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Editors

Race and Social Problems

Restructuring Inequality

Chapter 7
Interventions to Address Racial/Ethnic Disparities in School Discipline: Can Systems Reform Be Race-Neutral?

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Introduction

Racial and ethnic disparities remain consistent and widespread in American education. Significant gaps continue to be manifested in achievement (Ladson-Billings 2006), special education (National Research Council 2002), dropout and graduation rates (Wald and Losen 2007), and eligibility for gifted/talented programs (Milner and Ford 2007). In reviewing both the scientific literature and case law on disproportionality, Skiba et al. (2010) concluded that, while *Brown v. Board of Education* and the civil rights statutes that followed have guaranteed students of color access to public education, they have in no way guaranteed equal educational opportunity.

Of particular concern are severe and continuing racial disparities in exclusionary school discipline, out-of-school suspension and expulsion (Skiba and Rausch 2006). Among the most consistently documented of educational inequities, disproportionate representation in school discipline places students of color—in particular, African American students—at-risk for a wide range of negative outcomes. This chapter will review what we know about racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline and in particular examine the status of intervention research. Given the predisposition in America's current political landscape towards color-blind or race-neutral intervention, a significant part of this chapter will be devoted to considering the extent to which universal, race-neutral interventions could be expected to be sufficient to successfully address disproportionality in school discipline.

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What Do We Know About Disciplinary Disproportionality

A review of the literature on African American disproportionality leads to four conclusions:

1. Disparities in school discipline are consistent and severe for African American students, and found less consistently for other groups.
2. Racial and ethnic disparities in discipline often confound our expectations about the locus of disproportionality.
3. In particular, African American over-representation in exclusionary school discipline cannot be explained by poverty status or differential rates of behavior.
4. Over-representation in punitive and exclusionary school discipline in turn yields increased risk for a host of other negative outcomes.

Each of these propositions is explored in turn in the sections that follow.

African American Disproportionality Has Been Consistent and Severe

African American Disproportionality

Since the Children's Defense Fund (1975) brought the issue of racial disparities in discipline to national attention, the over-representation of African American students in a variety of school punishments has been consistently documented across time, location, and type of punishment. African American disproportionality has been reported in studies across the nation for office disciplinary referrals (Bradshaw et al. 2010; Rocque 2010; Skiba et al. 2011), suspension and expulsion (Eitle and Eitle 2004; Gregory and Weinstein 2008; Hinojosa 2008), school arrests (Theriot 2009), and corporal punishment (Gregory 1995; Owen 2005; Shaw and Braden 1990). Others have reported that Black students receive fewer mild disciplinary sanctions when referred for an infraction (McFadden et al. 1992; Payne and Welch 2010). While it might be expected that the "one-size-fits-all" approach of zero tolerance would increase consistency in the application of discipline across groups, African Americans have also been found to be over-represented in punishments for zero-tolerance-related disciplinary outcomes (Tailor and Detch 1998), and to be more likely to attend schools with greater use of both school security measures and police presence (Payne and Welch 2010). The over-representation of Black students in out-of-school suspension and expulsion appears to be increasing over the last 30 years (Losen and Skiba 2010; Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin 2010a; Wallace et al. 2008).

Other Racial/Ethnic Groups

Disproportionality in school discipline for other racial/ethnic categories has been less thoroughly studied, and the results have been less consistent. While Peguero and Shekarkhar (2011) found disparities in discipline for first and third generation Latino students, others have reported rates of out-of-school suspension for Latino students not significantly different from White students (Horner et al. 2010; McFadden et al. 1992; Skiba et al. 1997). In a national examination of self-reported data concerning discipline outcomes, Wallace et al. (2008) reported that American Indian students were over-represented and Asian students under-represented in school discipline in general and suspension in particular.

Data on Disciplinary Disproportionality Counters Expectations

Discussions on the topic of disproportionality often revolve around a storyline that highlights the challenges of urban education with concentrations of high poverty, focusing in particular on issues facing African American males. Yet data on disciplinary disparities more often than not yields conclusions that run counter to these expectations. For example, while rates of both suspension and expulsion increase with grade level, differences between Black and White rates of suspension have been found to be as great or greater at the elementary as at the secondary school level (Rausch and Skiba 2006; Wallace et al. 2008). Similarly complex findings appear to hold with respect to gender differences in school discipline. Wallace et al. (2008) reported that, although boys of all races and ethnicities were more likely than girls to be disciplined, disparities between Black and White rates of discipline were actually greater among female students.

