




# Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Perception and Experience with Zero-Tolerance Policies and Interventions to Address Racial Inequality

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## Abstract

This study expands the current research on anti-Black racism and student discipline in schools. It examines perception, experiences, and alternatives of zero-tolerance policies in education, in relation to the call for action by Black Lives Matter at Schools. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students are affected at a disproportionate rate when it comes to school discipline, leading to high, inequitable incarceration rates. However, behavior analysis already has powerful tools and interventions that can stop this “school-to-prison pipeline” effect. A survey of school professionals investigated awareness of adverse outcomes from zero-tolerance policies and the use of effective, behavioral alternatives to exclusionary disciplinary practices. Results confirmed zero-tolerance policies still exist in North American schools, but that school professionals, including behavior analysts, support Black Lives Matter at School’s call to end such practices. It is important to note that participants report already having the necessary skills to combat zero-tolerance; however, many still feel uncomfortable or ill-prepared to implement interventions specifically intended to decrease anti-Black racism in schools.

**Keywords** accompliceship · anti-Black racism · applied behavior analysis · education · systemic racism · zero-tolerance

The most recent deaths of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of the police have underscored an ongoing systemic problem within our society and intensified awareness and outrage of racism and racial inequality. Such events draw attention to the barriers and disparate treatment that Black,

Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) individuals face across various life domains. Inequity and racism are not new; civil rights advocates have made calls for attention and intervention for hundreds of years. Yet, the sequence of current events, including a world-wide pandemic, has disproportionately affected BIPOC both physically and economically. The events stimulated a renewed sense of duty among behavior analytic professionals to advocate and act for change. The field of behavior analysis must be more involved in understanding racism and racist behavior at the individual and societal levels, and work as members of multidisciplinary teams to create change (e.g., Matsuda et al., 2020; Mattaini & Rehfeldt, 2020). Although professionals need to act across a variety of areas, reducing systemic racism in the educational system is particularly critical. Black students receive exclusionary discipline at an inequitable rate compared to white students. Their behaviors are often punished more severely with consequences that often lead to the criminal justice system (National Association of Education, 2020). With the inequity that exists with disciplinary actions in education, it is important to come together and build “accompliceship,” a critical component in the efforts to dismantle systemic racism and promote equal rights. Accompliceship is established

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through continued supportive efforts, involving being “explicit,” “accountable,” and “responsible” in taking direct actions of togetherness right beside individuals facing cultural injustices (Indigenous Action, 2014, “Acts of Resignation”).

## Inequities in Discipline for BIPOC Students

In the 2013–2014 academic year, researchers estimated 2.6 million public school students received one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Although Black students made up only 15% of the student population, they received as many as 39.3% of all out-of-school suspensions. The situation was particularly extreme for Black males; 17.6% of Black males received out-of-school suspensions compared to 9.1% of Native American/Alaskan Native males, 6.4% of Hispanic males, and 5.0% of white males. Although rates are lower for females, the pattern was the same. Black females are much more likely to experience out-of-school suspensions (9.6%) compared to Native American/Alaskan Native females (4.3%), Hispanic females (2.6%), or white females (1.3%). These patterns begin as early as preschool and continue across the students’ academic careers (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2020; Owens & McLanahan, 2020). It is interesting to note that despite the significantly higher rates of out-of-school suspension for Black students, they are less likely than their Native American/Alaskan Native, Hispanic, or white peers to carry weapons to school. They are equally or less likely to have access to illegal drugs at school (de Brey et al., 2019).

In addition to out-of-school suspensions, Black students are more likely to be expelled or referred to law enforcement (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2017). Black males comprised 23% of expelled students in the 2015–2016 academic year, and Black females comprised 10%, despite each group making up just 8% of enrolled students (16% total). Similar proportions exist for referrals to law enforcement, as Black students made up 31% of students involved in law enforcement referrals or school-related arrests. Although the specific reasons for suspensions, expulsions, and law referrals/arrests may vary, many directly tie to zero-tolerance policies that affect BIPOC students disproportionately to white students (American Psychological Association [APA] Zero-Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

