



Looking Back, Moving Forward: Technical, Normative, and Political Dimensions of School Discipline

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Abstract

Purpose: School discipline reformers have presumed that such work is largely a technical task, emphasizing discrete changes to discipline policies and protocols. Yet prior theory and research suggest that emphasizing technical changes may overlook additional and important aspects of reform, namely, the normative and political dimensions within which technical aspects are embedded. Although this earlier work appears relevant to contemporary school discipline reform, the extent to which this theory extends to school discipline remains unestablished. The purpose of this article is to show how this earlier line of theory extends to the topic of school discipline.

Method: We draw on data collected as part of a qualitative study in which we conducted semistructured interviews and focus groups with 198 educators from 33 public schools on the topic of school discipline. We applied an equity-minded reform theory to examine technical, normative,

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and political dimensions of school discipline. **Findings and Implications:** We found the technical dimension of school discipline was characterized by educators' strategic use of school resources and capacity building; normative conditions that supported conflict prevention and increased responsibility; and political dynamics in which administrators shifted power to encourage more inclusive discipline strategies. Furthermore, using this model illuminated interrelationships between dimensions, suggesting that unidimensional models—and their related reforms—may overlook nuances of this important reform issue. This theoretical extension provides a more holistic conceptualization than currently used in reform efforts, contributes to earlier lines of scholarship, and opens up new avenues of future inquiry.

Keywords

school discipline, educational policy, equity-minded change, racial disparities, out-of-school suspension

For over a century, educational administrators and researchers have questioned whether exclusionary and punitive school discipline practices are effective or equitable. As early as 1938, the *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin* included an article by a high school principal from Alabama who reported that detention and suspension often “fail to get the desired results” (Clark, 1938, p. 1). He described an alternative approach in which a group of administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers work together as a “Pupil Adjustment Committee” to design tiered interventions in support of students’ “social adjustment, character development, and scholarship” (Clark, 1938, p. 3). Nearly three decades later, sociologist Richard Cloward (1966) observed that in New York “most children suspended from school are [Black] and Puerto Rican and they are inevitably poor” (p. 87). Cloward went on to argue that a “series of negative decisions” by school administrators can “destroy a family just as quickly as a verdict of lifelong punishment” (p. 87). It is striking how similar the ideas of Clark and Cloward are to current debates in education about the efficacy of team-based and graduated intervention models in reducing suspension rates, racial disparities, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Sadly, recent studies confirm Clark and Cloward’s suspicions that suspensions can negatively affect students’ educational trajectories and elevate their risk for contact with the criminal justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011; Fowler, Lightsey, Monger, & Asetine, 2010; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Likewise, suspension continues to be assigned disproportionately to low-income, Black, Latino,

and Native American students, even for behavior similar to White peers (Anyon et al., 2014; McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Howard, 2003; Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011). Consequently, policy makers, practitioners, and advocates have sought to reduce suspensions and racial discipline gaps through reforms that encourage schools to implement prevention and intervention programs, revise student conduct codes to minimize the use of exclusionary practices, and improve data tracking and disaggregation (Alvarez, 2013; Anyon, Gregory, et al., 2016; Kang-Brown, Trone, Fratello, & Daftary-Kapur, 2013; White House, 2016). Yet even with these reforms, punitive discipline practices remain common in American public schools (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data Collection, 2016; The White House, 2016). This pattern of recurrent proposals for alternatives to suspension, contrasted with the reality of their limited implementation, is reminiscent of Cuban's (1990) reminder that schools engage in "reforming again, again, and again" (p. 3). As efforts continue across the country to reduce exclusionary and punitive discipline, it is time to take stock of how these reforms are conceptualized and designed.

Research on other school reform movements may help explain why a gap between policy and practice persists in the area of school discipline and offer insights about more effective strategies moving forward. For example, studies of detracking suggest that transforming long-standing, inequitable practices requires a multipronged approach. In addition to changing the policies that dictating educational practices, effective reforms attended to the social context in which these practices were embedded. This required facing complex belief systems and power arrangements, particularly since these educational policies made salient issues of racial stratification (Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014; Oakes, 1992; Oakes, Quartz, Gong, Guiton, & Lipton, 1993; Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000; Welner, 2001). Thus, research on the detracking movement offers a warning to discipline reformers and researchers that without attention to the norms and politics that sustain disparities in student outcomes, technical strategies can be engulfed by old systems of beliefs and resource conflicts. They may even become tools for replicating old patterns of exclusion (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Tyack, 1992).

That said, the manifestation of technical, normative, and political dimensions of school discipline practices has not yet been established empirically. This article takes a first step toward this and considers whether these same three dimensions are evident in the approaches to discipline taken by building-level practitioners from a large urban district. In the hopes of advancing the broader school discipline reform movement, we provide examples of these dimensions and discuss the implications of using this model for reformers and researchers.

