

Social and Emotional Learning and Equity in School Discipline

Anne Gregory and Edward Fergus

Summary

Beginning as early as preschool, race and gender are intertwined with the way US schools mete out discipline. In particular, black students and male students are much more likely than others to be suspended or expelled—punishments that we know can hold them back academically. These disparities, and the damage they can cause, have driven recent reforms, including some that incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) practices.

Anne Gregory and Edward Fergus review federal and state mandates to cut down on punishments that remove students from school, and they show how some districts are embracing SEL in their efforts to do so. Yet even in these districts, large disparities in discipline persist. The authors suggest two reasons current discipline reforms that embrace SEL practices may hold limited promise for reducing discipline disparities.

The first is that prevailing “colorblind” notions of SEL don’t consider power, privilege, and cultural difference—thus ignoring how individual beliefs and structural biases can lead educators to react harshly to behaviors that fall outside a white cultural frame of reference. The second is that most SEL models are centered on students, but not on the adults who interact with them. Yet research shows that educators’ own social and emotional competencies strongly influence students’ motivation to learn and the school climate in general.

Gregory and Fergus describe how one school district is striving to orient its discipline policies around a conception of SEL that stresses equity and promotes both adults’ and students’ SEL competencies. Although such reforms hold promise, they are still in the early stages, and the authors call for rigorous empirical work to test whether such efforts can substantially reduce or eradicate racial and gender disparities in discipline.

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David Osher of the American Institutes for Research reviewed and critiqued a draft of this article.

Growing evidence shows that suspending or expelling students from school for misconduct can harm their academic progress.¹ We also know that students' race and gender play a role in how school discipline is meted out. Statistical comparisons of students who've been referred for discipline for similar reasons (such as fighting) show that black students and male students are more likely to receive out-of-school suspension than white students and female students.²

Such disparities are spurring reforms at all levels of government. For example, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law in 2015, specifies that one way to support learning is to curb the overuse of disciplinary practices that remove students from the classroom. Reforms are happening at the state level as well. California schools can't suspend students in kindergarten through third grade for infractions that don't threaten others' safety, such as "disruption" and "willful defiance." Connecticut has banned suspension of young students for any reason, with minor exceptions. Some school districts, such as Denver, CO's, have revised their student codes of conduct in response to grassroots organizing by parents and students, who filed complaints and produced reports documenting disparate suspension patterns. And civil rights investigations by the US Department of Justice have spurred extensive reforms in places like Oakland, CA.

In this article, we describe recent federal and state legislative policy reforms that aim to reduce schools' reliance on suspension. We also give examples of local efforts to reduce discipline disparities by incorporating social and emotional learning

(SEL) practices—thus making room for more developmentally appropriate, SEL-oriented approaches to behavior. We describe in detail the multifaceted efforts of three school districts where proposed changes in disciplinary procedures and practices will likely create more opportunities for student SEL and for structures that support SEL among adults in the schools.

Yet even if race- and gender-based equity discipline reforms fully embrace SEL as most people now understand it, the promise for substantially narrowing or eliminating disparities remains limited. That's because the prevailing understanding of SEL is "colorblind" and doesn't take power, privilege, and culture into account. Another limiting factor is an emphasis only on students' SEL, despite the evidence that students' and teachers' social and emotional competencies are interrelated.³ We believe that more promising policy reforms could arise if we reconceptualized SEL to account for the cultural beliefs, biases, and power dynamics that privilege developmental expressions of behavior that are more likely to be nurtured among white middle-class children.⁴ We speculate that this approach would make school environments healthier both socially and emotionally, while also strengthening educators' own social and emotional competence and improving their ability to foster students' SEL.

Racial and Gender Disparities in School Discipline

Latino, American Indian, and black youth—particularly black males in special education—are significantly

more likely than other students to be referred to school administrators for discipline problems. They are also more likely to be punished by out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or a referral to law enforcement—a fact that's well documented across states, districts, and schools.⁵ Recent research has found that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students may also be disciplined more often.⁶

School discipline, poor achievement, and contact with the juvenile justice system are interconnected.⁷ For example, researchers who followed a large cohort of Florida youth beginning in ninth grade found that each suspension the students experienced decreased the odds of their graduating from high school by 20 percent and of enrolling in college by 12 percent.⁸ A Texas statewide study found that students suspended or expelled for a discretionary school violation—that is, a violation for which suspension or expulsion wasn't mandatory, allowing administrators to exercise discretion in assigning consequences—were about three times more likely than other young people to have contact with the juvenile justice system in the next school year.⁹ Over the long term, these facts imply that groups of students who are disproportionately suspended are less likely to succeed in life.

