CHAPTER 14

The Empathic-Discipline Intervention

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Suspensions are the most common form of exclusionary discipline, discipline that removes students from the learning environment. They are associated with a negative consequence for education and life outcomes. Research suggests that suspensions result from a default punitive approach to curb student misbehavior. In this chapter, we detail an intervention designed to shift teachers' mindsets about misbehavior to show more empathy. An empathic mindset is one in which teachers value students' perspectives, nurture students' growth, and prioritize the maintenance of positive relationships with students. We describe lab studies and a large-scale field experiment that demonstrate how the shift from a punitive to empathic mindset can produce more productive outcomes for both teachers and students. The intervention ultimately halved suspension rates in middle school across three school districts (N = 1,682 students) and helped students with a history of suspension to maintain a perception of respect from adults at their school. This chapter situates the intervention in the wise intervention framework with information about the content and delivery of the intervention and the mechanisms by which it operates. We end with details about implications of the intervention for theory and integration with policy and practice.

BACKGROUND

Students across the United States are removed from learning environments by way of suspensions at an alarming rate. In 2011, more than 5 million students were suspended from schools throughout the United States, which marked a substantial increase since a few decades ago when less than 2 million students were suspended in 1974 (Losen & Wald, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016). These rates are of particular concern, because suspensions are an exclusionary discipline that removes students from environments where learning is the priority. And some students, especially those with multiple suspensions, are placed in an environment where they are

more likely to enter a life trajectory of school dropout, unemployment, mental and physical illness, and incarceration—a process called the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996; Gottfried, 2010; Couch & Fairlie, 2010; Pager, Western, & Sugie, 2009; Boynton, O'Hara, Covault, Scott, & Tennen, 2014; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). Further, one student's discipline problems can affect other students' outcomes in the classroom (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2013; Ferguson, 2012). The effects of discipline problems can also extend beyond the school. Recent research showed that taxpayers must contribute millions of dollars to offset the lifetime consequences of school suspensions for society at large—by way of incarceration costs and lower future earnings and tax revenue (Rumberger & Losen, 2017).

These effects have exploded concurrently with zero-tolerance policies put in place to deter threats to school safety with punitive repercussions. An unexpected drawback lies in how suspensions have become a more common response to relatively minor and ambiguous misbehaviors compared to weapon or drug possession (Skiba, 2014). In recent years, the most common reasons for office referrals that result in suspensions are for misbehaviors classified as insubordination or classroom disruption. However, according to Skiba, "no data exist to show that out-of-school suspensions and expulsions reduce disruption or improve school climate" (p. 27).

Stigmatized groups are impacted by these school policies at a disproportionate rate (Pager et al., 2009). Research has shown that lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, Black, Latinx, Native American, and students in special education are at a heightened risk for suspension from school (U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011; Poteat, Scheer, & Chong, 2015). For example, Black students are two to three times more likely to be suspended than their White peers (Fabelo et al., 2011). These disparities exist from preschool through high school (Skiba et al., 2011) with Black preschoolers being 3.6 times more likely to receive a suspension than White preschoolers (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

Teacher–student relationships suffer under these punitive—nonempathic—conditions. For teachers, they become disheartened when they feel that dealing with misbehavior gets in the way of their teaching goals (Johnson, Yarrow, Rochkind, & Ott, 2009). For students, they can feel threatened and question their teachers' intentions when teachers are more likely to critically respond to them without communicating that they care (e.g., Yeager et al., 2014). This process can be of particular risk for students from stigmatized groups who may already be vigilant to cues that they do not belong at school (Goyer et al., 2019) or will not receive fair treatment (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002; Steele, 1997). Students tend to behave with more defiance and less cooperation when they perceive a teacher to be an untrustworthy authority figure (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008)—a process that is exacerbated for stigmatized students who may already expect unfair treatment. In this way, the default punitive context can deteriorate the quality of teacher–student relationships and cause both teachers and students to feel their goals cannot be reached in school (Okonofua, Walton, & Eberhardt, 2016). Discipline problems can then arise, a process also especially likely for students from stigmatized groups.

Public and private institutions have attempted a variety of strategies to curb the exorbitant rates of exclusionary discipline. From a policy standpoint, many states have enacted laws that prohibit schools from suspending students for reasons such as insubordination

or "defiance" (Pupil Discipline . . . , 2015). From a skill-building standpoint, companies and organizations have partnered with school districts to invest in sweeping professional development and structural changes through programs like positive behavioral interventions and supports (Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013). Pointedly, these efforts do not precisely address a major source and effect of discipline problems: fraught teacher–student relationships. Approaches from these standpoints rightfully curb a punitive component of the context, yet lack a promotion of enhanced interpersonal communication (e.g., empathy) to take its place.

The empathic-discipline intervention aims to address that lack of an interpersonal approach head-on with an aim to help teachers sustain high-quality, trusting teacher–student relationships over time to prevent discipline problems. The theory underlying the intervention is based on two core findings about the role of teachers: (1) over time, processes of labeling students can contribute to discipline problems, and (2) valuing students' perspectives and reappraising responses to students' misbehavior can disrupt label-making processes in relationships. Across these aspects of the intervention, teachers are viewed as pivotal "gatekeepers" who are in a position to construct the context for better relationships for entire classrooms of students. The goal of the intervention is to reduce the likelihood that a punitive mindset will lead teachers to label misbehaving students as troublemakers and respond to them with severe discipline (see Figure 14.1).

