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Locked Out of the Classroom: How Implicit Bias Contributes to Disparities in School Discipline

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Executive Summary

While racial segregation in schools has been unconstitutional for over fifty years, Black students continue to face discrimination in the form of excessive school discipline. Like the legally sanctioned racism their grandparents endured, Black students today are subject to discriminatory behavior by the individuals they should trust most at school — teachers and principals. Compounding matters, in many cases, teachers and administrators may not know they are disproportionately targeting students of color for discipline. Rather, their behavior may be based on more subtle, subconscious beliefs, commonly referred to as implicit bias. Though subtle, these beliefs, and the racial stereotyping that results from them, can create a lifetime of serious, negative consequences for racially stigmatized students, ultimately causing them to distrust their teachers and to disengage in the classroom.

Civil rights advocates have long been aware of racial disparities in school discipline. As early as 1974, civil rights advocates highlighted that Black students were 2 to 3 times more likely to be suspended than White students.[1] Sadly, little progress has been made in reducing these disparities. In 2012, for example, Black students made up only 16% of students in the United States, but accounted for 42% of out-of-school suspensions.[2] Black students were over three times more likely than White students to be suspended or expelled from school.[3] Once a Black student is suspended, he or she becomes entrapped in a repeated cycle of disproportionate discipline; a student who is suspended once is more likely to get suspended again.[4] The consequences of school discipline on children are not limited to just their experiences in school. Once a Black student is suspended, the chances that he or she will drop out of school, become unemployed or underemployed, and enter the criminal justice system rise dramatically.[5]

Over the last twenty years, discriminatory school disciplinary systems have contributed considerably to the disproportionate rates of punishment of Black students. Zero-tolerance policies of the 1990's initially targeted violent, gun-related crimes in schools,[6] but quickly expanded to include non-violent offenses.[7] School districts implemented local policies that called for students to be suspended or expelled from school for less serious, discretionary offenses like defiant behavior and tardiness.[8] Because these offenses had no set definition, they afforded teachers and administrators broad discretion to take action against a student who was perceived to be committing them.

The inclusion of discretionary offenses for which students may be suspended has disproportionately harmed Black students even though Black students are not more likely to act out in school. Research has consistently established that Black students do not have higher rates of misconduct than other students.[9] Rather, Black students are disproportionately disciplined for more subjective offenses, such as disrespecting a teacher or being perceived as a threat, than their White counterparts.[10] These disparities result from and perpetuate stereotypes about Black students, specifically the stereotype that they are aggressive and dangerous.

Only recently have we fully understood that not only do such disparities perpetuate stereotypes regarding students of color, but are themselves the product of stereotypes subconsciously present in almost all of us. Every day, each of us is exposed to a variety of media that communicate negative stereotypes about persons of color. These stereotypes, unknowingly, affect behaviors of all people, including teachers. Teachers develop implicit biases that cause them to interpret otherwise innocent behavior as part of a pattern of negative behavior inherent in the student. Paired with disciplinary codes that define misconduct in vague terms, stereotypes significantly shape teacher decisions as to which students they punish. These discriminatory behaviors affect not only teachers, but the students who are their victims. Reacting to years of discriminatory treatment, students may adjust their behavior, reacting coldly to teachers with whom they are not familiar, fearing that the teacher, like others, will unfairly target them for discipline.

Fortunately, researchers have not only recognized the effects of these biases in schools, but have begun to develop techniques to address their effects. While the biases themselves may never be eliminated, their effects in schools can be limited through a variety of interventions that can help improve the relationship between teachers and students. Recent research has shown that interventions that prioritize: 1)"wise feedback" from teachers in place of punitive, dismissive discipline; 2)"social belonging" as students enter a new school environment; and 3)"empathic discipline" that attempts to understand perceived misbehavior from the student's perspective, can begin to limit the effects of implicit bias and related concepts in the classroom. Combined with the rescission of policies that allow for the suspension of students for relatively minor, discretionary offenses, and the removal of school resource officers, we can reduce the disparities that have long plagued children of color.

What We Know:
Black Students Are Disproportionately
Disciplined, Particularly for Discretionary Offenses.

Black Students Are Disproportionately Disciplined

We have long known that administrators, teachers, and school resource officers disproportionately discipline African-American students. The latest statistics, which the U.S. Department of Education released just last year, confirm a troubling pattern of which civil rights advocates have long been painfully aware. "While 6% of all K-12 students received one or more out-of-school suspensions, the percentage is 18% for black boys; 10% for black girls; 5% for white boys; and 2% for white girls."[11]

These disparities exist among even the youngest students. As the U.S. Department of Education has acknowledged, the over-disciplining of Black students begins as soon as they start school. "Black preschool children are 3.6 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as white preschool children."[12] Although, "Black children represent only 19% of preschool enrollment," they account for "47% of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions[.]"[13] By contrast, "white children represent 41% of preschool enrollment, but [only] 28% of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions."

