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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“SO THE S is for ‘sitting up straight,’” Ms. Anderson, a thirty-one-year-old White teacher with curly, shoulder-length hair and glasses, announced to the students in a clear, crisp voice.¹ She folded her hands together, with her fingers interlaced. “What I’m not doing is sitting like this,” she demonstrated, pretending to slouch back in a chair. “Like this,” she said, straightening her back. “Try to sit all the way up. Relax your shoulders now.” The crop of new Black and Latino fifth graders, seated “crisscross, applesauce” in eight straight rows on the cafeteria floor, mimicked her positions.² “I don’t have all eyes,” Ms. Anderson prompted. Then, she continued on with L for “listening,” A for “ask questions,” N for “nod for understanding,” and T for “track the speaker.”

Pointing her two fingers to her eyes, she demonstrated how students should keep their eyes on the speaker. “I should naturally see your eyes following me,” she instructed, as she paced around the front of the room. “To make it even better, you can add a little smile.” As the students’ mouths curled up in smiles, the nervousness in the air seemed to lighten.

“Why do we SLANT? It shows respect. Posture is everything. If I’m sitting like this, it doesn’t look academic.” She leaned backward on her chair. “SLANTing makes you look and feel smart. It also allows the blood to circulate to the brain more. It lets you listen and absorb and retain. It helps you prepare for the real world. I can’t go to my job, my mom can’t go to her job, my husband can’t go to his job without paying attention.”

Here, on the first day of school at Dream Academy, a “no-excuses” school, I observed a lesson in how to pay attention. I was not taken aback by this lesson. In fact, I had decided to immerse myself as a researcher in the school for the year precisely because I was interested in lessons like these.

I first became interested in no-excuses schools—the name given to a number of high-performing urban schools, including KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Success Academy, Uncommon Schools, YES Prep, and Achievement First—when I heard about SLANT. I was struck by its explicitness—it translated middle-class expectations for showing attention into a simple acronym. I nod (a lot) when I engage in conversation, but I certainly do not remember ever having been taught to do so.

When I started studying sociology as a graduate student, I was drawn to the concept of cultural capital because I recognized the importance of cultural know-how in getting ahead. Cultural capital comprises the cultural attitudes, skills, knowledge, and behaviors that give certain groups advantages in institutional settings.³ It can be thought of as the “taken-for-granted ways of being that are valued in a particular context.”⁴ As a daughter of Chinese immigrants, I had observed cultural differences between the deferent manner in which I approached my professors and the casual style in which my graduate school peers interacted with faculty, or in how I stumbled through an explanation while my husband, who grew up in an affluent neighborhood, always sounded like he was giving a lecture. I wondered if my peers’ seemingly natural ability to make small talk or articulate an argument could be learned.

To be a successful student requires a lot of background knowledge, not just about facts and figures, but also about what is appropriate to say and do. Sociologists of education have argued that schools operate under a set of middle-class, White (dominant) norms that favor children who have acquired the requisite social, cultural, and linguistic competencies at home.⁵ For children whose knowledge, skills, and behaviors do not match those expected in the classroom, school can be a disorienting experience. These students can have their actions and intentions misinterpreted by teachers and school administrators, particularly by those whose backgrounds differ from their own.⁶ Teachers’ perceptions of students have consequences for students’ academic achievement, as teachers assign higher grades to those who display skills like attention, engagement, and organization and, conversely, have lower expectations for, and give poorer evaluations to, students whom they view as disruptive, dressed “inappropriately,” and lazy.⁷ As misunderstandings multiply, young children may come to unconsciously sense that school is not a place for them, and adolescents may actively resist school.⁸

As a sociologist, I had read many studies about the role that cultural capital played in shaping students’ experiences and outcomes in school, but I had seen few studies that looked at whether or how this cultural know-how could be taught. That’s why I was intrigued when I heard about

SLANT. It literally spelled out what students needed to do to conform to school expectations for showing attention—they needed to sit up, listen, ask questions, nod for understanding, and track the speaker. I thought it was clever. Intrigued, I decided to see for myself how and why no-excuses schools were teaching students to SLANT and whether they were successfully transferring cultural capital to the predominantly low-income Black and Latino students they served.

Yet the more time I spent inside Dream Academy, the more I wondered whether Dream Academy's rigid behavioral *scripts* equipped students with the *tools* to successfully navigate middle-class institutions. To teach what the school considered “middle-class” behaviors, Dream Academy used *scripts*, which I define as detailed and standardized behavioral codes or procedures. Students at Dream Academy were given exhaustive scripts for how to dress, how to complete a homework assignment, and how to clap in an assembly. They were given scripts for how to walk down the hallways and how to sit at their desks. They were given scripts for how to interact with teachers—no eye-rolling, no teeth sucking, no refusing a teacher's directions, and no talking back, even if wrongly accused. The rigid scripts students were taught to follow, however, left little room for them to develop what I call *tools of interaction*, or the attitudes, skills, and styles that allow certain groups to effectively navigate complex institutions and shifting expectations. Would the behavioral scripts the school worked so hard to teach transfer to a different setting? As students reached the targeted goal of college, would they be able to adjust to a less structured environment? Or had no-excuses schools like Dream Academy, in their eagerness to get students to the college door, inadvertently failed to prepare students with the cultural capital they would need for life success and upward social mobility?

