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## School Discipline and Social Work Practice: Application of Research and Theory to Intervention

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Research has identified a relationship between school disciplinary actions and poor academic and psychosocial functioning of students subjected to them. The ways in which school discipline is a direct contributor to students' academic and psychosocial difficulty needs to be further established empirically. Several theories, based in existing research and theory in sociology of education and educational psychology, have been proposed to explain the school discipline-student dysfunction relationship. They generally suggest three pathways: disciplinary actions may contribute to students' psychological problems; student misbehavior may be encouraged through ineffective and unintentionally paradoxical learning experiences; and disciplinary practices may damage students' relationship with school. School social workers and others working with children who have been disciplined at school can use these research findings and theories as an assessment framework to guide their interventions. The awareness of the iatrogenic potential of school discipline and informed assessment can support a range of evidence-based alternatives to school discipline.

**KEY WORDS:** assessment; children; discipline; schools; school social work

Although voluminous research has proven them faulty and ineffective at best and damaging at worst, disciplinary policies and practices in U.S. schools have remained virtually unchanged since the advent of public schooling in the late 18th century (Finkelstein, 1989; Katz, 1975; Rothstein, 1984). Schools commonly used methods such as codes of conduct, suspension, corporal punishment, and teachers' management of students' behaviors inside the classroom to maintain safe and orderly environments that are conducive to effective teaching and learning. Teachers, however, often must balance the challenges of working in schools that may be lacking resources but have many children with great needs, and sometimes, serious psychosocial difficulties. Teachers need to maintain safe and learning-appropriate classroom environments, and some disciplinary methods are indispensable to accomplishing this task.

Four decades of research, however, have shown that these conventional school disciplinary policies and practices often fail to create the intended environment and appear, in some cases to have a destructive impact on children's academic and psychosocial functioning. School discipline has been linked with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

depression, anxiety, aggressive behavior in and outside of school, academic failure, and school dropout (for reviews see Cameron (2005); Hyman & Perone, 1998). Furthermore, children of color, boys, and those receiving compensatory services at schools for disabilities are disproportionately and more severely subjected to school discipline (for reviews see Cameron; Hyman, 1990,1995). Most of these studies are correlational, however, and have not conclusively demonstrated that school disciplinary policies and practices directly contribute to the development of these problems in school children.

Using more rigorous methods and statistical analyses, however, Mayer and Leone (1999), Wu, Pink, Grain, and Moles (1982), and Shaw and Braden (1990) found that school discipline directly contributes to the incidence of these psychosocial problems in children. Although their findings accord with the correlational studies, more research is needed to affirm and further specify these findings. The emerging picture, however, strongly suggests that conventional methods of disciplining students may be used prejudicially, and in some cases, to the detriment of the students disciplined.

Research and theories from developmental psychology, sociology of education, and the newer field of the study of school disciplinary practices offer a host of potential explanations for understanding the ways in which students may be adversely affected by common school disciplinary practices. These findings and theories represent the best contemporary conceptualizations of how school disciplinary practices can have paradoxical and iatrogenic effect on some students, and although tentative, can be used to guide professional interventions with children negatively affected by their experiences with school discipline.

School disciplinary practices have received little attention from social work researchers (key exceptions are Dupper, 1994 and Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002). Some school social workers and agency or private practice social workers working with children and adolescents may be unfamiliar with extant research on discipline and not know that although discipline may be doled as a remedy of school problems, it may actually harm children. This knowledge gap may limit social workers' understanding of their young clients and their effectiveness with them. Not being able to consider how school-based factors contribute to young clients' functioning, practitioners may develop overly narrow intervention plans that may help these clients but miss opportunities for greater and larger systems change efforts.