In this article, we focus on race and gender disparities between black and white youth because these groups have the most consistent and longstanding discipline gaps. The differences are striking: black youth are two to three times more likely than white youth to be suspended. Similar disparities occur

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between male and female students; still, in many schools the suspension rate for black female students surpasses the rate for male students who aren't black.

The discipline gap between black and white students starts as early as preschool. National data from 2013–14 show that although only 19 percent of preschool children are black, they represent 47 percent of preschool children who receive one or more out-of-school suspensions. These disproportionalities continue as students proceed through elementary, middle, and high school.

Could the disparities we see across racial groups be driven by other differences that fall along racial lines? The answer is no: rigorous research has shown that disparities in income, special education placement, and academic achievement don't fully explain the high rates at which black students are disciplined. For example, when researchers in the above-mentioned Texas study used statistical analyses to account for 83 possible differences among students (such as income and achievement), being black rather than white placed a student at a statistically significant higher risk of being suspended.¹⁰

Other studies have shown that black students are at risk for receiving harsher sanctions when compared to white students whose misconduct was equally serious.¹¹ When a black student and a white student who are comparable in many ways are issued

discipline referrals for similar reasons, the black student is more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension—thereby losing more days of instruction than the white student, who is more likely to receive detention or in-school suspension. This suggests that the adult assigning the sanctions may harbor implicit or explicit racial bias. Yet attributing racial disparities to bias on the part of the adults who assign sanctions is too simplistic. Bias-based beliefs and inappropriate processes and procedures in the school’s structure also contribute to racial inequality.¹²

Evidence that exclusionary discipline is harmful—and that students face persistent discipline disparities by gender and race—has spurred a wave of reforms. Next we examine the range of reforms at the federal, state, and local levels, and the degree to which these reforms might increase SEL opportunities in schools.

Federal and State Policies to Reduce Suspension

Federal and state discipline reform policies don’t directly call for more SEL opportunities for students. Instead, they tend to focus on reducing the use of suspension in general. The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act—now called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—establishes the federal government’s perspective and approach on discipline. ESSA seeks mainly to curtail the overuse of exclusionary practices that remove students from the classroom. The act outlines five strategies for doing so:

1. State education agencies will now be required to collect data from school districts on different forms of exclusionary discipline.
2. State education agencies will receive funds to support activities and programs on behavioral interventions.
3. State education agencies will develop plans for supporting school districts in reducing their use of exclusionary discipline.
4. School districts will develop plans for reducing the use of exclusionary discipline.
5. School districts will identify schools with high rates of discipline disaggregated by subgroups.

Together, these strategies promise to help reduce discipline disparities by requiring that states identify discipline problems, collect data on them, and support behavioral interventions.

Though ESSA doesn’t explicitly mention discipline disparities, a resource guide from the US Department of Education spells out the connection between disparate outcomes and some of the ESSA policy provisions, framing racial disparities in discipline as a civil rights issue.¹³ The guide states that the disparities documented by the department’s Office for Civil Rights don’t occur by chance, and that school districts therefore need to know their statutory obligations to ensure that discipline is administered without discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or national origin. To prevent discrimination, the guide argues, school districts must understand that “fair and equitable discipline policies” are part of a school environment that helps all students learn and grow. According to the guide, “Equipping school officials with an array of tools to support positive student behavior,

thereby providing a range of options to prevent and address misconduct ... will both promote safety and avoid the use of discipline policies that are discriminatory or inappropriate.”¹⁴

Together, ESSA and the DOE resource guide make room for schools to consider SEL approaches to handle student behavior. Moreover, a directory in the DOE guide offers resources for training and interventions focused on SEL. But we don't yet know whether states and districts will provide more SEL opportunities for students in response to federal policy changes that aim to reduce reliance on suspensions

State Legislation

States have also passed legislation recognizing that exclusionary discipline fails to create safer school environments and should be used sparingly. For example, California Assembly Bill 1729, which took effect in 2013, mandates that suspension should not be the first disciplinary consequence for students. According to the bill, “The overuse of school suspension and expulsion undermines the public policy of this state and does not result in safer school environments or improved pupil behavior.”¹⁵ In 2010, Connecticut lawmakers removed suspension and expulsion as an option at the preschool level.¹⁶

In other states, legislators are seeking to reframe zero tolerance policies to give school and district administrators the discretion to use less exclusionary practices. For example, a Colorado law argued that:

