



Measuring empathic-mindset effects based on educators and learning environments

BY JASON ANTHONY OKONOFUA

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT | OCTOBER 2021

Alarming suspension rates in the United States predict major negative life outcomes (e.g., unemployment and incarceration).^{1,2,3} Further, there are large racial disparities in these rates such that Black K-12 students are 3.8 times more likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than white students.⁴

The present research employed a randomized placebo-controlled field experiment with middle school teachers to test whether an empathic-mindset – valuing students’ perspectives and prioritizing the maintenance of positive teacher-student relationships – could reduce suspension rates and mitigate racial disparities in them.

RESEARCH TEAM

- [Jason Okonofua](#) (PI) University of California at Berkeley
- Parker Goyer, Stanford University
- Constance Lindsay (Co-PI), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Johnetta Haugabrook, Multi-Tiered System of Support
- [Gregory Walton](#) (Co-PI), Stanford University

Areas of expertise: Social psychology, education, stereotyping, applied psychology, policy

Key Findings

- The empathic-mindset treatment reduced in-school suspensions by 34% in a sample of 66 teachers and 5,822 students.
- The empathic-mindset treatment was especially effective for students who had one prior suspension, Black and Latinx students, and students with special education status.

Study Design

The U.S. Department of Education recommended the empathic-mindset intervention to school districts throughout the country as one of the most effective means to reduce suspension rates. The partner school district for the present research then reached out to our research team. We agreed to conduct an experiment to determine the intervention’s efficacy in the district.

Middle school mathematics teachers were recruited to participate in a program geared to gather their perspectives about interactions with students. Those who consented to participation were randomly assigned to engage with two online modules, a 45-minute session in the fall and a 25-minute session in the spring, with articles and

Sample

The sample for the randomized placebo-controlled experiment was 66 mathematics teachers and 5,822 students in a single school district.

exercises centered on empathic-mindset (treatment) or how technology can improve student engagement (placebo control).

This kind of treatment has been shown to help participants take ownership over the materials in a nonpejorative way. In turn, it can lead to large and lasting changes in how participants view and interact with their environments. The empathic-mindset treatment was designed to be scalable from the outset. It was thus amenable to the research design.

Key Findings

The empathic-mindset treatment reduced in-school suspensions by 34% in a sample of 66 teachers and 5,822 students.

This reduction in probability of suspensions persisted through the next academic year when nearly all students had new teachers.

The effect on out-of-school suspensions was not statistically significant. This may be due to the fact that in-school suspensions are often for less severe offenses, for more directly relational offenses (e.g., “insubordination”), and for offenses that entail greater subjective judgment. This relative ambiguity may provide more room for a shift in teachers’ mindset and an improvement in patterns of interaction to reduce removals from the learning environment. Out-of-school suspensions, by contrast, typically require documented rationale and remanding of the student to the custody of a legal guardian.

These findings extend previous research on the empathic-mindset treatment, which used a sample of 31 teachers and 1,682 students.⁵

The empathic-mindset treatment was especially effective for students who had one prior suspension, Black and Latinx students, and students with special education status.

This is the first mindset intervention with teachers to cause a significant mitigation of the racial disparities in suspensions (see Figure 1). These findings suggest that this intervention can benefit students who are at risk of

low-quality teacher-student relationships and punitive discipline without causing harm to other teacher-student relationships.

While the treatment was highly effective in reducing suspensions for students with one prior suspension, consistent with its goal in preventing the escalation of disciplinary responses following a prior misbehavior, it did not significantly reduce suspensions for students for whom this escalation process had not yet begun (no suspensions the previous year) or for whom this process was better established (two or more prior suspensions).

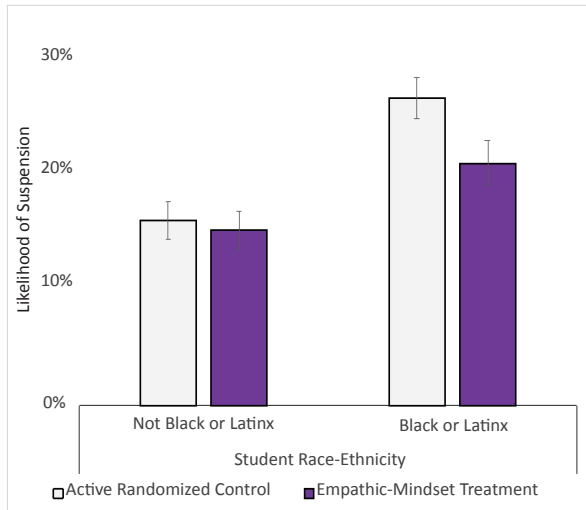
Insights & Future Directions

These findings inform policy and psychological approaches to mitigate punitive discipline. For policy, these findings support the notion that the default mindset in schools is punitive such that a brief and targeted psychological intervention can reduce suspensions. Education policy can benefit from putting systems and structures in place to provide teachers the opportunity to get to know and build meaningful relationships with students. For psychology, this work highlights the importance of designing intervention-based solutions with scaling in mind from the outset.

There is growing evidence that interventions that target the attributions people make about themselves and their surrounds can have key impacts on societal issues. This intervention is a new frontier to mindset research that typically focuses on students’ mindsets as a means to improve outcomes. Here the intervention targets the quality of teacher-student relationships with a mindset shift for teachers. In turn, many students can benefit from a single teacher’s mindset shift, and thousands of students can benefit from a targeted intervention with less than one hundred teachers.

Future research should investigate larger contextual factors that can contribute to the efficacy of this intervention with teachers. For example, might this intervention be more effective at schools with high suspension rates, where there may be a culture of punitive discipline and less inclination to empathize with students? Research should also investigate the specific psychological mechanisms responsible for how the intervention ultimately leads to large and lasting effects on students’ risk of suspension. A better understanding of these contextual factors and underlying mechanisms can improve our understanding of how to more broadly replicate and strengthen these effects.

Figure 1: Likelihood of in-school suspensions by student race and ethnicity



Note: The empathic-mindset treatment cut the racial disparity in in-school suspensions over the school year by 45%. In-school suspension rate is shown on the vertical axis.

References

1. Losen, D. J. (Ed.) (2015). *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion*. (pp. 17-44). Teachers College Press.
2. Noltemeyer, A. L., Ward, R. M., & Mcloughlin, C. (2015). Relationship Between School Suspension and Student Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis. *School Psychology Review*, 44(2), 224-240. <https://doi.org/10.17105/spr-14-0008.1>
3. Rumberger, R. W., & Losen, D. J. (2016). The High Cost of Harsh Discipline and its Disparate Impact. UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/85m2m6sj>
4. U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2016). 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look. <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/2013-14-first-look.pdf>
5. Hennessey, J. (2016). Walking in Their Students' Shoes: Encouraging an Empathic Mindset about Student Behavior Transforms Teachers' Discipline Practices. Student Experience Research Network. https://studentexperiencenetwork.org/research_library/walking-students-shoes-encouraging-empathic-mindset-student-behaviors-transforms-teachers-discipline-practices/