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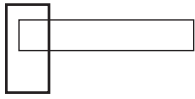
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# The Achievement Gap and the Discipline Gap: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

Anne Gregory, Russell J. Skiba, and Pedro A. Noguera

The gap in achievement across racial and ethnic groups has been a focus of education research for decades, but the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of Black, Latino, and American Indian students has received less attention. This article synthesizes research on racial and ethnic patterns in school sanctions and considers how disproportionate discipline might contribute to lagging achievement among students of color. It further examines the evidence for student, school, and community contributors to the racial and ethnic patterns in school sanctions, and it offers promising directions for gap-reducing discipline policies and practices.

**Keywords:** achievement gap; at-risk students; classroom management; school psychology; student behavior/attitude; violence

Although our national discourse on racial disparity tends to focus on academic outcomes—the so-called achievement gap—in school districts throughout the United States, Black, Latino, and American Indian students are also subject to a differential and disproportionate rate of school disciplinary sanctions, ranging from office disciplinary referrals to corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion (Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Ostensibly, the intent of school disciplinary interventions is to preserve order and safety by removing students who break school rules and disrupt the school learning environment and, by setting an example of those punished students, to deter other students from committing future rule infractions. However, schools tend to rely heavily on exclusion from the classroom as the primary discipline strategy (Arcia, 2006), and this practice often has a disproportionate impact on Black, Latino, and American Indian students. The use of school exclusion as a discipline practice may contribute to the well-documented racial gaps in academic achievement. This suggests that there is a pressing need for scholarly attention to the racial discipline gap if efforts addressing the achievement gap are to have greater likelihood of success.

In this article, we synthesize the research on racial and ethnic patterns in school discipline, and we suggest how the racial

discipline gap influences racial patterns in achievement. We then review the evidence on the factors that contribute to the discipline gap. Specifically, we examine the degree to which low-income status, low achievement, and rates of misconduct contribute to why Black, Latino, and American Indian students are overselected and oversanctioned in the discipline system. We argue that such student characteristics are not adequate to explain the large disparities, and we describe school and teacher contributors that need to be investigated in future research. Finally, we identify methodological challenges to the study of disproportionality and discuss promising strategies for gap-reducing interventions.

## Safety Efforts and Racial Disproportionality

A large body of evidence shows that Black students are subject to a disproportionate amount of discipline in school settings, and a smaller and less consistent literature suggests disproportionate sanctioning of Latino and American Indian students in some schools.<sup>1</sup> This conclusion has been drawn across a wide array of sanctions (e.g., suspensions, office discipline referrals) and methodology (see discussion below). The Children's Defense Fund (1975) first brought the issue of racial disproportionality to national attention, showing that Black students were two to three times overrepresented in school suspensions compared with their enrollment rates in localities across the nation. National and state data show consistent patterns of Black disproportionality in school discipline over the past 30 years, specifically in suspension (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002), expulsion (KewelRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007), and office discipline referrals (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). According to a nationally representative study utilizing parent reports, in 2003 Black students were significantly more likely to be suspended than White or Asian students ( $p < .001$ ). Specifically, almost 1 in 5 Black students (19.6%) were suspended, compared with fewer than 1 in 10 White students (8.8%) and Asian and Pacific Islanders (6.4%; KewelRamani et al., 2007). A nationally representative survey of 74,000 10th graders found that about 50% of Black students reported that they had ever been suspended or expelled compared with about 20% of White students (Wallace et al., 2008). The study further showed that, unlike the pattern for other racial and ethnic groups, suspensions and expulsions of Black students increased from 1991 to 2005 (Wallace et al., 2008).

Although disproportionality in school discipline has been documented for Latino and American Indian students, findings related to such disparities have been inconsistent. National data (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) show that, based on parent surveys administered in 1999, 20% of Latino students in Grades 7 through 12 had ever been suspended or expelled, which is a statistically significantly lower rate ( $p < .001$ ) than for Black students (35%) and a statistically significantly higher rate ( $p < .001$ ) than for White students (15%). Analyzing racial disparities in discipline, Gordon, Della Piana, and Keleher (2000) found that, in 3 of the 10 cities studied, the rates of suspended and expelled Latino students were 10% or more than 10% higher than the percentage of enrolled Latino students. Inconsistency in findings was further confirmed in a study measuring disproportionality using odds ratios. Based on state records from Maryland, Krezmien et al. (2006) found that Latino students had similar or lower odds than White students of being suspended for 9 successive years (1995–2003).

