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Racial Equity in Exclusionary Discipline Practices

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Racial Equity in Exclusionary Discipline Practices

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Education Specialist
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Racial Equity in Exclusionary Discipline Practices

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined whether external (out-of-school) suspensions are applied equitably to students of different ethnic backgrounds who commit violent and nonviolent offenses. The hypotheses presented in this study were addressed through secondary analysis of disciplinary records from a large metropolitan school district in Florida.

The results indicate that, for the group of 1,667 tenth grade students included in this analysis, racial equity was related to the type of offense, as well as to the student's socioeconomic status. Racial differences were found when SES was not considered, with African American students more likely to be suspended from school for status offenses and violent offenses. The same degree of racial disproportionality was not found among low SES students. However, middle and higher SES students appeared to account for much of the racial disproportionality seen in the sample, with African American students in this group more likely to be suspended for both violent and status offenses.

Chapter I

Introduction

In today's public schools, disciplinary measures that involve exclusion of students from the educational setting (e.g., suspension and expulsion) are increasingly common (Johnston, 2000). The current emphasis on zero-tolerance disciplinary practices has led to renewed debate over the fairness and effectiveness of such procedures.

A typical argument in favor of suspension is that, "The majority of students who are interested in learning should not suffer the constant disruption of the very few," (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). This sentiment has been echoed by administrators, who tend to view suspension and expulsions not as interventions designed to help the affected student, but as measures to preserve an orderly educational environment (Bowditch, 1993).

Federal law mandates that all students have access to a "free and appropriate education" in the least restrictive environment possible (IDEA, 1997). Because external discipline involves the removal of affected students from educational resources and social networks, equity issues related to its application have caused controversy among educators and researchers. Examination of the demographics of suspended students reveals that African American students, particularly males, are overrepresented in this group. European American males come in second, followed by African American females, while European

American females are suspended at the lowest rate (Office for Civil Rights, 1994).

Rationale

Exclusionary discipline has been a simultaneously commonplace and controversial educational practice for many years. A number of empirical studies have described racial and gender disparities in the application of such consequences. Suspension from school is synonymous with denial of educational resources. In addition, suspension (particularly multiple external suspensions) is associated with negative trajectories leading to dropout, delinquency, and poor educational achievement (Bowditch, 1993; Rodney, Crafter, Rodney, & Mupier, 1999; Sprague, Walker, Stieber, Simonsen, Nishioka, & Wagner, 2001). Therefore, it is imperative that educators ensure that, when such consequences are used, they are equitably applied.

The extant literature has established that African American students are suspended from school at higher rates than their European American peers. However, it is not known whether this disparity is due to student behavior, differential referral practices among teachers, or administrative bias in the application of disciplinary procedures. The present study examined whether internal (e.g., in-school) and external (e.g., out-of-school) suspensions are applied equitably to students of different ethnic backgrounds who commit violent and nonviolent offenses.

Although students receive disciplinary referrals for many different specific types of offenses, the infractions can be classified into five more general

categories (Bowditch, 1993). Using this classification system allows a lengthy list of district-wide referral codes to be simplified and more readily conceptualized. Property offenses include such property-based acts as stealing and vandalism. Status offenses include truancy and disrespect. These types of offenses are nonviolent and involve violations of social mores or rules specific to the school setting rather than illegal acts. The controlled substances category encompasses possession of alcohol, tobacco, and other unauthorized substances on school property. Violent offenses include fighting, possession of weapons, and assault. The “other” category encompasses referrals for which the exact offense code was not recorded.

The hypotheses presented in this study were addressed through secondary analysis of disciplinary records from one school district in southwest Florida. By nature of being a secondary analysis, this study has certain limitations. The author did not have control over the creation or coding of the data set. However, secondary analysis allows for efficient and comprehensive study of a relatively large sample.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the current literature related to racial equity in exclusionary discipline practices, several research questions were formulated to address the concerns of this study.

Research Question 1. Are students identified as having low socioeconomic status (SES) based on free/reduced lunch status suspended from school more

frequently than students not identified as having low SES with disciplinary referrals for the same types of offenses?

Research Question 2. Are African American students suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students with disciplinary referrals for the same types of offenses?

Research Question 3. Are low SES African American students suspended from school more frequently than low SES Caucasian students with disciplinary referrals for the same types of offenses?

Research Question 4. Are middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students with disciplinary referrals for the same types of offenses?

The following hypotheses were generated based on current research findings related to exclusionary discipline:

Hypothesis 1. Students identified as having low socioeconomic status (SES) based on free/reduced lunch status will be suspended from school more frequently than students not identified as having low SES.

- a. Low SES students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES students for violent offenses.
- b. Low SES students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES students for property offenses.

- c. Low SES students will be suspended from school more often than middle and higher SES students for status offenses.
- d. Low SES students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES students for offenses involving controlled substances.
- e. Low SES students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES students for offenses categorized as “other.”

Hypothesis 2. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students.

- a. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for violent offenses.
- b. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for property offenses.
- c. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for status offenses.
- d. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for offenses involving controlled substances.
- e. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for offenses categorized as “other.”

Hypothesis 3. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than low SES Caucasian students.

- a. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than low SES Caucasian students for violent offenses.
- b. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than low SES Caucasian students for property offenses.
- c. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than low SES Caucasian students for status offenses.
- d. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than low SES Caucasian students for offenses involving controlled substances.
- e. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than low SES Caucasian students for offenses categorized as “other.”

Hypothesis 4. Middle and Higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students.

- a. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students for violent offenses.
- b. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher Caucasian students for property offenses.

- c. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students for status offenses.
- d. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students for offenses involving controlled substances.
- e. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students for offenses categorized as “other.”

Chapter II

Review of Literature

The chapter reviews recent research on the issue of racial equity in exclusionary discipline practices in secondary schools. First, demographic trends in the use of suspension and reasons for suspension are discussed. Next, student attitudes and problems associated with suspension are summarized. Finally, limitations of the extant research and the need for further investigation are addressed.

