A new way of thinking about reducing racial disparities in discipline

BY JASON OKONOFUA

About 1 in 20 K-12 students are suspended from school each year. For many years of my education, I was one of them. As a Black boy growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, I excelled at my schoolwork but struggled with school discipline.

I once stood up for another kid who was about to get paddled in front of the class. I said it wasn't right. The teacher said that I would get paddled next. I refused, so I was sent to the principal's office.

With each incident like this, my sense of frustration and unfairness mounted, and so did my disciplinary record. By 10th grade, I had attended a half-dozen schools, getting suspended four times and expelled once.

Students from marginalized groups — including Black and Latinx students and students with individualized education plans (IEPs) — experience suspension much more frequently than their peers. In other words, students

like me are suspended not just for what they do, but also for who they are. Not only does this cost students learning time, but it also carries long-term consequences, as suspensions are associated with higher risks of underemployment and incarceration.

As a Black male with a history of suspensions, I was disproportionately likely to be branded as a troublemaker and suspended repeatedly. This unforgiving cycle could have easily derailed my education. Instead, I went on to earn a PhD in social psychology and study research-based methods for helping students succeed in school and reducing suspension rates.

GOOD INTENTIONS, FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS

Teachers come to school to teach, and kids come to school to learn. Teachers feel pressure to make sure students are learning what they should. If a student misbehaves, teachers might worry that they might not reach the student learning goals they're held accountable for. Students, meanwhile, have their own goals for their lives and their learning. If they are punished for their behavior, they might wonder if a

teacher respects them or dislikes them in some way.

When you put those goals and worries in the same classroom, sometimes a vicious cycle can ensue. A student misbehaves, and a teacher punishes the student. The student responds to the punishment with more — and more severe — misbehavior.

Unfortunately, negative stereotypes can accelerate and escalate this growing tension. Under duress, both teacher and student draw on assumptions about the other, particularly if students are from a marginalized group. The teacher may label the student as a troublemaker. The student, responding to perceived bias, may label the teacher as unfair.

These fixed labels feed a self-fulfilling prophecy. Stereotypes serve as glue, sticking otherwise unrelated behavior together to make it seem like a pattern. The label "troublemaker" leads teachers to discipline the student more severely because they see the behavior as a sign of disrespect. In the long run, this cycle can alienate students from school. It also leads to significant frustration and job dissatisfaction for teachers and interrupted learning time for other students in the classroom.

LIMITED EFFECTIVENESS OF EXISTING INTERVENTIONS

One of the most striking things about the racial disparities in suspensions is how consistent they are. This problem has been well-documented for years (e.g., Wu et al., 1982). There is no shortage of well-intentioned efforts to address bias, yet gaps persist. In general, most strategies to contend with racial bias aim to reduce racial bias itself. Yet these approaches show weak and short-lived results at best and do little to change behavior (Paluck et al., 2021).

In school, approaches to racial disparities in discipline have focused on prescriptive policies or intensive skill-building programs, each with mixed results. First, some states have banned the use of out-of-school suspension as a consequence for common interpersonal offenses for which racial disparities are largest (e.g., "willful defiance"). These approaches may reduce this classification of offenses, but they do not necessarily prevent the offenses or students' exclusion from the classroom by other means, such as in-school suspensions.

Second, many districts have

adopted Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which uses multitiered models that call for resource-intensive skill-building programs such as professional behavioral coaches and individualized learning experiences for students to learn better behavior. PBIS has reduced overall suspension rates in elementary schools but is rarely effective at higher grade levels when both suspension rates and racial disparities spike (e.g., Vincent et al., 2015).

INTERVENTION THROUGH EMPATHY

Given the lack of sustained improvement, it's time to pivot. Research shows that it's more effective to build empathy than to try to reduce bias directly. In some settings (e.g., schools), inequities can be mitigated with a mindset focused on empathy or "getting perspective." And with more perspective, bias is less likely to shape decision-making, a process called disambiguation (Spencer et al., 2016).

