

THE PUZZLE OF DISCIPLINE: AN EXAMINATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND STUDENT  
PERFORMANCE

A Dissertation

by

BETTIE RAY BUTLER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2011

Major Subject: Curriculum and Instruction

The Puzzle of Discipline: An Examination of African American Disproportionality in  
School Discipline and Student Performance

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## ABSTRACT

The Puzzle of Discipline: An Examination of African American Disproportionality in  
School Discipline and Student Performance. (May 2011)

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The intent of this study was to systematically investigate the relationship between African American disproportionality in school discipline – which is the overrepresentation of students for exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., out-of-school suspensions and/or expulsions) - and student performance. Utilizing official disciplinary records and performance data obtained from the Colorado Department of Education and a single urban school district within the same state, a series of quantitative analyses that included correlations and logistic and multiple regressions, were conducted to determine how out-of-school suspensions and expulsions impact African American students.

The premise upon which the present study is based relies heavily on the tenets of *Critical Race Theory* as it applies to education, which in part asserts that American schools are permeated by racism and that White privilege is used to preserve school inequities through the use of stratification. Given this, it is argued that out-of-school suspensions and expulsions have been used, or rather misused, to perpetuate the disproportionate exclusion of African American students from the classroom for

relatively minor offenses; which in some ways, can explain why this group typically suffers from poor student performance.

This dissertation was guided by two separate, yet interrelated studies, which posed the following research questions where the first study asks; What factors are important in predicting the likelihood of being suspended and/or expelled from school? and Are suspensions and race correlated? Here, the interest is in exploring the influence of race, class, gender and other possible demographic characteristics, such as school level and behavior role, on exclusionary discipline practices. The second study asks; How does the overrepresentation of African American students for exclusionary sanctions impact student performance? The interest, here, is in identifying the relationship between school suspensions and/or expulsions and its impact on the dropout rate, graduation rate, and performance on high stakes tests.

This dissertation study produces two findings that are not only unprecedented; they are cutting-edge and provocative. First, female and elementary students were found to be more likely to face suspension and/or expulsion in comparison to male and secondary students, respectively. Second, by increasing the number of suspended and expelled African American students, school districts improved their overall student performance on high stakes tests. With the contribution of these findings, a paradigmatic shift in research and discourse on disproportionality in school discipline is both fitting and warranted.

## DEDICATION

First, and most important, I want to give glory and honor to the Most High God, for this dissertation is truly a testament of His unmerited favor. I am forever reminded, “He which have started a good work in you; will perform it to the day of Jesus Christ.” This journey took much prayer and perseverance; but I fought a good fight, I kept the faith, and with this, I finished the course.

I dedicate this work to the love of my life, my best friend, and my backbone, Jeremy S. Butler, Sr. Without you, and your continued support, none of this would have been possible. And to my motivation for living and Granny’s beacon of light, Jeremy S. Butler, Jr., always know that mommy loves you unconditionally. For the many sacrifices, I am forever indebted to you both.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my mother and father, Sharon and Walter Ray, who never stopped believing in me. And to my sister, ShaDonna Ray, let this be an example of what happens when you refuse to give up. And to my brother, Lewis Ray, and his beautiful family, thanks for always reminding me of what is most important. And lastly, to my grandmother and grandfather, Fannie Mae and Willie Weatherly, this milestone is simply the fruit of your labor.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: THE PUZZLE OF DISCIPLINE

#### A REVIEW OF DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

The past three decades of scientific and behavioral research on school discipline (e.g., Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009) has chronicled the disproportionate representation of African American students for school discipline- specifically in the area of suspensions (McCarthy & Hodge, 1987), expulsions (KewelRamani, Gilbertson, Fox & Provasnik, 2007), and office referrals (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002); a phenomenon conventionally labeled the *discipline gap* (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Monroe, 2009). In analyzing this gap, several researchers (Brown, Losen, & Wald, 2002; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba & Knesting, 2002; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002) have consistently found evidence showing that African American students are oftentimes disciplined more frequently and severely; despite the fact that studies reveal that they are generally no more likely to display greater levels of disruptive behavior in comparison to their peers from other ethnic groups (Dinkes, Cataldi, & Lin-Kelly, 2007; Rocque, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Using a sample of over 2000 school districts from the federal Office of Civil Rights’ national dataset; the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) found that 1 in every 8

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This dissertation follows the style of *The Urban Review*.

African American students- compared to 1 in every 16 White students- were suspended at least once during the 1972-1973 school year (1975). Disproportionality in discipline practices, like those referenced by CDF, persist even today (Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009). Losen and Skiba (2010) point out that the racial gap in school suspensions has at least doubled since the early 1970's- this being particularly true for African Americans. The suspension rate for these students went from 6% in 1973 to 15% in 2006 (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Why exactly these trends continue to worsen is puzzling for many researchers; and herein lies the problem.

After reviewing much of the existing literature, the following general questions still remain unanswered: (1) Why are African American students more likely to face the severest forms of disciplinary punishment even though their actions might not warrant such sanctioning?; and (2) How does the discipline gap impact academic achievement? While both questions are addressed in this dissertation, it is the second inquiry that is often empirically understudied; and hence, becomes the major contribution of this work.

