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The role of race in the Out-of-school suspensions of black students: The perspectives of students with suspensions, their parents and educators

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ABSTRACT

The disproportionate out-of-school suspension of Black students is a persistent racial and social justice issue nationwide. We approached this issue sensitized by social construction and critical race theories. Thirty-one youth, 28 caregivers and 19 educators participated in in-depth, semi-structured audio recorded interviews. Most participants viewed racial bias and cultural differences as responsible for the disproportionate suspension of Black youth. Many highlighted educators' negative attitudes toward Black students. Students and caregivers argued that Black students are treated more harshly than White students and are targeted as disciplinary problems. These perspectives suggest that racial bias results in a school culture that pathologizes Black students and their families. Educators also described challenges to responding to student misbehavior including the cultural diversity of the Black student population and their disproportionate exposure to social problems such as poverty that impact school engagement. We discuss implications for how social workers may support the partnering of caregivers, educators and community members to reduce racial bias in schools.

1. Introduction

This article examines the role of race and racial bias in how the behaviors of Black students are socially constructed as suspendable offenses. Suspensions involve removing children from school for up to 10 days for behaviors such as noncompliance and fighting (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002). Many public schools persist in using suspensions as a standard practice for responding to students' problematic behaviors (Hemphill, Plenty, Herrenkohl, Toumbourour, & Catalano, 2013; Losen, 2011) even though suspensions are largely ineffective in their goal of deterring youths' inappropriate behaviors (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003); can negatively impact their well-being, health (Denby & Curtis, 2013), and academic achievement (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010); and are associated with entry into the juvenile justice system (Council on Crime and Justice, 2008; see Heitzeg, 2009).

Nationally, the odds of a Black child receiving an out-of-school suspension are 1.8 times that of a White child with Black boys being 3.5 times more likely to be suspended (Carter, Fine, & Russell, 2014; Finn & Servoss, 2013). This disproportionality persists even though Black youth do not commit more or more serious offenses than their White peers (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002; Skiba & Rausch, 2006a, b). Despite the disproportionate suspension of Black youth there is considerable debate about how race or racial bias may influence school discipline (Wald, 2014). Research has examined the perceptions of school personnel (Council on Crime and Justice, 2008) and caregivers (Gibson & Haight, 2013) on suspensions and administrative data are collected annually on students who have received suspensions (Losen, 2011). Missing from the literature is an integrated analysis of the role of race or racial bias in suspensions from the perspectives of youth who have been suspended, their caregivers and educators. This article begins to address this gap.

1.1. The racial context of exclusionary school discipline

To maintain a safe and appropriate learning environment, schools are mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 to develop disciplinary policies. Codes of Conduct, typically distributed to students, parents, and teachers (Fenning et al., 2012), describe the responsibilities of all students and specific consequences of students' misbehaviors (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). While school districts may vary in their particular disciplinary polices, most have zero tolerance policies that list predetermined consequences, such as suspensions, for various student misbehaviors (Klein, 2014). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2003) criticizes this practice as a "one-punishment-fits-all approach" (p. 1206). Such an approach may be justifiable for very serious and dangerous behavior, for example, bringing guns to school. Existing research, however, suggests that severe consequences, including suspensions, are imposed on students for relatively minor misbehaviors

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such as disrespect (see Dupper, Theriot, & Craun, 2009) viewed by educators as challenging.

Interpretation of which youth behaviors are "challenging" can vary widely within the multicultural contexts of contemporary public schools (Rhodes-Kline, 1997). A key consideration is which cultural group decides which student behaviors are challenging and warranting of disciplinary action. Differences exist between the culture of public schools which typically are dominated by White educators and that of Black students and their families (Noguera, 2008; Solomon, 1992). If the majority group dictates which behaviors are suspendable offenses, and members of that group lack adequate cultural knowledge, then the behavior of minority group members may be viewed as pathological or even criminal.

Pathologizing is a process that treats differences as "deficits" and leads to discriminatory policies and practices (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007; Shields, 2004). Misattributing challenges faced by members of particular groups as individual, familial or cultural deficits can result in a failure to address other, macro-level contributors. For example, the challenges experienced in school by some Black children may be misattributed to deficits within Black children or their families leading to a failure to address school system-level biases.