Such findings raise questions about our typical understanding of racial disparities, and nowhere is this more evident than with respect to the issue of urbanicity. Schools in poor urban districts have been consistently found to have higher rates of suspension and expulsion than schools in suburban, town, or rural settings (Losen and Skiba 2010; Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2009; Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin 2010b). Yet the degree of disparity between Black and White suspension rates appears to be as great or even greater in higher resourced suburban districts (Eitle and Eitle 2004; Rausch and Skiba 2006; Wallace et al. 2008). Together these findings suggest a picture far different than our typical understanding of racial disparities. Clearly, boys, secondary schools, and under-resourced schools in urban areas all experience higher rates of suspension and expulsion. Yet Black–White disparities do not necessarily follow the same patterns. Rather, racial disparities are as high or higher for girls, in elementary schools, and in suburban settings. Simply put, racial disproportionality in school discipline is ubiquitous.

Disproportionality Cannot Be Explained by Poverty or Differential Rates of Behavior

Poverty and Racial Disparities

It is true that students from poverty backgrounds are significantly more likely to experience suspension and expulsion (Brantlinger 1991; Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin 2010a; Skiba et al. 1997; Wu et al. 1982). Hinojosa (2008), for example, found that a number of demographic variables, including presence of mother or father in the home, number of siblings, and quality of home resources were all predictors of the likelihood of suspension.

Yet it is also true that poverty and its effects are not sufficient to account for the over-representation of students of color in school suspension and expulsion. Even after controlling for socioeconomic effects (e.g., percent of parents unemployed and percentage of students enrolled in free lunch programs), Wu et al. (1982) reported that nonWhite students still reported significantly higher rates of suspension than White students in almost all locales. Wallace et al. (2008) found that disproportionality in office referrals and suspension and expulsion for Black, Latino, and American Indian tenth graders remained significant even after controlling for family structure and parental education. Finding that urban schools consistently suspended a higher proportion of students out-of-school even after controlling for poverty, Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin (2010b, p. 33) concluded that "there is something above and beyond poverty that explains disciplinary differences between school types."

Different Rates of Disruptive Behavior?

Since school consequences such as suspension and expulsion are at least in part a response to student behavior, it is possible that differential rates of exclusionary discipline for Black and White students could be due to different rates or types of school misbehavior. Although there are no recent studies that have directly observed rates of Black and White student behavior in classrooms, a fairly substantial number of studies address the issue of whether disparities in suspension and expulsion are due to differences in rates of behavior.

Results from a variety of sources, using a variety of research designs, have not supported the hypothesis that the Black–White discipline gap is due to different rates of disruption. First, research has not found that students of color engage in more seriously disruptive behavior warranting higher rates of school punishment. Wallace et al. (2008) found Black, Latino, and Native American students to be more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions, despite few racial differences in actual zero-tolerance policy violations (e.g., drugs, alcohol, weapons). Where racial/ethnic differences are found in reasons for disciplinary referral, those differences tend to be for less serious infractions such as *defiance* (Gregory and Weinstein 2008), or *disrespect* and *excessive noise* (Skiba et al. 2002). Second, race persists as a determinant of school punishment, regardless of the characteristics or seriousness of student behavior. Multivariate studies introducing statistical controls for more or less seri-

ously disruptive office referrals (Eitle and Eitle 2004; Peguero and Shekarkhar 2011; Skiba et al. 2011) have reported that race remains a significant predictor of school punishment regardless of the type or severity of behavioral infraction. Racial differences in discipline appear to be independent even of teacher perceptions of the seriousness of behavior. A number of studies have controlled for teacher and peer ratings of aggressive or externalizing behavior (Bradshaw et al. 2010; Horner et al. 2010; Rocque 2010); all have reported that racial differences in office referrals or serious disciplinary actions remain significant regardless of the teachers' own ratings of behavioral severity. In sum, a fairly extensive body of research has failed to find any evidence to support that notion that students of color earn higher rates of exclusionary discipline through higher rates of disruptive behavior.

What Does Predict Disciplinary Disproportionality?

