Good Intentions Are Not Enough: Centering Equity in School Discipline Reform

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ABSTRACT

Exclusionary discipline is commonly employed in U.S. schools and disproportionately affects students of color. This article describes current approaches to discipline and contextualizes these approaches historically with particular attention to racial dynamics and violence. We identify the harmful effects of exclusionary discipline and describe efforts to move schools away from exclusionary approaches through school-wide positive behavioral intervention supports, social–emotional learning, and restorative practices. We identify limitations of current discipline reform efforts that are hampering progress toward equitable schooling. We explicate the need for integrative and comprehensive culturally responsive approaches to positive student development that are equity oriented and identify implementation challenges and tools for addressing these challenges.

Challenging behavior in school and how it is perceived, reinforced, and addressed continues to be a systemic problem in our schools. In spite of their shortcomings, educators often rely on strategies of punishment and external control. These strategies typically include out-of-class and out-of-school suspensions which have iatrogenic impacts at school and the community that both reflect and reinforce marginalization and institutionalized racism (e.g., Mittleman, 2018). Moreover, the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism have underscored concern that racial disparities in school discipline and their sequelae will widen if schools disproportionately suspend students of color for absenteeism, trauma-related behaviors, or breaches in health safety protocols (Belsha, 2020).

Although many states and districts have reduced or restricted use of suspension, exclusionary discipline remains a “go to” response for many schools (Harper et al., 2019). The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2018) and local studies demonstrate the widespread and disproportionate use and harmful consequences of exclusion (e.g., increased risk for low achievement, drop-out, and arrest; Anderson et al., 2019; Mittleman, 2018; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Owens & McLanahan, 2020). For example, approximately 2.7 million (5%–6%) of all K–12 students received one or more out-of-school suspensions during the 2015–2016 school year, and schools disproportionately suspended African American students and students with disabilities. Specifically, that year, African American students were suspended at twice the rate (8%) of White students (3.8%) and Latinx students (3.5%). Students with disabilities (8.6%) were also suspended at rates twice as high as students without disabilities (4.1%; Harper et al., 2019). Moreover, American Indian and Alaska Native students, in 2015–2016, were 10 times more likely than White students to receive suspension (Whitford et al., 2019).

Reviews of the last several decades of research have shown that there are multiple contributors to the racial disparities in school discipline (Gregory et al., 2010; Welsh & Little, 2018). Yet, study after study has shown that when accounting for a range of student-, family-, and school-level contributors (e.g., student achievement; student socioeconomic status; teacher-, parent, and self-reported behavior), African American and White disparities in student receipt of exclusionary discipline remain significant (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2010; Gopalan & Nelson, 2019; Owens & McLanahan, 2020). In other words, African American students remain overrepresented in school discipline sanctions after accounting for a range of potential explanatory factors. The collective findings point to the need for an equity and civil rights perspective on school discipline reform—a perspective that considers cultural, structural, and historical factors related to institutional racism, implicit racial bias, and punitive approaches to students of color.
Discipline processes can be designed to build an inclusive, equitable school community that places high value on maintaining academic engagement and achievement (Colombi et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2014). Positive and relational disciplinary practices can build and sustain classroom and school community by leveraging student-adult connectedness. In fact, safety is important to student and adult well-being and to productive school environments. Approaches to school discipline and safety can undermine or contribute to individual and group well-being, engagement, and sense of safety. When students and teachers feel unsafe, they are more likely to experience health threatening levels of stress and less likely to attend to learning and the needs of others (Cantor et al., 2019). Safety involves more than physical safety; it includes emotional and identity safety (feeling safe to be yourself and as a member of a group and not experiencing prejudice; Gamarel et al., 2014; Steele et al., 2002), and is linked to the experience of belongingness and support, both of which can be undermined by punitive and exclusionary discipline (Anyon et al., 2016; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013).

Increasingly, implementation of three widely adopted practices for school discipline—school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS), social–emotional learning (SEL), and restorative practices (RP)—is being approached through an equity lens (Jagers, 2016; Jagers et al., 2018, 2019; Vincent et al., 2011; Winn, 2018). The goal is to improve school safety and academic performance while minimizing exclusion and improving conditions for learning (e.g., Osher et al., 2014). Yet, it remains a challenge to do so at scale with a focus on equity, particularly robust equity, which intentionally counters inequality, institutionalized privilege, and prejudice and intentionally promotes thriving across multiple domains for individuals experiencing inequity and injustice (Osher et al., 2020). In fact, despite overall reductions in exclusionary discipline for all groups, African American and White discipline gaps can remain substantial in schools implementing SWPBIS (McIntosh et al., 2018), SEL (Gregory & Fergus, 2017), and RP (Gregory & Evans, 2020).