The literature provides three pathways for understanding the iatrogenic effect of school discipline on school children: (1) research and theory pertaining to student misbehavior and other symptoms as psychological sequelae of harmful school discipline, (2) operant conditioning and social learning theories on the ways students may learn misbehaviors as an unintended product of school discipline, and (3) social and political theories that focus on the problematic nature of students' relationship with school in the wake of exposure to discipline. The research and theory provide fertile ground for recommendations to social workers practicing with school children on how they might differentially assess the multiple ways that school experiences may be contributing to the problems that have brought their young clients in for assistance and design appropriate interventions shaped by these determinations.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SEQUELAE OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

### Suppressed Negative Emotions

Students who are subjected to school discipline may react to it with strong but unexpressed emotions, including anger, humiliation, shame, and anxiety (Rothstein, 1984). Corporal punishment, for example, may create fear of teachers and administrators that students may never express to anyone directly (Dubanoski, Inaba, & Gerkewicz, 1983). These strong and upsetting but suppressed emotions can provoke reactive misbehavior in the face of incidents that would not normally trigger such reactions, including playful, teasing, or a challenging-but unhostile-remark. In an analysis of the differential treatment of low-income students and others, Brantlinger (1991) found that students perceived peers often subjected to discipline as edgy, defensive, angry, and easily prodded into aggressive acts with others. Brantlinger suggested that the acting out was primarily the product of the humiliation and failure the low-income students experienced and the intense frustrations and social isolation that characterized their lives at school.

### Stigmatization and Negative Self-Image

Behavioral confirmation theory, also known as labeling theory or self-fulfilling prophecy, has been used to explain how teachers' negative expectations for and interactions with their students can have a profound impact on students' behavior and their identities (for a recent review see Eden, 2003). Receiving discipline suggests to some students that they failed in the eyes of the teacher, a "significant other," and that they are "bad." Students internalize the negative messages inherent in the disciplinary interaction (Hyman, 1990), and the messages become part of students' self-concept. Such experiences can be powerful and aversive enough that some students may develop a negative self-identity. Teachers who attribute students' misbehaviors to character defects may promote students' negative self-view (Hart, Brassard, & Germain, 1987). Misbehaving students placed into special education programs as a disciplinary move may also have this reaction.

As a result, students may also experience Stigmatization among their peers. The disciplining of a peer may be off-putting to students, who may shun the disciplined student, leading to another experience of rejection for the disciplined student. Also, students may come to believe that the way they are treated is proper and necessary for them even though it may be overly harsh and damaging to them psychologically (Epp, 1996, 1997). These students, feeling ostracized, may develop closer ties with troubled students (Williams, 1979) and, in some cases, lose interest in academics and other relationships at school (Costenbader & Markson, 1998).

### Trauma

Studies of disciplined school children suggest that punitive disciplinary actions taken by adults are traumatizing for some students. Symptoms associated with discipline-based trauma include anxiety, hypersensitivity to criticism, psychic numbing, poor concentration, somatic complaints, sleep disturbance, flashbacks, and other symptoms associated with PTSD (Hyman, 1990). PTSD symptoms have been identified in students who have been corporally punished or harshly reprimanded in class by their teacher (Hyman, 1990; Krugman & Krugman, 1984; Maurer, 1991). Students punitively disciplined by teachers may develop symptoms similar to those associated with the use of corporal punishment by adults at home, including anxiety, hypersensitivity to criticism, rumination, diminished social functioning, and school refusal (Hyman, 1990; Krugman & Krugman). Ridicule by teachers exacerbates existing symptoms of children corporally punished at home (Spencer, 1999). Students may cope with the trauma through re-enactment by acting abusively with peers (Hyman, 1995). A key element of the traumatization may be the humiliation of students in front of their classmates, a traditional practice in many public schools in the United States (Rothstein,

1984). Hyman (1995) and Hart and colleagues (1987) have characterized these experiences of punitive school discipline as psychological maltreatment.

