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Advancing Equity: A DEI Framework for Reducing Disciplinary Disparities in Middle Schools

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Advancing Equity: A DEI Framework for Reducing Disciplinary Disparities in Middle Schools

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Abstract

This capstone project examines systemic disparities in disciplinary practices at an independent private middle school and proposes a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) intervention to address these inequities. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Restorative Justice (RJ), the project identifies root causes of disparities, including implicit bias, inconsistent policy enforcement, and cultural misunderstandings, which disproportionately affect Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. The intervention includes a policy guide, professional development workshops, and restorative practices, such as restorative circles and community advisory councils, to build staff cultural competence and foster inclusive relationships. Data-driven decision-making and equity audits are employed to ensure ongoing improvement and accountability. By addressing systemic inequities and interpersonal dynamics, this project offers a replicable framework to reduce disciplinary disparities and promote an equitable and culturally responsive school environment.

Introduction

Disparities in disciplinary practices within schools disproportionately affect students from marginalized backgrounds, including Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. These inequities hinder academic achievement and perpetuate systemic barriers, reinforcing cycles of social disadvantage and contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2020). Research highlights those exclusionary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, are often applied more

frequently and harshly to students of color, even for comparable infractions to their peers (Gregory et al., 2021).

Addressing these disparities is particularly critical in independent private middle schools, where disciplinary inequities reflect broader societal challenges in education. As institutions with a commitment to holistic development, these schools are uniquely positioned to lead efforts in creating equitable environments. However, achieving this requires intentional interventions that address both systemic and interpersonal contributors to inequities.

This capstone project explores the central research question: *How can a comprehensive Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) intervention program, tailored for middle schools, reduce disciplinary disparities among marginalized student groups while promoting cultural responsiveness among school staff?* The proposed intervention integrates a robust policy guide alongside professional development workshops designed to enhance cultural competency, mitigate implicit biases, and ensure consistency in implementing equitable discipline practices.

Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Restorative Justice (RJ), the initiative addresses both the systemic and interpersonal dimensions of inequitable discipline. CRT provides a lens for analyzing institutional racism, while RJ emphasizes non-punitive strategies to repair harm, foster community, and build relationships (Zehr, 2015). By emphasizing root cause analysis, cultural responsiveness, and evidence-based strategies, this project aims to serve as a replicable model for promoting equity, inclusion, and justice in education.

Problem Statement and Root Cause Analysis

Disparities in school disciplinary practices disproportionately affect students from marginalized groups, including Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. These inequities are not isolated incidents, but systemic patterns rooted in historical and structural biases within the education system. Punitive measures, such as suspensions and expulsions, disproportionately target students of color, often for subjective or minor infractions, contributing to educational and social inequities, including the school-to-prison pipeline (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2020).

Research shows that implicit biases among educators exacerbate these disparities, with behaviors by Black and Latinx students often misinterpreted as defiance or disrespect (Aronson & Laughter, 2020; Skiba et al., 2021). Additionally, inconsistent policy enforcement and the cultural disconnect between staff and students reinforce these inequities, creating adversarial school climates and eroding trust. Independent private middle schools, despite their autonomy, face similar challenges, as their practices often reflect broader societal inequities. Addressing these disparities requires identifying the root causes and implementing systemic, equity-centered reforms.

Inconsistent Application of Disciplinary Policies

The absence of clear, standardized guidelines for disciplinary practices exacerbates inequities. In many schools, disciplinary decisions are left to individual interpretation, which amplifies the influence of implicit biases. For example, a study by Gregory et al. (2020) found that schools with vague policies disproportionately penalize students of

color, as staff rely on subjective judgment rather than consistent protocols. The lack of uniformity in addressing infractions often results in students from marginalized groups receiving harsher consequences for similar behaviors exhibited by their peers.

Moreover, schools that implement zero-tolerance policies further reinforce these disparities. These policies, which mandate strict consequences for specific infractions, fail to account for the contextual factors influencing student behavior. Research has shown that zero-tolerance approaches disproportionately impact marginalized students and contribute to increased dropout rates, exacerbating the cycle of disadvantage (Mallett, 2016).

