

Study examines how race, culture influence school discipline, dropout rates

April 23 2015, by Mike Krings

High school students throwing water balloons may seem harmless, but a case in which two black students were arrested for the prank illustrates the importance of considering race, students' background and the need for effective communication, especially when police are involved in school discipline, a University of Kansas professor argues in a new study.

Dorothy Hines Datiri, assistant professor of multicultural education, details the case of a newly enacted disciplinary policy at a California [high school](#) and how it can serve as a lesson for schools enacting their own policies or considering having police present at schools. In the examined case, the principal instituted a new [discipline](#) protocol that had officers present at school and held a meeting to discuss it with teachers. However, not all were able to be present due to their additional school duties, and the policy was not effectively shared with staff, [students](#) or police stationed at the high school. The water balloon prank is illustrative of how race and gender intersect to shape the school disciplinary experience of students of color.

Hines Datiri's study, "When Police Intervene: Race, Gender and Discipline of Black Male Students at an Urban High School" was published in the Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership.

"I hope educators can really start to question when is police presence necessary in schools, and how do race, gender and student identity play a role in that," Hines Datiri said.

The McDowell case is an example of how a lack of communication can lead to inconsistent treatment.

"A policy may be a policy, but everyone interprets it differently," Hines Datiri said. "That's why it's important to make it clear in advance what is expected and how it should be carried out."

The McDowell policy also did not take into account individual teachers' assumptions and implicit racial biases. Discipline can be a notoriously subjective process, where some school officials believe certain incidents including [minority students](#) deserve stern responses where others don't. It may not be an easy conversation to have, but students' race, culture and background experiences should all be taken into account when considering discipline, especially in schools where police are present, the researcher said.

"Minority students are much more likely to be punished severely, not only for major incidents, but also for minor incidents, where discipline becomes very punitive," Hines Datiri said. "Those types of disparities will continue until educators make a conscious effort to show students that 'I trust them and I want them to trust me.' I hope this will help pose those types of questions to people."

The author cites a 2013 study that showed 46 percent of students who received multiple suspensions, 39 percent of those expelled from school and 42 percent of those referred to law enforcement agencies outside of school were black. A 2010 national survey of 74,000 10th-graders showed that 20 percent of white students had prior suspensions or had been expelled, while 50 percent of [black students](#) reported the same outcome.

Hines Datiri has spent much of her career working with dropout prevention programs and recovery programs to bring students who have

dropped out back to the classroom to pursue a [high school diploma](#). Disciplinary problems are a common cause students cite as their reason for dropping out. Dropping out can lead to a host of other problems, chief among them limited professional economic opportunities. A large percentage of incarcerated adults never finished high school, Hines Datiri pointed out, and like the racial disparities in school discipline, blacks receive harsher prison sentences at higher rates than their counterparts.

"Dropping out is a process. It's not one event that just happens," Hines Datiri said. "Discipline is part of that process that can lead to it. That's not to say discipline shouldn't happen, but power shouldn't be used in a way that makes students of color feel like they shouldn't be there."

Provided by University of Kansas

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