Preprint

Context-based Discrimination in School Discipline

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Abstract

Numerous studies have documented racialized disparities in school disciplinary practices, with students from stigmatized racialized groups facing harsher punishment than their non-stigmatized peers. These disparities are often attributed to teachers' negative stereotypes. However, psychological theories have largely overlooked the impact of contextual factors, such as racialized segregation and the demographic composition of school environments, on teachers' decision-making processes. Drawing on ecological systems theory, we identify three gaps in the psychological literature on racialized disparities in school discipline: (1) the restricted focus on teachers' interactions with individual students, (2) the neglect of superordinate contextual levels, and (3) the limited consideration of racialized segregation patterns. To address these gaps, we introduce a context-based discrimination model, which holds that the racialized composition of school settings (classrooms, schools, and surrounding areas) shapes teachers' social categorization, stereotyping, and decision-making processes. We define context-based discrimination as the phenomenon whereby overall discipline rates between school settings systematically vary with their racialized composition. Crucially, effects of context-based discrimination may not be limited to students from stigmatized racialized groups, but may also affect non-stigmatized peers in a school setting. To understand how inequality is reproduced in educational settings, psychological science must investigate how structural context shapes teacher behavior.

Keywords

segregation, school and classroom composition, racial disparities, school discipline, social categorization, stereotypes, discrimination, social context

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Imagine the following scenario:

> *You are teaching a 9th-grade algebra class and notice a student, Darnell, disrupting your lesson. Darnell is talking with his neighbor, passing notes, and when you ask him to stop, he continues whispering and laughing while looking at you.*

In typical experiments on racialized disparities in school discipline, researchers use scenarios like this to investigate whether participants (e.g., teachers) who are presented with minor forms of disruptive student behavior suggest more severe discipline for a student with a stereotypical Black name (e.g., Darnell). Findings from experiments like the one described above suggest that participants are in fact more likely to recommend harsher disciplinary actions for Darnell, to attribute his behavior to internal causes, or to ascribe negative racialized[1] stereotypes to him compared to a student with a stereotypical White name (e.g., Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Studies like these, with their dyadic focus on teacher-student interactions, have significantly advanced our understanding of teachers' biases regarding students from racialized groups.

However, what if we zoom out from this teacher-student dyad and consider the entire classroom context? What if the class is predominantly White, and Darnell is just one of the few Black students? Or, conversely, what if the class is predominantly Black, and Darnell is one among many Black students? And if we take an even broader perspective, we may realize that the classroom is embedded in a school, located in a neighborhood, each nested structure characterized by a specific racialized composition. Would these nested structures of the environment influence how teachers think and act in response to disruptive behavior? In the present article, we argue that psychology has largely overlooked such context-based factors, resulting in a limited understanding of racialized disparities in school discipline. We start by reviewing research on racialized disparities in educational settings, specifically focusing on school personnel's disciplinary practices. We next outline several gaps in the psychological literature on racialized disparities in disciplinary practices. To address the identified gaps, we then introduce a model of context-based discrimination in school discipline, which argues that racialized segregation and the associated composition of school contexts may have important implications for teachers' social categorization, stereotyping, decision-making, and behavioral outcomes in the classroom. We close with a call to move beyond the focus of dyadic teacher-student interactions and to consider the importance of multiple contextual levels and their implications for racialized disparities in disciplinary practices.

Racialized Disparities in School Disciplinary Practices

A large body of field research has documented racialized disparities in the way students are treated by teachers, specifically concerning disciplinary practices (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Del Toro & Wang, 2022; Glock, 2016; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2002; Valdebenito et al., 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018). One highly cited study that relied on disciplinary records of thousands of students from public middle schools in a large, urban school district in the US found that Black students received more referrals to the office for infractions that were more subjective in nature (Skiba et al., 2002). Whereas White students were more often referred to school administrators for discipline for behaviors where the seriousness was less in question (e.g., vandalism; leaving without permission), Black students were more often referred for infractions that more strongly depended on the interpretation of the teacher (e.g., disrespect; excessive noise). Other studies have revealed similar racialized disparities in disciplinary referrals (see also Girvan et al., 2017) and have shown that these disparities remained even when controlling for student behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Similar patterns have been observed for other forms of disciplinary practices. For instance, a nationwide study of US elementary and middle schools suggested that compared to their White peers, Black students were more likely to face exclusionary discipline such as out-of-school suspensions for similar behaviors (Skiba et al., 2011). Likewise, a large-scale study based on a survey of teachers and students in an urban school district found that

[1] The term "racialized" conveys that human "races" do not exist. Instead, the term highlights "the process through which *racialized groups*, rather than "races," are formed." (Hochman 2019, p. 1245).

Black students faced higher odds of being suspended than their White peers, even when controlling for the behaviors that gave rise to the disciplinary response (Hinojosa, 2008). In sum, field studies suggest that students from stigmatized racialized groups face more frequent and more severe disciplinary responses for behaviors that do not result in the same outcome among their non-racialized peers.

Psychological theorizing and research suggest that racialized disparities in teachers' disciplinary practices are explained, in part, by negative stereotypes and affect, influencing how teachers deal with disruptive behavior (e.g., Legette et al., 2023; Reyna, 2008). For example, the attributional model of stereotypes (Reyna, 2008) suggests that teachers may attribute stigmatized racialized students' disruptive behaviors such as talking out of turn to internal causes (e.g., lack of self-control; disrespect for authority) and that these internal attributions are potentially affected by group-based stereotypes. Evidence on the role of negative stereotypes comes from a series of laboratory experiments, in which K-12 teachers read fictitious scenarios of a Black (vs. White) student who repeatedly displayed disruptive behavior in class (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). These studies revealed that although teachers showed an increased willingness to discipline White students after repeated infractions, their increase in willingness to discipline was even stronger for Black students. Importantly, this "Black-escalation effect" (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015, p. 623) was mediated by teachers' heightened tendency to label the Black student a troublemaker, a stereotype commonly ascribed to Black students (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Thus, teachers' racialized stereotypes about the behavior of Black students were related to their willingness to discipline Black students more than White students. Similar experimental findings of racialized disparities in disciplinary decisions have been replicated in other national contexts (e.g., Glock, 2016; but see Marcucci, 2019) and even among school principals (Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020).

These findings on the role of stereotypes are complemented by theorizing and research suggesting additional explanations for racialized disparities in disciplinary decisions, including teachers' racialized anger (Legette et al., 2023), prejudice (Ispa-Landa, 2018; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019), their level of discretion (Girvan et al., 2017), cultural mismatch between teachers and students (Blake et al., 2016; Osei-Twumasi & Pinetta, 2023), teachers' beliefs in the culpability of students from racialized groups (Gregory & Roberts, 2017; J. Owens, 2022), the imposition of cultural norms through discipline (Cruz & Firestone, 2024; Little & Welsh, 2022), and even the time of day at which the infraction occurred (Smolkowski et al., 2016).

