



“We Have to Educate Every Single Student, Not Just the Ones That Look Like Us”: Support Service Providers’ Beliefs About the Root Causes of the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Youth of Color

Jessica L. Yang, Yolanda Anyon, Malina Pauline, Katherine E. Wiley, Donna Cash, Barbara J. Downing, Eldridge Greer, Ellen Kelty, Thomas Lee Morgan & Lisa Pisciotta

To cite this article: Jessica L. Yang, Yolanda Anyon, Malina Pauline, Katherine E. Wiley, Donna Cash, Barbara J. Downing, Eldridge Greer, Ellen Kelty, Thomas Lee Morgan & Lisa Pisciotta (2019): “We Have to Educate Every Single Student, Not Just the Ones That Look Like Us”: Support Service Providers’ Beliefs About the Root Causes of the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Youth of Color, *Equity & Excellence in Education*, DOI: [10.1080/10665684.2018.1539358](https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2018.1539358)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2018.1539358>



Published online: 21 Mar 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 41



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



“We Have to Educate Every Single Student, Not Just the Ones That Look Like Us”: Support Service Providers’ Beliefs About the Root Causes of the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Youth of Color

Jessica L. Yang^a, Yolanda Anyon^b, Malina Pauline^b, Katherine E. Wiley^b, Donna Cash^c, Barbara J. Downing^c, Eldridge Greer^c, Ellen Kelty^c, Thomas Lee Morgan^d, and Lisa Pisciotta^c

^aWinthrop University; ^bUniversity of Denver; ^cDenver Public Schools; ^dUniversity of Northern Colorado

ABSTRACT

This study adds to the extant research on the school-to-prison pipeline by investigating how school-based service providers and administrators conceptualize the causal mechanisms constraining and enabling the school-to-prison pipeline in a large urban district. Thirty-three schools were selected for the study based on their suspension rates. Support staff and district partners ($n=36$) participated in focus groups guided by semi-structured protocols. Most participants emphasized structural and systemic causes of the school-to-prison pipeline, such as institutional racism and poverty. To minimize the school-to-prison pipeline, participants highlighted the importance of relationship building and non-punitive practices in response to misbehavior, although solutions offered limited evidence of promising interventions. Given strong research indicating that racial disparities cannot be explained by differential behavior, scholarship in this area emphasizes the need to increase school-level practices that promote positive school climate. The persistence of exclusionary and punitive attitudes among a subset of the sample suggests a need for differentiated professional development to address competing frameworks for understanding the root causes of, and solutions to, the school-to-prison pipeline.

For over 25 years, researchers have been describing disproportionality in school discipline rates for students of color (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014a). National and state-level data have documented that black students are two to three times more likely to experience an exclusionary discipline event than white students, usually for subjective, low-level offenses like disruption and defiance (Wald & Losen, 2003). Yet, when controlling for socioeconomic status, disability, family structure, and adverse experiences, along with teacher- and self-reported behavior problems, it is demonstrated that race persists as a large and significant predictor of exclusionary disciplinary outcomes (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2014b; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Additionally, students who receive special education services, particularly those who are classified as emotionally or mentally disturbed (EMD) or who are diagnosed as mentally retarded (MR), are substantially more likely to experience exclusionary discipline (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002). Students classified as EMD are as much as 13 times more likely to be arrested at school for a behavioral infraction than a non-EMD student (Osher et al., 2002). This is

compounded for black students where, despite national decreases in prevalence rates for MR, they are as much as three times as likely to have this diagnosis than their white peers (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Findings illuminate that observed disparities in school discipline likely exist not because of student characteristics, but rather as a result of systemic practices that inequitably target students of color and youth with disabilities.

Understanding the etiology of disparate discipline practices is important; however, understanding the impact of the consequences of such practices also demands attention. Exclusionary discipline practices have been demonstrated to have negative impacts on students' school bonding, investment in rules and course work, and motivation to achieve academic success, especially among students of color (Allen & White-Smith, 2014; Dancy, 2014). Moreover, black special education students who experience exclusionary discipline are more likely to experience academic failure and drop out than special education students who are not black (Osher et al., 2002). The effects of exclusionary discipline include decreased probability of school success and increased likelihood of negative outcomes, such as school dropout, arrest, and incarceration (Allen & White-Smith, 2014; Fabelo et al., 2011; Mowen & Brent, 2016). These effects persist far beyond the immediate exclusionary event. For example, 73% of special education students of color who have experienced exclusionary discipline outcomes will be arrested in the five years after leaving school (Osher et al., 2002; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Wald and Losen (2003) describe this phenomenon as the school-to-prison pipeline a trajectory that occurs when school discipline policies (e.g., using exclusionary discipline practices) force young people out of school and into contact with the juvenile justice system. A review of the literature offers consistent themes of the school-to-prison pipeline, namely that there has been an overall increase in the use of exclusionary discipline practices, such practices have negative implications on life outcomes for students, and such exclusionary practices disproportionately affect black and (less consistently) Latino students, especially those who receive special education services (Osher et al., 2002; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Few have considered how this literature has been utilized by educators working with students of color and students receiving special education services. Stemming the school-to-prison pipeline can only happen if practitioners have evidence-informed notions about the root causes of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline and effective responses to this problem. To fill this gap in the literature, this article reports findings from a qualitative study of educational professionals' beliefs about the causes and solutions to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Literature review

Zero-tolerance policies

One of the primary mechanisms contributing to discipline disparities for students of color and special education students are zero-tolerance policies and the school-level criminalization of student misbehavior (Allen & White-Smith, 2014; Osher et al., 2002). The zero-tolerance philosophy is rooted in a belief that removing students from school is effective and necessary to maintain the integrity of a learning environment (Skiba et al., 2014a). Touted as a means of addressing drugs, alcohol, and guns in American schools, zero-tolerance legislation mandated severe, punitive, and predetermined consequences, typically mandating the use of exclusionary discipline without consideration for contextual factors (American Psychological Association, 2008). Over time, zero-tolerance policies have expanded to a wide variety of behavioral infractions, far beyond those related to drugs or weapons (Kupchik, 2010).

