The Reality of Restorative: The Impact of Restorative Practices on Discipline Disparities

in an Urban School District

by

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Eboni N. Williams

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Abstract

Disparities in the rate of exclusionary discipline of African American students and their same-aged peers continue to exist. African American students are administered lengthier punishments than their White peers and often for more subjective offenses. They are often the subjects of implicit bias, with adults perceiving African American children as being older than they are, less innocent than their peers, more culpable and aggressive, and more deserving of harsher punishment than White children (Gilliam et al. 2016; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018). The excessive use of exclusionary discipline on African American students has been linked indirectly to higher dropout rates, future incarceration, and lower higher education outcomes (Skiba et al., 2014). Restorative justice is cited as a way to mitigate the implicit bias that has the potential to lead to the perpetuation of disparities in school discipline. Originating in New Zealand, restorative justice is seen as a solution to the negative consequences of exclusionary punishment and its disproportionate application. The purpose of this study is to use statistical analysis to determine the impact of restorative justice implementation on a large, urban district. Results of this study revealed that there has been no significant impact on instances of exclusionary discipline for African American students. Over the span of the study, there was no significant change in the suspension rates of African American students with regard to year, infraction, or grade band. Results of the general linear modeling analysis indicate that the change over time of the rate of suspensions for the 9-12 grade band was significant, $F(4, 115) = 7.048, p = <.001$. Results of the Tests of Between-Subject Effects indicate that a significant interaction existed between the race and interaction by year term.

Dedication

God, I thank you for purpose and provision to walk out the journey that 17-year-old Eboni dreamed of. All glory and honor is Yours.

I dedicate this work to my village. First and foremost, my parents, Carl and Gloria, and my sister Whitney. Words would never be enough. You all have been a source of constant support. For some reason you all believe I can do anything, so much that I had no choice but to believe it myself. I promise to spend the rest of my days trying to prove you right. Sister, I'm done for real this time. *smile*

 Ericka, what a long way from that morning at your apartment. Thanks for being the best big couster. Quiana (Let me know when you're ready), Aulanna, Kahilyah, Nechelle, Courtney, Miquita, LaTalia, and Joselyn (Dr. Parker loading) thank you all for your support, encouragement, and the space to complete this journey.

Thank you to my family and friends (too numerous to name and even for that I'm thankful) who have supported and encouraged me.

To every Youngstown City School teacher and staff member who poured into the student, person, and educator I am today, please accept this as a payment toward what I owe. To every student and family I have had the opportunity to serve as an educator, you are the inspiration for this work.

Lastly to my angel, Elma Ruth Williams. I have often pondered if you'd be proud of me, I think you would be. And that is enough for me.

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To my Sister Docs, I'm thankful for ordered steps that brought us together. 2% and rising.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Former first lady of the United States, Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson, once said that "Children are apt to live up to what you believe of them" (BrainyQuote, n.d.). It is unclear if First Lady Johnson was familiar with the Pygmalion effect or the converse stereotype threat, or if she simply understood the power of expectations. What is clear is that the expectations teachers hold for their students are a powerful motivator, and in some cases, an indicator. Teacher expectations matter, and studies demonstrate there is a causal impact on students' educational achievement (Papageorge et al., 2018). Science affirms what nations of students could attest to, the notion that what teachers do and say matters.

Statement of Problem

Considering that they can influence the behavior of many people simultaneously, unconscious biases can have a significant societal impact, and behaviors influenced by bias could be repeatedly performed by individuals (Killpack & Melón, 2016). Education research overwhelmingly demonstrates that eduators interact with students differently depending on the race of the student. These differences potentially contribute to racial disparities in student achievement and other forms of race-based inequalities in schools (Okonofua et al., 2016). African American students are referred more often for offenses that are subjective in nature and receive more severe consequences than their White peers even when the infractions are the same (Gilliam et al. 2016; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018). Students who are suspended are more at risk for attendance issues, grade retention, failure to graduate, and subsequent involvement in the juvenile, and

eventually, adult justice systems (Skiba et al., 2014). There is evidence that implicit biases can be changed; however, it does not always lead to a permanent change in behavior (Hanover, 2019). While it is difficult to eliminate implicit bias, strategies such as the limiting of zero tolerance policies, PBIS, restorative practices, and cultural competency training help to mitigate some of the effects (Rudd, 2014). If the effects of implicit bias are not mitigated, marginalized groups of students will continue to be negatively impacted.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of the implementation of restorative practices in schools on school discipline. There is evidence demonstrating that the implicit bias of educators leads to an overrepresentation of minority students being administered exclusionary discipline.

Research Questions

1. To what extent, if any, did restorative practices in schools decrease exclusionary discipline for African American students?

2. To what extent, if any, did restorative practices in schools impact the discipline disparities between African American and White students?

3. Did the impact of restorative practices vary based on grade band?

4. Did the type of infraction indicate any difference in the rate of suspension?

Research Design

The investigation was a meta analysis using statistical analysis to compare exclusionary discipline data for African American students in a large urban school district in the years following the implementation of restorative justice programs. The data was

driven by information from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and data provided by the subject district.

Significance of Study

The study aimed to examine the effects of restorative justice practices in schools on the existing discipline disparities impacting African American students, which then lead to other issues impacting their overall quality of life. Being suspended, even just once, during the ninth grade has been shown to double the potential for failing future courses later in high school (Balfanz et al., 2014). Compounding the effects, once students have experienced course failure in high school, it increases the risk of dropping out by 20% (LiCalsi et al., 2021; Marchbanks et al., 2015, as cited in Losen, 2015).

Restorative justice practices are cited as a way to combat the overrepresentation of African American students in exclusionary discipline data (Rudd, 2014). The study provides information that can be used to reduce the overrepresentation of exclusionary discipline practices for African American students. There is currently limited research examining the effects of restorative justice practices on impacting discipline disparities. The hope is to deepen the body of research and to possibly give more insight on whether the practices are actually addressing the disparity and closing the gap.

Assumptions

One assumption of this research is that the school district accurately reported information regarding their implementation of restorative justice practices. The accuracy of the data presented depends on the district accurately and transparently reporting their data.

Current research on restorative justice practices is limited. There is no guide that details specifically how schools should implement restorative justice practices. This could lead to discrepancies in how restorative justice practices are implemented across buildings in a given district. The study assumed that restorative practices were implemented fully and with fidelity. The accuracy of the data presented depends on the district accurately and transparently reporting their data.

Delimitations

This study does not cover the biases held that are the likely causes of the discipline disparities. Research has shown that implicit bias is a cause of discipline disparities in schools; however, it is also widely known that it is difficult to eliminate implicit biases. Focusing on mitigating the effects, in an attempt to close the resulting gaps, is a more practical purpose at this time.

Limitations

This study is limited to schools in one urban district, many of which have incorporated restorative practices in response to state law and district directives. Because restorative justice addresses referrals and not the attitudes or biases of the referrer, it is not a method that allows for proactive planning. Restorative justice practices may impact the resulting discipline disparities but will likely not impact the potentially held biases that lead to the disparities.

Definitions of Terms

Exclusionary discipline: Includes any disciplinary consequence levied by a school that removes a student from their normal educational setting (APA, 2017).

Implicit bias: unconscious or automatic decisions that people make in situations when they do not have the necessary time or cognitive capacity to make a thoughtful, or explicit, choice (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013).

Restorative justice: A philosophy that seeks to repair the harm caused by a crime while also holding the person who has caused the harm responsible for their actions (Zehr, 2002). In the setting in which this study will take place, a public school district, Restorative Justice is often synonymous with the term Restorative Practices. Therefore, the terms will be utilized interchangeably throughout this study.

Zero tolerance: School discipline policies and practices that mandate specific and predetermined consequences, which are generally harsh, punitive, and of an exclusionary nature, such as school suspension and expulsion. The consequences are typically levied without context or rationale for the behavior (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

School to Prison Pipeline: has roots in the zero tolerance policies of the early 1990s. The school to prison pipeline refers to policies that push children, typically from disadvantaged backgrounds, into the juvenile and eventually criminal justice system (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008).

Social identity: the part of the self that is defined by one's group memberships (Vinney, 2019).

Social identity theory: developed by social psychologist Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and describes the conditions under which social identity

becomes more important than one's identity as an individual (Billig & Tajfel, 1973).

Summary

This chapter briefly discussed the purpose, research questions, significance, and limitations of the study. The upcoming chapter explains how social identity theory impacts held biases. In addition, it reviews some of the historical roots of the current state of discipline in schools and its disparate impact on students, particularly students of color. The impact of exclusionary disciplinary practices on African American students is reviewed. Several potential solutions to reducing the discipline disparity will be discussed, including restorative practices.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Social Identity Theory

Social identity asserts that individuals develop part of a sense of who they are through their membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Developed by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, social identity theory explains under which conditions a person's social identity becomes more significant than the identity as an individual. The foundation rests on the idea that a person identifies with a particular social group based on a perceived emotional connection with other individuals in that group (Billig & Tajfel, 1973), and this association then impacts the person's self-image (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Tajfel & Turner (1978) explain that social identity requires both the acknowledgement of membership in the group and having an attachment to it. Individuals acting on behalf of a group may behave differently than they may as individuals (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Social identity theory is based on the ideas that self-esteem and self-concept are critical to an individual's development, and an individual's social group membership can positively or negatively impact their self-esteem. People compare group characteristics, both negative and positive, to those of other groups to establish status and prestige (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When people are not satisfied with their own social identity, they will either find a group that is more acceptable or try to change the characteristics of their current group (Miles, 2012).

A social group is more than two people who share the ways in which they identify and evaluate themselves (Hogg, 2006, as cited in Burke, 2006). A person's group

membership manifests as *we* versus *them*. Social identity theory asserts that people tend

to divide the world into in-groups (i.e., *us*) and out-groups (i.e., *them*) (Hogg, 2006, as

cited in Burke, 2006). People also share the same views on comparisons of their in-group

and other out-groups (Hogg, 2006, as cited in Burke, 2006). People look for the negative

characteristics of an out-group in order to positively impact their self-esteem (Davis &

Friedman, 2021). Membership in a group that is seen to have higher status positively

impacts collective self-esteem and pride, while being part of what would be considered a

low-status group is damaging. Being labeled as inferior to a more desirable group

threatens the group's identity and enacts the desire to improve its position (Larson, 2017).

The minimum group paradigm looked at minimal conditions for discrimination

based on group membership (Chi, 2015). The experiment placed participants in random

groups that had been invented by the researchers (Chi, 2015). The participants had no

other connections to their group mates outside of their shared group labels, and in some

cases, they had no interaction with them. Despite these conditions, when asked to

distribute rewards, most subjects favored those within their arbitrary group and

conversely discriminated against those in different groups. The discovery of the dynamics

of in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination led to the development of the social

identity theory (Chi, 2015).