These disparities exist regardless of student gender.[14] "Black boys represent 19% of male preschool enrollment, but 45% of male preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. Black girls represent 20% of female preschool enrollment, but 54% of female preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions."[15]

Black students continue to be disproportionately disciplined as they progress through school. Overall, "Black K-12 students are 3.8 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as white students. Black girls are [only] 8% of enrolled students, but 13% of students receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions."[16]

These disparities persist as the punishments increase. Black students are almost twice as likely to be expelled from school without educational services as white students.17 "Black boys represent 8% of all students, but 19% of students expelled without educational services. Black girls are 8% of all students, but 9% of students expelled without educational services."[18]

These disparities raise serious concerns under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.[19] Title VI prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin by any program that receives federal financial assistance.[20] The illegality of the racial disparities is further exacerbated by the fact that, in many jurisdictions, they are due to suspensions for vague and relatively minor, discretionary offenses.

Frequently, Black Students are Punished for Discretionary Offenses

Increasingly, Black students are punished for discretionary offenses with vague definitions that allow school officials broad discretionary authority to determine whether a student should be disciplined.

For example, in 2015, Texas Appleseed and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. completed a comprehensive review of school discipline data from the McKinney Independent School District in Texas. Analysis of the data revealed disturbing results. The disproportionate ticketing and arrest of African-American students was especially stark for the offenses that are most subject to the discretion of teachers, school administrators, and school police officers. Although African American students made up approximately 12-13% of the student population, they received approximately 46% of tickets for "disruption of class" — a vague, subjective offense. [21]

While the Texas legislature prohibited the ticketing of students for disrupting class in September 2013, the disproportionate ticketing of Black students simply shifted to a different, discretionary offense. Following the ban on tickets for disruption of class offenses, the proportion of citations issued to African-American students for the similarly subjective offense of "disorderly conduct" increased from 47% to 61%. [22] This increase in disorderly conduct tickets occurred despite an overall decrease in ticketing. [23] While citations for white students decreased from 28% to 15%, between 2012 and 2015, African-American students continued to be ticketed at disproportionately high rates. [24] This included relatively young children. African-American students between 11 and 13 years old received 33% of all citations issued to their age group. [25]

These Problems Have Been Exacerbated by the Increase in School Resource Officers.

These problems have worsened as schools have increasingly come to rely on school resource officers (SROs) who lack the necessary training to work with students, but rather are focused on the punishment and removal of students. Nationwide, police presence in schools has become ubiquitous. Nearly a quarter of elementary schools and 42% of high schools have SROs.[26] According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 19,000 police officers are stationed in schools across the United States.[27] Over three in four high schools and the vast majority of schools with 1,000 or more students have armed security staff.[28] Schools where at least half of the students are of color, as well as high-poverty schools (meaning those where at least 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch), are home to the highest percentages in the country of K-12 school law enforcement.[29]

The presence of police in schools disproportionately impacts students of color. Between 2012 and 2014, African American students made up approximately 12-13% of the student population, but accounted for about 36% of all tickets issued by SROs and 39% of arrests made by SROs.[30] Altogether, "[b]lack students are 2.3 times as likely to receive a referral to law enforcement or be subject to a school-related arrest as white students."[31]

Over the past several years, parents and education advocates have repeatedly confronted and challenged SRO violence against students of color. In many cases, SROs have reacted violently to innocent behavior by Black students:

• In October 2015, a cell phone video captured a South Carolina SRO violently flipping a female student who was seated at a desk, despite the fact that she posed no threat to the officer or her fellow students.[32] After the assault, the student's arm was placed in a cast and she reported neck and back injuries.[33] In April 2016, DOJ reached an agreement with Richland County requiring the Sherriff's Department to provide intensive annual training to officers working in schools.[34]

• A video from November 2015 documented a SRO in Florida grabbing a 13-year old African-American youth, slamming him to the ground, and then twisting his arm for approximately 40 seconds, while the student writhed in pain.[35] As police documents revealed, the student "never showed any aggression toward [the officer]."[36]

• In October 2015, a SRO in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma was charged with punching a student in the face after a dispute over a hall pass.[37] A video of the incident captured the officer approaching the student at a drinking fountain.[38] After the student walked away from the officer, the officer pursued the student and punched him multiple times.[39]

