

Implicit Bias, Part 2—Addressing Disproportionality in Discipline: A Prospective Look at Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports

The second in a series of articles focused on implicit bias, this iteration seeks to further develop school psychologist practitioners' understanding of implicit bias and how it affects equity in educational settings. Whereas *Implicit Bias: A Foundation for School Psychologists* (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016) provided an overview of implicit bias and how it contributes to disproportionate outcomes in education, the current article will specifically explore the relationship between implicit bias and school discipline. Additionally, we articulate the importance of equitable disciplinary practices using a culturally responsive positive behavior interventions and supports (CR-PBIS) framework. Finally, we offer tips for school psychologists who desire to influence systems-level change.

Recent statistics indicate there are approximately 3.5 million public school students who are suspended out-of-school at least once each school year (Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015). Further, the literature is clear that not only is the use of out-of-school suspension (OSS) ineffective, but there are serious, detrimental consequences associated with children being removed from the classroom (Losen et al., 2015). Students who have experienced one OSS are up to 10 times more likely to ultimately drop out of school; it is thought that this is at least in part due to a widening of the academic gap (Gonzales, Richards, & Seeley, 2002; Wraight, 2012). Notably, there is evidence that discipline is often more severe for students of color, despite engaging in the same behavior as their White peers, termed the “Black Escalation Effect” (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). It is also important to note that national data collected by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) confirms significant disproportionality in the use of OSS, namely with an overrepresentation of historically marginalized groups, including children of color and children with disabilities, even after accounting for the effects of socioeconomic status (Losen et al., 2015).

School psychologists, in their roles as consultants, data stewards, and school climate leaders, may consider the use of a multitiered system of support (MTSS) framework, ideally with a focus on equitable practices, to best support all students and improve disproportionate outcomes for at-risk groups. The following section will highlight the potential of CR-PBIS as a way to reduce ambiguous disciplinary decisions in the school setting, which are oftentimes a result of implicit bias.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Disciplinary practices often impact and shape school climate for students, staff, families, and the community. Preventive measures delivered using an MTSS paradigm allow schools the opportunity to develop positive social cultures. Importantly, the culture that exists in a school should represent

all of its students and allow for universal expectations, common language, and a common school experience. The adoption of PBIS as a systems framework has been instrumental in providing differentiated behavioral interventions at both district and building levels to match individual student needs.

The foundations of PBIS are (a) systems, (b) data, (c) practices, and (d) outcomes (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2015). Each of these influences the others, and together they allow for implementation of the framework with fidelity. Schools with disproportionate disciplinary practices reflect the need for systemic change that can help to reduce ambiguity in referrals and/or exclusionary consequences. District or building-based PBIS teams, with the support and expertise of school psychologists, can begin to evaluate their disciplinary data to detect disproportionality and subsequently inform their practices. Behavioral databases that allow schools to drill down into their data in order to determine root causes of disproportionate outcomes may reveal patterns of behavior from staff. Such data may include risk ratio calculations with a focus on various subgroups (e.g., ethnicity, disability, or gender). McIntosh, Barnes, Eliason, & Morris (2014) suggest that as teams evaluate their data and notice peaks and valleys in disproportionate office discipline referrals (ODRs), there is a greater chance that these are the result of implicit bias and vulnerable decision points (VDPs).

Vulnerable decision points may include fatigue, hunger, past experiences, and lack of exposure. In other words, when individuals (e.g., teachers, school administrators) are experiencing any of the above, they are more likely to be susceptible to implicit bias, which also increases the likelihood of a snap decision such as immediately sending a student to the office or reacting negatively to student behavior. The impact of vulnerable decision points is further supported by subjective behavioral referrals such as disrespect, defiance, and disruption. In a well-developed PBIS system, these behaviors are expected to be clearly defined to ensure that school staff are responding in a consistent manner to these behaviors.

The following example illustrates a staff member in the midst of a vulnerable decision point. *One of Ms. Smith's current students is the sibling of a former student. The older sibling presented with a variety of challenging (e.g., oppositional) behaviors that made managing his behaviors in the classroom very difficult.* This example shows that teachers' past experiences may influence their tolerance when the current sibling demonstrates a poor behavior choice. In other words, implicit bias (e.g., past experience) may affect the staff member's reaction and subsequent steps in discipline. Girvan & McIntosh (2014) suggest the importance of recognizing one's own VDPs and engaging in methods to neutralize or delay the snap decision. Suggestions include:

- Delaying responses to student behavior
- Speaking privately to the student
- Taking a few deep breaths
- Reframing the situation

As staff engage in neutralizing routines and examine their own vulnerable decision points, CR-PBIS has the potential to help reduce disproportionate disciplinary practices. Whenever schools identify disproportionate disciplinary outcomes, it is recommended that they begin with data-based decision making (e.g., calculating risk indices and risk ratios) to inform subsequent practice (e.g., culturally appropriate methods of intervention, family and community engagement, and consistency in behavioral expectations that reflect the many cultures that exist in a school setting).