National and state data have also shown disproportionality in discipline for American Indian students, although again there appears to be some inconsistency (Wallace et al., 2008). Krezmien et al. (2006) showed that American Indian and White students had a similar chance of being suspended from 1995 to 1998 in Maryland. However, from 1998 to 2003, they found that American Indians had significantly higher odds than Whites of being suspended (odds ratios ranged from 1.5 to 1.8). The disproportionality in American Indian suspension was again documented in nationally representative samples using school records (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008) and student reports (Wallace et al., 2008). It is unclear whether the inconsistent findings on American Indian suspension is a statistical artifact given their relatively small numbers of suspended students (e.g., Krezmien et al., 2006) or if it reflects actual variability in disproportionate suspension rates across time and school districts.

Males of all racial and ethnic groups are more likely than females to receive disciplinary sanctions. In 2004, only 1% of Asian Pacific Islander females were suspended, compared with 11% of Asian Pacific Islander males (KewelRamani et al., 2007). Expulsion data from that same year showed that White females were half as likely to be expelled as White males ( $p < .001$ ), and similarly, Black females were half as likely to be expelled as Black males ( $p < .05$ ). Black males are especially at risk for receiving discipline sanctions, with one study showing that Black males were 16 times as likely as White females to be suspended (J. F. Gregory, 1997).

### **Racial Disproportionality and Patterns in Achievement**

The consistent pattern of disproportionate discipline sanctions issued to Black students and the trends in sanctions for Latino and American Indian students, albeit less consistent, have rarely been considered in light of the well-documented racial and ethnic disparities in school achievement (KewelRamani et al., 2007). In many schools, large proportions of a group (e.g., Black males) receive at least one suspension, which typically results in missed instructional time and, for some, could exacerbate a cycle of academic failure, disengagement, and escalating rule breaking (Arcia, 2006). In fact, a suspended student may miss anywhere

from one class period to 10 or more school days, depending on the violation and school policies. One of the most consistent findings of modern education research is the strong positive relationship between time engaged in academic learning and student achievement (Brophy, 1988; Fisher et al., 1981; Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002). The school disciplinary practices used most widely throughout the United States may be contributing to lowered academic performance among the group of students in greatest need of improvement.

Research shows that frequent suspensions appear to significantly increase the risk of academic underperformance (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Arcia (2006) followed two demographically similar cohorts (matched on gender, race, grade level, family poverty, and limited English proficiency), contrasting a cohort that had received at least one suspension with another that had received no suspensions. In Year 1, suspended students were three grade levels behind their nonsuspended peers in their reading skills, but were almost 5 years behind 2 years later. Although other unmeasured risk factors may have contributed to cohort differences, suspension may have initiated or maintained a process of withdrawal from learning in the classroom. In the long term, school suspension has been found to be a moderate to strong predictor of dropout and not graduating on time (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Raffaele Mendez, 2003; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Discipline sanctions resulting in exclusion from school may damage the learning process in other ways as well. Suspended students may become less bonded to school, less invested in school rules and course work, and subsequently, less motivated to achieve academic success. Students who are less bonded to school may be more likely to turn to lawbreaking activities and become less likely to experience academic success. Consistent findings highlight the importance of school bonding for reducing the risk of delinquency (Hawkins, Smith, & Catalano, 2004). Conversely, Hemphill, Toumbourou, Herrenkohl, McMorris, and Catalano (2006) found that taking into account previous violent and aggressive behavior and a multitude of other risk factors (e.g., negative peer group, low grades), school suspension actually *increased* the risk of antisocial behavior a year later. In sum, disproportionate school discipline experienced by some racial and ethnic groups has important implications for academic outcomes. There is a need for research to identify why racial disproportionality in discipline occurs and what types of disciplinary practices might be less likely to exacerbate academic outcomes.

### **Explanations for the Racial Discipline Gap**

Certain demographic characteristics that are more common among some racial and ethnic groups have been used as a primary explanation for the racial discipline gap (see, e.g., National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2000). Low-income students with histories of low achievement, who reside in high-crime/high-poverty neighborhoods, may be at greater risk for engaging in behavior resulting in office disciplinary referrals and school suspension. A review of the literature suggests that such characteristics likely account for some proportion of the gap in sanctions across groups. Yet there is no evidence to suggest demographic factors are in any way sufficient to “explain away” the gap. Teacher and school factors need to be considered as possible

contributors to the overselection and oversanction of Black, Latino, and American Indian students.

