

Thinking systematically: Disrupting systems that maintain discipline inequities

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Abstract

High rates of suspension, expulsion, and/or arrests for perceived inappropriate behaviors has become the norm in schools and districts across the United States of America. Though there is not one single cause, it is clear discriminatory and biased decision-making exists. To adequately address disparities in rates of exclusionary practices, interventions at various points within oppressive systems and from multiple fields of influence are required. This article seeks to provide broad guidelines to support administrators with developing a systematic approach to replacing current systems of inequity with systems founded on equity, cultural responsiveness, and anti-racist practices.

Impact Statement: This article will assist educational practitioners (e.g., administrators, school psychologists, academic and behavioral coaches) from a culturally responsive and anti-racist perspective, in thinking about ways to utilize a systemic approach to mitigate discipline disparities in schools and across school districts. Evidence-based practices for school and district implementation are discussed using a socio-ecological model.

Key words: *Discipline, Equity, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support*

Thinking Systematically: Disrupting Systems that Maintain Discipline Inequities

Embedded in the culture of today's schools, are exclusionary practices used as "disciplinary techniques". Exclusionary practices remove a student from the classroom and instruction or school building after the student has been observed as having exhibited what teachers or administrators perceive as an undesired behavior (Nese & McIntosh, 2016). These practices range from the least restrictive (e.g., time-out, buddy rooms/ a sitting area in a neighboring classroom, sitting in the hallway, detention) to the most restrictive (i.e., in-school-suspension [ISS], out-of-school suspension [OSS], and expulsion). No matter the intensity, all exclusionary practices remove the student from access and engagement in academic instruction and social skills development opportunities. In contrast, discipline is defined as "training [teaching] that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character" and "to train [teach] or develop by instruction and exercise especially in self-control" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). By virtue of the definition, exclusionary practices are not disciplinary techniques as they simply do not teach character, self-control, or prosocial skills. Rather than teaching, reteaching, modeling, and reinforcing prosocial behaviors, schools and districts have traditionally chosen to address undesired student behaviors by applying exclusionary practices.

The intended outcomes schools seek to obtain by implementing exclusionary practices do not transpire (Green et al., 2018b). For example, one outcome for which schools seek to use exclusionary practices is to reduce the undesired behaviors exhibited by the student (Losen, 2013). However, there is no research demonstrating that exclusionary practices reduce the rate of undesired student behaviors. Instead, studies have found high rates of recidivism among students who have been suspended (Gregory et al., 2010). A second outcome schools seek when utilizing exclusionary practices is to improve the teaching and learning environment (Losen, 2013).

Conversely, these practices yield loss of access to and engagement with critical academic instruction, increased risk of student dropout, and are predictive of future anti-social behaviors (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2011). Further, schools with high rates of OSS have lower achievement and lower student perceptions of school safety (American Psychological Association, 2008). A third outcome schools seek when using exclusionary practices is to increase parental involvement (e.g., parents may discipline students at home for school related incidents and become more active in the child's schooling; Losen, 2013). However, research indicates that fostering family and parental engagement over time (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014) with systems level supports (e.g., collaborating with parents in the development and implementation of school initiatives and activities; Tseng et al., 2011) is more effective. And arguably, a fourth outcome schools seek when utilizing exclusionary practices is to punish students who "disrupt" the status-quo and historical Eurocentric ideologies. For example, in 2017, two Muslim students were sent home from school for wearing hijabs without permission slips. School administrators informed the students, that they had to carry permission slips to wear hijabs without which they would not be allowed to attend school (Canal, 2017). A more recent example occurred in Spring 2020 when two Black teenage boys were suspended from school for wearing their hair in long locks. The U.S. District Judge barred one of the boys from attending his high school graduation and senior prom (Griffith, 2020). Two years later, another Black teenage boy in the same district was placed in ISS for a month, then transferred to the District Alternative Education Placement for the same dress-code violation (Nguyen, 2023). Certainly, U.S. public schools include students from a variety of races, ethnicities, religions, cultures, and belief systems that affect how they show up in schools. These examples highlight how the current education system seeks assimilation while steadfast students push back, demanding culturally sustaining practices (i.e.,

strategies used to welcome and encourage all students' cultures and not simply that of the majority; Paris, 2021) and anti-racist policies.

