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Charter Management Organizations and the Regulated Environment: Is It Worth the Price?

Joan F. Goodman¹

Urban minority children are increasingly being educated at public schools run by charter management organizations (CMOs) characterized by a highly rule-ordered and regulated environment. These rules, enforced through continuous streams of reinforcements and penalties, while contributing to a tight focus on academics and a safe culture, have associated costs. The article scrutinizes four CMO commonalities, along with their implications: the pervasive adult monitoring of students, targeting behaviors tangential to learning, attributing independent agency to children who deviate, and student derogation by adults. It is concluded that rules can indeed be protective, but if not counterbalanced with opportunities for genuine choice and personal agency, the rules may quell students' desires and shrink their aspirations. A blanketing emphasis on obedience can create conditions for accepting instruction, but alone, it is dangerous, for students will not have developed their own compass to resist negative models.

Keywords: achievement gap; descriptive analysis; student behavior/attitude; urban education

The education of urban minority children has, in recent years, been significantly altered by the influx of charter management organizations (CMOs). In contrast to stand-alone charters, CMOs are characterized by centralized management teams that shape and supervise clusters of schools (Smith, Farrell, Wohlstetter, & Nayfack, 2009). The schools are concentrated in urban areas. According to a national study of middle school CMOs by the Mathematica Policy Research (Ferguson et al., 2011), as compared to other schools in their districts, they serve larger percentages of Black and Hispanic students (91% vs. 76%), and more of their students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (71% vs. 64%). On the other hand, they enroll a smaller percentage of students with disabilities and limited English. Although there is considerable variation among them, more than half ascribe to the proposition that students' academic success, always the primary goal, is dependent on erecting a highly rule-ordered and regulated environment (Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010; Miron, Urschel, & Saxton, 2010).

A conspicuous feature of the regulated environment is an insistence on continuous compliance to pervasive rules that shadow children throughout the day. The rules, covering even small details of children's comportment, both in and out of class, move beyond traditional forms of discipline, making these CMOs a rather new model on the educational horizon. The effort to create totalizing environments using a variety of systematic behavioral engineering techniques represents a significant

departure even from traditional schools avowing behavioral methodologies, where the use of reinforcement has been largely limited to achieving specific targeted behaviors. In this narrower form, a teacher, often with the cooperation of a student, works out contingent consequences to follow occurrences of specified desired and unwanted behaviors. Frequently, these plans are embedded in token economies (students collect tokens that are redeemed for privileges or items; see, e.g., Kazdin, 2001; Mayer, 2002). The single-minded focus of CMOs on preparing students for college, with every activity geared to that end, differentiates them as well from schools with strong missions (cultures) whose codes of behavior are characterized more by a set of normative expectations and aspirations than by a complex of detailed rules enforced throughout the day.

Charter schools tend to be evaluated on whether they "work," with work understood as rising student test scores, specifically narrowing the "achievement gap" (more aptly described as the "test gap"). The instructional and behavioral systems used to accomplish this end may be noted but tend not to be critically inspected in evaluations of success, for they are merely instrumental in producing results. However, separating means and ends in this instance may be shortsighted, for the "product" is not merely the test score but the student whose work it represents. One would not consider a competitive runner successful, for example, if he or she won a match but acquired an anxiety disorder.

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der from the stress of training or a student worthy of honor if he or she cheated his or her way to success. The CMOs are surely to be commended for setting high academic expectations. A remaining question, however, is even assuming the goals are achieved, is there a price to be paid and how does one weigh it?

This article describes four commonalities of the CMO cultures—present, too, in other charter and public schools committed to closing the achievement gap—that bear scrutiny. These four themes are pervasive monitoring of children, targeting behaviors tangential to learning, attributing independent agency to children, and student derogation. The elaborations and examples that follow are found in the parent-student handbooks of three charters operating in Philadelphia—Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), Mastery, and Young Scholars—supplemented by visits to classrooms.¹ Of course, not every school shares every policy, and not every policy is strictly enforced. Nonetheless, the parallelisms are sufficient to constitute a similar normative culture.

As prelude, it would be remiss not to credit the CMOs for three outstanding accomplishments. First, the strict controls have undoubtedly contributed to the diminished violence characteristic of urban schools, affording children a sense of safety they have not previously experienced (Whitman, 2008). Mastery claims that in the three Philadelphia middle schools it took over, violence has decreased by 80% and all but disappeared from the three elementary schools that it operates (Mastery Charter Schools, n.d.).

