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# **The Racial Pandemic: Positive Behavior Intervention Support as an Asymptomatic Carrier of Racism**

*Jade Calais & Matthew Green*

## **Abstract**

In an attempt to close the discipline gap, school systems have replaced traditional exclusionary practices with alternative interventions such as Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS). PBIS, as an alternative to exclusionary discipline practices, does little to help historically oppressed youth, specifically, because it denies the presence and value of race. This attempt to be race-neutral results in racist discipline outcomes. PBIS presents harmful outcomes for early childhood and elementary-aged children, as it normalizes children to the disciplinary structures that result in high school dropouts and other negative outcomes for older youth. Exploring this program aids in understanding the limitations of color-evasive policies in education and society at large. In this article, the authors explore failings of PBIS and argue for the adoption of color-conscious approaches that engage in co-construction of pedagogy, curriculum, accountability norms, and expectations (Milner et al., 2018).

**Keywords:** *PBIS, Neoliberalism, Critical Race Theory, color-evasive policies, alternative discipline practices*

## **The Contagion: Racism in America**

We are facing unprecedented times worldwide. Covid-19 has shut down the economy and riddled the world with shelter-in-place orders. It has disrupted life as we know it. As of December 2020, this global pandemic has impacted over 19.5 million people in the United States, resulting in over 341,000 deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The world has been dealt a great blow and brought to its knees. However, there is a longer-standing pandemic that has ravaged this country. It has caused genocide. It has caused fratricide. It has caused economic crises. America was diseased long before the existence of Covid-19. It has been ravaged by one of the deadliest, most divisive contagions in America—racism.

Racism, which permeates every part of our lives, manifests in a manner that is so pervasive and commonplace that it is normalized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). As Omi and Winnant (2014) articulate in their seminal work on racial formations in America, the socio-historical construction of race allows racism to be both socially constructed and very real in everyday life, permeating core institutions. Educational institutions are not exempt from this contagion. While schools should serve as curative agents, they are breeding grounds for this contagion. Race has been a ubiquitous factor in school discipline (Morris & Perry, 2017). The intersection of race, gender, class, ability, and sexual orientation has led to discipline disparities, which have been well-documented over the last decade (Anyon et al., 2014; Morris & Perry, 2017; Skiba et al., 2014). Data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2019), reveal that African Americans comprised 15% of the nation's students during the 2015-2016 school year; however, they accounted for 39% of students receiving out of school suspensions and 33% of the nation's expulsions. Exclusionary practices, such as out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and arrests lead to negative student outcomes such as school drop-out, stereotype threat, and poor climate and culture (Bottiani, 2017; Mello, 2012). Furthermore, these disciplinary practices are linked to the school-to-prison pipeline,

which describes the ways school conditions, policies, and practices create pathways that disproportionately push some students out of school towards the criminal justice system (Mallett, 2016; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014).

### **Positive Behavior Intervention Support: An Educational Malady**

In an attempt to close the discipline gap, school systems have replaced traditional exclusionary practices with alternative interventions such as Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS). PBIS has been implemented in schools across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (PBIS OSEP 2020). It has become a common approach to discipline in PK-elementary classrooms. PBIS, a multi-tiered system used to prevent disciplinary problems, features three progressive tiers (McDaniel et al., 2017; PBIS OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2020). These tiers progress from universal, to supplemental, to more intense interventions with measurable outcomes based on subjective data-driven decision-making, which primarily include teachers' observational and anecdotal data. For Tier 1, schools develop and teach expectations, which are implemented universally, and students are rewarded for following expectations set forth by staff. Tier 2 provides more targeted interventions for small groups of students who are unresponsive to Tier 1 interventions, and more intensive interventions are implemented for students still exhibiting maladaptive behaviors at the Tier 3 level (McDaniel et al., 2017).

According to a longitudinal study by Caldarella et al. (2011), PBIS positively impacts school climate, specifically in the areas of instructional quality, parental support, teacher excellence, and perception of leadership. Freeman et al. (2015) purport that school-wide PBIS might increase student attendance, which directly influences dropout rates. Although the aforementioned studies reveal a positive correlation between high-fidelity implementation of PBIS and behavioral outcomes, many studies reveal mixed results for academic outcomes (James et al., 2019; Noltemeyer et al., 2019). While Bradshaw et al.

