
“It’s All about the Relationships”: Educators’ Rationales and Strategies for Building Connections with Students to Prevent Exclusionary School Discipline Outcomes

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This qualitative study identified nonpunitive and nonexclusionary discipline strategies used in schools with low out-of-school suspension rates. Interviews and focus groups with 198 educators from 33 low-suspending schools in a large urban district were conducted to learn more about the approaches that were essential to their school’s success. Data were analyzed with inductive and deductive approaches to identify themes regarding efficacious approaches across schools. Relationship building was noted as a key strategy in reducing exclusionary discipline outcomes and racial disparities in out-of-school suspension. Specific relationship-building strategies and the rationales behind these practices are described, including home visits, greetings, morning meetings, advisory periods, increased adult visibility in and out of school, and positive contact with families.

KEY WORDS: *classroom behavior and environment; education policy; school context; teacher–adolescent relationships; teachers*

Exclusionary and punitive school discipline practices, such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion, have increasingly come under the national spotlight as information about their negative impacts on student’s life trajectories and glaring racial disparities has gained public attention. Several reports were recently issued recommending alternative practices to reduce suspension, and all emphasized the importance of establishing strong, healthy relationships built on trust and respect between school staff, students, and their families (Carter, Fine, & Russell, 2014; Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014; U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2014). Extant research does suggest a strong association between a range of academic and behavioral outcomes and students’ perceptions of teachers and administrators as caring and encouraging (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009).

However, less is known about the specific strategies educators use to strengthen connections with students and their families, or the factors that motivate educators’ use of these approaches in the context of discipline reform. Reductions in the use

of out-of-school suspension and expulsion have been slow to take hold, and punitive approaches remain the predominant paradigm (ED, 2016). Given ongoing challenges in reducing suspensions and discipline disparities, it is imperative that research document specific practices being used in schools to reduce the use of exclusionary practices. Such information can inform the development of systematic interventions that can be tested more rigorously. The present study aimed to identify the approaches used by school staff who work in low-suspending schools in a large metropolitan district, with a particular focus on their relational strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW School Discipline

The 1994 Gun Free Schools Act ushered in a tide of “zero-tolerance” policies that rely on exclusionary discipline practices, including out-of-school suspension or expulsion, to remove students from the classroom or school as a form of punishment, usually for minor offenses like disruption, defiance, and disrespect (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba, 2000). Research shows these practices do not work

and can actually be quite damaging to students' developmental pathways (Skiba, 2000). Children and adolescents who experience exclusionary school discipline are more likely to do poorly in school, disengage from educational environments, and have juvenile justice contact or be arrested (Bryan et al., 2012; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Fabelo et al., 2011; Mowen & Brent, 2016). Students who attend schools with higher suspension rates tend to have weaker connections to school adults (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016; Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011). The racially disparate impact of these policies has been documented for decades (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba et al., 2011). For example, the proportion of black students receiving an out-of-school suspension has risen 120 percent since 1975, whereas the proportion of white students receiving an exclusionary discipline consequence has only grown 64 percent (Kinsler, 2011). Some argue that these racial disparities reflect differential perceptions of behavior by race at both classroom and administrative levels (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

Relationship Building

Promising new shifts have occurred as school districts begin moving away from exclusionary practices toward those focused on building relationships and treating discipline as an opportunity to support students' healthy social-emotional development (Abregú, 2012). This movement is aligned with research indicating that supportive and genuine relationships are essential in creating a positive school climate, reducing problem behaviors, and lessening racial discipline gaps (Gregory, Bell, & Pollock, 2014). Students' perceptions of positive relationships at school are predictors of a variety of behavior outcomes, such as fighting, substance use, skipping school, and academic success as measured by student grades (Woolley et al., 2009; Yang & Anyon, 2016). Conversely, the absence of strong positive relationships is a predictor of negative psychological outcomes like depression, suicide attempts, and low self-esteem, along with adverse academic outcomes such as grade retention (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Myrick & Martorell, 2011). Building positive and meaningful relationships is important for all students; however, it is imperative that school staff intentionally cultivate relationships with students of color as these students often report feeling less safe among, and less connected to, adults in schools

(Anyon et al., 2016; Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanye, 2015; Woolley et al., 2009).