Zero-tolerance policies are intimately aligned with a "tough on crime" mindset that permeated American culture in the 1990s. In response to the occurrence of school shootings and fears about a rise in juvenile delinquency overall, zero-tolerance policies were utilized to reassure the public's

fear of unsafe schools (Fabelo et al., 2011). The adoption of a crime-control model of discipline often punishes students in a manner similar to the treatment of alleged and convicted adult criminals rather than using treatment or restoration, ideals which are the foundations of the juvenile justice system (Barton, 2016; Simon, 2007). Many of these schools also have integrated police officers into the school staff in order to handle discipline issues, even minor infractions, furthering the connection between school punishment and the criminal justice system and entrenching the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline (Cramer et al., 2014).

Effects of educational exclusion

Adult perceptions of youths' behaviors, including those that are developmentally typical (e.g., disrespect towards authority), as criminal, increases the use of punitive sanctions and labels students as offenders rather than allowing these adults to explore alternative explanations for misconduct (Noguera, 2003). Exposure to punitive discipline increases students' risk for negative outcomes such as grade retention, dropout, juvenile justice involvement, and later arrest (Mowen & Brent, 2016). Fabelo et al.'s (2011) research on school discipline and student success found that when students were suspended or expelled for a discipline violation, their likelihood for juvenile justice contact nearly tripled, and they were twice as likely to repeat a grade compared with those not being removed from school. More recently, Mowen and Brent (2016) found that suspended students are at greater risk for arrest the year following their sanction, and that this effect increases over time, a pattern echoed in the literature relating to special education students of color (Osher et al., 2002).

However, some factors may complicate this relationship, such as school alienation and reduced classroom time, which have been found to be predictors of delinquency for school-aged children (Barrett, 2011). Students who are suspended, expelled, or referred to law enforcement, or who attend schools with high suspension rates, are more likely to perceive their school environment as unsupportive and discriminatory (Anyon et al., 2016). Students who report low school bonding are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, like substance use, that are illegal and subject to state surveillance (Anyon et al., 2016). Regardless of the causal mechanisms that drive these patterns, there is overwhelmingly strong evidence of a relationship between punitive discipline and negative developmental outcomes.

Parallels to criminal justice

These patterns of racial disproportionality parallel those in the criminal justice system. In her seminal book, *The New Jim Crow* (2012), Michelle Alexander discusses the disparate criminal justice system which acts as a form of social control to keep people of color, particularly black men, at a permanent second-class status. Alexander (2012) reports that one in nine black men between the ages of 20 and 35 was incarcerated in 2006. Looking specifically at drug charges, the disproportionate rates of incarceration based on race are tremendous. Black men are incarcerated for drug charges at a rate 20 to 57 times more than white men, even though drug use rates are similar (Alexander, 2012). Such analogous inequities suggest that both our school and criminal justice systems work in a manner that consistently punishes black people at higher rates than white people, regardless of actual differences in behavior. Exclusionary practices are the first step into the pipeline, where youth of color are ushered into a trajectory that often appears to be set up for permanent disparate treatment. Recognizing the inequality at the adult criminal justice level proves the importance of implementing interventions at the school level if the school-to-prison pipeline is to be broken down.

Theoretical framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a strong theoretical framework through which one can understand the school-to-prison pipeline. Two tenets of CRT that best explain the school-to-prison pipeline are the ideas of whiteness as property and colorblindness.

Whiteness as property, or a process of protecting the rights of the dominant racial group at the expense of the marginalized (Harris, 1993) is observable in educational discipline policy. As Harris (1993) notes “whiteness and property share a common premise—a conceptual nucleus—of *a right to exclude*” (p. 1714, emphasis added). This is evident in the predominant narrative in public schools that disruptive youth should be removed and punished for their transgressions to promote the safety and well-being of other students in the school. That such disruptive and dangerous youth tend to be students of color is no accident. These narratives also promote social control, as described by Foucault (1980), in which schools are part of the institutional training system that reifies whiteness. Beyond curricular instruction, schools are designed to promote norms and expectations about appropriate behavior as a function of their role as an institution of social control. This is not new, in fact, the American educational system was originally designed to educate the white wealthy elite to adhere to the expectations that they would assume as adults (Dancy, 2014).

Over time the behavioral norms and expectations established by the wealthy white majority have become codified into educational discipline policy and touted as colorblind. Colorblindness in this context is the assumption that good behavior is not bound by a particular cultural context, instead it is objectively defined and all students should be equally held to the same standards (Author et al., 2017). Therefore it is not surprising to learn that the behavior of black students is often seen as defiant or disrespectful, as the lived experience of these individuals has been sanctioned for centuries as “less than” in contrast to the norms and expectations held by white communities (Dancy, 2014). Considering the above discussion around exclusionary discipline as it correlates with race, punitive practices, and negative life outcomes, prevention and alternative intervention through a CRT lens are vital in eliminating the school-to-prison pipeline and bringing equity to school discipline.

While the literature explains the present structure and impact of the school-to-prison pipeline further research is needed on how this phenomenon is understood by educators tasked with the responsibilities of supporting the most vulnerable students in the public school system. Looking specifically at [redacted] Public Schools, this study will explore how school-based student support providers and central office administrators understand the causes and potential solutions to the school-to-prison pipeline for youth of color. Identifying educators’ beliefs about the root causes of discipline problems, along with the types of actions they report using to battle the detrimental effects of exclusionary practices may offer insight into the degree to which discourses in academia about the school-to-prison pipeline have permeated the hearts and minds of practitioners. Understanding the daily practices regarding discipline strategies in addition to the presence of racial awareness as it relates to discipline is important information for those who wish to break-down the disproportionate discipline systems that currently exist. As such, our study aims to build an understanding of educators’ knowledge of racial disparities in discipline, the causes of the school-to-prison pipeline, along with their efforts to constrain this harmful trajectory.

