Research

BRIEF

The Color of Discipline: Understanding Racial Disparity in School Discipline Practices

When addressing the achievement gap, research has focused primarily on the issues of teaching and learning. In order to continue making progress toward our goal of reducing the predictability of who will succeed in school and who will fail, we must examine other aspects of education that contribute to the low academic achievement of children of color. One such area is school discipline.

School suspensions across the country have risen from 1.7 million in 1974 to approximately 3.1 million in 1997. This increase has impacted African American and Latino students disproportionately, especially boys. On a national level, African American students are suspended at twice their proportion in the school population. During the 1997 school year, African American children made up 17 percent of the U.S. student population but 32 percent of those suspended, according to U.S. Education Department, Office of Civil Rights statistics (Cantu, 2000; U.S. Education Dept., 1999).

Discipline statistics for Latino students suggest a more complicated picture. In some school districts, Latino students are disciplined in proportion to their numbers in the school population. On the other hand, there are urban areas and "urbanized" suburban school districts where Latinos are disproportionately disciplined (Applied Research Center, 2000). Similarly, suspension rates for other racial groups—Native Americans and Pacific Islanders—suggest that they are also subjected to disparate disciplinary treatment. Although the federal government has made an effort to track discipline data nationally, most schools or districts are not keeping data on discipline by race, gender or socio-economic status. Despite the lack of disaggregated data at the local level, many teachers and administrators report anecdotal evidence that support the national statistics: more African American students, particularly boys, are being sent to the principal's office in disproportionate numbers.

Most teachers are hard pressed to explain why more of their African American and Latino students are being sent out of the classroom. The prevailing view in schools is that disciplinary practices and policies are unbiased and race neutral. One educator put it this way:

> When the student comes to me, it is not a black-white issue, it's what type of behavior took place. Did this student break a school rule?…It is not a judgment of color, it's behavior, and the teacher is the only person who knows that behavior first hand (Nichols, 1999)

This administrator's comment highlights the feelings of many educators who believe their discipline policies are fair and objective. It raises a question for many researchers, educators, school boards, and parent groups: If disciplinary policies are race-neutral, how do we explain the disparate ways in which different students are being disciplined? The current data might lead one to conclude that there is something fundamentally wrong with African American males. Leading educators studying the dynamics of race and schooling on equity (Apple, 1992; Hilliard, 1994; Nieto, 1999) have rejected the theory that African American and Latino students are less intelligent or exhibit anti-social tendencies. Increasing research finds that discipline practices are not as unbiased or objective as once thought and are in fact often culturally loaded (Applied Research Center, 2000; Cotton, 1996; Noguera, 1997).

Three Leading Causes of Disparity

Although the issue of discipline disparity has yet to be fully understood, there is growing research that begins to shed light on some of the factors that contribute to the increasing number of students of color being suspended or expelled. Researchers believe there are three common factors that produce racial disparity in discipline:

1. Cultural Misperception and Misinterpretation

One factor contributing to the current discipline crisis stems from the shifting demographics in both the student population in public schools and the teaching force. Within the next decade, the majority of public school students will be comprised of racial and ethnic groups traditionally considered the minority. This shift has already occurred in California, New Mexico, Mississippi, and Texas (Education Trust, 1998). With growing urban sprawl in many cities, even suburban school districts are growing more diverse in their racial and linguistic demographics (Richard, 2000). In striking contrast, the teaching force remains predominately European American and female, with a steady decrease in the number of new teachers of color.

Researchers such as educator Gloria Ladson-Billings, author of *Dreamkeepers*, (1995) suggest that the contrasting teacher and student demographics often lead to a "cultural mismatch" in which an increasing number of teachers lack familiarity with the cultural values, norms, and belief systems of their students. Some educators conclude that this lack of familiarity with multicultural perspectives often leads to teacher misunderstandings about student behavior and intentions. These misunderstandings often stem from misperceptions and misinterpretations of student behavior.

