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Through MTSS, Empathic Discipline Program Can Mitigate Racial Disparities in Suspension Rates

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# Research Consortium

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A photograph of four women in a meeting. One woman is seated at a table with a laptop, while three others stand around her, looking at the screen. They appear to be in a professional or educational setting.

## Through MTSS, Empathic Discipline Program Can Mitigate Racial Disparities in Suspension Rates

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## SUMMARY

Research and practice highlight the need for fewer student behavior problems in schools and the need for more equitable disciplinary outcomes. The empathic discipline program is an intervention for teachers that is designed to mitigate the consequences of bias on their students' education outcomes, namely exclusionary discipline. The present research tested whether the empathic discipline program could be implemented through MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support) networks in a large and diverse school district and whether it could mitigate yearlong suspension rates. As compared to control conditions, the empathic discipline program meaningfully reduced yearlong suspension rates and mitigated racial disparities in them. Implications and recommendations are discussed.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over the last two decades, there has been an explosion of behavioral science approaches to solve societal issues and mitigate inequities. While we have learned a great deal about bias and how it may contribute to these inequities, recent analyses show a sobering lack of effectiveness in controlling these biases or to “de-bias” individuals.

With this development, a new “sidelining bias” approach has been offered to focus less on bias in the individual and more on becoming architects of contexts to create spaces where bias is rendered dysfunctional and its negative consequences attenuated in societal outcomes. Sidelining bias involves elevating individuals' context-based (e.g., professional) goals in a way that bias would be an impediment. While this new approach has been proven to produce large and lasting mitigation in inequity, it is less clear when and where such an approach can be effective. Circumstances can differ a great deal; under which situations is it possible for professional goals to override stubborn influences of bias?

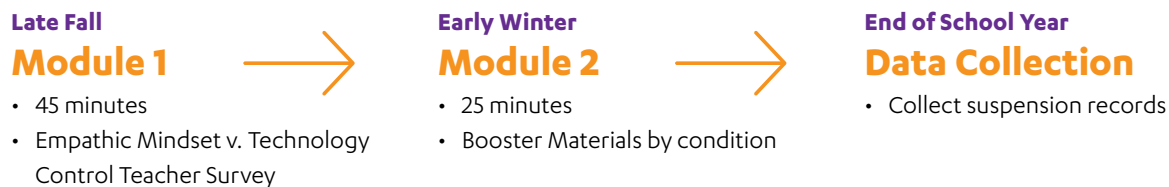
There has been a serious reckoning in social sciences to generate reproducible findings. Scientists have emphasized that a promising solution is a focus on heterogeneity, that is, the determination of factors needed for applied science (e.g., narrowing mindsets toward equity in education outcomes) to not only be replicable but also effective in real world contexts like K-12 schools. Indeed, scientists and practitioners alike seek to catalog contextual “affordances” and limitations to the practical use of science-based solutions to societal issues (Bryan, Tipton, & Yeager, 2021; Walton & Yeager, 2020).

Empathic discipline is an example of a sidelining bias approach that seeks to address disparities in school discipline. In the United States, Black students are three times more likely than their peers to receive exclusionary discipline that removes them from the learning environment and increases the likelihood of long-term negative consequences (e.g., underemployment and incarceration). Scientists have shown that bias may contribute to this disparity. Namely, teachers and principals are more likely to view a misbehaving Black, as compared to white, student as a troublemaker and want more severe discipline. The empathic discipline intervention elevates teachers' professional goals to help and support all of their students. This, in turn, reduces risk of discipline problems for all their students and mitigates racial and other disparities in them (Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016; Okonofua, Goyer, Lindsay, Haugabrook, & Walton, 2022). The current research asks under what circumstances might this approach be effective.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

The empathic discipline program was designed for scalability from the onset. Namely, the intervention is provided online so that teachers can participate anywhere with internet access. To ease logistical pressure, each of the two modules takes less than 40 minutes to complete. Teachers can participate during typical professional development sessions with MTSS or during teachers' preparation periods. It is also possible to provide participation windows (e.g., one month) when teachers can participate at their leisure. Finally, school discipline records are collected at the end of the school year to determine the efficacy of the program (See **Figure 1**).

**Figure 1. Empathic Discipline program schedule for academic year consisting of three steps: Module 1, Module 2, and Data Collection**



### Module 1

The first module was completed during the fall semester. Teachers were welcomed into the online program and read articles that described nonpejorative reasons students sometimes misbehave in class and how trusting relationships with teachers can facilitate students' growth.

Sample: *"Social and biological changes of adolescence can make middle school students insecure.... Worries can cause students to experience stress, to overreact, and sometimes to disengage from school."*

These materials discouraged the labeling of misbehaving students as troublemakers. Instead of such labeling, the materials encouraged teachers to understand and value students' experiences and negative feelings that can cause misbehavior and to sustain positive relationships when students misbehave. Teachers were reminded that "a teacher who makes his or her students feel heard, valued, and respected shows them that school is fair, and they can grow and succeed there." These ideas were reinforced through stories from students.

Sample: *"One day I got detention, and instead of just sitting there, my teacher talked with me about what happened. He really listened to me.... It felt good to know I had someone I could trust in school."*

Last, teachers wrote how they incorporate or could incorporate these ideas in their own practice.

### Module 2

The second module was completed during the winter/spring semester. Teachers were reminded that "students' feelings about and behavior in school can and do improve when teachers successfully convey the care and respect students crave." They reviewed a story from a current teacher who described a former teacher of hers who had eased her worries about mistreatment by showing her respect and how she tried to convey the same respect to her students. Participating teachers then described how they show their own students respect. Teachers also had their students complete surveys during this module that assessed broad perceptions of the school climate.

