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**Educator Perceptions of Adult-Student Relationships, Racial Climate, and Associated
Discipline Techniques**

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SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Abstract

The overuse and misuse of exclusionary and punitive discipline practices in schools have been consistently linked to social and educational inequities across the globe, particularly for students of color. However, there is an ongoing need for a greater understanding of how school climate factors (e.g., adult-student relationships, racial climate) relate to the types of discipline approaches observed, particularly from the viewpoints of educators. The current study used hierarchical multiple regression analyses to investigate teacher, administrator, and staff ($N = 168$) survey responses from four junior high schools where discipline disproportionality for Latinx students had been previously established. Analyses explored how perceptions of adult-student relationships were associated with the perceived use of punitive and positive discipline practices and the potential moderating effect of racial climate. Results suggest that perceptions of more positive adult-student relationships were associated with less punitive discipline, but not meaningfully related to positive discipline approaches (i.e., social-emotional instruction, positive reinforcement). Additionally, racial climate was a significant moderator in the relation between adult-student relationships and punitive discipline techniques, enhancing the inverse relation between positive adult-student relationships and punitive discipline. Implications for theory, research, and practical application are discussed.

Keywords: discipline disproportionality, racial climate, adult-student relationships
punitive discipline, positive discipline

Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature of this research, the district and participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Educator Perceptions of Adult-Student Relationships, Racial Climate, and Associated Discipline Techniques

The task of creating safe, supportive, and effective learning environments for students is a complex and demanding mission for school professionals. Given the diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and learning characteristics of students in the United States and across the globe, school professionals are faced with challenges and opportunities when attempting to foster environments that support a variety of individual needs (Gordon, 2015; Lee & Shute, 2010; Osher et al., 2012;). Currently, the most common methods of responding to student behavioral concerns in U.S. school settings include several forms of punitive and exclusionary discipline, including office disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Fenning & Sharkey, 2012; Welsh & Little, 2018). However, punitive discipline practices in schools are typically ineffective at reducing problem behaviors (American Psychological Association [APA] Task Force on Zero Tolerance, 2008), can be harmful for student academic outcomes (Fenning & Sharkey, 2012), and are often used unfairly with students of color (Skiba et al., 2002). In an effort to support schools in creating more effective learning environments for all students, additional research investigating school factors that may contribute to discipline disproportionality has been recommended (APA Task Force on Zero Tolerance, 2008). The central goal of the current study is to explore the relation between school climate variables and the use of different discipline approaches, within the context of four junior high schools in the United States with documented Latinx discipline disproportionality.

School Discipline Disproportionality

School discipline practices have been recognized as a critical component of school organizational structure for decades (Burns, 1985; Duke, 1977; Knoff, 1984). The philosophy of

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

zero tolerance emerged in the United States in the early 1990s as a discipline protocol for dealing with drug-related and violent crime in schools (APA Task Force on Zero Tolerance, 2008) and became a widely adopted school practice. However, teachers and administrators in schools across the U.S. regularly employ zero tolerance policies towards a range of minor and nonviolent student disciplinary offenses (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1998, 2012). Exclusionary discipline practices are not unique to the United States, though, and are relied upon in multiple countries across the globe (McCluskey, et al., 2008). Scholars argue that increasingly punitive discipline strategies may reflect a type of “criminalization” of most school behavior management systems (Hirschfield, 2008) that mirror broader cultural attitudes and practices of excluding criminals from societal privileges (Welch & Payne, 2012). This common tendency towards exclusionary discipline in schools has resulted in the “school-to-prison” pipeline phenomenon, which reflects institutionalized pathways from schools to the criminal justice system (Hughes et al., 2020).

Moreover, these disturbing discipline trends and outcomes impact students of color, low socioeconomic status (SES), and those with disabilities at higher rates than their representation in school populations (Skiba et al., 2002). Although discipline disproportionality is observed across several subgroups, race/ethnicity has been consistently found to be a significant and independent predictor of disciplinary outcomes (APA Task Force on Zero Tolerance, 2008). While this trend has been most consistently supported for Black students in the U.S. (Skiba et al., 2002), evidence of a similar trend has been found for Latinx students in some studies (Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011), though less consistently in others (Gordon et al., 2000). Additionally, Indigenous students in New Zealand and Australia have been consistently documented to be disproportionately excluded from schooling through suspensions and expulsions and have higher

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

rates of involvement in the juvenile justice system (Gray & Beresford, 2008). Racial or ethnic disparities in the use of punitive discipline appear to be more common in English-speaking countries with more diverse populations. While most available studies surrounding punitive and exclusionary school discipline practices focus on the more formal and documented forms of institutional level discipline (e.g. office discipline referrals, suspensions, expulsions), it is important to view punitive discipline on a spectrum that also includes the less formal punitive interactions that often take place between adults and students in school settings (e.g. yelling, shaming, and isolating). The current study will explore how these and other types of informal discipline practices relate to the associated school climate in a context where discipline disproportionality for Latinx students is an identified inequity.

School Climate

The importance of positive school climates on student development and outcomes has been widely supported by both professional organizations and scholars in the field of school psychology (Zullig et al., 2010). With no single agreed upon definition, school climate is a wide-ranging phenomena made up of interrelated constructs including attitudes, beliefs, values, norms, academic engagement, social relationships, school connectedness, and physical school structure (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). The complex construct is typically measured through self-report of key stakeholders (e.g., students, staff, parents) and can be conceptualized as an aggregate measure of perceptions and experiences of a particular environment (Anderson, 1982; Fan et al., 2011). Due to the complexity of school climate, it can be useful to deconstruct the concept into specific and relevant constructs when exploring its relation to school discipline. The current study will focus on two elements of school climate that are hypothesized to be pertinent to the examination of school discipline practices: Racial climate and adult-student relationships.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Racial climate. Racial climate is defined as “perceptions of race relations, racial fairness, racial treatment, and experiences of racism in school” (Watkins & Aber, 2009, p. 396). Although racial climate is not commonly included as an explicit component of school climate assessments, several recent school climate measurement studies have included conceptualizations and measures of multicultural and racial elements of the school environment, often referred to as *racial*, *interethnic*, or *multicultural* climate (Agirdag et al., 2011; Chang & Le, 2010). With growing evidence indicating that students of color may have differing school discipline experiences than White students (Dessel, 2010; Eccles & Roeser, 2011) and that race continues to emerge as the most consistent student characteristic associated with discipline disparities (Welsh & Little, 2018), it is critical to explore racial elements within school climate studies.