Second, the atmosphere is strict but supportive; teachers and administrators clearly care for, and believe in, their pupils. If one is not convinced of the teachers' devotion simply by watching them as they move about a classroom with warm individual smiles for everyone who is working, answering, or simply concentrating, then one can just count up the hours they spend in school followed by meetings, phone calls to students' homes, and evening preparation, not to mention an extended day and even Saturday classes in some instances. They generally share in the missions and values of the school (strong demands, hard work, and consistent rule enforcement) and are adamantly optimistic, repeatedly stating their high expectations for student success, both in print and in the class. Reciprocally, students are aware and appreciative of the investment teachers are making (Woodworth, David, Guba, Wang, & Lopez-Torkos, 2008). These personal predilections are frequently strengthened by intense 2- to 3-week summer training given by the schools, ongoing observation and coaching by experienced staff, small school size, and teacher collaboration (Lake, Bowen, & Demeritt, 2012; Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Woodworth et al., 2008).

Third, in at least some CMOs, test scores are improving. The handbooks make crystal clear the schools' aspirations for raising test scores, aspirations they firmly believe the children can meet. Mastery states it is "relentlessly committed to student achievement"; KIPP's first of five pillars is high expectations for academic achievement leading to college enrollment. Young Scholars expects that students "will work incredibly hard to achieve success in becoming a young professional and an academic scholar." After Mastery assumed management of three Philadelphia middle schools, it asserts that test scores increased an average of more than 40% per grade and that student turnover dropped by one third. In the three elementary schools, math scores increased

14% and reading scores increased 9% percent in the 1st year (Mastery Charter Schools, n.d.). Young Scholars reported in August 2011 that students in its seventh and eighth grades, enrolled for 2 or more years, bettered the Philadelphia District state scores by 20% ("Young Scholars and Scholar Academies are Closing the Achievement Gap," 2011). A study by Mathematica of 22 CMO middle schools, in which students were followed for 2 to 3 years, found favorable outcomes: Compared to district schools, and controlling for initial child characteristics, the students made more academic progress, especially in math, although the comparative improvement did not reach statistical significance (Furgeson et al., 2011). Furthermore, student gains in math and reading were larger in those schools with comprehensive behavior policies. After 2 years, there was a significant correlation between student achievement and policies that include "consistent behavior standards and disciplinary policies within a school, zero tolerance policies for potentially dangerous behaviors, behavior codes with student rewards and sanctions, and responsibility agreements signed by students or parents" (Furgeson et al., 2011, p. xxix). Another study by Mathematica focused exclusively on 22 KIPP middle schools and also followed students for at least 2 years. It reported, "For the vast majority of KIPP schools studied, impacts on students' state assessment scores in mathematics and reading are positive, statistically significant, and educationally substantial" (Tuttle, Teh, Nichols-Barrer, Gill, & Gleason, 2010, p. 1). Although there remains a continuing dispute around the validity of comparisons, so far, the test increases look promising. But these accomplishments come with a downside.

Big Brother Is Watching

A shared assumption of many CMOs is that in poor urban schools characterized by large achievement gaps, not a moment of the day can be "wasted." Any time off task is time squandered. Teachers, therefore, must exercise strenuous control over children's behavior not just to preserve an orderly learning environment but to keep children's attention riveted on the teacher. Moments of mental wandering, even when the child is silent, are wasted as, of course, are informal asides to classmates. The omnipresent monitoring reminds one of the disciplinary institutions Michel Foucault (1977) famously described (military hospitals, factories, schools) where an authority can, through close observation and supervision, efficiently control all the bodily movements and activities of subjects. A good teacher trains students using "few words, no explanation, a total silence interrupted only by signals—bells, clapping of hands, gestures, a mere glance from the teacher" (Foucault, 1977, p. 166).

This orientation has its modern-day counterpart in the classroom management theories of psychologists, such as Lee Canter (2010), Fredric Jones (1987), and Doug Lemov (2010), who have influenced the CMOs. According to Canter, children, without exception, should demonstrate 100% compliance 100% of the time. A teacher should never back down from his or her demands and never slow down in response to a child's pace, and there are no excuses for noncompliance, for every second counts. The "no-excuses" premise is explicit in all the handbooks. To meet high achievement goals, it is the school's task "to maximize every second of our school day to provide our students with the

knowledge and skills required to grant them access to limitless opportunity” (Young Scholars, p. 15). Only 100% attention to the teacher’s authority and strict precision in carrying out routines will accomplish the goals. Learning should be engaged in “with a sense of urgency” (KIPP Philadelphia Charter School, p. 5).