Scripting Success at No-Excuses Schools

The language that we use in teaching sometimes is “scripting the moves.”

You've got to script the moves for students. You have to narrate the experience so students understand exactly what the outcomes are. . . .

It's really not that different with teachers. If you want teachers to look thoughtfully at student work, you have to script the moves for them.

—PRINCIPAL, URBAN ASSEMBLY SCHOOL FOR LAW AND JUSTICE⁹

In 1994, David Levin and Michael Feinberg, two young White Ivy League graduates, had recently completed their stint with Teach for America, a Peace Corps-type program that places recent college graduates in

hard-to-staff, underresourced schools for a two-year commitment. Eager to do more in the fight against educational inequities, Levin and Feinberg decided to try their hand at starting their first two charter schools, one in Houston and one in the South Bronx. At that point, charter schools were still newcomers to the educational landscape, the first charter law having been enacted in Minnesota in 1991. Charter schools, which are independently run public schools that offer families alternative options to their district school, are now established in forty-five states and serve over three million students.¹⁰ Although they continue to generate controversy, charter schools receive bipartisan support and have become a central component of education policy, particularly because they are seen as a way to help low-income families access better schools for their children.¹¹ As schools of choice, charters generally are open to any student in the district who wishes to apply and are required by state law to enroll students through a random lottery process. Charter schools are concentrated in urban areas, with more than half located in cities (compared to a quarter of traditional public schools).¹²

When Levin and Feinberg founded their first two KIPP schools, they could not have anticipated their eventual success and impact. For its first eight years, KIPP Academy Houston was recognized as a Texas Exemplary School, and KIPP Academy New York was rated the highest performing public middle school in the Bronx for eight consecutive years.¹³ By 2020, KIPP was serving more than one hundred thousand students in 255 schools nationwide.¹⁴ Of the students KIPP serves, 95 percent are Black or Latino; 88 percent are low-income students.¹⁵ The U.S. Department of Education has declared KIPP “one of the most promising initiatives in public education today”¹⁶—a claim echoed by media outlets including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Forbes*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *60 Minutes*.¹⁷

KIPP would become a model for a group of mostly young, White “education entrepreneurs” starting new charter schools in the 1990s and 2000s and embracing market-based education reforms that emphasize choice, competition, and accountability (see chapter 5).¹⁸ Many of these new charters would come to replicate KIPP’s successes. Although charter schools on average have performed no better than traditional public schools on statewide standardized assessments, urban charter schools that follow KIPP’s “no-excuses” model have fared better.¹⁹ Over the past decade, a number of methodologically rigorous studies that compare the outcomes of students who apply to the charter school lottery and are not admitted with the outcomes of those who apply and are admitted have found

positive effects of no-excuses schools on students' standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates.²⁰

The term “no-excuses”—a label that has fallen out of favor in most of these schools—comes from two books highlighting high-achieving, high-poverty schools that refuse to make excuses for students' failure, regardless of their race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, or skill level.²¹ This statement might seem unremarkable, but many scholars suggest that schools alone cannot overcome the persistent effects of poverty and family background.²² The image of the failing urban school is a common one, though this stereotype has been critiqued by scholars as misrepresenting the diversity and assets of urban schools.²³ Yet it remains true that despite many repeated school reform efforts, urban schools continue to face significant obstacles, including staggering rates of teacher turnover, inadequate funding, dilapidated buildings, limited curricular options, and school safety concerns.²⁴ The low-income Black and Latino students concentrated in urban schools, the result of a long history of segregation and racial discrimination in the United States, thus face “opportunity gaps” that translate into “achievement gaps” that have proved difficult to close.²⁵ This is why no-excuses charter schools have been celebrated by many educators and policy makers for narrowing long-standing test score gaps.

Because of the unusual academic success of no-excuses schools, replicating them has even been proposed as a large-scale education reform strategy to close the racial achievement gap.²⁶ In the past two decades, the Walton, Broad, and Gates foundations, among others, have poured hundreds of millions into expanding no-excuses charters.²⁷ In cities like Boston, Newark, and New Orleans, no-excuses schools have come to dominate charter school options.²⁸ Even public school districts, including those in Houston, Chicago, and Denver, have experimented with no-excuses practices.²⁹ But before we too eagerly turn to “successful” charters to remake public education, it is important to take a look inside these schools and closely examine their practices. This is one of the first books to do so.³⁰

No-excuses schools typically share a common set of practices, such as an extended school day and school year, frequent student testing, highly selective teacher hiring, intensive teacher coaching, a focus on basic math and literacy skills, and a college-going culture.³¹ What is most distinctive about these schools, though, is their highly structured disciplinary system. No-excuses schools generally do not permit students to talk quietly in the hallway, enter and exit classrooms on their own, keep backpacks at their desk, wear jewelry, stare into space, slouch, put their head down, get out

of their seat without permission, or refuse to track the teacher's eyes.³² In the words of the urban school principal quoted at the beginning of this section, these schools “script the moves.” They are very intentional in their systems and procedures, dictating to students and teachers how to behave. Although scripting of student behavior and teacher instruction can also be found in traditional public schools, it tends to be concentrated and intensified in no-excuses charters.