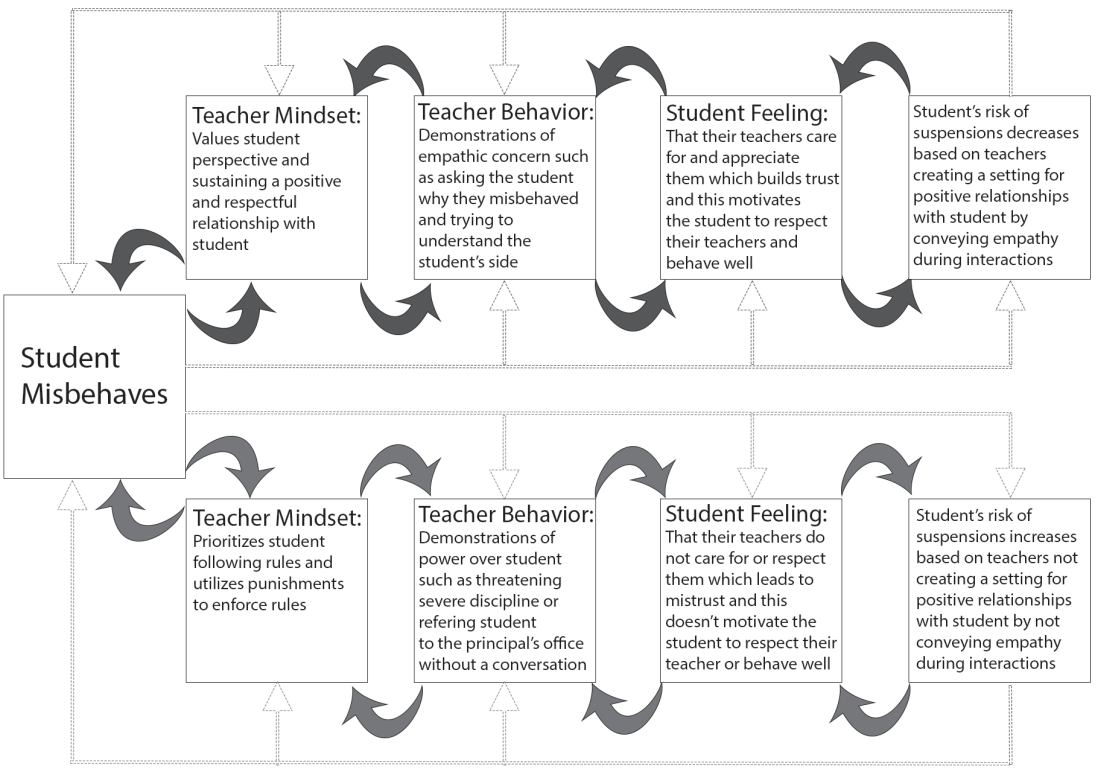

FIGURE 14.1. Empathic discipline (top path) activates empathic mindset, as opposed to default punitive mindset (bottom path). In turn, a more productive recursive cycle ensues.

What is the default punitive mindset? Teacher responses to misbehavior can be shaped by the extent to which a teacher thinks the misbehavior will be an ongoing or consistent hindrance. Teachers can come to think misbehavior will be ongoing when they attribute the misbehavior to an inherent characteristic of the student. We refer to this belief as a "punitive mindset." In turn, teachers may seek more punitive discipline, often discipline that removes the student from the learning environment (e.g., referral to the principal's office). Researchers evidenced such a belief and process in a series of experiments about race disparities in disciplinary action (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Teachers were presented with a series of misbehaviors by a student and were asked questions about how they would respond. Teachers were more likely to respond to a student they labeled as a troublemaker with a desire for more severe discipline and were more likely to see the student being suspended in the future. The troublemaker labeling was thus pivotal in the discipline process and it was a process that played out over the course of multiple misbehaviors. Further, teachers became more distressed and wanted more severe discipline from one misbehavior to the next, and this escalation was steeper for students viewed as troublemakers. All of these effects were most pronounced if the student was assumed to be Black, because the student was more likely to be a troublemaker if assumed to be Black as compared to White. However, for either a Black or White student, being labeled a troublemaker predicted the process of harsh responses to misbehavior. The empathic-discipline intervention seeks to replace this punitive mindset with an empathic mindset, one that appreciates the potential for students to behave better and for relationships with students to improve over time.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

The adoption of the empathic mindset creates opportunity to build respect, rather than mistrust, in a teacher's relationship with a student who has misbehaved. Over time, each mindset (punitive or empathic) can contribute to recursive cycles such that either the relationship deteriorates and thus discipline problems grow, or a positive relationship remains intact and thus future conflict is prevented (see Figure 14.1). In this section, we describe the process by which a psychological component (a teacher's mindset and a student's feeling of respect) and a behavioral component (how a teacher and a student then respond to each other) can contribute to recursive cycles that ultimately lead to severe exclusionary discipline, or not.

A teacher can have distinct mindsets or models for dealing with student misbehavior. As mentioned, a teacher's punitive mindset can lead him or her to view misbehavior as a stable pattern and thus respond with severe or exclusionary punishment. Also, due to many teachers entering the profession with a desire to support and help children grow (Johnson et al., 2009), that same teacher might also harbor an empathic mindset, one that prioritizes the maintenance of high-quality and productive relationships with students who struggle, including students who misbehave. Each mindset can be activated and affects the way a teacher will respond to misbehavior. When the empathic mindset is activated teachers are less likely to label a misbehaving student as a troublemaker and are more likely to want to find out more about why the student misbehaved.

The researchers conducted an initial experiment to determine whether a targeted exercise could activate distinct mindsets in teachers and in turn shift their responses

to a student's misbehavior. K–12 teachers (N = 39) were randomly assigned to engage with reminders of how punishment (punitive mindset) or good teacher–student relationships (empathic mindset) is the solution to misbehavior (Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016). It is important to note that, on average, these teachers had 14 years of experience as teachers. The brief article did not include information that was likely new to the teachers—rather, the article served as a structured reminder, a primer of a preexisting representation of quality relationships with students. Teachers in the empathic mindset condition were less likely to label the hypothetical student a troublemaker following the misbehavior. Further, when asked how they would respond to the misbehavior, teachers were more considerate of the student's perspective (e.g., "Ask the student why he or she was misbehaving") in the empathic-mindset condition. In the control condition, teachers were more punitive (e.g., threaten the student, assign detention, or involve the principal).

Students make sense of and respond to different kinds of treatment from teachers. For example, the extent to which students question their sense of belonging at school is associated with how they feel teachers treat them (Goyer et al., 2019). Students' responses can be directly connected to the mindsets that teachers act on in response to misbehavior. When a teacher's punitive mindset is activated, his or her response can lead a student to feel less respect for the teacher and less motivation to behave well. When teachers act on an empathic mindset in response to a student's misbehavior, might that process be curbed?