(2010) show that PBIS positively impacts disruptive behavior, student concentration, emotional regulation, and prosocial behaviors, the study failed to show a significant effect on suspensions.

Two major issues arise within the PBIS literature, obfuscating the major issues with school discipline: 1) a narrow scope of data and 2) scant literature analyzing the effectiveness of Tiers 2 and 3. Studies analyzing Tier 1 interventions are primarily conducted in elementary schools and often report results on universal school populations (Bradshaw et al., 2012; James et al., 2019; Noltemeyer et al. 2019). While many studies report whole-school curtailment of office discipline referrals (ODRs), there are studies that reveal PBIS, in and of itself, is ineffective in mitigating discipline inequities for racially vulnerable students, specifically African American students (Baule, 2020; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Vincent et al., 2016). Relatively few studies touting a reduction of ODRs show disaggregated data by student race (Caldarella et al., 2011; James et al., 2019; Noltemeyer et al., 2019; Noltemeyer et al., 2019), which should be reported in order to determine if PBIS is a more equitable program. Although Caldarella et al. (2011) showed positive outcomes, the study, which was funded by an Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) grant, featured a homogenous sample.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) uses the generic terms “positive behavioral interventions and supports” and “multi-tier system of supports” to promote outcomes for students, especially students with disabilities. As a framework, partially funded by the U.S. Department of Education (USDoE) and the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), PBIS is frequently conflated with federal law, which in fact does not explicitly advocate for a particular program or framework. The USDoE awarded millions of dollars, funding a National Technical Assistance (TA) Center and grants for PBIS initiatives. Notably, the USDoE often funds a large body of research that shows a proclivity for PBIS success (PBIS OSEP, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) delineates the theoretical framework for this paper, as it concerns itself with examining and altering the relationship between race, racism, and power. CRT postulates that racism—which is socially, culturally, and historically constructed—is ingrained and embedded into every aspect of our lives (Delgado, & Stefancic, 2017; Milner, 2008). Further, CRT provides a discourse that facilitates an unpacking of racism’s operation in educational spaces and the reproductive nature of schooling with regards to the educational outcomes of black students (Shujaa, 1993).

This critical analysis center's CRT in its critiques of school discipline practices, alternatives, and anti-blackness across discipline practices. The permanence of racism and function of interest convergence as articulated by Bell (1976) in maintaining racial hierarchy is a core function of American schools. Drawing from these core tenets of CRT, this paper examines specifically how PBIS functions to reinforce racist schooling practices often through ahistorical, and acontextual production of discipline norms and practices.

Alexander (2020) argues that “all major institutions in our society are plagued with problems associated with conscious and unconscious bias” and the “many ways in which racial stereotyping can permeate subjective decision-making processes at all levels of an organization” (p 4). CRT recognizes the subjective nature of experience and knowledge production, especially within schools and education settings (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this sense, CRT provides a valuable tool in countering the assumed objectivity of knowledge in the classroom, specifically knowledge with relation to behavior. CRT also provides an analytical framework that centers on the importance of race, racial experiences, and subject knowledge in both the positioning of students and teachers within education structures.

While CRT does not offer a complete framework for understanding the intersecting layers of marginalization experiences across race,

class, gender, socio-economic status, and more, it does provide a necessary critical framework for understanding the maintenance of white racial hierarchy within educational settings. CRT further decentralizes narratives around educational practices as “innovative,” “progressive,” or “alternative,” especially regarding classroom management and discipline, by centering the subjectivity of knowledge and the disparate impact of outcomes. This approach allows for the examination of what Yosso (2005) describes as “resistant capital” and “navigational capital” through an asset-based lens. This resistant capital is often part of a larger community cultural wealth for students of color in which parents attempt to provide their children with navigational knowledge of racist systems (Yosso, 2005).

### **Transformative Leadership**

While behaviorist analyses of discipline primarily illuminate and victimize students, attention should be concentrated on the pedagogue-educational leaders in this analysis, since student discipline is contingent upon the actions of school leaders. Transformative leadership, a theory for effective leadership, is needed in order to “[understand] the relational issues of race and the construction of power, privilege, and school success” (Lightfoot, 2009, p. 214). Transformative leadership is defined by the following five tenets: (1) recognizing power and privilege, (2) advocating for individual and collective purpose (3) dismantling and reassembling frameworks that create inequities, (4) balancing hope and critique, (4) creating equitable change, and (5) engaging in activism (Agosto & Rolland, 2018).