• In April 2016, the parents of three children filed a lawsuit alleging that a SRO in Abilene, Texas violently assaulted them on three separate occasions without justification.[40] The SRO "used a 'pain compliance' maneuver called an arm-bar against a six-year-old kindergarten student, a chokehold against a twelve-year old student, and repeatedly slammed a fifteen-year old student against the wall and to the ground."[41]

• In March 2016, three Baltimore SROs were placed on administrative leave after a video captured one of the officers slapping a young man three times — one slap loud enough to hear a pop – and then kicking him while yelling profanities.[42] Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake stated that "[t]he behavior . . . is certainly something you never want to see ... Certainly not a school officer acting in this way, particularly with a young person."[43]

• A video from March 2015 captured a Louisville, KY SRO picking up a 13-year old by his neck and choking him until he went limp, after the youth playfully attempted to push the officer.[44] After the incident, the middle-schooler dropped to the ground, where he didn't move for more than 20 seconds.[45] Another officer later testified that the officer's actions were "consistent with strangulation."[46]

• In April 2016, a SRO in San Antonio, TX was fired after a video captured him body-slamming a sixth grade girl.[47] After he slammed the girl down, a loud crack was heard and the surrounding crowd grew silent.[48] After the incident, the officer attempted to justify his actions, but the video of the incident directly contradicted his report.[49]

• In 2010, the Southern Poverty Law Center filed a lawsuit on behalf of eight high school students in Birmingham, Ala., all of whom had been pepper-sprayed by SROs.[50] In October 2015, a federal judge ruled that the officers had used excessive and unconstitutional force when they sprayed students for minor misbehavior at school.[51] The Court rejected the "eyebrow-raising position that school children are less deserving of protection from harm at the hands of overzealous law enforcement officers than adults."[52]

• Since 2011, there have been at least 84 incidents in which SROs tasered students, some of whom were as young as 12.[53] Students were tasered for, among other things, "mouthing off to a police officer" and "trying to run from the principal's office."[54]

Reliance on SROs compounds the problems discussed above by ignoring the root causes of alleged student misconduct. Rather than identifying and developing the supports necessary to assist students with behavioral problems, SROs exacerbate these problems and significantly alter the role of education in students' lives. SROs are more likely to interpret minor behavior such as interrupting class or being disrespectful to teachers as criminal behavior.[55] This results in unnecessary arrests that increase the likelihood that a child will end up in the juvenile-justice system, and later, prison.

Disproportionate Discipline Has Long Term Consequences for Black Students

The effects of disparities in discipline, particularly when they involve expulsion, arrest and/or incarceration, continue to be felt by black students throughout their lives. Once a student is identified as a potential "troublemaker" he or she is repeatedly subject to discipline, often of increasing severity. For example, a child who is expelled or suspended is more than twice as likely to be arrested within the same month as compared to a child who had not been previously suspended during the same month.[56] Once a student is involved in the criminal justice system, the problems grow exponentially. A recent study found that juvenile incarceration "reduces the probability of high school completion and increases the probability of incarceration later in life."[57] Even when the study controlled for potential confounding factors, the relationships remained strong. Individuals incarcerated as juveniles were 39 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school and were 41 percentage points more likely to have been incarcerated by the age of 25 compared to other public school students from the same neighborhood.[58] Moreover, having a criminal record can create lifelong barriers to opportunity, including the ability to obtain employment, housing, or an education.[59]

Despite common knowledge of these disparities and their consequences, relatively little progress has been made to reduce them. This failure is due to a variety of factors, including the proliferation of zero-tolerance school discipline policies concerning discretionary offenses and the increase in school resource officers. However, what has yet to be fully acknowledged, is that these disparities may, in part, be the result of teachers' and administrators' implicit biases affecting the way they interpret student behavior. Thankfully, researchers have begun to explore these topics, identifying key concepts that may not only be relevant to policing, but also discipline in schools.

What is Implicit Bias and What Do We Know About Its Effects?

Despite the fact that most teachers and school staff are committed to the fair and equal treatment of students, regardless of race, disparities in discipline have persisted for several years. According to research by various social scientists, this paradox may be the result of the role that "implicit bias" and other related concepts play in each of our lives.[60] Social scientists have identified a handful of key concepts that not only impact policing and consumer interactions, but are also relevant in the educational context.

Implicit Bias

Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.[61] These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control.[62] Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Because these biases are activated subconsciously, relying on them requires relatively little mental effort. When an individual finds him or herself in a new situation with a person with which he or she is unfamiliar, an individual may rely on such stereotypes, rather than consciously assessing the situation.