The Use of Suspension in American Public Schools

Out-of-school suspension is a long standing practice in public education. One of the earliest national surveys revealed that suspension rates in the 1970s were almost 1% for elementary students and 8% for secondary students, compared with more recent rates of 2% and 11%, respectively (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Although these rates may seem low, recent data indicate that suspensions impact nearly three million students annually (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data Collection, 2016). Moreover, suspension is not primarily used as a response to serious, violent or criminal behavior. The majority of suspensions are actually assigned for minor infractions such as disrupting class, tardiness, and dress code violations (Losen, & Martinez, 2013; Skiba & Knesting, 2002). These exclusionary and punitive practices negatively affect student outcomes. Children who are suspended run the risks of lowered academic performance, dropping out of school, juvenile justice system involvement, and arrest (Fabelo et al., 2011; Fowler et al., 2010; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Furthermore, the negative impacts of suspension are disproportionately experienced by students of color, making it a significant obstacle in the pursuit of educational equity. Extensive empirical evidence demonstrates that Black, Native American, and Latino students are more likely to be suspended than their White peers (Anyon et al., 2014; Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen & Skiba, 2010; McFadden et al., 1992; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2003; Skiba, Arredondo, et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011). However, the degree and consistency of disproportionality varies by racial group, grade level, and school district (Fabelo et al., 2011; Fowler et al., 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, Arredondo, et al., 2014). These patterns are not explained by differences in student behavior. Racial disparities persist even when controlling for the nature of the offense and teacher-reported behavior ratings, suggesting that the root of racial disparities is not the result of student characteristics (Anyon et al., 2014; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011; Roque, 2010; Skiba, Arredondo, et al., 2014).

Instead, a growing body of literature indicates that discipline outcomes are a direct outgrowth of school-level policies and practices within the realm of educators' control. As early as 1982, researchers demonstrated that school factors, including administrators' proclivity to use suspension and other staff attitudes, explained more variance in suspension rates than student characteristics (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). Recent research has confirmed the importance of similar factors, such as a preventive versus punitive orientation toward conflict (Fowler et al., 2010; Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, &

Belway, 2015; Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). In other words, “schools have the power to change their rates of exclusion” (Skiba, Arredondo, et al., 2014, p. 3).

Recent School Discipline Reforms

In 2014, the Department of Justice and the Department of Education jointly issued a Dear Colleague letter to local educational agencies explaining the national and legal significance of the issue of racial disparities in school discipline. This letter recommended school leaders revise discipline protocols, train teachers in classroom management, provide individual behavioral interventions, and regularly collect and analyze disaggregated discipline data (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Echoing federal recommendations, state and district reforms have also emphasized these technical strategies, such as revising conduct codes to prohibit or limit the use of exclusionary practices. For example, a 2014 law in California eliminated suspensions and expulsions for “minor misbehaviors” (Public Counsel, 2014). Similar policies in Miami-Dade, Denver, and Los Angeles have called on schools to limit their use of suspensions (O’Connor, 2015; Romo, 2014). In many districts, new discipline policies also encourage schools to use strategies such as school-wide positive-behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) and restorative justice, sometimes simultaneously (Anyon, Wiley, et al., 2016; Vincent, English, Girvan, Sprague, & McCabe, 2016). PBIS has been implemented in more than 21,000 schools across the country, whereas restorative justice was as a key tenet of reform strategies in several large districts (Anyon, Gregory, et al., 2016; Horner, 2014; Jain, Bassegy, Brown, & Kalra, 2014). These policy changes are important steps forward in the movement away from suspension. However, given the persistence of exclusionary discipline practices in schools, scholars must consider issues that have been overlooked by these largely technical approaches.

Theoretical Framework: Equity-Minded School Change

Earlier work on academic tracking suggests that the discipline reform movement’s emphasis on technical issues of policy and practice responds to only one of three important areas. Academic tracking is the practice of sorting students into high-, average-, and low-level classes based on perceived ability (Oakes, 2005). As evidence accumulated about the negative impacts tracking had on students’ educational trajectories, researchers turned their attention to the implementation of detracking reforms. They found that not

only were reformers confronting important *technical* or logistical barriers to creating heterogeneous classrooms, they also faced *normative* challenges, such as fixed mindsets about students' abilities, and *political* obstacles including pushback from affluent families who resisted racially and socioeconomically mixed classrooms (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 2005; Wells & Oakes, 1996). The equity-minded school change framework incorporates these three dimensions into one overarching theory (Oakes et al., 2005).

Technical dimensions include structures, strategies, and knowledge associated with the educational issue of interest. *Structures* include arrangements of space, time, people, and materials. *Strategies* include curricular and pedagogical approaches, whereas *knowledge* includes exposure to specialized knowledge, professional development and training for staff and students (Oakes et al., 1993). Examples of the technical aspects of detracking included new schedules and course offerings, teacher training, smaller learning environments, mentorship pairings, core curriculum specifications, and certifications (Oakes, 1992; Oakes et al., 1993).

