Trauma Responsive Education Practices: A Conceptual Framework

The TREP Project works to connect research on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences of developmental trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We focus on schools serving communities coping with high levels of concentrated poverty and social disorganization, such as housing and food instability, household and neighborhood violence, and drug dependence. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the socioemotional and academic needs of not one or two children who have been exposed to traumatic levels of chronic stress, but the needs of a classroom of traumatized children.

Each day, students across the country carry interpersonal traumas from abuse and neglect from the families they depend on for care into the classroom. Some of these students also carry community traumas associated with the structural violence of concentrated poverty. Even more, some carry with them the traumatic effects of historical and contemporary race-based oppression. The layering of these factors means that schools serving mostly brown and black children also tend to be schools serving students who are attempting to cope with interconnected interpersonal, structural, and historical traumas.

Because chronic exposure to traumatic stressors and the resulting loss of feelings of personal safety disrupts children's abilities to regulate their emotions and behaviors, they often respond to even the smallest classroom frustrations with defiant, aggressive, or avoidant behaviors. These behaviors challenge teachers' abilities to maintain control of the classroom environment. The extent to which educators respond with proactive developmental supports versus punitive and exclusionary discipline will determine the extent to which schools become spaces that advocate for positive development of historically marginalized students versus spaces that represent and recreate existing societal oppressions.

Teacher-student relationships are developmental: teachers provide protection, support, and learning opportunities; responsibility, power, and foresight is greater in teachers than students.

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Suggested Citation:
Keels, Micere, Jessica Staff, & Ramon Griffin. (September, 2017). *Trauma Responsive Education Practices: A Conceptual Framework*. Practice Brief #1. TREP Project.

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OPPORTUNITIES TO CONSIDER

The changes that trauma causes in brain structure and chemistry, and the cascade of emotional and behavioral damage don't have to be permanent. Children's brains have a substantial ability to adapt and change, which means that with the right developmental supports, damage caused by trauma can be reversed and post-traumatic growth is possible. For this to happen educators must become aware of how students are affected by trauma, and have access to training on the educational practices that can foster recovery and resilience.

Schools serving students living in high crime communities must provide a proactive and sustained supportive response. Proactive responses recognize that exposure to violence has negative effects on all children's development and do not wait for students to exhibit problematic behaviors before providing coping supports. A sustained response recognizes that restoring feelings of safety and recovery from trauma does not happen quickly, even if students are not showing any outward signs of traumatization.

Although most of our work focuses on how *Trauma Responsive Educational Practices* (TREP) can meet the developmental and educational needs of children exposed to high levels of community violence, much of our work will be relevant for children exposed to other forms of traumatic stress that create fear and a loss of feelings of safety.

WHERE ARE WE NOW & HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Rare but serious incidents of school violence during the 1980s and 90s lead federal, state, and local lawmakers to enact zero tolerance laws, and school administrators to create and enforce policies that emphasize the use of suspensions and expulsions for behaviors that threaten the safety of students and staff. Now, over three decades later, we have enough information about how these policies are used, for whom they are used, and the collateral damage they cause to know that they are not working.

Are suspensions and expulsions primarily used when safety is threatened?

Are there demographic disparities in who gets suspended or expelled?

Matthew Steinberg and Joanna Lacoe address these two questions in their article titled What Do We Know About School Discipline Reform?

They report that Insubordination, not threats to safety, accounts for an increasing share of harsh exclusionary discipline. Despite the importance of this issue, the School Survey on Crime and Safety stopped collecting this data after 2008.

