Critically Caring Classrooms:
The Benefits of Relational Discipline

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.

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Classroom management and student discipline are daunting for almost all teachers. Kathleen Cotton found that only 50% of classroom time is spent on instruction while the other 50% is consumed by behavior management. Although discipline comprises a large part of teachers' roles, they often receive very little training on addressing challenging student behaviors. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that behavioral challenges are among the top reasons for early career teachers leaving the profession.

For students, exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion can lead to decreased school engagement and increased involvement in the juvenile justice system. These practices disproportionately affect the school success of economically disadvantaged students of color. For example, the Kentucky School Discipline Study suggests that 20% of the Black-White gap on reading achievement could be explained through Black students' disproportionate exposure to exclusionary discipline.

Limiting exclusionary discipline interrupts the negative cycle of disengagement. Relational discipline provides an alternative to exclusionary policies where strong relationships between teacher and student encourage classroom engagement among historically marginalized students and facilitate post-traumatic growth.

> **"Caring is a bridge to whatever a student defines as success. Frustration, hostility, confusion, and hatred are bridges to failure."**
> - Katy Ridnouer

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DEFINING RELATIONAL DISCIPLINE

Relational discipline is grounded in research showing that positive student-teacher relationships, not punitive measures, are most effective in gaining compliance while also supporting students' abilities to meet classroom expectations. These relationships are built on teachers' genuine desire to understand students' experiences in and outside of school, and a foundation of mutual understanding of care for the student and their success. Relationship building is initiated and maintained by the teacher. However, the quality and intensity of the relationship will not be the same with every student nor will the process look the same for every teacher. Relational discipline is a school-wide process, and teachers are encouraged to invite support from other staff in the building with whom the student may have stronger relationships.

In these interactions, students are supported in the process of understanding the consequences of behavior choices and given time and space to improve their behavior rather than quickly moving to punishment. Teachers who effectively use relational discipline in their classrooms value student voice, developing social emotional competencies, and maintaining engagement, especially among students who exhibit challenging behaviors. Relational discipline is not just about behavior management—these values permeate decision making around routines, procedures, instructional practices, and academic content.

Students' content mastery is dependent on their ability to function in the classroom, thus teaching students how to function successfully is just as important to their academic growth as the content of the course.

RELATIONAL DISCIPLINE IN PRACTICE

Relational discipline is…

- Understanding that challenging behavior is often communicating another problem and investigating the underlying source of the behavior

- Using professional judgement to make disciplinary decisions based on individual student contexts

- Listening to students and acknowledging they are heard

- Demonstrating care through actions that benefit students

- Respecting student dignity through private conversations and behavioral redirections

- Giving students space to make mistakes and correct their behavior

- Taking time to work through the problem together with the student

- Planning responses to predictable student misbehavior in advance to maintain professionalism

- Enlisting family support in your efforts to support student success

- Using 'I' statements to minimize escalation

- Looking for behavioral patterns that help you proactively provide behavioral supports

Relational Discipline is not…

- Giving up your position as an authority in the classroom

- Allowing one student's needs to monopolize those of the whole class

- Making disciplinary decisions based on your emotions

- Punishing the class for one or a few students' misbehavior

- Using exclusionary or punitive discipline to address off-task behavior such as daydreaming or falling asleep in class

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Student-Teacher relationships are unlike the relationships teachers have with their colleagues or friends. Relational Discipline requires a hierarchical teacher-student relationship that is grounded in academic success. The teacher as the emotionally mature party carries the burden of demonstrating care when enforcing the school's discipline code to maximize the most challenging student's opportunities in the classroom.

EDUCATOR SELF-INQUIRY

As Dana Ashley concludes, building effective relationships with students requires teachers to be introspective about "their own beliefs and implicit biases about behavior and how our own experiences—as children, students, members of a community of faith, parents, etc.—shape our responses to behavior often in ways that escalate situations and produce negative outcomes for all concerned." This is asking teachers to suppress the human desire to reject those who reject us, and instead see challenging student behaviors as an opportunity to connect rather than an impediment to the relationship. Doing so effectively takes a willingness to engage in self-reflection and change.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Relating to Students

1. Do I share personal experiences with students to help them relate to me as a real person?
2. Who encouraged me to develop my own voice? How can I use similar methods in my classroom?
3. How do I relate to students with whom I do not share similar cultural or life experiences? What will I do when my views are in conflict with those of my students?

Perception of Behavior

1. What are some behaviors a student might display to cover up an experience with trauma or learning problem? How do I respond to these behaviors?
2. How do I view challenging student behaviors? What behaviors do I view as defiant? Disrespectful?
3. How do my personal experiences and cultural views affect my perceptions of student behavior?

Classroom Practices

1. What are my discipline goals? How does my classroom management plan help me achieve those goals?
2. What are some opportunities for teaching that I have missed during interactions with students?
3. How do I hold students to high expectations while providing supports to reach those students?

Self-Care

1. What is my method of evaluating your school day, week, year?
2. What are my emotional triggers? What do I need to de-escalate my emotions?
3. How can my relationships with my students enrich my own life?