Let us take a look at a no-excuses script. To understand the detail and rigidity of these scripts, we can turn to the student conduct section of a student handbook from a KIPP high school.³³ In this section, a comprehensive chart extends for nine pages detailing three tiers of misbehaviors and their consequences. The first tier of misbehaviors includes violations for being off-task, not following directions, disrupting class, sleeping in class, calling out, being out of one's seat, using offensive language, and committing a dress code violation.³⁴ A closer look at the first few categories clearly illustrates the detailed nature of the schoolwide script for student behavior:

Off-task: Not paying attention during instruction; not doing work; not following along; losing focus. This can also include the following: fiddling w/ tool or object, grooming—doing hair, using lotion, passing beauty supplies around classroom, etc. in class; losing place in book while popcorn reading.

Not following directions: Not following a class or school procedure; failure to follow a teacher direction or meet an expectation (i.e., missing a direction, not following class routine like passing papers, putting electronics away, lining up, still writing when teacher has given direction to put pencils down, etc.). *This is non-defiant but rather incompetent or opportunistic.*

Minor disruption: Talking, tapping, mouth noises, making faces, poor class transitions, excessive volume (i.e., not talking in whisper voices during T&T), any other potentially distracting *behavior exhibited unintentionally or without malicious intent.*

This KIPP high school makes no assumptions that students know what behaviors are expected of them in school; it spells out precisely what they need to do to comply with school expectations. From one perspective, this chart makes transparent what are typically unspoken behavioral expectations of schools, helping students follow them. From another angle, it is unnecessarily precise and prescriptive, reinforcing racialized patterns of social control, a point we will return to shortly.³⁵

In recent years, critiques of no-excuses disciplinary practices have intensified.³⁶ Yet supporters of no-excuses schools have defended these practices as teaching low-income students middle-class behavioral norms. In *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism*, education writer David Whitman describes no-excuses schools as an example of a “highly prescriptive institution that teaches students not just how to think but how to act according to what are commonly termed traditional, middle-class values”—such as punctuality, discipline, and effort.³⁷ Similarly, in *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, education scholars Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom argue that successful new schools for the urban poor not only teach math and reading skills but also change culture and character. In their book, they quote KIPP founder David Levin as saying, “We are fighting a battle involving skills and values. We are not afraid to set social norms.”³⁸ In an editorial on Promise Academy, a no-excuses school in Harlem, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks likewise states, “Over the past decade, dozens of charter and independent schools, like Promise Academy, have become no excuses schools. The basic theory is that middle-class kids enter adolescence with certain working models in their heads: what I can achieve; how to control impulses; how to work hard. Many kids from poorer, disorganized homes don’t have these internalized models. The schools create a disciplined, orderly and demanding counterculture to inculcate middle-class values.”³⁹

Are no-excuses schools teaching middle-class values and skills? Are they transferring valuable cultural capital that their students lack? In this book, I argue that these schools are *not* teaching what sociologists consider to be advantageous middle-class skills and strategies, nor do rigid behavioral scripts afford students the flexibility to learn to deploy cultural capital effectively.

Overview of the Argument

I argue that no-excuses schools like Dream Academy are giving students *scripts* for success but not developing the kinds of *tools* students are likely to need for long-term success. Despite these schools’ efforts to get students to college and set them on an upward trajectory, their rigid behavioral scripts do not supply students with the types of cultural capital that middle-class students use to navigate the more flexible expectations of college and the workplace—skills like how to express an opinion, advocate for resources, and interact with different kinds of people in different types of situations. This suggests that what might work for success in K–12

may not work for college success. It also suggests that what might work to teach the official curriculum may not work to teach what scholars have called the “hidden curriculum” of schools.

Along with the three Rs—reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic—students also learn in school a hidden curriculum of rules and roles through the structure of daily routines and social interactions.⁴⁰ Through this implicit instruction, students learn how to think about themselves and their place in society; they learn skills and strategies for how to be successful; they learn how to interact with their peers and authority figures. Sociologists have viewed this socializing function as one of the most important purposes of schools. Standing midway between the family and society, schools transmit to students values, norms, and behaviors that prepare them for their future roles.

Early sociological theorists showed how schools taught norms of independence, achievement, and universalism to prepare all students with the attitudes, skills, and behaviors that they would need to be productive members of society.⁴¹ Later research, however, took a more critical view of schools. Pushing against the idea that schools give all children a chance to learn, these researchers pointed to the ways in which schools are a microcosm of society, reproducing race, class, and gender inequalities. In particular, these scholars argued that through the hidden curriculum, schools differentially socialized students to take on stratified roles in society, reproducing existing social class hierarchies. Students from low-income families were taught to follow rules and fill out worksheets, learning skills like obedience, punctuality, and deference that were necessary to perform low-wage work, while students from more affluent backgrounds were taught to express their opinions and show creativity in their work to prepare them for managerial positions where they would need to demonstrate leadership.⁴² Harking back to the student conduct chart we looked at from the KIPP high school, we can see how scripts like these give students little latitude to question authority, bend rules to their advantage, or act spontaneously during the school day. By holding students to these scripts, no-excuses schools, while intending to prepare students for college, continue to teach them obedience, punctuality, and deference—all in the name of social mobility.