Implicit bias has been studied extensively in a variety of contexts. For example, studies show that bias can lead service providers, as well as police officers, to treat identical individuals differently depending upon the perceived race, religion, or ethnicity of the individual.[63] Implicit bias affects a person's behavior, impairing communication between staff and consumers, as well as impacting the treatment of consumers by staff.[64] Fortunately, recent studies have identified specific practices that have been shown to reduce and override implicit biases that can interfere with best practices in consumer and police interactions.[65]

Racial Anxiety

In addition to implicit bias, psychologists have also identified "racial anxiety" as a cause of discriminatory interactions. "Racial anxiety" refers to the heightened levels of stress and emotion that individuals confront when interacting with persons of other races.[66] For example, minorities, having been victim of discrimination throughout their lives, fear that they will be the subject of discrimination and hostility even when interacting with individuals whom they have never met.[67] Non-minorities, meanwhile, worry that they will be assumed to have biased beliefs. Studies have shown that interracial interaction can cause physical symptoms of anxiety and that our non-verbal behaviors — making eye contact, using welcoming gestures or a pleasant tone of voice, for example — can be affected as well.[68] The net result is that incidents that could otherwise be easily resolved — e.g., an individual not understanding a police officer's request— unnecessarily escalate, while endangering the individual. Fortunately, as with implicit bias, studies have identified practices to reduce and manage racial anxiety for both racial minorities, as well as non-minorities.[69]

Stereotype Threat

Finally, psychologists have identified "stereotype threat" as a potential source of conflict in interactions with police officials. Stereotype threat is the concern that an individual's behavior will confirm a negative stereotype about the identity group to which the individual belongs.[70] Stereotype threat often arises in a situation in which a person's identity is salient because their identity group is associated with a particular behavior in a particular context.[71]

Stereotype threat may arise in various contexts. Persons of color may be aware that they will be subject to additional scrutiny, particularly if they are perceived to be acting strangely or anxiously. Ironically and unfortunately, being conscious of such may lead them to behave anxiously, thus raising precisely the concerns that may trigger additional scrutiny. Fortunately, over the past decade, a broad array of institutional practices have emerged that can prevent stereotype threat from being triggered in the policing, as well as the consumer context.

Summary of Key Terms and Concepts

Discrimination Actions based on prejudicial beliefs regarding, among other things, a person's race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. For example, a young man denied a job because he is Black has been the victim of discrimination, regardless of whether he was denied due to explicit or implicit bias.

Explicit v. Implicit Bias Explicit bias is a conscious attitude, i.e., a belief of which one is conscious, while implicit bias is a subconscious attitude, i.e., a belief of which an individual in unaware. Attitudes about race can be processed both implicitly and explicitly.

Prejudice Attitudes about another individual based on that person's membership in a certain social group. For example, the false belief that because a young man is Black, he is dangerous.

Racial Anxiety "Racial anxiety" refers to the heightened levels of stress and emotion that individuals confront when interacting with persons of other races. For example, minorities, having experienced discrimination throughout their lives, fear that they will be the subject of discrimination and hostility even when interacting with individuals whom they have never met. Studies have shown that interracial interaction can cause physical symptoms of anxiety, which police officials, and other individuals in positions of authority, may misinterpret.

Stereotype A mental association about a person's attitudes or actions based on the person's membership in a group. These associations are largely created by the various media sources all of us have been exposed to since birth. A police officer may have a negative association with a Black person based on the person's race without realizing it.

Stereotype Threat Stereotype threat is the concern that an individual's behavior will confirm a negative stereotype about the identity group to which the individual belongs. Persons of color may be aware that they will be subject to additional scrutiny, particularly if they are perceived to be acting abnormally. Ironically and unfortunately, being conscious of such may lead them to behave anxiously, thus raising precisely the concerns that may trigger additional scrutiny.

How Does Implicit Bias Manifest Itself in Schools?

Recent research suggests that implicit bias and its effects are not limited to only the consumer or policing contexts. Rather, implicit bias, and the related concepts discussed above, are directly relevant to discipline in the classroom, particularly as police officials become more involved in the punishment of students for in-class behavior. Psychologists are beginning to understand that the cause of the extremely high levels of discipline meted out to Black students is due, in part, to a two-way social-psychological dynamic between teachers and students, stemming from stereotyping and bias.