In the current paper, we describe SWPBIS, SEL, and RP, their evidence base, and ways they can address equity. Then, we argue that school discipline reform, broadly speaking, is often implemented in a fragmented manner and often without sufficient attention to structural and cultural factors that undermine and contribute to the replication of inequity. Specifically, we point to limitations that are hampering equity-oriented implementation and progress toward equitable schooling. Too often school discipline reforms are implemented without (a) considering the sociohistorical and structural conditions of oppression; (b) increasing cultural relevancy/responsiveness, competence, and bias awareness; (c) complementary approaches to developing socioemotional and behavioral competencies; and (d) instructional reforms that address opportunity gaps. We offer promising ideas for school psychologists and educators to align and combine approaches in a culturally responsive and equity-driven manner. We posit future directions in equity efforts drawing on implementation research, the science of learning and development, and approaches to shifting mindsets.

**SCHOOL-WIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS**

SWPBIS systems and practices are predicated on the theory that when all school staff members actively teach and consistently recognize and reinforce appropriate behavior, the number of students with serious behavior problems will be reduced and the school’s overall climate will improve (Sprague & Horner, 2012). Grounded in applied behavioral analysis and social learning theory (Bandura, 1969; Sugai & Horner, 2010), SWPBIS schools aim to: (a) create a positive school climate, (b) establish and teach positive behavioral expectations school-wide, and (c) teach mastery of expected behaviors (e.g., safe and respectful peer to peer interactions) that will prevent the onset of risk behavior in typically developing children, and to some extent, alter the trajectory of children at-risk of destructive outcomes. SWPBIS targets preventing the onset and further development of problem behavior in schools (Sugai & Horner, 2010), offering a continuum of procedures for discouraging problem behavior, and implementing systems of support for more challenging students based on functional behavioral assessment (O’Neill et al., 2014). SWPBIS is based on a three-tiered public health approach, and suggests that a focus on systems (e.g., a school leadership team, teams for more intensive student support), data-based decision making (e.g., tracking the frequency, type, and location of office referrals and suspensions to support decision making), evidence-supported practices (behavioral, social–emotional, restorative, and trauma-informed), and monitoring outcomes (reduced disciplinary issues and improved school climate) will lead schools to sustainable and successful reform.

Evaluation reports, rigorous single-case studies, and randomized control trials demonstrate that high fidelity implementation of the primary prevention tier of SWPBIS (Tier 1; Horner et al., 2010) is feasible in a wide range of contexts and by typical implementation agents (e.g., administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals). Outcomes can include improved organizational health; reduction in reports of problem behavior, improved perception of school safety; and improved academic outcomes (promising but not definitive; Horner et al., 2010). Implementation of Tier 2 and 3 SWPBIS practices results
in improved student engagement and social and academic outcomes, and reduced likelihood of dropout (Anderson et al., 2004); reduced problem behavior (Dunlap et al., 2010; Hawken et al., 2007); and improved teacher ratings of student behavioral competence (Walker et al., 2009). Although SWPBIS systems and practices have been shown to reduce problem behavior, the evidence is less clear regarding impact on disciplinary inequity, with some studies showing mixed or even negative results related to racial disparities in exclusionary discipline (e.g., referrals, suspension; Skiba et al., 2011; Sprague et al., 2017; Vincent et al., 2015).

**SWPBIS AND EQUITY**

SWPBIS systems cannot be considered effective until they are effective for all student groups. SWPBIS provides an ideal framework for reducing inequities in student outcomes. For example, focusing on positive behaviors (and reducing reprimands and aversive interactions) may reduce factors that weaken trust and relationships between educators and students from marginalized groups (e.g., Gion et al., 2020). In fact, research shows that schools implementing PBIS with fidelity can make in-roads toward greater equity in school discipline especially in reducing African American/White discipline gaps (McIntosh et al., 2018; Vincent et al., 2015). However, PBIS teams may need to include equity-focused strategies in their action plans to achieve equitable outcomes for all student groups (McIntosh et al., 2014). These practices are referred to as culturally responsive PBIS (CR-PBIS; LeVerson et al., 2019).

Cultural responsiveness refers to the process of developing awareness of the significance of students’ backgrounds (including historical context), then intentionally integrating their customs and values into the curriculum, instruction, and school environment (Rose et al., 2020). The goal of cultural responsiveness within the educational setting is to increase the ability to meet student needs to foster positive student-teacher relationships that maximize academic engagement. CR-PBIS cultural responsiveness consists of five components: Identity Awareness (i.e., practitioners learn about their own sociocultural lens and the sociocultural experiences of their students and families), Voice (i.e., practitioners engage students, staff, and families as partners), Supportive Environment (i.e., practitioners are proactive and instructive to prevent challenging behaviors), Data for Equity (i.e., practitioners critically examine disaggregated data by student group), and Situational Appropriateness (LeVerson et al., 2019). Related to Situational Appropriateness, a sample classroom activity asks students to compare culturally based behaviors in the home, neighborhood, and school. Teachers affirm cultural differences and reinforce behavioral expectations appropriate to the school setting.