More recently, no-excuses charter networks have begun to reflect on the implications of their rigid behavioral scripts. Not only have protests and scandals erupted at no-excuses schools over their rigid disciplinary practices,⁴³ but these schools also may not be meeting their own metric of success: the college degree. The KIPP network reported that while

80 percent of their students enrolled in college, only 35 percent received a bachelor's degree within six years of high school graduation.⁴⁴ A study tracking students from thirteen KIPP middle schools found that they were no more likely to persist in a four-year college after the first two years than comparable students who did not attend these schools.⁴⁵ Finally, a national study of KIPP schools found that attending a KIPP school had no effect on a variety of measures of student attitudes and behaviors related to college success, including self-control, grit, school engagement, effort or persistence in school, academic confidence, and educational aspirations.⁴⁶ This book offers one explanation for these puzzling results—the school's rigid behavioral scripts may not provide students with the attitudes, skills, and interactional styles to effectively navigate college.

CULTURAL CAPITAL AS TOOLS OF INTERACTION

Culture is a resource. In introducing the concept of cultural capital, Bourdieu recognized that affluent families, besides providing their children with social capital and economic capital, also transferred cultural capital—a less visible form of advantage.⁴⁷ Early studies of cultural capital tended to focus on high-status cultural practices, like visits to the museum, knowledge of classical music, and art lessons.⁴⁸ Privileged students whose families had the time and money to invest in this form of cultivation were seen as more successful in school, both because they were familiar with the material being covered and because they were evaluated more positively by teachers who shared their status culture. Later studies have broadened the concept of cultural capital to encompass a wide variety of cultural attitudes, preferences, knowledge, behaviors, and goods that signal status within a field.⁴⁹ These studies have measured cultural capital as linguistic competence, the number of books in the home, children's participation in organized activities, children's work habits and behaviors, parents' homework help, parents' intervening on behalf of their children, and parents' knowledge of organizational processes.⁵⁰ Yet too often studies of cultural capital have treated cultural capital as a fixed commodity, identifying particular behaviors (taking art lessons, having books at home, participating in extracurricular activities) and not looking enough at the flexibility in which these behaviors are enacted.

In an effort to clarify an unwieldy concept, sociologists Annette Lareau and Elliot Weininger redefined cultural capital as the “micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of

evaluation.”⁵¹ This definition emphasizes cultural capital as a set of strategies used by certain groups to access resources and rewards in institutional settings, making clear that cultural capital must be actively employed in particular contexts, or what Bourdieu calls “fields.”⁵² That is, it is strategically applied rather than universally enacted. To activate cultural capital, one must possess not just the strategies or skills, but also the knowledge of when and how to use them. The natural “ease” by which children from higher social classes deploy cultural capital to their advantage is not easily imitated. Cultural capital becomes embodied into what Bourdieu called *habitus*, or ingrained and automatic ways of understanding and acting in the world that are durable though not unchangeable.⁵³ For cultural capital to reap profit, it must be effectively deployed and received.

Following Lareau and Weininger, I propose that cultural capital can be thought of as *tools of interaction* that allow certain groups to effectively navigate complex institutions and shifting expectations. By defining cultural capital as tools of interaction, I highlight its specificity and its flexibility. Like Lareau and Weininger, I emphasize cultural capital as an *interactional* resource that is dependent on the particular institutional context. In this historical moment, middle-class institutions privilege self-confident, assertive, and expressive individuals who advocate for their needs.⁵⁴ This reflects a shift over the second half of the twentieth century in middle-class cultural norms from strict discipline and self-restraint to informality, flexibility, and individuality.⁵⁵ Thus, the tools of interaction that a college student today needs to navigate the financial aid office or make a favorable impression on a professor are proactive skills—skills like how to negotiate with institutional agents and how to feel comfortable with authority, not how to sit quietly and show deference.⁵⁶

In defining cultural capital as *tools*, I borrow from sociologist Ann Swidler, who first proposed the idea of culture as a “‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action.’”⁵⁷ Culture can be thought of as a set of tools—not one prescribed way of doing something—that we can activate in different situations. Instead of a rigid script to follow, social actors have “a set of heuristics, hunches and shallow (but useful because they work most of the time) *practical skills* that allow persons to best interface externalized structures, contexts and institutions.”⁵⁸ If we were to make a sports analogy, we could say that to be a successful soccer player, one needs to be familiar with the rules of the game, have the right skills, and know when and how to use which plays. In other words, tools of interaction include (1) knowledge of the system (the “rules of the game”), (2) skills for acting effectively in that system

(including how to innovate and bend rules), and (3) the ability to interpret different situations and pick the right skill to deploy (a “feel for the game”). While other scholars have made useful conceptual distinctions between these different components, I include them together as components of cultural capital because they are difficult to distinguish empirically and each contributes to whether an individual is evaluated favorably in an interaction.⁵⁹

The cultural capital that middle-class students possess and use to their advantage in schools and workplaces is a flexible tool, not a straitjacket. Middle-class students know when to follow rules but also when and how to deviate from them. Sociologist Jessica Calarco, for example, found that middle-class children in an elementary school not only followed rules but also figured out how to strategically bend rules to their benefit, securing more attention, assistance, and accommodation from their teachers than did their working-class peers.⁶⁰ Affluent students learn how to defer to authority but also how to be at ease with authority. In his study of an elite boarding school, sociologist Shamus Khan observed how the privileged students developed a “sense of ease” through interacting with adults in both formal and informal situations that prepared them for managerial positions where they would need to be comfortable interacting with the custodian or the CEO, in the board room or at the bar.⁶¹

If we understand cultural capital as *tools of interaction*, we can begin to see the ways in which no-excuses schools like Dream Academy may fall short in both *what* kinds of behaviors they are trying to teach (i.e., obedience rather than initiative) and *how* they are trying to teach them (i.e., through rigid scripts rather than through developing a flexible set of skills).