## OPERANT CONDITIONING AND SOCIAL LEARNING THEORIES

### School Discipline as Ineffective Punishment

Teachers tend to not use positive disciplinary approaches with misbehaving students, preferring neutral or negative approaches that may best achieve their short-term objective of ending unwanted student behaviors (Brophy, 1996; Brophy & McCaslin, 1992; Furlong, Morrison, & Dear, 1994; also see Ringer, Doerr, Hollenshead, & Wills, 1993). Operant conditioning theory suggests that punishment- some sort of stimuli aversive to the individual receiving the punishment-as a consequence to actions will discourage the future use of those actions (see Thomas, 2005). Punitive approaches, however, may not be effective as deterrents or methods of eliminating unwanted behaviors, because teachers cannot control all of the conditions required for success. Teachers need to know what a particular student finds aversive to tailor an appropriate response to inappropriate behavior. The punishment needs to be timely, and it needs to be of the appropriate intensity. Teachers also should avoid forewarning the student of an impending punitive action (Bongiovanni, 1979). "[F]rom an experimental point of view it would prove to be impossible for school personnel to administer an effective punishing stimulus" (Bongiovanni, p. 356). Even if effective in the short term, punishment may only temporarily halt unwanted behavior, not durably modify it (Bear, 1995). When discipline is not effective as punishment, unwanted behaviors are not discouraged, nor are new behaviors encouraged or taught, so no meaningful corrective experience takes place, and behavioral patterns will not be modified.

### School Discipline as Positive Reinforcement for Misbehavior

Operant conditioning theory also holds that, although rewards for behavior may not appear as pleasant or positive to others, they may have the effect of increasing the problematic behavior that is the target of the intervention (Thomas, 2005). Unintentionally, school discipline may paradoxically reinforce students' misbehaviors, especially with students who do not like or have little interest in school (Rutherford, 1978). These students may be motivated to find ways to be away from school, and suspension and expulsion may have the unintended consequences of promoting these students' use of inappropriate behaviors to provoke disciplinary actions that will allow them to stay out of school (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). This may be especially true for students who are highly aggressive, hyperactive, or lacking in social skills (Atkins et al., 2002). Some students may see the time off from school as a relief from stressful or discouraging experiences in school (Hyman, 1997). These students may experience their time at home as an opportunity for unsupervised recreation, relaxation, and for some, misadventures in neighborhood streets (Neill, 1976). Also, when a student happily becomes the focus of attention when being disciplined by a teacher, or when a student receives praise from peers for the behavior that was displeasing to the teacher, he or she experiences social rewards that may defeat the deterrent effect of the punishment and may exacerbate misbehaviors (Doyle, 1990).

### School Discipline as a Model for Aggression and Hostility

Hyman (1995) found that students with verbally hostile teachers may be more likely to act with peers in hostile ways and theorized that these students may have been taking on some of the behaviors exhibited by teachers. Social

learning theory (see Thomas, 2005) supports the contention that children develop behavioral habits through observational learning. That is, they add a behavior to their repertoire that they see someone else perform or model. Teachers may have great influence with children seeking to acquire greater mastery and range in their interpersonal behaviors and those who may see the ways more coercive behaviors can help actors achieve their goals. The modeling of punitive discipline may unintentionally suggest to students that the use of aggressive and coercive actions is appropriate (Butchart, 1998; Hyman, 1990).

## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORIES

### Alienation

Students may become alienated from school if the adults there are, in students' experiences, insufficiently interested in them. Students may have very limited personal contact with adults during the school day. One estimate is that teachers and students spend less than 10 minutes each day in person-to-person interaction (Goodlad, 1983). This has been described as a form of neglect- depriving students of personal contact and individualized interest, caring, or affection (Hart et al., 1987). A recent study of teachers coping with the disruptive behaviors of students found that teachers routinely distanced themselves from students whom they experienced as challenging or threatening (Cameron, Sheppard, & Odell, 2005). Sadly, these students may be most in need of increased personal contact with caring adults.

