Interventions for Students and Teachers to Counter Stereotyping and Improve Student Outcomes: A Summary of Five Journal Articles.

Research Brief – September 2019

This research brief summarizes five journal articles focused on the negative consequences of racial and other demographic stereotypes for students' academic and life outcomes. Three of the articles focus on the relationship between stereotypes, discipline, and negative student outcomes. These articles also offer interventions to remedy stereotyping including:

- teacher training focused on understanding and overcoming one's own possible bias related to students' gender, ethnicity, or ELL status;
- institutions, including school districts, reframing perceived negative events through messages and processes that could result in more positive outcomes;
- student interventions related to values affirmation, growth mindset, and social belonging; and
- teacher interventions related to empathic discipline and wise-feedback.

Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Executive Functions: Disparities by Gender, Ethnicity, and ELL Status[1]
According to the authors, students' Executive Functions (EFs) predict students' academic achievement. EFs include such skills as controlling impulses, attention focusing, mental manipulation of information, and flexible adaptation to changes and challenges. Prior research demonstrates that disparities exist in objective, direct assessment of student EFs and teacher assessments of EF behaviors in classroom settings. The authors contend that these differences in teacher reports could be related to teachers' biases associated with specific student characteristics and that these biases *can hold serious consequences for students' long-term academic achievement* including *grade retention, and referrals for school discipline and special education* (p.8).

Using administrative data from 558 students in 33 third- through fifth-grade classrooms in eight schools, the researchers analyzed how students' gender, ethnicity, and ELL status *were associated with teacher rankings of students' EFs, controlling for directly assessed EFs* (p.3). They found that after controlling for direct assessments, teachers ranked girls and Asian children as having better EFs than boys and White children respectively and African American and limited English proficient children as having worse EFs than White and English dominant children respectively. These findings remained constant over the course of the school year. The authors contend that these findings are similar to prior research analyzing teachers' ratings of students' academic achievement.

The authors suggest further research to ascertain if teacher assessments describe actual differences among demographic groups that are not captured by direct assessments. However, if teacher assessments incorporate biases, school districts could remedy the situation through teacher training and the design of teacher assessments. Teacher training could help teachers better understand how EFs are expressed in the classroom and how they differ from other behaviors. Training could also focus on understanding and overcoming one's own possible bias related to students' gender, ethnicity, or ELL status.

"Bad" Things Reconsidered [2]
This article discusses the role of institutions, including educational institutions, in reframing perceived negative events through messages and processes that could result in more positive outcomes. The authors contend that negative events, such as placement on academic probation for a college student, *can risk leading people to draw negative, even catastrophic or stigmatizing inferences about themselves, other people, or their prospects* (p.2). Yet *messages and experiences that anticipate and forestall predictable pejorative interpretations can help people function better and achieve their goals over time* (p.4). This benefits not only the individual, but institutions, as institutional goals frequently include the success of their constituents, including students in educational institutions.

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[1] Garcia, E. B., Sulik, M. J., & Obradović, J. (2018, September 13). Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Executive Functions: Disparities by Gender, Ethnicity, and ELL Status. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000308

[2] Walton, G. M. & Brady, S.T. (2019). "Bad" Things Reconsidered. Manuscript Prepared for the 2019 Sydney Symposium of Social Psychology: Applications of Social Psychology.

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The authors describe five principles for reframing messages and illustrate these principles through multiple examples, including one related to a letter to college students being placed on probation. This *psychologically attuned* letter reduced negative feelings and, in some field tests, increased the use of educational resources and recovery from probation. This example could be relevant to other student experiences such as disciplinary actions or suspensions.

- **Prevent negative labels**: *The process for academic probation*
- **Communicate "You're are not the only one"**: *You should also know that you're not the only one experiencing these difficulties.*
- **Recognize specific nonpejorative causes:** *There are many reasons students enter the academic probation process. These reasons can include personal, financial, health, family, or other issues.*
- **Forecast improvement**: *By working with their advisors, many [students on probation] leave the process and continue a successful career at [school].*
- **Highlight positive opportunities**: *I learned something important in the process, about how to face up to challenges, to reach out to others for help, and find a way forward.*

A Vicious Cycle: A Social–Psychological Account of Extreme Racial Disparities in School Discipline[3]
According to the authors, high levels of discipline citations arise from student-teacher relationships gone awry in a context of racial stereotypes. For teachers, stereotypes can lead to the fear that racially stigmatized students might cause discipline problems and undermine their teaching goals. For students, stereotypes can lead to the fear that they will be seen in biased ways or not given a fair chance. These fears can intersect, reducing trust and conflict. Yet interventions that help both teachers and students see each other in more positive, growth-oriented ways can improve outcomes, as discussed next.