For example, often young African American boys will engage in loud word-play while playing. The noise level is high and emotions are openly displayed. A teacher unfamiliar with this type of play might misinterpret this behavior as an escalating confrontation between students. Lipman (1997) presents another striking example in a study of teachers' ideologies on school restructuring and equity. She cites the example of an African American student who was suspended for 10 days for wearing his overall straps unsnapped—a common African American style in that school—while white students who wore their jeans with large holes cut out in the thighs—a common white style—were not disciplined. Despite being involved in a schoolwide effort to improve equity, the teacher demonstrated a lack of familiarity with multicultural communication and misinterpreted the African American student's dress as "gang related." Students, parents, and educators reported similar incidents of cultural miscues and misreads with African American dress, hand-shakes, and dance styles at a recent U.S. Commission on Civil Rights hearing held earlier this year (Cantu, 2000; Civil Rights Project, 2000).

The situation in many schools is further complicated by socio-economic differences. Middle-class teachers living in racially and economically homogeneous communities and lower-income students of color living in economically distressed communities also have to overcome class issues that complicate the student-teacher relationship. According to Noguera (1999), less-experienced teachers unfamiliar with communities of color and low-income communities may be fearful of their students and their own ability to manage their students' behavior in the classroom, especially young boys nearing adolescence. As a consequence, teachers are more likely to refer minor disciplinary transgressions to the principal's office rather than developing the skills and understanding to resolve them in the classroom.

2. Student Resistance and Defiance
Another cause of disparate discipline numbers is student resistance. Several research studies report that the vast majority of student discipline referrals and suspensions are for "defiance" (Kohl, 1994). Defiance is defined as resisting the authority of the teacher. Common actions defined as defiant student behavior are talking back, not following directions, and insubordination.

Although it is true that every student at some point in his or her school years engages in these behaviors, researchers are learning more about what student resistance means in the larger context of equity, race, and schooling. Most students of color, even those in elementary school, are aware of the long history of inequity in the American educational system. Several researchers have documented how institutional racism continues to impact teaching and learning despite years of integration policies in large urban and rural school districts (Sleeter, 1996; Spring, 1997; Tatum, 1994). Harvard University's Civil Rights Project concluded that as inequity increases, there is also an increase in low teacher expectations for poor students and students of color despite rhetoric about "all kids can learn" (Orfield and Yun, 1999).

Students of color are not unmindful of overt and subtle inequities in their academic careers. They are not usually passive victims of inequity. They react to institutionalized racism in various ways—some more beneficial than others. Faced with teachers' and counselors' low expectations, many students of color have resolved to "prove them wrong" by developing a fierce determination to excel in school. In this case, negative expectations can prove to be a motivating force to succeed.

"Resistance" is another reaction to inequity (Giroux, 1983; Kohl, 1994). According to this theory, students resist schooling in a variety of ways, such as breaking school rules, being disruptive in the classroom, and refusing to learn. Herbert Kohl (1994) has called it a strategy of *creative maladjustment* that can be described best in the phrase, "I won't learn from you." Kohl asserts that this "strategy" is sometimes mistaken for failure or inability to learn, but in reality it's a sign of a young person's healthy self-respect and resistance to accepting teachers' negative labels of "slow learner" or "troublemaker." Although this strategy usually proves harmful to the student in the end, this approach seems logical to the student given his negative experiences in school and encounters with limited educational opportunities.

Research data bears out that student resistance may be a key factor in the current discipline crisis. Researchers like William Wayson (Applied Research Center, 2000; Gregory, 1997) state that over 90 percent of suspensions occur as a result of behaviors that are more irritating and annoying to the teacher rather than serious violations of school policies inflicting harm on others, such as bringing drugs or a weapon to school. Teachers are often unprepared for student resistance; they have few skills to defuse escalating episodes of so-called student defiance, especially when there is a racial undertone to the situation.

3. Lack of Academic and Social Support
The third factor most often cited for disparity in discipline referrals is closely linked to students' academic performance. Most administrators and teachers focus on improving order in the classroom in an effort to improve student achievement. A recent report by the Educational Testing Service, *Order in the Classroom*, suggests educators should focus first on providing high quality, authentic, and engaging instruction with adequate support for low performing students to reduce disruptive student behavior (ETS, 1999). We are learning more and more about the ways in which poor instruction in the classroom creates problems of order and discipline. Students faced with unchallenging subject matter become bored and search for other outlets for their energies. A major research study summarized in *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* documents this. Researchers interviewed students and asked them to share their perspective on school discipline. The boys interviewed reported being disruptive because they were not receiving adequate support to accomplish school assignments or develop self-management skills (Ferguson, 2000). Lack of adequate academic support to meet grade level expectations increases student frustration. As a consequence, the student becomes disruptive. The teacher, in an attempt to restore order to the learning environment, sends the student out of