Social identity theory states that there are three cognitive processes that contribute

to a person being part of an in-group or an out-group: social categorization, social

identification, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These processes naturally

occur as a way to group and categorize people. Collectively, these processes lead to an

emphasis on the similarities of individuals belonging to the in-group, and an emphasis on the variance of individuals belonging to the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Social categorization refers to the process of deciding which group one, or another person, belongs to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Developed during childhood, it is the natural and automatic cognitive process by which individuals place others into social groups (Jhangiani et al., 2022). The process of categorization is a critical element that is necessary for survival, as it allows an individual to use past experiences to make sense of new situations (Rhodes & Baron, 2019). Social categorization allows individuals to connect with others who share group memberships. Conversely, it identifies and emphasizes characteristics that define the in-group and the out-group (Fiske & Macrae, 2013). Individuals tend to exaggerate the differences between people from different social groups while perceiving members of other groups as more similar to each other than they are in reality (Principles of Social Psychology, 2015). This leads to an overgeneralization of members of a particular group (Jhangiani et al., 2022). Out-group homogeneity is the tendency to view members of out-groups as more similar to each other than individuals see members of in-groups. out-group homogeneity partially occurs as a result of limited exposure to members of the out-group, which reinforces stereotypes (Jhangiani et al., 2022).

Social identification refers to the processes by which an individual, or another person, identifies with an in-group more overtly (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). More specifically, it refers to the extent to which a person defines themselves in terms of a social group (Zacher et al., 2019). During this process, people take on the identity of the group they are a member of, and then behave in the manner in which they perceive

members of that group to behave, becoming emotionally invested in their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identification consists of seven components (Reimer et al., 2020, p. 6). Self-categorization occurs when an individual socially categorizes themselves. Evaluation involves examining how an individual perceives a social identity in a positive or negative sense. Importance refers to the salience of a social identity in relation to their self-concept. Attachment and interdependence considers the emotional attachment held as well as the extent to which group members are treated similarly. Social embeddedness describes how much a person's social identity impacts their daily lives. Behavioral involvement considers how much an individual's behavior is tied to their social identity.

Content and meaning refer to how characteristics typically attributed to the group reflect individual group members' traits (Reimer et al., 2020). Social identification is a necessary condition for intergroup bias to occur.

Lastly, social comparison refers to the comparison of an individual's group, the in-group, against another group, and an out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The goal of social comparison is to establish positive distinctiveness for the in-group. Positive distinctiveness means that people in a particular group are different, in a positive way, from those in other groups (Mallett & Monteith, 2019). The process of social comparison often leads to prejudice and discrimination of members of an out-group (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). Members of the favored group typically hold negative views of the members of other groups to positively impact their own self esteem. The comparison often leads to the increased emphasis of the differences between the in-group and out-group (Jhangiani et al., 2022). The focus on differences is necessary to justify the favoring of one group

over the other. To increase the focus on the differences between the groups, the variance

between in-group members is minimized to increase in-group cohesion (Jhangiani et al.,

2022). This causes members of the in-group to remember more favorable details about

the in-group and more negative information about the out-group (Jhangiani et al., 2022).

Social identity theory, developed by social psychologist Henri Tajfel and John

Turner in the 1970s, describes how an individual can come to value their social identity

more than they value their individual identity . Membership in social identity groups can

provide a sense of belonging, purpose, self-worth, and ultimately identity (Tajfel &

Turner, 1979). Social identity theory asserts that people often, as an almost automatic

response, separate others into in- groups (i.e., *us*) and out-groups (i.e., *them*) and seek out

the negative characteristics of an out-group in an effort to bolster their own self image.

In-group favoritism, or in-group bias, is the tendency to respond more positively to

people from one's in-group than from one's out-group, and it is a key component of

social identity theory (Jhangiani et al., 2022). The social identity that a person holds is a

predictor of the prejudices and intergroup perceptions that a person may hold (Hong et

al., 2004). Implicit bias is the unconscious or automatic response, and it involves

decisions people make when they do not have the time or capacity to make choices that

have been careful considered (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). Implicit biases may lead

people to indiscriminately assign certain traits, usually negative, to a group of people.

Legal scholars have concluded that implicit biases can more appropriately be classified as

"individuals acting on an ingrained stereotype" (Selmi, 2017, p. 37).

Bias

Bias is a trait possessed by all humans that results from an individual's need to be able to categorize individuals they encounter while trying to quickly process incoming information and make sense of it (United States Department of Justice, 2021). The information individuals take in becomes the guide used when faced with new experiences (United States Department of Justice, 2021). Social behavior is largely impacted by unconscious associations and judgments (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; United States Department of Justice, 2021).

Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is the unconscious, automatic response, or instinctive decisions people make in social situations when they do not have the necessary time or cognitive capacity to make a thoughtful, or explicit, choice (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). Handelsman and Sakraney (2015) explain that children as young as three years old begin to develop implicit biases. The biases often develop and are reinforced by stereotypes displayed in media, or they are passed on by those around them. Implicit bias manifests in expectations or assumptions driven by stereotypes that are based on a person's characteristics, often physical (Handelsman & Sakraney, 2015). Individuals generally hold implicit biases that favor their own in-group (Understanding Implicit Bias, 2021). An implicit bias may cause a person to behave in a way that is contrary to their conscious beliefs (Ruhl, 2023). Because of the idea that implicit bias is automatic and unconscious, individuals tend to be held less accountable for behavior born of implicit bias, when compared to explicit bias (Daumeyer et al., 2019).

According to Kahneman (2011), there are two systems by which the brain processes cognition. System 1 operates automatically, with little or no effort and no sense

of voluntary control. System 1 involves acts such as a reaction to a scary image, driving

on an empty street, or understanding simple sentences. Implicit bias is processed in what

is understood as System 1, a more automatic process. Implicit bias then becomes a part of

the set of unconscious and involuntary responses. Because of this, it is held that everyone

has implicit biases, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or age (Kahneman, 2011).

Explicit Bias

System 2 is said to direct attention to the mentally taxing type of activities that

demand it. System 2 is responsible for voluntary and conscious acts of cognition, and it

includes activities such as complex mathematical computations, parallel parking, or

playing mentally engaging word games. System 2 introduces choice and self-control in

decision making, unlike the split-second decisions of System 1(Kahneman, 2011). The

intentionality and deliberation of System 2 processes are meant to regulate those of

System 1. Explicitly expressed opinions are a result of System 2 processes.

Explicit bias is a collection of attitudes that the holder is consciously aware of

having and is able to specifically express (United States Department of Justice, 2021).

Unlike implicit bias, explicit bias exists at the conscious level. Explicit bias manifests in

ways such as overt racism and hate speech (United States Department of Justice, 2021),

and it involves self-reporting of beliefs (Selmi, 2017). Typically, these reported biases do

not show high levels of held bias because individuals are reluctant to state beliefs that

would identify them as racist or sexist (Selmi, 2017).

Implicit Bias and Education

Social identity theory explains that people divide the world into groups based on

various characteristics. These characteristics go on to define in-groups and out-groups

(Cherry, 2020). The categorization, identification, and comparison of social groups lead

to the development of implicit, and sometimes explicit, bias of members of other groups.

Unconscious racial stereotypes are a major example of implicit bias. Implicit bias can

also influence how teachers respond to student behavior, which suggests that implicit bias

can have a powerful impact on student discipline and academic achievement (Cherry,

2020).

      Most educators are well-intended and have a genuine care and concern for

children; that very same care and concern is why educators should ensure they are aware

of the implicit bias that most hold (Ford, 2016; Staats, 2016). Implicit bias is the

unconscious attitudes that affect understanding, actions, and decisions (Staats, 2016). In

the classroom, it can cause teachers to assume things about students' learning behaviors

and their capability for academic success, ultimately impacting student growth (Staats,

2017). Implicit biases have the potential to do the most damage when they are held by a

person in a position of authority (Miyatsu, 2021).

      In-group bias is a tendency to judge members of one's own group, the in-group,

more favorably than individuals who are members of another group, the out-group

(Tajfel, 1982). In-group bias is a major component of prejudice and discrimination,

leading people to extend extra privileges to people in their own in-group while denying

that same courtesy to others in an out-group (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

      Education research overwhelmingly demonstrates that educators interact with

students differently depending on students' race. These differences potentially contribute

to racial disparities in student achievement and other forms of race-based inequalities in

schools (Okonofua et al., 2016). People are often not aware of the implicit biases they

possess, or they are unwilling to acknowledge them as a reflection of their beliefs as it

relates to those groups (Hinton, 2017; Miyatsu, 2021; Payne et al., 2018). People often

rely on their System 1 functions when they are under time constraints, are fatigued, or

have a lot of things in their minds (Kahneman, 2011). Teachers encounter those

conditions frequently (Staats, 2017).

Results from the Implicit Association Test (IAT) showed that approximately 68%

of respondents held pro-White/anti-Black implicit associations (Cameron et al., 2012;

Scialabba, 2017). In a laboratory study using college students as participants, researchers

discovered that White instructors who held greater implicit pro-White/anti-Black racial

biases yielded lower test performance for Black students but not for White students

(Jacoby-Senghor et al., 2015). This begins to explain why racial disparities in schools

continue to exist despite efforts to reduce them. Even teachers who consider themselves

fair and unbiased may at times find themselves being fueled by their implicit biases,

particularly toward students belonging to traditionally stigmatized groups (Staats, 2017).

Implicit biases based on race are likely to impact student outcomes because they correlate

with feelings and ultimately behaviors that present negatively during interactions. Nance

(2017) states that laws should be changed so educators are required to take implicit bias

training to help curb their implicit racial bias in the classroom.

Discipline and Implicit Bias

Biased perceptions can unintentionally influence the decision making of even the

most well-intended person (Kawakami & Miura, 2014). Biases toward racial minority

groups significantly contribute to inequality in the educational process, primarily because

they are pervasive (Kawakami & Miura, 2014). Overall, African American students are

referred more often for offenses that are subjective in nature and receive more severe consequences than their White peers even when the infractions are the same (Gilliam et al., 2016; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018). White students are referred more than Black students for offenses that are more objective, such as smoking and vandalism, while Black students are referred more than White students for offenses that are more subjective, such as disrespect or loitering (McConnell, 2022). As discipline disparities continue to prevail, research has pointed to implicit bias as a major cause (Ford, 2016).