HOW TO TEACH CULTURAL CAPITAL

Cultural attitudes, skills, and behaviors are often implicitly transferred through a long period of family socialization, a process that is time-intensive and costly. Traditionally, schools have not tried to teach cultural capital to students who are not familiar with dominant norms.⁶² As the role of cultural capital in promoting success becomes more widely recognized, however, institutions and programs that support low-income and first-generation student success have also made efforts to explicitly teach cultural capital. College preparatory programs for low-income students and students of color like Prep for Prep, A Better Chance, I Have a Dream, and others often include a socialization aspect where students learn norms

for applying to colleges and navigating interactions with peers and faculty on campus.

Despite the growth of these programs, few scholars have examined how they teach cultural capital.⁶³ Although there have been some studies of how teachers can teach students dominant norms while affirming students' own cultural knowledge and skills, in practice teachers often lack a clear sense of how to implement this kind of culturally responsive/relevant teaching.⁶⁴ Additionally, teachers who try to teach students school-appropriate ways of dressing, speaking, or interacting often unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups, framing students' culture in deficient ways.⁶⁵ Finally, even if Black and Latino students acquire and deploy dominant cultural capital, they may not reap the same rewards as White students given institutionalized racism and implicit racial biases.⁶⁶ Sociologist L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy has argued that theories of cultural capital need to take into account institutional reception, particularly the ways in which race shapes how schools respond to different groups' attempts at advocacy and entitlement.⁶⁷ For these reasons, some education scholars have distanced themselves from a focus on cultural capital in favor of concepts like "community cultural wealth," which shifts attention to the assets students from nondominant groups possess rather than the dominant cultural capital they lack.⁶⁸ Sociologist Prudence Carter has termed the cultural capital of socially marginalized groups as "non-dominant cultural capital."⁶⁹

Although these are good reasons for shifting the lens away from cultural capital, an argument can still be made for explicitly teaching cultural capital to students from nondominant groups. In her influential essay "The Silenced Dialogue," education scholar Lisa Delpit advocated for teaching the "culture of power" (or cultural capital) to students of color in order to help these students access power.⁷⁰ Schools do not teach students the culture of power, she contended, because White liberal educators find being explicit about rules and expectations too prescriptive. To tell students that they have to show attention by SLANTing, for example, makes clear the teacher's power over the student. Yet by insisting on the same freedoms for all students that middle-class White parents want for their own children, argued Delpit, schools fail to teach all students the codes they need to acquire power.

Herein lies an important tension in thinking about cultural capital and whether and how it can be taught. To explicitly teach cultural capital is to be prescriptive. High levels of prescriptiveness, however, impede students from acquiring the tools of interaction—tools like assertiveness,

initiative, and ease—currently valued in middle-class institutions. Prescriptiveness also stands in contradiction to the flexibility required to develop and use tools.

The rigid behavioral scripts used at Dream Academy magnify these tensions. As we've seen, no-excuses behavioral scripts make crystal clear what are typically unstated norms of schools and can make it easier for students to learn school-sanctioned ways of speaking, dressing, and interacting. Scripts, however, are also extremely prescriptive, leaving little room for agency or adaptation. A student who is required to SLANT at attention, for example, will not learn when or how to be at ease with authority. A student who is carefully monitored for speaking out of turn will not learn when it is appropriate to interrupt. A student who is told not to talk back, even if falsely accused, will not learn how to negotiate. Because culture is complex and situations are difficult to predict, individuals need interpretative skills to read a situation and choose among alternatives—skills that are difficult to transfer through a rigid script.

Developing entitlement, initiative, and ease requires a degree of autonomy, flexibility, and egalitarianism. The prescriptiveness of the directives used by no-excuses schools can potentially hamper students from fully understanding and navigating the rules of the game. The rigid scripts the school uses to teach cultural capital may inhibit students from learning the proactive and flexible tools it is composed of. Being a competent student and, more generally, a competent cultural actor requires more than a script—it requires *tools of interaction*.

CAPITAL OR CONTROL?

Scripts are meant to be useful in teaching students cultural capital to help them achieve success. However, scripts in no-excuses schools sometimes serve more as social control than useful capital. Given the racialized and classed history of social control, any exercise of intense social control over students who have been historically marginalized needs to be considered from a vantage point of power. Such was Brian's take on the school's practices. One afternoon, sitting in an empty classroom during lunch, I interviewed Brian, a Latino eighth grader, along with his girlfriend, Angie. As we talked about school rules they didn't like, Brian pointed to SLANT. He saw SLANT as another way for the school to "overpower" students, not a way to help them pay attention. "Now SLANT is another word for power," he insisted. "S-L-A-N-T. P-O-W-E-R. Same five letters of the words." Angie agreed, arguing that you listen with your ears, not your eyes and

hands. Students like Brian and Angie found school scripts like SLANT to be an example of the school's extreme control over their bodies rather than a way to help them learn.