the classroom for disciplinary action. Disrupting the classroom may be a student's way of "saving face" with others in light of his low academic competence.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 1998) reports that more than half of African American males and 48.5 percent of Latino males are performing below grade level, and consequently most have been held back at least once (Roderick, 1995). Data from the National Coalition Advocates for Students (NCAS) suggests that this vicious cycle of misbehavior, disciplinary action, and removal from the classroom only leads to lower achievement and more acting out in school. Research shows that those students suspended repeatedly are at risk for less participation in positive extracurricular activities, increased placement in special education programs and increased truancy (Civil Rights Project, 2000).

The issue of providing adequate academic support to low performing students is critical as more emergency-credentialed teachers and newly certified teachers enter the classroom. Teachers' most common response to poor academic achievement is remediation for low performing students, which decelerates their learning. Few new teachers are taught how to offer strong academic and social support for students two or more grade levels behind by accelerate learning (Haberman, 1999).

Strategies for Supporting Positive Discipline Practices

Although schools report having discipline policies in place, Noguera (1997) notes most school district discipline codes leave too much room for arbitrary interpretation that allow teachers' conscious or unconscious beliefs about their students of color to influence decisions about how to discipline. It is true that students must be held accountable for their behavior. It is equally true that teachers also have to be held accountable for their management skills and cultural awareness.

Many educators assume that simply placing pre-service or newly-credentialed European American teachers in urban schools with large numbers of students of color will naturally lead to increased cultural awareness and competence. In fact, merely placing teachers in a diverse setting without an opportunity to reflect continually on their experiences and interactions with diverse students can actually worsen attitudes and affirm existing stereotypes rather than change ways of understanding the behavior of African American and Latino students (Bollin and Finkel, 1995; Haberman, 1991). Schools have also relied on diversity seminars and anti-racist training to give teachers an expanded perspective on how and why students behave as they do. Studies of teacher preparation programs and multicultural education suggest that short-term information oriented courses and workshops, although easy to implement, do not typically offer the depth necessary to go beyond a cursory level of understanding (Gallavin, 1997).

If schools are interested in better understanding what is behind the escalating numbers of Latinos and African Americans being sent out of the classroom, they must begin a specific cycle of inquiry into discipline issues schoolwide and collect specific data on why students are being disciplined. Teachers must examine what management techniques they are using in order to be proactive in their interactions with students of color. As part of an ongoing strategy to build teachers' cultural competence, schools must find opportunities to engage teachers in ongoing discussion and reflection around multicultural issues that impact education today.

In addition to deepening understanding of multicultural education issues, teachers must build their knowledge of the day-to-day experiences of the communities in which their students live. Strong ties with community-based organizations, social organizations, and faith-based organizations may offer teachers opportunities to learn about the values and experiences of other cultures.

In addition to building cultural competence, schools might consider some of the following strategies for creating a more positive school climate.

- Encourage teachers to develop classroom level cycles of inquiry to collect data on causes of student misbehavior and understand how they are currently managing discipline issues in the classroom.
- Teach teachers specific skills to de-escalate and redirect student resistance and misbehavior.
- Help schools create effective, high quality alternatives to in-school and out-of-school suspension.
- Create effective school-wide strategies for supporting academic achievement of at-risk students and closing the achievement gap.
- Hold students accountable for their behavior based on community standards by involving a broader network of adults.
- Help students develop self-management skills and resiliency skills to manage the impact of inequity and institutionalized racism.

Conclusion

Improving practices to reduce the disproportionate number of African American and Latino children being disciplined requires helping students, teachers, and schools develop strategies for managing behavior in the classroom. These strategies cannot ignore the institutional and social realities of the achievement gap and inequity in the lives of low-performing students of color and linguistically different students. Developing culturally-relevant strategies requires teachers to move beyond their comfort zone in dealing with parents and communities of color.

Unfortunately, educators often look for a set of generic practices that they can use with African American and Latino students. There is no one set of strategies that teachers can use successfully without having some deep understanding of the social-political reality of how communities of color have been impacted by racism in society and in our educational system. Addressing disparity in discipline practices is an integral part of closing the achievement gap in the nation.

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