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African-American Students and the Discipline Gap in High Schools

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Research to Make a Difference

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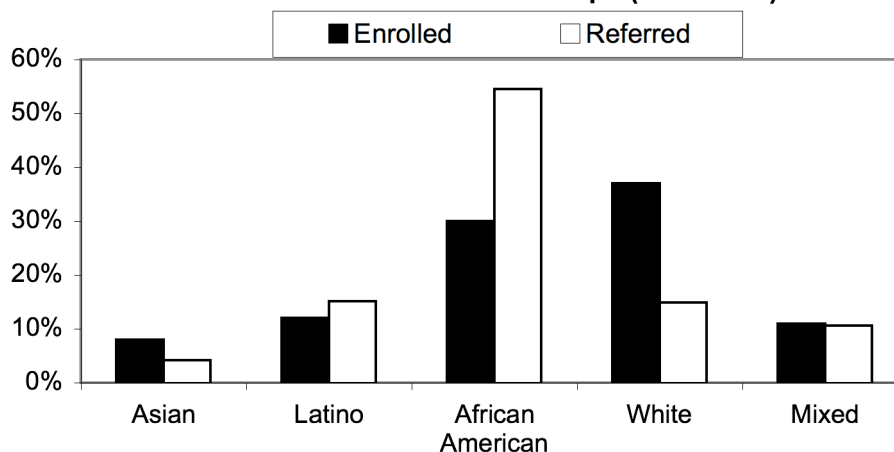
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Introduction

Achievement problems and discipline problems are interconnected. Although achievement gaps are well-documented, the gaps in referrals for discipline problems between students of different racial and ethnic groups are often ignored. In districts across California and the nation, African-American adolescents have been over-represented in school discipline sanctions that often remove them from classrooms and schools for long periods of time (Advancement Project and Civil Rights Project, 2000; Gordon, Della Piana, & Keleher, 2000). Removal from classes and school hampers students' ability to benefit from opportunities to learn and to graduate. Suspended students are more likely to become truant (Newcomb et al., 2002) and drop out of school (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986). Efforts to increase the pipeline of under-represented students into higher education need to identify approaches that will keep students in school and narrow the discipline gap. To provide directions for such efforts, research on the discipline gap was conducted at a large, urban high school in California¹.

African-Americans are over-represented in discipline referrals (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Percent of Discipline Referrals Given to Racial and Ethnic Groups (2002-2003)*

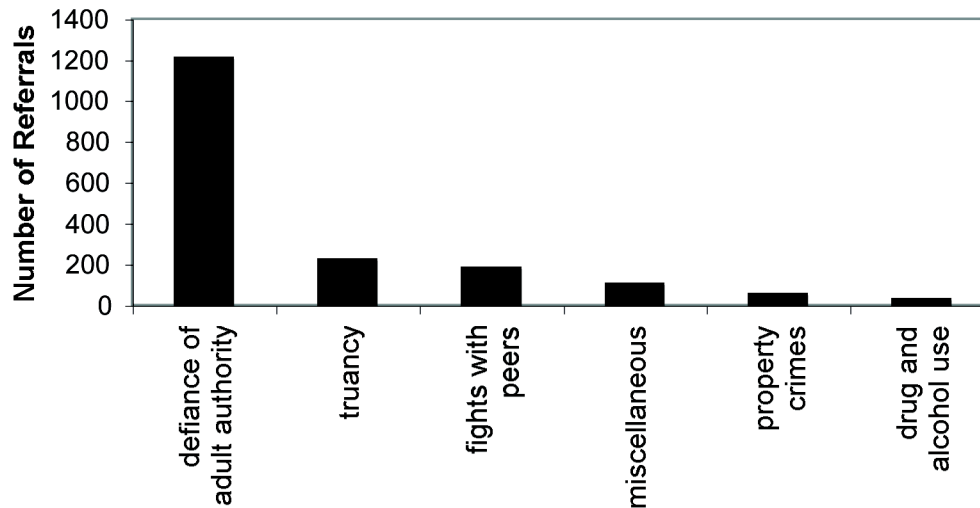


* Racial and ethnic groups comprising less than 1% of the enrollment not included above

¹ The research was conducted at a large, urban high school in California. Part 1 used an epidemiological review of one year of discipline data and the population of 442 students referred for defiance. Part 2 used repeated measures analyses and multilevel modeling with a sub-sample of 33 defiance-referred students and two of their teachers.