They also report that although Black students make up only 16% of K-12 students, they make up 43% of students who received two or more out-of-school suspensions and 36% of expelled students.
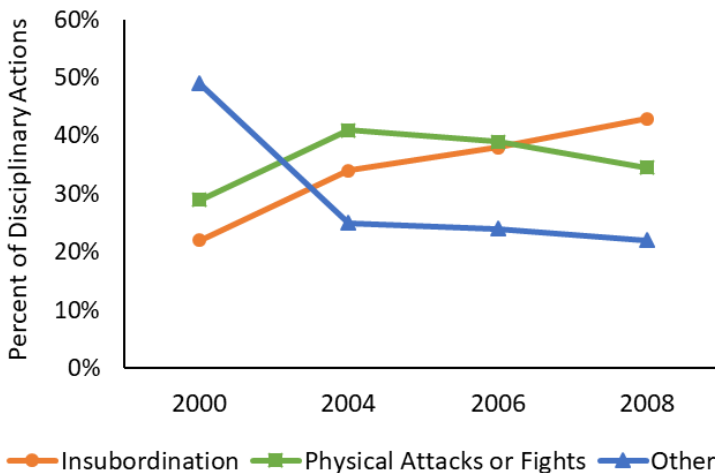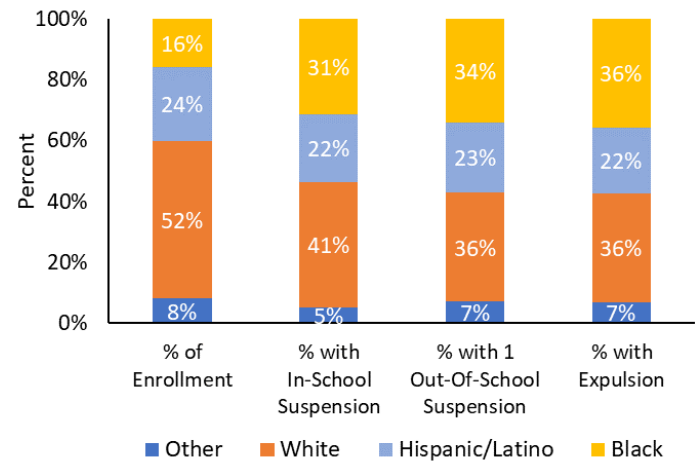
Fig. 1. School Disciplinary Actions

Fig. 2. School Disciplinary Actions, Race-Ethnicity

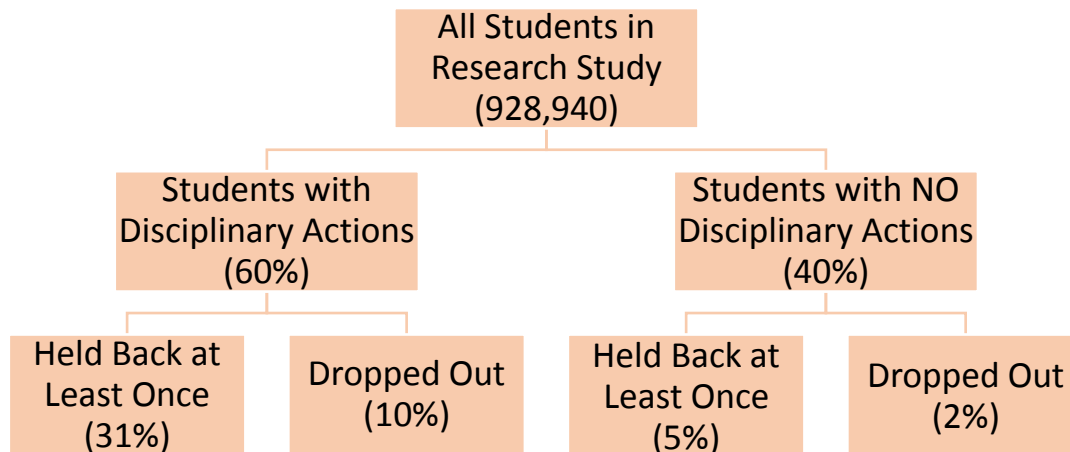## Suspensions and expulsions represent lost educational opportunities.
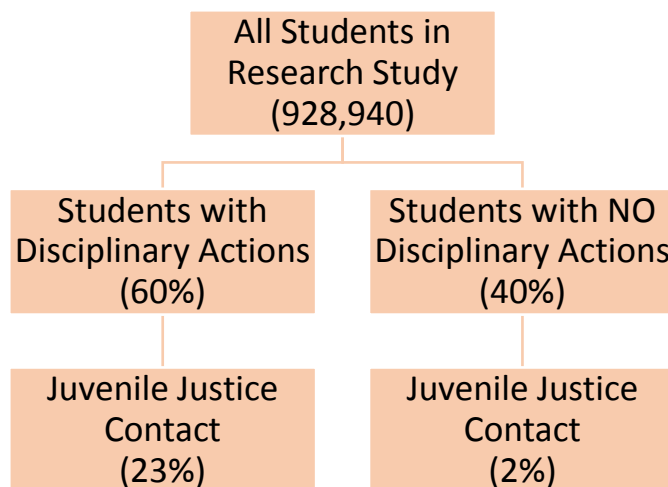
WHERE ARE WE & HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Do suspensions and expulsions improve student outcomes?