METHOD

This qualitative study was designed to identify the discipline strategies used in low-suspending schools. Using a phenomenological approach, which is designed to explore the meaning of participants' lived experiences, we conducted interviews and focus groups during which participants were asked to provide narratives about interventions and strategies that were essential in their school's success in achieving local discipline reform goals (Padgett, 2012). Data were analyzed with inductive and deductive approaches to identify themes regarding efficacious approaches across schools. Preliminary codes were extracted from a literature review and were developed based on our district partners' priorities for the project; themes also inductively emerged from the data.

STUDY CONTEXT

This study took place in Denver Public Schools (DPS) as part of a researcher-practitioner partnership between the school district and the University of Denver to conduct rigorous and relevant research on school discipline and racial disparities in exclusionary practices; collaborate with policymakers, administrators, educators, and local stakeholder groups to identify research questions, interpret results, and disseminate findings; and strengthen and sustain efforts to connect research with local policy reforms and advocacy efforts. District partners were involved in all stages of this research study, from agenda setting and protocol development to the creation of coding schemes and analysis. As a result, our methods reflect not only the researchers' values and preferred methodologies, but also the priorities of our community partner.

DPS is a large urban school district in the western United States with over 100,000 students in more than 200 schools. In 2014–2015, students enrolled in DPS were predominantly low income (70 percent) and children of color (56 percent Latino, 22 percent white, 14 percent black, 3 percent multiracial, 3 percent Asian, 1 percent Native American, and less than 1 percent Pacific Islander). Fifty-one percent of the student body were male, 40 percent were English language learners, and 12 percent were eligible for special education services. Suspension rates in district schools ranged

from 0 percent to 48 percent, with a mean of 5 percent.

DPS is an ideal district for studying school discipline. Although the issue has caught the attention of national media outlets and federal agencies in recent years (for example, [Lhamon & Samuels, 2014](#)), only a small number of districts have voluntarily responded to the problem of racial discipline gaps with robust policy reforms ([White House, 2016](#)). In contrast, DPS has been engaged in discipline reform for nearly 10 years, after parents, students, and community members organized for a new policy to address their concerns about racial disparities in exclusionary discipline practices and the growing school-to-prison pipeline. District guidelines encourage school administrators to minimize their use of exclusionary discipline practices, expand implementation of schoolwide prevention programs, increase the use of supportive discipline approaches like restorative practices, and track racial discipline gaps. The district set a goal of all schools having a suspension rate of 3 percent or lower for all students, and a 3 percent or lower rate specifically for black students. These goals were based on [Losen and Gillespie's \(2012\)](#) recommendations, which were informed by trends from the 1970s, before the explosion of zero tolerance policies.

Protocol

Semistructured interview and focus group protocols were developed based on a pilot study ([Anyon,](#)

[2016](#)) as well as the research literature about interventions and strategies that can reduce discipline disparities. In each participating school, an interview was conducted with an administrator (for example, principal, dean) and a focus group was held with key personnel within the school such as a dean of culture, restorative justice coordinator, lead teacher, or school social worker. Both the interviews and the focus groups were conducted using the same semi-structured protocols. Topics addressed in the interview protocol included site-specific discipline policies, prevention and intervention programs, hiring practices, staffing structures, and professional development approaches. The only difference between the focus group and interview protocols was that in the individual interviews, participants were asked to verbally list the most salient factors related to their school's suspension rates and in focus groups, participants first generated these factors on Post-it notes. Our motivation for conducting focus groups was to efficiently collect data from a wide variety of staff members about their perceptions of factors supporting low out-of-school suspension. We conducted interviews separately with administrators to provide a more candid space for administrators and their staff to speak about the issues, absent one another's presence.

Sample

Although it is not typically the goal of qualitative research, the task from our community partner (the school district) was to generate findings that were representative of all low-suspending schools in the district. Therefore, we used a mixed-methods sampling approach with quantitative data to purposively identify a group of schools for our qualitative study ([Teddlie & Yu, 2007](#)). The sample included 198 educators from 33 schools that were purposively selected on the basis of achieving the district reform goal of having a suspension rate that was 3 percent or lower for all students, and for black students in particular, and having at least 10 black students ([Losen & Gillespie, 2012](#)).

