Nudging the Gap:

Introduction to the Special Issue *Closing in on Discipline Disproportionality*

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Abstract

This special issue of *School Psychology Review*, entitled "Closing in on Discipline Disproportionality" examined promising approaches and critical issues related to the challenge of closing racial and ethnic gaps in schools' use of exclusionary and punitive discipline practices. In this introductory paper, we briefly reviewed the rationale for and urgency for a focus on disproportionality in discipline and highlighted some of the most salient findings from the five empirical studies in this special issue. We identified some challenges for the field going forward, with particular attention to issues of measurement and structural factors that shape differential disciplinary outcomes. Consistent with the National Association of School Psychologists' (2013) position statement, we emphasized the need to build the science of discipline disparities intervention through more systematic empirical research. Taken together, these new directions are intended to catalyze scientific rigor in the next generation of evidence-based interventions to close the discipline gap.

Keywords: school discipline, disparities, race, racism, disproportionality, educational inequality

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Introduction to the Special Issue *Closing in on Discipline Disproportionality*

Schools' differential use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., office disciplinary referrals, out-of-school suspensions) by race has been an unremitting problem since at least the 1970s. In the nearly half-century since these gaps were first documented on a national scale (Children's Defense Fund, 1975), Black-White disparities in out-of-school suspensions across the US have almost quadrupled, according to a 2015 report by UCLA's Center for Civil Rights Remedies (Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015). In light of increased research and media attention to the discipline gap since the early 2000s, the report's eponymous question asked, "Are we closing the school discipline gap?" The answer, in large part, was "no".

While there has been much concern about the issue of disproportionality from equity, societal, and legal perspectives, few researchers have documented outcomes associated with effective or promising practices aimed at reducing these disparities. In fact, over the past four decades since these gaps were first identified, much of the research on the topic has continued to focus on documenting the existence of discipline disproportionality and exploring factors that contribute to it. Research providing empirical support of the efficacy of specific interventions to reduce and eliminate the gap remains scarce (Bottiani, Larson, Debnam, Bischoff, & Bradshaw, 2017). Although we need to know more about the potential sources or factors contributing to disproportionality in discipline, there is a critical need for more research on effective approaches to close these gaps.

The current special issue of *School Psychology Review*, entitled "Closing in on Discipline Disproportionality", aimed to address some of these gaps in the extant research by identifying strategies to disrupt and redress discipline practices that reify racism in schools and classrooms.

Toward that end, the special issue highlighted interventions and approaches that hold great promise for closing racial and ethnic gaps in student discipline. Consistent with the National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP, 2013) position statement on racial and ethnic disproportionality in education, we also intended to draw attention to issues that school psychologists can attend to their efforts to reduce racial disparities in school discipline.

In this introduction, we briefly present the rationale for our focus on disproportionality in discipline, then summarized the promising approaches to reducing disproportionality examined in the papers within the current issue. After identifying some strengths and common themes across the papers, we highlight issues that need to be addressed to further advance the field of evidence-based approaches for closing the discipline gap. In reviewing this collection of papers, we conclude that the field has made some progress in "nudging the gap", rather than "closing in on" it. Nonetheless, we anticipate that this research will help advance the field and inform the next stage of rigorous empirical work on interventions related to equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive school environments.

Rationale for Science-Based Intervention to Address the Discipline Gap

Discrepant patterns of exclusionary discipline have been documented by race/ethnicity, ability status, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual identity, and sexual orientation (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015; GLSEN, 2016; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Losen et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2002, 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Yet schools' excessive exclusion of Black students in particular stands among the most glaring indicators of opportunity inequality in our education system. More so than for any other student group, out-of-school suspensions affect an alarmingly high proportion of Black adolescents. Nationally, 23.2% (or roughly one in four) of all Black secondary school students

received an out-of-school suspension in a given school year (i.e., 2011-12; Losen et al., 2015). In terms of having ever received a suspension, another national study showed that almost half (49%) of Black high school students had ever been suspended, compared to 18% of their White peers (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011). Moreover, risk of suspension for Black youth increases exponentially at the intersections of their other identities (e.g., gender, ability status). For example, nationally representative studies have shown that Black boys are in the range of six-to-eight times as likely as White girls to be suspended (e.g., 28.4% of Black males relative to 3.8% of White females; Gregory, 1997; Losen et al., 2015). At the intersection of race, sex, and disability status, more than a third (33.8%) of Black male adolescents identified with disabilities nationally are suspended at least once per year (U.S. DOE, Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

