

What Discipline Is For: Connecting Students to the Benefits of Learning

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Throughout the United States, schools tend disproportionately to punish the students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs.¹ Examination of which students are most likely to be suspended, expelled, or removed from the classroom for punishment reveals that members of racial-ethnic minority groups (especially Blacks and Latinos), males, and low achievers are vastly overrepresented.² Close scrutiny of disciplinary practices reveals that a disproportionate number of the students who receive the most severe punishments are students who have learning disabilities, are from single-parent households, are in foster care, are homeless, or qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In many schools, these students are disproportionately students of color.

Educators must reflect upon the factors that give rise to such imbalances in school discipline. Often students' unmet needs cause misconduct, and schools' inability to address the needs of their most disadvantaged students results in their receiving the lion's share of punishment. I urge educators to ask whether discipline is meted out fairly and responds to students' needs.

Students who are behind academically, who are more likely to be students of color, are also more likely to engage in disruptive behavior, sometimes out of frustration or embarrassment.³ Children who suffer from abuse or neglect at home or who are harassed and teased by their peers⁴ are also more likely to misbehave. Since poverty rates are higher among racial minorities in the United States, students of color are more likely to exhibit behavior problems because of unmet needs. In many schools, it is common for the neediest students to be disciplined and for the needs driving their misbehavior to be ignored. Disturbingly, these disparities in who gets punished and how often do not evoke alarm, or even concern, because these patterns are accepted as normal.

Some of this disproportionate discipline may occur because of educators' racial bias, rather than students' disproportionate "disruption." But educators are unlikely to admit bias even to themselves, so it is more effective to ask educators to examine the disproportionate effects of their actions. Teachers

and administrators who seek to reduce the disproportionate discipline of children of color can start by using data to demonstrate that this disproportion exists and then probe to find out why it occurs.

An administrator at a middle school in New Haven, Connecticut, began a professional development activity by writing the reasons teachers gave for sending a student to the office on the blackboard. He then went down the list with the group and asked whether they felt the infractions listed were legitimate reasons for referring a student to the principal's office for punishment. In a public setting with their colleagues present, no one would defend sending a student to the office for chewing gum, wearing a hat, or forgetting to bring a pencil. Yet, these and other minor infractions were the reasons given on the bulk of the referrals. He pointed out that Black and Latino boys received over 80 percent of these referrals; and he engaged the staff in a discussion of the implications of these practices.

Holding educators accountable for racial imbalances in discipline need not result in finger-pointing or recriminations about racist intentions that cannot be proved. However, if educators are going to reduce the disproportionate discipline meted out to poor children of color, they must accept responsibility for racial disparities in discipline patterns. Analyzing their approaches to maintaining order can help educators to identify alternative methods for producing positive learning environments. Alternatives are essential if schools are to stop using discipline as a strategy for weeding out those they deem undesirable or difficult to teach and instead to use discipline to reconnect students to learning.

Educators sometimes discipline students of color for tiny offenses that do not require discipline at all. Even when responding to more egregious acting out, educators typically punish children of color without reflecting on the factors that may be motivating the misbehavior. Instead of asking why a student is disrespectful to a teacher, fighting, or disturbing a classroom, many schools react to the behavior by inflexibly enforcing rules and imposing sanctions. By responding to conduct while ignoring the factors that cause it, schools inadvertently further the educational failure of these students and may ultimately contribute to their marginalization as adults.

The marginalization of students who are frequently punished occurs because schools rely primarily on two strategies to discipline students who misbehave: humiliation and exclusion. Typically, they respond to minor infractions with humiliation, by singling out a misbehaving student for rebuke and ostracism, or placing a student in the back of the room or the hallway. If problems persist, most schools exclude the student from the classroom, starting with referrals to the principal's office and gradually escalating to removal from the school through suspension, or in the most serious cases, expulsion. These strategies effectively deny targeted students access to instruction and the opportunity to learn and do little to enable students to learn from their mistakes

and develop a sense of responsibility for their behavior. The fact that many schools frequently punish a small number of students repeatedly⁵ suggests that these approaches are ineffective in changing students' behavior and making schools more orderly.

Discipline strategies that rely upon humiliation and exclusion are based on the assumption that by removing disruptive children from the learning environment, others will be allowed to learn in peace. While the logic behind this approach may seem compelling, a closer look at the consequence of these practices reveals obvious flaws. Students who are punished for fairly minor behavior problems when they are young frequently perpetrate more serious offenses as they get older. The almost exclusive reliance on suspension and other forms of exclusion makes little sense, especially since many of the students who are suspended dislike school and there is little evidence that it works as a deterrent to misconduct. In schools where suspension rates are high, sorting out the "bad" students rarely results in a better education for those who remain, because many students are deeply alienated from school, have weak and even antagonistic relationships with the adults who serve them, and believe that very few teachers care about them.⁶

An implicit social contract serves as the basis for maintaining order in schools as it does in society:⁷ in exchange for an education, students are expected to obey the rules and norms operative within school and to comply with the authority of the adults in charge. Students are expected to relinquish a certain degree of individual freedom in exchange for receiving the benefits of education. For the vast majority of students, this arrangement elicits a relatively high degree of compliance with school rules and to adult authority. Despite surveys that suggest a growing number of teachers and students fear violence in school, schools in the United States are actually generally safe places.⁸ Even though children significantly outnumber adults, they largely conform to adult authority and, through their compliance, make it possible for order to be maintained.

