

Research Memo October 2022

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Searching for Solutions: Demystifying Disproportionality through DisCrit

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Overview:

Black youth are overrepresented in San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) in both special education and suspensions. Given this significant disproportionality, this study centers the voices of those most impacted by exclusionary actions: Black youth who have been suspended, both in and outside of special education. SFUSD cannot fully enact anti-racist commitments without examining who and how it excludes through instructional and discipline practices. This study's aim is to build tools for educators to enact their racial justice commitments through reflections on pedagogy and policy from students. Specifically, the project explores trajectories of and strategies identified by Black students that focus on recognizing and reducing exclusionary discipline. Additionally, by centering their voices, this study seeks to create affirming spaces for Black students in SFUSD.

In this research memo, we present findings from a preliminary analysis of data collected to-date. Accordingly, we use language throughout that is reflective of its preliminary nature (e.g., emerging patterns). A full report and an updated research memo will be completed by August 2023.

Data Counts:

- **Focal Population:** Black youth in SFUSD who have ever been suspended, both in and outside of special education
- **Data Collection Update:**
 - 50 Black youth have been interviewed (23 in middle school, 27 in high school)
 - 71 interviews have been conducted in total (i.e., 50 round 1 interviews, 21 round 2 interviews)
 - 49 Education Journey Maps have been created
- **Next steps:**
 - Conduct 10 interviews with Black youth who are refugees
 - Conduct 20 Round 2 and 3 interviews (i.e., follow-up and member checking)
 - Perform in-depth data analysis

Emerging Patterns:

1. Racialized discipline practices
2. Limited pedagogy and curriculum
3. Constraining and debilitating school culture
4. Safety and belonging in the presence of Black adults
5. Recommendations and solutions advanced by students

Finding 1: Racialized discipline practices: A culture of anti-blackness in discipline practices

Summary: Students provided repeated examples of both adults and peers using racial slurs or making other derogatory comments about Black youth. Further, they described racial inequities in the use of suspensions, providing several examples of how Black youth specifically have been disproportionately targeted. When faced with disciplinary situations, students described myriad ways in which the underlying assumptions around, investigations into, and consequences for their perceived misbehavior were all imbued with anti-Black biases.

Evidence:

- Black students described instances of their teachers and other adults in school directing racial slurs and other derogatory language toward them, both in and around their classrooms indicating an unsafe learning environment for students
- Black students described how the fights that led to their suspensions were often the result of anti-Black bullying by non-Black peers using racial slurs
- Students noted how adults in their schools often made unfair assumptions about incidents without listening to them
- Black students described how adults making decisions about discipline focused only on the physical fight (i.e., who pushed first) and ignored the racial slurs that caused the reaction
- They also described how when adults claimed to listen to both sides of the story, it was often performative, superficial, and perfunctory, leaving students feeling unheard or disbelieved
- Black students also noted several instances where they or other Black students were disciplined (e.g., suspended) for something that non-Black students were either not punished for at all or for which they were given a more lenient punishment
- Black students were aware of racist practices and clearly articulated their experiences of them, showing evidence of racism in how schools interact with them both generally, and with regard to disciplinary practices specifically

Recommendations:

1. Create a brave space: Black students who understand how pervasive racism and anti-blackness are in the day-to-day of schooling must have (1) a clear and safe mechanism for making these experiences known to adults whom they trust and (2) a say in designing how these issues are addressed at the institutional level
2. Believe Black students: authentically listen to, hear, and incorporate Black students' experiences and concerns as institutional knowledge so as to be best equipped to identify root causes and meaningfully address the institutional issues shaping the environments students are navigating
3. Increase awareness of - and structural change around - how anti-Blackness presents in schools: introduce curriculum for all educators as a preventative measure and reflect on/root out anti-Blackness when addressing systemic inequities. For example, having an anti-bullying campaign or sexual harassment prevention campaign without addressing anti-Blackness will not support Black students who are often victims and survivors of both

Finding 2: Limited pedagogy and curriculum: Poor academic opportunities and instruction

Summary: Our data revealed how limited academic opportunities and instruction are provided to Black students. Black students indicated the pedagogical and curricular decisions made by educators - including lack of culturally sustaining curriculum, an emphasis on behavior management over academic instruction, and insufficient instruction to meet their learning needs in the classroom - harm their future life trajectories. Black students had a deep appreciation for adults in school who provided individualized support, consistent structure, and encouraged them towards their academic goals. They also expressed postsecondary aspirations, despite the disruption of disciplinary exclusion.

