

# An Argument for Communal Approaches to Discipline for Racial Equity in US Elementary Schools

Kate Feinberg Robins, PhD (Independent Scholar)  
katefeinbergr@gmail.com

## Introduction

In a racially diverse public US elementary school, Laura and Michael's calm, quiet son Bryan was being sent repeatedly to the principal's office.<sup>1</sup> "We were concerned that he already had a disciplinary record before turning seven," Laura, who is white, recalled. "Those labels stick with you," added Michael, who is Black. "He's... already being labeled as a problem."

When I heard Laura and Michael's story, it interested me on both a personal and professional level. Like Laura, I'm a white American raising a child with a Black American. As an anthropologist who has conducted fieldwork in an elementary school, it struck me that the situation they described was so unlike what I'd seen at the school where I'd worked.

I followed up to collect in-depth narratives, which I analyze together with publicly available parent handbooks and statistics about Bryan's school. Inspired by my previous fieldwork, I present an analytical framework that emphasizes how social dynamics and communication impact behavioral incidents and their resolutions.

I argue that within the US context, individual and decontextualized approaches to school discipline are prone to perpetuating racial biases and exacerbating systemic inequities. In contrast, communal approaches are well positioned to promote equity and inclusion. This qualitative analysis adds to a growing body of multidisciplinary research on race and alternative approaches to discipline in US schools (e.g. Gregory and Fergus 2017; Joseph et al. 2021; Payne and Welch 2010, 2015).

## Individual Approaches

I use the terms *individual* and *communal* to emphasize the impact of disciplinary practices on children's relationships with their school communities. In an individual-focused disciplinary system, a school responds to behavioral incidents by identifying, removing, and punishing a culprit. I call this *individual* because it erases the social dynamics at play when the incident occurred. It renders invisible broader patterns of socialization that contribute to peer conflicts (Pascoe 2013).

Individual approaches teach children that when they draw adults' attention to a classmate's misbehavior, that classmate will likely be blamed and punished. Children learn implicitly that problems are resolved by removing the person at fault. Such approaches have long been a locus

of critique for racial inequity in school discipline (Ferguson 2001; Fronius et al. 2016; Gregory and Fergus 2017; Joseph et al. 2021; Simmons 2017).

### **Communal Approaches**

In contrast, communal approaches teach that one student's problem is everyone's problem. When an incident occurs, the entire class is responsible for resolving it to repair their community. This is the approach I observed in classrooms in Andean Peru (Grim-Feinberg 2013).<sup>2</sup> Children often drew adults' attention to peers' misbehavior. Their facial expressions, verbal tones, and follow-up actions demonstrated genuine concern for misbehaving peers. Rather than pushing individuals away, they reached out and sought help to pull them back.

Some US schools have implemented restorative justice practices rooted in similar notions of community-building, and many have met with success (Fronius et al. 2016; González et al. 2019; Pavelka 2013). Such approaches provide safe spaces where children can make mistakes and repair them without losing valuable members of their community.

### **What's at Stake for Children of Color**

Michael and Laura repeatedly expressed frustration that no one seemed to understand why this was a big deal for them. They saw their son being labeled and categorized in ways that did not line up with their understanding of him, but did line up with school-wide and broader trends of what happens to Black boys in US schools (CDE 2022; Ferguson 2001; Goodman et al. 2012).

They could see clearly that the stakes were high. When a child is singled out, dropped off at the principal's office by his class, and "parents are called," then classmates and their parents get the message that this child threatens the learning environment and safety of others. When the child fits societal images of who needs to be policed (Ferguson 2001; Gregory 2003; Maynard 2017; Sojoyner 2016), they can quickly be labeled and ostracized by the school community.

Michael and Laura also saw opportunities closing. Every visit to the principal's office was a mark on Bryan's permanent record that would follow him for the next twelve years. While they had initially been pleased with the diversity they saw at Bryan's school, they now understood that "a good school" on paper meant little for students of color who were under-represented in the school's high test scores and over-represented in suspensions (CDE 2022).

Such patterns of inequity are consistent with a long history of US schools directing Black and brown students into disciplinary systems and away from academically rigorous programs (e.g. Ferguson 2001; Fronius et al. 2015; Goodman et al. 2012; Gregory and Fergus 2017; Joseph et al. 2021; Moody 2016; Nance 2016). While this tracking may be unintentional, the biases that fuel it could be removed or minimized by de-individualizing and recontextualizing schools' approaches to behavioral incidents.

