



# An ecological-systems inquiry into racial disproportionalities in out-of-school suspensions from youth, caregiver and educator perspectives



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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the perspectives of youths, their caregivers and educators on specific incidences of recent out-of-school suspensions. Racial disproportionality in out-of-school suspensions is a persistent, multi-level social justice and child well-being issue. We examined suspensions sensitized primarily by an ecological-systems perspective and secondarily by critical race and social language theories. We employed a mixed methods design with an emphasis on the qualitative component. Twenty-eight youths with recent out-of-school suspensions, 25 of their caregivers and 16 educators participated in individual, semi-structured, audiotaped interviews. Participants from all groups expressed a commitment to youths' education, viewed suspensions as a racial issue, believed youth and caregiver behaviors contributed to suspensions, observed that suspensions are harmful to youth achievement and educator–youth relationships, and emphasized the need for youths to have caring relationships with educators and to change problematic behaviors. Youths underscored the role of peer behaviors in their suspensions and the impact of suspensions on their peer relationships. Caregivers emphasized the negative impact of suspensions on family–school relationships, and the need for interventions that provide moral, spiritual and general guidance to youth. Family members (caregivers and youths) underscored the need for intervention to improve educators' sensitivity to youths. Educators emphasized the need to maintain a positive learning environment for all students, and for preventive and flexible approaches to problematic youth behaviors. They also described a variety of macro system constraints to implementing better alternatives to suspensions. These included inadequate school resources, legal liability issues and a culturally diverse student population and relatively homogeneous staff. Implications for reducing suspensions of Black youths are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Racial disproportionality in out-of-school suspensions (suspensions) is a persistent, multi-level social justice and child well-being issue affecting not only youths and families, but schools and other social institutions. Suspensions involve removing children from school for up to ten days. They are imposed by school administrators for behaviors such as non-compliance and fighting (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002) to maintain a safe and appropriate learning environment consistent with the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Many public schools persist in using suspensions as a standard practice for responding to children's problematic behaviors (Hemphill, Plenty, Herrenkohl, Toumbourour, & Catalano, 2013; Losen, 2011) even though suspensions are largely ineffective in their goal of deterring children's 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, Black children are three times more likely than White children to be suspended (Losen, 2011). Yet Black students are no more likely than other students to engage in unsafe or rule breaking behaviors at school (e.g., see review by Gregory et al., 2010). Nonetheless, Black youths and their families bear the brunt of the consequences of suspensions.

This research is the first to simultaneously examine the perspectives of youths, their caregivers and their educators on specific incidences of suspensions and to do so sensitized primarily by an ecological-systems perspective and secondarily by critical race and social language theories. We assume that the design of effective remedies to the problem of racial disproportionalities in suspensions will require an adequate understanding of the problem. Exploring the experiences and meanings of suspensions for those who are directly involved will provide an important lens for considering how youths, caregivers and educators can work together to reduce suspensions of Black youths.

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## 1.1. The multi-level problem of suspensions

### 1.1.1. Youths

Youths who receive suspensions may miss academic content, as well as other crucial educational opportunities including interactions with educators who encourage their achievement and serve as role models (see Tatum, 2004). Suspensions are associated with lower educational achievement and have been implicated in the racial achievement gap (Gregory et al., 2010; Losen, 2011) which widens as children progress through the elementary-school years (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). By high school, dropout rates for Black youths are two times higher than for White youths (Aud et al., 2010).

Suspensions also may increase psychosocial risks to vulnerable youths. A disproportionate number of youths with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) receive suspensions (e.g., Duran, Zhou, Frew, Kwok & Benz, 2011; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006). Most students with specific learning challenges cannot afford to miss class time, nor can most students with emotional and behavioral challenges afford unsupervised time at home. In general, children who are suspended may feel disconnected from school (Cameron & Sheppard, 2006), and become increasingly involved with the juvenile justice system (Council on Crime and Justice, 2008). Yet suspensions are generally ineffective in reducing students' chronic, problematic behaviors (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003), and youths with suspensions are rarely referred for professional services to address any underlying issues (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003).

### 1.1.2. Caregivers and families

Suspensions also can harm caregivers and families. Youths from low income (Bruns, Moore, Stephan, Pruitt, & Weist, 2005) and single-parent (Dawson, 1991) families have particularly high rates of suspensions. If caregivers must miss work to meet with school administrators or supervise their children, they may risk losing jobs and income (Losen, 2011). Furthermore, if parents and youths perceive suspensions to be problematic, family-school relationships critical to effective schooling may be damaged (e.g., Galindo & Sheldon, 2011; Gibson & Haight, 2013; Semke, Garbacz, Kwon, Sheridan & Woods, 2010).

