

FORUM

From Path Dependence to Alternative Paths

Kathryn E. Wiley¹  and Douglas S. Reed² 

¹Howard University, Washington, DC, USA and ²Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA

Corresponding author: Douglas S. Reed; Email: reedd@georgetown.edu

Abstract

In this essay, we explore the concept of path dependence through the example of the long-standing issue of racialized exclusionary school discipline. We argue that historians of education can reduce policy makers' tendency to continue down existing policy paths (especially unhelpful ones), a phenomenon known as *path dependence*. We use racialized school discipline as a case in point. We also argue, however, that path dependence as an analytical tool can be “too much of a good thing” because it discounts the viability of ever-present options to change course. The real challenge lies in creating processes of path alteration that impose costs on policymakers for readopting policies shown to have such deleterious effects.

Keywords: education policy history; exclusionary school discipline; path dependence; race

In this brief essay, our argument is simple, but (we hope) not simplistic: Without historians of education, policymakers are blind to the current consequences of past policy choices, to the detriment of students and good policy. Education historians can help reduce the tendency among policymakers to continue down existing policy paths (especially unhelpful ones), a phenomenon known as *path dependence*. We use racialized school discipline as a case in point. We also caution that utilizing path dependence as an analytical tool can be “too much of a good thing” because it discounts the viability of ever-present options to change course.

Of the many benefits that education historians provide to contemporary policy scholars, explaining the chain of events giving rise to today's policy issues is crucial.¹ Most social scientists infrequently examine change over time and instead rely on cross-sectional explanations. In other words, instead of looking to the cumulative effects of policy choices on current educational contexts (such as racialized inequities in school discipline), policy analysts typically see only currently prevailing forces at work.

One reason for this may lie in social scientists' limited conceptualization of the power of historical forces. Path dependence as a concept can render history and

¹Maris A. Vinovskis, *History and Educational Policymaking* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

historical change more cognizable to policy analysts. At the same time, however, path dependence has deterministic limitations that discount the viability of current-day policy choices. Thus, policy analysts who embrace path dependence to understand current dilemmas run the risk of failing to recognize alternative policy paths.

While *path dependence* can take on a variety of meanings, we rely on Paul Pierson's narrower construct, in which path dependence arises when "the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down that path. This is because the relative benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increase over time."² Under path dependence, "the costs of exit—of switching to some previously plausible alternative—rise," thereby reinforcing the commitment to the status quo and eliminating the ability of political actors to revert to an earlier policy.³

For social scientists who examine policy changes over time, the challenge is to distinguish between long-term and short-term costs and benefits. If a policy or commitment is untenable in the long term, the short-term returns are insufficient to prevent collapse or policy failure. Or, if short-term changes are costly to implement, the long-term returns of a policy switch may never be realized. This sort of analysis marks much of the work on climate change and health care.⁴ This approach, however, often leaves little room to explain change, innovation, or policy collapse. We argue that conceptualizing policy history as the emergence of path dependence, while powerful, is incomplete and self-limiting. Path dependence can provide powerful, but only partial accounts of change and policy evolution, particularly within education. The remainder of this essay examines these issues in the context of racialized exclusionary school discipline and its evolution over time.

Over the last seventy-five years, the consequences imposed upon students for violating school rules have changed dramatically. Education policy has, over this period, produced a standard set of school discipline practices, two of the most common being suspensions and expulsions. This path toward a rigid discipline structure has been forged by the adoption of state laws, regulations, and district policies. Extensive technical infrastructure has been developed to manage information and data about school discipline (including databases, dashboards, and reporting structures), and specific personnel roles at state, district, and school levels have been used to monitor, enforce, and enact discipline policies. These are components that deepened a reliance on punishment over time.

From the beginning, this system has functioned as a form of racialized social control.⁵ Decades of evidence document school administrators' chronic overuse of

²Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (June 2000), 251–67, 252.

³Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," 251–67, 252.

⁴Azad Bali, Jingwei He, and M. Ramesh, "Health Policy and COVID-19: Path Dependency And Trajectory," *Policy and Society* 41, no. 1 (March 2022), 83–95; Jon Barnett et al., "From Barriers to Limits to Climate Change Adaptation: Path Dependency and the Speed of Change," *Ecology and Society* 20, no. 3 (Sept. 2015), 1–11; and Roger Fouquet, ed., *Handbook on Green Growth* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

⁵Decoteau J. Irby, "Trouble at School: Understanding School Discipline Systems as Nets of Social Control," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 47, no. 4 (2014), 513–30.

suspensions and expulsions against Black children and youth.⁶ The racialized use of discipline is not new. Historians of education remind us of its entrenchment in public schools since at least the early twentieth century, which has increasingly had a carceral dimension.⁷ The plethora of punitive, racialized practices formally permitted in schools today—and the policies supporting them—did not emerge overnight. Instead, decades-long trajectories resulted in today's landscape.