### Data Collection

The school district provided school records for all students of teachers who participated in the program. The primary outcome was lower yearlong suspension rates during the academic year when the program was implemented, while controlling for suspension rates the academic year before the program was introduced.

## STUDY OVERVIEW

The program was tested in a randomized placebo-controlled field experiment such that analyses could determine the efficacy of the program compared to a control condition. Half of math teachers at the school were assigned to receive the empathic-discipline intervention, while the other half of participating teachers were assigned to receive similar materials but that focused on how technology use could improve student engagement.

The empathic discipline program was implemented in 20 schools across 17 cities in one of the 20 largest school districts in the United States through the district's MTSS. The MTSS specialists served as school facilitators responsible for introducing the program and monitoring

participation at each school. The final sample consisted of 66 teachers of 5,822 students (16.5% Black; 14.7% Hispanic; 57.8% white; 6.2% Asian; 0.003% American Indian; 4.5% two or more races; 49.4% female; average age, 13.05;  $SD=0.66$ ).

For some analyses, we used a full sample that included a comparison group (passive control) of students who did not have a teacher in the program.

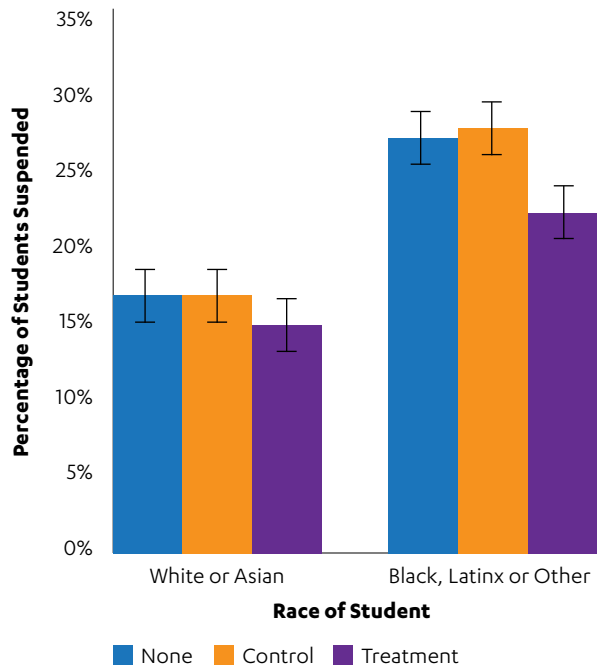
**The primary research question was whether the program, as compared to an active control condition (technology use to improve student engagement), meaningfully reduced overall yearlong suspension rates and mitigated racial disparities in them.**



## FINDINGS

The empathic discipline program **meaningfully reduced yearlong suspension rates** by 2.4 percentage points and **mitigated racial disparities in suspensions** by 45% (reduction of 5.6 percentage points).

**Figure 1. Interaction of condition (Empathic Discipline v. Control v. No condition assignment) for middle school math teachers (n=175) and middle school students' (n=13,210) race on likelihood to be suspended during the academic year of the intervention.** "Other" includes American Indian or students who reported two or more races. Error bars reflect standard error.



## CONCLUSION

These findings inform policy that pertains to the capacity for MTSS to be a vehicle for improvement in student misbehavior and school disciplinary action. For policy, these findings suggest that MTSS can effectively implement an empathic discipline program across many schools and by doing so can reduce discipline problems for all students and mitigate racial disparities in those suspension rates. Further, the findings from the comparison (control) groups indicate that the default mindset is a punitive one that contributes to high rates of exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspensions that remove students from the learning environment).

## LIMITATIONS

### Structural

While the present research was conducted in a large and diverse sample, it was a single school district. This district's policies and structures were consistent for the entire sample. Thus, it is not possible to determine how well empathic discipline will work in other districts with other policies and structures in place. Future research should be employed in various school districts to determine whether the program requires adaptations to be effective in different settings.

### Entry Points

The present research was also conducted solely with middle school math teachers. Thus, the findings may not extend to implementation at other grade levels (i.e., elementary school or high school) or with other teachers (e.g., science teachers, ELA teachers, school leaders). Future research should test the empathic discipline program at other grade levels and with other teachers or school leaders to determine its effectiveness with these different kinds of implementation.

### Outcomes

The primary outcome in the present research was lower yearlong suspension rates, but benefits may extend to other outcomes of interest. The empathic discipline program leverages empathy from adults at school as a means to reduce discipline problems. The increased empathy may also lead to improvements in academic and social-emotional learning. When teachers show students more empathy, students may feel more comfortable and more motivated to perform well. Students may also learn more productive ways to navigate relationships with adults throughout their education. Future research should consider academic and social-emotional development outcomes in addition to behavioral ones.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Put systems and structures in place—ideally through MTSS—to provide teachers an opportunity to get to know and build meaningful relationships with students.
- Develop more scalable mindset interventions like empathic discipline that can be implemented through typical professional development schedules.
- Regularly analyze suspension rates to determine triumphs and challenges with implementation programs to mitigate discipline problems and disparities.
- Determine contextual factors that provide affordances for an empathic discipline to be effective (e.g., support from district and school leaders).
- Consider methods to strategically integrate mindset approaches (i.e., empathic discipline) with structural (e.g., PBIS, Restorative Practices) and skill-building (e.g., Cultural Competency) approaches to mitigate discipline problems and to sustain the mitigation (*Okonofua, Perez, & Darling-Hammond, 2020*).



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