## **Bias Toward Adult-Like Communication**

Ethnographers of childhood have shown that eliciting accurate information from children requires deep understanding of nonverbal and verbal communication in context (Clark 2011; Corsaro 2003; Epstein 1998; James 2007; Mandell 1988). One result of individualizing and decontextualizing incidents is that staff rely on children's verbal communication with adult authorities to determine what happened. I argue that this favors children who are more comfortable and skilled with normative adult-like communication. Such children are likely to be neurotypical, white, middle-class, monolingual English speakers, gender-normative, and outgoing. Children who come to school already comfortable with communicating in normative ways are more likely to be listened to. Those who don't feel comfortable with adult-like verbal communication are more likely to remain unheard and to learn that they will not be listened to when they try to express themselves.

The bias toward adult-like communication embedded in individualized discipline reinforces societal images of how a trustworthy person looks and acts. This exacerbates racial and other inequities by positioning as more credible white middle-class children whose socialization at home aligns closely with institutional expectations at school.

## **Policy and Implementation**

The parent handbooks for Bryan's district and school outline both a "no-tolerance" and a "restorative" approach. They state that physical violence against another student is a suspendable offense. Before suspending a student, a school must accurately identify the behavior and its cause and make a good faith effort to correct it.

The handbooks mention "restorative" practices as corrective measures for individuals "who do not meet behavior expectations." While restorative discipline is rooted in the principle of inclusive community-building (Ferland 2016; GES 2014; WAT Staff 2023), schools sometimes implement it in ways that reinforce individual blame and exclusion (Joseph et al. 2021; Schiff 2018; Sojoyner 2016).

When Laura met with the administrator who had disciplined her son, she was handed a card with "restorative questions." One side had questions "to respond to challenging behavior" and the other "to help those harmed by others' actions." Laura expressed to me frustration that her son had been identified as the only person with "challenging behavior," and another child as the only one "harmed by others' actions."

The administrator explained that she had asked the appropriate "restorative questions" to each corresponding child in one-on-one meetings, and that neither had responded. She'd interpreted Bryan's lack of response as an inability to reflect on his behavior. She'd referred him to "disciplinary counseling," which would remove him from the classroom to work on social and emotional skills. When Laura asked whether Bryan could instead work on these skills in the

classroom with other students who were involved, the administrator told her that the student who was harmed was too traumatized to discuss it. While the administrator drew on restorative questions in framing her conversations with students, she appeared unwilling to consider the incident as a collective problem with a collective solution.

## Conclusion

For communal approaches like restorative justice to work, a school needs to create and reinforce a strong sense of communal responsibility. Children must learn that if a classmate is hurt, it's everyone's responsibility to make sure they're okay before moving on. If a classmate is out of line, it's everybody's top priority to bring them back. They must learn to see each individual as essential to the functioning of their community. Individualized discipline directly undermines this by sending the message that the classroom will function better when the "problem child" is removed.

Ultimately, teachers and administrators need policy-level support and training to address interpersonal incidents as communal problems for the class as a whole. Policies that support communal approaches are more equitable and less prone to reproducing societal inequities. In the absence of such policy change, school staff can improve equity by building awareness of the biases inherent in individualized approaches. Even within individual-focused policies, communal approaches to investigating behavioral incidents in context can go a long way toward equity. By holding all students accountable for helping to identify and solve problems as a group, teachers and administrators can encourage inclusion rather than exclusion. Instead of teaching children that problems are resolved by identifying and punishing an individual culprit, children can learn to resolve problems together.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms. Some details have been altered to protect the identity of the family interviewed.

<sup>2</sup> The research in Peru was based on 14 months of participant observation in a primary school and surrounding community.

## References

California Department of Education. 2022. *California School Dashboard*.  
<https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>

Clark, Cindy Dell. 2011. *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research*.  
New York: Oxford University Press.

