

## Chapter 11

# Eliminating Disparities in School Discipline: A Framework for Intervention

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*Race and gender disparities in school discipline and associated harms have been well documented for decades. Suspension from school can reduce instructional time and impede academic progress for students who may already be lagging in their achievement. This chapter offers a research-based framework for increasing equity in school discipline. The framework is composed of ten principles that hold promise for helping educators to address student behavior in a developmentally appropriate manner and reduce race and gender disparities in school discipline. The framework also informs directions for future research in school discipline.*

Federal and state actions to reduce racial disparities in discipline respond to a decade of findings (e.g., American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008) on the ineffectiveness of exclusionary discipline in improving educational outcomes and their disparate impact on students based on their racial/ethnic group membership, thereby violating civil rights protections. Male and female Black students disproportionately receive discipline referrals and out-of-school suspension (Fabelo et al., 2011), most often at a rate two to three times greater than White students. Disproportionate discipline has also been documented for males, Latinos, American Indians, and students in special education (U.S. Department of Justice/Department of Education, 2014). Recent research has raised concerns that lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender students are also at heightened risk of receiving discipline sanctions (Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011; Poteat, Scheer, & Chong, 2015).

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Findings such as these have led policymakers and educators in school districts across the country to examine how best to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, especially for students from marginalized groups. The rapid pace of reform has outstripped research and documentation. While some evaluations of district-level efforts show significant reductions in rates of exclusionary discipline across racial-ethnic groups (e.g., González, 2015; Osher, Poirier, Jarjoura, Brown, & Kendziora, 2015), few investigations have focused specifically on the discipline gap and even fewer have demonstrated a shrinkage of that gap.

We seek to inform current reforms through a systematic synthesis of promising policies and practices for reducing disciplinary disparities. We draw on naturalistic research and the few extant published intervention studies to propose the Framework for Increasing Equity in School Discipline. The Framework includes 10 school principles that hold promise for reducing race and gender disparities in school discipline. We intentionally offer numerous principles that span many aspects of the ecology of schooling. Narrow, singular interventions targeting only one aspect of schooling will not likely disrupt entrenched patterns of racial and gender inequality. Thus, the principles address varying levels of the school ecology including intrapersonal (educator beliefs and attitudes), interpersonal (quality of individual and group interactions), instructional (academic rigor, cultural relevancy and responsiveness of instruction), and systems levels (access to behavioral supports and avenues for collaborative approaches to resolving conflicts).

In describing the Framework's principles, we distinguish between prevention and intervention-oriented action. Schools that successfully develop communities of responsive and supportive adults and motivated and engaged learners typically prevent disciplinary incidents and punitive responses to behavior from occurring in the first place (Emmer & Sabornie, 2014). Yet, as with all communities, some conflict is inevitable. When conflict happens, it can be addressed in a constructive and equitable manner. Thus, 5 of the 10 principles address prevention, four are intervention oriented, laying the groundwork for constructive responses to conflict and reduced unnecessary discipline, and one addresses both prevention and intervention (see Table 1).

Without what might be called "culturally conscious implementation," there is the risk that advantaged students will reap the rewards of less punitive discipline policies and practices while marginalized students continue to receive more punitive treatment. Thus, we posit the need for culturally conscious implementation of the Framework's 10 principles. This means educators need to explicitly consider issues of culture, race, gender, power, and privilege in addressing inequality in schooling (Gay, 2010, Ladson-Billings, 2009; C. S. Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004; Winn, 2016).

We begin by reviewing emerging federal, state, and district reforms to describe the current context for intervention. We then discuss the typical approaches to intervention and argue the racial and gender gaps will only substantially reduce when educators undertake culturally conscious implementation of reforms. We then synthesize available research that supports our selection of each of the 10 principles in the Framework for Increasing Equity in School Discipline, and we offer some preliminary considerations about their culturally conscious implementation.

**TABLE 1**  
**Framework for Increasing Equity in School Discipline**

Prevention	1. Supportive Relationships	Authentic connections are forged between and among teachers and students.
	2. Bias-Aware Classrooms and Respectful School Environments	Inclusive, positive classroom and school environments are established in which students feel fairly treated.
	3. Academic Rigor	The potential of all students is promoted through high expectations and high-level learning opportunities.
	4. Culturally Relevant and Responsive Teaching	Instruction reflects and is respectful of the diversity of today's classrooms and schools.
	5. Opportunities for Learning and Correcting Behavior	Behavior is approached from a nonpunitive mind-set, and instruction proactively strengthens student social skills, while providing structured opportunities for behavioral correction within the classroom as necessary.
Intervention	6. Data-Based Inquiry for Equity	Data are used regularly to identify "hot spots" of disciplinary conflict or differential treatment of particular groups.
	7. Problem-Solving Approaches to Discipline	Solutions aim to uncover sources of behavior or teacher–student conflict and address the identified needs.
	8. Inclusion of Student and Family Voice on Conflicts' Causes and Solutions	Student and family voice are integrated into policies, procedures, and practices concerning school discipline.
	9. Reintegration of Students after Conflict or Absence	Students are supported in reentering the community of learners after conflict or long-term absence has occurred.
Prevention and Intervention	10. Multitiered System of Supports	Schools use a tiered framework to match increasing levels of intensity of support to students' differentiated needs.

*Note.* The numerical ordering of principles is not meant to suggest their relative importance.

