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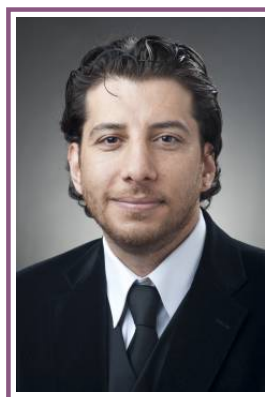


## Equity Alliance Blog

Mar 13, 2015

# Beyond the Color of Discipline: Radical Possibilities for Culturally Responsive School Discipline by Aydin Bal

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**Aydin Bal is an assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Professor Bal studies racial disproportionality and capacity building in local education agencies for systemic transformation. His recent research projects aims at developing culturally responsive intervention methodologies for ecologically valid, socially just, and sustainable transformations in schools. As a practitioner, Professor Bal has worked with youth from historically marginalized communities and refugees who experience behavioral difficulties. He is directing a statewide research project, Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.**

Youth from nondominant cultural and linguistic backgrounds are disproportionately exposed to exclusionary and punitive school disciplinary actions (e.g., detention, suspension, and expulsion) and placed in special education for emotional disturbance (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). The racialization of school discipline has a long history (Children's

Defense Fund, 1975). These disparities hold today, with African American, Latino, and Native American students disproportionately subjected to harsher punishments for less objective reasons such as disrespect, insubordination, or excessive noise (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2012). Racial disproportionality in behavioral outcomes has been a major social justice problem that contributes to unacceptable and detrimental consequences in the lives of nondominant youth, their families and teachers and the society as a whole (Noguera, 2003).

In 2011, I developed the Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS) to operationalize cultural responsiveness in the content of PBIS. The CRPBIS framework is a theory of systemic transformation for building culturally responsive behavioral systems in local schools (Bal, 2011). In the CRPBIS framework, cultural responsiveness is operationalized as an inclusive problem solving team of multiple local stakeholders that aim to examine and renovate behavioral support systems in their local schools (Bal, 2011). To provide specific guidelines to form and run this problem solving process, I developed a methodology of systemic change called *Learning Lab* (Bal, 2011, 2012a).

The Learning Lab methodology was adapted from Yrjö Engeström's [theory of expansive learning and the change laboratory methodology](#) (Engeström, 1987; 2011). The change laboratory was grounded in Vygotsky's Marxist psychology and has been successfully used in health care, finance, telecommunication, and education for organizational redesign (Engeström, 2011). The Learning Lab methodology provides specific guidelines for building authentic family-school-community partnerships to develop locally meaningful and sustainable systemic solutions to racial disproportionality in behavioral outcomes (Bal, 2011, 2012a; Bal, Thorius, & Kozleski, 2012).

In 2012, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction funded [the CRPBIS Project](#). In the first phase, the CRPBIS research team analyzed racial disproportionality in the state. We found that African American students were seven times and Native American and Latino students two times more likely to be removed from schools due to disciplinary reasons in Wisconsin (Bal, Betters-Bubon, & Fish, 2013). Then we moved into the local schools that had produced the racial outcome disparities. The Learning Labs have been formed in three Wisconsin schools with two objectives: to unite local stakeholders in an inclusive problem-solving process and to renovate behavioral support systems to be culturally responsive.

The moral purpose of the Learning Lab is [participatory social justice](#) (Bal, 2012b). Participatory social justice is about nondominant communities' equal access and influence on decision-making activities. Participatory social justice asks who makes the decisions in our schools? Who determines what disrespect, insubordination, or

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excessive noises mean and how to respond to behavior problems? [See the photo](#) taken during a House Oversight and Government Reform hearing on religious freedom and birth control rule. What did you notice? On this “expert” panel on birth control, there are no women.

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The Learning Lab realized participatory social justice in two ways (Bal, 2012b): First, the sociodemographic diversity of the CRPBIS schools was represented in Learning Labs. For example, in 2013-2014, Martin Luther King (MLK) High School (a pseudonym) student body was comprised of 55% White, 14% Black, 14% Hispanic, 10% Asian, 6% two or more races, and less than 1% Native American. The school's PBIS team had 15 White school staff. The Learning Lab formed at MLK had 13 members: 6 school staff (1 Black, and 1 Hmong, 4 White), 3 parents (1 Black, 1 Hmong, 1 Latina), 3 community members (1 Black, 1 Latino, 1 White) and 1 student (Latino):

Second, Learning Lab activities were strategically designed to make sure that all members participated in the problem-solving process as equal partners. The stakeholders in the Learning Labs have examined school cultures, exclusionary and punitive disciplinary practices, and disproportionality within their schools and the state. In addition, participants at the middle and high school Learning Labs developed a new behavioral support system in 7-9 meetings during 2013-14 academic year. The new behavior support systems were responsive to diverse experiences, the goals of the whole school community and to the existing resources, initiatives, and needs within their school and the communities that they served. In the 2014-15 school year, they are implementing the culturally responsive systems in their schools.