LeVerson et al. (2019) make the case that cultural responsiveness should be a core part of all implementation efforts and will look different depending upon variations in any of the five elements, even if schools are within the same district.

**SOCIAL–EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

SEL is “the process by which children and adults acquire and apply core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle personal and interpersonal situations constructively” (Osher et al., 2016, p. 645). Many frameworks linked to SEL outline focal developmental competencies (Berg et al., 2017; Denham, 2018) and key learning contexts. The prominent framework of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) features five core social and emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making that represent broad categories for facilitating a range of intra- and interpersonal knowledge, skills, and abilities identified by the field as being critical to student success. The SEL approach recognizes classrooms, schools, families, and communities as contexts in which all aspects academic, social, and emotional learning occur (CASEL, 2019; Durlak et al., 2011).

SEL is grounded in diverse theories/research that focus on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children and promotion of mental wellness and other desirable life outcomes. These theories view children as active rather than passive learners. A combination of multiple individual factors (emotional, cognitive, and behavioral) and environmental factors (peer, home, classroom, school, community, and cultural factors) operate in a coactive dynamic manner in determining student behavior. This understanding translates into teachers and schools using a combination of teacher-centered and student-centered practices for improving school climate and developing SEL competencies as the relation between school climate and SEL is bidirectional (Bear, 2020; Osher & Berg, 2017). Although teacher-centered practices for managing student behavior, such as high behavioral expectations and the judicious and strategic use of praise and rewards are valued, there is much greater emphasis in SEL than in SWPBIS on strategies that target teacher and student social, cognitive, and emotional competencies, such as empathy, social perspective taking and problem solving, and managing emotions. Likewise, there is greater emphasis on teacher–student relationships. Developing educator as well as student social and emotional competencies and ensuring positive teacher–student relationships are viewed as critical to school safety (Jennings et al., 2019). Such emphasis is supported by
research linking each of CASEL's social and emotional competencies and the quality of teacher-student relationships to students’ well-being (Bear, 2020).

Most current SEL programs are designed to be implemented at the universal level and many rely primarily on packaged curriculum lessons for teaching the above processes (e.g., labeling and expressing emotions, practicing steps for problem identification and resolution). Students also are provided ample opportunities for the application, reinforcement, and continued development of SEL competencies (Bear, 2010; Frey et al., 2019; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). This generally includes targeting multiple domains of school climate for improvement, particularly teacher–student relationships, peer relationships, home–school–community collaboration, student engagement, school safety, clear behavioral expectations, and fair rules and consequences (Bear, 2020). The strategies and supports used to address each of those domains, and the emphases placed on each domain, vary greatly across programs. For example, in developing SEL competencies some programs emphasize engaging instruction and curriculum (e.g., The Responsive Classroom; Center for Responsive Schools, 2019), that include promoting prosocial peer relationships (e.g., pair share, cooperative groups). Regardless of emphasis, building and maintaining positive, culturally responsive teacher–student and student–student relationships (including relationships in the context of mentoring, sports, and clubs) is recognized as important in nearly all SEL programs.

SEL approaches can be employed by school psychologists and other pupil service personnel both in their direct services, and when they serve as consultants to other educators. While SEL programs are often implemented by teachers, who should always incorporate them in their pedagogy and classroom practices, SEL programming can also be provided by pupil service personnel and outside providers. Although SEL programs are typically universal in nature, they can be made available to students for whom universal SEL programming is not sufficient. SEL can be incorporated in selective and indicated interventions (Dymnicki et al., 2012; Osher et al., 2008), and SEL language and approaches can be incorporated in mental health counseling and treatment, child welfare, and other child services.

Comprehensive meta-analyses support the effectiveness of school-based SEL intervention programs in producing important, valued outcomes in education. Durlak et al. (2011) meta-analysis of 213 programs found significant improvements in student academic achievement, attitudes (i.e., about the self, the school, and school safety), social and emotional skills (e.g., identifying emotions, perspective taking, social problem solving), and externalizing and internalizing behaviors (e.g., positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress). Four practices, which moderated program effectiveness, were captured by the acronym SAFE: sequenced activities, active forms of learning, a focus on developing social and emotional skills (with sufficient time to teach and practice those skills); and targeting explicit and specific social and emotional skills. Wigelsworth et al. (2016) meta-analysis of 89 SEL programs found similar effects on social–emotional competence, prosocial behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic achievement.