In contrast to poverty or differential behavior, there appear to be a number of variables that have been found to show at least some relationship to rates of racial disparity in school punishment. Gregory et al. (2010) reviewed literature on the achievement gap and the discipline gap and found sufficient evidence to suggest a relationship between the two. The representativeness or diversity of school faculty has been explored; results thus far suggest that schools with a more diverse and representative teaching force have lower rates of racial disparity in school discipline (Rocha and Hawes 2009), although race of the school administrator has not been found to be a significant contributor to disproportionality (Roch et al. 2010). There is evidence that racial disparities in school discipline begin with classroom referral and classroom management (Gregory et al. 2010), but that there is also a contribution at the level of administrative decision-making (Skiba et al. 2011). Finally, both the school climate in general (Gregory et al. 2011) and perceptions of the racial climate at school (Mattison and Aber 2007) have been found to relate to levels of disproportionality in school discipline.

Association of Disciplinary Disproportionality with Negative Outcomes

Regardless of the reasons for racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline, over-representation in suspension and expulsion places students of color at increased risk for a number of negative outcomes. Although exclusionary and punitive approaches to discipline are intended to improve school safety and student behavior, a number of negative effects have been documented associated with suspension and expulsion or increased police presence, including (a) negative impact on school climate, (b) reduced academic achievement and lost educational opportunity, (c) a moderate negative relationship with school dropout, and (d) increased risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system. Together these outcomes appear to provide support for a *school-to-prison pipeline* (Kim et al. 2010), that punitive and exclusionary approaches to school discipline represent the first step in a process that ultimately increases juvenile risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Negative Relationship with School Climate

One of the fundamental assumptions of zero tolerance and disciplinary exclusion is that removal of troublemakers from the school will improve school climate, reducing disruption, and improving the learning environment for those who remain (Ewing 2000). Extensive review of the research (e.g., American Psychological Association 2008) has, however, failed to support that contention. Schools with higher rates of suspension have been reported to have higher student–teacher ratios and a lower level of academic quality (Hellman and Beaton 1986), spend more time on discipline-related matters (Davis and Jordan 1994) and pay significantly less attention to issues of school climate (Bickel and Qualls 1980). A survey of students and teachers in Chicago Public Schools found that schools with harsh discipline policies and higher rates of suspensions were perceived as less safe by students and teachers (Steinberg et al. 2011). Such relationships may be even more salient for students of color. Mattison and Aber (2007) compared self-reported rates of detention and suspension with ratings of racial school climate and found that African American students reported more experiences of racism and lower ratings of racial fairness at school, and that both of these ratings were associated with higher rates of detentions and suspensions.

School Engagement/Achievement

Educational research has consistently documented a relationship between time engaged in academic learning and student achievement (Brophy 1988; Greenwood et al. 2002; Wang et al. 1997). Time lost to suspension and expulsion may thus have a negative impact on school connectedness and student engagement, and ultimately on student achievement. McNeely et al. (2002) found school connectedness to be lower in schools that expel students for relatively minor infractions, while Davis and Jordan (1994) reported that the number of suspensions that African American males received was negatively related to achievement in eighth grade and to school engagement in tenth grade. Emerging data have revealed a negative relationship between the use of school suspension and expulsion and academic achievement. In a multivariate analysis of the relationship between school discipline and achievement, Rausch and Skiba (2005) reported that higher school rates of out-of-school suspension were associated with lower school passing rates on the state accountability test, regardless of the demographic, economic, or racial makeup of the school.

Relationship to School Dropout

In the long term, school suspension has been found to be a moderate to strong predictor of dropout or not graduating on time (Ekstrom et al. 1986; Raffaele Mendez and Knoff 2003; Wehlage and Rutter 1986). Suh and Suh (2007) found that being suspended at least once increased the likelihood of dropping out of school by 77.5 %

and that suspensions are a stronger predictor of dropout than either grade point average or SES. In a 5-year longitudinal study of all students in the state of Texas through their high school years, the Council of State Governments (2011) found that suspended/expelled students were five times as likely to drop out compared to students with no disciplinary action.

Increased Risk of Juvenile Justice Contact

Recent studies appear to support the contention that out-of-school suspension and expulsion increase youth risk for contact with the juvenile justice system. Racial disproportionality in out-of-school suspensions has been found to be a strong predictor of similar levels of racial disparity in juvenile court referrals, even when controlling for levels of delinquent behavior, poverty, and other demographic variables (Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2009). Multivariate analyses of longitudinal data have indicated that suspended or expelled students had a greater likelihood of contact with the juvenile justice system in subsequent years, even after controlling for demographic data; the relationship was even stronger for African American students (Council of State Governments 2011).

