

Reframing the Connections between Deficit Thinking, Microaggressions, and Teacher Perceptions of Defiance

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African American students are being suspended/expelled at a greater rate than their peers, a phenomenon that scholars have come to call the “discipline gap.” As the gap has grown, so have instances of African American student suspension and expulsion for “defiance.” This article offers a revision of the Baker framework, which troubles deficit notions of overrepresentation in the disciplinary category of defiance by offering a different conceptualization of African American students being labeled defiant. The author argues that the very acts classified as defiant are often a response to microaggressions. A framework is presented to explain why African American students are overrepresented in terms of suspension/expulsion for defiance.

Keywords: *microaggressions; school discipline; defiance; disproportionality; discipline gap*

African American students are being suspended and expelled at a greater rate than their peers (Smith & Harper, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002; Wu et al., 1982), a phenomenon that scholars have come to call the “discipline gap” (Gregory & Mosley, 2004; Losen et al., 2015; Monroe, 2005a). As the gap has grown, so have instances of African American student suspension and expulsion for “defiance.” Studies by Monroe (2005b, 2005c), Forsyth and colleagues (2015), and Van Dyke (2016) affirmed that instances of defiance make up a growing portion of the discipline gap. Identifying exactly which factors contribute to educator perception of African American student behavior as “defiant” is challenging. However, there are many factors that researchers have identified as contributing to perceptions of defiant behavior, including *conflicting values between the school and student culture* (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008), *cultural mismatches* (Irvine, 1990; Monroe, 2005c), *teacher perception* (Hargreaves, Hestor & Mellor, 1975; O’Brennan, Bradshaw, & Furlong, 2014) and *teacher race* (Downey & Pribesh, 2004). The aim of this article is to add a new conceptualization of factors that may be contributing to African American students more frequently being perceived as defiant, and that is *microaggression*. Microaggressions are defined as the “subtle, stunning, often automatic, verbal and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of Blacks by offenders” (Pierce et al., 1977, p. 65). The author posits that educators microaggress students individually and systemically.

Microaggression is used to frame one possible explanation for why African American students are overrepresented in terms of suspension/expulsion for defiance. Furthermore, a framework is offered for defiance as a response to microaggression being enacted on students daily. In describing this framing literature on defiance, school discipline, deficit thinking, and microaggression is examined. The goal is to provide a heterodoxical narrative (Valencia, 2010) that interrupts the consistent storyline of African American students being more defiant than other students. The work here is a revision of the 2012 study where student and school characteristics were examined using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to determine which set of characteristics are a greater predictor of suspension/ expulsion of African American students for defiance. This conceptual piece revises the original framework on defiance and extends the discussion, adds to a gap in literature, and responds to several calls by researchers (Howard, 2013; Milner, 2008; Monroe, 2005c; Okonofua, Walton & Eberhardt, 2016) to put forth new interpretations of perceptions of African American student behavior that is not centered on solely blaming the student. To develop a response that does not solely center blame on students for

disciplinary actions, two theoretical frameworks guided the exploration—deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010), and microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008).

Deficit thinking is used to interpret the attitudes of school representatives toward defiant behavior by students, microaggression is then added in concert with deficit thinking to articulate a conception of both the attitude of school representatives toward defiant behavior, and the student's interpretation and response to being the near-daily victim of microaggressions. Similarly to Monroe (2005a, 2005b), Gregory (2005) and Gregory and Weinstein (2008) this examination considers defiance as contextual and specific to certain situations. Unlike Monroe (2005a, 2005b), Gregory (2005) and Gregory and Weinstein (2008), this attempt at reframing defiance uses microaggressions as the catalyst to defiance infractions.

This intention is to contribute a heterodoxical narrative (Valencia, 2010) to interrupt the common notion of how and why African American students are overrepresented in the disciplinary category of defiance. Presenting the very acts that are classified as defiant as a response to microaggressions is counter to the widely held belief that African American students exhibit worse behavior than their counterparts. Other studies, such as Skiba and associates (2002), Gregory, (2005) and Van Dyke (2016) have noted that the bad behavior narrative has been countered.

