

**“Broke the Rules? Exclusion is the Punishment for Some, Not All”:
Exclusionary Discipline and the Funneling of African American Youth to the
School-to-Prison Pipeline**

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**“Broke the Rules? Exclusion is the Punishment for Some, Not All”:
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School-to-Prison Pipeline**

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Abstract

The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) is a theoretical concept that seeks to explain how students of color, particularly African-American students, are disproportionately represented in school discipline data and in the usage of exclusionary discipline methods. While the STPP may be theoretical, there is statistical data to validate its existence. This paper will examine the data and trends surrounding exclusionary discipline in United States public schools, while seeking to tie exclusionary discipline data to adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGR) and individuals future social and economic statuses. Recommendations will be made for alternatives to exclusionary discipline methods, ones that are more cognizant of student's cultural backgrounds.

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INTRODUCTION

Horace Mann, the father of the American public education system, believed the United States needed to establish a public education system designed to bridge the gap between societal divides. Mann advocated for children of all upbringings and backgrounds to be educated together. In 1848 Mann wrote, “Education...beyond all other devices of human origin, is the greatest equalizer of the conditions of men – the balance-wheel of social machinery” (Gasoi & Meier, 2018, p. 36). While the 1848 world Mann was living in was much different than today’s, public schools are still tasked with providing an ‘equal’ education for children from all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

When children gather at the schoolhouse steps they bring an array of upbringings, behaviors, and moral compasses of right and wrong. The variety in students’ backgrounds can sometimes clash with the societal recognized norms of acceptable school behavior. Educational experts stress that teachers need to have clearly defined expectations and guidelines for acceptable classroom behavior. And the more these acceptable behaviors are clearly defined and proper etiquette procedures are taught to students, the less disciplinary issues teachers and schools have (Boynton & Boynton, 2005) - something that is easier said than done. Classroom discipline is a topic heavily discussed and researched among educators, administrators, and educational scholars, yet it remains a highly personal, moral topic for individual teachers. What works for one teacher, in terms of discipline, will not always work for another; it is a system of trial and error and one that requires constant adjustment.

Statement of the Problem

There is a wide array of classroom discipline strategies touted by educational experts as being the “best” at achieving appropriate student school behavior; positive behavioral support

strategies seek to work with students on identifying specific unacceptable behaviors. Furthermore, its goal is to teach students appropriate behaviors and how to appropriately interact with individuals, family members, groups of people, and people within the larger school or community setting (Warren et al., 2006). Positive behavioral support strategies are opposite of exclusionary discipline techniques which seek to single-out or separate a disruptive student from the masses. Once removal from the educational environment happens, there are vast inconsistencies in education regarding how the student and behavior are discussed and processed; many times, very minimal discussion takes place between the student and school administration.

Whatever disciplinary method chosen within the educational setting, it should be applied to students based on behavior, severity of the incident, and not based on demographic factors, i.e., gender, disability (physical or mental/emotional), or race. Yet discipline data reveals that is often the antithesis of what happens. The disproportionality in discipline data is referred to as the ‘discipline gap,’ the propensity for students of color to be disciplined more frequently and with greater severity than their peers. Students of color are often the subjects of exclusionary discipline, rather than positive behavioral interventions, within schools (Monroe, 2005).

The American Psychological Association defines exclusionary discipline as “any type of school disciplinary action that removes or excludes a student from his or her educational setting” (American Psychological Association Services, Inc., n.d., p.1). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has long touted the belief that both exclusionary and zero-tolerance discipline policies tend to criminalize even minor violations of school rules, which begins to push students out of schools and into the criminal justice system (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020). Research indicates that the disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline on students of

color can lead individuals down the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). Additionally, research acknowledges that the application of discipline in schools is subjective in nature and that implicit biases (racial and/or gender) may be what is unknowingly driving the disproportionality of the application of exclusionary discipline (Walker, 2020).

According to national and state educational data, which is collected by the Department of Education and a state's Department of Public Instruction, it has been "documented that black students are two to three times more likely to experience an exclusionary discipline event than white students" (Yang et al., 2018, p. 316), and this discipline is typically assigned for lower-level or minor behavioral infractions, such as defiance or disruption of activities/class. According to Wolf and Kupchik (2017), "approximately one in seven Black students [are] suspended each year, compared to one in twenty of their white counterparts" (p. 411).

Purpose of Study

This research will review Kindergarten through 12th grade discipline data in United States public schools to show exclusionary discipline is disproportionately applied to students of color. Additionally, the long-term consequences of exclusionary discipline techniques (increases in dropout rates and lower graduation rates) will be examined from the context of the school to prison pipeline (STPP). The purpose of this research is to try and establish a long-term connection between the disproportionate usage of exclusionary discipline on students of color, which can inadvertently lead to increased interactions with the criminal justice system.

"Higher suspension [and expulsion] rates are closely correlated with higher delinquency and high school dropout rates, which have tremendous economic costs for the suspended student, the school, and our larger society" (Smith & Harper, 2015). The consequences of not achieving

‘academic success’ in high school can be far-reaching into adulthood. There are numerous negative personal and social/societal consequences, as well as economic consequences of not earning a high school diploma. In terms of economic consequences alone, which can be difficult to quantify, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that individuals with the greatest levels of educational achievement (professional/doctoral degrees) will earn more than triple than those with less than a high school diploma (Torpey, 2018). Additionally, individuals without a high school diploma tend to have higher rates of depression, poorer overall physical health, and increased rates of poverty (Lee-St. John et al., 2018). The economic and societal costs of failing to earn a high school diploma can inadvertently funnel individuals down the school-to-prison pipeline.