Taylor et al. (2017) examined the effects of 82 SEL intervention studies that were conducted internationally, which included over 97,000 students of all grade levels. They found positive outcomes, with the greatest effects among children age 5–11 (effect size = .27, 95% confidence interval = .19, .34) lasting from 6 months to 18 years postintervention in multiple areas, including SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, drug use, academic performance, peer and family relationships, school attendance, graduation rates, college attendance, and arrests. Although only 34 and 26 of the 82 studies, respectively, reported specific data on ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES), positive effects emerged regardless of the reported student background characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, SES).

Despite multiple meta-analyses reporting the effectiveness of SEL programs, several limitations of the research have been noted (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). First, as noted above, there is much heterogeneity in results across programs. Not all programs and interventions have been found to be effective, and effectiveness often depends on the outcome assessed. Relatedly, there is a lack of studies that have reported data on academic achievement. Second, most studies have relied entirely on students’ self-reports. Teacher-reported data also are common. Both have inherent biases. Rarely have studies used outside, observer reports of student behavior, which could help reduce bias if the observers are culturally sensitive. Third, most programs do not meet the SAFE criteria above, and many studies have failed to adequately describe program components. Thus, it is unclear what specific features of SEL interventions are most and least effective. Finally, it remains unclear if SEL programs and interventions are more effective with certain populations than others (e.g., age, ethnicity, presence of risk factors).

**SEL AND EQUITY**

In recent years, there has been increased attention to the implications of SEL for issues of educational equity. Despite its origins in community mental health and wellness (Schlund et al., 2020), legitimate concerns had surfaced about the narrowing of SEL such that it would become yet another educational innovation used to benefit students.
from well-resourced backgrounds and to highlight putative deficits and the need to remediate historically underserved students (DePaoli et al., 2019; Jagers et al., 2018). Disparities may worsen as report card ratings of students’ SEL become another way of sorting and labeling students along racial/ethnic, gender, and social economic lines. Scholars have appropriately called for research that examines the degree to which improving schools depends on both adults as well as students developing their social awareness about diverse racial and cultural groups, increasing perspective-taking about how structural inequalities and everyday racism affect well-being, and fostering skills in building trusting relationship across identity lines (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, ability status, sexual/gender identity; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Osher et al., 2018).

Toward this end, Jagers et al. (2018, 2019) offered equity-elaborations on SEL competencies to help broaden conceptions of SEL and illuminate how it might be a lever for equity and excellence. Each of the five competence clusters implies student and adult development and can subsume issues of equity and justice (Jagers et al., 2018). For example, as noted by Jagers et al. (2019), self-awareness is “foundational for equity,” as it includes cultural values and orientations as well as self and collective identities. Likewise, relationship skills are critical to respecting diversity and cooperating with others.

Further, Jagers et al. (2019) posit that SEL can be operationalized in ways that position students and teachers as colearners engaged in the critical examination of inequities and the development of collaborative solutions that foster personal and collective well-being and thriving. They suggest that some programs (e.g., Facing History and Ourselves) and approaches (e.g., project-based learning) hold such promise and offer opportunities for meaningful, authentic student–student and student–teacher relationships.

**RESTORATIVE PRACTICES**

RP aims to build community, strengthen relationships, and repair harm (e.g., Morrison & Ristenberg, 2019). Roots of RP can be traced back to principles embedded in various Indigenous cultures around the world. Philosophies regarding community and justice amongst native communities generally emphasize repairing relationships over punishing offenders as a means to address wrongdoing (Tauri, 2019; Zehr, 2014).

RP involve transforming schools’ cultures, not just changing practices (Ristenberg, 2012). Fundamental to the values of RP is that students share power with adults and engage in collective solution-seeking about challenges (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014; Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Opportunities for student voice arise through each tier of an RP multitiered system of support model (Jain et al., 2014). Universal school community-building practices include weekly circles for students in small groups or advisory periods. Circles are a “structured process of communication” (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014, p. 3) in which students practice sharing and listening about personally relevant topics in a nonhierarchical format. Selective interventions include problem-solving circles, and informal restorative conversations. Students affected by discipline incidents have the opportunity to express how they were impacted and problem-solve with their peers. When “more-serious” harm occurs, intensive interventions include formal restorative conferences or reentry conferences, which are preplanned with a facilitator to bring together all parties involved in the harm when possible. Again, student voice is fundamental to the process. Those impacted by conflict and discipline incidents have the opportunity to express how they have harmed and what they need to repair the harm.