It important to note the subjective nature of school discipline, as behavioral definitions of infractions, and consequences imposed, can vary widely within and across schools (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Some types of student infractions can be considered more objective, such as graffiti, smoking on school grounds, or carrying a weapon to school; they are objective in that a student either did or did not commit these violations—there is not much subject to interpretation. Other infractions can be understood as subjective, also called “soft” offenses, which can include defiance, insubordination, and disrespect; these types of offenses rely relatively more on school staff perceptions of students’ behavior. Studies have found that White students more typically receive suspensions for objective violations, whereas Black youth tend to receive suspensions for subjective offenses (Skiba et al., 2002). Other research has shown that racial and ethnic disparities in discipline persist even when controlling for teacher ratings of student behavior or socioeconomic status of the student (Wallace et al., 2008). Taken together, the literature suggests the potential that cultural differences in assumed expectations and styles of

communication, as well as implicit racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender biases, may contribute to disparities in exclusionary discipline rates (Skiba et al., 2011). Yet research establishing an evidence-base for explicit professional development targeting these areas for training and intervention is still in a formative stage. It is for this reason that the current special issue focused on specific strategies for closing the discipline gap.

Overview of the Contributing Articles

The first three papers in the special issue consider some of the proximal factors associated with the classroom context, where much of the school-based dynamic contributing to disproportionality has its root. Specifically, Bradshaw and colleagues present findings from a randomized controlled trial testing a novel classroom coaching and professional development model called Double Check in 12 elementary and middle schools. Double Check aims to help teachers and school staff to reflect on, and ultimately address the following five core components associated with culturally responsive practices: *Reflective Thinking, Authentic Relationship, Connection to Curriculum, Effective Communication,* and *Sensitivity to Student's Cultural and Situational Messages* (Hershfeldt et al., 2009). The self-reflection process is facilitated through professional development and coaching, following an adaptation of the Classroom Check-up (Reinke, 2008), which is a data-driven process intended to increase teachers' use of culturally-responsive classroom management and student engagement strategies. Their results indicated that relative to teachers who only received exposure to the school-wide professional development, the teachers who were randomly assigned to receive coaching were rated by outside observers as employing significantly better classroom behavior management strategies. Moreover, their findings also demonstrated significant effects on observations of student behaviors and reductions of office disciplinary referrals of Black students. These results suggest

promising effects of the combined Double Check professional development and classroom-based coaching model for teachers and their students.

The paper by Cook and colleagues turns our attention to the role of implicit bias using the GREET-STOP-PROMPT approach. This program involves proactive classroom behavior management strategies, a self-regulation technique to minimize impact of implicit bias in classroom decision-making during disciplinary encounters, and reactive behavior management strategies designed to generate more empathic responses to problem behavior. Through a single case experimental design, they report data suggesting that the GREET-STOP-PROMPT approach is associated with reductions in disproportionality in office disciplinary referrals for Black males in particular, as well as concomitant improvements in Black males' self-report of belonging and connection at school, suggesting the potential effectiveness of the interventions' focus on addressing implicit bias.

The study by Larson et al. digs deeper into classroom processes that may contribute to disproportionality. Leveraging quantitative and objective measures of culturally responsive behavior management (i.e., both self-reports and independent observations of culturally responsive teaching and behavior management in the classroom) they explored conceptual and measurement gaps regarding the extent to which culturally responsive teaching can serve as a mechanism to for reducing discipline disproportionality. Specifically, they found significant association of observations of teachers' culturally responsive and proactive behavior management practices in the classroom with positive student behaviors. Their findings highlight the potential promise of interventions targeting teacher culturally responsive practices in the classroom.

