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Middle school students' experiences with inequitable discipline practices in school: The elusive quest for cultural responsiveness

Dorinda J. Carter Andrews & Melissa Gutwein

Abstract: Research indicates that school discipline practices are inequitable based on student race, class, and gender; yet, few studies highlight students' voices regarding their experiences with these practices. Further, we know that positive teacher-student relationships are a significant factor in student academic achievement and success. This article presents qualitative data from 40 middle school youth who participated in five focus groups in one midwestern suburban school district. Findings indicate that students understand their experiences with teachers' discipline practices as culturally biased and inequitable. The article explores the importance of middle grades educators taking a critically reflective approach to the ways their discipline practices are shaped by their conscious and unconscious understandings and enactments of race, class, and culture in school. The article also discusses the importance of pre- and in-service middle grades educators implementing culturally relevant and restorative discipline as a way to reduce teacher referrals for minor infractions.

Keywords: *culturally relevant discipline, race, restorative discipline practices, school discipline, teacher education, youth voice*

***This We Believe* characteristics:**

- The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.
- Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.
- Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.

The middle school years mark an important transition for students; many educators expect them to develop the academic and social skills necessary for success in high

school and beyond. Unfortunately, schools often report a significant increase in discipline referrals and suspensions during this transition (Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Theriot & Dupper, 2010), and Black and Brown students often receive these (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2011; Wun, 2016). This phenomenon is troubling given our growing knowledge about the relationship between a student's discipline record and their academic achievement (Gregory et al., 2010; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008).

Research indicates that students' positive perceptions of school social climate are associated with fewer emotional and behavioral problems (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). In the midst of learning environments that are layered with sociocultural and sociopolitical influences, teachers work to build meaningful relationships with students that enhance their exploration of possible selves in the middle grades. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) teacher preparation standards call for middle level preservice teachers to "serve as advocates for all young adolescents and for developmentally responsive schooling practices." Additionally, teachers should serve as "informed advocates for effective middle level educational practices and policies" (AMLE, 2012, Standard 5b). This advocacy should be demonstrated through the use of equitable and just discipline practices in middle school settings. However, there is a plethora of research that highlights the challenges students encounter with school

discipline policies and practices across the grades; the research on middle school students is still growing (e.g., Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). AMLE (2012) Standard 1 calls for preservice teachers to integrate their understandings of young adolescent development theories and research into their curricular and instructional decision-making. Element 1b further suggests that middle level preservice teachers implement curriculum and instruction that is responsive to adolescents' cultural identities. We suggest that the spirit of Standard 1 – and Element 1b more specifically – should be inclusive of teachers' discipline practices. Given the rates of disproportionality by which Black and Brown students are referred or suspended, middle level pre- and in-service teachers need ongoing professional development that aids them in overcoming stereotypes and biases they embody about students of color and students with other minoritized identities and, subsequently, enacting practices that support restorative discipline.

Purpose

Academic literature surrounding school discipline tends to focus on the elementary and high school years, leaving middle school under-researched. Further, existing literature is less illustrative of youths' voices regarding their discipline experiences. For these reasons, this article focuses on qualitative data from an equity audit conducted by a university research team in collaboration with an “urban characteristic” (Milner, 2012) school district to build upon the growing body of research surrounding middle school students' of color experiences with teachers' discipline practices. Milner (2012) defines “urban characteristic” schools as those that are “not located in big or midsized cities but may be starting to experience some of the challenges that are sometimes associated with urban school contexts in larger areas” (p. 559). These challenges often include the allocation and utilization of limited resources that are expected to serve a student population that is predominantly Black and Brown, has a high number of students living in poverty, and serves a significant number of bilingual and/or English Emergent Learners. “Urban intensive” environments often serve students with many of the aforementioned characteristics and represent a population of more than 1 million in the city. For this study, our research took place in a midwestern suburban school district with urban characteristics – the city population is under 1 million, yet the

student population mirrors the aforementioned characteristics. We explored the following research question: *How do middle school students in an urban characteristic school district describe their experiences with school discipline?*