## Zero-Tolerance in Schools

Zero-tolerance policies to “mandate the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (APA Zero-Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 852). However, there is not a singular definition. Though some

situations may warrant serious consequences due to the level of risk to the student and the community, zero-tolerance policies prevent case-by-case analysis of risk, contextual variables, or consequences that may be in the best interest of students. Such policies fail to help students improve behavior, be successful, and stay in school. According to a report by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, 2008), zero-tolerance policies have resulted in significant increases in suspensions, expulsions, and law enforcement referrals—often for minor offenses. In interviews, law officials raised concerns that schools often use zero-tolerance policies to “push out” students they deem as challenging. Such an approach is particularly concerning for Black students, because research indicates that the application of zero-tolerance policies leads to stricter punishments for all students. Yet, those punishments are applied differently across ethnicity (ACLU, 2020). In particular, school staff more often punish the objective behaviors of white students (e.g., smoking, vandalism, using obscene language). In contrast, they more often punish behavior of Black students such as “being disrespectful,” making “excessive noise,” or “acting threatening.” School professionals’ subjective interpretation of these behaviors (Losen, et al., 2015) contributes to biased and exclusionary discipline.

Just as definitions of zero-tolerance policies vary, so do the behaviors targeted and consequences applied by school systems. These discrepancies can lead to systemic racism in the education system, because biases and prejudice affect interpretation of behavior and selection of consequences. Zero-tolerance policies are often subjectively interpreted and implemented. Research suggests such variations in use specifically contribute to anti-Black racism, defined as “policies and practices rooted in institutions such as, education, health care, and justice that mirror and reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping and/or discrimination towards people of Black-African descent” (Benjamin, 2003, as cited by Black Health Alliance, 2018). As a result, zero-tolerance has led to disproportionate rates of injustice for Black students, causing a *school-to-prison pipeline* in which students, predominantly Black males, are pushed into the criminal justice system through suspensions and expulsions (Bailey, 2017, p. 155; OME, 2020). The APA Zero-Tolerance Task Force (2008) indicated that bias affected the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, as handling of disciplinary issues was contradictory across student groups. School professionals can help end the school-to-prison pipeline, however. Understanding the intersectionality of zero-tolerance and anti-Black racism is a key step toward ending systemic racism in education.

## Systemic Racism in Schools

Systemic racism may be one of the primary causes of disparity in education. *Systemic racism* (also referred to as

*institutionalized racism*) is a system of assigning value and allocating opportunity based on skin color with an unfair allocation of privileges assigned to different individuals and groups, such as in education (APA, 2020; Matsuda et al., 2020). It is important to note that racism need not be “purposeful” by individual school personnel, but biased responding by many, even when done inadvertently or “unconsciously,” leads to systemic effects that are catastrophic for many students and communities. One push to eradicate systemic racism comes from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The BLM movement originated in 2013, aiming to eradicate systemic racism and white supremacy, and to “build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (BLM, 2020). Through this work, they draw attention to how systemic racism deprives BIPOC of fundamental human rights and dignity, in areas such as education (Howard, 2016).

BLM at Schools is a national coalition organizing for racial justice in education. The group cites several demands as critical to the movement, including “hire more black teachers,” “mandate black history and ethnic studies in the K–12 curriculum,” and “fund counselors, not cops” (BLM at Schools, 2020). Their first demand, however, is to end zero-tolerance discipline. The Canadian chapter of the movement also presents 11 developing movements in education, including public apologies, creating community healing spaces for BIPOC students that have experienced anti-racism in schools, and creating Black advisory and student council committees (Black Lives Matter-Canada, 2020). These efforts are all important but ending zero-tolerance is an urgent educational crisis.

### Ontario, Canada, Case Example of Systemic Racism

Looking to dismantle systemic barriers to education, the OME (2020) conducted a review on anti-Black racism, discord in senior leadership, and governance issues within a mid-sized school district. The study confirmed that “there has been a historical, collective absence of a call to action to stop the harmful effects of anti-Black racism and to take responsibility for the poor outcomes” of BIPOC students (OME, 2020, p. 7). This review found that 2016 employee census data indicated only 25% racialized staff, countering the student body’s demographics (OME, 2020). Also, they found existing policies and procedures designed to guide police interaction in schools were not working. There was a need for greater accountability by school administrators to inform and consult with parents when implementing progressive discipline that may trigger police intervention (OME, 2020). Further findings suggested school administrators needed more training with deescalation and restorative techniques to reduce the need for police involvement in schools (OME, 2020).

