Good things happen when an individual makes wise decisions” (KIPP Appendix, 2012); the faculty and staff who implement the regulated environment frame it as fair and necessary, a beneficial structure that teaches students how to successfully meet middle-class norms (Mathews, 209; Whitman, 2008). In effect, school leaders use symbols to communicate these messages with the expectation that students will internalize them and behave accordingly. Thus, policy is designed to channel its targets towards a particular subset of all possible interpretations of the social world (see Figure 1a).

But social actors also practice agency in their sense-making processes (Coburn, 2001). While the school may attempt to guide students towards pre-approved messages about the regulated environment, students can and do draw on a variety of other resources to interpret their world. For example, youth may consider the messages from family, peers, media, or other role
models (Ferguson, 2001; Harter, 2006). According to Ferguson, students “bring with them theories, commonsense knowledge, readily available explanations, to give meaning to the everyday occurrences” at school (2001, p. 41). Moreover, actors have the capacity to creatively construct alternative frames, to imagine other possible interpretations, in their search for meaning. In school, students may bring external or self-invented frameworks to bear on the regulated environment, to allow for defining one’s self on one’s own terms (see Figure 1b).

The individual’s capacity for creative reconstruction of symbolic activity creates a tension with the channeling effects of the structure (see Figure 1c). Students may choose to accept and internalize the messages of the regulated environment, as in Goodman & Uzun’s (2013) study. According to the authors, the students in their survey “believe in the judgments of powerful adults” because “[c]hildren who live without the security provided by predictable and constant care… are particularly likely to accept the negative verdict of authorities. Weak and powerless, they find comfort in subordination to, and agreement with, the powerful” (Goodman & Uzun, 2013, p. 15). In other words, Goodman and Uzun concluded that students whose self-concept provided insufficient protection and organization, who were unable to construct an alternative message about self, were more likely to take on the school’s concept of themselves. In the regulated environment, students may actively or passively accept the narrative imposed by teachers and administrators, particularly in order to fulfill the motivational or organizational functions of the self-concept. So when students do not have the resources to construct personal interpretations, acceptance of the dominant narrative can provide students with a coherent understanding of school and stimulate them to work towards the goals that are demanded of them.

Alternatively, students may resist the messages of the regulated environment and instead
construct their own set of messages. For example, Kohl’s (1993) description of “active non-learning” and Willis’s (1981) portrayal of “symbolic resistance” to school both represent active opposition to school via a counter-narrative of the self. Unlike the students in Goodman and Uzun’s (2013) survey, these students bring their own organizational schema to bear on school, which allows them to develop substitute narratives and pursue their own goals. Pope’s (2003) portrait of students who “do school,” on the other hand, represents students who perform an acceptance of, but internally reject, the school’s narrative. Thus in the regulated environment, students who already have a self-concept that provides strong protection and organization may have a greater capacity to resist narratives from authorities and may be more likely to develop oppositional identities. In some cases, students who strongly resist the school’s ideology may leave for another school.4

The continual battle to define meaning creates a “dynamic, mutually shaping relationship between policy instruments and the interpretive, sense-making or symbolic activities of social actors” (Rosen, 2009, p. 268). It also represents the nexus of structure and agency in the construction of the self – the central tensions of “the modern soul” (Foucault, 1977, p. 23). The regulated environment offers an ideal opportunity to explore this dynamic.

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4 For a discussion of charter school attrition, see Robelen, 2007.
**Figure 1.** Symbolic interactionism for agents in structured institutions.

*a.* Policy narrows interpretive possibility. Out of the spectrum of possible ways to interpret a symbol, policy seeks to narrow the range of meanings and guide actors towards a particular understanding.

*b.* Individual agency broadens interpretive possibility. Individual actors expand the range of possible interpretations of a symbol by drawing on external resources and their own creativity.

*c.* Tension between structure and individual. As policy attempts to channel individuals towards particular interpretations of symbolic activity, individual agency resists constriction and instead expands the range of interpretation and action.
Research Design

As a form of symbolic action, the regulated environment has both explicit goals and implicit functions. The implicit functions constitute what Anyon (1980) calls the hidden curriculum, or the tacit pedagogical practices that differentially emphasize certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes for different socioeconomic classes of students. As Anyon’s research demonstrates, the hidden curriculum helps to “contribute to the development in the children of certain potential relationships to physical and symbolic capital, to authority, and to the process of work” (1980, p. 90). These relationships are significant because they structure life opportunities for students, and insofar as they are differentially allocated by socioeconomic status, they reproduce the existing system of relations and inequalities in society.