The last two original papers in the special issue give prominence to commonly used school-wide approaches for addressing disproportionality. Specifically, Gregory and collaborators leverage pioneering work of Denver Public Schools (DPS) in implementing restorative justice programming to examine what they describe as differential processing of discipline-referred students based on their racial background. This lens highlights the multifaceted, sequential nature of the problem of discipline disproportionality. Restorative practices are intended to help schools address student behavior from a relationally-focused, non-punitive, and non-exclusionary stance. Yet research on the effects of restorative practices on school disciplinary outcomes is only emerging. Their study seeks to build the evidence base while specifically examining impacts for Black students. Following a multilevel examination of outcomes for over 9,000 discipline-referred students, Gregory et al. concluded that restorative interventions (occurring after a discipline incident occurred) may have benefits for all groups, but do not demonstrate substantially better outcomes for Black students.

Finally, the study by Cornell and collaborators examined the use of threat assessment, which is a systematic process of evaluation and intervention for students who have made verbal or behavioral threats of violence against others, as an approach to achieving greater racial and ethnic parity in disciplinary outcomes. This timely study leveraged the unique opportunity to examine the impact of a state mandate in Virginia, which required the use of student threat assessment teams in all public schools and submission of annual data on their use of threat assessments. The authors reported on racial and ethnic differences for White, Black, and Hispanic students in disciplinary and legal outcomes. They found neither Black nor Hispanic students were more likely than White students to be suspended or expelled from school, transferred to a different school, or receive legal consequences (arrest, formal charges, or

incarceration). Cornell and colleagues discussed possible explanations for the racial and ethnic parity in threat assessment outcomes and tentatively suggested that the threat assessment process may reflect a generalizable pathway for reducing disproportionality in school discipline.

Two commentaries provided by leading experts in prevention-focused approaches to school discipline and behavioral intervention highlight policy implications related to discipline disproportionality and recommended future directions. Specifically, Sprague's commentary ties together the special issue by providing concrete and tangible next steps for researchers and practitioners alike. His commentary particularly addresses gaps in translating theory to practice and methodological clarity needed to promote solution-focused research. Finally, Fergus points to important levers for change in discipline policy and touches on current state-level school discipline legislative reforms that may herald a new era nationwide of policy change to cut excessive use of exclusionary discipline.

Critical Challenges Hindering Advancement

This collection of papers represents some of the most current and innovative approaches currently being used in the field. Despite the promising findings reported, a number of challenges also emerged which are worthy of further consideration. We focus first on some of the measurement issues hindering advancement in this field.

Measuring Progress

In this issue, two studies measure the construct of teacher cultural responsiveness (Bradshaw et al. ; Larson et al., this issue) in ways that improve upon prior research, which has relied primarily on teacher self-report measures of cultural responsiveness. As with many other self-report measures, a concern regarding the validity of self-report of cultural responsiveness is a potential bias towards reporting about oneself in a positive, if not entirely accurate, light (i.e.,

social desirability bias; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960); yet this bias may be amplified in the context of societal consciousness and attention to issues of cultural competence and racism in education (Larson & Bradshaw, 2017). In recognition of this concern, the studies by Bradshaw et al. and Larson et al. statistically controlled for this tendency in their models using a measure of social desirability bias. Yet even when accounting for this bias, other concerns persist in relying on self-report of cultural responsiveness. Specifically, some of the most widely used self-report measures of teacher cultural responsiveness assess teacher attitudes and beliefs, rather than their use of specific behaviors, which may be more readily linked to student outcomes (for examples, see Munroe Multicultural Attitude Scale, Munroe & Pearson, 2006; Teacher Multicultural Attitude Survey, Ponterroto, Baluch, Greig, & Rivera, 1998; Cultural Awareness Beliefs Inventory, Roberts-Walter, 2007). There has been some measurement attention given to self-efficacy to exercise certain culturally responsive skills or practices in the classroom (e.g., Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale, Siwatu, 2007; Multicultural Efficacy Scale; Guyton & Wesche, 2005; Double Check Self-Assessment Tool, Hershfeldt et al., 2009), and attitudes are likely important predictors, or at least correlates, of behavior. However, only recently has there been increased attention to measurement approaches to facilitate reliable, independently observed indicators of culturally responsive practice (Debnam, Pas, Bottiani, Cash, & Bradshaw, 2015). In this issue, both Bradshaw et al. and Larson et al. employed a measure of independently observed cultural responsiveness as an intervention outcome, recognizing that behavioral and observational measures may provide a more accurate assessment of teacher cultural responsiveness (Debnam et al., 2015).