The review found little evidence that parents of BIPOC students received notifications of exclusionary classroom

measures or suspensions—even for students as young as preschool age (4 years old). More significant, however, is that school personnel did not consistently record suspension data, despite Ministry standards. Likewise, the school did not consistently report data on race; in several reports, individuals recoding the reasons for suspensions simply recorded *other*, without further description. In short, between 2013 and 2019, the OME (2020, p. 9) found that 78% of the secondary school suspensions and approximately 40% of elementary school suspensions ( $n = 20$ ) did not meet the definition communicated by the MOE for the use of *other* incident codes. It is noteworthy that BIPOC youth reported they were held to higher standards and different codes of conduct in comparison to white or other racialized students (OME, 2020, p. 10). It is sad that this example is not unique. A similar report produced within the State of Missouri also found that data on student discipline is not easily accessible (ACLU, 2017), but based on available data, it was clear that Black students were disciplined differently than white students, with a higher proportion of Black students experiencing exclusionary discipline or referral to law enforcement.

### Potential Behavior Analytic Solutions

The evidence shows that BIPOC students are affected at a disproportionate rate when it comes to school discipline and zero-tolerance policies (Bailey, 2017; Child Trends, 2017; Gastic, 2017, Harvard Civil Rights Project & Advancement Project, 2000; Howard, 2016; Ontario Human Rights Committee, 2020; OME, 2020). Therefore, alternative approaches are needed. The field of behavior analysis is not yet doing enough to address large-scale cultural variables of racism (Matsuda et al., 2020; Mattaini & Rehfeldt, 2020; Zarcone et al., 2019). Yet, behavior analysis is ideally suited to investigate and explain the contingencies maintaining inequities in schools. Behavior analytic professionals can help to end zero-tolerance policies through the development, implementation, and support of positive, restorative interventions.

Although the field of behavior analysis can contribute to eliminating anti-Black racism in education, we know too little about the current perceptions and experiences of professionals in school settings, as related to zero-tolerance policies, racism/racial inequality, or training and experience with alternative interventions. Gathering this data may reveal if school professionals already know about, use, and are comfortable with evidence-based, behavior science alternatives to zero-tolerance policies. To date, no study has investigated the experiences of school professionals implementing behavior analytic techniques to reduce racism, in alignment with the demand of BLM at School. To gather this information, a survey study was conducted.

## Methods

### Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling procedure, was utilized to set inclusion criteria for study participation. The study invited school staff members and behavior analytic professionals, working in school settings, to participate. School staff included professionals such as teachers, registered early childhood educators, psychologists, school administrators, licensed professional counselors, health care assistants. Behavior analytic professionals included Registered Behavior Technicians® (RBT®), Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts® (BCaBA®), Board Certified Behavior Analysts® (BCBA®), and Board Certified Behavior Analysts-Doctoral™ (BCBA-D™). Snowball sampling increased the number of potential participants, because the recruitment information encouraged individuals to share the invitation with others (Rea & Parker, 2014). Although this distribution method does not allow for a calculation of a response rate, it is consistent with other survey research conducted and disseminated within the behavior analytic literature (e.g., Taylor et al., 2019).

### Data Collection

A survey, developed by the authors and set up in Qualtrics was used to collect data. It included questions both explicitly developed for this study and revised from the *Anti-Racism Behavior Inventory* (Pieterse et al., 2016). The survey consisted of 27 questions about: (1) participant demographics, (2) willingness to build accompliceship with BLM at Schools, (3) experiences with zero-tolerance policies personally and professionally, and (4) experiences discussing and intervening against racism and racial inequities in schools. Authors distributed recruitment information containing the survey link to potential participants via emails to professional contacts and through social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn). The recruitment information encouraged individuals receiving the emails and/or viewing the social media posts to share the study information with anyone who might be interested. Participants completing the survey could choose to enter a lottery for a \$50 Gift Card.

### Data Analysis

Following the completion of the survey, data were exported from Qualtrics and imported into SPSS®, a statistical software used for data analysis. Authors reviewed the data to ensure that the transfer was complete and accurate (e.g., no data were missing or transferred incorrectly). Analyses included descriptive statistics, for the data set as a whole and for select cases as

appropriate (e.g., only for participants who reported to be behavior analysts).