Cultural-ecological theorists have attempted to explain racial and ethnic differences in school experiences as resulting from both individual and institutional influences (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). Although school professionals may not intentionally accommodate students who adhere to the dominant cultural norms, consistent reinforcement of behaviors aligned with dominant values, interactions, and styles provides significant advantages to students that identify with the dominant culture or who have developed the capacity to navigate through the school’s cultural environment (Dessel, 2010). Given the established racial disparities in punitive discipline across schools in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, it is reasonable to hypothesize that many students and school staff are able to recognize these inequities in their immediate environments. While there is emerging evidence that racial climate plays an important role in how students experience their school environment (Voight et al., & Adekanye, 2015; Watkins & Aber, 2009), less is known about how school staff perceive the racial climate in their schools and how this may relate to their own behaviors or classroom management decisions.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Therefore, increased assessment and awareness of racial climate as it relates to school discipline are key in moving towards equitable discipline systems.

Adult-student relationships. Central in the conversations surrounding positive school climate is the quality of social relationships within a school community (Bear & Yang, 2011; Zullig et al., 2010). The social context within a school has been identified as a condition for resilience in the school setting, especially for students who are marginalized and/or underserved (Hopson & Lee, 2007). Positive adult and peer social relationships are also important for the deterrence of antisocial behavior in youth and lower use of weapons (Lee & Shute, 2010; Gregory et al., 2010; Reinke & Herman, 2002). Furthermore, the quality of adult-student relationships in the school setting is consistently identified as being related to student academic engagement, achievement, and social-emotional wellbeing (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008), particularly for students of color and/or economically disadvantaged students (Liew et al., 2009; Meehan et al., 2003; Murray & Zvoch, 2011).

Within the context of school discipline, the social relationships between students and adults appear to be particularly relevant, given the fact that adults are typically responsible for the implementation of discipline techniques. A recent literature review on school discipline disparities highlighted that **subjective decisions made by teachers and administrators, as influenced by discipline policies and/or classroom management styles, may provide more robust explanations for discipline disparities experienced by Black and other minoritized students** (Welsh & Little, 2018). Through this lens, and the plethora of evidence that punitive discipline disproportionately harms students of color, further investigation of potential interactions between racial climate, adult-student relationships, and discipline practices are warranted. In other words, studying school discipline with a specific focus on the associations

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

with racial climate and relational climate may be critical as educators attempt to define and implement equitable school discipline practices.

Equitable Discipline Practices

Considering the established negative consequences associated with punitive and exclusionary practices for many students and society as a whole (APA Task Force on Zero Tolerance, 2008; Arcia, 2006), it is vital to consider alternative and effective strategies for correcting problematic behaviors. Investigation of school characteristics that contribute to social equity in achievement and discipline outcomes have provided information about how schools may effectively serve students of diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Gregory et al., 2011). The concept of *positive discipline* has been discussed in discipline research for decades and is generally described as approaches that focus on the building of optimism, respect, trust and intentionality to nurture adult-student relationships (Schmidt, 1989). Positive discipline theories have emerged within several modern forms of universal social-emotional and behavioral support systems with potential for more equitable school discipline outcomes.

Although no one positive discipline approach has been identified as the “gold standard”; school behavior management systems that are preventative, utilize evidence-based behavioral theories, promote teaching of social-emotional and behavioral skills, emphasize respectful interactions from authority figures, are culturally sensitive, and consider diverse learning needs are most likely to nurture more positive school climates and subsequently improved student outcomes (Osher et al., 2010). Furthermore, when used conservatively, logically, and in conjunction with positive discipline strategies, exclusionary discipline may be more effective as one disciplinary tool in some circumstances (Bear, 2012).

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Two of the most common positive discipline approaches used in the U.S. include School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) and Social-Emotional Instruction (SEI; often referred to as social-emotional learning) which are delivered through multi-tiered systems designed to provide universal interventions that increase in intensity depending on needs (NASP, 2016). In SWPBS, schools provide explicit instruction about behavioral expectations, provide early intervention, focus on positive reinforcement and re-teaching of skills, and adjust intervention intensity based on student need (Netzel & Eber, 2003; Sugai & Horner, 2006). Ensuring that students have the necessary skills and motivation for desired behavior change is a key element to the success of SWPBS as a disciplinary system. While many schools that implement SWPBS have been successful in reducing overall antisocial behavior and student exclusion (Osher et al., 2010), this approach alone has not consistently reduced racial/ethnic disparities in school discipline practices (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Vincent & Tobin, 2010) and has been widely criticized for its emphasis on compliance and deference to dominant (i.e. White) cultural values for expected behaviors (Banks & Obiakor, 2015). Nevertheless, SWPBS persists as one of the most commonly used positive discipline paradigms in schools today despite serious concerns regarding limitations in culturally responsive implementation.

