Beyond the Classroom: Tracing Justice in Education Through Student Discipline and School Climate

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Over 50 million K-12 students are enrolled in the United States. Students' experience in school goes beyond just their curricula: it is highly dependent on supportive learning environments. For example, the "school-to-prison pipeline" refers to a process that funnels students from public schools to the juvenile justice system. Among the factors underpinning the school-to-prison pipeline are exclusionary discipline practices (ex. school-related arrest, expulsion, and suspension). As a result, this investigation quantifies the language used in US school discipline statutes and identifies associations with student justice outcomes. Through a comprehensive linguistic analysis of current (2023-2024) school discipline laws and regulations across the 55 states and territories in the US circuit court system (n=8,215) using Natural Language Processing, this research provides original insight into the foundational legal language for student discipline in US public schools. By organizing data into 35 subcategories and 8 categories within "school discipline," the investigation found correlations between measures like bullying, youth arrest, and suspension and the scope of their corresponding statutes. Between states, the volume of laws focused on exclusionary discipline was significantly different from the volume focused on supportive programs ($p<0.05$). However, while there was no observed relationship between exclusionary discipline statutes and rates of youth detained in residential placement, there was a moderate and negative relationship for supportive discipline statutes. More laws scaffolding school support were associated with fewer youth in placement. Thus, this investigation points to areas of policy where further inquiry would be most impactful.

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