As noted above, stereotyping is a tool the mind uses to save mental resources and make quick judgments about others in situations of uncertainty. Research shows that people are more likely to exhibit behavior based on stereotyping and bias when their knowledge of others is ambiguous.[72] Less mental energy is needed to rely on a stereotype than is needed to think through a situation.[73] Accordingly, unless directed to act otherwise, a teacher when interacting with a new student of a race different than his or her own may automatically draw conclusions regarding the student and his or her behavior, without any legitimate basis to do so.

This process can play out as follows in the classroom.[74] Darnell, a Black boy in the 7th grade enjoys learning about science. His teacher, Mrs. Smith, a white woman, is excited about inspiring students. Like almost all Americans, both Darnell and Mrs. Smith have been continuously exposed to negative stereotypes about or racial bias against Black boys in school through various forms of media. One day, Mrs. Smith observes Darnell throwing paper airplanes across the classroom. Mrs. Smith unconsciously interprets the misbehavior as confirmation that Darnell is a "bad kid." When Mrs. Smith sees the same or similar behavior from Darnell later that week, she wants to punish him more harshly, believing his action to not be a relatively innocent childlike behavior, but rather a reflection of his supposedly poor and disobedient character. In turn, this can confirm Darnell's concerns regarding the teacher's discriminatory motive and his fear that he is not accepted in the school or the classroom. As a result, Darnell cooperates even less with Ms. Smith and other teachers. The situation unnecessarily escalates, as Darnell is entrapped in the school-to-prison pipeline, in which he is continuously punished more severely.

The example above illustrates how stereotypes and the implicit biases that result can create barriers between teachers and students, shaping their actions and responses to one another. As the school year progresses, these stereotypes and their effects wear away at the teacher-student relationship. The negative perceptions and behaviors continue to reverberate, and minor disputes lead to major infractions. Though they do not realize it, stereotypes affect Mrs. Smith and Darnell, and they miss the opportunity to connect with each other.

Teacher-student relationships are a key determinant of discipline problems, and they appear to work cyclically.[75] Disciplinary problems can strain the relationship, and as the relationship deteriorates, disciplinary problems escalate. The effects of this chain can be serious, and for some students, life-altering. As noted above, in many jurisdictions, disrespect, expressed by insubordination or classroom disruption, is one of the most common reasons teachers refer students, especially Black students, for disciplinary action.[76]

These concerns are not merely conjectural, but have been borne out by recent studies examining how teachers' assumptions about Black students lead to a deterioration of the student-teacher relationship. Researchers from Stanford University gave K-12 school teachers records describing two misbehaviors over the course of four days by a student and asked them how they would respond.[77] The teachers all received the same records, but were randomly assigned to read about different students in the incidents. Half of the teachers read about a student with a stereotypically Black name (Darnell or Deshawn) while the other half read about a student with a stereotypically White name (Greg or Jake).[78] Teachers reported more negative responses to the misbehavior if it was by a student they believed to be Black, as opposed to a student they believed to be White.[79] Teachers reported that the misbehavior was more severe, felt more hindered by it, and felt more irritated by the Black student.[80] Teachers also expressed a desire to discipline the Black student more severely for the misbehavior and were more likely to anticipate that the Black student would be suspended in the future.[81] Further, researchers found that the racial disparity in the teachers' responses was due to the fact that they were more likely to believe the Black student was a troublemaker.[82]

Discipline issues impact both teachers and students. Most teachers enter the profession wanting to inspire children to fulfill their potential and reach their educational goals,[83] but teachers can struggle to achieve that goal when they believe they are unable to maintain control over their classroom. This leads many teachers to become disheartened and increases the likelihood that they will leave the profession.[84]

One teacher expressed the following regarding her frustrations with classroom discipline:

"For the most part, I truly enjoy being with the students. But the amount of time I spend trying to get them to stop having side conversations, stop hitting each other, stop cursing, stop walking around the classroom for no reason, etc., is frankly absurd…The day-to-day efforts of managing their classroom behaviors—getting everyone quiet, focused, back on task every time someone starts talking — takes up an inordinate amount of time that should go into instruction."
-A high school teacher (Education Week, 2013).[85]

For students, discipline problems can lead to anxiety, disengagement from school and an increased likelihood that they will eventually drop out of school. Racially stigmatized children, who have experienced stereotypes and bias, often from a very young age, become increasingly aware of racism as they reach adolescence.[86] With this awareness, students may develop anxiety about fitting in at their school as a result of their race.[87] Black students' internalization of the racial bias in school only confirms what they have already experienced from an early age.