Addressing the Root Causes

Addressing disciplinary disparities requires a multifaceted approach. Implicit bias training helps educators reflect on and mitigate unconscious biases, with research by Staats (2020) showing measurable reductions in disparities when paired with ongoing professional development. Policy reform is also critical. Clear and equitable disciplinary guidelines, such as restorative justice practices like mediation and restorative circles, reduce exclusionary discipline while fostering stronger school relationships (Zehr, 2015). Equally important is fostering cultural responsiveness among educators. Professional development programs emphasizing cultural competence enable teachers to value students' diverse identities, creating more inclusive environments. Schools adopting these practices see improved engagement and reduced behavioral incidents (Gay, 2022).

By addressing implicit biases, enacting equitable policies, and promoting cultural responsiveness, independent private middle schools can create environments where all students thrive. Such evidence-based interventions not only reduce disparities but also foster a culture of inclusion, mutual respect, and systemic change.

Literature Review

A substantial body of research underscores the critical need for equitable discipline practices in educational settings, particularly to address the systemic disparities that disproportionately impact marginalized student groups. These disparities, rooted in historical and institutional inequities, necessitate interventions informed by theoretical frameworks and evidence-based strategies.

Culturally Responsive Frameworks

Culturally responsive frameworks effectively reduce disciplinary disparities by aligning practices with students' cultural contexts. Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) found that schools implementing these frameworks observed significant decreases in referrals among students of color. Gay (2010) emphasizes that integrating students' cultural backgrounds enhances engagement and reduces behavioral issues.

Recent research reaffirms the importance of cultural responsiveness. Aronson and Laughter (2020) highlight its dual impact on reducing discipline disparities and improving academic outcomes for marginalized students, underscoring the need for ongoing professional development to equip educators with the skills to implement these practices effectively.

The Role of Critical Race Theory in Education

Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines systemic inequities in educational policies and practices, offering a framework to reimagine discipline through a lens of institutional racism. Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced CRT to education, emphasizing the need to challenge dominant narratives and center marginalized voices.

Recent research underscores CRT's relevance in addressing disciplinary disparities. Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison (2017) highlight how CRT reveals the racialized nature of discipline policies and provides actionable insights for reform, emphasizing the importance of involving students, families, and communities in culturally informed decision-making.

Restorative Justice as an Alternative to Punitive Discipline

Restorative Justice (RJ) offers a complementary approach to CRT, emphasizing accountability, reconciliation, and community building. Unlike punitive disciplinary measures, which often exclude students from the learning environment, RJ focuses on repairing harm and fostering understanding among stakeholders. Zehr (2002) underscores the importance of shifting from a punitive paradigm to one that values relationships and collective responsibility.

Recent evidence suggests that RJ practices significantly reduce exclusionary discipline and improve school climate. González (2015) found that schools implementing restorative circles experienced lower suspension rates and increased student engagement.

Moreover, Kline (2020) highlights that RJ fosters stronger relationships between students and staff, creating a supportive environment that prioritizes mutual respect and empathy.

Intersectionality in Disciplinary Disparities

The intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic status plays a critical role in shaping disciplinary outcomes. Black girls, for example, are often disciplined at higher rates than their peers due to stereotypes and biases that label them as disruptive or defiant (Morris, 2016). Addressing these disparities requires an intersectional approach that considers how multiple forms of marginalization interact to influence student experiences.

Recent research by Blake et al. (2021) reinforces the importance of intersectionality in addressing disciplinary inequities. Their study found that culturally informed interventions that account for students' intersecting identities are more effective in reducing disparities and fostering inclusivity.

Gaps in the Literature and Future Directions

While the existing literature provides valuable insights, several gaps remain. For instance, there is limited research on the long-term impact of culturally responsive and restorative practices in independent private middle schools. Additionally, more studies are needed to explore how these interventions can be adapted to the unique contexts of religiously affiliated institutions, such as Catholic schools. Future research should also investigate the role of community partnerships in sustaining equitable discipline practices.