Methods

This qualitative inquiry employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to examine how the root causes and possible solutions to the school-to-prison pipeline are understood by school-based and central office student support services staff within Denver Public Schools. IPA involves systematically identifying salient themes of participants’ lived experiences related to a

Table 1. Demographic Information ($n = 36$).

	<i>n</i>	%
Race		
White	23	64
Latina	6	17
Black	5	14
Multiracial/Other	2	6
Gender		
Female	28	78
Male	8	22
Role/Title		
School-based social worker, psychologist, or special educator	21	58
Central office administrator or technical assistance provider	15	42

particular phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). For this study, researchers sought to understand participants' experiences with, and perspectives about, discipline issues in a large urban district.

We conducted seven focus groups at multiple sites throughout the district in order to be accommodating to participants' varied work schedules and geographical locations. Focus groups consisted of four–nine individuals and averaged one and a half hours in length. The sample consisted of 36 student support professionals and was predominantly female ($n = 28$, 78%). The racial composition of the group was 64% white ($n = 23$), 17% Latino/a ($n = 6$), 14% black ($n = 5$), and 6% multiracial ($n = 2$). School psychologists and social workers comprised 58% of participants ($n = 21$), and office administrators or technical assistance providers constituted 42% ($n = 15$) of participants (see Table 1).

Focus groups used a semi-structured interview protocol and were facilitated in two phases. First, participants were asked to complete a brainstorming exercise where they identified factors related to suspension rates, such as: site-specific prevention and intervention practices, discipline policies and protocols, and district supports. These broad topics were gleaned from a pilot project that indicated such factors were critical in implementing non-exclusionary discipline practices at three schools within the same district (Anyon, 2016). Next, discussions were facilitated with the group to elicit narratives about school's approaches to discipline and information about the participants' personal beliefs about discipline and racial disparities.

Study context

This study was conducted as part of a researcher-practitioner partnership between the University [redacted] and the Division of Student Equity and Opportunity in Denver Public Schools. Members of this partnership have worked together since 2012 to improve school discipline outcomes and reduce racial discipline disparities in exclusionary discipline practices through action research.

Analysis

This study employed an IPA approach to elucidate how the school-to-prison pipeline is understood among student support service providers and administrators within the school district. All focus group data were transcribed verbatim and loaded into a qualitative data analysis software program, *Dedoose*. Findings were derived through an analysis process utilizing the parent codes of Race Talk and Root Causes/Solutions. The Race Talk code captured all discussion of race/ethnicity in reference or relation to students and/or staff members, with focus primarily on topics of discipline. Root Causes/Solutions explored the factors to which participants attributed students' perceived misbehavior and discussion of potential solutions for addressing such

Table 2. Parent codes & themes.

Race Talk: Applied to discussions of issues and topics related to race or ethnicity of students, staff, administrators, or issues of discipline	Root Causes/Solutions: Applied to discussions of factors to which participants attributed students' perceived misbehavior and discussion of solutions for addressing such behavior
Awareness of the problem of disproportionality: Applied to discussions about race that reflected or implied an awareness about discipline disparities such as roles of discrimination and bias, racial divides, or institutionalized racism in discipline outcomes	Extrinsic root causes: Attribution of misbehavior to systemic or structural issues impacting students, teachers, or schools. Intrinsic root causes: Attribution of misbehavior to an individual student, their family, or their community. Solutions: Discussions on mitigating or eliminating racial disparities in discipline or the school-to-prison pipeline

behavior; these were often paired together in participants' statements. Themes emerged within each parent code, leading to the development of four subcodes, awareness of the problem of disparities, extrinsic root causes, intrinsic root causes, and solutions (see Table 2). References to extrinsic factors suggests an anti-essentialist concept whereby something is attributed to factors *outside* of the student. For example, when people say, "The school system is bad." In contrast to this are intrinsic factors, where behavior is understood as something natural or essential to the student. For example, when people say, "Kids are bad." Coding occurred in two waves of analysis and all primary codes were assessed for inter-rater reliability across two researchers using Cohen's Kappa ($k > .80$).

Findings & discussion

This study adds to the extant research on the school-to-prison pipeline by exploring educators' beliefs about the root causes of, and solutions to, racially disparate outcomes in exclusionary discipline practices. Identifying how these issues are discussed among school administrators may offer insight into the types of interventions needed to ensure our most vulnerable students have access to evidence-based interventions. Results from this study indicate that there is awareness of disproportionality in discipline, a range of beliefs as to why it exists, and much more limited ideas about potential solutions. Participants provided discussions of root causes to misbehavior often involving acknowledgment that there was a root cause extrinsic or intrinsic to perceived student misbehavior. Solutions to the disproportionality often focused on the ways individuals contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Frequently, participants expressed understanding of the cause and solution simultaneously, therefore these themes are presented together.

Awareness of the problem of disproportionalities in discipline

Nearly all participants acknowledged that discipline disparities are present in district schools. As one participant described,

Are we really affecting disproportionality? ... Are we really going in the right positive direction at ending disproportionality with race and suspension? No, we're not ... it's still there, the segregation is still there, it's still a problem ... what else can we do to really have a positive effect at ending disproportionality? Because right now, we're not. It's not ending.

Recognition of the existence of racial disparities, the need for change, and emphasis on the lack of impact current practices have on disproportionality was shared by many, though not universally. However, all participants expressed a common consciousness that racially disparate discipline outcomes persist.

