Leveraging Collective Efficacy in
The Dangerous Space Between
Good Intentions and Meaningful Interventions[i]:
A Study on the Use of School Suspensions in Manitoba

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[i]*Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (2018)*

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A Review of Literature
for
Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning

Unsplash (2021)

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1

Table of Contents

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Executive Summary

1. In positive school settings, individuals feel safe and secure, valued and welcome.

2. Student misconduct can detract from a context of safety and create negative classroom or school environments.

3. School and division discipline policies can enhance overall safety, or unfairly target racially diverse students.

4. Historically, discipline practices have involved coercive and punitive strategies, with methods of managing student behaviour largely non-existent.

5. Human rights, changes in legal doctrines and public perception, have resulted in shifts towards less punitive but more exclusionary discipline practices – suspension and expulsion.

6. Students are suspended more often for less-disruptive behaviours, yet more consistently for serious infractions.

7. Harsh policies and practices related to discipline, shift students away from positive school connections.

8. Poverty, diversity and special educational needs, are factors which result in over-representations of students suspended from schools.

9. Positive school climates are associated with increased attendance, reduced suspension rates, enhanced student achievement and improved environments for students with special educational needs.

10. Where possible, school organizations have adopted positive and equitable responses to student behaviour including, Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Measures, objective Violence Threat Risk Assessments and Wraparound planning.

11. Supportive, culturally-relevant classroom level instruction and intervention for student behaviour enhances discipline proactively and preventatively.

12. School organizations have traditionally been considered loosely coupled, which has allowed both teachers and school administrators greater discretion when responding to student behaviour.

13. Recent government legislation and standards have re-coupled educational organizations in an effort towards increased alignment, resulting in less flexibility and discretion.

14. In Manitoba, school boards, superintendents and teachers have the right to suspend, however, it is most often the school principal or designate who undertakes this action.

15. School discipline is complex in nature and is affected by characteristics of teachers, administrators and schools, in addition to student attitudes or behaviour.

Introduction

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (1943) advocates that all individuals have foundational

needs for safety and security. In a school setting this involves key stakeholders such as students,

families, staff and community members. The Toronto District School Board describes a positive school

climate as one where everyone not only feels safe and secure, but also valued and welcome (Zheng &

De Jesus, 2017). Student misconduct, however, can detract from that environment and might include

infractions such as, disrespect, intimidation, disruption, aggression or violence (Milne & Aurini, 2017).

Educators are well aware of the negative impact that these types of actions have on school and

classroom environments, however there is limited agreement on which discipline approaches best

address these concerns. On one hand, policies and procedures can enhance social and behavioural

expectations in schools (Brint et al., 2001; Ingersoll, 2006). Conversely, they can legitimize exclusion,

with evidence of inequitable application of practice resulting in disproportionate representations of

minority groups being suspended (Cruz et al, 2021; Greflund, 2013; Gregory et al, 2017; Lacoe & Manley

2019). As the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY, 2018) cautioned in reference to a

young Indigenous student who had been suspended eight times in a school year, "when professionals

are delivering services to children, those professionals hold an incredible privilege to ensure that the

services they provide help children build skills that support and protect them as they emerge into

adulthood" (p. 8).

Thus begins a review of literature, examining "the dangerous space between good intentions

and meaningful interventions" (MACY, 2018), with a focus on the current application of school

suspension as a mechanism of discipline. By mobilizing research and practice on this topic, educators

are more likely to perceive that they can make a difference for their students, despite demographic and

socio-economic realities, or current achievement in school (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Bandura

(1986, p. 21) noted, "Among the types of thoughts that affect action, none is more central or pervasive than people's judgements of their capabilities to deal effectively with different realities." Goddard and colleagues (2004) expanded on this notion to describe the belief of a group in their ability to affect a positive outcome, coining the term collective efficacy. It is this construct that is being leveraged in this research, to move beyond "the methodology of the current evidence base" (MACY, 2018, p. 51).

The Evolution of School Discipline

Historically, responses involving student discipline have typically been met with coercive strategies, akin to corporal punishment, humiliation and shame (Hurn, 1993). Corporal punishment was once determined to be a right practiced by teachers according to the doctrine, in loco parentis, which established that educators could act in place of parents where discipline was concerned (Curtis, 1988). From the beginning of the twentieth century, methods of managing student misbehaviour in educational settings were near non-existent. If students did not meet behavioural expectations, they either could not attend, or willingly left school (Axelrod, 2011). At the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1959), a first agreement was created to define the rights of youth. Consequently, a movement began to eliminate harsh and painful, disciplinary practices. Even though corporal punishment was used until the 1970's, Gagne (1982) described a notable reduction over time in

incidents of this nature. As public perceptions shifted away from punitive practices in the 1980's and early 1990's, the main approach to student discipline evolved into exclusionary practices of school suspensions and expulsions. These type of responses were fueled by the concept of "zero tolerance," a notion derived from the military and frequently applied in the justice system (Skiba et al.,

2011). This approach demanded a stringent application of consequences for various student infractions, despite individual circumstances or specific situations (Zheng & De Jesus, 2017). Additional procedures have included the use of school-based resource officers (often police), video and surveillance protocols, as well as, the ongoing possibility of search and seizure of student property.