### THE CONTEXT FOR INTERVENTION

Evidence of the deleterious correlates of exclusionary discipline has continued to grow. Multivariate and longitudinal studies demonstrate that exclusionary discipline is a risk factor for a host of short- and long-term negative consequences, including academic disengagement, depressed academic achievement, school dropout, and increased involvement in the juvenile justice system (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams,

2014). A recent meta-analysis of 24 studies found evidence of a link between in-school and out-of-school suspension and low achievement (Noltemeyer, Ward, & McLoughlin, 2015).

Although concerns about racial disproportionality go back at least to the 1970s, when the Children's Defense Fund (1975) published a report on disparities in suspensions for children of color, it was not until the late 1990s that the issue began to attract wider notice. The current wave of reform has been field-driven in many ways. Young people, parents, and civil rights advocates began documenting growing rates of suspensions, expulsions and arrests in schools, and their disproportionate impact on students of color (Mediratta, 2012) using the term *school-to-prison pipeline* to describe a pattern of educational exclusion and justice system involvement (Ginwright, 2004). Efforts by grassroots community groups such as *Padres y Jóvenes Unidos* in Denver, CADRE in Los Angeles, and Voices of Youth in Chicago Education demonstrated not only the need for reform but also how partnerships could be built with local schools and districts to develop positive interventions and supports to manage student behavior (Padres y Jóvenes Unidos & Advancement Project, 2010; Rogers & Terriquez, 2013).

By 2014, research and advocacy had established that exclusionary discipline in U.S. public schools constituted a problem of serious proportions. Faced with evidence of the widespread use of these sanctions and the extreme disparities for students of color, policymakers have begun to implement national, state, and local initiatives to reduce rates of suspension and expulsion and increase the use of alternatives (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014).

### **National Level**

The U.S. Departments of Justice and Education launched the national Supportive School Discipline Initiative to improve data collection, expand technical assistance, and inform reform efforts by state and local officials (U.S. Department of Justice/Department of Education, 2011). In January 2014, the two agencies jointly released a two-part federal guidance document with recommended practices for fostering supportive and equitable school discipline. Most recently, Congress passed the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA S. 1177), which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary School Act and includes a number of provisions intended to reduce disciplinary exclusion and disparities in exclusion. Every Student Succeeds Act identifies school climate as an indicator of student success, requires local education agencies to detail how they will reduce the overuse of exclusionary discipline, and permits districts to use federal funding for intervention services such as parent engagement, school-based mental health services, and multitiered systems of support (Capatosto, 2015).

### **State-Level Changes**

States and school districts across the nation have taken action concurrently with the federal-level changes. Often driven by local advocates, at least 17 states have passed legislation on discipline and climate in recent years (Colombi & Osher, 2015). Provisions in state law aim to do the following:

- *Limit out-of-school suspension and expulsion:* California passed measures to curtail the use of suspension, expulsion and referral to law enforcement, and most recently a bill (AB420) that eliminates *willful defiance* as a reason for suspension, which has been associated with particularly extreme levels of disparities (California Department of Education, 2015).
- *Collect disaggregated data and reduce disparities in exclusionary discipline:* In 2014, Illinois mandated the reporting of disaggregated data on discipline and, beginning in 2017, requires districts in the top 20% of use of exclusionary discipline to submit an improvement plan for reducing exclusion and racial disparities (State of Illinois, 2014).
- *Implement alternatives to suspension and expulsion:* Building on a pilot program in Denver, the state of Colorado has expanded the use of restorative justice (RJ) in programs throughout the state (Restorative Justice Colorado, 2015).

### School District Reform Efforts

Attempts to reform school disciplinary practices have also made their way to the district level. District-wide reform has been documented in numerous school districts across the country, including the following:

- *Denver:* Beginning in 2005, the Denver Public Schools, in partnership with the advocacy group *Padres & Jóvenes Unidos*, implemented RJ practices in selected pilot schools and later expanded them to much of the district (Padres y Jóvenes Unidos & Advancement Project, 2005). Between 2006 and 2013, the overall suspension rate dropped from 10.58% to 5.63%, and the gap between Black and White students decreased from a 12- to 8-point gap (González, 2015).
- *Oakland:* In 2005, the Oakland Unified School District initiated a pilot program of RJ at Cole Middle School and saw an 87% decrease in suspensions in three years (Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010). By 2014, they expanded the program to 24 schools. In the middle and high schools with RJ programming, suspensions decreased by 23% between 2010 and 2013, and dropout rates declined by 56% (Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Kalra, 2014).
- *Los Angeles Unified School District:* This was among the first large urban districts to substantially revise its Code of Conduct, and data show declines in suspension and expulsion (<http://www.publicintegrity.org/2014/01/31/14201/new-california-data-show-drop-overall-school-suspensions-expulsions>).

### TYPICAL APPROACHES TO REFORM

Stokes and Baer (1977) first identified the strategy of “train and hope” to describe the faulty assumptions behind efforts to generalize individual’s behavior change, arguing that attempting to teach an individual a new behavior and then hoping it will generalize to other settings, times, or individuals is not an effective strategy for ensuring generalizable change. In the same way, many strategies for addressing disparate outcomes in school might be termed “implement and hope”—taking a strategy that

has shown positive outcomes for students in general, and assuming it will be equally effective in (that is, generalize to) reducing racial/ethnic disparities. The “implement and hope” strategy is so deeply engrained that data often are not disaggregated, precluding tracking, and assessment of implementation effects on target populations. Indeed, one recent report described how fewer than half of Schoolwide Positive Behavior Intervention Support (SWPBIS) schools that entered ethnicity enrollment information into their SWPBIS data system examined disaggregated discipline data by group even once during the school year (McIntosh, Eliason, Horner, & May, 2014).