We situate this work within critical multiculturalism (May & Sleeter, 2010) and critical race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) frameworks that suggest educational issues like school discipline inequity should be examined through the lenses of race, culture, power, and justice. As an analytical tool, critical multiculturalism offers a ‘more complete’ analysis of oppression and institutionalization of unequal power relations in education. It integrates and advances antiracist education, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory (May & Sleeter, 2010). Critical Race Theory reminds us that racism is endemic to society and schooling, and it operates intersectionally with other identity markers (e.g., social class, gender, sexuality) to institutionally and structurally marginalize students of color in schools. Simson (2014) argues that through a complex and interlocking process – influenced by longstanding racial stigma, societal stereotypes and implicit bias derived in part from such stigma, differential perception and evaluation of the same event when engaged in by white students and students of color, and normative baselines regarding what constitutes appropriate behavior – teachers evaluate student behavior within an existing framework of social meanings associated with the student's racial category. These evaluations often disproportionately negatively affect Black and Brown students for discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. We approach this work as two educators committed to racial justice and educational equity in K-12 schools. One of us is an African American female teacher educator with former experience teaching secondary mathematics in urban and suburban schools and 19 years of experience as a teacher educator working to help preservice and in-service educators understand how their biases and stereotypes about adolescents can lead them to differentiate their discipline practices based on race and culture. The other of us is a white female special education major, currently completing a yearlong student teaching internship in a large, midwestern urban public-school system. Our lived experiences as middle- and upper-middle-class women who attended predominantly white K-12 schools and have professional teaching experiences in a variety of school settings, and who also have academic and clinical expertise in the topic of this article, inform our ideological and analytical orientations to this study.

In the remainder of this article, we provide a brief review of the literature on the discipline gap and its impact on student success. We then provide an overview of our research methodology and discuss three major themes from the study. Lastly, we discuss implications for middle grades pre-service teacher education and teacher discipline practice, informed by the perspectives of the middle school youth in this study and our larger knowledge of the research field.

The discipline gap and academic achievement

Decades of research indicate that Black and Brown students are disciplined at a much higher rate by their teachers than their white and Asian peers, despite demonstrating similar levels and types of misbehavior (Anyon et al., 2018; Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Gregory et al., 2010; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Nichols, 2004; Skiba et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2008; Wun, 2016). This gap includes both the frequency at which students are disciplined as well as severity of punishment for particular infractions. Zero tolerance policies have greatly exacerbated these racial differences, despite little evidence demonstrating their effectiveness (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Skiba, 2014). As the authority figure spending the most time with students during the school day, teachers play a critical role in the existence and perpetuation of the discipline gap.

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They also play a significant role in eliminating discipline gaps in schools (Monroe, 2009). Scholars suggest the discipline gap exists in large part due to the sociocultural factors at play regarding race in the classroom, specifically the negative implicit biases that many teachers unknowingly hold against students of color (Noguera, 2003; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Students are often aware of these biases, noticing that students of color are punished more often and more severely than their white peers (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2017; Soumah & Hoover, 2013).

Given that the majority of teachers are White, these effects likely exist in the vast majority of classrooms.

While it is not entirely clear precisely how these two major aspects of schooling interact, the relationship between discipline and academic achievement cannot be ignored. For example, McIntosh et al. (2008) found that behavior referrals in eighth grade were related to academic achievement the following year. Other researchers found that literacy rates in lower elementary years may predict aggressive behavior in upper elementary years (Miles & Stipek, 2006), and higher-grade point averages in high school may predict lower levels of delinquent activities (Choi, 2007). These correlations, among others, are why Gregory et al. (2010) have dubbed the discipline gap and the achievement gap “two sides of the same coin.” Racial biases against students of color not only lead to higher levels of discipline, but also to hindering academic achievement (Jacoby-Senghor, Sinclair, & Shelton, 2016; Sorhagen, 2013). Students frequently report that their teachers appear to hold lower behavioral and academic expectations of students of color (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2017; Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). While this is not the only factor contributing to gaps in academic performance between subgroups of students (Jeynes, 2014), it is an area in which teachers have a great degree of control. By listening to student voices and reflecting critically on their own biases, teachers may enact practices that cultivate and support improved academic performance of their traditionally minoritized students.

