

## **Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions: The Potential Impact of Developing Social-Emotional Competency within Students**

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Students are being excluded from their right to an education due to disciplinary measures. In SY 2009/2010 alone, there were over 2 million students suspended from school based on data from 26,000 middle and high schools nationwide (Losen & Martinez, 2013). The inequities represented in these numbers are shocking where it appears that many students (primarily African American) are being excluded disproportionately based on race, gender, and disability status. The following article highlights the use of alternatives to out-of-school suspensions (OSS) which focus on building social and emotional competence on the primary school level. It is imperative for the reader to understand the context by which OSS has increased and the policies such as “zero tolerance” and the “Gun-Free Schools Act” which have pushed administrators in the direction of opting to use exclusionary discipline measures as one of the first resorts rather than a last one. Two million students suspended translate to over 14 million hours of instruction lost. This accounts for an increased likelihood of academic failure and overall student disengagement. In addition, there is significant research which points to the inequities which are evident in the assignment of suspensions in particularly three different categories: (a) race, (b) gender, (c) socioeconomic status, (d) and students with disabilities (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Fenning et al., 2012; Nielsen, 1979; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). All of these factors have led to a myriad of unintended consequences such as an increase in student disengagement, retention and even dropout.

Despite the use of OSS in many schools, repeat suspensions may indicate that OSS is ineffective as a deterrent; and it fails to work as a modifier of inappropriate behaviors and a tool which reinforces prosocial behaviors amongst students (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff & Ferron, 2002). Many students who are suspended repeatedly may lack the social and emotional competence to select

alternative behavioral options. The need for alternatives to suspension which support the development of social and emotional competence may serve as an effective intervention leading to a decrease in OSS. Stoiber (2011) posits that there is much agreement amongst those in the field of education and psychology that schools must look at ways to build social competence amongst children rather than develop systems aimed at solely decreasing disruptive behavior. This article alerts readers about OSS and the inequities present in its use; the social and emotional competence needed by students to support a decrease in disruptive behavior; and the Responsive Classroom® (RC) approach to supporting students’ social and emotional competence in the elementary school setting. It seeks to show that the high rate of OSS can be reduced by building social and emotional competence within students through appropriate programmatic options such as RC.

### **History and Impact of OSS**

OSS is the removal of a student from their regular instructional setting for a period of time. The use of OSS as a disciplinary measure has occurred over the past 25 years (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron 2002). It is a disciplinary response to an infraction which does not typically include interventions which would promote future prosocial behaviors. Several policies have had an effect on the use of OSS and its prevalence in public schools.

### **Zero Tolerance Policies**

Zero tolerance refers to policies which punish all offenses severely no matter how minor the offense. These policies were originally adopted to assist in dealing with drug enforcement on the state and federal level in the 1980s (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Despite the original intent of zero tolerance, they were soon applied to a myriad of offenses such as “environmental pollution,

trespassing, skateboarding, racial intolerance, homelessness, sexual harassment, and boom boxes” (Skiba & Peterson, 1999, p. 373). The enforcement of these policies was met with much criticism as harsh punishments were being given for the most minor offenses. By the 1990s, zero tolerance began to phase out of its initial use. It soon became widely accepted by schools as a policy mandating specific predetermined responses to all student infractions no matter how minor or egregious (Skiba, 2008 & Fabelo et al., 2011). Schools began to either suspend or expel students for all levels of infractions with little regard for the context surrounding a particular situation (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). These policies, although initially intended to deal with offenses involving drugs and weapons, have been used broadly in schools to include a myriad of additional offenses.

### **Gun-Free Schools Act**

Although zero tolerance policies were used nationwide, it was not until the passage of the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) in 1994 that harsh disciplinary actions were mandated by law for particular offenses. The GFSA stated the following:

“Each State receiving Federal funds under ESEA must have in effect, by October 20, 1995, a State law requiring local educational agencies to expel from school for a period of not less than one year a student who is determined to have brought a weapon to school. Each State’s law also must allow the chief administering officer of the local educational agency (LEA) to modify the expulsion requirement on a case-by-case basis “(U.S. Department of Education, n. d.).

Since the passage of this act, the number of suspensions has steadily increased (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 2000). Despite the rise in suspensions, there is no clear indication that schools are safer or students better behaved than before. The largest numbers of suspensions are due to students not following the school rules as opposed to dangerous or violent acts (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 2000).