Most who presented as having an awareness of racial disparities did so through noting the inequitable practices currently taking place in their schools. Students of color were recognized as being disproportionately disciplined, often without documentation, therefore keeping such practices unknown and unaddressed:

The rates [of in-school suspension] were really similar to that of out of school suspension as far as disproportionality goes. And there were far, far more black students and Hispanic students in ISIR [in school intervention rooms] and their offenses were also typically more subjective, so they were things like disruption ... And so the students are still being removed from the classroom, but in a way that's not showing up.

This quote also illustrates educators' awareness that ending the school-to-prison pipeline may require more than just eliminating suspensions, as schools may then simply shift their practices to those that are not publicly reported like in-school suspension.

Some participants' awareness of racial discipline gaps and their relationship to the school-to-prison pipeline was grounded in their commitment to equity, both in terms of ending racial disproportionalities in out-of-school suspension and expulsion and improving achievement among students of color. This awareness appeared to be the result of intentional efforts by the district to increase central office staff members' understanding of disproportionality:

So, I mean, we literally we would meet daily and talk about equity issues for a year. And then bringing it all to psychs and social workers, bringing it to all the [Office of Social Emotional Learning] partners, we would talk about ethnicity and equity, so there's just been a lot of work that's happened years before this became the pop topic.

Scholars and policymakers' increasing attention to exclusionary school discipline practices and related racial disparities was evident in participants' statements during focus groups. They went so far as to allude to the state of literature by referring to the issue as a "pop" (popular) topic in recent years (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2014b). Participants were even aware that students of color are often disciplined for more subjective reasons, like defiance, rather than more objective behaviors like fighting or substance use, acknowledging issues of racialized behavioral expectations that are often codified in educational policy (Dancy, 2014).

Participants did not universally refer to all phenomena related to the school-to-prison pipeline, such as zero-tolerance policies or mass incarceration. Instead, their responses reflected a particular emphasis on disproportionality in suspensions. Participants also spoke less about the impact of exclusionary practices on student- or school-level outcomes. Although it may have been assumed, they did not indicate much knowledge of the growing body of literature on the connections between exclusionary discipline practices and poor academic performance, negative school climate, or lower school safety (Fabelo et al., 2011). These topics were not discussed during the focus groups. This inability to explicitly discuss the impact of exclusionary practices on students is concerning as it is dehumanizing and mitigates the responsibility staff have on the resulting consequences of these practices.

Root causes of racial discipline gaps

Extrinsic factors

One of the most prominent themes from the focus groups was an emphasis on factors extrinsic to young people, such as school practices or cultural differences between staff and students, rather than factors intrinsic to individual students, like developmental deficits. In these cases, participants attributed misbehavior and disproportionate discipline practices to inequitable structural systems rather than individual students, and asserted the belief that schools are responsible for supporting student's needs. Some participants acknowledged that these patterns are a reflection of broader racial inequities in society; in other words, schools were a microcosm of American culture:

The topic of race comes up in this—you know people have different theories about that, I find myself living in a racist society you know from my perception, so why would it surprise me that we have a racist—you know institutional racism within our school systems? It would be shocking to me if we didn't, that somehow we were totally insulated from all the other factors in society, that would be astounding, and

those factors are still there and they're still part of our reality, and so if we take our eye off the ball, we'd be right back where we were.

Implicit in these statements is a recognition of whiteness as property, that without vigilance the school system goes "right back where we were" in terms of racialized privilege and disadvantage. More explicitly, if schools fail to continually address the exclusionary practices that serve to separate students of color from white students under the guise of discipline, the exclusionary ideas of whiteness as property prevail and students of color will continue to be disproportionately funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Participants also recognized the impact inequitable social systems have on school functioning, and how the school-to-prison pipeline manifests in education. As one participant shared,

Just that, creating a police state right? ... all I heard was three strikes right? And then you go— and it was patterned, so our discipline systems have been patterned historically, after prison and you know incarceration. And so that's not what it's about, we're in school.

Here the participant recognizes that while it is true that discipline disproportionalities may reflect patterns in the criminal justice system, our schools should be distinct educational spaces where students are safe from the injustices of the broader society.

Others acknowledged how influential such external inequitable social and educational systems can be, and the resulting racial inequities witnessed within school walls. The impact of these systems and beliefs about education was explained by a participant who recognized that historically the problem of discipline was understood as intrinsic to students, particularly students of color, but that perspective was no longer acceptable in this district:

The problem was always localized in the child and localized in some very pernicious racial ways ... A lot more principals have been able to embrace that [this] kind of thinking really doesn't fit what is our philosophy of education and what should be in public education ... We educate every single student, not just the ones that look like us, or the ones that we like, or that don't cause problems.

Differences based in racial or cultural identities (e.g., "not just the ones who look like us") were acknowledged by other participants as extrinsic factors that teachers need to consider in student interactions. Participants recognized that the function of a behavior needed to be placed in a greater social and cultural context in order for educators to understand students' actions. In other words, participants recognized that discipline policy could not be colorblind.

A participant specified this by stating,

Well and also teachers misunderstanding how kids are trying to communicate. Just because they don't communicate the way you're used to or how you would like them to doesn't mean that they're being disrespectful. That's just how they grew up communicating, and they're not just trying to yell at you, they're trying to talk.

Among participants, there was a pervasive understanding that factors beyond the student directly impacted their behavior, and it is therefore the school staff's responsibility to modify policies and protocols to address these larger systemic issues.

Having principals and teachers understand that if a kid is hungry or tired or if they are homeless or if they are having trouble with their parents or they are arrested that we have to deal with those things before they are going to be able to learn.