Significance or Implications of the Study

This research will argue that the common-place usage of exclusionary discipline strategies in public schools needs to be replaced with positive behavioral support strategies focused on teaching appropriate, socially acceptable behavior. It will be argued that shifting disciplinary strategies will aid in reducing the disproportionate focus of disciplinary strategies on students of color, which will decrease delinquency and dropout rates of said students. The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) is centered on the belief that exclusionary educational disciplinary methods ‘push’ students out of the classroom environment, which in turn, leads to the criminalization of students’ behaviors and increases their probability of entering the states jail or prison systems (Ruiz, 2017). This research will be significant because the goal is to establish a long-term connection between educational disciplinary strategies (exclusionary discipline), higher delinquency and drop-out rates, and the STPP.

Contribution to the Field

This research will contribute to the field by compiling recommendations for best practices to alternatives to exclusionary discipline techniques – how to ‘discipline’ students without excluding them from the classroom environment. Alternatives to exclusionary discipline will be explored, programs like School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (SWPBIS) and cultural competence training for educators and other school staff will be specifically explored. Overall, the goal is to train educators how to model and teach acceptable behavior, rather than punish for unacceptable behavior. Punishment within the educational setting is often structured with the assumption that all children have been raised in similar environments and are raised knowing *how* to behave; the antithesis of that is true. The alternatives to exclusionary discipline take into consideration theories of criminology that could account for why individuals (juveniles) respond to situations with societally unacceptable or delinquent behavior. Recommendations for alternatives to exclusionary discipline will be made for teachers, school-professionals, and educational administrators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the first studies ever conducted on the disproportionate application of discipline on students of color was done in 1975 by the Children’s Defense Fund. In 1972, the Office of Civil Rights, a division of the Department of Education, began collecting data on school suspensions to determine if the number of school suspensions indicated racial discrimination within districts with a high minority enrollment. Suspension, which can be in or out of school, is defined as the temporary removal of a student from school property “by the school administration for noncompliance with school district policies or rules, for threatening to destroy school property, or for endangering the property, health, or safety of those at school” (Wisconsin

Department of Public Instruction, 2020). The Children's Defense fund analyzed data from the 1972-1973 school year and determined that secondary (high school) students were "nine-times more likely to be suspended than elementary students" (Children's Defense Fund, 1975, p. 73), and while the majority of the students suspended that school year were white, the suspension rates for African American students at the secondary level was twice what it was for white students (Children's Defense Fund, 1975).

In the years since the Children's Defense Fund's 1975 groundbreaking study, the usage of exclusionary discipline techniques by schools has increased nearly fifty percent (Caramanis, 2020). Since the 1970s, the number of out-of-school suspensions has doubled and since 2000 the numbers have increased by more than 10 percent (Raufu, 2017). Research documents the use of out-of-school suspensions as an essential discipline option for schools, with expulsions being used with less frequency; however, both disciplinary techniques have seen a substantial increase in application over time (Skiba et al., 2014). Additionally, there has been a substantial growing body of evidence highlighting the disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline or zero tolerance policies on students of color. Research indicates that the "disproportionately in punishment begins in pre-school...[and] schools with large populations of racial/ethnic minorities are more likely to rely on exclusionary, criminal justice-oriented security and punishment" (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017, p. 411).

Exclusionary Discipline

Researchers and scholars define exclusionary discipline as "any type of school disciplinary action that removed or excludes a student from his or her usual educational setting" (American Psychological Association Services, Inc., n.d.; Gagnon, Jaffee, & Kennedy, 2016). Examples of exclusionary discipline include seclusion/isolation rooms, in-school suspensions

(ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), or expulsion from the school district (Gagnon et al., 2016). Expulsion is defined as the removal of a student from school property for disciplinary purposes by a districts school board “for violation of school district rules; threats against school property; or conduct which endangers the property, health, or safety of those at school” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2020); expulsion typically means a student is barred from returning to the school district and must seek education at another school district. Nationally, between 2013-2014, roughly 2.6 million (5.3%) students in public schools (kindergarten through 12th grade) in the United States received one or more out of school suspension(s), and 111,000 (0.2%) public-school students were expelled during that same year (US Department of Education, 2019).

The rationale for the usage of exclusionary discipline varies based on incident, United States Department of Education data collected does not classify discipline data by specific offense category; however, Skiba et al.’s (2014) research revealed out-of-school suspensions were assigned for offenses from severe, safety related incidents to minor or moderate violations of school policies, “such as disobedience and disrespect, defiance, attendance problems, failing to report to detention, and general classroom disruption” (p. 550). Expulsions are usually more selectively assigned and reserved for behaviors that are considered extremely disruptive to the learning environment, violent, or violations of law (Skiba et al., 2014).

State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s discipline data for 2018-2019 indicates that students were subjected to exclusionary discipline for the following offenses: assault, drugs/alcohol, endangering behavior (fights or horseplay), weapon related and other violation of school rule(s) (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2020). The State of Wisconsin requires that out of school suspension or expulsions be submitted in half day

increments for up to five consecutive school days per incident violation. However, if a student is up for expulsion for his/her violation, the individual “may be suspended for up to 15 consecutive school days” (Student Services/Prevention and Wellness Team, 2012). For students with disabilities, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children with “a disability may only be suspended for more than ten consecutive school days if the condition is not a manifestation...of the child’s disability” (Taylor, 2006, p. 1). If a student is to be suspended for more than ten consecutive school days, a manifestation meeting must be held to evaluate if the behavior/disciplinary violations are a result of the students diagnosed disability (Taylor, 2006).