Despite the desire for OSS to have a mitigating effect on antisocial behavior in schools, the substantial use of OSS has led to a number of unintended consequences. OSS has significant correlation with poor academic achievement and grade retention, delinquency and school drop-out, student disaffection and alienation, and drug use (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron 2002). Being suspended even once in 9<sup>th</sup> grade has been shown to double the likelihood of a student dropping out (Losen & Martinez, 2013). In addition, the use of suspension was associated with school dropout and entry into the juvenile justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). The *School-to-Prison Pipeline* terminology has been used to describe the strong association between exclusionary discipline practices, dropping out of school, and subsequent entry into the juvenile justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003).

### **OSS Disparities and Inequities**

OSS has led to a system of disparity and inequity on the basis of race, gender, disability and socioeconomic status. The Children’s Defense Fund (1975) reported higher rates of suspensions for black students than white students and also found that black students were more likely to be suspended repeatedly although no differences were found in the length of suspensions (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). Nielsen (1979) noted that dramatic increases in suspension were seen after desegregation. In addition, Fabelo et al (2011) found that in a study conducted on Texas public schools in a statewide longitudinal study, spanning the review of records for six years, it was found that black students had a 31% more likely to incur disciplinary action than their white or Hispanic counterparts.

Referral bias is most likely the explanation of overrepresentation of black students with disciplinary action as opposed to greater misbehavior on the part of the black students (Skiba, 2000). One may wonder how much referral bias can impact OSS but several studies have found that black students have a higher number of referrals than white students for reasons which require much more subjective judgment (Skiba,

Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). Despite all of this focus on black students, there has been no evidence demonstrating that the disproportionality of disciplinary actions towards them are due to more serious behavior infractions (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002; Losen & Skiba 2010). Nielsen (1979) found that even over 30 years ago, the trend has been that black students were being suspended for more subjective offenses such as “disrespect” more frequently than the white students in their schools. White students, on the other hand, tended to have office referrals for objective offenses such as smoking and vandalism (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002).

White teachers and students see racial disparity in student discipline as unintentional and unconscious; while black students tended to see it in an opposite manner and state that teachers apply classroom rules unfairly and in a manner which focuses on removing particular students (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). Numerous studies have found that minorities have been disproportionately suspended from school (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron 2002; Losen & Martinez, 2013). Black students, specifically, are suspended on average two or three times more frequently than white students (Brooks et al, 1999).

Although there seems to be a preponderance of evidence that black students are being suspended at disproportionate rates, there is no such evidence that they act out at a significantly higher rate than other students (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). According to Shaw and Braden (1990) although black students were referred for disciplinary infractions at a higher rate than other students, white students tended to be referred for more serious rule violations. It is important to note that “black female students were found to be suspended at higher rates than secondary males from any other racial or ethnic group” (Losen & Martinez, 2013, p. 9).

There is also much disparity when reviewing OSS in terms of gender and disability as well. An overrepresentation of boys in OSS was found and many studies report that boys are four times as likely as girls to be referred to the office, suspended

or subjected to corporal punishment (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). As it relates to disabilities, Nielsen (1979) reported that students with academic difficulties were suspended frequently. Students with learning disabilities were 2.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than those without LD in Kansas (Mellard & Seybert, 1996 as cited by Raffaele Mendez, Knoff & Ferron, 2002). In Kansas, students with emotional disability were 11 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than those without the disability (Mellard & Seybert, 1996 as cited by Raffaele Mendez, Knoff & Ferron, 2002). In addition, Losen and Martinez (2013) found that one in every five secondary students with disabilities were suspended.

When these variables are combined, the forecast for one particular subgroup becomes rather dim. According to Losen and Martinez (2013), 36% of all black male students with disabilities enrolled in middle schools and high schools were suspended at least once in 2009-2010. This means that there was an over one in three chance that these students would face a suspension during 2010. These students have among the highest rates of OSS. Correlational analysis reveals that demographic variables such as mobility, low socioeconomic status, and race have a strong positive correlation with suspension rates primarily on the elementary level (Mendez, 2002).

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The frequent use of OSS has helped to create what has been called a School to Prison Pipeline. This pipeline refers to the “strong association between exclusionary discipline practices, dropping out of school, and subsequent entry into the juvenile justice system” (Wald & Losen, 2003). Many have even gone as far as terming this issue as the *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* as it signifies the targeting of specific groups of students very early on with the use of policies such as *Zero Tolerance* (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). As a result of the implementation of *Zero Tolerance*, students as young as six years old have been criminalized and arrested for many nonviolent

offenses at their schools (Children's Defense Fund, 2013).