Through the evolution of positive discipline theory and practice, many school leaders have sought to strengthen or complement SWPBIS programs with the simultaneous use of universal SEI systems, which emphasize the development of core social-emotional skills that underlie behavioral regulation (Carr et al., 2002; Osher et al., 2010). Expanding from a more teacher-centered focus of clear behavioral expectations and reinforcement for compliance, SEI is a more student-centered and process-oriented approach which involves formal teaching of self-regulation and social skills to foster social, emotional and moral development (Osher et al., 2010;

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). SEI techniques are aimed at strengthening student capacities for positive interactions and responsible decision-making (Dodge et al., 2006). Combining elements of both SWPBS and SEI has been promoted as a promising approach to reducing problem behaviors without the negative consequences associated with exclusionary or punitive discipline (Osher et al., 2010).

Factors Associated with Teacher Use of Positive and Punitive Discipline Approaches

Schools are comprised of a number of different stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and community collaborators. An important facet of understanding how and why certain school discipline approaches are implemented, is understanding the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Whereas several studies have investigated student perceptions across several domains of school climate (Fan et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2010; Watkins & Aber, 2009; Way et al., 2007; Zullig et al., 2011), racial climate (Agirdag et al., 2011; Chang & Le, 2010) and experiences with discipline (Brown, 2007), there still exists a gap in the literature surrounding teacher and staff perspectives on these interrelated topics. Research on student perceptions of school climate has consistently pointed to inverse relations between exclusionary discipline and/or poor racial climate and positive school climate **in that perceptions of school climate are worse in school environments where students experience more punitive discipline or varying degrees of racial discrimination** (Bryson & Childs, 2018; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013; Watkins & Aber, 2009). However, given the noted discrepancies between student and teacher perceptions of school climate (Gase et al., 2017), particularly in the area of classroom management (Mitchell et al., 2010), it may be helpful to gain more insights into adult perspectives of these classroom-level discipline dynamics. Within the school discipline literature, authors have frequently stated or

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

hypothesized that biased attitudes and practices of teachers and school staff contribute to the overuse of punitive discipline; however, few researchers have investigated teacher and staff perspectives about their perceived use of different discipline practices within their settings.

Current Study

In an effort to better understand what contributes to teacher, administrator and staff discipline decisions, the current study examines how a key school climate factor, adult-student relationships, is related to punitive and positive discipline approaches. In the current study, the term “positive discipline techniques” will be used to refer to both positive reinforcement (PR) and social-emotional instruction (SEI) approaches. The relation between adult-student relationships and discipline has been established in previous studies (Agirdag, 2011; Brown, 2007; Gregory et al., 2011), but less so from the perspective of educators. Additionally, the effect of racial climate on these associations is further explored. Specifically, we are interested in understanding if racial climate enhances/exacerbates the effect of adult-student relationships on discipline. This is an important moderator to examine, as it is possible that any effort to reform school discipline by targeting adult-student relationships will be futile if racial climate (also called respect for diversity) is not fostered. The four U.S. junior high schools where educators were sampled from for the current study resided in a school district where Latinx students are the most prevalent ethnic minority and are disproportionately represented in all forms of exclusionary discipline. Whereas some research has been conducted to investigate discipline disproportionality for Latinx students, results have been inconsistent (APA Task Force on Zero Tolerance, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002, 2005) and, therefore, more research is needed to understand the disciplinary experiences of this population.

Taken together, the current study asks: (a) *Do educator perceptions of adult-student*

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

relationships account for reported levels of PR, SEI, and/or punitive discipline techniques? (b) If adult-student relationships are associated with the use of different discipline approaches, is there a significant moderating effect of racial climate on the adult-student relationship-discipline association? It is hypothesized that the perceived quality of adult-student relationships will be significantly related to the the types of discipline techniques reported, in that perceptions of more positive relationships will be related to more use of positive discipline (i.e. PR, SEI) and less use of punitive approaches. Given the presence of racial discipline disproportionality in the schools of study, it is hypothesized that racial climate will have an enhancing effect on the association between adult-student relationships and discipline approaches.

Method

Participants

Survey respondents include a sample of 168 teachers, school administrators, and staff (i.e., support and office staff) from four junior high schools (serving grades 7 and 8) in a California school district, which represented all of the junior high schools in this district. This reflects a 58% response rate for the total number of teacher/staff members employed across all four schools ($N=168$). Teachers, administrators, support staff (e.g. school counselors, psychologists, nurses, specialists, instructional aides), and office staff (subsequently referred to as “educators”) responded to the web-based questionnaire as part of a district-level initiative to examine various aspects of school climate in their district. Table 1 displays the participants’ demographic information, position, and level of experience. There were no significant differences between subgroups on any of the variables of interest for the current study. For this reason, the participants were grouped as “educators” for analytic purposes.

Procedure

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

The four junior high schools from which educator survey data were collected had documented the existence of discipline disproportionality for Latinx students prior to the current study. According to a districtwide summary presented at a public board meeting (source not included to protect identity of school district), the ratio of Latino male to white male expulsions was 2:1 and suspensions was 3:1. Female expulsions occurred too infrequently to make solid conclusions, however district officials approximated the expulsion ratio between Latina and white females to be 4:1; suspensions were approximately 6:1. The web-based educator survey used in the current study was administered through district email request in conjunction with school efforts to collect preliminary baseline school climate information and to inform plans in implementing a pilot restorative justice program to reduce discipline disproportionality. The district planned to begin pilot programming at the junior high level and therefore focused on these 4 schools at this stage. **Participants were assured that responses were anonymous, voluntary, and confidential. While survey measures always carry the limitation of potential dishonest or inaccurate responding, particularly in circumstances where there are concerns of systemic problems (i.e. discipline disparities), the use of perception measures among key stakeholders can still yield important and useful information about relative perspectives and how people choose to report those perspectives. However, it is important to note that this survey study was only one small part of a larger and multi-faceted approach to data collection and reform planning, as should always be the case in similar efforts. The limitations to this survey study are more thoroughly discussed in the discussion section.**

Measures

School climate. The *Delaware School Climate Survey-Teacher/Staff* (DSCS-T/S; Bear & Yang, 2011) was used to measure educator perceptions of school climate. The DSCS-T/S takes

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

about 20-30 minutes to administer. The school climate section of the measure consists of 24 items which educators respond to using a 4-item Likert scale (1 = *disagree a lot*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *agree a lot*). Previously conducted confirmatory factor analyses indicated a seven-factor solution: adult–student relationships (3 items), student–student relationships (4 items), safety (3 items), clarity of expectations (3 items), fairness of rules (3 items), respect for diversity (3 items), school-home communications (5 items), and one general factor (Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011). In the current study, only items measuring adult-student relationships (e.g. “Teachers care about their students”) and respect for diversity (e.g. “Teachers treat students of all races with respect”) factors are used. The respect for diversity items are theoretically aligned with the construct of racial climate and these terms are used interchangeably throughout the results and discussion sections.