Pathologizing Black children's behavior in public schools also can result in the criminalization of youth identities (Denby & Curtis, 2013). Rios (2011) describes the criminalization of Black and Latino youth as a process whereby adults view the cultural and behavioral differences of children of color as criminally deviant. According to Rios, youth of color are routinely monitored, threatened, policed, labeled, and punished (particularly by educators and police) as part of a "youth control complex" that criminalizes everyday youth behaviors. For instance, Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest (2003) found that youth utilizing movement styles (e.g., "strolling") associated with Black culture were perceived by teachers as lower in academic achievement, more aggressive, and likely in need of special education services. Kupchik (2010) also argues that contemporary forms of school discipline (i.e., zero-tolerance policies, surveillance cameras, security guards, and uniformed police) contribute to a prison-like school environment that alienates students and can thrust them into contact with the juvenile justice system.

Youth respond to the pathologizing of their behavior in a variety of ways including the development of an oppositional identity that rejects the values and norms of the majority group (Tatum, 2003). These oppositional or "resistance identities" often occur in response to exclusion, prejudice, and perceived unfair treatment (Castells, 2010; Rios, 2011). Citing research by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Tatum (2003) argues that youth develop oppositional identities as a means of protecting and distancing themselves from the perceived racism of White educators and adults. Anderson (1999) describes that the alienation and contempt Black youth experience in wider society leads to the development of an oppositional culture that delegitimizes mainstream (i.e. White) cultural behaviors and institutions such as schools. When youth internalize oppositional identities, they may embrace problematic behaviors and values that can ultimately lead to delinquency. Rios (2011), however, argues that the internalization of resistant or oppositional identities also provide youth with a sense of dignity, pride, and independence in the face of oppression and exclusion. In this regard, youth may consciously take on the negative identities that have been forced upon them, but also protest or resist oppression and exclusion by engaging in "deviant politics" such as committing petty thefts or "cussing out" police officers (or educators). Thus, the criminalization and punishment of culturally normative youth behaviors in schools can be counterproductive and actually encourage delinquent behaviors by youth.

1.2. Theoretical approaches: social construction and critical race theory

We approached the study of suspensions sensitized by concepts from social construction (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and critical race (e.g., DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) theories. The foundational premise of social construction theory is that our interpretations of complex human behavior are socially and culturally constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Gergen, 1985). In other words, our socio-cultural-historical contexts fundamentally shape our perceptions and understandings of the social world. Within multicultural contexts such as contemporary public schools, we actively construct our perceptions of the world using our diverse cultures as guides (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985; Pines, 2001). Social construction theory recognizes that there may be multiple, legitimate interpretations for complex social behaviors, and interpretations of various cultural majority and minority groups may differ.

Concepts from critical race theory emerged in the legal literature (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004) as a structure for considering racial power dynamics within culturally diverse contexts such as public schools. When a middle-class or dominant ethnic group has the power to interpret social behavior and cultural values, those cultural groups whose behaviors and beliefs diverge will be marginalized (Jones, 1997) and stereotypes about the minority group maintained (DeCuir & Dixson). An important aspect of White privilege is that the behavior, language and values of White middle-class people are socially constructed as the norms against which others' cultural beliefs, language and practices are measured (e.g., DuBois, 1935; Wise, 2011). One of the central concepts of critical race theory is counter-storytelling which challenges "the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 27). Critical race and social construction theories both suggest that the stories (or socially constructed interpretations) of suspended Black students, their parents, and predominantly White educators will vary from one another.

1.3. Current research

This study is part of a larger investigation in which we examined suspensions from the social vantage points of Black youth, their caregivers and educators (Haight, Gibson, Kayama, Marshall, & Wilson, 2014). Our assumptions are that (a) the design and implementation of effective intervention begins with an adequate understanding of the problem, (b) listening to the voices of those directly involved with suspensions is critical to adequate problem analysis, and (c) a clearer understanding of participants' perspectives will emerge from discussion of actual, recent events they experienced rather than from abstract or general discussions of the role of race and/or racial bias in suspensions. Our primary research questions are: 1) To what extent do Black youth who have been suspended, their caregivers and educators interpret race or racial bias as impacting the events surrounding and leading to their suspensions? 2) How do these individuals perceive race or racial bias as impacting their suspensions?

2. Methods

2.1. Research site

Data were collected from September, 2012 to July, 2013. The primary site was a suburban public school on the border of a large metropolitan area in a Midwestern state. It serves about 700 students from 6th through 12th grades. Most students (80%) are youth-of-color from families with low incomes (approximately 75% of students receive free or reduced-price meals at school). Although Black children comprised 45% of the student population, they comprised 87% of the students receiving suspensions during the period this study was conducted. To potentially broaden perspectives represented in this research, especially from administrators, some data also were collected from an adjacent, secondary research site with similar demographics within an urban school district. Exemplars presented in the results section primarily are from the primary research site.