Observational assessment of cultural responsiveness may be a critical next step in establishing the effectiveness of interventions to promote teacher culturally-responsive practices

(e.g., Double Check; Bradshaw et al., this issue); however, it has been difficult among experts and practitioners alike to agree on indicators of culturally-responsive positive behavior support in the classroom. Building greater consensus around these indicators will provide the necessary foundation to operationalize the construct in a way that is observable and can be efficient and reliably coded in real time. Observational measures are often time-intensive and potentially burdensome for researchers to collect, so feasibility, particularly for school personnel, to administer observational measures is another concern. Logistical issues related to observational assessments are particularly challenging when considering the preference for multiple waves of observational data collection across multiple raters and various classroom activities in order to make valid inferences about the teacher (Cantrel & Kane, 2013). Thus, considerable attention is needed to the measurement of classroom practices and teacher behaviors that reflect a culturally responsive teaching and learning environment, and in turn to promote a high level of equity and inclusion.

A related gap in the measurement literature is the extent to which students may be an alternative source of reliable report on these practices and classroom factors. Arguably, students are well-positioned to report on the effects of culturally responsive teaching (e.g., whether they feel fully engaged by the content, their sense of emotional belonging and inclusion, and other student-reported climate indicators, e.g., Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Lindstrom Johnson, 2014), yet they may not be attuned to report well on the teachers' actual practices, and student-report measures that help to identify which culturally responsive teaching practices are effective are limited and only just emerging. Without valid and reliable measures, it will be challenging for either researchers or practitioners to determine and monitor whether we are moving the

needle or even making progress in improving proximal outcomes like culturally responsive teaching.

In terms of the more distal outcome of eliminating racial disparities in discipline practices, the lack of consensus on an efficient, valid, and reliable method of identifying and monitoring disproportionality at classroom, school, and district levels is another critical challenge evident in the papers presented in this special issue. Disproportionality is typically operationalized for measurement purposes as the extent to which the representation of a group in a category (e.g., proportion of Black students receiving suspensions) differs from an agreed upon benchmark for that group (e.g., proportion of White students receiving suspensions; Skiba et al., 2008). Although discipline gaps are often readily identifiable on national and statewide levels, operationalizing significant disparity at classroom, school, and district levels for practical purposes of detection, intervention, and monitoring improvement is a far more complex task. These challenges are due in part to variation in representation of racial/ethnic groups, rates of disciplinary actions, sizes of student enrollment, and lack of consensus on what thresholds and indicators should be used to identify a significant level of disparity. Specifically, in classroom settings, the overall denominator for rates of referral to the office is typically relatively low (e.g., 25-30 students per classroom); when calculating rates for racial and ethnic groups within the classroom, the denominator is much lower, creating a higher chance of zero cells and instability in rates. For example, in a class of 30 in which there are only five Black students, even one to two referrals can dramatically change rates. Moreover, tracking students' referrals to a teacher is relatively straightforward at an elementary level, where students are assigned to a single teacher and typically remain with that teacher for most of the day. However, as discussed by Bradshaw and colleagues (this issue), tracking referrals to a classroom is more complex at the secondary

level, where students typically change classrooms and are exposed to multiple teachers across the course of a day or week, thereby making it difficult to calculate a denominator for a teacher or classroom. Systems for tracking referrals often only track the referred student, but not the number of students in the classroom from which that student was referred (a number that is needed to calculate referral rates). Further work is needed to develop procedures for reliably assessing discipline disparities at the classroom level, both for research and applied monitoring purposes.

