

Online empathy intervention course found to reduce student suspension rates

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Credit: Wikipedia

(Phys.org)—A trio of researchers at Stanford University has found that offering a one-time course on empathy to math teachers, resulted in a dramatic reduction in suspension rates for students. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Jason Okonofua, David Paunesku and Gregory Walton describe two

experiments they conducted regarding empathetic teaching techniques, their results and why they believe a more empathetic approach to teaching could reduce suspension rates in general.

Prior research has shown that [students](#) that are suspended from school on occasion, tend to do less well economically later on in life and wind up in prison more often. Also, recent statistics show that suspension rates in the U.S. have been rising dramatically over the past half century, from approximately 3.7 percent in the 70's to almost 11 percent in 2011. As part of an investigation to better understand why suspension rates have been rising and to see if it might be possible to reduce them, the researchers embarked on a two-stage study.

The first part of the study consisted of enlisting the assistance of 39 K-12 teachers, who were divided into two groups, one group was asked to read literature that described ways to use more empathy rather than punishment to maintain order, while another group was asked to read documents that focused on using punishment as a means of maintaining classroom discipline. Both groups were then asked to read about a fictional problem student and then to recommend ways for dealing with him. The researchers report that those who had read the empathetic leaning literature tended to offer fewer solutions that were punishment oriented, while those that had read the punishment literature were more likely to do so.

The second study consisted of asking 31 [math teachers](#) to take a short online course—for one group the course emphasized empathy and the ways it can be used to develop caring relationships between teachers and students. The course for the other group was about using technology in the classroom and its importance. The researchers then tracked actual suspension rates of the 1,682 students that were taught by the teachers in the study over the course of a year and found the suspension rate to be just 4.6 percent for those students who were taught by teachers that had

taken the empathy course, versus 9.8 percent for those students taught by [teachers](#) who had taken the technology course.

More information: Jason A. Okonofua et al. Brief intervention to encourage empathic discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016). DOI: [10.1073/pnas.1523698113](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1523698113)

Abstract

Growing suspension rates predict major negative life outcomes, including adult incarceration and unemployment. Experiment 1 tested whether teachers (n = 39) could be encouraged to adopt an empathic rather than punitive mindset about discipline—to value students' perspectives and sustain positive relationships while encouraging better behavior. Experiment 2 tested whether an empathic response to misbehavior would sustain students' (n = 302) respect for teachers and motivation to behave well in class. These hypotheses were confirmed. Finally, a randomized field experiment tested a brief, online intervention to encourage teachers to adopt an empathic mindset about discipline. Evaluated at five middle schools in three districts (Nteachers = 31; Nstudents = 1,682), this intervention halved year-long student suspension rates from 9.6% to 4.8%. It also bolstered respect the most at-risk students, previously suspended students, perceived from teachers. Teachers' mindsets about discipline directly affect the quality of teacher–student relationships and student suspensions and, moreover, can be changed through scalable intervention.

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