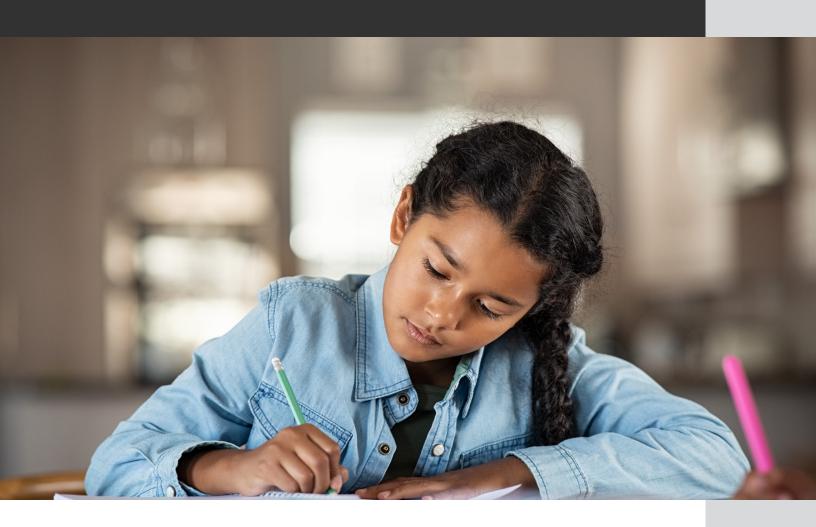USC Race and Equity Center

ELIMINATING RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

By James Bridgeforth, Ph.D.

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James C. Bridgeforth is an educator, researcher, and policy advocate. He has extensive experience collaborating with practitioners and conducting equity-focused, policy-oriented educational research. Drawing on his professional experiences across K-12 and higher education contexts, his nationally recognized scholarship critically examines issues of racism, power, leadership, and learning in K-12 schools. James holds a PhD in Urban Education Policy (University of Southern California '23), an MEd in Educational Administration and Policy (University of Georgia '17), and a B.A. in Political Science and Sociology (Georgia College & State University '13).

ABOUT THE SERIES

This practice brief is one of eight in a series of resources published by USC Race and Equity Center for every K-12 school and teacher education program across America. Guidance is offered to educators who are serious about achieving equitable learning conditions and outcomes for students, families, and teachers of color, despite increasing public scrutiny, executive gag orders, and legislative censorship. Each brief introduces research, practical examples, reflective questions, and useful strategies for educators advancing racial equity.

Eliminating Racial Disproportionality in School Discipline

In September 2019, Kaia Rolle was arrested in Orlando, Florida. As Kaia was restrained with zip ties and placed in the back of a police car, she pleaded with the arresting officer, saying "Please, give me a second chance".

She was transported to the Orlando Police Department, was forced to take a mugshot, and continued to be detained until her grandmother was notified to pick her up.

At the time of this incident, Kaia Rolle was just six years old.

Kaia's story is not a singular tale of administrative overreach or police overreaction. For example, in October 2015, video footage of a White school resource officer body-slamming a Black girl at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina quickly spread across social media. The video depicted the violent attempt by the resource officer to remove the student from the classroom, seemingly by any means necessary (Love, 2016).

Prior research details how Black girls are often heavily disciplined for daring to be expressive in a setting that characterizes their expressions as overly loud and out of place (Annamma et al, 2019; Blake et al, 2010; Wun, 2016). Similarly, Black boys are disproportionately criminalized and characterized as aggressive in their schools (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Monroe, 2005; Morris, 2005; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Collectively, these experiences are illustrative of the often violent manifestations of racial disproportionality in school discipline. In response, this brief explains how educators *can* and *should* play a significant role in addressing long standing racial injustices in K-12 school discipline practices.

Interrogate Educator Biases

Existing research across the fields of education and cognitive psychology recognize that people hold various implicit racial biases that influence how they navigate society (Chin et al., 2020; Warikoo et al., 2016). Quinn and Stewart (2019) explain that White teachers' racial attitudes, or "the beliefs, stereotypes, and affective orientations that people hold regarding different racial groups" (p. 273) are generally less positive than teachers of color. Given the reality that the K-12 teaching force remains largely White and that White teachers are often unaware of their racial biases (Warikoo et al., 2016), it is critical that educators come to understand their role in perpetuating racially harmful discipline practices.