The Nature of Disproportionality

Racial disproportionality has long been a “hot topic” in such areas as special education and school discipline. Recent research on the interpretation of disproportionality data points out that the two most common methods of reporting such data can yield very different percentages (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Reschly, 1997). One common method compares the total proportion of the target group (e.g., percentage African American students) in the population as a whole with the proportion of the target group in the category of interest (e.g., percentage of African American students suspended from school). The other method simply examines the percentage of a population (e.g., African American students) in the category of interest (e.g., students suspended from school). Disproportionality studies historically have used inconsistent criteria in determining whether a statistical discrepancy represents a significant overrepresentation. In one common standard, a group is considered to be

overrepresented in a target category if its representation in the target category exceeds its representation in the population by 10% or more (Reschly, 1997).

Demographic Trends in Suspension

Exclusionary discipline, such as suspension, is an increasingly popular alternative for administrators at the middle and high school levels. Federal data indicate that 6.9% of public school students in the United States were suspended from school at least once in 1998. This figure represents an increase from 3.7% in 1974 (Johnson, 2000). Suspension is employed with greater frequency as students progress from elementary to middle to high school (Costenbader & Marksson, 1994).

Across studies of suspension in middle and high schools, one consistent trend is that African American students, particularly males, are suspended in numbers significantly disproportionate to their total enrollment (e.g., Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). Racial disparities in the use of suspension have been extensively documented at local and national levels. A survey of 43,034 public schools in 4,692 school districts, encompassing more than 25 million students (Office for Civil Rights, 1994) revealed 1,524,241 cases of suspension during one school year. An examination of likelihood ratios derived from that survey indicated that African American boys were twice as likely to be externally suspended as Caucasian boys, and six times as likely to be suspended as Caucasian girls (Gregory, 1997).

In a survey examining suspension rates in middle and high schools representing rural, suburban, and urban areas in 10 states, Costenbader and

Markson (1994) found that African American students were suspended in greater proportion than other students, while Asian American students were underrepresented in suspensions.

In an investigation of school discipline practices in middle schools in two Midwestern cities, Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) found similarly striking ethnic disproportionalities, with Native American students receiving the most disciplinary referrals and suspensions, followed by African American students. Other factors associated with higher referral rates included being male and qualifying for free or reduced lunch. In addition, students labeled Emotionally Handicapped received more office referrals and suspensions than students in general education and students in other special education programs. Students identified as having learning disabilities or mild mental handicaps also were suspended more frequently than students not receiving any special education services.

Sources of Disproportionality

Researchers have posited various reasons for the widespread racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline. These causes have ranged from statistical artifacts to the depiction of schools as primarily white, middle-class matriarchies in which African American males of lower socioeconomic status are at a cultural disadvantage (Gregory, 1997). Research that empirically examines the reasons for racial disparities in suspension is the most useful for determining possible ways to remediate this problem.

In a seminal analysis of national suspension data, Wu et al. (1983) investigated the relation between types of student misbehavior, teacher judgments and attitudes, administrative structures, teacher perceptions of academic potential, racial bias and suspension rates. The analysis revealed a complex interplay among factors related to the operation of the school, ultimately characterizing suspension more as a reflection of school culture than of student behavior. Suspension was more prevalent in schools exhibiting the following characteristics: (1) students view the school's governance as largely unfair or inconsistent, (2) students view the teachers as uninterested in them, (3) teachers view students as having poor problem-solving skills, (4) disciplinary matters are primarily handled through administrative channels, and (5) racial and academic biases are prevalent in the school. Further, the overrepresentation of nonwhite students among those suspended from school was relatively independent of variables commonly posited as mitigating factors. When differences in socioeconomic status were statistically controlled, nonwhite students still were suspended in numbers disproportionate to their Caucasian peers across most settings. In addition, suspension rates did not differ significantly for African American students attending schools with more Caucasian or more nonwhite teachers.

In a recent position paper incorporating disciplinary incident data from a large, Midwestern public school district, Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Patterson (2000) investigated possible sources of racial disproportionality in suspension rates. They examined whether the overrepresentation of African American

students could be explained as an artifact of statistical methodology, a reflection of socioeconomic differences, or a product of higher rates of misbehavior among African American students.

Based on the presence of significant racial discrepancies in the number of suspensions, regardless of whether statistical methodology focused on the proportion of suspended students or the “ten percent of the population standard,” Skiba et al. (2000) concluded that racial disproportionality in suspension does not represent an artifact of statistical methodology. Echoing the findings of Wu et al. almost two decades earlier, Skiba et al. (2000) concluded that, while students of low socioeconomic status are suspended from school more frequently than high-SES peers, disciplinary outcomes and race remain linked when SES was statistically controlled.

Finally, Skiba et al. (2000) addressed the issues of student behavior and referral bias. Citing research on disproportionate representation of minority students in special education (Serwatka, Deering, & Grant, 1995) and the overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system (e.g., New York State Attorney General’s Office Civil Rights Bureau, 1999), the authors concluded that high suspension rates among African American students are most likely the result of referral bias, in which African American students are more likely than Caucasian students to be referred to administrators for disciplinary action. The authors posited that African Americans are overrepresented in the criminal justice system because this population is more likely to be contacted by

law enforcement (e.g., “racial profiling”), and that a similar effect occurs in school discipline.

The investigation conducted by Skiba et al. (2000) provides a valuable analysis of exclusionary discipline practices in a large metropolitan school district, and explores some common hypotheses related to this issue. However, the issue of referral bias was not empirically addressed. Also, the paper does not address whether Caucasian and African American students were suspended for the same types of offenses.

The overrepresentation of African American students among those suspended and expelled from school has been increasingly problematic as “zero tolerance” disciplinary policies have caused suspension rates to skyrocket. The impact of zero tolerance on minority students has been addressed in recent testimonies before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. As the use of exclusionary discipline increases, so does the overrepresentation of African American students in suspension and expulsion (Advancement Project, 2000; Keleher, 2000). Keleher has called for school districts and states to collect comprehensive discipline data and set measurable goals toward reducing the use of exclusionary discipline and eliminating racial disproportionalities.

Reasons for Suspension

In the analysis conducted by Costenbader and Markson (1994), the most common reason for suspension was physical aggression, accounting for 35% of internal suspensions and 51% of external suspensions in middle schools and 12% of internal suspensions and 33% of external suspensions in high schools.

The findings from the middle school study by Skiba et al. (1999) were similar to those from Costenbader and Markson's survey in that the most common disciplinary infraction leading to suspension was fighting. Office referral data were analyzed in the middle school study, and indicated that the most common behaviors leading to referrals were noncompliance and disrespect. For infractions other than fighting, no consistent relationship was found between the type of offense and the administrative consequences.

