The Discipline Gap: Teachers’ Views on the Over-Representation of African American Students in the Discipline System

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While the achievement gap between African American students and white and Asian students is discussed widely in the media (e.g. Schemo, 2003), the gap in discipline between African Americans and these groups has gained much less attention. Few studies have explored teacher processes that affect the over-representation of African American students in discipline referrals. Teachers decide which students are considered a discipline problem, what is driving the problem, and how to intervene. This qualitative study examines teachers’ implicit theories about the causes of discipline problems, and specifically examines how they consider race and culture in their theorizing. The results show that teachers considered forces inside the school, the adolescent, and the community as causes for misbehavior. Most teachers’ theories were culture- and race-blind and could not account for the discipline gap. Drawing on the teachers’ theories, we present a new framework of Culturally Relevant Discipline that takes into account the ecology of the school, community, and society in understanding discipline problems. This multifaceted framework has implications for culturally and racially conscious solutions to narrow the discipline gap.