The theme of educators' consideration of external factors that impact a student's behavior and academic investment continued to the issue of trauma. Participants who endorsed this idea discussed working to increase awareness of trauma, primarily from living in poverty, and adjust discipline responses to account for them. A participant stated, "I think the school I was at really emphasized the importance of mental health and recognized that a majority of our students come from [or] experienced trauma, experience poverty and have that cultural understanding." Indeed, youth residing in high poverty communities are more likely to encounter a myriad of factors

such as abuse and neglect, food insecurity, homelessness, intimate partner violence, community violence, and poorer health outcomes (Barton, 2016). Any one of these factors, and even more so when multiple factors are present in the life of a child, has the potential to elicit a trauma response that looks like “acting out” at school.

Extrinsic solutions

Participants also discussed solutions to the problem, more specifically relationship building as a key component in challenging disparities and inequitable practices. Participants discussed the value of relationship building, particularly with students of color, as a means for connecting with and supporting students. Acknowledging the impact of systemic inequity, participants described the power of home visits:

I think sometimes we walk into the building in that supposedly neutral territory, but pragmatically a teacher’s classroom is their classroom and that’s their turf right? And to kind of change that dynamic and go into the family’s turf, I personally feel like you get a better appreciation of, figuratively and literally, where a person’s coming from, like you see when that kid comes in and they’re tired, well, there’s eight people living in that two-bedroom apartment, maybe that’s why they’re tired.

Relationship building acted as a means for preventing misbehavior through building non-adversarial relationships with students who may typically struggle to build connection with their school. Additionally, participants noted that recognizing a student’s strengths and areas for growth helped them to understand any underlying motivation behind misbehavior, thus responding in a more effective manner. Being aware of root causes influencing a student’s behavior (e.g., trauma or lack of social support) also allowed for implementation of interventions that addressed such root causes rather than seeing the problem in the student and disregarding driving forces, again, addressing the critical links among the environment, the trauma potential, and the appropriate assessment of the child’s needs. As one participant described,

If a kid feels safe in school they’re gonna be more attentive, if a kid is more attentive they’ll show that academic growth. They go together. But if the focus is only on the academic growth and we don’t focus on making kids feel safe, then we’re kind of spinning our wheels.

Relationships also were described as a way to minimize problem behavior and maximize the impact of the chosen interventions, in turn reducing overall misbehavior and the use of exclusionary practices. In determining a discipline response, one participant noted, “If she [the Dean] knew the background or where the behavior or what the student was going through in their life she would take that into consideration.”

Participants recognized the importance of noting racial and cultural differences, as well as modifying academic approaches to account for how these factors may impact a student’s capacity for learning and interest in relationship building. They acknowledged the need for color-conscious, rather than colorblind approaches:

The big thing for, like, relationships, when you’re looking at kids from a different culture and different race, that’s the only way that they’re gonna relate to you ... unless you build that relationship with them they think that there’s nothing, you have no understanding of where they’re coming from, so why in the world would I respect you? Why would I try or show any effort? Because you don’t know what I deal with from day to day, because you don’t look like me, or you don’t speak the same language I do, and that’s where the relationship becomes [important], especially when it comes to culture and race.

Participants argued that in efforts to address inequity there needs to be a shift in responsibility to the school and a transformation of belief systems among educators that aligns with a commitment to keeping kids in schools. As one participant said, “Whenever we decide a kid is not going to be in school we actually are violating the one thing we’re responsible for.” Such statements are a direct challenge to whiteness as property, as the rights of students of color are valued rather than ignored to the benefit of white students and the exclusionary narrative is subverted.

Intrinsic factors

In stark contrast, some participants expressed that students are involved in school discipline because they themselves are inherently bad, rather than because the school as a system had failed them. The belief that misbehaving students, especially those of color should be removed from the school setting schools expressly excludes students of color from the educational environment and funnels them directly in to the school-to-prison pipeline. This exclusion of misbehaving students, in tandem with the codification of white norms as the standards of behavior, serve to exemplify the concept of whiteness as property as it reflects the notion that transgressions by students of color must be punished in order to promote safety for all (Dancy, 2014).

Further, some believed that schools were not responsible for addressing student behavior challenges, and rather the student and their family should work to attend to students' needs. These perspectives were much less common, but still evident, for example in this participant's statement:

The students that are in there all the time are creating a lot of trouble they get transitioned out ... They are not a right fit for the school if they have a lot of discipline problems, attendance, or things like that. They go to the transition lady who recommends GED or the principal doesn't want them at the school anymore.

Such participants were more likely to blame students for their misbehavior, and did not acknowledge the contribution of systems to disproportionate discipline rates. These participants did not feel discipline practices should be adjusted to meet specific student needs, and attributed misbehavior to attention seeking: "It is pretty cut and dry and usually our frequent fliers, it is the same thing. 'Didn't we just talk about this two weeks ago and do you remember what we talked about and why are we here again talking about it?'" Here, the participants do not show any awareness of cultural differences in behavior, and instead these students were seen as being particularly difficult and the ones who needed to change. This example serves as an additional illustration of the ways in which whiteness was codified as the standard of appropriate behavior.

Participants that presented with this "colorblind" approach also tended to identify the problem of misbehavior as a problem in the student, rather than the systems at play, and therefore did not see much reason for schools to change. These individuals noted utilizing the same response to misbehavior regardless of a student's background or racial identity, implying that racial disparities in discipline, or the school-to-prison pipeline more broadly, reflects differences intrinsic to students rather than extrinsic to education. Suggestions that student behavior explains racial disparities are present in the scholarly literature (see e.g., Wright, Morgan, Coyne, Beaver, & Barnes, 2014), however, as in our study, they do not constitute the majority.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study is that data collection was conducted entirely within one school district. Within this district, the school-to-prison pipeline has been a topic of conversation and target of intentional practices since 2008, after the passage of a city-wide discipline reform policy. Since then, this district has attempted to bring awareness to disproportionate discipline rates, particularly for students of color (Anyon et al., 2016). Discussions about how to implement inclusive practices intended to combat racial disparities have increased, which although not completely unique to this district (e.g., Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Kalra, 2014), still likely impacted participant responses.