Similar findings regarding reasons for suspension have been echoed in other school districts. McFadden, Marsh, Price, and Hwang (1992) examined discipline records for 4,391 students receiving disciplinary action in a Florida school district between August 1987 and April 1988. The researchers grouped the 25 disciplinary offense categories identified by the district into five levels of severity, with the most serious infractions involving drugs, weapons, or violence, and the least serious involving such behaviors as "bothering others" (p. 143). Again, African American students received the most office referrals and suspensions in proportion to their total enrollment, accounting for 22% of all students in the district, 36.7% of disciplinary referrals, 43.9% of external suspensions, and 23% of internal suspensions. However, this study did not examine possible links between race and the types of offenses for which students were suspended from school.

In summary, the extant research on racial equity in exclusionary discipline indicates that African American students are overrepresented among suspended students. The studies discussed in this chapter provide thorough documentation

that racial disproportionality in the application of exclusionary discipline is a real and long-standing problem. However, the reasons for this overrepresentation remain unclear. The extant research does not address the issue of whether students from ethnic minority groups receive referrals and suspensions for the same types of misbehavior, or whether exclusionary discipline is differentially applied to various ethnic groups.

Problems and Attitudes Associated with Suspension

Suspension from school is a risk factor for negative outcomes, including grade retention and dropout. In a multiple regression study examining predictors of grade retention among African American adolescent males, Rodney, Crafter, Rodney, and Mupier (1999) found that the number of suspensions from school was the strongest predictor of grade retention. The other identified predictors (conduct disorder and home disciplinary practices) are factors largely outside the control of educators. Suspension appears to place students already having problems at additional risk for academic failure by excluding them from the educational environment.

Costenbader and Markson (1998) surveyed urban and rural secondary students about their experiences and attitudes related to suspension and found that students who had been suspended were more likely than others to be involved with the legal system. Regarding their feelings about suspension, the majority of students reported feeling either angry at the person who suspended them or happy to get out of the school situation. The authors theorize that suspension places students at increased risk for delinquency because it removes

them from positive social networks and increases their potential contact with the “delinquent subculture” (p. 73).

Perhaps the most insidious threat suspension poses to adolescents relates to alienation from the school environment and adoption of a “troublemaker” identity (Bowditch, 1993). In an ethnographic study of disciplinary procedures at an inner city high school, Bowditch (1993) found that, once a student was referred for administrative discipline, whether or not to suspend was generally based on the student’s prior disciplinary history (i.e., previous suspension predisposes a student to later suspension), and the degree of remorse shown by the student. Thus, the same students were often repeatedly excluded from the educational setting, and the suspension was not applied in a consistent manner to all students. Bowditch argues that based on the racial disproportionality evident in school disciplinary practices, suspension serves to perpetuate racial and class stratification in the larger society.

In another investigation of middle and high school suspensions, Morgan-D’Atrio, Northup, LaFleur, and Spera (1996) found that students with recurrent suspensions tend to exhibit considerable academic and social skills deficits. Morgan D’Atrio et al. used the school-wide data processing program to examine suspension rates and identify students with multiple suspensions. In this descriptive study, individual assessment was conducted to identify potential deficits in social or academic skills. Measures used include a semi-structured interview, standardized reading assessments, the Social Skills Rating System- student and teacher reports (Gresham & Elliot, 1990), and the Child Behavior

Checklist- self-report and teacher measures (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1991). More than half of the students with multiple suspensions scored more than two grade levels below placement on a word recognition task, and 33% of the middle school students were rated by their teachers as having significant social skills deficits. Students with repeated suspensions had a mean grade point average (GPA) below 2.0.

Students typically perceive suspension as punishment (Miller, 1986). Literature in the field of applied behavior analysis has documented numerous undesirable consequences of punishment. For example, when an administrator applies a punishment-based procedure such as suspension and the student ceases to engage in the negative behavior, the administrator is reinforced by the termination of that behavior (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 1987). He or she may be more likely to suspend that student or other students for future misbehavior. In addition, punishment may lead to an emotional or aggressive response on the part of the student. Avoidance or escape behaviors also may emerge, with students becoming truant or viewing the actual period of suspension as a welcome escape from aversive interactions with school personnel.

Summary

Research on exclusionary discipline indicates clear racial disproportionality, although the reasons behind this issue remain unclear due to limitations of the extant research on this topic. The research to date, however, indicates that African American students, especially boys, are more likely to be suspended from school than their peers. The disproportionality could be due to

actual behavioral differences among students, referral bias at the classroom level, disciplinary bias at the administrative level, or some combination of factors. The preponderance of empirical studies on racial equity in suspension have clearly documented the existence of widespread, long-standing disparities but not the reasons for them. The disproportionality is not likely to be fully accounted for by statistical methodology, socioeconomic differences, or documented group differences in behavior. While referral bias has been documented on a limited basis (Huberty, 1994), the relationship between race and the disciplinary outcomes of referrals has not been directly examined. This issue has not been addressed empirically since the advent of zero tolerance disciplinary practices in the late 1990's.

It can be argued that suspension from school places already at-risk students at even greater risk for academic failure and negative social outcomes by limiting their connection to teachers, positive peer influences, and educational opportunities. Students who experience exclusionary discipline are more likely to suffer academic and social skills deficits, grade retention, dropout, and delinquency. Suspension appears to be a widely-employed practice that conflicts with the notion that interventions are valuable only when associated with positive outcomes for students (Reschly & Tilly, 1993).

Considering the long and stable history of the overrepresentation of African American students among those suspended from school, it is important for practitioners to address this issue from a problem-solving perspective, rather than merely documenting continued inequality. By adopting a problem-solving

approach, educators can advocate more effectively for students who continue to be impacted by exclusionary discipline. Investigation of the types of offenses that most often lead to the suspension of African American students can be linked to the development of interventions that target those specific behaviors on the classroom, school, and system-wide levels. The present study will provide information about the impact of equity issues when consequences are doled out at the administrative level.