Researchers have found that suspensions are used by administrators to push out students with behavior concerns from the school environment and create enough documentation to warrant a transfer to an alternative setting (Skiba, 2000). Most suspensions are given due to minor infractions such as tardies and trancies and may not really warrant an OSS (Fenning et al., 2012; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). As a result, students are on the path of falling behind academically due to missing a significant amount of instruction which tends to lead to possible retention and eventual dropout as this cycle continues.

According to the Children's Defense Fund (2013, p. 5-6), "every second and a half a student in suspended nationally and every eight seconds a public high school student drops out." Students who are suspended may find themselves less engaged in the learning environment with each subsequent suspension. This lack of connection and the potential of falling behind significantly academically can lead to significant consequences. Students who are excluded from school extensively tend to continue to act out leading to an escalation of consequences (Children's Defense Fund, 2013). These consequences are the direct link to the juvenile criminal justice system. Currently, states are spending more than two times the amount on a prisoner than a student in a public school (Children's Defense Fund, 2013). As OSS continues to be used as a primary response to student infractions, it is possible that the prison population and thus the increased need for funding in this area will continue to rise at an alarming rate.

### **OSS as a Deterrent for Student Misbehavior**

OSS may not be an effective deterrent for student infractions. The primary goal of suspensions is to decrease or eliminate the probability of a repeat offense which warrants another referral or suspension but multiple suspensions speak to the fact that this method is not successful (Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002). A study in Miami-Dade County reveals that schools

which are focused on preventing inappropriate behaviors have lower suspension rates than those focused on punishing those same behaviors (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff & Ferron, 2002).

Many believe that the use of OSS is necessary because it: (a) improves student behavior by getting the parent's attention and involvement, (b) deters other students from misbehaving, and (c) ensures a conducive learning environment (Losen, 2011). The literature, however, has not shown strong evidence supporting these intended effects. Although an OSS may prompt a level of parental involvement, more times than not it leads to significant issues for the family such as lost work and income or a student being left home unsupervised (Losen, 2011). Children who tend to incur the most suspensions are usually from homes in which supervision may be unlikely (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). It has also been found that students who are unsupervised while on a suspension are more likely to commit crimes and to become involved in behaviors which lead to further consequences.

Regarding the claim that OSS is successful in deterring other students from misbehaving, the literature has not shown much support. Skiba (2008) stated that, there's no evidence that zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and their application to non-violent misbehavior improve school safety or produce positive change in student behavior. It is important to note that their statement did not focus on severe and egregious infractions. Several studies have shown that most suspensions which occur are due to minor infractions (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff & Ferron, 2002; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). In addition, there are many administrators who will use suspension as a cooling off period for both the student and the staff as opposed to a means to modify behavior (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003).

There are many supporters of OSS who believe that its usage will lead to a conducive learning environment which allows for instruction to take place. Although this assumption is widespread, a search for empirical evidence

supporting this claim was not found. Ewing (2000) stated that schools needed OSS for several reasons, one being that 10% of all public schools tend to experience one or more severe and violent offenses and OSS is still needed as a result. He also stated that zero tolerance policies could have an impact on the school environment by reducing distractions and improving overall safety. None of these statements were supported by any empirical study and thus could not be used to substantiate the use of OSS.

Numerous studies report, however, that there is no true value found in the use of OSS (Skiba, 2008; Losen, 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2013). Back in 1974, the Children's Defense Fund conducted a full study on suspended students and recommended that OSS should only be used in cases of property damage or assault (Nielsen, 1979). The evidence seems to point to the validity of this recommendation.

### **The Need for Social Emotional Competence**

Students are exhibiting behaviors which can lead to a disruption in the learning environment, causing it to become extremely difficult to instruct and thus impact student achievement negatively. Although OSS has not proven to be an effective method to deter these behaviors, schools must still respond in a way which minimizes inappropriate student behavior. By seeking to build the capacity of students to deal with conflict, build self-awareness, develop skills to manage emotions, and foster healthy social interactions; schools can begin to empower students to make positive choices. Stoiber (2004, p.47) states, "efforts aimed at stopping disruptive behavior but fail to improve one's capacity to get along with others and enjoy relationships represent an empty success." In addition, building this capacity, particularly in students who face a myriad of life-stressors can serve as a preventive measure and increase the likelihood of school success (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

### **Social-Emotional Deficits among Urban Youth**

There are several factors which have been shown to hinder the development of social-emotional competence in urban youth. According

to Barbarin (2002), some of these factors include: early deprivation or trauma, family instability or conflict, involvement in the child welfare system, and neighborhood danger or violence and limited resources. Children faced with one or a combination of these elements may experience minimal opportunities to develop and implement the necessary skills and are at risk of poor social-emotional development (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006). When this reality is coupled with the likelihood that students will face conflicts with peers or deal with the challenges of learning new concepts, there is a high probability that there may be escalations in behavior. Students who do not gain the necessary social-emotional skills are at greater risk of falling behind in school and experiencing not only deficits with social relationships and emotional stability but also behavioral challenges which can potentially lead to OSS.

