

Seen Without (in)Sight

This CRT counterstory exemplifies the inherently racialized nature of school discipline in a middle school context where school and district staff contentiously strategize to address the persistent discipline gap between Black and white students. The story is guided by CRT tenets, particularly the intercentricity of race and racism, the challenge to dominant ideology, and the commitment to social justice. The intercentricity of race and racism and challenge to dominant ideology are centered in the explication of the taken-for-granted assumptions of Black youth who are often characterized by school staff as students that don't care about learning and labeled as "frequent flyers," which obscures the punitive, social reproductive function of schools while blaming students and families for their marginalized status. This story also demonstrates the CRT tenet of commitment to social justice by emphasizing the need for interventions such as Restorative Justice to counteract the anti-Blackness that pervades American schools.

Walking down the hallway of Truman Middle School in her usual upbeat stride, Principal Emily Peterson locked her eyes onto DeShawn Adams, a Black male seventh-grade student, who was seated by himself playing with a fidget spinner outside the gym. Principal Peterson walked over and asked in a sympathetic tone, "What's going on DeShawn? Why are you sitting outside of your class today?" DeShawn paused, shrugged his shoulders, and without making eye contact replied, "I don't know. Some kids started shoving and stuff during the game and I'm the one that got in trouble. It's like the teacher only sees me."

"I'll be right back," Principal Peterson said as she entered the gym. Inside the gym, Mr. Bradley, the physical education teacher of over 25 years, was monitoring the seventh-grade girls and boys who were playing basketball on both ends of the court. Ms. Peterson approached Mr. Bradley, "Good afternoon, Mr. Bradley. Why is DeShawn sitting outside of class again?" Mr. Bradley sighed and remarked matter-of-factly, "He doesn't know

how to act and doesn't want to be here." Without missing a beat, Principal Peterson retorted, "Well, have you tried talking to him?"

"Of course, I've tried to talk to him, but he's too aggressive and it ruins the fun for the rest of the kids," Mr. Bradley said as he gestured to the kids on the court shooting the ball, running around laughing, and playing. "I'm sure DeShawn would like to have fun, too," Principal Peterson said with a smile to ease the tension now bubbling to the surface. Mr. Bradley, hoping to end the conversation, remarked without emotion, "I'm sure DeShawn would like a lot of things, but he needs to learn consequences so that he thinks before he acts."

This wasn't the first time Principal Peterson had conversations with Mr. Bradley and her staff about DeShawn's behavior and their interactions with other Black students, particularly Black boys. She noticed that during her eight-year tenure as Principal at Truman Middle School, the Black students at her school were consistently disciplined at higher rates and currently had a 338 percent greater likelihood of being suspended than their white peers. Principal Peterson recognized that this data reflected deeply entrenched racial biases, but she also told herself and others, "We are more than these numbers, but they're telling us something: We have students that we just haven't figured out how to support yet." In response to the persistent inequities in discipline and academic outcomes, the district superintendent set up a meeting with Principal Peterson and Truman staff a few weeks later to discuss the short-term and long-term plans for supporting Black students.

Superintendent Barbara Williams, Ed.D.¹ and Steven Connor, the district's Chief of Schools, arrived in the early morning to meet in the Truman Middle School conference room with Principal Peterson and a select group of teachers and staff,

¹ The aforementioned story was based on a news article I read in which a Minnesota Superintendent of schools chose to take drastic measures (such as the moratorium on suspensions for students in pre-K through first grade for nonviolent offenses) to address the rampant racial disparities in the disciplining of Black students (Green, 2018). I was struck by the backlash that ensued as a result of the Superintendent's policies that were implemented to increase racial equity. Consequently, I infused some of the tensions into the story, along with comments and concerns that I have heard while working with school teachers and staff to implement Restorative Justice policies and practices.

including Mr. Bradley, to voice concerns and strategize to address the ongoing racialized discipline gaps.

Principal Peterson began the meeting:

I would like to welcome Superintendent Barbara Williams, and the District Chief of Schools, Steven Connor to Truman Middle School. We are here to discuss issues related to school discipline and specifically, the racial disparities that disproportionately impact our Black students. As you all know, Dr. Williams and her team have already implemented a moratorium on suspensions across the district for students in pre-K through first grade for nonviolent offenses. We are hopeful that we can help develop and implement additional policy and procedural changes to better support our Black students here at Truman Middle School.

Dr. Williams, a stern and astute Black woman, introduced herself and got right to business:

Hello everyone, I am Superintendent Barbara Williams and I am not here to sugarcoat this dire situation. Our schools are in crisis. Particularly, there is a crisis of consciousness, the difference and dissonance between what we profess to know and how we choose to act. In the case of school discipline, we know there are disparities that persist, but our actions have yet to fundamentally change this circumstance.”