Although the literature on discipline policy thoroughly documents its overt effects, researchers have not thoroughly analyzed discipline as a component of the hidden curriculum. Yet as symbolic action, discipline has the potential to substantially shape students’ relationships to authority, rules, social institutions, power – and even the self. The need to understand how the hidden curriculum of discipline might reproduce social inequalities is the primary motivation behind this investigation. With equity and social justice as important goals guiding this research, the proposed study is oriented towards students. That is, the study is designed to uncover the lived experiences of students, the stories beyond the discipline statistics; to give students the opportunity to voice their own reality; and ultimately to contribute to the pursuit of equity in education.

Methods

Qualitative methods are ideal for a study that seeks to interpret symbolic processes (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, this investigation will employ ethnographic methods. Although
the project will center on personal experiences and processes of meaning-making, phenomenology is not the most appropriate tool here because there is no essential experience of the regulated environment (van Manen, 1997). Instead, students in the regulated environment represent a culture-sharing group, and understanding their experiences requires “cultural interpretation” (Wolcott, 1987). Ethnography offers the tools for such interpretation of the daily activities of a group, thus fitting the symbolic action framework (Fetterman, 1998). Moreover, the ethnographic emphasis on emic understanding supports the goal of highlighting student perspectives (Rock, 2001). Thus, a micro-level ethnography (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977/2000) is the most appropriate approach for this investigation.

The Site

This study will use one charter secondary school as the primary site of fieldwork. The most important criterion for site selection is the use of the regulated environment. As described above, the defining characteristics of this environment are: uniform policy throughout the school; regulations covering a wide scope of behaviors; continual surveillance; elaborate systems of reward and punishment; and emphasis on individual choice and responsibility. Middle schools are targeted because of the important processes of social-emotional development in early adolescence, as noted earlier. On a practical note, adolescents are also becoming increasingly articulate about their beliefs and values (Harter, 2006), allowing the researcher greater access to their ideas. Middle schools that employ the regulated environment will be identified based on prior research and news articles, school websites and their parent/student handbooks, school visits, and/or interviews with teachers and administrators.

Gaining access to the field site may be challenging, given the focus on a controversial, potentially image-threatening topic. The researcher will emphasize the benefits to the school
community: namely, the opportunity for charter students to have a voice, and a more nuanced picture of life inside a “no excuses” school than sometimes portrayed by critics. In addition, the investigator will also offer to serve as a tutor in order to show appreciation and commitment to the school. Finally, demonstrating strict adherence to privacy protections and a willingness to answer questions about the research should provide reassurance of concern for students’ welfare.

The Sample

Within the school, data collection will focus on a sample of approximately six to eight students (i.e. sampling within a case, Merriam, 2009). The sample will not necessarily be statistically representative of the student body as a whole, although socio-demographic characteristics will be considered. Instead, the sample will be chosen so as to represent the range of student experiences within the regulated environment. To begin, the sample will include students who frequently “get in trouble” and students who consistently meet behavioral expectations. In addition, the sample will include long-time members of the school community as well as newcomers, who will be interviewed over the summer prior to their school entry and into their first year. Finally, students who have elected to exit the school or been counseled to exit for disciplinary reasons will also be sought out via peer referral, or snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009).

Even after gaining formal access to the site, it will be necessary to build rapport and trust with students to access their worlds. The goal will be to develop a position of nonjudgmental observation (Fetterman, 1998), striking a balance between professional stranger and group member (Powdermaker, 1966). Relationship-building, then, will be a key task throughout the research process. The researcher’s prolonged involvement will help build familiarity, while involvement in the school community will demonstrate care and dedication to students. Efforts
will be made to clearly explain the purposes of the research, including potential benefits to the students. Furthermore, consistently following procedures for ensuring students’ confidentiality will help to build trust. The approval of the Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.) at Penn State University as well as permission from the school administrators will provide further assurance that students’ interests are protected.