Compounding the emphasis on using time productively is the division of academic instruction into tiny subunits; the clock’s tick becomes an extension of the instructor’s monitoring. Thus a teacher may give students 3 minutes to copy instructions from the board, another 3 minutes to read a passage. If children are caught mumbling, that reduces their allotted time to 2.5 minutes. A couple of minutes may be devoted to “discussion,” meaning an opportunity for students to answer teacher questions: “What was the major theme?” “Who was the major character?” “Who felt hurt?” (observation). Partitioning the day into fractionated bits has been called “defensive teaching” by Linda McNeil (1986, 2000), a device by which the teacher retains control. (See also Suransky, 1982.) For the teachers, however, it is understood and justified as ensuring continual learning.

Naturally, children are not 100% compliant. To preserve the regulations, therefore, rewards and sanctions are constantly administered. At Mastery, for example, behavior of younger students is monitored, in real time, on a five-tiered color system: Green and blue are good, purple is a warning, yellow is a privilege denied, and red is a phone call home. When on red, the student cannot move up; a call home is certain. (Color codes for tracking student behavior are also used with younger students at KIPP.) The “Choice Charts” are reset in the morning and after lunch so that students can have a fresh start. They travel with students from class to class. At day’s end, students bring home their progress reports, inclusive of the Choice Chart ratings, homework completion, and uniform compliance.

In middle schools, children tend to be tracked through merit and demerit cards. At Mastery, they receive blank merit and demerit cards every week to be carried on their person, prepared to be marked by a teacher at any moment. After six offenses, the student receives a 3-hour in-school detention. In addition, the teacher (or teachers if students have more than one) maintains a clipboard to monitor the class (“Cohort Behavior Clipboard”). During each lesson, the class is graded on a 1- to 5-point scale based on “participation, body language, and adherence to the classroom rules.” Ratings may be given throughout the lesson with the final entry summing up the class score. The last-period teacher averages the day’s ratings for possible reward eligibility.

At KIPP (DuBois), “character cards” are given to students every 2 weeks with a list of possible infractions listed on the back of the cards. Among other violations, demerits can be given for chewing gum, being out of uniform, being unprepared for class, using a cell phone, or not having the card in one’s possession (four demerits). And the accumulation of four demerits results in a Saturday detention. Teachers become accustomed to giving out individual and class sanctions without interrupting instruction, an amazing feat of multitasking to observe. Depending on the school, they keep records by writing student names on the blackboard, on their own clipboards, or on a child’s merit card or by moving children’s markers along the color-coded strip, all the while not interrupting a seamless lesson.

Several CMOs use their own monetary system to encourage rule obedience (KIPP, Young Scholars). Students at Young Scholars Middle School, for example, receive a weekly paycheck of \$50.00. Deductions are made for violations of core values, or “PATH” (*professional*, including being on time, following all procedures and directions; *attentive*, including good listening, eye contact, and posture; *thoughtful* and *hardworking*, including having high goals, perseverance, and demanding excellence), as well as for violating the behavioral codes, or SMARTS (stand and sit straight, make good choices, always 100% on task and engaged, respect, track the speaker, shine). Additional earnings for good behavior are also possible. One week with a balance below \$30.00 results in an after-school detention; 3 weeks of the low balance results in an in-school or out-of-school suspension; and 6 weeks, a suspension plus reinstatement meeting. For good behavior, students at KIPP earn KIPP dollars that may be redeemed for school favors (trips, items from the store). The balances are always known to the child, with deductions for infractions and additions for meritorious behavior made at any time by a teacher or staff member. On Fridays, the week’s paycheck is calculated, taken home for a signature, and returned to school on Monday.

And there are rewards. As balances accumulate, students are granted trips and access to special events, the number increasing along with the balance. Frequently held community meetings at all the charters are opportunities to acknowledge student achievement, to congratulate them for making the right choices, and to serve as a motivational spur. At KIPP (West Philadelphia), students receive bracelets in the seventh grade separate from their merit and demerit checks so that staff and other students can formally recognize exceptional interactions. The bracelets entitle students to such privileges as choice of lunch seat, school store discounts, and dress-down days. At Mastery, elementary students earn “Bulldog Prints,” exchangeable for awards, when they are on time, are in uniform, complete homework, and make the right behavior choices in the morning, midday, and afternoon.

Beyond the above control devices—the clock, merit and demerit systems, and money—shaming is used for infractions. Thus a miscreant student at KIPP is put on a “behavior plan” that may mean having to wear a special distinguishable shirt and spending the day in silence, neither speaking nor being addressed. A low bank account may result in being forbidden to talk with others, being disallowed from sitting in a chair, or being required to eat separately and silently, stand in the back of the classroom during lessons, or write, “I will work and behave in the best way I know how and do whatever it takes for me and my fellow students to learn” (David et al., 2006, p. 14). Public reprimands and collective confessionals, in addition to a penalty, are often required (Mastery; Woodworth et al., 2008).