Accumulating U.S. studies demonstrate that when schools implement a restorative initiative, their out-of-school suspension rates tend to decrease (see Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Fronius et al., 2019; Gregory & Evans, 2020). The evidence has been largely based on findings from single group pretest–posttest research designs (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2018). However, a recent experimental trial offered corroborating evidence: In 22 program schools and 22 comparison schools, Augustine et al. (2018) found that program schools’ days lost to suspension declined by 36%, whereas this decline was only 18% in the comparison schools. They also showed that elementary schools, but not middle and high schools, had steeper declines in the suspension rates of African American students and low-income students. This corroborates other studies that suggest RP may have promise for reducing racial disparities in discipline (e.g., González, 2015). Whereas most RP research focuses on reduced exclusionary discipline, more studies have begun to examine whether engaging student voice, community-building, and problem-solving can foster positive school climate, intrapersonal benefits and interpersonal gains (Acosta et al., 2019; Bonell et al., 2018; Ortega et al., 2016; Schumacher, 2014).

**RP AND EQUITY**

Scholars have asserted that RP cannot be siloed from social and racial justice in a “colorblind, injustice-blind bubble” (Valandra & Waphâha Hokšíla, 2020, p. 31). RP in schools can be implemented with a commitment to transforming sociohistorical conditions and institutions (Davis, 2019; Winn, 2018). A mechanism to do so is through raising student and staff critical consciousness about how inequality is reproduced in communities. For example, Knight
and Wadhwa (2014) describe how they empower students as change makers through discussions about racism, oppression, and the school-to-prison pipeline during the RP circle process. In addition, some initiatives explicitly integrate programming to increase staff’s critical consciousness and self-awareness of their own implicit bias while implementing a whole school racial equity, RP, and SEL initiative (e.g., Manassah et al., 2018).

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT SCHOOL DISCIPLINE REFORM

As described above, there have been advancements in the conceptualization and implementation of equity-oriented discipline reform such as CR-PBIS (Leverson et al., 2019), equity-elaborations on SEL competencies (Jagers et al., 2019), and RP implemented through a racial justice lens (Manassah et al., 2018). Notwithstanding these advancements, many discipline reform efforts, we argue, will not substantially reduce disparities in discipline unless they address the following limitations: ignoring institutionalized oppression, professing cultural neutrality, neglecting social and emotional support, and failing to address opportunities to learn.

Ignoring Institutionalized Oppression

Too often school discipline reform is implemented without considering the sociohistorical and structural conditions of oppression. Disciplinary practices and related disparities reflect dynamically related cultural, structural, and historical factors (Osher et al., 2019; Spencer & Swanson, 2016). Cultural factors include an episteme of punishment, ethnocentrism and negative dispositions regarding children of color, economically disadvantaged students, and diverse learners. Structural factors include school design and the allocation of resources. Historical factors include institutionalized racism and the use of high stakes testing as a lever to promote school improvement. These forces come together when stressed and poorly supported teachers interact with equally stressed students in environments that promote student alienation and active resistance on the one hand and teacher reactivity and victim blaming on the other hand (e.g., Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

Violence and racial exclusion are deeply woven into U.S. history and culture, and often rooted in a preoccupation with the self-interested pursuit of goods and power (Alexander, 2010; Goldenberg, 1978; Hofstadter & Wallace, 1970). International comparisons of rates of homicide and intimate partner violence, gun ownership, bullying, and incarceration illustrate the magnitude and relative ubiquity of violence in U.S. society (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013). There is a continuing legacy of racialized violence that relies on racial/ethnic stereotypes to justify, normalize, and perpetuate exploitation and oppression in interpersonal and institutional relations (Alexander, 2010; Eberhardt et al., 2004; Williamson, 1984). Racism and economic inequity contribute to the use of negative racial/ethnic, gender, and class stereotypes to conjure the attributions (e.g., entitlement/privilege, victim blaming) and emotions (e.g., fear, anger) that help create and sustain school related disparities, which include access to enriched opportunities to learn (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights CRDC, 2018). Stereotypes justify and normalize punitive and exclusionary approaches. Implicit bias, microaggressions, and stereotype threat undermine short- and long-term academic, social, and emotional development and outcomes (e.g., Keels et al., 2017; Yeager et al., 2017).

Racial threat theory (Blalock, 1967) can help explain micro- to macrolevel trends in racial attitudes and interactions. The theory offers that the White majority exerts social control to squelch a perceived power threat from racial minorities and preserve the status quo (Blalock, 1967). For example, communities with higher percentages of residents of color, relative to lower percentages, have more aggressive policing and surveillance, stringent sentencing, negative perceptions of African American students, and punitive disciplinary practices (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Goff et al., 2014). The greater the percentage of students of color, the more rigid the school policies and practices, the greater the use of punitive and exclusionary discipline practices, and the lower the likelihood of more prosocial approaches such as RP and community service (Payne & Welch, 2015). The resulting alienation and disengagement from school contributes to young people engaging in and being exposed to a cluster of risky contexts (e.g., negative peer affiliation, minimal adult supervision; Mittleman, 2018).