Historical administrative practice, emerging from business models, warrants a top-down approach emphasizing productivity within schools (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Transformative leadership favors an ethics of critique, justice, and care (Starratt, 1991). Contrastingly, leaders have been relegated to positions of mere managers, focused on administrative skills seeking out greater efficiency (Agosto & Rolland, 2018; Giroux, 1992; Lightfoot, 2009). Furthermore, traditional educational leadership theories are gender and color-evasive (Blackmore, 1989).

A more comprehensive posture will account for educational leaders' roles in student discipline. Transformative leadership, in conjunction with CRT, allows for a critique of teacher and principal leaders' operation of power within the student discipline context. Transformative leadership exposes the banking model (Freire, 2000) of behavioral expectations in school as it seeks to disrupt hegemonic practices. This form of leadership requires critical awareness, or conscientization, coupled with action (Freire, 2000). While leadership theories often focus on school improvement, transformative leadership advances social justice leadership by "challenging inappropriate uses of power and privilege that create or perpetuate inequity and injustice" (Shields, 2010, p. 564). Transformative leadership has the potential to upend the current culture of power in schools, producing leaders who possess a raised consciousness of their positionality, authority, and equity.

This critical foundation can foster culturally responsive educational leaders, leaders who exhibit cultural competence, critical consciousness, and champion the success of historically marginalized students who are not only critically aware but action-oriented (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### **Failed Containment: A Critique of Color-evasive Policies**

A core principle of Tier 1 PBIS requires schools to "define the behaviors they want to see" otherwise referred to as "appropriate behavior" (PBIS OSEP, 2020). A school PBIS leadership team consisting of six to eight staff members are tasked with identifying the most essential problem behaviors, defining the qualities of an "ideal student," composing three to five school-wide expectations, and developing a system of rewards (PBIS OSEP, 2020). Traditional public-school demographics are shifting. Within a 15-year span, white student enrollment has decreased to 52%; yet the homogeneity in the educator workforce remains. In 2017-2018, 79% of public-school teachers and 79.6% of principals were white (McFarland et al., 2018). While the mostly homogeneous group of white middle-class

teachers develop school-wide expectations, there is a reverberating absence—the voices of Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color.

### **A Critique of PBIS as a Colorblind Policy**

PBIS is a colorblind, or race-neutral, framework functioning much like an asymptomatic carrier of a disease. Asymptomatic carriers of a virus can infect anyone they come into contact with; however, they are often unaware that they are carrying and spreading this infection. PBIS is a color-evasive policy, which denies the presence and value of race. With color-evasive policies and frameworks, there has to be a standard. This standard is not co-created between teachers and students, leading to teacher-created expectations such as “be respectful” or “be responsible,” which are not easily definable and highly subjective. (McDaniel et al., 2017). If PBIS has subjective expectations, racial stereotypes can permeate subjective decision-making processes. It is a covert process of racialized control. Color-evasive ideology claims to eradicate bias; however, this is inaccurate. Vaught & Castagno (2008) assert that white teachers often want to maintain and control the right to determine meaning. This is never more present than in beliefs about classroom behaviors.

PBIS policies fail to account for student variability and teacher/principal variability. It standardizes discipline and socializes students to the dominant ways of being. Bell Hooks (1994) explains the origins of this problem:

Although no one ever directly stated the rules that would govern our conduct, it was taught by example and reinforced by a system of rewards. As silence and obedience to authority were most rewarded, students learned that this was the appropriate demeanor in the classroom... If one was not from a privileged class group, adopting a demeanor similar to that of the group could help one to advance. It is still necessary for students to assimilate bourgeois values in order to be deemed acceptable. (p. 178)

PBIS is a racially socializing force. When a hegemonic group determines the standard, determines the rules, someone is silenced.