This laser focus on behavioral compliance through the continuous ministration of sanctions and rewards may or may not be necessary to preserve an educational environment suitable for learning. What students clearly learn is never to lose sight of adult expectations, never to be distracted from what they are expected to do by what they might want to do. Children’s initiative is suppressed in favor of conformity, autonomy in favor of heteronomy. The goal is to meet performance criteria, while internal interests remain unexpressed and unexplored. Presumably, they can await

the acquisition of foundational skills when there is time to “waste.”

Broken Windows

The theory of broken windows, introduced by Wilson and Kelling (1982) and then popularized by Malcolm Gladwell (2000), is that the probability that small misdemeanors will escalate into more-serious crime is lowered by policing the former. Thus, the prospect of future felonies is cumulatively inhibited by such actions as quickly repairing a broken window, not allowing litter to accumulate, cleaning up graffiti, repairing streetlights, and stopping “squeegee men” who, unbidden but expecting pay, wipe windshields on cars stuck in traffic. The CMOs under discussion appear to have adopted an analogous belief with a key exception: Although the wrongs enumerated in the broken window theory may be petty, they are still wrongs. One may argue about the seriousness of littering, breaking a window, or spraying paint, but each instance is a degradation of property. By contrast, many of the behaviors that schools demand and/or forbid are not wrongs in themselves. It is not obviously harmful to talk quietly to a neighbor in the classroom or hallways, to slouch when sitting or standing, to gaze into space, to have one’s feet next to rather than under the desk, to wear jewelry, to leave one’s desk momentarily, or to wear brown rather than black socks, but these behaviors are generally forbidden in the schools under discussion. That is, sanctions in these CMOs are not limited to what would commonly be considered misbehavior—disrupting class by interrupting a lesson; threatening, intimidating, bullying, or fighting others; failing to produce the required assignment. They are employed for behaviors that, despite appearing innocent in themselves, are forbidden so as to foreclose the *possibility* of misbehavior. At Mastery, the achievement culture is created by “sweating the small stuff” (Whitman, 2008, p. 3). This is an extreme extension of the broken window theory: Behaviors not problematic in themselves are off-limits because authorities believe they might escalate into a behavior that leads to another behavior that threatens the learning environment. It could be called the harbinger theory of discipline.

Thus, because physical contact can be harmful, rather than prohibiting hitting, or even poking, squeezing, and unwanted touching, schools demand that children keep their hands folded on the desk at all times (observation). Because excessive noise in a hallway is disturbing to those studying, rather than insisting on soft voices as a prevention, schools require students to walk silently, in a straight line, sometimes with hands clasped behind their back or one finger over their lips in a shush position (KIPP and observations at others). Because the cafeteria can also be deafening, rather than insisting on modulated speech, schools restrict students in whom they talk with; sometimes tables must be silent (KIPP, Young Scholars). Because inattentiveness can inhibit learning, students not only are forbidden to sleep or occupy themselves with irrelevant activities but must track the teacher at all times, looking directly into his or her eyes. Because suggestive clothing can be distracting or perceived as disrespectful, rather than implementing a dress code to ensure modesty, the schools impose tightly regulated uniforms that go so far as specifying the color of belts, shoelaces, sneakers, and socks and a prohibition on makeup (KIPP Philadelphia). Because children

sometimes misbehave in the bathroom or use it to avoid class, rather than developing a responsible pass system, schools restrict use of the bathroom: Elementary classes may go as a group; individuals may be permitted to go only between classes, with a few individual passes allotted per semester (KIPP, Mastery).

The schools operationalize their demands through acronyms memorized by the children: For KIPP, it is SLANT (sit up, listen, attend, nod your head, track); for Mastery, it is STAR (sit upright, track the speaker, actively listen, rest hands) and HALL (hallway heads and eyes forward, arms with finger on silent lips, a hand at the side, legs straight and lips sealed); for Young Scholars, it is SMARTS (see above). Songs, choral responses, chants, and slogans reinforce the oft-repeated acronyms. Children as young as 5 and 6 are expected to follow these standards all day. And they do. But are they reasonable expectations? If good posture is important to health, it should be practiced and acquired as a habit with that end in mind, but is it a proven necessity for learning? And violations of the rules result in a penalty, not merely a reminder.