Normative dimensions refer to beliefs, attitudes, and values held by stakeholders and decision makers related to the educational issue of interest (Oakes, 1992). Attention to normative aspects reveals the taken-for-granted assumptions people hold about what is true and good. This dimension constitutes "what are seen to be appropriate actions people can take within a school's context" (Oakes, 1992, p. 12; see also Oakes et al., 1993). Studies on academic tracking identified certain beliefs associated with its use, for example, that students' individual needs and capacities vary enormously and that schools can and should transmit knowledge and values that differentially prepare students for workforce entry (Oakes, 1992).

Political dimensions are related to power and resource stratification in schools. If an educational practice is linked to racial and economic stratification (both within schools and later in students' life trajectories), as was the case with tracking, reforms seeking parity in educational opportunity can anticipate pushback from those benefiting from the previous arrangement (Holme et al., 2014; Oakes, 1992; Stuart Wells & Serna, 1996; Wells & Oakes, 1996). Reforms that challenge the distribution of educational opportunity shift schools' "political arrangement in terms of 'who gets what, when, and how'" (Lasswell, 1936, as cited in Oakes et al., 1993, p. 472). In particular, changes that advance the interests of traditionally underserved groups can threaten the interests of more powerful groups, which, in turn, can constrain implementation (Oakes, 1992; Oakes et al., 1993). Examples include reallocating material goods, expanding authority and rights, redefining stakeholder roles and influence, and realigning participation structures with new sets of normative values (Oakes et al., 1993).

Similarities Between Tracking and Discipline

Tracking and discipline share several features in common, suggesting that the equity-minded school change framework can be applied to reforms targeting the use of suspensions. First, racial disparities in academic tracking are similar to those found in the use of exclusionary school discipline. Black and Latino students are typically overrepresented in lower track placements (Ferguson & Mehta, 2011; Gamoran, 2009; Oakes et al., 2005; Welner, 2001). Second, the negative impacts of academic tracking are similar to those of exclusionary discipline. Research indicates that placement into lower-track coursework reinforces existing inequalities and contributes to achievement differences between low- and high-track students (Gamoran, 2009; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2006). Moreover, being tracked into lower level coursework is associated with dropping out of high school and lesser economic and social opportunities later in life (Ansalone, 2001; Werblow, Urick, & Duesbery, 2013). Because tracking and exclusionary school discipline negatively affect students' academic and life trajectories, they both contribute to broader issues of social stratification. As Oakes (1992) described, such practices are connected to the "struggle among individuals and groups for comparative advantage in the distribution of school resources" and are connected to "opportunities and credentials that have exchange value in larger society" (p. 13). In short, students who are subjected to lower tracks, and exclusionary discipline, are similarly dispossessed of later life opportunities that contribute to racial and economic inequalities in adulthood.

These shared qualities suggest that the three-dimensional model used to study tracking could be extended to school discipline. Applying this framework would open up new avenues of inquiry and strategy from which reformers and researchers could benefit. Indeed, several studies suggest school discipline is amenable to a three-dimensional model, but it has yet to be conceptualized as such. Research on the technical aspects of discipline (strategies like suspension, expulsion, or their alternatives) comprise much of the research base. Other studies highlight educators' normative perspectives about discipline, and the association of these beliefs with discipline outcomes (Christle, Nelson, & Jolivette, 2004; Evans, 2007; Losen & Gillespie, 2000; Shabazian, 2016; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Finally, scholars have explored the relationship between perceived racial threat and the use of punitive discipline strategies, highlighting the political nature of discipline reform (Edwards, 2016; Evans, 2007; Hughes, Warren, Stewart, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Mears, 2017; Welch & Payne, 2010). These studies indicate that discipline can be conceptualized using the three-dimensional model, but has yet to be done. We take this first step by drawing on extensive qualitative data from a

large urban district to illustrate the existence of these dimensions in school discipline practice.

Method

This study took place in Denver Public Schools (DPS) as part of a partnership between the school district and the University of Denver to conduct rigorous and relevant research on school discipline and racial disparities in exclusionary practices; collaborate with policy makers, administrators, educators, and local stakeholder groups to identify research questions, interpret results, and disseminate findings; and strengthen and sustain efforts to connect research with local policy reforms and advocacy efforts. District partners were involved in all stages of this research study, from agenda setting and protocol development to the creation of coding schemes and analysis. DPS is a large urban school district in the Western United States with more than 100,000 students in more than 200 schools. In 2014-2015, students enrolled in DPS were predominantly low income (70%) and children of color (56% Latino, 22% White, 14% Black, 3% Multiracial, 3% Asian, 1% Native American, and less than 1% Pacific Islander). Fifty-one percent of the student body was male, 40% were English language learners, and 12% were eligible for special education services. Suspension rates in district schools ranged from 0% to 48% with a mean of 5%.