As illustrated in [Table 1](#), the school sample comprised 19 elementary schools, two middle schools, four high schools, and eight schools with alternative grade configurations (for example, K–12, K–8). Schools in the sample served predominantly students who were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (56 percent, a proxy for poverty) and identified as students of color (43 percent Latino,

Table 1: School Sample Characteristics (N = 33)

Characteristic	%	M
Grade configuration		
Elementary schools	58	
Nontraditional schools (for example, K–8, K–12)	24	
Middle schools	6	
High schools	12	
Management type		
District-managed schools	58	
Charter schools	21	
Innovation schools	21	
Student composition		
School size		503
Students of color	61	
Eligible for free and reduced-price lunch	56	
Limited English proficient	14	
Students with disabilities	9	

34 percent white, 13 percent black, 4 percent multi-racial, 3 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, and 1 percent American Indian). However, compared with the district as a whole, middle schools and those serving higher proportions of disadvantaged students (students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities) were underrepresented in our sample. This is not surprising given evidence that punitive and exclusionary practices, along with racial disparities, are more likely in highly segregated schools (Anyon et al., 2014; Chapman, 2014; Payne & Welch, 2015).

In total, 198 educators participated in this study, the majority of whom were female (71 percent) and white (73 percent) (see Table 2). Nearly 60 percent had been at their current school less than five years, but over half of all participants had been working in education longer than 10 years. Most of the sample comprised administrators or school leaders (39 percent), followed by teachers (24 percent) and school-based service providers, such as social workers and psychologists (23 percent).

Analytic Strategy

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded with Dedoose qualitative software (Lieber, Weisner, & Taylor, 2011). Analysis used both inductive and deductive techniques, with preliminary codes gleaned from a literature review and developed on the basis of our district partners' priority questions for the project. Iterative code development was driven by participant responses. We used both methods to capitalize on the richness of our data and to ensure that we captured themes that were not reflected in our a priori codes. In short, our aim was to explore existing ideas about

school discipline but also allow for the possibility of new concepts to emerge. Coding occurred in three major cycles and all primary codes were assessed for interrater reliability across three researchers using Cohen's kappa ($k > .80$). We triangulated the multiple sources of data by analyzing findings from the focus groups and interviews simultaneously as well as exploring comparisons across different school characteristics (for example, grade level and demographic composition).

FINDINGS

Participants in this study were asked to speak to the strategies that they felt were most critical in their school's ability to achieve a low suspension rate for all students and black students in particular. Throughout these conversations, one of the most common themes that emerged was the importance of relationship building (see Table 3). Although the topic was not specified in the interview or focus group protocols, staff at all participating schools identified relationship building as essential in their efforts to prevent out-of-school suspensions. This sentiment was shared by participants at all grade levels (though less frequently in middle schools), but was discussed most often by those serving higher proportions of students of color. Administrators and school staff showed similar degrees of support for relationship building.

In fact, there was a sentiment among many educators that "it's all about the relationships" when preventing exclusionary discipline outcomes. As one participant described,

There's a lot of schools of thought out there about relationships, if they are important at all. I will go to the end of the earth to say that that's the number one thing, [but] there's other people that say you need academics and that's it. I feel like you have to have rapport with the students. They have to know if you care about them first before they will go the extra mile.

Reiterating the role relationship building has on discipline, another participant shared: "I mean it's all about relationships, it's all about clear communication, it's all about redirecting behaviors and helping, you know, students to own the solution."

Echoing these thoughts, most staff members attributed their school's low suspension rates to the strong connections that adults in the building established with students.