In the interest of clarity, this introductory chapter has been divided into four subsections. Subsection one will provide a brief, yet succinct, review of the more seminal literature that systematically profiles the overrepresentation of African Americans in school discipline (Skiba et al., 2002). Subsection two will discuss the primary theoretical framework- *critical race theory*- which guides the investigation into the relationship between African American disproportionality in school discipline and student performance. Subsection three will present the research questions that will be

used, in the chapters to follow. Lastly, subsection four will identify and define a list of key concepts that will be used throughout the present study.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Discipline Gap**

Evidence of the discipline gap was first documented by the CDF (1975) in a seminal report revealing the disparities in discipline practices within American schools. The discipline gap, as it is referenced here, is much like the other gaps- the opportunity gap (Flores, 2007) and the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006)- in that disparities (i.e., in discipline, in education resources, in education experiences, etc.) between White and African American students have historically created advantages for some, and disadvantages for others. While attention to the other gaps tend to overshadow that of the discipline crisis; the understanding of both is quite pertinent to assessments of equitable schooling practices- as can be seen in the CDF report.

From this report, two major findings emerged. First, during the 1972-1973 academic school year, the use of suspensions in public schools accounted for the removal of over one million students from their respective educational institutions, which was a total loss of over four million school days and 22,000 school years (CDF, 1975). Second, African American students were suspended twice the rate of any other ethnic group (CDF, 1975). These findings would, ultimately, provide a platform whereby racial discrimination in the use of school suspensions could be further explored.

Since the publication of the CDF report, some researchers (Kinsler, 2009; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987) contend that racial bias plays a very minute role, if any, in the



distribution of school sanctions. McCarthy and Hoge (1987) were among the first to challenge the viability of race as a determinant of school punishment. They found that students' past history of official punishment, teacher perceptions of student demeanor, and previous academic performance were stronger predictors of suspensions in comparison to race. When these three variables are controlled, McCarthy and Hoge (1987) find, in their study, that race- along with other demographic characteristics, such as, socioeconomic status and gender- has no effect on the type of school punishment a student receives.

Kinsler (2009) - in his study of the Black-White school discipline gap- reports findings closely related to that of McCarthy and Hoge using North Carolina school infraction data. In investigating gaps in punishment within and across schools, he found that Black and White students are equally likely to be suspended and receive similar suspension durations. While Kinsler certainly does not rule out the possibility that racial bias could very well explain racial gaps in discipline; he maintains that such was not the case in his study.

Despite these findings, the interest in the relationship between race and school suspensions continued to gain notoriety; perhaps as an immediate result of the publication of *Opportunities Suspended*. This report, developed by the Civil Rights Project (CRP) at Harvard University (2000), was the first comprehensive national report to scrutinize the disproportional impact of zero tolerance policies- school or district-wide policies that mandate pre-determined, typically harsh, consequences or punishments

(such as suspension and expulsion) for a wide degree of rule violations (Solari & Balshaw, 2007)- on students of color (Civil Rights Project, 2000).

Initially, the report showed that African American students make up roughly 17% of U.S. public school enrollment, yet they constitute approximately 32% of those suspended from school. White students, on the other hand, represent 63% of the total enrollment, and make up 50% of suspensions. When comparing these two statistics, suspensions for White students are seemingly more proportionally distributed.

The CRP report also showed that while several students were referred to the office for a variety of reasons; Africans Americans were frequently referred for nondangerous, nonviolent offenses, such as, disobedience, defiance of authority, disrespect of authority, etc. (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2010; Butler, Lewis, Moore, & James, 2011; CRP, 2000). Infractions such as these are often subjectively defined. As a result, it is quite possible that the determination of whether an infraction occurred could, very well, be tainted with bias and stereotypes (CRP, 2000).

While some skeptics of the discipline gap believe that African American students' behavior is simply more disruptive; there is little evidence in support of this theory, which in turn speaks to why it is rarely considered a plausible explanation for the overrepresentation of African Americans for disciplinary action. With no explanation at hand, to explain this phenomenon, researchers have, therefore, felt the need to revisit the influence of race in the administration of school discipline; with the aim to clearly articulate if indeed race- as it pertains to bias and discrimination- could be in part

responsible for the disproportional patterns seen in discipline practices (Bennett & Harris, 1982; Hanssen, 1998; Roch, Pitts, & Navarro, 2010; Welch & Payne, 2010).

Notwithstanding the overwhelming interest in racial disproportionality in school discipline, only a handful of researchers have attempted to empirically test the relationship between race and exclusionary discipline practices. This area of research, while highly provocative, remains largely unaddressed in the broader context of education scholarship. Yet, and still, this vein of inquiry is deserving of much needed attention due to the severe implications that function as a result of its relationship with student achievement.

One of the most seminal studies, within the corpus of discipline literature, was conducted by Russell Skiba and colleagues (2002). Using the method of discriminant analysis, these researchers uncovered large, statistically significant differences between the rate of office referrals and race. Consistent with much of the prior scholarship in this area, they generally concluded that those students typically referred for sanctioning- which resulted in suspension- were most notably African Americans (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003). While discipline disparities impact both males (Bennett & Harris, 1982) and females (Blake et al., 2010) within this subgroup; inequities appear to be more pronounced among African American males (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Ferguson, 2000; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002).