Baker (2012) addressed the use of suspension and expulsion for defiant behavior. The study examined the contributions of student and school characteristics and their relationship to suspension and expulsion for defiance, specifically focusing on African Americans. Using HLM, and all 9th and 10th graders in a Midwestern state within a given academic year, the author found that student characteristics: student race, student socioeconomic status (SES), and student achievement (ISTEP+ scores), predict suspension/expulsion for defiance. As well, it was found that school characteristics: students by race, school free/reduced lunch percentage, teacher experience, teacher race, locale, and dropout rate are strong predictors of suspension/expulsion for defiance. Ultimately, the study concludes that the school a student attends is a greater predictor of suspension/expulsion for defiance than the characteristics of the individual student. School characteristics are representative of the characteristics of both the overall school system and the individual institution, as it is the school system and the individuals therein (i.e., teachers, administrators, etc.) who enact microaggressions on students. Therefore, the findings of the study demonstrated that school characteristics are the most accurate predictors of suspension/expulsion for defiance. There are two particular results based on school characteristics worth noting: (a) the free/reduced lunch percentage was the strongest predictor of suspension/expulsion for defiance, pointing to systemic influences on student suspension/expulsion for defiance; and (b) a school district's locale consistently had a significant relationship with suspension/expulsion for defiance. Relative to the second finding, if a student's school is a strong predictor of suspension or expulsion for defiance, than the actors at the school (i.e., teachers, administrators) are clearly deeply implicated in the problem. This finding suggests that systemic racism is one reason for the overrepresentation of African American suspension or expulsion for defiance. In fact, it was concluded that those actors are likely to commit microaggressions against African American students.

Microaggression provides a lens for viewing the dynamic interplay of student race, teacher perception, student characteristics, and suspension/expulsion for defiance. A visual image of the conceptual framework for examining the cyclical nature of defiance is shown and discussed later. Microaggression is used as a lens to view defiance as the result of African American students retaliating against systemic interactions that negate their value, interactions that result in students feeling labeled. Applying the theme of microaggression to school discipline offers a lens to examine how that "dynamic interplay" (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008) is useful for examining the subjective classification of defiance.

DEFINING DEFIANCE

Since behaviors are determined to be defiant by teacher perceptions, defiance is a subjective disciplinary classification for students who behave in a manner contrary to teacher expectations

(Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). These perceptions affect how a teacher interprets student behavior, especially student behavior perceived to be contrary to teacher expectations (Hargreaves, Hestor & Mellor, 1975; Okonofua, Walton & Eberhardt, 2016). As a result, students are labeled defiant. Next research literature is reviewed related to defiance through three constructs: (a) the definition of defiance provided in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR, 2000; DSM-V-TR, 2013); (b) defiance as a result of cultural mismatch; and (c) defiance as context-based. These constructs are used to create a working definition of defiance.

There is limited literature to define defiance in the context of student behavior in school. As a consequence, it may be useful to share the psychopathology definition of defiance as outlined in the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The DSM provides a clinical definition of defiance, psychopathology research has defined defiance as within the student, terming it, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). ODD is a "pattern of angry/irritable mood, argumentative/defiant behavior, or vindictiveness lasting at least 6 months" (DSM-V-TR, 2013). Generally, ODD is characterized by deliberately annoying others, losing temper, arguing with adults, refusing to comply with adult requests, and being spiteful or vindictive (DSM-IV-TR, 2000). These characteristics must be displayed more frequently than they are by other individuals at the same developmental stage or age. An ODD diagnosis occurs when the "behavior causes clinically significant impairment in social, academic, or occupational functioning" (DSM-IV-TR, 2000, p. 101). While it is important to address ODD as a diagnosis of defiant behavior, it is an orthodox framing of defiance that fails to address the systemic and contextual nature of a defiance classification in school discipline. Furthermore, an ODD diagnosis lists specific behaviors as defiant behavior; however, this characterization of defiant behavior is not included in studies on defiance in school discipline (Gregory, 2005; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Monroe, 2005a, 2005b) that have neglected to define defiance. In spite of this lack of definition, defiance is accepted as a category to refer students for disciplinary action.