DPS is an ideal district for studying school discipline and related reforms. Although the issue has caught the attention of national media outlets and federal agencies in recent years (e.g., Lhamon & Samuels, 2014), only a small number of districts had voluntarily responded to the problem of racial discipline gaps with robust policy reforms (The White House, 2016). In contrast, DPS has been engaged in discipline reform for nearly 10 years, after parents, students, and community members organized for a new policy to address their concerns about racial disparities in exclusionary discipline practices and the growing school-to-prison pipeline. District guidelines encourage school administrators to minimize their use of exclusionary discipline practices, expand implementation of school-wide prevention programs, increase the use of supportive discipline approaches like restorative practices, and track racial discipline gaps. The district set a goal of all schools having a suspension rate of 3% or lower for all students, and a 3% or lower rate specifically for Black students. These goals were based on Losen and Gillespie's (2012) recommendations, which were informed by data from the 1970s prior to the explosion of zero tolerance policies.

Table 1. School Characteristics ($n = 33$).

| Characteristics | Percentage or Mean |
|---|--------------------|
| <i>Grade configuration</i> | |
| % Elementary schools | 58 |
| % Nontraditional Schools (e.g., K-8, 6-12) | 24 |
| % Middle schools | 6 |
| % High schools | 12 |
| <i>Management type</i> | |
| % District-managed schools | 58 |
| % Charter schools | 21 |
| % Innovation schools | 21 |
| <i>Student composition</i> | |
| Mean school size | 503 |
| % Students of color | 61 |
| % Eligible for free and reduced price lunch | 56 |
| % Limited English proficient | 14 |
| % With disabilities | 9 |

Participants

This study drew from a project that aimed to qualitatively identify the discipline practices used in schools that had met the district's discipline reform goals. The sample of interview and focus group participants was culled from 33 schools who met the district's suspension goals during the 2014-2015 school year and had at least 10 Black students. As illustrated in Table 1, the majority of these schools were elementary schools (58%), followed by schools with nontraditional grade configurations (K-8, 8-12, and K-12; 24%), high schools (9%), and middle schools (6%). More than half were traditional district schools, 21% were charter schools, and 21% were schools with innovation status. These schools served predominantly students eligible for free and reduced lunch (56%) and students of color (43% Latino, 34% White, 13% Black, 4% Multiracial, 3% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian).

In total, 198 educators participated, the majority of whom were White, female, and had worked in education for an average of 12 years, as shown in Table 2. School leaders or administrative personnel made up 39% of the sample, followed by teachers (28%) and school-based service providers (24%). Of the service providers, 18% were school psychologists, 9% were school social workers, and 28% reported a range of very specific roles (e.g., nurses, counselors, restorative practice coordinators, paraprofessionals, family

Table 2. Participant Characteristics ($n = 198$).

| Characteristics | Percentage or Mean |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Demographics</i> | |
| Female | 71 |
| White | 73 |
| Black/ | 10 |
| Latino | 12 |
| Other | 5 |
| <i>Professional background</i> | |
| Years in education | 12 |
| Years at school | 5 |
| School leader/administrator | 39 |
| Teacher | 28 |
| School-based service provider | 23 |

liaisons, etc.) and 44% did not provide any additional information about their professional background (see Table 2).

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of interviews with school leaders and focus groups with teachers and support staff to elicit information about the discipline approaches used in each school. The protocols were first developed by the second author based on consultations with practitioners involved in the university–district partnership and an academic expert in school discipline (R. Skiba, personal communication, July 28, 2014). The initial protocol focused on site-specific discipline policies and practices, prevention and intervention approaches, staffing structures, and district supports. After holding pilot interviews and focus groups at three schools (Anyon, 2016), we expanded the protocols to include the topics of hiring, staff characteristics, and unique school features. The focus group and interview protocols were the same with one exception. In the case of individual interviews, participants were asked to verbally list the most salient factors related to their school’s ability to meet the district’s discipline goals in the year prior. In the focus groups, participants first generated these factors on post-it notes, which were then grouped into themes and used by the facilitator to ground the discussion.

The second author conducted 2-hour interviews individually with a school leader ($n = 29$) or in a small group of two to three administrators at the request of the primary participant ($n = 4$). At the end of the interview, the administrator

was asked to nominate focus group participants by identifying teachers and support staff who had been highly involved in discipline. School leaders were prompted to recommend staff who reflected a range of opinions or beliefs about discipline, not just those in alignment with school leaders' agendas. Asking administrators to nominate staff who were knowledgeable about discipline practices introduced a purposeful nomination bias, such that participants were selected precisely *because* they had special information about an issue unlikely to be had by others (Maxwell, 2013). Including classroom teachers and support staff in the focus groups provided a broader array of perspectives than had we limited the sample to educators traditionally responsible for discipline, such as assistant principals or deans. Focus groups with support staff ($n = 34$) were facilitated by the first author, ranging in size from two to seven participants, with an average of four participants, each lasting two hours. In all but one case, a single focus group was held at each school. However, two separate focus groups were held at one site in order to accommodate the schedules of participants.