Evidence:

- Black students consistently reported either having lost or having never had access to racially affirming or culturally sustaining curriculum & pedagogy which resulted in (1) their not feeling valued in school and (2) feeling disconnected from school
- Black students described how their teachers often prioritized exerting control over individual students and/or the class broadly and deprioritized teaching academic content
- Students noted that teachers rarely provided sufficient instruction to meet their individual learning needs in the classroom
- They also described how teachers prioritized assignment completion over meaningful learning engagement (i.e., understanding and comprehension of new concepts)
- In reflecting on the use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions) in their schools, many students described it as a counterintuitive process given the barriers to learning that it creates (i.e., removing students from their classrooms, putting them behind in schoolwork, and leaving them overwhelmed at their falling grades)
- Black students described appreciation and admiration for teachers who provided individualized support for them with their lessons and encouraged them towards their academic goals
- Despite the disruptive experiences of suspension, Black students described clear vision for their academic goals and aspirations (i.e., going to college)

Recommendations:

1. Implement accountability structures that center student academic success
2. Invest in culturally sustaining and racially affirming curriculum in schools (e.g., Ethnic Studies, Black Studies).
3. Provide resources to support students in working toward meeting their learning goals and future aspirations

Finding 3: Constraining and debilitating school culture: Environments focused on control rather than engagement

Summary: Our data revealed that Black students who have been subject to suspensions view schools as spaces that constrain their opportunities to thrive. Expertly debunking the utility of punitive and exclusionary discipline, Black students instead envisioned the possibility of schools with inclusive structures, fair systems of accountability that center student connectedness and success, and educators and administrators who build classroom and school communities complete with Black families as partners in those efforts.

Evidence:

- Regardless of their academic standing, Black students often found the school culture hostile, described their schools as “jails,” and noted a culture of constantly being watched and surveilled
- Accordingly, they often described school as a means to an end, not a place that enriched their lives
- Black students described the ways in which their schools address issues like fights and sexual harassment as reactionary and ineffective (e.g., putting up posters about sexual harassment after an incident has occurred as falling far short of disrupting a culture of sexual harassment)
- Black students described schools as either too unstructured (e.g., allowing students to make up their own rules) or too strict (i.e., systematically erasing students’ voices). They expressed a desire for structure from schools, not stricture
- Black students reflected on a double standard in teachers’ expectations of their student’s conduct versus their own conduct. Whereas students’ emotional reactions were punished, teachers’ emotional reactions (e.g., to a perceived a loss of control over student behaviors) were not met with punitive consequences from the school
- Black students described feeling further ostracized from their schools when they observed the hostility their families were met with when advocating on their behalf

Recommendations:

1. Approach peer conflict mitigation by investing in supports rather than exclusion
2. Facilitate open, transparent, and consistent processes in which students are heard and believed
3. Invest in building strong school communities to support peer relationship building
4. Provide strong academic learning opportunities with individualized support responsive to student needs
5. Support and build teacher capacity to prioritize academic engagement

Finding 4: Safety and belonging in the presence of Black adults: A social safety net in a hostile environment

Summary: Our data revealed how Black students often see Black adults in schools as sources of support and encouragement.

Evidence:

- Black students described how Black adults, regardless of their title or rank, provided guidance and support in school
- Black students remarked on how Black adults in their schools - who were often a part of their communities and had strong bonds with their own families - created a social safety net for them
- Black adults in school were described as focused on building relationships with students rather than on controlling them and punishing their behaviors
- In those relationships, Black students described feeling free from deficit-based narratives, constant surveillance, or threats
- Most students reported having, at most, one Black educator in their current school. Students also described feelings of devastation in instances where their one Black educator left or was pushed out
- Black students advocated for more Black adults in their schools with decision-making power, including Black teachers, Black administrators, and Black district leaders

Recommendations:

1. Build partnerships between school districts and community organizations that recruit Black adults to schools in *all* roles, but *particularly roles with power to shift schools' vision and practices*
2. Invest resources in, support, and capacity build among Black adults already in schools, valuing their additional labor, honoring their expertise, and committing to structural change to ensure schools are welcoming and inclusive environments for them
3. Invest resources and support students in building sustainable relationships with Black adults in schools

Finding 5: Recommendations and solutions advanced by students

Summary: Students articulated several alternative approaches for how school discipline and academics could be more sensitive to and supportive of their needs.

Recommendations:

1. Assemble and uphold clear accountability structures rooted in fairness and community. Avoid perfunctory and performative discipline processes rooted in blame and punishment.
2. Facilitate open, transparent, and consistent processes in which students are heard and believed. Avoid arbitrary, top-down decision-making by adults.
3. Build strong student advocacy systems based on mutual respect and dignity. Avoid investing in systems of surveillance and punishment.
4. Implement accountability structures that center student academic success. Avoid systems that exclude students from classroom instruction and cause them to fall behind in their classes.
5. Provide opportunities for academic engagement, comprehensive curriculum, and student-centered academic supports. Avoid culturally exclusionary curriculum and practices that disrupt school-based relationships.

To access the 'Fall 2022 Presentation of Preliminary Findings' slidedeck, please click here:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1kbkZ1Wkkv8nkMx5M9SQaAaYQ4GripFxe/edit#slide=id.g17580758b48_0_17