Studies on Defiance in School Discipline

Monroe (2005a) examined the factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of Black males in school discipline, and discusses how teachers ought to approach discipline for diverse students. Monroe (2005a) noted how social scientists, cite actions like "playful aggression, authenticity and directness in expression, animation, direct speech, physical movement, and emotionally textured forms of expression as hallmarks of black expression" (p. 155). Many of these actions are behaviors exhibited by students, and they are often misinterpreted by teachers as defiant behavior, rather than the result of "cultural incongruities between students and teachers" (Monroe, 2005c, p. 319). The misinterpretation of defiant behavior is also related to how students react to teachers. Gregory's (2005) assertion that students "do not blindly defy all teachers' authority" (p. 45) is affirmed by other scholars who believe that defiance does not happen in a vacuum, rather it is a response to teacher perception (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Hargreaves, Hestor & Mellor, 1975). When "students perceive teachers as caring and demanding, the students felt obliged to cooperate with teachers' authority" (Gregory, 2007, p. 2) and react more favorably to teachers' requests. This corresponding cooperation varies with differing combinations of students and teachers. Gregory (2007) affirmed that defiance is context specific, and understanding the context may be helpful in challenging the labeling of students, specifically African American students, and focusing attention on the contextual contributors to the behavior (Gregory et al., 2014; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). It is important to examine both the context in which the behavior is happening, and whether certain school characteristics provoke defiant behavior from students. Acts of defiance are situational and different responses and perceptions of student behavior play a major role in what is considered defiant behavior.

Defiant Behavior Definition

Defiant behavior is a combination of teacher perception and student behavior. Using DSM-IV-TR (2000) and Monroe (2005c) demonstrates that there are behaviors that are associated with defiance (annoying others, losing temper, playful aggression etc.), and that classifying different student behavior associated with cultural norms and cultural mismatches in schools, often results in the misinterpretation of behavior as defiant. Gregory and Weinstein (2008) demonstrated that teacher perception renders defiance context specific. In this study defiant behavior is defined as any student act or behavior characterized as such based on an educator's subjective perception of the behaviors displayed. While this definition is tautological, it follows the familiar pattern of behavior that is qualified as defiant because the behavior (of students) is classified as defiant by those who are being defied (educators). Sometimes educators perceive student behavior as an affront to their authority and utilize defiance as a disciplinary category that gives them a way to have the last word in a power struggle. The difference in how defiant behavior is perceived makes it difficult to define, since a singular behavior is not consistently called defiant. Differences, such as talking back, mumbling under one's breath, and walking away while a teacher is talking, can be seen as defiant. Having this working definition of defiance simplifies further discussion and its connection to school discipline, deficit thinking, and microaggression.

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

School discipline can be understood in many ways and most schools and school districts define school discipline policies and practices for themselves. According to Osher and colleagues (2010), the goal of school discipline is to address "school-wide, classroom, and individual student needs through broad prevention, targeted intervention, and development of self-discipline" (p. 1). Generally, students, parents, and school representatives consider school discipline to be a form of punishment—a student is reprimanded for a behavior in an attempt to deter the student from repeating the particular behavior (Christle, Nelson, & Jolivet, 2004). The following section addresses literature related to school discipline including, the purpose of school discipline, consistent problems with suspension and expulsion, suspension and expulsion as a frequent punishment for defiant behavior, the discourse on defiance as a disciplinary category, and the deficit thinking often underlying perceptions of behavior defined as defiant.

According to Skiba, Rausch and Simmons (2006) there are four essential purposes to school discipline: "1) to ensure the safety of students and teachers; 2) to create a climate conducive to learning; 3) to teach students skills needed for successful interaction in school and society; and 4) to reduce rates of future misbehavior" (p. 87). Educators use punishment, with suspension and expulsion being most common, to attain the goals purported to be achievable through school discipline.

Educators employ various tactics to punish children for disciplinary infractions, but the effects of these punishments can have many consequences. For example, suspension/expulsion creates an exclusionary system that contributes to reduced learning opportunities in school and a weakening of student-school attachment, which negatively affects student performance (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016). In addition, dropout rates are also consistently higher for suspended or expelled students (Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Van Norman, 2013). Some research indicates schools actually use suspensions to push troublesome students out of school (Nelson et al., 2017). The negative consequences associated with suspension, such as reduced achievement, dropping out, and delinquency all have been linked to future economic struggles for individuals (McFadden et al., 1992). Furthermore, students of color, specifically African Americans, disproportionately receive suspension/expulsion for defiance.

