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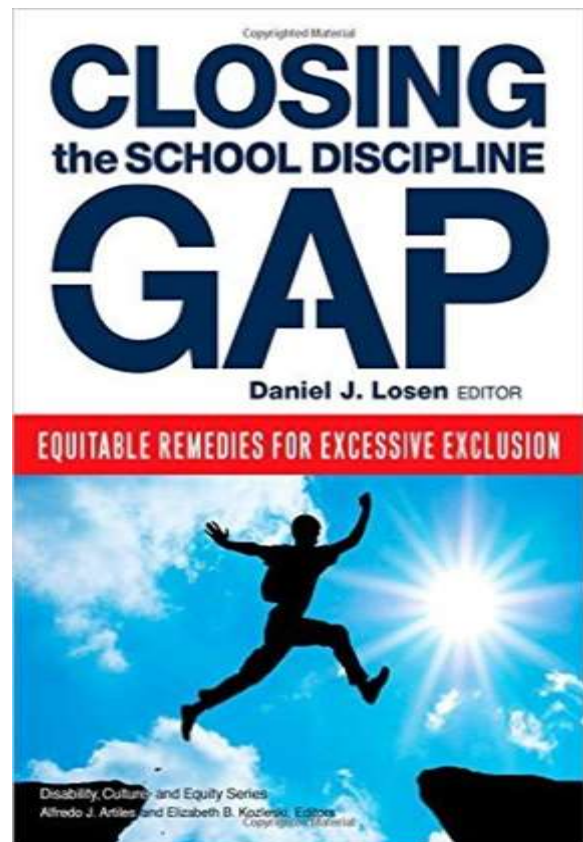
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Educational outcomes have profound life course and health effects, making school disciplinary policies and practice a mechanism of concern. Daniel Losen's most recent edited volume, collectively demonstrates a disturbing relationship between race/ethnicity, school discipline, and school dropout. Building on his previous work (e.g., Losen and Martinez, 2013) Losen's newest contribution to the literature demonstrates powerful correlations between school disciplinary policies of exclusion like suspension, to trajectories of student disengagement, and ultimately dropout. Losen and colleagues convincingly argue that a "discipline gap" is inextricably connected to the "achievement gap," the latter term referring to the inequality of educational outcomes, such as graduation rates, between students of color and their White counterparts. The book's most important contribution to educational research lies in the connection it makes between discipline and school dropout.



Educational research has demonstrated the existence of dramatic inequalities of educational outcomes such as dropout and graduation rates, college completion, and upward social mobility. These inequalities consistently fall disproportionately along lines of race/ethnicity (e.g., Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007), as students who are Black, Latino/a, and Native American are overrepresented in rates of school dropout, also known less pejoratively as *early-school leaving*, or *school non-completion*. Public health research also identifies an education-health gradient in which every additional year of educational attainment corresponds with a commensurate increase in favorable conditions of health and wealth (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Health outcomes include longer lifespan and decreased prevalence of non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, respiratory diseases, and diabetes. The presence of corporeal and fiscal inequalities associated with educational attainment are reason for increased scrutiny of public education, which is charged with the education of *all* students, regardless of race/ethnicity, being labelled (dis)abled, socioeconomic status (SES), or geographic location (urban/suburban/rural). *Closing the school discipline gap* builds upon this educational and public health research by providing data on disciplinary practices in schools. By addressing disciplinary practices of exclusion like suspension, its high frequency of use, and its inequalities (“the discipline gap”) along lines of race/ethnicity, gender, English Language Learner (ELL) status, and (dis)ability status, researchers of dropout are better able to chart the trajectories of school disengagement that often precedes school dropout.

The book’s editor, Daniel Losen (J.D., M.Ed.), is well-suited for this project. Director of the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, whose mission is “to create a new generation of research in social science and law, on the critical issues of civil rights and equal opportunity for racial and ethnic groups in the United States” (Civil

Rights Project, 2015), Losen was also former lecturer in Law at Harvard. Losen assembled a diverse group of scholars, notably Johns Hopkins researcher Robert Balfanz, who is known for writing on issues of school equity, urban education, and race/ethnicity, and Jeremy D. Finn, a distinguished Professor at SUNY Buffalo who is often cited for his work on student engagement (e.g., Rumberger, 2011). The volume holds an added benefit of the endorsement of Stanford’s Linda Darling-Hammond, another eminent scholar of education.