The most comprehensive understanding of this issue comes from Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement. This study followed every incoming Texas 7th grader (nearly one million students) over three years, through high school and sometimes beyond. The data mapped each student's school records against any entry in the juvenile justice system. They found that when students are suspended or expelled, the likelihood that they will repeat a grade, not graduate, and/or become involved in the juvenile justice system increases significantly. Additionally, Black students and children with particular educational disabilities who qualify for special services were suspended and expelled at especially high rates. This study included over 80 variables to control for other factors that could account for the observed outcomes.

Figure 12: Relationship between Disciplinary Action and Repeating a Grade or Dropping Out

All Students in Research Study (928,940)

Students with Disciplinary Actions (60%)
Students with NO Disciplinary Actions (40%)

Held Back at Least Once (31%)
Dropped Out (10%)
Held Back at Least Once (5%)
Dropped Out (2%)

Figure 15: Relationship between Disciplinary Action and Juvenile Justice Contact

All Students in Research Study (928,940)

Students with Disciplinary Actions (60%)
Students with NO Disciplinary Actions (40%)

Juvenile Justice Contact (23%)
Juvenile Justice Contact (2%)

THE PENDULUM SWINGS OF EDUCATION REFORM

School reform is often described as a pendulum swinging between poles of reform ideas. Professor George Bear describes how classroom management has swung between order and behavioral control versus individualized growth and development.

1

At the turn of 20th century, schools emphasized machine-like and military style obedience based on rule enforcement and punitive consequences to manage student behavior.

2

The first half of 20th century ushered in a student-centered focus based on developing self-regulation through character education, with the belief that positive character traits prevented behavior problems.

3

During the second half of the 20th century, schools moved to a law and order framework of punitive control. This is particularly true of schools serving racial-ethnic minority and poor children. Urban schools enforced discipline codes based on narrowing self-expressive behaviors that discouraged students from bringing their authentic selves to school.
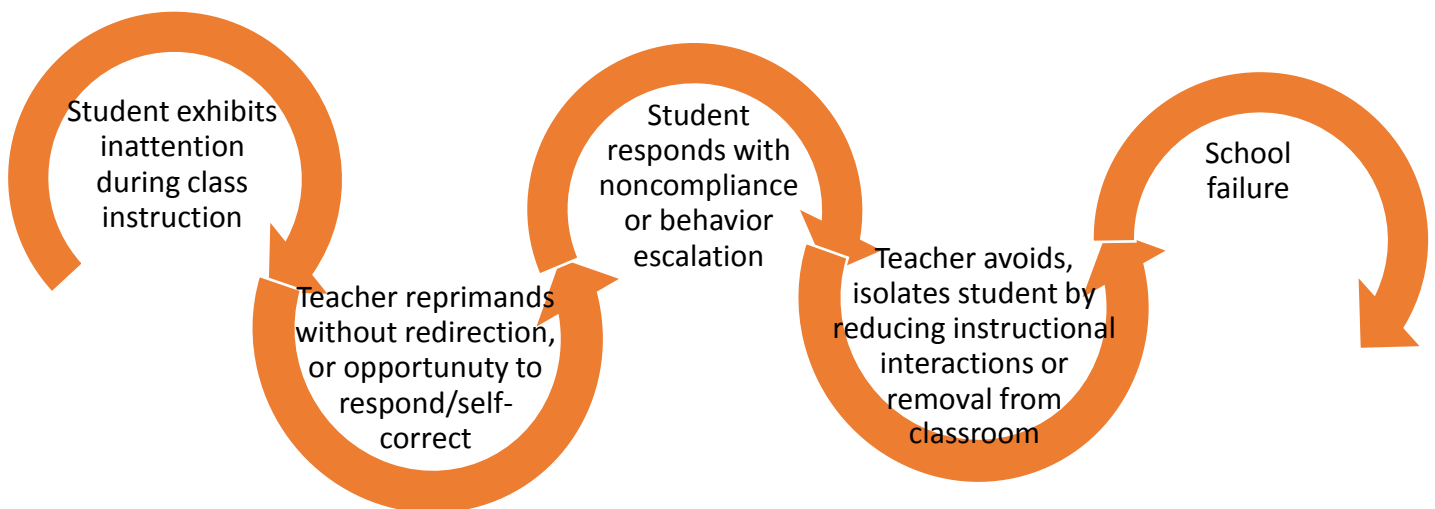
4

Schools are now moving back to recognizing the importance of supporting students in developing their self-regulation skills. There is also increased understanding of how school and classroom culture can create conditions that increase the likelihood that students will develop and exhibit self-regulation.