In some ways, the burgeoning infrastructure related to school discipline illustrates the power of path dependency. In particular, the gradual accumulation of exclusionary disciplinary policies and practices has created a complex legislative and technical infrastructure, one that ostensibly presents change-minded policymakers with prohibitive costs, both politically and financially. To oppose exclusionary discipline requires not only tackling numerous policies permitting their use; it also requires decommissioning technical components of bureaucratic practices and record-keeping that surface “repeat offenders” and “problematic behaviors.” This, in turn, requires political will from school boards, teacher unions, parent groups, and legislators.

Yet the costs of continuing down the path of exclusionary discipline remain high for students, particularly Black students, and for public education and democracy at large. When a child is suspended or expelled, the whole community suffers through lost educational achievement, economic opportunity, and civic engagement.⁸ The historical development of school disciplinary structures and practices, then, is a story of these competing costs, pitting a bureaucracy's and legal regime's investment in exclusionary discipline against the costs to students and society.

But that is only part of the story. Path dependency has little to say about the long-standing social movement that has sought to reverse entrenched disciplinary policies and practices.⁹ This movement has shifted policies from exclusionary to non-exclusionary forms of discipline and has reduced racial disparities.¹⁰ Many state and school board policies now require schools to consider non-exclusionary forms of discipline (e.g., Florida and Texas, where state statutes encourage

⁶Richard O. Welsh and Shafiqua Little, “The School Discipline Dilemma: A Comprehensive Review of Disparities and Alternative Approaches,” *Review of Educational Research* 88, no. 5 (Sept. 2018), 752–94.

⁷Tera Eva Agyepong, *The Criminalization of Black Children: Race, Gender, and Delinquency in Chicago's Juvenile Justice System, 1899–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Jon Hale and Candace Livingston, “‘If You Want Police, We Will Have Them’: Anti-Black Student Discipline in Southern Schools and the Rise of a New Carceral Logic, 1961–1975,” *Journal of Urban History* 49, no. 5 (Sept. 2023), 1035–48; Matthew Kautz, “From Segregation to Suspension: The Solidification of the Contemporary School-Prison Nexus in Boston, 1963–1985,” *Journal of Urban History* 49, no. 5 (Sept. 2023), 1–22.

⁸Amity Noltemeyer, Rose Marie Ward, and Caven McLoughlin, “Relationship between School Suspension and Student Outcomes: A Meta-analysis,” *School Psychology Review* 44, no. 2 (June 2015), 224–40.

⁹Kavitha Mediratta, “Grassroots Organizing and the School-to-Prison Pipeline: The Emerging National Movement to Roll Back Zero Tolerance Discipline Policies in U.S. Public Schools,” in *Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, ed. Sofia Bahena et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012), 211–36; and Mark Warren, *Willful Defiance: The Movement to Dismantle the School-To-Prison Pipeline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁰Gary Ritter, “Reviewing the Progress of School Discipline Reform,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 93, no. 2 (April 2018), 1–6.

alternatives, and Denver and Oakland, where district policies emphasize restorative approaches).¹¹

A simple story of path dependence regarding exclusionary discipline underrepresents the acts of resistance and the campaigns to reverse exclusionary practices.¹² These active, agentic social movements show it is possible to reverse paths that are worse for children. Indeed, some schools have resisted the enormously common use of suspension and expulsion—whether through force by civil rights investigations, through pressure by community organizers, or through the voluntary action of community leaders. Despite these efforts, far too many districts continue to use suspension and expulsion and only “encourage” non-exclusionary alternatives. Furthermore, several state legislatures have recently returned to harsh discipline policies. These retrenchments signal that the powerful logics of path dependence require deeper transformation of normative and cultural elements. Whether explicit or not, policymakers make assumptions about history, sometimes failing to consider it at all. The real challenge lies in creating processes of path alteration that impose costs on policymakers for readopting policies shown to have such deleterious effects.

Kathryn E. Wiley is assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Howard University. **Douglas S. Reed** is professor of government and director of the MA Program in Educational Transformation at Georgetown University.

¹¹Education Commission of the States, “School Discipline Policies: Which Non-Punitive Approaches, If Any, Are Outlined as Alternatives to Suspension and/or Expulsion?” May 2021, <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/school-discipline-policies-04>.

¹²Warren, *Willful Defiance*.