The study sample also was selected based on each school's success of having met specific district discipline goals for suspension rates of 3% or less for all students and black students in particular. Participants may therefore be more likely to have an overall competency and consciousness in regards to the issue of racial inequities in school discipline, suggesting increased bias towards these topics in their responses. In other words, these participants may maintain

more racially conscious practices working to reduce disparities within their schools. As such, results may not extend to other schools or districts whose values, demographics, and educational goals differ from the district that was the focus of this study. Without a predisposition towards achieving equitable practices, other districts may lack awareness and tools that were prominent within this sample of participants. Future replication of this study may exhibit varied responses from districts that do not have explicit policy goals of reducing disproportionality, or where discipline disparities have not been identified as a problem to be addressed by community stakeholders.

This study also is limited by relatively homogeneous sample demographics. Participants within this study were overwhelmingly white and female. Although this is representative of the racial and gender makeup of staff members in the district, it likely impacted their experience and responses. Given that the school-to-prison pipeline primarily affects students of color, insight from school-based professionals who identify as people of color could offer alternative results that differ from our study. School culture and relationships with students most likely to be impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline may vary based on staff demographics and the personal experiences participants may have had within inequitable systemic structures. Future studies could benefit from a sample that is more diverse to explore the stability of our findings. Despite its limitations, this study has several larger implications for educators and school practitioners interested in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and cultivating more equitable school environments.

Implications

CRT acknowledges the agency of individuals to respond to deeply entrenched systematic racism; however, it also promotes the dismantling of such systems at a macro level so as to disrupt the proliferation of future racist institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As such, implications of our findings are presented across the micro-meso-macro spectrum to reflect that individuals are capable of harnessing their own agency to disrupt these systems, but also need to address the system as a whole.

Micro-level: teachers & school staff

Catalyzing change at the micro level means addressing the work of teachers and school staff members in and outside the classroom. Teachers and staff should engage in ongoing professional development to increase their awareness of implicit biases, develop race-conscious educational practices, and universal strategies for building relationships with students. There is a need to work with educators to reframe their thinking about meaningful engagement with students to address their behavior to keep students the classroom. Many empirically supported training programs exist for teachers including My Teaching Partner (MTP-S) (Gregory, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2015). These programs focus on providing education, coaching, and support for teachers to adjust how they interact with students in the classroom (Gregory et al., 2015). This connects with the suggestions from our focus group participants who shared that there is a particular need to educate school staff members on the impact exclusionary discipline can have on students of color in order to motivate engagement with alternatives to exclusionary practices. Simply eliminating the use of out-of-school suspensions is an insufficient solution, as school-staff may simply find in-school alternative means to punish and exclude students. Rather, disrupting the pipeline requires alternative actions that not only keep students in school, but also in the classroom, working to address their individual needs while restoring relationships, school bonds, and investment in academics.

Additionally, trained professionals also need to ensure that, when necessary, children are being screened and diagnosed in order to ensure they qualify for the greatest level of support and protection available under educational law (Kalvesmaki & Tulman, 2017).

Meso-level: schools & administration

Beyond the classroom, findings suggest that school staff need the support of an overarching prevention policy framework voiced by school administrators at their site (Skiba et al., 2014b). Our findings highlighted some participants' awareness of subjective and unfair consequences being implemented by school leaders, indicating the important role principals play in setting the tone for the entire building. School-level policy should emphasize early prevention efforts in the classroom and implementation of individualized and graduated responses to perceived misbehavior that take into account the context of conflict.

Many of the schools in our study and throughout the country attempt to create school discipline systems through the use of Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS). PBIS focuses on creating shared norms and expectations and having clear systems for rewarding positive behavior, and can be a powerful tool in creating and maintaining discipline systems (Bornstein, 2017). If not implemented through a culturally responsive framework, PBIS may lead to disparities by codifying whiteness. However, when implemented through a culturally responsive framework that enjoins the principles of restorative justice with the procedural aspects of PBIS, it creates a system that reflects the needs of the student body and promotes more equitable discipline strategies.

Furthermore, by allowing students to participate in the process of establishing norms, otherwise marginalized students can intentionally be given voice in the process promoting greater buy in, support of, and adherence to implemented discipline systems (Bornstein, 2017). Group norm creation also can facilitate a broader discussion of where behavior norms come from and whether they need to be different in school than at home or in the community. When implemented using an intentional culturally responsive process, this forces all involved to evaluate their biases about where the expectations for appropriate behavior are rooted and ultimately creates space for equitable practices (Bornstein, 2017).

To facilitate the reality where educational spaces provide safety and protection from injustice, schools must also acknowledge their history and the systematic racism that permeates implicit and explicit norms and rules in educational settings. Given that the historical function of schools was to educate wealthy white students, schools must evaluate their standards of behavior, codes of conduct, and implicit expectations of students to explicate the ways in which their programs and policies exalt whiteness while condemning behaviors associated with students of color (Dancy, 2014). Only then can schools actively work to disrupt the pathway that feeds young people from the educational system into the criminal justice system.

The needs described by educators in this study suggests a strong commitment to increased training and intervention options as a priority held by administrators and school leaders. Providing teachers with a framework, such as culturally responsive PBIS, with an integration of restorative justice principles for implementing equitable practices holds promise for maintaining the shift necessary in disrupting the pipeline. Teacher and principal coaches dedicated to equity could be deployed to offer on-call support and continued education for incoming and current staff, ensuring that new practices and racial awareness are maintained.