In a second experiment, the researchers sought to determine the impact on students of teachers' punitive or empathic mindsets. Might students feel more respect for a teacher and more motivation to behave well when a teacher responded to their misbehavior with an activated empathic mindset?

College students (N = 302) were prompted to reflect on their experiences as middle school students and answered questions about how they would feel in a hypothetical scenario about their misbehavior in class. Each participant was randomly assigned to either read that the teacher threatened him or her, assigned detention, and involved the principal (punitive control) or read that the teacher asked why the misbehavior occurred and rearranged the classroom to make it more conducive to better behavior (empathic mindset). Compared to the control condition, participants who read about a teacher with the empathic mindset were more likely to think the teacher deserved respect and were more motivated to behave well and follow instructions. While there were some limitations to this experiment,[1] these findings were noteworthy. The findings suggest that a student response to the default punitive mindset is less respect and motivation to behave well. Further, this response can be reversed when teachers' empathic mindset is activated.

These preliminary experiments provide theoretical insight into how distinct teacher mindsets can be activated through a strategic reminder of their values and the benefits of valuing students' perspectives. It also shows how an empathic mindset can set forth a cycle of more productive behaviors from both the teacher and student thereafter. When teachers' empathic mindset was activated, they were more likely to want to get perspective (e.g., have a conversation with the student) and to respond to the student's situation (e.g., rearrange the physical structure of the classroom). In turn, the student felt more respect in the relationship and became more interested in behaving well. Taken together,

[1]Ideally, middle school students would have been the participants in this study. However, we decided that college students would be better able to express how they would have felt in the situation.

while the findings are short term—based in scenarios—they suggest that a productive recursive process would ensue between the teacher and student.

The productive recursive process is coined "empathic discipline" and as a whole makes way for a mindset shift and a behavioral shift in the effects of discipline. The mindset shift pertains to the change in teachers' beliefs about students and their behavior. When teachers engage with materials that remind them of the powerful positive impact of quality teacher–student relationships—as opposed to a default punitive mindset—they become less likely to attribute a student's behavior to a rigid component of the student's character (i.e., labeling the student as a troublemaker). In turn, the student respects the teacher more and is more motivated to behave well in class in the future.

The behavioral component is evident in how the teacher and student interact in their behaviors toward each other. The teacher seeks to find out more about the student's perspective and how to use discipline as a vehicle to gain or maintain the student's respect and trust in the relationship. The student wants to follow the teacher's instructions and to behave well in the future. Over time, the quality of the teacher–student relationship is protected and there is a reduced likelihood of conflict in the future due to these intertwined mindset and behavioral shifts.

The empathic-discipline intervention is geared to offset the punitive path to discipline problems. It aims to shift teachers' mindsets away from default troublemaker labeling and punitive responses to misbehavior. Instead, it strategically highlights (1) listening to and seeking to understand students' perspective in periods of misbehavior, even when this perspective is not productive; (2) prioritizing and sustaining positive relationships with students, especially in times of misbehavior; and (3) helping students grow and improve within the context of a trusting relationship. The intervention seeks to remind teachers that they are in a unique position to do each of these three things, which will allow them to make meaningful contributions to their students' lives. In turn, teachers will create a context for students to feel more respect in the teacher–student relationship and be more motivated to behave well.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The researchers conducted a randomized controlled field experiment to test whether the effects described in the previous section can extend to actual teacher–student relationships and discipline rates. Can an opportunity for teachers to reflect on, articulate, and commit to an empathic mindset cause reductions in discipline problems?

Outcomes

The experiment was evaluated at five middle schools in three California districts with math teachers (N = 31) and students (N = 1,682; 52% female; 17% Asian, 2% Black, 54% Latino, 7% White, 20% other/unknown). The schools varied in the percentage of their student population that received free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of socioeconomic status (37%, 68%, 70%, 61%, and 62%, in order of largest to smallest total student enrollment at each of the five schools that participated).

In the experiment, math teachers were randomly assigned to engage either with modules about how technology use is important in involving students (control) or with

modules about the importance of sustaining positive relationships with students by way of valuing and seeking to understand their perspectives, especially when students misbehave. In each module, teachers read brief articles and narratives about the topic, and answered questions about their understanding and experiences related to the topic.

Math teachers completed two online modules, a 45-minute session in the fall (October–November) and a 25-minute session in the winter (January–February).[2] All materials were delivered online such that teachers completed the sessions from their own computers and did so at their convenience during a 2-week window. The fall and spring time line was chosen to ensure that teachers had experiences with their current students before engaging in the first module—that is, teachers would be able to engage with the materials in a meaningful way that would directly apply to their students. The second module was designed to serve as a booster, or reminder, when the school year reconvened after holiday breaks.

As described earlier, suspensions are especially impactful because they remove students from the learning environment and they are significantly more common than other exclusionary disciplines, like expulsions or referrals to law enforcement. Further, this was the only discipline outcome schools tracked across each school district. This intervention halved year-long student suspension rates from 9.6 to 4.8% (see Figure 14.2). Similar to national suspension rates, control-condition suspension rates were highest among boys, Black and Latinx students, and students with a history of suspensions. The reduction in suspension rates was comparably large for the following groups: boys, from 14.6 to 8.4%; African Americans and Latinx, from 12.3 to 6.3%; and previously suspended students, from 51.2 to 29.4%.

There was also a notable shift in students' experiences of respect. Students were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement "Teachers and other adults at my school treat me with respect." The intervention bolstered the respect of the most at-risk students and previously suspended students, perceived from all teachers and adults at their school. It is important to note that the felt respect was not solely from their math teacher but rather all teachers at the school. This point is further explained in the next section.

Mechanism

Did suspensions drop solely due to a change in math teachers' interactions or discipline standards with students, or did they drop, as well, because students experienced fewer suspensions from interactions with adults across school contexts (e.g., nonmath teachers)? Evidence suggests the latter.