The effectiveness of discipline policies should be judged by their outcomes, and because punitive and exclusionary discipline tend to be associated with an **increased** likelihood of behavioral challenges they are not meeting their stated purpose. Suspensions and expulsions have the paradoxical effect of enabling students to escape an environment in which they may be experiencing failure, and reinforces their belief that they don't belong in that educational contexts. Exclusion from school also does not address the underlying problem that lead to the disciplinary infraction, and when students do return they often do so with an even more antagonistic and alienated perspective of their teachers and school, which lessens their capacity for behavioral regulation.

TRANSACTIONAL & ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS & OUTCOMES

Classroom management does not need to swing between the needs of teachers control versus the needs of students to express their individuality. School cultures are co-constructed— teachers and students each bring something to their initial interactions; the experiences and perceptions of each other that results from those initial interactions create a downward or upward spiral of reciprocal interactions. We focus on what teachers bring in terms of their understandings and perceptions of challenging behaviors, and on what traumatized students bring in terms of challenging classroom behaviors and lack of trust in the motivations of adults. Exhibiting challenging behaviors such as aggressive, angry, anxious, asocial, dependent, and/or defiant behaviors are significantly more impactful on teacher-student relationships that exhibiting prosocial behaviors. Traumatized students appear to be at risk for exhibiting the coupling of two behavioral and emotional patterns that research suggests are most challenging for positive teacher-student relationships: being both aggressive and withdrawn.

Below is a heuristic of these interactions, adapted from Kevin Sutherland and Paul Morgan's model of how teachers and students react to and influence each other in the classroom.

Student exhibits inattention during class instruction

Teacher reprimands without redirection, or opportunuty to respond/self-correct

Student responds with noncompliance or behavior escalation

Teacher avoids, isolates student by reducing instructional interactions or removal from classroom

School failure

Student's behavior is affected by:
- Curricular demands that are too high/low
- History of traumatic stressors
- History of instructional experiences
- History of punitive discipline

Teacher's behavior is affected by:
- Physical & mental health and family stressors
- Training & professional development
- Perceptions of causes of off-task behavior
- Compassion fatigue & burnout

Students and teachers are affected by:
- Number of students in classroom
- Physical arrangement of classroom
- School-wide disciplinary policies
- School's provision of socioemotional supports
- Numbers of students in classroom/school with behavioral challenges

DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA 101

BRAIN & BODY: Repeated exposure to traumatic experiences interferes with the basic development and connections among neurons in the brain. Chronic exposure to traumatic stress also interferes with the integration of left and right hemisphere brain functioning, such that a child cannot access rational thought in the face of overwhelming emotion. Traumatized children are then inclined to react with extreme helplessness, confusion, withdrawal, or rage when stressed. They may also have a wide variety of medical problems, such as body pain, asthma, skin problems, autoimmune disorders, and pseudoseisures.

ATTACHMENT: When children are placed in situations where they feel they have to take responsibility for their safety, particularly when a caregiver is the source of trauma, they attempt to exert some control by disconnecting from social relationships or by acting aggressively. This may lead children to constantly look out for others who may threaten their safety; withholding their emotions from others, and never letting people see when they are afraid, sad, or angry. These children often have great difficulty regulating their emotions, managing stress, developing concern for others, and using language to solve problems. They often show an inability to regulate emotions without outside help or support.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION: Children coping with trauma are easily-aroused and express high-intensity emotions, due to their low stress tolerance or a high base stress level. These children often feel out of control because of their inability to identify their internal states of arousal and apply appropriate labels (e.g. "happy," "sad," "frightened"). Because they have difficulty in both self-regulating and self-soothing, these children may display chronic numbing of emotions, pervasive depressed mood, avoidance of emotional situations, and maladaptive coping strategies.