Additionally, schools should focus their training efforts on services and programs offered to children with disabilities given the high use of exclusionary discipline practices among these students, particularly when they are students of color. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides provisions and protections for students who are classified as having a disability, but many schools either do not understand the requirements or fail to meet them (Kalvesmaki & Tulman, 2017). To address this highly vulnerable population of students, schools

and administrators should increase training on the provision of services for students with disabilities, as well as work diligently to ensure that standards are upheld within their individual schools (Kalvesmaki & Tulman, 2017). There needs to be follow through ensuring proper documentation and thorough philosophical shifts have both taken place and are maintained.

Macro level: policy makers

Policy makers at the district, state, and national levels also must take action to address inequitable discipline practices beyond simply recognizing that they exist through documentation. To assist school administration and teachers in accomplishing such changes, school districts and policy-makers must increase their commitment to ending disproportionate discipline rates by reallocating resources in a way that combat factors that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (Losen, Hewitt & Toldson, 2014). This commitment needs to represent budgetary support for programs, personnel, and professional development, but also advocacy at a state and national scale. Our participants primarily identified relational strategies as a solution to this problem, but the ability for teachers and students to build relationships is constrained or enabled by institutional contexts. Financial support for programs that strengthen student connectedness to school adults, such as home visitation, restorative practices, and mental health services is vital. So too is the dismantling of approaches, like security guards and overcrowded classrooms, that create prison-like conditions in public schools.

Macro approaches also should include advocacy efforts to change policies that strengthen their enforceability (like IDEA), deter the use of zero tolerance discipline approaches, and provide education about the importance of understanding the needs of the whole child throughout educational policy. Arguably one of the most pressing needs is for policies like IDEA to be expanded, and for local school districts to commit to understanding that exposure to trauma can lead to symptoms such as acting out, emotional reactivity, and aggression. Mental health conditions, including those rooted in trauma, are largely unaddressed by educational law, however if the particular symptoms of a student are not contextualized into the trauma and emotional disability, those children may never be able to obtain the services they need (Kalvesmaki & Tulman, 2017).

Conclusion

Given strong evidence that racial discipline gaps are not fully explained by differential behavior, recent scholarship in this area emphasizes the need to change school-level practices that promote a positive school climate, especially preventive approaches such as relationship building and restorative practices (e.g., Skiba et al., 2014b). Considering recent cuts to both civil rights office and disabilities services by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos' administration, it is even more vital to foster educational environments and utilize discipline strategies that ensure equal access to education for students of color and students with disabilities (Klein, 2018). Such cuts threaten the Obama-era guidance that calls on schools to reduce reliance on exclusionary practices and consider how racial bias plays a role in their disciplinary practices (Sargrad, 2018). In response, educators' awareness of the school-to-prison pipeline and implementation of preventative strategies are needed to combat such repeals being made by the DeVos administration.

Overall, educators in this sample expressed perspectives that were well aligned with this focus of the extant literature on the school-to-prison pipeline. However, the persistence of exclusionary and punitive attitudes among some educators in this sample suggests there is a need for differentiated interventions that address competing frameworks for understanding the root causes of, and solutions to, the school-to-prison pipeline. Moreover, given the more limited discussion in our focus groups regarding *answers* to the problem of the school-to-prison pipeline, it is critical that

scholarship about this issue consistently highlight specific strategies that practitioners can deploy to break down this harmful trajectory.

References

- Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: [Jackson, Tenn.]: New Press; Distributed by Perseus Distribution.
- Allen, Q., & White-Smith, K. (2014). "Just as bad as prisons": The challenge of dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline through teacher and community education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 47(4), 445–460. doi:10.1080/10665684.2014.958961
- American Psychological Association. (2008). Are zero-tolerance policies effective in the schools?: An evidentiary review and recommendations. *American Psychologist*, 63, 852–862.
- Anyon, Y. (2016). *Taking Restorative Practices School-wide*. Technical report.
- Anyon, Y., Gregory, A., Stone, S., Farrar, J., Jenson, J. M., McQueen, J., ... & Simmons, J. (2016). Restorative interventions and school discipline sanctions in a large urban school district. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(6), 1663–1697.
- Anyon, Y., Lechuga, C., Ortega, D., Downing, B., Greer, E., & Simmons, J. (2018). An exploration of the relationships between student racial background and the school sub-contexts of office discipline referrals: a critical race theory analysis. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(3), 390–406.
- Barrett, K. (2011). The school-to-prison pipeline: structuring legal reform. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 22(4), 593–596. doi:10.1080/10511253.2011.616002
- Barton, W. H. (2016). Juvenile justice policies and programs. In Jenson, J., & Fraser, M. (Eds.), *Social policy for children and families a risk and resilience perspective* (pp. 97–124). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Bornstein, J. (2017). Can PBIS build justice rather than merely restore order? In Okilwa, N., Khalifa, M., & Briscoe, F. (Eds.), *The school to prison pipeline the role of culture and discipline in school* (pp. 192–206). Bigley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Cramer, E. D., Gonzalez, L., & Pellegrini-Lafont, C. (2014). From classmates to inmates: An integrated approach to break the school-to-prison pipeline. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 47(4), 461–475. doi:10.1080/10665684.2014.958962
- Dancy, E. T. I. I. (2014). (Un)Doing hegemony in education: Disrupting school-to-prison pipelines for black males. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 47(4), 476–493. doi:10.1080/10665684.2014.959271
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Fabelo, T., Thompson, M. D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks, M. P., III., & Booth, E. A. (2011). *Breaking schools' rules: A statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement*. New York, NY: The Council of State Governments Justice Center.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977*. London: UK. Harvester Press.
- Gregory, A., Allen, J. P., Mikami, A. Y., Hafen, C. A., & Pianta, R. C. (2015). The promise of a teacher professional development program in reducing racial disparity in classroom exclusionary discipline. In D. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the school discipline gap* (pp. 166–179). New York, NY: Teachers College.
- Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 106(8), 1707–1791. doi:10.2307/1341787
- Jain, S., Bassey, H., Brown, M. A., & Kalra, P. (2014). Restorative justice in Oakland Schools. *Implementation and Impact: An effective strategy to reduce racially disproportionate discipline, suspensions, and improve academic outcomes*. Retrieved from: www.ousd.k12.ca.us/
- Kalvesmaki, A., & Tulman, J. B. (2017). A systems theory analysis for ending the school-to-prison-pipeline: Using disability rights laws to keep children in schools and out of courts, jails, and prisons. In Okilwa, N., Khalifa, M., & Briscoe, F. (Eds.), *The school to prison pipeline the role of culture and discipline in school* (pp. 192–206). Bigley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Klein, R. (2018, April 4). Betsy DeVos mulls the fate of guidance designed to reduce racial bias in schools. *Huffpost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/devos-discipline-guidance_us_5ac4f523e4b093a1eb2150df.
- Losen, D., Hewitt, D., & Toldson, I. (2014). *Eliminating excessive and unfair exclusionary discipline in schools: Policy recommendations for reducing disparities. Discipline disparities research to practice collaborative*. Bloomington, IN: The Equity Project at Indiana University. Retrieved from: http://www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Disparity_Policy_010915.pdf
- Losen, D. J., & Orfield, G. (2002). *Racial inequity in special education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.