Using Hirschi's social control theory, Hawkins and Weis (1985) conceptualized students' alienation from teachers as a lack of a social bond between students and school. The break is produced by teacher actions that students perceive as unfair, undemocratic, and non-reinforcing. These students are pessimistic about experiencing success in school and feel little incentive to adhere to the rules and norms of the school and classroom cultures. Students may also disengage from teachers, peers, and others, and from school altogether, if they see school discipline as inconsistent with important life tasks, values, and norms in their lives. These students may not understand or see the advantages in compliance with school rules that appear to be disrespectful or insensitive to their values. Thorson (1996) and Brantlinger (1991), through interviewing students about their views of discipline at school, heard students describing discipline as unfair, insensitive, and overreactive to situations that could not be helped. Rules may not be flexible enough to accommodate the pressing demands of some students' lives, such as those students who are caregivers of younger siblings before they go to school and risk being late (Thorson). Another example is the prohibition against displays of aggression in school. Adolescents especially may believe that unless they respond aggressively to the challenges and threats of their peers, they may be more vulnerable to future attacks and lose face with their friends (see Andersen, 1999). In a study of interpersonal conflicts among girls in an urban high school (Cameron & Taggart, 2005), girls who had been involved in violence with other girls saw rules and the consequences for breaking them as much less important than taking an appropriately aggressive stand when threatened and avoiding being seen as a coward or "punk."

Distancing on the part of teachers and other adults at school and rules and methods of enforcement that disregard important student values may be seen by students as a kind of personal betrayal and rejection and may result in a loss of trust and a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness in their relationships with teachers (Hyman, 1990). This disjuncture has lasting repercussions for students: a strong distrust and disengagement from the teacher and

instruction, an avoidance of closeness with the teacher, or, for some, a preoccupation with regaining the trust and faith in the teacher (Hyman, 1990). Teachers who overrely on punitive disciplinary tactics in response to student misbehaviors may also create distance between themselves and their students, which may be experienced by students as rejecting, impersonal, and indifferent to them and their needs (Akorn, 2001).

Also, when teachers do not understand or appreciate the meaning or importance of students' behavior, they may be disapproving, distancing, and punitive with those students. This might be especially true when there are cultural differences between teachers and students (Noguera, 1995). Supporting this theory is a substantial body of literature demonstrating that students of color, especially African Americans, are disciplined disproportionately compared with white students and more severely for less serious and less violent infractions of school conduct codes (for example, Children's Defense Fund, 1975; McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Skiba, 2000, 2001; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

When students believe that teachers are treating them insensitively, they may seek to punish the teachers by disrupting class and challenging rules (Stanley, 1998). Newmann (1981) found an association between student alienation and vandalism at school. Hyman (1995) found that the chief rationale of disciplined students for misbehaving in school was that they wanted to go after teachers who they believed had belittled them, shown them disrespect, or were disrespectful to their families or their culture. When teachers distance because they fear students and resort to discipline as a way of coping with their anxiety, frustrated and angry students may retaliate by capitalizing on that fear and fighting to control activities in the classroom (Noguera 1995). Other students may withdraw from classroom activities and relationships with teachers as a passive-aggressive demonstration against those who appear to dislike them (Brantlinger, 1991; Stanley, 1998).

#### Disempowerment

A related theory, based on the work of Classer (1969), focused more explicitly on the power differential between teachers and students and the ways in which students may experience teachers as domineering and manipulative. A student may be forced to relate to teachers and other school personnel "in ways which emphasize his subordinancy and dependency" (Rothstein, 1984, p. 156). What may be experienced as assaults on personal autonomy may provoke resentment and self-protective resistance in students. Teachers may view these students more simply as misbehaving and inappropriately challenging of their authority (Stanley, 1998). Students need to be able to have and express some degree of power in the classroom. Instruction and classroom management practices that deny this may drive students toward expression of the need for power in self-defeating ways (Henry & Abowitz, 1998). The power imbalance between teacher and student may be exacerbated when some students receive more rewards and are empowered by teachers in ways that their peers are not, leading to conflicts, rejection among peers, and distrust between students and between students and teachers (McEwan, 1998). "Given the realities of many students' lives outside of schools, as well as the quality of the activities and interactions that are countenanced by mainstream approaches to classroom management and the corresponding view of teaching within the school, we might well see as understandable the kind of 'deviancy' and 'misbehavior' that management strategies try to root out. Indeed, that sort of deviancy may make good sense, given the internal dynamics of classroom culture and the conditions within which many students live. Misbehavior might even be seen as resistance to authoritarianism masked as behavior management—a resistance to be valued if not encouraged" (Beyer, 1998, pp. 72-73).

