

Federal Government Recognizes the Role of Implicit Bias in School Discipline Disparities

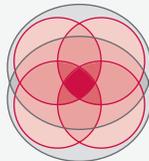
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On January 8, 2014, the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice jointly released the first-ever national policy guidelines on school discipline and school climate.¹ Designed to help public elementary and secondary schools administer school discipline without discriminating on the basis of race, the five part guidance package aims to assist states, school districts, educators, parents, and other stakeholders develop discipline policies and practices that yield safe and supportive school climates.

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Many lauded the new guidelines and the administration's recognition of school discipline disparities, stating that the release of the guidelines represent "a watershed moment"² and "a victory for all who care about creating environments where students can thrive."³ As a researcher currently examining disproportionality in school discipline, I, too, was pleased with the attention this issue is receiving. What caught my eye in particular, though, was the guidelines' recognition of implicit racial bias as a contributing factor to these disparities.



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While many hypotheses have emerged over the years to explain discipline disparities, **implicit racial bias** has only begun to garner attention as another possible factor driving this disproportionality. Also known as unconscious bias or implicit social cognition, implicit bias refers to attitudes or stereotypes that influence our actions, perceptions, and decisions, all without individuals' awareness.⁴ Everyone has implicit biases; this is a natural and universal phenomenon. These biases are robust, pervasive, automatically activated, and have a tremendous impact on numerous social situations, such as interactions in the education domain.

Several aspects of situations involving student discipline can activate implicit biases in school personnel, thereby influencing outcomes for students. For instance, implicit biases may be activated when school staff members make subjective judgments regarding whether discipline is merited in an ambiguous situation, such as determining what constitutes “disruptive behavior,” “loitering,” or “disrespect.” Research from the field of implicit bias indicates that ambiguous situations are ripe for the arousal of implicit biases;⁵ therefore, when subjectivity is part of a teacher or other school staff member’s decision-making regarding the need for discipline, “background experiences and automatic associations shape his or her interpretation of the scene.”⁶ Influenced by implicit biases, this subjectivity can contribute to discipline disparities. For example, work by prominent school discipline researcher Dr. Russell J. Skiba finds that office referrals and other discipline for students of color tend to rely on subjective interpretations (e.g., “excessive noise”), while White students’ office referrals tend to stem from objective infractions (e.g., vandalism or smoking).⁷

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Second, culture-based misunderstandings between students and teachers can activate implicit biases in ways that contribute to discipline disparities. Cultural mismatches between a teaching workforce that is largely comprised of White females and an increasingly diverse student population can lead to misinterpretations of student behavior. For example, the active “call-response” participatory speech pattern familiar to African American students may be inadvertently perceived as disruptive or impolite when contrasted with the “passive-receptive” speech model that may be more familiar to White teachers.⁸ In situations such as this, even though the students’ actions are not intended to be inappropriate, implicit biases and cultural mismatch can lead teachers to discipline some students disproportionately for perceived unruliness.⁹

Finally, an extensive body of research has documented pervasive implicit biases related to Blacks, particularly Black males. Several studies have found implicit associations that link Blackness to traits such as criminality¹⁰ and aggression.¹¹ Notably, these negative implicit associations can surface in school discipline situations. Dr. Carla R. Monroe succinctly captures the heart of this concern when she writes that “Many teachers may not explicitly connect their disciplinary reactions to negative perceptions of Black males, yet systematic trends in disproportionality suggest that teachers may be implicitly guided by stereotypical perceptions that African American boys require greater control than their peers and are unlikely to respond to nonpunitive measures.”¹²

In light of this compelling body of research, the federal policy guidelines released last month acknowledge implicit bias as a consideration with respect to the administration of school discipline. References to implicit bias throughout the documents continually emphasize the need for training. Sections related to the fair implementation of school discipline policies by school staff members suggest training and other awareness-raising learning opportunities “to explore staff awareness

of their implicit or unconscious biases and the harms associated with using or failing to counter racial and ethnic stereotypes.”¹³ Other parts of the policy materials specifically address the need for school resource officers, security personnel, and law enforcement to receive training on this topic. The policy guiding principles and accompanying Dear Colleague Letter both emphasize the need for these individuals to receive instruction in bias-free policing that includes topics such as implicit biases and cultural competence.

While these references to implicit bias comprise only a small portion of the guidance package, they represent an important acknowledgement of the role of unconscious cognition in the implementation of school discipline. Encouraging implicit bias training is an appropriate suggestion, as raising awareness of the existence of unconscious biases is a vital first step of working toward their negation. I applaud the government for recognizing these unconscious dynamics in the context of school discipline. Eliminating racialized school discipline disparities is a challenge that cannot be understated; however, acknowledging the role of implicit biases in this realm is an important contribution to this endeavor.

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References

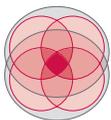
1. These guidelines are available at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>.
2. Quote from Thena Robinson-Mock, Project Director for Advancement Project's Ending the Schoolhouse-to-Jailhouse Track Campaign. See press release from the Advancement Project. "Civil Rights and Community Groups Applaud DOJ/DOE Race and School Discipline Guidance for Schools." January 8, 2014. <http://www.advancementproject.org/news/entry/civil-rights-and-community-groups-applaud-doj-doe-race-and-school-disciplin>
3. Quote from Deborah J. Vagins, ACLU senior legislative counsel. See press release from the ACLU. "ACLU Comment on Groundbreaking Federal School Discipline Guidance." January 8, 2014. <https://www.aclu.org/criminal-law-reform/aclu-comment-groundbreaking-federal-school-discipline-guidance>
4. For more information on implicit bias, please see the Kirwan Institute's State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2013.
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10. See, for example, Payne, B. K. (2001). Prejudice and Perception: The Role of Automatic and Controlled Processes in Misperceiving a Weapon. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(2), 181-192. Eberhardt, J. L., Goff, P. A., Purdie, V. J., & Davies, P. G. (2004). Seeing Black: Race, Crime, and Visual Processing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87(6), 876-893.
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13. Quoted from p. 17 of the Guiding Principles Document. www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf

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