Racialized disparities in school disciplinary practices have various negative implications, both short- and long-term (see Skiba et al., 2014). In the short-term, racialized disparities in school discipline are linked to students' negative perceptions of the school climate and lower academic achievement. For example, students in classrooms with higher suspension rates in response to minor forms of disruptive behavior also reported more negative perceptions of the classroom climate (e.g., perceived teachers and peers as less supportive) and had lower math achievement outcomes (Wang et al., 2024). Links between suspensions and lower academic achievement seem to be particularly pronounced for students from racialized groups, who face escalated disciplinary responses. For example, longitudinal evidence suggests that suspension of Black adolescents in response to minor infractions were related to lower grades even two years later (Del Toro & Wang, 2022). These effects of suspensions on lower grades were especially strong among Black students who perceived the school climate negatively. Such associations between racialized disparities in) disciplinary practices and negative school climate perceptions have been replicated in various studies (e.g., Mattison & Aber, 2007; Skiba et al., 2014). Other negative implications of racialized disparities in educational settings are well-documented and may manifest in students' reduced sense of belonging, perceptions of fairness, trust in school institutions, and worsening teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships (for reviews see Childs & Wooten, 2023; Okonofua et al., 2016). Lastly, scholars argue that in the long-term, racialized disparities in disciplinary practices result in a "school-to-prison pipeline" (Okonofua et al., 2016), in which exclusionary discipline increases the likelihood that students from stigmatized racialized groups drop out of school, and eventually face higher odds of juvenile detention and prison sentences.

Taken together, empirical evidence based on field and lab data suggests that students from stigmatized racialized groups face harsher and more frequent disciplinary

responses than their non-stigmatized peers. These escalated disciplinary responses appear to be in response to behaviors that are often more subjective in nature and may, at least in part, be driven by biases in teachers' beliefs, feelings, expectations, and attributions about students from stigmatized racialized groups. However, as we argue next, there are several theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature on racialized disparities in school discipline, which may limit our understanding of the nature and extent of racialized disparities in school disciplinary practices.

Gaps in Understanding Racialized Disparities in School Discipline

The present article identifies three gaps in the psychological literature on racialized disparities in school discipline that limit our understanding of the processes that cause racialized disparities in teachers' disciplinary practices. First, previous theorizing and research have mostly focused on dyadic models of teacher-student interactions, which might not capture dynamics within the classroom in many school settings. Second, classrooms are not isolated from their surroundings, thus making it likely that factors at superordinate contextual levels (e.g. school, neighborhood) shape characteristics and dynamics in the classroom. Third, current psychological theorizing and research have not fully acknowledged the extent to which school and classroom compositions are shaped by patterns of racialized segregation, thus limiting the extent to which current models of disparities in educational settings might apply. Together, these gaps underscore the need for more comprehensive models that consider how racialized disparities in school discipline are shaped by factors at multiple contextual levels.

Gap 1: Teachers Interact with Entire Classrooms, Not Just Individual Students

Research on racialized disparities in school discipline that focuses primarily on dyadic teacher-student relationships, such as illustrated in our opening scenario, likely fails to fully capture the complex social dynamics playing out in a classroom. First, it is important to consider that teachers do not only interact with individual students but often engage with multiple students simultaneously or address the entire classroom. For example, during group activities or classroom discussions, teachers frequently interact with several students at once or provide collective feedback. Moreover, teachers may hold classroom-wide beliefs and expectations (e.g., "this class is difficult/easy to work with") or develop specific feelings about their class (e.g., "I like teaching in this class"), which may translate into classroom-wide behaviors, i.e., behaviors that are directed at the whole class rather than at individual students. This reasoning is consistent with a large-scale study of more than 800 elementary school classrooms, which found that teachers interacted with the entire class during more than 50% of the observed intervals (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002). Whole-class instruction thus is a primary form of teacher-student interaction in many classrooms, a finding that is also backed up by more recent research (see also Denessen et al., 2020; Flieller et al., 2016; Hollo & Hirn, 2015). Together, these examples and data points illustrate the various ways in which teachers might interact with entire classrooms, not just individual students. Consequently, it is possible that teachers direct disciplinary responses not only toward individual students, but also toward groups of students as well as the entire class. Such classroom-wide behavior has so far been largely neglected in previous psychological research on racialized disparities in school discipline.

Second, it is essential to recognize that teacher's responses in class, even if directed at a single student, can be shaped by the presence of peers and the interactions among them (e.g., Bany & Johnson, 1964; Schmuck & Schmuck, 2001). For instance, the presence of peers who observe infractions of classmates might heighten teachers' perceived need to maintain order in the classroom to keep students engaged in class activities (e.g., Alvarez & Borer, 2023), potentially impacting the severity of disciplinary action (cf. Okonofua, Walton, & Eberhardt, 2016). Alternatively, teachers might feel the need to demonstrate authority to deter future disruptive or disobedient behavior in front of the class (see Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). This need to demonstrate authority might be even more pronounced when teachers are confronted with multiple students who presumably pose a risk to challenge their authority. To our knowledge, the presence of peers in a classroom and their effect on how teachers deal with infractions has not been considered in psychological theorizing on racialized disparities in school discipline.

This gap has significant implications for our understanding of how disparities in disciplinary practices arise and manifest in educational settings. A sole focus on dyadic teacher-student models risks overlooking broader classroom dynamics that may shape teachers' perceptions and decisions. Teachers engage with whole classrooms and their responses, even to a single student, can be influenced by the presence of peers. Considering how classroom context contributes to escalated disciplinary responses advances our understanding of racialized disparities in disciplinary practices.

Gap 2: Classrooms are Not Isolated from Surrounding Ecologies

Just as dyadic student-teacher interactions are not isolated from the classroom, classrooms are not isolated from their surroundings; they are embedded within larger ecologies, including schools, neighborhoods, and broader geographic areas. These surrounding ecologies and their potential impacts on student outcomes have long been recognized in various fields such as criminology, education science, and developmental psychology. For example, structural characteristics such as school size, urbanity of schools, or community poverty levels have been shown to be related to a host of psychological and academic student outcomes (Anderman, 2002; e.g., Battistich, 2010; Battistich et al., 1995; Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Despite their potential relevance, consideration of surrounding ecologies is strikingly absent in psychological theorizing on disparities in school discipline. Drawing on ecological systems theory (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1977), we focus on two contextual levels—schools and neighborhoods—to illustrate how omitting surrounding ecologies in theorizing limits our understanding of how racialized disparities in school discipline might emerge and manifest.

First, prior research suggests links between school-level factors and teachers' psychology. For example, US teachers from predominantly-White schools were more likely to endorse a color-blind ideology than teachers from schools with higher shares of non-White students (Frankenberg, 2012), suggesting that factors beyond the classroom are linked to teachers' beliefs. Moreover, given that overall discipline rates have been shown to vary between schools (e.g., Welch & Payne, 2010), other school-level factors—such as school leadership, poverty levels within schools, or school climate—may also affect how discipline is administered in the classroom (see Welsh & Little, 2018, for a review). For example, school principals' favorable attitudes towards exclusionary discipline were related to racialized disparities in disciplinary practices (Skiba et al., 2014). Moreover, schools with higher percentages of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (as an indicator of poverty) had higher suspension rates than those with lower percentages (Mendez et al., 2002; but see Skiba et al., 2014).