- Mowen, T., & Brent, J. (2016). School discipline as a turning point: The cumulative effect of suspension on arrest. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 53(5), 628–653. doi:10.1177/0022427816643135
- Noguera, P. (2003). Schools, prisons, and social implications of punishment: Rethinking disciplinary practices. *Theory into Practice*, 42(4), 341–350. doi:10.1353/tip.2003.0048
- Osher, D., Woodruff, D., & Sims, A. E. (2002). Schools make a difference: The overrepresentation of African American youth in special education and the juvenile justice system. *Racial inequity in special education*, 93–116.
- Sargrad, S. (2018, March 7). Rolling back rights for students. U.S. and World Report News. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2018-03-07/betsy-devos-education-dept-to-roll-back-help-for-students-with-disabilities>.
- Simon, J. (2007). *Governing through crime: How the war on crime transformed American democracy and created a culture of fear*. Oxford University Press.
- Skiba, R. J., Arredondo, M. I., & Williams, N. T. (2014). More than a metaphor: The contribution of exclusionary discipline to a school-to-prison pipeline. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 47(4), 546–564. doi:10.1080/10665684.2014.958965
- Skiba, R. J., Chung, C., Trachok, M., Baker, T. L., Sheya, A., & Hughes, R. L. (2014). Parsing disciplinary disproportionality: Contributions of infraction, student, and school characteristics to out-of-school suspension and expulsion. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(4), 640–670. doi:10.3102/0002831214541670
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. London: Sage.
- Wald, J., & Losen, D. J. (2003). Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2003(99), 9–15. doi:10.1002/yl.51
- Wright, J. P., Morgan, M. A., Coyne, M. A., Beaver, K. M., & Barnes, J. C. (2014). Prior problem behavior accounts for the racial gap in school suspensions. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 42(3), 257–266. doi:10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2014.01.001

Notes on contributors

Jessica L. Yang, PhD, is an assistant professor of social work at Winthrop University in South Carolina. Her research focuses on systematic oppression, disparities, and lived experience of marginalized youth in systems such as child welfare, foster care, and education. She relies on qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches using a critical race lens to illuminate mechanisms within systems that can improve outcomes for those who are marginalized.

Yolanda Anyon, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver. Her mixed methods research focuses on the role of schools and community-based organizations in shaping the life outcomes of youth of color.

Malina Pauline obtained her Masters in Social Work from the University of Denver and is currently a Mental Health Therapist in a residential treatment center working with adolescents. Her background and research interests include the intersection of the criminal justice system with education and youth's success in academics.

Kathryn E. Wiley is a research associate at the University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work where she uses qualitative research methods to examine issues of race and equity in educational policy and practice.

Donna Cash is a project manager for student equity and opportunity in Denver Public Schools.

Barbara J. Downing, Ph.D., is a school psychologist for Denver Public Schools. Promoting equity and inclusion, and supporting the social emotional learning of all students is the focus of Dr. Downing's work. In addition to Threat Assessment, she has the responsibility for managing student discipline and the development and implementation of student discipline policy and practice in DPS.

Eldridge Greer, PhD is the associate chief of student equity and opportunity for Denver Public Schools. Greer has worked to accelerate discipline reform efforts, resulting in 64% fewer out-of-school suspensions and 78% fewer expulsions in the past 10 years.

Ellen Kelty, MA, NCSP is the Director of Student Equity and Opportunity in Denver Public Schools. Prior to that she served in DPS as a school psychologist. She provides support and strategic leadership to our school psychologists, nurses, social workers and behavioral team. She is passionate about removing barriers to education by providing strong social emotional and physical health supports to the most vulnerable students.

Thomas Lee Morgan, PhD is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Northern Colorado. Dr. Morgan has experience as a teacher and school leader in private, charter, and public schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels across the United States. He specializes in community engaged QuantCrit scholarship focusing on inclusive school culture and international perspectives of school leadership.

Lisa Pisciotta has worked in both community mental health settings and school settings for the last twenty-five years. Lisa is a Licensed Professional Counselor and holds a Certified Addiction Counselor Level III, Certification serving those facing domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse. Lisa currently works for Denver Public school supporting the elimination of disproportionate discipline outcomes for students of color as well as supporting the discipline and expulsion process for the district.