Aside from race, other studies have also identified additional variables that are likely to contribute to disparities in discipline. Among the most prominent of these

indicators include school segregation (Eitle & Eitle, 2004), socio-demographic characteristics (Skiba et al., 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982), previous discipline record (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987), and urbanicity (Devoe, Peter, Noonan, Snyder, & Baum, 2005; Wu et al., 1982). Studies, such as these, not only seemingly counter the prior notion about the inconsequential nature of race- seeing how these additional factors are very much race-based- but they also put forth other plausible, more finely tuned, explanations for the overrepresentation of students of color for disciplinary action.

### **Zero Tolerance Policies**

The concept of zero tolerance was first seen in the United States federal drug enforcement policies during the 1980's (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Peter Nunez, a former U.S. attorney, ordered Customs Service officials to seize and impound sea vessels attempting to smuggle drugs across the border. All individuals in direct violation of the order were to be apprehended and prosecuted in federal court, no matter how small the amount of narcotics confiscated from each vessel; hence bringing about the term zero tolerance.

In response to public uproar concerning the increasingly high incidents of violence in public schools; in like manner, state legislators and Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) of 1994, which catapulted the philosophy of zero tolerance into educational institutions. This law was intended to severely punish students with a minimum, one year expulsion if they were found in possession of a weapon, namely a firearm, while on school property (CRP, 2000; McNeal & Dunbar, 2010). To ensure compliance with GFSA, Congress threatened to withhold federal education funds

from those states that failed to enforce expulsions for weapons violations (Weissman, 2010). Perhaps somewhat of a precautionary measure, following the passing of GFSA, states expanded the law to include not only firearms, but drugs and other instruments that could be used as weapons (e.g., knives, nail files, scissors, stilettos, etc.) (CRP, 2000; Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002).

The actual implementation of zero tolerance policies in schools, however, can be credited to school districts, as they- in conjunction with school officials- are primarily responsible for determining the consequence or punishment for specific school-related offenses (Sughrue, 2003). Like the states, school districts exercised their discretion (even though the policy was presumably intended to limit discretion and maintain objectivity), and in turn, broadened the list of offenses punishable by harsh disciplinary consequences (i.e., out-of-school suspensions and/or expulsions) to include certain behavioral infractions (e.g., disrespect, insubordination, disruption, etc.) (Dupper, 2010; Skiba & Knesting, 2001). District officials have justified the use of these “get tough” (CRP, 2000, p. 1) disciplinary measures, to be applied to the most minor of offenses, on account of two very specific forms of logic. First, the use of suspensions and expulsions function as a deterrent to violence in schools (Casella, 2003). Second, excluding disruptive students from school helps to foster the most efficacious learning environment; leading to substantial improvements in teaching and learning once disruptive students have been removed from the classroom (Skiba, Ekes, & Brown, 2009). Despite this reasoning, there is little research, if any, that supports these claims (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Even four years after its entry into

education, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that schools that used a zero tolerance approach to discipline were still less safe, and no more academically advanced, than those schools that chose not use the approach (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

Paradoxically, the very policy that was initially created to provide educational opportunities is now largely responsible for limiting them. Because zero tolerance policies have played a major role in increased suspensions and expulsions (Weissman, 2010), they have been linked to grade retention, dropping out of school, and recidivism (Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009; Sullivan, 2007). An even more apparent consequence of this policy is its direct connection to the exacerbated racial gap in school discipline (Solari & Balshaw, 2007). With students of color being disproportionately affected by this mandate, it has been said that racism lies just beneath the surface of many decisions based on the zero tolerance philosophy (Cross, 2001). In sum, from what can generally be gleaned from the existing research; zero tolerance policies are not only partially responsible for the loss of educational opportunities (Townsend, 2000), but they could very well be the source of academic failure for historically marginalized groups of students (Gregory et al., 2010).

In considering those groups that are more susceptible to classroom removal, African American urban students appear to be most vulnerable as indicated by their stark overrepresentation in exclusionary discipline (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Additionally, they are equally vulnerable to the negative academic consequences- mentioned above- that stem from zero tolerance policies. However, failing school is but one deleterious

result. Beyond issues of low achievement, students who are excluded from the classroom through exclusionary measures are more likely to engage in criminal behavior (CDF, 1975; CRP, 2000; Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty, & Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Monroe, 2005a). Recently, studies have connected increases in school suspensions and expulsions to increases in incarceration rates (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Losen & Hewitt, 2010; Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009) in a relatively new strand of research known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” literature (Wald & Losen, 2003). This relationship between the school and juvenile justice system has been identified most notably among African Americans (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). All things considered, any policy that results in a negative correlation with academic achievement and a positive correlation with incarceration- for any ethnic group- is, to this end, extremely difficult to justify (Skiba, Simmons, Staudinger, Rausch, Dow, & Feggins, 2002). For this reason, school-based zero tolerance policies remain highly controversial; and has been met with much resistance- often being challenged as a violation of civil rights in federal courts (Solari & Balshaw, 2007).