Students are being socialized into white ways of being when the majority-white staff defines “behaviorally acceptable.” Instead of empowering students, PBIS is an enforcement system of white culturalization and oppression (Williams & Land, 2006). PBIS does not take into account the identity of PBIS team members and how they might unconsciously, or even consciously, evaluate behaviors through racial filters (Bornstein, 2017). PBIS preserves white hegemony. Notions of acceptable behavior are legitimized and normalized through educational institutions, passively indoctrinating students into white middle-class standards. There are various influences on the ways in which leaders construct their social world. Racial ideology is produced through media, images, and family socialization (McLaren, 2009). Black students are criminalized through the media, creating socially constructed stereotypes that spread like a virus. This media replication solidifies the black deficit narrative as the sole source of knowledge for those who lack cross-cultural relationships (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Another influencer of knowledge construction is cultural inheritance, which forms and shapes one’s identity. It is through this identity, that we compose, create, and comprehend meaning.

PBIS, as an alternative to exclusionary discipline practices, does little to help historically oppressed youth. Exploring this program aids in understand the limitations of color-evasive policies in education and society at large. Behaviorism, the theory behind PBIS, asserts that behaviors can be altered through positively reinforcing desired behaviors. Behavior becomes a form of meritocracy where desired behavior is rewarded. Teachers and educational leaders are not culpable in any capacity for student behaviors and outcomes. Because PBIS is race-neutral, the role in which race informs discipline is left uncritiqued, allowing inequities to persist, leading to detrimental outcomes. Students enter school buildings as read texts, which means their speech, thought, behaviors, and actions are read through teachers’ and educational leaders’ purview. Before knowing who students are, they are reduced to attributes that schools have

ascribed to them. For this very reason, marginalized students often enter school buildings where they have already been criminalized and adultified. This was evidenced in 2019 when school resource officer Dennis Turner was fired for failing to follow proper protocol when he zip-tied two six-year-olds, placed them in a squad car, and transported them to a juvenile assessment center, arresting one for battery after she kicked a teacher during a tantrum (Mansell, 2019). Hirschfield (2008) expands upon the concept of criminalization and its symbolic nature in a schooling context. "Criminalization," he writes, "encompasses the manner in which policy makers and school actors think and communicate about the problem of student rule-violation as well as myriad dimensions of school *praxis* including architecture, penal procedures, and security technologies and tactics" (Hirschfield, 2008 p. 80). There has been an increase in criminal justice resources in schools including school resource officers, metal detectors, cameras, drug dogs, and searches (Hirschfield, 2008). These tools classify students, separating them into criminal and non-criminal groupings. If marginalized students enter buildings already criminalized then programs such as PBIS lack neutrality to begin with. This ascribed identity is oftentimes a catalyst for resistance. In studying the effectiveness of PBIS, the correlation between race, discipline, and school leadership must be observed and analyzed.

### **Neoliberal Values within PBIS**

The characteristics found within the PBIS framework serve as a primer for students living within a neoliberalist culture an economic policy system that favors privatization and meritocracy through the creation of a hyper punitive state characterized by fear, punishment, and recognition. Discipline frameworks like PBIS proliferate the politics of accountability and the commodification of education. According to Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012), "Elements of governmentality such as governance by data, disciplining and technologies of the self, and humiliation as organizing value widely operate in educational practices, including recently emerging school-wide behavior plans like PBIS and longer-standing processes of criminalization" (p. 202).

The school, acting as a panopticon, becomes a token economy system that does little to prepare students living in a democracy. Within Tier 1, students earn capital, often in the form of paper or electronic bucks, for exhibiting behaviors deemed worthy of recognition by faculty and staff. Students are then able to use their earned capital to purchase rewards. This system promotes notions of individualism and meritocracy, as it appears on the surface that individuals demonstrating socially acceptable behaviors earn prizes based on their own self-discipline and work ethic. However, PBIS rewards students who conform to the socially acceptable standards of behavior as defined by those in power. PBIS trains students to become automatons, complicitly following orders. Students are evaluated and trained to view their behavior as their own inherent value. Rodriguez and Magill (2017) argue the following:

Private industry, with its tentacled hold on education, ensures the divestiture of subjectivity as it propagates capital 'T' truth, represented in the prescriptive means by which kindergarten through tertiary students are educated...[T]he educational system, like the economic system, becomes representative of the perceived value the student has to society. This relationship is inversely proportional to the interest the teacher has in her or him as student and member of the community. The teacher's valuations of the student are also relative to ways students are valued as particular groups (laborers, scientists, doctors, athletes) *qua* society that is units of measure, surplus, value, existing on spreadsheets; the commodification of the human spirit. (pg. 1-2)

The need to collect data and account for students' behaviors has given rise to more edupreneurs in the educational market. PBIS Rewards, for example, is a PBIS management program that tracks students' compliance with behavioral expectations and allows schools to distribute PBIS points and give students an opportunity to redeem points by making store purchases (PBIS Rewards, 2020).