Through this lens, we can interpret the rigid behavioral scripts employed by no-excuses schools as in line with a long history of managing poor youth of color through social control, surveillance, and punishment. The poor have long been viewed as intractable, in need of guidance and reform. From the welfare state to penal institutions, the state has a long history of regulating the poor. Through “distorted engagement,” sociologist Patricia Fernández-Kelly contends, “[poor] individuals learn to see themselves from early childhood as subjects of regulations and discourses so constrictive and detrimental as to incite mostly manipulation, resistance, and circumvention.”⁷¹ While the middle class engages with state institutions with a degree of autonomy and entitlement, the poor are surveilled and controlled. Since the 1970s, neoliberal reforms that have increased personal freedoms and consumer choice for the middle classes have coincided with an erosion of the social safety net and even greater controls on the poor and marginalized.⁷²

Race and social control are also intimately intertwined. Sociologist Loïc Wacquant identifies four social institutions throughout history that have been used to contain and confine African Americans: slavery, the Jim Crow South, the ghetto, and the prison.⁷³ Schools, however, have also become part of what sociologist Victor Rios terms a “youth control complex” of institutions that control and criminalize Black and Latino youth.⁷⁴ Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, schools—particularly urban schools that served youth of color—began to resemble prisons in employing metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and uniformed police officers to establish control. These decades also saw the introduction of zero-tolerance policies that mandated suspensions or expulsions for drug and violent offenses but were applied liberally to more minor status offenses and paradoxically to truancy.⁷⁵ An abundance of research has found that the intensification of school discipline has disproportionately impacted Black and Latino students, whose suspension rates soared between the early 1970s and the early 2000s.⁷⁶ Studies of school discipline have found that Black males in particular receive more frequent and harsher punishment,⁷⁷ are perceived as more threatening and aggressive,⁷⁸ and are more likely to be referred for subjective behaviors like making excessive noise or being disrespectful as compared to White students, who are referred for more objective violations like smoking or vandalism.⁷⁹

Too many urban schools in marginalized communities have become places, in sociologist Pedro Noguera's words, "whose primary mission is not to educate but to ensure custody and control."⁸⁰ Although the primary mission of no-excuses schools, and many other programs that try to transfer cultural capital, is not custody and control but preparing students with the knowledge and skills for college, overly rigid scripts for behavior risk reinforcing a narrative of low-income Black and Latino students as "out of control" and in need of strict discipline.⁸¹ Discipline, which traditionally has pushed students out of school, excluding them from academics, is now perceived as a vehicle to transform students into more productive learners, an inclusionary mechanism for preparing students with the skills and behaviors to be successful in a middle-class world. The line between teaching cultural capital and reinforcing social control is not easy to draw apart, and in drawing it schools risk justifying the latter in defense of the former. In this way, behavioral practices that are seen as promoting social mobility for students can serve to maintain racial and classed structures of domination and subordination through control of vulnerable populations in vulnerable spaces. As has been made all too clear in recent police shootings, the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of Black and Brown bodies as dangerous and in need of control can have deadly consequences.

Inside a No-Excuses School

At the time of my fieldwork, Dream Academy, a pseudonym I use for the school to protect its confidentiality, leased a brown-brick building at Sixth Street, across from a line of vacant storefronts and next to a Catholic church. The school is compact, with three floors and about a dozen classrooms: the bottom floor houses the seventh- and eighth-grade classrooms; the second floor houses the main office and the fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms; and the top floor contains the music classes and the cafeteria, which doubles as a gym and auditorium. Classrooms are referred to by their college names—Princeton, Penn, Carnegie Mellon—and painted with college colors and logos. The hallways are neat and brightly decorated, filled with college pendants, brightly colored posters of "grit," "self-control," and "gratitude," and exemplary student work. There are no lockers inside the school.

Dream Academy promotes itself as a no-excuses school and adheres closely to no-excuses practices, including an extended school day (seven thirty to four) and school year (mid-August through June), frequent

student testing, highly selective teacher hiring, intensive teacher coaching, a focus on basic math and literacy skills, and a college-going culture. Scrolling down Dream Academy's website, we can see these core elements of the model:

Highest Standards

- We use a college preparatory curriculum for all students
- We have highly structured student conduct expectations
- We consistently enforce our student conduct expectations—across each classroom at each campus, at every hour, day and month of the year
- Students earn or are denied privileges based on their conduct
- We hire an elite professional staff and give them demanding responsibilities to fulfill

Data Driven

- We measure everything
- We conduct regular student formative assessments to track our progress
- We judge teacher performance based, in part, on student test results
- We transparently communicate data organization-wide to inform decisions

Tough Love

- We have a longer school day—8 1/2 hours—and longer school year—200 days
- We explicitly teach and reinforce our core values of caring, respect, responsibility and honesty
- We recognize students and staff for successes before the entire school community
- We expect members of our community to acknowledge their mistakes and to apologize to their peers when appropriate

As in other no-excuses schools, instruction is traditional, with a focus on basic skills and the use of techniques like direct instruction, guided instruction, and independent practice.⁸² In addition to basic academic classes, students also participate in music, gym, advising, and morning circle—a schoolwide assembly that features chants, announcements, recognition of students and teachers, and a short lesson on character. Five

times a year, the school administers practice schoolwide assessments that reflect the content and conditions of the state standardized test. Following these tests, teachers and administrators devote a full day to analyzing student test results and making plans for reteaching areas that students have not mastered.