Evidence suggests that, even in the case of empirically based interventions, implementation without explicit attention to addressing disparities is like its individual analogue, unlikely to reduce discipline disparities. Studying a nationally representative sample of 346 elementary and middle schools implementing SWPBIS for at least 1 year, Skiba et al. (2011) found that Black students remained twice as likely as their White peers to be referred to the office, and that Latino and Black students were more likely than White students to receive suspensions or expulsions as a consequence for similar behaviors, especially for minor misbehavior. Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, and May (2011) found that, even in schools in which SWPBIS decreased overall school rates of out-of-school suspension, Black students continued to be overrepresented in out-of-school suspensions, particularly suspensions longer than 10 days. Such data underscore the need for explicit consideration of issues of culture, power, and privilege in addressing inequality in schooling (Gay, 2010, Ladson-Billings, 2009; C. S. Weinstein et al., 2004; Winn, 2016). The failure to create equitable outcomes for students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds has led to recommendations for better integration of sociocultural aspects in the design, implementation, and interpretation of interventions (Olmeda & Kauffman, 2003; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006).

### **CULTURALLY CONSCIOUS IMPLEMENTATION**

Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, and Pollock (2015) argue that schools cannot effectively target racial disparities in discipline without addressing longstanding issues of race and power. They write,

It is impossible to tell the full story of racial discipline disparities without considering the full range of racialized historical and current factors that shape school life in the United States. The ravages of slavery and Jim Crow, forced migration, and policies that enforced unequal treatment placed African Americans and most people of color at an economic and social disadvantage that persists to this day. (p. 2)

They continue,

Regrettably, our history also left us with pervasive and false ideas about “races” that have shaped our perceptions of who is valued and who is not, who is capable and who is not, and who is “safe” and who is “dangerous.” (p. 2)

Winn (2011) and Morris (2016) also point out that efforts to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline need to address the varying forms of discrimination that thwart the

positive development of youth depending on their identities and social locations (e.g., race, gender, social class, sexual and gender identity). Together, these scholars raise the importance of considering the interacting sociohistorical forces that contribute to the current disparities in school discipline. According to Carter et al. (2015), such considerations extend to how we approach affecting change. Specifically, they call for a race-conscious approach to intervention. We expand on their call and posit the need for a “culturally conscious” approach to implementing reforms. A handful of tenets underlie our conceptualization of “culturally conscious implementation”:

1. We use the term “culture” broadly, referencing the beliefs and behaviors of groups that are bound to history and are passed down from generation to generation. We also see that students and educators in schools perpetuate beliefs and behavior through their own shared culture. For instance, educators can share implicit beliefs that punishment is the appropriate response to student rule-breaking.
2. Interactions among educators, family, and students are sociohistorically situated within a longstanding history of racial and class segregation and unequal schooling (Carter et al., 2015). As Ladson-Billings (2006) describes, achievement gaps reflect the “educational debt” that has accrued over time. Thus, culturally conscious implementation considers the *differential access* marginalized groups have had to high quality schooling given the current and historical legacy of racial and socioeconomic segregation in neighborhoods and schools.
3. Sociocultural and historical narratives shape perceptions and judgements about the “appropriateness” of behavior. Bal, Thorius, and Kozleski (2012) write, “Racial minority students’ experiences and cultural and linguistic practices (i.e., ways of knowing, behaving, and being) are often devalued and/or pathologized . . .” (p. 4). In terms of discipline, this means that students of color can be subject to *differential selection*—their behavior can be “selected” for punishment (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010). For example, teachers’ culturally based judgments about dress, speech, vocal tone, and body language can fuel whether or not a teacher “reads” Black students’ behavior as defiant or disruptive (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Dominant beliefs about what it means to display appropriate female behavior can also affect treatment toward students. For example, Morris (2016) describes adults’ negative appraisals of Black females who are loud or have an “attitude”—negative appraisals which, according to Morris, come from a lack of understanding of Black girls’ desire to be heard and seen in the context of gender and race oppression.
4. While Black/White disparities in school discipline have been documented in U.S. public schools for over four decades (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975), disproportionate discipline has also been documented for a range of other groups including males, Latinos, American Indians, students in special education, and lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender students (Anyon et al., 2014; Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011; Poteat et al., 2015; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). This raises concerns about how “difference” is policed in schools and

indicates the need for an intersectional lens to understand how expectations/norms for “respectable” behavior span varying aspects of identity (Snapp & Russell, 2016). For instance, gender–non-conforming girls of color who identify as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer may challenge many adults’ behavioral expectations based on White, heterosexual, hyperfeminine forms of self-presentation (Chmielewski, Belmonte, Stoudt, & Fine, 2016).

5. Racism and negative stereotypes are powerful influences on the punitive treatment of students of color. Indeed, Black male and female students are subject to harsher sanctions than their White peers, even when controlling for the seriousness of their infractions (Skiba et al., 2014), the frequency of being involved in discipline incidents (Anyon et al., 2014), and the levels of teacher-reported misbehavior (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, & Leaf, 2010). Moreover, a recent statewide study showed that Black females had 13% higher odds of discipline in a year than White males, accounting for student grade retention and student- and school-level poverty (Blake et al., 2016). This body of research demonstrates that Black students are treated more harshly when compared to similar students, suggesting that race, in the form of stereotypes and implicit bias, affects everyday interactions in school (Carter et al., 2015). Thus, culturally conscious implementation efforts need to further recognize *differential sanction* of marginalized groups.