Data Analysis

Master's-level research assistants transcribed the audio files from the interviews and focus groups. The first three authors developed an initial coding scheme for the larger project using the topic areas of the data collection protocols. The research team then developed a codebook that defined each topic code, outlined criteria for inclusion and exclusion, and provided example excerpts (Saldaña, 2015). Three coders reduced the data by organizing transcript excerpts under the topic codes using Dedoose qualitative software. The authors then reviewed excerpts from each code category and wrote descriptive memos. For this study, the first author used previous studies on detracking to create a new codebook that defined technical, normative, and political dimensions of school discipline using a literature review. She then coded the descriptive memos from the larger study using these three dimensions. Subsequent analytic memos served as the basis for developing findings and were shared among the research team as an opportunity to confirm or expand claims.

Findings

In the following section, we present and describe the features of the technical, normative, and political dimensions of school discipline. Our intent is to suggest the *applicability* of the framework to the issue of school discipline but not to imply that the ways each dimension manifested will generalize to other contexts. We found the three-dimensional framework made salient particular

dynamics that together discouraged classroom exclusion, including using professional development, time, and money to build capacity for changing discipline practices; beliefs about conflict prevention and staff responsibility; administrators' reinforcement of expectations among educators; and intentional personnel decisions.

Technical Dimensions of School Discipline

Educators spoke with us about a wide range of strategies, structures, and knowledge they used to meet the district's discipline reform goals, such as offering professional development that expanded educators' capacity to implement school-wide curriculums and programs geared toward conflict prevention; designing school schedules dedicated to community building; and using discretionary funds to hire additional support staff.

Professional learning for program implementation. Participants reported using programs, particularly social-emotional learning curricula, PBIS, and Restorative Practices, as school-wide systems for preventing and responding to conflict. They relied on trainings to expand and align staff members' knowledge and competence in these approaches:

You practice as teacher. . . . As soon as [staff] use a different word than what we've agreed on as a whole school, I stop and I say, "Use this word, it's going to be the same for every classroom, every grade. Try it again." We give them all a chance to practice with adults before they practice it with students.

A charter school leader observed, "You need that support, the additional training and coaching, to be able to implement at a consistent level." Participants considered setting aside intentional time to build new knowledge among teachers to be a critical component of their schools' success. This looked different across schools; several sites schools held training prior to students entering in the fall, while others dedicated regular time once or twice per month.

Allocating instructional time for community building. Schools also dedicated time for students and staff to participate in community and relationship building activities, usually during instructional hours. These took the forms of classroom-based, grade-level, or all-school meetings, often held in the morning. School leaders encouraged teachers to implement relationship-building activities during instructional time throughout the year but especially in the fall. During our focus groups, several educators noted that taking time to

build relationships might be unacceptable in some schools where it would be perceived as taking time away from academic instruction, particularly in the current high-stakes accountability environment. When asked to explain how they justified their choices in this regard, comments like the following were typical:

I would just say it pays off. . . . I would point to different people who have amazing relationships with students and show them how high the teacher can go with rigor, how that teacher can get them to do what the teacher down the hall can't get them to do.

Such responses suggested that some teachers viewed the dedication of time and resources to community building as a way to strengthen, rather than diminish, students' academic success.

Budgeting. Strategic use of site-based budgeting was another technical strategy supporting schools' approaches to discipline. Many educators noted their use of school budgets to hire additional support service providers. Some leveraged funds to increase the number of hours that social workers and school psychologists were on site, while others dedicated financial resources restorative practice coordinators and family liaisons. These adult-rich environments supported robust implementation of school-wide systems and helped educators create a safety net so that, as one school psychologist explained, "We're able catch kids before they fall." They described the importance of having support service providers in the building every day of the week to "see patterns" and "really get to know the students."

Applying a technical lens revealed specific strategies educators used to advance their discipline practices. Staff explained that professional development, relationship-building, and discretionary spending provided tangible and intangible supports for their approaches to discipline. As many educators would attest, *time* was a crucial resource, of which there rarely was enough. Intentional use of time factored into both professional development and relationship building, providing a structure through which to potentially establish deeper connections among the entire school community. Support for professional development provided yet another important technical resource: new knowledge. Offering new ideas and practices through training provided structural and intellectual support to help staff undertake new approaches to conflict and discipline. Budgetary allocations were used to purchase additional support staff who could offer an extra pair of eyes for monitoring and building relationships with students, along with expertise in conflict resolution, mental health, and counseling.

Normative Dimensions of School Discipline

Certain beliefs undergirded educators' discussions of discipline: the importance of prevention; that suspensions do not work; that relationships support students' success in school; that adults are responsible for conflict; that students and staff have the capacity to change and grow; and that educational inequities were rooted in structural racism.