Another digital program, LiveSchool, allows purchasers to “track, reward, and improve student behavior” (LiveSchool, 2020). Users can view trends to see how much money individual teachers have awarded students with, how much students have spent, and how many demerits students have earned. While emphasizing data through a points and rewards system, these programs fail to analyze root causes of behavior, they fail to evaluate disciplinarians’ behaviors, and they fail to capture negative student outcomes. Many of schools’ adopted expectations are universal. Examples of these expectations are: be respectful, be polite, be responsible, and be engaged. The reproduction of this universal set of behaviors ignores the subjectivity and discriminatory judgments that lie at the heart of what these behaviors mean to students and teachers. Instead of accounting for the unique fabrication of individuals, PBIS manufactures obedient students through rewards and punishment.

Through formal and informal policing of behavior, the insider-outsider polarity occurs, working to normalize some children while isolating non-conformists. Rodriguez and Magill (2007) argue:

As with all aspects of society, white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant, and heterosexual students are affirmed while all others are alienated as they are positioned. “Othered” students are offered access only as economic interests converge, supporting systematic obedience along propaganda lines. Subjectivity, a student’s lived ontology runs counter to knowledge imposed via mainstream educational practice. (p. 1-2)

Schools, acting as their own surveillance state with surveillance equipment and resource officers, have become subsidiaries of the prison system. There is an economic interest in upholding policies like PBIS that appear to be an antithesis to exclusionary practices. This is where interest convergence diverges. Schools funnel students through tiers and eventually to juvenile justice systems, and many eventually end up in for-profit prison systems. It is no coincidence that Blacks are incarcerated at disparate rates. The PBIS tiering system

sorts, labels, and categorizes children who are considered behavioral issues, leading to exclusion. This emphasis on universalized behaviors, that purport to be proactive and facilitate punitive discipline. Students exhibiting non-compliant behaviors often receive minor infractions, which can lead to office discipline referrals and school suspensions, and eventually lead down the path to school push-out. School push-out is a precursor to imprisonment, and programs like PBIS are complicit in the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2020; Bornstein, 2017). While Giroux (1992) advocates for educational leaders to defend education as a democratic space, PBIS serves to assimilate students through behavioral surveillance. The “power processes (enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidal hierarchy)” solidifies white dominance over minoritized students (Foucault, 1982; p. 787). The power afforded whites and their superiority is legitimized through color-evasive ideology. PBIS creates special divisions within schools, doing little to build a sense of school belonging and connectivity. Hebert and Brown (2006) argue that “it is beyond neglectful to note this shift toward hyperpunitiveness... without noting the pre-eminence of race” (p. 770).

Race-neutral ideology renders race irrelevant. However, “racial categories shape the lives of people differently within existing inequalities of power and wealth” and “as a central form of difference, race will neither disappear, be wished out of existence, or become something irrelevant in the United States” (Giroux, 1997, p. 297). PBIS rewards compliant subjects based on their adherence to white norms, reifying the value of whiteness. It is a form of new racist discourse (Giroux, 1997) coded in the language of discipline reform. These policies appear healthy but silently transmit and replicate disease. Consequently, PBIS, as an alternative to exclusionary practices, is an ineffective means of forming a more fair and equitable discipline program.

### **Combatting a Pandemic**

With the aid of a microscope, scientists have come a long way in studying viruses and the diseases they cause, and in developing

vaccines that can help humans build antibodies that leave us a little less vulnerable to infections. With modern medicine we often look for viruses, especially in the case of a pandemic, to be cured and eradicated through magical medical marvels and innovation. This approach does two things: 1) absolve us from having to change anything about our daily habits, and 2) absolve us from having to put in any effort into realizing our own implication in a solution.

However, both viral pandemics and racial pandemics can be combated through widespread individual and collective action. One of the simplest ways to combat viral pandemics is the widespread washing of hands. While this metaphor stops short of washing hands of racism, it is illustrative of the need to engage in individual and collective work. Racial discourse cannot operate in the peripheral but must become front and center. It is with an intentional discourse on race that we can (un)learn some of our ways of knowing (Brooks & Watson, 2018). This can happen in a practical sense through professional development, which is often omitted in pre-practitioner and practitioner programs (Brooks & Watson, 2018). Professional development programs have the potential to address issues of racism and other issues of equity.