Not only did students report experiencing greater respect from all their teachers at school (not just their math teacher) but records also indicated that the fewer suspensions were not likely due solely to fewer referrals for discipline from math teachers. One school district in the sample kept records of the faculty member who referred a student for ultimate suspension. Students from this school accounted for 33% of the full student sample.

[2]Math teachers were recruited because all students at the schools had one math teacher only. This allowed for a design that determines efficacy of the treatment with only one of the students' teachers. Otherwise, it would be difficult to determine effects on students if they had some teachers randomly assigned to the treatment condition and others to the control condition.

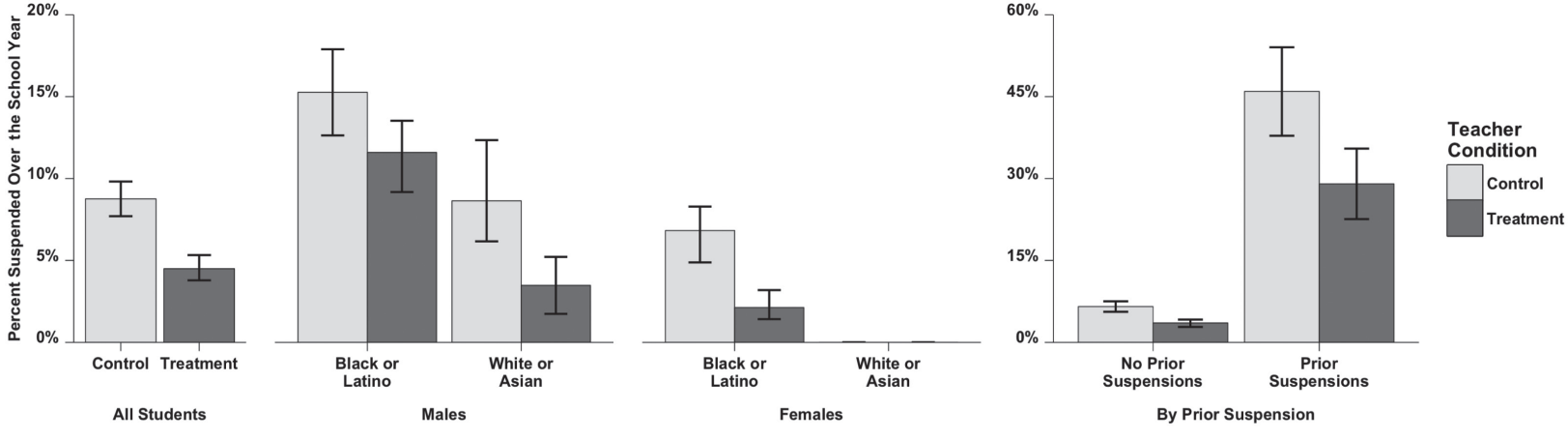

FIGURE 14.2. Middle school students (N = 1,682) whose math teacher (N = 31) completed the empathic-mindset intervention as compared to randomized control materials were half as likely to be suspended over the school year. From Okonofua, Paunesu, and Walton (2016). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals after 10,000 bootstraps. Reprinted with permission from the authors.

In this school, students of math teachers who received the intervention were 55% less likely to be suspended from school (treatment = 5.4%, control = 12.1%). Yet, the effect was not due to a change only in math class. Only 7.4% of suspensions were referred by math teachers. Furthermore, all students referred for suspension by a math teacher were also referred for suspension by other faculty (e.g., a science teacher). Thus, even excluding suspensions referred by math teachers from the analysis yields an identical reduction in suspension rates. This supplemental finding suggests that, at least in this school, improving the experience with at least one teacher led to a broad improvement in student behavior across diverse classroom contexts. It notably also suggests that the effect was not merely due to math teachers being more lenient in their discipline practices nor to an improvement in students' behavior solely in math classes—rather, students' perceptions of and experiences in the entire school context became more productive and less conducive to discipline problems.

These findings suggest that part of the effect results from a shift in students' perceptions and experiences throughout the school and the school day. Students' entire school experiences can be improved when a single teacher presumably treats them as more deserving of respect and as having a valuable perspective. This is consistent with the aforementioned recursive process of respect in teacher–student relationships (see Figure 14.1). This is also consistent with the finding that the most at-risk students, those with a history of suspensions, were less likely to lose respect for adults at their school when they had a teacher who received the empathic-discipline intervention. It also suggests the importance of students' perspectives in this process (see Goyer et al., 2019).

Effects over Time

The intervention's effects lasted for several months. Teachers began participation in October and suspension records were evaluated for that entire school year. The sustained effects seem to also be associated with protecting teacher–student relationships from deterioration. This is evident in how, several months after the intervention, students with a history of suspension perceived more respect from adults at their school when they have a teacher with the empathic mindset, as opposed to not having it. Future research might explore outcomes beyond the year of the intervention, such as how teachers interact with new students in following years or how students interact with new teachers in the following years.

Heterogeneity

In the initial test of the intervention, the proportional reduction in suspension rates was comparable for all students. Also, due to certain groups being more at risk of receiving suspensions, the absolute impact was relatively larger for them (males: from 14.6 to 8.4%; African American and Latinos: from 12.3 to 6.3%; and previously suspended students: from 51.2 to 29.4%). The intervention was tested at only five schools and with only the math faculty at those schools (N = 31; 77% female; 39% sixth grade, 29% seventh grade, 32% eighth grade). While this can attest to the intervention's strength to bring about large and lasting effects with a small sample of high-impact players, it does not allow for definitive heterogeneity information.

Future research is needed to confirm more specific conditions for the intervention's efficacy. For example, randomized controlled trials are currently in place to evaluate the effects of teacher characteristics (e.g., race, gender, and stress) and school characteristics (e.g., school size, student demographics, and grade levels) on the extent to which the intervention reduces suspension rates (see "Future Directions" section).

COUSINS

The empathic-discipline intervention is a psychologically wise intervention (see Walton & Wilson, 2018) that focuses on relationships between teachers and students. How can the quality of these relationships be maintained over time? The value of pursuing answers to this question is not unique to school settings. For example, other interventions have focused on how to maintain relationship quality in marriages.