### *Poverty and Neighborhood Characteristics*

Race, socioeconomic status (SES), and characteristics of neighborhoods associated with risk of negative outcomes are frequently connected in the United States (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; McLoyd, 1998). The confluence of these factors makes it challenging to separate out the contributions of each to the racial discipline gap. Many low-income students living in urban neighborhoods may experience adversity, such as exposure to violence and substance abuse, which may increase the likelihood of their receiving school sanctions (Brantlinger, 1991; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005). Although there is no evidence that exposure to violence causes behavior difficulties, correlational studies show links between exposure to violence and student mental health and behavior in the classroom (e.g., Kuther & Fisher, 1998). Many violence-exposed children suffer from anxiety, irritability, stress, and hypervigilance (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). These conditions may have a negative effect upon behavior in classrooms and result in increased discipline referrals.

Exposure to violence may also influence how students cope in school. One coping mechanism to ward off the threat of violence includes presenting a “tough front” or even arming oneself to ward off future victimization (Anderson, 1999; Stewart, Schreck, & Simons, 2006). The need to negotiate what Anderson has called the “code of the street” may contribute to behavior problems in school as students from high-crime neighborhoods adjust to a different set of norms in their interactions with peers and teachers in school settings (Dance, 2002). Additional research is needed to tease apart community effects (e.g., concentrated poverty, neighborhood crime, and the stress of low SES) and their impact on student behavior in school.

It is important to distinguish, however, between the role of poverty in predicting disruptive behavior and the ways it may contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in discipline. Existing school discipline research suggests that student SES is limited in its explanatory power of the racial discipline gap (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Wallace et al., 2008). Whether statistically controlling for a measure of SES at the school level (percentage of parents unemployed or percentage of students enrolled in free or reduced-cost meals; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982) or at the student level (parental education or qualification for free or reduced-cost meals; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Skiba et al., 2002), multivariate analyses have repeatedly demonstrated that racial differences in discipline rates remain significant. The most recent of these analyses (Wallace et al., 2008) used a series of logistic regressions to test racial/ethnic disparities in office disciplinary referrals, suspension, and expulsion. Race/ethnicity remained a significant predictor of all three disciplinary outcomes even after accounting for student-reported parental education, family structure (e.g., single-parent household), and urbanicity of neighborhood. In sum, being enrolled in a school with high rates of low-income students (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002; Wu et al., 1982) or being from a low-income family (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Skiba et al., 2002) does increase the likelihood that a student will be subject to punitive forms of discipline and even appears to make a mild contribution to

disproportionality (Wallace et al., 2008). Yet the highly consistent finding that race/ethnicity remains a significant predictor of discipline even after statistically controlling for measures of family income suggests that student SES is not sufficient to explain the racial discipline gap.

In fact, some research has found an inverse relationship between student demographics and rates of disproportionality in school discipline. Rausch and Skiba (2004), examining suspension and expulsion records across one Midwestern state, reported that Black students are at greater risk of suspension when compared with White students, not in urban schools but, rather, in more resource-rich suburban schools. Other research suggests that the context of school or district racial climate may have an influence on rates of disproportionality. Thornton and Trent (1988) reported that racial disproportionality in school suspension was greatest in schools that had been recently desegregated, especially if those schools had a higher SES student population. Conversely, Eitle and Eitle (2004) found decreased rates of disproportionality in school suspension in schools that became resegregated. Such data suggest that, at the school and district levels, financial resources, staff perceptions, and racial climate may be as important as student demographics in predicting racial disparity.