This we believe characteristics

Given what is known about the discipline gap, we believe three *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010) characteristics are promoted and sustained from middle grades educators’ and administrators’ intentional efforts to enact culturally responsive and restorative discipline practices in schools.

The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all. If a school is disproportionately and unfairly punishing students of color, the school environment cannot be assumed to be supportive of all students.

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We argue that administrators, teachers, and staff at the middle grades level have to work together to create and maintain a school culture in which the discipline gap is obsolete. This will ultimately result in a learning environment that is inviting, affirming, and inclusive for all students (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013; Woolley & Brown, 2007).

Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate. A student's formation of close and meaningful relationships with adults in school may be challenged by the experience of being unfairly disciplined. Additionally, adults who disproportionately discipline students of color are working directly in opposition to their role as an academic and personal advocate for those students. Schools that implement discipline justly create an environment in which adults are working on behalf of their students, and a level of trust is developed (Simson, 2014). In this way, students' academic and personal development is an explicit focus through all practices.

Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices. In order for middle grades teachers to enact discipline practices that cultivate inviting, safe, and inclusive classroom cultures as well as demonstrate effective advocacy for minoritized students, they must have ongoing professional development that centers critical self-reflection and research-based programs, policies, and practices that foster culturally responsive discipline (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2017). Without this, the cycle of punitive discipline will continue in ways that further marginalize students who are already disadvantaged by educational systems.

Research context

The data presented here are part of a larger investigation of factors contributing to achievement and discipline inequities in one midwestern suburban, urban characteristic school district with a student population of roughly 3,700 and a city population of roughly 33,000. The district equity audit/needs assessment included interviews of all principals and assistant principals (n = 14), a representative sample of teachers (n = 79) at each school in the district, nine focus groups with a total of 72 students in grades 6 through 12, and survey administration with administrators, staff, parents, and secondary students (n = 2,424). The district student demographics were as follows: 46.73% Latina/o, 38.17% White, 7.6% Black, 4.75%

Multiracial, 2.48% Asian, and less than 1% Native American. Approximately 67% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch, 11% were Limited English Proficient, and 16% of students were receiving special education services.

Data sources and analysis procedures

Data sources. While we recognize the importance of data triangulation in qualitative research and share commitments to such, our focus in this article is to highlight middle school students' perspectives regarding their experiences with school discipline, absent of teachers' perspectives. This aligns with our use of a critical race analytical approach to the data, whereby, critical race scholarship illuminates the perspectives of unique voices of color to examine the material impact of institutional and structural oppression in schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Thus, here we present student data from five focus groups across two middle schools (grades 6 through 8), totaling 40 students (11 Black/African American, 22 Latina/o, 1 Micronesian, 6 White). We refer to the middle schools as Middle School 1 (MS1) and Middle School 2 (MS2). We asked students questions in four areas: 1) school culture and climate; 2) thoughts on achievement gap; 3) thoughts on discipline; and, 4) resources and support. There were eight students in each focus group. In two focus groups, all of the students self-identified as Latina/o; in one focus group, all of the students self-identified as Black; two additional focus groups included students from multiple racial groups (e.g., Black, Latina/o, Micronesian, and White). Dorinda participated in conducting focus group interviews for this project. Melissa was instrumental in assisting Dorinda with data transcription and analysis.