An array of research reveals that exclusionary discipline strategies are unevenly assigned across the student population. Wolf and Kubchik (2017) reported black students are noticeably more likely to receive a disciplinary punishment for behavior in schools than white students. “Approximately one in seven Black students is suspended each year, compared to one in twenty of their White counterparts” (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017, p. 411). Walker’s (2020) research revealed that as African American students progressed in educational grade level, their suspension rates increased as well.

While exclusionary disciplinary punishments, like suspensions (in and out of school) are assigned for an array of offenses and the length of said punishment is determined by the offense, schools have an additional exclusionary discipline technique that is supposed to be reserved for the most heinous offenses: expulsion based off zero-tolerance policy violations.

‘Zero-Tolerance’ Policies

Zero-tolerance policies are often defined as the automatic application of exclusionary discipline techniques (primarily expulsion) for a variety of offenses, regardless of individual

student circumstances (Dankner, 2019; Darensbourg, et al., 2010; Ruiz, 2017). The foundation of zero-tolerance policies was laid during the mid-1980's with the national adoption of mandatory minimum and sentencing guidelines and it is the 1994 *Gun Free Schools Act* (GFSA) that lays the foundation for school districts across the United States to roll-out 'zero-tolerance' policies within public schools. The GFSA requires schools to expel any student that possesses a firearm on school property for at least one year to ensure federal funding (Dankner, 2019; Ruiz, 2017). Zero-tolerance policies were originally expected to expel students from school districts and were to be applied to only the most serious student violations for drugs and weapons; however, over time, many states and school districts have used such policies for more minor disciplinary infractions such as on campus drug and drug paraphernalia possession or usage (Schiff, 2018).

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has not established a formal or universal zero-tolerance policy for Wisconsin public schools, but "Wisconsin law does require expulsion for a minimum of one year if a student brings a firearm on school property" (Wisconsin State PIRC - Parents Plus, 2015). This policy is in alignment with the GFSA, however, this requirement can be adjusted by a district's school board on an individual, case-by-case basis. In many instances, zero-tolerance policies in schools are used to send the message to students that "these behaviors will not be tolerated and will immediately be dealt with using a range of options designed to stop the behaviors, prevent future violations and protect the safety of the school environment" (Wisconsin State PIRC - Parents Plus, 2015).

While zero-tolerance policies were originally thought to enhance school campus security during the wake of school shootings during the 1990s, the focus has now changed to removing a disruptive student so that other students are in turn deterred from partaking in similar behavior. This is meant to produce an improved learning environment for the remaining student population

(Dankner, 2019). Research shows that such policies do not work, as they are not a deterrent, are not applied evenly or equitably, and are damaging to a student's mental and emotional development (Anyon, et al., 2018).

With the national standard for zero-tolerance policies was established in the 1994 *Gun-Free Schools Act*, the act did not specifically define key terms and allows “public schools to broadly interpret the definition[s] of “violence,” “weapons,” and “drugs”” (Dankner, 2019, p. 586). While the intent of zero-tolerance policies was to be applied to incidents involving weapons, without a formal definition on either the national or state level, schools are left to interpret what zero-tolerance means.

The current application of these policies varies from state to state and varies within school districts within a state. Many schools classify not only for firearms as a zero-tolerance offense but include other weapons (real or perceived), drugs (illegal, prescription or over-the-counter pain relievers), alcohol, violence, and tobacco (including e-cigarettes) too (Danker, 2019; Ruiz, 2017). Without clear definitions of these key terms, public schools are left to interpret and apply policies on a case-by-case basis, which can lead to a racial, ethnic, gender disproportionality in the application of said policies (McIntosh et al., 2014). Additionally, scientific research does not support that harsh punishments and zero-tolerance policies increase safety within schools or encourage academic success, in fact the antithesis has been established (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020; American Psychological Association Services, Inc., n.d.; Skiba et al., 2014). Research supports that consequences for zero-tolerance offenses “tend to put students at greater risk for decreased connectivity to school, increased participation in risky or illegal behavior, poor academic achievement and dropout, and, for many, subsequently entry into the ‘school to prison pipeline’” (Schiff, 2018, pp. 123-124).

What is the School-to-Prison Pipeline?

The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) is a theoretical concept that scholars use to help explain the correlation between school discipline data and the interaction of students with the criminal justice system. While an exact definition of the STPP has not been formally defined by the Department of Education, educational scholars and researchers have developed various working definitions. In 2014, Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams conducted a search of bibliographies from peer-reviewed articles and web-based reports from research, advocacy groups, and policy reports seeking to identify themes in the definition of the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP). Skiba et al.'s (2014) search revealed four themes in the various scholarly definitions of STPP:

- 1) “School exclusion through out-of-school suspension and expulsion as a form of school discipline has become widespread, systematic, and increasing in usage...
- 2) The use of exclusionary school discipline increases the probability for long-term negative outcomes, in particular juvenile justice involvement...
- 3) These practices and outcomes fall disproportionately on specific populations, in particular students of color...
- 4) The term STPP implies that there is a direction of causality – that policies and practices of schools, rather than solely the characteristics of students themselves, are responsible to some degree for those negative outcomes” (Skiba et al., 2014, pp. 547-548).