Prevention not punishment. Most participants placed a high value on creating a "foundational" school culture that reflected a preventive and proactive orientation to minimizing conflict. An elementary school principal noted, "The school-wide expectations we establish are a foundation upon which we all stand." Staff reported that they intentionally invested instructional time in establishing consistent expectations throughout the building, which were taught and reiterated to staff during professional development. Teachers, in turn, shared them with students in classroom and school-wide meetings. Although specific approaches ranged, underlying all of them was a commitment to proactive, rather than reactive, conflict prevention and resolution. Drawing on a popular saying, a principal of a K-8 school summarized this sentiment, "An ounce of prevention, is worth ten pounds of cure."

Ineffectiveness of suspension. Many school staff did not believe suspensions addressed the root causes of conflict, and said they only used exclusionary practices as a "last resort" after attempting other preventive interventions. Punitive and exclusionary practices were seen as ineffective and necessary to limit, or at the very least, seriously limited. Participants drew on beliefs about the inefficacy of discipline to justify their limited use of it. For example, a school leader noted, "We believe that suspension is really a last-ditch effort, you know. We just don't believe suspension is very successful." Participants saw suspension as ineffective because it undermined staff-student relationships. An administrator told us that they did not use suspension because "the staff and teachers here believe that we don't throw away kids," echoing a conviction expressed by other participants that suspensions sent the wrong message to kids. Abstaining from suspension demonstrated a broader normative commitment to problem solving and supporting students, even in times of conflict:

Something that we value here is the idea that we fix our problems, we don't run away from them. . . . We tell the kids all the time that we're not going to throw you away. We care, and we are going to work at it.

Importance of student–teacher relationships to instructional mission. Educators’ also believed that positive student–teacher relationships were essential in preventing conflict and for promoting academic engagement. An elementary school educator observed:

There are a lot of schools of thought about relationships, and if they are important at all. I will go to the end of the earth to say that’s the number one thing, [but] there’s other people that say you only need academics. You have to have rapport with the students. They have to know if you care about them first before they will go the extra mile.

Another offered, “There’s not a teacher in this building who wouldn’t argue that relationships are the most important factor.” Staff described positive relationships as key to preventing conflict. One educator said, “Without that relationship you just don’t get anywhere.” Indeed, this belief in the power of relationships was one of the strongest and most consistent themes from our data.

Taking responsibility for conflict. Another normative feature was the belief that adults in the building, rather than students, were responsible for creating and resolving conflicts. For example, after using a zero-tolerance approach for several years, one school leader realized this approach was actually leading to more challenges: “We were creating behavior problems, we were creating meltdowns.” Others spoke about the relationship between teachers’ capacity for community building and their ability to manage conflict in the classroom. Rather than attributing high referral rates to “bad kids,” the following quote is typical: “A teacher that’s constantly referring kids—what’s the problem? It’s most likely relationship problems, they have a hard time building relationships with kids.” These participants believed that school staff members’ behavior could exacerbate or minimize discipline issues. Another reported, “You have to be willing to change your instruction, or how you deal with things, to support children being in your classroom.” Speaking more broadly, a charter school principal told us, “It’s one hundred percent our responsibility for understanding and changing ourselves and our own understandings and skills, so that we can better support our students. That’s a big paradigm shift.” These convictions stand in contrast to narratives that attribute student “misbehavior” to family and community characteristics.

Growth mindset. Another normative sentiment was that, among both students and staff, “it’s okay to make mistakes.” Slipups were not something deserving of punishment, shame or judgment:

There's a lot of grace and a lot of forgiveness in our staff culture, and I think that trickles down to the way we see our students. There's very little that would be so extreme that we would kick them out of the family, off of the team and [this] is similar to the way we see and treat our students.

Instead, mistakes were seen as opportunities to problem-solve and learn new tools, for both students *and* school staff, without attacking or humiliating. One administrator explained, "I'm not going judgment-shame, or blame . . . but I do have to hold [teachers] accountable." Educators said that the emphasis on growth prevented discipline incidents from escalating, and also encouraged school staff to use one another as resources. Staff members perceived their peers' requests for support with conflict as indicators of teachers' commitment to equity and inclusion, rather than weaknesses.

Recognizing race and equity. Another normative sentiment was a commitment to addressing the role of racism in educational inequities. One school social worker explained: "It is not the student's fault, the achievement gap exists because there is something wrong in our culture, there's something wrong in our society . . . children of color are set up from day one to fail." Rather than placing blame on students and their families, she located the cause of the achievement gap in larger structural, racialized inequities. Similarly, beliefs that racism and social inequalities in education motivated school leaders and practitioners to place a high value on building relationships with students and families of color: "We've worked incredibly hard with our Black and our Latino students to make sure that they feel respected and feel heard, feel loved." Such educators were committed to creating affirming climates for parents and students of color.

Using the normative lens made evident a set of beliefs within which educators made decisions about discipline. These norms revolved around prevention rather than punishment, the importance of relationships; adult-responsibility for conflict; the human capacity for growth; and beliefs about the importance of addressing racism.