At school and district levels, disproportionality metrics are traditionally relative, meaning that a group of interest is typically compared to a benchmark group using a ratio of either rates (Hosp & Reschly, 2003), odds (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011), incidence (Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011), or composition indices (Gregory & Weinstein, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). Each of these metrics has advantages and disadvantages; however, the disadvantages of the risk ratio are most salient given the extent to which it is in being selected for use by states and districts to monitor discipline disproportionality. The risk ratio is an accessible and often compelling metric of disparity because it facilitates comparative interpretations (e.g., that Black students have four times the risk of suspension compared to their White peers). Yet the risk ratio divorces itself from information about the rates the ratios comprise. In the preceding example, four times the risk could be 10% for Black students and 2.5% for White students, or it could be 40% for Black students and 10% for White students. This loss of meaningful information about the actual rate of disciplinary actions matters a great deal in decision-making about when it is imperative to intervene because the outcome of concern has potential to cause harm (Losen et al., 2015). It also becomes a problem when schools are highly homogenous Black or White, and ratios become

unstable or invalid due to low cell counts or zero cells. To address this concern, absolute indicators of risk have been advised for use at school and district levels (Losen et al., 2015), meaning that rates are subtracted from one another, rather than divided. In subtracting rates, more meaningful information on the extent to which the rate of exclusionary discipline is a problem can be retained.

In their intervention studies, Cook et al. (this issue) examined risk ratios, whereas Gregory et al. and Cornell et al. (this issue) examined odds ratios, both relative indicators of discipline disparity outcome. Yet the use of relative indicators in a research context is less concerning than their use in monitoring disproportionality for purposes of detecting significant problems requiring intervention at school and district levels. This is because in research, inferences are drawn with respect to a larger sample of schools or districts, whereas in monitoring disparities in applied settings, high-stakes inferences are drawn from these metrics at the individual school and district level. Unfortunately, the limitations of the risk ratio statistic are not just in identifying correctly the schools in need of attention, but also in monitoring their improvements over time. Changes in risk ratios can often be deceptive and not accurately reflect progress where improvements in fact have been made (Losen et al., 2015). Because the risk ratio is frequently used by states to monitor progress in reducing discipline disparities, districts and schools that make improvements in reducing gaps, but do not receive recognition for their corrections, or worse continue to receive reprimands despite improvements, may be discouraged from their efforts to remedy disparities. Moreover, schools and districts that excessively refer or suspend Black students may not be well detected using the risk ratio and thus may avoid accountability to remedy the problem. We highlight these important issues to be addressed in relation to both practice and policy, in the hope that, through advances in measurement,

researchers and practitioners will be better prepared to engage in research-based approaches and interventions to reduce disproportionality and improve engagement.

Levers of Change in Complex School Ecologies

Schools have complex ecologies typically filled with numerous initiatives and prioritized reforms. Few studies have examined what happens when multiple competing initiatives are put in place, especially when they have underlying differences in their approach to student behavior (Ispa-Landa, 2017; Lustick, 2015). For example, a restorative justice focus on repairing harm may co-exist with more authoritarian approaches meted out through safety agents and zero-tolerance discipline policies (Ispa-Landa, 2017). Unfortunately, prior research (including Gregory et al.'s study on restorative intervention in this issue) does not account for the complexity of potentially competing approaches. To understand more about the contexts in which reforms are embraced, coopted, or abandoned, studies will need to better account for the complex (and sometimes contradictory) policies and practices related to student behavior that may be implemented concurrently in schools.