Interventions to Address Disproportionality

A number of universal, school-wide interventions have been shown to be effective in improving school discipline or school climate and have thus been suggested as having potential for reducing disproportionality (Osher et al. 2010). School-wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS) (Bradshaw et al. 2009; Horner et al. 2009) is a framework that is intended to restructure school disciplinary practices through a school-wide team-based approach to restructuring school discipline. Social–emotional learning (SEL) programs are implemented as preventative curriculums and/or through the creation of supportive learning environments aimed at reducing problem behaviors by teaching students needed social or life skills (Durlak et al. 2010; Ialongo et al. 2001; Payton et al. 2008). Finally, restorative justice programs aim to restore relationships and repair the harm caused by misbehavior through such strategies as: (a) collaborative decision-making and restitution to victims, (b) holding offenders accountable, (c) conferences and community meetings, and (d) preventing similar actions in the future by changing behavior and the conditions that caused that behavior (Jennings et al. 2008; International Institute for Restorative Practices 2009; Strang and Braithwaite 2001; Stinchcomb et al. 2006).

To what extent could such universal interventions be expected to be successful in reducing racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline? Certainly universal interventions without specific attention to issues of race or culture could be expected to be more acceptable to the courts in a political context that favors color-blindness and race-neutrality in intervention (see e.g., Skiba et al. 2010). Yet there is as yet no

evidence that race-neutral interventions are sufficient for addressing issues of disproportionality and, in the area of desegregation, some evidence that race-neutral strategies are not as effective as race-conscious approaches for addressing racial and ethnic disparities (Mickelson 2003; Reardon et al. 2006).

There is some data that could inform the extent to which universal, race-neutral methods could successfully address racial and ethnic disparities in discipline. The following sections evaluate the possibility of a race-neutral approach to disciplinary disproportionality, in the areas of *data disaggregation, interpretation, culturally responsive intervention*, and *evaluation*.

Data Disaggregation

One can assume that a universal or race-neutral intervention approach could be effective in addressing issues of racial disparity under certain conditions. For example, if there were no qualitative differences in how the procedures were experienced by race, the problem might well be one of simply reducing rates of exclusion for all groups. Yet the data have consistently documented that students of different races are treated differentially at the level of classroom referral (Skiba et al. 2011), more likely to be disciplined for more interactive or subjective behaviors (Skiba et al. 2002), and in particular for defiance (Gregory and Weinstein 2008). Such differences are not lost on students of color, who perceive differences in both the administration of the school discipline system (Sheets 1996) and school climate in general (Mattison and Aber 2007). This difference in baseline rates of discipline makes it difficult to conceptualize how race-neutral intervention could be effective in addressing racial disparities. In order to create equal outcomes beginning from an initial state of inequality, such an approach would have to affect groups differentially (e.g., create larger improvements for African American students) without consciously intending to do so.

Limited data on the differential effects of universal interventions suggest that such skepticism is justified. In a nationally representative sample of elementary and middle schools implementing school-wide PBS for at least one year, Skiba et al. (2011) found that PBS schools in general use an efficient, graduated system of discipline; that is, minor infractions receive less severe punishments and more severe consequences are reserved for more serious infractions. A dramatically different pattern was found, however, when the data were disaggregated—African American and Latino students were significantly more likely than White students to receive suspension and expulsion for minor infractions. Similar findings have been reported by Vincent and Tobin (2010).

Together these data strongly suggest that it is not sufficient to review schoolwide data in the aggregate and assume effects on specific groups. Rather, understanding current levels of disparity and monitoring the effects of intervention on those disparities require disaggregation of disciplinary data by race and ethnicity.

Data Interpretation

The availability of data, assessing the current status of educational processes and outcomes, is a critical first step underlying most current school reform models. Yet the accessibility of data do not in and of themselves guarantee that data will be used in a way to ensure an effective reform process (Earl and Fullan 2003). In the area of racial/ethnic disparity, the ability to use available data to fuel a change process is especially threatened by one particular barrier—the difficulty that educators and other professionals have in openly discussing issues of race and culture.

