Chapter 6
Analyzing the Role of Implicit Bias From a DisCrit Perspective:
The Practical Application of Recommendations for the Pyramid Model Framework

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ABSTRACT

Using a disability studies/critical race theory (Discrit) lens, the authors reviewed and analyzed specific literature within the pyramid model (PM) framework—a three-tier hierarchical framework for promoting social-emotional competence and reducing challenging behavior among young children—to understand the model's framing of implicit bias and the specific strategies noted in the literature that help teachers to recognize and counteract implicit bias and subsequently reduce disciplinary inequities among Black preschool children. Findings revealed that although the PM literature discussed, defined, and emphasized the importance of cultural responsivity, it did not engage critically with the construct of implicit bias (i.e., racism and ableism), specifically as it relates to the experiences of children most vulnerable to disciplinary sanction. This chapter ends with suggestions to help readers rethink the PM framework as a way to shift practice toward more equitable experiences for Black children in their earliest years of schooling.

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) issued a sobering report about the dangers of growing up Black and poor in America; they identified multiple and convergent family-, educational-, and community-based risks that form a cradle-to-prison pipeline, potentially leading children to marginalized lives, prison, or death. Single-parent or teen families, violent neighborhoods, lack of early education and enrichment, failing schools, grade retention, suspension, and expulsion represent some of the risk factors that disproportionately impact and disadvantage Black children throughout the life span. The report serves as a harsh reminder that "the most dangerous place for a child to … grow up in America is at the intersection of race and poverty" (CDF, 2007, p. 15). This danger is particularly evident in our schools—starting as early as preschool— where exclusionary discipline policies and practices disproportionately impact the educational experiences of many Black students, increasing their "risk for school disengagement, poor school outcomes, dropout, and involvement with juvenile justice" (Skiba et al., 2014, p. 558).

Exclusionary discipline is any form of discipline that removes a child from the learning environment, including office disciplinary referral, in- and out-of-school-suspension, and expulsion (Wesley & Ellis, 2017, p. 22). It undermines the educational experiences of Black students, as they face disciplinary sanctions more often than students of other racial/ethnic groups (United States Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2018). Significant racial disproportionality raises further concerns that "schools may be engaging in racial discrimination that violates federal Civil Rights laws" (GAO, 2018, p.10). Equally disturbing is the fact that such disparities are evident as early as preschool (GAO, 2018). According to the GAO (2018) report, Black students represented almost half (i.e., 47%) of all students suspended from public preschools in 2013/2014, even though they made up only 19% of the resident population; of those suspended, 35% were Black boys, while 12% were Black girls.

The aforementioned statistics signal an unsettling reality about the potential for bias and inequity in the earliest years of school, a time during which schools are expected to nurture the unlimited potential, curiosity, and motivation that characterize children's early years. For too many Black boys, the transition from "brilliant baby" to "child at risk" is an inevitable one (Rashid, 2009), and exclusionary discipline practices and policies further exacerbate that risk. Research shows that educators do observe Black boys more closely when they expect challenging behaviors to occur, leading some to speculate that implicit bias may indeed account for some of the disparities in exclusionary discipline among preschoolers (Gilliam et al., 2016).

Responding to the preschool suspension crisis, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DOHHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) released a joint policy statement that identified several important objectives for "preventing and severely limiting expulsion and suspension practices" (DOHHS & DOE, 2014, p. 1). Recommendations to early childhood programs include implementing "self-reflective strategies and cultural awareness training to prevent and correct all implicit and explicit biases, including racial/national origin/ethnic, sex, or disability biases (p. 7). The DOHHS and DOE have further supported preschools through the Technical Assistance Center on Positive Intervention Behavior and Supports (PBIS), which they have funded to implement the Pyramid Equity Project (PEP). The main goals of the PEP are to "develop, demonstrate, and disseminate an effective approach for the promotion of social competence in young children and the prevention of suspension, expulsion, and discipline disparities in early learning programs" (PEP, 2016, p. 2), and "develop tools, materials, and procedures to explicitly address implicit bias, implement culturally responsive practices, and use data systems to

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