Chapter III

Method

Participants

Participants were students involved in a longitudinal study administered by a large metropolitan Florida public school system. The longitudinal study has collected data annually from the entire cohort of students who entered kindergarten in the fall of 1989. The initial cohort was comprised of 8,268 students. Demographic features of the sample used in the present study are summarized in Table 1. Parents, teachers, and/or students have been surveyed yearly using scales and questionnaires covering a wide range of issues in the family, behavioral, and academic domains. The specific variables of interest and the sample of participating students surveyed varied each year. A committee of researchers and school personnel convened yearly to identify areas of concern and select questions for the survey. The committee membership and areas of interest have changed from year to year.

The longitudinal study's database was updated yearly with information from the general student data file. This information included grades, special education status, discipline referrals, and standardized achievement test scores.

For the present study, disciplinary records from the general student data files for the 1999-2000 school year were analyzed. The cohort participating in the longitudinal study was selected for this investigation because of the large sample size, and the availability of data beyond the general student data, which could be

included in later analyses related to the same problem. Data from the 2000-2001 school were used because these students were in the tenth grade during that time period, which represents the last year of compulsory school attendance for many students. The disciplinary referrals occurred at 47 different school sites, including traditional high schools, juvenile justice programs, exceptional student education centers, hospital/homebound education, vocational centers, and alternative education sites. Four referrals also occurred at middle school sites.

Table 1 summarizes the racial demographics of the sample used in the present study. The data indicate that the sample in this study was primarily Caucasian.

Table 1

Numbers of African American and Caucasian Students in the 1999-2000 Tenth Grade Sample with One Referral

Category	Frequency	Percentage
African American	449	26.9%
Caucasian	1,218	73.1%
Total	1,667	100%

Table 2 contains information about the free/reduced lunch status of the students in the tenth grade sample with one referral. Free/reduced lunch status served as an index of socioeconomic status in the present investigation. The majority of students in this sample were not participating in the free/reduced lunch program.

Table 2

Free/Reduced Lunch Status of Students in the 1999-2000 Tenth Grade Sample with One Referral

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Free or Reduced Lunch	360	21.6%
Did not Apply	1,307	78.4%

Table 3 summarizes the frequency of tenth grade students per number of referrals for the 1999-2000 school year. The distribution is skewed, with the majority of students at the lower end. The modal student received only one disciplinary referral during the academic year. Therefore, the present study focused on disciplinary actions applied to students with only one referral, thereby limiting the impact of multiple disciplinary referrals on consequences applied.

Table 3

Frequency of Students Per Number of Referrals

Number of Referrals	Number of Students	Percent
1	1667	42.9
2	442	11.4
3	328	8.4
4	239	6.1
5	159	4.1
6	158	4.1
7	130	3.3
8	97	2.5
9	78	2.0
10	69	1.8
11	72	1.9
12	54	1.4
13	50	1.3
14	33	0.8
15	27	0.7
16	39	1.0
17	35	0.9
18	24	0.6

Continued on the next page.

Table 3 (Continued)

19	21	0.5
20	31	0.8
21	18	0.5
22	14	0.4
23	12	0.3
24	9	0.2
25	6	0.2
26	8	0.2
27	8	0.2
28	9	0.2
29	5	0.1
30	8	0.2
31	5	0.1
32	6	0.2
33	3	0.1
34	1	0.0
35	2	0.1
36	4	0.1
37	3	0.1
38	1	0.0
39	3	0.1

Continued on the next page.

Table 3 (Continued)

40	1	0.0
41	1	0.0
42	1	0.0
43	0	0.0
44	0	0.0
45	3	0.1
46	0	0.0
47	0	0.0
48	2	0.1
49	2	0.1
50	0	0.0
51	0	0.0
52	0	0.0
53	0	0.0
54	0	0.0
55	0	0.0
56	2	0.1

Measures

For this study, the independent variables were race (two levels: African American and Caucasian) and socioeconomic status (two sublevels: middle/high

SES and low SES based on free/reduced lunch classification). The study's dependent variable was type of administrative action taken (suspension or other). Because of the preponderance of literature indicating that African American students have been particularly affected by racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline, only Caucasian and African American students were included in the present analysis. Thus, whether or not a student is suspended may partially depend on the student's race.

As stated previously, only data pertaining to students with one disciplinary referral for the 1999-2000 school year were included in the present analysis. This delimitation was selected because of the tendency of students with multiple administrative disciplinary contacts to be viewed and treated as "troublemakers" or subjected to harsher penalties for repeat offenses (Bowditch, 1993). To limit the potentially confounding effect of administrative policies and attitudes toward "repeat offenders," only the disciplinary outcomes of first-time referrals were analyzed.

Overall, this study examined possible racial and socioeconomic differences in whether a student was suspended for five general types of offenses: property offenses, status offenses, controlled substances, violent offenses, and an "other" category used on the district referral forms.

The school district in the present study classifies disciplinary referrals by referral codes, based on the type of offense. The district code of student

conduct can be found in Appendix A. For the purposes of this study, each of the offenses was classified into one of the four categories listed above, plus a fifth category called “other.” The “other” category encompasses referrals for which the exact offense code was not recorded. This classification system is adapted from Bowditch (1993) and provides a framework for simplifying and conceptualizing a lengthy list of offenses. Property offenses include such property-based acts as stealing and vandalism. Status offenses include truancy and disrespect. These types of offenses are nonviolent and involve violations of social mores or rules specific to the school setting rather than illegal acts. The controlled substances category encompasses possession of alcohol, tobacco, and other unauthorized substances on school property. Violent offenses include fighting, possession of weapons, and assault. A separate analysis was conducted for each type of violation. The referral codes and their assigned categories are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Referral Codes and Categories

Referral Code	Assigned Category
Alcohol	Controlled Substance
Battery – Student	Violent
Battery – Adult	Violent
Drugs	Controlled Substance
Fighting	Violent
Leaving School Without Permission	Status
Disrespect – Defiance – Threats	Status
Profane/Obscene Language	Status
Repeated Misconduct	Status
Skipping Class	Status
Use of Tobacco	Controlled Substance
Stealing	Property
Weapons	Violent
Bus Misconduct	Status
Cheating	Status
Class Disruption	Status
Vandalism	Property
Missed Detention	Status
Other	Other

Continued on the next page.