There are notable differences between the empathic-discipline intervention and interventions for romantic relationships. Romantic relationships involve equal status between partners and partners who have chosen to be connected. Further, the interventions often administer the treatment to both partners. However, teacher–student relationships are hierarchal in nature with teachers in a superior position to students. Teachers and students typically do not choose their relationships—rather, they are assigned. Yet, the similarities in the relationships (e.g., sustained contact over time, stress from interpersonal contact, and interconnected goals) can make interventions similar in theory.

Targeted psychological interventions can mitigate the deleterious effects of conflict in relationships. In one randomized controlled trial, researchers aimed to curb the decline in marital quality (Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013). Couples (N = 120) were assigned to either engage with control materials or engage with a treatment that encouraged them to consider a perspective other than their own as a way to reappraise their emotional responses to conflict in their relationship. Every 4 months for 24 months, all couples completed checkup activities about marital quality (e.g., satisfaction, trust). After the first 8 months, couples also completed activities to describe a "significant disagreement" or conflict during the preceding 4 months and reported how distressed they felt by answering questions such as "I am angry at my partner for his/her behavior during this conflict." At months 12, 16, and 20, couples in the treatment condition reappraised the conflict they reported for the preceding 4 months by responding to prompts that guided them to view the conflict as a "third party . . . who sees things from a neutral point of view." It also guided them to reflect on obstacles to getting that perspective and to make plans to make the best of disagreements by taking this kind of perspective during the next 4 months. Compared to couples in the control condition, couples that reappraised conflict by considering a perspective other than their own showed a significantly mitigated decline in relationship quality.

Why might getting a perspective other than one's own protect relationships from reductions in quality? In the reappraisal intervention, the researchers found that the benefits of the intervention were due to a reduction in conflict-related distress over time. The researchers also suggest that the effect was due to the couples in the reappraisal condition adopting an "adaptive framework" of wanting the best for all involved in the relationship (see Libby & Eibach, 2011, p. 234).

The empathic-discipline intervention and the reappraisal intervention are similar in key ways. They both focus on relationship-based processes that unfold over time, target shifts in how people make sense of conflict and distress, and use perspective-getting and empathic intentions to protect relationship quality. First, like the reappraisal intervention, the empathic-discipline intervention aims to combat a decline in relationship quality over time. Similar to marital quality, research shows that the quality of teacher–student relationships declines over time and ultimately contributes to discipline problems (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Second, in both marital and teacher–student relationships, the decline in quality is connected to stress in times of conflict (e.g., when one or both persons feel disrespected; e.g., Johnson et al., 2009). Third, both interventions leverage a consideration of another person's perspective and an adaptive framework as a means to protect the quality of the relationship. Albeit, the reappraisal intervention involves considering the perspective of a neutral third-party's perspective of the relationship; both interventions aim for a person to think beyond his or her own perspective or the imagined perspective of the other person in the relationship. As in the reappraisal intervention, teachers exposed to the empathic-discipline intervention engaged in activities to remind them and guide them through the importance and benefits of getting students' perspectives—and not solely imagining them. Teachers were reminded to think about doing so especially when conflicts arise. Further, in both interventions, this was presented as something that can be difficult to do but worthwhile—and the worthwhile component is framed as such for all parties involved. Teachers who engaged with the empathic mindset were reminded that high-quality teacher–student relationships enhance both teachers' capacity to reach their teaching and career goals and students' capacity to reach their learning and life goals (see Okonofua, Walton, et al., 2016).

An underlying component of the similarities between these interventions lies in their focus on processes that unfold over time. Relationships are not one-time encounters—rather, they play out over time. Conflict early in a relationship can contribute to later conflict such that the magnitude of its detriment grows. The cycle of reverberating attitudes and behaviors exists in martial relationships and also in how teachers and students view and treat each other. It is critical for interventions to consider this dynamic (see Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

INTERVENTION CONTENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Framing

Following past social-psychological interventions (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2011), teachers were not told that they were receiving an intervention, that the exercise was intended to reduce discipline problems, or that teachers are biased in their discipline practices. Teachers could have interpreted that framing as controlling or as stigmatizing. Instead, teachers were treated as experts asked to offer their feedback on best practices and how to not show bias in discipline. They were told that the researchers were interested in learning more from them about effective discipline practice so they could pass on their insights to new teachers.

The intervention was delivered through a 45-minute online session in the fall and a 25-minute online session in the winter. Each session was introduced as an opportunity

for future teachers to learn from participants' past experiences as teachers and that the researchers would present them with brief articles and stories to guide their feedback. These different forms of reflection were geared to cohesively remind teachers of the three primary themes for empathic discipline: (1) seek to understand students' perspective when misbehavior occurs, (2) prioritize the maintenance of positive relationships with students, and (3) help students develop and control their behaviors.

Articles

The articles detailed how it is important for teachers to bring out the best in their students through communication of care and respect relationships. They highlighted how situational factors such as stigma and puberty can cause students to worry about unfair treatment and can affect their behavior. A student can also come to feel less threatened in school and more motivated to behave well when teachers consider situational factors and value the student's perspective. The following is an example of language used in the articles:

> Of course, it takes more time to reach some students than others because their previous experiences and expectations differ. Some students have had good experiences with teachers. Others have had negative experiences. . . . But teachers who consistently reach out and engage students do make a difference. They help students see that they do have a fair shot and that people in authority are there to help them grow and develop, not stand in their way.

Last, the articles explain how this consideration is especially important in the heat of the moment, when conflicts or misbehavior arise. One article states:

> Teachers told us that some of the greatest challenges they faced—and some of their best opportunities for helping students—occurred after students misbehaved or struggled academically. These situations offer teachers an opportunity to talk with students and help them understand their experiences in class and in middle school more positively.

Turmoil is an opportunity to show students care and respect in a way that can be especially meaningful for students and impactful for long-term gains in quality teacher–student relationships.