### *Low Achievement*

Low achievement is another variable that may contribute to the racial discipline gap. A wide body of research documents a persistent pattern that Asian and White students score higher on achievement tests compared with Black, Latino, and American Indian students (A. Gregory & Weinstein, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Faced with repeated academic struggles, underperforming students may become frustrated and disaffected and have lower self-confidence, all of which may contribute to a higher rate of school disruption (Miles & Stipek, 2006). Low literacy achievement in the elementary grades is linked to later aggression in third and fifth grades (Miles & Stipek, 2006). Similar patterns have been found in later grades—low achievement in middle and high school is linked with more serious forms of aggression a year later (Choi, 2007). Although it is clear that low achievement is highly correlated with aggressive behavior and disciplinary infractions, such patterns in and of themselves do not explain disproportionality in discipline. Studies of the relationship between achievement and student discipline have shown that when taking into account grade point average, race remains a predictor of suspension (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Moreover, it is also possible that any relationship between the achievement gap and the discipline gap is in fact the product of other variables, such as educational disadvantage. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that what is widely viewed as an achievement gap between White and Black students could more properly be termed an “education debt” in that educational opportunities in the United States have historically never been equalized for different groups. McLoyd (1998) notes that poverty’s effects on students are mediated not simply by family or community risk factors but also by poor school conditions in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Poor students of color are more likely to attend schools with lower quality resources and facilities (Kozol, 2005),

higher teacher turnover, and a lower percentage of highly qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Discrepancies in the quality of resources available to rich and poor districts are well documented, but there is a need for sound policy research that can specify how to address resource disparities in order to positively affect both the achievement gap and the discipline gap.

### *Differential Behavior*

Another explanation for the racial discipline gap is that students from certain racial and ethnic groups misbehave or contribute to a lack of safety in schools more than students from other racial and ethnic groups. Studies using both measures of student self-report and extant school disciplinary records have examined this premise and have generally failed to find evidence of racial differences in student behavior (e.g., Skiba et al., 2002; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). In one of the earliest longitudinal studies of student race and school sanctions for misbehavior, Wehlage and Rutter examined predictors of school sanctions for 7th, 9th, and 11th graders over a 3-year period and reported that Black students did not consistently report more misbehavior than White students. This failure to find consistently large racial and ethnic differences in student self-reported behavior has been corroborated in the literature (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Wu et al., 1982). A recent study using a nationally representative sample showed few and generally small differences in self-reported unsafe behavior across racial groups compared with the racial discrepancy in discipline sanctions (Dinkes, Cataldi, & Lin-Kelly, 2007). There were, for example, no differences in self-reported weapon carrying among Black, White, and American Indian students. Some of the most recent data on school safety (Bauer, Guerino, Nolle, & Tang, 2008) show that victimization by violence or theft is not statistically differentiated by race, with similar percentages of White (4.7%), Black (3.8%), and Latino (3.9%) students reporting that they had been victimized in the past 6 months in school.

The use of self-report data, however, can raise questions about the accuracy of the student reporters and hence the validity of the results. Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis (1979) hypothesized that the failure to find differences between Black and White self-report of serious delinquent behavior could be due to underreporting by Black youth. Studies examining this hypothesis, however, have failed to find support for it. McCarthy and Hoge (1987) examined whether Black students, more than White students, underreported their rule-breaking behavior. Comparing student self-report with a sample of teacher reports of rule breaking from a sample of 1,125 7th and 11th graders, the researchers found no clear pattern that teacher reports were more highly correlated with either White or Black self-reports of misconduct, and they concluded that neither group tended to systematically under- or over-report their misconduct.

The findings of self-report data have also been corroborated by studies using extant school data on office referrals, which have also failed to find substantial differences in rates of disruptive school behavior by race. McFadden, Marsh, Price, and Hwang (1992), studying discipline records in a single Florida school district, found no general differences in behavior between White and Black students and indeed found that White students engaged in

a higher level of those behaviors (e.g., defiance, fighting, and bothering others) that tended to result in suspension or corporal punishment. Similarly, Shaw and Braden (1990) reported that White children in a single school district were significantly more likely than Black children to be referred for disciplinary action for severe rule violations, despite the overrepresentation of Black students in that district in corporal punishment. Finally, Skiba et al. (2002) set out specifically to test the differential behavior hypothesis, using disciplinary referrals from all 19 middle schools in a single large urban district. They found no evidence that either Black or White students were referred to the office for more serious behaviors. The analyses did show, however, that reasons for referring White students tended to be for causes that were more objectively observable (smoking, vandalism, leaving without permission, obscene language), whereas office referrals for Black students were more likely to occur in response to behaviors (loitering, disrespect, threat, excessive noise) that appear to be more subjective in nature. In short, there appears to be a notable paucity of evidence that could support a hypothesis that the racial discipline gap can be explained through differential rates of misbehavior.