Data analysis. Each focus group interview lasted 60 min and was audio-recorded and transcribed. We utilized open-coding and theory-based coding to answer the research question and to cover the scope and depth of the data collected. To ensure consistency, dependability of the qualitative study, and to guard against researcher bias, we used the code-recode strategy and peer examination (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). First, we independently analyzed transcriptions using open-coding. This allowed for the extraction of recurring ideas that emerged across focus groups using categories or codes. Utilizing students' emic perspectives to analyze data during our first round of coding was essential to understanding *their* perspectives on

school discipline practices (Fetterman, 2008). For example, when asking students if there are differences in how discipline is handled in their school, ideas related to *different treatment, discrimination, yelling, and picked on* emerged. We used these preliminary codes and others to guide the next round of coding.

In the second round of coding, we collectively analyzed the data from etic perspectives. We renamed and reorganized the codes to make sense of what we collected from the participants' point of view, but through our researcher lenses (Fetterman, 2008). The goal was to create codes that represented a more nuanced picture of students' explanations, experiences, and stories. For example, we noticed that *discipline gap, intimidation, and teacher behavior management system* appeared across multiple transcriptions. By re-coding and reorganizing, we were able to clearly connect students' experiences and commentary to racialized themes within the research study.

After two rounds of open-coding utilizing both emic and etic perspectives, we employed theory-based coding to connect codes to critical multiculturalism and critical race theory. We identified instances where participants explicitly stated or alluded to interactions with adults in their school that seemed to be rooted in negative cultural stigmas. Ultimately, we noted a series of student experiences that were racialized across both schools in interactions with teachers. We identified three major themes that we discuss in the findings section based on the synthesis of site-specific, cross-case codes, and theory-based iterations of coding.

Findings

Our goal here is not to demonize teachers or render them intentionally discriminatory. Rather, we aim to highlight the nuances in student-teacher relational dynamics and teachers' pedagogical practices that often unintentionally harm minoritized students due to a lack of critical self-reflection on one's ideologies and pedagogical orientations to discipline, which are grounded in cultural understandings that may conflict with those of students and their families. We discuss three major themes central to understanding these middle school students' experiences with discipline. We describe these themes and their seemingly disproportionate presence for Black and Brown students in these two schools.

The only one getting picked on

Across all five focus groups, students described many of their experiences with discipline as being "picked on." They used this phrase to describe a situation in which a student felt they were either disciplined unnecessarily or were the only student disciplined as other students misbehaved in a similar fashion. Students also used this phrase to describe behavior they witnessed teachers demonstrate toward students other than themselves. For example, one Black female (all-Black focus group, MS1) explained, "The whole class can be talking then they [teachers] just pick on one person or like two people." Another student (multiple races focus group, MS2) described a white male teacher as "lik[ing] to pick on any race but white." A peer in that same focus group stated, "I feel like he picks on, like, the Black kids." In three of the five focus groups, students perceived teachers as spotlighting students of color with unwarranted scolding. Additionally, most students identified talking as the most common reason for being disciplined (i.e., picked on). A Black male student (all-Black focus group, MS1) shared an experience being picked on for talking, stating:

She [a teacher] makin' me write all this cuz I was talking. And I was barely talking, like everybody else was talking. I start talking. 'Take these home and write.' I was like, 'really?' And then she gave me another one before because I started talking when everybody else was talking.

In the experience described above, the student is required to write lines as a punishment for talking out of turn. He was not the only student talking, but he was the only student to receive a punishment. His irritation with this punishment is underscored with a response of "really?" As a result, his teacher hands him another form to write lines. The student's frustration stems from watching his peers avoid punishment, while he is singularly "picked on."

