

The Impact of Exclusionary Discipline on Students

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Abstract

The impact of exclusionary discipline on students is clear and negative as we report herein. The impacts of exclusionary discipline have been negatively linked to the academic and social development of disciplined students. We argue that this discipline form has been disproportionately used among certain groups, particularly those students of certain minority and / or ethnic groups, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those students with identified exceptionalities. Exclusionary and zero-tolerance approaches to school discipline are not the best techniques to create a safe climate in contemporary education settings.

Keywords: suspensions, exclusion, suspensions, zero-tolerance, discipline

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Success for all students continues to be at the forefront of many educational initiatives because of the underlying goal of the education system, which is to provide students with the necessary academic, social, and emotional skills required for successful and meaningful participation in everyday society (Dewey, 1916). Underpinning student success is a cadre of educators and disciplinary practices employed within our schools to treat and remedy student misbehavior (Ryan & Zoldy, 2011). Herein we argue that the use of exclusionary discipline, in the form of out of school suspensions and expulsion has been found to impact student outcomes negatively, and these practices need to be diminished and/or erased to resurrect progressive and positive outcomes. We also suggest via written evidence that certain groups of students experience exclusionary discipline more often than other groups of students. We need to consider this phenomena and path since current data support movement towards a more positive progressive outcome.

Recently, the Ontario School Community Safety Advisory Panel (2008) investigated and concluded:

The punitive approach that demanded mass suspensions and other forms of conventional discipline for complex-needs youth reached its zenith with the zero tolerance philosophy that dominated the early years of the *Safe Schools Act* amendments enacted in 2002. Youth were suspended and expelled in 'droves'. The Panel refers to this enforcement style for responding to troubled youth as the *Safe Schools Culture*. (p.2)

Informing a needy student that they must leave the school for a period of time is not a solution when dealing with student wrongdoing (Daniel, 2008). It merely puts the needs of a student on the street (Ryan & Zoldy, 2011). Concluding a recent review of literature one large department of education reported that there has been very little evidence gathered demonstrating exclusionary discipline actually reduced school violence or improved student behaviour (Maryland State Department of Education, 2010). In addition Rossi (2006) has explained how exclusionary discipline is often abruptly deployed as "the quick fix and [is] easier in the short term for the individual teacher, administrator, or other school staff" (p. 45). While this may be an entirely accurate generalization we believe there is a need to look at the excluded, the shunned, and the very people who are expelled, to better understand the impacts of exclusionary discipline on students who endure this consequence (Falconer, 2008; Ryan & Zoldy, 2011).

Purpose

The purpose of this review is to examine research that has centered upon exclusionary discipline and the impact it has on students. Three consistent trends have emerged recently which highlight the academic and social impacts of exclusionary discipline on students as we will demonstrate herein. We will explore the disproportionate use of such forms of discipline on certain student groups and in doing so we hoped to advance our knowledge, understanding and beliefs concerning the impact of exclusionary discipline on our students in an effort to guide further research and ultimately, improve disciplinary practices for all stakeholders.

Academic Impact

The academic impacts of exclusionary discipline on students have been well documented leading Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson (2004) to conclude that "suspension may be a temporary solution to a behaviour problem, but it is academically detrimental and may

produce life-long, negative effects” (p. 521). Christle et al. (2004) examined suspension rates in Kentucky middle schools and compared the characteristics of schools with the top 20 suspension rates with those of the bottom 20 within the state. Findings indicated that suspension rates were negatively correlated with academic achievement. One limitation noted was the use of secondary documents, which could not account for other underlying student factors such as learning disabilities (Christle, et al., 2004). The use of exclusionary (zero tolerance) discipline was found to be applied to minor infractions outside of the dangerous behaviours in which it was originally intended (Brownstein, 2010). Rausch & Skiba (2004) explained, “maintaining safety is only one purpose of a school discipline system; appropriate discipline also preserves a climate conducive to teaching and learning” (p. 5). Subsequently, current research actually highlights the need for a disciplinary approach that is not only punitive, but provides an opportunity for the student to learn from his or her misbehaviour.

Flanagain (2007) employed a quantitative research design in which students who were suspended 4 or more times were given a controlled (yes or no response) questionnaire to measure the degree to which they agree with the use of out of school suspensions. In the findings, Flanagain (2007) identified students who are suspended, finding they were “usually weak academically, and by missing instruction they may fall further behind in their studies” (p. 13). Furthermore, Flanagain (2007) found “30% of students said that they were not allowed to make up the lessons they missed” (p. 44). One limitation of the question posed in the research to illicit this response was based solely on conditions of the students return and did not address opportunities over the duration of the suspension.