District Chief of Schools, Steven Connor, chimed in:

We’re at a tipping point, and that’s what you see in the schools. Last month, our state Department of Human Rights notified 43 school districts and charter schools that suspension rates for nonviolent offenses still suggested widespread discriminatory practices.

Dr. Williams continued:

Nationally, Black students are suspended three times as often as their white peers, and here in our state, it is eight times as often. This grim reality is highly contingent upon the poverty gap between Blacks and whites, which exceeds the national average, along with the rapid increase in our state’s minority population over the last decade.

Mr. Bradley, sitting at the conference table next to a few of his colleagues, remarked:

Yes, I've been here at Truman for over 25 years and our school is changing for the worse. We're having a lot more behavior problems, especially now that teachers are scrutinized for every referral and suspension.

A few teachers and staff nodded and murmured to each other. Dr. Williams followed:

Which brings me to my next point. As you can see from your experience as well as the statistics, referrals and suspensions are not working for our students. It is doing more harm than good to reduce students' instruction time.

Visibly perturbed, Mr. Bradley argued:

Well now our school is in chaos. Kids know they aren't going home so they are more defiant, less responsive to my commands. It's so bad now that I feel like I have to let most things go.

Ms. Peterson thought about DeShawn and asked, "Mr. Bradley, can you tell us why you would have a student like DeShawn removed from class?" Mr. Bradley explained, "He's a frequent flyer.² I can't have a student like that always disrupting the class

² This story is undergirded by CRT tenets including intercentricity of race and racism, the challenge to dominant ideology, and the commitment to social justice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The intercentricity of race and racism and challenge to dominant ideology are centered in the explication of the taken-for-granted assumptions of Black youth who school staff often characterize as students that don't care about learning (Harper & Davis, 2012) and label as "frequent flyers" (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016), which obscures the punitive, social reproductive function of schools while blaming students and families for their marginalized status.

For example, Kennedy-Lewis and Murphy's (2016) study explored the experiences and perspectives of "persistently disciplined" elementary and middle school students. The researchers were guided by two main research questions: "How do these students' accounts of their academic and discipline histories reveal their experiences with being labeled a 'bad kid'? How do they experience educators' responses to them in the process?" (p. 3). This study was intentionally positioned to highlight the voices of students who are labeled as "frequent flyers" to assess the potential impact of such a label in relation to the students' internalized sense of identity and self-efficacy.

or else the other students think they can act the same way. We need real discipline.”

Ms. Camila Garcia, an eighth-grade social studies teacher, mentioned, “Discipline is a loaded term. It can mean different things to different people. Are we talking about discipline as helping to empower students in making positive choices or discipline as control?” Dr. Williams cut to the point, “When people have kids around them that don’t look like them, they want them controlled.” Mr. Bradley responded incredulously, “I don’t think we’re racist, if that’s what you mean.” Ms. Garcia clarified:

You don’t have to be a racist to enact racially discriminatory policies and practices, but systemic racism does have a lot to do with it. Our conversations have to be about a mistake that a child made, not something that’s wrong with them. If students are demonstrating behaviors that are not aligned with our policy, it’s our job to figure out why.

Dr. Williams added:

Yes, our policies and practices are the issue, not the students. Let’s consider two main areas of change: discipline and curriculum. I’ve already had conversations with Ms. Peterson

The racial composition of the study sample seemed purposely aligned with the literature that reveals highly disproportionate school discipline practices targeting African American students. The researchers noted, “For instance, African American students are three and a half times as likely to get suspended for the same first offense as White students, are more likely to be repeatedly sanctioned and receive harsher sanctions than their White peers for similar behaviors” (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016, p. 3). Additionally, “Ninety-one percent of out-of-school suspensions were given to Black students” (p. 8). Race is shown to play a central role in the experiences of marginalization among students of color, yet the researchers noted, “While exclusionary discipline and the labeling of ‘bad kids’ disproportionately affects students of color, we did not ask students about the role of race in their labeling, and they did not bring it up with us” (p. 28). As with so much of mainstream social science research, it is concerning that race was not centered in this study even though race is identified as highly salient in the findings. This begs the question of how much is missing in the analysis when eliding the impacts of racism on the internalized perceptions of a predominantly African American student sample. Hence the need for a theoretical lens with an explicitly counterhegemonic analytical frame, such as CRT, to inform the research design and data analysis of a study that is constructed to elucidate the racialized experiences of Black students.

about revisions to the curriculum that are on the way. Ms. Peterson, would you please tell everyone a little bit about it?³

Ms. Peterson replied as she looked around at her staff:

Yes, this year we've begun curriculum changes that require teachers to reflect on their own identities and how they are adjusting to serve a more diverse student population. I think we have to challenge our own biases every day. I know some teachers aren't ready, and some teachers need more time. But I'm telling you that we're not going to give up on students, and I'm not going to give up on you.

