The Root of Discipline Disparities

James E. Ford

Why are students of color punished and suspended at such high rates? It's time to recognize the role of implicit racial bias.

In his best-selling book *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates pens these chilling words:

I came to see the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast. One enjoyed the official power of the state while the other enjoyed its implicit sanction. But fear and violence were the weaponry of both. Fail in the streets and the crews would catch you slipping and take your body. Fail in the schools and you would be suspended and sent back to those same streets, where they would take your body.
And I began to see these two arms in relation—those who failed in the schools justified their destruction in the streets. The society could say, "He should have stayed in school," and then wash its hands of him (p. 33).

With poetic prose, Coates recounts his upbringing in Baltimore, Maryland, and tackles issues of systemic racism, police brutality, and social justice. The book has justifiably received critical acclaim and is already considered a classic. It is provocative, insightful, and compelling from start to finish.

What I found most staggering in Coates's book was the way he describes the role of schools in disenfranchising young people of color—specifically through the practice of suspension. The quoted passage provides a haunting revelation of what is at stake in the lives of many students in the United States today. Coates takes the education system to task for calloused inflexibility with young people and tone-deafness toward the communities it serves. He recalls his own schools less as a gateway to opportunity than as a fence that trapped would-be scholars. His stories expose the inner workings of the pipeline that leads from school to prison or even death.

As a black male educator, I know full well that his narrative reflects a pervasive reality.

"The Teacher for Those Kids"

Having spent my career as a teacher in urban schools with large majorities of black and brown students, I've witnessed the school-to-prison pipeline at work too many times to deny it. Although I've most certainly seen instances of student conduct worthy of heavy sanctions, perhaps even judicial action, in most situations this simply wasn't the case.

I've taught my share of students who would typically be categorized as "challenging." Despite this, students had few-to-no behavior problems in my classes. I'd describe my classroom management style as strong but empathetic, grounded in relationship building. I took seriously the task of understanding the world my students came from and responding to that reality as an instructor.

At times, this ability to connect with students has been equal parts blessing and curse. I have frequently been thrust into the designated role of "the teacher for those kids." Whenever some of my colleagues felt they had reached their tolerance level with their students' behavior, it was common for those students to show up at my door with a hall pass explaining that they had been "bounced" by their teacher. When I asked what got them removed, I typically heard trivial reasons along the lines of, "I had my head down," "I wasn't participating," or even "I didn't have a pencil." I'd twist my face in confusion trying to comprehend the reasoning, but eventually I'd open the door and let them in for the duration of the class period so they wouldn't get tied up with unnecessary disciplinary action.

What I couldn't fathom was why these alleged infractions were so severe that they warranted kicking students out of class. The kids were engaging in typical off-task high school behavior—but for whatever
reason, it was perceived differently and handled more severely. This scenario mirrors the experience of many other educators in urban settings.

Data Confirm the Story

The data on discipline tell a story that bears an uncanny resemblance to the reality described by Ta-Nehisi Coates and to my experience as an urban educator. Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than their white counterparts are. In other words, students of color get disproportionately punished and suspended.

The Civil Rights Data Collection found that in the 2013–2014 school year, black K–12 students were 3.8 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as white students were. Among all K–12 students, 6 percent received one or more out-of-school suspensions, but the percentage differed by race and gender: 18 percent for black boys, 10 percent for black girls, 5 percent for white boys, and 2 percent for white girls. The disparities started even before kindergarten: Black children represented 19 percent of preschool enrollment, but 47 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

News headlines and videos posted online have reinforced the story told by the statistics. A black high school student in South Carolina is thrown from her desk by a school resource officer for refusing to put away her phone (Aartun & Yan, 2015); a 12-year-old Latina girl in Texas is body-slammed and nearly knocked unconscious by police following a verbal altercation with another student (Bever, 2016); a black middle-school boy in Virginia is arrested for allegedly "stealing" a free carton of milk (Wise, 2016). These stories have helped bring the issue to the forefront, justifiably arousing the interest of the general public in how students of color experience discipline.

This problem isn't new, however. Since the early 1970s—coinciding with the advent of widespread desegregation efforts—the racial gap in suspensions has been trending upward. This trend has been caused in part by the adoption of zero tolerance initiatives that demand heavy-handed approaches to the slightest disciplinary infractions. Zero tolerance hasn't proven effective as a preventative measure; instead, it has contributed to increased truancy, dropout rates, and encounters with law enforcement (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Skiba, 2000).

Common logic assumes that if students of color are disproportionately represented in the discipline data, it must be because they commit the lion's share of offenses. I've been privy to many conversations in education circles where assertions are made about which kids are causing problems at the school. There's a prevailing belief that students of color are disciplined more because of cultural deficiencies that exist at home—deficiencies that apparently don't exist in white households. As is the case with many assumptions, this is false.
Fortunately, many researchers, such as Russell Skiba, Daniel Losen, and Jamilia Blake, have applied an empirical analysis to the data. In *Closing the School Discipline Gap* (Losen, 2014), these researchers and others provide a more nuanced look at the discipline disparity phenomenon, bringing a few things to light. For example, various studies have found that students of color are more likely to be reprimanded for subjective offenses not specified by the school (insubordination, disrespect, excessive noise, and so on) on the basis of a judgment call of a teacher or administrator. In contrast, white students' punishments are more likely to be for objective offenses for which the school requires a categorical sanction (drugs, weapons, obscene language, and so on). Students of color—black students in particular—are more likely than white students to be referred to the office or suspended, even when the misbehaviors are similar. This is not just disproportionate representation; it is differential treatment by the system.