### **Theoretical Framework of Social-Emotional Competence**

Thorndike opened up the field of social intelligence in 1920 and described it as the ability to understand others, manage people, and act wisely in social contexts (Seal, Naumann, Scott, & Royce-Davis, 2011). Prior to this point, much of psychology remained focus on why human beings behaved as they did without speaking of the steps which can be taken to improve those behaviors. Gardner (1993) also became a pioneer in this field when he introduced the idea of multiple intelligences which consists of seven different types. Of those seven he proposed two forms of personal intelligence and termed them interpersonal (one directed towards others) and intrapersonal intelligence (one directed towards oneself). In describing intrapersonal intelligence, Gardner (1993) explained that it describes one who has a true assessment and understanding of self and uses that understanding to inform life decisions. These two intelligences speak directly to the field of social intelligence and social-emotional development (Seal, Naumann, Scott, & Royce-Davis, 2011).

Sternberg (1985) added to this new viewpoint of intelligence when he developed the

*triarchic theory of human intelligence*. This theory divided intelligence into three different components: (1) contextual (relates intelligence to an individual's external world), (2) experiential (relates intelligence to the individual's internal and external world), and (3) componential (relates intelligence to an individual's internal world). He believed that although many before him argued that intelligence was fixed at birth, there were different variables which affected intelligence, particularly context and experience. This led him to an expansion of his primary theory which he termed, *successful intelligence*. Sternberg (2003) stated the following in explaining successful intelligence:

People are successfully intelligent to the extent that they have the abilities needed to succeed in life, according to their own definition of success within their sociocultural context. They succeed by adapting to, shaping, and selecting environments, which they do by recognizing and then capitalizing on their strengths, and by recognizing and then compensating for or correcting their weaknesses. (p. xvi)

Sternberg believed that intelligence could be taught and that schools were in a dynamic position to teach in a way which catered to more than one type of intelligence. Through the experiences and context of schooling, it is possible to increase the level of social-emotional intelligence within students.

Social intelligence, however, hardly stands alone as it is usually coupled with emotional intelligence as well. Up until the concept of emotional intelligence was presented, emotions were mainly seen as disturbances in one's mental activity which must be controlled. Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) began to see, in their work as researchers, that emotional intelligence is a subset of social intelligence which "involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions." They believed that it spoke directly to Gardner's (1993) personal intelligences which is divided into inter and intra personal intelligence as these aspects of intelligence speak to the feelings

and emotions which affect human behavior. Individuals with emotional intelligence demonstrate the ability to regulate their emotions in a logical manner (Mayer & Salovey, 1995). By recognizing one's own emotional state and utilizing this information to manage life's conflicts and overall behavior, individuals are able to actualize a higher level of functioning (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Although Salovey and Mayer were the first researchers to bring the theory of emotional intelligence to the forefront, it was through the work of science reporter, Daniel Goleman (1995) that the concept gained mainstream popularity through the release of his book, *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*.

The development of emotional and social intelligence along with problem solving skills can help students significantly with managing themselves as well as others (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003). The skills which are developed with social and emotional competence are: problem-solving behavior, perspective taking, person perception, self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, internal motivation, social skills (Goleman, 1995). Children develop the ability to perceive and understand emotion with age; and students who are at risk of failure may need to acquire these skills through direct instruction to ensure development in this area. By understanding one's own emotions and learning to interpret and understand the emotions of others, students are better positioned to deal with a variety of emotions including anger and frustration.

### **Benefits of Social-Emotional Competence**

The development of social and emotional competency may provide students with the skills they need to manage behaviors which may lead to OSS. Elias et al (1997) reports the following:

Social and emotional competence is the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development. (p. 2)

Research is showing that OSS may not successfully deter student misbehavior. Schools are mostly focused on decreasing problematic behaviors using punitive measures which include OSS, even for minor infractions (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Fenning et al., 2012). In a one-year Florida study, it was found that 25% of students receiving in-school suspension, OSS or corporal punishment had over 5 disciplinary infractions, 75% of students had between one and five infractions and less than 1% of students committed only one offense (McFadden & Marsh, 1992).

