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Student Misbehavior In K-12 Classrooms: Discipline vs. Support

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Abstract

Student misbehavior in K–12 classrooms is often addressed through disciplinary actions such as suspension or punishment, yet these approaches do not always address the root causes of behavior. This paper examines student misbehavior through an interdisciplinary approach that includes psychology, education, and sociology or policy. Psychological perspectives highlight the role of emotional and developmental needs in shaping behavior, while educational perspectives emphasize the importance of classroom management and student engagement. Sociological and policy perspectives reveal how disciplinary practices can impact students on a larger scale, particularly through exclusionary discipline. By integrating these disciplines, this paper argues that supportive approaches, including strong classroom management and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), are more effective than punishment alone in improving student behavior and long-term outcomes.

Student misbehavior is a common challenge in K–12 classrooms and often creates frustration for teachers and school staff. Many schools rely on disciplinary actions such as suspensions or punishment to address disruptive behavior. However, these approaches do not always address the root causes and can lead to negative outcomes for students. While punishment may stop behavior temporarily, it does not always help students understand or improve their actions in the long term. Because of this, it is important to look at student misbehavior as a more complex issue. When examining this topic through multiple disciplines, including psychology, education, and sociology or policy, it becomes clear that student behavior is influenced by a variety of factors. Students’ emotional and developmental needs, classroom environments, and school discipline systems all play a role in shaping how students behave. Instead of viewing misbehavior as simple defiance, these perspectives show that behavior is often connected to deeper causes. When these ideas are considered together, supportive approaches that focus on understanding, prevention, and structure are more effective than punishment alone in improving both student behavior and long-term success.

Student misbehavior is often connected to underlying emotional and developmental factors rather than intentional defiance. Research by Sun and Shek (2012) shows that classroom misbehavior is frequently influenced by students’ emotional experiences, social challenges, and unmet needs. This means that behavior in the classroom can reflect stress, frustration, or difficulty managing emotions, rather than a simple choice to misbehave. When teachers take time to understand what may be causing a student’s behavior, they are better able to respond in ways that are supportive instead of purely disciplinary. In a real classroom setting, this can look very different from what teachers might initially assume. A student who refuses to complete work or constantly talks during instruction may not simply be trying to disrupt the class. That

student could be overwhelmed by the material, struggling to focus, or dealing with challenges outside of school. Without understanding these underlying causes, a teacher might respond with punishment, which could make the situation worse. For example, removing a student from the classroom might stop the behavior in the moment, but it does not help the student learn how to manage their emotions or improve their behavior moving forward. Understanding behavior in this way allows teachers to respond more effectively. Instead of immediately disciplining a student, a teacher might check in with them, provide additional support, or adjust instruction to better meet their needs. This approach helps students feel understood and supported, which can reduce the likelihood of continued misbehavior. It also encourages students to develop better emotional regulation skills over time. This idea connects directly to what happens in the classroom, since meeting students' emotional needs can influence how they behave and engage in learning. When students feel supported, they are more likely to participate and stay focused. This shows that behavior is not just an individual issue, but something shaped by both internal experiences and external environments. Recognizing this connection is an important step in moving away from punishment-based responses and toward more effective solutions.

What happens in the classroom itself plays a major role in student behavior. Effective classroom management helps prevent disruptions before they begin. Gage and MacSuga-Gage (2019) explain that when teachers establish clear expectations, remain consistent, and build positive relationships with students, overall engagement increases and disruptive behavior decreases. Instead of reacting to behavior after it occurs, strong classroom management focuses on creating an environment where misbehavior is less likely to happen. In practice, this can be seen in classrooms where routines and expectations are clearly established. When students know what is expected of them and understand classroom procedures, they are more likely to stay on

task. For example, a teacher who begins each day with a consistent routine and clearly communicates expectations can reduce confusion and prevent disruptions. On the other hand, a classroom without structure may lead to more misbehavior because students are unsure of what they should be doing. Building relationships with students is another important part of classroom management. When students feel respected and supported by their teacher, they are more likely to respond positively and follow expectations. This connection can make a significant difference in how students behave. A teacher who takes time to get to know their students and create a positive classroom environment can often prevent issues before they start. This also connects to the understanding of students' emotional needs. A structured and supportive classroom helps students feel more secure, which can reduce anxiety and improve behavior. When students are engaged and feel comfortable in their environment, they are less likely to act out. This shows that effective classroom management is not just about control, but about creating a space where students can succeed both academically and behaviorally.