Rules this extended and consequences for violations this severe raise the question, What legitimate limits exist to the power exercised by schools over children? Aside from disallowing physical punishment, and none of the CMOs permits it, what restraints are there on the demands and prohibitions a school can make? What is to stop a school from demanding even more prohibitions—no talk at recess (if they are fortunate enough to have one), walk on tiptoes for a silent tread, hair no longer than one’s ears—and imposing more severe sanctions—stay after school through the dinner hour, come in on Saturdays and clean the basement, return home for a day or two if pen and pencil are forgotten? To protect the dignity of the child, does there not have to be some evidence that what is prohibited or demanded at school is clearly relevant to the educational project, or can an adult do anything to a child for the sake of order?

It’s Your Choice

The CMOs are strong advocates of children’s making the right choice. Repeatedly one hears teachers commenting on the poor choice a child made as an explanation for the penalty to follow. According to Young Scholars, “Students choose to make the right or wrong decision. We expect students to make the right choice at all times and to think about consequences” (Young Scholars, p. 16). At Mastery, as previously mentioned, children’s behavior is tracked on their individual *Choice* Charts on a five-tiered color system. When a student makes an excellent choice, he or she may be moved up the Choice Chart and the reverse. At KIPP, students earn dollars by making “good choices” and lose dollars if they make “bad choices.” The daily choices are delineated by different-colored circles on a behavioral chart. When students make bad choices, they are moved back a color (represented by circles). If a good choice follows, they are restored to their previous status and rejoin their team. The behavioral report card goes home each day for their guardian’s review. Through these procedures, they are expected to learn the distinctions between good and bad choices (KIPP Philadelphia).

The initial problem with this language is the restricted use of the word *choice*. Genuine choice implies the opportunity to weigh options without threat and to make selections from alternatives with impunity; in school, it might be choosing a subject

on which to speak, a book to read, a topic to investigate, or sides and arguments in a debate. When choosing becomes a matter of right and wrong decision making, it is coercion—choice under threat. True, even with the degree of coercion operating in these charters, a student can conceivably weigh the cost of noncompliance. By encouraging self-consciousness about decision—“It’s your choice”—the schools gesture toward building judgment and self-control. But the thrust of these programs, with their demand for strict compliance, is not welcoming of genuine choice. The invitation to choose is merely a smoke screen, obscuring the demand for submission. The teacher’s power, and the child’s dependency on his or her judgments, makes independent thought all but impossible. A well-adapted child will try to be the student he or she believes the teacher expects. (See Erich Fromm, 1942, for this and for the classical analysis of ostensible and real freedom.)

Furthermore, the assumption of an independent will that underlies the choice talk is just what behaviorists usually deny. For them, and presumably for schools that rely on external reinforcements, people act on the basis of conditioned responses, not from an independent will. Behavior is altered through planned consequences that will decrease the unwanted behavior and increase the desired behavior (Kazdin, 2001). To ask a student to write 50 times over, “I will work and behave in the best way I know how and do whatever it takes for me and my fellow students to learn,” is a penalty intended to reduce the likelihood of a repeated poor choice, because the child wants to avoid this unpleasant overcorrection experience. It is not a means for promoting independent choice making. To induce good choices, the schools frequently punish (penalize), as well as reward, their students. Again, this is contrary to behavioral principles where punishment is avoided because of its negative side effects (Kazdin, 2001; Skinner, 1976). In a thorough-going behaviorally engineered environment, such as imagined by B. F. Skinner (1976) in *Walden Two*, the desired behaviors are instilled through a reward, not punishment, system. After the behaviors are established, the external reinforcements are reduced or eliminated. The (imagined) citizens of *Walden Two* continue to follow behavioral patterns established by the managers because programming has eliminated personal agency. No one wants to deviate from the approved. The education assumes a uniform environment with no exposure of children to alternatives, so the possibility of deliberating on alternatives is eliminated. Similarly, the CMOs curb exposure to options and genuine deliberation in their effort to control children’s actions; the verbal emphasis on choice disguises the mind control they try to exert.

Educators, one assumes, would like children to make choices based on short- and long-term goals to which they are committed, at least temporarily. Hopefully, the decisions are regularly funneled through a moral prism—“I will walk away from the fight because I don’t want to hurt a classmate” . . . “I will contribute to a class activity because I want to do my share.” The CMOs rely on rules rather than personal decision making in part because the students are not encouraged to develop such prisms. Were the rules such that children adhered to them out of belief, punishments and rewards could be deemphasized. Rules and incentives, as Barry Schwartz (2011) has noted, do not generate moral will; they are a substitute for them. Of course, it may be impossible to

grant children very much genuine choice (although some should be possible) as they are insufficiently mature. The critique, rather, is addressed to the use of “choice” in an environment that basically denies it and to blaming the child who chooses poorly rather than the behavioral programming that has been ineffective.