Exclusionary discipline outcomes are indicators of complex, interactive processes involving a number of school players, including teachers, students, and administrators, that may be the consequence of a teacher's individual bias or lack of skills, a student's problem behavior, a mismatch in accepted cultural norms within the school climate, a punitive or zero-tolerance disciplinary stance at the school, and/or broader, structural resource and opportunity inequalities affecting the school ecology. It is unknown whether sustainable disparity-reducing interventions need to address all of these multiple facets of the school ecology, through both prevention-focused initiatives (e.g., bias-awareness, classroom management training) and through more downstream intervention-oriented initiatives (e.g., alternatives to suspension). In fact, scholars

have argued a multi-faceted approach to intervention is likely needed to address the complex factors driving disparities in discipline (Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017). For example, beyond raising awareness about individual-level racial bias in discipline decision-making, we may need to address racial opportunity gaps (e.g., differential access to engaging and motivating instruction), thereby confronting the legacy of unequal access to high quality schooling experiences.

Research from this issue is honing in on the appropriate targets for intervention. For example, Gregory et al. (this issue) examined restorative interventions and concluded that significant in-roads for racial equity in discipline may more likely result from efforts at the prevention end of the prevention-intervention continuum. Notably, three studies in this issue have a prevention focus at the classroom level (i.e., preventing serious disciplinary incidents from rising to the level of administrator involvement; Bradshaw et al.; Cook et al.; Larsen et al., this issue). These studies also raised important questions for future research related to identifying the most feasible and efficient levers for equity-oriented change. Specifically, the programs, GREET-STOP-PROMPT (GSP; Cook et al., this issue) and Double Check (Bradshaw et al., this issue) aimed to address various aspects of teachers' classroom practice. For example, GSP includes teacher training in prevention *and* intervention using non-exclusionary discipline techniques. They also aim to raise awareness about implicit bias and train teachers to slow down during decision-points vulnerable to implicit bias. In their Double Check program, Bradshaw et al. (this issue) also help teachers learn skills in proactive behavior management. To increase racial equity in disciplinary referrals, they also push another lever for change: their coaches encourage teacher self-reflection about culturally-responsive practices. Larson et al. (this issue) shows that above and beyond teachers' observed proactive behavior management, culturally-

responsive behavior management is associated with positive student behavior. This suggests training in proactive and culturally-responsive behavioral management may be additive (or complementary) in equity-oriented programing. That said, further research needs to identify the relative emphasis on teacher training in basic skills in proactive classroom management versus teacher training in bias-awareness, cultural fluency, and culturally-responsive practice.

Future research is also needed regarding administrator, staff, and teacher beliefs that propel or hinder reform efforts. Prior research has shown that beliefs or mindsets are related to disciplinary outcomes. For instance, Skiba and colleagues (2014) showed that principals' beliefs in a preventive orientation toward school discipline were associated with lower odds students received suspension. In a small scale, experimental trial, Okonofua and colleagues (2016) showed that an intervention aimed at increasing teachers' empathic mindsets resulted in students receiving fewer suspensions. The links between *shifts* in beliefs and *changes* in behavior in the area of equity and discipline reform, however, have largely been overlooked in prior research. For example, past research has demonstrated that when staff participated in Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG) training, their support for a zero-tolerance approach to threats reduced (e.g., Cornell, Allen, & Fan, 2012). In this issue, Cornell and colleagues' study further demonstrates that educator training in threat assessment is associated with racially equitable assignment of consequences. As of yet, however, it is unknown whether a shift in beliefs (e.g., reduced support for zero tolerance) is essential before educators undertake new practices (in this case, the practice of threat assessment). Further research might examine the degree to which changes in beliefs mediate high fidelity implementation of discipline reforms.

Relatedly, it may be helpful to identify the degree to which belief in the need for punishment impedes initiatives that focus on responding to student misconduct through a social

emotional learning, restorative, and bias-awareness approach. Research might uncover that deep-seated beliefs in the need for punishment severely hamper implementation of reforms. For example, news accounts suggest that some teachers feel the primary way to hold students accountable for their behavior is through exclusionary discipline (Ahern, 2014). For some teachers, pressure to minimize exclusionary discipline has resulted in their feeling that they have less authority in their classroom and that they have fewer means to deter student misconduct (Rey, 2017). The findings from Cook et al. (this issue) suggest that teachers likely need concrete strategies to prevent and diffuse negative interactions to help them experientially learn non-exclusionary approaches to student behavior, which may then, in turn, help them develop a new set of beliefs about student behavior – potentially lessening their belief in punishment. However, this proposed transactional process requires further rigorous investigation.