Males

When implicit bias is present in the classroom, it leads to excessive discipline, decreased expectations on the part of the teacher, and grading that may be overly critical in nature (Quershi & Okonofua, 2017). In terms of quality of life, it has been linked indirectly to higher dropout rates, future incarceration, and lower higher education outcomes (Arizona State University, 2022; Gullo & Beachum, 2017; LaCalsi et al., 2021; Losen & Marinez, 2013; Staats, 2017; Wiley, 2021). In addition, students who are suspended are more at risk for attendance issues, grade retention, failure to graduate, and subsequent involvement in the juvenile, and eventually adult, justice systems (Skiba et al., 2014). Some disciplinary infractions are ambiguous and dependent on context such as disruptive behavior or disrespect and excessive noise, yet they are frequently provided as reasons for student discipline. These infractions all share a subjective nature. Studies show that those most disproportionately impacted are Black students (Albritton et al., 2018). Racial disparities exist in every state. Ohio has the biggest difference in rates of exclusionary discipline between Black children and their peers (Paxson, 2021). African

American children are often subjected to instances of implicit bias, due to being

perceived by adults as more mature, less innocent than their same aged peers, more

aggressive in nature, and deserving of more severe consequences when compared to their

White peers (Arizona State University, 2022).

Owens and McLanahan (2020) cite a 2016 experiment conducted by the Yale

Child Study Center which revealed that when educators were given the task of watching a

video of a classroom and spotting potentially problematic behavior, the teachers focused

on the Black children. The video was absent of any misbehavior on the part of any of the

children, yet the expectation seemed to be directed at the African American children. The

study concluded that early educators of all races were more likely to focus on African

American boys over African American girls and White children when expecting

potentially problematic behavior in a classroom. The second conclusion was that implicit

racial bias in preschool teachers was influenced by the educators' race. Opinions were

more favorable when the child and the teacher were of the same race. Actual differences

in the behavior exhibited by students explain only a small portion of the racial disparities

in suspension (Owens & McLanahan 2020).

African American students, especially males, are more likely to be suspended and

expelled than students of other races, particularly white students (U.S. Department of

Education, 2022). According to the most recent federal civil rights data, African

American students are almost four times as likely to be assigned at least one out-of-

school suspension when compared with White students (U.S. Department of Education,

2022). According to The Children's Defense Fund, disciplinary disproportionality has

been a persistent and prevailing issue since schools first desegregated, as even then,

African American students were two to three times as likely to be suspended as White students, even in elementary school (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). African American boys have been the most consistently affected, and they account for the largest disparity across all race/ethnicity and gender identifications (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

While research reveals that out of school suspensions have seen an overall 0.9 percent decrease, there continues to be disparities regarding race (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). African American students continue to be suspended at double the rate of their White peers, while White boys experienced higher rates of in-school suspensions (Harper, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). According to the Civil Rights Data Collection Report, during the 2017–18 school year, African American students represented 15% of the total student enrollment, and 31% of students who were referred to law enforcement or arrested (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). This showed a 16-percentage point disparity between enrollment and referrals (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). While African American male students represented 8% of enrolled students, they accounted for 25% of students who received an out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The disparities begin as early as preschool. African American children make up 18% of preschool enrollment, yet they account for 43% of preschool suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). African American boys were suspended at a rate more than three times their enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). It is also important to note that African American students accounted for 28.7% of all students referred to law enforcement and 31.6% of all students arrested at school or during a school-related activity, reflecting twice their share of total student enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Females

African American girls are most affected when considering the intersection of race and gender (Walker, 2019). African American female students represented 8% of the student enrollment and accounted for 13% of students who received an out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Educators' negative perceptions of African American girls often lead to increased disciplinary referrals and suspensions (Walker, 2019). Teachers and school leaders often view African American girls as loud, disrespectful, disruptive, and aggressive (Walker, 2019). This overgeneralization of this group of students, combined with the subjective nature of the offenses, have been attributed to implicit biases, both racial and gender based (George, 2015).

African American females are punished more harshly for similar offenses. Consequently, African American female students are disproportionately suspended when compared with White female students, as they are six times more likely to be suspended from school than their White female counterparts for offenses that continue to be subjective in nature (Hassan & Carter, 2021; Lamboy, et al., 2020). The bias is even greater for darker-skinned African American girls versus their lighter-skinned counterparts. In addition to being punished more often, African American girls are also penalized more harshly for the same infractions committed by their White girl peers (Crenshaw et al., 2015). African American girls make up the fastest growing population in the juvenile justice system, and their contact with the system often begins as a result of school disciplinary actions (Martin & Smith, 2017).

Race and Poverty

African American students who attend schools with high rates of poverty are suspended at higher rates than African American students who attend other schools (Barrett et al., 2017). The study, *Disparities in Student Discipline by Race and Family Income*, uses statewide, student-level data from Louisiana from the 2000-01 through 2013-14 school years to examine gaps in exclusionary discipline between African American and White students, as well as between poor and non-poor students. African American students accounted for 46% of the student population but 64% of the student suspensions, while poor students accounted for 62% of the population but 74% of the suspensions. Both race and poverty status were factors in the disproportionate disciplinary assignment, and being African American and poor were consistently significant predictors of being suspended, being suspended multiple times in the same year, and length of suspension in days (Barrett et al., 2017). For students having no prior suspensions, African American and poor students were more likely than their peers to be suspended for both a nonviolent infraction and a violent infraction. When African American and White students with similar disciplinary records engaged in fights with each other, African American students tended to receive slightly longer suspensions (Barrett et al., 2017).

Effects of Discipline Disparities

Exclusionary school discipline methods claim to serve the purpose of preventing the recurrence of problematic behaviors and promoting a safe school environment; however, most out of school suspensions are nonviolent and non-safety related issues (LaCalsi et al., 2021). Research shows that once a student is suspended, they are likely to

be suspended again (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Citing that roughly half will be suspended in the same year (Losen & Martinez, 2013). An exclusionary discipline assignment does not serve as a deterrent to students' future misbehavior, and for younger students, it may actually increase the likelihood of recurrence (LaCalsi et al., 2021).

Being suspended in the ninth grade, even just once, results in a doubling of the potential of course failure in high school (Balfanz et al., 2014). Compounding the effects, once students have experienced course failure in high school, it increases the risk of dropping out by 20% (LaCalsi et al., 2021; Marchbanks et al., 2015, as cited in Losen, 2015). Being held back at any grade level significantly increases the liklihood that a student will drop out of high school, with ninth grade being the most critical (Kang-Brown et al., 2013). If a student drops out of school, it limits their opportunities for employment and ultimately their lifetime earning potential (Skiba et al., 2014; Torpey, 2021). In addition to the likelihood of diminished lifetime earning potential, they are also eight times more likely to face incarceration than their peers who graduate from high school (Skiba et al., 2014). Studies indicate that students who experience exclusionary school discipline are more likely to be arrested by the police outside of school settings in the same month as their suspension (Monahan et al., 2014).

Academic Outcomes

The U.S. Department of Education (2022) reported that in the 2017-18 school year, there were 11,205,797 days of instruction lost due to exclusionary discipline. African American students lost 103 days per 100 students enrolled, while White students lost 21 days per 100 students enrolled. Researchers agree that the racial achievement gap

occurring in the United States cannot be closed until the discipline gap is addressed (Losen & Martinez, 2020).

Students of color constitute just over half of all students; however, middle class White women make up the overwhelming majority, about 80%, of educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Lack of implicit bias awareness can contribute to negative outcomes, both in academic achievement and discipline, for African American students (Yoon, 2012). Starck et al. (2020) suggest the possibility "that well-intentioned teachers may be subject to biases they are less conscious of, limiting their capacity to facilitate racial equity despite their best intentions" (p. 273). The Cultural Synchrony Hypothesis shared in Blake et al., 2016:

> …asserts that educators' negative evaluations of Black students are fueled by stereotypes of Black adults, who are depicted in the media as violent, threatening, hypersexualized, and in need of socialization. These negative evaluations have been shown to intensify when teachers do not share the racial/ethnic background of their students. (p.80)

The lack of implicit bias awareness most significantly impacts the achievement gap between economically-disadvantaged students and more affluent students, White students and students of color, and native English speakers and those who are learning English as a second language (Yoon, 2012).

Educators' negative implicit biases toward racial groups influence the interactions between students and families, as the demeanor is detectable (Chin et al., 2020). They often communicate a lack of interest or concern for students, which strains the ability to develop relationships. Teachers who hold implicit biases have the potential to provide

biased evaluations of students' academic performance or even potential (Papageorge et al., 2016). Implicit biases held by White teachers were found to negatively impact the performance of African American students by the equivalent of one letter grade when compared to their White peers (Jacoby-Senghor et al., 2016). Implicit biases can also negatively impact African American students through self-fulfilling prophecies (Papageorge et al., 2016). Implicit bias can predict the extent to which teachers expect their minority students to perform more poorly and can add to the actual achievement gap in their classrooms.

Gershenson and Papageorge's (2018) research showed bias that could be classified as statistically significant as it relates to White teachers' expectations for African American students, while showing almost no bias for White students. They found that White teachers were nine percentage points less likely to expect an African American student to graduate from college than their African American colleagues, when both teachers considered the same student. Thirty-three percent of African American teachers expected that same student to finish college, while 24% of White teachers did (Gershenson and Papageorge, 2018). Gershenson and Papageorge concluded that a teacher's disbeliefs in student ability could negatively influence a student's outcome.

Reducing Effects of Bias

Eliminating, or reducing, bias has varying effects. The older a person is, the more entrenched they are in their viewpoints (Devine et al., 2012). As implicit biases develop early in life, much of the research is centered on eliminating implicit bias in children. When left unchecked, implicit bias continues to manifest into disparate treatment of students who are members of out-groups, particularly African American students.

According to Harvard's Project Implicit, the IAT measures the strength of associations between concepts (Greenwald et al., 1998). The idea of the IAT is:

> …implicit biases are revealed if the test taker makes faster associations when presented with stereotype-congruent pairings (photos of white people with terms that denote good things, photos of black people with terms that denote bad things) than when presented with the related stereotype-incongruent pairings. (Killpack & Melón, 2016, p. 15)

Unconscious biases can have a significant societal impact, considering that they can influence the behavior of large groups of people at the same time, and the behaviors influenced by bias could be regularly repeated (Killpack & Melón, 2016).

A reprogramming of the way individuals mentally associate particular groups is the key to addressing, and eventually eliminating, the biases. An approach that may help change implicit bias is exposure to counterstereotypic examples. This includes increased positive contact, thereby exposing individuals who hold bias to individuals who contradict the widely held stereotypes (Killpack & Melón, 2016; Sparks, 2021). The idea is that the exposure will begin to reshape the previously-held stereotypical views. In counter-stereotypic imaging, an individual is challenged to make a positive association with an image that is the exact opposite of their held stereotype (Sparks, 2021).