Discipline approaches. The DSCS system also includes a supplemental survey (called the Discipline Technique Survey) designed to measure respondents’ perceptions of the use of positive reinforcement (PR; 4 items; e.g., “Students are often given rewards for being good”), social emotional instruction (SEI; 5 items; e.g., “Students are taught to understand how others think and feel”), and punitive approaches (4 items; e.g., “Students are often sent out of class for breaking rules;” Bear & Yang, 2011). All three factors from the Discipline Technique Survey were used in the current study.

Table 2 displays relevant survey scales and items used for the current study with corresponding reliability coefficients. Bear and Yang (2011) found the DSCS to have concurrent validity with state-level standardized testing scores in English/Language Arts and Mathematics and suspension/expulsion data. Alpha coefficients indicated high reliability of items within each factor (Bear and Yang, 2011), which was also true in the current study sample (alpha = .75 - .96).

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software 18.0. To explore the relations between perceptions of adult-student relationships, racial climate, and discipline techniques, a series of three multiple regression analyses were conducted. For each regression (1 – 3), in the first model (Model 1), the dependent discipline variable (punitive, PR, SEI, respectively) was regressed onto the explanatory variables of adult-student relationships and respect for diversity. Then, if a significant relation was found, a moderation analysis (Model 2) was conducted by including the interaction term (e.g., adult-student relationship x respect for diversity). Multiple regression procedures have been identified as an acceptable and preferred method for the examination of moderator effects, particularly when moderator variables are continuous (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). To reduce issues of multicollinearity all independent and moderator continuous variables were centered by converting variables to “deviation units by subtracting sample means to produce revised sample means of zero” (Frazier et al., 2004, p. 120). In order to protect against inflated Type I error due to the inclusion of multiple explanatory variables in each regression, the Bonferroni adjustment was made ($p < .05/2$ explanatory variables), requiring a more conservative p -value to establish statistical significance ($p \leq .025$; Mundfrom, Perrett, Schaffer, Piccone, & Roozeboom, 2006). It was also hypothesized that educator race/ethnicity might be related to study findings, thus race/ethnicity (i.e., Hispanic/Latinx versus white) was originally included as a dummy variable in the first step of each analysis to control for possible effects. Because the inclusion of race/ethnicity had no significant effect on any of the regression analyses, it was excluded in the final models to achieve greater parsimony (see intercorrelations between Hispanic/Latinx dummy variable and study variables in Table 3).

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Results**Descriptive Results**

To conduct multiple linear regression, the following assumptions must be met: (a) linearity, (b) normally distributed residuals, (c) no multicollinearity, and (d) homoscedasticity. Review of scatterplots showed a linear relationship between independent and dependent variables. Plots of residual and predicted values revealed no significant concerns about normality or homoscedasticity. Intercorrelations show that all independent variables are statistically significantly, but modestly, correlated with the dependent variables (-.21 to .39). The two school climate variables were more strongly correlated with each other (.75), as were the two positive discipline variables (PR and SEI, .65), which is expected given the conceptual relatedness of these constructs (all values below accepted cut-off value of .80; Allison, 1999). Table 3 displays the reliability indexes, means, standard deviations, and skewness and kurtosis (with standard errors) of the independent, moderator and dependent variables, as well as a correlation matrix displaying the intercorrelations between all study variables.

Power analysis. Because the sample size was dependent on percentage of educator response in the district, a post-hoc power analysis was conducted using a statistical software package “G*Power3” (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) to determine achieved power. For the given sample size, there was more than adequate power (i.e., power \geq .80) at the moderate to large effect size level, but less than adequate statistical power at the small effect size level.

Do educator perceptions of adult-student relationships account for reported levels of punitive discipline techniques? If so, does respect for diversity moderate this association?

Table 4 displays results of the multiple regression analysis for all three discipline

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

techniques. For the dependent variable of punitive approaches, Model 1 shows that adult-student relationships (centered) and respect for diversity (centered) accounted for 12.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.122$, $F(2,145) = 10.11$, $p < .001$) in punitive discipline techniques. A statistically significant main effect was found for adult-student relationships and the use of punitive discipline techniques in Model 1 ($\beta = -.30$, $p = .011$). As perceptions of adult-student relationships were more positively rated, teacher/staff perceptions of punitive discipline practices were less prevalent, while controlling for respect for diversity.

To answer the question of the potential moderating effect of the respect for diversity variable, Model 2 included the interaction term for adult-student relationships and respect for diversity, which accounted for a significant proportion (17.5%) of the variance in punitive discipline and explained significantly more variance than the previous model ($\Delta R^2 = .05$, $F(1,144) = 8.74$, $p < .001$; $\beta = -.26$, $t(144) = -2.96$, $p = .004$). Thus, respect for diversity was a significant moderator of the relation between adult-student relationships and punitive discipline techniques (see Figure 1). Analysis of the interaction plot showed that more positive perceptions of adult-student relationships were related to lower perceptions of punitive discipline overall and that respect for diversity enhances this effect. When perceptions of adult-student relationships were more negative, having more positive perceptions of respect for diversity was not related to less punitive discipline. However, at higher levels of adult-student relationships, more positive perceptions of respect for diversity enhanced the inverse association between adult-student relationships and punitive discipline.