The use of inflexible “zero tolerance” policies as a means of addressing disciplinary problems in schools has

resulted in unnecessary expulsion, out-of-school suspensions, and referrals to law enforcement agencies ... [and that] state laws must allow school administrators and local boards of education to use their discretion to determine the appropriate disciplinary response to each incident of student misconduct.¹⁷

Another argument is that exclusionary practices are inappropriate for children at certain developmental stages, particularly elementary-age children. For example, California's Assembly Bill AB420—which passed in 2014 and took effect January 1, 2015—prohibits school districts from using in-school and out-of-school suspension for students in kindergarten through third grade for disruption or willful defiance.¹⁸ In 2015, Connecticut's General Assembly prohibited schools from suspending children in second grade and below, except for possession of weapons.¹⁹ That same year, Oregon's State Legislature moved in a similar direction, limiting the circumstances in which students in fifth grade and below may be suspended or expelled. Oregon's law also requires school administrators to consider students' age and behavior patterns before imposing suspension.²⁰

Banning or limiting the suspension of young children may help states reduce lost instructional time. It can also interrupt a reinforcing circle of disengagement and punishment for students from groups that have traditionally been suspended disproportionately. In preschools and elementary schools, removing or limiting suspension also opens up opportunities for different approaches to handling student behavior. Without the option of sending a student home, schools may seek other ways

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to deal with misconduct, and educators in schools with traditionally high suspension rates could be prompted to turn to SEL approaches. The laws may compel educators to shift from a punishment mindset to a developmental perspective, which recognizes that fostering students' social and behavioral competencies will help them follow school rules.

Overall—as the framing of state and federal discipline policy reform shows—policymakers and practitioners are recognizing that exclusionary disciplinary practices don't improve the quality of children's educational experience. Policies that aim to identify more inclusive disciplinary practices may help usher in SEL as a discipline reform strategy. However, it's still an open question whether such policy changes will actually give students new opportunities to learn, improve, and practice SEL skills.

School District Discipline Reforms

If federal and state reforms have made room for SEL by reducing reliance on suspension, some district-level reforms have gone a step further by embracing an SEL orientation. In other words, these districts are orienting policies and practices toward increasing SEL opportunities in schools.

To illustrate this point, we briefly describe discipline reforms in three US school districts: the Syracuse (NY) City School District, Denver (CO) Public Schools, and the Cleveland (OH) Metropolitan School District. Reforms in all three districts discourage punitive discipline and emphasize prevention and early detection of behavioral difficulties, suggesting that students need opportunities to increase their social and emotional literacy.

Syracuse

Syracuse public schools began their reforms after being investigated by the New York State Attorney General's office for possible civil rights violations related to using school discipline in a manner that treated “similarly situated individuals differently on the basis of race.”²¹ At the time of the investigation, Syracuse's suspension rates placed it among the top 3 percent of districts in the nation. In the district's secondary schools in 2009–10, 38 percent of black students were issued one or more suspensions—14 percentage points above the national average for black high school students.²²

In 2014, after an extended process that involved numerous constituencies, the district released a revised student code of conduct. Its aim was to ensure “that schools provide equal access to a wide range of supports and interventions that promote positive behavior, help students develop self-discipline and social and emotional efficacy, and enable students to improve and correct inappropriate, unacceptable, and unskillful behaviors.”²³ Whereas typical codes of conduct usually focus on a matrix of punishments applied to each type of infraction, the Syracuse district's revised

code limits the use of in-school and out-of-school suspension, stressing that removing students from the classroom should be a last resort. With its SEL orientation, the code focuses on supports and interventions that can help students develop self-discipline. At the same time, it emphasizes equal access to such supports.

To help shift the district away from a punitive approach to behavior, the Syracuse code uses a *multi-tiered system of support*. This framework, characterized by four conceptual tiers or levels of support, aims to build capacity among all students and to intervene with greater intensity when students have more need. At the first level, school-wide efforts focus on teaching, practicing, and recognizing positive behaviors with all students. At the second level, students with specific needs receive targeted interventions. At levels 3 and 4, students with the greatest needs receive comprehensive interventions.²⁴ Opportunities for SEL likely arise throughout all four levels of support.

The Syracuse code also emphasizes an alternative approach to student misconduct—*restorative* interventions.²⁵ Such interventions can help students correct their own behaviors, solve problems, make amends and repair harm, learn new behaviors, and restore their good standing. These benefits of restorative interventions overlap conceptually with social-emotional competencies such as self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Denver

Like those in Syracuse, Denver's public schools have been working to reduce exclusionary discipline and integrate

restorative approaches. Reforms there came in response to grassroots organizing by parents and young people in the activist group *Padres & Jóvenes Unidos*, which collaborated with the Advancement Project on a 2005 report drawing attention to the problem of racial disparities.²⁶ Since then, the group has worked with the district to support a staged rollout of restorative interventions, beginning with seven pilot schools. More than 2,500 Denver educators have now been trained to lead restorative interventions.