Table 4 (Continued)

Missed Saturday School	Status
Excessive Tardies	Status
Lack of Cooperation	Status
In Unauthorized Area	Status
P.E. Misconduct	Status
Forgery	Property
Arson	Property
Breaking and Entering	Property
Sexual Harassment	Status
Threat/Intimidation	Status
Trespassing	Property
Electronic Devices	Status

Procedures

Obtaining the data. The University of South Florida (USF) Institutional Review Board (IRB) evaluated the appropriateness of this study and determined that the procedures used in this study fulfilled ethical standards. In addition to USF IRB approval, permission to access the data was obtained from the school district and project manager for the longitudinal study.

Data Integrity. The data in these analyses were derived from school records of students enrolled in a Florida school district. Preliminary examination

was conducted to ensure the integrity of these archival data. Specifically, no student was included more than once in the analysis.

Type of Analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were generated for each group examined in this study, where appropriate. These statistics were not only created for each group but also broken down by the five types of violations addressed in this study.

Chi-square tests were conducted to examine the hypotheses presented in this study. Chi-square is a nonparametric statistical test to determine whether research data in the form of frequency counts are distributed differently in different samples.

The first research question was examined using a chi-square. Students receiving free/reduced lunch who had committed a violation tracked in the district database were compared with those who did not receive free/reduced lunch in terms of total suspensions for each of the five types of offenses. The research has supported that SES is a major consideration when examining school outcomes such as suspension. This analysis evaluated whether or not significant differences existed between students from higher and lower SES groups in terms of their total suspensions. A second chi square analysis compared suspension rates of African American and Caucasian students for each of the five offense categories. The third question took SES into account, and compared Low SES students from both racial groups on the suspension outcomes of five types of offenses. A fourth set of chi-square analyses evaluated differences on the same offense outcomes in the middle to high SES group.

Assumptions of Chi-Square. For a chi-square analysis, the sample must be randomly drawn from the population. In this study, the sample of tenth grade students with one disciplinary referral for the school year was analyzed. In addition, data must be reported in raw frequencies, rather than percentages. The data set reported student demographics, referral codes, and disciplinary actions in terms of raw frequencies. Another assumption of chi-square is that measured variables must be independent. No student was included more than once in the analysis conducted for this study. Also, no two values were generated from a single source. Values/categories on independent and dependent variables must be mutually exclusive and exhaustive. No student was counted as both Caucasian and African American, nor as both suspended and not suspended. Finally, observed frequencies cannot be too small. In this study, the expected values of each cell were considered likely to be greater than 5.

Chapter IV

Results

This chapter describes the results of the study. The research questions presented in the Introduction guide the progression of this chapter. The total frequencies and percentages of referrals for each separate offense for all tenth graders are presented in Table 5, while frequency data for the first-time referrals included in this analysis are presented in Table 6. These data are presented as more specific information about why students receive disciplinary referrals, beyond the five general categories examined in the Chi Square analysis. The most frequent offense was excessive tardies, accounting for 20.2% of referrals. When the related categories of skipping class and leaving school without permission are added to this figure, attendance-related offenses accounted for 31.6% of the disciplinary referrals. The categorically related offenses of disrespect, profane/obscene language, and lack of cooperation account for 24.9% of the total referrals. Status offenses accounted for the majority of referrals.

Table 5

Referral Code Frequencies for All Tenth Graders

Referral Code	Frequency	Percent
Alcohol	15	0.1
Battery – Student	102	0.5
Battery – Adult	27	0.1
Drugs	107	0.6
Fighting	277	1.4
Leaving School Without Permission	592	3.1
Disrespect – Defiance – Threats	2288	11.8
Profane/Obscene Language	764	4.0
Repeated Misconduct	1029	5.3
Skiping Class	1607	8.3
Use of Tobacco	212	1.1
Stealing	63	0.3
Weapons	37	0.2
Bus Misconduct	208	1.1
Cheating	109	0.6
Class Disruption	1726	8.9
Vandalism	20	0.1
Missed Detention	1481	7.7
Other	1353	7.0

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Table 5 (Continued)

Missed Saturday School	905	4.7
Excessive Tardies	3908	20.2
Lack of Cooperation	1756	9.1
In Unauthorized Area	527	2.7
P.E. Misconduct	54	0.3
Forgery	51	0.3
Arson	5	0.0
Breaking/Entering	1	0.0
Sexual Offenses	1	0.0
Threat/Intimidation	78	0.4
Trespassing	3	0.0
Electronic Devices	9	0.0

Table 6

Referral Code Categories for Students with One Referral

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Violent	155	9.3
Status	1223	73.4
Property	26	1.6
Controlled Substance	29	1.7
Other	218	13.1
Missing Data	16	1.0
Total	1667	100

Research Question 1. Are students identified as having low SES suspended from school more frequently than students not identified as having low SES? This question addressed whether students receiving free and reduced lunch were suspended from school more frequently than students not receiving free and reduced lunch for the same types of offenses. Frequency data are reported in Table 7. The results of the chi square analyses are summarized in Table 8. Students receiving free and reduced lunch were significantly more likely to be suspended for status offenses, $\chi^2 (1, N = 1,223) = 8.74, p = 0.003$.

Table 7

Frequencies of Suspensions for Five Categories of Offenses, by SES

Referral	SES	Suspended	Not Suspended
Violent	Low	34	8
Violent	High	80	33
Status	Low	62	193
Status	High	158	810
Property	Low	4	5
Property	High	10	7
Substance	Low	2	1
Substance	High	11	15
Other	Low	9	41
Other	High	19	149

Table 8

Chi-Square Analysis for Research Question 1, SES Comparison of Suspensions

Referral Category	Pearson's Chi-Square	Significance (2-sided)
Violent	1.623	0.203
Status	8.737	0.003
Property	0.490	0.683
Substance	0.645	0.422
Other	1.541	0.215

Research Question 2. Are African American students suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students with disciplinary referrals for the same types of offenses? The results of the chi-square analyses are summarized in Table 10. African American students were significantly more likely than Caucasian students to be suspended from school for violent offenses, $\chi^2 (1, N = 155) = 9.70, p = 0.002$ and status offenses, $\chi^2 (1, N = 1,223) = 36.47, p = 0.000$, as well as offenses classified as "other," $\chi^2 (1, N = 218) = 9.13, p = 0.003$.