### **Discipline in Urban Schools**

Not many would argue that school urbanicity is closely associated with more punitive forms of school punishment (Welch & Payne, 2010); but exactly why this is the case is not always entirely clear. According to Brantlinger (1991), the exposure to violence and substance abuse in urban neighborhoods is thought to stimulate aggressive behavior, and thus, potentially increase the likelihood of receiving sanctions for students attending school in urban districts. While there is no supportive evidence confirming a

causal relationship between exposure to violence and school punishment (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010); researchers have still tried to link one with the other. Among them are Jenkins and Bell (1994), who in their study of inner city African American high school students found a significant correlation between witnessing violence and self-reports of school-related problems which resulted in out-of-school suspension.

One of the more popular explanations, however, for why urban schools are seemingly more fraught with cases of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, is the idea that the students and teachers are culturally mismatched; which in its simplest form, means that a student's behavior is misunderstood or misinterpreted by the teacher as defiant or noncompliant (Townsend, 2000). Because the majority of students in most urban school districts are low income students of color, and the teaching force in is overwhelming White and middle class (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Landsman & Lewis, 2006); there are bound to be problems associated with student discipline which can be attributed to the lack of multicultural competence- the awareness of diverse cultures as they relate to one's individual beliefs, values, biases, and assumptions about human behavior- on the part of the teacher (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). For instance, Weinstein and her colleagues point out that a spirited verbal interaction between two African American males can be perceived very differently (as cited in Monroe, 2006, p. 163). On one hand, the exchange could be seen as aggressive behavior; but on the other hand it could be considered a culturally linguistic exchange. Unfortunately, more often than not, such interaction is perceived as aggressive behavior



because the very institutional norms that typically govern urban schools are markedly different from the cultural backgrounds of its students (Ferguson, 2000).

As it stands, no matter how logical the explanation may appear; neither reasoning (i.e., exposure to violence or cultural mismatching) has been determined to have single handedly influenced the increasing rate of school suspensions and expulsions found in urban schools. Perhaps both, exposure to violence and cultural mismatching, have worked together to create this undesirable outcome. Nonetheless, whatever the rationalization, one thing is clear; urban schools tend to impose exclusionary discipline consequences more frequently than those schools located in suburban and rural areas (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). This is a cause for much concern, especially when considering students of color make up a large proportion of student enrollment in urban districts (Kincheloe, 2010); and are therefore the ones who have a greater likelihood of being suspended or expelled (McLoughlin & Noltemeyer, 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The impetus for this study is based on two simple, yet profound, tenets. First, racism- a system of dominance, power, and privilege based on racial group designations; rooted in the historical oppression of a group defined or perceived by dominant-group members as inferior, deviant, or undesirable; and occurring in circumstances where members of the dominant group members create or accept their societal privilege by maintain structures, ideologies, values or behaviors that have the intent or effect of leaving the nondominant-group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status, and/or equal access to resources (Harrell, 2000) - continues to permeate urban public

schools in the United States (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Scott, 2010). Second, Whiteness is used to perpetuate school inequities by upholding and maintaining stratifications (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Each tenet represents the very basic assumptions of critical race theory as it applies to education (Ladson-Billings, 2009). It is this theory which helps to guide the investigation into the relationship between African American disproportionality in school discipline and student performance; the vein of inquiry established within the present study. What is to follow is a rather brief, but succinct, overview of this theoretical frame.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) originally surfaced in the early 1980's as an outgrowth of critical legal studies (CLS), which appeared just 10 years prior (Ladson-Billings, 1999). While each of these ideologies share similar thoughts concerning Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony- a concept used to describe a condition in which the supremacy of a social group is achieved not only by physical force (i.e., domination or command) but also through consensual submission of the very people being dominated (Litowitz, 2000)- and generally agree on its ability to use the law as a vehicle to legitimize oppressive structures in American society; it is the recognition of the relationship between racism and this Gramscian ideal that marks the point of divergence between the two traditions.

CRT scholars have often criticized CLS scholarship; suggesting that this body of work is seemingly indifferent toward the experiences of people of color (Tate, 1997).

CLS ideology sees racism as no different from any other forms of class-based oppression- in that it functions largely as a result of hierarchical structures; and therefore, ignores the influence of race in U.S. jurisprudence (Bell, 1984; Crenshaw, 1988; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1987). Yet, because racism is a central ideological underpinning of life in the United States (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1988); the failure to acknowledge it, as such, is problematic. From this critique emerged CRT.

CRT begins with the premise that racism is endemic (Tate, 1997), and moreover, a normal part of society and a permanent part of American life (Bell, 1987; 1992). Abrams and Moio (2009) goes on further to add that society, itself, is far from being race neutral in its laws and social structures; and consequently, these larger social entities tend to influence everyday thought, actions, and interactions. In recognizing the role of racism, the major goal of CRT- as interpreted by Ladson-Billings (1999)- is to unmask and expose racism in its various permutations. Simply put, CRT aims to achieve racial justice (Bell, 1987; Tate, 1997).

