

Chapter 3

Exploring the Applicability of Group Threat Theory to School Disciplinary Policies and Practices: A Social Justice Approach

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ABSTRACT

As school policies have become more intolerant to all behaviors, albeit, violent or non-violent, the result has shown a shift in school practices that has adolescents being adjudicated into the juvenile justice system at alarming rates. The literature has consistently documented the arbitrary application of punishment to certain groups, outlining the importance of social and biographical positions in the organization of school discipline. This chapter attempts to embed social justice perspective in this analysis structured within the framework of group threat hypothesis. The arguments and tenets outlined in both perspectives are directly related to the decades-long problems highlighted in the literature around school disciplinary policies and practices and the disparate impact on minority students. The analysis within these frameworks is missing from the K-12 disciplinary school-to-prison pipeline debate and literature. This chapter will be helpful in adding more elements to the discussion and fill this gap in the literature.

INTRODUCTION

As school policies have become more intolerant to all behaviors, albeit, violent or non-violent, the end result has shown a shift in school practices that has adolescents being adjudicated into the juvenile justice system at alarming rates. The precipitation of such policies is directly linked to the overall trend of mass incarceration and “getting tough” on crime, which has been evident throughout the larger criminal justice system in the United States. The research over the last five decades shows young people, specifi-

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cally children of color, have been, disproportionately disciplined, or punished far more than their white peers when engaging in similar offenses or even lesser offenses (Nation et al., 2016). The literature has consistently documented the arbitrary application of punishment to certain groups in the K-12 system, outlining the importance of historical, social, and biographical positions in the organization of school discipline.

Concerns around school violence in the 1970s helped propelled policies and technologies that changed the nature of school discipline. These policies and practices were not guided by any theoretical or empirical knowledge. The resulting impact has been more detrimental to certain groups in American society. Minority group members socio-political and economic weakness or absence and advancement of their criminalization in the larger American society is a result of these policies. These policies and practices have had the effect of being disproportionately applied to students of color and consequently hindered their progress within the larger society. Students of color has experienced an advancement of their criminalization within the school setting that no other group has experienced. The diffusion of the larger criminal law and criminal justice system application that has been evident across K-12 institutions has had the effect of depriving students of color equal access and participation in the educational system. These harsh “zero-tolerance” and other criminalizing policies have limited the educational experience and opportunities for students of color (Duncan, 2000). The result has had impact across all spheres of people of color existence—social, economic and political (Anderson, 1988; Duncan, 2000; Mead, 2000).

The disregard for the disenfranchisement of youth of color educational needs and attainment is a social justice and human rights issue that has not been explored frequently as such in the literature. Further, the agenda and actions—whether, manifest or latent—that have continued to drive these policies must also be discussed and analyzed within appropriate theoretical frameworks. Group threat theory embedded in a social justice perspective provides a valuable explanatory frame of reference in explaining racial disparity in school disciplinary policies and practices—which has fueled the school to prison minority problem.

The criminalization of school discipline is embedded not just in actual increase in students’ misbehavior but broader socio-political and economic fears and changes. Present day theoretical arguments around school disciplinary approaches must be situated within the historical persistence of attitudes guided by historical and cultural inequities. These cultural inequities and misunderstandings are at the center of micro-aggressive approaches in education as these approaches relate to students of color. The current state of education, particularly K-12 calls for continued theoretical exploration of this issue is imperative. Specifically, applying more culturally relevant theoretical explanations and perspectives to further understand this issue will also help to solve some of these problems. The historical antecedents of racially biased disciplinary problem did not happen overnight, this is a long historical problem guided by the policies influenced by the institution of slavery. A discussion about racially biased disciplinary school policies would be incomplete if not examined within these historical lenses. This chapter will examine through a systematic literature review the theoretical arguments around school disciplinary approaches that will include historical and cultural inequities as well as the misunderstandings that are at the center of present day micro-aggressive discussions in education as it relate and the students of color.

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