Despite discrediting research and legislation requesting discontinuance of exclusionary practices, school systems continue to use these practices at alarming rates, especially for students of color (i.e., non-White students), Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Further, these student groups are more likely to receive more restrictive exclusionary practices than their white, non-disabled peers, or peers from higher socio-economic environments (Skiba et al., 2011). The consequence of applying such practices affects students' ability to develop, practice, and maintain positive relationships and places them further behind academically.

In the 2015-2016 school year, students across the United States lost 11,360,004 million days of instruction due to OSS (Losen & Whitaker, 2017). When data were disaggregated by race, the days of lost instruction due to OSS was found to be higher among all ethnic groups, except Asian students, when compared to White students. Black students had the highest number of missed days of instruction (66 days) per 100 students compared to their White peers (14 days). Students with disabilities lost 44 days of instruction compared to the 20 days per 100 students experienced by their peers without disabilities. When students lose access to and engagement with instruction, they fall academically behind their peers which increases their drop-out risk. Noltemeyer and colleagues (2015) found that statistically, exclusionary practices significantly decreased students' academic achievement. Findings also yielded a statistically significant positive relationship between the overall OSS rate and dropout. Exclusionary practices rob students of opportunities to develop and practice prosocial behaviors and receipt of an exclusionary practice is a predictor of future anti-social behaviors (Lee et al., 2011).

While attending school, Black individuals are pushed out (Varela et al., 2020) by the invisible hand of a racist system; reminiscent of desegregation when Black students were literally, physically pushed out of their schools despite the 1954 passing of Brown vs. Board of Education. From an educational lens, collective fields must do their part to hold to the values and ethics of their professions that essentially claim to serve and educate children and youth towards becoming contributing and self-sustaining citizens. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to support district (e.g., superintendents, curriculum specialists) and building level (e.g., Principal, coaches) leadership teams in dismantling current disciplinary approaches through the systematic and equitable application of evidence-based practices, cultural responsiveness, and anti-racist ideologies.

Systematic Levels of Influence

Eubanks et al. (2012) states:

Schools are a major part of society's institutional processes for maintaining a relatively stable system of inequality. They contribute to these results by active acceptance and utilization of a dominant set of values, norms and beliefs, which, while appearing to offer opportunities to all, actually support the success of a privileged minority and hinder the efforts and visions of a majority. (p. 1)

The overuse of exclusionary practices is a systemic issue maintained by European cultural practices and perspectives (Ford, 2016). As such, the disruption of such a system calls for strategic interventions that are anti-racist and focus on equity at various points of entry within that system. This task can be accomplished using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model as it directly relates to the multiple levels of factors that influence a student's outcomes. Bronfenbrenner posits children exist in interrelated ecosystems (i.e., home, school, and society),

classified as the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem. In this article, the socio-ecological model will be used to theorize how the classroom, school building, and school district can abandon current practices of oppression and further marginalization while working towards becoming an equitable environment. Specifically, this article will discuss a systematic approach, grounded within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model, to disrupt current practices impinging upon student access to equitable, preventative, and positive evidence-based practices at the micro (i.e., classroom), meso (i.e., school building), and macro (i.e., school district) levels of a school system.

Viewing the Classroom as a Microsystem

The microsystem encompasses an individual's immediate environment and is a setting where the student develops and experiences roles, activities, and interpersonal relations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When thinking about microsystems in preschool-12 education, we can look at a student's classroom environment. Students' interactions with their teachers (e.g., discriminatory decision-making and application of exclusionary practices) affect their academic growth and prosocial development. To reduce the likelihood of engaging in detrimental patterns of practice that often lead to dismal outcomes, teachers should be skilled in at least two concepts – evidence-based practices and function-based thinking.

Equitable Implementation of Evidence-based Practices

Research indicates teachers feel unprepared to address students with perceived undesired behaviors because many teachers feel they have been insufficiently trained to prevent and remediate various student behaviors (State et al., 2011). As such, classrooms are staffed with teachers who struggle with classroom management and instructional practices. Thus, while there is an urgent need for teachers to use evidence-based practices that promote students' academic

achievement and prosocial behavior (Gresham, 2015; Kern & Clemens, 2007), there is an equally if not greater need that they receive ongoing training and coaching on the implementation of these practices.