The difficulty that educators, especially White educators, have in openly talking about race and racism has been well documented (Henze et al. 1998; King 1991; Singleton and Linton 2006). To gain insight into practitioners' perspectives on racial and ethnic disproportionality, Skiba and Rausch (2006) interviewed teachers, administrators, and related services personnel in diverse urban and near-urban school districts. In general, Skiba and colleagues found that, particularly for White respondents, race proved a difficult topic to approach:

> When you say minorities, are you, what are you speaking of? ... INTERVIEWER: Ethnic and racial minorities ... Oh .... OK ... Alright ... We have like ... I guess we have about half and half. I don't know that I've ever really paid attention to it. (Skiba and Rausch 2006, p. 1445)

In contrast, African American teachers seemed much more aware of, and willing to talk about, the diversity in their classes.

The inability to bring the topic of race to the table covers over a different kind of racial gap—that is, differential perception concerning the seriousness of the issue. Consideration of nationally publicized events concerning race and racism highlights a fundamental difference in how White and Black Americans perceive and talk about the topic of race. In a survey conducted by *Time Magazine* in February of 1997, 68 % of African Americans but only 38 % of Whites agreed that racism is a significant problem in America (Lafferty 1997). Table 7.1 presents a series of salient events over the last 20 years pertaining to race, along with public polls disaggregating the substantial and at times dramatic African American and European American responses. Across every national event involving race across a twenty year span, there is a striking difference in the perspectives of Black and White respondents.

Regardless of policy preferences, it is quite clear that neither American society nor American education have become race-neutral; rather, the experience of race depending on the color of one's skin differs on a daily basis. Authors on White privilege note that Whites are in the position where it is possible to avoid considering race and how it has affected the opportunity structure in America (McIntosh 1990; Wise 2002). Howard (2008) uses the stories of African American high school students, such as this Black male, to describe the incidents of microaggression they face in their day-to-day schooling:

> I play football, so you know they expect you to be good in sports. But when you are on the ASB (Associated Student Body) council, like I am, and being a school leader, have good grades, and talking about going to college on an academic scholarship, then they look at you like Whoa!! I didn't think that they (Black males) were into those kinds of things. One teacher even told me once, "You're not like the rest of them." I didn't ask her what that meant, but believe me, I knew what that meant. (Howard 2008, p. 907)

Table 7.1 Differential reactions of Black and White respondents to national polls on incidents involving race

Incident and question	African American respondents (%)	White respondents (%)
Reactions to Pastor Jeremiah Wright comments:		
Should Barack Obama leave Rev. Wright's church in the wake of Wright's comments about race? (Rasmussen Reports 2008)	16	46
Jena 6 case:		
The six Black teenagers in the Jena, Mississippi case were treated unfairly by the legal system. (CNN/Opinion Research Corp. Poll, DiversityInc. 2007)	79	33
Hurricane Katrina:		
Did poverty and race affect hurricane protection? (ABC News/Washington Post 2005)	71	28
O.J. Simpson verdict:		
From what you've heard, do you think O. J. Simpson murdered Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman? (Dateline NBC 2004)	29	87
Trial of Policemen in Rodney King case:		
The guilty verdicts in the Rodney King Trial were not enough (USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll Jet 1993)	55	21

Thus, silence about the topic of race and ethnicity in no way signals unanimity among Americans and indeed, that silence may make it more difficult to uncover and explore important cultural differences in the personal experience of race.

Systems change is a difficult undertaking in any organization, even when it does not involve an emotionally-laden issue. Attempts to create systemic reform that can address racial and ethnic disparities are likely further compounded by emotional reactions that limit the ability of school personnel to directly address the issue of race. School practitioners, for example, may well resist attempts to identify racial disparity in their school if they fear that information will reflect poorly on them or their institution. It is unlikely that schools that are unwilling to broach the topic of race will be able to formulate solutions that are responsive to racial, ethnic, or cultural differences, much less accept the need for extensive reform of policies or procedures. Thus, attempts to address inequity in special education service may need to attend not only to the data and the recommendations that flow from those data, but also to the way in which *dysconscious* beliefs (King 1991) may short-circuit full consideration of race-based data (Singleton and Linton 2006). In order to address racial issues, we must be able to talk about race.