- Corsaro, William. 2003. *We're Friends, Right? Inside Kids' Culture*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.
- Epstein, Debbie. 1998. " 'Are You a Girl or are You a Teacher?' The 'Least Adult' Role in Research about Gender and Sexuality in a Primary School." In *Doing Research about Education*. Geoffrey Walford, ed. Pp. 27-41. London: Falmer.
- Ferguson, Ann Arnett. 2001. *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Ferlazzo, Larry. 2016. "Response: How to Practice Restorative Justice in Schools." *EducationWeek*. February 6. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-response-how-to-practice-restorative-justice-in-schools/2016/02>
- Fronius, Trevor, Hannah Persson, Sarah Guckenbug, Nancy Hurley, and Anthony Petrosino. 2016. *Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review*. San Francisco: WestEd Justice and Prevention Research Center.
- Glenview Elementary School. 2014. "Restorative Justice: What is Restorative Justice?" Oakland Unified School District: Oakland, CA. <https://wpvip.edutopia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/edutopia-stw-glenview-restorative-justice-practices.pdf>
- González, T., H. Sattler, and A. J. Buth. 2019. "New directions in Whole-School Restorative Justice Implementation." *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 36: 207-220. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21236>
- Goodman, Alan H., Yolanda T. Moses, and Joseph L. Jones. 2012. "Race and Education." In *Race: Are We So Different?* Goodman, Moses, and Jones, eds. Pp. 174-194. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blacwell.
- Gregory, Anne, and Edward Fergus. 2017. "Social and Emotional Learning and Equity in School Discipline." *The Future of Children* 27 (1): 117-36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44219024>.
- Gregory, Steven. 2003. "Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community." In *The Anthropology of Space and Place*. Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, eds. Pp. 284-297. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Grim-Feinberg, Kate. 2013. *Cultural Models of Respectful Subjectivity Among Primary School Children in Post-Conflict Ayacucho, Peru: An Embodied Learning Analysis*. Ph.D. dissertation. Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

- James, Allison. 2007. "Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials." *American Anthropologist* 109 (2): 261-272.
- Joseph, A., R. J. Hnilica, and M. Hanson. 2021. "Using Restorative Practices to Reduce Racially Disproportionate School Suspensions: The Barriers School Leaders Should Consider During the First Year of Implementation." *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* 20 (2): 95-119. <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol20/iss2/6/>
- Mandell, Nancy. 1988. "The Least-Adult Role in Studying Children." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 16: 433-467.
- Maynard, Robyn. 2017. *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*. 1st Edition. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Moody, M. 2016. "From Under-Diagnoses to Over-Representation: Black Children, ADHD, and the School-To-Prison Pipeline." *Journal of African American Studies* 20: 152–163. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-016-9325-5>
- Nance, Jason P. 2016. "Over-Disciplining Students, Racial Bias, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline." *University of Richmond Law Review* 50:1063-1074. <http://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/facultypub/749>
- Pascoe, C. J. 2013. "Notes on a Sociology of Bullying: Young Men's Homophobia as Gender Socialization." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 0 (1): 87–104. doi: <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.0087>
- Pavelka, Sandra. 2013. "Practices and Policies for Implementing Restorative Justice Within Schools." *The Prevention Researcher* 20 (1): 15.  
[link.gale.com/apps/doc/A323659474/AONE?u=anon~6cbe1e64&sid=googleScholar&xid=32d78d0e](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A323659474/AONE?u=anon~6cbe1e64&sid=googleScholar&xid=32d78d0e)
- Payne, Allison and Kelly Welch. 2010. "Modeling the Effects of Racial Threat on Punitive and Restorative School Discipline Practices." *Criminology* 48: 1019-1062.
- . 2015. "Restorative Justice in Schools: The Influence of Race on Restorative Discipline." *Youth & Society* 47 (4): 539–564.
- Schiff, Mara. 2018. "Can restorative justice disrupt the 'school-to-prison pipeline?'" *Contemporary Justice Review* 21 (2): 121-139. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10282580.2018.1455509>

Simmons, Lizbet. 2017. *The Prison School: Educational Inequality and School Discipline in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. 1st ed. University of California Press.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1hd17hh>

Sojoyner, Damien M. 2016. *First Strike: Educational Enclosures in Black Los Angeles*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

We Are Teachers Staff. 2023. "What is Restorative Justice in Schools? Everything Educators Need to Know." *We Are Teachers*. August 29.  
<https://www.weareteachers.com/restorative-justice/>

### Author Biography

**Kate Feinberg Robins** is an independent scholar and Founding Director of Find Your Center Arts and Wellness. She has a PhD in anthropology from University of Illinois (2013) and a BA from Bard College (2004). She served as Editor of *Neos* from 2014-2016. She has published in the *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* and contributed a chapter to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of *A World of Babies*.

---

**Author contact:** Kate Feinberg Robins, PhD (Independent Scholar),  
[katefeinbergr@gmail.com](mailto:katefeinbergr@gmail.com)

**To cite this article:** Feinberg Robins, Kate. 2023. "An Argument for Communal Approaches to Discipline for Racial Equity in US Elementary Schools." *NEOS* 15 (2).

**To link this article:** <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol15iss2fall23/FeinbergRobins>