According to Skiba and Rausch (2006), school suspension is a practice applied by school administration to address misbehavior or misconduct by removing a student from a classroom situation (in-school), or from a school (out-of-school), for a temporary period of time. Expulsion is also an exclusionary approach to student discipline, but is applied much less often. It involves the removal of a student from a school, or from a district for an indefinite period of time. Ostensibly, the use of disciplinary strategies such as suspension or expulsion would be predicted to increase with apparent intensity of infractions (Skiba, 2011). Raffaele Mendez & Knoff (2003) argued however, that students were more frequently suspended for minor and less disruptive offenses than those which were criminal in nature, or threatened to jeopardize the safety of others.   The researchers explained, that though more serious behaviours were consistently linked to exclusion from school, these types of behaviours occurred much less often. Hence, students were suspended most commonly, for infractions such as disrespect, insolence, tardiness, class disruption and absenteeism (Skiba et al., 2014).

The Negative Effects of Suspensions

Noltemeyer and colleagues (2015) acknowledged that out-of-school suspensions correlate with deleterious outcomes for students and advocated for ways of instructing children and youth on appropriate school behaviour while minimizing disruption to educational programming. School suspensions are associated with the risk of academic failure and attrition (Arcia, 2006; Moskowitz et al, 1979); school disengagement (Butler et al., 2005), delayed graduation rates (Raffaele Mendez, 2003); as well, substance use and disruptive behaviour (Hemphill et al., 2011; Hemphill et al., 2009; Hemphill et

al., 2006). Harsh disciplinary policies and practices have been known to contribute to a systemic setback, notably the school-to-prison pipeline, which gradually shifts students away from positive school connections and towards juvenile or adult correctional systems (Dohrn, 2002; Kupchik, 2010; Meiners, 2011; Mittleman, 2018; Price, 2009; Theriot, 2009). Origins of this trend can also be related back to the proliferation of zero-tolerance legislation and policies in the 1990's (Scott, 2004).

Poverty has been a firm predictor of the likelihood of suspension in addition to demographic factors such as access to resources in a home, or to parental presence and engagement (Hinojosa, 2008). Nonetheless, racial diversity remains a main predictor of receiving a school suspension or expulsion, even when taking into account socio-economic status. The prevalence of poverty in a school division catchment, influences not only the rate at which students are disciplined, but exaggerates the disparities apparent in marginalized groups (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Research suggests that specific student populations are excessively disciplined when compared to their peers. Studies from the U.S. identify that African-Americans are more likely to receive school suspensions than their Caucasian counterparts (Krezmien et al., 2006; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2002; Skiba et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2008) and in Canadian schools, disproportionality exists for Indigenous students (Greflund, 2013). Concern has also been raised relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, who are at increased risk of experiencing exclusionary sanctions (Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011; Poteat et al., 2015). Students diagnosed with emotional and behavioural disorders, other intellectual disabilities or low academic capability, also experience persistent overrepresentation when it comes to school suspensions, changes in placement (managed moves), restraint interventions and seclusion (Parks Ennis & Katsiyannis, 2017; Skiba et al., 1997).   Hemphill and colleagues (2014)

argued that understanding the impact of exclusionary discipline strategies on students was not only essential in developing new approaches to reduce the negative effects, but also important for supporting students when responding to their challenging behaviours. Afterall, when it comes to education, seat time in class equates to success. This has caused many schools and districts to re-evaluate their approaches toward discipline, particularly any forms that exclude students from the classroom.