Political Dimensions of School Discipline

The political lens made evident two ways that school leaders used authority and accountability to achieve school discipline goals. First, school leaders used their power to reinforce expectations for how teachers handled conflict in classrooms. Second, they used personnel processes to make intentional decisions about hiring and retaining staff based on alignment between staff and school values.

Reinforcing expectations among staff. An expectation at many schools was that when student conflict arose, teachers should first address it inside the classroom before referring a student out. When teachers deviated from this expectation, administrators used their authority to send students back to class, and to follow-up with the teachers afterwards. In what administrators described as coaching conversations, they asked probing questions about steps the teachers had taken before sending the student out of class in order to hold teachers accountable to expected protocols. An administrator told us that teachers “knew that we were going to hold them accountable, just as they were trying to hold their students accountable.” Another school administrator shared an example of what these conversations entailed:

If you bring a child to me because they have done something in your classroom, I’m going to ask you. . . . “What have you done? . . . What relationship have you built? Have you talked to their parents? . . . What do you know about the child? Have you taken the time?”

Such comments indicated that administrators held teachers accountable to discipline protocols by asking them to provide explanations and evidence about their decisions to remove students from the classroom. Conversations between administrators and teachers about discipline-related decisions provided opportunities for reflection and growth:

There [were] a lot of times when something would happen [and we] would have to debrief it, and really talk about the antecedents, the trigger. Those were hard conversations because you know, we really asked our staff to reflect on their practice—both instructionally and behaviorally. But that’s how you start changing what’s happening, when people start recognizing like, “Oh, maybe if I had said this instead.”

Despite being hard conversations to have, the vice principal saw them as generating insights that could change what was happening in the building.

Personnel decisions. Administrators leveraged their hiring resources to identify candidates whose values aligned with their desired school culture. In writing samples or initial interviews, school leaders asked questions about teachers’ approaches to building relationships, beliefs about students, and commitment to equity and inclusion. For example, one school leader described asked candidates to “relate to a story, personal or professional, where the value of all kids was taken into account.” Another

administrator who was particularly race and equity conscious said they asked candidates:

How has your own race and class privilege tied into your success? . . . If someone's willing to say, "I don't know, I've never thought about that, let me unpack this," that's who we want in front of our kids. Someone that says, "That's not a thing" [is not] the best fit for our culture.

After preliminary screeners, schools further assessed fit through observations, demonstrations, mock meetings, and scenarios. Candidates' alignment with schools' norms was valued even beyond content knowledge or technical training. For example, one school leader said:

The first year here, I tried to hire the best content teachers. This year I just went out looking for people who were going to love our kids. I find people who care about kids. That's a big shift for me.

Administrators also moved "people out of the building" if they insisted on sending kids out of the classroom or made derogatory statements to students, like that they would never "amount to anything." For example, a principal shared:

The numerous conversations I had about how to speak to kids. . . . I said "we don't kick kids out of class. When you do that you tell them you don't care. You can't do that." So, two of them were non-renewed, and one went to another school.

School leaders used their power to advance the interests of underserved students by reinforcing expectations for handling conflict in classrooms and using personnel processes to hire and dismiss staff with incongruent values. The political nature of these strategies affected the distribution of "who gets what and how" in their schools. Exerting pressure to keep students out of the discipline office and using discretion in staffing decisions helped school leaders create a more supportive climate for students marginalized through traditional approaches to discipline.

Discussion

This study suggests that school discipline, like academic detracking, can be conceptualized using technical, normative, and political dimensions. First, technical approaches were evident in participants' use of professional

development to expand knowledge of new school-wide curricula and programs, modified schedules for relationship building, and discretionary funds to increase support staff. Second, participants illustrated normative dimensions in their beliefs about conflict prevention rather than punishment, the importance of relationships and personal growth, and the need to acknowledge the root causes of racial disparities. Last, this framework helped us see the political actions of administrators, who were intentional about holding staff accountable to inclusive discipline protocols and making staffing decisions amenable to equity-oriented values, thereby upending traditional power dynamics that often push students out of classrooms.

Furthermore, looking at these dimensions together reveals their interrelated dynamics, offering a more nuanced picture than studies examining each in isolation. In particular, they reveal how leadership practices in all three dimensions supported an inclusive approach to discipline. The material conditions made available by school leaders' allocation of time, money, and staff was supported by a normative emphasis on learning, relationships, prevention, and racial equity. These dimensions were further complemented by school leaders' reinforcement of shared responsibility for conflict prevention and resolution through political pressure and hiring/firing. The equity-minded school change framework helps illuminate these interrelationships, suggesting that one dimensional models may overlook key elements of this important reform issue. Examining only educators' beliefs, for example, runs the risk of analytically overlooking procedures, knowledge, and temporal resources that can be leveraged in correspondence with these norms. Furthermore, the distribution and use of power by school administrators strengthened the use of technical strategies and buttressed particular normative sentiments. Likewise, if one were to only focus on technical strategies, they might overlook how these strategies may or may not align with staff beliefs and local distributions of power. The exact role that these dimensions played in discipline outcomes was not supported by our analysis, but applying this framework to future studies on discipline to examine calibration issues and the impacts on reform is an exciting area of future research. Future analyses should examine how these dimensions factored into policy implementation processes.

