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Instructional Improvements Can Help Close the Racial Discipline Gap, Study Finds

By Madeline Will on July 28, 2016 3:58 PM

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Personalized professional development in instructional improvement can lead to reduced and more equitable disciplinary referrals—posing a possible solution to the racial discipline gap in schools, where black students are more frequently and more severely punished for the same infractions as their non-black peers.

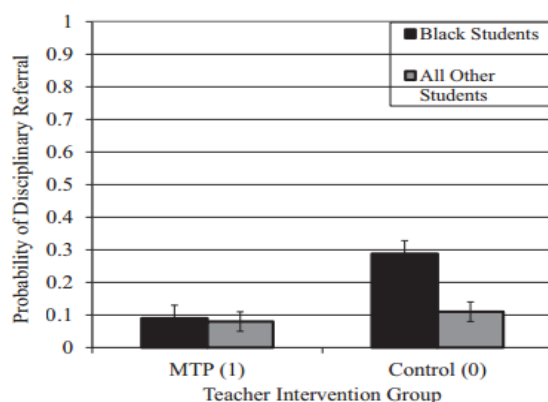
That's the conclusion of **a new study** published in the June issue of the *School Psychology Review* and conducted by researchers from the University of Virginia, Rutgers University, and the University of British Columbia. The study looked at 86 middle and high school teachers from five Virginia schools in a randomized controlled trial that examined the effects of a two-year teacher-coaching program. (The teachers were unaware of the study's purpose.)

The researchers had previously found that one year of teacher coaching closed the gap in office discipline referrals between black students and students of all other racial and ethnic groups, while the gap was maintained in the control teachers' classrooms. The researchers wanted to see if the positive effects would continue for a second year, when the teachers had a new group of students, and if the effects would be maintained the year after the program's conclusion.

Interestingly, the teacher coaching did not explicitly focus on equity or implicit bias, or draw teachers' attention to their interactions with black students—it was focused on skills in effectively interacting with any student. The 86 teachers in the intervention group had the ongoing, personalized coaching, and feedback for two years. Meanwhile, 52 percent of the teachers in the control group did not receive even routine mentoring.

During the entire second year of the experiment, teachers who were in the coaching program issued up to eight disciplinary office referrals to students in their classroom. By contrast, teachers in the control group issued up to 12 referrals. Significantly, the intervention teachers had a lower use of disciplinary referrals for black students, whereas black students in the control teachers' classrooms were more than two times more likely to be issued a referral compared with non-black students.

Figure 1. Probability of Disciplinary Referral in Year 2



In the post-intervention year, when the teachers were no longer receiving coaching, the intervention teachers still had no evidence of a racial discipline gap in their classrooms, in contrast to the control teachers.

The findings held when accounting for risk factors including students' achievement levels, gender, economic status, and teacher characteristics like race and experience. (The teachers in the intervention group had an average of 9.4 years of teaching experience and their racial-ethnic composition was 56 percent white and 33 percent black.)

A great deal has been written about racial disparities in school discipline—studies have found that students of color are disciplined and taken out of class at higher rates than their white peers, and that black students are more likely to be punished for subjective offenses like "defiance." A Stanford study published last year **found that teachers recommend more severe punishments** for black students with a pattern of minor misbehavior than for white students with the same disciplinary record.

This study concluded that the racial discipline gap closes when teachers' instruction improves—"the degree to which teachers were observed as facilitating higher level thinking skills, problem solving, and metacognition was significantly linked to their equitable and infrequent use of

discipline referrals," the researchers wrote. Students are more engaged when instruction is high quality and when teachers have high expectations for achievement, the study noted.

"A proactive, prevention-oriented approach to discipline, therefore, is a means to reduce racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline," the authors wrote.

For more on racial discipline gaps and other signs of bias in schools, check out *Education Week's* special year-long project, "[Beyond Bias: Countering Stereotypes in School.](#)"

Source: Chart from the paper "Closing the Racial Discipline Gap in Classrooms by Changing Teacher Practice, published in *School Psychology Review*

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