Additionally, factors at the neighborhood level may be important to consider too, as they relate to school discipline. These may include community poverty levels (cf. Anderman, 2002; but see Skiba et al., 2014), neighborhood crime rates (Gerlinger, 2020; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), or negative perceptions of surrounding neighborhoods (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016). Other less tangible factors may include community involvement. For example, the level of community involvement in schools might impact the support systems available for students and teachers (cf. Battistich et al., 1995; Battistich et al., 1997), ultimately affecting the extent to which exclusionary discipline is commonly used to manage classroom behavior.

Taken together, links between the classroom and other nested contextual levels may create a complex system of potential influences on disciplinary practices. Our aim is not to provide an exhaustive account of the nested ecologies and contextual factors that affect disciplinary practices. Instead, we highlight that because psychological theorizing has not yet considered how teacher cognition, decision-making, and behavior might be affected by ecologies surrounding classrooms, our current understanding about the processes contributing to racialized disparities in school discipline remains severely limited.

Gap 3: Racialized Segregation, School, and Classroom Composition

> *"We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does." (Brown v.*

Board of Education of Topeka, Opinion, May 17, 1954)

In the 1954 landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision, the U.S. Supreme Court declared school segregation as unconstitutional, ruling against the "separate but equal doctrine" that had permitted separating Black and White students into different schools if they provided equal physical facilities. What was striking about the ruling was that judges did not only consider "tangible factors" such as school facilities, but also relied on social science and the psychological effects of school segregation on Black children, considering its potential detrimental impact on motivation by fostering a sense of inferiority among Black students (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Opinion,* May 17, 1954).

Despite the ruling in Brown v. Board of Education, patterns of racialized segregation continue to shape everyday life in the US (see Banaji et al., 2021; Richeson et al., 2025), including the composition of US schools and classrooms, particularly in cities and urban areas. These patterns are not accidental but reflect numerous forces including deliberate discriminatory practices in the housing market (Banaji et al., 2021; Krysan et al., 2017; Massey & Denton, 1993). A study of the 100 largest urban public school districts across the US found moderate but increasing levels of segregation between Black and White students, with particularly high levels in about 20 percent of districts (Billingham, 2019). Due to patterns of racialized segregation, students from racialized groups attend schools with vastly different compositions than those attended by students from non-racialized groups. For example, analyses of US nationwide administrative data suggests that Hispanic and Black students attended schools in which Hispanic and Black students respectively comprised the majority of the student body, whereas White students attended schools that were predominantly White (A. Owens, 2020; Turner et al., 2021; Ukanwa et al., 2022). Racialized segregation also shapes school and classroom composition in many European nations (Baur & Häussermann, 2009; Boterman et al., 2019; Fincke & Lange, 2012; Nast, 2020). In Germany, for example, schools are frequently segregated along racialized lines, especially in larger metropolitan areas (Boterman et al., 2019). Other data from Germany similarly suggest that one in four students from families with a migration history attended schools in which students with similar backgrounds were overrepresented (Fincke & Lange, 2012). Students from stigmatized racialized groups are thus often enrolled in schools where their group makes up a disproportionately large share of the student body, reflecting broader patterns of racialized segregation.

Taken together, racialized segregation shapes the composition of schools and classrooms in many places in the United States and Europe, with high levels of racialized segregation in some locations. Given that many students, particularly those from stigmatized racialized groups, attend schools with high shares of students from racialized groups, it seems striking that an important aspect of how school environments are structured is rarely considered in psychological theorizing on racialized disparities in school discipline. Focusing on racialized disparities without considering the implications of segregation patterns and school or classroom composition limits our understanding about the nature and extent of disparities in school discipline. To our knowledge, only few studies explicitly considered relationships between neighborhood segregation and racialized disparities in school discipline, suggesting that schools in more segregated districts tend to have lower racialized disparities in discipline between Black and White students (Eitle & Eitle, 2004; K. J. Freeman & Steidl, 2016). However, while these studies provide initial evidence that neighborhood segregation affects school discipline, their results may be misleading. Specifically, the effects of segregation on school discipline might not appear in disciplinary disparities *between Black and White students* (the outcome measure used in the cited studies), but rather in disciplinary disparities *between schools in more or less segregated districts or neighborhoods*. It might thus well be that in segregated schools with higher proportions of students from racialized groups, disciplinary disparities might be lower, while at the same time the overall rates of discipline could be higher, if teachers generally administer more frequent or severe discipline overall (see Fig. 1). Focusing on disparities and ignoring absolute rates of discipline risks overlooking that broader context. In the worst case, scholars might derive problematic implications by suggesting that higher levels of segregation lead to lower racialized disparities, cautioning that less segregation might paradoxically lead to increased discrimination and higher disparities in discipline.

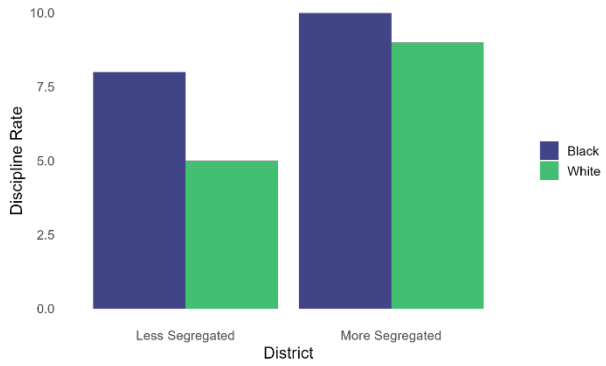

Figure 1. Hypothetical illustration of how focusing solely on racialized disparities in discipline can obscure differences in overall discipline rates between contexts.

Disparities Between Contexts: How Racialized Composition of School Settings is Linked to Overall Rates of Disciplinary Action

Recent studies suggest that the racialized composition of schools and classrooms may affect a student's likelihood of experiencing escalated disciplinary responses. Most of these US-based studies have looked at the share of Black or Hispanic students in schools and linked these racialized compositions to overall rates of disciplinary action (Anyon et al., 2014; Edwards, 2016; Payne & Welch, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014; Welch & Payne, 2010, 2012). Initial evidence comes from a study by Welch and Payne (2010), who surveyed secondary school principals on their use of different types of disciplinary responses. They observed that schools with higher percentages of Black students also had higher absolute/overall rates of punitive discipline and were more likely to have zero-tolerance policies. These schools were also more likely to use extremely punitive measures to respond to infractions—such as expulsions, calling the police, or charging students or parents with a crime—and less likely to use milder and restorative forms of discipline (Welch & Payne, 2010). Another study that relied on administrative records of 1,720 public schools in a US Midwestern state similarly observed that schools with higher percentages of Black students were more likely to use out-of-school suspensions to respond to infractions (Skiba et al., 2014). The percentage of Black students in schools turned out to be among the strongest predictors of escalated disciplinary responses, even when controlling for the severity of the student behavior, or for school-level characteristics such as poverty levels among students. Lastly, a study that relied on Denver K-12 public schools' discipline records observed that higher percentages of Black and Latinx students in schools were related to higher likelihoods of students facing office discipline referrals and suspensions (Anyon et al., 2014).