Importantly, the three dimensions used to study tracking do appear to lend themselves to studies of school discipline, indicating the theoretical generalizability of normative, technical, and political dimensions to a new policy arena. This is not to say that the specific manifestations of the dimensions we observed is generalizable. Because schools are embedded in a wide array of

contexts, the configurations of each dimension (e.g., the nature of the strategies, values, and politics consists) will likely differ across environments, providing a rich area for future research. Until further studies can clarify the role of these dimensions in reform processes, we can only speculate as to how a persistent reliance on technical structures, strategies, and knowledge may affect the discipline reform movement. Previous studies suggest that inattention to the norms and politics of school discipline may mean that new strategies—such as restorative practices and positive behavior supports—will be reshaped by schools to fit their local culture and bureaucratic structures (Deschenes et al., 2001; Oakes et al., 2005).

Our findings suggest that reformers seeking to address the normative and political dimensions of school discipline can consider enacting policies that incentivize processes in which school staff collectively define the core values that underlie their discipline practices, and demonstrate how their financial and human capital allocations are aligned with these beliefs. The practices we observed school leaders used suggests that reformers should also attend to the roles and responsibilities of school leaders to create holistic systems that support desired discipline outcomes.

Limitations

This study is limited in several ways that highlight opportunities for future research to examine the goodness of fit between this framework and school discipline reform. By deductively focusing our analysis on these three dimensions, we may have overlooked other dynamics that would have been identified through a more inductive approach. The second coding phase, using the equity-minded school change framework, was a largely top-down processes that, until the third phase, reduced the themes we ultimately derived. Methodologically speaking, an open coding approach would enrich the range of themes and complexity that such a framework could bring to bear on school discipline. Our analysis was also limited because our code categories were premised on identifying themes that were shared among participants, rather than exploring divergent themes.

There were also key sampling issues that may have affected what constituted the examples provided within each dimension. Our sample of schools was purposive and not representative; it only included sites with low suspension rates overall and for Black students in particular. In particular, previous literature suggests that these dimensions are likely to manifest differently in schools that rely on suspension as their primary strategy for

resolving conflict. For example, high suspending schools might have norms that emphasize punishment over prevention, use discretionary funds to hire security guards rather than social workers, or use nonrenewal to exclude teachers who challenge exclusionary practices (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Welch & Payne, 2010). Thus, future research should examine how these dimensions contribute to exclusionary contexts. Additionally, that school leaders nominated participants may have resulted in data that did not represent perspectives held by all staff members in each school. A greater range of viewpoints may have expanded both the content of each dimension, and the dimensions themselves. Given that our participants were mostly White women suggests future research should also examine how these dimensions differ in schools with more leaders and teachers of color. Future research should examine this framework in relation to data collected in different school contexts and wider range of staff members while also attending to both shared and discordant coding themes.

Furthermore, readers might be enticed to see the themes we have presented as directly connected to schools' low suspension rates. Yet it is unknown whether the technical, normative, and political dynamics we found within each dimension *caused* lower suspension rates; our data collection and analysis precludes us from making statements about causal processes and explanations (though this is more a product of our analysis than our use of qualitative methods, see Eisenhart, 2005). That said, previous research does indicate similar themes have been found in other studies of low-suspending schools. For example, experimental studies indicate that dedicating professional learning and instructional time to relationship building reduces suspension rates overall and for Black students in particular (Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2004; Gregory, Bell, & Pollock, 2004). Research also indicates that the amount and quality of training and technical assistance, including consultation and coaching, is associated with higher fidelity in school-based prevention programs (Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2006). In fact, other studies confirm that schools with low rates of suspension tend to provide more staff development and training and more varied ways of reducing and preventing misbehavior (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). The norm of prevention instead of punishment is also consistent with findings that a principal's emphasis on prevention and services over exclusion is a primary driver of lower exclusionary discipline outcomes (Christle et al., 2004; Mukuria, 2002; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). However, due to limitations in analysis we have not linked these factors directly to changes in discipline outcomes. Future research should consider longitudinal designs that allow for deeper examination of process connecting technical, normative, and polit-

ical dynamics to *changes* in discipline outcomes, as well as studies that compare processes and dynamics found in higher suspending schools.

In applying an equity-minded framework to school discipline, we hope that future studies will address the limitations we encountered and develop more nuanced models. We are optimistic that a multidimensional approach to school discipline will complement current efforts to reduce the use of exclusionary and racially disproportionate discipline practices. Traditionally, school processes have incentivized student removal; however, we found educators used a complementary blend of technical, normative, and political strategies to keep students in classrooms and schools, providing a critical stop-gap in the discipline processes that normally lead children into the school to prison pipeline.

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