Stories

The content also included brief stories to drive home major points in the articles. The stories were told from the perspectives of various students and a teacher, and they each included multiple psychological methods to persuasively remind teachers of how key themes emphasized in the articles play out in real-life situations (see Table 14.1). For example, norms were established in most of the stories. These norms ranged from how many students misbehave when they feel anxious to how students become less anxious when they feel they receive care and respect, especially from teachers. The objective was to remind teachers that misbehavior is to be expected from growing children and a normal response is to show care to students. Research shows that establishing norms in this way can lead a person to change his or her behavior to avoid deviating from it (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008).

TABLE 14.1. Psychological Approaches through Stories in the Intervention Content from the Study by Okonofua, Paunesku, and Walton (2016)

Story	Reminder strategy
Messages: Teachers seek and value students' perspectives; it helps when discipline prioritizes respect.	
Student quotation "In middle school, I didn't feel like I belonged. . . . So I didn't pay attention in class and sometimes I got in trouble. One day I got detention and, instead of just sitting there, my teacher talked with me about what happened. He really listened to me. . . . It felt good to know I had someone I could trust in school."	1. Reminder that any given student can be in a situation to misbehave and that misbehavior can be due to context (e.g., worries about belonging at school). 2. Encourage teacher to listen to student to gain perspective and show respect. 3. Show how a student's perception of a caring teacher is pivotal to development.
Student quotation "One time, after I got in trouble in 7th grade, I still remember how my teacher took me aside later and listened to my side of the story. . . . Even though I still got a detention, I was glad that she didn't just dismiss what I had to say, like other teachers sometimes did. . . ."	1. Show how efforts to seriously understand a student's perspective can communicate respect. 2. Show that discipline can be administered in a mutually respectful manner that protects the integrity and trust in the teacher–student relationship.
Teacher quotation "When I was a child, I remember worrying about how I would be treated by teachers at my school. But I will always remember Ms. McBride, who treated me with respect and trust. She showed me that teachers could make all the difference in how students feel about school."	1. Show it is normal for a student to crave respect, trust, and care, especially from adults in their lives. 2. Show how teachers' own past experiences can allow for common ground with students and their perspectives.
Messages: Students worry about respect; stigma can affect students' perspectives.	
Racially stigmatized student quotation "Whenever I get a new teacher, I think 'Is she gonna treat me fairly? Does she call on the White students more? Does she expect them to know the right answers and us to get them wrong?"	1. Show that it is normal for students to worry about unfair treatment and how that feeling can be heightened by risk of discrimination due to a student's background. 2. Provide an example of how a teacher's intentions may not always be clear to a student.
Racially stigmatized student quotation "I always thought school wasn't for me, or for people like me. It seemed that people like me just get in trouble in school. But my 6th-grade math teacher really changed my mind. She told us that she knew that every one of us could learn and that she would work hard to help us get there. . . ."	1. Show that students from stigmatized groups may expect unfair treatment. 2. Place teachers in the perspective of a student to help him or her remember the situational reasons why a student might misbehave. 3. Provide an example of how a teacher can help a stigmatized student to feel more certain that he or she can belong at school.

Saying Is Believing

After reading and reflecting on the materials, teachers wrote essays describing how they use the kinds of practices described to build positive relationships with students during difficult disciplinary contexts. For instance, one participating teacher wrote, "I NEVER hold grudges. I try to remember that they are all the son or daughter of someone who loves them more than anything in the world. They are the light of someone's life" (see Table 14.2 for more teacher quotations). Teachers were told that these essays would be shared with new teachers to help them in their practice. This procedure, in which people freely advocate for an idea to a receptive audience ("saying is believing"), is a powerful persuasive technique. It makes the experience active, not passive, promoting deep processing. It also encourages people to commit themselves to an idea and to connect this idea to their own lives and practice (Walton & Wilson, 2018; Yeager & Walton, 2011).

TABLE 14.2. Sample Teacher Responses about Building Positive Relationships with Students from the Study by Okonofua, Paunesku, and Walton (2016)

Teacher responses to "*What are some of the ways that you try to build positive relationships with your students, or things that you would like to try in the future to improve your relationships with your students?*"

1. "At the start of the year I introduce myself to each student individually. We do several journal and other assignments that allow me to learn more about my students. I write comments on the pages so the students know that I actually do read their work. I take note of anything my students share that I may want to reference in conversation."

2. "I make myself available to students after school to provide them with more personalized support. When students are struggling I try to get on their level and find out what is going on not focusing on what they are doing wrong but trying to focus more on what I can do to ameliorate the situation and look for solutions moving forward. I also try to attend events like sports or theatre that they are interested in and talk to them about the things they like."

3. "I feel that one way to build positive relationships is to talk to the students. Often times students feel that they are judged even before they walk into the classroom. So if you listen to them and talk with them they are willing to work for you."

4. "We share good news each week—building a strong classroom community. Each student who wants to share can share. No one is left out. I am fair. I say hello to each student as they walk through the classroom door. I also try and say good-bye to students as they leave. I smile at each student as they enter the classroom. I also try to listen to what a student is telling me and try to be fair and consistent in my discipline in the classroom."

5. "Pull students aside to talk with them about behavior or grades; help students set goals and create steps for meeting them; incorporating student interests into activities and lessons; giving students choice in projects (i.e., students can select, research, focus, determine format for presenting information, etc.); allowing students to create own groups for work; chatting with students about their interests and their daily lives."

6. "I try to find out interests and hobbies outside of school. I attend these activities and talk with parents to build relationships. I talk to the students back at school about the activity that I attended."

7. "I do ice-breaker activities & ask students their hobbies and interests. I also make a point of letting the class know that I am human & make mistakes as well. Our motto is It's OK to make a mistake as [long] as you have grown from it. That could mean apologizing, fixing or having the Ah-Ha moment. We also have 'Bad Day' plans and students can let me know if it is a Bad Day and I will work with their comfort level for participation."