Table 9

Frequencies of Suspensions for Five Categories of Offenses, by Race

Referral	Race	Suspended	Not Suspended
Violent	AA	57	9
Violent	C	57	32
Status	AA	93	226
Status	C	127	777
Property	AA	7	6
Property	C	7	6
Substance	AA	1	0
Substance	C	12	16
Other	AA	12	34
Other	C	16	156

AA = African American, C = Caucasian

Table 10

Chi-Square Analysis for Research Question 2, African American and Caucasian Students

Referral Category	Pearson's Chi-Square	Significance (2-sided)
Violent	9.703	0.002
Status	36.467	0.000
Property	0.000	1.000
Substance	1.275	0.259
Other	9.134	0.003

Research Question 3. Are low SES African American students suspended from school more frequently than low SES Caucasian students for the same types of offenses? The results of the chi-square analyses are summarized in Table 12. The results of the chi-square analyses do not indicate significant significant racial differences in suspensions for low SES students referred for any of the five types of offenses.

Table 11

Frequencies of Suspensions of Low SES Students for Five Categories of Offenses, by Race

Referral	Race	Suspended	Not Suspended
Violent	AA	23	3
Violent	C	11	5
Status	AA	42	109
Status	C	20	84
Property	AA	2	4
Property	C	2	1
Substance	AA	0	0
Substance	C	10	0
Other	AA	7	19
Other	C	19	149

Table 12

Chi-Square Analysis for Research Question 3, Low SES African American and Caucasian Students

Referral Category	Pearson's Chi-Square	Significance (2-sided)
Violent	2.496	0.114
Status	2.466	0.116
Property	0.900	0.343
Substance	not computed*	N/A
Other	2.922	0.87

*Insufficient number of cases

Research Question 4. Are middle and higher SES African American students suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students for the same types of offenses? The results of the chi-square analyses are summarized in Table 14. Middle and higher SES African American students were significantly more likely to be suspended from school for status offenses $\chi^2 (1, N = 968) = 29.32, p = 0.000$ and violent offenses $\chi^2 (1, N = 113) = 6.04, p = 0.014$.

Table 13

Frequencies of Suspensions of Middle and Higher SES Students for 5

Categories of Offenses, by Race

Referral	Race	Suspended	Not Suspended
Violent	AA	34	6
Violent	C	46	27
Status	AA	51	117
Status	C	107	693
Property	AA	5	2
Property	C	5	5
Substance	AA	1	0
Substance	C	10	15
Other	AA	5	15
Other	C	14	134

Table 14

Chi-Square Analysis for Middle and Higher SES Students (African American and Caucasian)

Referral Category	Pearson's Chi-Square	Significance (2-sided)
Violent	6.042	0.014
Status	29.317	0.000
Property	0.781	0.377
Substance	1.418	0.234
Other	4.212	0.39

Analysis at the School Level. Due to the large number of referrals county-wide and the potential for variability among school sites, the referrals were analyzed at the individual school level. Table 15 presents the frequency and percentage of referrals from the four schools with the highest numbers of single referrals in the study. These high schools are identified as High Schools A, B, C and D. These sites accounted for a total of 466 referrals, or a combined 27.9% of the 1667 referrals included in this analysis.

Table 15

Frequency and Percentage of Single Referrals, by Site

Site	Frequency	Percent
High School A	135	8.1
High School B	114	6.8
High School C	107	6.4
High School D	110	6.6

Tables 16 through 19 provide information about the frequency and percentage of African American and Caucasian students with single referrals suspended for each of the five offense categories, at each of the four target high schools.

Table 16

Frequency and Percentage of Suspensions for 5 Referral Categories by Race,
High School A

Referral	Race	Frequency	Percent
Violent	AA	5	100%
Violent	Caucasian	5	83.3%
Status	AA	5	11.4%
Status	Caucasian	11	19.0%
Property	AA	1	100%
Property	Caucasian	1	100%
Substance	AA	0	0%
Substance	Caucasian	3	75%
Other	AA	2	40%
Other	Caucasian	1	9.1%

Table 17

Frequency and Percentage of Suspensions for 5 Referral Categories by Race,
High School B

Referral	Race	Frequency	Percent
Violent	AA	6	85.7%
Violent	Caucasian	7	77.8%
Status	AA	7	31.8%
Status	Caucasian	8	11.8%
Property	AA	1	100%
Property	Caucasian	0	0%
Substance	AA	0	0%
Substance	Caucasian	0	0%
Other	AA	0	0%
Other	Caucasian	5	100%

Table 18

Frequency and Percentage of Suspensions for 5 Referral Categories by Race,
High School C

Referral	Race	Frequency	Percent
Violent	AA	4	80%
Violent	Caucasian	6	85.7%
Status	AA	7	23.3%
Status	Caucasian	7	13.7%
Property	AA	1	100%
Property	Caucasian	1	100%
Substance	AA	0	0%
Substance	Caucasian	1	100%
Other	AA	0	0%
Other	Caucasian	1	14.3%

Table 19

Frequency and Percentage of Suspensions for 5 Referral Categories by Race,
High School D

Referral	Race	Frequency	Percent
Violent	AA	1	100%
Violent	Caucasian	5	83.3%
Status	AA	4	23.5%
Status	Caucasian	14	20.0%
Property	AA	0	0%
Property	Caucasian	1	100%
Substance	AA	0	0%
Substance	Caucasian	1	100%
Other	AA	0	0%
Other	Caucasian	1	7.1%

Table 20 summarizes the percentages of African American and Caucasian students with each referral code who were suspended from school.

Table 20

Percentages of Caucasian and African American Students Suspended for Each Referral Code

Referral Code	AA	Caucasian
Alcohol	N/A*	100%
Battery – Student	78.9%	50%
Battery – Adult	85.7%	100%
Drugs	75%	100%
Fighting	87.9%	64.9%
Leaving Campus	72.7%	25.9%
Disrespect/Defiance/Threats	43.9%	25.7%
Profane/Obscene Language	45.0%	35.6%
Repeated Misconduct	62.5%	33.3%
Skiping Class	0%	2.8%
Use of Tobacco	100%	23.8%
Stealing	55.6%	71.4%
Weapons	100%	100%
Bus Misconduct	18.2%	27.3%
Cheating	0%	9.1%
Class Disruption	27.5%	13.8%

Continued on the next page.