The literature highlights the critical need for culturally responsive and restorative approaches to discipline, informed by frameworks such as CRT and intersectionality. By addressing the systemic and interpersonal dimensions of disciplinary disparities, these strategies offer a pathway for creating inclusive and equitable educational environments. This project builds on these insights, integrating evidence-based practices to develop a replicable model for reducing disciplinary disparities in independent private middle schools.

Historical and Current Contexts

The systemic disparities in school disciplinary practices have deep historical roots and persist in contemporary educational settings, disproportionately affecting students from marginalized communities. Understanding these contexts is essential for designing interventions that address both the historical and current dimensions of inequity.

Historical Context

Inequitable disciplinary practices in the U.S. are rooted in broader systemic racial and social inequality. Historically, schools reflected societal power dynamics, with Black students disproportionately punished for minor infractions during the era of segregation, a trend that continues today (Blake et al., 2021). The implementation of **zero-tolerance policies** in the 1990s further exacerbated disparities by disproportionately targeting marginalized students for subjective behaviors like “defiance” (Mallett, 2016).

Current Context

Despite increased awareness, **disparities in discipline** persist. Data from the **U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2020)** shows Black students are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than White students for similar behaviors. Implicit biases and cultural misunderstandings further compound these disparities, particularly in private schools where oversight may be limited (Aronson & Laughter, 2020). The growing resistance to **Critical Race Theory** and **DEI programs** also creates challenges in addressing these inequities, underscoring the need for evidence-based interventions.

Institutional Dynamics and Organizational Factors

Independent private middle schools, such as the one examined in this project, face unique organizational challenges and opportunities when addressing disciplinary disparities. These factors ranging from institutional culture to staff training and resource allocation play a critical role in shaping disciplinary practices and outcomes. Understanding these organizational dynamics is essential for designing and implementing effective Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) interventions.

Institutional Culture and Leadership

The culture of an institution often reflects its values, priorities, and approaches to discipline. In many independent private schools, including religiously affiliated institutions, a commitment to holistic education is emphasized, yet disciplinary practices may still reflect broader systemic inequities. For example, subjective interpretations of student behavior, influenced by implicit biases, can lead to inconsistent disciplinary actions (Gregory et al., 2020).

Leadership within the school is a significant driver of organizational culture.

Administrators and principals set the tone for how discipline is approached, whether through punitive or restorative practices. Schools with leadership that prioritizes equity and inclusion are more likely to adopt culturally responsive and restorative frameworks. Conversely, leadership that lacks commitment to DEI principles may inadvertently perpetuate disparities by upholding traditional, exclusionary approaches to discipline.

Staff Training and Professional Development

A key organizational factor contributing to disciplinary disparities is the lack of comprehensive training for staff. Educators and administrators often receive minimal instruction in addressing implicit biases or implementing culturally responsive strategies. This gap in professional development leaves staff ill-equipped to interpret student behaviors within cultural contexts, leading to punitive measures that disproportionately impact marginalized students (Aronson & Laughter, 2020).

Effective DEI interventions require ongoing, evidence-based professional development that equips staff with the tools to foster an inclusive environment. Workshops on topics such as implicit bias, cultural responsiveness, and restorative justice are critical for ensuring that staff can implement equitable disciplinary practices consistently and effectively (Staats, 2020).

Disciplinary Policies and Practices

The structure and enforcement of disciplinary policies are another critical organizational factor. In many independent schools, policies are shaped by tradition and institutional

autonomy, often lacking the oversight and standardization present in public school systems. As a result, disciplinary practices may vary widely across classrooms and staff members, contributing to inequities (Skiba et al., 2021).

Policies that emphasize zero-tolerance approaches exacerbate these disparities by applying rigid consequences without considering contextual factors. Schools that adopt restorative practices, however, have seen reductions in disciplinary disparities and improved school climates (Zehr, 2015). Establishing clear, standardized, and restorative policies is essential for addressing inequities within the organization.