Data Collection

As a participant-observer immersed in the site, the researcher will have access to data from a variety of sources. While certain data collection procedures will be pre-planned in order to ensure thorough treatment of the research question, flexibility will also be important to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities for data. Again, additional questions about processes of identity development are anticipated to arise in response to early observations. With this in mind, the two major data collection procedures will be observations and interviews.

Observations. Observations are a critical process of the ethnography, to develop an emic perspective and to learn how to function as a member of the group (Fetterman, 1998). In addition, observations will generate the “thick description” at the core of an ethnography (Geertz, 1973), a comprehensive description of behavior, context, and meaning. This data will be critical for interpretive analysis, and will also give the readers a window into the experience of the regulated environment. Observations will be recorded as field notes on a secure computer.

Initially, extensive observations will be important for the researcher to establish a presence in the school and to survey the basic structure of the regulated environment. Early observations will also help to identify students to include in the sample for further interviews. As the researcher becomes more familiar with the culture of the school, observations will focus specifically on how students navigate in, interact with, and respond to the regulated environment.
For example, the researcher may take field notes on how students react to being punished or to seeing a peer punished; how students act in novel situations, as with a substitute or on a field trip; how students behave when expectations are unclear; how students respond to perceived unfair treatment; or how students socialize each other. As the researcher becomes more fully embedded in the community, observations may extend to before and after-school hours and off-campus sites to take note of how students behave outside of the regulated environment. Additional opportunities for observation will be considered as they arise.

**Interviews.** Interviewing constitutes “the ethnographer’s most important data gathering technique” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 37). Here, interviews will be critical to revealing students’ perspectives, students’ processes of interpretation, and students’ sense of self. When possible, interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. When not possible, as in the case of unexpected, informal interviews, post-hoc field notes will be written to describe the interview. Recordings, transcripts, and notes will all be kept on a secure computer.

Formal and informal interviews will be conducted throughout the investigation, and students will be the primary interview subjects. While formal, scheduled interviews will have set topics, the protocol will be relatively unstructured to allow the student’s own thought process to unfold. Interview topics may include the student’s perceptions of the school environment; the student’s perceptions about how this school compares to other schools; the student’s beliefs about the reasons for the wide scope of rules and continuous monitoring; and the student’s beliefs about him or herself, as well as how those beliefs have changed over time. Interviews will specifically target the student’s own personal experiences of the regulated environment, such as memorable rewards or punishments, for in-depth exploration of how those incidents were understood. Stimulated recall (Dempsey, 2010) or hypothetical classroom scenarios may be used.
to probe personal experiences. Once again, opportunities for informal interviews will be considered as they arise. Informal conversations will help to build relationships, as well as reveal multiple sides of each student’s self. Teachers, administrators, parents, and others may also be interviewed.

**Data Analysis**

In ethnography, data collection and data analysis occur in tandem (Fetterman, 1998). This dual-process will be guided by a grounded theory approach, as this study does not seek to test a pre-specified hypothesis. Instead, working hypotheses will emerge as the project constantly “moves between induction and abduction” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014, p. 153). Progressive focusing will be used to continually test and refine these emerging theories, as well as guide the next steps of data collection (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis will be primarily facilitated through analytic memos and coding.

*Analytic memos.* Frequent memo-writing will be a key part of the data analysis process. First, a formal memo will be written weekly to assess the progress of the project and plan next steps (Fetterman, 1998). These memos will be kept on a secure computer as an audit trail. Second, informal memos will be written frequently to record and explore emergent connections and working hypotheses (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014), using a constant comparison method to search for disconfirming evidence (Creswell, 2013). Lastly, memos will be used to practice reflexivity throughout the research process (Saldaña, 2013). Memo topics will generally not be planned in advance, but will respond to new developments, ideas, theories, questions, and problems as they arise. In addition, memos will frequently address the unfolding coding process.

*Coding.* Along with memo-writing, coding will take place throughout the research process (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Coding will be used to elicit the meaning underlying
students’ words and actions. The coded data will form the basis for generating theory to answer the research question. Observations, interviews, memos, and any other data collected will be coded in a secure, computer-based program such as Dedoose (www.dedoose.com).