While students were aware of and understood the formal behavior expectations set by teachers, the ambiguity was in the way teachers implemented discipline for failing to meet expectations. This was evident in the fact that while some students believed they were meeting their teacher's behavior expectations, they still found themselves a target for scolding. Another Black male student (all-Black focus group, MS1) explained, "The only teacher that likes me is the gym teacher. I'm athletic. I pay attention in other classes, then I get frustrated cuz all these teachers be pickin' on me if I start talkin." For this male,

there is a perception that whether or not a student is picked on in a class is informed by the relationship between the student and the teacher. In gym, this male student has a positive relationship with his teacher and does not feel negatively targeted. However, in his other classes, despite displaying what he believes to be relatively positive behavior, he finds himself targeted by his teachers. This student does not perceive that his other teachers like him, and therefore pick on him. From an intersectional identity perspective, it is not clear to the student whether teachers pick on him because of his race, gender, or both. The strain put on this male both by the complex relationships with some of his teachers as well as the perception of unfair disciplinary procedures contribute to his reported frustration, which may have implications for his academic achievement. Additionally, the more we listened to students across the five focus groups, the more we gleaned that they perceived the disproportionate discipline as rooted in racial and other cultural differences.

The resulting attitudes of students who perceived 'being picked on' themselves or witnessed this behavior toward others provides insights for pre- and in-service middle grades teacher professional education. It is important for teachers to develop clear behavior expectations that are communicated clearly to students. Because of the cultural differences in how teachers and students might define and understand acceptable behavior, effective teachers engage students in constructing classroom behavioral norms. These do not have to run counter to school policy, but they should be reflective of student voice and enacted in ways that make sense for teachers *and* students. Pre-service middle grade teachers need academic classroom experiences that allow them to explore theories related to the social construction of discipline and punishment and the ways in which their own positionalities shape their approach to discipline and to understanding students' behavior. These conversations should be coupled with dialogue about what it means to 'control' and/or 'manage' a classroom and the connections to ideas around conformity and compliance.

Fish out of water: Discipline "for no reason"

In one of the multiple races focus groups (MS1), six of the eight students raised their hands when asked if they felt like they got in trouble in class for no reason. Several students commented on what they perceived to be the ineffectiveness of the Fish Out of Water behavior management system (also

called a Fish Behavior Board). For many students in both middle schools, the purpose for the system's use was unclear. One Black female (all-Black focus group, MS1) stated, "it seems like all of them [teachers] just give me fish out of waters for like literally, for like, for no reason, like, at all." A female student from one of the multiple races focus group (MS1) shared the story of getting "kicked out of Spanish four times for no reason, and he [the teacher] gave me a fish out of water and he called home and I got suspended for, like, two days." Another student from a multiple-races focus group (MS2) shared the intimidation resulting from a teacher publicly announcing someone's fish out of water to the entire class. "I don't like when teachers intimidate kids to like, like they'll write their name on a fish out of water and then put it on the screen just to intimidate them. I don't like that."

These responses from students illuminate the negative effects of some behavior management systems. Presenting all students in a school of fish on a public classroom board might seem like a way to promote collectivity and a communal atmosphere. However, when a student's fish is gradually moved away from the school, or the fish's color changes due to negative behavior, the educator must consider what are the negative implications of public isolation from the 'school' (i.e. community) and how a student's anticipation around being further isolated from the group actually counters the goal of getting a student to redirect his/her behavior based on the lack of desire to be separated from the community. With the implementation of any discipline practice, teachers must ask some critical questions: 1) What is the intended outcome of implementing a specific behavior practice? 2) For the student being disciplined and/or for other classmates, what negative psychological, emotional, or physical reactions might result from my discipline practices? 3) How might a student perceive my behavior practice as influenced by any of their social identity markers (e.g., gender, social class, race, ethnicity, ability, religion)? 4) How, if at all, does the implementation of this practice advance academic and/or behavioral success for the individual student? Middle grades preservice teachers should have opportunities to explore these types of questions in courses where they are discussing discipline practices and classroom management strategies.

Teachers' use of intimidation tactics

Across four of the focus groups students commented on teachers' use of intimidation tactics to persuade students to behave appropriately. One student in a multiple-races focus group (MS2) described challenges in one teacher's classroom:

She just yelled at Philip for, like, no reason ... when he giggles, she'll yet at him, write his name up sometimes. Some of us will ask questions, and she's like 'it better not be a stupid question or else your name is going on the board.' Most of the time she'll call us dumb if we ask one [a question].

