Mind the Gap: Addressing the Disproportionate Rate of Discipline of Black Students in the Public Education System

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ABSTRACT— Within public education, it has been shown that there is a disproportionate rate of discipline between Black and White students. A literature review was conducted to identify prevailing themes as to why this gap occurs, what factors maintain it, and what can educators do to reduce it. Several themes were found and are detailed in this paper in the following order: First, several studies have debunked the previously held idea that low socioeconomic status and the Differential Involvement theory could be explanations for the disproportionate rate of discipline. Second, there are two leading factors, among many others, that maintain the disproportionate rate of discipline: individual teachers and their daily interactions with students and a cultural disconnect between faculty and students. Third, three ways to reduce this discipline gap are promoting cultural competence, implementing proactive disciplinary practices, and, at the highest level, total policy reform.

Keywords: Education, public education, special education, discipline, disproportionate discipline

I. INTRODUCTION

Decades of research have shown that time and time again Black students are disproportionally disciplined in the public education system when compared to their White peers. Studies have found that Black students are disciplined 3-7 times more than White students (Bradshaw et al., 2010, p. 509), are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended (Huang, 2018, p. 290) and in urban districts 3-22 times as likely to be suspended (Wallace et al., 2008, p. 2), and 2.27 times more likely to receive an office discipline referral (ODR) (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 762). In 2000, it was reported that Black students make up only 17% of the U.S. public school population, yet they disproportionally account for 32% of suspended students; however, White students make up

50% of the population and 63% of suspended students, a more proportionate ratio (Young et al., 2018, p. 98). These discrepancies lead to what is known as the discipline gap: the disproportional overrepresentation of Black students in discipline compared to the proportional representation of White students. It has also been shown that within the discipline gap, Black students receive harsher consequences than White students for the same offense (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019, p. 478) and are more likely to receive an ODR for less serious, subjective offenses. Several studies have shown that Black students are referred more for disruption, disrespect, insubordination, nonviolent offenses, defiance, loitering, and tardiness (Vincent & Tobin, 2011; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Nasir et al., 2013; Skiba et al., 2002). Whereas White students are referred more for smoking, vandalism, obscene language, and leaving without permission (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Skiba et al, 2002). Identification of those behaviors from Black students relies heavily on subjective interpretation from the teacher administering the ODR and may result in consequences more severe than deserved.

Establishing the existence and impact of the discipline gap is one thing; however, identifying the causes and factors that perpetuate it is a complex task, as there are social, academic, personal, and countless other influences involved. Finding a solution to the discipline gap will prove to be even more difficult as this is a multifaceted issue to which there is no one answer for. With that knowledge, this paper aims to describe two hypotheses commonly found in discipline gap literature, two potential factors that maintain the gap, and three ways to reduce the gap on an individual, school wide, and systemic level.

II. HYPOTHESES

Within the literature surrounding the disproportionate discipline of Black students, there are two early hypotheses that attempt to explain the cause of the discipline gap. The first being that lower socioeconomic status (SES) is the reason for disparities in discipline and that lower SES students were more likely to display inappropriate behaviors (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Huang, 2018; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Salend et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). Studies have shown that lower SES students are more likely to be suspended (Huang, 2018, p. 285) and that SES is predictive for receiving exclusionary discipline (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 763); however, the idea that poorer students commit more offenses has been disproven in many studies. In a 2018 article by Welsh and Little, they reference a study that found when controlling for SES, race and gender disparities in discipline persisted (p. 763). Another article found that when you control SES, gender, and disability, Black students still had a higher risk of suspension (Huang, 2018, p. 285). Other articles, like in Whitford et al. (2016), suggest that SES research is shifting and finding that SES has little to no effect on disproportionality (p. 123).

The second hypotheses seen in early discipline literature is known as the Differential Involvement Theory; the theory that Black students commit more frequent and more severe infractions (Bell, 2020, p. 8; Huang, 2018, p. 284). If this were the case then the disproportionality in discipline would be an appropriate response to the level of behavior displayed (Huang, 2018, p. 284); however, several studies have shown that this is not the case. For example, Nasir et al. (2013), states that there is an increased likelihood for Black male students to be labeled as "difficult" or "disruptive," but there is no evidence of Black male students misbehaving more (p. 491). Skiba et al. (2002), found that analysis of racial disparities failed to show a pattern of more serious misbehavior in Black students (p. 334). There is no overwhelming evidence that supports the idea that Black students inherently commit more

offenses. Research into the Differential Involvement Theory, with regards to discipline, has shown that it is not the cause of the disproportionality and has led researchers to conduct subsequent studies into other possible factors that may cause and maintain the discipline gap.

III. MAINTAINING FACTORS

As stated before, identifying potential factors that maintain the discipline gap is multifaceted and complex. As it would be an incredibly difficult task to both create and discuss an exhaustive list of possible factors, this paper selects only two to discuss: individual teachers and cultural disconnect.

A. Individual Teachers

It may seem that individual teachers could not be responsible for such a large-scale problem as the disproportionate rate of discipline; however, it is the individual teacher who interacts with the student, decides what is and is not inappropriate behavior, and, ultimately, is the one writing an ODR. Efficient and effective teachers not only must have the skills to teach academic topics to students, but they must also be equipped with the necessary classroom management skills. When teachers have poor classroom management skills it often leads to a loss of control over the classroom, which, in the short-term, can lead to more inappropriate behaviors from students, and, in the long-term, causes fear and anxiety in the teacher (Fenning & Rose, 2007, p. 537). This fear

can lead teachers to rely on more reactive, harsher punishments in an attempt to regain control; however, all the teacher is doing is widening the discipline gap.

