



## Walking in Their Students' Shoes: Encouraging an Empathic Mindset about Student Behavior Transforms Teachers' Discipline Practices

BY JESS HENNESSEY

RESEARCH SUMMARY | APRIL 2016

Research shows that suspensions are not an effective solution to behavioral issues in schools. Suspensions remove students from their classroom communities and put them in potentially threatening situations outside of school, while yielding no measurable academic benefit for the students left behind in the classroom.<sup>1</sup>

Being suspended from school has been shown to have numerous detrimental long-term effects, as well, including adult unemployment and increased likelihood of incarceration.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite this evidence, suspension rates have nearly tripled over the past forty years, affecting about 11% of all students in K-12 schools.<sup>3,4</sup> Additionally, students of color tend to be suspended at much higher rates than their peers; for example, African American students are suspended at over three times the rate of white students (17% vs. 5%).<sup>5</sup> How can this process be disrupted to promote better classroom environments and learning outcomes for students?

While there are many factors that influence student behavior, the quality of students' relationships with their teachers is one of the strongest predictors of classroom behavior.<sup>6</sup> Thus promoting positive and respectful relationships between teachers and students could be a critical component of attempts to lower suspension rates. In order to test this theory, Jason Okonofua and Mindset Scholars [David Paunesku](#) and [Gregory Walton](#)

### KEY FINDINGS:

- A brief online exercise led teachers to adopt an empathic mindset about students' misbehavior and reduced inclination to rely on punitive discipline
- Students exposed to empathic discipline behavior by their teacher reported higher levels of respect for their teacher and increased motivation to behave in class
- Students whose math teacher received the empathic program were less likely to be referred for suspension by all of their teachers throughout a school year

explored whether a short program designed to influence teachers' mindsets about student behavior and discipline could lead to changes in the way teachers interacted with students and whether these changes in teachers' behavior could, in turn, positively affect students' classroom experience and behavior.

This research summary highlights findings from the following article: Okonofua, J. A., Paunesku, D., & Walton, G. M. (2016). A brief intervention to encourage empathic discipline halves suspension rates among adolescents. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

## STUDY 1

In the first study, thirty-nine K-12 teachers were randomly assigned to either an empathic- or punitive-minded condition. Teachers in the empathic mindset condition read a brief article on how “good teacher-student relationships are critical for students to learn self-control.” Teachers in the punitive mindset condition read an article about how “punishment is critical for teachers to take control of the classroom.” After reading the article teachers were given multiple student behavior scenarios and asked to write about how they would discipline the student and whether they would consider the student a ‘troublemaker.’

***Teachers who received the empathic exercise displayed disciplinary responses that were more empathic and less punitive than the teachers in the punitive condition.***

In holding this ‘empathic mindset’ about discipline, teachers prioritized valuing the students’ perspective and understanding what might have triggered the misbehavior, sustaining positive relationships with the student, and working with them within the context of a trusting relationship to improve their behavior. For example, teachers were more likely to ask students about their behavior than to send students to the principal’s office. This provides evidence that a psychological intervention that carefully targets teachers’ beliefs about students has potential to shift their perspectives on discipline. Further, teachers were less likely to make a fixed attribution about the student by calling him a troublemaker.

## STUDY 2

Once the researchers found that teachers’ mindsets could be influenced through a brief online exercise, they designed an experiment to test how students respond to empathic and punitive discipline by their teachers.

In this study, 302 college students were asked to imagine themselves as middle school students who were repeatedly disrupting class by walking to the trashcan. Students randomly assigned to the empathic condition were told that their teacher responded by asking about their behavior and moving the trashcan closer to them, while students in the punitive condition were referred to the principal’s office (same discipline practices teachers reported in Study 1). The participants then reported their level of respect for their teacher and whether they would be motivated to behave well in the future.