## Results

### Participants Demographics

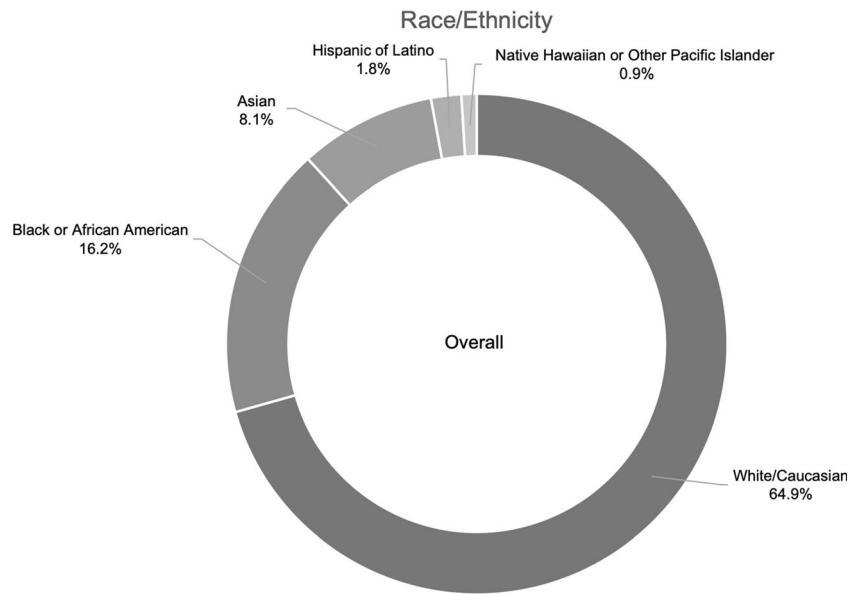
A total of 111 participants completed the survey. The majority of participants were over the age of 35 ( $n = 78$ , 70.3%) and preferred use of she/her pronouns ( $n = 94$ , 84.7%). In demographics, almost two thirds of participants reported white/Caucasian ( $n = 72$ , 64.9%), and the remaining one third reported BIPOC ( $n = 33$ , 29.7%). BIPOC individuals reported a variety of ethnicities, i.e., Asian ( $n = 9$ , 8.1%), Hispanic or Latino ( $n = 2$ , 1.8%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander ( $n = 1$ , 0.9%), or other ( $n = 9$ , 8.1%), with 18 (16.2%) reporting to be Black or African American (see Figure 1). Almost all of the participants ( $n = 107$ , 96.4%) indicated that English was their first language. A majority reported to be from the United States ( $n = 79$ ; 71.2%) or Canada ( $n = 24$ ; 21.6%). However, other regions were also represented, including Europe (2%), the Caribbean (2%), Asia/Pacific countries (1%), and Central and South America (1%). It is important to note that 2% ( $n = 2$ ) of the participants who reported that they were not aware of zero-tolerance policies also indicated that they were from Europe, indicating the possibility of nonrepresentation.

In terms of professionals, participants included behavior analysts (i.e., BCaBAs ( $n = 1$ , 0.9%), BCBAAs ( $n = 53$ , 47.7%), and BCBA-Ds ( $n = 11$ , 9.9%)), teachers ( $n = 27$ , 9.9%), occupational therapists ( $n = 1$ ; 0.9%), and other professionals ( $n = 18$ , 16.2%) including RBTs, school psychologists, and school administrators. Note that these numbers do not add up to 100%, because some participants indicated more than one professional association. Consistent with the inclusion criteria, all participants reported having at least some experience working or consulting in schools, with a large number of participants ( $n = 80$ , 72.1%) reporting more than 5 years of experience within the school setting.

### Willingness to Build Accompliceship

To assess the willingness of participants to build accompliceship the survey included several questions about the BLM in Schools movement. Of the 111 participants that completed the survey, 77 participants (69.4%) had heard of the call to action by BLM at Schools. In regard to level of support for BLM at Schools, almost three quarters of participants either agreed ( $n = 16$ , 14.4%) or strongly agreed ( $n = 64$ , 57.7%) that they would be supportive of the movement in schools (see Figure 2). On the other hand, some disagreed ( $n$

**Fig. 1** Participant’s Race/Ethnicity Summary



= 4, 3.6%), strongly disagreed ( $n = 9, 8.1%$ ), or were uncertain of their level of support ( $n = 13, 11.7%$ ).