Basic, universal evidence-based practices include a maximized structure that includes the following elements; post, teach, review, monitor, and reinforce expectations; active engagement; use of a continuum of support to respond to desired behaviors; and use of a continuum of support to respond to undesired behaviors, among others (Simonsen et al., 2008). More specifically, instructional strategies such as using explicit instruction, scaffolding supports, pre-teaching vocabulary, opportunities to respond, and flexible grouping are proven to prevent undesired behaviors from occurring in the learning environment (McLeskey et al., 2017). Further, to respond to desired behaviors and increase the likelihood that students will continue exhibiting desired behaviors, highly effective practices such as behavior specific praise or positive feedback statements (Royer et al., 2019) and precorrections (Ennis et al., 2017) are known to increase rates of desired behaviors in the classroom. However, when using evidence-based practices, teachers must be sure to implement them equitably as opposed to equally. That is, while teachers seek to meet the minimum recommended rate of a strategy (e.g., about 4 positive feedback statements per minute; Reinke et al., 2008) for all students (this would be ensuring equality), students with higher rates of undesired behaviors may benefit from additional positive feedback statements (this would be ensuring equity). Equity ensures all students receive the practice they need at the rate at which they need it, while equality ensures all students receive all rates of the same practices regardless of need. Additionally, though a practice may be evidence-based, it is also important to evaluate for whom that practice has shown promise, and for whom it has not. Students may respond better, or worse, to aspects of an intervention or strategy because of

cultural alignment, relationships with the individuals delivering the support, or other contextual factors. Analysis of these differences are important to ensure that every student receives the support they need, and not simply the support that works for everyone else.

Function-based Thinking

Function-based thinking is “a model for thinking and a systematic process for defining undesired behaviors and selecting interventions that match the function of the behavior” (Hershfeldt et al., 2010, p.13). In the classroom, teachers would use function-based thinking to determine the function (i.e., purpose or reason) for a student’s current or ongoing behavior and supporting the student in meeting that function using a socially preferred behavior. Function-based thinking is drawn from the research-based components of Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA; O’Neill et al., 1997). Although in practice FBAs are typically reserved for students requiring a higher level of support, teachers would greatly benefit from a deeper understanding of the theoretical components (i.e., identifying functions of behavior, teaching replacement behaviors, reinforcing desired behaviors). Such an understanding may lead to effective implementation. When teachers can identify the function, a function-based intervention (or strategy) can be used to address the undesired behavior; in turn, leading to decreased rates of undesired behaviors (Sugai & Lewis-Palmer, 2004) and reduce the subsequent use of exclusionary practices. Furthermore, students who have historically experienced exclusion from school, and lack a sense of belonging and support may engage in further undesired behavior to escape a learning environment that has been aversive and punishing. Thus, by providing a welcoming, supportive, and engaging learning environment for historically underserved students, limiting exclusionary practices is crucial in addressing behaviors that may have grown out of

years of experiencing schools that made these students, and their families, feel as though they do not belong.

As with the implementation of all evidence-based practices, function-based thinking can be helpful in reducing disparate treatment. For example, in a study conducted by Gilliam and colleagues (2016), preschool teachers wearing an eye-tracking device were asked to watch a video of students playing in a classroom and to look for sign of undesired behaviors, although there were not any. Results indicated that teachers watched the Black children, especially the boys, more than the other students in the classroom. In another study, Markowitz and colleagues (2023) used natural language processing strategies to examine the written content in over 3.5 million office discipline referrals from a sample of over 4,000 U.S. schools. Findings indicated teachers wrote longer and more negatively worded descriptions of incidents for Black students, especially girls, than White students. Because teachers' perceptions of behavior can significantly influence their decision-making and use of exclusionary practices, function-based thinking can help to neutralize teacher perspectives while they try to make sense of the student's behavior from a scientific perspective. At the same time, teachers should assess their culture, biases, and potentially racist ideologies as well as the culture of their students when making decisions and implementing evidence-based practices (e.g., Might this behavior be culturally related? Am I viewing this behavior from my cultural perspective only?). The need to recognize the benefits of cultural identities and confront racist ideologies will be discussed in a forthcoming section.