Quite often, the issue of “equal opportunity” is discussed in terms of the idea that students of color should have access to the same opportunities (i.e., funding, facilities, curriculum, and instruction) as those afforded to their White counterparts. Yet, in using CRT to address equal opportunities, it is assumed that equality is nonexistent; thus, explaining why school inequities are rampant. So when examining disparities in public education, this framework can potentially serve as a powerful explanatory tool for understanding the sustained inequalities that are experienced by students of color- namely African Americans (Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1999). As a caveat, however,

this framework is only useful when race is recognized as an important component in the structuring of education- an idea commonly purported by many critical race theorists.

### **Study Overview and Guiding Research Questions**

Disproportional trends in disciplinary practices are a cause for immediate concern. In many cases, African American students- in comparison to their peers- are often overrepresented for exclusionary discipline sanctions. This, in and of itself, has led researchers to believe that there may, in fact, be some form of racial bias- either intentional or unintentional- embedded in the distribution of sanctions.

Admittedly, several theories- *critical race theory* (CRT) (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Bell, 1987); *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP) (Gregory & Mosely, 2004); *culturally responsive classroom management* (CRCM) (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004); *culturally responsive discipline* (Sheets & Gay, 1996); and *representative bureaucracy* (Roch, Pitts, & Navarro, 2010)- have all addressed the influence of racial bias in the disciplinary process; however, there is seemingly a more pressing issue at play. Very few scholars (Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Scott & Barrett, 2004) have taken the initiative to empirically investigate how disproportionality in school discipline impacts student performance.

For years, studies have shown that low school attendance rates are detrimental to learning and student performance. For instance, Lamdin (1996) - using Baltimore public elementary school data- found that the average level of attendance has a positive and significant influence on performance on high stakes tests; ultimately concluding that lower attendance is associated with lower levels of student performance. Similarly,

Gottfried (2010) – in his longitudinal study comprised of data from Philadelphia elementary and middle schools- found that the number of days a student spends in school, positively affects learning outcomes. Altogether, both studies show that students who are seldom absent from classroom instruction tend to do better academically than those who attend school less frequently.

Considering what these researchers have found about the relationship between attendance and achievement, one has to ask: What factors contribute to absenteeism? While there are a myriad of well-known reasons why students are absent from school, one that is generally recognized is school suspensions (Sundius & Farneth, 2008). Despite the fact that suspensions have been considered largely responsible for the increased number of non-attending students (Sundius & Farneth, 2008), very little attention has been given to the relationship between student performance and missed instruction time resulting from exclusionary forms of discipline. If indeed those students who do not attend school as frequently, receive fewer hours of classroom instruction and consequently perform poorly academically - as research has generally suggested (Gottfried, 2010); what then are the academic ramifications for those students who are suspended or expelled from school?

Herein lies the major contribution of the present work. The aim, here, is to articulate the effects of exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., out-of-school suspensions and/or expulsions) on student performance. Because African American students are among those who frequently suffer from racial disparities in school discipline, the focus of the investigations, here, is primarily devoted to this group.

This dissertation was guided by two separate- yet interrelated studies- that posed the following major research questions. The first study, presented in Chapter II, asked: *What factors are important in predicting the likelihood of being suspended and/ or expelled from school?* and *Are suspensions and race correlated?* Here, the interest is in exploring the effects of race, class, gender and other possible demographic characteristics- such as school level and behavior role- on exclusionary discipline practices.

The second study, presented in Chapter III, asked: *How does the overrepresentation of African American students for exclusionary sanctions impact student performance?* The interest, here, is in identifying the relationship between school suspensions and/or expulsions and its impact on the dropout rate, graduation rate, and performance on high stakes tests.

Subsequently, given the findings from each study, the concluding chapter- Chapter IV- will discuss the link between the two studies and their individual contribution toward the advancement of educational scholarship and discourse. As a point of departure, directions for future studies will also be provided.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of Study**

Although these studies render very important findings, some caution must be exercised in interpreting the results. Given that a portion of this analysis focused on a single urban school district in the Midwestern region of the U.S., one is urged to take particular care in generalizing the findings to the larger student population in other school districts. Also of concern was the time span upon which the data was collected.

Unlike some studies that assess disproportional trends using longitudinal data, this study is limited in the sense that it reports information that was collected during a single academic school year (i.e., 2005-2006). One final limitation of the study was the use an existing secondary dataset (i.e., data which is collected by someone other than the researcher). Because of its structuring, certain variables that were of particular interest to the researcher (e.g., individual level data for dropouts, graduates, and high stakes test scores) were omitted and thus could not be analyzed in this study. Additionally, other analyses that would have greatly enhanced the study (e.g., conducting follow-up interviews; administering questionnaires; participant/ observation etc.) were impossible to facilitate due to the sensitivity of information being collected and the unavailability of participant's contact information.

The delimitations of the study are just as important as the limitations. This being said, it should be noted that the focus of this study was specifically on African American students. Racial disproportionality in school discipline among other students of color- specifically Hispanics, American Indians, and Asian Americans- was either minimally addressed (i.e., Hispanic) or completely excluded (i.e., American Indians and Asian Americans) from the analyses. Also, while there were a number of non-exclusionary sanctions (e.g., after school detention, restricted lunch, warnings, etc.) included within the dataset, attention to exclusionary sanctions- those sanctions which suspended or expelled students from school grounds, and was thus responsible for missed instructional time - were the only form of school punishment examined.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

For the purpose of the present study, the following terms have been provided in an effort to offer a common focal point and level of understanding:

*Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)* - yearly cross-cohort comparisons of the percentage of students meeting the proficiency and graduation standards established under NCLB (Sanders, 2003).