**Experience and Perception of Zero-Tolerance Overall**

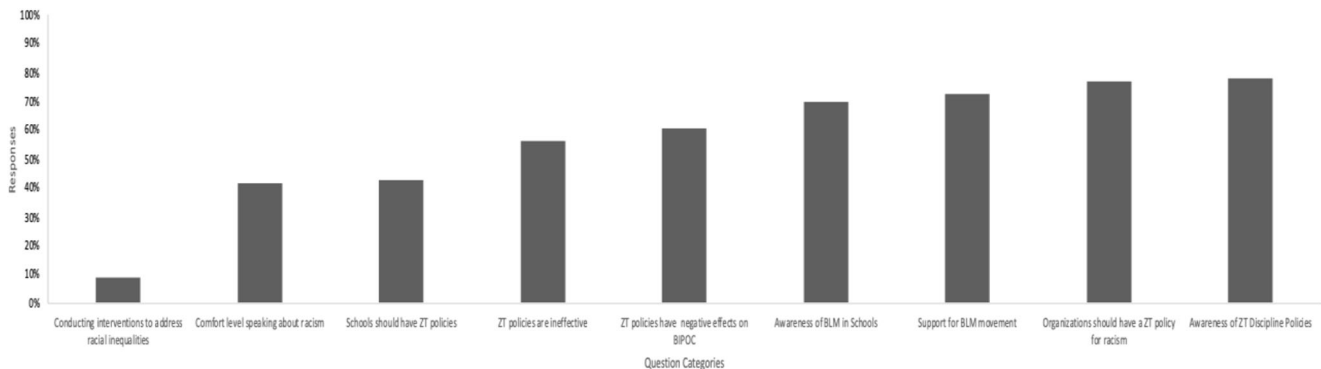
The next set of questions explored participants’ experience with zero-tolerance policies in their school workplaces and opinions about the effectiveness and appropriateness of such policies. The beginning of the survey included a definition of zero-tolerance to ensure respondents understood the term in relation to the questions. Eighty-six participants (77.5%) reported that they were familiar with zero-tolerance discipline policies in schools before they participated in this survey. This result closely aligns with the number of participants who reported working in schools that had adopted zero-tolerance policies ( $n = 83, 74.8%$ ). Regarding participant experience with zero-tolerance discipline, 42 participants (37.8%) indicated that they had worked in at least four schools that had a zero-tolerance disciplinary policy. Of the 111 participants, more than half ( $n = 62, 55.8%$ ) indicated that zero-tolerance policies did not work well in schools. The majority either disagreed ( $n = 30, 27%$ ) or

strongly disagreed ( $n = 42, 37.8%$ ) with the idea that zero-tolerance policies make schools safer or more effective in handling disciplinary issues. In comparison, only a minority of participants agreed ( $n = 9, 8.1%$ ) or strongly agreed ( $n = 4, 3.6%$ ) that this would be the case. Three participants (2.7%) indicated they preferred not to answer that question.

Almost half of participants either disagreed ( $n = 22, 19.8%$ ) or strongly disagreed ( $n = 25, 22.5%$ ) with the idea that schools and organizations should have zero-tolerance policies for some misbehavior, whereas one third of participants agreed ( $n = 27, 24.3%$ ) or strongly agreed with this idea ( $n = 7, 6.3%$ ); and over one quarter were uncertain ( $n = 30, 27.0%$ ). Many participants reported that schools should not implement zero-tolerance policies for any problem behavior. In contrast, others supported or felt uncertain about the use of zero-tolerance in some situations.

**Perception of the Impact of Zero-Tolerance for BIPOC Students**

The following section asked about participants’ professional experiences of zero-tolerance policies for BIPOC students,



**Fig. 2** Summary of Key Results. *Note.* The information shown displays participant’s responses to each question category

**Table 1** Level of Agreement with Survey Questions

Survey Items	Level of Agreement					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Prefer Not to Answer
How strongly would you support a movement like Black Lives Matter at Schools?	8.1% ( <i>n</i> = 9)	3.6% ( <i>n</i> = 4)	11.7% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	14.4% ( <i>n</i> = 16)	57.7% ( <i>n</i> = 64)	4.5% ( <i>n</i> = 5)
I often speak to my colleagues about the problem of racism, racial inequity, and what we can do about it.	4.5% ( <i>n</i> = 5)	9.9% ( <i>n</i> = 11)	6.3% ( <i>n</i> = 7)	23.4% ( <i>n</i> = 26)	15.3% ( <i>n</i> = 17)	40.5% ( <i>n</i> = 45)
I feel comfortable talking about racism at work.	5.4% ( <i>n</i> = 6)	3.6% ( <i>n</i> = 4)	8.1% ( <i>n</i> = 9)	23.4% ( <i>n</i> = 26)	18% ( <i>n</i> = 20)	40.5% ( <i>n</i> = 45)
Schools and organizations should have zero-tolerance policies for some misbehavior.	22.5% ( <i>n</i> = 25)	19.8% ( <i>n</i> = 22)	27% ( <i>n</i> = 30)	24.3% ( <i>n</i> = 27)	6.3% ( <i>n</i> = 7)	0%
Survey Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Prefer Not to Answer
Zero-tolerance policies generally make schools safer and more effective in handling disciplinary issues	37.8% ( <i>n</i> = 42)	27% ( <i>n</i> = 30)	8.1% ( <i>n</i> = 9)	3.6% ( <i>n</i> = 4)	4.5% ( <i>n</i> = 5)	2.7% ( <i>n</i> = 3)