Part I of *Closing* lays the research and theoretical foundations of the school discipline domain for the second half of the book, which presents research on specific interventions and preventions that are supported by empirical research. Chapters in Part I present findings from large state and national samples that: establish the harmfulness of disciplinary exclusion; debunk the myth that those classmates who remain benefit from the exclusion; correlate higher suspension rates by high-security measures; correlate suspension with grade retention, dropout, and involvement with the juvenile justice system; project economic costs associated with suspension-correlated school dropout; show how students with (dis)abilities are suspended at twice the rate of non-dis/abled peers; demonstrate suspension increases with identification with “two or more disadvantaged subgroups” (p.8), and; correlate suspension risk with presence of novice teachers. Part I also explores predictive factors of suspension that schools might control such as student engagement, and student-teacher relationships, and school leader’s attitudes.

Part II presents what are considered the most research-supported responses meant to reduce disciplinary exclusion: restorative practices (in which all involved parties engage in dialogue), teacher training programs focused on improving student engagement rather than simply reducing disciplinary exclusion; state-level policy changes regarding responses to threatening behavior (e.g., the Virginia “threat

assessment guidelines”); social-emotional learning strategies, student support teams, and planning centers; school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS); the reframing of alternative schools as disciplinary exclusion and ultimately their dissolve.

Losen’s closing paragraph reiterates his call for alternative approaches to disciplinary exclusion and presents recommendations for policymakers, teaching professionals, and administrators. Losen suggests that while not abolishing suspension altogether, alternative approaches to youth discipline should be rigorously implemented and should encompass principles of restorative justice and equity. His recommendations range from calls for stronger data collection and top-down accountability regarding disciplinary practices, to the reallocation of funds, and the amendment and enforcement of preexisting federal policies. The recommendations grow organically from the findings of the chapters and are reasonable and executable. Losen does not offer disciplinary reform as a panacea for the socially-embedded inequalities that are represented by skewed rates of suspension; rather, the strongest recommendation is to produce interventions and preventions in those domains which are changeable. Changeable domains include school policies and practices, and state and federal education policy. Recommendations for policy interventions and preventions include: “improving student engagement in learning and fostering a supportive school community” (Losen, 2015, p. 1); the keeping of better school suspension records (e.g., demographic data, nature of the offense); the adoption of restorative justice, increased spending on mental health workers in schools (e.g., psychologists, counselors); enforcement of preexisting federal policies addressing exclusion/discipline of students with disabilities (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [(IDEA)]), and; a fairer distribution of novice teachers.

Expanding further on the theme of changeable domains for intervention and prevention, Losen directs our attention to the role of educators. Paralleling the Staying close to the findings of its contributing authors, Losen identifies two common threads of recourse that are within the control of educators: (1) “the need to improve student engagement” and (2) improving levels of trust and overall relational quality within schools (p. 243). While the first thread of recourse necessitates further critique—presented further on—the second is admirable for its attention to the fundamental importance of equitable human relationships in the project of education.

Educational equity is guiding theme in *Closing*. The book is brimming with alarming statistics and stylized facts that tell a disheartening story of racialized inequality that are nested in a growing post-post-racial social movement of anti-discrimination uprising this year on US college campuses like Missouri State, Yale, and Amherst College. At these institutions of higher education, students of color have protested against racism at all structural levels, including policy. For example, Losen notes that

- 3.45 million students are suspended from school annually (only counting students, not total suspensions, which would amount to approximately 7 million suspensions annually), and those at highest risk of suspension are, in descending, order students who are Black, Native American, and Latino/a.
- Asian students have the lowest rates of suspension, with White students, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islanders following closely behind.
- Male students have higher rates of suspension than female; however, this does not suggest that females are not suspended.
- Black females are suspended at a rate that is eight percentage points higher

than all female students (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

These statistics, like the increased appearance of racialized campus resistances, remind us that “colorblindness” and post-raciality have been, and continue to be myths. The data on disciplinary inequalities contained in *Closing* provides researchers with a window into the backstory of college uprisings. College students of color have defied statistical probability to gain access to higher education, but only to discover that their next phase of education displays racial inequities as well.