### *Differential Selection*

In juvenile justice research, there has been a similar focus on exploring *disproportionate minority contact* in the justice system (Piquero, 2008). Some of this research has sought to identify whether the high incarceration rates of ethnic minority youth, compared with the rates of White youth, are due to their higher rates of illegal behavior or due to institutional practices such as patterns in police surveillance, racial profiling, or biased sentencing (Piquero, 2008). This research provides a useful framework for understanding discrimination as a contributor to the racial discipline gap in schools. Specifically, the “differential selection” hypothesis asserts that ethnic minorities are more likely to be arrested because they are more likely to be picked out for wrongdoing despite similar levels of infractions (Piquero, 2008). This hypothesis is useful when applied to the school setting; that is, despite relatively similar rates of disruption, Black, Latino, or American Indian students may be more likely to be differentially selected for discipline consequences.

There is a fairly substantial research base suggesting that differential selection at the classroom level contributes in some way to racial/ethnic disproportionality in school disciplinary outcomes. Consistent findings of disproportionality in office referrals (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2008; Wallace et al., 2008) suggest that racial/ethnic disparities in discipline begin at the classroom level. In an ethnographic observational study of urban classrooms, Vavrus and Cole (2002) found that many office referrals leading to school suspension were due to what the authors described as a student’s “violation of implicit interactional codes,” most often a student calling into question established classroom practices or the teacher’s authority. Those students singled out in this way were disproportionately students of color. Skiba et al. (2002) reported on findings of referrals based on objective versus subjective reasons by race. Together with findings that Black students are more likely than White students to be referred to the office for defiance (A. Gregory & Weinstein, 2008) or noncompliance (Skiba et al., 2008), these results strongly suggest that

some process of differential selection at the classroom level may contribute to disparities in discipline.

Explanations for the overselection of certain students for discipline may include cultural mismatch, implicit bias, or negative expectations in classrooms and schools. The cultural mismatch hypothesis suggests that the classroom culture or the teacher's culture is at odds with the culture of ethnic minority students (Irvine, 2002; Townsend, 2000). For instance, Boykin and colleagues argued that Western European-based individualism and competitiveness are the dominant underlying ideologies guiding classroom activities (Boykin, Tyler, & Miller, 2005)—an orientation that may clash with a stronger emphasis on communal values in Black, Latino, and American Indian culture (Gay, 2006). Gay further suggested that communicative tensions can arise through cultural difference. Specifically, differences in ways of communicating between Blacks (e.g., animated, interpersonal) and Whites (e.g., dispassionate, impersonal) may lead to conflict (Kochman, 1981). In a study of 62 White elementary teachers who taught in two predominantly Black schools, Tyler, Boykin, and Walton (2006) found that teachers were more likely to rate vignettes of students who exhibited competitive and individualistic behavior as motivated and achievement oriented than students who exhibited more communal and vervistic (e.g., collaborative and multitasking) behaviors. Such findings, if validated in actual classroom settings, would indicate a differential perception on the part of teachers that could well advantage White students exhibiting competitive behaviors and disadvantage Black students exhibiting a more active and community-oriented learning style.

Other scholars have focused on ways in which negative teacher beliefs and expectations can contribute to racially related authority conflicts (R. S. Weinstein, 2002; R. S. Weinstein, Gregory, & Strambler, 2004). In her ethnography of school discipline in an elementary school, Ferguson (2000) observed patterns in negative teacher–student interactions and argued that these events were fueled by White teachers' overreacting and relying on stereotypes to interpret Black students' language and physical expression. Given stereotypes and media portrayals of Black youth as dangerous and aggressive (Devine & Elliot, 2000; Noguera & Akom, 2000), teacher expectations for behavior may also influence whether these students are selected for discipline sanctions. A related area of research examines how implicit beliefs may negatively affect Black and Latino students. Implicit racial bias, according to social psychologists, operates out of conscious awareness yet influences decision making (e.g., Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005). Although no studies have been conducted on the implicit bias of teachers and how race may activate stereotypes, Graham and Lowery (2004) conducted an analogous experimental study with police and probation officers. They found that, compared with officers who were subliminally primed with neutral, non-race-related words, officers who had been subliminally primed with words related to the category *Black* were more likely to recommend harsher punishments for adolescents who had committed crimes, as presented in standardized, written vignettes.