Another academic theme identified in the research pertained to the relationship between suspensions and drop out rates. Brownstein (2010) examined the negative consequences of zero-tolerance and exclusionary disciplinary practices on youth. Brownstein (2010) stated; “a student is more likely to drop out if he or she has been retained for a grade – a common consequence of multiple suspensions” (p. 24). However, the author failed to provide substantial correlated evidence on the relationship between suspension rates and grade retention. Brownstein (2010) also documented the negative relationship between out of school suspension, expulsion and academic achievement, even when controlling for demographics such as socio-economic status. Once again, the failure of the author to cite specific evidence calls into question the validity, reliability and generalizability of the results. Additional peer-reviewed research and valid data are required to satisfy these suggested relationships and associations.

Rausch & Skiba (2004) studied the relationship between school suspension and expulsion rates with the percent passing rates of students in the literacy and numeracy components of the Indiana State Test of Educational Progress (ISTEP). After controlling for “poverty rate, percentage of African-American students, total school size, school type (elementary or secondary), and locale (urban, suburban, town, and rural), it was found that the use of out-of-school suspension is negatively related to school achievement” (Rausch & Skiba, 2004, p. 5). These results do provide proof for further inspection of disciplinary practices utilized in schools. One important variable that was not controlled for in Rausch & Skiba’s (2004) study that could have affected the outcome was the factor of student learning disabilities. This factor is as important as the other control factors as it can greatly affect student learning outcomes and achievement. Thus, Rausch & Skiba highlighted the detrimental effect of exclusionary discipline on student academic achievement but additional variables needed to be addressed in order to truly identify causal relationships that could inform and guide future practices.

Social Impact

The evidence in the literature regarding the social impacts of exclusionary discipline on students is largely from the interpretations of the authors based on government and agency reports. For example, Christle et al. (2004) noted, “according to the Civil Rights project (2000) suspension sends a ‘push-out’ message to students, and suspension is one of the top reasons for dropping out of school” (p. 521). There are, unfortunately, no tangible numbers provided in the Christle, et al. article regarding this specific topic. Furthermore, Christle, et al. (2004) reported, “students who are suspended often are least likely to have supervision at home, are from single parent families, and are those most in need of professional help” (p. 510). Further inspection into the source of these findings, the Committee on School Health of the American Academy of Pediatrics, revealed that this specific finding was based on the 2000 U.S. Census Report. Nevertheless, this heightens the need for additional first-hand inquiries into the social impacts of exclusionary discipline. As highlighted by the Maryland (2010) report, “government studies have found that denying alternative education programming to students increases their likelihood of engaging in high-risk behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse, and criminal behaviour” (p. 14). Based on the evidence from government and agency findings, exclusionary discipline is a topic of considerable importance.

There is some quantitative evidence to support the impact of exclusionary discipline on students’ social development. Flanagan’s (2007) study on student perceptions of out-of-school suspensions found, “60% of the suspended students said the teachers did not look at them differently after they returned from suspension while 40% did think that they were treated differently” (p. 44). These findings can be used to support Flanagan’s claim that suspension serves to further alienate students and parents from the school. It is not surprising, given our understanding of the role of student engagement on learning, that these social factors have the capability to greatly influence learning outcomes among students.

The implied effectiveness of exclusionary discipline as a remedial tool for student misbehavior was reported to be ineffective, for example, Brownstein (2010) highlighted, “studies of school suspension have typically found that 30-50% of those suspended will suspend again” (p. 25). As mentioned previously, the merits of Brownstein’s findings were questionable as the author failed to provide an adequate references for further inspection. However, it does stimulate further inspection within the Ontario context. The Ministry of Education (2008), in its Safe Schools – Suspension and Expulsion Facts, 2007-08 reported that “94,647 students were suspended, 167,252 total suspensions were issued, accounting for multiple suspensions for individual students”(p. 6). These findings indicated that within the Ontario context, there are similar issues with respect to the effectiveness of disciplinary practices. One such explanation for these results was reported by Flanagan (2007) who claimed that “70% of [suspended students] were not offered anger management counseling when they returned from suspension” (p. 44). We taped into a growing body of evidence which suggested that suspensions “have a range of unintended negative consequences including academic failure, school dropout, alienation, substance use, and crime and delinquency” (Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009, p. 5). These findings highlight one of the issues pertaining to stand-alone exclusionary discipline. Consequently, the literature is wanting and voids exist when we attempt to look into the effectiveness of exclusionary practices and the promotion and development of appropriate social skills for all students.