Table 2: Participant Sample Characteristics (N = 198)

Characteristic	%	M
Demographics		
Female	71	
White	73	
Black	10	
Latino	12	
Other	5	
Professional background		
Years in education		12
Years at school		5
School leader/administrator	39	
Teacher	24	
School-based service provider	23	

Table 3: Study Findings

Theme	Example Quotes
Rationale for relationship building	
Relationship building with students	There's not a teacher in this building who wouldn't argue that relationships are the most important . . . thing to help reduce out-of-school suspensions. When you take time to build those relationships with kids, they don't want to disappoint you, and when they do, they want to talk it through. They want to know . . . how they can repair the harm.
Relationship building with families	What it boils down to at the end of the day is strong relationships with kids and families. Developing those relationships with parents early on so they trust you to work through the situation with their child, and they can give you input on working with their child, is really helpful.
Skills, steps, or strategies used to build relationships	
Home visits	We at our school participated in a home visit program. . . . And I think that's been key, for teachers, for staff, just building those relationships not only with the kiddos but with those parents. So that they can, if a situation comes up, have all the more support from the parents because of that positive relationship that they've built.
Positive contact with caregivers	The advisors reach out to the parents and just let them know, like, hey, my name is such and such, I'm your child's advisor . . . here's a little bit of something about me, and can you tell me something about you and what your desires for your kids and . . . you know, what do you want to see them accomplish this year, is there anything I should know?
Greetings	There's intentionality in saying "good morning" to people, using people's names, getting to know people.
Morning meetings	It's mandatory that every classroom is having that, you know, 30, 35-minute morning meeting every morning. That's our leadership at our school saying, "You need to take the time to build relationships, like, it's not that you don't have time, we're giving you the time to do that."
Advisory periods	[Relationship building] really plays out in our advisory structure, so students probably have the best relationship with their advisor and that's kind of their go-to adult in the building.
Staff visibility	Like, being outside when they drop off their kids or pick their kids up; it's going to the sports games and sitting with parents; it's . . . just that constant presence . . . yeah, showing up and so . . . they know who you are, and they're building relationships.

Rationale for Relationship Building

Many educators in this study reported that strong student–staff relationships created the foundation for productive problem solving in times of conflict. The development of these relationships was grounded in adults' knowledge of students' lives both inside and outside school. Awareness of students' strengths, triggers, coping resources, and areas of growth helped adults understand the underlying motivation behind misbehavior. Such knowledge and a deep understanding of students' lives allowed adults to respond to misbehavior by implementing tailored and relevant consequences or interventions. Through relationship building with students, staff could identify and target the root cause of the problem (for example, low reading skills, lack of classroom rituals or routines, or trauma), rather than the symptom of acting out. Such personal knowledge about each student created the conditions for discipline to be viewed as an opportunity for growth and problem solving, rather than punishment. Staff members also

felt that students were more willing to take responsibility for their actions and were more motivated to change when they trusted school adults. An educator reported, "If you've got a relationship with a student, they're 100 times more likely to listen to you and understand and respond and try."

Participants characterized these relationships as distinct from friendships because they were defined by mutual respect rather than affinity. Some participants characterized their approach as "warm-strict," explaining that

warm comes down to genuinely showing that you care about each individual student through relationship building, taking an interest in their life outside of school, taking a lot of interest in their life inside of school and how they're doing and keeping tabs on things. . . . Then, the strict side [is] that I am going to hold you accountable and follow up with you when you make a poor choice because I care so much about you.

This quote illustrates participants' claims that effective student–staff relationships did not involve leniency or lowered expectations for young people, but rather were rooted in lovingly holding students accountable. Developing rapport through this warm–strict approach allowed for the creation of a sense of reciprocal obligation between staff members and students. Educators observed that strong relationships minimized problem behaviors and maximized the impact of interventions or consequences.

Although many relational approaches were relatively time–intensive, participants reported that the investment yielded substantial benefits. For example, when asked to justify time dedicated to relationship building in the face of a high–stakes testing environment, a participant responded,

I would just say it pays off. . . . I would point to different people who have amazing relationships with students and show them how high the teacher can go with rigor, how the teacher can get them to do what the teacher down the hall can't get them to do. When [your relationships] are in order, it becomes easier for you to teach.

In general, educators reported that their commitment to relationship building was warranted because it paid dividends for both behavioral and academic outcomes.

Results indicate that participants held multiple and complementary rationales for their focus on building student–staff connections. The following section outlines the specific approaches they deployed toward this end.