This arrangement tends to be least effective for students who do not receive the benefits promised by the social contract. Students who are behind academically, have not been taught by teachers who have cultivated a love of learning, or have come to regard school as a boring, compulsory chore, are more likely to disrupt classrooms and defy authority. Although these students are typically more likely to be disciplined, punishing them is often ineffective because it is not aimed at connecting them to learning. As they come to understand that the rewards of education—admission to college and access to well-paying jobs—are not available to them, students have little incentive to comply with school rules. Students who frequently get into trouble may have so many negative experiences in school that they conclude school is not for them and that the rewards associated with education are beyond their reach. As students develop identities as "troublemakers" and "delinquents," they often

internalize the label and, instead of changing their behavior, embrace the stigma.⁹ Punishment reinforces undesirable behavior rather than serving as an effective deterrent.

To break the cycle of failure, schools must find ways to reconnect students who have become disaffected through prior disciplinary experiences and academic failure to learning and the goals of education. Students who disrupt the learning environment for others must come to see the benefits of the knowledge and skills that education offers. In order to be motivated to comply with school norms, they must be inspired to believe that education can serve as a means for them to improve their lives and help their families and community.

This task necessarily involves providing these students with access to teachers and other adult role models who can establish supportive, mentoring relationships with youth who have had negative experiences with the school system. In many schools, such mentors are in short supply, both because racial-ethnic and class differences often make it difficult for teachers to provide the "tough love" and moral authority that students need and because adults are often positioned in antagonistic relationships with students. Those who learn to cross racial and class boundaries to forge strong, productive bonds with students are able to use those relationships to motivate students to apply themselves and get them to see that education can serve as a vehicle for self-improvement.¹⁰ Creating these types of relationships requires educators to take time to find out what students are personally interested in or concerned about so the content of the curriculum can be made relevant to students.

While seeking to learn about and meet students' individual needs, educators should also respond to any more structural local factors underlying students' acting out. A program created in Berkeley, California, in 1987 demonstrates such an approach that works. Concerned about a crack trade that relied heavily upon local teenagers to serve as foot soldiers and salesmen on the streets and was contributing to discipline problems and a rising dropout rate, the city funded a novel program aimed at preventing young people from becoming involved in drug dealing. The Real Alternative Program (RAP) recruited middle school students who had committed at least one criminal offense and were regarded by their teachers and parents as at risk of greater delinquency. Students were provided with tutors, recreational opportunities, summer employment, and a caseworker. The city funded the program by hiring an additional officer for parking meter enforcement and earmarking the revenue to the program. An evaluation showed that RAP was extremely successful at reducing delinquency and improving school performance. Delinquency prevention programs in communities and schools throughout the country have proven effective at changing student behavior and reducing the incidence of juvenile delinquency. Yet, even though they are substantially cheaper to fund than more punitive approaches, they have not been adequately supported.

In most cases, what separates teachers who experience frequent behavior problems from those who do not is their ability to keep their students focused on learning. Unless we focus on how to engage students, schools will continue to be revolving doors for students who are bored, restless, behind academically, and unconvinced that schooling will provide benefits for them and who, in consequence, often act out. When we locate discipline problems exclusively in students and ignore the school and local contexts in which problematic behavior occurs, we overlook the most important factors that give rise to misbehavior. Schools that suspend large numbers of students, or suspend small numbers of students frequently, typically become so preoccupied with discipline and control that they have little time to address the conditions that influence teaching and learning.

Finally, schools must focus on the values students should learn when they are disciplined. In his pioneering research on moral development in children, Lawrence Kohlberg argued that teaching students to obey rules in order to avoid punishment was far less effective than helping students to develop the ability to make reasoned ethical judgments about their behavior.¹¹ Rather than punishing students by sending them home for fighting, educators should teach students how to resolve conflicts peacefully; discipline should always teach a moral lesson. Students who vandalize their building can be required to do community service aimed at cleaning up or improving their school, and students who are disrespectful to teachers can be required to assist that teacher on a project and to write a letter of apology. Over time, students will understand the values that underlie the operation of the school and appreciate that all members are accountable to them, that the social contract holds. Research on school discipline and safety shows that, rather than leading to a more lenient environment that tolerates misbehavior, schools promoting an ethical culture can create an environment where misconduct is less likely.¹²

By relying upon alternative discipline strategies rooted in ethics and a determination to reconnect students to learning, schools can reduce the likelihood that the neediest and most disengaged students, who are frequently children of color, will be targeted for repeated punishment. Some of these alternative strategies are practiced in private and public schools for affluent children, but they are less common in public schools that serve poor children of color. There are some exceptions. Phyl's Academy in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, has been praised for adhering to principal Monica Lewis's admonition to "treat children with kindness." In describing her school, Lewis reports: "We don't have a rigid hand. We show them values. Once you give a child reasons, you get them to follow directions."¹³

Producing safe and orderly schools need not require turning schools into prisons or detention centers. It is possible to create schools where learning and academic achievement is encouraged for all students and where disciplinary problems are responded to in a manner that is consistent with the broader

educational goals. We must recognize that the children of the poor and children of color are no less deserving than the children of the affluent to be educated in a nurturing and supportive environment. Perhaps what is needed even more than a shift in disciplinary tactics is recruitment of educators who question the tendency to punish through exclusion and humiliation and see themselves as advocates of children, not as wardens and prison guards. Without this approach, the drive to punish will be difficult to reverse.

RESOURCES

William Ayers, Rick Ayers, and Bernardine Dohm. 2001. *Zero Tolerance: Resisting the Drive for Punishment*. New York: The New Press.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** For what sorts of behaviors are students in your school punished? Does discipline in your school often take the form of humiliation or exclusion, as Noguera suggests? Does such discipline disproportionately affect students of color?
2. **Strategy:** What sorts of alternative disciplinary strategies have you seen reconnect students to the benefits of learning?
3. **Try tomorrow:** Think of a student you often discipline, or see disciplined. How might you and other educators at your school reconnect that student to the learning experience?

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