## FRAMEWORK FOR INCREASING EQUITY IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Studies of the effects of interventions currently are too few in number to support a meta-analysis. Yet the extensive research on the existence and causes of disparities in discipline (Losen, 2015; Skiba, Mediratta, & Rausch, 2016) makes it possible to identify *research-based* principles on which intervention to reduce disciplinary data can be based. Below, we present a framework of 10 research-based principles for disparity-reducing intervention in schools. The following 10 principles were identified in a review of research by the Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative, a group of 26 researchers, policymakers, educators, and advocates (Discipline Disparities Collaborative, 2015). Eight of these 10 principles were presented in prior publications from the Discipline Disparities Collaborative (Gregory, Bell, & Pollock, 2016).

The Framework’s principles are not exhaustive, and future theory and research may augment or condense them. With that caveat in mind, we explore the extent of empirical support for each of the 10 principles, drawing findings from studies using a wide range of methodologies (ethnography to randomized controlled trials). In addition, we consider how each practice relates specifically to disparities in school discipline for marginalized groups. We draw on the extant research which largely compares the experience of Black and White students, but when possible, we also draw from more recent research which identifies disparities in rates of exclusionary discipline for other racial/ethnic categories (e.g., Latino, American Indian), and by gender, disability status, and sexual orientation and gender identity (Skiba et al., 2016). We also offer some preliminary ideas that relate to the culturally conscious implementation of each principle in the Framework.



### **Principle 1: Supportive Relationships**

A convincing accumulation of research has shown that students who feel supported by their teachers tend to be more engaged in academic work and have fewer disciplinary interactions with adults in school, relative to their peers who experience less support. Two meta-analyses have substantiated the link between the affective dimension of teacher–student relationships and student engagement in school. Examining results across 119 studies, Cornelius-White (2007) found that teacher empathy ( $r = .32$ ) and warmth ( $r = .32$ ) were associated with positive student outcomes. In a meta-analysis of 99 studies, Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, and Oort (2011) found medium to large effects for both positive relationships and engagement ( $r = .39, p < .01$ ) and negative relationships and engagement ( $r = -.32, p < .01$ ). Of particular concern is the likelihood that negative relationships with teachers in the early years of schooling may have cumulative adverse effects across grade levels (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Rubie-Davies et al., 2014).

A recent randomized control trial of a teacher coaching program demonstrated that strengthening relationships made a difference for students in groups who receive high rates of discipline. In the My Teaching Partner–Secondary (MTP-S) program, teachers were randomly assigned to a business-as-usual or a coaching condition (Gregory, Hafen, et al., 2016). Coaches worked individually with teachers to increase the emotional, organizational, and instructional supports in their classrooms. During the 2 years of coaching and the year after coaching was discontinued, the MTP-S teachers issued discipline referrals to Black and non-Black students at similarly low rates. The control teachers, in contrast, had a large racial gap in discipline referrals. In classrooms where teachers improved in observed sensitivity to students' social and emotional needs, Black students were less likely to be issued a disciplinary referral than their peers in classrooms where teachers showed less improvement. We might speculate that MTP-S teachers developed trusting relationships with their Black students—treating them as individuals and possibly disrupting negative behavioral stereotypes about Black students.

#### *Culturally Conscious Implementation*

Given that the teaching force in the United States is predominantly White and female (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013), educators need to ensure that they are attuned to the social and emotional experiences of students of color in an intentional manner. This is underscored by the growing body of evidence demonstrating that Latino and Black students are less likely than White students to report feeling cared about by an adult at school (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2014; Fan, Williams, & Corkin, 2011; Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanyel, 2015).

### **Principle 2: Bias-Aware Classrooms and Respectful School Environments**

Emerging findings raise the possibility that educators' disciplinary decision making may be influenced by implicit racial bias—unconsciously held negative

associations linked to racial stereotypes. A meta-analysis of 184 studies of implicit bias concluded that, generally speaking, implicit bias predicts differential treatment of dissimilar individuals (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009). A recent experimental study found a link between race and teacher perceptions of student behavior. Teachers were shown an office discipline referral for a student with two incidents of misconduct, the name of the disciplined student varied between those that are stereotypically Black (Darnell or Deshawn) and White (Greg or Jake; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Teachers responded with more severe disciplinary actions to students with stereotypically Black names than those with names that are stereotypically White. Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) also found that the more likely teachers were to think the student was Black, the more likely they were to label the student a troublemaker. Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, and DiTomasso (2014) found that Black boys are generally viewed as older and more culpable than White peers, and that the characteristic of innocence, typically associated with childhood, is less frequently applied to Black boys relative to White boys.

A recent randomized field experiment demonstrates how respectful teacher interactions may reduce negative disciplinary outcomes of marginalized students (Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016). Okonofua et al. (2016) randomly assigned 39 math teachers to an empathic mind-set intervention or a control condition (an intervention about the use of technology to promote learning). In the empathic mind-set intervention, teachers read an article and student testimonials on a range of nonpejorative factors that affect student misconduct and how positive relationships with teachers help students thrive. The teachers were then asked to write about how they use these ideas in their own practice and were told their written contributions would be integrated into the teacher training program. The aim of the empathic mind-set intervention was to increase teachers' perspective taking about student misconduct and promote a context of trust and understanding. Findings showed that males and Black and Latino students in classrooms of teachers in the empathic mind-set intervention were half as likely to receive a suspension relative to their peers in the control teachers' classrooms that school year (boys 8.4% vs. 14.6% and Black/Latinos: 6.3% vs. 12.3%, respectively). Importantly, students with histories of suspension felt more respected by math teachers in the empathic mind-set intervention versus the control intervention.