For a period of eighteen months, beginning in March 2012, I became a regular presence at Dream Academy, which at the time served approximately 250 middle school students in grades five to eight, with 25 to 27 students per class.⁸³ Founded in the 2000s, it was one of the highest performing middle schools in this medium-sized northeastern city. Like many other deindustrialized cities, the city faced problems of crime, concentrated poverty, and low educational attainment—half of the students did not graduate from the city’s public high school. Charter schools in the city had a mixed record of success. In the year preceding my fieldwork, three charter schools in the city closed for discipline problems, low student attendance, and poor student performance. By contrast, Dream Academy had performed well. Over two-thirds of its students passed the state’s standardized assessment in math, compared to about one-third of students in the local school district; more than one-half of Dream Academy students passed the state literacy assessment, compared to just over one-quarter in the local school district.⁸⁴ Dream Academy was recognized by the state for significantly improving students’ standardized test scores, and both its charter renewal application and expansion plan had been approved. Its first graduating high school class boasted a 100 percent college acceptance rate. Given the selection of students and families into charter schools, however, Dream Academy’s academic results do not necessarily mean that the school was more successful than district schools because it served a different mix of students. Although the cost to attend the school was free and students were selected via a random lottery, students and families still had to apply to the school and commit to its expectations. Because there was no bus transportation available, families had to live in the vicinity of the school or be able to transport their children each day.

Over 80 percent of Dream Academy students received free or reduced-price school lunch; for a family of four, this meant that the students’ household income had to be below thirty thousand dollars for free lunch and forty-three thousand for reduced-price lunch.⁸⁵ Approximately two-thirds of students were Black and one-third Latino,⁸⁶ mirroring the demographics of the city. Families were required to sign a contract committing to the school’s expectations and values before their students were enrolled. Contracts between schools and families have become a common feature of

no-excuses schools.⁸⁷ At Dream Academy, parents promise to bring their children to school on time and ensure that they complete 90 to 120 minutes of homework each weekday night, while students commit to following a stringent set of behavioral expectations. These expectations may be reflected in the low number of special education students (10 percent) and limited English proficiency students (1 percent) served by the school.⁸⁸ Although attrition can be high in no-excuses schools, student attrition rates were low, at less than 1 percent during the school year.

The school staff was predominantly young and White, with little prior teaching experience. It included four newlyweds, a handful of first-time full-time job holders, three Ivy League alumni, several graduates from local colleges, and a former executive assistant to the founder of a highly successful tech start-up company. Most teachers were under thirty—the youngest was twenty-one and the oldest was fifty-eight. Mr. Bradley, the White school principal, was thirty-four; Ms. Williams, a Black instructional dean who became principal halfway through my observations, was twenty-nine. (Mr. Bradley planned to serve as principal of the network's new elementary school the following year, so this arrangement gave Ms. Williams time to ease into the role, with the benefit of having Mr. Bradley around to advise.) No-excuses teachers have traditionally tended to be young, with strong academic backgrounds and limited classroom experience, and they often have taken alternative routes into teaching.⁸⁹ At Dream Academy, teachers' work hours were considerably longer (seven fifteen to four thirty) than those of teachers in the local public school district (contractually limited to six hours forty-five minutes with a lunch break), and the pay for a novice teacher was approximately 10 percent lower.⁹⁰

Mr. Taylor, the genial Black founder and director of the school, compared its teachers to the individuals one finds on Wall Street or Capitol Hill. It is the same pool of smart, hardworking, ambitious young people, each with a slightly different motivation—to make money, to serve the country, or to make a difference in children's lives. One teacher at Dream Academy applied to the school after watching *Waiting for "Superman,"* a documentary featuring successful no-excuses charter schools. Two left finance jobs to do more meaningful work. Ms. Wallace, one of the students' favorite teachers, came to Dream Academy as a local reporter on an assignment. She was so impressed by what she saw, she decided to switch professions.

My own role in the school was mostly as an observer, following one fifth-grade and one eighth-grade class almost every school day, typically for four to five hours. However, I also engaged with students: sitting with them at their lunch table, assisting them with class work, tutoring them

after school, and accompanying them on field trips and to football games. Sometimes I would sit in an absent student's seat or fall into line behind the students as they walked silently through the hallways, trying to get a better sense of their experiences in the school. To better understand the teachers' perspectives, I also regularly observed their one-on-one meetings with their supervisors, sat in weekly staff meetings, and attended the two-week summer teacher orientation. To meet parents, I attended parent association meetings and school activities. Finally, to get a sense of students' preparation for college, I conducted observations at Dream Academy's high school and the local community college where students took dual-enrollment courses. I sought parental permission to interview students, and by the end of my fieldwork I had conducted interviews with seventy-two students. These interviews were typically conducted during lunch in a private room and lasted approximately thirty minutes. I also interviewed thirty-three current and former teachers and twenty-seven parents, with these interviews lasting between one and two hours. All the names used in this book are pseudonyms to protect the identity of my respondents. A fuller discussion of my research methods can be found in the methodological appendix.