*Note.* This tables provides data from the participant survey indicating level of agreement.

and their perceptions of the effects of these policies on their own children, if applicable. Just over one quarter of participants (*n* = 29, 26.1%) had children who attended schools with zero-tolerance policies. Of these participants, almost one quarter indicated that zero-tolerance policies had been positive (*n* = 4, 13.8%) or very positive (*n* = 3, 10.3%) for their children, whereas an equal number had indicated that the policies had been negative (*n* = 4, 13.8%) or very negative (*n* = 3, 10.3%). Over half (*n* = 15, 51.7%) stated that they were uncertain what the effects may have been. It is interesting that all participants reporting zero-tolerance policies as positive or very positive for their children identified as white. Regarding professional experience and perception of zero-tolerance policies for BIPOC students, over half of participants indicated zero-tolerance policies had a somewhat negative (*n* = 15, 13.5%) or negative (*n* = 52, 46.8%) impact. Although these findings suggest that participants' personal experience with zero-tolerance policies may not have been negative for the majority,

a large proportion indicated that they have at least a somewhat negative effect on BIPOC students Tables 1 and 2.

### Skills and Experiences in the Workplace

The final section of the survey investigated participants' training and experiences with potential interventions to reduce racism and racial inequality. Participants indicated whether they had received training in 19 different intervention technologies that have been shown in the literature to be effective alternatives to zero-tolerance (see Table 3). They also indicated whether they had training or experience training other staff to implement any of the programs listed (APA Zero-Tolerance Taskforce, 2008; Boccanfuso et al., 2011; Pitlick, 2015). All but one participant indicated they had received training in at least one of the techniques, with participants reporting to have been trained in an average of seven techniques (range: 0–10). When behavior analysts were considered as a subgroup, this

**Table 2** Participant Perception of Level of Impact

Survey Items	Level of Impact				
	Negative	Somewhat Negative	Neither Positive and/or Negative	Somewhat positive	Positive
How well has zero-tolerance policies worked in schools?	32.4% ( <i>n</i> = 36)	23.4% ( <i>n</i> = 26)	26.1% ( <i>n</i> = 29)	14.4% ( <i>n</i> = 16)	2.7% ( <i>n</i> = 3)
How have zero-tolerance policies affected Black, indigenous, or students of color?	46.8% ( <i>n</i> = 52)	13.5% ( <i>n</i> = 15)	25% ( <i>n</i> = 28)	10% ( <i>n</i> = 11)	7% ( <i>n</i> = 8)
For your child(ren), please rate how zero-tolerance affected them?	13.8% ( <i>n</i> = 4)	10.3% ( <i>n</i> = 3)	51.7% ( <i>n</i> = 15)	10.3% ( <i>n</i> = 3)	13.8% ( <i>n</i> = 4)

**Table 3** Skill Experience Summary

Skills	N	%
Reinforcing positive behavior <sup>3</sup>	95	85.5%
Use of praise for positive behavior <sup>3</sup>	89	80.2%
Individualized behavior support <sup>1,2</sup>	87	78.4%
Training staff to implement any of the programs listed	87	78.4%
Positive behavior support interventions <sup>2,3</sup>	86	77.5%
Social skill instruction <sup>2,3</sup>	81	73.0%
Social and emotional learning programs <sup>1</sup>	81	73.0%
Role play and practice of positive behaviors <sup>1</sup>	80	72.1%
Modeling or video modeling of skills <sup>1</sup>	77	69.4%
Interactive teaching of social or emotional skills <sup>2,3</sup>	64	57.7%
Cognitive behavioral training <sup>2,3</sup>	40	36.0%
Other	10	9.0%

*Note.* This table presents data on the skills that participants report to have training in, that can serve as alternatives to zero-tolerance policies. *Other* skills reported included acceptance and commitment therapy, behavior skills training, psychological flexibility, teacher preparation, discrete trail training, functional communication training, trauma-informed care.