Additionally, Skiba et al. (2014) provides a comprehensive (but not all-inclusive) chart compiling available scholarly definitions for STPP. For this research, the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) will be defined as “the use of educational policies and practices that have the

effect of punishing students, especially students of color and students with disabilities, out of schools and toward the juvenile and criminal justice system” (Skiba et al., 2014). It is this ‘push-out’ (through exclusionary discipline/zero-tolerance policies) of students from the classroom that leads to the criminalization of students’ behaviors and increases their probability of entering the states jail or prison systems (Ruiz, 2017).

Consequences of Exclusionary Discipline

Consequence: Graduation Rates

Research indicates that students who are subjected to exclusionary discipline techniques are “more likely to do poorly in school, disengage from educational environments, and have juvenile justice contact or be arrested” (Anyon et al., 2018, p. 222). Being removed from an educational setting, whether frequently or infrequently, can greatly affect a student’s academic progress. Academic content is missed and often students do not have the necessary support systems in place needed to facilitate reengaging in education (Smith & Harper, 2015). In Fabelo et al.’s (2011) research, it was revealed that “students who were suspended and/or expelled, particularly those who were repeatedly disciplined, were more likely to be held back a grade or to drop out than were students not involved in the disciplinary system (p. xi).” Schools track drop-out rates and report the data to the State Department of Public Instruction; drop-out rates are translated nationally into adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGR).

The adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGR) is a percentage of ninth grade students in public high schools who will graduate with a regular high school diploma within four years of starting ninth grade; many states also track and report the six-year ACGR rate, which is students who have graduated within six years of starting ninth grade (National Center for Education Statistics , 2019). While national data indicates that the adjusted cohort graduation rates

(ACGR) in public schools are increasing, “from 79 percent in 2010-2011 to 85 percent in 2016-2017” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019, p. 1), the ACGR can range greatly from state to state. Additionally, “factors such as race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language learner status, geography, [and] gender among other conditions” (Garcia-Perez & Johnson, 2017, p. 41) have a great deal of influence over the overall ACGR especially for students of color.

While the ACGR for the 2016-2017 academic year indicated an 85 percent graduation rate for all students, if one examines the ethnic breakdown, “American Indian/Alaska Native (78 percent), Black (78 percent), and Hispanic (80 percent)” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019) were all below the national average. Conversely, White students ACGR ranged across states from “76 percent in New Mexico to 95 percent in New Jersey, and were higher than the U.S. average ACGR of 85 percent in 37 states and the District of Columbia” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019, pg. 1). There were only four states (Arkansas, West Virginia, Texas, Alabama) where the ACGR for Black students was higher than the national average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Upon a closer examination of the ACGR, it becomes clear there is a disparity in the ACGR for students of color compared to white students; what needs to be explored is why the ACGR of African American students is lower when compared to White students (Bates & Richelle, 2018). This disparity is not only present in the ACGR, it can also be witnessed socially and economically.

Consequences: Social and Economic

The consequences of not graduating from high school can be far-reaching into adulthood. There are numerous negative personal and social/societal consequences, as well as economic consequences of not earning a high school diploma. In schools, students learn more than

academics, they learn appropriate social behaviors and roles which help prepare them for adulthood. If students are continuously the subject of exclusionary discipline, their ability to learn appropriate social behaviors and roles is severely compromised. Additionally, being excluded from the mainstream educational environment effectively limits a student's social friend group, increases negative feelings towards education, and decreases one's social bonds. Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan's (2011) research revealed that "suspended students reported that their friends shared their negative attitudes toward school," (p. 171) and when one's peer group is disinterested in academic success or has a blatant disregard for school rules/policies, one may be more easily persuaded to break the rules (Lee et al., 2011).

Research also indicates a significant negative connection between out of school suspensions that occur in the ninth grade and high school graduation, as well as postsecondary plans (Smith & Harper, 2015). "Higher suspension rates are closely correlated with higher delinquency and high school dropout rates, which have tremendous economic costs for the suspended student, the school, and our larger society" (Smith & Harper, 2015).

In terms of economic consequences, which can be difficult to quantify, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that individuals with the greatest levels of educational achievement (professional/doctoral degrees) will earn more than triple than those with less than a high school diploma (Torpey, 2018). Skiba et al. (2014) reported that "students who drop out of school, will, over the course of their lifetimes, earn an average of \$375,000 less than high school graduates and roughly \$1 million less than college graduates" (p. 554); additionally, individuals who have dropped out of high school are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than students who graduate from high school" (Skiba et al., 2014, p. 554). These economic and societal costs are

often witnessed when excluded students inadvertently follow into the criminal justice system, hence validating the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Labeling Theory

Researchers have long known of the negative effects of exclusionary discipline upon students' development. The 1975 Children's Defense Fund study on the effects of exclusionary discipline acknowledged the detrimental effects on students' development. Exclusionary discipline techniques can severely hinder a student's academic progress, increase the likelihood of disengagement from school, and attach the societal label of 'deviant' to them (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Children's Defense Fund (1975) refers to it as the 'labeling process' – meaning, suspending or expelling a student, brands them with the label of a 'trouble-maker' and once that moniker is established, it can follow that student from teacher to teacher (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). Labeling Theory holds that once someone (a student in this case) is 'labeled' a deviant, that student will have difficulty escaping said label and may come to identify with or embrace it (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017).

Since discipline data is electronically stored in today's schools, it is easy for a teacher to research a student's disciplinary background and inadvertently formulate a preconceived opinion of a student. "Suspension, once on a child's record, blocks a child's chance of wiping the slate clean with another teacher, another school, or another agency that receives his[/her] records" (Children's Defense Fund, 1975, p. 63). The label of a 'deviant' by an adult authority figures in school becomes obvious to one's peers when the disciplined student is no longer present in class. The stigmatization by adults in the student's life, suspension and expulsions give students a label among their peers as a troublemaker; this label can inadvertently affect a student's friend

network, which can lead to negative choices leading down the school-to-prison pipeline (Smith & Harper, 2015).