Smith, Fisher, & Frey (2015) draw out several elements that teachers can take in classrooms to encourage communities of healing, as well as both social and emotional learning. While these strategies focus on how both teachers and students can respond to adverse situations, very often this responsibility is shifted to students. This leaves teachers not doing enough to engage in the hard work of unpacking and unlearning the way race operates through marginalizing systems of discipline. Nor do teachers reengage with efforts of care (Noddings, 2002, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999) or love (Douglas and Nganga, 2015; Hooks, 2006; Watson et al., 2016; Villenas, 2019) within the classroom that can lead to radical racial healing (Singh, 2019). Through centering racial healing, critical love, and authentic caring, teachers are better able and prepared to address the internalized dominance and internalized racism that perpetuates and upholds disproportionality causing discipline practices such as PBIS.

The need for a cogent framework to organize both teacher reflection and teacher action is needed to provide teachers with a guide for their thinking and professional learning. Hannigan and Hannigan (2016) describe three approaches for teachers and students to explore alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices: (1) reflective, (2) instructional, and (3) restorative. While these approaches were first created for use only with students, they are instructive in work with teacher reflection, learning, and action as well. A reflective approach asks all involved to reflect on what led to a situation and their own personal action, an instructional approach focuses on learning new skills to avoid future situations that may cause harm, and a restorative approach provides the opportunity to repair harm. All of these approaches, typically applied to students, can also be applied to teachers interrogating their own teaching practices, learning new alternatives, and restoring harm that may exist in their classroom.

Further, while restorative practices have been a focus of much research relating to school discipline practices, many of these “restorative practices” function to restore order utilizing the same existing systems of deficit ideologies (Lustick, 2017). Restorative approaches should focus beyond repair and aim to “make whole” relationships and identities. Students cannot become whole if teachers are restoring a “subtractive” environment. As Smith, Fisher, and Frey (2015) explain, “punished children learn from adult examples that exerting power is the way for them to get what they want” (p. 9). Practices for teachers must mean unpacking their own assumptions, beliefs, and rooting their classroom practice in critical love (Watson, Sealy-Ruiz, & Jackson, 2016) and racial healing (Singh, 2019). *The Racial Healing Handbook* (Singh, 2019) provides an excellent step-by-step approach for teachers to unpack their own racialized experiences and their racial understanding of the US.

PBIS, as well as many restorative practices, continue to function through color-evasive approaches. This pandemic can only be disrupted if alternative practices are also accompanied by continued critical racial self-reflection from teachers. A restorative approach

relies on the assumption that actions change when one becomes aware of how their actions affect others and engage in self-correction. We all too often offload these responsibilities onto students without examining how we can still implement subtractive schooling through restorative practices. To dismantle color-evasive ideologies, teachers and administrators must adopt color-conscious approaches that engage in co-construction of pedagogy, curriculum, accountability norms, and expectations (Milner et al., 2018).

One example of this work is the Village of Wisdom, created by Dr. William Jackson, which works with schools, parents, caregivers, and community members to create “culturally affirming instructional environments” in Durham, North Carolina. These “culturally affirming instructional environments” are co-created with parent-researchers as places where educators work to cede power and decision-making to students, parents, and community members with the overall goal being to protect #BlackGenius. The Village of Wisdom utilizes a community-based participatory research framework that asks parent-researchers to evaluate their child’s learning environment and make suggestions for creating culturally affirming spaces. Village of Wisdom’s initiatives represent racial justice work in action and provide steps for schools to engage with students, families, and communities.

### **Implications**

Prescribed leadership standards fail to address social justice issues and have fallen victim to “prescriptive performance standards” (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p.7). Educational leaders are ill-prepared to educate students living in a diverse democracy. To resolve this, educational leadership programs must evolve into social justice programs, serving as bastions that develop and sustain critically conscious leaders. Leadership programs must develop critical understanding of knowledge construction, power, and privilege (Brooks & Watson, 2018). Once educational leaders develop a critical consciousness, they can act like an immune cell working to fight off infection. Teacher preparation courses and professional development do not inherently foster a critical mindset.