Strategies for Relationship Building

In defining strategies for relationship building between school staff members and students, several practices were outlined: home visits, positive contact with caregivers, greetings, morning meetings, advisory periods, and staff visibility. Many participants reported that they conducted home visits as part of the Parent–Teacher Home Visitation program of the local school district. Home visits provided school staff the opportunity to develop new insights about their students' lives. A secondary school leader observed, "Home visits change the relationship. Once you're in someone's home, that opens everyone's eyes to a different sort of encounter that's not about grades, it's not about attendance."

Another consistently noted approach for relationship building was to use the beginning of the school day as an opportunity to check in with students, learn about their lives, build community, and set a positive tone for the rest of the day. Specific practices included personal greetings as students enter school or the classroom, advisory periods that integrate social–emotional learning activities, and regularly held classroom–based, grade–level, or schoolwide morning meetings. A secondary school teacher observed, "It used to be check for dress code or gum, and now it's check for tears; check for an angry countenance; check for, like, a kid walking on clouds, and figure out why."

Finally, participants reported that increased visibility of adults throughout the school day and during after–school activities supported relationship building. One educator shared examples:

Like being outside when they drop off their kids or pick their kids up; it's going to the sports games, and sitting—sitting with parents; it's just that, just that constant presence . . . yeah, showing up and so they . . . know who you are.

Some schools encouraged teachers to make themselves visible during lunches and passing periods, and administrators deepened their involvement with students by leading activities in classrooms. School staff also used time outside of school to get to know students by attending school–sponsored or community–based sporting events, recitals, or field trips. These approaches created opportunities for students and staff to identify common interests and supported discussions around topics outside of academics. For example, a participant described how staff members made extra efforts to build relationships with their students by being present in their lives in and outside of school:

I know all of us go the extra mile to build relationships with our students. I mean it's beyond definitely what other schools do. . . . I mean, I'm just thinking about one of our fifth–grade teachers, you know recently she just went to go watch one of her students perform in a dance recital and she brought along another student who also wanted to go. And then they all went out to dinner afterwards. . . . Even though maybe not all of us have time to do that all the

time, it is much more common to find teachers who are going to go out of their way to somehow build that relationship. . . . Teachers will find a way to take that time, take a moment, find a moment to pull that kid aside and talk to the kid, or, you know, to do something with the kid, or notice something, to just build that relationship. . . . You know that doesn't happen everywhere.

The vast majority of discussions about relationships were focused on the students themselves; however, some participants also spoke about relationships with families as central to addressing discipline and behavior concerns in school. In terms of strategies, home visits were again mentioned as a “great way to get that relationship going and involving the whole family.” Participants stressed that it was important to communicate with caregivers before a discipline incident so that a relationship was in place if challenging behavior became an issue. An elementary school staff member described the approach of making “positive phone calls home” in which caregivers were contacted when a student did something well:

Positive phone calls home, and so again . . . building relationships with the parents. But you know, you're not calling home just because of a bad decision made that day on a student but really seeking out, and again that mind set—always looking for something good.

Partnering with families to collectively develop effective interventions when challenging behavior did occur was another building block to relationships with families. A principal shared his staff members' approach:

We worked very hard trying to get parents in for a meeting that was really messaged as, look we love this kid, you love this kid, we all love each other and . . . we want student A to be successful. . . . In order for student A to be successful we really want to be on the same page and communicate. . . . We want to communicate both those good days and those bad days. . . . Almost all cases with these frequent flyers . . . I probably knew or know most of the parents by first name and really work on the relationship with those parents.

Another study participant noted the importance of partnering with families:

I believe that relationship building is the most important thing to help reduce out-of-school suspensions. And I think always going to the least, if there is any way you can do something creative, if you can have a conversation with the parents and say look, this happened, normally I suspend, I need you—come, let's talk. Can you counsel your child at home? Can you help me with this one? What can we do together to help your child understand that this is not a good choice? The school wants them here and you want [them] to spend the day here at school. What can we do? Again, relationships.