Blaming Students

The quiet, orderly, nonviolent environment of the CMOs suggests that students accept the rules and for the most part conform; they have been successfully conditioned. In the schools’ terminology, they make the right choices. Although students may momentarily protest when the teacher dispatches them to the silent boxed-off area in the hall or assigns them a corner desk facing the wall, they generally appear to follow orders, knowing that if they resist, suspension may be the next consequence. But beyond behavioral conformity, how do the constant monitoring, appraising, and correction influence children’s sense of themselves? Although one might assume frequent teacher approval, merit badges, and monetary rewards boost self-confidence and self-esteem, when approval is so highly contingent on following orders, it can have the reverse impact. By registering disapproval for so much of what students may want to express, and denying them autonomy, the CMOs may be contributing to an impoverished view of self.

Soliciting student input into their own education, offering them voice, would only detract from the central objectives of the CMOs. Yet, exercising volition (agency) and initiating successful encounters—in play, work, and relationships—are essential, first to developing self-awareness and then, if all goes well, to self-esteem (Damon & Hart, 1988; Deci & Ryan, 1995).² If independent strivings are disregarded or negated, if one’s self-worth becomes contingent on living as expected by others, then it dissolves when one fails in those efforts. Alone, measuring up to external standards does not yield self-esteem, although approval is a spur to it. That approval is most effective when directed, in part, to supporting a student’s burgeoning self-identity and not exclusively focused on what one wants him or her to do and become. For adolescents in particular, self-esteem involves expressing one’s “true feelings” as opposed to “being phony,” “not saying what you think,” “putting on an act,” or “changing yourself to be something that someone *else* wants you to be” (Harter, 1998, p. 581). Deprivation of one’s voice is “associated with low self-esteem, hopelessness, and depressed affect” (Harter, 1998, p. 582). In addition, a well-articulated positive sense of self that is subjectively experienced as independent of others’ demands, although of course heavily molded by socialization, is central to such virtues as authenticity and sincerity (Fromm, 1942; Trilling, 1972). One can hardly be authentic, that is, true to oneself, in the absence of an articulated internalized view of the self.

For the many students whose self-worth is highly dependent on social approval, disapproval from others and the constant anxiety that one is going to be scolded generate a weakened sense of self (Harter, 1999, 2006). Those children within the school population who cannot assume a benevolent accepting environment, who may be deprived of steady predictable caring at home, or who have experienced trauma are particularly likely to be on guard (hypervigilant) and distrustful of others, even of themselves. They are prone to developing an internal “model of the self

as unworthy, ineffective and incompetent” (Harter, 1999, p. 266) and are vulnerable to accepting negative verdicts of authorities. Those who believe they are weak and powerless may find comfort in subordination to, and agreement with, the powerful rather than in resisting negative judgments. The “narrative about [their] own life is not derived from personal experience but from someone else’s story” (Frankel, 2002, p. 114).

In a questionnaire-interview study that investigated the relationship between strict control systems and emergent self-concepts of 56 high school seniors, it was found that by and large, students distrusted and disparaged themselves; they mostly rejected the proposal that they would be better off with greater opportunities for self-determination and self-expression (for details of this study, see Goodman & Uzun, in press).³ Merit, a high school for students who have had difficulties in regular public schools ranging from extensive absenteeism to law breaking, is run by a charter organization that imposes strict and detailed behavioral norms. Students are ranked weekly in one of five categories each with associated privileges and deprivations. The uniform policy includes no sunglasses, jewelry, food, drink, electronic devices, book bags, pocketbooks, backpacks, or chewing gum. Morning arrival procedures are like those at an airport: Students must remove shoes and coat, go through a metal detector, and then be frisked by a staff member of the same gender. When outside the classroom, they must walk in “protocol” (in line, hands clasped tightly behind the back). The school gives students no choice in their curriculum and almost no extracurricular options.

When asked for their reactions to the behavior controls, students were generally favorable. Because they were unable to exercise responsible freedom, the rules were necessary. Strict enforcement of the norms was helpful: “So you don’t make a fool of yourself” . . . “Because I’m loud” . . . “So I don’t get out of line” . . . “So that they can prevent violence” . . . “So nobody gets out of control” . . . “I might get upset about some things so they [teachers] help me not make the wrong decision” . . . “It’s probably to keep the other students safe and also so I’m not a disruption.” The word *disruption* sounds like teacher-speak and suggests student internalization of the adult’s perspective. Only three students objected to the controls. One defiantly claimed, “I will not give in easy.” Another saw the controls as the teachers’ wish “to show more power, and to make mines [my behavior] better.” The third commented, “They control us but sometimes they going to lose control.” A more characteristic comment was “I like the norms here. I’m comfortable with them. They’re simple, easy to follow.”

