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SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin. Watson professor and sociologist, Jayanti Owens is an expert in unpacking the ways racial discrimination affects American life. This fall Owens is teaching two classes on the sociology of discrimination. She assumed there were similar classes taught other universities, but as she started preparing the curriculum she was surprised by what she found.

JAYANTI OWENS: I started looking around the country at syllabi expecting, surely, this is a cause that every college or university is teaching, and guess how many syllabi I found on this topic? One.

SARAH BALDWIN: On this episode, we talked about Owens' is research in an arena where racial discrimination has some of its biggest and most disturbing consequences, our schools.

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Jayanti, thank you so much for coming in to talk to us today. It's my pleasure to be here. I was hoping we could talk about a study that you just published where you look at different treatments of black and white students by teachers and specifically expulsion and suspension rates of five to nine-year-olds. And when I read that just as an aside I was like since when do five-year-olds get expelled? That was incredible.

But what you found was really shocking, and I'm hoping you can unpack it for us. So you found that not only are black and white students disciplined differently for the same behaviors but that difference accounts for almost half the racial gap in suspensions and expulsions. Just explain what that means, and then if you can talk about bias and interpretation how they come into play, that'd be great.

JAYANTI OWENS: Absolutely, so you're totally correct. The overall finding of the study is that African-American students in elementary school between kindergarten and third grade are about 3 and 1/2 times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts, and this is not new information. There's been a lot of really important reports by the Office of Civil Rights and the US Department of Education and others that have documented this disparity. But what's new about this study is that we are able to actually disentangle the various sources that lead to that disparity. And what we find, as you accurately say, is that about half of the overall racial gap

that I just mentioned in school suspension and expulsion in early elementary school can be traced back to differences in the ways that African-American compared to white kids who enter school with the same behavior problems are differentially treated by way of school suspension.

SARAH BALDWIN: Can you describe some of the behaviors that are being disciplined?

JAYANTI OWENS: Yeah, so the behaviors that we measure are things related to sitting still, paying attention, the way that teachers perceive these things on the part of kids, other things like getting along with other students, getting into fights, the types of behaviors that tend to be correlated with misbehavior and lead to school discipline in general. But what's really powerful about what we're able to do is we're able to get teachers to rate at the start of kindergarten every single kid in our study in terms of these developmental scales that are frequently used to measure a kids behavior problems and that we know from other work are already linked to school suspension and expulsion. And so what we are able to say is that four black and white kids who are perceived as having the same behavior problems in the part of teachers on in the eyes of teachers themselves are themselves differentially treated, right.

So one could argue, oh, perhaps, that kids don't actually have the same behavior problems. Perhaps, if parents are reporting the behavior problems or the kids themselves are reporting the behavior problems, you might see differential treatment or harsher treatment of African-American kids. But what we're able to say is, no, this is actually for kids who are rated as being comparable in their behaviors by the very teachers that are involved in the disciplining process.

SARAH BALDWIN: So am I understanding that you used existing reports, the governmental reports, and also did your own study of actual children and teachers?

JAYANTI OWENS: So we were able to use a really powerful data set called the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study, which is a sample of about 5,000 children who are born in large urban centers around the United States disproportionately to mothers who are not married. And what's really powerful about the sample is that these are the types of kids, both black and white, who are already at risk of being suspended from school because of everything we know about residential socioeconomic segregation. These are the types of kids that are in the types of urban environments that go to schools that practice, sort of, suspension and expulsion in the first place.

SARAH BALDWIN: Which the rates of which have increased a ton, like 40% in the past few decades.

JAYANTI OWENS: School suspension rates went up really dramatically up until about 2010. They actually have started to decline a bit since then. But what's been really striking is that even though the overall rates of suspension have declined, racial disparities in suspension remain tremendous.

SARAH BALDWIN: OK, so you have teachers looking at kids differently. Why?

JAYANTI OWENS: So this issue of why the same behaviors could be perceived differently on the part of teachers is I think really heavily draws on the psychological literature around stereotyping and the factors that being sort of raised in the United States or living in this society, we are inundated with messages that are related to racial stereotypes and negative racial stereotypes oftentimes about African-American kids, boys in particular. And this can lead teachers to expect certain types of misbehavior and be on the lookout for this type of misbehavior on the part of certain kids but not others. And in fact, there are some really interesting studies that show that if you show teachers a videotape of kids just playing naturally in the classroom and there's no misbehavior happening but you tell the teachers where is the misbehavior happening, their eyes will automatically look to the African-American students at the table or the students of color more broadly but especially the African-American students.

SARAH BALDWIN: You mentioned that this-- a lot of this is taking place in urban schools. Where particularly-- where specifically were you looking?

