

# 'I'm watching you' behavior produces racial disparities in school discipline, study suggests

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During the 2020–21 school year, the number of Black male students involved in disciplinary outcomes at school was disproportionately high compared to their enrollment numbers in kindergarten through grade 12, according to a [report](#) the U.S. Department of Education's Office for

Civil Rights published in November that surveyed student discipline in U.S. public schools. Specifically, the data indicated that Black boys were nearly two times more likely than white boys to receive an out-of-school suspension or an expulsion.

While this report includes the full extent of the elementary through high school population, research from Calvin Zimmermann, the O'Shaughnessy Assistant Professor of Education in the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame, indicates that even early childhood teachers often apply discipline disproportionately in their classrooms based on a student's race.

[In his study](#), published in the journal *Sociology of Education*, Zimmermann found that [elementary school teachers](#) not only anticipated trouble from Black students more so than they did from [white students](#), but they also watched and scrutinized their [behavior](#) more carefully and subsequently handed out heavier punishments to them.

"Official data show that Black boys are disciplined at the [highest rate](#) of any racial and gender subgroup," Zimmermann wrote in his study. This over-representation troubled Zimmermann and led him to conduct his own investigation into what causes such disparity.

By conducting a two-year observational study in a public charter school, following a group of male kindergarten students through [first grade](#), Zimmermann was able to see firsthand the daily interactions between students and teachers within the classroom as well as on the playground.

The first thing he noticed was that teachers—regardless of their own race—took more of an "authoritarian approach" to discipline with Black boys and a more "permissive approach" to white boys in routine school behavior scenarios. The more authoritarian approach led to teachers surveilling the Black boys more carefully than the white boys, including

making such comments to them directly as "I'm watching you," even as the two played side by side in the same space.

"Black boys were singled out and monitored for 'rough play' behaviors even when white boys were also participating in the same activity," Zimmermann said. "It was as if teachers were 'looking for trouble' intentionally."

The manner in which the teachers engaged with misbehaving boys also differed, Zimmermann explained. The teachers would frequently engage with and reprimand the Black boys for their behaviors but did not acknowledge the same behaviors on the part of the white boys.

"White boys more easily evaded teacher reprimands as compared to Black boys," Zimmermann wrote, with their misbehavior remaining largely ignored.

The third example of differential treatment was in how the teachers responded to noncompliance on the part of students who weren't doing what they were told or who challenged the teacher's authority.

"Teachers exhibited patience and leniency with white boys who were noncompliant but unwavering harshness with Black boys," Zimmermann said. Sometimes the correction would even involve gentle physical force, such as moving the students from one place to another, removing them from the classroom entirely or guiding them with a hand on their shoulder to sit down or comply.

"Teachers may have unconscious biases that lead them to believe that Black boys are somehow more responsible for their behaviors or less innocent," Zimmermann surmised.

"They are not being given the benefit of the doubt of 'boys will be

boys'—and teachers are assuming that there's something more negative involved in their intentions, that they're actually 'trying to cause trouble.'"

These early, everyday interactions between teachers and students can have important, long-lasting consequences for a student's future life choices, life chances, social relations and [educational opportunities](#), as well as potential career and income trajectories, according to Zimmermann.

Specifically for Black boys, these divergent disciplinary experiences in [early childhood](#) may impact their future attitudes toward school, affect their relationships and level of trust with their teachers, and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline that plagues our country's educational system, he said.

"Authoritarian disciplinary practices may socialize Black boys into a broader sense of racial inferiority and contribute to a negative self-image," Zimmermann explained, "while permissive discipline may socialize white boys into a sense of racial superiority, entitlement and privilege."

In addition, when Black boys are repeatedly singled out and altogether removed from the classroom for bad behavior, they miss out on learning opportunities that come from time spent in class. "This impacts your [test scores](#) and performance further down the road," Zimmermann noted, "further reducing your chances for educational success."

Zimmermann said it's difficult to change whatever beliefs or biases teachers may carry in their hearts or minds, but schools and school leadership can focus specifically on changing their behaviors and actions in the classroom.

"Schools can do a lot to support teachers in engaging in this work," Zimmermann said. By providing training on racial bias and placing behavioral support staff in the classroom to help manage discipline and behavior issues, schools can take the burden off of teachers so they can focus more on teaching and engaging positively with their students.

"It is important to understand how race and racism shape children's earliest school experiences," Zimmermann wrote. "Even for students as young as six years old, schools perpetuate existing social and educational inequalities."

**More information:** Calvin Rashaud Zimmermann, Looking for Trouble: How Teachers' Racialized Practices Perpetuate Discipline Inequities in Early Childhood, *Sociology of Education* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00380407241228581](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407241228581)

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