Taken together, research on classroom processes suggests that Black students are differentially selected for discipline referral (e.g., Skiba et al., 2002), although there is insufficient data to

establish why this may occur. Several reasons may include societal stereotypes, implicit bias, or cultural mismatch between teachers and Black students. To advance research in this area, a systematic line of mixed-methods research is needed, using observational studies of classroom interactions and interviews of teachers and students concerning the process of school discipline. Coding of teacher–student interactions could help identify whether teachers are more or less tolerant of racially specific deviations from implicit behavioral standards in the classroom.

### *Differential Processing*

The *differential processing* hypothesis asserts that discrimination occurs in the courts and correctional systems, which leads to a disproportionate arrest and incarceration rate of minorities (Piquero, 2008). Subjective judgments in sanctioning may be detrimental to Black, Latino, and American Indian youth. Morrison (Morrison et al., 2001; Morrison & Skiba, 2001) noted that the application of school consequences such as suspension and expulsion represents less a discrete event than a complex process whose outcome is influenced simultaneously by student behavior, teacher classroom management, administrator perspectives, and school policy. There is tremendous local flexibility in the types of infractions that move forward from the classroom to the office and in the types of consequences issued by administrators. The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 mandates a 1-year expulsion for the possession of firearms at school, but such consequences can be modified based on the discretion of the district administration. Thus, in general, there is considerable flexibility in the type and length of sanction students receive for an infraction. For the same offense, one administrator may decide to mandate a conference with parents or guardians; a different administrator may mandate a 5-day suspension (Noguera & Yonemura Wing, 2006).

The most well-documented gap in sanctions is between Black and White students. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) found that Black students were more likely than White students to report being sent to the principal's office and were more likely than White students to report being suspended even though they did not report higher incidents of misbehavior, across 2 years of study. These findings suggest a discrepancy between sanctions and student-reported behavior. Indeed, it may be that Black students are suspended and punished for behavior that is less serious than the behavior of other students. McFadden, Marsh, Price, and Hwang (1992) reported that Black pupils in a Florida school district were more likely than White students to receive severe punishments (e.g., corporal punishment, school suspension) and less likely to receive milder consequences (e.g., in-school suspension). These results are consistent with findings that Black students were referred for corporal punishment for less serious behavior than were other students (Shaw & Braden, 1990). These findings, as a whole, suggest harsh sanctions issued to Black students may contribute to their overrepresentation in discipline data.

### **Methodological Issues and Recommendations**

Although the concept of disproportionate representation seems straightforward, its measurement can be complex, as demonstrated in special education research (Skiba et al., 2008). The *composition index* (Donovan & Cross, 2002) compares the proportion

of those served in special education represented by a given ethnic group with the proportion that group represents in the population or in school enrollment. For example, Black students account for 33% of students identified as mentally retarded at the national level, clearly discrepant from their 17% representation in the school-aged population (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Although an intuitive measure, problems with interpretation and scaling of the composition index measure have led the field toward use of the *risk index* and *risk ratio* (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Skiba et al., 2008; Westat, 2005). The risk index is the proportion of a given group in a given category; at the national level, 2.64% of all Black students enrolled in the public schools are identified as mentally retarded (Donovan & Cross, 2002). To interpret the risk index, a ratio of the risk of the target group to one or more groups may be constructed, termed a *risk ratio* (Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Parrish, 2002). Comparison of Black student risk for identification as mentally retarded (2.64%) with the White risk index of 1.18% for that category yields a risk ratio of 2.24 (2.64/1.18), suggesting that Black students are over two times more likely to be served in the category mental retardation than White students. The same data can also be used to compute an *odds ratio* (Finn, 1982), often drawn from logistic regression (Wallace et al., 2008). In contrast to the risk ratio, the odds ratios assesses both occurrence and nonoccurrence data.

Methodological issues in the measurement of disproportionality remain outstanding, including criteria for determining a significant level of disproportionality (Bollmer, Bethel, Garrison-Mogren, & Brauen, 2007; Skiba et al., 2008), the appropriate comparison group when calculating risk ratios (Westat, 2004), and the comparability of risk and odds ratios (Davies, Crombie, & Tavakoli, 1998). In the face of national special education law mandating the identification of significant disproportionality at the local level, however, criteria for making that determination are necessary. Thus, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs issued policy guidance to state and local education agencies regarding the calculation and interpretation of risk indices and risk ratios (Westat, 2004, 2005), which has implications for how disproportionality in discipline sanctions could be identified. The Office of Special Education Programs recommends that a risk ratio can be used to understand the relative risk of students receiving special education services for different racial and ethnic groups (Westat, 2005). The office cautions, however, that risk ratios are difficult to interpret when based on small numbers of students in a racial and ethnic group. It further describes the benefits of a weighted risk ratio, which takes into account differences in the size of racial and ethnic groups. This allows for comparison of risk ratios across districts with varying racial and ethnic composition.