In 2016, my colleagues and I conducted a rigorous study on the power of empathy in reducing student-teacher conflict (Okonofua et al., 2016). We worked with teachers of about 1,600 students in middle schools across three school districts in California. Some teachers were randomly assigned to complete a brief, online exercise focused on empathic teaching practices, such as seeking to learn from students what they think and experience.

Teachers who completed this exercise were better equipped to support positive behavior, and their students were 50% less likely to be suspended over the coming school year, compared to teachers who were randomly assigned to a control exercise about incorporating technology in teaching practices.

Why did this approach work when other efforts to address bias tend to fall short? We believe it's because, instead of trying to rewire a lifetime of unconscious assumptions, we instead

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seek to sideline bias and reduce its control over teachers' behavior. To do so, we elevate an ideal self in teachers, one that prioritizes strong working relationships with students, especially when they misbehave, and a goal — to help students grow and improve — for which bias would be maladaptive.

The concept of empathy is not new to teachers, but under stress, teachers can easily lose sight of the relationships they want to build with their students and the goals they have for their students' success. What we wanted to do is help teachers renew their empathy and access it in stressful environments. By activating empathy, teachers are primed to start by seeking to understand why the student is misbehaving and focus on sustaining positive relationships even when students misbehave, rather than immediately focusing on disciplinary action.

A SCALABLE INTERVENTION

To scale this approach, my colleagues and I designed a short course for educators called Empathic Instruction. The 45-minute online professional learning course, implemented in partnership with TNTP, builds on the latest psychological research and is, to date, the only science-based intervention to reduce disparities in suspension rates.

Participating teachers begin by affirming their values and sharing why they became teachers. Then educators briefly reflect on why students might

misbehave and how they might respond to student misbehavior while also understanding the student's perspective, believing in student growth, and operating in alignment with their values and the reasons they became teachers.

This activity helps teachers take a different perspective and consider a different narrative when students misbehave. Rather than labeling a misbehaving student a troublemaker, teachers respond with empathy and tell themselves the student is trying their best.

This may sound simple, but it can be powerful in practice. Longitudinal studies of this intervention with 66 middle school math teachers and more than 5,800 students show that the intervention improved student-teacher relationships and student behavior and decreased suspension rates, particularly for students of color and those with IEPs, as measured by eligibility for special education. Pilot research shows it may also increase teacher job satisfaction, a key predictor of teacher retention.

Moreover, the reduction in suspensions persisted through the next year when students interacted with different teachers, suggesting that empathic treatment with even one teacher in a critical period can improve students' trajectories through school (Okonofua et al., 2022). We don't yet know exactly why. The improved relationship with one teacher may support a stronger sense of belonging at school and improve student behavior overall. Perhaps the experience shifted adolescents' developing beliefs about the kinds of relationships they have or can have with teachers, beliefs that underlie their behavior in school.

As we scale this approach to different school contexts, many research questions remain: Is this approach equally powerful in different grades and subjects? How do we balance in-school and out-of-school suspensions? Can teachers maintain

this empathic mindset year after year, or do they need a regular refresher with each new class of students?

No single intervention is a panacea. Empathic Instruction reduces the racial gaps in suspensions, but it does not close them fully. For example, it reduced the racial disparity in suspension rates by 45%. However, the potential for a brief, online, and low-cost approach to reduce suspensions is significant for theory, practice, and policy. We have powerful new evidence that we can create a more affirming, equitable experience for students by focusing less on reducing bias and more on building empathy.

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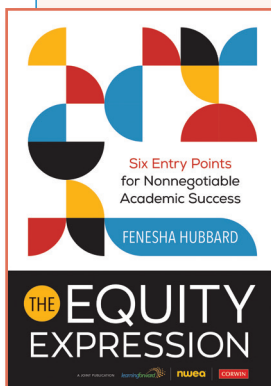
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