Importantly, not only the composition of schools, but also the composition of classrooms might be linked to teacher behavior, including their disciplinary practices. Based on hundreds of classroom video sequences, Osei-Twumasi and Pinetta (2023) observed that White teachers managed their classrooms less effectively if these were composed of higher percentages of Black students. Classroom management in this study was operationalized, in part, as teachers' ability to prevent or redirect misbehavior, thus providing suggestive evidence that racialized classroom composition is related to teachers' disciplinary practices. Taken together, previous research has linked racialized composition of schools and classrooms to disciplinary practices, suggesting that students in schools or classes with higher proportions of students from racialized groups face higher odds of escalated disciplinary responses.

These recent studies add an important layer to our understanding of the nature of disparities in disciplinary practices by highlighting that disparities might not only manifest in disparities in disciplinary outcomes for students from stigmatized racialized groups relative to their non-stigmatized peers, but also in disparities in absolute disciplinary rates between school settings depending on their racialized composition. It is thus possible that in classrooms with a higher percentage of students from racialized groups, students may face more and harsher disciplinary practices, regardless of whether they belong to a stigmatized racialized group or not. To explain such links between racialized composition and discipline rates, scholars have mostly relied on the minority threat hypothesis (Blalock, 1967). According to the minority threat hypothesis, growing shares of stigmatized racialized groups lead to more frequent and/or more severe discrimination committed by dominant groups. As the number of stigmatized racialized group members relative to dominant group members increase, so increases the tendency of dominant group

members to discriminate against that group. Blalock assumed that dominant groups use discriminatory behavior to exert control over stigmatized groups, out of fear of losing power or because of feelings of threat about growing competition. While this theoretical approach helps explain why students from stigmatized racialized groups may face increased disciplinary action as their percentage in a school setting increases, it cannot explain the *overall* increase in disciplinary action based on the enrollment of students from stigmatized racialized groups that has been observed in the studies cited above.

To date, theorizing on racialized disparities in school discipline has rarely addressed how the racialized composition of school settings might influence psychological processes beyond threat perceptions among school personnel that are known precursors to discriminatory behavior. In other words, we still know little about how the composition of classrooms and schools might shape the ways teachers perceive, interpret, and respond to student behavior. This gap is striking given extensive social psychological research on processes such as *social categorization* and *stereotyping*, both of which can shape teachers' perceptions, judgments, and disciplinary decisions (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Reyna, 2008; Roth et al., 2019). Our goal is to (a) address gaps in the literature on racialized disparities in school discipline, (b) connect empirical findings on links between racialized composition and disciplinary practices with theorizing and research from social psychology and social cognition research, and (c) to broaden our understanding of how school discipline can reflect discriminatory outcomes. To achieve these goals, we next propose a model that emphasizes the impact of compositions of school environments on social categorization, stereotyping, and disciplinary practices.

A Context-based Discrimination Model of School Discipline

This article proposes a context-based discrimination (CBD) model that conceptualizes disparities in discipline as arising not only from dyadic teacher-student interactions, but also from nested environmental structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). According to this model, segregation and the resulting composition of school settings have profound implications for social categorization, stereotyping, decision-making, and behavioral outcomes in the classroom (Figure 2). A key assumption is that teachers' responses to students are not only shaped by processes at the individual level (i.e., social categorization and stereotyping), but also by immediate (i.e., classroom composition) and superordinate (i.e., neighborhood and school composition) contextual factors. Specifically, we propose that the racialized composition of these contexts shapes teachers' (a) chronic accessibility of racialized categories; (b) activation and application of associated stereotypes, and (c) decision-making regarding the overall propensity to employ disciplinary measures, a phenomenon we call context-based discrimination.[2]

Proposition 1: Chronic Accessibility of Racialized Categories

Psychological theorizing on racialized disparities in school discipline has focused on how teachers perceive and treat individual students from stigmatized racialized groups relative to their non-stigmatized peers. However, as outlined earlier, this dyadic focus has mostly overlooked how characteristics of the classroom environment may shape teachers' perceptions and disciplinary decisions. The first proposition of the CBD model addresses this gap by suggesting that the racialized composition of classrooms influences the chronic accessibility of racialized categories in teachers' minds (Fig. 2, Path A_1).

We propose that in classrooms with a high proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups, teachers frequently perceive students through the lens of racialized categories. These categories are cued by permanent, visible, and frequently encountered student characteristics and are reinforced by the broader ecological context in which classrooms are embedded. Because teachers in these environments are repeatedly exposed to racialized cues across multiple levels of context, racialized categories are not just occasionally but chronically accessible. In other

[2] Our model primarily focuses on psychological processes and outcomes among teachers. In Western, industrialized nations, teachers from stigmatized racialized groups are underrepresented in the educational workforce (Osei-Twumasi & Pinetta, 2023). As a result, the processes and outcomes outlined here are presumed to be most applicable to the predominant demographic within the workforce: White, middle class teachers.

words, the chronic accessibility of racialized categories reflects the constant perceptual and cognitive relevance of racialized categories in these settings.

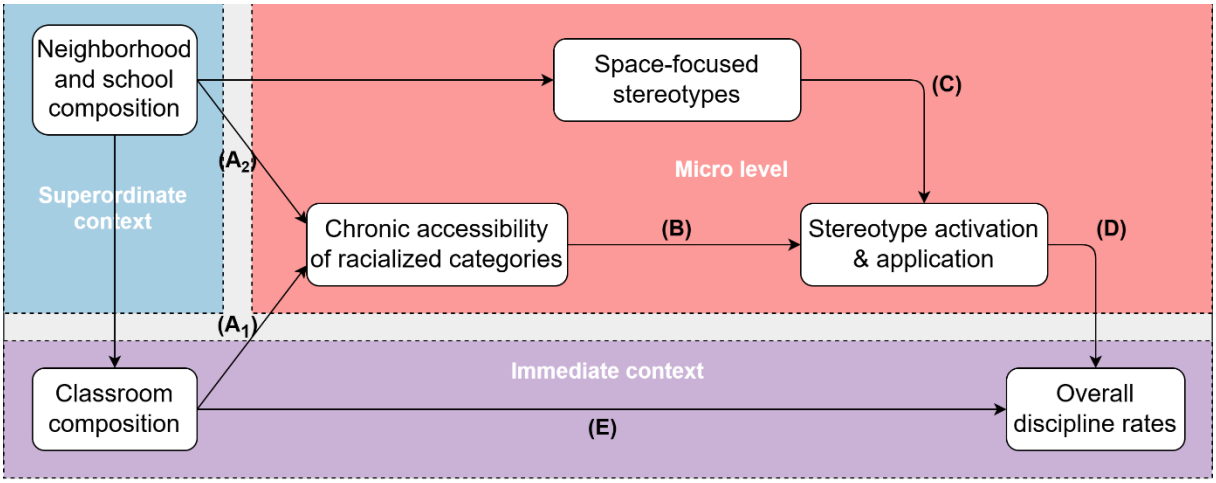

Figure 2. Schematic depiction of the context-based discrimination model of school discipline.