Family-school relationships are complexly intertwined with issues of race and ethnicity. Historically, socialization for Black children has emphasized education (e.g., Baker, 2005). Contemporary middle and lower income Black parents continue to view education as paramount for their children's success (Diamond & Gomez, 2004), and view their support of education as a parenting strength (Gibson, 2005). Yet many Black children continue to face significant challenges in obtaining an education (Cunningham, Corprew, & Becker, 2009; Mandara, 2006).

Black parents have expressed concerns that school disciplinary practices are obstacles to their children's education (Bracey, 2010; Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Indeed, many Black caregivers with low-incomes whose children have recently been suspended from school express anger and frustration at school policies and professionals. In a qualitative study of caregivers' experiences and perspectives of suspensions, participants acknowledged that some of their children's behaviors were inappropriate and agreed that consequences were needed, but most also described suspensions as *morally* problematic (Gibson & Haight, 2013). Many viewed suspensions as unfair, disproportionate responses to youths' misdeeds, uncaring and harmful responses that ignored youths' real problems. Further, suspensions were viewed as damaging family-school relationships, and as racially motivated.

### 1.1.3. Educators and schools

Racial disproportionality in suspensions also can harm educators and schools. In schools with racial disproportionalities in suspensions, educators may be vulnerable to criticism of racial insensitivity and bias (e.g., Dupper, Theriot, & Craun, 2009), inequitable treatment of Black students (e.g., Chavous et al., 2003; Hinojosa, 2008; Jackson &

Moore, 2006), poor relationships with Black youths (Caton, 2012), and failure to address underlying problems (e.g., Gibson & Haight, 2013; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Schools with high rates of suspensions also may come under government scrutiny regarding the safety and appropriateness of the learning environment (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2014),<sup>1</sup> as well as the appropriate provision of early intervention for students exhibiting behavior problems<sup>2</sup> (e.g., Zirkel, 2013).

## 1.2. Theoretical and methodological approaches

We approach the issue of racial disproportionality in suspensions sensitized primarily by ecological systems theory (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and secondarily by critical race (e.g., Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and social language (e.g., Miller, Koven & Lin, 2012) theories. In addition, we focus on specific, recent incidents of suspension. We consider the causes, consequences and solutions for these suspensions across multiple embedded and interacting social system levels: individual youth, educators, and caregivers; and family, school and macro social systems. In addition, we examine these social system levels from the multiple social vantage points of individuals directly involved in suspensions: youths, caregivers and educators.

### 1.2.1. Ecological systems

Youth development occurs in relation to multiple embedded and interacting social systems including family, school and larger sociocultural and historical systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Causes, consequences and solutions to suspensions are likely to be found at, and impacted by, each of these interacting ecological levels. Studies have considered student factors (e.g., Theriot, Craun & Dupper, 2010) such as behavior, student perceptions of educators' roles in suspensions (Hinojosa, 2008), the co-construction of discipline by students and educators (Vavrus & Cole, 2002), caregiver understanding of their children's suspensions (Gibson & Haight, 2013); and school- and macro system-level factors (e.g., Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002; Theriot et al., 2010). Yet current research on suspensions has not examined complex interactions of factors across multiple-ecological levels, e.g., the interrelations of inadequate school funding, teachers' culturally-sensitive responses to youths' problematic behavior, and family-school relationships.

In addition, suspensions involve individuals occupying various social vantage points: youths, caregivers and educators. These groups have somewhat different personal experiences of suspensions. Such experiences deepen individuals' access to particular corners of cultural knowledge, compared to others who have not had such experiences, as well as result in particular biases. When perspectives of complex social events such as suspensions from diverse social vantage points (e.g., youth, caregiver, and educator) converge (triangulate), the credibility (validity) of the perspective is enhanced. When perspectives diverge, consideration of multiple social vantage points can offer a clearer line of sight not occluded by that which is taken-for-granted by any single perspective.

### 1.2.2. Critical race theory

Critical race theory is a body of legal scholarship which challenges racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law, and promotes equalitarianism (Bell, 1995). In the macrosystem of the contemporary U.S., some overt forms of individual and institutional racism (e.g., public hate speech and school segregation) have been reduced in many contexts. Yet White privilege and racial oppression continue to

<sup>1</sup> The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to develop criteria to identify schools that are persistently dangerous. Nationally, the number of suspensions and/or expulsions has been used to identify "unsafe" schools (Jones, Bradshaw, Haynie, Simons-Monton, Gielen & Cheng, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Students in such unsafe schools are allowed to transfer to other public schools.

<sup>2</sup> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires districts with significant racial/ethnic disproportionality in discipline to review their disciplinary policies/practices/procedures and spend 15% of their Part B allocation to provide early interventions.

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