Positive School Climates

The literature also encompasses the influence of positive school climates on academic achievement (Burdick-Will, 2013; Ramey, 2015). A positive school climate is noted as essential for student motivation (Eccles et al., 1993), well-being of children and youth (Ruus et al., 2007; Virtanen et al., 2009) and for improved school attendance (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989). A context of this nature is associated with reduced suspension rates at the secondary level (Lee et al., 2011), decreased substance use and improved mental health (LaRusso et al., 2008; Ruus et al., 2007), a reduction in sexual harassment (Attar-Schwartz, 2009), as well as, declines in violent and aggressive behaviours (Karcher, 2002, Gregory et al., 2010). Moreover, a positive school climate has been observed to offset the adverse effects of lower socio-economic status on students' academic development (Astor, Benbenisty, & Estrada, 2009). Bradshaw et al. (2015) believed that positive school climates are attractive to educational organizations, as they not only foster ideal inclusive environments for all students, but allow for additional supports to learners with social-emotional or behavioural needs.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2006) described a positive school climate as one which is mutually accepting, inclusive and where appropriate behaviour is modeled by all. Subsequent amendments to the Ontario Education Act (2008) ushered in approaches which involved early intervention and prevention strategies, moving from more rigid processes to progressive disciplinary

measures that promoted positive behaviours. The Manitoba Government, through amendments to the Public Schools Act (2013), was proactive to encourage and sustain safe schools across the province with a focus on caring learning environments, student achievement, equity, inclusion and sustainability.

Manitoba Education (2013) described a positive school climate as one where the whole community develops awareness, skills and knowledge for student well-being, positive relationships and problem solving. In both Ontario and Manitoba, a concept of progressive discipline was fitting, as the ideals of safety were top of mind, along with suitable amounts of discretion and local decision making maintained. Nonetheless, the most pressing issue faced by schools continued to be, how best to respond to student behaviour which was less than positive, inappropriate, unsafe or at times violent, in a manner that was not only corrective, but supportive (Milne & Aurini, 2017).

Alternative and Equitable Interventions

Many school organizations have shifted, when possible, to embrace alternative approaches to discipline which do not involve exclusion. Initiatives on which they have focused, not only involved effective responses for student misconduct, but have allowed students to continue with both academic and social emotional learning (Owen et al, 2015). For example, alternatives to school discipline might include school-wide strategies such as Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (PBIS), a system that provides a framework of expectations of behaviour across settings that can be taught, monitored and assessed (Sugai & Horner, 2002; Horner et al., 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2015). By comparison, Restorative Measures (Riestenberg, 2015) focus on relationships, promoting opportunities for accountability with students who have been involved in school misconduct and healing for those who have been negatively

impacted by the actions of their peers. According to Cornell (2020), protocols such as objective Violence Threat Risk Assessments (VTRA) allow for designated school team members and clinicians (school counsellors, psychologists and social workers) to undertake specific evaluations to determine the probability of serious misconduct or threatening behaviour being carried out. For the most part, a VTRA can provide important insights into a student's social emotional learning, specifically in areas where additional supports are required. Furthermore, partnerships between community organizations and schools can provide supports and services to students with complex needs and their families. Healthy Child Manitoba developed the Wraparound Protocol for Children and Youth (2013), which detailed a coordinated planning process across multiple systems. Collectively, alternative organizational approaches empower professionals to provide appropriate services to collaboratively support and protect youth, as they navigate school outcomes.

At the classroom level, Gregory et al. (2017) suggested a number of prevention and intervention strategies to positively increase equity where discipline is concerned. Proactively, they highlighted the importance of supportive relationships between teachers and their students, bias-aware classrooms, rigorous and culturally relevant instruction, and opportunities to learn from behavioural correction. From the perspective of intervention, there was emphasis placed on the use of data to recognize areas of disciplinary

conflict or inequitable treatment of specific student groups, solution-focused responses to behavioural misconduct, inclusion of student and family voice in the development of discipline policies, and the assurance of reintegration once a conflict had occurred.

Latitude and Discretion in School Organizations

The dichotomy of approaches ranging from zero tolerance to positive, progressive and alternative disciplinary practices, gives way to a concept from the organizational literature referring to the connection between external environments and schools themselves. Weick (1982; 1976) argued that schools have traditionally been considered as loosely coupled entities that do not behave like other organizations. For example, Weick noted a disconnect between the ability of school administrators to control outcomes for students in classrooms. He also observed the limited influence that teachers have over their working conditions, in terms of choosing the students in their classes, or designing content of curricular outcomes that they teach. Further, given the independent nature of their instructional roles, Coburn (2004) and Hallett (2010) suggested it is conceivable for teachers to have greater interpretations of behavioural expectations in classrooms and for school administrators to approach student misconduct with enhanced latitude.