Dr. Williams replied:

Thank you, Ms. Peterson. We will be following up with you and your staff to assess the ongoing impact of the new curriculum and to ensure it aligns with state standards. Regarding discipline, Mr. Connor, please explain the potential use of Restorative Justice tools and techniques as an intervention and alternative to traditional, punitive discipline practices.⁴

³ According to hooks (1994), education designed to shift hegemonic ideologies and social structures requires a shift in curricula and pedagogy. Engaged pedagogy centers a holistic approach to well-being, is culturally relevant, supports student voice, empowers students and teachers, and transforms the biases that are embedded in the curriculum (pp. 13-22). In this way, pedagogy and curriculum are developed to intentionally uplift the dignity and worth of all students. Vaandering (2010) asserts that engaged pedagogy also "leads to a transformed classroom, which in turn will lead to transformed lives that extend beyond the classroom" (p. 161). Ultimately, the effectiveness of RJ and engaged pedagogical frameworks is based on the underlying philosophy that guides the implementation and whether the intended effect is social reproduction through social control, or collective liberation through dialogic consciousness-raising and praxis.

⁴ This story highlights the CRT tenet of the commitment to social justice by emphasizing the need for Restorative Justice to counteract the anti-Blackness that pervades American schools. The National Centre for Restorative Approaches in Youth Settings defines RJ:

. . . an innovative approach to offending and inappropriate behavior which puts repairing harm done to relationships and people over and above the need for assigning blame and dispensing punishment. A restorative approach in a school shifts the emphasis from managing behavior to focusing on the building, nurturing and repairing of relationships. (Hopkins, 2002, p. 147)

Mr. Bradley interjected under his breath before Mr. Connor responded, “Oh, here we go again.” Mr. Connor said, “Excuse me, did you have something to say?” Mr. Bradley stammered, “Well, no . . . I mean yes.” Mr. Bradley responded more confidently than ever:

I’ve heard of RJ and it doesn’t work. Here’s another training to get us all emotional, talking about feelings. All that touchy-feely Kumbaya new-age nonsense. If the kids don’t want to act right, if they don’t want to be here, that’s their parents’ issue, not mine.

Dr. Williams plainly remarked:

Each and every one of us has the responsibility to meet these kids where they are; to truly see them and their experiences with compassionate insight. So, Mr. Bradley, if you don’t want to get on board with helping all of our students succeed, if you don’t want to be here, that’s your issue, not mine.

The meeting continued with Mr. Bradley silently sulking in his seat. Mr. Connor explained the conceptual elements that underlie Restorative Justice praxis and additional plans were made to implement staff and teacher trainings by the next school year. Mr. Bradley retired before the curriculum and discipline changes went into effect. Ms. Peterson is hopeful that the changes will make lasting improvements to school climate and the experiences of Black students. DeShawn went into the eighth grade never having to deal with Mr. Bradley again. Yet DeShawn and many like him are still dealing with being seen as the perennial problem—seen without insight into who they are or the critical understanding and care to address the real problem of systemic racism.

Conclusion

Restorative Justice (RJ) can be viewed as an approach that helps keep students in school by cultivating and sustaining relationships among students and staff, which allows for restorative responses to the deeper causes of behavioral issues. Yet, as the Mr. Bradley character signified, some educators and stakeholders are resistant to RJ because it can be perceived as

being “too soft” on student misbehavior (Evans & Lester, 2013). Some researchers also suggest shifting attitudes away from the use of punitive discipline may take one to three years (Karp & Breslin, 2001), and the more substantive shift to a restorative school climate may take up to three to five years (Evans & Lester, 2013). This timing requires that the RJ program is financially sustained, which underscores the importance of considering the resources and timeframe that are necessary to introduce RJ in a particular school or district.

In addition to the various challenges of RJ implementation, there are also limits to its potential to address the underlying, endemic causes of disproportionate disciplining in schools. Irby (2014) contends, “Even restorative approaches have limits if and when restorative work restores students to academic and social contexts that are fundamentally flawed by inequitable access to educational opportunities” (p. 520). Educational opportunities are structured by a hegemonic social order that normalizes disparities and lack of support in key areas such as funding (Ladson-Billings, 2006), critical race and anti-oppressive curriculum (Kumashiro, 2000; Yosso, 2002), and empowering collaborations with students, families, and communities (Armour, 2013). Disproportionate disciplining perpetuates these inequitable schooling experiences and the subordinated status of historically marginalized students by sustaining deficit perspectives and implicit biases, along with the concomitant violence of discriminatory treatment and lowered expectations that hinder life outcomes (Meiners, 2007).

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