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Discipline Patterns in a Public-School District with a History of Disproportionate Suspensions

Barbara Slingerland, EdD

Problem

In the 2013-2014 school year, one school district in the southeastern United States disciplined Black students with disabilities at nearly 3 times the rate of White students with disabilities. This type of disproportionality was a concern for the district.

Prior to this study, a complete analysis of other types of disproportionality in the district derived from other variables, such as student related characteristics, had not been done.

Purpose

To investigate how student-related characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender, age, grade level, disability status, and school location) predict the number of discipline referrals, types of discipline referrals, and types of suspensions issued to students.

Significance

Understanding patterns related to disproportionality for in-school and out-of-school suspension will allow school administrators to implement evidence-based practices to reduce disproportionate suspension. This may result in:

- all students participating equally in school
- higher school engagement
- higher school achievement
- increased graduation rates
- decreased drop-out rates

Social Change Implications

Students with disabilities as well as Black and Hispanic students, within this study and across the country, have received in-school and out-of-school suspension at a much higher rate than White students. Suspension has been associated with school drop-out and poor- post secondary outcomes including entry into the juvenile justice system and lack of gainful employment. Addressing this inequity may allow students of all races more positive post-secondary outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Behaviorism (Skinner,1984)

- Patterns of behavior are maintained by positive or negative consequences that a person experiences over time.
- School discipline practices and classroom management strategies have their roots in Behaviorism.

Relevant Scholarship

The student-related characteristics that are most commonly associated with exclusionary discipline practices are race/ethnicity, sex, grade level, and disability status.

In particular, black male students with disabilities:

- have in-school and out-of-school suspension nearly 3 times more than other students (Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen, Ee et al., 2015; Mellard & Seybert, 1996; Miller & Meyers, 2015 Skiba et al., 2014)
- receive harsher disciplinary consequences than any other group of students, even when controlling for poverty (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; McFadden et al., 1992; Skiba et al., 2014; Toldson et al., 2013).

Disproportionate application of in-school and out-of-school suspension often leads to poor post-secondary outcomes for the groups of students that receive the most days of suspension. These outcomes include:

- high rate of school drop-out (Miller & Myers, 2015);
- juvenile delinquency (Schollenberger, 2015; Wolf and Kupchik, 2016)
- incarceration (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Schollenberger, 2015; Wolf and Kupchik, 2016)

Research Questions

What are the predictive relationships between student-related characteristics of race/ethnicity, gender, age, grade level, disability status, and school location and:

1. total number of discipline referrals?
2. type of discipline referrals?
3. suspensions?

Participants

A convenience sample of 5523 students, in a suburban K-12 public-school district, who received at least one discipline referral during the 2015-2016 school year. The total school student population within this district was approximately 32,000 students.

Procedures

Design: Non-experimental, ex-post facto examination of school discipline data.

Data Collection

Archival discipline data collected during the 2015-2016 school year, including:

- total number of discipline referrals
- type of discipline referral
- suspension type

Analysis

Chi square tests for independence to determine likelihood that observed frequencies of student-related characteristic outcome variables were due to chance.

Logistic regression analyses for outcome variables that were categorical including: type of referral and suspension.

Linear regression analysis of continuous variable including: number of referrals

Findings

Students with disabilities vs. non-disabled students:

- higher numbers of referrals
- referrals for subjective offenses
- more likely to receive out-of-school suspension or in-school suspension than no suspension

Students at significantly greater risk of office referral and exclusionary discipline include:

- Black
- male
- disabled
- secondary school

Interpretation

There were clear patterns of discipline that were not congruent with the tenets of Behaviorism.

Discipline procedures applied disproportionately to:

- students with disabilities
- Black and Hispanic students
- students at middle and high school levels

Having a disability predicted all dependent variables.

Limitations

Generalizability: only to other school districts with comparable populations with:

- suburban setting
- similar discipline policy
- similar data collection guidelines

Use of archival data set:

- not triangulated with other data sources

Variability in:

- definition of office discipline referrals
- dispensation of office discipline referrals

Recommendations

Additional research to:

- Examine other variables related to discipline
 - race/ethnicity of persons making referrals
 - location where discipline referrals are occurring
 - disaggregated for other marginalized populations such as LGBTQ students
- Obtain qualitative data including:
 - Principal or teacher attitudes toward discipline

The district should:

- examine disciplinary patterns
- use research-based interventions to reduce the inequitable disciplinary procedures
- examine categories of eligibility for disabled students related to each of the outcome variables