*Colorado Model Content Standards*- an academic standard that reviews and defines mastery according to the expectation of what students need to know and be able to do (CDE, 2010a).

*Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP)*- a high stakes test- mandated under NCLB for the state of Colorado- administered to students in grades 3-10 to determine if they are able to meet the Colorado Model Content Standards in the specified content areas (i.e., reading, writing, math, and science) (CDE, 2010c).

*Critical Legal Studies*- a legal movement that sought to examine both legal ideology and legal discourse to determine how the two work to reproduce and legitimate hierarchical structures in American society (Crenshaw, 1988).

*Critical Race Theory (Context of Education)* - a pedagogy, curriculum and research agenda that accounts for the role of race and racism in U.S. education and works toward the elimination of racism as a part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination (Solorzano, 1997).

*Cultural Mismatching*- an instance in which a student's behavior is misunderstood or misinterpreted by the teacher as defiant or noncompliant (Townsend, 2000).



*Culturally Responsive Classroom Management*- an ongoing, long-term, and often discomfiting process in which cultural diversity becomes a lens through which teachers view the tasks of classroom management (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004).

*Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*- a theoretical lens used to understand why conflicts and punishments occur in urban high school settings (Gregory & Mosely, 2004).

*Culturally Responsive Discipline*- the ability of educators to understand the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, how they sanction behavior and celebrate accomplishments, and their rules of decorum, deference, and etiquette (Sheets & Gay, 1996).

*Exclusionary Discipline*- any type of disciplinary sanction that results in the suspension or expulsion of a student from school premises, and confines them to their home or an alternative educational facility for an extended length of time (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010).

*Exclusionary Strategy*- a strategic plan, devised by schools and school districts, to use student suspensions and/or expulsions to exclude low-performing students from taking state mandated high stakes tests, as a means of attempting to meet AYP (Ryan, 2006).

*Fourth Grade Failure Syndrome*- a phenomenon found among African Americans whereby they experience a drop in enthusiasm and academic performance; beginning a downward spiral that persists throughout their academic career, as they transition to the fourth grade (Kunjufu, 2005).

*Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA), 1994*- education mandate which catapulted the philosophy of zero tolerance into educational institutions. This law was intended to severely punish students with a minimum, one year expulsion if they were found in possession of a weapon, namely a firearm, while on school property (McNeal & Dunbar, 2010).

*High Stakes Test*- standards-based assessment that is often tied to major consequences for the test taker (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2005).

*Institutional Racism*- policies, or norms of an institution, that perpetuate structures of power in society (Mendez, 2009).

*Hegemony*- a condition in which the supremacy of a social group is achieved not only by physical force (i.e., domination or command) but also through consensual submission of the very people being dominated (Litowitz, 2000).

*Low-Performing Students*- students who do not achieve minimum competency levels on state tests (Townsend, 2002).

*Multicultural Competence*- awareness of diverse cultures as they relate to one's individual beliefs, values, biases, and assumptions about human behavior (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004).

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 2002*- legislative cornerstone of the Bush Administration that represented a significant shift in federal education policy; one which moved the emphasis away from the federal government's role as a funding source for low-income students to its position as a major force in the shaping of goals and outcomes in education (Fusarelli, 2004).

*Proficiency*- a CSAP achievement level which indicates that the student has successfully demonstrated a solid academic understanding of the subject matter as reflected by the Colorado Model Content Standards (Colorado Department of Education, 2009c).

*Racism*- a system of dominance, power, and privilege based on racial group designations, rooted in the historical oppression of a group defined or perceived by dominant-group members as inferior, deviant, or undesirable; and occurring in circumstances where members of the dominant group members create or accept their societal privilege by maintain structures, ideologies, values or behaviors that have the intent or effect of leaving the nondominant-group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status, and/or equal access to resources (Harrell, 2000).

*Representative Bureaucracy*- a theory which holds that passive representation- the bureaucracy matching the general population on salient indicators of diversity, such as race, ethnicity, or gender- will lead to active representation, which is the formulation of policies that will benefit the interests of diverse groups. (Roch, Pitts, & Navarro, 2010).

*Standards-based Reform*- education policies which are rooted in the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals functions as the starting place for increasing student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

*Whiteness (White Privilege)*- a social construct used to articulate the privileges that persons of European descent possess as a function of their status in society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

*Zero tolerance*- School or district-wide policies that mandate pre-determined, typically harsh, consequences or punishments (such as suspension and expulsion) for a wide degree of rule violations (Solari & Balshaw, 2007).