Improved measurement of the racial discipline gap should advance substantive areas of inquiry. One important area relates to the unique contributions of student, teacher, school, and family and neighborhood to the racial discipline gap. As of yet, there have been no comprehensive studies or systematic lines of research that have disentangled the unique effects of these contributors. Education researchers might follow the lead of a recent study by Sampson, Morenoff, and Raudenbush (2005) on the gap in community violence between White, Black, and Latino young adults, which offers a guide for ecologically sensitive

research on race and discipline. Using data from almost 3,000 young adults in 180 Chicago neighborhoods, Sampson and colleagues identified the unique contributions of individual, home, and neighborhood variables to the relative odds of self-reported violence for each racial and ethnic group. The apparent multi-level causation of disciplinary disproportionality strongly suggests that multivariate procedures, in particular hierarchical approaches (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), will be most appropriate in future research. The next generation of research could simultaneously consider the effects of student attitude and behavior, teacher tolerance and classroom management skills, administrative leadership, school climate, and school and community demographics on the racial discipline gap.

Following the lead from research on the juvenile justice system (Piquero, 2008), systematic lines of research on the chain of events that culminate in suspension and expulsion are needed. Unfair selection *and* sanction at various points in the discipline process could additively contribute to the discipline gap. Another crucial area of research needs to test mechanisms and develop theory regarding the conscious and unconscious processes that result in differential treatment of some racial and ethnic groups. Previous research has shown that cultural mismatch between teachers and students can contribute to misunderstandings, fear, and conflict with respect to pedagogy (Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings 1995; Pollack, 2008); further research is needed on the extent to which such processes also contribute to inequitable disciplinary practices. Social class, immigrant status, racial and ethnic identity, neighborhood and familial diversity, and educator training and perspectives may all affect student behavior, teacher responses, or their interaction. Clearly, conducting research that could truly sort out the numerous and interacting sources of variance contributing to disciplinary disproportionality is challenging. Subtle and implicit processes related to racial bias, negative expectations, or stereotypes are not easily detected outside of controlled laboratory conditions, and it is not a simple matter to observe the complex and interactive social processes that can contribute to an escalating sequence of actions and reactions during actual discipline encounters.

Identifying the characteristics of resilient schools is another important next step in research on racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline. In the field of public health, research has established a strong link between community violence and manifestations of school violence (Ozer, 2005). Not surprisingly, schools in areas with a high incidence of crime and violence also tend to experience higher rates of violence and disorder (Noguera, 2003). Yet the presence of schools that demonstrate positive outcomes despite their location in high-risk neighborhoods (e.g., Welsh, Greene, & Jenkins, 1999) strongly suggests that neighborhood and family disadvantage be approached in research and practice as conditions that increase educational challenge, rather than as limiting conditions. In particular, there is a need for additional research on the types of strategies schools can implement to reduce the effects of violence in neighboring communities.

### **Disciplinary Practices, Prevention Programming, and School Reform**

Existing research on the racial discipline gap suggests that, similar to efforts that address the achievement gap or the disproportionate

number of Black students placed in special education (Skiba et al., 2008), no single causal factor can fully explain racially disparate discipline, and no single action will therefore be sufficient to ameliorate it. Multifaceted strategies may offer promise, but there is as yet no empirical research testing specific interventions for reducing the discipline gap.

Given the lack of systematic research addressing the effectiveness of gap-reducing interventions, promising directions must be extrapolated from other intervention research. Freiberg and Lapointe (2006) reviewed 40 school-based programs targeting the reduction of behavior problems in schools. Of those, 29 were implemented with Black, Latino, urban, and low-income students and offered some evidence for their success in increasing student problem solving and/or reducing difficulties in classroom management for participants as a whole. Freiberg and Lapointe identified commonalities among those effective programs. The programs move beyond discipline, emphasizing student learning and self-regulation, not simply procedures for addressing rule infractions. They encourage “school connectedness” and “caring and trusting relationships” between teachers and students. Overall, the programs try to increase students’ positive experience of schooling and to move away from a reliance on punitive reactions to misbehavior.

