

"They Want Good Numbers:" How Race, Political Context, and Public Data Shape Views of Discipline in Middle Schools

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HOW DO TEACHERS VIEW DISCIPLINE IN THEIR SCHOOLS?

WHAT FACTORS SHAPE THESE VIEWS?

Background

- There are vast racial disparities in who is punished in schools - and how they are punished
- Suspension is associated with a host of negative outcomes (e.g. dropout, test scores)
- There is increasing public attention and access to data from schools, including test scores and discipline rates by race
- Examining how teachers perceive discipline in their schools may aid in understanding how students are treated and how reforms are implemented and received

Methods

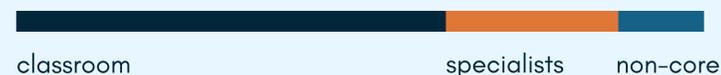
Interview-based study with 26 middle school teachers from two schools in a small, progressive city in the Northeast

- Predominantly white (65%), with Asian, Black, Latinx, and multiracial students comprising between 6-10% of the population each
- Less than 5% of students are out-of-school suspended, but Black students are 4x as likely to be suspended as white peers

Teacher Participants

- Predominantly white (92%) and female (81%)
- Average experience teaching was 15 years, with 10 in their current school

Type of Teacher Participants



Findings

Race and Perceptions of Discipline

Teacher perceptions of discipline varied greatly, even within schools, though most said overall behavior was good.

Over half of teachers expressed a perceived lack of formal consequences for students:

"There is a perception of zero discipline in the school...who is running the school, the students or us?"
- Tom, classroom teacher

Specifically, teachers held the view that schools were overlooking misbehavior from students of color:

"I think that if you are a well off Caucasian student, with supportive parents you will get in trouble and if you are not, you won't..."
- Emily, classroom teacher

Over half of teachers relied on racialized stereotypes or 'cultural' explanations to explain student behavior, which they saw as worse among students who are low income or of color:

"A lot of the American African males don't have like a father figure so it's a lot of times a one parent household, they're working, they're being raised by another sibling or they just don't have those expectations at home..."
- Kate, non-core teacher

On the other hand, a small contingent of teachers (~20%) viewed students of color as targets of discipline, often for subjective offenses like disrespect or disruption:

"It usually falls on minorities or low income families, those [forms of discipline] that are really punitive and very almost oppressive."
- Jocelyn, classroom teacher

Public Data and the Shift to Restorative Practices

One third of teachers believed the district has adopted restorative practices, such as a "reflection room," as a way to work around giving formal in-school suspensions (ISS) or other forms of discipline that are recorded and may appear bad to a progressive public:

"They did away with the ISS room... A lot of people said it because there's criticism when you look at ISS and you see most of the kids are students of color. So, that falls back on the district, is this institutional racism, are you treating kids differently...the way to fix that is to do away with the ISS Program, so, now there's no data."

You can't say that we have institutional racism problem because there's no data to look at. So, if you have a kid who is misbehaving and needs to be sent out of your class where did they go, what did they do? So, they started this..."
- Cindy, classroom teacher

These new approaches were seen as incomplete and poorly implemented, and teachers viewed the lack of formal suspensions as explicitly linked to concerns over protecting the district's image in relation to students of color:

I think the principal has tried to discipline the kids but if it's going to look bad against the school district, the superintendent will step in... he doesn't want that at all and especially if they are a kid of color."
- Nicole, specialist

Conclusions

Race informs teachers' interpretation of and explanations for student behavior

Incomplete implementation of restorative practices results in perceptions of few consequences for students

Teachers view districts as changing disciplinary practices to respond to political pressures as public access to school data grows

New practices in the accountability era attempt to reform discipline, but also function to shelter schools against allegations of racial disproportionality



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