Culturally Responsive Intervention

For almost 40 years, the database documenting disproportionality has been consistent and extensive; yet there is little research that has specifically targeted reductions in racial/ethnic disparities in discipline. As noted, a number of universal,

school-wide interventions that might be regarded as race-neutral have been used to address issues of school discipline or school climate, and thus may have potential for reducing disproportionality (Osher et al. 2010), including SWPBS (Bradshaw et al. 2009; Horner et al. 2009), SEL (Durlak et al. 2010; Ialongo et al. 2001; Payton et al. 2008), and restorative justice (Jennings et al. 2008; International Institute for Restorative Practices 2009).

To date, however, the study of interventions specifically intended to reduce disciplinary disparities is isolated to a few case studies. In a case study conducted on a Dine reservation in New Mexico, Jones et al. (2006) reported that both the fidelity and effectiveness of implementation of School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) was dramatically increased by embedding the culture, language, and history of the Dine people into the implementation of SWPBIS. Similarly, Wearmouth et al. (2007) describe the application of restorative justice in a New Zealand school with a predominantly indigenous Maori student population in order to illustrate how understanding and embedding students' and families' cultural values and worldviews into disciplinary systems can facilitate the development of culturally safe and responsive schools. While such case studies demonstrate the promise of adapting universal approaches to address racial and cultural issues, more research will be necessary to assess the effectiveness of universal interventions for the specific issue of racial and ethnic disparities in discipline.

Our nation's population is composed of a number of cultural subgroups; the complex and differing history of those groups calls into question the assumption that educational strategies and interventions will operate in the same way for all groups. The need to be responsive to the needs of diverse students has led to calls for culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings 2001) and more recently for culturally responsive classroom management (Brown 2004; Weinstein et al. 2004). While Kauffman et al. (2008) have argued that there is no evidence that behavioral interventions operate differently based on ethnicity, gender, or religion, they also note that differential effects based on race and ethnicity have been understudied in the behavioral literature. Until a sufficient database on interventions for reducing disciplinary disproportionality has accumulated, it seems logical that implementations of interventions designed to affect student behavior in school should explicitly explore the extent to which those interventions work equally well for all groups.

Outcomes

As noted, few studies have used racial and ethnic disparities as a dependent measure in studying interventions to affect school discipline outcomes. As a result, it is impossible at this point to definitively answer the question framed by Kauffman et al. (2008) regarding the necessity of culturally responsive variants of universal programs for creating change in different racial/ethnic groups. Early indications, however, raise questions about whether the universal application of PBIS is sufficient to reduce measured disparities in office referrals and out-of-school suspension.

Table 7.2 SWPBIS implementation in two middle schools: effects on rate and disproportionality of office disciplinary referrals (ODRs)

	Total ODRs	ODRs per 100 students	Risk index AA	Risk index White	RR AA
Middle school #1					
2004–2005	1,738	204.47	75.90	41.18	1.84
2006–2007	1,080	124.00	71.43	31.51	2.27
Middle school #2					
2004–2005	2,150	318.52	85.88	32.39	2.65
2006–2007	805	115.83	54.93	26.88	2.04

Data Source: SWIS Ethnicity Reports
Note: ODR = Office Disciplinary Referrals; Risk index represents the percentage of a given racial/ethnic group in the school receiving ODRs; RR AA is the risk ratio comparing the rate of African American ODRs to the rate of White ODRs. Thus African American students are 1.84 times more likely to be referred to the office in Middle School #1 for the 2004–2005 school year, but 2.27 times more likely to receive an ODR in the 2006–2007 Academic Year. The author is grateful to Dr. Lucille Eber and her colleagues at the Illinois PBIS Network for sharing these data

Indeed, if interventions addressing disciplinary and management practices address only the needs of a school's White students, it is possible they will *increase* the racial/ethnic disciplinary gap, even while appearing to reduce overall rates of referral, suspension, and expulsion. Table 7.2 represents the results in terms of changes in Office Disciplinary Referrals (ODR's) in two middle schools in a state-wide PBIS network as a result of their implementation of PBIS. Clearly, the overall effects appear promising, in that implementation over a 3-year period appeared to lead to very substantial drops in rates of ODRs for both schools over that period (Columns 1 and 2). In both schools there are clear racial discrepancies between the percent of students (risk index) referred to the office for White and Black students (Columns 3 and 4). In particular, while White risk indices decrease in both middle schools, Black rates of referral drop significantly only in Middle School #2. As a result, while disproportionality as measured by the risk ratio (Column 5) decreases in Middle School #2, racial disparities in ODRs *increase* in Middle School #1, even as the overall rate of referrals decreased.