In recent years, government reform efforts focused on standards-based curricula and accountability for academic achievement and safe schools, have resulted in processes of organizational recoupling which have impacted both school administrators and teachers (Hallett, 2010; Sauder & Espeland, 2009; Spillane & Burch, 2006;). Milne & Aurini (2017) elaborated that there have been trade-offs in terms of flexibility of approaches to student discipline, evidenced by policies and practices which have demanded tighter coupling and hence increased adherence and control. With legislation and policy under the guise of safe schools, limitations had been imposed on latitude and discretion in decision making where student behaviour was concerned (Manley-Casimir & Moffat, 2012). In general, however, Davis (1969) contended that it was important and necessary to have a "proper balance between rule and discretion" (p.42). Findlay concurred, suggesting that the practice of discretion, "much like Goldilock's porridge, needs to be just right" (2012a, p. 25).

The Authority to Suspend

While discretion is considered to be an indicator of professional status, the degree of autonomy can shift for educators depending on legal, legislative or policy direction (Findlay, 2012). Canadian school principals derive authority for school discipline under the legal doctrine of "parens patriae" (Stelck, 2007) and through the standard of a "careful and prudent parent" (Hutchinson, 2007). Insofar as suspensions are concerned, under Manitoba legislation (the Public Schools Act 48(4); the Education Administration Act 4(1)(d) and; Manitoba Regulation 92/2013), teachers, principals, superintendents and school boards, have the authority to sanction this disciplinary practice. The ability for teachers to suspend students from classrooms is typically limited by school division policy and superintendents are generally involved in suspensions that are longer than one week in duration. While school boards are entitled to suspend a student from a school for any length of time, it is usually principals or their designates who most often suspend, up to five days, for conduct considered injurious to the welfare and educational purpose of schools. When suspensions extend beyond five days, Manitoban principals must ensure that educational programming is provided to students in the form of home study, alternative program placements or other supportive accommodations. A student may be expelled only by a school board, however unlike a suspension, the student is not allowed to return to a school, division or district unless authorized by the board. Narrowing the latitude of discretion for school administrators by implementing tightly coupled policies, has been one way of aligning legislation with practice.

For students with special educational needs, Manitoba Regulation 468/88 requires that school divisions (by policy) provide reasonable accommodation when learning needs affect student behaviour. The regulation further outlines that parents must be informed on each occasion that a student is sent home due to disciplinary concerns. Subsequently this regulation stipulates that, records must be kept pertaining to the types and length of school suspensions and data of this nature is suggested for use in school division planning and determinations of programming. Alternatively, policies can be written to include more personalized routines and flexibility for school administrators to provide individualized responses with students.   Appropriate Educational Programming in Manitoba - Standards for Student Services (2006), encourage a range of supports on a continuum from positive and preventative strategies, to more reactive consequences pending the frequency, severity or intensity of behavioural infractions. A more elaborate description of intervention possibilities and disciplinary approaches is contained in the Manitoba Provincial Code of Conduct (2017). The Provincial Code of Conduct emphasizes the importance of using positive and proactive strategies first and applying negative consequences sparingly, when other strategies toward resolving challenging student behaviour have been unsuccessful.

Beyond Student Behaviour and Attitudes

School discipline factors are sometimes interpreted as having linear relationships with student behaviour, when in fact they are quite dynamic. Kinsler (2013) asserted, that the processes involved in determining school discipline might be a matter of choice on the part of the student pending the consequences involved, or possibly an indicator of the extent of collective behavioural infractions in a school (Sheets, 1996). Morrison & Skiba (2001) suggested similarly, that the process of school suspension could not always be detailed in a direct line from student misconduct to an established form of discipline. They elaborated that contributing factors such as teachers' judgments of student

behaviours, teachers' abilities to tolerate and manage conduct in the classroom, as well as, the

availability of supports to assist teachers with challenges, have all contributed to a high degree of

variability in approaches. Skiba et al.,

(2014) added that characteristics of schools,

such as teachers' attitudes, school

governance and the nature of

administrative decision making, were more

indicative of the possibility of a student

being suspended from school, than either

students' behaviours or attitudes.

Furthermore, racial diversity in a school has been shown to result in more exclusionary and punitive

disciplinary strategies (Rocha & Hawes, 2009; Welch & Payne, 2010). Inherently, the choice, rates and

differential application of school suspensions as disciplinary consequences, are the result of a complex

set of variables which require further exploration and examination.

      With the foregoing in mind, the current study for which this review of literature is composed,

will be undertaken to research provincial perspectives and practices involving school suspensions. The

intention is to affirm, enhance or expand on the literature reviewed, by documenting both constructive

and critical perspectives inherent in suspension practices in Manitoba, as well as, alternative approaches

to discipline that could be used in place of suspending students. This work is being completed in

response to the recommendation of the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY, 2018): "…to

review the use of out-of-school suspensions with the goal of developing a province-wide strategy to

limit, reduce or possibly phase-out exclusionary practices, except in situations of imminent safety risk to

students and staff."

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