Freedom in school was generally perceived as bad: “[We have] no freedom and it’s good that way ’cause we’re here to do our work.” . . . “I don’t have much freedom but that’s a good thing because it keeps me in school.” . . . “It’s very restrictive but in a good way.” If you give freedom to students, they will “take advantage” of it, “get carried away,” “act up,” “mess up,” “not do their work” . . . “hallways would be crazy.” “It’s a bad thing [freedom] because if students got too much freedom they going to run wild and don’t care about life and mess up in class while someone else trying to learn.” Unconstrained moments were opportunities for “bad choices” or “wasting time.” Adolescents in general “have too much freedom. That’s why things like flash mobs happen.” Schooling is coercion for your own good. Its function is to teach

students what they need to know as adults and cultivate obedience, not foster or respond to student capacities, interests, or individuality. “You’re not supposed to come to school for that [freedom]. I personally come to do my work and leave.” You “do your work, get your diploma and go onto your next step.” . . . “In college there’s no time to joke around. You have no freedom. Other people [who don’t go to college] don’t do anything. They have freedom to do whatever they want but it’s not gonna get them anywhere.” . . . “Life [as exemplified by school] is not doing what you want all the time, but just doing what you gotta.” Several students indicated that it was the teacher’s task to make decisions and curtail freedom and the student’s job to obey. “As far as school, less freedom is better. You need to be organized. You need to know that somebody’s over top of you making sure you do what you gotta do.” Going farther, some saw the rules and routines not as merely instrumental to gaining skills but as worthy in their own right. Schools “prepare you for waking up in the morning and being somewhere on time. . . . You have a lot of situations where you have to deal with things, be places on time.”

For most of these students, freedom is associated with an untamed spirit. Those possessing it are likely to do bad things and get into trouble. That has been their personal experience. The “free” students in their communities are viewed as a source of danger. One student approvingly noted that children in suburban schools have more freedom, such as to bring phones to school. But Merit students are different. “It got people who went through more things. It’s more dangerous. You gotta watch your back.” Suburban kids “make better choices. . . . If you watch the news, all the crime happens here. In the suburbs, their news is that they save cats from trees.” Freedom should be reserved for adults. “An adult is someone with a diploma. An adult, you can pay your own bills, you got your own house; that makes you an adult. Then you can do what you want and have freedom. Until then, you’re still a child.” Students are not to be trusted. Give them freedom and they are likely to go “crazy.”

Self-disparagement, the internalization of the negative views of others, is not limited to schools like Merit. I have found that young students in CMO charters may also see themselves as unworthy. A primary grade student, asked what she would do if there were no rules, responded, “I would break the computers . . . climb up the wall . . . knock over tables and chairs . . . rip books.” When the teacher, unbelieving, gave the class some free time, they immediately did just that: knocked down chairs, screamed, dog-piled in middle of the carpet. Another primary grade child, from a different charter, responded to the no-rules question, “We will run all over the place . . . everyone getting hurt . . . we would get hurt and squashed . . . we would hit each other in the face . . . we would fight and kick each other.” Asked whether that is what she would do in a store, the student said, “No, there are cameras in stores, they’re watching, you’ll go to jail.” Bad kids like them need to be controlled.

Conclusion

Students at schools like Merit, and perhaps to a lesser extent many of those attending CMOs, have lived with aggression as victims and perpetrators. The schools, understandably, emphasizing the risks of violence, view them primarily as perpetrators who need to be dominated. Safety and security lie in a rule-based,

highly controlled environment run by adults who know students' best interests and have the power to enforce standards. Through constant monitoring, eliminating behaviors only marginally relevant to necessary school decorum, and erecting a series of negative consequences for "bad choices," the schools subdue discordant impulses and keep students narrowly focused on the tests that are believed to be gateways for their futures. Although the CMOs may successfully deliver higher student scores, the success comes with significant costs.

Even the advertised successes, however, must be considered with caution. Some argue that KIPP and other charters "cream" the better students and families, thereby invalidating comparisons (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mischel, & Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein, 2004). At the outset, added parental initiative is required to enroll one's child in a charter that may include a signed contract rather than to enroll him or her in a neighborhood school. It has been asserted that students who enter these schools in the middle grades have higher average test scores than their Black and Hispanic peers in neighboring schools (Furgeson et al., 2011), although this is disputed, at least for the KIPP schools, where the claim is made that the reverse is true (Tuttle et al., 2010; Woodworth et al., 2008).