Grappling with Racism

James Baldwin once wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced," (Baldwin, 2011, p. 42). In this vein, we suggest that a reckoning with the discipline gap as a manifestation of racism in education is an important precursor to real progress in ending the excessive disciplinary exclusion of Black children and youth. Scholarly discourse on root causes of the discipline gap has tended to lack substantive theories of change related to racism as it affects complex disciplinary processes in schools. Instead of delving into theoretical mechanisms related to racism, the role of cultural mismatch or home-school differences often has been emphasized. Although these are important potential contributing factors to examine (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Gregory et al., 2010; Monroe, 2005a, 2005b; Skiba et al., 2011), they may also be more comfortable to discuss and thus serve as a way to avoid more difficult issues related to racism (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017). The focus on

cultural mismatch unfortunately also has created opportunities for deficit views of culture and family home life to take root (e.g., frameworks on the "culture" of poverty; see critiques by Ladson-Billings, 2006 and Gorski, 2008). Historical legacies and persistent patterns of power, resource, and opportunity inequalities by race as they contribute to the discipline gap will continue to stymie our research and intervention efforts unless we begin to more explicitly and intentionally develop our collective thinking on the specific ways that racism is reified in school discipline processes. Yet discomfort and silence on issues of racism among educators, and particularly White educators (Tatum, 2017), has been a persistent barrier to progress in this area.

A shared conceptualization of racism as structural (e.g., Bailey et al., 2017) may provide a useful touchstone to support more open discourse on this highly charged topic. Often, racism is conceptualized at an individual-level as overt or covert discriminatory actions of one person against another, and thus sensitivity about potential labeling or blaming of individuals as racist may drive some of the discomfort in facing race-related issues. A systems-level view contextualizes and broadens this conception of racism to include its historically government-sanctioned (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow laws), institutional (e.g., GI Bill, Tuskegee Study, redlining, racial profiling), interpersonal (e.g., murder of Trayvon Martin, everyday microaggressions), and intrapersonal forms (e.g., internalized sense of oppression or privilege; Miller & Garran, 2017). Taking a systems-level perspective, structural racism has been defined as the "the totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination through mutually reinforcing, inequitable systems," (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 1454; also see Krieger, 2014). This concept of "uber racism" (Reskin, 2012) can be understood through ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997) to involve not only the culture, laws, systems, institutions, group practices, and individual behaviors that uphold systemic inequalities and perpetuate

racialized outcomes like the discipline gap, but the cumulative legacy of these forms of racism as well as the interactions between and within them over time.

New theoretical work directly addressing race and racism in the discipline gap is critical and beginning to emerge (e.g., Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollack, 2017). Coming face-to-face with the ubiquity and persistent legacy of racism in our present-day work as school psychologists and researchers is vital to our forward progress. As Carter and colleagues point out, the elimination of racial disparities in school discipline practices may hinge on coming to terms with the discipline gap *as* racism in education. It is imperative that future theoretical and empirical efforts to remedy the discipline gap be grounded in and informed by a broader, structural-ecological definition of racism that recognizes its pervasiveness.

Conclusion

This special issue, *Closing in on Disproportionality in Discipline*, sought to advance the field's understanding of effective approaches that school psychologists can use to support school leaders, educators, and school discipline teams to equitably respond to challenging student behaviors. As interventions to promote educator competencies and school-wide procedures to bridge cultural divides in the classroom have become increasingly critical (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010), research documenting the extent to which interventions actually improve disproportionality in student discipline or staff participants' culturally responsive practices has remained painfully scarce (Bottiani et al., 2017). There is also considerable variation in the way in which disproportionality and culturally responsive practices are measured as outcomes within the context of school staff professional development studies. By identifying effective, promising, and emerging approaches, this special issue has potential to build consensus and promote dissemination of evidence-based models of professional development, training and intervention

models in order to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and actually close, rather than just nudge, the discipline gap.

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