BEHAVIORAL REGULATION: Both under-controlled behaviors (such as aggressive or defiant behavior) and over-controlled behaviors (such as resistance to changes in routine) can develop as a way of coping with overwhelming stress and loss of safety. Children may appear to be self-destructive, aggressive toward others, or even over compliant.

DISSOCIATION: Dissociation is the failure to take in or integrate information and experiences. Thus, thoughts and emotions are disconnected, physical sensations are outside conscious awareness, and self-soothing repetitive behavior can take place without conscious choice or self-awareness. Dissociation begins as a protective mechanism in the face of overwhelming trauma. Chronic trauma exposure may lead to an over-reliance on dissociation as a coping mechanism, which then creates other behavioral and emotional regulation problems. Dissociation makes it difficult for children to concentrate in the classroom and remember was discussed.

THINKING & LEARNING: Because of impairment in the domains above, traumatized children show significant delays in expressive and receptive language development, abstract reasoning, problem solving, difficulty sustaining curiosity and attention, memory challenges due to distraction, misperception, and overwhelmed anxiety, and deficits in overall IQ.

SELF-CONCEPT: Having a safe and predictable environment and caregivers that are responsive and sensitive allow children to develop a sense of themselves as valued, worthy, and competent. Additionally, because of impairment in the domains above, traumatized children develop low self-esteem, feelings of shame and guilt, and generalized sense of being ineffective in dealing with their environment.

Implications for Pre-Service Training and In-Service Professional Development

Trauma and its effects on development and school functioning are not a standard part of teacher preparation programs so the overwhelming majority of teachers do not have the knowledge and skills that would enable them to effectively keep traumatized students in the classroom and engaged in learning.

WHERE DO WE NEED TO GO & HOW DO WE GET THERE?

Educators tasked with meeting the developmental and educational needs of traumatized students have a difficult job. To support traumatized children educators must…

Be able to …
- ✓ Read and respond to children's emotional states as signaled by their behavior
- ✓ Offer acceptance and warmth as well as accurate and appropriate feedback
- ✓ Support children in learning how to tolerate frustration during the learning process
- ✓ Provide limits on the boundaries of acceptable behavior while providing space for individual expression

While managing their own…
- ✓ Feelings of frustration and irritation with students' challenging behaviors
- ✓ Impetus to respond with harsh or rejecting statements
- ✓ Desire to isolate or neglect or emotionally withdraw from challenging students
- ✓ Feelings of secondary traumatic stress
- ✓ Need for emotional distance from students' traumas

In *The Heart of Learning & Teaching Compassion, Resiliency & Academic Success* Ray Wolpow and colleagues remind us that behavior is not arbitrary, it is based on previous experiences and serves a function in the present context, even if it is a maladaptive function. One way of being constantly mindful of this is to move away from labeling behaviors and students as "good" and "bad", and focus on the information that is communicated by the behavior. Off-task behavior such as talking out of turn, getting up out of one's seat, and causing other distractions during class may happen because the student is having trouble with the academic content or is unable to regulate their emotions. Either way, **off-task behavior signals the need for additional instructional and behavioral supports.**

"Classroom participants [don't] act with equal power, … it is the teacher's interpretation of these moments of tension that ultimately determines whether a suspension will occur."

-Frances Vavrus & KimMarie Cole

ATTENDING TO RACIAL & ETHNIC EQUITY

Widespread research shows that teachers' biases leads to school discipline that is unequally enforced. Black and Latino students, boys, and students from low-income families are significantly more likely to experience exclusionary discipline. These factors intersect such that low-income, Black boys are the students most likely to be responded to with punitive discipline and excluded from instruction. Research contends that some race-specific factors are associated with the use of more punitive and more exclusionary discipline even after accounting for level of misbehavior or delinquency, academic performance, parental attention, school organization, economic disadvantage, drug use, teacher victimization, and teacher perceptions of lack of safety. Put differently, educators are subject to broader societal biases that position minorities, and particularly Black students as threatening and needing harsher social control and punishment to succeed in school.