Given the prison–school nexus (Stovall, 2018), discipline reform initiatives can be understood as playing an essential role in disrupting the negative life trajectory imposed on too many young people. This trajectory is made more likely when young people’s educational experiences do not affirm them or offer relevant skills to overcome perceived barriers to personal and collective thriving (Jagers et al., 2019).

Professing Cultural Neutrality

Too often school discipline reform is not linked to efforts to increase cultural relevancy/responsiveness, competence, and bias awareness. There is a general consensus that culturally informed content and instructional
processes reflect the best of the science of learning and development as they can promote cultural well-being and affordances that can result in fertile contexts for academic, social, and emotional learning for diverse student groups (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Aronson and Laughter (2016) use the organizing concept of culturally relevant education to encompass efforts aimed at: (a) connecting students’ cultural assets and references to academic concepts and skills, (b) employing curricula that encourages student reflection on their own lives and society, (c) supporting student cultural competence by facilitating learning about their own and other cultures, and (d) pursuing social justice through critiques of discourses of power. These approaches help address disconnects minoritized and marginalized students experience between their lived reality, cultural capital, needs, and funds of knowledge (e.g., Gay & Howard, 2000) and school culture and pedagogy which contribute to school-related transactions and outcomes. Culturally relevant education is associated with desirable student outcomes such as academic motivation and performance, school attendance, and college going as well as heightened awareness of the power of political movements and effects of racism (for a review, see Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Cultural competence is necessary to systematically address the disadvantaging disconnects and adversities that culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families routinely face. These include rituals, policies, institutionalized processes, and routinized behaviors that privilege some students while placing others at risk. These disconnects are stressful and drain psychic energy; they contribute to disparities in educational opportunities, special education placement, and discipline (e.g., Artiles et al., 2010; Pennington et al., 2016).

Culturally responsive schools foster safe environments that support inclusivity and connectedness, by helping to address emotional, motivational, interpersonal, and learning needs, build upon strengths, and create learning environments where students feel a sense of belonging, emotional and intellectual safety, and appropriate support and challenge (e.g., Gay & Howard, 2000). Rather than ignoring students’ assets or viewing them as deficits (Valenzuela, 1999), culturally responsive approaches leverage cultural resources and build upon strengths.

Future research is needed to advance an understanding of how school discipline reform efforts integrate cultural relevancy/responsiveness, competence, and bias awareness. With educators engaging in implicit bias trainings (Sweedler, 2018) and “courageous conversations” about power and oppression (Singleton & Linton, 2006), practice in this area has outpaced research. Importantly, scholars continue to develop and evaluate implicit bias interventions with educators (Whitford & Emerson, 2019), especially in light of the findings that intervention effects can fade over time (Lai et al., 2016). Moreover, scholars have begun to address much needed research on translating how cultural responsiveness translates into culture-specific classroom management strategies (Bottian et al., 2017). For example, one experimental study demonstrated that teachers who participated in workshops and classroom coaching focused on increasing “CARES” (Connection to the curriculum, Authentic relationships, Reflective thinking, Effective communication, and Sensitivity to students’ cultures) engaged in significantly more proactive behavior management and had greater student cooperation, relative to comparison teachers (Bradshaw et al., 2018).

Neglecting Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Support

Too often school discipline approaches are implemented without complementary adaptations aimed at providing social, emotional, and behavioral support. Environmental stress, trauma, and adversities along with mental health disorders can contribute to troubling student behaviors and trouble-producing adult behaviors. These adaptations can and should align with and incorporate trauma sensitive approaches and strengths-based mental health and social services. No single approach or intervention may adequately address the multiple risk factors that diverse groups of students may present.

SWPBIS, SEL, and RP offer complementary and aligned formats (Sprague & Tobin, 2016; Sprague et al., 2019) for teaching and promoting positive school, peer and teacher-related skills, such as cooperation or academic effort (Walker & Sprague, 2007) and empathy (Weissberg et al., 2015). Students may be more comprehensively supported by blending practices horizontally (within a tier of support) and vertically (aligning practices across Tiers 1, 2, and 3; Domitrovich et al., 2010). Multiple types of supports can be provided to all students within a tier (e.g., learning basic school expectations such as “be respectful” along with learning impulse control or anger management) while individual students may receive additional practice in Tier 1 skills, or receive a Tier 2 support such as Check in, Check out (Hawken et al., 2007) or CBITS (Jaycox et al., 2019). Check-In Check-Out (CICO) is a program to support students who can benefit from extra help managing their behavior. Students check in with an adult at the beginning of each day to be sure they are prepared for class and ready to learn. Throughout the day, students check in with teachers and receive points on a card (0, 1, or 2) related to learn. Throughout the day, students check in with an adult at the beginning of each day to be sure they are prepared for class and ready to learn.
to how closely they met school-wide behavior expectati-
on. At the end of the day, students check out with an adult
who totals up the points. Students take their point cards
home to share with their parents and the card gets turned
in the next morning at check-in. CICO programs without
a family component ask students to turn in their cards at
check-out and the cycle repeats itself each day. The
Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools
(CBITTS) program is a school-based, group and individual
intervention. It is designed to reduce symptoms of post-
traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and behav-
ioral problems, and to improve functioning, grades and
attendance, peer and parent support, and coping skills.
CBITS uses cognitive–behavioral techniques (e.g., psy-
choeducation, relaxation, social problem solving, cogni-
tive restructuring, and exposure), typically in a small
group format.

