



Professional development for teachers plus coaching related to school-wide suspensions for a large urban school system



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ABSTRACT

Little is known about how professional development models can be used to address exclusionary disciplinary practices in response to behavior management challenges in classrooms and schools. This is of great concern given data that suggests that such practices predict negative outcomes for students, including repeat suspensions, dropout and incarceration. Instead, the professional development literature has focused largely on instructional practices in the classroom. Using secondary data, the current paper sought to address this limitation by examining the potential impact of a professional development intervention, focused on classroom management strategies through training and one-on-one coaching, on reductions in disciplinary practices. School-level suspension and behavioral incidence data were available for 70 schools participating in the intervention and 1605 schools that did not participate in the intervention during the 2011–2012 school year. First, differences in demographics between the schools receiving the professional development intervention and schools that did not receive the intervention were explored. Next, a series of hierarchical regression models were estimated in order to test the level of dosage as a predictor of change in suspensions and behavior incidents. Results reveal that intervention schools experienced significantly reduced suspensions and behavior incidents in the school year following the intervention. The number of coaching sessions also predicted significant decreases in suspensions and marginally significant decreases in behavioral incidences. These findings suggest that professional development interventions may have the potential to shift teacher behavior management practices that reduce exclusionary disciplinary practices known to be detrimental to student outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The use of exclusionary disciplinary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, has become the subject of increased concern and criticism among scholars and practitioners in recent years. Scholars have argued that exclusionary policy responses as disciplinary tools are at best ineffective, and at worst, profoundly damaging for students (Fabelo & Carmichael, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Pownall, 2013). Suspensions and expulsions deny students access to needed instructional time. Such decreases in instructional time have been linked to negative academic outcomes (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; Mosehauer, McGrath, Nist, & Pillar, 2012; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). Indeed, research suggests an association between high rates of suspension and expulsion and lower rates of individual and school-wide academic achievement (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011) in addition to a litany of negative outcomes, including repeated suspensions, drop out, grade

retention and entry into the juvenile justice system (Fabelo & Carmichael, 2011).

Data from the United States Department of Education (US DOE, 2014) reveals that suspensions nearly doubled from approximately 1.7 million in 1974 (3.7% of all students) to more than 3.3 million in 2006 (6.8% of students) (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014). One longitudinal study of one million students in Texas found that six in 10 students were suspended or expelled at least once over a 6-year period (Fabelo & Carmichael, 2011). Recent analyses of suspension statistics suggest that the risk for suspension increases as students grow older (Losen & Martinez, 2013). The likelihood a student will be suspended has been shown to increase from 2.4% in elementary school to 11% in middle school (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Furthermore, subgroups of students educated in urban public schooling systems, including English Language Learners, students with disabilities and students of color, are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary discipline policies (US DOE, 2014). In particular, suspensions have increased at a greater rate for black students as compared to white students. Since the 1970s, suspension rates for black students increased from 11.8% to 24.3% in 2010 while suspension rates for white students have grown by only 1.1% from 6% to 7.1%. The gap in

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suspension rates between white and black students has more than tripled in the past 30 years from 5.7% points to 17% points (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Students with disabilities are also especially vulnerable to exclusionary discipline policies. Nationally, students with disabilities make up 12% of the student population, but 20% of students suspended and 25% of students suspended multiple times (US DOE, 2014).

The growing use of suspensions and expulsions has been accompanied by a new set of policy responses that not only exclude and segregate but also criminalize. Police and law enforcement personnel have become increasingly involved in responding to behavior that in the past would have been addressed by school personnel such as principals and guidance counselors (Advancement Project, 2005; American Civil Liberties Union and ACLU of Connecticut, 2008; Civil Rights Project and Advancement Project, 2000; Dahlberg, 2012; US Human Rights Network, 2010). Black students are also more likely to have school behavior lead to involvement in the criminal justice system (Fabelo & Carmichael, 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Noguera, 2003). State- and district-level studies have repeatedly found that black students are more likely to be arrested when compared to their white peers (American Civil Liberties Union and ACLU of Connecticut, 2008; Fabelo & Carmichael, 2011; Finn & Servoss, 2014; Pownall, 2013). Furthermore, these studies have found the overwhelming majority of these arrests to be for minor, non-violent behaviors. The tendency of these policies to steer students out of schools and into the criminal justice system has been dubbed “the school-to-prison pipeline.”

Punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices do not just have a detrimental effect on the students who are suspended, but also on the school community as a whole. Research has challenged the effectiveness of these practices in their purported goal of improving school safety (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Fabelo & Carmichael, 2011; Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004; Reynolds et al., 2008; Tebo, 2000). Scholars contend that disciplinary policies force school personnel to impose draconian punishments for certain infractions, regardless of context or circumstance (Casella, 2003; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Monroe, 2005; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). Further, reliance on exclusionary disciplinary practices has been found to erode trust between school staff and students and negatively impact school climate (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; US DOE, 2014).

A plethora of reports and guidelines for addressing such practices have been issued by multiple agencies. The American Psychological Association, the American Bar Association, the Council of State Governments and the American Pediatric Association have all issued reports challenging the effectiveness of school disciplinary policies (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Fabelo & Carmichael, 2011; Morgan et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2008). In 2014, the US Department of Education, in collaboration with the Department of Justice, issued a report criticizing the “widespread overuse of suspensions and expulsions” and called upon states and districts to reform their discipline policies (US DOE, 2014). These reports are highly critical of zero tolerance policies, and call upon states and districts to reform their discipline policies.

Research at the school and classroom levels suggests that policy changes alone will not eliminate exclusionary disciplinary responses. For example, abundant evidence indicates that school personnel frequently use zero tolerance policies, intended solely for the purpose of responding to violent and extreme behavior, to justify suspensions and expulsions that do not involve violence at all. Rausch and Skiba (2006) found that only 5% of suspensions were for incidents involving weapons or drugs. More often than not, zero tolerance policies and subsequent expulsion of students are results of minor behavioral incidences, such as projecting a spitball across a classroom (Carr, Fidrick, & Soling, 2009). Such examples underscore the important role that school and classroom context and climate can play in shaping disciplinary outcomes. Studies show that disciplinary outcomes vary greatly by teacher, by administrator and by school (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Skiba et al., 2013). Accordingly,

in addition to policy changes, reducing school suspensions will require support and intervention at the school and classroom level.

1.1. Teacher professional development

Both the US DOE’s “Guiding Principles” and Council of State Governments’ “School Discipline Consensus Report” emphasize the importance of developing teachers with the skills and commitment to build positive relationships, provide rigorous instruction and teach social emotional skills and conflict resolution (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011; Fabelo & Carmichael, 2011; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; US DOE, 2014; Voelkl, 1995). These recommendations are supported by research linking rates of suspension and disciplinary referrals to students’ perception of adults as trustworthy and teachers ability to respond to inappropriate behavior with strategies for promoting positive behavior (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997; Payton et al., 2008). Research has found that interventions that take proactive approaches to addressing student behavior, known as either Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) or School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS), have been successful in reducing school suspensions and classroom behavior incidents (Chin, Dowdy, Jimerson, & Rime, 2012; Ward & Gersten, 2013). Accordingly, professional development intervention models targeted towards increasing teachers’ classroom and behavior management skills represent a promising avenue of exploration for reducing exclusionary disciplinary practices.

1.2. The current study

The current study explored the potential impact of a professional development intervention delivered to teachers in New York City public schools on two disciplinary outcomes: suspensions and behavior incidents. The professional development intervention’s focus was on teaching classroom behavior management skills through both training and one-on-one coaching with a goal of reducing behavior incidents, and ultimately exclusionary discipline practices. The schools targeted by the intervention are schools with a high amount of risk for exclusionary disciplinary practices as these schools serve student populations that are primarily low-income, predominately black and Latino and with high percentages of special education students.

1.2.1. Study objectives

The first hypothesis was that schools that received the professional development model focused on behavior and classroom management would reduce suspensions and behavior incidents in the following school year. The second hypothesis was that the more coaching a school received the greater the reduction in suspensions and behavior incidents. As previous research (US DOE, 2014) found that school demographics relate to the amount of suspensions and behavior incidents. The New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE, 2012) weighted average of school demographics (i.e. demographic index) was used in analyses to control for the percentage of special education, free lunch, black and Latino, and English Language Learner students.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

The current study was a secondary analysis of longitudinal data. School-level data from 2010 to 2013 was obtained from the New York City Department of Education’s (NYC DOE) Research and Policy Support Group and the Office of the Research and Policy Support Group in order to examine the effectiveness of the professional development program. School demographic data and suspension and behavior incident occurrences were collected. The professional development intervention was implemented during the 2011 to 2012 school year (Intervention Year). Therefore, the 2010 to 2011 school year served as baseline (Baseline)

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