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Q & A with Dr. Juan Del Toro, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and Dr. Ming-Te Wang, University of Chicago, authors of “Vicarious Severe School Discipline Predicts Racial Disparities among Non-Disciplined Black and White American Adolescents”

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Vicarious severe school discipline predicts racial disparities among non-disciplined Black and White American adolescents

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PRESS RELEASE

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Research shows racial disparities in school discipline may have collateral consequences on the larger non-suspended student population. When minor infraction suspensions target predominantly Black classmates, Black American youth who witness same-race peers receive minor infraction suspensions may feel threatened and anticipate more unfair discipline. Little is known about how White American youth respond when they witness White versus Black American peers receiving minor infractions.

A new study released in *Child Development* examined the longitudinal relations between classmates' minor or serious infraction suspensions and adolescents' engagement in defiant behaviors among two independent samples of non-suspended Black and White Americans. The study showed that limiting educators' options of suspensions for minor violations in policies can be a step toward just and fair discipline practices. School staff can also provide educators with training and resources to replace punitive disciplinary practices with more empathic responses to student misbehavior.

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to chat with Dr. Juan Del Toro from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and Dr. Ming-Te Wang from the University of Chicago in the United States about this important research.

SRCD: What contributed to your interest in pursuing this particular research?

Dr. Del Toro and Dr. Wang: We pursued this research due to the number of suspensions for minor infractions, such as talking out of turn or violating a dress code policy, that disproportionately target Black American youth nationwide. We sought to understand the repercussions of these suspensions for non-suspended Black and White American youth, who represent a large segment of the student population and whether there are "spill over" effects of severe discipline for minor violations.

SRCD: Describe your hypothesis.

Dr. Del Toro and Dr. Wang: We proposed that witnessing or learning about peers' minor infraction suspensions may lead non-suspended adolescents to develop more cynicism toward educators and school rules. Thus, we predicted that Black American youth would engage in more defiant behaviors specifically when their classmates received more frequent minor infraction suspensions. Moreover, we hypothesized that the relation between classmates' minor infraction suspensions and next year's defiant behaviors would be stronger for Black American youth with more same-race classmates than for Black American youth with less same-race classmates. Lastly, we predicted that the proportion of same-race classmates and classmates' suspensions for minor infractions would have null main and interaction effects on White American youth's defiant behaviors.

SRCD: Please summarize your findings.

Dr. Del Toro and Dr. Wang: Across two longitudinal studies, we found that classmates' minor infraction suspensions predicted greater next year's defiant infractions among non-suspended Black American adolescents, and this longitudinal relation was worse for Black American youth enrolled in predominantly Black American classrooms. For White American youth, we found that classmates' minor infraction suspensions predicted greater defiant infractions specifically when White youth were enrolled in predominantly non-White American classrooms.

SRCD: Your work revealed that racial inequities in school discipline may have repercussions that disadvantage all adolescents regardless of race. Talk about your recommendations for policy and practice to improve the schooling experiences for all adolescents.

Dr. Del Toro and Dr. Wang: We need to consider the role of discretion involved in school discipline policies. In many school discipline policies, school adults have the discretion to choose between non-severe forms of discipline (e.g., detention, student/teacher conversation) and severe forms of it (e.g., suspensions) for non-violent and minor infractions. Based on our study, it may be important to limit discretion and limit teachers' and school administrators' opportunities for choosing severe discipline options for minor infractions, because of what we know about the role of racial biases in school discipline.

SRCD: What are some implications of your research?

Dr. Del Toro and Dr. Wang: An implicit assumption of racial inequities is that such inequities only disadvantage the social groups of people who are disadvantaged by racial inequities. However, as we show with our paper, racial inequities that disadvantage Black American youth can also backfire and create distrust among White American youth who witness racial inequities being perpetuated in the classroom.

SRCD: What are any limitations in your research?

Dr. Del Toro and Dr. Wang: Limitations include our focus on public secondary schools in a single urban city, so we could not make broad generalizations. Second, our study focused on Black and White American youth, who represented the numerical majority in these public schools, so there were not many Latinx and Asian American youth represented in the city for us to include in our study. Third, we could not distinguish between in-school versus out-of-school suspensions, so we were not able to rule out which one is driving the observed negative effect linked to youth who witnessed or learned about their peers' suspensions for minor infractions. Fourth, because the present study was an observational study of school records data, we did not use a randomized controlled trial to make strong causal inferences.

SRCD: Do you have recommendations on future work in this area?

Dr. Del Toro and Dr. Wang: The first research question that we recommend for future work is: Where does the issue lie in the school discipline pipeline and where is a good point for intervention? We know that educators are referring students for school discipline and are suggesting school discipline penalties, and we also know that school administrators dispense penalties that either follow an educator's suggestion or that is more severe than the suggestion. With our data, we are interested in learning more about where the racial disparities lie in this process and when students begin to feel animosity toward their school in this process.

The second question that we recommend for future work is: What can we do to reduce educators' racial biases? Currently, we are working to understand whether teachers who engage in more culturally responsive education also engage in less racially disparate school discipline practices.

SRCD: If you could offer one quote or takeaway about the research, what might that be?

Dr. Del Toro and Dr. Wang: Racial inequities disadvantage everyone and are a detriment to core American values in liberty, justice, and democracy for all.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, "Vicarious Severe School Discipline Predicts Racial Disparities among Non-Disciplined Black and White American Adolescents" by Del Toro, J. (University of Minnesota-Twin Cities) and Wang, M.T. (University of Chicago). Copyright 2023 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.