The Learning Labs have functioned as research and innovation sites not only for the CRPBIS schools but also for the school district, state's education agency, and the research team to test and improve tools for facilitating and sustaining ecologically valid systemic transformations in the district. The school district that participated in the CRPBIS Project is now working with the research team and the Learning Lab members to scale up this methodology for the whole district. Moreover, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction will be utilizing the tools developed in the CRPBIS Project such as the interactive data maps showing the district and school level disproportionality and community resources in the state of Wisconsin ([see the Maps Opportunities and Risk](#)).

In the age of standardization with the constant and coordinated attacks against public education, education leaders and practitioners across the nation find themselves between a rock and a hard place juggling multiple tasks and demands while facing lessening resources and opportunities to reflect on their practice, experiment, and collaborate with other practitioners, students, and families. The Learning Lab provides a research-based structure for building productive family-school-community coalitions (Bal, Kozleski, Schrader, Gonzales, & Pelton, 2014).

Reflecting on the Learning Lab process, Es, a Hmong parent, pointed out, “I graduated from [MLK], my kids graduated from there, and I think this is the first time I heard about having a group with teachers, parents, and administrators get together to talk about what we should do to improve or keep the kids in school.”

Grant, the student member of the MLK Learning Lab, stated:

We did something you know. It's that sense of accomplishment...We brought all sorts of parties to the table—the admins, the parents, the students, they all have different views and problems they see and how they should be fixed. Even though it might not be the real solution or the real problem, they bring just that one piece of information that can be crucial to what we're trying to accomplish.

All in all, the CRPBIS project has been a productive experience for all parties involved and showed the possibilities of systemic transformations with local stakeholders (for the preliminary results of a Learning Lab implementation at an elementary school, see Bal et al., 2014). Next, I outline key insights from the CRPBIS study.

### **From individuals to context**

Historically, special education research has mainly focused on the individual. It aims to identify individuals' abilities and disabilities and to change their behaviors and thoughts. Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) expanded this unit of analysis by considering the whole school context and providing positive school climates and timely and research-based behavioral supports for all students (Sugai et al., 2000). PBIS is one of the most important innovations in special education and has a significant potential for improving schools. However, the PBIS scholarship has not completely solved two significant issues in vastly diverse local schools: Racial disproportionality and contextual fitness of PBIS implementations (Sugai, O'Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011).

PBIS was found to reduce office discipline referrals and discipline recidivism (Bradshaw, Mitchel, & Leaf, 2010). However, White students benefited the most from these changes. African American, Latino, and Native American students remained overrepresented as recipients of discipline referrals (Vincent & Tobin, 2011). In response, schools and districts use their already lessening resources on professional development (PD) workshops to increase educators' self-awareness about race, racial biases, and disproportionality.

This approach solely focuses on the outcome (disproportionality) –at the expense of targeting systems – and changing educators' perceptions as the solution. While self-awareness is important and necessary, this remedy ignores the larger systemic factors such as institutionalized racism and how individual, social, and institutional factors play out in actual, day-to-day practices (e.g., deficit-based ideologies and tools and practices that privileges the dominant group cultural practices and interests) (Artiles, 2011).

### **From behavioral outcomes to systemic transformation**

Racial disproportionality in school discipline is a persistent, complex systemic problem. It demands persistent, complex systemic solutions. Disproportionality is a symptom of larger structural problems and the racial opportunity gaps from health care, to law enforcement, to housing, and education (Artiles, 2011). Understanding racialized education outcomes (e.g., suspension/expulsion, special education identification, academic achievement, and drop out) is important but not enough. If we only focus reform efforts on tracking and changing outcomes, we may end up with over simplistic explanations for the racial disproportionality problem: Either practitioners have racial prejudice or students of color have more behavioral problems. Therefore, the subsequent remedies focus on changing the minds of individual practitioners and/or students.

Currently, there is an exceedingly popular theory in education used to explain racial disproportionality with educators' implicit or subconscious racial bias. The implicit bias theory assumes practitioners have involuntary racial biases. And these implicit biases influence practitioners' actions, specifically when they need to make snap judgments, and thus it results in disproportionality. This explanation has quickly gained popularity in other fields where enduring racial disparities exist such as law enforcement.

