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The Grammar of School Discipline: A Review of the *Four Rs*

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This review critiques Hannah Carson Baggett and Carey E. Andrzejewski's *The Grammar of School Discipline*. To examine school discipline and to specifically highlight anti-Black racism in public schools in the state of Alabama, the authors detailed and criticized the three Rs of school discipline: removal from classrooms, resistance by students and staff, and reform of disciplinary practices. They added one more R to the list: repair for both schools and self. The authors used literature from varied fields (e.g., education, educational psychology, sociology, criminal justice, developmental psychology), numeric data on school disciplinary practices, and portraits of students and school leaders to support their arguments. This review will summarize the authors' arguments, provide analysis and critique of the text, and detail what it contributes to the field.

Keywords: anti-Black racism, alternative schools, race-evasive school policy, school discipline, school reform

Anyone familiar with the American song, "School Days" will remember the alliterative lines "'reading and 'riting and 'rithmetic/taught to the tune of a hick'ry stick" (Cobb & Edwards, 1907). The authors of *The Grammar of School Discipline*, Hannah Carson Baggett and Carey E. Andrzejewski, alluded to that famous song with the structure of their book. However, although the alliteration remained, the authors' exploration of grammar of school discipline was no happy tune. Instead, Baggett and Andrzejewski (2021) composed a somber look at disciplinary policies and practices in Alabama's schools.

Baggett and Andrzejewski are both professors in the College of Education at Auburn University. Additionally, and importantly to this text, both were, in their words, "participants and stakeholders" in public education, whose desire for reforming and repairing public education fueled their research (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2021, p. 5). As a frame for the text, the authors focused on their three Rs of school discipline: removal from classrooms, resistance by students and staff, and reform of disciplinary practices in their home state of Alabama. Then, they add a fourth R: repair or "the redress of harms that have been done to students via their removal, the rejection of their resistance, and the perpetual efforts at reform, in addition to the repair of our humanity and the humanity of schools" (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2021, p. 6). Their goals were to examine how school district discipline policy and practice affects not only all students in Alabama, but also specifically Black students. To accomplish this, they presented literature from varied fields (e.g., education, educational psychology, sociology, criminal justice, and developmental psychology), numeric data on Alabama's school discipline, and portraits of students and school leaders. Some portraits, which the authors included to add "depth and dimension" to the data (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2021, p. 4), were culled from their experiences teaching at an alternative school as a university-funded research project. Both the data and the portraits effectively highlighted the anti-Black disciplinary practices in the state of Alabama.

In "Removal," the authors "explore explanations for removal as an extension of historically rooted legacy of removal in the Deep South" (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2021, p.10). They defined objective and subjective behaviors – the former being specific, concrete behaviors (e.g., weapons possession) and the latter being behaviors that are more open to interpretation (e.g., defiance) – for which students are disciplined. They argued that Black students are disproportionately disciplined for their (mis)behaviors, many of which are labeled as subjective, and that these disciplinary actions are often exclusionary (e.g., out-of-school suspensions, placement in alternative schools). This exclusionary discipline has detrimental effects on the student, their family, and the community at large. "Removal" ends with a portrait of Cotton County Schools in which the authors dove

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deeply into one school's data to illustrate their points. Cotton County Schools were generally considered good schools with high test scores and graduation rates, qualified teachers, and equity as a pillar of their educational practices, but the schools also had disproportionate exclusionary discipline and expulsion practices for Black students. By exploring the tensions between a specific school district's good reputation and its anti-Black disciplinary practices, the authors contextualized for the reader the oppressive systems in place in Alabama schools.

In "Resistance," the authors argued that Black students' (mis)behavior may be in response to inequitable exclusionary disciplinary practices and called on practitioners to consider how they might reframe students' (mis)behaviors as productive resistance. The authors challenged the dominant narratives about Black students by including data and portraits of alternative-school students and of Black school-based practitioners. The portraits were powerful anecdotes that sometimes gave life to and other times challenged the data presented. "Resistance" began with information about incidents that caused students to be placed in the alternative school, but it was the portraits that contradicted common stereotypes about Black student (mis)behavior. For example, they included a compelling conversation among three alternative school students about being labeled a "Bad Kid." In it, Samuel, who felt he had been labeled a bad kid, said he wished his teacher knew: "That I'm a good kid. I'm a funny kid. I'm quiet, but at times, when it comes to it, I'll have a little fun. Then, when I'm older, I want them to know that I'm doing good" (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2021, p. 86). This heartbreaking example of a child wishing for acknowledgement and approval challenged the stereotypes of alternative-school students. Alternatively, the authors illustrated the challenges for Black administrators of resistance in leadership. The anecdotes shared by the administrators highlight the race-evasiveness of current disciplinary practices that are exacerbated by discriminatory practices of teachers and other administrators. For example, Leonard, a Black school leader, described a situation where a White teacher asked him to remove Black students from the hallway where most honors-level classes were held because, according to the teacher, 'They have no reason to be in this building' (Baggett and Andrzejewski, 2021, p. 97). Leonard expressed frustration at the teacher's behavior and at the expectation that he would serve as the disciplinarian of Black students. The authors used these portraits to detail the challenges of resisting an oppressive school system by exploring how students are affected by anti-Black stereotypes and how Black school leaders navigate anti-Black racism.