Nor do recent tests of implementation across a national sample provide encouragement for a race-neutral approach to disciplinary intervention. Vincent and Tobin (2010) studied the effects of PBIS implementation on disciplinary outcomes in 77 elementary, middle, and high schools drawn from a national sample of schools implementing that approach for at least 2 years. Results suggested that more complete implementation of PBIS procedures in classroom settings was associated with reductions in rates of out-of-school suspension (OSS) in elementary schools, whereas fuller implementation of PBIS in non-classroom settings was associated with OSS decreases at the high school level. When the data were disaggregated, however, there was no effect of PBIS implementation on the disparity between number of days lost for OSS between African American and White students, prompting the authors to conclude, "These rather sobering outcomes suggest that SWPBS

implementation might have little effect on the pervasive disproportionate exclusion of African American students" (Vincent and Tobin 2010, p. 12).

It is important to be clear that there is nothing in any of this data to suggest that universal interventions could not be adapted in order to effectively address racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline. Tobin and Vincent (2011) examined eight schools that had reduced racial disproportionality over time while implementing PBIS and found that those schools had made significant improvement in one of the core competencies of PBIS, *Expected student behaviors are acknowledged regularly (reinforced)*. The institutional change process inherent in PBS (Lewis et al. 2006), using a team-based examination and re-engineering of school practices, policies, and procedures around school discipline (Sugai and Horner 2006), may be well-suited for addressing issues of reproductive behavior within schools as institutions. The processes of self- and systemic reflection inherent in restorative practices (Stinchcomb et al. 2006) or the instruction in social and emotional skills that is part of the Social Emotional Learning model (Payton et al. 2008) also address key skills that could be promising in addressing disciplinary disparities. Data to this point make the case, however, that in implementing any intervention to reduce disproportionality, changes in rates of racial/ethnic disparity in school disciplinary outcomes should be explicitly tested, not assumed.

The need to address culture directly in any intervention should come as no surprise, given the central importance of directly instructing the targeted skill in previous education research. Across outcomes ranging from academic achievement (Greenwood et al. 2002; Wang et al. 1997) to reading intervention (Foorman et al. 2003) to classroom behavior (Harvey et al. 2009), research has been highly consistent in finding that chances of successful outcomes are significantly improved by providing direct instruction or intervention designed to specifically address the identified problem. It is reasonable to believe that creating a change in outcomes in which race and culture are implicated will likewise require targeted attention to those specific issues of concern.

Conclusions

The problem of racial and ethnic disparity in school discipline in America's schools remains unresolved, and some ways unaddressed, in America's schools. After nearly forty years of attention, research has succeeded in better describing the problem, but there remain few if any interventions proven to address the issues.

The data reviewed herein often contradict intuitive assumptions. Although boys are suspended more frequently than girls in general, some data suggests that racial disparities are greater among girls. Similarly, while suspensions occur more frequently in poor urban schools and districts, disproportionality is as great or greater in suburban locales with lower rates of poverty. Most importantly, the data contradict the widely-held perception that disproportionality in discipline is mostly a matter of poor kids behaving badly. Race remains a potent factor predicting disciplinary

outcomes regardless of the level of poverty; accumulating data has consistently failed to find any evidence that Black students engage in more serious behaviors, hence earning a higher rate of suspension and expulsion.

There remains a pressing need for research-validated interventions specifically addressing racial disparities in discipline. Although several universal and race-neutral intervention approaches have reported success in changing disciplinary outcomes, there have been insufficient tests to know whether or not such approaches can reduce disparities. Indeed initial tests raise some concerns in this regard.

Racial and ethnic disparities in educational outcomes have both an empirical and a moral/ethical element. Data have demonstrated repeatedly the existence of racial and ethnic disparities in discipline and have begun to more clearly elucidate the causal variables that maintain disproportionality. Those data can also be used to track the effectiveness of interventions to reduce disparities. The commitment to a new course of action, however, is in part a moral decision, one that has informed every leap forward in civil rights, from the Emancipation Proclamation to *Brown v. Board of Education*. Data regarding racial and ethnic disparities are becoming increasingly clear over time. It remains to be seen when the attendant national commitment necessary to bring an end to such disparities will emerge.

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