Do educator perceptions of adult-student relationships account for reported levels of positive reinforcement (PR) techniques? If so, does respect for diversity moderate this association?

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

For the dependent variable of PR discipline techniques, Model 1 shows that adult-student relationships (centered) and respect for diversity (centered) accounted for 15.8% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.158$, $F(2,146) = 13.71$, $p < .001$) in reported PR techniques. The main effect of adult-student relationships and PR discipline techniques, while controlling for respect for diversity, approached significance ($\beta = .24$, $p = .035$), but did not meet the significance criterion calculated with the Bonferroni correction method ($p \leq .025$). Despite the lack of statistical significance, these variables had a positive association, such that more positive reports of adult-student relationships were associated with greater PR discipline techniques.

Model 2 included the interaction term for adult-student relationships and respect for diversity. This model accounted for only 1% more of the variance in PR techniques than the prior model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.014$), and the interaction term was non-significant ($p = .12$).

Do educator perceptions of adult-student relationships explain reported levels of social-emotional instructional (SEI) techniques? If so, does respect for diversity moderate this association?

For the dependent variable of SEI discipline techniques, Model 1 shows that adult-student relationships (centered) and respect for diversity (centered) accounted for a significant amount of variance (17%) in SEI discipline techniques ($R^2 = 0.17$, $F(2,149) =$, $p < .001$). The main effect of adult-student relationships and SEI discipline techniques, while controlling for respect for diversity, approached significance ($\beta = .23$, $p = .047$), but did not meet the significance criterion calculated with the Bonferroni correction method ($p \leq .025$). Again, despite the lack of statistical significance, these variables had a positive association, such that more positive reports of adult-student relationships were associated with greater SEI discipline techniques.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Model 2 included the interaction term for adult-student relationships and respect for diversity. This model accounted for <1% more of the variance in SEI techniques than the previous model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.004$), and the interaction term was non-significant ($p=.37$).

Discussion

The consistent documentation of discipline disproportionality for students of color and ethnic minorities in schools within and the U.S. and other countries is a serious social justice and racial equity problem that deserves attention from the research community. Although there has been much work done to document the problems that exist surrounding discipline and racial equity, there remains a gap in the literature surrounding the malleable underlying factors that contribute to these problems, which could be the target of intervention and policy change. The current study contributes to this growing body of research by investigating the explanatory and moderating relations between key school climate variables (i.e., adult-student relationships and racial climate) and the use of both punitive and positive discipline approaches. As these data were collected from a district where exclusionary discipline disproportionality was already well documented for Latinx students, the current study provides an analysis of how staff perceptions of relational and racial school climate variables may relate to discipline approaches within this specific context. Deepening our understanding of educator perceptions surrounding these consequential practices may provide valuable insights for systems change efforts and professional development processes.

Results relevant to the first research question, investigating main effects between the relational climate variable (adult-student relationships) and discipline techniques, indicated that teacher and staff perceptions of adult-student relationships were significantly related to perceptions of the use of punitive discipline techniques. Adult-student relationships and racial

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

climate accounted for 12% of the variance in punitive discipline. Adult-student relationships and punitive discipline had an inverse relationship, in that, as teacher and staff perceptions of positive adult-student relationships increased, their ratings related to punitive discipline practices decreased. However, the relations between adult-student relationships and positive discipline techniques (i.e., PR and SEI) were not found to be statistically significant using the Bonferonni adjustment, though they approached significance and were associated in the expected direction. The significant relation between perceptions of adult-student relationships and punitive discipline techniques, but not positive approaches, may suggest that positive adult-student relationships are associated with a reduction in the use (or perception of use) of punitive approaches, but not necessarily a meaningful increase in the use of positive approaches.

One hypothesis for this finding is that punitive discipline interactions and positive relational interactions with students are typically incompatible experiences, and thus it would be logical to surmise that these factors would be inversely related. On the other hand, while the use of positive reinforcement and SEI strategies might result in more neutral relational outcomes, such as compliance or lack of problematic behavior, they may not always be sufficient to produce more positive adult-student relationships, **particularly for minoritized students who may be complying with norms that are not congruent with their own cultures. Even students who master compliance to dominant cultural norms may continue to feel culturally excluded or disconnected from their learning environments, which may also negatively impact their perceptions of racial and relational climates.** Banks and Obiakor (2015) argue that positive relationships are promoted within culturally responsive PBIS systems when respect and caring are not only explicitly taught but also modeled by teachers through interactions with students. **Respect and caring may also be demonstrated by educators**

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

seeking to understand the cultural differences within learning environments and integrating diverse manifestations of these values. The positive discipline questions included in the current study were primarily about tangible actions toward students (e.g. “rewarded”, “praised”, “taught”). What these items do not capture is how teachers and staff actually demonstrate qualities like respect and caring within the context of these positive discipline systems. Thus, this nonsignificant finding between the measured school climate variables and positive discipline techniques may be consistent with the emerging research that suggests practical strategies geared towards behavior modification and instruction of social-emotional skills may not be sufficient for the development of authentic relationships or improving the discipline gap (Welsh & Little, 2018). However, it is critical that these non-significant findings are not overemphasized, as they are not considered sufficient evidence to rule out the potential association between adult-student relationships and use of positive discipline approaches.