School discipline may act as part of a larger organizational system that treats students as untrustworthy and incompetent, suggesting to them that they are best off following directions and conforming to expectations. This may have a diminishing effect on student's developing autonomy and responsibility, as well as their capacities for independent thought. "The world enacted via mainstream understandings of classroom management is dominated by mistrust-the sense that students, like most of us, 'need a taskmaster' if we are to function effectively in or outside of schools; that students must learn to be obedient, which will be facilitated if we can get them to think of others' directions as their own, resulting in a kind of duplicity. In addition to needing to be led by others, this world is one in which students must be constantly watched and supervised, managed and cajoled into the proper courses of action. The result for students is a decided powerlessness, a 'followership' that often results in apathy and a withdrawal of their own interests and investments" (Beyer, 1998, pp. 64-65).

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE TO SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Greater awareness of how school discipline may be contributing to the difficulties of school children may help school social workers avoid overly restrictive, non-ecologically based problem definitions. Locating the source of a child's difficulties solely within the child or linked only to family processes will likely limit practice effectiveness and may lead to a worsening of clients' symptoms. The theories and research findings described here may help assessing social workers consider the multiple ways that school discipline may be experienced by children and how discipline may indirectly or directly relate to the difficulties the child is experiencing. Combined, these theories form a conceptual framework that may be used when considering organization-level and structural factors that must be weighed in a balanced, ecological approach to resolving young clients' difficulties.

Determinations derived from the use of the framework logically lead to differential interventions for each student. For example, interventions based on an assessment of trauma might clearly be different from those derived from a determination that a student is bored at school and consciously provokes suspension through misbehavior. If an assessment indicates that a student is experiencing stigmatization and diminished self-image as an effect of discipline, that might suggest working with teachers and administrators to use positive disciplinary methods and to avoid humiliating the student in front of his or her peers. A student who expresses alienation from school might be helped by speaking with school personnel about the child's need for more personal attention or, if relevant, increased sensitivity to the child's cultural values and norms. A child suffering trauma-related symptoms would likely require more intensive, individual treatment by a social worker or other professional trained in the area.

The use of this framework may also guide school social workers in their efforts to work at the organization level to modify the school's disciplinary philosophies, codes of conduct, and sanctioned disciplinary procedures and to introduce alternative methods. Alternatives cover a range of evidencebased approaches, including actively involving students in the development of rules of conduct for the school and the classroom; clearly articulating rules to students and enforcing them consistently; using instructional methods that maintain student involvement in exercises that present challenges at the appropriate level; using campaigns against bullying and disrespectful behaviors to improve school culture; using positive reinforcement on a regular basis; trying to avoid humiliating students in front of their peers; preventing distancing between teachers and students; and providing alternatives to traditional disciplinary actions such as suspension, conflict resolution services, drop-in centers and discussion groups, and in- school

suspension programs staffed with tutors and counselors (see Bear, 1995; Furtwengler, 1990; Moles, 1990; Olweus, 1993; Sugai & Horner, 1999; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

Perhaps as important, social workers should advocate to eliminate harmful, punitive, and unfair disciplinary practices in schools, as called for in the NASWs Standards for School Social Work Services (National Association of Social Workers, 2002). Advocacy at the school district level, educating school district administrators and school boards about the potential harm of conventional disciplinary practices, recommending alternatives, and offering training may help prevent the discouragement, upset, and estrangement experienced by many children disciplined at school.

Social workers know well that teachers, administrators, and others working with youths in schools perform critical and courageous tasks under what can be extremely challenging circumstances. Discipline is necessary for their work and for the safety of all school children. Social workers also must realize, however, that common disciplinary practices can be harmful to children and that they must address this problem to effectively help those who may be negatively affected. Additional research and greater awareness of the potential for harm of school disciplinary practices is needed to reform schools' disciplinary programs so that order, learning, and child safety and well-being are all valued and protected qualities of the school environment.

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