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Factors that Contribute to Disciplinary Alternative Education Placements: Lessons Learned from Urban Schools in Texas

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Abstract:

US public school children lose approximately 18 million days of instruction in one year due to exclusionary discipline (D. Losen et al., 2015). Researchers have found that exclusionary disciplinary policies are ineffective in keeping schools safe or deterrents for further student engagement in misbehaviors. These exclusionary practices are most frequently found in large urban schools with high rates of student poverty and African American students are disproportionately impacted by these practices. Inequities in how disciplinary consequences are meted out in public schools to students along racial lines have been long documented in the research since the early 1970s. Nationally, 1.2 million Black students were suspended from K-12 public schools in a single academic year – 55% of those suspensions occurred in 13 Southern states. Of all of the southern states identified in this research conducted by Smith and Harper, 2015, the state of the Texas was the state with largest diverse student population with 71% of the student population being non-white. Given the large numbers of students that are suspended from schools in the US, this research explored school level factors that may provide a better understanding of this phenomenon such as concentration of poverty, concentration of African American students, teacher experience, education, and school size in urban schools in Texas.

1. Introduction

US public school children lose approximately 18 million days of instruction in one year due to exclusionary discipline (D. Losen et al., 2015). Public schools have historically and unsuccessfully relied on disciplinary interventions to preserve order and safety in schools. In fact, during the 1980s and 1990s, Zero Tolerance disciplinary policies once touted as the solution to school violence, resulted in an exponential increase in exclusionary disciplinary consequences for students with a minimal impact on keeping public schools and communities safer (Heitzeg, 2009; Skiba, 2014). The unintended consequences of these policies were increased student likelihood of dropping out of high school, not graduating on time and students becoming involved with the juvenile justice system—a direct line to the “school to prison pipeline.” Researchers have also found that not only are exclusionary disciplinary policies ineffective in keeping schools safe or deterrents for further student engagement in misbehaviors. Furthermore, these exclusionary practices are most frequently found in large urban schools with high rates of student poverty, and African American students are disproportionately impacted by these practices at both the local and national levels (Smith & Harper, 2015; US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014) “Nationally, 1.2 million Black students were suspended from K-12 public schools in a single academic year – 55% of those suspensions occurred in 13 Southern states. During this same academic school year, school districts in the South were responsible for 50% of African American student expulsions from public schools in the United States” (Smith and Harper, 2015). Of all of the southern states identified in this research conducted by Smith and Harper, 2015, the state of the Texas was the state with largest diverse student population with 71% of the student population being non-white (The Texas Education Agency, 2016).

Inequities in how disciplinary consequences are meted out in public schools to students along racial lines have been long documented in the research since the early 1970s (Edelman, Beck, & Smith, 1975; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; D. J. Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace Jr, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). A succinct review of the literature has shown that the disparity in school suspensions based on the students’ race, cannot be reasonably explained by differences in student behavior; that is African American students do not engage in more disruptive or violent behaviors in school when compared to their White peers (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’ Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Gregory et al., 2010; Hoffman, 2014; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Furthermore, disparities in the assignment of disciplinary measures cannot be explained by poverty (Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace Jr et al., 2008; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). Although there are reported findings of correlations between socioeconomic status and suspension in the research, the disproportionality in the assignment of discipline consequences are not due to African American students being poor.

1.1. Study Purpose

Given the large numbers of students that are suspended from schools in the US, this research explored school level factors that may provide a better understanding of this phenomenon such as concentration of poverty, concentration of African American students,

teacher experience, education, and school size. The purpose of this research was to examine the association of school level factors, student non-cognitive factors, teacher characteristics and exclusionary disciplinary assignments in Urban schools in Texas.

1.2. Study Context

In the state of Texas there are 11 urban school districts which represent less than 1% of all school districts in the state, however 19% of the student population in Texas are educated in urban schools; roughly 1 million students. Urban school students in Texas represent 15% of all students enrolled in urban schools in the United States. During the 2014-15 school year, the characteristics of the students attending schools in urban districts in Texas were as follows:

- **41%** of the all economically disadvantaged students in Texas attend urban schools;
- **23%** of all African American students enrolled in Texas attend urban schools;
- **25%** of all Hispanic students enrolled in Texas attend urban schools;
- **33%** of all LEP students in the state of Texas attend urban schools.
- More than **83%** of urban school students in Texas are non-white.

1.3. Methods

The data reported herein were drawn from disciplinary records from the *Disciplinary Data Reports* reported on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website. A standard multinomial logistic regression was used to examine associations between non-cognitive student factors, teacher and school level factors and levels of Disciplinary Assignment to Alternative Educational Placements (DAEP) in schools located Urban districts in Texas. Three DAEP Placements were represented: No DAEP Placements, Below State Average DAEP Placements and Above State Level DAEP Placements; No DAEP Placement was the reference category. Two binary predictor variables, Poverty Concentration: Above 40% and Below 40%, was used in this study, above 40% was the focus category and African American Student Concentration: Above State Level and Below State level, Above State Level was the focus used in this study and 5 quantitative predictor variables: total student count, percent of White teachers, percent of Male teachers, percent of teachers with Masters' Degrees and average teacher experience.