Table 20 (Continued)

Vandalism	N/A*	100%
Missed Detention	4.8%	5.0%
Other	26.1%	9.3%
Missed Saturday School	100%	80%
Excessive Tardies	100%	100%
Lack of Cooperation	16.7%	5.1%
In Unauthorized Area	10.0%	4.7%
P.E. Misconduct	N/A	100%
Forgery	33.3%	33.3%
Sexual Harassment	N/A	50.0%
Threat/Intimidation	100%	68.7%
Electronic Devices	N/A	100%

Chapter V

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate racial equity in the use of suspension and expulsion among tenth grade students in a large Florida school district. The study was conducted using archival discipline data from the general student data files. Information used in the analysis included the student's race, referral code, disciplinary action code, and free and reduced lunch status. This chapter will address each research hypothesis, including how each hypothesis was supported, implications of the findings, and directions for future research. Results of this study will be synthesized and interpreted. Limitations of the study will be presented, as well as potential questions to be addressed through future research. Implications for school psychology practitioners also will be discussed.

Hypothesis 1. Students identified as having low socioeconomic status (SES) for free/reduced lunch status will be suspended from school more frequently than students not identified as having low SES.

- a. Low SES students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES students for violent offenses.
- b. Low SES students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES students for property offenses.
- c. Low SES students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES students for status offenses.

- d. Low SES students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES students for offenses involving controlled substances.
- e. Low SES students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES students for offenses categorized as “other.”

The first set of hypotheses were tested through chi square analysis. This hypothesis was supported for one category of disciplinary referral. Low SES students were more likely to be suspended from school for status offenses, such as skipping class, than their middle and higher SES peers. They were not significantly more likely to be suspended for property offenses such as stealing or vandalism, violent offenses, offenses involving controlled substances, or those falling into the “other” category.

The impact of school performance and grades should be considered when interpreting these results. Low SES students often receive lower grades and experience more academic difficulties than middle and higher SES students (Bowditch, 1993). Students who receive poor grades and experience many academic difficulties may derive less positive reinforcement for attending school, participating in classroom activities, and following the rules. Such difficulties could be related to a higher likelihood of skipping class and subsequent suspension.

Hypothesis 2. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students.

- a. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for violent offenses.
- b. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for property offenses.
- c. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for status offenses.
- d. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for offenses involving controlled substances.
- e. African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Caucasian students for offenses categorized as “other.”

This hypothesis was supported for two referral categories, status and violent offenses. The results of the chi-square analysis indicate that African American students who committed status offenses were more likely to be suspended than Caucasian students who committed status offenses. Additionally, African American students who were referred to the office for violent offenses were more likely to be suspended than Caucasian students with the same referral category.

Hypothesis 3. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Low SES Caucasian students.

- a. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Low SES Caucasian students for violent offenses.

- b. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Low SES Caucasian students for property offenses.
- c. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Low SES Caucasian students for status offenses.
- d. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Low SES Caucasian students for offenses involving controlled substances.
- e. Low SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Low SES Caucasian students for offenses categorized as “other.”

This hypothesis was not supported for any referral category. The chi square analysis indicated that low SES African American students were not significantly more likely than low SES Caucasian students to be suspended from school for any of the five types of offenses included in the analysis.

Hypothesis 4. Middle and Higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than Middle and Higher SES Caucasian students.

- a. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students for violent offenses.

- b. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher Caucasian students for property offenses.
- c. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students for status offenses.
- d. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students for offenses involving controlled substances.
- e. Middle and higher SES African American students will be suspended from school more frequently than middle and higher SES Caucasian students for offenses categorized as “other.”

Similar to the pattern seen when SES was not considered, this hypothesis was supported for status and violent offenses only. Middle and higher SES African American students were significantly more likely to be suspended for status offenses and violent offenses than their Caucasian peers with referrals of the same variety. It appears that whether or not a student is suspended from school depends on a combination of factors: the nature of the offense, race, and socioeconomic status.

Comparisons within schools. Due to the small numbers of students with single referrals in each category, chi-square analysis at the individual school level was not feasible. However, examination of raw frequency and percentage data for four high-referring high schools provides insight into how discipline is

implemented at these sites. For each of the four high schools, African American students with one referral were more likely to be suspended for status offenses than their Caucasian peers who committed the same category of offense. In three out of four sites, African American students who committed violent offenses also were more likely to be suspended than Caucasian students with the same referral category.

It is difficult to produce broad generalizations from the data about individual schools, because the sample size is small and further restricted by the delimitations of this study. For example, students with multiple disciplinary referrals were excluded from the present study. However, when addressing discipline issues at the school level, it would be important to include data regarding the students most likely to come in contact with administrative discipline.

Summary and Implications

Previous research has extensively documented the overrepresentation of African American students among those suspended and expelled from school. The present study sought to investigate whether, given the same general category of offense, African American students were more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than Caucasian students. The results indicate that, for the group of students included in this analysis, racial equity was related to the type of offense, as well as to the student's socioeconomic status. When race was not considered, low SES students referred for status offenses were more likely to be suspended than middle and higher SES students with the same

referral type. However, Low SES African American students were not significantly more likely to be suspended from school than low SES Caucasian students with the same type of referral, for any of the five offense categories. Racial differences were found when SES was not considered, with African American students more likely to be suspended from school for status offenses and violent offenses. The same degree of racial disproportionality was not found among low SES students. However, middle and higher SES students appeared to account for much of the racial disproportionality seen in the sample, with African American students in this group more likely to be suspended for both violent and status offenses.

The results of this study indicate that African American students remain overrepresented among those suspended and expelled for offenses involving social infractions (e.g., verbal disrespect, truancy) and those involving violence. These findings support those of Skiba et al. (2000), in which race was strongly related to the use of suspension. However, it is important to note that low SES is a significant risk factor for suspension, regardless of race.

The findings of this study echo previous research (Costenbader & Markson, 1994) in identifying violent offenses as those lending themselves most readily to suspension. These findings make sense in light of zero tolerance policies and the overall need to preserve safety in the school environment.