The process will include multiple iterations of open, axial, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2013); specific choices about coding technique will be made in response to the data and emergent theory. First-cycle codes may include the four characteristics of the regulated environment (e.g. “surveillance”) and descriptions of self (e.g. “rebellious”). In vivo codes will be particularly important at this stage to capture student voice and stay close to their understandings. Second-cycle codes will build on students’ interpretations to develop theory. Codes at this stage may include explanations of how the regulated environment works (e.g. “peer pressure to follow rules”), descriptions of school culture or student-faculty relationships (e.g. “supportive mentor”), and processes of interpretation (e.g. “social mirror”). In addition, discourse analysis may be used to identify instances where students express the school’s frame for discipline policy (e.g., language such as “no excuses” or “sweating the small stuff”; Whitman, 2008) or instances where they reject this language and assert their own. Throughout coding, symbols and their meaning will be identified and analyzed in relation to the research question.

As codes develop, visual aids and organizational schemes may be used to help generate, test, and refine theory. For example, data matrices may be used to search for intersections of codes related to the regulated environment and beliefs about self (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). Other useful visual techniques may include code mapping and code landscaping (Saldaña, 2013). Later, these visual representations will be used to communicate the findings.
Ensuring Validity

A qualitative, ethnographic study is subject to particular threats to validity, but taking steps to anticipate and prevent them in advance can help to strengthen the integrity of the research. Initially, one of the main threats will be observer effects (Fetterman, 1998), the possibility that the presence of a researcher in the school will change students’ behaviors. Students may be concerned that the researcher’s observations of their behavior will be reported to teachers, or may behave differently so as to give a particular impression of the school. Similarly, students may be reluctant to speak honestly during interviews; students might fear retaliation from teachers and administrators, or might be concerned about hurting people about whom they care. Prolonged engagement in the school will help to address observer effects (Fetterman, 1998). As students gradually get used to being observed, they will become less self-conscious and return to their typical behaviors. Evidence of this pattern will be noted as it occurs, and taken into consideration in data analysis. In addition, efforts to build trustworthy relationships will be critical to addressing student concerns about the confidentiality of their participation. As described earlier, involvement in the school community, approval from I.R.B. and administration, and honest and clear explanations of research procedures will help build students’ trust.

In terms of data analysis, the major threat to the validity of the interpretations and theory will be a lack of criticality. To ensure self-criticality, the researcher will use memos to identify and reflect on her own positionality, and explore how it affects the research process (Creswell, 2013; Fetterman, 1998). Moreover, to ensure critical appraisal of the data, the constant comparative method will be used to systematically seek out contradictory evidence and alternative explanations (Creswell, 2013). Constant comparison will be facilitated by frequent
memo-writing, which will specifically apply a critical lens to the research process. Finally, member checks (Creswell, 2013) and peer review will allow for internal and external voices to raise interpretive possibilities that may not have been considered by the researcher.

Throughout the process, the investigator will use Spindler and Spindler’s (1987) criteria for quality ethnography as a guide to maximize credibility and authenticity. Systematic data collection, prolonged observation, and triangulation between multiple sources of data will demonstrate the trustworthiness of the research. Where possible, member checks will be used to assess the interpretive validity of claims about students’ perspectives. Furthermore, rich, “thick” description (Denzin, 1989) and intentional inclusion of multiple voices will strengthen the authenticity of the work. In the end, then, the research will not only represent the regulated environment, but resonate with students’ experiences in the regulated environment.

**Significance of the Study**

The major contribution of the proposed investigation will be the development of a theory of discipline policy as symbolic action, a new perspective to inform future education practice and research.

**Practical Implications**

This investigation has immediate implications for educators within and around the regulated environment. Because this model is relatively new, there is almost no empirical literature on the regulated environment; but its rapid spread (Dillon, 2011a and 2011b) demands careful study. A disciplinary structure frequently perceived as unduly harsh is a particular concern in the current policy context of heightened awareness about the school-to-prison pipeline (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011; Thompson, 2011) and retreat from “zero tolerance” policies (Lhamon & Samuels, 2014; Shah, 2013). Researchers and education advocates question whether
“no excuses” charter schools channel insubordinate students into the school-to-prison pipeline when they fail to meet the standards of the regulated environment (Goodman, 2013; Winerip, 2011). Such concerns are amplified in charter schools, which tend to be even more racially isolated than traditional public schools (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011). Thus, there is an urgent need for rigorous investigation into the structure, processes, and effects of the regulated environment.