There is no clear evidence that any particular kind of anti-bias training is effective in reducing bias (Sparks, 2021). The general goal of implicit bias training is to increase self-awareness, not necessarily to eliminate implicit biases (Johnson et al., 2014). Soraya Chemaly (2015) declared, "Training teachers to understand bias will not eliminate it, but it could create an institutional environment in which it is clear that understanding bias

and its effects is critically important. The long-term return on investment is inestimable."

When participants see their biases as both common and uncontrollable, training can

sometimes have the opposite effect, and they are then less likely to feel responsible for

their actions (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018). There is evidence that implicit biases can be

changed; however, it does not always lead to a permanent change in behavior (Hanover,

Research, 2019). While immediate reduction in bias can be seen, the effectiveness

weaned in as short as the span of a day (Lai et al, 2016). Employees are often left feeling

complacent in their held biases, and they assign the responsibility of awareness to the

anti-discrimination policies of the organization. Diversity training can increase

individuals' biases toward minority group members, making majority groups feel left out.

In turn, this can reduce their support for diversity (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018).

When organizations force employees to undergo anti-bias training, it can also

have unintended effects. After suppressing uncovered biases, the rebound effect often

leads to hyper-accessibility (Staats, 2014). The argument is that the training and asking of

people to suppress their biases actually activates stereotypes (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018;

Hanover Research, 2019). However, when training is voluntary, it often draws on people

who are already engaged and open (Atewologun et al., 2018). When training is

mandatory, it is likely to activate a level of resistance (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018). For

training to be effective, a minimum of 25% of the team should participate (Atewologun et

al., 2018). An effective way to impact implicit bias is to address them directly and openly

(Staats, 2014).

Devine et al. (2012) conducted a study where they recruited 91 non-Black

students, and they were randomly assigned to either an intervention group or a control

group. The participants were given the IAT and assessed on attitudes toward race, how

motivated they were to behave without prejudice, how aware they were of their own

biases, and any concerns about how discriminatory behavior affected people. The

intervention group also watched an interactive presentation which included education and

training. It was explained to participants that implementing anti-bias strategies would

require practice and continued effort to break the implicit habits. At the conclusion of the

intervention, participants in both groups participated in additional meetings two, four, six,

and eight weeks after the experiment. Results showed that those who participated in the

intervention group had lower implicit bias scores eight weeks later, while those in the

control group showed no marked changes. Researchers concluded that giving the

participants practical strategies and making them more aware of their bias has the

potential to result in long term implicit bias reduction (Devine et al., 2012).

As African American students continue to be on the receiving end of a

disproportionate amount of exclusionary discipline, it becomes incumbent upon school

leaders to explore strategies to address the disparities. Rudd (2014) chronicles several

ways to reduce and eliminate bias, as it relates to school discipline. Those ways include

limitation of zero tolerance policies, implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions

and Supports (PBIS) practices and interventions in all schools, cultural competency

training, and the implementation of restorative justice practices in all schools.

Limiting Zero Tolerance Policies

Zero tolerance policies require administrators to assign specific, consistent, and

harsh punishment (e.g., suspension or expulsion) when students break certain rules. The

consequence is applied without regard to the circumstances, the reasons for the behavior,

or the student's previous disciplinary record. Zero tolerance policies were originally

implemented as a response to serious offenses, to ensure safe and healthy schools;

however, zero tolerance policies are being used to address minor infractions, such as

talking back to school personnel and for dress code violations (Skiba et al., 2014). The

zero-tolerance policy was born out of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994. The act

required that each state receiving funding under the Elementary and Secondary Education

Act (ESEA) enact a law that requires school districts to expel students for firearm

offenses for a period of no less than one year. The philosophy of zero tolerance is based

on law enforcement's *broken-window* theory (Skiba et al., 2014). The theory asserts that

communities must react strongly to even minor disruptions in order to send a message

that inappropriate behaviors will not be tolerated (Skiba et al., 2014). There is no clear

evidence that the implementation of these policies has made schools safer. There is

evidence that suspensions have continued to rise, disproportionately, even under the

effects of zero tolerance policies (Teasley, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

In 2018, John Kasich signed the Supporting Alternatives for Fair Education

(SAFE) Act, also known as House Bill 318. This bill mandated that school districts

implement PBIS, social-emotional learning supports, and trauma-informed practices.

PBIS is described as "a schoolwide systematic approach to embed evidence-based

practices and data-driven decision- making to improve school climate and culture to

achieve improved academic and social outcomes and increase learning for all students"

(Ohio Department of Education, 2019). The desired results of PBIS include the

following:

- Preventing chronic behavioral challenges

- Providing early intervention for children and youth displaying minor, but repeated, patterns of problem behavior

- Providing proactive support to children and youth at risk and those with emotional disturbances to allow them to successfully remain in the general education environments with the appropriate supports

- Providing instruction, practice, and reinforcement for students regarding expected behaviors in the various school settings. (Ohio Department of Education, 2019)

PBIS utilizes a tiered system of behavioral supports that address issues and needs at varying levels of the continuum. As a student moves though the necessary tiers, schools and school districts are required to employ varying strategies. Students who attend a school with a schoolwide PBIS system in place are 33% less likely to receive an office discipline referral than students who attend schools that do not have the system in place (Bradshaw et al., 2012). If students are not being referred for disciplinary action, they will not be subject to exclusionary school discipline methods. In addition to the behavioral implications, a variety of studies have shown that schools with a fully implemented PBIS system also see marked gains academically (Horner & Sugai, 2015; McDaniels et al., 2017). An effectively implemented PBIS system also involves the collection of discipline data that can be summarized by student, grade level, teacher making the referral, location, type of infraction, and time of day or year (Center on PBIS, 2024). Once collected, the designated PBIS leadership team can use the data to develop additional intervention plans, adjust existing ones, and provide valuable feedback to teachers (Koon, 2013).

Cultural Competency Training

One of the effects of ongoing cultural competency training is a decrease in exclusionary discipline rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Cultural competence involves being aware of and understanding one's own identity as it relates to culture and the willingness to learn about the various cultures one comes in contact with (NEA, n.d.). It also includes being able to interact, work with, and develop relationships with people of diverse backgrounds (de Guzman, 2016). Cultural awareness training can help to overcome biases through discussion and self-reflection (de Guzman, 2016). While brief implicit bias training may produce immediate reductions, it does not have lasting effects (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Lai et al, 2016). However, ongoing interventions can lead to lasting results (Hanover Research, 2019). Much of the research on cultural competency training exists as it relates to healthcare and calls attention to the need for continued study (Getha-Taylor et al., 2020).

Restorative Practices

Restorative practices is a social science that explores ways to strengthen relationships between individuals and communities (Wachtel, 2012). Restorative justice finds its roots in New Zealand. The practice began as an experiment offering alternatives to criminal prosecution and the incarceration that would result (Leung, 2001). Restorative justice seeks to replace exclusionary discipline, and other punitive approaches to discipline, with an approach that focuses on addressing behaviors and mending relationships in a humane way (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Restorative practices are seen as a solution to the negative consequences of exclusionary punishment and its disproportionate application (Fronius et al., 2019). Restorative practices are said to

promote a sense of community, relationship-building, and problem-solving through such restorative methods that bring stakeholders together to address the offense and the path forward.

Districts across the country have increasingly implemented restorative justice practices as part of their approach to discipline. However, restorative practices were not generally implemented in schools that served high proportions of African American and Latinx students (Payne & Welch, 2013). The larger the population of African American students in a school, the significantly less likely a school was to utilize restorative practices to address discipline (Payne & Welch, 2013). Common restorative practices include restorative circles, peer mediation, conferencing, and restorative disciplinary hearings. Instead of facing automatic punishment, students are encouraged think about what they have done, accept accountability, and think of a way to mend the relationship and right the wrong (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). If students are given the opportunity to address and correct behavior instead of resorting to exclusionary methods, it allows for restoration and increased relationship building (Pavelka, 2016). Restorative practices strengthen students' connections to both staff and other students. Increased connections could decrease out-group homogeneity through increased positive exposures. Increased positive exposures could see a reduction in implicit bias (Jhangiani et al., 2022).

When implementing restorative practices, exclusionary methods are used as a last resort, which keeps students in schools. Restorative practices allow for increased resolution of issues instead of punishment for behaviors. As a result of restorative practices, participating schools have reported a decrease in disciplinary disparities and have seen decreases in problematic behavior over time, leading to an increase in the

perceived positivity of the school culture (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2016). Schools in Pittsburgh, Denver, San Francisco, and Oakland experienced a reduction in suspension rates after the implementation of restorative justice policies (Anyon et al., 2016; Augustine et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). However, other studies of Denver Public School data showed that restorative practice implementation did not decrease the likelihood of African American students receiving a suspension after a referral (Anyon et al., 2016). Similarly, Los Angeles Unified School District noted the gaps between the suspension rates of African American students and White students prevailed even after implementation (Hashim et al., 2018).

Summary

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social identity theory describes the importance placed upon a person's place in a social group over that of their identity as an individual. The theory asserts that people sort others into groups, typically into in-groups and out-groups, or *us* and *them*. The negative characteristics of the out-group are highlighted by the in-group with the intent to bolster their own self-image. The focus on the negative characteristics leads to increased accentuation of the differences between groups.

Implicit bias operates at a more automatic level. These biases often manifest as the unconscious decisions that people make in situations when they do not have the time to thoughtfully process information. Implicit biases may lead people to assign certain traits to all members of a group. Decreased teacher expectations, excessive and disparate discipline, and inconsistent grading procedures for students of color have been shown to have a direct correlation to the presence of implicit bias in schools. These practices are indirectly linked to higher dropout rates, future incarceration, and lower higher education

outcomes. Studies show that those most disproportionately impacted are African American students, particularly male. While it is difficult to eliminate implicit bias, strategies such as the limiting of zero tolerance policies, PBIS, restorative practices, and cultural competency training can help to mitigate some of the effects.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This quantitative causal-comparative study aimed to examine the effects of restorative justice practices in schools on the existing discipline disparities impacting African American students, as those disparities lead to other issues impacting their overall quality of life. Just one suspension during the transitional ninth-grade year can double a student's chance of course failure during their high school career (Balfanz et al., 2014). Once a student has failed a course, the effect is compounded and increases the risk of dropping out by 20% (LiCalsi et al, 2021; Marchbanks et al., 2015, as cited in Losen, 2015). A quantitative approach was taken to explore the potential relationship between variables (Creswell, 2002). Specifically, a quantitative causal-comparative approach was taken to explore possible differences in the instances of exclusionary discipline in student groups, while providing factual numerical data to support (Mertler, 2021).

The current investigation provides information concerning restorative justice practices as one way to combat and potentially correct the overrepresentation of African American students in exclusionary discipline data (Rudd, 2014). The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent, if any, did restorative practices in schools decrease exclusionary discipline for African American students?

2. To what extent, if any, did restorative practices in schools impact the discipline disparities between African American and White students?