Focusing on reducing problematic behavior is not enough. Stoiber (2011) found that improving social competencies of students had much more of an impact as it allows students to develop skills necessary to acquire positive social relationships. It was also shown that there are differences between low and high suspending schools with similar demographics. These are: (a) particular attention is paid to developing prevention strategies which help limit inappropriate behavior (i.e. social skills training for students, behavior management training for teachers), (b) increase in parent involvement including participation in the development of a school wide discipline plan, and (c) a belief that responding to the needs of students and providing them with respect is effective in reducing problematic behavior (Mendez, 2002, p. 274). In promoting social-emotional learning in schools, Goleman (n.d.) asserts that the goal should not be to simply reduce problematic behaviors but to enhance the school climate and thus impact student achievement overall.

Students who are deficient in social skills tend to demonstrate two types of problems; acquisition and performance (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003). Acquisition problems occur when students do not have the required social skills to cope in various situations while performance problems speak to the student who has the skills but fails to use them. The development of social and emotional competence can help ward off the lack of skills which students may present with and allow them an opportunity to respond differently to potential triggers. This management can lead to a decrease in some misbehavior which can otherwise lead to

OSS. Becker and Luthar (2002) concur when they state that although there is significant focus on building the academic skills of disadvantaged students; school reform which places an emphasis on developmental skills is just as important for student success.

### **Responsive Classroom® as an Intervention**

The high rate of out of school suspensions (OSS) can be reduced by building social and emotional competence within students through appropriate programmatic options such as Responsive Classroom® (RC). Stoiber (2011) reported that one of the reasons why social-behavioral training has not been as successful as hoped is due to the constraints which are in place since many programs are implemented in a fragmented manner as opposed to a systematic, integrative and comprehensive manner. The RC program meets this suggestion of being a systematic program which is integrated within the present curriculum.

RC was developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children and offers educators tools to expand instructional opportunities by creating positive learning communities, and increasing student achievement and teacher effectiveness (Northeast Foundation for Children [NEFC], 2013). The seven principles which guide this approach are: (a) the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum; (b) how children learn is as important as what they learn; (c) the greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction; (d) to be successful academically and socially, children need a set of social skills; (e) knowing the children we teach is as important as knowing the content we teach; (f) knowing the families of the children we teach and working with them as partners is essential to children's education; and (g) how the adults at school work together is as important as individual competence (NEFC, 2013).

The RC approach is research and evidence based and is focused on developing three main elements within the school setting: engaging academics, a positive community, and effective management. These elements are implemented

through the use of several different key components (NEFC, 2013). The daily morning meeting is the first component and enables teachers to set a positive tone for learning while setting the stage for teaching social/emotional skills such as respect and empathy. Building a sense of community is another element and is accomplished through the establishment of community rules and logical consequences. Through structured student academic choices and the use of guided discovery to introduce new concepts, autonomy and independence is developed within students. Finally, by implementing the key components, teachers are able to take a proactive approach to discipline within the classroom leading to a warm, safe and positive learning environment (NEFC, 2013).

RC is usually implemented on the elementary level so this seems to fit well as a comprehensive option as it seeks to address the needs of students within that context. Losen and Martinez (2013) found that as children move into secondary schools there appears to be a greater willingness to suspend or expel students from the learning environment due to disciplinary infractions (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Thus the need to build the skills on the elementary level becomes greater. By implementing a program such as RC, schools can begin to address some of the social and emotional deficits which may increase the likelihood of recurring behavior concerns for many students.

### **Conclusion**

Developing social and emotional competence within students may reduce the use of OSS significantly. Over the past 25-30 years there has been a significant increase in students being excluded from the educational setting due to infractions. Despite the fact that the number has been rising, there has been no indication in the research that schools have become safer and more productive learning environments as a result of these measures. Instead the field of education is left with a stained history of disparity and inequity as study after study show that students of color, with disabilities, male and of low socioeconomic status are seemingly targeted with these disciplinary

practices. In addition, the large numbers of students suspended annually fail to represent those students who are repeatedly suspended with a sure trajectory of future dropout and/or entry into the criminal justice system.

By providing solutions which assist students in developing necessary skills to manage the myriad of emotions and challenges which tend to arise during their school career, schools can begin to support students in becoming productive participants in the school community. Programs like RC, which provide a systematic and comprehensive approach to social emotional development may offer promise in making a difference and providing a potential solution for school staff looking to develop students with challenges as opposed to excluding them.

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