Toward an Antiracist Restorative Justice Approach for Black Children

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Every young person deserves to be treated with love and respect. They need to feel heard by the adults in their lives and seen by educators as valued members of the school community.

Students are human beings with the inherent desire for human connection[1] that comes by way of substantively positive relationships with educators, and one another. For Black children, however, school is too often a painful experience. For example, education researchers find that PreK-12 history curriculum rarely depicts Black people in a positive light,[2] and Black students are frequently educated in learning environments that feel sterile and uncaring.[3] These experiences take a toll on Black learners' emotional and psychological well-being. School discipline happens to be a site of Black children's interactions with adults that more often increases, rather than alleviates, their precarity.[4] Instead of discerning meaningful approaches for healing and reconciliation, school discipline for Black children tends to be incredibly punitive.[5]

Taking an Antiracist Restorative Justice Approach to School Discipline

This policy brief describes the urgency for scalable antiracist restorative justice approaches to school discipline. Discipline is generally a good thing. Living a disciplined life is essential for developing the behavioral habits that enhance a young person's resilience and capacity to persist toward accomplishing personal goals no matter the difficulty. On

Key Takeaways

- School discipline systems should focus on reconciliation and repairing harm, not punishing students.

- Antiracist restorative justice approaches to school discipline invite student expression and reduce Black students' school pushout and exclusion.

the contrary, Black youth tend to be disproportionately punished, policed, and penalized. Such an orientation to school discipline policy and practice centers on controlling Black bodies rather than improving the quality of peer interactions and student-educator relationships. Transitioning school discipline policy away from more traditional rewards and consequences toward antiracist restorative justice approaches has at least three distinct benefits.

Strengthens Collective Student Wellbeing

First, antiracist restorative justice approaches to school discipline reduce harm and strengthen students' investment in one another's well-being. Antiracist restorative justice approaches humanize school discipline systems such that Black students can feel seen and heard by adults and one another in ways that genuinely respond to frustrations that may have led to the student conflict(s) requiring disciplinary mediation.

student experience
R E S E A R C H   N E T W O R K

Student Experience Research Network (SERN) envisions an education system in which every student experiences respect as a valued person and thinker, so that they can learn and thrive. To this end, SERN connects people and ideas across research, practice, and policy to advance scientific knowledge and inform decision-making by education system and institution leaders.

Leverages Student Voice for School Improvement

Second, student voice is an essential feature of antiracist restorative justice approaches to school discipline. Student voice has been found to strengthen school improvement efforts.[6] Antiracist restorative justice approaches frame a student's misbehavior as evidence, perhaps, that they have too little agency and voice in school. Moreover, antiracist restorative justice approaches rely on discourse practices that provide youth ample opportunity to express themselves honestly without judgment, or fear of punishment from adults. In turn, adults are better positioned to listen soberly, and to understand students' perceptions of their place and value in the school's learning environment. Antiracist restorative justice approaches assume schooling for Black children in the U.S. has been more often assaultive than it has been protective. As such, antiracist restorative justice approaches invite students to describe how schools might eliminate barriers to deeply humane social interactions among and between other students and adults.

Reduces School Pushout and Adverse Interactions with Police

Finally, the last two decades of data on policing and police presence in schools insist that discipline for Black students tends to push them out of school, rather than restore them to the school community. Out-of-school suspensions, for instance, raise the likelihood that Black youth are on a path toward prison. More importantly, the research insists that the schools that Black children attend are too often experienced as prison-like structures. Such is especially true for "no excuse" charter schools,[7] for instance, and institutions with zero tolerance policies. These schools tend to be in racially segregated, densely populated neighborhoods–the locale of generational municipal neglect in large cities like Chicago. There is no shortage of examples of the many ways that police presence in schools undermines goals for school safety. Scholars find Black and Latinx children attending urban schools often feel less safe in school because of direct or vicarious interactions with law enforcement.[8]

In Sum...

Antiracist restorative justice approaches redistribute resources away from mechanisms of punishment and control, toward youth-led and collective community normed systems of reconciliation. Such systems use disciplinary interactions as opportunities to establish and sustain proactive approaches to problem-solving that are necessary to preempt future conflicts.

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