Findings of the second research question supported the hypothesis that racial climate (i.e., respect for diversity) was a significant moderator in the relation between adult-student relationships and the perception of punitive discipline techniques. For those who reported more positive adult-student relationships, perceptions of high respect for diversity actually strengthened the inverse relation between quality of adult-student relationships and punitive discipline. The combination of strong adult-student relationships and racial climate was associated with the lowest perceived use of punitive discipline. The fact that perceptions of respect for diversity was a significant moderator of the relation between adult-student relationships and punitive discipline techniques suggests that perceived presence of racial biases and differential treatment based on race may be especially salient in punitive discipline experiences, as reflected in the enduring racial disparities in school discipline data (Partington &

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Gray, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002). This association is also consistent with literature surrounding the relationship between implicit bias and harsh punishments in school discipline (Ispa-Landa, 2018). However, in the current study, for those reporting lower quality of adult-student relationships, higher reported racial climate could not “make up” for the association between poor adult-student relationships and greater perceived use of punitive discipline. This finding that higher ratings of racial climate *and* adult-student relationships were related to lower levels of punitive discipline techniques indicates that both of these elements of the school climate may be critical conditions for schools to focus on within discipline reform efforts.

Limitations

There are several limitations to be noted regarding the current study. First, because this study relied on self-report measures, social desirability may have impacted participants' responses. This may have been further exacerbated by the fact that this study was conducted after initiation of a district-led initiative that was prompted by a federal investigation of discipline practices; thus, it is possible that teachers and staff may have responded to items in a more socially desirable way despite the anonymous nature of the survey. This was reflected by the finding that the climate items (i.e. adult-student relationships and respect for diversity), in particular, were positively skewed. However, while this may reflect a limitation in the current study, it may also reflect a common phenomenon in school climate research in that teachers tend to rate climate variables as more favorable than students in the same setting (Mitchell et al. 2010), possibly because adults tend to have more control over classroom conditions than students do. Furthermore, there is also the possibility that educators who were more interested in school discipline reform efforts were more likely to participate in the voluntary survey. While there is no way to know for certain what may have impacted bias in the school staff responses in the

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

current study, it is also important to consider that school climate ratings are subjective in nature as they are reflections of the raters' perceptions of their environment rather than the realities themselves. Even if this information is biased, the information may still be useful in understanding stakeholder perceptions at any given point in time. To mitigate the impact of these potential factors, particularly for personalized school recommendations, future studies should take into account multiple perspectives and more objective measures of discipline strategies that are used in the classroom (e.g. reward system artifacts, SEI curricula, observations of classroom processes). Larger sample sizes with more representation across educator roles may also provide more nuanced information about differences in perceptions that likely exist between teachers, administration, support staff, etc.

Second, there were some inherent limitations in the measure used for this study that are important to discuss. The DSCS-T/S has strong validity evidence and was developed by renowned researchers in the area of school climate and school discipline (Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011). However, the respect for diversity scale only consists of three items and may represent a narrow aspect of racial climate. Although it is true that a construct can often be measured reliably and validly with even 2-3 items (Worthington and Whittaker, 2006), for a construct as nuanced and important as racial climate we believe that a lengthier scale may be preferable. In addition, the last item on the scale "The color of a student's skin doesn't matter to teachers in this school," may reflect the quality of "color-blindness," which is a perspective that is potentially harmful, as it may disregard the reality of differential racial experiences (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Although the most updated version of this survey (2018-2019) omits this problematic item, it was included in the earlier version used for this study. For this analysis, it was still considered to reflect more positive perceptions of racial climate, as supported by alpha

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

coefficients for the subscale as a whole. However, a more robust racial climate measure would have strengthened the current study.

Third, the current teacher sample was comprised of primarily white females. The sample demographics are generally representative of many schools in the United States (National Center for Information in Education [NCEI], 2012), but a larger and more diverse sample of educators may yield different results, as perceptions of racial climate are likely influenced by personal experience and racial identity. Although teacher race was not found to be a significant explanatory variable in the current study, there may have been too few non-white teachers to detect a measurable difference. In addition, although administrators comprised 6.5% of the current sample, future studies should consider seeking more detailed accounts from administration about their experiences and perspectives on discipline. Even though teachers are the first line of responders when it comes to discipline, it is often administrators who support teachers in discipline and make ultimate decisions about which disciplinary consequences are most appropriate.

Last, the cross-sectional design of this study does not allow for any understanding of causality; we do not know whether school climate variables cause or predict discipline approaches and vice versa. Current results only elucidate the relation between these variables at one point in time. It will be critical that future research advances current findings by using a longitudinal design to explore causality.

Implications and Future Research

Current study findings have important implications for school communities that serve Latinx students, and potentially other marginalized student populations, that are significantly impacted by punitive discipline practices. Specifically, results point to the relation between

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

adult-student relationship quality, racial climate, and use of punitive approaches. Although the direction of the relation between these variables cannot be determined from the current analyses, they do highlight the positive relation between positive adult-student relationships and less perceived use of punitive discipline approaches and the enhancing effect of positive racial climate. Thus, any effort to reduce the use of punitive discipline approaches, will likely need to consider how to strengthen adult-student relationships and improve experiences of racial climate. While the current results support previous research that links punitive discipline to fractured interpersonal relationships and poor school climate (Brown, 2007; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013), further investigation into the types of behavior management strategies that intentionally foster a positive racial climate and strengthen adult-student relationships is warranted.

Racial climate is an aspect of discipline reform and school climate that has historically not been given enough focused attention. Leading school psychology researchers have been calling for the field to place race and racial justice at the center of any effort to address discipline disproportionality (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Gregory, 2018). For example, Gregory and Fergus (2017) explain that any effort to close the racial discipline gap that is “colorblind” is unlikely to be successful. The findings of the present study further suggest that racial climate, in tandem with positive adult-student relationships, is related to the lowest reported perceptions of punitive discipline. It is important to note that improvements in perceptions of racial climate are not possible without actual system and structural changes that are geared towards more equitable and inclusive environments. Some ways to begin this work include discipline policy changes, inclusive and multicultural curriculum, strong integration of culturally responsive practice and implicit racial bias training into school professional development processes (Ispa-Landa, 2018; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011). Explicit and continuous

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

assessment of disaggregated discipline data and across contexts (e.g. classroom, supervision, administrative), as well as student and staff experiences of racial climate, are also critical to ensure that school leaders are taking appropriate and relevant actions toward increasing racial equity (Hughes et al, 2020). In addition, further research that explore similarities and differences of discipline practices across countries with different languages and racial/ethnic compositions may shed some light on factors that may contribute to or protect against harmful discipline practices in schools. These considerations across every layer of school systems may not only improve multiple facets of school climate but could also disrupt the pathways of students from schools to criminal justice systems.