### *Culturally Conscious Implementation*

Adolescents may be particularly adept at detecting unfair treatment based on implicit bias and negative stereotyping (Brown & Bigler, 2005), and these perceptions may in turn affect their disengagement or active resistance to authority in school (Yeager et al., 2014). This may be particularly salient for students of color. Based on interviews with Black girls, Morris (2016) discusses how their behavior can be a demonstration of resistance to gender and racial oppression. She writes, "The 'attitude' often attributed to Black girls casts as undesirable the skills of being astute at reading

their location—where they sit along the social hierarchy—and overcoming the attendant obstacles” (p. 19). She further states, “To be ‘loud’ is to be heard. To have ‘attitude’ is to reject a doctrine of invisibility and mistreatment” (p. 19). Morris’s theorizing suggests that efforts to raise awareness about bias should include considering how deeply ingrained culturally bound notions of “appropriate” behavior may impact everyday interactions.

### **Principle 3: Academic Rigor**

When students are engaged in and excited about academic activities, school discipline referrals are typically rare (Emmer & Sabornie, 2014). Cornelius-White’s (2007) meta-analysis of 199 studies found that teachers’ encouragement of higher order thinking ( $r = .29$ ) and learning ( $r = .23$ ) was associated with positive student outcomes. Access to instructionally rich and motivating classrooms, however, are not evenly distributed across student groups (e.g., Kena et al., 2015). Comparing the experiences of high- and low-tracked students, Wing (2006) found that high-achieving classrooms, composed of predominantly White and Asian students, had lively teacher and student engagement with interactive teaching styles and student autonomy, while more remedial classes, composed of predominantly Black and Latino students, emphasized tight management of behavior over student autonomy.

The results from two recent studies indicate that efforts to reduce racial disparities in discipline need to include providing more equitable access to rigorous and interactive curriculum and instruction (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Gregory et al., 2016). Evaluating the effects of a tracking program using a regression discontinuity research design, Card and Giuliano (2016) compared outcomes between fourth- and fifth-grade students who were placed into gifted/high-achiever classrooms or into general education classrooms in a large urban school district. Relative to similar peers, Black students in the gifted/high-achiever classrooms made greater achievement gains and were less likely to receive suspension through sixth grade. Gregory et al.’s (2016) randomized control trial of MTP-S further corroborates the finding that access to cognitively rich and motivating instruction reduces students’ risk of receiving a discipline sanction. Teachers in the MTP-S coaching condition had no significant racial disparities in office discipline referrals compared with a large racial gap in discipline referrals among teachers in the control condition. Mediation analyses showed that the degree to which teachers were observed facilitating higher level thinking skills, problem solving, and metacognition was significantly linked to their equitable and infrequent use of discipline referrals.

### *Culturally Conscious Implementation*

Efforts to increase access to academic rigor often take the form of ensuring students from marginalized groups have opportunities to enroll in advanced or honors-level coursework in high school (Handwerk, Tognatta, Coley, & Gitomer, 2008). While important, this singular focus is narrow and does not address the subtle ways

marginalized students can be denied access to academic rigor in special education and general education classrooms. Culturally conscious efforts to increase academic rigor, therefore, should address how teacher beliefs about marginalized students' academic potential can impact everyday interactions that result in their receiving subpar instructional opportunities and content (R. S. Weinstein, 2002).

#### **Principle 4: Culturally Relevant and Responsive Teaching**

Culturally relevant and responsive instruction has been identified as a positive predictor of student outcomes in increasingly diverse classrooms. Gay (2010) argues that culturally responsive teachers acquire knowledge about their students' cultural and social history and build trust with their students by communicating an understanding of their lives. This in turn helps them both understand student behavior and design instruction that helps students process their experiences of inequality and marginalization. C. S. Weinstein et al.'s (2004) model of culturally responsive classroom management consists of five components: (a) teacher recognition of their own ethnocentrism, (b) development of caring classroom communities, (c) incorporation of students' cultural backgrounds in classroom learning experiences, (d) classroom management strategies that are in synch with those backgrounds, and (e) teacher understanding of the social, economic, and political issues facing their students.

Empirical evidence for the promise of culturally relevant and responsive teaching in reducing disparities in school discipline primarily arises from small-scale qualitative studies of classrooms and small groups of teachers. Researchers have provided rich descriptions of how culturally responsive relationships elicit student engagement and cooperation (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Howard, 2010). Ethnographic research with eight female teachers of mostly Black youth by Ladson-Billings (2009) found that teachers who most effectively engaged their Black male students in a culturally responsive manner were those that (a) affirmed and celebrated their culture, (b) integrated students' life experiences into the curriculum, and (c) communicated high academic expectations while scaffolding rigorous academic work. Using this perspective, the Oakland Unified School District developed the Manhood Development Program, an in-school elective for Black male students, which aims to foster positive cultural identities, social and emotional competence, and academic skills (Watson, 2014).

Although theory has outpaced empirical studies in this area, a growing number of related studies link student participation in culturally relevant coursework with subsequent academic outcomes. Kisker et al. (2012) argue that culturally relevant coursework, such as ethnic studies, is meaningful and engaging to students whose cultural heritage is not recognized or honored in typical curricula. Using data from a large urban district in a regression discontinuity design study, Dee and Penner (2016) compared the trajectories of similarly low-achieving ninth graders who were or were not assigned to an ethnic studies course. Their sample consisted of 1,405 students (60% Asian, 23% Latino, 6% Black) in five unique school-year cohorts enrolled in three high schools in San Francisco. They found that assignment to ethnic studies

increased attendance, grade point average, and ninth-grade credits earned. Importantly, the findings held for students with prior school suspensions, offering compelling evidence that culturally relevant courses can actually shift students' educational trajectories.