3. Did the impact of restorative practices vary based on grade band?

4. Did the type of infraction indicate any difference in the rate of suspension?

Currently, there is limited research examining the effects of restorative justice practices on impacting discipline disparities. The hope is to extend the body of research regarding restorative justice and provide more insight on whether the practices are effective in addressing the discipline disparity and closing the gap.

Research Design

This quantitative causal-comparative study used statistical analysis to compare expulsion and suspension data for African American students in the subject school district to measure the impact of implemented restorative justice programs in the schools. Due to the sample size of over 18,600 total students and the availability of data to compare suspensions for African American students in the years after the implementation of restorative justice practices, statistical analysis was chosen. The study compared suspension data for African American and White students.

Data Collection Methods and Tools

After the Youngstown State University Institutional Review Board approval, pre-existing public data was requested from the school district's Institutional Review Board. Public information from the Pennsylvania Department of Education regarding discipline data was utilized to determine the effectiveness of restorative justice practices. Statistical analysis measured whether the implementation of restorative practices reduced the instances of exclusionary discipline assigned to minority students, as well as whether there had been on impact on the discipline disparities that existed for minority students. The population utilized in the study was a non-probability sample of students in the subject school district for the school years following the implementation of restorative justice practices, with African American students as a subset. Pennsylvania has laws that

require school districts to provide staff with restorative justice training. Their strategic

plan cites increased equity and eliminating racial disparities as major focal points.

Participants

The district is a large school district in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania that

includes 23 schools, spanning grades PreK to 12. The district educates 18,652 students.

Student demographics include 56.5% African American, 34% White, 10% Multiracial,

4% Hispanic, 4% Asian, <1% Native Hawaiian, and <1% American Indian. Nearly 70%

of the students in the district are economically disadvantaged and 5% are English

Language Learners (ELL) (PPS, 2022).

Data Analysis

The sample population consisted of students attending schools in the specified

school district. Basic descriptive analysis was used to report the number of schools who

provided the suspension data for the district, by year, by gender, and by racial group, as

well as the number of suspensions issued by each school by year, by gender, and by racial

group. Repeated measures ANOVA was used to analyze the variables. The criterion

variable for the analysis was the reported number suspensions; the predictor variables

were the race of the students, grade band, and type of infraction. The analyses were

expected to be deemed tenable due to the large number of observations and sample size.

Validity and Reliability Tests

The use of statistical analysis strengthens the confidence that the impact of

restorative justice practices was being measured for each selected subgroup, as it related

to each research question. External reliability was more difficult to substantiate due to

possible variance in implementation by the schools and district. The study can only be

generalized to schools and districts with similar populations and demographics.

Summary

The presence of racial disparities in school discipline is a prevailing issue in

education. The usage of exclusionary discipline has been linked to the school to prison

pipeline phenomena. In response, many schools have moved to implement restorative

justice practices to mitigate and lessen the effects. It is critical to examine if these

practices are achieving the intended effect.

Chapter Four

Results

The purpose of this causal-comparative study was to examine the impact of restorative justice practices on the instances of exclusionary discipline of African American students. The study also sought to determine if exclusionary practices were decreasing over time, when restorative practices were applied in a large urban school district. Publicly obtained data and data provided by the school district were acquired for the years following the implementation of restorative justice practices in the school district. General linear analysis was utilized to answer the following areas of inquiry.

Research Question I

To what extent, if any, did restorative practices in schools decrease exclusionary discipline for African American students?

Research Question II

To what extent, if any, did restorative practices in schools impact the discipline disparities between African American and White students?

Research Question III

Did the impact of restorative practices vary based on grade band?

Research Question IV

Did the implementation of restorative justice impact the use of restorative opportunities when the infractions were not suspension worthy?

Extracted data, as well as the provided data, was coded K to 5 for buildings with students in kindergarten through fifth grade, 6 to 8 for buildings with students in sixth through eighth grade, 9 to 12 for buildings with students in ninth through twelfth grade, K to 8 for

buildings with students in kindergarten through eighth grade, 6 to 12 for buildings with

students in sixth through twelfth grade, and Academy for buildings that operate as

specialized academies within the district that are designed to meet the specialized needs

of students, academically or behaviorally. The frequency of schools in the district that

reported exclusionary discipline data from the 2016-2017 school year through the 2021-

2022 school year is present in Table 1.

Table 1

Schools Reporting Exclusionary Data

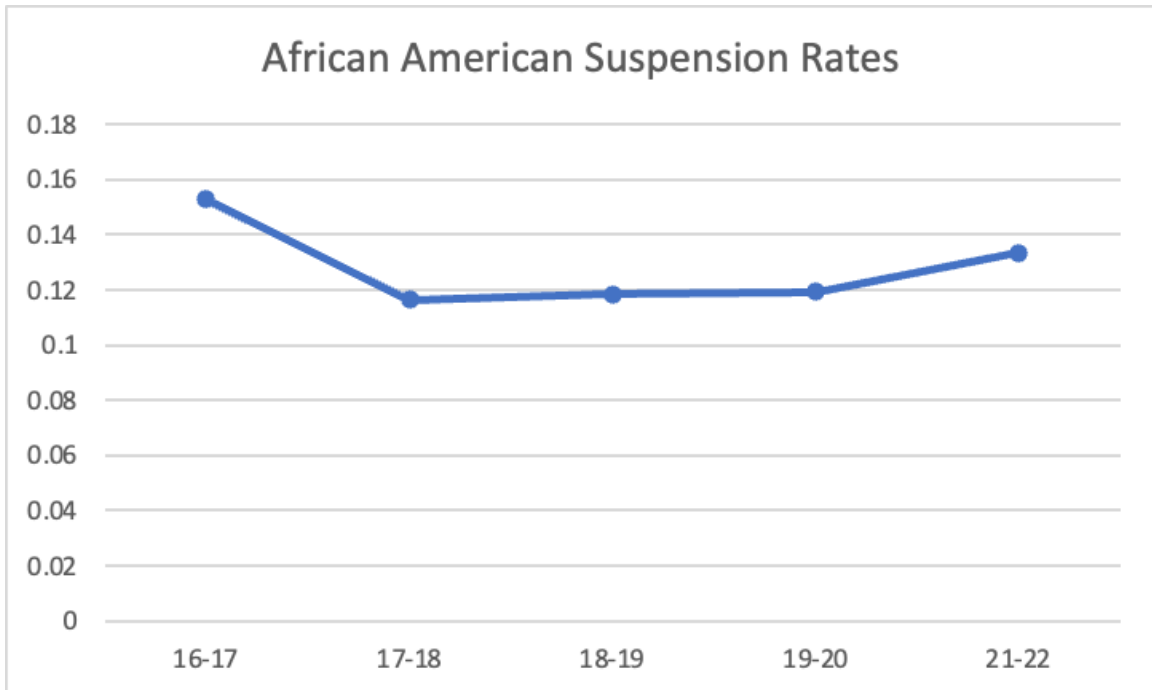| School Year	Suspension
16-17	54
17-18	58
18-19	57
19-20	58
20-21	*0*
21-22	57
Total	284

Note: 2020-21 School Year was impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Most classes were conducted remotely or in a hybrid format.

As indicated above, $n = 284$ schools reported suspension data. The suspension rate over

the years by race is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Suspension Rate by Race

School Year	African American	White	Hispanic
16-17	.15	.07	.028
	n = 14028	*n* = 8010	*n* = 776
17-18	.12	.04	.04
	n = 13611	*n* = 7829	*n* = 825
18-19	.12	.06	.04
	n = 13078	*n* = 7481	*n* = 877
19-20	.12	.05	.02
	n = 12339	*n* = 7079	*n* = 935
20-21	0	0	0
21-22	.13	.05	.03
	n = 11294	*n* = 6453	*n* = 935

*Note: 2020-21 School Year was impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Most classes were conducted remotely or in a hybrid format.

As indicated above, African American students yielded the highest proportions of suspension rate for each of the years reported.

Research Question I

This question addressed whether the use of restorative practices decreased exclusionary discipline for African American students. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of suspension rates for African American students across all grade bands and levels.

**Figure 1**

Suspension Data

As seen in Figure 1, suspension rates saw a drop in the school year following the

implementation of restorative practices in the school district.

Research Question II

This question examined to what extent, if any, restorative practices in schools

impacted the discipline disparities between African American and White students. Figure

2 provides a visual representation of suspension rates for African American and White

students across all grade bands and levels.

Figure 2

Suspension Data for African American & White Students
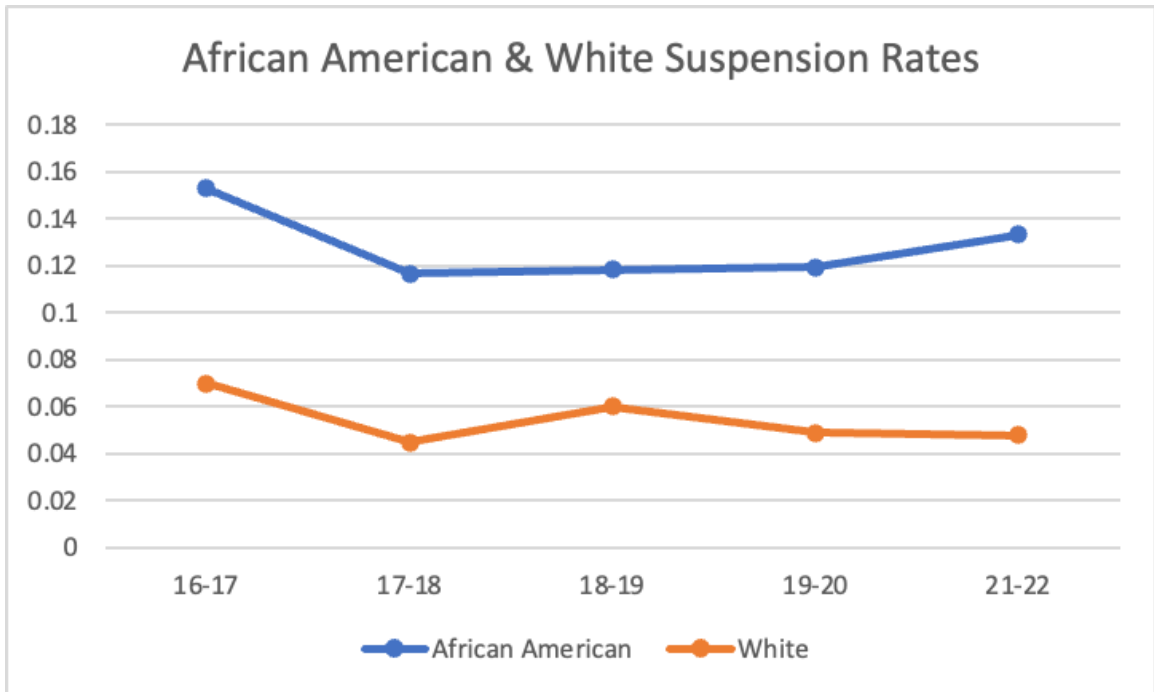
As indicated above, there remains a gap in the suspension rates of African American and White students. African American students continue to be suspended at double the rate of White students.