To illustrate, imagine a teacher scanning their classroom. They may notice that the class looks tired, engaged, or restless. They may also register the gender balance or the racialized composition of the class. Such impressions are not formed by evaluating each student individually, but rather by perceiving the classroom holistically. This process, known as *ensemble perception*, allows observers to extract "summary statistical information from groups of similar objects" (Whitney & Yamanashi Leib, 2018). Together with social categorization (Klapper et al., 2017), ensemble perception forms the conceptual foundation of our first proposition.

Racialized categories are considered among the most early and salient for social categorization (Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007; Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Stangor et al., 1992). In classrooms with a high proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups, teachers are frequently exposed to perceptually salient features—such as skin tone, hair texture, dress, or other stereotypical cues—that may facilitate racialized categorization (Kawakami et al., 2017). As a result, teachers may be more likely to perceive individual students in terms of racialized categories (e.g., "Black") and to perceive the class *as a whole* in racialized terms (e.g., "predominantly Black class"). Research on ensemble perception supports this idea. People can rapidly and efficiently judge the racialized composition and typicality of crowds (Alt & Phillips, 2022; Jung et al., 2017; Lamer et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2018; I. Thornton et al., 2014; I. M. Thornton et al., 2019), just as they can estimate gender composition (Goodale et al., 2018). Perceptions of larger groups of people (i.e., crowds) are based on summary statistics rather than on individualized perceptions of crowd members. Thus, individuation of crowd members "is lost and replaced with social information about average crowd characteristics" (Ristic & Capozzi, 2022). These racialized crowd perceptions may also shape how teachers perceive individual students. For example, racially ambiguous individuals are more likely perceived as Black when seen among other Black individuals (Cooley et al., 2018), suggesting that classroom-level perceptions may similarly reinforce the racialized categorization of individual students.

Beyond the classroom, the accessibility of racialized categories is likely shaped by cues at higher contextual levels such as the school and neighborhood (Fig. 2, Path A_2). Teachers' knowledge and expectations about the racialized composition of these surrounding ecologies may influence how they categorize students in the classroom. This idea is consistent with findings that social environments facilitate racialized categorization. For example, participants in one study were more likely to categorize racially ambiguous individuals as Black after learning that they came from a racially diverse environment (Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008). Similarly, participants in another study more quickly categorized faces as Asian when presented in a stereotypically

Chinese setting (J. B. Freeman et al., 2015). Lastly, teachers may also mentally associate environments with specific racialized groups—for example, linking "suburb" with White Americans (Bonam et al., 2017). Such associations may lead teachers to perceive schools or neighborhoods in racialized terms (e.g., "predominantly Black"), which in turn may shape how they perceive their classrooms. These findings suggest that racialized categorization is not only shaped by immediate perceptual cues but also by contextual knowledge and expectations.

Because teachers in classrooms with a high proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups are likely to encounter racialized cues frequently across multiple contextual levels, we propose that the accessibility of racialized categories in these settings is not merely temporary but chronic. By chronic, we mean that these categories are persistently activated—readily available and consistently used in social categorizations in the classroom. This notion aligns with social cognition research on priming, which suggests that frequently or recently activated concepts are more accessible and more likely to guide subsequent judgments (Higgins, 1996; Srull & Wyer, 1979, 1980). Taken together, individual student characteristics, as well as contextual cues at classroom, school, and neighborhood level jointly contribute to the chronic accessibility of racialized categories in the classroom. As we describe next, these racialized categorizations likely provide a basis for racialized stereotypes in teachers' minds.

Proposition 2: Stereotype Activation and Application

The second proposition of the CBD model posits that the chronic accessibility of racialized categories in the classroom increases the likelihood that associated stereotypes are activated and applied to individual students and to the classroom as a whole (Fig. 2, Path B). In other words, once racialized categories are frequently accessible, the stereotypes linked to those categories are more likely to come to mind and influence teachers' perceptions. Our second proposition is consistent with longstanding psychological models suggesting that social categorization precedes stereotyping (e.g., Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Kawakami et al., 2017; Roth et al., 2019).

Research suggests that students from stigmatized racialized groups are often ascribed negative stereotypes—such as being disruptive, defiant, or lacking self-control—which shape teachers' expectations and interpretations of behavior (Glock, 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Okonofua, Walton, & Eberhardt, 2016; Skiba et al., 2002). At the school level, such stereotypes may be reinforced through informal communication among school staff (Perez & Okonofua, 2022), and may become embedded in the broader classroom climate (Del Toro & Wang, 2023). Moreover, schools often promote norms that encourage internal attributions for student behavior (e.g., laziness, disrespect), rather than structural, contextual, or situational explanations (Reyna, 2008). In this way, racialized stereotypes are a pervasive feature of school environments and, as we propose next, may especially likely emerge in classrooms with a high proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups.

A key mechanism underlying this proposition is *confirmation bias*, the tendency to seek or interpret information in ways that confirm preexisting beliefs (Allport, 1954; Nickerson, 1998). In classrooms where racialized categories are chronically accessible, teachers may be more attuned to behaviors that align with negative stereotypes. For example, in a study by Gilliam and colleagues (2016), early childhood educators were asked to detect signs of challenging behavior in video clips that contained none. Eye-tracking data revealed that participants spent more time monitoring Black boys compared to other children, suggesting that stereotype-based expectations shaped their attention. Similarly, foundational work suggests that contextual cues can lead observers to test hypotheses in biased ways, resulting in the confirmation of stereotypes (Darley & Gross, 1983). In addition to confirmation bias, teachers may rely on salient, visible cues when interpreting behavior, a tendency often known as correspondence bias (Gawronski, 2004; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Goudeau & Cimpian, 2021). In classrooms where racialized categories are chronically accessible, teachers may be more likely to attribute misbehavior to internal traits associated with racialized stereotypes. Thus, stereotypes are not only activated but also applied in interpreting student behavior.

Importantly, racialized stereotypes may extend beyond individual students to the entire classroom. This aligns with research in social

vision suggesting that people attribute traits not only to individuals but also to groups, often in exaggerated ways (see Alt & Phillips, 2022, for a review). For instance, larger groups are perceived as more dominant or threatening than smaller ones, and group-level judgments amplify negative traits beyond what would be inferred from individual members alone. In one study, participants were more likely to ascribe negative stereotypes to group photographs of Black men than to individual portraits (Cooley & Payne, 2019; but see Persson et al., 2021). Another example is the "anger bias"—the tendency to misperceive neutral facial expressions as angry—which has been shown to be more pronounced when perceiving crowds compared to individuals or small groups (Mihalache et al., 2021). These findings suggest that in classrooms with a high proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups, teachers may not only apply negative stereotypes to individual students (e.g., "he's defiant") but also to the class as a collective (e.g., "this class is difficult"). Thus, stereotype application in these settings may operate at both the individual and classroom level. As we describe next, these stereotypes are likely further influenced by the broader geographic context in which schools are embedded.