<sup>1</sup> APA Zero-Tolerance Taskforce (2008); <sup>2</sup> Child Trends (2011); <sup>3</sup> Pitlick (2015).

result was similar; behavior analysts reported training in eight techniques (range: 0–10).

Concerning issues of racism and racial inequality, 66 participants (59.5%) indicated that they had discussed problems related to these issues within their school workplace, with a large number ( $n = 43$ , 38.7%) indicating that they often speak with colleagues about issues of racism, racial inequality, and possible solutions. However, 45 participants (40.5%) chose not to answer *both* this question and another about their level of comfort discussing racism with colleagues. Of those that reported their comfort level, almost half of the participants agreed ( $n = 26$ , 23.4%) or strongly agreed ( $n = 20$ , 18.0%) that they were comfortable discussing racism with colleagues. It is also interesting to note that 85 participants (76.6%) indicated that their organization should have a zero-tolerance policy for racism.

Although over half of participants indicated that they discussed these issues in their schools, only 11 participants (9.9%) reported that they had collected behavioral or educational data within the past few months to identify possible racial inequities. Only 10 participants (9.0%) conducted ABA-based interventions specifically to address racial inequalities. Results indicate that school professionals, including behavior analysts, have many evidence-based skills that may be effective alternatives to zero-tolerance policies. However, although many participants are comfortable talking about race and racial inequity solutions, most are not collecting data or using ABA-based interventions to intervene.

## Discussion

This survey examined school professionals' and behavior analysts' knowledge, experience, and perceptions of zero-tolerance policies, racism, and racial inequality. Although most participants indicated that they support BLM at Schools' demand to end zero-tolerance policies and want to build accompliceship with the BLM in Schools movement, they are not always comfortable talking about race and inequities. Fewer still reported developing and/or implementing evidence-based interventions to address racism or racial inequality. Despite the efforts by the current social justice movement, dismantling anti-Black racism in education is still a pressing crisis in North America. Many participants reported that these policies do not make schools safer and have a negative impact on BIPOC students. Furthermore, existing literature has indicated that zero-tolerance's effectiveness is inconsistent and highlights the need for alternative strategies to progress towards effective change (González et al., 2018; Harvard Civil Rights Project & Advancement Project, 2000; Pitlick, 2015; APA Zero-Tolerance Task Force, 2008) Table 4.

School professionals likely have the skills, such as using positive behavior supports, reinforcement, individualized behavior support plans, or social skills instruction, as alternatives to zero-tolerance practices, yet few are implementing those approaches to affect racial inequities. Practice guidelines, adapted from the APA Zero-Tolerance Task Force (2008, pp. 857–858), can help us take action (see Table 5). From a behavior-analytic perspective, zero-tolerance policies are punishment procedures that do not produce a long-lasting effect on socially appropriate behaviors (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Exclusionary discipline of this sort does not teach new skills or build relationships as a proactive, culturally appropriate approach to school behavior issues. Most important, zero-tolerance reinforces systemic racism for BIPOC. Widespread discipline practices of suspension, expulsion, and arrest for school behavior problems may turn students in crisis into criminal offenders (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Instead of using punishment-based procedures, the current literature supports implementing preventive measures or restorative justice approaches. For example, we should focus on improving classroom management, teaching social-emotional skills, involving parents and the community in the development of behavior programs, adopting early screening procedures for mental health issues, improving data collection on discipline, and ensuring effective and ongoing collaboration between educators, juvenile justice professionals, and law enforcement (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

Professionals wishing to reduce racism must engage in both self-reflection and an uncomfortable dialogue about racism in education. Behavior science has powerful tools that can help end the school-to-prison pipeline. Reducing anti-Black