The findings in the Baker (2012) study show that being African American is the strongest predictor of suspension/expulsion for defiance. While there are many explanations regarding why students are suspended or expelled for defiance (i.e., disrespect, excessive noise, etc.), there is a lack of literature examining which student or school characteristics most accurately predict the defiance classification. Defiance is complex and the contributing factors vary. One

contributing factor identified in the literature on defiance is student achievement. Studies from school discipline literature document a strong negative correlation between suspension and student achievement (Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al, 2015). Another factor identified in the literature is race (Schollenberger, 2015; Toldson, McGee, & Lemmons, 2015). Gregory and Weinstein (2008) argued that the disposition of school personnel determines the manner in which African American students react to them. In other words, African American student behavior is a reaction to school personnel. These reactions become authority conflicts, which are a major contribution to African American overrepresentation in the discipline system. Burke and Nishioka (2014) found that 15% of African American students and 5% of White students experienced exclusionary discipline. **While evidence of the discipline gap is abundant, research about the factors that contribute to the existence of this gap is sparse.**

Characteristics of Defiance as a Disciplinary Category

The studies on defiance examine student and teacher interaction and perception (Gregory, 2005; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Monroe, 2005a, 2005c), but there is a gap in defiance literature. The author's contribution to this area of inquiry is to explicate the nuances of the disciplinary category of defiance, including interrogating the consistent deficit storyline that African American student behavior is inherently worse than that of other students. That storyline legitimates the discipline gap which in turn creates a serious obstacle to understanding what is really happening in school discipline, specifically as it relates to charges of defiance.

Defiance is a subjective offense (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010) **defined by the person who is being defied, and can be characterized in many ways.** For example, educators may excessively punish students for **talking back, storming out of class, or refusing to comply with classroom rules deeming these as defiant behavior, rather than viewing student responses as connected to their feelings of being disrespected or silenced in moments of adult–youth conflicts.** While these behaviors may be committed by any student, research on school discipline suggests that racial differences interact with student and school characteristics to determine which results in disproportionality in school discipline (Gregory, 1995; Mendez, Knoff & Ferron, 2002; Skiba, Petersen, & Williams, 1997; Wu et al., 1982). Scholars have also noted that there is no clear justification for the racial gap in discipline based on student behavior (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2015).

Defiant behavior is characterized in various ways, although virtually all characterizations are framed through deficit thinking based on student characteristics like race, SES, and academic achievement (Baker, 2012). Microaggression is used to conceptualize African American overrepresentation for defiance in order to interrogate deficit thinking, and conceptualize one process for how defiance is articulated within school discipline.

Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking legitimates the notion that African American students behave poorly. Valencia (2010) defined deficit thinking, in the context of schools, as blaming students for their own internal deficiencies. For example, “the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest . . . in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior” (p. 7). This definition of deficit thinking is pivotal to framing how one perceives defiant behavior exhibited by African American students.

Victim blaming is a common dynamic that informs teacher perceptions of defiant behavior. It places a singular possibility for changing behavior within the individual who is “failing” to meet the school's expectations. In addressing the ideological discourse around deficit thinking, the author focuses on victim blaming and reframing deficit thinking in relationship to the defiant student as the victim. Utilizing prior research on microaggression (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), the characteristic of victim blaming (Valencia, 2010), and a conceptualization of defiance

(Baker, 2012), the framework created is heterodoxical to the current assertion of defiant behavior being located within the student only (Valencia, 2010).

Microaggression

Scholars continually examine microaggression in their research (Allen, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Hotchkins, 2016; Nelson, 2006; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Microaggressions are defined by Pierce and colleagues (1977), as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, verbal and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of Blacks by offenders” (p. 95). The manifestations of these exchanges have been labeled aversive racism (Dovidio, Gaetner, & Pearson, 2016) and modern racism (Perry, Murphy, Dovidio, 2015). Even within well-intentioned individuals who are not consciously aware that their beliefs, attitudes, and actions often discriminate against African Americans (Nelson, 2006). **While microaggressions often are not consciously recognized, the effect of the aggression is always internalized, whether known or unknown to the recipient** (Taylor, 2014). “Racial microaggressions are similar to unconscious racism, but they are broader, describe a dynamic interplay between perpetrator and recipient, and focus primarily on their everyday active manifestations” (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008, p. 329). These active manifestations are important to understanding microaggression.

According to Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000), Black students report microaggressive behaviors by White teachers who negate their contributions, communicate low expectations, and exclude their participation from school activities. Students internalize the spoken and unspoken biases of teachers as microaggressions, even when teachers are well meaning and only unconsciously discriminatory.