The Social Control Theory and Social Bonding Theory

The Social Control Theory broadly assumes that all youth would commit delinquent acts, or violate the law, if they thought they could get away with doing so. The theory asserts individuals in society are designed to participate in delinquent activity, but individuals are prevented from doing so by strong personal and social bonds controls (Kelly, 1996; Tibbets & Hemmens, 2019). According to this theory, social bonds are what ties individuals to ‘conventional’ or societally acceptable behaviors; bonds such as family, friends, school, work, religion, employment. Students that are subjected to exclusionary disciplinary methods often experience feelings of alienation and detachment from school, therefore making the educational social bonds weak, which can lead to delinquency (Skiba et al., 2014). Hirschi’s social bonding theory takes it one step further to assert that delinquency and crime are the result “of an individual’s bond with society being weakened, broken, or nonexistent” (Watts, 2017, p. 702).

The main premise of Hirschi’s Social Bonding Theory is that delinquency, in this instance student behavior leading to exclusionary discipline, is “the result of weak or broken bonds between the individual and society” (Kelly, 1996, p. 323) and that most individuals would offend if he/she thought they could get away with it. However, it is the strength of these bonds that keeps individuals from offending; in school, those bonds would be with teachers, administrators, coaches, counselors, etc. Hirschi indicates that these bonds are divided into four main elements – attachment, commitment, involvement, and beliefs. Attachment refers to strong, loving attachments to parents, significant others, stable adults, commitment refers to one’s status in society – if a person feels he/she has a lot to lose (job, reputation, money) then they are

less likely to offend, - involvement in outside activities (education, sports, volunteering, church, charity) decreases one's likelihood to offend, and beliefs are considered to be one's values and morals (Tibbets & Hemmens, 2019). Yang et al.'s (2018) research revealed that "students who report low school bonding are more likely to engage in risky behaviors" (p. 318). Additionally, the weaker the bonds are under the four elements of Hirschi's theory, the greater the likelihood students will disengage from the academic setting and engage in delinquent behavior (Yang et al., 2018).

The phrase *school belongingness* has been defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Kalu et al., 2020, p. 3). Research indicates that the level of school belongingness is connected to classroom/school behavior. Additionally, a strong level of belongingness and positive school interactions lead to positive student development, provides increased opportunities for stronger social relationships, and helps to improve adolescents social and/or psychological skills. "Research shows that Black students are particularly susceptible to low levels of school belongingness and engagement" (Kalu et al., 2020, p. 3). Social Bonding Theory would suggest that if students feel increased levels of school belongingness, they would be less likely to engage in delinquent behavior as they would be more 'bonded' to the school environment. Furthermore, students with low levels of feelings of school belongingness are linked to "criminal behavior, gang membership, and substance abuse" (Kalu et al., 2020, p. 3).

By utilizing exclusionary discipline practices as punishment, schools are inadvertently limiting the opportunities for students to develop high levels of school belongingness. Exclusionary discipline, by nature, removes students from the educational setting and assigns a negative label to the individual disciplined; those two factors limit a student's opportunity to

positively socialize with peers in school. Additionally, “[students] are also prevented from bonding to their school, they lack emotional adjustment, and are more at risk for developing non-violent and violent anti-social behaviors” (Kalu et al., 2020, p. 3). The more positively students interact with school, teachers, peers, etc., their likelihood for academic success increases and their chances of dropping out of school decrease (Kalu et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This research was accomplished by collecting, interpreting, and analyzing secondary research and statistics collected from the National Center for Educational Statistics, the United States Department of Education, and independent sources of data on suspension and expulsion rates, broken down by race/ethnicity. Data collected and analyzed was from peer-reviewed academic research on the disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline, and its detrimental economic and social impact, was utilized to connect its effects to an increase in juvenile delinquent behaviors, decreased feelings of school belongingness, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

RESULTS

Suspension and Expulsion

The usage of exclusionary discipline is tracked on the national and state levels. Nationally, the Department of Education, through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), collects and analyzes all reported data from all public schools in the United States, those data reports are issued every three years. Additionally, the Office for Civil Rights, an extension of the Department of Health and Human Services, collects, analyzes, and reports annually on certain subsections of data, related to gender, disability, age, national origin, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity (Institute of Education Sciences (IES), 2021; U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services, 2021). Each state's method of collection varies, but all data is reported to the individual states Department of Public Instruction. Nationally, the last academic year the NCES reported data was the 2013-2014 academic year, and the most recent year the Office for Civil Rights data is the 2017-2018 academic year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2018-2019 academic year was the last complete school year and data from the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years will be incomplete due to the COVID-19 gubernatorial shut-downs of public schools in many states across the country.

The NCES reported for the 2013-2014 academic year and the Office for Civil Rights reported for the 2017-2018 academic year suspensions and expulsions across all grade levels, not broken down by individual grade levels. Looking at suspension data first, the NCES reported that 2.6 million children enrolled in public schools for the 2013-2014 academic year (5.3%) received one or more out-of-school (OSS) suspension during that time. Of that 5.3 percent receiving one or more OSS, Black students made up 13.7 percent of total suspensions while White students made up 3.4 percent (US Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, males were suspended twice as often as females (7.3% to 3.2%) regardless of race/ethnic group. When taking race/ethnic group into consideration,

the percentage of Black male students who received out-of-school suspensions (17.6 percent) was the highest of male students from any racial/ethnic group. This percentage was nearly twice the percentage of the next highest racial/ethnic group—American Indian/Alaska Native male students with 9.1 percent—and was more than twice the percentage of male students from any other racial/ethnic group.” (US Department of Education, 2019, p. 1)

A parallel pattern emerged when looking at female students, Black female students composed the highest percentage (9.6%) of students receiving out-of-school suspensions (US Department of Education, 2019).