Control Condition

In the randomized controlled trial, half of the math teachers were assigned to a "technology-engagement" control condition. The content of this condition was about how to leverage technology to engage students in lessons and assignments. Thus, like the treatment condition, it was about means to improve student outcomes. The key difference is that this condition did not talk about seeking students' perspectives or ways to think about student misbehavior.

The control condition was similar in structure and in time to complete. Like the treatment condition, the control condition consisted of two online sessions: a 45-minute session in the fall and a 25-minute session in the winter. Also, the content was delivered in the form of articles, stories, and exercises similar in length.

NUANCES AND MISCONCEPTIONS

The empathic-discipline intervention is still not fully understood. Current and future research is needed to determine the specifics for implementation and expectations for effects in various contexts. So far, there is one major nuance or misconception about the intervention. The psychological message is about seeking to understand a student's perspective when the student misbehaves, not merely imagining or assuming his or her perspective.

The Empathic Mindset Leads Teachers to *Get* Perspective, Not *Take* Perspective

Second, the intervention is about getting perspective. It is not about a teacher's ability to guess what a student thinks or feels. It is more about the act of learning a student's perspective (e.g., by listening to him or her) and what that act can communicate to the student (e.g., respect).

The intervention is about the process of finding out more about a student or why a student misbehaved. It is about understanding the student—even if the student's perspective is unproductive. For example, if a student is distressed, a teacher mirroring this emotion could escalate the conflict. Also, it is not necessarily about sharing a student's opinions or agreeing with a student's interpretations of his or her surroundings. If a student thinks that school is a waste of time, it could be problematic and ethically questionable for a teacher to agree with the student—rather, it is about showing that one cares to know about and values the perspective and works from that perspective to productively respond to misbehavior. This can lead a student to feel less threat and more respect. For example, when a teacher asks a student why he or she behaved a certain way (i.e., his or her thoughts and feelings predicating the behavior), it communicates that the teacher thinks the student is more than a collection of behaviors (e.g., troublemaker) but rather a person with thoughts and feelings behind those actions. It communicates that the teacher cares about and respects the student as a person. The question and understanding are the key points, not necessarily that a teacher agrees that a student's thoughts or feelings should continue to manifest in a certain behavior. In fact, many times, discipline requires

teachers to guide students to better manage their thoughts and feelings, a key lesson in child development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

It is important to be cautious when introducing to real-world context interventions that are based on effects studied in lab settings. Lab experiments are particularly informative because they control conditions (e.g., a set and specific student misbehavior) in a way that makes it possible to detect specific effects (e.g., different understandings of misbehavior) of a given treatment (e.g., reminder to value students' perspectives). The empathic-discipline research reports from both lab experiments and experimentation in actual classrooms. It thus provides noteworthy insights about how context matters for practical implication (Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

Scalability

The empathic-discipline intervention was administered with teachers in five schools across three school districts. This required a focus on scalability that maintained fidelity to the treatment—in other words, it was important to make sure the cohesion of the psychological experience was sufficient while also done in a way that can be administered across many contexts. This form of consideration is key for future steps to increase the scalability of the intervention.

Critical components for scalability was that the intervention could be administered online and at teachers' convenience. By constructing the intervention materials in an online forum, it could be implemented remotely from the research base—the location of the research team. The intervention was thus able to be administered at schools in different cities while still being able to be monitored in a single location.

The online platform also made it possible for teachers to participate in the intervention at their convenience within a 3-week window. As mentioned, context matters. Schools have varying schedules and planning in place that determine teachers' day-to-day schedules. For example, in some schools, teachers have planning periods when participation would work best. In other schools, teachers have dedicated times for professional development meetings when participation would work best. While a strict participation schedule (e.g., all participation at a single time and in a single place) would allow for more control over the delivery of the materials and fidelity to the participation procedure, it could disrupt schools', teachers', and students' regular working and learning schedules. In turn, it could lead teachers to not appropriately engage with the materials or opt to not participate at all. The implementation schedule of providing a set number of weeks for teachers to participate at their leisure allowed for relative control over timing of implementation while also being flexible to schools' various schedules.

Context Matters

As with all psychological interventions, the context matters. Schools have different policies in place and different theories for how to approach improvements to student

outcomes. The empathic-discipline intervention will likely work best when tactfully integrated with policy and skill-building approaches. While future empirical research is needed to confirm the efficacy of integration, theory suggests that it will be beneficial in contexts with certain policy and skill-building interventions in place.

In modern times, research suggests that schools can have a default punitive climate in which teachers become more likely to respond to misbehavior with punishment instead of care. In this social climate, teachers can come to view a misbehaving student in terms of a label (e.g., a "troublemaker" or a "bad kid"; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Okonofua, Walton, et al., 2016). Their discipline might then focus on getting rid of the student as opposed to adjust the context to make it more conducive to better behavior. The intervention takes a psychological approach (i.e., how teachers interpret student misbehavior) to shift classrooms from the default punitive social climate to one that is more conducive to teachers and students feeling less disgruntled or threatened. Therefore, the intervention may be particularly beneficial in school contexts that can provide time and space for teachers and students to nurture their relationships. Put differently, teacher–student relationships can be strengthened and discipline problems reduced when policies are in place to enable local or district leaders to effectively create nonpunitive social climates in schools.

Integration with Policy and Skill Building

There have been promising developments in discipline policy and skill building, and the researchers predict that this psychological intervention will work best when integrated with those approaches. For example, many states have adopted policies to restrict office referrals or suspensions for defiance or disrespect (see Pre-K Student Discipline Amendment Act of 2015; Pupil Discipline . . . , 2015). This can lead teachers to experience a loss of a tool in their toolkit to respond to misbehavior. The empathic-discipline intervention can remind teachers of the importance of seeking new tools that can help them get students' perspectives and to respond to misbehavior in a manner that is mindful of students' worries about respect and fair treatment. Together, these approaches can reduce the likelihood of punitive mindsets guiding discipline decisions.