Resource Allocation

Resource allocation significantly impacts a school's ability to address disciplinary disparities. Schools with limited budgets may struggle to invest in DEI initiatives, including professional development and restorative practices. Additionally, small staff sizes can limit the availability of counselors, mentors, and other support systems critical for addressing student needs.

However, independent schools often have greater autonomy in allocating resources compared to public schools. This flexibility presents an opportunity to prioritize equity-focused initiatives, such as hiring DEI specialists, implementing restorative justice programs, and enhancing professional development for staff.

Stakeholder Engagement

Engaging stakeholders, including students, parents, and community members, is vital for addressing organizational factors that contribute to disciplinary disparities. Schools that foster open communication and collaboration with stakeholders are more likely to develop policies and practices that reflect the needs and values of their communities. Community Advisory Councils, as proposed in this project, provide a platform for diverse voices to inform decision-making processes and ensure accountability in implementing equitable practices.

Addressing organizational factors such as institutional culture, staff training, policy enforcement, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement is critical for reducing disciplinary disparities in independent private middle schools. By examining and reforming these internal dynamics, schools can create environments that are equitable, inclusive, and supportive of all students. This organizational foundation is essential for the success of any DEI intervention.

Federal Civil Rights Protections

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in federally funded programs, including public schools. While private schools may not be directly bound by Title VI unless they receive federal funding, the principles of non-discrimination remain a cornerstone for equity in education. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces these protections by investigating schools with significant disparities in discipline rates. Data from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) highlights persistent disparities, with Black students being suspended and

expelled at rates three times higher than their White peers (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2020).

Private and religious schools, such as the institution examined in this project, often operate with greater autonomy but are not exempt from scrutiny. While they may avoid direct federal oversight, many adopt policies that reflect broader civil rights principles to uphold their mission-driven commitments to equity.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

Zero-tolerance policies, initially implemented in the 1990s to address safety concerns, have had a profound impact on school discipline practices. These policies mandate strict consequences for specific infractions, regardless of context or intent. Research has shown that zero-tolerance approaches disproportionately impact marginalized students, particularly Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students (Mallett, 2016). For example, behaviors such as defiance or noncompliance, which are often subjectively interpreted, frequently result in harsher penalties for students of color.

Critics argue that zero-tolerance policies fail to account for cultural and contextual factors influencing student behavior and exacerbate the school-to-prison pipeline. Many schools, including independent private institutions, have begun to shift away from these policies in favor of restorative justice frameworks, which emphasize accountability and community building.

Restorative Justice Legislation

Restorative justice (RJ) practices have gained traction as a more equitable alternative to punitive discipline. While federal legislation does not mandate RJ practices, states such as California and Colorado have enacted policies encouraging schools to adopt restorative approaches. These practices focus on repairing harm, fostering understanding, and rebuilding relationships, aligning closely with the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (Zehr, 2015).

For private and religious schools, the adoption of RJ practices often depends on institutional leadership and mission alignment. Many such schools view restorative justice as consistent with their holistic educational goals and values, making it a promising avenue for reducing disparities.

Protections for Students with Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that students with disabilities receive free and appropriate education, including protections from discriminatory disciplinary practices. While independent private schools are not always subject to IDEA in the same way as public schools, they are often guided by similar principles. Disparities in discipline are particularly pronounced for students of color with disabilities, who are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary measures (Gregory et al., 2020). Schools must consider both legal and ethical obligations when addressing the intersection of race and disability in disciplinary practices.

Theoretical Framework

The proposed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) intervention is grounded in two established frameworks: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Restorative Justice (RJ). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing systemic inequities in disciplinary practices and designing actionable strategies to foster equity and inclusion.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory examines how systemic racism is embedded in societal structures, including education. Originally developed by legal scholars and introduced to education by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), CRT critiques exclusionary practices and identifies institutional biases that disproportionately affect marginalized students.

Key principles of CRT relevant to this project include:

- **Centering Marginalized Voices:** Prioritizes the perspectives of those most affected by systemic inequities, such as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students (Blake et al., 2021).
- **Interrogating Power and Privilege:** Challenges dominant narratives to dismantle structural barriers, emphasizing equity audits and policy reform.
- **Commitment to Social Justice:** Advocates for transformative change through reforms such as restorative practices and professional development.