Viewing the School Building as a Mesosystem

The Mesosystem consists of interactions between different ecosystems formed over time in which a child exists and interacts (e.g., home and school; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within school buildings, students are often expected to assimilate into the school culture. Further, this

expectation leaves many students vacillating between the home and school cultures. This is especially true for students whose home culture directly contrasts with the dominant Eurocentric culture present within U.S. schools. This cultural incongruence is a systematic factor that tends to yield biased and racist perspectives about a student's behavior that can lead to the use of exclusionary practices (Skiba et al., 2013). Therefore, schools should actively create systems that explicitly draw upon what a student learns and values at home to enhance the school environment.

School Climate and Culture

A positive school climate fosters students' academic and social development and promotes student mobility which includes aesthetics of an environment such as, physical and social-emotional safety, and allows students to feel respected and engaged (LaSalle, 2018). School climate is defined as the collective perceptions of educators, staff, students, and parents (Gray, 2007) and encompasses three characteristics: safety, engagement, and environment (Cohen et al., 2009b). Extensive research has demonstrated that a positive and sustained school climate enhances student success and healthy development, as well as promotes teacher retention (Cohen et al., 2009a).

The routine disbursement (e.g., beginning, middle, and end of year) of school climate surveys is one effective way of assessing the school's strengths, weaknesses, and areas needing improvement regarding culture and climate. When school climate is measured over time, it serves as a powerful tool to track progress towards goals, analyze data gathered within schools, and to compare across schools within the same district (Thapa et al., 2013). These surveys can be used to get a pulse on the feelings and perceptions of students in the school about the school and its systems. For example, California's Office to Reform Education (CORE) district leaders

gathered school climate survey data from various schools. Results from the surveys indicated that existing systems and practices were unsuccessful in improving student outcomes such as closing the achievement gap among Black and Hispanic/Latino students. These findings led to the development and implementation of new practices such as classroom management practices that promoted positive student-teacher relationships and enhanced students' social and emotional skills (Nayfack et al., 2017). Additionally, through school climate surveys the field of education has been informed that schools with higher rates of suspension and expulsion tend to make students feel less safe rather than safer as some educators might have instinctively thought (APA, 2008).

Monitoring Equitable Implementation of Evidence-based Practices

It is imperative for schools to gather data and implement an effective system that supports the use of practices implemented at the classroom level. Routine data collection, review, and decision-making to support effective teacher practices can reduce school violence and disruptive behaviors (McIntosh et al., 2017). Specifically, building teams should focus on developing long-term plans for monitoring and sustaining the equitable evidence-based practices teachers are implementing.

Research suggests routine teacher observations tied to coaching can be used to increase teachers' overall use and more equitable implementation of evidence-based practices (Gion et al., 2020; Green et al., 2020). For example, Green et al. (2020) conducted an exploratory study to determine whether general education teachers used evidence-based practices during instruction, and whether those practices were used at varied rates across different demographic groups, (i.e., race and disability risk). Results from the study revealed both lower rates of opportunities to respond and positive specific feedback offered to students who were considered by the teacher to

be at-risk for a behavioral disorder. Similarly, Gion and colleagues (2020) conducted an experimental study on classroom interventions to decrease racial disproportionality in discipline. Their focus was primarily on culturally responsive classroom behavior systems and bringing about a change in teacher behaviors (i.e., reprimands and use of praise). Results indicated a functional relation between teachers' use of classroom interventions such as increased rates of praise, and a significant decrease in reprimands towards African American students. Further, when teachers are engaged in self-evaluation and self-assessment opportunities, their improvement, professional growth, and changes in practices are demonstrated (Dunst et al., 2010).

Viewing the School District as a Macrosystem

The Macrosystem contains the norms, laws, and values within an ecosystem, that help facilitate growth, development, and interactions among students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although relatively distant to the student, the macrosystem has significant influence over the meso- and micro-systems and thus, the student. Continuing with the current conceptualization of Bronfenbrenner's model, the school district serves as the student's macrosystem.

McIntosh and Goodman (2016) state that district involvement is paramount, especially when supporting and implementing evidence-based practices, enacting effective policies, providing training, and overcoming barriers and obstacles. The district is key in providing resources and support as well as communicating expectations for implementing culturally responsive and anti-racist practices that support students at the building and classroom levels. Two ways districts can systematically disrupt disparities in their level of influence is through fostering a paradigm shift regarding discipline practices across the district by implementing

professional development and accountability standards and reviewing and revising discipline policies.