The school environment becomes a place where the student mistrusts his teacher and feels like an outsider, rather than a place that promotes his or her trust and sense of belonging in the world. The student-teacher relationship is a long-term one, and is often the child's first introduction to socialization in the world outside of his or her immediate family. It can be especially threatening to a Black student when a teacher confirms fears that the child may already have about bias and stereotyping in the world.[88] The student's worries about fitting into the school environment can ultimately contribute to underperformance in school and disengagement from classroom activities, which can be interpreted as misbehavior.[89]

New research contends that both the student and teacher perspectives are important in addressing implicit bias and its effects in schools. A more holistic approach—one that considers the predicaments of both teachers and students—gives us a better understanding of how relationships can go awry and of how to shift relationships towards a healthier path. The goal of these social interventions is not to de-bias teachers. Rather, this new body of research attempts to solve disparities in school discipline by curbing the impact of implicit bias in the process of decision-making.

What Can Be Done to Limit the Effects of Implicit Bias in the Classroom?

For years, teachers and principals have believed that taking a child who is misbehaving out of the classroom would improve the student's behavior, while preventing his or her classmates from being distracted. Research, however, shows that removing students from school has consequences that reach far beyond the classroom. As detailed in the previous section, traditional forms of punitive punishment, like suspension, negatively affect students and teachers. According to a 2016 study, the cost of suspensions for 10th graders in Florida and California alone exceeded $35 billion annually when taking in factors like criminal justice costs, higher healthcare costs, and lost tax revenue.[90] Thus, everyone loses.

Not only are such responses deeply damaging to students and society, but as noted above, they fail to respond to the implicit biases that can play a significant role in perpetuating the perceived disruptive behavior. As a result, the situation is likely to repeat itself with other students of color. Thankfully, researchers, as well as advocates have begun to convince districts to employ more effective and efficient interventions that directly address the impact of implicit bias.

Many schools are starting to integrate restorative methods that refocus disciplinary strategies into opportunities to nurture relationships. These new strategies follow a body of research conducted over the last decade.[91] Initial research attempted to combat implicit bias by eliminating individuals' personal biases. The tested strategies ranged from increasing awareness of implicit bias by talking about racial injustice to teaching the values of different minority groups through workshops and trainings.

However, current research shows that many of these efforts are by themselves ineffective.[92] Awareness of bias has not, by itself, been shown to have a lasting effect on a person's behavior. More recent research has taken a slightly different approach, by placing additional focus on combatting the effects of implicit bias, as well as the biases themselves.

Three recent approaches have shown great promise to combat the effects of implicit bias in schools. "Wise Feedback," "Social Belonging," and "Empathic Discipline" employ various techniques to shift student and teacher mindsets to ones more conducive to avoiding processes that implicate implicit biases and cause the deterioration of the student-teacher relationship.

Psychological interventions that address the deterioration of student-teacher relationships restore trust between students and teachers while also improving overall outcomes for students. For example, teachers with a more empathic mindset were less likely to threaten students, to assign detention, or to involve the principal.[93] Teachers were more likely to ask for students' perspectives and to adjust their conduct in the classroom to avoid future misbehavior.[94] The approaches discussed below show us how basic changes in the classroom setting can improve both the student-teacher relationship and educational outcomes for children.

The "Wise Feedback" Intervention

The way in which teachers provide students feedback can be critical to student success. While most teachers know that feedback is necessary for a student to improve academically, many students may misinterpret critical feedback as an indication that the teacher is biased against them, particularly if the student is unfamiliar with the teacher or if, even worse, the teacher and student have had previous negative interactions. The "wise feedback" intervention is designed to improve communication between students and teachers in a very practical way. Researchers have found that students trust teachers more when teachers are thoughtful about how they provide critical academic feedback or "wise feedback". "Wise feedback" is feedback that sets high standards for students, but assures students that they can meet those standards.[95]

Even seemingly simple interventions have been found to be effective. For example, in one study that tested "wise feedback", researchers attached to students' assignments a handwritten note from their teacher.[96] The first group received a note that read, "I'm giving you these comments so you'll have feedback on your paper."[97] Meanwhile, the second group received a note reading, "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know you can reach them."[98] While only 17 percent of students receiving the first note revised their essays, 72 percent of students receiving the second note did.[99] The greatest increase in revised assignments occurred among Black students who previously had the lowest rates of trust in their teachers.[100]

The "wise-feedback" intervention prevents students from believing that the teacher may harbor a negative bias against them by presenting students with an alternative explanation for the teacher's statements.[101] The teacher's note shows the student that the teacher believes in their ability to succeed in the classroom. Students frequently react to the feedback positively and work to improve their grade.[102] The intervention demonstrates how the inclusion of clear communication and respect can improve trust between teachers and Black students while avoiding unnecessary punitive discipline.