2. Results

2.1. Descriptive Data

Table 1 provides descriptive data on the 1,254 urban schools that were included in this research.

Variables	N	Percentage
Discipline Assignment		
Above DAEP (Focus)	276	22
Below DAEP	462	36.8
No DAEP	516	41.1
Concentration of African American Students		
AA Concentration Above State Level	463	36.9
AA Concentration Below State Level	791	63.1
Concentration of Poverty		
Poverty Over 40% (Focus)	1116	89
Poverty Under 40%	138	11

Table 1: Descriptive Data of Urban Schools in Texas

Model	B	SE-b	Wald	Df	Exp (B)	95% CI Exp (B)
Above DAEP Placements						
Intercept**	-7.581	.898	71.298	1		
School Poverty Level (Above40%)**	2.387	.483	24.460	1	10.885	4.226-28.035
AA Concentration (Above State Le)*	.465	.219	4.501	1	1.591	1.036-2.445
%Male Teachers**	.139	.010	199.657	1	1.149	1.127-1.171
%White Teachers*	.016	.006	8.407	1	1.016	1.005-1.027
Total Students**	.003	.000	85.775	1	1.003	1.002-1.004
Avg Teacher Experience**	-.186	.044	17.616	1	.830	.761-.906
%Teacher w Master Degree	.003	.011	.101	1	1.003	.982-1.025
Below DAEP Placements						
Intercept**	-4.027	.570	49.867			
School Poverty Level (Above40%)**	1.273	.262	23.592	1	3.573	2.137-5.973
AA Concentration (Above StateLe)	.193	.148	1.714	1	1.213	.908-1.621
%Male Teachers*	.016	.007	5.360	1	1.016	1.002-1.030
%White Teachers**	.013	.003	13.494	1	1.013	1.006-1.020
Total Students**	.003	.000	71.482	1	1.003	1.002-1.003
Avg Teacher Experience	-.003	.028	.008	1	.998	.943-1.055
%Teacher w Master Degree	.011	.007	2.264	1	1.011	.997-1.025

Table 2: Multinomial Logistic Regression Results

Note: The dependent variable No DAEP Placement as the reference category; Poverty Level Above 40% was the focus group of the Poverty Level variable and African American Level above State Level was the focus group of the AA Student Levels variable; Multinomial Nagelkerke $R^2 = .492$.

**p<.001

**p<.05

Results of the multinomial logistic analysis as reported in Table 2 indicates that the 7-predictor model provides a statistically significant prediction of success, $-2 \text{ Log Likelihood} = 2100.513$, $X^2 (14, N=1269, 712.632, p <.001)$. The Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 indicated that the model accounted for approximately 49.2% of the total variance. Prediction success for the cases used in the development of the model was moderate, with an overall prediction success rate of 60.2% and correct prediction rates of 73.2%, 43.1% and 68.6% for Above State Average DAEP Placement, Below State Average DAEP Placement and Non DAEP Placement respectively.

The upper portion of the Table 2 presents regression coefficients, the Wald test, adjusted odds ratio [Exp(B)], and the 95% confidence intervals (CI) for odds ratios for each predictor contrasting Above State Level DAEP Placements with No DAEP Placements. The Wald test indicated that 6 out of the 7 predictor variables were statistically significant predictors of the outcome variable of **Above State Level DAEP Placements**: concentrations of student poverty, concentration of African American students, total student count, % of male teachers, average teacher experience and % of White teachers. The influence of the variables *concentration of poverty* and *concentration of African American students* was strong; schools with poverty levels above 40% were 10.8 (CI=4.226-28.035) times more likely than schools with student poverty levels below 40% to have above state average DAEP placements than schools with no DAEP placements, controlling for all other variables. Schools with concentrations of African American students above the State average were 1.59 (CI=1.036-2.445) times more likely than schools with student concentrations of African American students below the state average to have above State average DAEP placements than no DAEP placements, controlling for all other variables. The variable, *Average Teacher Experience* was negatively associated with Above State DAEP Placements (adjusted odds ratio=.830; 95% CI: .761-.906). An increase in the 1 % of average teacher experience will increase the odds of schools being placed in the No DAEP placements by .830, controlling for all other variables.