Overuse

As evidenced in this review, the academic and social impacts of exclusionary discipline are documented. Across the literature, a common theme has been identified in terms of the disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline among certain student

groups. Flanagain (2007) reported that the use of out-of-school suspension was not only found to be ineffective but also discriminatory. These findings, as noted previously, were based on the perceptions of students who had served a suspension four or more times within their academic careers. Christle, et al. (2004) identified in their study of Kentucky middle school suspension rates that, “suspension is used disproportionately with students who are: i) of a minority ethnic background, ii) from low socio-economic families, and iii) identified as having a disability or low academic competence” (p. 510). Similar findings of this disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline across all or some of these three levels have been reported by Heitzeg (2009), the Maryland State Department of Education (2010), Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin (2010), Brownstein (2008), Howarth (2008), Rausch & Skiba (2004, 2006), Rossi (2006), Christle (2004) and in the Ontario context by the Ministry of Education (2008). Thus, additional inspection into the unequal use of exclusionary discipline as experienced by visible minorities, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students with learning disabilities warrants attention.

Disparities within exclusionary discipline practices cross race and ethnicity lines and are evident in the research data. For example, Rossi (2006) reported, “exclusion rates between 2000 and 2003 have shown that African American and Hispanic students are excluded at much higher rates than other groups in Massachusetts” (p. 19). Once again, these findings were based on evidence from government reports and little qualitative evidence regarding the social, emotional and individual academic impact on the students was included as it was merely inferred from the data. Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin (2010) studied 326 school districts in Ohio to investigate exclusionary discipline and two variables: School typology and student ethnicity. As with Rossi, Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin (2010) found racial disparities within exclusionary rates, namely, “the mean rate of exclusionary discipline for African American student was two-to-three times the rate for White students” (p. 7). Furthermore, Rausch & Skiba (2004) found in their Indiana context that African-American students were suspended at a rate “4 times higher than that for Whites” (p. 3). Again, these findings were based on limited state empirical reports.

Examination of Canadian research, statistics and studies regarding disparities among racial and ethnic groups yielded few results but may prove to be an interesting endeavor. Recent limited evidence suggested, that “not only did the Safe School Act cause increased numbers of suspensions, but it also seemed to unduly suspend minorities and those requiring special education services, which seemed to oppose both common sense and the needs of youth” (Daniel & Bondy, 2008, p. 12). However, Skiba (2008) explained that the “disproportionality is not due entirely to economic disadvantage . . . [or because] “... African American students exhibit higher rates of disruption or violence” (p. 854), instead it was concluded they may be punished more severely for less serious infractions. Sadly, students of color may be disciplined more often because the classroom teacher is not versed in adequate classroom management techniques (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Thus, disparities in exclusionary discipline among racial / ethnic groups were found to be prevalent across different school settings.

As mentioned earlier herein, little evidence exists in the Canadian context regarding racial disparities within exclusionary discipline but the findings within the literature are important to note, as they can exist within all our educational settings. On a related note, Heitzeg (2009) reported “some of the highest rates of racially disproportionate discipline are found in states with the lowest minority populations, where the disconnection between white teachers and black students is potentially the greatest” (p. 4). These findings bring to light the importance of professional development opportunities in which teachers and administrators can gain a thorough understanding and be sensitive to the cultural differences of a vast number of students. This is particularly important as we continue to move towards a more diverse society. Brownstein (2010) has reflected upon the matter and wrote:

White students are referred to the office at a higher rate than students of colour for offences that are more objectively proven (e.g., smoking). In contrast, African-American and Latino students are referred for discipline at a higher rate than their White peers for disrespect, excessive noise, and loitering – behaviours that would seem to rely more on subjective judgments on the part of educators. (p. 26)

To add to these findings, Rossi (2006) noted, “race does correlate with the severity of the punishment imposed, with students of colour receiving harsher punishments for less severe behaviour” (p. 20). The limitations of Rossi’s claim included how it failed to explain how this conclusion was developed as only previous studies were cited and the author did not define the parameters of terms such as ‘harsher punishments’. Nevertheless, the implications of such findings justify further review in current studies. In sum, the literature identified concerns regarding a disconnect between students and teachers which may result in a disproportionate amount of discipline among certain students.