In the charters, students may be further advantaged. A national study of KIPP schools found that both student attrition and per-pupil expenditure are higher (\$457.00) than in comparable local schools (Miron et al., 2011). Similarly, as compared to local public schools, the funding for three New York City CMOs provides a 30% increase in per-pupil spending. Many of the CMOs receive private donations from foundations, individuals, and government grants (Baker, Libby, & Wiley, 2012).

Attrition also characterizes staff. The (commonly) newly minted teachers attracted to the CMOs may not stay long. In a study of KIPP schools, 37% were younger than 30 years of age as contrasted with only 11% in traditional schools (Miron et al., 2011). New teachers are particularly vulnerable, with attrition rates close to 40% in a study of KIPP schools (Miron et al., 2011). The charters benefit from their youthful energy, enthusiasm, and confidence; when that diminishes, they leave for less-taxing work. Overall teacher attrition rates at charters vary from 15% to 40%, with 20% to 25% most common. In traditional public schools, the range is from 11% to 14% (Miron & Applegate, 2007). Of course, unknown numbers leave because their contracts are not renewed.

Although some CMOs are beginning to add extracurricular activities to the narrow test prep-prescribed curriculum and may take their students on field trips (KIPP, for example, regularly takes students on a weeklong trip to Washington, D.C.), the notion that school is a place for exploration, self-expression, generating ideals, and answering the question "Who am I?" is largely meaningless or, in any case, can wait until after the attainment of civility and skills. The standards of "high expectations" and "success" are determined entirely by adults.

If students were perceived more roundly, as needing varied opportunities to explore who they are and might become, they would have a better chance of finding a genuine, rather than imposed, identity; of formulating and pursuing ends other than conforming and not misbehaving; of learning to trust themselves rather than willingly relinquish agency. Rules can indeed be

protective, as the students testify, but alone, rules do not offer worthwhile ends or the means to pursue them; indeed, unrelenting stringency may quell desires and shrink aspirations. Perhaps obedience creates conditions for accepting instruction, yet it can be dangerous, as when one fails to resist negative models.

There are examples of urban schools in the Philadelphia area that have broader social goals, are less laser focused on raising test scores, and place greater emphasis on student agency. The Russell Byers Charter School (Grades K–6), for example, "provides students roots, a safe, stimulating environment with a rigorous academic education grounded in Expeditionary Learning. Our students take responsibility for their learning to become powerful communicators, creative problem solvers and compassionate, engaged citizens." They stress learning by doing and claim to educate through a partnership between students and teachers (<http://byersschool.org/about>). The Independence Charter School (Grades K–8) has a global-focused curriculum "designed to develop independent, thoughtful global citizens" (<http://www.independencecharter.org>). They emphasize second-language acquisition through immersion classes and the integration of worldwide arts, ideas, and histories. At Wissahickon Charter school, there is also a stress on the environment as well as "active learning that allows students to experience the curriculum" and service learning projects (<http://wissahickoncharter.org/wp>).

The questions remain: How do such schools, as compared with more controlling models, serve their students throughout the course of years? Can they, should they, become increasingly the norm rather than the exception?

NOTES

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¹The policies and examples in the text come from the charter schools' current handbooks unless otherwise specified as an observation. Except for KIPP schools that individualize their general practices through appendices added to the common Parent/Student Handbook, I simply mention the name of the charter, rather than give full references in the text. Policies characterizing multiple KIPP schools are referenced simply as KIPP. Specific schools are mentioned where appropriate. Below are the relevant citations.

KIPP DuBois Collegiate Academy (Grades 9–10): Appendix to Parent/Student Handbook 2011–2012 School Year: <http://kippdubois.org/resources.html>

KIPP Philadelphia Charter School (Grades 5–8): Appendix to Parent/Student Handbook 2011–2012 School Year: <http://www.kippphilacs.org/resources.html>

KIPP West Philadelphia Preparatory Charter School (Grades 5–7): Appendix to Parent/Student Handbook 2011–2012 School Year <http://www.kippwestphilacs.org/parent-resources.html>

Mastery Charter Schools, Elementary Student-Parent Handbook 2011–2012, Philadelphia: http://www.masterycharter.org/uploads/school_files

Young Scholars: <http://phillyscholars.org/yssc/wp-content/themes/scholar-academies/pdfs/student-family-handbook.pdf>

²*Self-esteem* is understood by these authors to mean confidence and enterprise. It is not instilled through the flattery commonly extended by parents and teachers in a well-meaning but fruitless effort to instill self-esteem; rather, it fundamentally depends on personal effort and self-satisfactions from accomplishments.

³The questionnaire responses were voluntary and therefore may well not be representative. There were no comparison groups. The quotes I have included represented the general attitudes found among the 54 students, and no generalizations can be made.

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