In terms of fostering positive adult-student relationships, it is important that schools do not assume this will be an automatic after-effect of behaviorally focused approaches, like SWPBS and SEI. While these positive discipline systems appear to be promising approaches for improving student behavior and school climate (Netzel & Eber, 2003; Osher et al., 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2006; Vincent & Tobin, 2010), they may not focus intentionally enough on the importance of the quality of the adult-student relationship. The way this is done will likely look different in each school depending on unique contexts, cultures, and classroom dynamics, but regardless the importance of positive relationships in schools is well-supported (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Generally, authoritative discipline styles that are high in both structure (e.g., high expectations and close supervision) and support (e.g., warmth, acceptance, and involvement) are associated with more positive adult-student relationships (Bear and Yang, 2011; Gregory et al., 2011; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Additionally, adult understanding and attention to student perceptions of procedural justice (i.e. perceived fairness of

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

educator decisions surrounding differentiated supports) may contribute to a stronger classroom relational ecology (Pnevmatikos & Trikkaloiotis, 2012).

Overall, comprehensive discipline reform requires attention to the variety of contexts that interact with students and impact discipline decisions, ranging from classroom culture and interpersonal climate to formal policy changes. An emerging and promising framework to consider within discipline reform efforts is school-based Restorative Justice (RJ), which emphasizes a significant reduction or elimination of punitive approaches and is primarily focused on increasing trust, belonging, increasing student voice, and a commitment to social and racial justice (Brown, 2018; Davis, 2019). School-based RJ is a positive discipline framework that is rooted in strengthening relationships and repairing relational harm through restorative practices (e.g. affective dialogue, circle processes, democratic classrooms, conflict resolution) rather than punishment and exclusion. There is increasing awareness and evidence that school-based RJ may not only be a more effective alternative to punitive discipline but may also be a vehicle for building strong relationships, more positive and connected school climates, and equity in school discipline (Fronius, Persson, Guckenburger, Hurley & Petrosina, 2016; Gregory et al, 2016). RJ practices are being increasingly used to address inequitable discipline internationally, including in Australia, New Zealand, the U.K., and Canada (McCluskey et al., 2008). Some scholars have also suggested that school-based RJ is congruent with social-emotional learning systems in that students and adults are provided with more opportunities to actually practice these skills together through the structured relational interactions that are inherent to restorative practices (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). However, even restorative approaches are susceptible to biased application such that schools with higher percentages of Black students are less likely to utilize such practices (Payne and Welsh, 2015). As with any systems change effort,

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

implementation of positive discipline frameworks like RJ should be pursued systematically, with racial and cultural consciousness, and with judicious, resourceful and integrative approaches to avoid unsuccessful attempts (Song & Swearer, 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study serves as another stepping stone on the path toward understanding the complex and nuanced relationship between school climate factors and use of punitive and positive discipline approaches. There is a continuous and urgent need for research that helps elucidate the malleable factors contributing to punitive discipline and disproportionality, as it is a persistent social justice issue. The current study shows that adult-student relationships, as perceived by teachers, administrators and staff, are related to the use of punitive discipline. When adult-student relationships are more positive, less punitive discipline is perceived to be used. Furthermore, racial climate moderates this relationship. Efforts to reduce punitive discipline, particularly in schools like those in the current study, where discipline disproportionality exists, would likely benefit from considering approaches that place adult-student relationships and racial climate at the forefront. As countries across the globe continue to become increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality and religion (Wike, Stokes, & Simmons, 2016), these issues and their solutions will be of critical importance to not just the United States, but the international community at large.

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SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Table 1

Descriptive Information for Participants (N=168)

Sample Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Female	114	68%
Male	54	32%
Ethnicity		
White	114	68%
Hispanic/Latinx	25	15%
Other	14	8%
Prefer not answer/Missing	15	9%
Position		
Classroom Teacher	115	68%
Administrator	11	7%
Support staff	27	16%
Office staff	15	9%
Years of Experience		
0-3	13	8%
4-7	24	14%
8-11	22	13%
12-15	36	22%
16-19	28	17%
20+	45	27%

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Table 2

DSCS-T/S Survey Scales and Specific Items Used within the Current Study

ADULT-STUDENT RELATIONS ($\alpha = .86$)

- Teachers care about their students.
- Teachers listen to students when they have problems.
- Adults who work in this school care about the students.

RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY ($\alpha = .87$)

- Teachers treat students of all races with respect.
- Adults in this school care about students of all races.
- The color of a student's skin doesn't matter to teachers in this school.

PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE ($\alpha = .72$)

- In this school students are punished a lot
- Students are often sent out of class for breaking rules.
- Students are often yelled at by adults.
- Many students are sent to the office for breaking rules.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT ($\alpha = .83$)

- Students are praised often.
- Students are often given rewards for being good.
- Teachers let students know when they are being good.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL INSTRUCTION ($\alpha=.86$)

- Students are taught to feel responsible for how they act.
- Students are taught to understand how others think and feel.
- Students are taught that they can control their own behavior.
- Students are taught they should care about how others feel.
- Students are taught how to solve conflicts with others.