CHAPTER II  
ASSESSING THE ODDS:  
DISPROPORTIONAL DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

One of the most frequently held assumptions found within the school discipline literature suggests that students of color- particularly African Americans, males, low-income/urban populations are at an increased risk of receiving exclusionary discipline sanctions (i.e., out-of-school suspension and/or expulsion) (Dupper, 2010; Mcloughlin & Noltemeyer, 2010; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). Aside from race, gender, and socioeconomic status, however, less is known about the other factors that may increase the likelihood of a student being temporarily, or even permanently, removed from school premises as a result of disciplinary action. These other factors, so to speak, are presumably equally important in understanding disproportionality in school discipline. Subsequently, the purpose of this article is to systematically explore the likelihood that a student will be suspended or expelled- from one Midwestern urban school district- by assessing the impact of race, gender, and socioeconomic status alongside the other, not so common, demographic characteristics; including school level (i.e., elementary or secondary) and behavior role (i.e., direct or indirect involvement). The findings from this study revealed that gender, school level, and behavior role significantly predict the likelihood that a student will receive some form of exclusionary discipline. Female students, elementary students, and students directly involved in the committal of an offense were each shown to have an increased

risk of being suspended or expelled when compared to male students, secondary students, and students with indirect involvement.

### **Introduction**

School discipline is by far one of the most perennial and widely contentious problems in education today (Skiba et al., 1997). From minor classroom squabbles to massive school shootings; these increasingly high incidences of school violence have left many educators paralyzed with fear while in the classroom. As a result, when dealing with disruptive students it is not uncommon for educators to tackle- what is seemingly- an inconsequential offense with the severest of punishments; suspension and/or expulsion (Morrison & Skiba, 2001; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003). For instance, during the early 1990's, Lipman (1997) conducted a case study by which she observed two teams of urban school teachers. Within her study, she makes note of an occurrence whereby a ninth grade student was reprimanded with a 10-day suspension- not for fighting, but for a dress code violation (i.e., wearing his overall straps unsnapped). At the time, this fashion trend was apparently too suggestive according to administration.

In a like manner, Brownstein (2010) discusses a similar incident that occurred in Columbus, Georgia- a fairly dense metropolitan area. This time an eleventh grade student received a 10-day suspension for talking on a cell phone during his lunch break. When questioned about whom he was speaking with, he told officials that he was on the phone with his mother- who had just been deployed to Iraq. Notwithstanding his rationale, the officials upheld the suspension; citing their 'no cell phone' policy as the reason for their decision (CNN, 2005).

In more recent news, Pasciak (2010) reported that a high school freshman, attending school in Buffalo, New York, was suspended for wandering the school's hallways. On surface, this appears to be a relatively minor offense, but it was one that ended in a deadly altercation. Within an hour of the student being suspended, he was fatally gunned down while waiting for the city bus to take him home. The administration has since reconsidered their suspension policy; and as a result, reduced the sanction- for roaming the halls and skipping class- to a parent conference (Pasciak, 2010).

These cases, while separate, have one string of commonality; each of the individuals suspended were described as African American, male, and residing in low-income/urban communities. As research has generally suggested, these descriptives typically characterize not only those students who face an increased chance of being suspended or expelled (Planty, Hussar, Snyder, Kena, KewalRammi, Kemp, Bianco, & Dinkes, 2009); but they also describe those students who face such disciplinary recourse for relatively minor offenses (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003). As seen in the examples above, these minor offenses include- but are in no means limited to- dress code violations (Ali, 2008; Lipman, 1997), cell phone use (Brownstein, 2010; Raus, 2010), work refusal (Hershfeldt, Sechrest, Pell, Rosenberg, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010), tardiness/truancy (Skiba & Peterson, 1999), and general classroom disruption (Imich, 1994).

The resulting impact of this zero tolerance approach- that is, the severe punishment of all infractions, no matter how minor (Skiba & Peterson, 1999) -to school discipline has had less of an influence on the elimination of, or reduction in, problematic

behaviors (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Theriot et al., 2010); and more of an effect on academic achievement (Arcia, 2006; Kravovich et al., 2010; Taylor & Foster, 1986). To this end, there becomes a need to meticulously analyze which students face an increased chance of being suspended or expelled. In conducting such an analysis, more can be done to address possible misuse of zero tolerance policies, as well as, the overuse of exclusionary discipline sanctions. Ideally, the information gleaned will better arm urban educational stakeholders with strategies that help to effectively combat disproportionality in school discipline; ones that aim to tackle discipline responses to student misbehavior by utilizing sanctions that keep students in school, rather than push them out.

### **Statement of Purpose**

While there has been much said about the racial, gender, and socioeconomic composition of those students receiving exclusionary sanctions; less is known about other, potentially germane, demographic attributes- such as, school level (i.e., elementary or secondary) and behavior role (direct or indirect involvement) - which also potentially explain more about the odds of a student being suspended or expelled. Given this, the purpose of the present study is twofold: first, to assess the likelihood of receiving a suspension and/or expulsion when a student's race, gender, socioeconomic status, school level, and behavior role are considered; and second, to determine if race and suspensions are correlated in any way. Additional attention is given to school level and behavior role because, while often overlooked in the literature, each could



potentially reveal more about who gets suspended and/or expelled. It is this reason that both variables were deemed relevant to the present study.