However, research also shows that some educators and schools serving mostly minority and mostly low-income students effectively resist using punitive and exclusionary discipline.[1]

The following qualities have been found among educators who resist punitive discipline:
- ✓ Perceive themselves as advocates for maintaining high educational standards for historically marginalized students.
- ✓ Gather information about students' lives outside of school to understand the stressors they carry with them into the classroom.
- ✓ Build positive relationships with students and leverage those relationships to build self-control and compliance with policies and procedures.
- ✓ Proactively provide behavioral supports based on student's pattern of off-task behaviors.
- ✓ Utilize assets from students' cultural experiences to facilitate classroom engagement.
- ✓ Provide a range of opportunities to respond so all students can have success and mastery experiences.

TRAUMA & EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Trauma negatively affects children's abilities to manage many of the expectations and demands of how schools traditionally operate. Traditionally, schools expect that students come with strong self-regulation skills that allow them to appropriately read and respond to social cues from peers and teachers, and self-manage classroom frustrations. Students who are internally dysregulated, are often responded to with punitive and exclusionary discipline rather than with proactive, positive discipline. Because school success is one of the primary pathways of escaping poverty, traumatized children are at risk of being routed, through the American educational system, into an intergenerational cycle of continued poverty, violence, victimization, which perpetuates trauma into the next generation.

DIRECTION OF CHANGE

Moving from…	Moving toward…
Perceiving challenging behaviors in the framework of willful defiance	Perceiving challenging behaviors as off-task behaviors
Needing to place blame	Identifying underlying cause of the problem
Perceiving challenging behaviors as a personal attack on authority	Perceiving off-task behaviors as signal of need for behavioral support
Emphasis on culpability	Emphasis on re-engagement
Engaging in punitive, escalating interactions	Engaging in re-direction and de-escalation
Denigrating verbal reprimands	Emotionally neutral, firm limit setting

One pathway forward that is backed by research evidence is School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS). SWPBIS is a structure and process that helps schools organize, implement, and evaluate multiple initiatives and strategies related to socioemotional development. The focus is on establishing clear expectations for students and then teaching, re-teaching, modeling, and reinforcing a consistent set of expected behaviors school-wide. Emphasis is on the behaviors one wants to see versus behaviors to eliminate.

SWPBIS is defined by four elements. One, decisions about what problems to target, which students need what level of supports, and which teachers need coaching are data driven, Two, selected interventions and strategies are evidence-based and matched to the characteristics and needs of the school population. Three, it is about improving the capacity of all the adults in the building (teachers, librarians, cafeteria staff, maintenance staff, and security staff) to engage in positive discipline. Four, progress is constantly monitored and disaggregated by status characteristics that are relevant for each school, to determine whether the intervention is working and where additional supports are needed.

Coupling a trauma responsive perspective with SWPBIS highlights that the implementation of SWPBIS must consider the extent to which teachers understand the potential role of trauma in students' abilities to exhibit positive behaviors, and need to identify underlying causes of challenging behaviors. Additionally, there is recognition that students' feelings of safety and security at school and trusting relationships with teachers is integral to the process of implementing any system of proactively teaching expected behaviors and rule adherence.

EACH ONE TEACH ONE is a proverb born during the years of African slavery in the U.S. when, because knowledge is power, they were forbidden from learning to read. There is power and empowerment in learning from each other, and getting beyond the state of ignorance of only knowing about one's most immediate circumstances. We believe that educators learn best from their peers and are empowered by using their challenges to teach others.

Please send us your experiences about how trauma showed up in the school and classroom experiences of your students and how you handled it in the moment. Also, please tell us what you wish you knew at the time but didn't, what you have learned since, and what you have done or would do differently. Email us about your experiences at info@TREPEducator.org

Fear of losing control of the classroom. Pamela Fenning and many others argue that fear of losing control of the classroom rather than an actual threat to safety may be a large part of why historically marginalized students are most likely to receive exclusionary discipline consequences. Perceptions of loss of control determines whether off-task behavior will be responded to with inquiries into the student's needs, re-direction, and opportunities for self-correction, or responded to with assertion of power, sanctioning, and referral to the office.

Please email us at info@TREPEducator.org to share your experiences with fear of loss of control of the classroom, how that affected the way you responded to off-task behaviors, how this has changed over your teaching career, and advice you want to share.

Please join our virtual learning community @ http://www.trepeducator.org/forum/ to receive weekly Research To Practice briefs on the following topics:
- TREP Classroom Management
- De-Escalation
- Social & Emotional Learning
- Educator Self-Care

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