### *Culturally Conscious Implementation*

School curricula, schoolwide events, and library resources are forums for educators to present content that is relevant to students' lives. A culturally conscious approach is not limited to making content relevant to only one aspect of students' identity (e.g., ethnicity). Instead, it considers the need to connect with the range of racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, and sexual identities and experiences of students and communities (e.g., Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2011). Also, it is not limited to increasing the relevancy of content. A culturally conscious approach includes reflecting on how interactions in classrooms have a cultural basis that aligns or misaligns with varying student communities (e.g., Boykin, Tyler, & Miller, 2005). For example, the Double Check teacher coaching program aims to support teachers in such critical reflection and is currently being evaluated in a randomized controlled trial in elementary and middle schools (Bradshaw, Pas, & Debnam, 2015; Hershfeldt et al., 2010).

### **Principle 5: Opportunities for Learning and Correcting Behavior**

A stream of professional development programming draws on behavioral theory and the strategic use of extrinsic rewards to help schools utilize a behavioral-supports approach to student behavior (Kamps et al., 2015; Sugai & Horner, 2010). When educators respond with specific praise to desired behavior, students tend to decrease disruptive behavior and increase the reinforced behavior (e.g., Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). For example, in the Class Wide Function-related Intervention Teams program (CW-FIT), teachers use a social skills game format and reward teams of students who demonstrate social skills taught through direct instruction (Kamps et al., 2015). Similarly, in SWPBIS, school staff teach all students jointly agreed-on, schoolwide expectations for behavior (e.g., be respectful) and issue students tangible reinforcers for positive behavior such as tickets that earn them special privileges. Both CW-FIT and SWPBIS have been shown to reduce disruptive behavior (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Kamps et al., 2015). Through such programming, adult behavior may also change. When educators intentionally increase their focus on, and praise of, positive student behavior they may shift away from reprimands and punitive mind-sets (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al., 2010).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs draw on theory about the development of self-discipline through social and emotional competencies (Bear, Whitcomb, Elias, & Blank, 2015). Evidence that students' SEL skills in early childhood are closely tied to their later well-being (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015) has provided momentum for revised discipline policies and new practices that offer students

greater opportunities to learn and practice social and emotional “literacies.” A meta-analysis found that SEL programs can strengthen students’ SEL skills which in turn relate to a range of positive outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

### *Culturally Conscious Implementation*

When schools offer more opportunities for students to learn SEL skills and correct behavior, it needs to be recognized that the selected SEL skills and expectations are culturally based and infused with a value system. Educators prioritize culturally laden types of SEL skills and, therefore, may unintentionally marginalize certain forms of cultural expression (Morris, 2016). In addition, while schools often focus on developing students’ social and emotional competencies, there is a growing recognition that educators need support to deepen their own social emotional competencies as well as their skills in developing prosocial classrooms (Jennings & Frank, 2015, Milner, 2014). Jennings and Frank (2015) argue that teachers with high social and emotional competence have strong relationship-building skills and are better able to develop mutual understanding with their students, consider multiple perspectives during conflict, and resolve disputes with skill. Doing so in a culturally responsive manner may help educators navigate diverse cultural norms and defuse or prevent disciplinary interactions with marginalized students (Morris, 2016).

### **Principle 6: Data-Based Inquiry for Equity**

Every Student Succeeds Act requires that state education agencies collect data from local education agencies on a range of discipline-related issues, including “rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement . . .” (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012, p. 47). While the collection and examination of accountability data in schools is not new to federal policy (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012), this is the first time that discipline outcomes have been integrated into federal accountability efforts.

What is measured and tracked in accountability systems is an indicator of outcomes that are valued. McIntosh et al.’s (2013) correlational study of 217 schools across 14 states showed that SWPBIS teams’ use of data was a statistically significant predictor of sustained SWPBIS implementation. The authors observe that the practice of regularly sharing data with the entire school staff likely communicated administration’s commitment to high-quality SWPBIS implementation to achieve improved student outcomes.

### *Culturally Conscious Implementation*

States and localities that collect, disaggregate, and share discipline data signal the importance of identifying and addressing discipline disparities. In response to advocates’ demands for greater transparency, state legislatures are increasing public access to disaggregated discipline data (e.g., Washington State, 2015) and districts are

beginning to use data in a process of goal setting and continuous improvement (e.g., Meridian Consent Order, 2013). To support these efforts, the federally funded National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments recently issued recommendations on using data to reduce discipline disparities that include data analysis, identifying root causes and developing an action plan (Osher et al., 2015). Identifying patterns in the data can help educators strategically direct their intervention efforts to address the specific issues that are causing high racial and gender disparities in disciplinary referrals (Scott, Hirn, & Barber, 2012).

### **Principle 7: Problem-Solving Approaches to Discipline**

When school community members come together to identify contributors to discipline incidents and jointly develop plans to help resolve those incidents, they are engaging in a problem-solving approach to discipline. For example, teachers, specialists, and/or parents might collaborate in a problem-solving process to understand individual students' academic or behavioral challenges (Sheridan et al., 2012). Moreover, inquiry into what drives student behavior may, in itself, build trust and shared respect when students are given the opportunity to offer their "side of the story" (Sheets, 1996). Problem-solving approaches also may help uncover unaddressed learning or mental health needs of students who are typically "criminalized" or punished, resulting in more appropriate supports or trauma-informed care (Phifer & Hull, 2016; Ramey, 2015).