To expound on how microaggressions are internalized, Sue and associates (2008) have classified microaggression into three subcategories:

1. Microassaults—clear, obvious and blatant racism that is readily apparent to a student. However, this is less likely to occur in schools with significant Black populations.
2. Microinsults—actions that convey insensitivity, are rude, or directly demean a person’s racial identity or heritage. This becomes apparent in school when student difference is negated and White middle class values are ascribed.
3. Microinvalidation—actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of people of color. (p. 331)

Microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidation effect students and their connections and reactions to teachers. These consistent interactions unfortunately erode relationships between students and teachers.

When microaggressions occur in the form of micro- assaults, insults, or invalidation, students respond in ways that could be perceived as defiant. Specifically, African American students internalize these forms of microaggression and retaliate against the accumulation of microaggressions. In doing so, the student behaves in a manner classified as defiant.

A DEFIANCE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for visualizing how African American students are disproportionately suspended or expelled for defiance is cyclical in nature. The idea is that **the educator enacts microaggressions that reflects the educator’s perception of the student, and position of authority. The amassing of deficit thinking based micro-assaults, insults and invalidation enacted upon the student is internalized by the student. The student’s response is characterized as defiant.** Whether student’s responses are informed by environmental, verbal, or physical microaggressions, students respond, and their behavior is then labeled by the microaggressor (teachers, principals, and school staff) as defiant. Due to the fact that students internalize the microaggression, the defiant behavior is not necessarily a response to an immediate aggression, but could be the accumulation of many microaggressions that culminates in a response being characterized as defiant. Figure 1 displays a cyclical representation of defiance.

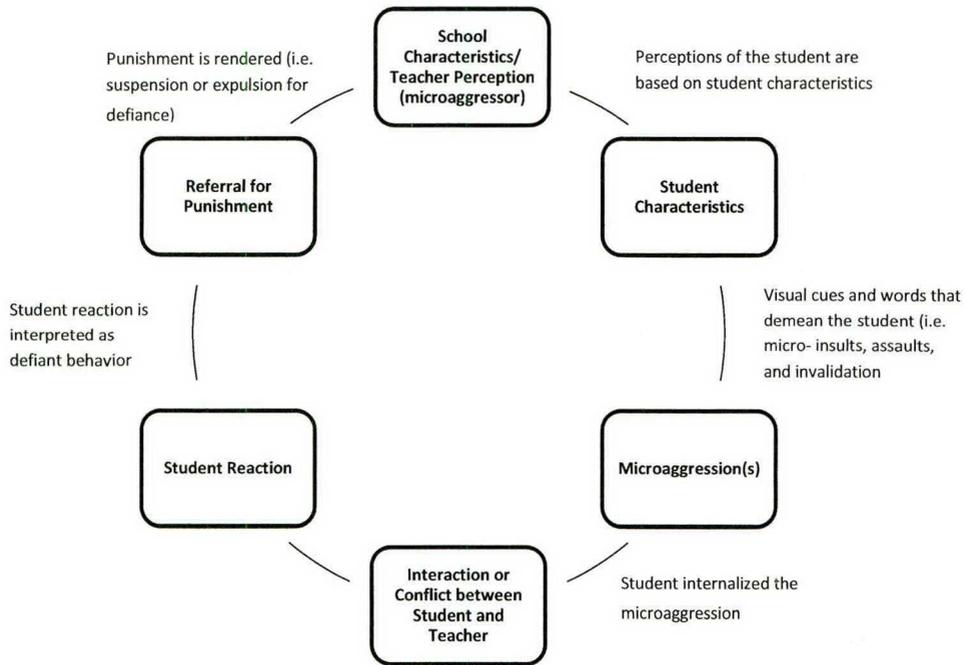


Figure 1. Flow chart depicting the conceptual framework which uses microaggression to describe the proposed cycle of student experiences and behavior that leads to a suspension or expulsion for defiance. This cyclical interpretation of defiance is consistent with the works of Gregory, Monroe, and Forsyth & Biggar, Forsyth, and Howat.