The Office for Civil Rights reported that 50.9 million students attended public-school for the 2017-2018 academic year, and of those students, students of color composed 67.1 percent of all students receiving one or more out-of-school suspension, 38.2 percent of those students suspended were Black or African American, compared to 32.9 percent of white students, the rates for Black students receiving suspensions are more than two times their portion of total student enrollment (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Consistent with the NCES data, males (69.5%) received more suspensions than females (39.5%) (Office for Civil Rights, 2020); however, when breaking down the data by race/ethnicity further disparities emerge. Black female students received suspensions “at rates almost two times their share of total student enrollment (7.4 percent)” (Office for Civil Rights, 2021, p. 17) and Black males suspension rates were “more than three times their share of total student enrollment (7.7 percent)” (Office for Civil Rights, 2021, p. 18).

When translated into number of academic days missed by students due to out-of-school suspension, the total number of academic days missed for the 2017-2018 was 11,250,797 (100%) for all students. Students of color missed 7,771,953 days (69.4%), Black or African American students missing 4,671,301 days (41.7%), while White students missed 3,433,846 days (30.6%) (Office for Civil Rights, n.d.). The number of missed academic days of instruction directly contribute to students falling behind academically and make it incredibly difficult for a student to remain academically similar with his/her peers (Bryan, 2017). Research indicates that African American students, males in particular, that are repeatedly “suspended or expelled become

academically disengaged, increase their association with deviant peers, become resentful of school personnel, and experience a heightened sense of alienation” (Darensbourg et al., 2010, p. 198).

Expulsions, generally defined as the permanent exclusion of a student, is a more extensive process for schools to complete; therefore, they are rarer in dispensation than suspensions. Expulsions cannot be assigned by school level administrators, suspensions can be, because students are entitled to due process before the school board before an expulsion can be handed down. Students can either be expelled with or without educational services; this refers to whether a student will receive alternative (usually at home) instruction or be completely devoid of all educational opportunities (Office for Civil Rights, 2021).

For expulsion data, the NCES reported that 111,000 students, 0.2 percent of the public-school population for the 2013-2014 academic year, were expelled. The percentage of Black and expelled (0.4%) was higher than White students (0.2%) and regardless of race/ethnicity, males received more expulsions than females (US Department of Education, 2019). According to the Office for Civil Rights, out of the 101,652 expulsions assigned for the 2017-2018 academic year, 65 percent were given to students of color, 37.6 percent to Black or African American students, while 34.8 percent were given to White students (Office for Civil Rights, n.d.). Additionally, Black students, “15.1 percent of total school enrollment, were expelled at rates that were more than twice their share of student enrollment” (Office for Civil Rights, 2021, p. 12). Consistent with suspension data, males were expelled at a disproportionate rate when compared to females.

Recent educational policy reform initiatives have been enacted by numerous districts across the United States to reduce the usage of exclusionary discipline. According to the Office for Civil Rights, there was a 2 percent decline in the application of exclusionary discipline

penalties from the 2015-2016 to the 2017-2018 academic year. However, there were three types of discipline practices that increased in their application(s): “1) school related arrests; 2) expulsions with educational services; and 3) referrals to law enforcement.” (Office for Civil Rights, 2021, p. 4). In the 2017-2018 academic year, 28.7 percent of all student referrals to law enforcement were Black students and the percentage of Black students arrested at school or during a school-sponsored event was 31.6 percent. Both are twice the Black student share of total student enrollment (15.1 percent) for the 2017-2018 academic year (Office for Civil Rights, 2021).

“Students who are suspended, expelled, or referred to law enforcement...are more likely to perceive their school environment as unsupportive and discriminatory” (Yang et al., 2018, p. 318), and it is that perception that leads to students engaging in increasingly risky behaviors. Engaging in risky behaviors increases the likelihood of students being suspended or expelled, and, according to Yang et al. (2018), nearly triples a youth’s likelihood of contact with the juvenile justice system. Regardless of recent data showing a slight decrease in the usage of exclusionary discipline, research is clear, exclusionary discipline practices are the first step in the school-to-prison pipeline (Yang, et al., 2018).

Impact of Exclusionary Discipline

While prior research consistently demonstrates the significant relationship between the usage of exclusionary discipline and lack of school connectedness and academic failure, it also illustrates the relationship between these and the criminal justice system. Numerous studies have explored the relationship between exclusionary discipline, school dropouts, and the criminal justice system. Speaking as a teacher with more than twenty years of experience in public education, from an educational standpoint, the link between exclusionary discipline and

lack of school connectedness and academic failure is clear: missing class time means missing instruction, missing instruction means falling behind, falling behind can lead to failing classes, failing classes can lead to not meeting the necessary graduation requirements, failing to meet requirements can lead to alternative education placement or not graduating high school. The aforementioned litany of events is supported by Wolf and Kupchik (2017) who “found that students who were either suspended or expelled were more likely to drop out of school or be held back a grade” (p, 410). Skiba et al., (2002) referenced Bullara’s (1993) research which argued that the classroom management style in schools, especially one that relies heavily on punitive or negative consequences, directly contributes to the increased drop-out rates of African American youths. Furthermore, it was documented that students with higher rates of suspension tend to have lower reading and mathematics scores when compared to students who have not received suspensions (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). It has been additionally documented that higher rates of suspension can translate into higher rates of dropping out, and high school drop outs are more than eight times more likely to become incarcerated than individuals who graduate high school (Skiba et al., 2014).