From the literature, another group that has been shown to experience disproportionate exclusionary discipline are those students from lower socio-economic settings. Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin (2010) concluded that students who received free lunches and whose fathers were not permanently employed were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline. Examination of the source of these findings in educational databases produced no results and there was no indication from Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin regarding the nature of neither the study nor the variables being controlled. Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin (2010) reported, “very-high poverty school districts consistently demonstrated higher mean disciplinary actions per 100 students than any other school typologies” (p. 33). In qualitative studies regarding the topic, Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin (2010) cited research by Brantlinger that “found that both low and high income students believed that low-income students were unfairly targeted and received more severe disciplinary consequences than their peers” (p. 29). Thus, the perceptions of students across different socioeconomic groups warrant further examination.

Howarth (2008) studied all school districts across the state of Massachusetts to find a correlation between both minority students, students from low-income families and out of school suspension rate. Howarth (2008) found that the “low income enrollment variable was statistically significant ($t=8.8$, $p<.001$)” (p. 8). Furthermore, Howarth (2008) found that socioeconomic status was a better predictor of the use of out of school suspensions than visible minority status. However, Howarth (2008) noted that previous findings found a strong relationship between socioeconomic status and race. Again, these findings were significant in that they suggested prejudicial practices, which in turn, can alienate students from the education system and produce less than favourable outcomes.

Another disparity in terms of application of exclusionary discipline has been found among students identified with disabilities. Brownstein (2010) claimed, “children with mental and emotional disabilities are much more likely to be suspended, expelled and arrested at school, despite disciplinary protections that exist under federal special education law” (p. 26). These findings are troubling as they suggest a shortcoming in current educational policies and practices in meeting the needs of all students. Heitzeg (2009) realized that, “zero tolerance policies do not distinguish between serious and non-serious offences, nor do they adequately separate intentional troublemakers from those with behavioural disorders” (p. 9). These statements were based on the regional findings across several contexts.

The Maryland (2010) study found in their context that disabled students were suspended “at a rate two times of that of their non-disabled peers” (p. 17). However, the authors failed to provide a clear distinction between ‘disabled’ and ‘non-disabled’ peers so the findings between different contexts are challenging to fully interpret and generalize. Rausch & Skiba (2006) noted that while data on the relationship between learning disabilities

and suspension rate are not well documented, they found “that students with disabilities typically represent between 11% and 14% of the total school, district, or state population, but represent between 20% and 24% of the suspended and expelled population” (p. 1). Rausch & Skiba (2006) further refined their findings to identify students with a particular disability, namely emotional disability, and reported that these students “were 12 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than all other students with and without disability” (p. 1). Investigation of evidence from a local perspective supported these claims and the Ontario Ministry of Education (2008) reported “4.54% of all students in Ontario were suspended while 7.3% of all students identified as exceptional in Ontario were suspended” (p. 1). The Ministry of Education (2008) defined an exceptional pupil as “a pupil whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program by committee” (p. 1). Although these findings were not validated by measures of statistical significance, they did offer support for further inspection in our local context around the application of exclusionary discipline.

Conclusion

As evidenced in the literature, the impacts of exclusionary discipline have been linked to the academic and social development of disciplined students. Further, research indicated that the application of this discipline form has been disproportionately used among certain groups, particularly those students of certain minority and / or ethnic groups, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those students with identified exceptionalities (Falconer, 2008).

The existing data does, however, have its limitations and stimulates the need for additional research and understanding. Firstly, more recent data are required in order to identify local trends as well as understand the unique characteristics of student populations within certain contexts. One such example in our Canadian context would be to look into the experiences of Native-Canadian or newly immigrated students with respect to exclusionary discipline. To add to this understanding, more introspective, qualitative studies need to be undertaken to more thoroughly understand the underlying social, emotional, and cognitive impacts of exclusionary discipline on students. With this evidence, educational institutions may become more sensitive to the particular needs of all students and thus be better prepared to offer proactive, restorative, and supportive interventions to promote and maintain positive student behaviour. With this recent and localized understanding, we may become better prepared to address the needs of the vast array of students and reach our ultimate goal of success for all within our education system.

Recommendations

We now know that “exclusionary, zero-tolerance approaches to school discipline are not the best way to create a safe climate” (Skiba & Sprague, 2008, p. 38). The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force report has concluded that “zero tolerance policies *could* potentially have worked if they were only applied “with greater flexibility, taking school context and teacher expertise into account” (Skiba, 2008, p. 857), however Bear (2012) suggested that “rather than advocating the outright elimination of suspension and expulsion (as opposed to its limited and judicious use), research suggests that it would be wiser to advocate for much greater use of more student-centered techniques . . .” (p. 184). Evidence we gathered, examined and reflected upon demonstrated that using a combination of alternative discipline measures such as restorative justice and well-designed in-school suspension programs, while reserving out-of-school suspensions for the most serious offenses, should improve school climate and student behavior of all students over time.

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