***Students in the empathic condition reported higher levels of respect for the teacher and motivation to behave well in the future compared to their peers in the punitive condition.*** Additionally, students’ reported levels of respect for their teacher affected the likelihood that the students claimed they would be motivated to behave well in the future. These results suggest that empathic discipline could be a pathway for more respectful relationships between teachers and students, resulting in a cycle in which students are more motivated to continue with positive behavior patterns when they trust their teacher. Here we see that change to a teacher’s mindset can transfer to a change in students’ mindsets.

## STUDY 3

The results of the first two studies inspired the researchers to design a longitudinal experiment to explore long-term effects of empathic discipline. Thirty-one math teachers from five middle schools in California and their students ( $N=1,682$ ) participated in the study. Teachers completed two online program sessions. The participants in the empathic condition read an article about non-pejorative and developmentally appropriate reasons why students might misbehave in class. For example, a student might put her head on her desk because she didn’t get enough sleep or act defiantly because of the stressors and experiences of adolescence. The program emphasized how positive relationships with students can facilitate their development and that it is critical to prioritize sustaining these positive relationships in disciplinary encounters. It also encouraged teachers to understand and value students’ experiences while discouraging them from labeling students as troublemakers. The participants then wrote about how they would incorporate this information into their classroom. The control group completed a program similar in format that focused solely on the benefits of technology in the classroom.

***Students whose math teacher completed the empathic program were half as likely to be suspended over the school year as their peers (4.6% vs. 9.8%, respectively).*** Suspension rates decreased for all groups, including students who tend to be suspended at higher rates, including boys, African Americans, Latinos, and students with prior suspensions. This finding provides evidence that a short program aimed at promoting an empathic mindset for teachers can have positive effects on suspension rates and be a potential lever for decreasing gaps in suspension rates. Notably, these

teachers were not given additional training on what discipline practices should be used instead of punitive measures; they were merely encouraged to think about classroom behavior, relationships, and discipline from students' point of view. And when the punitive mindset about discipline was replaced by this empathic mindset, teachers' behavior and students' outcomes changed.

***Students whose math teacher received the treatment were also referred less for suspensions by other teachers and school staff members.*** This provides evidence that improving a student's relationship with one teacher could positively affect their overall school experience and cause a reduction in misbehavior that extends beyond a single classroom.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

The intervention tested in these studies represents a “new frontier” for research on psychological interventions and learning mindsets more generally. By focusing on teachers' mindsets, we may be able to foster greater trust and sense of belonging in school among their students. As the researchers note in their paper, “past [learning mindset] interventions help students navigate the social world of school more effectively...however, psychological interventions can also make [these] worlds easier to navigate.”

Changing teachers' mindsets on discipline offers a potential lever for positive change in schools. However, in order for these changes to have a wider, sustained impact, schools and districts will likely need to provide support for discipline policies that are not merely punitive, or based in maintaining control over students.

The results from this study also have potential to extend beyond school discipline. Further research should explore whether these types of psychological approaches could be used to influence individuals' mindsets in other domains to positively affect social systems and improve interpersonal relationships—particularly those individuals in positions of power whose actions have broad implications for the well-being and outcomes of others.

This brief was edited by Lisa Quay, Managing Director of the Mindset Scholars Network.

---

<sup>1</sup> Morris, E. W., & Perry, B. L. (2016). The Punishment Gap: School Suspension and Racial Disparities in Achievement. *Social Problems*, 63, 68-86.

<sup>2</sup> Rocque, M. & Paternoster, R. (2011). Understanding the antecedents of the “school-to jail” link: The relationship between race and school discipline. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 101, 633-666.

<sup>3</sup> Wald, J. & Losen, D. J. (2003). Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 99, 9-15.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2012). Q:14 Civil Rights Data Collection.

<sup>5</sup> Losen, D. J. & Gillespie, J. (2012). *Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of Disciplinary Exclusion from School*. Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project.

<sup>6</sup> Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M., Split, J.L., Oort, F. J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher student relationships on students' school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81, 493-529.