Part of the work of an ethnographer is to make the familiar unfamiliar. What follows may feel both familiar and unfamiliar to those who experienced the school year with me. As an ethnographer, my vantage point is different, shaped by the theories I have studied and the different perspectives I had the privilege of observing from. During my fieldwork, I often felt uneasy gazing critically at the school, jotting notes, when everyone else was working tirelessly to help the kids succeed. I admire the teachers and staff and still feel ambivalence in highlighting some of the unintended consequences of the school's practices. My aim in this book is not to point fingers but to think about the larger structures and narratives that are shaping schooling in new and old ways for children in economically deprived urban communities. This book focuses on one no-excuses school, but the concepts and ideas developed in the book extend beyond the scope of no-excuses schools and can be applied to understanding similar processes in other schools and other institutional settings.

Organization of the Book

This book presents an in-depth look into how Dream Academy used *scripts* to demand strict regulation of both students and teachers. It shows why these scripts were adopted, what purposes they served, and where they fell short. What emerges is a complicated story of the benefits of

scripts, but also, importantly, their limitations in developing in students the *tools of interaction* they need to navigate college and other complex social institutions: tools like flexibility, initiative, and ease with adults.

The book examines how Dream Academy's efforts to transmit cultural capital through rigid behavioral scripts distorted students' *expectations* about what it takes to be successful (chapter 2), impeded their *skills* for navigating middle-class institutions (chapter 3), and constrained their *styles* of interacting with authority (chapter 4). The book then turns to the no-excuses organizational script and examines how adherence to this script also limits the tools that schools (chapter 5) and teachers (chapter 6) develop.

Chapter 2 introduces the school's behavioral scripts for how to achieve success. Following the incoming fifth graders through new student orientation, we see how students are explicitly taught a detailed set of behavioral codes to follow, including how to complete homework, how to clap at an assembly, and how to walk down the hallway. Though seemingly impossible to follow, these rigid scripts were enforced through a detailed schoolwide system of rewards and punishments and justified as a way to teach students middle-class values and behaviors. Yet when we consider what lessons students learned from these rigid school scripts, we see a divergence between the expectations that the predominantly low-income students at Dream Academy formed about success and those that middle-class students internalize. Taught to make "no excuses," Dream Academy students were pressured to make no mistakes, as the prospect of failure and the weight of success were placed on their shoulders. Middle-class students, by contrast, learn to be successful by sometimes "making excuses"—that is, by demanding accommodations for themselves and bending rules in their own favor.

In chapter 3, we meet students like Alexis who perceptively recognized that their college preparatory school was not preparing them with the skills they needed for college. As students were taught behavioral scripts to keep silent and follow rules, they failed to develop tools critical for college success like expressing an opinion, being flexible, displaying leadership, advocating a position, and making independent decisions. As we visit with students in their college-level classes, we see how Dream Academy's scripts may not have translated well to a less structured college environment where students must take initiative and manage their work independently.

Chapter 4 illustrates how students were given narrow scripts for how to relate to their teachers rather than a broad set of tools for interacting with

authority. With the school's myriad rules and constant monitoring, students come to see teachers as out to get them, leading students to become distrustful, resentful, and resistant to authority. Because time and space at the school were so highly structured, students and teachers had little informal time to correct these impressions and develop more positive relationships with each other. As a result, students developed a *sense of antagonism* toward authority rather than a *sense of ease*.

Chapter 5 zooms out to present the history of Dream Academy and its behavioral scripts, weaved into the broader history of no-excuses schools and the charter school movement. We learn how Dream Academy school leaders copied a rigid script to establish order but found it difficult to deviate from this script to address the school's emerging needs. We see how the no-excuses model also spread through copying, both through individual mimicry on the part of charter school leaders and through a strategy of replication on the part of powerful foundations. The spread of the no-excuses script throughout the urban charter school landscape, however, potentially undermines two core goals of the school choice movement: innovation in education and responsiveness to local communities.

Chapter 6 focuses on teachers who also were subjected to the school's rigid behavioral scripts. We see how the school recruited mission-driven and coachable teachers who were likely to be amenable to following school scripts. School scripts support novice teachers in managing their classrooms but do not develop in teachers the tools to adjust their practices to fit their own styles and respond to different student needs. Overreliance on behavioral scripts also can limit teacher autonomy and undermine teacher expertise and commitment. Teachers, however, did demonstrate agency in modifying and resisting school scripts.

Chapter 7 concludes by stressing that cultural capital needs to be seen as flexible, not fixed, not scripted. I offer lessons for teaching cultural capital and, alternatively, for supporting students from marginalized communities by affirming their cultures and recognizing their more pressing everyday needs. I also offer lessons for no-excuses schools and for educational policy. Ultimately, I argue that students, teachers, and schools need flexible tools they can adapt, not rigid scripts from which they cannot deviate.

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