**Facing Up to Implicit Racial Bias**

As the 2014–2015 North Carolina Teacher of the Year, I enjoyed the honor of sitting on the state board of education for two years as an advisor. I weighed in on many issues and was present while a lot of good policy was made. However, each time we reviewed the state's consolidated discipline report, I'd ask a question that for me felt pressing: "What is causing this?" The response … dead silence. Naturally, the presenters were hesitant to speculate on such a thing; they were data collectors, not social scientists. But this question was left begging for an answer. I grew tired of educators wringing their hands in befuddlement while trying to surmise what could possibly be causing these glaring racial disparities in discipline, without making any concerted effort to dig deeper.

There is a saying, "The life of the tree is not in the branches, but in the roots." When assessing why egregious racial discipline gaps exist, schools and school systems need a root-cause analysis—a thorough diagnosis of the origin of the problem. Initiatives to close racial disparities will likely prove impotent unless we honestly ask where the dysfunction is coming from.

Emerging research suggests that one major root of the disparities is *implicit racial bias*—unconscious attitudes about groups of people that influence our behavior and decision making. When we hear claims of racism, we are conditioned to think of the most extreme kind of racial hatred, expressed in the form of verbal slurs or symbols like swastikas or cross burnings. But the truth is, the most insidious and pervasive form of racism operates on an institutional level, through systems that treat people as superior or inferior in ways that produce outcomes stratified by race.

Institutional racism doesn't require any individual culprits with malicious intent. Instead, it reflects prevailing attitudes that tell us who is intelligent and who is simple-minded, who is up to no good and who is well-intentioned, who deserves a break and who deserves to be made an example of. Implicit racial bias explains why, in today's society where scarcely anybody would admit openly to being racist, we still have racialized outcomes that stack up in predictable ways.
This bias exists across institutions, from health care, to housing, to criminal justice, to banking. And as much as we cringe at the idea, it exists in schools. Skiba's research found that principals who support zero tolerance policies suspend more students, and black students are disproportionately represented even after controlling for socioeconomics (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson, 2002; Rausch & Skiba, 2005). Findings like this make it plausible that implicit racial bias, rather than deliberate acts of racism, may be at the root of the discipline disparities we see with students of color.

Reducing Bias

The question remains: What can we do to mitigate the effects of implicit racial bias? Much like the poisonous gas carbon monoxide, implicit racial bias is odorless, colorless, and tasteless. It is nonetheless just as lethal. The only reasonable response is to do a better job of detecting and removing it. This task is difficult because even the most well-meaning educators come into the classroom with biases of some sort. Teachers and administrators are human, after all; we aren't raised in a vacuum. We've all been socialized and conditioned to believe certain things about people. It is a Herculean task to set about reorienting how grown men and women look at the world.

However, some research has suggested that habits of bias can be unlearned and broken. An intervention developed by Patricia Devine and her colleagues (2012) has shown promise for helping people deconstruct prejudices and replace them with more balanced thought processes. In a single training session, participants learned about implicit racial biases and how those biases can lead people to unwittingly perpetuate discrimination. Participants were taught five bias-reduction strategies as a "toolkit for breaking the prejudice habit": stereotype replacement, counter-stereotypic imagining, individuating, perspective-taking, and increasing opportunity for positive contact. Eight weeks later, participants still showed a reduction in implicit racial bias; they maintained an increased awareness of personal biases; and they reported being more concerned about racial discrimination.

Whether an intervention like this would translate to more equitable school practices remains to be seen. But implicit bias training done in conjunction with positive behavior interventions and support, social and emotional learning strategies, and restorative justice practices could prove a powerful approach to eliminating racial disparity in discipline. Over a three-year period of practicing restorative justice, Oakland Unified School District has decreased overall suspensions by 50 percent. Black students in particular experienced a one-year drop of 40 percent, and the black/white discipline gap is slowly shrinking (Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Preety, 2014).

I don't know whether any plan of action can effectively eliminate implicit racial bias. It is a centuries-old thread woven into the fabric of our nation, which is not likely to be eliminated easily. But the first step in
tackling this intractable problem is refusing to let it remain buried. As educators, we have a responsibility to do everything in our power to unearth and expose it for the sake of our children. The axe is at the root.

References


Endnote
For a tool to diagnose a school's practices and deduce what is happening at a systems level beneath the surface, see *Addressing the Root Causes of Disparities in School Discipline* (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2015), available at https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/addressing-root-causes-disparities-school-discipline.

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