A Black student (all-Black focus group, MS1) reported one teacher's comments as being a bit more egregious when s/he misbehaved, stating: "If you keep talking this class is gonna be a living hell." In one of the Latina/o focus groups (MS1), a student described a teacher's yelling as representative of an intimidation tactic:

Our class kinda has, like, kids that are annoying and talk a lot, and so they talk during it and then he [the teacher], like, yells at the whole class. And I'm like 'why are you yelling at us?' Like keep those kids after class and do something with them.

Another Latina/o student (all-Latina/o focus group, MS1) commented on a teacher's yelling tactics, describing that when students would not listen to the teacher, s/he "would just start getting mad and, like, send them to the office or start yelling at them."

These comments from students mirror findings in prior research where teachers used yelling tactics and threatening language to attempt to get adolescents to behave in conformist ways (see, for example, Anyon, 1997; McEvoy, 2005). These intimidation tactics are more egregious when commonly utilized against students with minoritized and marginalized identities (e.g., students of color, students living in poverty) (Devine, 1996; Kennedy, 2011; McEvoy, 2014; Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Brethour, 2006; Whitted & Dupper, 2008). This, in part, is due to the fact that individuals who belong to these social categories have stigmatized identities in the larger society. Thus, teachers' discipline behaviors are actual manifestations of negative stereotypes, assumptions, and biases that they have internalized from other areas of their lives (Whitted & Dupper, 2008). This is why it is so important for middle grades pre- and in-service educators to engage in critical professional development that challenges them to engage in dialogue and explore case study scenarios where their identities of privilege inform their behaviors that are (un)intentionally oppressive to students who are already oppressed by the educational system.

Discussion

As we stated earlier, our intent in this article is not to demonize middle grades teachers for the discipline practices they

employ in middle school classrooms. We recognize that all educators enact implicit and explicit biases in their work, and often unconsciously oppress and traumatize students through their discipline practices. Our collective experiences in K-12 urban and suburban schools as pre- and in-service teachers, students ourselves, and as teacher educators remind us of the sociocultural and sociopolitical nuances embedded in the discipline process between classroom teachers and their students, and the often colorblind and culture-blind discipline policies and procedures imposed upon teachers to enact in educational spaces. However, we argue that students' voices and insights are often ignored or rendered invisible when considering the root causes of misbehavior, how 'misbehavior' and 'good behavior' are concepts that are culturally constructed and often align (or not) with white, middle class, heteronormative understandings of 'good' and 'bad.' Further, students' voices and insights are often absent from conversations regarding what constitutes effective discipline practice for behavior redirection. Given findings illuminated from this study, we propose three primary implications for middle grades teachers and teacher education that support the Standards we highlighted at the beginning of this article as well as the three *This We Believe* characteristics that we noted.

In order to support the *This We Believe* characteristic for developing and maintaining school environments that are inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all students, middle grades teachers need formalized opportunities to critically reflect on how they individually define and understand good behavior and misbehavior, and how these concepts might differ across teachers in the same building and from how students define them. Ultimately, middle grades educators in a particular learning environment must develop, effectively communicate, and implement behavioral practices that support the healthy identity development and academic success of all students.

Ultimately, middle grades educators in a particular learning environment must develop, effectively communicate, and implement behavioral practices that support the healthy identity development and academic success of all students.

A majority of students interviewed felt as though they had been disciplined for no reason, were persistently targeted by their teacher, or witnessed students of color being

subjected to these practices. This suggests that teachers lack a reliable methodology for reflecting on their disciplinary practices to ensure their decisions are just. Developing such a methodology may begin with teachers addressing implicit racial biases through professional development and/or professional learning communities that are established and maintained within the school context.