Proposition 3: Space-focused Stereotypes and Geographic Context

Classroom and school environments are embedded within broader geographic contexts. This fact, long acknowledged by education researchers (e.g., Kennedy et al., 1976), forms the basis of the third proposition of the CBD model. We propose that teachers' perceptions of students and the classroom are shaped by how they perceive the surrounding geographic area—particularly its demographic composition (Fig. 2, Path C). While various features of the built environment may influence classroom perceptions, we argue that demographic cues play a central role. Specifically, stereotypes associated with the racialized composition of neighborhoods may prime teachers to anticipate misbehavior, which they are then more likely to perceive—a process consistent with confirmation bias. As a result, teachers may more frequently apply negative stereotypes (e.g., "disorganized," "social problems") not only to individual students, but also to the student body or the entire classroom.

Recent research on *space-focused stereotypes* provides support for the third proposition of the CBD model that the geographic context surrounding schools affects teachers' perceptions in the classroom. This research suggests that people ascribe stereotypes to places based on the social groups presumed to inhabit them (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016). For example, experimental studies have found that US participants associate Black neighborhoods with negative characteristics (e.g., dirty, dangerous) and White neighborhoods with positive ones (Bonam et al., 2016). These effects of space-focused stereotypes are not limited to the US context. In a series of experimental studies, participants in Germany associated immigrant neighborhoods with negative characteristics (e.g., crime-ridden; dirty; dangerous) and non-immigrant neighborhoods with positive ones (e.g., quiet, clean; Essien & Rohmann, 2024). Taken together, space-focused stereotypes produce stark perceptual divides between stigmatized racialized and non-stigmatized spaces (Bonam et al., 2016; Bonam et al., 2020; Essien & Rohmann, 2024; Yantis & Bonam, 2021).

Although stereotypes of stigmatized racialized spaces have been shown to contain negative perceptions of educational settings (e.g., "failing schools"; Bonam et al., 2016, p. 1564), their influence on teachers' classroom perceptions remains underexplored. Still, education research offers suggestive evidence. In an early observational study, Kennedy and colleagues (1976) found that teachers in "inner-city" schools reported more frequent classroom problems than those in suburban or rural schools, despite not feeling more troubled by them. The authors speculated that teachers may bring different expectations to schools in stigmatized areas, which are then confirmed through experience. While the study did not directly assess space-focused stereotypes, its findings resonate with our proposition: that perceptions of the surrounding neighborhood may prime teachers to anticipate problems in the classroom, thereby shaping how they interpret student behavior. Taken together, we propose that space-focused stereotypes, activated by the racialized composition of surroundings, contribute to the activation and application of negative stereotypes in the classroom.

Proposition 4: Disciplinary Outcomes as Context-based Discrimination

The fourth proposition of the CBD model posits that stereotypes associated with the racialized composition of school settings affect teachers' overall tendency to use disciplinary measures to respond to infractions (Fig. 2, Path D). In school settings with a high proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups, teachers are more likely to react punitively to respond to disruptive behavior—a phenomenon we call *context-based discrimination*. These punitive reactions might manifest in teachers' use of more severe disciplinary action (e.g., Skiba et al., 2014), fewer use of milder approaches (Skiba et al., 2002), more frequent disciplinary interventions, or earlier interventions in anticipation of misbehavior (cf. Gilliam et al., 2016).

Context-based discrimination has been documented in numerous studies (e.g., Edwards, 2016; Welch & Payne, 2010). The CBD model builds on this work by proposing that in classrooms with a high proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups, teachers do not necessarily discipline students from stigmatized racialized groups more than their non-stigmatized peers—although this might still be the case. Instead, we propose that the *overall rates* of discipline administered by teachers increase in these school settings. As we have outlined, teachers may not only apply negative stereotypes to individual students (e.g., "they are troublemakers"), but they may also apply them to the entire classroom (e.g., "this class means trouble"). Our theorizing is consistent with research showing that the proportion of Black students enrolled in a school—not the individual student's racialized group membership—predicted whether an infraction would lead to an out-of-school suspension (Skiba et al., 2014). Consequently, teachers in classrooms with a high proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups should be more likely use discipline as a general classroom management strategy.

One important implication following from our focus on overall discipline rates is that context-based discrimination may occur even in the absence of discipline disparities between students from stigmatized racialized groups and their non-stigmatized peers. In such cases, the classroom as a whole may still be subject to more frequent or severe disciplinary action, potentially affecting students regardless of their individual group membership. Supporting this idea, Wang et al. (2024) found that higher classroom-level suspension rates in science and math classrooms with large shares of Black students were associated with lower academic achievement—not only among suspended students, but also among their non-suspended classmates. These spillover effects were mediated by more negative perceptions of the classroom climate: students in high-suspension classrooms perceived the environment as less supportive, which in turn predicted lower achievement. The authors speculated that suspensions for minor infractions may be perceived as unjust, fostering a climate of distrust. Extending this interpretation, we propose that such spillover effects may also reflect context-based differences in teacher behavior. In classrooms with high suspension rates, teachers may engage in more controlling or punitive practices, which could directly undermine academic engagement and reinforce negative classroom dynamics.

Taken together, we define context-based discrimination as the phenomenon whereby the racialized composition of a school setting influences overall rates of disciplinary action. This may be reflected in teachers more severe, less mild, more frequent, or earlier interventions. Because these elevated discipline rates can affect all students in a given context—regardless of their own racialized group membership—context-based discrimination might have broader implications than typically captured by research solely focused on disparities between students from stigmatized racialized groups and their non-stigmatized peers.

General Discussion

This paper introduced the context-based discrimination (CBD) model to address critical gaps in psychological theorizing on racialized disparities in school discipline. The model emphasizes how broader, nested contextual factors—particularly classroom, school, and neighborhood composition shaped by racialized segregation—influence teachers' perceptions and disciplinary decisions. We argued that disparities in school discipline cannot be fully understood without considering these broader contexts in which teacher-student interactions occur. Instead, we proposed that the racialized composition of educational settings shapes the chronic accessibility of racialized categories, the activation and application of racialized stereotypes, and ultimately,

teachers' disciplinary behavior. In our model, disparities in discipline rates between school settings reflect *context-based discrimination*, a phenomenon not captured by a sole focus on discipline disparities between students from stigmatized racialized groups compared to their non-stigmatized peers. In doing so, the CBD model integrates insights from ecological systems theory, social cognition, educational research, criminology, sociology, and social vision research to explain how structural and psychological processes converge in the classroom.

Clarifying Terms: Why We Use "Discrimination," Not Just "Disparities"

In this article, we intentionally used the term "discrimination" to describe the effects of racialized composition on disciplinary outcomes. This choice is deliberate and grounded in both conceptual clarity and ethical responsibility. First, when the racialized composition of a school setting systematically influences how teachers respond to student behavior—regardless of whether the behavior itself differs—this constitutes an effect of social category membership on treatment. In its most basic form, this is what discrimination entails: differential treatment based on group membership. If students are treated differently depending on who else is present in the classroom, this is not merely a disparity, it is discrimination enacted at the contextual level.