Unlike traditional school discipline, restorative approaches—which the Syracuse and Denver districts integrated into their equity reforms—focus on strengthening relationships, encouraging collaborative problem-solving, and giving voice to both the person harmed and the person who caused the harm.²⁷ Restorative practices in schools arose out of the restorative justice movement, wherein victims, offenders, and other affected people—including families and community members—meet to resolve conflicts and repair relationships.²⁸

Many schools apply restorative approaches to behavior within multi-tiered systems of support. At tier 1, for example, all students participate in *community-building circles*: as they sit facing one another, they're asked to reflect on a prompt or question and then take turns voicing their perspectives. At tier 2, students affected by a minor disciplinary incident work together in *responsive circles* to resolve the problem. At tier 3, everyone involved in a serious disciplinary event participates in *restorative conferences*, in which a facilitator guides the exchange using a structured set of questions. Ultimately, participants are asked to jointly develop a solution to the problem and repair the

harm caused. Also at this tier, school administrators and others involved in a student's return to school after a long-term absence participate in a re-entry process to welcome the student back and to identify any supports the student may need.

Restorative circles and conferences are thought to offer SEL opportunities for students. When participants gather after a discipline incident, they have an opportunity to reflect on such questions as, What happened? What were you thinking about at the time? Who was affected by what you did? How has this affected you and others? What do you think needs to happen to make things right? What do you think you need to do to make things right?²⁹ We need more research to confirm it, but we believe that these questions may foster the type of reflection that enhances students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Cleveland

Beginning in 2008–09, the Cleveland schools adopted a series of reforms to increase school safety, support students' behavioral and academic needs, and reduce punitive approaches to behavior.³⁰ The reforms included supports for students that were oriented toward both prevention and intervention. The reforms also established support teams to identify students who could benefit from early behavioral help, to discern the underlying reasons for the students' behavioral problems, and to develop plans accordingly.

The district also aimed to provide equitable access to such supports and interventions, a move that may especially benefit students in demographic groups that tend to be

criminalized or harshly punished instead of offered help or support.³¹ Cleveland revamped its in-school suspension programs as well: now called "planning centers," they use de-escalation strategies and social-problem-solving techniques to help students practice alternative ways to resolve conflicts while continuing their academic work.

The Cleveland schools also joined seven other districts around the nation in the multi-year Collaborating Districts Initiative, led by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL helps members of the initiative build capacity for systematic changes to enhance students' social and emotional development.³² For example, Cleveland is training all prekindergarten to fifth-grade teachers in an SEL curriculum called Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies in which classroom lessons that promote emotional literacy, self-control, social competence, positive peer relations, and interpersonal problem-solving skills are carried out two or more times a week for a minimum of 20 to 30 minutes per lesson. Teachers are also trained to use instructional strategies throughout the school day that reinforce concepts introduced in the formal SEL curriculum.³³

Evidence for District-Level Change

Data show that all three districts discussed above have substantially reduced exclusionary discipline. For example, in 2014–15, when Syracuse implemented its reforms, 54 percent fewer black students were suspended than in 2011–12. The number of white students who were suspended also fell, by 39 percent. From 2006 to 2013 in Denver, the district's overall suspension rate dropped by half, from 10.58

percent to 5.63 percent. In Cleveland, suspensions dropped by 60 percent over three years. Moreover, in Cleveland schools whose principals reported medium- or high-level implementation of Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, discipline incidents decreased significantly in the categories of disobedient/disruptive behavior, fighting/violence, harassment/intimidation and serious bodily injury.³⁴

The good news is that in all three districts, substantially fewer students were excluded from instruction for discipline infractions. The bad news is that black students' exclusionary discipline rates remained substantially higher than those of white students.

Because the three districts implemented numerous initiatives each school year, and because simply comparing pre- and post-reform discipline data only tells us so much, we can't pinpoint which programs or policies helped reduce discipline incidents and suspensions. In fact, we can't even claim that the reforms caused the reduction—that is, we can't rule out the possibility that other factors in the districts were responsible for the reductions. We also have only limited information on how well the reforms were implemented. That said, we speculate that the SEL orientation of these comprehensive reforms, as opposed to a punishment orientation,

was integral to changing how these schools approached students' behavioral development. It seems reasonable to suppose that such multifaceted reforms as multi-tiered systems of support, restorative justice, and SEL coursework helped re-orient responses to behavior by emphasizing students' social and emotional development.

