

# Can better classroom instruction close the racial discipline gap?

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The MyTeachingPartner coaching model, designed by researchers at UVA's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, focuses on a range of classroom topics. Credit: University of Virginia

Better classroom instruction is one answer to reducing the racial discipline gap, according to a study conducted by researchers from the

University of Virginia, Rutgers University and University of British Columbia.

The finding, reported in the current issue of *School Psychology Review*, has important implications for addressing one of the most alarming and persistent trends occurring in high school classrooms across the country – that African-American students are typically disciplined, suspended and expelled at much higher rates than adolescents from other racial backgrounds.

To address this racial discipline gap, [professional development](#) programs for teachers typically place an emphasis on classroom and behavior management. But this study, in which [high school teachers](#) participated in a two-year-long, video-based coaching program called MyTeachingPartner – developed at UVA – found that the gap closed when a greater emphasis was placed on improving classroom instruction.

Erik Ruzek, a research assistant professor at UVA's Curry School of Education, said the study points to a specific change in instruction.

"When teachers provided ways for students to engage in more critical thinking, analysis and problem-solving, the rate of disciplinary referrals for African-American students in that classroom decreased and was not significantly different than referrals of students from other racial groups." In other words, there was a racial equity effect.

Anne Gregory, associate professor at Rutgers University's Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, said she suspects that the improved instruction changed the dynamic of the classroom, and in turn, the relationship between teacher and students.

"I imagine that African-American students detected higher academic expectations and that they experienced being treated as scholars," she said. As a result, a dynamic may have been established that increased

positive expectations and trust between teacher and student, and reduced the overall focus on disciplinary issues.

Gregory, a leading expert in educational equity and discipline reform, said she is hopeful that the findings encourage school districts to consider a different type of professional development, one that is holistic in its approach.

"In the national dialogue on improving racial disparities, there is an emphasis on improving classroom management, but this study pushes back on that," she said. "MyTeachingPartner is the first coaching model that has been rigorously tested using a randomized control trial and shown to reduce the racial discipline gap, but it is not singly focused on disciplinary practice."

The MyTeachingPartner coaching model, originally developed in 2003 by a team of researchers at UVA's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, focuses on a range of classroom topics, from social-emotional support to behavior management to instructional interactions. One of its hallmarks is that coaching can be individualized to focus on the topics that are most relevant to a given teacher and classroom.

The findings not only point to a new direction for professional development, but also aim to address a much larger problem facing today's schools and society.

"When students are referred often, it typically leads to school suspension, which leads to time outside of the classroom, which leads to activities that are risky and that we don't want students to engage in," Ruzek said. "Ultimately, student begins to display a pattern of disengagement in school. Long term, it can lead to what we call 'the school-to-prison pipeline.'"

The idea that improving [classroom instruction](#) is one way to minimize this negative chain of events is promising and has researchers like Gregory thinking about long-term implications.

"I think a coaching model like MyTeachingPartner fits right into creating higher-quality classroom experiences for African-American students, who are often unfairly criminalized and associated with negative social stereotypes," she said. "The more we can reduce exclusionary discipline from classrooms as an early precursor to later problems, the more potential we have to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline."

As a next step, Gregory and Ruzek are following up with a study to see if MyTeachingPartner coaching was able to create a true behavior shift in the way teachers approached discipline. During the original study, the researchers collected data about discipline referrals and academic outcomes for one classroom that was the focus of the two-year coaching experience, and one additional classroom that the teacher selected in a follow-up year when the coaching was discontinued. Now, the research team is heading back to collect the same data from each teacher's full schedule of classrooms during that three-year time period.

The researchers are hoping to find a ripple effect, evidence that an individualized coaching experience focused on just one classroom impacted the way teachers address student behavior across the entire school day.

"We have found a hint of a ripple effect from the initial study," Gregory said. "In year three, when the coaching had been discontinued and teachers selected a focus classroom for their follow-up year, we continued to see an effect."

By analyzing a larger data set, the researchers are hoping to see an even

bigger impact. "We will investigate whether the effect of the coaching on reduced discipline referrals is present beyond a single classroom and spreads across more classrooms the teacher worked with throughout the day," Ruzek added.

If so, Gregory believes it will be a first step in rethinking professional development for [high school](#) educators, shifting from a one-day, whole-school approach to an approach that drills down to one classroom and takes a firsthand look at the interactions taking place across the year.

The new study is funded by the William T. Grant Foundation and will take place over two years. It will shed even more light on what teachers can do in the [classroom](#) to improve the learning experience for all students and, ultimately, close the racial disciplinary gap.

**More information:** Anne Gregory et al. Closing the Racial Discipline Gap in Classrooms by Changing Teacher Practice, *School Psychology Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.17105/SPR45-2.171-191](https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR45-2.171-191)

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