Note. Reliability coefficients are for teachers and staff serving all grade levels. Only scales used for the current study are included in this table.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Table 3

Reliability Indexes, Means, Standard Deviations and Intercorrelations Between the Explanatory Variables (A-S Relationships, Respect for Diversity) and Dependent Variables (Punitive, PR, SEI Discipline)

Variable	Descriptive Analyses						Intercorrelations					
	α	M	SD	Range	Skew	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>School Climate</i>												
1. A-S Relationships	.83	3.35	.51	1.00-4.00	-1.28 (.19)	4.08 (.38)	—	.75**	-.35**	.37**	.39**	-.18*
2. Respect Diversity	.78	3.22	.56	1.00-4.00	-.55 (.19)	1.06 (.38)		—	-.28**	.33**	.38**	-.19*
<i>Discipline Techniques</i>												
3. Punitive	.76	2.11	.48	1.00-3.75	.46 (.19)	.76 (.38)			—	-.21**	-.30**	.03
4. PR	.75	2.89	.45	1.00-4.00	-.28 (.19)	1.82 (.38)				—	.65**	.07
5. SEI	.89	2.80	.54	1.00-4.00	-.63 (.19)	1.80 (.38)					—	.08
<i>Control Variable</i>												
6. Hispanic/Latinx	—	0.18	.39	0 - 1	—	—						—

Note. A-S = Adult-Student; PR = Positive Reinforcement; SEI = Social-Emotional Instruction; M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Table 4

Regression Analyses of Perceptions of Adult-Student (A-S) Relationships, Respect for Diversity, and Use of Punitive, PR, and SEI Discipline Techniques

DV		R^2	Adjusted R^2	ΔR^2	F	B	SE	β	t
Punitive	Model 1	.12	.11	.12***	10.11***				
	IV: A-S Relationships					-.28	.11	-.30	-2.59*
	M: Respect Diversity					-.05	.10	-.06	-0.50
	Model 2	.17	.16	.05**	10.01***				
	IV: A-S Relationships					-.42	.12	-.45	-3.62***
	M: Respect Diversity					-.03	.10	-.04	-0.34
	Interaction term: A-S x RD					-.21	.07	-.26	-2.96**
Positive Reinforcement (PR)	Model 1	.16	.15	.16***	13.71***				
	IV: A-S Relationships					.21	.10	.24	2.12
	M: Respect Diversity					.14	.09	.18	1.57
	Model 2	.17	.16	.01	10.05***				
	IV: A-S Relationships					.14	.11	.17	1.33
	M: Respect Diversity					.15	.09	.19	1.68
	Interaction term: A-S x RD					-.10	.07	-.14	-1.57
Social Emotional	Model 1	.17	.16	.17***	15.30***				
	IV: A-S Relationships					.23	.12	.22	1.96
	M: Respect Diversity					.21	.11	.22	1.96

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Instruction	Model 2	.18	.16	.00	10.45***				
(SEI)	IV: A-S Relationships					.18	.13	.18	1.44
	M: Respect Diversity					.22	.11	.23	2.00
	Interaction term: A-S x RD					-.07	.08	-.08	-0.89

Note. IV = independent variable; M = moderator variable; DV = dependent variable; * $p < .025$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND POSITIVE AND PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

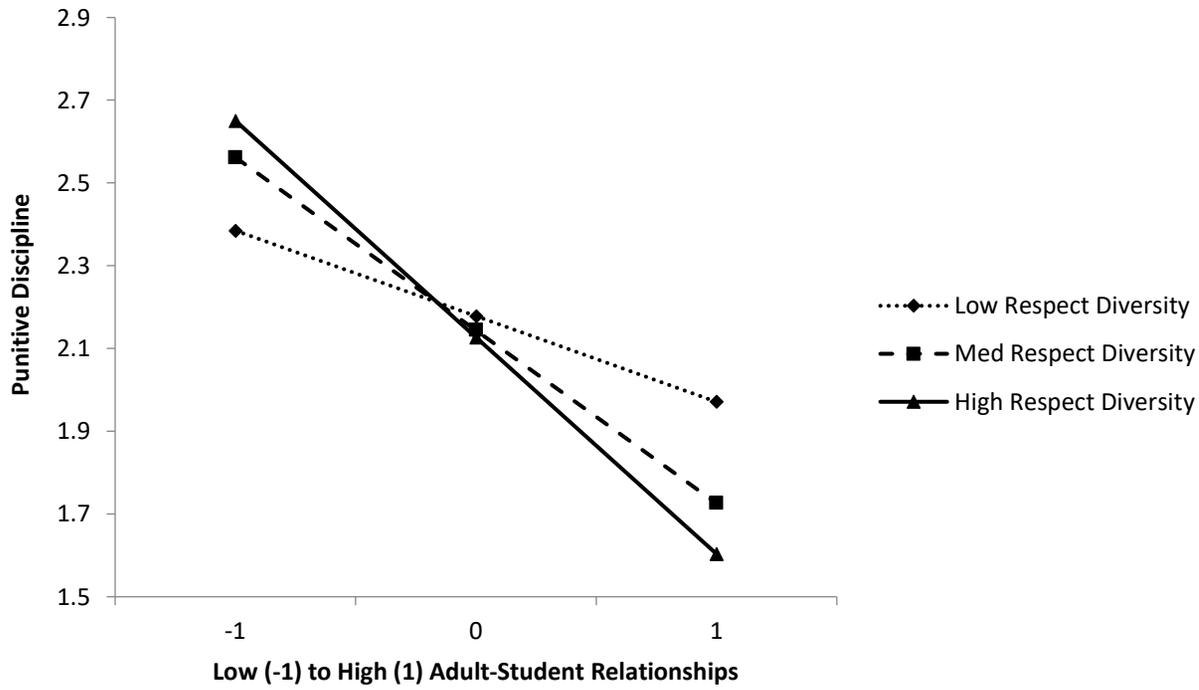


Figure 1. Examination of the Adult-Student Relationships x Respect for Diversity interaction for teacher/staff perceptions of use of punitive discipline techniques.