The programmatic commonalities described by Freiberg and Lapointe (2006) offer a promising direction for lowering the oversanctioning of Black, Latino, and American Indian students. Yet universal approaches to educational practice have frequently been critiqued for not specifically addressing the racial dynamics, economic stressors, or other influences on the racial discipline gap (Goldstein & Noguera, 2006). In a national sample of schools at the elementary and middle school level that implemented positive behavior supports for at least a year, Skiba et al. (2008) reported generally positive findings before disaggregation by race but significant disciplinary disproportionality for Black and Latino students in both office disciplinary referrals and administrative consequences when the data were disaggregated. Explicit attention to issues of race and culture may be necessary for sustained change in racial and ethnic disciplinary disparities.

Studies of successful teachers of Black students support the idea that teachers differ from one another in their ability to elicit cooperation and diffuse conflict. A. Gregory and Weinstein (2008) found that teachers who elicited trust and cooperation with their Black students tended to use an authoritative style of teaching—one in which teachers showed both caring and high expectations. These “warm demanders” (Irvine, 2002) may provide cultural synchronization between authority in the home and in the school. Teachers’ use of humor, emotions, and colloquial expressions are other avenues through which cultural synchrony may occur (Monroe & Obidah, 2004; C. S. Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). Additional research on preservice teacher training and professional development is needed to ascertain if an increase in teacher cultural responsiveness or synchrony with students is linked to lower discipline referrals for Black, Latino, and American Indian students.

Overall, little is known about the types of interventions that reduce the racial discipline gap. Given the research on possible contributors to the gap, a variety of strategies may be needed, including (a) increasing the awareness of teachers and administrators of

the potential for bias when issuing referrals for discipline, (b) utilizing a range of consequences in response to behavior problems, (c) treating exclusion as a last resort rather than the first or only option, (d) making a concerted effort to understand the roots of behavior problems, and (e) finding ways to reconnect students to the educational mission of schools during disciplinary events (Noguera, 2007).

## Summary

The racial and ethnic disparity in discipline sanctions has not received the attention it deserves. Few studies have examined where and why disproportionality between Black and White students is on the increase, especially for Black females (Wallace et al., 2008). Discipline trends for Latinos have been inconsistently documented. Given the diversity of Latinos in the United States (e.g., immigrant status, country of origin), in-depth examinations of different Latino groups is needed (e.g., first-generation Mexican American, third-generation Cuban American). Moreover, comparisons of schools with racial diversity versus racial homogeneity would be informative. Such research would then lend itself to inquiry about why such trends exist in school discipline.

Unfortunately, the discourse on racial and ethnic disproportionality seems to be constrained by simplistic dichotomies that artificially pit individual student characteristics (e.g., student aggression, disengagement from school) against systemic factors (e.g., school administrators’ implicit bias, community violence) as the reason why some groups are overrepresented in suspension or expulsion (Skiba et al., 2008). The multiple and interacting variables that appear to contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in discipline demand a more comprehensive and nuanced approach. More sophisticated statistical methodologies such as hierarchical linear modeling or sequential analysis (Gottman & Roy, 1990) may prove to be better suited for modeling the complexity of inequitable outcomes in school discipline.

At this time, however, little is known about the efficacy or effectiveness of possible “gap-reducing” interventions. What types of interventions might successfully increase teacher and administrator awareness of the potential for bias when issuing referrals for discipline? Do interventions aimed at using exclusion as a last resort rather than the first or only option reduce the gap in referrals across racial and ethnic groups? Will interventions aimed at reducing the achievement gap, such as access to rigorous curriculum and caring teacher–student relationships, be accompanied by a narrowed discipline gap? Can gap-reducing interventions draw on universal approaches, or do they need targeted, culturally specific approaches that respond to the students’ cultural and socioeconomic contexts? Effectively addressing these questions poses a serious challenge to researchers, as it necessarily involves attention to the complex, politically charged, and often personally threatening topic of race. Yet creativity and perseverance will be necessary to craft such research if we are to understand and develop interventions that can effectively reduce the racial discipline gap.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Rarely does research differentiate between expulsion resulting in alternative educational services or exclusion from such services. As a result, this review must rely on a broad usage of the term *expulsion*.



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