Research Question III

This question asked if the impact of restorative practices varied based on grade band. The subject district utilizes a model of organization that designates schools as K-5, K-8, 6-8, 9-12, 6-12, and specialized Academies. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of suspension rates for students at the K-5 grade band.
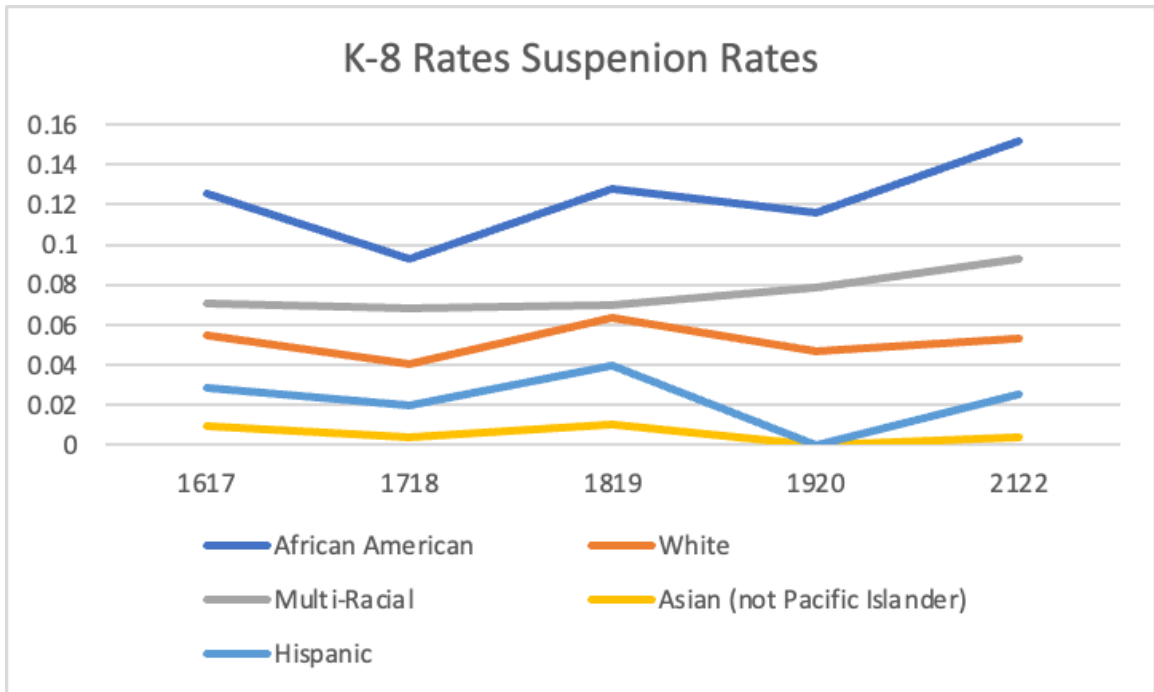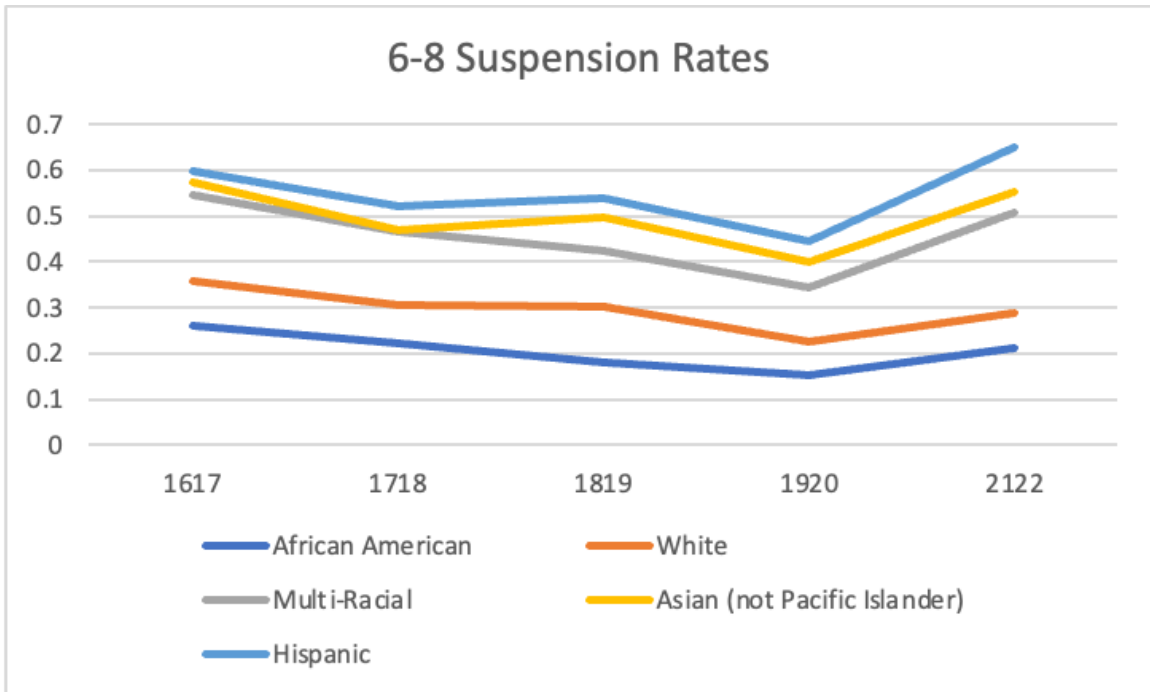
Figure 3

Suspension Data for Students at the K-5 Grade Band
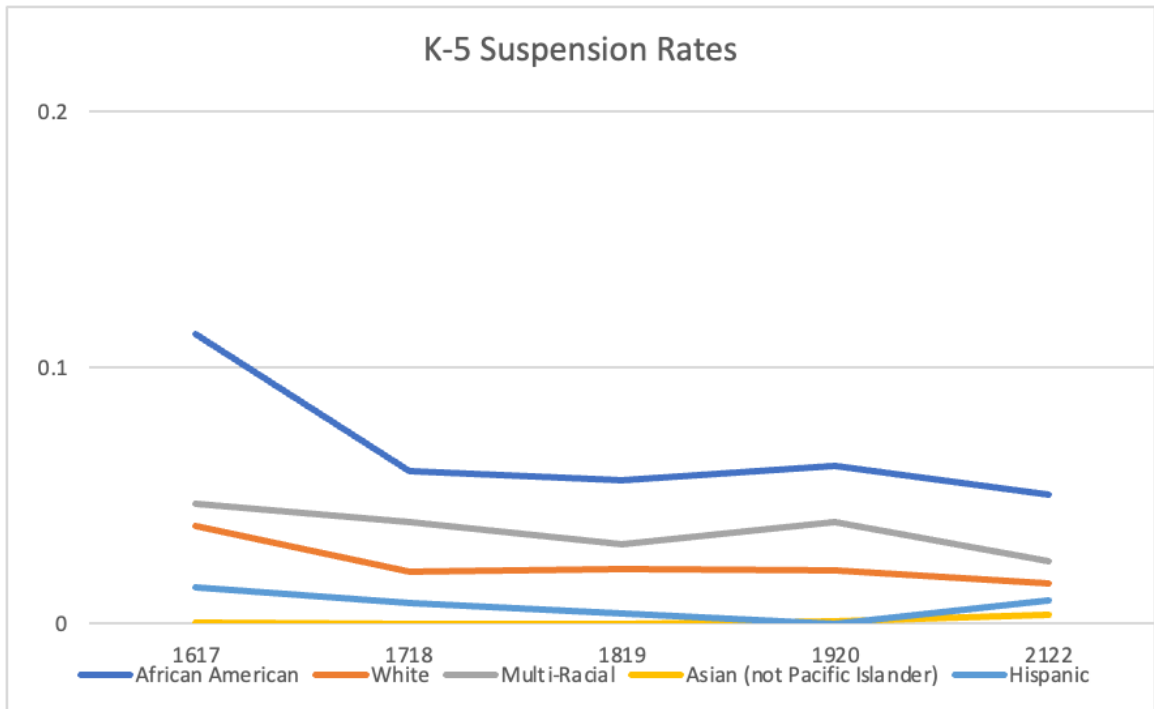
As indicated above, African American students had the highest rate of suspension at the

K-5 grade band. Results of the general linear modeling analysis indicate that the change

over time of the rate of suspensions for K-5 grade band was not significant, F (4, 905)

=1.72, p = .143. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the suspension rate for

students at the K-8 grade band.

Figure 4
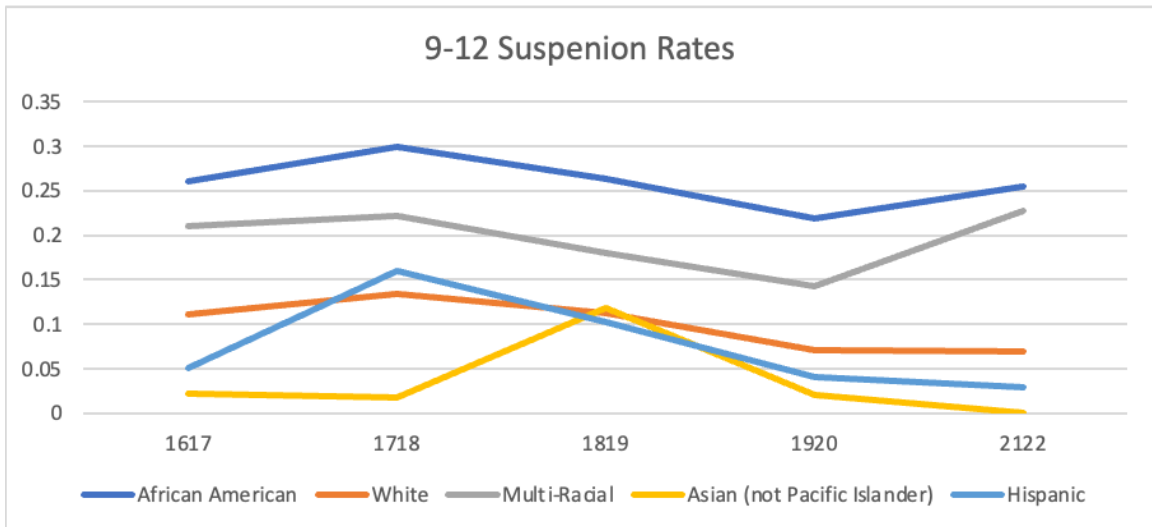
Suspension Data for Students at the K-8 Grade Band

As indicated above, African American students had the highest rate of suspension at the K-8 grade band. Results of the general linear modeling analysis indicate that the change over time of the rate of suspensions for K-8 grade band was not significant, $F (4, 610) =$ .113 $p = .978$. Figure 5 provides a visual representation of the suspension rate for students at the 6-8 grade band.