It is important here to note that implicit racial biases are deeply intertwined with histories of race and racism in America (Carter et al., 2016). I raise this point because of the often difficult nature of discussions of race, racism, and racial disproportionality in school discipline. Daramola et al. (2023) note that these discussions can devolve into moralistic and personal characterizations of whether or not a specific individual is viewed as racist, inhibiting attempts at bringing about significant changes in policy or practice.

Yet, as Myers and Finnigan (2018) remind us, grounding discussions of race and racism (including issues of racial disproportionality) in data can be a useful mechanism to demonstrate the systemic nature of this issue. For example, recent research demonstrates that a relatively small percentage of largely White early career educators in one large school district are responsible for an outsized percentage of that district's discipline referrals (Liu et al., 2023). Using this classroom-level referral data, in concert with broader, site-level discipline data, to interrogate educators' implicit racial biases can be an impactful strategy to guide initial discussions of how biases continue to shape the experiences of students of color within K-12 schools.
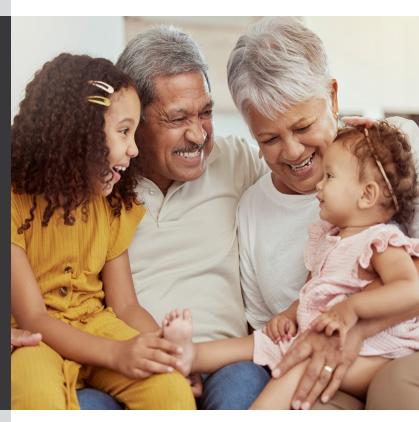
Questions for Consideration

1   What forms of data might teachers have access to that can help them lead conversations geared toward building awareness of racial disproportionality in discipline? Consider using various data points including administrative data such as suspension and expulsion data, then ask: from whom do discipline referrals most often originate? It may also be helpful to ask educators how they interpret and make sense of discipline policies in their use of office discipline referrals. For example, interrogating how teachers characterize willful defiance or disrespect and how these characterizations vary across racial groups and backgrounds may prove promising in developing a more racially conscious teaching force.

2   Consider additional forms of data that can help provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ways that students experience discipline practices within your school. For example, you might engage students in data-driven discussions or focus groups using the school-level discipline data to better understand students' perspectives on discipline practices. Responses from these focus groups can help guide educators to a more critical understanding of how implicit biases impact students' experiences and the relationships between teachers and students.

Prioritize Critical Curiosity and Race-Conscious Student Discipline Policies
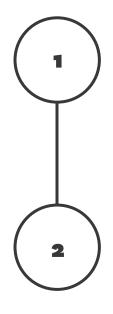

While professional development and learning on implicit racial bias in schools can be an important entry point in shifting educational practice, research also demonstrates that such opportunities can have limited effect on explicit behaviors and practices (Forscher et al., 2019). This does not mean that existing professional learning opportunities should be discontinued; a limited effect is not synonymous with a nonexistent effect. For example, Ipsa-Landa (2018) offers perspective-taking and individuating as two social psychological practices that could influence implicit racial biases within education. Rather than position professional learning and systemic change as oppositional, it is important that educators committed to racial justice in school discipline both continue to refine their practices through professional development, while also seeking to transform the racialized systems and structures that govern schools' disciplinary practices.

A key step in beginning to transform racialized disciplinary systems and structures is employing race-conscious understandings of policy and practice (Carter et al., 2016). For example, Vincent et al (2015) explain that while a race-neutral implementation of school-wide positive behavior support systems can broadly limit expulsions, the impacts of these interventions largely benefit White students with limited effects on reducing racial disparities in expulsions. Similarly, shifts toward restorative justice policies in schools can be less impactful when racialized histories are ignored and race-neutral approaches are adopted by schools and districts (Gregory & Evans, 2020; Winn, 2023).