**Table 4** Yes, No Response Summary for Survey Questions

Survey Items	Yes, No Responses		
	Yes	No	Prefer Not to Answer
My organization should have a zero-tolerance employee policy for racism?	76.6% ( <i>n</i> = 85)	23.4% ( <i>n</i> = 26)	0%
Are you familiar with “zero-tolerance” discipline policies in schools?	77.5% ( <i>n</i> = 86)	22.5% ( <i>n</i> = 25)	0%
Have you read or heard of the current calls to action by Black Lives Matter at Schools, a national coalition organizing for racial justice in education?	69.4% ( <i>n</i> = 77)	30.6% ( <i>n</i> = 34)	0%
In the past 3 months, discussed problems of race or racial inequity or racism in your school?	59.5% ( <i>n</i> = 66)	40.5% ( <i>n</i> = 45)	0%
Do you have children who attend a school with zero-tolerance policies?	26.1% ( <i>n</i> = 29)	72.1% ( <i>n</i> = 80)	1.8% ( <i>n</i> = 2)
In the past 3 months, collected behavioral or educational data to identify possible racial inequity?	9.9% ( <i>n</i> = 11)	90.1% ( <i>n</i> = 100)	0%
Conducted an ABA intervention that may help reduce racial inequity in the school?	9% ( <i>n</i> = 10)	91% ( <i>n</i> = 101)	0%

*Note.* This table provides data from the participant survey indicating percentages of participants who indicated agreement or disagreement with statements made in survey questions.

racism in schools requires action, even when it feels uncomfortable. It seems there are still skill gaps or blind spots around collecting, utilizing, discussing, and intervening against racial biases, racism, and inequity in school settings. As a group, behavior analysts are not yet skillfully culturally sensitive, and need more training in intercultural competence (Beaulieu et al., 2019). Purposeful collaboration and consultation with professionals experienced in this area could help (e.g., with advocates and allies of the BIPOC community or

with racism researchers in other fields). Future efforts should also help preservice professionals demonstrate the skills necessary for effective dialogue and intervention around racism, such as cultural humility (see Wright, 2019). Other efforts may focus on training behavior analysts as change agents (Connors et al., 2019), understanding how one’s culture affects decision making and bias (Fong et al., 2016), and researching ways to reduce racism in service delivery.

**Table 5** Practice Guideline Summary

Guidelines
Foster a collaborative school team approach incorporating increased flexibility for implementing preventative measures to eliminate “one size fits all” discipline.
Ensure consistent transparency in communicating discipline incidents with parents and caregivers.
Consistently define violations and appropriately train all staff on proactive or reactive steps.
Continuously evaluate current school discipline or violence prevention strategies and modify as necessary.
Identify high-risk youth and use threat assessments procedures to develop a continuum of alternatives for meaningful interventions.
Hire trained professionals (e.g., mental health counselors) who are adequately equipped to address the root of the problem behavior, to better account for minor violations caused by developmental contributions.

*Note.* Adapted from APA Zero-Tolerance Task Force (2008, pp. 857–858)

## Limitations

This survey had several limitations that can inform future research. First, a sample size of 111 participants may not represent the full range of behavior analysts and professionals working in schools. Replication with a larger sample and with professionals from diverse disciplines is recommended. Second, there was a possibility of response bias. Participants may have had a personal interest in decreasing punishment procedures in schools due to dissatisfaction with current social events involving BIPOC communities. Future research should replicate this study at different points in time when social disparities are not national news. Third, although zero-tolerance was defined at the beginning of the survey, some participants indicated less familiarity with this type of exclusionary discipline. Thus, their direct experiences with such policies may have been limited. Future research can recruit participants with more extensive experiences and knowledge with zero-tolerance policies. Fourth, the length of the survey



may have caused fatigue in responding. Although the average time for survey completion was 10 min, a shorter survey may result in fewer skipped questions. Lastly, the survey was administered during the first summer of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have also reduced participation and responding.

## Conclusion

Results suggest that school professionals, including behavior analysts, want to build an accompliceship with the BLM in Schools movement. A desire to work toward shared goals of eradicating racism is an essential aspect of multidisciplinary teams working toward an equitable and supportive educational system. Yet, few respondents reported taking action to implement evidence-based interventions for racism. Some don't yet feel comfortable discussing racial inequity in their workplace. So, although professionals in school settings may have the skills and willingness to implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline, the path forward is not easy. Eradicating racial inequity will require school teams to talk about the issues and take action together. This study suggests many professionals have the necessary motivation and skills to improve outcomes for all students, particularly BIPOC students disproportionately affected by discriminatory disciplinary policies.

**Funding** No funding was received for this project.

**Data Availability** The results of the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Code Availability** Not applicable

## Declarations

**Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethics Approval** The questionnaire and methodology for this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Chicago School of Professional Psychology (Approval #: IRB-20-06-0073)

**Consent to Participate** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Consent for Publication** Participants signed informed consent regarding publishing their data.

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