Figure 5
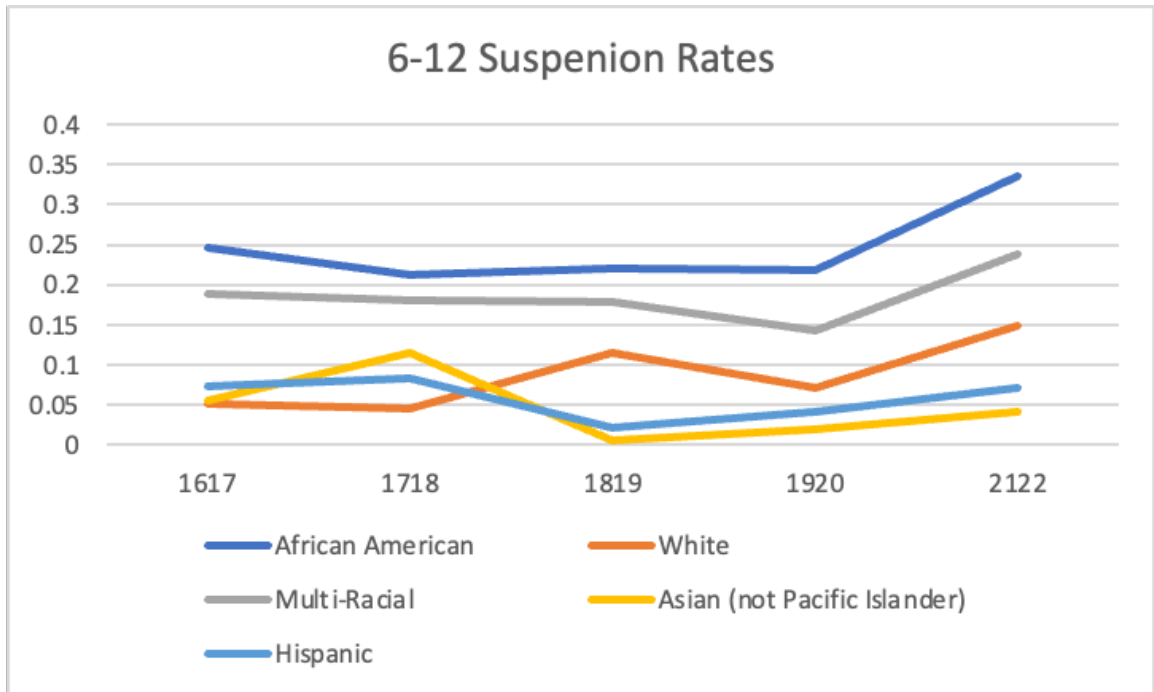
Suspension Data for Students at the 6-8 Grade Band

As indicated above, African American students had the highest rate of suspension at the 6-8 grade band. Results of the general linear modeling analysis indicate that the change over time of the rate of suspensions for the 6-8 grade band was not significant, $F_{(4, 210)} = .396$, $p = .811$. Figure 6 provides a visual representation of the suspension rate for students at the 9-12 grade band.

Figure 6

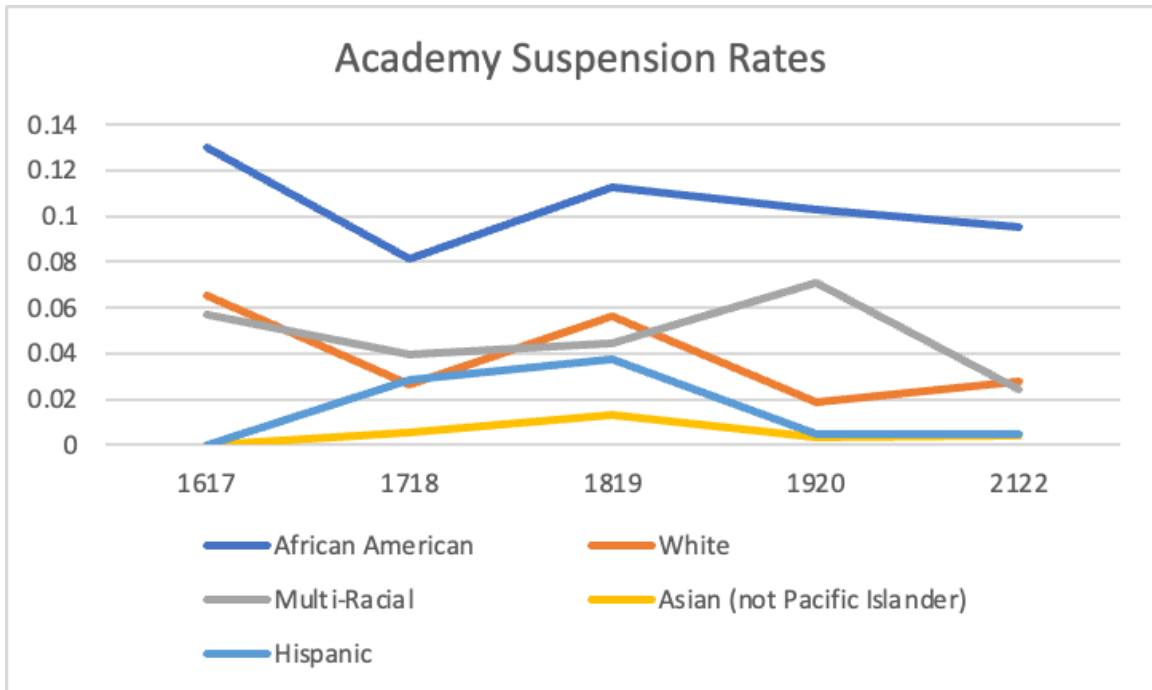*Suspension Data for Students at the 9-12 Grade Band*

As indicated above, African American students had the highest rate of suspension at the 9-12 grade band. Results of the general linear modeling analysis indicate that the change over time of the rate of suspensions for the 9-12 grade band was significant, $F(4, 115) = 7.048$, $p = <.001$. Figure 7 provides a visual representation of the suspension rate for students at the 6-12 grade band.

Figure 7

Suspension Data for Students at the 6-12 Grade Band

As indicated above, African American students had the highest rate of suspension at the 6-12 grade band. Results of the general linear modeling analysis indicate that the change over time of the rate of suspensions for the 6-12 grade band was not significant, F (4, 175) = .967, p = .427. Figure 8 provides a visual representation of the suspension rate for students at the Academy grade band.

Figure 8

Suspension Data for Students at the Academy Grade Band

As indicated above, African American students had the highest rate of suspension in the Academy grade band. Results of the general linear modeling analysis indicate that the change over time of the rate of suspensions for the Academy grade band was not significant, $F (4, 395) = .05$, $p = .995$. An academy is a school in the district that is designed to meet the specialized needs of students, academically or behaviorally. They range in the grade levels served.

Research Question IV

This question examined whether the type of infraction indicated any difference in the rate of suspension. Suspensions were sorted into infractions that could be resolved through a restorative approach and infractions that involved actions that interfered with safety and security or violated the law. The new values were coded as 1 = restorative and 0 = not restorative. A general linear model was conducted, which examined the year, race

of student, and type of infraction rate. For this model, an interaction term was created by

multiplying IT by year (Field, 2016). Results of the Tests of Between-Subject Effects

indicate that a significant interaction existed between the race and interaction by year

term, $F(20, 20) = 2.367$, $p = .030$. Specifically, the results demonstrate that the number

of restorative infractions that resulted in suspensions dropped for most students after the

16/17 school year, and they have stayed lower, based on the available data. However, the

restorative infractions that resulted in suspension still remained significantly higher for

Black students. This is illustrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9

Infraction Type by Year by Race of Student
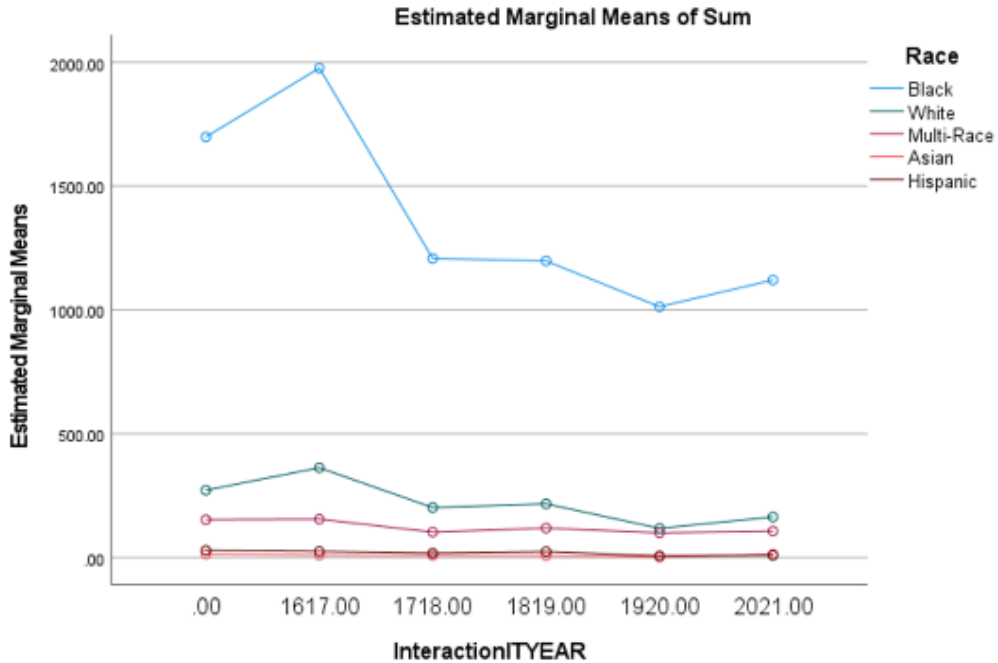
The implementation of restorative justice practices has not been successful in reducing

the rate of suspensions for African American students. When analyzing the changes at

various grade bands, the changes were only significant at the 9-12 grade band, but not for

African Americans. Analyzing infraction types still showed a disproportionate number of

African American students being suspended.

The final chapter of this study summarizes the findings presented in this chapter.