Poor classroom management skills coupled with the intense workload of teaching, lead educators to rely on stereotypes to quickly assess a situation. Stereotypes allow for quick, but biased, social judgments, and, in a school setting, allow the teacher to assign certain labels to groups of students (Kuensh & Noltemeyer, 2019, p. 472). There is a societal stereotype that Black men are more threatening and dangerous, and if teachers, consciously or unconsciously, accept that stereotype they are more likely to disproportionately discipline Black male students (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 336). A study referenced by Welsh and Little (2018), found that teachers are more likely to think there is a pattern of misbehavior in Black students and approach the behavior more harshly compared to identical misbehavior from White students (p. 764).

B.   Cultural Disconnect

The majority of educators are White middle-class women, and their students are increasingly composed of minority individuals (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 764). Studies have shown that cultural values like communalism, verve, and the use of movement are particularly important to the Black community but are rarely encouraged or supported in the classroom (Bradshaw et al., 2010, p. 509). Other cultural aspects such as clothing, hair style, music and the use of Ebonics and slang are valued in Black culture but seem to be incompatible with the majority White culture of education (Bell, 2020; Nasir et al., 2013). This leads to Black students feeling less valued or wanted in the classroom, which can turn into feelings of apathy between the student and their education. A study found that when students felt that their teachers did not value them and held low expectations, Black students were more likely to admit to being defiant;

furthermore, when teachers felt that their students were apathetic and defiant, they were more likely to refer those students for misbehavior (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 767).

IV. REDUCING THE GAP

These factors, and countless others, must be addressed if disproportionality in discipline is to be fixed; however, as mentioned previously, this is an intricate multifaceted problem that does not have one solution. It will take long-term, proactive, and cooperative work from members at all levels of the education industry to reduce and eliminate the discipline gap. This paper examines three potential ways to reduce the overrepresentation of Black students in discipline: promoting cultural competence, proactive discipline, and policy reform.

C.   Promoting Cultural Competence

Cultural incompetence has an astounding impact on how educators teach and discipline their students. A study referenced by Whitford and Katsiyannis (2016), found that teachers can successfully reduce their implicit bias by implementing stereotype replacement, counterstereotypic imaging, perspective taking, and through contact; however, reducing implicit bias hinges on the individual's awareness and acceptance of their own prejudices (p. 128). There is also a lack of culturally inclusive instructional methods and curricula. By incorporating culturally responsive instructional strategies like emphasizing verbal interactions, focusing on real-world tasks, and facilitating divergent thinking, students can find relevant connections, feel valued, and are more likely to be engaged in the material (Salend et al., 2002, pp. 293-294).

D.   Proactive Discipline

School-wide positive behavioral supports (SWPBS) is a set of disciplinary practices that are built on the assumption that when behavioral expectations are defined, supported, and implemented by the entire school, it establishes a culture where students are equally held to the same standards (Vincent & Tobin, 2011, p. 218). Elements of SWPBS include proactive teaching of school-wide behavioral expectations, consistent reinforcement of expected behavior and consistent consequences for inappropriate behavior, and the use of data in decision making (Vincent & Tobin, 2011, p. 218). Several studies have found that SWPBS is correlated with decreases in ODRs, suspensions, and misbehavior (Welsh & Little, 2018; Vincent & Tobin, 2011; Huang, 2018; Fenning & Rose, 2007). Within SWPBS, the use of a diverse disciplinary team, composed of general and special educators, service staff, community members, parents, students, and other important members, has been found to be incredible successful in reducing reliance on stereotypes, implicit bias, reducing misbehaviors, and increasing cultural competence (Fenning & Rose, 2007, p. 551). In general, SWPBS is associated with the reduction of ODRs, suspensions and expulsions; however, some studies have found that there is little evidence that SWPBS is associated with reducing the disproportionality in discipline (Vincent & Tobin, 2011, p. 227). It can then be concluded that SWPBS is an excellent starting point for reducing the disproportionality in discipline, but there is more work needed, possibly at a systemic level.

C. Policy Reform

Zero tolerance policies were established in the 1990s for drug use, alcohol use, and gun possession in reaction to a perceived threat that violence in schools was on the rise (Wallace et al., 2008, pp. 6-7). Zero tolerance policies were meant to create predetermined consequences for behaviors that would endanger students; however, most schools came to expand on zero tolerance policies to include minor infractions that had little to no impact on school safety

(Wallace et al., 2008, p. 2). Since minor infractions are being met with pre-determined severe consequences, like suspension and expulsion, there are serious implications for students' short-term academic performance as well as their long-term social and economic standing (Wallace et al., 2008, p. 2). There is evidence that suggests that zero tolerance policies are not beneficial for school safety or school discipline, and policymakers should repeal and replace zero tolerance policies and the federal, state, and district levels (Monroe, 2005; Wallace et al., 2008; Welsh & Little, 2018; Whitford & Katsiyannis, 2016; Young et al., 2018).

V. CONCLUSION

The disproportionality in the discipline of Black students is not a new finding. There are decades of research solidifying the fact that Black students are punished more frequently and more severely than any other group of students. Research has found that there are several contributing factors that perpetuate the overrepresentation of Black students in discipline including deficits in classroom management skills, reliance on stereotypes, implicit bias, lack of cultural competence, disconnect between student and teacher, and countless others. Policies, like zero tolerance, have also strayed away from their original intention and have caused more harm than good. There are strategies to reduce the disproportionality, like incorporating culturally responsive curricula and instructional strategies, developing a diverse disciplinary team, and implementing school-wide positive behavioral support systems. Despite the positive correlation these strategies have, studies have shown that the disproportionality in discipline remain, leading to the conclusion that this is a multifaceted systemic issue rooted in racially biased and racist policies, practices, and disciplinary actions.

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