Persisting Disparity Despite Reforms

Although the Syracuse, Denver, and Cleveland school districts have reduced suspension rates, large racial disparities in discipline persist. For example, in Syracuse in 2014–15, black students constituted 50 percent of those enrolled but 69.5 percent of those suspended. During the same period, white students constituted 24 percent of those enrolled but only 14.1 percent of those suspended. Denver saw a slight narrowing of racial suspension gaps: from 2006 to 2013, suspension rates for black students fell by 7.2 percentage points—the largest reduction among the district's racial groups in absolute terms. Still, in 2013 the suspension rate for black students, at 10.42 percent, remained almost five times higher than that for white students, at 2.28 percent.³⁵ Moreover, a recent study found that black students in Denver were still significantly more likely to be suspended than white students, even after controlling for various school and student characteristics (such as low income status), the reasons students were referred to the office for misconduct (for example, tardiness versus fighting), and whether the students participated in restorative conferences or circles. These findings suggest that despite the reforms, Denver's black students continued to receive harsher sanctions for similar misconduct.³⁶

The good news is that in all three districts, substantially fewer students were excluded from instruction for discipline infractions. The bad news is that black students' exclusionary discipline rates remained substantially higher than those of white students. This suggests that using an SEL orientation to guide policy and practice reform is only a first step. It's likely that the prevailing SEL mindset doesn't sufficiently account for the *ecological* conditions in schools that affect equity. In the context of schools, ecology refers to interactions between young people and the factors that influence their development—such as the quality of instruction, classroom management strategies, messages on the school walls, and so on. These ecological factors may contain bias-based beliefs and discriminatory processes that affect students' school experiences. To make more progress toward racial equity in discipline, we may need to pay more attention to such factors, as well as to the dynamics of power and privilege in the lives of students and adults.

Ecologically and Equity-Oriented SEL

We believe that even discipline reforms that fully embrace SEL as it's currently conceptualized hold limited promise for eliminating disparities, for two reasons. The first is that “colorblind” notions of SEL don't consider power, privilege, and cultural difference. The second is that prevailing SEL models are centered on students, but not on the adults who interact with them. Student-centered SEL doesn't consider the school environment, with all its multifaceted influences—policies,

disciplinary practices, and interpersonal interactions guided by culturally informed adult and student social and emotional competencies.

In the 2015 *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning*, psychologist Joseph Durlak of Loyola University Chicago and his colleagues present a conceptual SEL model of coordinated classroom, school, family, and community strategies that are supported through district, state, and federal policies. They argue that a positive school climate and fair and equitable discipline are integral to school-wide SEL. In the same volume, Patricia Jennings and Jennifer Frank of Pennsylvania State University draw on categories developed by CASEL—which we discuss in more detail later in this article—to argue that educators themselves need social and emotional competencies. For example, they write, teachers with high self-awareness recognize their own emotions and can motivate students to learn through joy and enthusiasm. Teachers with high social awareness understand how their own emotions and those of their students' affect one another. And teachers with strong relationship-building skills develop mutual understanding with their students, consider multiple perspectives during conflicts, and resolve disputes skillfully.³⁷

Other scholars have also made the case that educators' social and emotional skills are essential for building positive student relationships and preventing discipline incidents.³⁸ Whereas typical SEL interventions tend to focus on students' skills, some interventions do aim to strengthen those of educators. For example, the RULER program developed at Yale University helps teachers

recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate emotions.³⁹

We're concerned that when schools implement equity-oriented discipline reform, they may lose sight of ecological, school-wide perspectives on SEL. The reforms in Syracuse, Denver, and Cleveland lend themselves to an SEL orientation that focuses solely on the students as the problem—and, in the case of racial disparities, on black students with SEL “deficits” as the problem. Unfortunately, these reforms pay little attention to beliefs about race and racialized groups that set the stage for how SEL practices are interpreted and enacted. For instance, researchers have shown that teachers' beliefs are correlated with students' academic performance.⁴⁰ One study found that teachers' beliefs about cognitive ability among different groups contribute to whether black students were identified for gifted-student programs.⁴¹ Yet beliefs alone don't produce disparate outcomes. Instead, beliefs foster discriminatory behaviors that then contribute to excessive referrals of racial/ethnic minority students for special education and discipline.⁴²