ATTENDING TO EQUITY IN STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Mayes Payne and colleagues argue that the racial-ethnic discipline gap may stem from teachers' implicit ideology about the causes of classroom discipline problems and student's capacity for change. One ideology, regarding the roles that teachers and students play in the classroom, called the dominant ideology is described as beliefs that support conventional views of discipline, teaching, and learning that involve lecturing, authoritarianism, competition, and passivity. On the other hand, transformative ideology includes beliefs that support critical social practice views of discipline, teaching, and learning that encourage democratic negotiable social processes in the classroom.

Teachers who hold the transformative ideology of teaching are described as teachers who feel empowered to use their classroom agency to change oppressive conditions and, in turn, empower students from nondominant racial backgrounds to do the same. They show that this sense of agency to transform classroom disciplinary decisions was associated with significantly reduced likelihood of suspensions. Teachers who rarely or never wrote referrals did not expect passivity from students, rarely or never used coercion, consistently used normative power, and interactively established behavioral contracts with students. Teachers who frequently or always wrote referrals expected passivity from students, used inconsistently normative power, and quickly resorted to coercive power.

Equally as important, is that teachers who rarely or never wrote referrals also encouraged students' agency and identity development.

Mayes Payne and colleagues conclude that providing teachers with professional development opportunities to rethink the ideological underpinnings of their discipline goals may help reduce teachers' reliance on exclusionary discipline practices. We believe that rethinking the ideological underpinnings of discipline goals should be a collective school-wide practice.

National Policy Connection

The Every Students Succeeds Act signed in 2015, has ushered in a new era of school reforms that closely examine and limit the use of exclusionary discipline. These reforms are a response to the mounting evidence that highlight both the ineffectiveness of exclusionary practices as well as the social status biases in who gets excluded from instruction. It is not enough to authorize new policy, teachers need thoughtful training in what to do in replace of exclusionary discipline.

DEVELOPING POSITIVE STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

When building relationships, intentionality is key. Plan time to learn about students' lives by asking how assignments connect with their interests or life experiences, and having brief conversations with students during free time. Once the relationship is initiated, it is important to maintain private, consistent, reliable communication that is responsive to student needs. This can take many forms such as oral and written feedback, shared journals, and positive notes home. For teachers or students for whom relationship building does not come easily, structured, scheduled check-ins may be more beneficial. Teachers who are perceived as warm, predictable and consistent build trust with their students that facilitates high levels of engagement and academic achievement.

Actions teachers take in the classroom can also damage relationships with students. A public negative interaction with a student can have widespread damaging effects. To prevent these interactions, teachers can plan responses to challenging behaviors in advance to maintain composure and respect student dignity.

Building positive, enduring relationships with students, especially those coping with trauma, can be challenging. The same actions will not work for every student or every teacher, nor is it reasonable to expect to have equally strong relationships will all students. Students need a network of supportive collaborative adults in the school. These relationships increase students' feelings of connection and trust.

"If you treat each student as a unique individual with a life separate from your own experience, you will connect with that student or end the school year trying." - Katy Ridnouer

10 Building Blocks of Enduring Relationships

1 Awareness of students' life

2 Empathy

3 High expectations

4 Humility

5 Unconditional care and forgiveness

6 Consistency and predictability

7 Intentionality

8 Responsiveness to student needs

9 Patience and restraint

10 Respect and celebration of individuality

RESEARCH DRIVEN PRACTICES

While most schools still rely heavily on exclusionary discipline, many others are finding that relational discipline has broad positive effects on student success. This success is supported by research on teacher practice.

Table 1: Effectiveness of Disciplinary Techniques

Type of Disciplinary Technique	Percentile Decrease in Disruptions
Punishment and Reinforcement	33
Reinforcement	31
Punishment	28
No Immediate Consequence	24

*Adapted from Marzano et al., 2003. Figure 3.1

As Table 1 shows, reinforcement alone (providing positive incentives for desired behavior) is as effective at decreasing classroom disruptions as reinforcement and punishment, or providing both incentives and disincentives for behavior. For example, effective verbal praise, which provides a specific observation of student action, not just "good job," can be given for behavior and academics.

Table 2 shows that teacher reaction, an immediate direct response to student behavior, was found to be more effective in reducing classroom disruptions than tangible rewards, punishments, or communication with families. Teacher reaction includes verbal praise as well as discrete non-verbal communication. Thus, immediate, discrete responses to desired and undesired behavior is most effective at regulating students.

Table 2: Effectiveness of Disciplinary Interventions

| Type of Disciplinary Intervention	Percentile Decrease in Disruptions
Teacher Reaction	34
Tangible Recognition	29
Direct Cost	21
Group Contingency	34
Home Contingency	21

*Adapted from Marzano et al., 2003. Figure 3.2

Relational Discipline as a school-wide practice is effective in reducing exclusionary discipline. In their first year implementing a school-wide relational discipline practice coupled with a multi-tiered behavioral support system, a collaborative of schools in New York City (Positive Learning Collaborative) saw a 46% reduction in suspensions and a 40% drop in overall disciplinary incidents. Teachers reported improvements in relationships with students, administrators, and other teachers as well as an overall improvement in school culture.