JAYANTI OWENS: So one of the other things that we found that was extraordinarily shocking to me was we-- our sample contained students or kids born in the largest urban centers around the country, but a lot of students attend schools even if they're born in cities in a range of different contexts, right. So suburban context, urban context, rural contexts. And what we found that was really shocking to me was that actually the largest gaps in discipline, right, the largest racial gaps in discipline are actually not in urban schools. They're in-- they're in predominantly white schools and, in particular, predominantly poor white schools.

But in addition to that, we looked at where is differential treatment, meaning black and white kid enter school with the same behavior problems the black kid is a lot more likely to get suspended, where does that happen most? And it turns out that that is actually concentrated within quite affluent white schools. So what I think this illuminates in my mind is this idea that it's not-- there's a lot of talk out there about urban schools being really punitive and being really harsh to students, right. And while that is true, that doesn't actually necessarily mean that differential treatment is greatest within those schools, right.

The differential are more harsh treatment of African-American students actually isn't concentrated within those schools, which once you think about it kind of makes some sense. Because if certain schools are more punitive in general as an overall orientation, they're probably going to be equally so to white students and black students. Of course, we don't talk about it that much, because there aren't that many white students that go to urban schools because of the way that racial residential segregation plays out in our country.

But within the predominantly white schools where there are black students, we actually see a lot more harsh treatment of black students. So there are some really interesting psychological theories that can help-- sort of help us understand this, and one of them has to do with the racial salience, which is this idea that racial stereotyping and the priming of race in the minds of teachers and other students and really just any of us in our society, right, is a major factor. So when we are an environment that is predominantly white being black makes you stand out a lot more, and that can trigger racial stereotypes. And when that triggers racial stereotypes, it's a lot more likely to lead to the more punitive sanctioning. So we really have a lot more work to do from a policy perspective around trying to disentangle what specifically is leading to these disparities, but we do know that they are not as large within minority-- predominantly minority schools as many of us would have thought.

SARAH BALDWIN: So besides being incredibly unjust, why does what you find matter? Talk to us about the consequences of using disciplines that remove kids from the classroom. Like, what happens to those kids? And why do we as a society care?

JAYANTI OWENS: So I would say my answer to that is twofold. So on the one hand, we know there's a bunch of research showing that being suspended and expelled from school has really serious consequences for kids own well-being and their future academic achievement and their likelihood of dropping out from school as opposed to completing school, completing high school, their overall rates of educational attainment-- so how far they go down the school trajectory-- but also for their interaction with the criminal justice system and other, sort of, indicators of well-being down the road. So being suspended has quite negative consequences for everyone but the fact that African-American kids are suspended so much more has really serious implications for social inequality, especially at a time when we know that our society is getting increasingly divergent between the haves and the have nots. So that's the first part.

The second part that I would say is that we don't know specifically what the causes of these

racial disparities are prior to this study. So before we published our paper, and the thing that really motivated us to do this paper was the idea that there is a narrative out there that the reason that there are these tremendous racial disparities in school suspension and expulsion is because African-American kids just come to school with worse behaviors. And so the reason that there is disparities in suspension is because they just behave worse at school, right. And that narrative puts a lot of onus on African-American kids themselves but also their families and their communities in a way that I think is not accurate. And in fact, what our study was able to show is that it's not accurate.

So we're looking at kids who come to school with the same behavior problems and are able to show that even within schools having arrived at school with the same types of behaviors the kids that are African-American are much more likely to get suspended. So that's part of it, and we also show directly head on that this explanation that's out there about differences in kids' behaviors with African-American kids behaving much worse and, therefore, being suspended more differences in behavior is only account for 10% of the gap in elementary school suspension. So we're able to directly head on, sort of, cut down this narrative, because it doesn't have empirical evidence base.

SARAH BALDWIN: Were you surprised by what you found?

JAYANTI OWENS: I was tremendously shocked in some ways in the sense that I suspected that there was going to be a lot of differential treatment of African-American kids in schools relative to their white counterparts who have the same behavior problems, but I didn't expect it to empirically show up as accounting for so much of the gap, keeping in mind that these are elementary school kids. These are kids who are nine years old. And so the fact that differential treatment plays such a large role even among kids who are so young was especially shocking to me.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, it's one thing for you to know this. Who should be reading this study for it to have some sort of positive policy implication?

JAYANTI OWENS: The way that research makes its way into policy is something that I continue to be fascinated by. My understanding and my impression is that this, sort of, finding can make its way into action and change through a variety of channels.

One thing I've seen myself is just that educators have been e-mailing me since the study was published and have asked you know-- they'll ask really great follow up questions. Like, did you consider this possibility or that possibility? Did you consider that maybe there actually are

differences in kids behavior, the very narrative that I just mentioned?

And I'm able to write back to them and say here's what we were able to do. Here's what we found and have had some really wonderful exchanges. These are teachers who are in our community here in Providence but really also throughout the world. I've had teachers contact me from California, from Texas, Massachusetts, and there's also been some interest in the UK. So that's one channel right, and that's kind of in my mind some of the most direct impacts that studies like this can have but also to the extent that it shows up on the radars of school principals and administrators. This is another way that as schools increasingly, sort of, get ready to handle some of these issues, to confront some of these issues.