Research on problem-solving processes has been conducted on a schoolwide program, Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines (e.g., Cornell, 2013). A recent study found that the suspension gap between Black and White students narrowed when schools implemented a threat assessment team, which is a multidisciplinary team of school staff available to help students involved in a crisis or a conflict that included a threat of violence (Cornell, 2013). More recently, a statewide study of schools using the threat assessment protocol in Virginia found no racial disparities in suspension, expulsion, or arrest among students whose behavior prompted threat assessments (Cornell et al., 2016).

School community members also might engage in RJ or restorative practice (RP), which provides a structured process for problem solving in schools. For example, in a responsive circle or restorative conference, participants typically answer a series of restorative questions about a discipline incident (e.g., "Who has been affected by the incident?"; "What do you think needs to happen to make things right?" Wachtel, Costello, & Wachtel, 2009). Winn (2016) has proposed that RJ in the classroom may not only disrupt punitive practices and racial inequality but also engage students, their families, and school staff in critical dialogue about "notions of citizenship, belonging, and worthiness that can impact teacher practice and student learning" (p. 5).

Case studies of schools implementing RJ/RP in the United States and internationally document schoolwide reductions in exclusionary discipline (e.g., Anyon et al., 2014; International Institute of Restorative Practices, 2014). As of yet, however, there

is not enough empirical evidence to claim that RJ/RP, as currently implemented, results in substantial reductions in race and gender discipline disparities. A few studies of districts using RJ have shown that Black students had the greatest decline in the suspension rates, relative to other student groups (González, 2015; Jain et al., 2014). Yet, persistent and large Black/White suspension gaps in these districts and the uneven implementation across district schools suggests that more research is needed to understand the potential of RJ and how to implement it with high fidelity across schools (Anyon et al., 2014; Gregory & Clawson, 2016).

### *Culturally Conscious Implementation*

When implementing problem-solving approaches to conflict educators need to vigilantly watch for how such reforms can revert to shaming, punitive processes that do not authentically engage the voices of marginalized youth and their families. In other words, collaborative problem solving may become part of discipline policy, but in the day-to-day, they may be implemented in a superficial manner that masks hidden agendas reflecting the traditional, underlying stance toward punishment and exclusion. Moreover, culturally conscious implementation of problem-solving approaches need to explicitly address issues of power and privilege. For example, the Oakland Unified School District's RJ implementation guide indicates that a social justice orientation to RJ includes acknowledging that race, gender, and sexual orientation inequities of the larger society impact students' academic and life outcomes, recognizing historical harms when appropriate, and ensuring students in marginalized groups have forums where their concerns can be effectively addressed (Yusem et al., 2016).

## **Principle 8: Inclusion of Student and Family Voice on Causes and Solutions of Conflicts**

A number of school districts are revising their school discipline policies to improve student and family engagement in the disciplinary process (e.g., Syracuse City School District, *Student Code of Conduct, Character, and Support*). This area of policy reform is supported by a diverse body of research demonstrating the feasibility of student and family engagement in addressing discipline incidents and behavioral challenges (e.g., Patton, Jolivet, & Ramsey, 2006). Schools can integrate student voice and family perspectives in many different ways—for example, students might set their own behavioral goals and self-monitor their progress (Patton et al., 2006) or lead a restorative circle with their classmates to address a problem in the classroom (Wachtel et al., 2009). Research has demonstrated that students are more likely to cooperate when they feel fairly treated by teachers (Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Sheets, 1996). Moreover, they tend to be more engaged and motivated in classrooms where they are allowed to express their opinions and exhibit autonomy (Reeve, 2009). Similarly, respectfully engaging family perspectives to help address discipline incidents can build trust and increase the likelihood of a positive resolution to disciplinary incidents (Sheridan et al., 2012).



*Culturally Conscious Implementation*

Integrating student and family perspectives into the disciplinary process may be especially important for building trust between educators and students from marginalized groups. Several recent studies show that Black and Latino students report less adult support in school compared with their White peers (Bottiani et al., 2014; Voight et al., 2015). Ethnic minority parents also have reported the need for educators to engage them in a respectful and culturally competent manner (National Education Association of the United States, 2010). Respectful and regular engagement of historically disenfranchised voices in school could engender the type of trust needed for constructive collaboration to prevent or diffuse disciplinary interactions that fuel race and gender disparities in discipline (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Winn, 2016).

**Principle 9: Reintegration of Students After Conflict or Absence**

Rearrest rates of youth released from the juvenile justice system have highlighted the need for “reentry programs” (Bonnie, Johnson, Chemers, & Schuck, 2013). Osher, Amos, and Gonsoulin (2012) recommend that supports for formerly incarcerated youth engage members from the student’s “ecology” to help them successfully reintegrate into their schools and communities. Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, and Havel (2002) followed youth after their release and found that those who received appropriate after-care services—mental health, substance abuse treatment, educational supports, and others—were more than three times as likely to be positively engaged in their community after 12 months, relative to their released peers without such services.

Disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline requires reducing students’ odds of rearrest and repeated suspensions. This is especially important since state rearrest rates can be as high as 50% to 80% for high-risk youth over a 1- to 3-year follow-up period (Seigle, Walsh, & Weber, 2014). Reductions in rearrest would be especially beneficial to students in groups who are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, including Black youth, who account for half of all juvenile arrests for violent crimes (U.S. Department of Justice/Department of Education, 2014).