The lower portion of the Table 2 presents regression coefficients, the Wald test, adjusted odds ratio [Exp(B)], and the 95% confidence intervals (CI) for odds ratios for each predictor contrasting Below State Level DAEP Placements with No DAEP Placements. The Wald test indicated that 4 out of the 7 predictor variables were statistically significant predictors of the outcome variable of **Below DAEP Placement**: concentrations of student poverty, total student count, % of male teachers and % of White teachers. The influence of the variable *concentration of poverty* was strong, schools with poverty levels above 40% were 3.5 (CI=2.13-5.97) times more likely than schools with student poverty levels below 40% to have below state average DAEP placements than no DAEP placements, controlling for all other variables. The variable, *Average Teacher Experience* was negatively associated with Below State DAEP Placements (adjusted odds ratio=.998; 95% CI: .943-1.055). An increase in the 1 % of average teacher experience will increase the odds of schools being placed in the No DAEP placements by .998, controlling for all other variables.

3. Discussion

Of all of the school types in Texas (i.e. urban, rural, town) based on locale, urban schools have the highest percentage of non-white students statewide at 83% and the highest percentage of poor students at 73.6%; (Texas Education Agency, 2015). According to the Texas Education Agency (2015), urban schools in Texas have the highest percentage of teachers with less than 5 years teaching experience (34%), the highest percentage of non-white teachers (54.5%) and the highest student to teacher ratio of 16.3.

This study reveals that according to the multinomial logistic regression, variables such as number of students, school poverty levels, percentage of African American students, percentage of male teachers, percentage of white teachers and average teacher experience are significant factors in terms of urban schools in Texas having above the state average DAEP placements when compared to schools with NO DAEP placements. That is, factors of percentages of African American students and percentage of poverty were significant contributors for schools that had above the state average of DAEP. Conversely, variables such as school poverty, percentage of male teachers, percentage of White teachers and the total number of students are significant factors in terms of urban schools in Texas having below the state average DAEP placements. Concentrations of school poverty had the most influence on the percentage of students placed in DAEP assignments for schools with both above and below state averages. Interesting DAEP placements were not impacted by teachers being more educated as one would expect in schools with either below or above DAEP placements. The findings from this research are in alignment with prior research on this subject, schools with higher concentrations of poverty and African American students will have higher percentages of students disciplined than in schools with lower concentrations (Skiba et al., 2014; Smith & Harper, 2015; US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

No other *school* factor has a greater impact on school students than an effective teacher (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hanushek, 2011; Rand Education, 2012). Low income high poverty schools have difficulty in attracting and retaining high quality teachers. Urban schools are often left with hiring substitutes due to this lack of available supply (Jacob, 2007). Urban schools have a high rate of teacher turnover, which results in these schools having a higher percentage of replacement teachers who are less experienced. Far too often, poor African American children are disproportionately assigned to classrooms with teachers who received the least preparation and have the weakest academic backgrounds (Murnane & Steele, 2007). The research is clear in informing us that teachers teaching in low income high poverty schools when compared to their peers working in suburban schools are more likely to be inexperienced, lack certification, less likely to have graduated from a competitive college and scored lower on standardized exams (Afram, Stenbridge, Fergus, & Noguera, 2013; Jacob, 2007; Shields, 2009; Simon & Johnson, 2013).

4. Implications and Recommendations

Researchers have found that not only are exclusionary disciplinary policies ineffective in keeping schools safe, deterrents for further student engagement in misbehaviors. These exclusionary practices are most frequently found in large urban schools with high rates of student poverty, and African American students are disproportionately impacted by these practices at both the local and national levels (Smith & Harper, 2015; US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Decades of empirical research has informed us that African American students do not engage in more disruptive or violent behaviors in school when compared to their White peers (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2010; Hoffman, 2014; Skiba et al., 2002). Furthermore, disparities in the assignment of disciplinary measures cannot be explained by poverty (Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace Jr et al., 2008; Wu et al., 1982). D. Losen et al. (2015) warned that “if we ignore the **discipline gap**, we will be unable to close the **achievement gap**” (p. 4).

Given that the empirical research has been instructive in informing us for decades that exclusionary disciplinary policies are ineffective and more often than not result in the disproportionate assignment of consequences to poor African American students, school leaders must make a concerted effort to examine their discipline policies and practices to ensure that all students are successful, particularly students who are poor and African American.

5. Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted after careful consideration of the following limitations. Findings of this study do not constitute proof of racial discrimination of teachers or school leaders in the state of Texas in their assignment of DAEP to students based on ethnicity or poverty. Further qualitative analysis of the specific reasons as to why individual students were assigned to DAEP as a consequence would be needed and demographic data of the teachers and school leaders involved with each violation would need to be identified and analyzed to identify a pattern of bias of which was not covered in this research. The statistical power of the data presented in this research relied very heavily on the accuracy of the discipline data that was publicly available on the Texas Education Agency website. In this research the unit of analysis was the school which did not allow the researcher to investigate the impact of prior student disciplinary infractions, a variable that may contribute to school leaders' decisions regarding the assignment of students to DAEP. Finally, this study examined disciplinary trends in urban schools in the state of Texas and therefore may not be generalized to urban schools in other states, whose disciplinary policies, particularly those at the local level may not be determined by local school districts.

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