

Rethinking Efforts in Breaking the School-to-Prison Pipeline: What Schools Can Do*

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The term "school-to-prison pipeline" describes a trend where students, especially those from marginalized communities, are funneled out of educational institutions into the criminal justice system. This phenomenon is frequently considered in relation to school zero-tolerance disciplinary practices, increased police presence in schools, and high rates of school suspensions. Unfortunately, besides ineffectiveness in misconduct reduction, these policies disproportionately impact vulnerable children, adolescents, and their families. The aim of this paper is to systematize research data on mechanisms beyond the cutting "school to prison pipeline" at school level. Eligible studies meet the following criteria: assessed school-based disciplinary practices (designed or related to lower misbehaviors or delinquency); focused on school-aged children up to 18 years old; published in English; dated between the years 2015–2025 and are directly accessible. Research data suggest that there is a scarcity of studies examining the effectiveness of disciplinary practices that are alternatives to punitive approaches. Restorative school-based practices have been found to be effective in decreasing in-school delinquency among reactive practices. Positive behavioral support and social-emotional learning as proactive practices, are recommended as effective strategies for preventing the school-to-prison pipeline and reducing inequality.

KEYWORDS: school / disciplinary practice / restorative justice / SEL / equity

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Introduction

Even comprehensive literature frequently references 2013. for the term "school-to-prison pipeline" (STPP) first use (Kang-Brown et al., 2013), more precisely, conference held at Northeastern University in 2003 yielded the first published use of the phrase (Crawley & Hirschfield, 2018). Widespread use initiated from civil rights and education organizations referenced the term in their organization (e.g. National Education Association). STPP concept was popularized in academic discussions around the early 2000s. One of the earliest considerations in a research context can be found in the report by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, titled "Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline Policies" (Auburn, 2000). STPP is a widely used metaphor that describes how schools can act as a pathway to the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This concept highlights how certain disciplinary policies and practices, for example labeling students as troublemakers, excluding them from school, and increasing their risk of delinquency can lead to their involvement in the justice system and eventual incarceration (Crawley & Hirschfield, 2018).

The post-Columbine era shifted the focus on school safety to a security-oriented perspective in schools around the world. However, evidence suggests that zero tolerance, is not as effective in reducing misconduct, as it was supposed to be. On the contrary, researchers suggests "zero tolerance – zero evidence" (Skiba, 2000), or "zero benefit" (Hoffman, 2014). For example, out-of-school suspensions are linked to higher rates of school dropout, misconducts, and justice system involvement (Liu, 2024). However, there is still a gap in research regarding what works in cutting STPP. Although punitive discipline can be effective for managing student behavior in the short term (Landrum & Kauffman, 2006), more democratic alternative disciplinary practices are found to be more effective in fostering students' self-discipline and promoting long-term positive developmental changes (Dray et al., 2017; Gueldner et al., 2020). Over the past two decades, improving school safety by promoting specific models, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Pas et al., 2019), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Green et al., 2021), and restorative justice practices (Schiff, 2018), has become both popular and effective.

Following a last year school shooting in Serbia, there is a concern that punitive policies may be adopted as a "promising" school-based approach. Government has expanded the presence of school police officers as one of its initial measures, stating that "hundreds of new officers will be recruited, and thousands more will be transferred from other positions to monitor schools" (Euronews, 2024). Also, mass arresting of children because of their behavior on social networks related to the tragedy and glorifying the perpetrator (Danas, 2023) demonstrated a zero tolerance policy. Available research from Serbia show that punitive disciplinary

practices are related to more school bullying perceived by students (Kovačević Lepojević et al., 2024).

The aim of this paper is identifying and systematizing school disciplinary practice that are evidenced as powerful in cutting the predictable pathways that many students follow en route to incarceration. Recognizing the models that are alternative to zero tolerance policies, methaphorically, can contribute to the breaking of the STPP.

Method

Comprehensive search to identify and analyze relevant studies reporting on the impact of school disciplinary practices on the prevention of misbehavior, incarceration and delinquency. Eligible studies meet the following criteria: assessed school-based disciplinary practices (designed or related to lower misbehaviors or delinquency); focused on school-aged children up to 18 years old; published in English; dated between the years 2015–2025, and are directly accessible. Documents such as conference proceedings, books, and dissertations were excluded. The following bases were searched: Web of Science, Science Direct, PubMed, APA PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles. The following keywords were used in the search: “school disciplinary practice”, “misconduct”, “delinquency”, “teachers”, “students”. The research process was conducted in the period between July 20 and August 20, concluding with the papers published by August 2024. At first, 72 articles met the inclusion criteria. After removing 8 research paper considering teachers’ misconduct, and 52 research paper exploring the effects of zero tolerance policies and practices, 12 article left for the final review.

