

How Teacher Bias and School Culture Shape School Discipline



By [Ileana Najarro](#) — June 16, 2023 ⌚ 5 min read



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Research has often found that racial disparities exist when it comes to which students face harsher and more frequent disciplinary actions in schools. Black and Latino students are suspended and expelled from school at disproportionately higher rates than their white counterparts, for instance.

A study [published in December 2022](#) found bias plays a major contributing factor in

racial/ethnic disparities in school discipline, in two interconnected ways: individual teacher biases perceiving the misbehavior of students of color as more blameworthy when compared to that of white peers; and districts with a majority of students of color as more likely to have a culture of control and a punitive approach to discipline when compared to predominantly white schools.

In her report, Jayanti Owens, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at Yale University's School of Management, worked with 1,339 teachers in 295 U.S. schools. The teachers viewed and responded to randomly assigned videos of a white, Black, or Latino boy committing identical, routine classroom misbehavior.

The results found that, compared to white peers, Black and Latino boys were perceived as being more "blameworthy" and referred more readily to the principal for identical misbehavior. This was more so the case if teachers worked in schools with a majority of students of color.

While the study did find interpersonal biases at play, for Owens, it was clear that the school culture in which teachers operate is as critical to address when discussing remedies to discipline disparities.

"It's about changing the context in which they're operating," Owens said. "So that you're able to minimize the effects of any bias that does exist through things like policies and norms, leadership styles of administrators, the ways in which you construct your discipline code in the first place, and the ways in which you operationalize that code, as well as a bunch of sort of proactive preventative strategies to prevent misbehavior from occurring in the first place."

How bias around discipline works on two simultaneous levels

In past efforts to explain the racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline, some educators pointed to what scholars call the differential behavior hypothesis, meaning Black students and other students of color misbehave more often and therefore are disciplined more often.

Yet researchers say data don't support such a claim, especially in cases of all students misbehaving in the same way, regardless of race or ethnicity.

More recent data points instead to teacher biases, Owens said.

Yet Owens is cognizant of separate research that finds schools with a majority of students of color are more likely to have higher levels of punitive policies and zero tolerance policies in place. These schools have strict dress codes, a greater presence of security cameras and school resource officers or police officers on campus, and processes that send an implicit message to teachers that the culture of the school is one of monitoring, surveillance, and social control, Owens said.

To factor in how those types of environments could feed into biases that lead to disparities in discipline, the sample of teachers Owens selected for her study came from a range of school cultures (those that prioritize restorative justice policies and those with more punitive policies) and a variety of demographic make-ups.

What she found shows other researchers that while individual biases can't be ignored, when thinking of remedies to disparities in school discipline, organizational context must be factored in as well.

Possible systemic remedies to discipline disparities

To address biases of individual teachers, Owens cites research that found training around building empathy was more effective than anti-bias training.

But she and other scholars note that for any intervention at the individual level to work, there needs to be a consideration for teachers' workloads.

It's why Anne Gregory, a professor in the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University, said teachers need time and support in their already packed schedules to reflect on their relationships with students and what implicit biases they may carry and act on.

"I want to try to move away from a teacher blaming perspective, try to understand more of how we can support teachers in improving and reflecting on their practice," Gregory said.

Jessika Bottiani, a research associate professor at the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia, said in the long term, diversifying the teacher workforce, investing in more culturally responsive teaching, and social-emotional learning, are ways to cultivate school cultures of belonging and respect to get ahead of misbehavior.

There's also a need for a mindset shift around the purpose of school discipline. Historically it's been thought of as a means of control, to get students to fall in line, and act in specific ways, Bottiani said. But if the goal is to get students to come to school engaged in what they are learning and respectful of themselves and others, that requires less a culture of control and more a culture that is focused on understanding and meeting students' developmental and psychological needs as conditions for learning, and tapping their cultural strengths as funds of knowledge to support their engagement.

Overall, as Owens' study found, administrators need to be thinking about prevention and intervention from a policy perspective, Gregory said, and not leave decisions about how to address student behavior solely to teachers. And equity needs to be front and center when thinking of interventions and culture shifts at a school or district.

"Dr. Owens' study highlights, underscores, emphasizes the importance of us directly confronting issues around racial bias," Gregory said.

Gregory added that Owens' notion of blameworthiness, which comes from criminal justice research, is also something schools need to explore more in the K-12 field.

"When do we perceive blame? Guilt, lack of innocence? And when did we give people the benefit of the doubt? Or when do we have more empathy? That concept in itself could be a good cornerstone for intervention and to reduce disparities in discipline," she said.



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