Targeted Identity-Safety Interventions Cause Lasting Reductions in Discipline Citations Among Negatively Stereotyped Boys[4]
Prior research demonstrates that disciplinary actions in schools, disproportionally related to African-American and Latino boys, deny these students the opportunity to learn, harming life outcomes. Discipline problems also make classroom management more difficult for teachers, impacting the quality of education for all students. The authors hypothesize that disciplinary actions *arise in part from negative cycles of interaction between students and teachers, which unfold in contexts of social stereotypes* (p.229).

This study tested the impact of three interventions targeted to students' *sense of belonging, inclusion, and growth* (p.230):

- **Values affirmation**: Students describe their core values and why they are important to them in a 15-minute writing exercise.
- **Growth-mindset**: Within a 20-minute guided sessions, students learn that intelligence is not fixed but can grow through hard work, effective strategies, and help from others.
- **Social-belonging**: In two, 25-minute sessions, students read about older students experiences and concerns about fitting in at middle school and how these concerns dissipated with time.

[3] Okonofua, J. A., Walton, G. M., & Eberhardt, J. L. (2016). A vicious cycle: A social-psychological account of extreme racial disparities in school discipline. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 11, 381-398.
[4] Goyer, J. P., Cohen, G. L., Cook, J. E., Master, A., Apfel, N., Lee, W., Henderson, A. G., Reeves, S. L., Okonofua, J. A., & Walton, G. M. (2019). Targeted identity safety interventions cause lasting reductions in discipline citations among ethnic-minority boys. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 117, 229-259.

The researchers found that these interventions reduced disciplinary actions for Latino and African-American male students:

- **Study 1**: Together, the three interventions reduced disciplinary citations over 7th and 8th grades for negatively stereotyped boys in two middle schools, with a population of 669 Latino children, compared to a control group by 57 percent. The growth-mindset intervention alone also reduced disciplinary citations by 70 percent.
- **Study 2**: The social-belonging intervention alone, delivered early in 6th grade, reduced disciplinary actions for African-American boys through the end of high school by 65 percent. Suggesting improved interactions with teachers, the intervention prevented rises in citations requiring the subjective judgments of teachers (e.g., "insubordination") within 6th and 7th grades.

Brief Intervention to Encourage Empathic Discipline Cuts Suspension Rates In Half Among Adolescents[5]
This research tested an intervention addressing teachers' mindsets about misbehaving students to mitigate suspension rates. Teachers were theorized to be caught between a punitive model of student misbehavior that advocates learning through punishment and a more empathic approach. Early studies suggest the punitive model can alienate students, furthering behavior issues. Yet *empathic discipline*—described as *valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings that give rise to misbehavior, sustaining positive relationships with misbehaving students, and working with students within trusting relationships to improve behavior* (p.5221)—can improve disciplinary outcomes:

- **Study 1** (lab study): Priming teachers to use empathic approaches resulted in less punitive responses to misbehaving students than teachers primed with a punitive approach (N=39).
- **Study 2** (lab study): College students (N=302) reported that, as middle-school students, they would respect the teacher who used the less punitive approach far more than a teacher who used the punitive approach. They were also more motivated to behave well in the future.
- **Study 3** (field intervention): A brief, online intervention (2 sessions, 70-minute total) asking established math teachers how they implement an empathic approach to misbehaving students in five middle schools in three California school districts reduced year-long suspension rates among students they taught from 9.6 percent to 4.8 percent. It also increased the respect the most at-risk students, those who had been previously suspended, perceived from their teachers (N teachers = 31; N students = 1,682).

[5] Okonofua, J. A., Paunesku, D. & Walton, G. M. (2016). Brief intervention to encourage empathic discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 113, 5221-5226.