MAXIMIZING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CLASSROOM

As discussed in our previous Practice Brief the most common discipline referrals are for defiance, disrespect, and uncooperative behavior. The use of relational discipline allows teachers to reduce these power struggles, increase behavioral engagement, and optimize instructional time. Teachers who prioritize relationships tend to be more effective at gaining the trust of their students, who in turn are more likely to cooperate with classroom rules. Moreover, high behavioral engagement has been linked to increased academic performance. This cycle of engagement and achievement is positively reinforcing.

When instances of exclusion from the classroom do happen, either from disciplinary action or student absence, teachers who have strong relationships with their students are more effective in positively reengaging students in the classroom community.
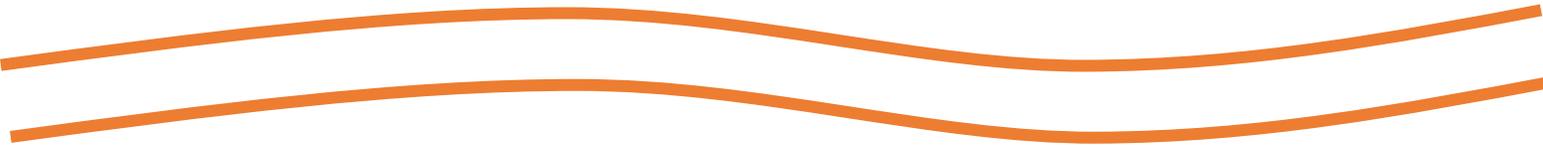
Examples of Discrete Non-Verbal Communication to Improve Student Behavior

- Privately "catch a student being good" and give a thumbs up.

- Make sustained eye contact with a student exhibiting off-task behavior. This is a subtle but powerful way of alerting a student to the fact that the behavior needs correcting.

- Make eye contact then use a physical sign such as a finger to the lips or shake of the head to indicate that a given action is inappropriate.

- If a student is not following instructions, provide the student with a simple verbal reminder—ideally as privately and subtly as possible.

- Remind the class of the expected appropriate behavior and give students time to self-correct.

*Adapted from Marzano et al., 2003

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

While relational disciple is centered on the interactions between teachers and their students, educators cannot be held accountable for systemic barriers. Effective implementation of relational discipline needs to be supported by school discipline codes that include strategies that assist educators with attending to the educational needs of students who have behavioral challenges. Positive behavior discipline codes shift school philosophy and policy from reactionary to prosocial. By adding proactive policies to discipline codes, administrators can set a new tone that limits the use of suspensions and expulsions.

For additional information, read the TREP project's RTP brief on discipline codes >> read more

School Systems and Structures

- Promote culture of consistent and open communication among staff, between staff and students, and between school and home.

- Create a common language and clarity around the classification of various challenging behaviors.

- Reduce punitive policies and specify prevention and intervention policies.

- Create behavioral support teams that can review implementation of punitive policies to account for context.

- Include equity, socioemotional learning, and cultural competence in teacher goal setting.

- Specify re-engagement procedures for students receiving exclusionary discipline.

- Offer professional development in stress management, de-escalation, and relationship building.

THE ROLE OF BEHAVIORAL SUPPORT TEAMS

Behavioral support teams, comprised of members of administration, teaching and support staff, play an important role in the successful implementation of school-wide relational discipline policies. Some possible roles of the support team include:

1. Regularly assess behavior and climate data, make policy adjustments where necessary
2. Track observable student behaviors to proactively prevent escalation
3. Identify and track students in need of behavioral interventions
4. Discern underlying reasons for challenging behavior
5. Develop intervention and support plans for targeted students

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

Growing up extremely poor, suffering from bouts of homelessness and bouncing around from school to school, school was often the only constant in my life. No matter what school I ended up at I was always able to find someone in the building who made me feel safe and wanted. It is because of this that I work to ensure that I can also be that person for someone else.

Positive relationships are the essence of good classroom management and helping students achieve academic success. Not only does it work to personalize the education experience, but it allows students to see that you care not just about what they learn in the classroom, but who they become as people.

The easiest thing to do when trying to build relationships is first listen to them. Many times, students just want to be heard and understood, and by doing this they see that you care. You can also show them you care by supporting them and coming out to their events. Their family members might be working and unable to come, so you may be the only support that they have. These extra efforts will work to increase positive student relationships.

One student I taught in 9th grade had struggled in middle school, repeating 7th grade twice and was on the same track freshman year. He was not a bad student, but was acting out so I reached out to him to see what was wrong. He explained that he was one of 8 children at home, his mom worked all the time to support the family, and that he hadn't had anyone to care about him since the passing of his grandfather in 7th grade. After observing him in class and talking to him I knew he had so much unrealized potential that he was not tapping into both academically and socially. It was through my encouragement that he began to get more involved with school and his grades began to improve. I encouraged him to sign up for the student government and to take advanced placement courses. He has since passed several AP courses, became a leader in the student government, created his own male mentoring program and is applying to college. While I believe he had the potential to do all of these things prior to my class, I do believe that the positive relationships worked to encourage this.

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