As key participants in school and district-wide efforts to address racial disparities, teachers can play an important role in leveraging race-conscious learnings into critical curiosity regarding implementation and evaluation of discipline policies and practices within their schools. Educators can approach site-level transformation of discipline policies and practices through a lens of critical curiosity that interrogates such policies through an explicit racial justice lens.

Questions for Consideration

1

Using a lens of critical curiosity, examine current discipline policies and practices within your given context. How were they developed? Who was involved in the development process and in what ways? Were understandings of racial justice prioritized?

2

Consider whether existing policies and practices are working. You might examine what "working" means in your context, in addition to considering which groups your policies seem to be working for. Lastly, it is important to ask, "according to whom?" when examining existing policies and practices. Are responses to how and whether your discipline systems are working different across different role types? Racial groups?

Build Trusting Relationships that Recognize Historical Traumas

Developing reciprocal, trusting relationships between families, students, and teachers is a key component of building a positive school climate (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Research on school discipline demonstrates how building deeper connections and opportunities for family-school collaboration can reduce disciplinary rates (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), with significant suggested promise for narrowing racial disparities in schools (Rodriguez & Welsh, 2023).

While it is important to elevate building trusting family-school relationships as a promising practice for addressing racial disparities, educators must also recognize how historical traumas and negative racialized experiences, particularly related to school discipline may influence the early stages of developing such relationships. For example, Powell and Coles (2021) emphasize that teachers responsible for educating Black children:

must be attuned to the racial history that frames Black life in the U.S. and beyond. In tandem, educators must acknowledge and grapple with the ways such history results in a continuum of historical trauma that is present between every interaction with Black families, children, and schools. (p. 17).

Their argument recognizes the ways in which historical traumas regarding discipline, both at societal and individual levels, can deeply impact the extent to which families and students of color may inherently trust schools and school actors. With this understanding, educators can approach the implementation of discipline policies and practices through first seeking to understand families' historical experiences with school-level discipline. The narratives that emerge from these understandings, whether positive, negative, or neutral, should be used to inform strategies aimed at partnering with families to support racially-just discipline policies and practices.

Questions for Consideration

1 Consider learning directly from students and families how they have experienced discipline within your context. What are the racial histories of disciplinary policies and practices within your school community? For example, you might use critical dialogues or oral histories to better understand predominant discipline narratives within the community.

2 Do families in your school community feel safe, valued, and respected when engaging with school actors (i.e., administrators, teachers, front office staff) about student discipline? Are opportunities to engage about student discipline primarily unidirectional (e.g., families receiving notices about discipline) or bidirectional (e.g., families being able to initiate collaborations to support student learning)?

3 What opportunities exist for families and students, particularly families and students of color, to provide meaningful feedback on how school discipline policies and practices impact their schooling experiences? How might you build regular opportunities to facilitate these opportunities that can inform changes in strategy or policy?

While the mission and vision statements of many K-12 schools include commitments to the safety and wellbeing of all students (Bebell & Stemler, 2011), students of color continue to be disproportionately and regularly targeted in these institutions. Through implementing the strategies and recommendations shared in this brief, educators have an opportunity to shift this reality. Through interrogating educator biases, utilizing race-conscious data strategies, and prioritizing trusting relationships, educators can help their schools and districts move toward mitigating the persistent legacy of racial disproportionality in school discipline.

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ABOUT THE USC RACE AND EQUITY CENTER

The University of Southern California is home to a dynamic research and organizational improvement center that helps professionals in educational institutions, corporations, and other contexts strategically develop and achieve equity goals, better understand and correct climate problems, avoid and recover from racial crises, and engineer sustainable cultures of inclusion and respect. Evidence, as well as scalable and adaptable models of success, inform our rigorous approach. Grants from the Ford, Lumina, Bill and Melinda Gates, W.K. Kellogg, Kresge, and Open Society Foundations have funded the Center's research and partnerships.

The Center is home to the USC Equity Leadership Academies (a professional learning and organizational change series for K-12 schools and districts), USC Equity Institutes (a professional learning and organizational change series for higher education institutions), the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (a quantitative survey), PRISM (a racial equity employee recruitment tech tool for higher education), and the Alliance for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Business.

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