As teachers work to refine their disciplinary practices, it is also necessary that they build positive relationships with their ‘misbehaving’ students. As one student reflected, a positive relationship with his gym teacher is the reason he is not picked on in that class. Additionally, by building positive relationships with students of color, teachers may rely less on harmful stereotypes as they make disciplinary decisions. Strong student–teacher relationships are not developed overnight, and they require sharing best practices amongst teachers for how to effectively work with students and families to understand the whole child and how to best meet her/his needs.

Finally, middle schools and their educators should consider employing restorative justice (RJ) practices and culturally responsive positive behavior interventions and supports (CRPBIS) if a primary concern is keeping students in school and maintaining healthy adult–student relationships. The principles of RJ focus on adults building and maintaining caring relationships with students and the process of repairing the harm caused by acts of misbehavior (Payne & Welch, 2015; Riestenberg, 2012). “A restorative justice paradigm offers a disciplinary model that can repair harm and create a whole-school community environment, while reducing the frequency and severity of school violations” (Payne & Welch, 2015, p. 540). Research indicates that students prefer restorative discipline practices over detentions, suspensions, and expulsions (Drewery, 2004; Fields, 2003). Specific techniques employed in schools include student conferences, peer mediation, and restorative circles.

While many schools have implemented school-wide PBIS programs, there has been growing concern that these programs do not incorporate culturally responsive practice that result in perspectives, instruction, and interventions that promote equity and justice for all students. A good initial starting place for teacher education programs and in-service teachers to learn more about CRPBIS is the Equity Alliance at Arizona State University (www.equityallianceatasu.org). Their report,

Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Support Matters (Bal, Kozleski, & Thorius, 2012), provides a descriptive process for implementing CRPBIS. CRPBIS starts with examination of the cultural practices of schools, understanding that these practices are entrenched in institutional processes that generate long-term learning and social opportunity gaps. Thus, implementation of CRPBIS in a middle school requires administrators and teachers to examine exclusionary discipline practices by examining historical, social, and cultural patterns of discipline in the school. Additionally, CRPBIS requires a focus in three areas: (a) collaboration with families and community members in teaching and reinforcing school-wide behavioral expectations; (b) monitoring disproportionality in office discipline referrals between dominant and non-dominant groups by analyzing trends in data disaggregated across student identity markers (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, social class, ability); and, (c) providing professional development aimed at increasing educators’ critical awareness of their own social identities and how those interact with the social identities of their students (Bal et al., 2012). Teacher education programs should spend more time discussing RJ practices and CRPBIS with future middle grades teachers and engaging them in field experiences where they can see these interventions operating effectively in middle school learning environments.

Challenges

While the focus group data with these 40 students provides a rich qualitative description of their perceptions of teacher discipline practices in their middle schools, we recognize that having not observed teacher practice in the classroom or in social spaces in the schools presents a missed opportunity to glean another perspective on students’ understandings. We also recognize the challenges of painting a complete picture of school discipline practices in these two middle schools by not providing teacher perspectives on school culture and climate, the discipline gap, and the opportunity gap in their schools in this article. Analysis of observational data and teacher voice would have provided a more complete, and perhaps nuanced, narrative regarding race, culture, and discipline practices in these two middle schools. Future publications on this data can provide a more triangulated perspective of the data on middle school students’ experiences with school discipline.

Conclusion

More research is needed at the middle grade level regarding disproportionality in discipline enactment. Further, investigations should focus specifically on the negative effects that school policies, programs, and teacher practices have on Students of Color and students with additional minoritized identities. Moving forward, middle level teacher preparation and professional development must ensure that educators have opportunities to construct and deconstruct ideas related to discipline, culture, identity, power, and privilege. Exploring these topics in isolation or not at all results in pre- and in-service middle grades educators fostering learning environments that do not adhere to the goals of Standards 1 and 5, and the *This We Believe* characteristics that we identified earlier. We believe that most middle grades educators want to do right by adolescents and keep them in the classroom; we must continue pursuing discipline practices that affirm students' whole selves and allow them to live their full humanities in middle schools.

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