More broadly, an in-depth investigation of the regulated environment can inform many modes of discipline and character education. Because school discipline is a major means of teaching important social norms and values (Goodman, 2006), a stronger awareness of student experiences and interpretations of discipline will help educators achieve important social goals. Middle school is an especially critical period for children’s social-emotional development (West & Schwerdt, 2012), and a period of rapid identity development (Hart & Carlo, 2005). This study will offer an in-depth analysis of how students think about school during this critical period of development, which can be extremely valuable knowledge for teachers and school leaders. This study, then, has the potential to inform policy and practice even beyond the regulated environment.

**Theoretical Significance**

In another sense, however, this study is not primarily about discipline; instead, the proposed study takes a specific model of school discipline as a site to explore larger questions. Just as Anyon’s (1980) studies of social studies textbooks revealed how school policies and practices reproduce unequal concepts of the self as a knower, a case study of discipline in a segregated school may surface subtle ways that the “new paternalistic” schools reproduce race and class relations. And as Foucault (1977) uses a history of punishment to expose the conditions
of the modern soul, theory about students navigating school structures may elucidate insights about the universal processes of constructing a “self” against the symbols and structures of society.

Furthermore, this research advances the use of a symbolic action perspective in education and policy research. Though much education research follows a rational or positivist tradition (Rosen, 2009), this study will prove that education policy is necessarily mediated by the meanings that actors co-construct. It will also demonstrate how an interpretive analysis can complement a technical analysis, and even help to explain anomalies and variation that may be dismissed as “noise” when school processes are conceptualized as purely mechanical procedures.

Finally, this study promotes attention to student perspectives, too often missing from education research. Directly sampling and documenting student perspectives empowers students by involving them in research and offering a vehicle for expression of their voice. The resultant research also provides administrators and policy-makers, who may be removed from the classroom, a window into the daily experiences of the students they manage – and hopefully a more comprehensive understanding of the meanings behind the policies they craft.

Ultimately, then, the proposed study fills both practical and theoretical needs. It builds on a solid foundation of prior work, but extends inquiry in new directions. The design of the proposed study reflects these goals.

**Limitations and Further Questions**

This study is not intended to produce a widely generalizable theory. The non-random sample includes a limited number of students at one school, with no control group for comparison. As such, the findings will not be directly transferrable to other schools. Moreover, a student’s self-concept is shaped by a variety of factors external to school discipline policy, and
changes over time. The proposed study will only explore a limited set of influences on students’ self-concept at a particular point in time; again, the findings cannot be generalized to other social influences or other periods of the life course. Instead, the investigation is designed to use one limited case to develop a new perspective, offering another lens for examining other social phenomena. To that end, validity is emphasized over external generalizability in the design of this study.

This study is also not designed as an evaluation, and cannot answer questions about whether the regulated environment is a “good” policy. The research does not address whether the techniques are effective as classroom management tools or whether the policy improves school safety. More importantly, this study cannot determine whether the regulated environment fulfills the plurality of goals of American education. Although this work cannot settle the controversy, it will provide rigorous evidence and innovative analysis for educators, policy makers, and community members to consider in their decisions.

Ultimately, however, the most important contribution of this study may be its power to generate exciting new questions. Future research on the regulated environment may address the goals and perceptions of parents, teachers and administrators; the implications of adiaphorization of character education in many “no excuses” schools; or the ways in which the regulated environment parallels other forms of social control in segregated, impoverished urban neighborhoods. This research is merely the first step of a research journey into the regulated environment.

Conclusions

This study contributes to education research by exploring how students make sense of a tightly controlled disciplinary system: the regulated environment. The application of a symbolic
action framework will generate new ways to understand how students relate to the structures in their school. Rigorous ethnographic methods will yield rich data, authentic voices, and strong grounded theory. A description of students’ perspectives on this model of discipline has practical and theoretical implications, particularly for educational equity. In sum, the proposed study combines a solid framework and strong design to achieve meaningful, multi-faceted goals.
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