The figure represents the relationship between microaggressor, student, student behavior, and punishment. The perceptions of the educator are informed by student characteristics which illicit microaggressions in the form of words or actions that are demeaning to the student. The microaggressions are internalized by the student and the student and teacher have a conflict. In this conflict, one has the power that comes with authority, and the other is powerless. From this powerless position, the student reacts in what is characterized as defiant behavior (i.e., talking back, losing temper). The behavior is then punished and the cycle begins again, with possibly another student characteristic, repeat offender, added. This cycle may also be projected onto other students who share characteristics that have previously been, or are currently, in the cycle. The characterization of the student as defiant is assigned by those who are the microaggressors. The same cycle continues to repeat itself as the school representatives (i.e., teacher, administrators, etc.) microaggress the student and the student reacts in a manner characterized as defiant.

DISCUSSION

Dismantling the complex problem of African American overrepresentation in the disciplinary category of defiance is daunting, yet progress is possible. I assert that a step in the right direction is to counter the deficit thinking of educators, while positing student behavior as a response to microaggression, is one contribution. The conceptual framework described in this article can add to educational research on defiant behavior by reframing the way we think about defiance. Furthermore, this framework encourages reflective practices among school representatives that calls for further inquiry into the behaviors and actions of educators as antecedents to defiant behavior from students. Additionally, this framing may assist parents and teachers in discussions about how they can assist students in learning to recognize microaggressions (micro-assaults/insults/invalidations) and to craft constructive responses to them.

The growing body of work on specific categories of disciplinary infractions contributes to the overall understanding of disproportionality in school discipline and processes, practices, and attitudes that perpetuate the discipline gap (Losen et al., 2015). This gap is encouraged and perpetuated by deficit thinking, and it is punctuated with the racialized terms, tones, and meanings that constitute microaggression. Examining a particular disciplinary category through a racial group perspective (African American) elucidates and multiplies the possible avenues for addressing deficit thinking and its catalytic effect on the discipline gap.

A shortage of data on the systemic influences of school disciplinary outcomes inhibits the creation of well-developed theories related to discipline (Skiba, Rausch, & Simmons, 2006). Contributing to the discourse about defiance will assist the development of theory in the area of systemic influences of school discipline. My aim is to add to the literature and contribute to theory that offers a working definition of defiance and a heterodoxical conceptualization that will aid in examining the impulse to punish for defiance in a clearer way. Interrupting deficit notions of student behavior is also present in an effort to “correct approaches and ideologies of those purported to serve” (Howard, 2013, p. 60), meaning school representatives (i.e., teachers, administrators). In his research about Black males, Howard (2013) suggests that to counter deficit beliefs research that is centered on the complexity, success, and diversity of Black students is necessary. In light of his efforts in dismantling deficit frameworks, I have addressed this complexity in a manner that will interrupt deficit-laden beliefs. In addition, recognizing student defiant behavior as a response to microaggression can improve our understanding of dynamics that underlie student behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

Reframing how teachers and other school personnel think about African American students is not often the first course of action when considering ways to contribute to the larger discussion of reducing suspension and expulsion of African American students for disciplinary incidents, and specifically defiance. Using this framework as a means to interrupt the orthodox African American deficit storyline, and as an analysis of microaggression, helps to illuminate educator perceptions of defiant behavior.

Baker’s (2012) conceptualization of defiance suggests that the interaction of African American students and school characteristics including teacher experience, Black enrollment, free/reduced lunch status, and district locale—urban, suburban, town, rural—all influence microaggressions enacted on students. To extend that work, the author argues that African American students respond to microaggressions perpetrated on them, and this response is often perceived to be defiant behavior. This perception of defiance is often directly connected to deficit thinking. Still, there are classroom approaches that can diminish the effects of microaggressions, support positive student teacher relationships and improve teacher perceptions of student behavior. Reframing the deficit thinking that results in victim blaming (Valencia, 2010) by interjecting a heterodox construction of how defiance is happening presents an opportunity to begin to understand its operation differently. In moving this work forward there is much more that can be done, including classroom observations, and reviewing video of teacher and student interactions. The use of classroom observation can yield rich data about the antecedent behaviors of both student and teacher that result in students being suspended or expelled for defiance. Additionally, classrooms are a valuable place to examine student characteristics and how deficit thinking toward groups of students manifests itself. Undoubtedly, there are mitigating factors when explicating the predictive characteristics of defiant behavior (Baker, 2012). The author has discussed some of those factors in this conceptualization. It is clear that if educators are to improve quality, equality, and equity of education for all students, we must pay attention to deficit thinking and its relationship to microaggression. By doing so, we can add volume to an already-sounding alarm with what is happening to African American students in the name of school discipline.

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