

Disproportionality, Discipline and Race

Addressing Critical Issues

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Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.

- James Baldwin, 1924-1987

.....Inclusive ways of knowing and living offer us the only true way to emancipate ourselves from the divisions that limit our minds and imaginations

- bell hooks -The Columbia Book of Quotations by Women

Racial disproportionality in discipline can be defined as the overrepresentation of children of color that are subject to discipline, suspension and/or expulsion as compared to the total population of children in the community or institution (NCCREST, 2009). Current trends, nationwide, show that when it comes to school discipline, African American students are suspended two to three times more frequently than other students. Similarly, they are overrepresented in office referral, expulsion and corporal punishment (Skiba, et al, 2011, Duncan, 2010, Kim et.al. 2010). The problem of disproportionality has been particularly controversial surrounding “zero tolerance” and “one-strike you are out”.

The longevity and severity of the challenge begs the question of why the persistent disproportionality patterns applied to

African American students persists. In the face of broad disparities in disciplinary exclusion, questions are raised about the root causes of behavioral problems, the culture of educational environments, and norms that may be consciously or unconsciously more hostile to some groups than others.

System-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS or SWPBS) is a well-established systemic and data-driven approach to improving school learning environments. Its emphasis is on changing underlying attitudes and policies concerning how behavior is addressed. The behavior support systems encourage “school connectedness” and “caring and trusting relationships” between teachers and students. Overall, the programs try to increase students’ positive experience of

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schooling and to move away from a reliance on punitive reactions to misbehavior (Skiba, Lassenet, et al. 2006, Vincent, 2008).

Yet universal approaches to educational practice have frequently been critiqued for not specifically addressing the racial dynamics, economic obstacles or other influences on the racial discipline gap (Goldstein & Noguera, 2006). In fact, one study of an otherwise successfully implemented PBIS system demonstrated that Black and Latino students nevertheless received more severe punishment for the category of *minor misbehavior* and concluded that one cannot assume that interventions intended to improve behavior will be effective to the same degree for all groups (Losen, 2011).

Overall, the importance of considering culture when implementing these school-wide models cannot be overemphasized (Townsend, 2000). Large racial differences in suspension rates raise questions about whether training to improve classroom management skills might be more effective for more African American students if it included components of multicultural sensitivity to broaden teachers' awareness that implicit bias may affect how they discipline their students (Losen, 2011). While explanations for disproportionality vary considerably, a growing body of

literature is suggesting that lack of cultural competency and classroom management are especially important factors contributing to disproportionality (Skiba et al, 2006, Texas Appleseed, 2008).

According to the Disproportionality in Disciplinary Action in Public Education Literature Review submitted by Shore Research, Inc. (February 2012), the preponderance of recommendations found in the literature are for educators and policy makers to:

1. develop culturally responsive instructional and classroom management strategies and train teachers in those strategies.
2. develop clear definitions of disproportionality and analyze individual school data to determine if/where disproportionality exists.
3. incorporate disaggregated data systems that are analyzed with culturally competent data analysis; and balance zero tolerance policies and consideration of students' intentions for misbehavior.

PROMISING PRACTICES

- Test, Punish, and Push Out: How Zero Tolerance and High Stakes Testing Funnel Youth into the School-to Prison Pipeline
www.advancementproject.org/resources/entry/test-punish-and-push-out-how-zero-tolerance-and-high-stakes-testing-funnel
- The Equity Alliance at ASU
www.equityallianceatasu.org
- Discipline, Policies, Successful Schools and Racial Justice
<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/discipline-policies>
- PBIS Indiana
<https://pbis.indiana.edu/>
- The Learning Carousel
<http://www.equityallianceatasu.org/archives/lc/old>

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