In the wake of recent visible cases of police brutality toward black and brown people across the United States, F.B.I. director [James B. Comey](#) gave a speech on the racialization of law enforcement. Comey raised the subject of the explicit racial bias and suggested to increase self-awareness toward racial biases among law enforcement officers. The Department of Justice's recent report on the Ferguson Police Department in relation to killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old *black boy*, challenged Director Comey's explanation. The report highlights the deep structural problems, socially unjust practices, and the institutionalized racism that involves but goes beyond individual members of the department. Some of the structural issues are underrepresentation of people of color in the police department, constant abuse and violation of the rights of African American civilians, and generating revenue through law enforcement rather than ensuring the safety of all residents (see [the report](#)).

The implicit bias theory does not offer any actionable information for educators and policy makers to take an action except "training" practitioners to develop self-awareness toward their subconscious biases that are neither observable nor measurable. The formulation of racism as an unconscious individual attribution individualizes racism locating the problem within isolated individuals. Moreover, it makes invisible deep structural, material factors and takes the responsibility away from the institutional cultures, practices, and policies that serve the interests of dominant groups and further marginalize nondominant communities. Subsequently, the individualization of racism buries racism deeper into individuals' subconscious and ends up endorsing a logic akin to Bonilla-Silva's (2014) powerful work on color-blindness described as, [Racism without racists](#).

Racism is not a psychological residue of a bygone era. Racism is a living and evolving infrastructure created and constantly renovated. It has a purpose and serves a function. For centuries, racism has given unjust benefits for white and wealthy citizens to take advantage of others' labor, bodies, lands, and ideas. Racism has also created a culture with material and ideological tools for dominant groups to hoard privileges at the expense of nondominant groups and to rationalize those privileges (see racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and eugenics).

Racism is materialized in education, public transportation, law enforcement, water supply systems, housing, and health (for the racialization of housing and ready access to healthy and affordable food, see [the United States Department of Agriculture's maps for food desserts](#)). In this sense, the color of school discipline is just another shade of the color of economic and social structures in the United States.

Critical educators taught us that the function of schools is not to challenge but to reproduce existing social hierarchies based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability (Apple, 2013; Anyon, 2005; Artiles, 2011). In U.S. schools, nondominant communities' ways of acting, speaking, and being have been devalued and pathologized (Erickson, 2009). The default mode of U.S. schools is marginalization of nondominant communities and maintaining racial privilege. If the education system is not intervened continuously and strategically, it is most likely to produce the similar outcomes that have been produced for decades. Forming democratic, inclusive, and socially just schools requires bold and persistent experiments in practice by practitioners that inform and are informed by research.

### **The color of academia**

Academia has a long history of marginalization of people of color. Research fields that exclude people of color in the knowledge production processes cannot make apt solutions to the racial disparities found in practice.

Individuals from nondominant cultural and linguistic backgrounds have not been equally included in empirical studies in special education (Artiles, Trent, & Kuan, 1997; Trent et al., 2014). On the other hand, the results of those studies are often presented as evidence-based practices for all students (Klingner, Sorrells, & Barrera,

2007). Moreover, the nation's most prestigious research institutions do not adequately recruit and retain scholars of color; thus exclude their diverse voices, lived experiences, and knowledge in academic discourses. To illustrate, conduct a quick search on [the top 10 special education programs](#). To what extent does the faculty body in those programs represent cultural and linguistic diversity in U.S. schools?

If scholars of color end up finding a place in academia, they face greater structural and social barriers to make their contributions (Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, & Galindo, 2009). In daily workings of academia, scholars of color are constantly challenged to justify and defend their presence and their research. Specifically when they study race, racial inequalities, or social justice, their research is often challenged as racially motivated, biased, and unscientific (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008). Considering the historical role that academia has played in reproducing and justifying racial supremacy (see [the eugenic movement](#)), the color of academia influences how we understand and dismantle the color of discipline.

The racialization of discipline or policing black and brown bodies in schools is a complex systemic problem that requires complex systemic solutions that are responsive to the experiences and interests of all local stakeholders. Any attempts to disrupt and transform an unjust education system and thus impact its outcomes require researchers, practitioners, families, and community members to engage in a sustained, critical dialogue as equal partners to develop and test ideas for systemic improvement (Bal, 2011, 2012a). In such reciprocal relationships, practice and research will inform each other generate what Anyon (2005) calls "radical possibilities" for building democratic schools from the ground-up with (not for) local stakeholders.

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