Students are most often referred for “defiance of authority” (Figure 2)

Figure 2. Reasons for discipline referrals (2002-2003)



Authority conflicts in the classroom were a major contributor to the over-representation of African-Americans in the discipline system. Almost 80% of the African-Americans referred for discipline were given at least one defiance referral compared to less than 50% of the white students who were referred for discipline.

Few students are perceived as chronically defiant across their various classrooms

A majority of defiance-referred students were sanctioned by only one or two adults across the school year. Referred students were more cooperative and less defiant in one classroom compared to another. This suggests that defiance referrals often arise as situation- or relationship-specific for most students, with only a small number of students consistently defiant in most or all of their classrooms.

Teachers matter

Students do not defy all teachers' authority. When students perceive teachers as caring and demanding, the students felt obliged to cooperate with teachers' authority. The likelihood of a teacher eliciting students' trust and cooperation was not related to the teacher's race, gender, or years of teaching experience.

What can policy makers, schools administrators, and teachers do?

1. Redesign teacher evaluation and teacher support

Teacher evaluation and teacher support programs need to consider the relational aspect of teaching. Despite overwhelming demands, many teachers earn the trust of their African-American students. These teachers find the time and have the skills to show a deep level of caring for students. Pre-service and professional development opportunities need to emphasize interpersonal skills that foster positive relationships with students and nurture fair and responsive classrooms.

2. Implement discipline policies that identify optimal contexts of learning

Current discipline policies do not require administrators or teachers to identify the classrooms and conditions in which students are doing well. A student's referring and non-referring teachers could collaborate to share information about students and learn methods for developing relationships with referred students and engaging students in coursework.

3. Expand achievement gap initiatives to address the discipline gap

Equity-driven efforts to increase the number of under-represented groups applying to colleges and universities should include attention to discipline practices and policies. A starting place for this focus would be the classes and teachers where referred students have good relationships and some measure of success.

Discussion of the Findings:

Authority conflicts in the classroom

The current research demonstrates that African-American students are over-represented in the disciplinary system. Most important, this research documents that the most common reason for referral is defiance. The gap between whites and African-Americans in referrals can be partially explained by the pervasive problem of negative interactions between African-Americans and their teachers. Although high schools give sanctions for numerous types of infractions (e.g., fighting with other students or smoking), conflict related to teacher authority needs greater examination as an integral part of equity-driven efforts to improve schooling for African-American students. The absence of positive relationships with teachers may place African-American adolescents at greater risk of missed instructional time, loss of adult advocacy, lower adult support for achievement, and the stigmatizing labels of being a behavior problem, all of which reinforce lower achievement.

Cooperative behavior in some classrooms

Most referred African-American students do have negative teacher and student interactions across all of their classrooms. Analyses of the subsample of 33 students referred for defiance-related reasons showed that the students had at least one teacher whose class they attended more often and with whom they consciously cooperated. These teachers, in turn, perceived the students as more cooperative and less defiant than the referring teachers and issued higher grades to the students. Thus, students were experienced quite differently by two of their teachers. For instance, an African-American, 11th grader was described as “combative” and “argumentative” by a teacher who issued a defiance referral. He said about her:

“She’s gone through periods where she doesn’t come at all for weeks. And when she does come to class, it seems to me that she is trying to challenge my rules directly, purposely... it seems like she is trying to pick a fight most days when she is here.”

In sharp contrast, another teacher described this same student as “respectful” and “jovial.” He said about her:

“At the beginning, she was a little too talkative...I always had to let her know that she needed to quiet down...She said, “Okay okay, my bad my bad.” And then I try to bring her into the conversation... ‘What do you think about that?’...and then she would be much more interactive and much more participatory.”

Evidence that student defiance is context specific may be helpful in challenging the labeling of African-American students and focus attention on the contextual contributors to the behavior.

Student beliefs about authority

Adolescents are conscious and active decisions makers in their response to teacher authority. They hold strong beliefs about whether teachers treat them fairly. In fact, students rarely received discipline referrals from teachers they perceived as fair. This suggests that schools should consider student beliefs about their treatment when trying to solve the schools’ discipline problem.

Firm and demanding teachers

Finally, school records, teacher perception, and student self-reports converged to show that most students behaved more cooperatively and less defiantly with teachers who they perceived to be firm and fair. This suggests that teachers of African-American students with negative disciplinary trajectories possess the skills and dispositions to develop trusting relationships while maintaining high academic standards.

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