In summary, participants in this study identified relationship building with both students and families as a key strategy for reducing their reliance on suspension as a discipline practice. They used a variety of approaches—home visits, positive calls home, morning meetings, staff visibility, and greetings—but all were based on the principle that knowing the “whole” child, including their families, would pay dividends in terms of students' behavior at school and establish the conditions necessary for educational achievement.

DISCUSSION

Authentic and supportive student-staff relationships have been identified by scholars in the field as important levers in creating a positive school climate, minimizing problem behaviors, and reducing racial discipline gaps (Gregory et al., 2014). Given the ample amount of research suggesting that relationship building plays a positive role in students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, this study also documented specific relationship-building strategies and the implicit theories of change that motivated their use in the context of schools with low suspension rates (Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Myrick & Martorell, 2011; Woolley et al., 2009; Yang & Anyon, 2016).

Overwhelmingly, school leaders noted that strong relationships played a key role not only in the general climate of their building, but also in their school's lower suspension rates. Participants acknowledged the importance of knowing about students' lives and understanding their triggers to pinpoint underlying explanations for behavior. Building relationships

with students transformed discipline processes from a one-sided administrative practice to an opportunity for personal growth. Although participants recognized that many approaches to building relationships with students and families required significant time, and in some cases money, they felt that the payoff was well worth the investment of resources.

Findings indicate several strategies schools can implement to build relationships with students and minimize disparate discipline outcomes. Some approaches are more time intensive, such as advisory periods, while several others are simple and relatively quick, like morning meetings and staff presence during transitions. Study participants noted that the presence of staff during passing periods and lunches created opportunities to connect with students. Participants also suggested an easy approach to relationship building was to use the start of the school day as a space where staff could quickly check in with students through a morning meeting involving brief structured community-building activities or games. Not only did participants find these practices useful in building relationships, they also set a positive tone for the day.

More time-consuming approaches included implementing home visit programs, which participants found offered a window into students' lives and strengthened connections to caregivers. However, schools may find this program challenging to implement without financial support to compensate staff members for their time outside of the typical school day. Another more intensive approach was to offer advisory periods in which classes met for a set amount of time to build community and address students' individual social or emotional needs.

Although many of the study's findings centered on relationship building between students, teachers, and administrators, participants also noted the importance of building bridges with families. Engaging with parents, making positive phone calls home, holding family meetings, and simply keeping families informed about their child's experiences in school were commonly reported. Study participants also noted that establishing a positive relationship with families before problems arose made it less challenging to discuss concerns if they did happen.

A limited body of empirical research provides support for just a few of these relational approaches.

Parent-teacher home visits have not been extensively evaluated, but emerging evidence from non-peer-reviewed sources indicates that they can lead to improved communication, enhanced individual instruction, and increased academic success and attendance (Christiansen, 2015; Sheldon & Jung, 2015). Morning meetings are a central component of the Responsive Classroom intervention, which has shown efficacy in promoting positive behavioral outcomes in a longitudinal randomized clinical trial (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). Similarly, through experimental studies, the My Teaching Partner program—which emphasizes teacher-student relationship building in part through interactions that focus on young people's interests, concerns, and perspectives—has shown promise in reducing office disciplinary referrals and racial disparities (Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2015). It remains unknown whether these approaches are effective as stand-alone interventions. Additional research is needed to identify whether these strategies have utility when used individually or in different combinations.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations in design should be taken into account when considering study findings. First, we purposively selected schools that had low suspension rates to identify promising practices that could be the focus of more rigorous evaluation. This focus led to a sample of schools that served higher percentages of advantaged students. It is likely that relationship-building strategies look different in schools serving even higher proportions of low-income students and students of color, and this is an important area for future research. Moreover, this study was unable to identify whether the strategies described are unique to low-suspending schools because it did not include a comparison group of schools with higher suspension rates. Future studies could address the limitations of this research by including a broader sample of schools with greater variation in suspension rates and student demographic composition.

CONCLUSION

This study adds to an emerging body of literature indicating that relationship building may be a key method for reducing exclusionary discipline outcomes and racial disparities. Participants reported that relationships open a path for educators to

understand student behavior in context. Further research is needed to determine whether the strategies reported by educators in this study have a causal impact on positive student–staff relationships and, ultimately, exclusionary discipline outcomes. **CS**

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