Thus as schools adopt discipline reforms, we worry that students may become the sole focus and that schools won't seek to improve the equity-oriented social and emotional competencies of adults—or, for that matter, of the system as a whole. For example, multi-tiered systems of support tend to focus on changing student behavior, identifying students' behavioral needs, and developing individualized interventions to help those students. Restorative justice focuses on giving students new ways to build community, resolve conflict, and repair harm. Both these strategies put

less emphasis on the need for adults to increase their own social and emotional competencies. In the case of multi-tiered systems of support, adults may need to shift away from a tendency to reprimand and toward a habit of acknowledging and teaching positive behavior. In the case of restorative justice, adults may need to learn how to listen as students share their perspectives, how to temper their concerns about giving students' authority in resolving conflicts, and how to practice sharing their own emotional experience of discipline incidents.

We also worry that “colorblind” notions of SEL limit the degree to which an SEL orientation can substantially narrow or eliminate racial disparities in school discipline. Duke University sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva lays out a sound theoretical case for this concern. He describes colorblindness as a new form of racial ideology that emerged after the civil rights era, with three key beliefs:⁴³

1. The best way to remove racism is to omit race, gender, and other social identities as descriptors.
2. We should treat people as individuals, without considering their social identities.
3. We should focus on the commonalities among people.

The first and second features of this ideology sustain a white cultural frame as a way of viewing the world. Imagine an educator seeing a white student and a black student arguing in a hallway, or an educator reprimanding a Mexican American student for speaking Spanish in the hallway. In those examples, educators using a white cultural

frame might view the black student's argumentative stance as "menacing" or "threatening" and the Mexican American student's use of Spanish as disrupting the dominance of English.

In SEL, colorblindness can lead to an unspoken conceptualization of social and emotional competencies based on a white cultural frame.

Bonilla-Silva argues that the third feature of colorblindness ideology—focusing on people's commonality—has led to rationalizing racial inequality as a product of "market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations."⁴⁴ For example, he writes, this belief is used to make assertions such as "Latinos' high poverty rate [is due] to a relaxed work ethic, or residential segregation [is due to] natural tendencies among groups."⁴⁵ Extending Bonilla-Silva's theory, we propose that in SEL, colorblindness can lead to an unspoken conceptualization of social and emotional competencies based on a white cultural frame and the idea of commonalities. This prevents any exploration of other expressions of SEL that are tied to race- and gender-based marginalization.

Finally, we believe that SEL today is too narrowly focused on how social and emotional competencies can enhance student academic performance or improve self-regulation so that students comply with adults' instructions. We agree with

University of Michigan psychologist Robert Jagers, who says that SEL can "advance resistance to oppression and collective wellbeing for a range of disenfranchised groups."⁴⁶ Jagers argues that SEL programs can position students as experts in promoting equity and justice. Such a shift in the purpose of SEL, we hypothesize, would promote students' agency and their critical consciousness about the sociohistorical conditions of power and privilege.

Equity-Oriented Social and Emotional Competencies

We believe educators and scholars need to further refine theory and conduct empirical testing to develop a more comprehensive, equity-oriented conceptualization of the five widely recognized social and emotional competencies set forth by CASEL: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.⁴⁷ These competencies could be augmented to make them more sensitive to the ways that culture, power, and privilege affect schools and students. More specifically, we should consider how students from marginalized groups are expected to attain the same SEL competencies as white students, who don't face the constraints imposed by power and privilege.

As an illustration, we offer some preliminary ideas about how equity considerations might be integrated into educators' own social and emotional competencies. (We acknowledge that these ideas must be empirically tested.)

Self-awareness is the ability to understand your own emotions, values, and personal goals. To advance equity, educators could examine their own conscious and unconscious beliefs, and consider whether

they hold negative stereotypes about students' cultural and stylistic codes.⁴⁸ When they see students of color who sag their pants, for example, some teachers may make snap judgments—stereotyping the students as not committed to education or prone to reject adult authority. Educators could also examine how their unconscious beliefs affect their decision-making. In a recent experimental study, teachers were shown an office discipline referral for a student with two incidents of misconduct. The researchers varied the name of the disciplined student, sometimes using a stereotypically black name (Darnell or Deshawn), sometimes a stereotypically white name (Greg or Jake). The teachers indicated that students with stereotypically black names should be disciplined more severely than those with stereotypically white names.⁴⁹ Those harsher sanctions for students with stereotypically black names may have been affected by implicit racial bias. This study suggests that for educators to overcome what University of Wisconsin psychologist Patricia Devine—an expert on prejudice—calls the “habit” of implicit bias, they need strategies to recognize it.⁵⁰