*Culturally Conscious Implementation*

Recognizing the risk associated with transitions back to school, some districts have taken steps to create formal reentry procedures for students returning from long-term suspensions. From 2013 to 2014, the Oakland Unified School District provided RJ programming to students as part of a formal reentry procedure after incarceration, involuntary transfer, or suspension (Jain et al., 2014). Students were offered individual meetings or reentry circles including teachers, counselors, friends, and family to welcome them back into the school community and proactively provide wraparound supports. Culturally conscious supports need to also consider the multiple interacting stressors students face as relate to their social positioning. For example, gender-conscious reentry programs for girls released from juvenile detention might address girls’ needs for reproductive health education/support or treatment for sexual abuse (Winn, 2011).

### **Principle 10: Multitiered System of Supports**

Finally, schools across the nation are implementing multitiered systems of support (MTSS) to provide a comprehensive approach to prevention and intervention (MTSS; Vincent, English, Girvan, Sprague, & McCab, 2016). The MTSS approach offers districts a systematic way to track data and provide prevention and intervention services that reduce exclusionary responses to student behavior. The emphasis on providing access to supports when students exhibit behaviors that violate school rules and expectations is especially needed for students in groups overrepresented in discipline sanctions (Ramey, 2015).

MTSS is characterized by a tiered framework, drawn from public health, that calibrates the intensity of behavioral supports to students' behavioral needs, with more intensive supports offered when more general strategies fail to resolve the problem. For example, when students are not responsive to Tier 1 social and behavioral programs in the classroom, they can be referred to Tier 2 interventions in small groups or individual sessions outside of the classroom (Bradshaw et al., 2014). SWPBIS is the most widely disseminated and extensively studied MTSS (Vincent et al., 2016), but the multitiered framework has also been used with other types of positive discipline programming such as RJ/RP programming (Jain et al., 2014).

The most extensive research on the promise of MTSS frameworks for reducing disparities has been conducted within the SWPBIS framework. Experimental trials have shown that implementing SWPBIS with fidelity can lead to reductions in negative student behavior and discipline referrals and suspensions (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Horner et al., 2009). Despite the general positive outcomes associated with SWPBIS, there have been inconsistent findings regarding discipline outcomes for marginalized students (Vincent et al., 2016). For example, Black elementary students have been found to have significantly greater odds of receiving a discipline referral than White students in schools with SWPBIS, even as those schools reduce disciplinary referrals in general (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al., 2010; Kaufman et al., 2010).

#### *Culturally Conscious Implementation*

The inconsistent results from SWPBIS in reducing disparities have led researchers to highlight the promising results of SWPBIS when it is integrated with explicitly culturally conscious practices. For example, in five Canadian schools implementing SWPBIS, Greflund, McIntosh, Mercer, and May (2014) found that students with aboriginal status were no more likely to receive office disciplinary referrals than their peers. Similarly, Vincent, Sprague, CHiXapkaid, Tobin, and Gau (2015) identified several SWPBIS schools that had low suspension rates of American Indian students, a group historically over-represented in exclusionary discipline. The authors of both studies speculate that the racial equity in discipline in those schools may be due to the culturally responsive adaptations to SWPBIS which emphasized teacher training in cultural sensitivity, culturally relevant instruction,

and strong school relationships with parents and families (McIntosh, Moniz, Craft, Golby, & Steinwand-Deschambeault, 2014).

Another promising direction is the integration of SWPBIS and RJ/RP. This blended approach, School-Wide Positive and Restorative Discipline includes teacher training about students' need for positive relationships, fair treatment, and procedural justice. School-Wide Positive and Restorative Discipline recently was piloted in a high school that had been implementing SWPBIS with fidelity, yet had persistent racial disparities in discipline (Vincent et al., 2016). Through online materials and workshops, teachers learned about RJ/RP concepts (e.g., social capital, procedural justice, restoring relationships), and building community through active listening, classroom circles, and delivery of behavior-specific affective statements. Examining end-of-year discipline referral rates, Vincent et al. (2016) reported reductions in schoolwide referrals and racial disparities relative to the year prior.

## CONCLUSION

We see the 10 principles in the Framework for Increasing Equity in School Discipline as important considerations for parents, students, educators, and support personnel who wish to shift disciplinary conflicts and consequences toward a more positive school climate. For researchers, the 10 principles are launching points from which to consider the possible "mechanisms of action" in current reform initiatives. Researchers might examine whether select principles from the Framework mediate the program impacts on reducing discipline gaps. In other words, it will be informative to know if a program's success is explained by its inclusion of one or more of the principles (e.g., increasing bias awareness or access to academic rigor).

As of yet, there is insufficient empirical evidence to indicate which combination of the 10 principles from the Framework should be implemented together, or which principles might be prioritized over others to reduce gender and race disparities in school discipline. Similarly, it is unknown whether principles from the multiple levels of the school ecology combine in a synergistic manner or whether addressing one level would "ripple out" and affect another level of the ecology. For example, does increasing awareness of bias (intrapersonal level) lead to change at the interpersonal level or at the systems level whereby punitive treatment of marginalized students is reduced through changes in disciplinary practices and policies?

As relates to culturally conscious implementation of the principles, it is not yet clear *what level of attention* to issues of gender, race, class, culture, power, and privilege will be necessary to effectively close discipline gaps. Research on both positive behavior supports (Vincent et al., 2016) and restorative justice (Gregory & Clawson, 2016; Winn, 2016) has begun to explore the extent to which explicit, culturally conscious modifications to standard models of those interventions are likely to have an impact on discipline gaps. Moreover, it will be essential to identify the best ways to undertake culturally conscious implementation given the research that shows diversity-related initiatives do not necessarily lead to anticipated changes in attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors (e.g., Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2016).

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