Second, using the term "discrimination" helps clarify the nature of the phenomenon and resists the tendency to obscure its origins. Hetey and Eberhardt (2018) argue that "the numbers don't speak for themselves" (p. 183). Disparities in discipline, such as higher suspension rates in classrooms with more students from stigmatized racialized groups, are sometimes explained through competing narratives. Some observers attribute such disparities to differences in student behavior (Cesario, 2022), reinforcing narratives of racialized stereotypes and legitimizing punitive discipline. Others see them as evidence of systemic bias (e.g., Edwards, 2016). The term "disparities" leaves room for both interpretations. In contrast, "discrimination" emphasizes the role of social structures, institutional practices, and psychological processes that produce unfair treatment. Moreover, in contentious domains like school discipline, where public discourse often centers on individual responsibility and behavioral norms, the language we use shapes how problems are understood and addressed. Referring to these patterns as "discrimination" underscores that they are not natural or inevitable, but rather the product of social systems, psychological biases, and decisions that can—and must—be changed.

On Intersectionality: Race, Class, and Gender

While the CBD model centers on racialized categories, it is essential to recognize that race does not operate in isolation (e.g., Dupree et al., 2021). Social categories such as gender and social class likely intersect with race to shape how teachers respond to infractions in the classroom (Morris, 2005). For example, students from stigmatized racialized groups who are also perceived as working-class may be particularly vulnerable to negative stereotyping and exclusionary discipline. Teachers—often from middle-class, non-minoritized backgrounds—may perceive a cultural mismatch between themselves and students with working-class backgrounds (Alexander et al., 1987; Goudeau et al., 2024; Osei-Twumasi & Pinetta, 2023). This mismatch can manifest in teachers' perceptions of low school fit, especially when students' behaviors, language, or appearance deviate from middle-class norms. Critically, this mismatch may also lead teachers to perceive behaviors as more disruptive, if they are enacted by students from working-class backgrounds. Moreover, social class cues (e.g., clothing, accent; see Kraus et al., 2017) can facilitate racialized categorization (J. B. Freeman et al., 2011), which in turn may activate racialized stereotypes. Integrating an intersectional lens may thus advance our understanding of how overlapping social categories moderate context-based discrimination in school discipline (see Crenshaw, 1989; Hester et al., 2020; Petsko et al., 2022, for in-depth analyses on intersectionality). Specifically, patterns of context-based discrimination based on the racialized composition of classrooms may also be moderated by their socioeconomic composition. In classrooms with higher percentages of both students from stigmatized racialized groups and those with working-class backgrounds, teachers might be even more likely to respond to infractions with escalated disciplinary responses—because of cultural mismatch, amplified racialized stereotypes, or due to a combination of both.

Considering the gaps we have outlined at the beginning, it is also possible that socioeconomic compositions at higher contextual levels (e.g., school, neighborhood) impact context-based discrimination. For example, perceptions of a school as "failing" or of a neighborhood as "poor" or "run-down" (Bonam et al., 2016) might increase the likelihood that teachers perceive classrooms with higher percentages of students from stigmatized racialized groups as disorderly, thus increasing their willingness to resort to escalated disciplinary responses.

Gender may further compound these dynamics. Stereotypes about boys—particularly boys from stigmatized racialized groups—often associate them with aggression or defiance, leading to harsher disciplinary responses (Glock, 2016; Glock et al., 2025; Pitten Cate & Glock, 2024; Skiba et al., 2014). Moreover, Black boys are perceived as more threatening than their female peers (Halberstadt et al., 2018; Halberstadt et al., 2020; Todd et al., 2016), and boys in general are more likely to be punished for norm violations (Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2002). Similarly, threat-related stereotypes in European contexts are especially ascribed to Arab and Muslim men (Essien et al., 2017; Stelter et al., 2023). Consequently, in classrooms with a high proportion of boys from stigmatized racialized groups, teachers may be especially prone to escalate disciplinary responses. Taken together, considering intersectionality highlights that context-based discrimination in school discipline is likely not only affected by the racialized composition of school settings, but also by their social class and gender compositions: specific intersections of race, class, and gender may intensify teachers' perceptions of threat, misbehavior, or nonconformity, thereby increasing the likelihood of punitive responses.

Teacher Characteristics

The CBD model emphasizes the influence of contextual factors on teachers' perceptions and behavior, but it may also be important to consider how individual characteristics of teachers shape their perceptions and disciplinary decisions. Teachers are not passive recipients of context; they actively interpret and respond to classroom environments through the lens of their own identities and individual psychology. These individual characteristics may moderate the processes outlined in the CBD model and may help explain variability in the emergence of context-based discrimination.

One key characteristic is teachers' own social identity. Research suggests that White teachers from middle-class backgrounds are particularly likely to perceive a cultural mismatch with students from stigmatized racialized groups or those with working-class backgrounds (Goudeau et al., 2024; Osei-Twumasi & Pinetta, 2023). This mismatch may lead to perceptions of low school fit and increased reliance on stereotypes when interpreting student behavior. As alluded to before, teachers may interpret cultural differences in language, dress, or behavior as signs of disrespect or defiance, rather than as expressions of different socialization contexts. Importantly, teachers' social identity may interact with contextual features in shaping disciplinary behavior. For example, research suggests that White (but not Black) teachers may provide less effective classroom management as well as lower levels of emotional and instructional support in classrooms with higher proportions of Black students (Osei-Twumasi & Pinetta, 2023). Findings like this underscore the need to consider how teachers' social identity and classroom composition may jointly influence disciplinary decisions.

Beyond their social identity, teachers' ideological beliefs may also play a role. For example, teachers who endorse a colorblind ideology may be less likely to recognize structural inequalities and more likely to interpret behavior in the classroom through an individualistic lens (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). Such individualistic interpretations of behavior may be further shaped by correspondence bias or related phenomena—i.e., human tendencies to attribute others' behaviors to internal dispositions rather than external circumstances (Gawronski, 2004; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Goudeau & Cimpian, 2021). In addition, teachers high in social dominance orientation may be more prone to punitive disciplinary responses and may react more negatively to behaviors enacted by students from stigmatized racialized groups (Berry, 2023; Sidanius & Pratto, 1994). Consequently, in classrooms with higher proportions of students from stigmatized racialized groups, tendencies to respond punitively may be particularly pronounced when teachers endorse a colorblind ideology, interpret behavior through an individualistic lens, and endorse group-based hierarchies (i.e., social dominance orientation).

Lastly, numerous psychological processes among teachers with known relevance for racialized disparities in school discipline may potentially also moderate context-based discrimination. These include teachers' racialized anger (Legette et al., 2023), levels of prejudice (Ispa-Landa, 2018; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019), levels of discretion (Girvan et al., 2017), and empathy with and beliefs in the culpability of students from stigmatized racialized groups (Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Okonofua et al., 2022; Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016; J. Owens, 2022). Consequently, the processes outlined in the CBD model may be moderated by teacher characteristics that influence how contextual cues are interpreted and acted upon. Rather than assuming a uniform response to context, future research could adopt an interactive and cross-level perspective and explore how teacher characteristics shape the activation and application of stereotypes, the perception of classroom dynamics, and the likelihood of engaging in context-based discrimination.