Educators committed to raising their self-awareness might also consider how their cultural frame of reference affects their personal goals and values. While at Smith College, Ann Arnett Ferguson observed teacher-student interactions in an elementary school and found that teachers affirmed and elevated the expressive modes of the dominant societal group and devalued the expressive mode of African American boys. She writes, “A defiant, challenging oppositional body; dramatic, emotional expressions; [and] a rich, complex nonstandard vocabulary establish the ‘outer limits’ in a field of comparison in which the

desired norm is a docile bodily presence and the intonation and homogenous syntax of Standard English.”⁵¹ Educators who learn to scrutinize their own culturally informed values might be able to detect when they're honoring familiar forms of student behavior and speech—and when they're monitoring and punitively responding to behavior and speech less aligned with their own culture.

Social awareness is the ability to take the perspective of people with different backgrounds or cultures and to empathize and feel compassion. To develop their social awareness, educators likely need to minimize colorblindness and adopt a sociocultural, historical orientation. This would help them understand the complex ways that valuing or devaluing certain culturally based forms of expression can contribute to discipline disparities. For example, Monique Morris, founder of the National Black Women's Justice Institute, has described how adults who criticize black girls for being loud or having an “attitude” don't understand the girls' desire to be heard and seen in the context of gender and race oppression.⁵²

Adopting a sociocultural, historical orientation might help educators see how their students experience social inequalities.⁵³ For example, if educators understood more about systemic racism and abuse of power, they might empathize when their students of color describe feeling unfairly treated during a disciplinary incident. But achieving such empathy might be hard for many educators. It requires them to relinquish the discourse of individualism—“I am an individual. I make my own reality. I make my own path”—in explaining conditions and behaviors. Otherwise, educators will continue to see

racism as an individual act, rather than a system predicated on favoring certain characteristics and behaviors. Teachers who fail to understand that racism is systemic may perceive colorblindness as a more elevated form of social awareness.

Self-management includes skills and attitudes that regulate emotions and behaviors. Educators can help marginalized students recognize the self-management demands they face as they move between cultures.⁵⁴ When they're among friends or family, the way they express themselves may be admired. But in another context, the same expressions may be devalued or seen as disruptive. When the culture of the neighborhood, home, and peers contrasts with the culture of school and classroom, students may carry the extra burden of learning to code-switch (that is, alter language and tone depending on context) or to minimize their cultural expressions to ensure that members of dominant cultural groups feel comfortable during interactions.⁵⁵

Relationship skills help establish and maintain healthy interactions among individuals. To do this, people need to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate, and resolve conflict when necessary. Relationship skills may be especially important for the predominantly white and female teaching force to develop trust with their diverse students. Compared to white students, black and Latino students tend to report less support from adults in school.⁵⁶ Elementary teachers have reported less warmth in their relationships with black students compared to their white students.⁵⁷ And the largest discipline disparities between black and white students occur for reasons related to perceived disruption

and defiance—disparities that may reflect the poorer quality of relationships between teachers and their black students.⁵⁸

Taken together, these findings suggest that educators need to strengthen their relationship skills and develop trust among students from diverse groups.

Responsible decision-making includes the consideration of ethical standards, safety, social norms, and your own wellbeing and that of others when making choices about personal behavior and social interactions. When educators must make choices about disciplinary policy and enforcement, responsible decision-making can guide them to consider the potential effects on diverse groups. For example, Edward Fergus (an author of this article) learned that the administrators in a certain high school recently required all students to address their teachers using “Ms.” or “Mr.” and their surname. The aim was to promote more respectful interactions between teachers and students. But after the policy was implemented, Spanish-speaking students were being issued numerous discipline referrals for not using “Ms.” or Mr.” Instead, they tended to use “*maestra*” and “*maestro*”—a cultural norm demonstrating respect for the instructor. Thus the blanket policy didn't consider the new rule's cultural specificity and its adverse effect on Spanish-speaking students. Administrators versed in equity-oriented responsible decision-making might have adjusted the policy to head off this disparate impact.

A Framework in Oakland, CA

The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is striving to orient its discipline policy toward ecologically and equity-oriented SEL. The district's reforms are still

in the early stages, and rigorous empirical work will be needed to test whether these efforts can substantially reduce or eradicate racial and gender disparities in discipline. Moreover, the OUSD reforms include the expansion of charter schools, which some community members fear will undermine initiatives in the district's traditional public schools.⁵⁹ A local blogger expressed skepticism about the changes: "For many who have watched these cycles of reform, it seems that they are just that—cycles—that often leave us in roughly the same place we started, with fewer resources, and more discouraged stakeholders, with a lot of talk, paper, and bills from consultants, but no better schools for underserved students."⁶⁰ However, we believe that the policy OUSD is developing may eventually align discipline reforms with ecologically and equity-oriented SEL.