The "Social Belonging" Intervention

Middle school presents an important transitional time for a student's emotional, social and educational growth. The "social belonging" intervention acknowledges this reality and seeks to improve relationships between teachers and students during their first year of middle school.[103]

In one iteration of the "social belonging intervention", researchers encouraged 7th graders to write notes to 6th graders in an attempt to quell anxieties that 6th graders might have related to attending a new school.[104] The notes told 6th graders that teachers would "have their back", that "teachers are on your side," and that, with time, the new students would come to feel at home in the new school.[105] The intervention was particularly important to Black students, who reported lower rates of trust in the new school and feared teachers would give them negative feedback because of negative racial stereotypes.[106] Black students felt more comfortable in the classroom and more able to focus on their work.[107] Additionally, the overall student-teacher relationship improved. The recursive dynamics between the student and teacher proved to reduce incidents of discipline beginning in 6th grade, and through the end of high school.[108] All in all, disciplinary incidents among Black boys fell over a seven-year period by 64%.[109]

Although the intervention is seemingly simple, such basic exercises can meaningfully improve the experience of Black students. The intervention focuses on individuals' positive desires and the sources of negative behavior, how to create better behavior, and how to elicit positive interactions on the part of the teacher and the student. By appealing to both parties' desires to be their best selves, teachers and students contribute to better overall outcomes.

The "Empathic Discipline" Intervention

Recently, a group of University of California-Berkeley and Stanford University researchers have begun developing strategies for building strong relationships between students and teachers based on the principles of "empathic discipline." They found that a one-time intervention based on these principles cut the number of school suspensions in half in five California middle schools.[110]

In the pilot, principles of empathic discipline were integrated through a series of interactive online exercises for middle school teachers.[111] Teachers were asked to read articles about discipline from students and teachers that highlighted student anxieties that contribute to student misbehavior.[112] Teachers first read quotations describing student fears.[113] In one example, a student said, "Whenever I get a new teacher I think 'Is she gonna treat me fairly? Does she call on the White students more? Does she expect them to know the right answers and us to get them wrong?"[114] Teachers then read articles that focused on creating growth-oriented relationships with students who misbehave.[115]

In one example, a student said:

"One time, after I got in trouble in 7th grade, I still remember how my teacher took me aside later and listened to my side of the story. She repeated what I said back to me to be sure she understood what I was saying. Then she explained why she still had to give me a detention because I was disrupting class. Even though I still got a detention, I was glad that she didn't just dismiss what I had to say, like other teachers sometimes did. After that, I actually felt better in school because I knew I had someone to talk to."[116]

As part of the intervention, teachers also read stories from other teachers describing instances in which teachers used student misbehavior as an opportunity to build positive relationships with their students.[117] After reading the materials, teachers wrote essays describing how they might also build positive relationships with students.[118] Rather than being passive participants in the intervention, teachers took on an active role, as agents of change in their approach to teaching.

The ideas and aspirations expressed in their essays helped teachers adopt principles of empathic discipline and implement them in their classrooms.

The "empathic discipline" intervention has proven effective for several reasons. First, teachers gained insight into the experience of racially stigmatized students in school.[121] This helped teachers understand how threats can have the potential to cause misbehavior.[122] The exposure to student stories encouraged teachers to use discipline as an opportunity to build a relationship with the student and to cultivate a learning opportunity for that student.[123] Simply put, humanizing the student experience proved to help teachers see students as people who have the ability to grow and change.

In addition to dramatically reducing suspension rates, the intervention also helped students who had been previously suspended develop better relationships with their teachers and increase their sense of belonging in the school community.[124] Two months after the intervention, students who had been previously suspended described their teachers as more deserving of respect.[125]

The empathic discipline model is now being implemented in several school districts throughout the U.S.

Implications and Limitations of These Approaches

Given the severe lifetime consequences racial disparities in school discipline cause, there is an urgent need to develop concrete solutions to this problem. While the interventions discussed above have proven to be effective in initial testing, they cannot by themselves eliminate disparities in discipline.

Student-teacher relationships exist in the context of schools, which are part of school districts, which, in turn, are managed by states. Each of these institutions, through their policies and practices, affect the relationship between teachers and students. When local and state policies prioritize the criminalization of students, teachers, despite their best intentions, may have only a limited ability to eliminate disparities. For example, while the techniques discussed above may help improve the relationship between teachers and students, they do not address the conduct of SROs. As noted above, law enforcement in school contribute significantly to negative outcomes for Black students. To fully address the racial disparities, schools and local educational agencies must severely curtail, if not eliminate, the presence or, at a minimum, role of school resource officers.