Chapter Five also provides a contextual interpretation of the findings. Implications

pertaining to future research and potential implementation are addressed in addition to

limitations relative to the perceived limitations outlined in Chapter Three. Lastly, the

chapter provides suggestions for the direction of future research in the area.

Chapter Five

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research was to determine what impact, if any, the implementation of restorative justice practices had on decreasing exclusionary discipline for African American students in a large, urban district in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In the early years of implementation, a study was conducted that showed restorative justice practices did not yield a positive result for all groups of students in the schools, particularly in the 6-8 grade band where suspension rates showed no improvement at all (Augustine et. al, 2018). It was predicted that the implementation of restorative practices in schools decreases the instances of exclusionary discipline for minority students. The results of this current research revealed that there has been no significant impact on instances of exclusionary discipline for African American students. Over the span of the study, there was no significant change in the suspension rates of African American students with regard to year, infraction, or grade band.

A secondary research question considered to what extent, if any, did restorative practices in schools impact the discipline disparities between African American and White students. The hypothesis predicted that the implementation of restorative practices in schools would impact the discipline disparities between African American and White students. The reduction in suspensions experienced by African American students was matched by a drop in suspensions of White students in the years of initial implementation. There remains a gap in the suspension rates of African American and White students, with that gap beginning to widen in recent years. Fallo and Larwin (2022) saw similar results in the San Francisco United School District.

An additional research question asked if the impact of restorative practices varied based on grade band. A significant gap in the suspension rates of African American students and White students existed at every grade band. The gap was the smallest at the K-5 level. The gap was the most pronounced at the 9-12 band. These results were mildly inconsistent with the findings of Darling-Hammond (2023) who examined restorative practices exclusively at the middle school level in California. The gap in discipline remained; however, there was evidence that suggested the implementation of restorative practices was leading to a reduction in the disparity.

The final research question explored whether the type of infraction indicated any difference in the rate of suspension. Sorting the offenses into restorative and nonrestorative still resulted in a significant disparity in the rate of suspension of African American and White students. Suspensions for restorative offenses saw a decline for African American students in the initial year of implementation. White students experienced the same decline, which resulted in no impact on the existing gap. This finding is unique to the current investigation. This is the only known investigation that examined whether the type of infraction was associated with the difference in the suspension rate.

Interpretation of Findings

As a result of restorative practices, previous studies found that schools reported a decrease in disciplinary disparities and have seen decreases in problematic behavior over time (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019). Other studies showed African American students did not experience the same benefits of restorative practices (Anyon et al., 2016; Payne & Welch, 2013). Results of the current research study revealed the

implementation of restorative practices did not have an impact on reducing the disparity of exclusionary discipline for African American students with regard to grade band, infraction, or over time.

An explanation for the lack of impact could be found in the different degrees of implementation (Fallo, 2019). There was no guide that outlined the specificity with which restorative practices should be utilized and administered. The lack of specificity leaves room for the continued use of subjective measures by which to administer discipline. Research indicates that African American students, all other factors equal, have less access and exposure to restorative measures than do their peers, even in the same school (Darling-Hammond, 2023).

The initial reduction in rates across groups could be attributed to the newness of the implementation and the intentionality of utilizing the restorative strategies. The decline in suspension rates across groups could be an indication of an early effort to decrease rates for all students, possibly without the regard or focus on African American students as a subgroup. Davison et al. (2022) highlighted the need to examine and highlight the racial equity component of restorative practices, forsaking the idea of colorblindness, as it relates to the issue of school discipline.

Implications of Findings

The theoretical framework explored throughout this study was social identity theory and the resulting implicit bias that develops. Social identity theory asserts that people generally categorize the world into in-groups (i.e., *us*) and out-groups (i.e., *them*) and look for the negative traits of an out-group in order to bolster their own self-image. The comparison of groups often results in a hyper focus on the differences between the

in-group and out-group. In turn, this emphasis leads to overgeneralization and discrimination of the out-group (Jhangiani et al., 2022). A person's social identity is a predictor of the prejudices, intergroup perceptions, and biases, both explicit and implicit, that a person may develop and hold in life (Hong et al., 2004).

In the classroom, teachers tend to treat students differently depending on the students' race. These differences in teacher behavior toward groups of students contribute to racial disparities in achievement and other forms of inequity in schools (Okonofua et al., 2016). In a 2021 study, it was concluded that White teachers make up 79% of public-school educators in the country. In 37 states, that percentage is even greater (Schaeffer, 2021). In the subject district, 85% of teachers identified as White. In the 2021-22 school year, African American students represented 75% of all out of school suspensions (A+ Schools, 2022).

Coupled with the suspension rates of African American students, the composition of the teaching staff supports the idea that implicit bias is a factor in the prevailing presence of discipline disparities, even after the implementation of restorative justice practices. The differences in how discipline is administered essentially creates multiple systems within the system (Wiley, 2021).

The results of the current investigation add to the body of research about the implementation of restorative justice practices as a solution to disparities in school discipline. It contributes analysis of the impact of the implementation beyond the one to two years that most studies have addressed. This research analyzed more than five years of restorative justice practice implementation. The study also contributes to the literature examining the implementation of restorative practices in schools with a large minority

population, as much of the early research did not. Additionally, the study adds to the

research of how the implementation of restorative justice practices impacts closing the

discipline disparity gaps of subgroups, particularly African American students. Much of

the early research considered its impact on exclusionary practices as a whole.

A previous study cited "...the buy-in of the administration, the type of

professional development offered, the implementation of the professional development,

and the fidelity of the implementation" as possible reasons for the lack of impact (Fallo,

2019). These factors lend themselves to the subjectivity that could have contributed to the

outcome. The subjectivity that asserts itself and presents as bias could also impact the

way restorative practices are utilized and who receives the benefit of restoration versus

exclusion.

As school district and building leaders look for ways to reduce their exclusionary

discipline rates and to address the existing disparities, this research would be of interest

to them. Districts with similar demographics (i.e., large, urban, high minority student

populations, low minority teaching populations) may find it the most useful and practical.

This research could be used to mitigate some of the possible pitfalls of implementation.

In a very realistic sense, the material could also be used to temper expectations.

Discussions on Limitations of Study

A major limitation of this study is in the fact that the majority of the data was self-

reported through the district's own Institutional Review Board and Office of Research

and Evaluation. The publicly accessible data did not include raw numbers, as it had

already been processed and filtered for subgroup analysis. Though unlikely, this left the

potential for manipulation. Through self-reporting, there was also the absence of other

forms of exclusionary discipline commonly utilized in schools. In-school suspension as a consequence was not reported. More importantly, expulsions were not publicly available and were not provided when requested. This impeded the ability to fully examine the scope of exclusionary discipline in this district and leaves questions about how the rates of other forms of exclusionary discipline have been impacted.

Restorative practices address the results of submitted referrals and not the attitudes or biases of the referrer. Therefore, it is not a method that allows for proactive planning. Restorative justice practices may impact the resulting discipline disparities but will likely not impact the potentially held biases that lead to the disparities. As a result of the reactive nature of restorative practices, the reported instances of disciplinary infractions could have been subject to the bias of the referrer. This leaves room for doubt that restorative practices can be cited as a way to impact implicit bias.

In addition, examining referrals leading to suspensions does not allow for the examination of all infractions. Only the infractions that were referred for disciplinary action that led to a suspension were considered. There are potentially countless instances where a student's behavior was handled by the classroom teacher and was not referred to the office. Were there disparities in the way the unreferred behaviors were handled? This also excludes referrals that resulted in other forms of exclusionary discipline.

This study was conducted in one large, urban, public school district. Whether the results would apply to districts that did not share the same demographic, even within the same state, is undetermined. The preponderance of restorative justice research has not been examined or centered in more diverse populations (Payne & Welch, 2013). The implementation of restorative justice practices has been cited as a way to mitigate

implicit bias and impact disparities in school discipline; however, much of the research has not had an intentional focus on the subgroups most impacted.

Lastly, a limitation of the research is how the implementation levels of the practices impacted the outcomes. There was no measure of the degree of fidelity with which the district and participating schools implemented and adhered to the use of restorative practices to address discipline. The analysis showed that there was no statistically relevant impact in discipline rates for African American students. A root cause analysis would be needed to inspect implementation as a factor.

Discussion on Future Direction of Research

To legitimize the implementation of restorative justice practices as a way to impact implicit bias and reduce discipline disparities for African American students, or any other impacted subgroups, there should be continued studying of the use of restorative justice in schools, with an intentional focus on subgroups. A varying demographic of schools (e.g., rural, urban, suburban, public, private) should be included to allow for the examination and analysis of any potential differences. The discovery of any differences could be used to direct how schools approach the implementation and use of restorative practices as a response to discipline as a whole, as well as a method to impact discipline disparities.

A recommendation for a future study would be to broaden the scope of analysis to include all referrals and their corresponding consequences, as well as not limiting the examination to referrals resulting in an out-of-school suspension. Including all referrals and consequences would allow for a more thorough analysis of how discipline is handled, and it could possibly provide insights as to whether restorative practices are being used

consistently and with fidelity. Other forms of exclusionary discipline should also be analyzed. If one form of exclusionary discipline is simply being exchanged for another less monitored form, the resulting data would not reflect a true representation. Examining instances of in-school suspension and expulsions, along with out-of-school suspensions, would provide a more complete view of the use of exclusionary actions as a consequence.

Lastly, and possibly most importantly, a reframing of the idea that the implementation of restorative justice practices will impact disciplinary disparities absent of the discussion and addressing of the bias that can potentially be fueling it is necessary. Implementing restorative justice practices in a school setting without providing education and professional development opportunities addressing implicit bias and cultural competency is likely to yield more stagnation. Restorative practices can only impact the students who are extended the opportunity. If bias can potentially impact the way discipline is handled, it stands to reason that would extend to the idea that it can also affect how restoration is handled. Guidelines addressing which infractions of a district's established code of student conduct should be met with a restorative response need to be established.

Summary

The implementation of restorative practices in the subject district did not lead to a reduction in the rate of suspension for African American students. The implementation of restorative practices also did not lead to a reduction in the discipline disparity that exists between African American and White students. Continued research on how, and if, restorative justice practices can be utilized as a strategy to impact the exclusionary

discipline rates for African American students is necessary. The addition of a focus on the most affected subgroups of students is critical to continued research.

In the Fall of 2021, more than 49 million students sat in classrooms in public schools across the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). These students came from many different backgrounds, ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, and familial circumstances. All 49 million of these students deserved the opportunity to grow and be successful without the weight of bias. Schools are intended to serve as a vehicle for that growth and success. Famed educator, the late Rita Pierson once said, "Every child deserves a champion—an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be" (Pierson, 2013). Ms. Pierson and First Lady Johnson both understood the immense power of expectation. With that power, there is the responsibility for educators to cultivate environments that truly model the principles of fairness and equality.

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