The relationship between SES and suspension from school may be related to a number of factors. Students of lower socioeconomic status often obtain lower grades and achievement test scores than their middle and higher

SES counterparts (Mujis, 1997). In addition, some of these students may have adopted values inconsistent with the pursuit of higher education and mainstream conformity (Bowditch, 1993). Low SES students also may lack the strong parental advocacy that is often helpful in negotiating with school personnel, thereby remaining more vulnerable to exclusionary discipline. Finally, low SES students may be impacted by referral bias in the classroom.

Limitations of this Study

The present study is limited by the fact that it is a secondary analysis. As such, the author did not have control over how the data were collected and maintained. Inclusion of the “other” category is especially problematic, because no information is provided about the actual referral offense for these cases. In addition, free and reduced lunch status is a crude measure of socioeconomic status. Some low-income families do not apply for free and reduced lunch, and there is certainly income variation within each of the two lunch status groups. In addition, lunch status provides no direct information about parental education, family orientation toward school, or parenting strategies. These types of information would provide additional insight into the factors that shape students’ behavior and attitudes toward school and may subsequently impact disciplinary outcomes.

The low numbers of referrals for property and controlled substance offenses present a problem in the present analysis, as they are too low to be meaningfully interpreted. To fully understand how exclusionary discipline is used for these types of offenses, a larger sample size would be necessary.

Another limitation is that these data do not allow examination of the finer nuances surrounding various offenses, such as the specific type of assault or the nature of disrespectful conduct, the number of students involved, where the incident occurred, or behavioral interventions (if any) attempted prior to administrative referral.

Certain delimitations were placed upon the study, in order to focus specifically on the problem of interest. Only Caucasian and African American students were compared, because the impact of exclusionary discipline on the educational experience of the African American population has been documented in the extant literature as a serious concern. However, because of this delimitation the results of the present study cannot be generalized to other ethnic groups. Future research should address the use of suspension with Latino, Native American, and language minority students. Students with multiple disciplinary referrals were excluded from this analysis, because of the complex impact of administrative attitudes and policies, students' reputations, and other factors on the disciplinary outcomes of "serial offenders." These results cannot be generalized to students with a long history of disciplinary infractions leading to numerous administrative referrals.

Directions for Future Research

The present study demonstrated that African American students were overrepresented among those suspended from school for violent and status offenses, regardless of socioeconomic status. While this study elected to focus only on Caucasian and African American students, the diversity of many public

school systems warrants investigation of the use of exclusionary discipline with other racial, cultural, and language minority groups. Thus, future research should examine the use of suspension with other racial and ethnic groups.

Referral bias is another important issue to be explored in future studies. Given the results obtained and theories posited by such researchers as Skiba et al. (1999) and Costenbader and Markson (1994), it could be predicted that African American students will be referred to the office more often than Caucasian students committing the same types of infractions. This hypothesis could be examined through naturalistic observation of teacher responses to classroom behavior with students of different races at the middle and high school levels. In light of the present results, socioeconomic status also should be taken into account. While this type of study would likely necessitate a smaller sample size than the present investigation, it also would allow for direct observation of why students may or may not be referred to the office for a given type of offense.

In addition, the impact of multiple suspensions from school is an important issue for future inquiry. Extant research has demonstrated that previous suspensions from school are a strong predictor of future suspensions (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). Therefore, racial equity in the use of multiple suspensions also must be addressed, as well as the impact of multiple suspensions on a student's educational trajectory. Future research could address this issue by examining how suspension is applied with different racial and ethnic groups beyond the first administrative referral. In addition, such important outcomes as high school graduation rates, higher educational attainment, juvenile justice involvement,

substance abuse, and teen parenthood should be examined relative to the use of exclusionary discipline. Also, the fact that nearly half of all students with disciplinary referrals received only one for the entire academic year raises the all-important question of why some students continue to receive referrals while others do not. Future research should delve into the risk and protective factors that differentiate students with one referral from repeat offenders.

Finally, the efficacy of school-based behavior management and intervention programs should be compared with suspension for various ethnic groups. Alternatives to suspension warrant extensive research, because current research does not support the efficacy of suspension as a strategy for behavior change. Exclusionary discipline is generally an ineffective intervention, as it is associated with the need for repeated suspensions (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). There is a need for practical, empirically supported interventions that provide education and remediation, rather than exclusion, for students with problem behaviors.

Implications for School Psychology Practitioners

Researchers and practitioners have long questioned the effectiveness of suspension and expulsion as helpful interventions for students with serious problem behaviors. However, exclusionary discipline remains prevalent in many school systems. From an administrative viewpoint, suspension and expulsion are often seen as means for maintaining a safe and orderly educational environment (Wu et al., 1983). As child advocates, school psychologists are often faced with a difficult “balancing act” when administrators insist that a

student with problem behaviors be removed from the school setting. Real and exaggerated fears of school violence contribute to the overuse of suspension, at the expense of students' access to a free and appropriate public education. However, school safety and maintenance of an environment conducive to learning for all students remain issues of critical importance.

Chronic and serious problem behaviors must be addressed in a manner that promotes positive outcomes for all students. When a child exhibits chronic problem behaviors that are resistant to intervention strategies used in the classroom, or when a child presents a serious threat of harm to self or others, remedial programs present a preferable alternative to suspension. Effective remedial discipline programs share a number of characteristics, summarized by Bear, Cavalier, & Manning (2002). First, they target multiple risk and protective factors within a comprehensive framework. These programs also adopt a broad-based, ecological systems perspective that facilitates collaboration among schools, agencies, and families. Effective remedial programs for aggressive and antisocial behavior also use empirically supported interventions in a manner that remains intensive and sustained over a significant period of time. Additionally, effective programs are sensitive to the developmental appropriateness of intervention strategies. Finally, these programs include early intervention strategies for targeting problem behaviors at an early age or at the beginning stage of problem development.

School psychologists are in a position to potentially influence school and public policy regarding the treatment of children with chronic and severe problem

behaviors. School staff training and dissemination of information regarding alternatives to exclusionary discipline are important roles. In addition, ongoing program evaluation at the school and district levels is important for obtaining information about which interventions are effective and which need to be modified. Funding and support at the government level for remedial programs also will increase the likelihood that intensive intervention strategies can be maintained over time with some degree of integrity.

The results of this study indicate that racial inequity remains a serious problem with the use of exclusionary discipline. Suspension from school represents the denial of educational opportunities and resources to the students who are most in need.

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