In 2012, OUSD entered a Voluntary Resolution Agreement with the US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights to end its investigation into racial discrimination in the district.⁶¹ The district agreed to use:

- school-wide Positive Behavior Intervention Supports that encourage adults to establish clearly defined expectations of behavior and systematically reinforce positive student behavior throughout the school;
- restorative practices that aim to repair harm, restore relationships, and build community;
- services that incorporate understanding of trauma effects and wraparound supports (that is, an individualized plan of care developed by a collaborative team);

- data to improve and revise strategies; and
- discipline policies that reduce the use of exclusionary discipline.

These reforms are similar in many ways to those adopted in Syracuse, Denver, and Cleveland. But the OUSD went further by introducing the Manhood Development Program (MDP), which is grounded in equity-oriented SEL.⁶² An in-school elective for black male middle and high school students, the program aims to help these young people develop positive cultural identities, culturally relevant social and emotional competencies, and academic skills. OUSD also joined CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative, which we described earlier.

After several years of reforms, OUSD made progress in shifting disciplinary practices. From 2011 to 2013, its overall suspension rate dropped from 13.2 percent to 10.2 percent; the suspension rate of black students decreased by 7 percentage points—the greatest decrease relative to other groups.⁶³ From 2011 to 2014, the number of referrals issued to black males for disruption or willful defiance declined by 37 percent.⁶⁴ Yet despite progress over several years of reform, the racial discipline gap persisted. In 2013, the suspension rate of black students (20.5 percent) remained about ten times higher than that of white students (1.8 percent).⁶⁵ Given these persistently large disparities, the district worked to strengthen its reforms by aligning them with ecologically and equity-oriented SEL.

In recent public statements and board policies, OUSD administrators have drawn explicit links between SEL, equity, and system-wide institutional practices and

procedures.⁶⁶ For example, the district integrated its concerns about equity into an SEL guidance document that explains:

OUSD aims to seamlessly integrate Social Emotional Learning into the academic experience of all our students and across our organization for every adult. We seek to reverse old paradigms predicated on hierarchy, violence, race, and subordination. Instead, equality, mutual respect, collaboration, civic participation, high academic achievement, and joy in learning will be the norm.⁶⁷

OUSD administrators are also introducing new professional development and learning opportunities for teachers, leaders, and staff members. For example, the district has created a Teacher Growth and Development System that integrates teachers' goal-setting with equity, SEL, and cultural competence.⁶⁸ The system's rubric asks observers to rate teaching performance in four domains, using performance indicators that regularly encompass equity and SEL. For example, in the domain "Building a supportive and challenging learning environment," the rubric describes teacher and student behaviors that touch on issues of equity and SEL. It asks whether students "make connections between curriculum and personal community and culture" and "describe the classroom as a place where they feel accepted." It also questions whether teachers "accept different registers of language and explicitly teach their appropriate use in different contexts (code-switching)" and "address systems of power and privilege, even in mono-cultural classrooms, in a way that decreases bias and increases equity." By measuring such observable behaviors in the classroom and

setting concrete goals for progress, the district believes the rubric will provide a roadmap for improvement. In this way, teachers can improve their own and their students' social and emotional competencies and increase equitable outcomes in the classroom.

OUSD illustrates how one district is striving to move beyond discipline policy reforms that ignore the role of power and privilege. Since OUSD's reforms are in the early stages, we don't yet know whether they'll substantially reduce or eliminate gender and racial disparities in discipline. The district's challenge now is to bridge the substantial gap between policy and practice.

Conclusions

State and federal discipline policy reforms aim to reduce reliance on suspension. In doing so, they make room for more developmentally appropriate SEL-oriented approaches to behavior. Many school districts are undertaking multifaceted reforms that integrate a range of programming, some with the potential to provide SEL opportunities to marginalized students. Yet we believe that a student-focused and colorblind conceptualization of SEL limits the potential of these reforms to substantially reduce racial and gender discipline disparities. Though SEL as currently conceived might narrow these gaps, we've made the case that further progress may require an ecologically and equity-oriented SEL that acknowledges the cultural and power dynamics inherent in disciplinary interactions. Such an approach could make the school environment healthier, enhance educators' own social and emotional competencies, and improve their ability to foster students' SEL.

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