Researchers have also established a link between education and overall adult/lifetime income achievement. Wolf and Kupchik (2017) state that “the more education a person attains, the less likely they are to be involved in crime as an adult” (p. 411). In terms of wage earning alone, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that for the third quarter of 2019, workers age 25 and over, working full time could expect to earn approximately \$975 weekly. Individuals without a high school diploma could expect to earn approximately \$606 weekly, while high school graduates (without college) could expect \$749 weekly, and individuals with an associate’s degree or some collegiate experience, could expect \$874 weekly. Income continues to rise the

more education one attains, individuals with bachelor's degree could expect to earn \$1,281 weekly, and advanced degree individuals (master's/doctoral) could expect weekly earnings of \$1,559 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Skiba et al. (2014) indicates that "students who drop out of school, will, over the course of their lifetimes, earn an average of \$375,000 less than high school graduates and roughly \$1 million less than college graduates" (p. 554). The National Center for Educational Statistics echo's Skiba et al.'s (2014) research by finding that high school drop outs, on average, cost the U.S. economy "approximately \$272,000 over his or her lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, higher reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, higher rates of criminal activity, and higher reliance on welfare" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

This is further supported by Skiba et al.'s (2014) research that a noteworthy proportion of youth who had received exclusionary discipline punishments, who later become delinquent, did not participate in serious delinquent activities until after receiving their first suspension. Skiba et al.'s, (2014) research "present[s] a strong case that, above and beyond individual, family, and community risk factors, exclusionary discipline makes a significant contribution in and of itself to a range of negative developmental outcomes" (p. 556).

With a plethora of research indicating the detrimental effects of exclusionary discipline upon students present and future accomplishments, alternative means or methods of punitive consequences must be explored and utilized. Implementation of disciplinary strategies that are focused on teaching acceptable behaviors and how to appropriately interact with individuals in family, school, and the community should be the focus of public schools within the United States. Shifting disciplinary strategies away from exclusionary discipline methods, which are disproportionality applied to students of color, is in the best interest of all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In education, disciplinary reform methods often fall into two categories: programs, sometimes referred to as initiatives, or policies. Educational programs or initiatives are designed to be an aid in the classroom, with the goal of having a specific program that focuses on the success of young people and their ability to learn. Educational policies are generally a broader set of rules that are used within the entire educational (or school district) system. Disciplinary reforms (program or policy) can also be implemented on a multitude of levels – state, district, school or targeted strategies towards specific groups. State and district level implementations are often considered ‘educational policies’ whereas, school or individualized targeted strategies are considered ‘educational programs’ (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017). The question is, *which of the current educational program or policy reforms is the most effective to reduce the usage of exclusionary discipline and bolster student success?* This research will make a recommendation for one educational program and one policy to reduce the usage of exclusionary discipline practices within schools and help stem the school-to-prison pipeline.

Educational Policy

In society today, cultural norms are vastly different based on race, religion, and ethnicity, and school classrooms house a wide array of cultures in one concentrated area. With a vastly diverse student population, it would be no surprise if misunderstandings between staff and students resulted in disciplinary action. Skiba et al. (2002) cited “cultural discontinuity or misunderstandings” (p. 336) as a main reason for miscommunication and conflicts between European-American school personal and African-American students. The miscommunications and conflicts often stem from individuals being “unfamiliar and even uncomfortable with the more active and physical style of communication that characterizes African-American

adolescents” (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 336). Popular among African-American adolescents is the “impassioned and emotive [communication] manner” (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 336), which can often be misinterpreted as being argumentative or confrontational to individuals who are unfamiliar with this communication style. Additionally, research suggests (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2002) that stereotypes and fear of African-American adolescents, particularly male, as being aggressive, threatening, or ‘dangerous’ may lead to an overreaction on the behalf of school personnel for relatively minor behaviors. This often leads to a referral to school administration for disciplinary action, “especially if their anxiety is paired with a misunderstanding of cultural norms of social interaction” (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 336).

In an effort to bridge the cultural and communication gap, one educational policy gaining movement is *cultural competence training* which includes addressing culturally responsive discipline practices. According to the National Education Association (NEA), cultural competence “requires teachers to understand the impact of culture on themselves and their students and to value their students’ cultural backgrounds” (Hanover Research, 2017, p. 10). It is the belief that culturally competent teachers will be able to address conflicts or miscommunication that may arise due to cultural differences. General teacher education programs do not provide structured guidance in culturally competent or responsive strategies (Monroe, 2005); therefore, the NEA indicates that it is imperative for schools to train culturally competent teachers. Doing so will work to fight issues of “implicit bias and cultural mismatch [that] may lead to disproportionalities in discipline” (Hanover Research, 2017, p. 10).