The book is commendable for a number of reasons. First, its findings gather in a single place a compendium of data that scathingly critiques the deeply racialized practice of disciplinary exclusion and places in the context of trajectories of student dis/engagement—a process occurring over time which often culminates in school dropout (e.g., Rumberger, 2011). The reader is left with little doubt that if public schools in the US use suspension at all, best practices would dictate its usage for only the most grievous of offences such as acts of violence. Among school dropouts, those who are suspended in the ninth grade are twice as likely to dropout as those who have not been suspended; those who are suspended four or more times are over three times more likely (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015).

Second, the book draws a reasonably firm connection with suspension and the school-to-prison pipeline. Suspension is described as preliminary event in this predictable, racially disproportionate pathway from school institution to juvenile institution, to jails and prisons—students of color bear a disproportionate burden in such an institutional framework. Third, there is good cohesion between all parts of the book: the authors are familiar with each other’s contributions to the text and the chapters are highly integrated.

While a strong contribution overall, *Closing* bears some issues worth addressing.

One area of weakness is the book’s theoretical mishandling of *student engagement*. Student engagement arises in the introduction, conclusion, and multiple chapters, (particularly in Chapters 7 and 11) as an influential variable and outcome, but does not receive its due attention as a theoretical construct. An unfortunate, but not entirely unexpected oversight, this omission leaves the reader with questions about what is most important about dis/engagement and how best to measure it; moreover, the relationship between student dis/engagement with pedagogical tactics and theories of learning—each emanating from its particular ontology and epistemology—remains unclear. In this regard, the usage of the term dis/engagement suffers from the “jingle and jangle” of conceptual haziness that Reschly and Christenson (2012) noted years ago. Broadly speaking, the term is used in the text to refer to interest in schoolwork (*cognitive engagement*) and student behavior (*behavioral engagement*) two of three commonly constructed domains of student engagement (the third is *emotional engagement*) (Reschly & Christenson, 2012).

A second weakness of the volume is the omission of school type (e.g., charter, traditional public school, Catholic school, elite boarding school) and geographic location (urban/suburban/rural) as important categories of data disaggregation. The authors are not entirely to blame for this, as they are limited by the data which they have and must sometimes sacrifice depth for breadth (e.g., using a national data set). However, considering (a) the extraordinary proliferation of charter schooling in the last 10 years, (b) the presence of research that demonstrates a disproportionately lower presence of students labelled (dis)abled and/or English Language Learners, and (c) recent media exposure of larger no-excuses charter organizations who rely heavily on suspension, school type would have been an appropriate disaggregating variable. There is little if no mention of charter schooling as a factor for suspension. Also missing expected attention is the resurgence of

racial segregation via charter schooling (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee & Kuscera, 2014).

Finally, I would consider the book's entrenchment in a number of discourses, some of them highly politicized, as another weakness. The main example of this dynamic is the discourse of evidence-based practice (EBP) found throughout the book (for a critique of EBPs, see Biesta, 2014). There has been a longstanding call by some for the transfer of EBPs from the medical domain into education. One aspect of EBP is the lifting of quantitative research methods over qualitative methods. There is a well-worn demand by politicians, policymakers, pundits, and researchers for empirical, or "gold standard" research such as random-controlled trials (RCT) and multivariate statistics. These research methods are touted by proponents for their ability to provide certainty and objectivity in the field of social science research—which is very different from the field of biophysical sciences, from which EBPs emanate. While valuable tools, these methods are not what they are often held to be: the reliable provider of certain, objective truths about human activity. Other language in the book falls into the trap of pathologizing the individual for a social phenomenon couched in nested levels of family, community, society, and history, for example: "disruptive behavior," isn't adequately critiqued. A qualitative study or component might have helped us understand what it means to be "disruptive" in a system that is so clearly

unjust to youth of color. On the other hand, while some terms evade critique, the overarching message of the book is that systemic injustices in school discipline persist.

Weaknesses notwithstanding, the text is anticipated to be highly influential and widely cited for the potency of its call for a strong revisiting of educational disciplinary policy and practice. The book contributes to the rising social awareness of the continued struggle for racial/ethnic justice in the US, particularly in institutions of education at every level. Education has been the symbol of hope for generations of working-class families, irrespective of race/ethnicity. Whatever purpose one ascribes to education—social mobility, employment, democratic participation, subjectivity, etc.—there is widespread agreement that its outcomes must at least be distributed fairly. The publishing of *Closing* is the good fortune of US families of color, students labelled (dis)abled, and English Language Learners, who have so very much to gain from the books' call for increased fairness in school disciplinary practices.

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