There is emerging evidence for a blended approach that
draws on SEL and reinforcement of prosocial behavior
associated with Tier 1 of SWPBIS (Cook et al., 2018;
Dimitrovich et al., 2016). For example, Dimitrovich et al.
(2016) trained teachers to use an integrated program,
referred to as PATHS to PAX, of the PAX Good Behavior
Game that uses group-contingent positive reinforcement
(Embry et al., 2003), and a SEL curriculum called
Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS©).
Results indicated that the PATHS to PAX condition gen-
erally demonstrated the most benefits. These findings sug-
ggest that school-based preventive interventions can have a
positive impact on teachers’ beliefs and perceptions, par-
ticularly when the program includes a social–emotional
component.

With a blended focus on both building positive adult–
student relationships (e.g., RP) and reinforcing positive
student behavior (e.g., Tier 1 of SWPBIS), Cook et al.
(2018) have developed and tested an approach called
“Greet, Stop, Prompt” (GSP). GSP relies on three core
components to mitigate proximal causes of exclusionary
discipline decisions, including: (a) proactive classroom
management strategies; (b) a self-regulation technique to
reduce the impact of teacher biases on the response to
problem behavior; and (c) reactive strategies to increase
empathic, consistent, and appropriate responses to prob-
lem behavior. Results from a single case experimental
concurrent multiple baseline design across schools indi-
cated that the GSP strategy yielded systematic reductions
in risk ratios for African American male students. More
specifically, these results showed that the likelihood of
African American male students receiving an office refer-
rall was cut by two thirds following implementation of the
GSP strategy. Notwithstanding this growing evidence base,
more research is needed to examine blended approaches
(combining PBIS, SEL, and RP) to examine equity in stu-
dent outcomes.

Failing to Address Opportunities to Learn

Too often school discipline reform is divorced from
instructional reforms that address opportunity gaps.
Students, who are academically challenged and experience
strong conditions for learning, are less likely to be involved
in disruptive behaviors (Dwyer et al., 2000). At the same
time, punitive and reactive approaches to discipline dis-
rupt vectors of learning and student’s willingness to engage
in academic struggle (Nasir, 2020; Osher et al., 2010).
Unfortunately, many students of color disproportionately
experience poor conditions for learning and high levels of
militarized security (Finn & Servoss, 2015). To support
optimal learning outcomes and related senses of safety
among diverse learners, educators and schools should
draw from scholars studying the science of learning and
development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Immordino-
Yang et al., 2019)—they make the case that in addition to
relational, SEL, and behavioral supports, students need:
Productive instructional strategies that include collabora-
tive inquiry-based activities that build on students’ prior
knowledge and employ explicit instruction, scaffolding,
and application to make the work meaningful and to facili-
tate conceptual understanding, critical thinking, elabora-
tion, coconstruction, and transferable knowledge and
skills (Farrington, 2020).

Pursuing educational equity means that every stu-
dent—regardless of background, circumstances or ability
status—has access to strong conditions for learning, rob-
ust opportunities to learn, academic rigor and chal-
lenge, and the supports necessary to take advantage of
the opportunities and challenge. Advances include dis-
tricts examining whether marginalized groups have fair
access to academic, socioemotional, behavioral supports
and restorative interventions (Anyon et al., 2016; Osher
et al., 2015). Opinions vary regarding the educational
content and processes that are required to close persistent
opportunity gaps and to fully develop young people’s
interests and human potential in an increasingly complex
global community. Still, there is a growing consensus that
quick-fix narrow “programs” are not likely to disrupt
long-standing opportunity gaps and disparities in disci-
pline and achievement. An equity-oriented and integra-
tive approach to school discipline reform situates
discipline policy and practices within a dynamic rela-
tional developmental systems perspective that focuses
on thriving and robust equity and pays attention to the
dynamic coinfluences between and among people, and
between people and systems. This suggests that efforts
to transform school discipline are embedded in the relational and instructional contexts in schools (Osher et al., 2018).