Research indicates that teachers trained in cultural competence or culturally responsive strategies are better able to recognize and understand students’ actions or words, especially ones that “are not intended to be disruptive, and discipline student in ways that respect and affirm

students' identity" (Monroe, 2005, p. 323). When schools adopt culturally competent or responsive disciplinary strategies, it appears to encourage better student outcomes and responses because the behavioral issues are addressed in the classroom, with a culturally competent teacher, rather than by administrators that have the power to assign harsher disciplinary punishments, like suspensions (Monroe, 2005). Studies suggest that when discipline issues are addressed by teachers within the classroom, rather than by administration, students are better able to process the behavior and teachers "may help students avoid negative life outcomes that are associated with recurrent school disciplinary action" (Monroe, 2005, p. 323).

The goal of cultural competence or responsive training is to promote social and emotional learning for all students and staff and to create a safe and supportive school climate for all students; especially one that is respectful and inclusive of an array of cultures (Hanover Research, 2017). Studies show that schools that adopt culturally competent or responsive disciplinary practices minimize the reliance on exclusionary discipline (Hanover Research, 2017) because "schools with inclusive social [and cultural] climates, where students feel respected, listened to, and part of a school community, have less student misbehavior" (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017, p. 411) when compared to schools that do not.

Training teachers in cultural competency or responsiveness will be a multifaceted undertaking. Ideally, the training would begin in the collegiate preparatory courses for new teachers but training current teachers would need to be done in stages and would take time. That is the nature of educational policies – they take time to fully implement due to their expansive nature. So, what can be done in the more immediate sense? Educational programs or initiatives can be implemented in a shorter time frame, often times yielding more immediate results.

Educational Program or Initiative

One educational program or initiative gaining nationwide attention for “targeting a school’s overall social cultural and providing intensive behavioral supports” (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017, p. 50) is a program called *Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS)* or *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)* – the two names are used interchangeably within the educational community. SWPBIS is a prevention strategy that focuses on changing a school’s climate through the setting of clear social and behavioral expectations, with a variety of consequences for violating such expectations (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017). There are four core components to SWPBIS:

“(a) teaching a small set of positive, schoolwide behavioral expectations to all students, (b) establishing a regular pattern in which all adults acknowledge and reward appropriate student behavior, (c) minimizing the likelihood that problem behaviors will be inadvertently rewarded, and (d) collecting and using behavioral [discipline] data to guide whole-school support efforts” (McIntosh et al., 2014, p. 11).

Traditional educational settings provide discipline in a retroactive manner – discipline comes after the behavior has already been done – SWPBIS “teaches appropriate alternatives to inappropriate behavior” (Darensbourg et al., 2010, p. 200) The goal of SWPBIS is to teach students the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, and to teach effective and appropriate “communication, social, and self-management skills” (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017, p. 51).

While the lessons and strategies outlined in SWPBIS are not new concepts, what is unique about it is the view of the cause of student behavior: the environment. Rather than assuming the cause of the behavior rests solely with the individual student, SWPBIS assumes the

cause of behavioral issues is the environment, therefore changing the environment will yield changes in behavior. “Through the universal provision of proactive and positive responses to discipline, changes in student and staff behavior will occur and lead to reductions in disproportionate representation in punitive discipline practices” (Darensbourg et al., 2010, p. 201). If SWPBIS is universally implemented in schools, and it does lead to a reduction in the disproportionate representation of African-American youth in exclusionary discipline, it is reasonable to speculate that it could also decrease the flow of students into the school-to-prison pipeline.

One way to accomplish this is by using the discipline data (referral, citations, suspensions) collected in SWPBIS to drive the different consequences and interventions for behavioral violations. Discipline data should be examined for “(a) the prevalence of discipline referrals among specific teachers, (b) the demographics (i.e. race, gender), and (c) the reason for referral” (Darensbourg et al., 2010, p. 201). Collecting such data can provide a comprehensive look into the discipline patterns present within a specific school climate and target such patterns for improvement. Data-based decision making can provide the best methods of intervention strategies as they are tailored to the specific needs and discrepancies in a school’s discipline data. “In addition to using data to determine discipline patterns within a school, the continuous monitoring of this data is imperative to ensure that the implemented strategies are effective at reducing disproportionality” (Darensbourg et al., 2010, p. 202). Additionally, research supports the benefits of combining cultural competency training and SWBPIS in schools as a measure to decrease the disproportionality of the number of African-American youth subjected to exclusionary discipline (Darensbourg et al., 2010; McIntosh et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2002; Steinberg & Lacoé, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Whichever educational reform to counteract the use of exclusionary discipline schools choose to adopt, it needs to be one that is focused on creating a positive, supportive, inclusive school climate. Schools where the climate is supportive, positive, and culturally sensitive, report fewer behavioral interventions, higher attendance rates, and greater overall student academic achievement (Anyon et al., 2018; Lee-St. John et al., 2018; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Therefore, if the theoretical construct of the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) is real, schools with high attendance rates, lower behavioral referrals, and greater overall student academic achievement will in turn lead to a reduction in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Experts often debate the existence of the STPP, regardless, what is statistically documented in the literature is the disproportionality of students of color, specifically African-American students, in exclusionary discipline data. The negative academic, societal, and personal consequences of such disproportionality, which are well documented in academic scholarship, are far-reaching and life-long. What is also documented is the stronger a student is 'bonded' or feels a high level of belongingness to school, and the more positive school interactions a student has, will lead to positive student development, provide more opportunities for the development of stronger social relationships. Programs, like SWPBIS and initiatives focused on cultural competency training, will bring about the positive changes and developments needed within schools. Making such programs and initiatives, like SWPBIS and cultural competency trainings, standard and mainstream practices will help to improve adolescent social and/or psychological skills and aid in the reduction of the usage of exclusionary discipline methods in schools, and in the reduction, or potential elimination, of the school-to-prison pipeline.

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