"Reform" was the next component of the grammar of school discipline addressed. The authors summarized reform efforts nationwide and then, more specifically, in Alabama. They critiqued the race-evasive nature of school reform; in other words, schools avoid conversations about race when discussing discipline and school reform. The authors also provided examples from the administrators in "Resistance," both examples were born of anti-Black racism and were addressed in a race-evasive way. The portrait the authors provided in "Reform" is of a community, Timber County, who worked with the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) to reform the local school district's disciplinary policies. With the help of an SPLC advocate, the community created an advocacy taskforce called Fighting for Our Rights to Children's Education (FORCE). Also, six students, represented by the SPLC, sued the district for denial of due process and won. Because of the advocacy of FORCE and the lawsuit, the code of conduct of the school was reformed. However, although Timber County was successful in its goal of reforming the school district's discipline policies, the authors noted that legal remedies for anti-Black racism in schools are not cure-alls and that discriminatory discipline practices in the county's schools may have simply shifted form (e.g., fewer expulsions, but an increase in alternative school placements). This portrait is an example of how justice might be enacted by engaging all stakeholders: community and the school district. Even so, reforms that are race-evasive or achieved through legal remedies will not address the systemic anti-Black racism embedded in schools.

The last R, "Repair" called for an "ethos of repair" that not only addressed financial reparations, but also addressed the broken relationships among schools, students, and families. The authors did not provide specific monetary values for financial reparations but did assert that the state of Alabama should look at the costs of student removal through exclusionary discipline, surveillance technology in schools, and school-based police and reinvest those costs as reparations. Financial repair was only one suggestion; they also recommended that school practitioners and researchers enact repairs in their local contexts. In other words, there is no one-size-fits-all formula for reparations. Instead, practitioners and researchers should examine their own communities to determine what reparations are necessary. The authors made a table of concrete suggestions on how school administrators and practitioners could

begin making these much-needed repairs. They also detailed limitations about their work. They noted challenges in obtaining accurate data on school disciplinary incidents from the Alabama Department of Education. For example, the state does not disaggregate data by student demographics, so they had to cross-reference data from the state and the Office of Civil Rights. They also addressed their own positionality, expressing a desire to simultaneously remain reflective and steadfast in their anti-racist work. Again, "Repair" provided the reader with many opportunities for practitioners and researchers to reimagine reparations. The specific suggestions could serve as a pathway to transform disciplinary practices not only in Alabama schools, but in schools across the United States.

As stated, the authors made a compelling case for reform of disciplinary practices in public education, with a specific focus on anti-Black racism. To make their case they provided well-researched literature from many fields, data on school discipline and student demographics, and portraits of students and school administrators. This book has implications for the researchers, students, practitioners, and school systems of Alabama and beyond.

The authors' work provides insights and opportunities for researchers interested in the study of systemic racism in American schools. Baggett and Andrzejewski (2021) focused on Alabama, but their work would be relevant in other states. For example, the portraits of students and administrators coupled with disciplinary data could be replicated in other school districts. Another opportunity for future research is an exploration of the myriad problems with the state reporting of disciplinary incidents in Alabama and potentially in other states as well. Finally, the authors' examination of their own positionality is an important model for researchers interested in issues of social justice and anti-racist practices. This examination should serve as an exemplar for other researchers.

Additionally, this book can help K-12 practitioners interested in anti-racist work understand just how systemic discriminatory disciplinary policies are. It can serve as a template to enacting repairs to these policies. Practitioners, such as teachers and administrators, can use this book as an opportunity to reflect upon their own ideologies and behaviors. It could also be used as a guide for both classroom and district-wide reform. This would be an excellent book for a district book club; it could open the door for conversations among teachers, administrators, and community members alike. Although these conversations may result in discomfort, the suggestions for reform could engender hope and true change.

Finally, the lack of clarity in the reporting of disciplinary incidents can serve as a call to action for the state of Alabama and its school districts. Policy makers and district-level leadership must be more intentional and honest concerning their reporting on school disciplinary data, specifically about who is being disciplined, for what they are being disciplined, and how they are being disciplined. School districts can also examine the data of disciplinary practices in their schools and use the suggestions in "Repair" to imagine context-specific ways to reform their disciplinary policies.

Although the structure of Baggett and Andrzejewski's book alluded to the nostalgic song "School Days," Alabama's disciplinary policies and practices are nothing students in alternative schools will look back fondly upon. Ultimately, this is an important book, particularly in our current sociopolitical moment, in which PK-12 public schools, teachers, and administrators who challenge oppressive school systems are confronted by parents and politicians. Baggett and Andrzejewski's calls for resistance and reform resonated deeply for me and will resonate for others as well.

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