Results with Discussion

Studies included in this review have been conducted mostly in the USA, UK, Australia. The people involved in the studies as participants were students, teachers, principals. Of the reviewed studies, five were literature reviews or qualitative research studies exploring school discipline at policy level (Ritter, 2018; Skiba, 2015; Steinberg, & Lacoë, 2018; Welsh, & Little, 2018; Zondo, & Mncube, 2024).

Thematic analysis of the identified research paper shows that school disciplinary practice can be divided into reactive and proactive one (Fissel, et al., 2019). Reactive practice can be punitive and non punitive (e.g. community service). Punitive reactive practice involves police or court action against students or parents, expulsion from school, suspension from school, etc. Non punitive reactive practice refers to community service, reward practices, plea-bargaining

frequency (school-mandated punishment for example for possession of alcohol, drug, knife...) (Fissel, et al., 2019).

Among reactive but not punitive school-based practices, restorative justice practice (RJP) affect improving the school climate, discipline, positive conflict management through actions that aim at preventing suspensions, exclusions, conflicts, and misbehaviours (e.g. bullying) (Anyon et al., 2014; Augustine et al., 2018; Buckmaster, 2016; Gregory et al, 2016; Huang et al., 2023; Kine, 2016; Rich et al., 2017; Schotland et al., 2016; Sopcak & Hood, 2022). RJ approaches conflict by viewing crime or harm as primarily a violation of individuals, relationships, and communities, which creates a duty to "make things right" (Zehr, 1990, p. 181). Additionally, RJP promote positive relationships between peers and between students and teachers, as well as to prosocial behaviours through the development of social and emotional skills. The most used RJP in school are circles, followed by restorative conferences, peer mediation, restorative conversations, mediation, community-building circles (Lodi et al., 2021). It is found that students who received RJP for consequences in the fall semester were less likely to be referred to the office or receive suspension in the spring semester than students who did not receive RJP (Anyon et al., 2014)

Following alternative practice are recognized and divided in two category: 1) specific interventions aimed at working with students with chronic, frequent, or violent behavioural issues (e.g. The behavioural education plan: Check-in/check-out, School survival group, Conflict resolution and social-cognitive skills training); and 2) school-wide interventions which usually involve the entire school community (Authoritative school discipline model, Democratic or student-driven school discipline model, RJP, Strength-based approach or the empowerment model; Positive discipline model (Jean-Pierre, & Parris, 2018). RJP, often is, aligned with other behavioral and disciplinary approaches such as (SW)Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), or Social Emotional Learning (SEL) (Kress & Elias, 2006). SWPBIS attempts to restructure disciplinary practices, SEL targets misbehavior via teaching students social and life skills, and RJ attempts to restore and repair relationships affected by misbehavior (Skiba, 2015).

Contemporary research identifies several school-based proactive practices that have the potential to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) and offer numerous benefits for the entire school community. Bradshaw et al. (2015) examined whether the effects of SWPBIS on student outcomes varied based on students' social-emotional characteristics. Their analysis of school-level data and latent profile analysis revealed that at-risk and high-risk students in SWPBIS schools were less likely to receive office disciplinary referrals compared to their peers in non-SWPBS schools. The Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) program, which emphasizes social-emotional learning (SEL), student support teams, early identification, and planning centers, has been shown to improve school safety, discipline, and learning conditions. This program has

resulted in better learning environments for students in Grades 5 through 12, increased student attendance, reduced disobedient/disruptive behaviors, fewer out-of-school suspensions, and a decrease in various disciplinary incidents such as fighting, harassment, and serious bodily harm (Osher et al., 2015).

Research also indicates that perceived injustice can impact in-school delinquency, highlighting the importance of the nature of school disciplinary practices (punitive vs. positive) (Fissel et al., 2019). Implementing SEL with an equity-focused approach is crucial for enhancing school discipline (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Transformative SEL is recommended for reducing inequality and fostering students' self-discipline (Jagers et al., 2019). Strengthening social-emotional competence (SEC) among educators is emphasized in models such as the Prosocial Classroom and the RULER program developed at Yale University, which assist teachers in this effort (Jennings et al., 2021). Teachers should receive support and encouragement to implement positive behavioral interventions tailored to their school's specific needs for addressing misbehavior (Zondo & Mncube, 2024).

Conclusion

Effective reform in school disciplinary practices should prioritize the connection between discipline and educational quality. A proactive, school-based approach, along with restorative justice practices, has the potential to close this often noticeable gap. However, a challenge remains in developing accurate measures for assessing student outcomes. To ensure reliable data on program effectiveness, the implementation quality of these programs in schools must be enhanced.

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