I was presenting at a conference last year, and a school administrator who was attending the conference came up to me after my presentation and said I'd like to follow up and talk with you more, because our district is actually ready to talk about this now. And I was struck by that language, because it really showed that this is, one, something that much to the credit of many school districts is on people's minds and people are interested and committed to trying to figure out a way to address it, but second that this really is sort of a process of evolution for many schools and school leaders and administrators where you have to be ready to confront this issue. Because it is such a challenging one, and it's one where, I think, kind of one of the worst things that we can do is our finger as it is at individual teachers and administrators and put the blame on individuals who went into this profession because they wanted to make a positive impact and they wanted to make a difference.

So what I don't want the study to do is lead teachers to feel that they are being singled out for not doing the very best that they can. In spite of all the efforts and tremendous efforts that they're making to make positive change, we all are raised in live in a society that has its fair share of biases and racism. And I think it's important to recognize that this is not something that is unique to what's happening in classrooms, right. This happens to be the our study, but it's something that is much more wide spread of a problem than in schools.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well just speaking of addressing, being ready to address the issue, what can be done? Like for a school district who is-- that is ready to address the issue, is it a matter of teacher training? What are-- is there any evidence about what works?

JAYANTI OWENS: So this is a fantastic question. I would back up one step and say another motivation for us in doing this study was that we really wanted to help policymakers think about where to target

their interventions, right. So when we talk about this overall problem that there are these huge racial disparities in school discipline that doesn't actually in itself imply an intervention point, right.

In order to figure out where to intervene, you actually have to know what the mechanisms that are driving the disparate treatment and what we find as disparate treatment. But really just the disparities in general, you have to know what's causing them, right. And so what we wanted to do in our study was disentangle the likely contributors to this racial gap in discipline to be able to say, hey guys, it turns out it's not really that much about differences in kids behavior. So one policy approach if that had been what we found that it's all about differences in behaviors, there's been a ton of emphasis on early education programs or empowering parents and families from disadvantaged backgrounds to better prepare their kids to start school.

But that's actually not what we found to be the biggest driver in this specific case of racial disparities and suspension. Instead what we found is that it's much more about processes within schools. And so as we mentioned, this differential treatment shows up even among black and white kids who enter school with the same behavior problems. So this is all about processes that begin after the point of school entry.

So that suggests in itself a very different type of policy approach, right, because now it's saying we actually have to figure out how to target the specific processes within schools either in the ways that students are being identified as having problems and the, sort of, subjective experiences that lead-- the subjective evaluations that lead certain students to be identified more than others and/or the ways that schools actually administer sanctions. So what we're able to do in our study is really shine the light on processes within schools. But what we need to do for future work is actually figure out, is the most effective thing going to be something around the ways that we train teachers or helped professionally develop teachers to figure out the right ways to check their own biases and perceptions in classrooms?

Is it at the point where they decide who to refer to the principal's office? So those would both be sort of within classroom processes, right, or is it something about the way that sanctions are administered conditional on being referred. So another possibility is that teachers might be, sort of, accurately perceiving kids' behaviors and referring them as would be appropriate to the principal's office, but it's at the point that the administration decides what is the appropriate sanction that we're seeing racial disparities emerge. So future research really needs to tackle some of those specific processes within schools.

SARAH BALDWIN: Got it. That is really important and interesting. I hadn't thought of that, and then also just like questioning the effectiveness/negative effects of removing kids from the classroom when what you want is for them to be in the classroom and happy in the classroom and attentive and alert and at ease. Because how else can they learn? You're teaching two courses this fall at Brown, discrimination in public policy and sociology of discrimination. So what kinds of discussions are you having in the classrooms? How interested in this are students?

JAYANTI OWENS: I have been really pleased by the conversations we've been having in both of these classes. Of course, I was motivated to create these courses in part because of the type of research that I do, but also because I started looking around the country at syllabi expecting, surely, this is a course that every college or university is teaching. And guess how many syllabi I found on this topic? One.

SARAH BALDWIN: Wow.

JAYANTI OWENS: One syllabus. And I thought how is it possible that in 2019 in spite of everything we know about inequities in the criminal justice system, incarceration, as you said, the criminalization of African-Americans in this country and other groups as well, how is it that we do not have this as part of our regular curriculum? And so I was really thrilled when my department's at Watson Institute and sociology sort of openly embraced the idea of developing these courses. And it's been really a pleasure to, sort of, incorporate these into the college curriculum here.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, this is illuminating and horrifying in some ways, but the fact that you are continuing to work on these things is also very positive and gives me hope. So go back to work and please come in again and talk with us.

JAYANTI OWENS: Thank you so much for having me.

SARAH BALDWIN: Thanks for coming in. This episode of Trending Globally was produced by Dan Richards, Babette Thomas, and Alex La Ferrier. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

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