Paradigm Shift

A paradigm shift is historically viewed as a shared set of beliefs and agreements about how a problem is understood and subsequently addressed (Kuhn, 2012). For example, when school district policies banning hair styles are deemed discriminatory and racist (e.g., The CROWN Act, H.R.567) or when the idea of culture is differentiated from the idea of behavior (behavior is not racially related; Kendi, 2019), a paradigm shift has been made. Upon a paradigm shift, districts can begin to implement strategies that will foster the same paradigm shift through the meso- and micro- systems. These paradigm shifts can be achieved through (1) targeted, ongoing professional development at the district level and (2) implementation of accountability systems with concrete goals and objectives.

Professional Learning. In a multi-tiered system of support, equity and the implementation of equitable practices should begin at the universal level. To combat traditional and historic perspectives regarding exclusionary practices and student behavior, districts should begin with making sure educators have the knowledge to implement culturally responsive (Gay, 2013) and anti-racist practices (Kendi, 2019). Districts can strategically provide an iterative series of ongoing professional learning opportunities that can build educators' cultural proficiency (Cross, 2012) beginning by learning around Ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism. These phenomena require attention first as they affect teachers' perceptions of behavior and the selection and development of academic curricula and supplementary resources (Gay, 2013). However, professional learning, on its own, is not enough to invoke change. The professional

learning topics must be imbedded in other systems as previously mentioned in the explanation of the mesosystem.

Accountability. In practice, equity initiatives tend to be utilized as supplemental support. However, equity should be understood as the foundational practice across the district and within all schools. It is the district's responsibility to promote the message of equity and anti-racism and implement systems of practice and accountability that measure outcomes aligned with the stated goals and objectives. An "Equity Team" can assist districts in this task. Due to the intersection between school climate, culture, and ecology (LaSalle, 2018), Equity Teams can help create and revise systems, analyze data, problem solve, monitor action plans, and help departments develop goals and objectives for sustainability; especially in schools with discipline disparities (Green, 2018a). However, an Equity Team should be understood to be a temporary structure. These teams should dissolve as quickly as possible as the goal of the team is to change the daily workings of individual departments that are not functioning from an anti-racist and equity perspective. The Equity Team along with climate surveys can help monitor the effectiveness of culturally responsive and anti-racist practices imbedded in systems throughout the district and school buildings.

Address policies. Discipline policies are instrumental in influencing educator decisions regarding students' behaviors. Thus, discipline policies should align with the district's values (and paradigm shift) regarding the use of evidence-based practices to prevent and address undesired behaviors. In a systematic review of discipline policies, Green et al. (2021) found that most of the policies reviewed did not include recommended features of an effective discipline policy (e.g., focus on implementing positive, proactive behavior support practices; clear, objective discipline procedures). Additional findings demonstrated that districts often have

philosophies of discipline as well as mission and value statements that are unaligned with their discipline policies or student codes of conduct. The misalignment between these concepts can maintain discipline disparities.

The goal of discipline policies should be to provide clear guidelines for desired behavior and the equitable application of consequences to address undesired behaviors while maintaining a healthy and safe school climate and culture (Fenning & Bohanon, 2006). Therefore, when developing or revising policies for discipline, districts will need to ensure the use of positive, preventative, culturally responsive, anti-racist, and equitable practices that are explicitly written so they may be implemented systematically; that is, there are detailed plans available for educating faculty and staff on the policies and a system of accountability that monitors the policy implementation fidelity. Revisions can incorporate practices and components of policies that yield effectiveness (Author, 2015) so as not to cause further inequities. Further, to develop effective and non-discriminatory policies, districts should seek to include key stakeholders such as family members and individuals that represent their community to ensure policies are anti-racist, non-discriminatory, and culturally responsive (Author, 2015).

Conclusion

Given the need to support the use of preventative practices and best serve children and youth, especially students who have historically received disparate treatment, guidelines in this article provide crucial first steps towards dismantling systems of inequity at various levels. Implementing strategies such as parental involvement, function-based thinking, and policy revisions are practical ways to begin addressing educational inequities. Exclusionary practices and loss of access to instruction are not effective practices for increasing students' academic achievement and prosocial skills. Thinking about, responding to, and systematically

implementing practices that disrupt systems perpetuating inequities could have a positive impact on the large numbers of minoritized students attempting to receive a quality education in American schools.

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