Conversely, when local and state governments eliminate policies that contribute to racial disparities, it can improve educational outcomes and the experience of both students and teachers. For example, California recently amended its Education Code to eliminate a teacher's authority to suspend (grades K-3) or expel a student (grades K-12) for "disruption" and for "willful defiance."[126] As in Texas, willful defiance has been one of the most common reasons for disciplining students in California and has significantly contributed to racial disparities in discipline between Black and White students.[127] The amendment may help reduce suspension rates for minor behavior, and if coupled with means for teachers and students to maintain stronger teacher-student relationships, it can mitigate racial inequality in suspension rates as well. Both teachers and students can feel less hindered by stereotypes and more capable of reaching their respective goals in the school context.

Conclusion

Every year, large numbers of Black students are ushered away from the classroom into the criminal justice system. The racial disparities in school discipline continue to feed the school-to-prison pipeline, with a disproportionate number of Black youth filling our jails and prisons. New interventions with more attention directed towards student-teacher relationships and the social and psychological factors contributing to these relationships have begun to lessen the extreme levels of discipline administered to Black children. As this body of work evolves, we have the potential to contribute significantly to keeping Black children in classrooms – where they belong.

Recommendations

Implicit Bias

1. Require Teachers, Administrators and any other school officials that have the power to suspend, expel or otherwise discipline students to undergo training regarding implicit bias, specifically what it is, how it is created, and how it affects interactions in the educational context, including student discipline.
2. Implement interventions that reduce the effects of implicit bias in the educational context by, among other things, encouraging teachers to provide feedback, that if critical, reassures students of their ability to achieve.
3. Implement interventions that reduce the effects of implicit bias in the educational contest by, among other things, creating feelings of social belonging for all students, particularly Black students, who, due to a history of discrimination, may distrust their teachers.
4. Implement interventions that reduce the effects of implicit bias in the educational context by, among other things, encouraging teachers to respond to perceived student misbehavior with dialogue, understanding, and other empathic principles.

Discretionary Offenses

1. Collect and publicly report data on discipline related to discretionary offenses, sortable by charge, disaggregated by race and disability status and cross-tabulated by gender.
2. Conduct an annual comprehensive review and issue a report analyzing all data regarding discretionary offenses and, if necessary, implement interventions to address racial disparities.
3. Prohibit the expulsion or prolonged out of school suspension of students for discretionary offenses.
4. Solicit and employ the feedback of affected community members, including disciplined students and their families, in the process of revising policies and practices related to the disciplining of students for discretionary offenses.
5. Implement evidence-based practices, such as School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports, shown to properly address minor misbehavior while improving school safety and academic achievement: http://www.pbis.org.
6. Implement early intervention programs for students who are repeatedly punished for discretionary offenses and who are at risk of being retained in grade or dropping out of school.
7. Implement a restorative justice model for responding to discretionary offenses by students, allowing the student to be reintegrated into the educational community, as opposed to unnecessarily excluding him or her.
8. Provide screening of students repeatedly disciplined to ensure that the behavior is not the product of a disability. If it is, discontinue disciplining the student for such behavior and, in its place, provide an appropriate accommodation and/or appropriate mental health services.

School Resource Officers

1. Prohibit the use of SROs to address non-violent student code of conduct violations and other non-law enforcement related matters, and prohibit the use of SROs to assist with classroom management, including, but not limited to, responding to disruptive students.
2. Detail legal standards relating to stops, searches, arrests and the use of force by SROs.
3. Require that school officials use alternative measures to resolve a situation before involving an SRO.
4. Require local school districts use adequate hiring criteria for SROs, including prohibitions on the hiring or assignment of SROs that have a history of discriminatory conduct.
5. Require adequate training for all SROs on de-escalation and on how to effectively engage with students, including those with disabilities and of color.
6. Require local schools districts, their state partners, and law enforcement agencies to annually collect and publicly report use-of-force and other complaints regarding a SRO's treatment of a student.
7. Require local school districts and their state partners to collect and annually report for public release the number of SROs in each district, including actual enforcement officers and private security personnel, disaggregated by school level.
8. Require local schools districts, their state partners, and law enforcement agencies to annually collect and publicly report the number of arrests by SROs, the race and gender of students arrested, and whether they have a disability.
9. Require local school districts and their state partners to annually evaluate whether the presence of SROs is necessary to a legitimate educational goal, and if so, whether the goal can be satisfied by a reasonable alternative means.

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