Educational leaders have to recalibrate school climate and (re)culture schools to prioritize social justice. This means developing an awareness of children and their behaviors through a critically conscious critical race lens that acknowledges the diverse set of assets that students bring to the classroom. Educational leaders must create a culture where the concrete world of students, their lived experiences, are known. Education must become a reciprocal process, not places where we impute our beliefs, our language, behavior, ways of being onto students. Educational leaders must find barriers that further oppress students of color and act as change agents.

There is no quick cure for racism. It often appears that without some form of interest convergence, there is no impetus to fix this problem (Milner, 2008). Racism benefits the maintenance of white racial hierarchy both inside and outside of schools. Speaking practically, we need to examine oppressive school policies and practices. (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). We have to liberate silenced voices to disrupt the dominant narrative that is ubiquitous throughout society. The landscape of education and government must transition to a state where white, heterosexual, able-bodied individuals are not the norm but a portion of a more inclusive body. A more diversified body of educational leaders and teachers should be recruited and trained in social justice leadership. Those currently in leadership should be trained to implement and sustain social justice leadership.

## **Conclusion**

Symptoms of a virus are often present even before a diagnosis. The school-to-prison pipeline, a widespread symptom of structural racism, has been well documented over the last two decades (Christle et al., 2005; Gonzalez, 2012). PBIS presents harmful outcomes for elementary-aged children. Although the school-to-prison pipeline research often tracks high school dropouts in their teens or early adulthood, this phenomenon commences as early as preschool and elementary school. The Civil Rights Data Collection tracked preschool suspensions for the first time in 2011-2012. Close to 5,000 preschoolers were suspended

once and 2,500 were suspended more than once (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Aligned to the established discipline gap, this data reveals that Black students accounted for only 18% of preschool enrollment; yet, they represented 42% of students who received one out of school suspension and 48% of students who received multiple out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). A joint policy statement issued by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education (2016) expresses the need to eliminate exclusionary practices:

The beginning years of any child's life are critical for building the early foundation of learning, health, and wellness needed for success in school and later in life. During these years, children's brains are developing rapidly, influenced by the experiences, both positive and negative, that they share with their families, caregivers, teachers, peers, and in their communities. A child's early years set the trajectory for the relationships and successes they will experience for the rest of their lives, making it crucial that children's earliest experiences truly foster - and never harm - their development... Suspension and expulsion can influence a number of adverse outcomes across development, health, and education.

Suspensions and expulsions only occur after a series of office discipline referrals (ODRs). The sorting, tracking, and labeling that occur through PBIS are an impetus for these ODRs. The aforementioned policy statement calls for the following guiding principles to curtail the use of exclusionary practices with young children: "focusing on prevention, developing and communicating clear behavioral expectations, and ensuring fairness, equity, and continuous improvement" (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). PBIS does not meet all of these guiding principles, as it reinforces meritocracy and faux objectivity. Disciplinary practices should prioritize equity. Without an equity mandate, behavioral modification frameworks such as PBIS will always harm historically marginalized students.

PBIS is ineffective at treating the contagion. Instead, it reifies White norms that are endemic in social institutions such as schools. While some students are extrinsically motivated by rewards, schools should invest more time and effort in developing a discipline system that recognizes and acknowledges the subjectivity at work. PBIS attempts to decontextualize behavior management. Therefore, it is limited in its scope and objectives, placing it at odds with the democratic possibilities of schooling. The mass-produced behaviors PBIS seeks to create through unquestioned obedience to authority not only fails in creating critically conscious students, but also fails to upend anti-democratic values. In order to serve as a site that inculcates democratic principles, schools should forgo PBIS and seek a program that recognizes the effects of racism and addresses school discipline from a racially equitable lens. It is time to treat the disease instead of the symptoms.

Color-evasive paradigms have led to an assimilationist view of the world. This is a regression. To effect change, early childhood sites should take a progressive stance on issues of justice, acceptance, and belonging to counter the assimilationist and behaviorist philosophies taking root. In terms of the discipline gap, the educational system cannot fix what it fails to acknowledge. Discipline must be reconceptualized in a way that students are not objects. They are racialized subjects and so, too, are educational leaders. Perhaps the body can begin to heal when all subjects have an “engaged voice” that is never “fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself” (Hooks, 1994, p. 11).

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