Restorative Justice (RJ)

Restorative Justice complements CRT by providing a relationship-based approach to conflict resolution and harm repair. Unlike punitive methods, RJ emphasizes accountability, empathy, and community building, making it a transformative model for equitable discipline (Zehr, 2015).

Core principles of RJ include:

- **Repairing Harm:** Focuses on meeting the needs of both harmed parties and harmers through restorative circles and reconciliation.
- **Building Relationships:** Strengthens connections among students, staff, and families, fostering mutual respect and an inclusive climate.
- **Prevention Through Accountability:** Encourages responsibility-taking while addressing root causes of conflict, reducing reliance on exclusionary practices.

By integrating RJ, the intervention moves beyond addressing disparities to actively fostering a culture of inclusivity and belonging. RJ provides the practical tools necessary to implement the equity-centered reforms advocated by CRT.

Developing a DEI Intervention for Reducing Disciplinary Disparities

The proposed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) intervention addresses disciplinary disparities at an independent private middle school through a multifaceted approach. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Restorative Justice (RJ), the intervention seeks to dismantle systemic inequities while fostering a culturally responsive and inclusive environment.

Core Components of the Intervention

1. Policy Guide for Equitable Discipline

The policy guide establishes clear, consistent, and equitable practices to address systemic biases. Key elements include:

- **Standardized Protocols:** Clear guidelines for consistent responses to behavior.
- **Restorative Justice Practices:** Strategies like restorative circles to promote accountability and reconciliation.
- **Equity Audits:** Regular reviews of disciplinary data to ensure policies remain effective.

2. Professional Development Workshops

Workshops enhance staff cultural competence and address implicit biases.

Facilitated by DEI experts, they incorporate interactive methods such as role-playing and case studies. Topics include:

- Understanding systemic inequities.
- Implementing restorative practices in disciplinary scenarios.
- Building empathy and trust through culturally responsive engagement.

3. Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Collaboration with students, parents, and community members, is integral to the intervention's success. A **Community Advisory Council** ensures interventions are contextually relevant, while parent workshops provide tools to support equity at home.

Supportive Strategies

- **Restorative Circles:** Structured dialogues to rebuild trust and reduce reliance on exclusionary practices.
- **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Systems to analyze data, identify inequities, and adjust practices.
- **Mentorship and Peer Support Programs:** Peer and mentor support networks to foster positive relationships and accountability.

Sustainability and Scalability

An annual review process evaluates the effectiveness of policies, workshops, and community initiatives, refining strategies based on outcomes. The intervention is scalable for other independent and religiously affiliated schools seeking to address similar disparities.

Expected Outcomes

The DEI intervention aims to achieve the following outcomes:

- **Reduced Disciplinary Disparities:** A measurable decrease in exclusionary disciplinary actions, among marginalized student groups.
- **Improved Cultural Responsiveness:** Increased awareness and competency among staff in addressing the diverse needs of students.
- **Enhanced School Climate:** Greater trust, collaboration, and inclusivity within the school community.

- **Replicable Framework:** A proven model for equitable discipline that can inform broader efforts to advance DEI in education.

Closing

This capstone project addresses the systemic issue of disciplinary disparities in schools through a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) intervention grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Restorative Justice (RJ). These frameworks provide tools to understand systemic inequities and implement actionable strategies for fostering equity in independent private middle schools.

The intervention identifies root causes such as implicit biases and inconsistent policy enforcement while offering solutions through policy reform, professional development, and community engagement. By integrating evidence-based practices, this model seeks to reduce disparities, foster accountability, and promote inclusivity.

Beyond this school, the intervention offers a replicable framework adaptable to diverse educational contexts. Addressing disparities is not just a compliance issue but a moral imperative aligned with education's mission to empower all students.

In summary, this project demonstrates the transformative potential of equity-driven practices. By addressing systemic inequities and fostering inclusive environments, schools can create spaces where students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, contributing to a more just and equitable education system.

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