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS: IMPLEMENTATION MATTERS**

How educational leaders and school psychologists address physical, emotional, psychological, and identity safety affect student learning and well-being (Flannery et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2019). The challenges of school violence and discipline are multifaceted and require a coherent and culturally competent multitiiered, multicomponent approach that addresses the individual and ecological factors that dynamically contribute to these challenges including the impacts of institutionalized racism (Jagers et al., 2019; McIntosh et al., 2018; Nasir, 2020). Although the evidence and need for an equity-focused preventive approach to safety is compelling, changing practice is never easy (Domitrovich et al., 2008; Miles, 1993) and requires readiness and implementation support (Dymnicki et al., 2017; Wandersman et al., 2008).

Whereas temporary removal has successfully been sometimes used as a preventive “cool off” strategy in some contexts (Nelson, 1996), extended exclusion from instruction, without a balance of support and efforts to restore school engagement, weakens academic outcomes and maintains or amplifies antisocial trajectories (Fabelo et al., 2011). Also, while some students may become so disruptive or engage in unsafe behavior that warrants temporary, short-term removal from the classroom (e.g., a class period) or school (e.g., 1–2 days), extended suspension and expulsion are harmful interventions which may be inappropriately used due to systemic or school incapacity and/or teacher bias, stress, depression, and skill gaps. While removing a student may appear to be necessary, it limits opportunities for students to build and practice self-regulation skills (Bailey et al., 2019), reduces instructional time (Losen & Whitaker, 2017), contributes to chronic absenteeism, and impairs child–adult relationships and school attachment, particularly for students with chronic problem behavior (Baker et al., 2008). For example, a longitudinal quasi-experimental study by Osher and colleagues, which employed machine learning and propensity matching to examine the impacts of suspension and suspension dosage on every student in NYC schools for 10 years, found that suspension and suspension dosage contributed to more suspensions and more nonsuspension related absences while reducing the likelihood of graduation (LiCalsi et al., 2020). In addition, research on the appropriate use of threat assessment indicates that many students who were removed, do not have to be, and that disparities in suspensions for threat incidents can be averted through systematic processes that assess whether there is a need to remove the student (Cornell et al., 2018).

School psychologists and educators can lead efforts in changing disciplinary practice and addressing disparities. Yet, this is hard when adults have punitive mindsets, racial biases are primed (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018; Spencer & Swanson, 2016), and children and teachers interact in stress-producing environments (Osher et al., 2020). Changing discipline practices is also particularly challenging where schools lack sufficient capacities to support both students and teachers. Fortunately, there are examples of schools and districts building a capacity to support students and teachers (see Osher et al., 2019) and tools are available to assist schools and teachers in this process (Gregory et al., 2017; Gregory et al., 2016; National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2018; Osher et al., 2015). This includes tools for disaggregating school disciplinary data (e.g., https://www.pbis.org/resource/using-discipline-data-within-swpbis-to-identify-and-address-disproportionality-a-guide-for-school-teams) and school climate data (e.g., http://www.delawarepbs.org/school-climate/use-of-school-climate-data/)

These tools will be insufficient if school psychologists and educators do not address fragmentation, incoherence, and the gap between good intentions and everyday practice (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2020; Osher et al., 2019; Sprague et al., 2019). All too often new initiatives to reduce opportunity gaps, strengthen the relational and instructional context of classrooms, increase cultural responsiveness, honor student voice, and foster SEL, restorative, and behavioral supports are implemented in isolation from one another and without sufficient attention to the need for collaboration among all members of the school community (Osher et al., 2019; Rappaport, 2002). Yet, the accumulating science of learning and development demonstrates diverse learners’ experience of safety, motivation to learn, engagement in academics, and sense of belonging are interrelated (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019) and occur across all settings and interactions (Osher et al., 2020). Although collaboration and alignment are hard, so too is practice change: it requires that school psychologists foster readiness and support affective as well as cognitive change. Approaches such as the Concerns Based Adoption Model and readiness assessment and support (Butler et al., 2019; Dymnicki et al., 2017) along with social psychological strategies to address bias and mindsets (e.g., Eberhardt, 2019; Okonofua et al., 2020; Whitford & Emerson, 2019) may be particularly useful in addressing gnarly problems such as changing disciplinary expectations and practices. Future research on organizational change processes is needed to offer school psychologists guidance in implementing and sustaining best practices grounded in the science of implementing
integrated equity-oriented initiatives, particularly since these practices challenge hard to change dispositional factors—implicit biases, subtractive mindsets, and epistemes that support punishment and discipline.

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environments and enhancing developmental outcomes, especially for children and youth from historically underserved groups.

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