School discipline policies also play a major role in how student behavior is addressed. Research from Education Week (2023) shows that practices such as suspension and exclusionary discipline are often ineffective and can negatively impact students' academic progress. When students are removed from the classroom, they miss valuable instruction time, which can make it harder for them to keep up with their peers. This can lead to frustration and continued behavioral issues. In addition, The Education Trust (2021) highlights that these disciplinary practices often disproportionately affect marginalized groups. This creates additional challenges and contributes to existing inequalities in education. When certain groups of students are disciplined more frequently or more harshly, it can impact their academic success and overall school experience. This shows that discipline is not just about individual behavior, but also about how systems

within schools operate. Using punishment as a primary response to misbehavior can create long-term consequences. Students who are repeatedly disciplined may begin to feel disconnected from school, which can lead to decreased motivation and engagement. Instead of improving behavior, these practices can sometimes make the situation worse. This is especially true when the underlying causes of behavior are not addressed. When looking at this issue alongside psychological and classroom factors, it becomes clear that discipline alone is not enough. While consequences may be necessary in certain situations, they should not be the only approach. Schools need to consider how their policies impact students and whether those policies are helping students improve. This highlights the importance of moving toward more balanced and supportive approaches to discipline.

Due to the limitations of punishment-based approaches, many schools are beginning to shift toward more supportive strategies. One example is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, also known as PBIS. This approach focuses on prevention, teaching expectations, and creating a positive school environment. According to the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (2018), PBIS helps improve behavior by encouraging positive actions and providing support for students who need it. In a classroom setting, this might look like teachers recognizing and reinforcing positive behavior instead of only focusing on negative actions. For example, acknowledging when students follow directions or stay on task can encourage them to continue those behaviors. This creates a more positive environment where students feel motivated to succeed. PBIS also includes additional support for students who may need extra help. Instead of immediately turning to punishment, teachers and schools can provide interventions that address the root causes of behavior. This might include small group support, check-ins with students, or adjustments to instruction. These strategies help students develop the skills they need to improve

their behavior over time. This approach brings together ideas about emotional development, classroom management, and school systems. It recognizes that behavior is influenced by multiple factors and that effective solutions must address all of them. By focusing on support instead of punishment, schools can create environments that promote both positive behavior and academic success.

Looking at student misbehavior through multiple disciplines helps create a more complete understanding of the issue. Emotional and developmental factors explain why students may act out, classroom practices show how behavior can be prevented or managed, and school policies reveal how larger systems influence student outcomes. Each of these areas provides important insight, but none of them fully explain the issue on their own. When these perspectives are combined, it becomes clear that effective solutions must address both individual and systemic factors. Teachers need to understand their students and create supportive classroom environments, while schools must also examine their discipline policies and practices. This combined approach allows educators to move beyond simple punishment and toward strategies that focus on long-term improvement. Understanding the connections between these disciplines also highlights the importance of balance. Structure and expectations are necessary, but so is support and understanding. When both are present, students are more likely to succeed. This interdisciplinary approach provides a more effective way to address student misbehavior and improve outcomes for all students.

Student misbehavior in K–12 classrooms is a complex issue that cannot be solved by punishment alone. Behavior is influenced by a combination of emotional needs, classroom environments, and school policies, all of which must be considered when addressing the

problem. While discipline may still be necessary in some situations, relying on it too heavily can lead to negative outcomes and does not address the root causes of behavior. Supportive approaches, including strong classroom management and systems like PBIS, offer more effective solutions by focusing on prevention and student support. These strategies help create positive learning environments where students feel understood and are more likely to succeed. Overall, a balanced approach that includes both structure and support is the most effective way to improve student behavior and create better outcomes in schools.

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