While the literature supporting the effectiveness of CR-PBIS is currently in its infancy, its principles are consistent with the longer-standing tradition of implicit bias intervention research. As with any intervention implemented in schools, school psychologists should consider collecting data regarding its effectiveness, as well as fidelity, feasibility, and acceptability to continuously monitor the progress their schools or systems are making in reducing bias in disciplinary practices. The following implications for school psychologists, when considering the implementation of CR-PBIS, are recommendations to support school teams in increasing equitable disciplinary outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

When considering the impact of implicit bias on discipline and behavior, school psychologists must consider the following.

1. Discussions with stakeholders, including school staff, regarding implicit bias and discipline may lead to resistance. In particular, **topics related to race and privilege may increase the likelihood of tough conversations**. The handout *Understanding Race & Privilege: Suggestions for Facilitating Challenging Conversations* (National Association of School Psychologists, 2017) is a strong resource for engaging and navigating discussions that may be difficult or tense. Albeit at times uncomfortable, these conversations are imperative to moving forward in reducing disproportionate disciplinary outcomes.
2. **Data serves as the catalyst for examining disproportionality** and alerts school-based teams of the need to evaluate and consider outcomes that suggest implicit bias. School psychologists are often experts in assisting teams with data review and program evaluation.
3. School psychologists can advocate for the use of **behavioral database systems** that monitor Tier 1 ODRs, which allows schools and school systems to solve problems and uncover inequity and discipline disproportionality. Databases that calculate risk indices and risk ratios by subgroup (e.g., ethnicity, gender, disability status) are ideal for supporting data-based decision-making, thereby potentially reducing the influence of implicit bias on outcomes.
4. School psychologists can **continue to advocate for expanding the conceptualization of culture beyond race and ethnicity**. In more racially homogenous settings, evaluating discipline disproportionality related to gender, disability status, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation may be considered. Additionally, these settings may compare their data to national norms (e.g., risk ratios).
5. School psychologists are encouraged to **engage families and community members** of various backgrounds. Family–school and community partnerships may provide PBIS teams with school-wide rules/expectations that are culturally sustaining and relevant. This may include serving as a liaison between a particular cultural group and the school to ensure that their voices are heard and included in the development and implementation of CR-PBIS. During specific PBIS team meetings, these liaisons may be invited to help problem solve around disproportionate data and encourage specific strategies that may be useful in supporting students from various backgrounds and communities. For example, this could include discussing a subjective behavior and learning how it is perceived in different cultures versus the school culture (e.g., “How is disrespect perceived in X culture? Or, what is considered disrespect in X culture?”).

6. School psychologists may recommend the use of a **student-level PBIS team**, and/or student representatives on the PBIS team, to ensure student voices are captured in the continuous enhancement of positive school climate. This has been particularly useful at the secondary level (e.g., high school PBIS). Selected students should be representative of the diversity in the building (e.g., ethnicity, disability status, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion).
7. School psychologists may also serve as key members of **equity task forces** and similar initiatives within their schools or districts. Such task forces may be charged with reviewing discipline or school climate data and trends; informing professional development toward understanding issues of inequity and social justice; serving as a liaison for families and community members; or generating solutions to issues of inequity in schools and school systems.
8. School psychologists can **advocate for district or school policy changes as well as legislative changes** that seek to end the use of harmful and ineffective exclusionary discipline practices.

These tips may be useful when facilitating actions around disproportionality in discipline. School psychologists have the opportunity to bring the necessary attention to these outcomes and participate in preventive measures that support equitable practices for all students.

WEBSITES AND RESOURCES

- Advancement Project
<http://www.advancementproject.org>
- Community Matters—Suspension Loss and Cost Calculator
<http://community-matters.org/programs-and-services/calculator>
- CRPBIS Implementation Rubric—Indiana University
<http://indiana.edu/~pbisin/resources/CRPBISImplementationRubric12.2014.pdf>
- Harvard Project Implicit
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium
www.maec.org
- Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports OSEP Technical Assistance Center
<http://www.pbis.org>
- Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports OSEP Technical Assistance Center: Equity in Schools
<http://www.pbis.org/school/equity-pbis>
- Safe and Supportive Schools—Compendium on State Discipline Laws & Regulations
<http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-discipline-laws-regulations-state>
- Teaching Tolerance
<http://www.tolerance.org>
- UCLA Civil Rights Project
<https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu>
- U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.htm>

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