

Trauma-informed approaches to discipline matter for equitable and safe schooling

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Schools across North America are increasingly implementing policies and practices to reduce suspensions and expulsions.

Yet the disproportionate application of school discipline for Black and Indigenous students remains a significant concern.

Trauma and adversity [can have a significant and negative impact on student outcomes](#). Due to systemic inequity, trauma and adversity also [disproportionately affects](#) Black and Indigenous students.

We wanted to understand what is already known about the contribution, role or prevalence of trauma and early childhood adversity for students who are disciplined at school. We found there is very little [research on the relationship between childhood adversities and school discipline](#).

Without research on students' experiences of adversity in school discipline, it is difficult for educators to recognize, understand and support students who are coping with adversity. Additional research—particularly from Canada—would provide schools with the knowledge necessary for evidence-based, trauma-informed and culturally attuned approaches to school discipline.

Lack of attention to adversity, trauma

Trauma is the [negative impact that can happen when exposed to adversity, while adversity is a potentially traumatizing event or the absence of healthy stimulus](#). While trauma and adversity are related, adversity does not always lead to trauma.

[Adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\) have been associated with negative health outcomes, even early death](#). There have been calls to expand our understanding of [adversity](#) to include [school and community violence, racism and poverty](#), noting the disproportionate impact of

these.

Our research suggests that [disproportionate exposure to adversity may contribute to students experiencing school discipline](#). However, how exactly this happens is not clear.

Disproportion in school discipline

Research shows that school discipline is disproportionately applied to students [who are Black, Indigenous, male](#), have [identified special education needs](#) or live [in lower-resourced areas](#). These students are more likely to be suspended, suspended for longer or expelled.

Considerable research about the [disproportionate use of discipline](#) affecting Black communities exists from the United States, with less attention to Indigenous communities.

There is very little Canadian research in this area, and yet existing research suggests the rate of disproportion to be on par with the U.S.

The 2017 report "Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area" documented [discipline disparities affecting Black and Indigenous youth](#). Researchers in other regions have documented how racism against Indigenous and Black students affects students' school engagement or attendance.

Discipline affects opportunities

This disproportion is [one of the factors contributing to a documented gap in educational achievement](#) and an over-representation of Black and Indigenous people within the [criminal justice system](#).

Time away [from school](#) through out-of-school discipline is a barrier to [academic success](#). This [affects opportunities](#) for post-secondary education and ultimately [who has access to power, money and resources](#). Therefore, there are grave implications of disproportionate discipline.

Research on adversity or trauma and discipline

In our article "[Exposure to Adversity and Trauma Among Students Who Experience School Discipline: A Scoping Review](#)" we detail how we searched for and analyzed articles about school discipline and trauma or adversity. We found only 49 peer-reviewed articles that met our inclusion criteria.

Of these 49 articles, 14 detailed original research on the relationship between adversity and school discipline. This research showed experiences of adversity or trauma play a significant and potentially contributing role in school discipline, including suspension and expulsion.

However, 14 studies is insufficient. It is even more concerning [that there was only one article from Canada and few others from outside of the U.S.](#)

Canadian research matters

Context matters when studying school discipline. In Ontario, [Zero-Tolerance legislation was removed in 2008](#).

[This followed the province's 2006 legislation that students remain in school to age 18](#). Related policies include "restorative practices" (emphasizing accountability for actions [in a context of sustaining and repairing interpersonal and community relationships](#)) and [school-based](#)

[mental health](#).

In Ontario, [the rate of suspension decreased](#) from [4.32 percent of students in 2007/08 to 2.23 percent in 2022](#). [Expulsion decreased from 0.05 percent, to 0.01 percent](#). The five-year graduation rate increased from 68 percent to [89.1 percent in 2022](#).

'Safe and Caring Schools'

In contrast, the suspension rate in the U.S. [was five percent in 2017–18](#). Zero-Tolerance policies are still active across many U.S. school districts.

Ontario students on long-term suspension or expulsion are now offered [programs run through "Safe and Caring Schools" in every school board](#).

While not explicitly trauma-informed, these programs provide significant support, including dedicated child and youth workers and [social workers](#) and a high staff-to-student ratio. These supports enable [connection with students and a different approach with students who appear to be coping with trauma](#).

Expulsions still disproportionate

Yet the 2017 report, "Towards Race Equity In Education," found Black students were [expelled at four times their representation and Indigenous students at over three times](#).

To understand this disproportion and to develop effective policy and practice it is critical for educators in Canada to have more contextual knowledge.

People respond to situations [based on how they understand them](#).

Educators who have not [experienced or been educated about adversity](#) [may not account for or recognize students who are coping with adversity](#).

When discipline is [the response to trauma, it is likely to increase a student's stress and anxiety and alienate them from necessary resources](#).

This is particularly concerning in a social context of historical and ongoing systemic racism negatively impacting Black and Indigenous students that was maintained through both anti-Black public schooling models and residential schools.

Acknowledging adversity

Expanded adversities were less often included in papers that detailed [original research and only seven papers overall included indicators of racism, discrimination and structural inequity](#).

This is noteworthy given research identifying the disproportionate application of [school discipline among non-white students, and the school-to-prison pipeline](#).

When researchers don't identify expanded forms of adversity [like racism and poverty](#), they are less likely to be recognized.

It is important that researchers collaborating with educators and communities generate Canadian-based knowledge to guide policy and practice.

We hope to foster acknowledgement of hidden and unaddressed trauma among students being disproportionately disciplined. We hope this can lead to a greater understanding of student lives—and evidence-based, [trauma](#)-informed and culturally attuned discipline.

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