Unlike skill-building approaches, the empathic-discipline intervention does not teach teachers new information about pedagogy or curriculum. However, the intervention might work best when coupled with such information and training. The content of the intervention is intended to encourage teachers to actively seek an understanding of students' perspectives (Eyal, Steffel, & Epley, 2018). The intervention aims to increase teachers' motivation to seek out new or more effective tools—strategies that show students they care for and respect them—to put in their discipline toolkit. This encouragement and motivation can increase the likelihood that teachers seek and meaningfully engage with relevant skill-building professional development. For example, *cultural competency* is a skill-based approach that has received a great deal of attention in how it might bridge the cultural gap between teachers and students from different backgrounds (Prater, Wilder, & Dyches, 2008; see also Dee & Penner, 2016). A teacher who remembers the importance of connecting with students—especially those who might fear they will not receive fair treatment—might engage with this kind of professional development in a more meaningful way that is likely to stick with them and apply it when interacting with students from stigmatized cultural groups.

As individual approaches—psychological, policy, or skill building—they might do some work to reduce discipline problems and inequity in their rates of occurrence. The largest and most lasting effects will likely result when these approaches are strategically integrated with a common aim. The empathic-discipline intervention should be understood and employed with attention placed on how it fits in a broader range of approaches that combat the default punitive climate in many school contexts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

Many psychological interventions have shown large positive effects from a direct focus on students' own mindsets about their experiences. Empathic discipline advances that work with evidence for how a focus on students' environments (i.e., teachers' responses to their students' behavior) can also improve student outcomes. This intervention attests to the power of the situation to affect outcomes, for better or for worse (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). This is most apparent in how the intervention highlights the default punitive context in schools. Lab studies show that when teachers are reminded that punishment is critical for students to learn self-control, the teachers are more likely to view a student as a troublemaker when he or she misbehaves. They are also more likely to start students on a path to suspension and less likely to try to find out more about the cause of the misbehavior. The default context is so normalized that a brief intervention that reminds teachers to value students' perspectives and to help students perceive respect from them can significantly change the likelihood of a student getting in trouble throughout the school day.

Second, psychologically wise interventions can contribute to lasting change in real-world outcomes. These interventions are low cost and brief, which can cause them to be interpreted as magic (Yeager & Walton, 2011). However, they are carefully crafted to shift how people interpret their experiences in a way that can build on itself with new experiences over time (see Walton & Wilson, 2018). This is the case with empathic discipline. It shifts the way teachers interpret misbehavior and the students who misbehave. Over time, this can change the way teachers interact with students, and students can come to feel more respected at school. In this way, the intervention provides an example of how a strategic nudge can be embedded in patterns of interaction such that it can build on itself and ultimately influence an entire context (see Harackiewicz, Rozek, Hulleman, & Hyde, 2012; Outes, Sanchez, & Vakis, 2017; Paluck, Shepherd, & Aronow, 2016; Powers et al., 2016, for other examples).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The high-priority next steps for the empathic-discipline intervention include investigations of mechanisms by which the intervention's effects benefit teachers, benefit students, and persist over time, and also include explorations of conditions in which the intervention is most effective, or not.

How might the intervention affect teachers? The preliminary findings indicate that teachers who engage with the empathic mindset or participate in the empathic-discipline intervention are less likely to view students as troublemakers and more likely to respond to misbehavior in ways that communicate respect to students. Previous research suggests

higher levels of empathy are associated with decreased teacher stress (Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2017). Other research indicates that decreases in teachers' stress (e.g., by way of less perceived threat in teacher–student relationships) are associated with fewer discipline problems for their students (O'Brennan, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2017; Pas, Bradshaw, Hershfeldt, & Leaf, 2010). Might the empathic-discipline intervention's effect on relationships be in part associated with reductions in less anxiety or stress? Further, research shows that people's perception, judgment, and decision making are more likely to be shaped by stereotypes when they lack cognitive resources (e.g., when stressed or exhausted; see Spencer, Charbonneau, & Glaser, 2016). If the intervention's effects are associated with reductions in stress, might it also reduce the likelihood of stereotyping, as is suggested by the reduction of troublemaker labeling?

How might the intervention affect students? When college students imagined themselves as receiving treatment from a teacher with the empathic mindset, they felt more respect in the relationship and more motivation to behave well. Also, previously suspended students of teachers who received the empathic-discipline intervention were more likely to feel respect in their relationships with all adults at their school. These findings suggest that students might experience a shift in their construal of respect throughout the school day. Might the intervention lead students to feel less stress or anxiety in their relationships with teachers or in school at large? Recent research suggests that such a shift in construal can lead to long-term reductions in discipline problems (Goyer et al., 2019).

How might the intervention's effects extend beyond single teacher–student relationships? Preliminary results mark a 50% reduction in year-long suspension rates. Also, previously suspended students reported a heightened perception of respect several months after teachers participated in the intervention. Might future students (e.g., the next year) of a teacher who receives the intervention also be less likely to be suspended and more likely to feel respect with adults at their school? Also, might students of teachers who receive the intervention continue to be less likely to be suspended and more likely to feel respect in future years with new teachers?

Under what conditions might the intervention not work? So far, the empathic-discipline intervention has been tested in middle schools in adjacent districts that serve racially diverse student populations (17% Asian, 2% Black, 54% Latino, 7% White, 20% other/unknown). Future research is needed to determine the intervention's efficacy in other middle school contexts and at other grade levels. For example, it will be useful to discover how well the intervention works in schools with (1) more or less racial and socioeconomic status diversity in the student population (e.g., more Black students); (2) various default cultural contexts, such as policies for responses to student misbehavior (see Pre-K Student Discipline Amendment Act of 2015) and school structure and support (see Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011); and (3) various teacher characteristics, such as their race (see Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015), stress levels, job satisfaction, and burnout—each of which has been associated with the quality of teacher–student relationships (Johnson et al., 2009). Research suggests that factors like punitive policies and stressed teachers are associated with more suspensions for students. The empathic-discipline intervention may then be especially effective for teachers affected by these factors.

Answers to these questions will provide a better understanding of the mechanisms that lead to the overall shift in how teachers and students view each other following the intervention. It is important to better understand these mechanisms to ensure it can

predictably improve teacher and student outcomes in various contexts throughout the country that suffer from high and disproportionate rates of discipline problems.

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