Rethinking Contact: Why Encounters in the Classroom May Not Reduce Stereotyping

The idea that negative stereotypes are more likely activated and applied as the proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups in a classroom increases may seem counterintuitive at first glance. After all, intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) suggests that sustained interactions between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice. From this perspective, one might reasonably expect that teachers who work in classrooms with a higher proportion of students from stigmatized racialized groups would, over time, come to hold less negative stereotypes about students from stigmatized racialized groups—not more.

A closer look at intergroup contact theory reveals that our conclusion of more contact resulting in more negative stereotypes is less paradoxical than it may initially seem. Allport (1954) outlined specific conditions that lead to prejudice reduction: equal status between groups, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support. These ideal conditions are rarely realized in educational settings marked by unequal status between teachers and students, racialized segregation, and structural inequality. In fact, Allport acknowledged that superficial encounters may exacerbate, rather than alleviate, intergroup tensions, concluding for these situations "the more contact, the more trouble" (Allport, 1954, p. 263). He speculated that confirmation bias may lead people to selectively attend to behaviors that align with preexisting stereotypes, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging them. Subsequent research on negative contact has reinforced this concern. Negative contact—such as conflictual or stereotype-confirming interactions—can have a stronger impact on prejudice than positive contact. Thus, the effects of negative experiences may even outweigh those of positive experiences (see Schäfer et al., 2021). In classrooms where teachers perceive students from stigmatized racialized groups through a lens of threat, disorder, or cultural mismatch, repeated exposure may reinforce rather than challenge existing stereotypes.

Importantly, the relevant question that the CBD model seeks to address is not how teachers' biases evolve over time. Instead, the relevant questions are how the same teacher would perceive and respond to a classroom with a different racialized composition; how the same teacher would think and act in a different school; and how cognitions and decisions of the same teacher might differ if the school was located in a different neighborhood. Consequently, the main focus of the CBD model is not to explain how teachers perceive and treat some students compared to others in a school setting, but how teachers' perceptions and discipline decisions vary between different school settings. In sum, while intergroup contact theory may seem to offer a hopeful vision of prejudice reduction, the realities of segregated and unequal school contexts complicate this picture. Rather than contradicting the CBD model, the literature on intergroup contact arrives at the same conclusion about how the racialized composition of school settings may affect stereotypes in the classroom.

Open Questions, Limitations, and Future Directions

The CBD model offers a framework for understanding how the racialized composition of classrooms, schools, and neighborhoods shape teachers' perceptions and disciplinary decisions. At the same time, several open questions remain. One important open question is at what threshold does racialized composition begin to affect teacher perception and behavior (paths A1 and A2). The CBD model

assumes that higher proportions of students from stigmatized racialized groups in classrooms increase the accessibility of racialized categories, stereotyping and punitive responses, yet it remains unclear whether these effects emerge gradually or start at a certain threshold. Osei-Twumasi and Pinetta (2023) observed that in classrooms in which 40% to 61% of the students were Black, teachers received the lowest scores in terms of emotional support, instructional support, and classroom management. Studies like this provide important first answers, but more research is necessary to clarify at what threshold racialized composition affects teacher perception, resulting in context-based discrimination in school discipline.

A second open question concerns how the CBD model applies to hyper-diverse classrooms—contexts in which students from multiple stigmatized racialized groups are present, but no single group constitutes a clear majority (e.g., Meissner, 2019). The current model, for conceptual clarity, assumes a relatively simplified structure: a stigmatized racialized group and a non-stigmatized reference group. Yet, in many classrooms this binary may not hold. Still, because the model is formulated from the perspective of teachers, it is possible that even in hyper-diverse settings, teachers—especially those with middle-class, non-minoritized backgrounds—form a relatively homogeneous image of "stigmatized racialized students," without differentiating between distinct backgrounds. For example, in European contexts such as Germany, people with Arab, North African, Turkish, or Muslim backgrounds are often conflated in peoples' minds and stereotyped similarly (e.g., Froehlich & Schulte, 2019), reflecting broader societal patterns of racialization (Stelter et al., 2023; Stürmer et al., 2019). Whether and how such conflations shape stereotypes and disciplinary decisions in classrooms without a clear majority group remains an open empirical question. Future research should investigate whether other complex demographic classroom compositions constitute potential boundary conditions to the processes outlined in the CBD model.

Empirical studies will be essential to evaluate the propositions of the CBD model and refine its scope. Multi-level designs—modeling students, teachers, classrooms, schools, and neighborhoods—are well-positioned to examine how contextual composition is linked to perceptions and disciplinary outcomes (e.g., Skiba et al., 2014). Such studies should ideally include psychological measures, such as racialized group-based and space-focused stereotypes, to assess whether the effects of composition on disciplinary behavior are mediated by teachers' perceptions (paths B, C, and D), and to what extent alternative processes not conceptualized in our model might account for effects of racialized composition on disciplinary behavior (e.g., stress or burnout among teachers; Glock et al., 2019). While these approaches offer a promising starting point, future research should also leverage methodological advances in machine learning and large-scale data analysis to incorporate richer data sources, such as classroom video recordings (see Osei-Twumasi & Pinetta, 2023; Voigt et al., 2017). In addition, qualitative methods—including ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Croizet & Millet, 2024)—could provide deeper insight into how teachers experience and navigate classroom dynamics in settings with varying racialized compositions. Finally, to establish causal claims, experimental research is needed to simulate key processes (e.g., different compositions) in controlled settings. Together, these approaches may help clarify not only whether context-based discrimination occurs, but how and under what conditions it unfolds. Finally, future work should explore whether context-based discrimination extends beyond discipline to other domains of teacher-student interaction, such as academic expectations (see also Osei-Twumasi & Pinetta, 2023).

Closing Reflection

Context-based discrimination in school discipline has received limited attention in psychological research, perhaps because the field has largely focused on disparities between students from stigmatized racialized groups and their non-stigmatized peers. We agree that this focus has yielded important insights, but caution that it may obscure a broader phenomenon: that the structural composition of school settings can shape teachers' perceptions and behaviors in ways that affect entire groups of students simultaneously. Crucially, these effects may extend beyond students from stigmatized racialized groups, influencing classrooms more broadly. To fully understand how inequality is reproduced in educational settings, psychological science must look more closely at how structural context shapes teacher behavior.

At the same time, ongoing developments in education policy illustrate the persistence of competing narratives about school discipline. The context-based discrimination model introduced in this article emphasizes how structural features, such as racialized segregation, can shape disciplinary practices in ways that reflect systemic bias. In contrast, recent policy shifts in some national contexts promote a return to ostensibly neutral, behavior-based discipline, while framing equity-oriented approaches as discriminatory. This divergence reflects broader societal tensions in how fairness, discipline, and discrimination are understood. Rather than adjudicating these debates, our aim is to provide a psychological framework that clarifies how disciplinary practices may be shaped by larger social structures. In doing so, we underscore the relevance of context-based approaches to understanding disparities in school discipline.

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