The first, of the two objectives, seeks to systematically investigate- through the use of binary logistic regression analysis- disproportionality in disciplinary practices in one Midwestern urban school district. The second objective attempts to explore, at the elementary level, the relationship between race and the number of out-of-school suspension (OSS) days using correlation analysis. With the contribution of these two objectives, one can only hope that discipline scholars will begin to see the utility in empirically assessing disproportionality in school discipline, as well as, the importance of expanding the disproportionality discourse to include elementary institutions.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed in an attempt to further investigate the objectives of the present study:

RQ(1):            *What factors are important in predicting the likelihood of being suspended and/ or expelled from school?*

RQ(2):            *Are suspensions and race correlated?*

These research questions potentially yield two important insights: (a) first, *what* factors (e.g., race, gender, school level, etc.) generally influence the odds, or probability, that a student will receive an exclusionary sanction; and (b) second, *who* (e.g., African Americans, Whites, males, females, etc.) is more vulnerable to school suspensions and/or expulsions.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Participants included elementary, middle, and high school students with at least one discipline sanction (N= 27,884) that were enrolled in a Midwestern urban school district during the 2005-2006 academic school year. The school district sampled served approximately 32,183 students across an average of 44 schools.

Male students accounted for 66.4% (18,520) of the dataset, compared to 33.6% (9,364) of the female students in the present study. The majority of the students were categorized as either Hispanic (38%) or African American (37%). White students comprised approximately 21% of the total number of students. An estimated 47.5% (13,263) were enrolled at the middle school level, 33% (9,215) at the high school, and 18.7% (5,216) at the elementary level.

Information on how each student was involved in the offense was also documented. This data were classified into two distinct categories: (a) direct involvement, or (b) indirect involvement. Those students cited as the offender or participant were categorized as having direct involvement, while those cited as an instigator were categorized as having indirect involvement. Of the entire sample, 16,640 (59.6%) were classified as offenders, 1,719 (6.1%) as participants, and 9,477 (33.9%) as instigators.

### **Procedures**

Data reported in this study were collected from an extant database comprised of detailed information concerning all documented office referrals that occurred during a

single academic school year in one Midwestern urban school district. Data access and dissemination of findings were approved by the district's Research Department. The individual level data used in the present study consisted of each student's disciplinary referral and corresponding sanction, throughout the course of the 2005-2006 academic school year. Information regarding disciplinary referrals and sanctions was based on the district's school disciplinary policy, as outlined in its student behavior handbook. Referrals for disobedience were the only form of office referral considered in this study, as it was the single most cited behavioral infraction among all ethnic groups.

School records identified 38 possible discipline sanctions. They ranged in severity from restricted lunch to expulsion. However, only exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., out-of-school suspension and expulsion) were examined. While non-exclusionary discipline practices were included for comparative purposes (serving as a benchmark variable in the dichotomous ordering of school sanctions); they were not directly assessed.

### **Analysis**

In exploring out-of-school suspensions and/or expulsions two analytical methods were considered; logistic regression analysis and bivariate correlations. Each of these methods will be discussed in terms of how they relate to the research questions posed in this study.

The first of the two methods, logistic regression analysis, was used to assess RQ1. Recall, this question asked, *What factors are important in predicting the likelihood of being suspended and/ or expelled from school?* This method of analysis is particularly

useful in addressing this question because it allows the researchers to predict the probability, or odds, of belonging to one of two categories (i.e., incurring an exclusionary or non-exclusionary sanction) given additional information, or other factors (i.e., a student's race, gender, socioeconomic status, school level, and behavior role).

The second method, bivariate correlations, was used to assess RQ2. Once again, recall this question asked, *Are suspensions and race correlated?* This method of analysis is well suited for analyzing this question because the interest, here, is in the relationship (i.e., statistical significance of two or more variables) and the strength of the said relationship (i.e., the magnitude of the association and its corresponding direction) between the number of OSS days and race. Because the variables in question are a combination of continuous and categorical variables, the point biserial correlation, which is mathematically equivalent to the Pearson's  $r$ , is reported when discussing the details of this relationship.

### **Logistic Regression Analysis**

**Dependent variable.** The dependent, or outcome, variable used for the logistic regression analysis was discipline sanctions for acts of disobedience- the most frequently cited infraction for all groups within the dataset. Sanctions ranged in severity from a warning to expulsion. Exclusionary sanctions such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions were the focus of this study. This variable was measured by grouping each of the possible 38 discipline sanctions into one of two categories: exclusionary and non-exclusionary sanctions. Table A1 provides a detailed list of all 38 sanctions, in addition to, its corresponding categorization as exclusionary or non-exclusionary. The sanctions

identified as exclusionary included all forms of out-of-school suspensions (i.e., ranging from 1-day to 20-day suspensions) and expulsions (i.e., including negotiated withdrawals and systematic exclusions). All other sanctions were categorized as non-exclusionary. The dependent variable was coded as a binary variable; whereby exclusionary sanctions were coded 1 and non-exclusionary sanctions were coded 0.

**Independent variables.** The independent, or predictor, variables used for the logistic regression analysis included race, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), school level, and behavior role. Like the dependent variable, each of these predictors was binary and coded with either a 1 or 0. This method of coding is most beneficial because it simplifies the relationship between the coefficient and the odds ratios; hence, decreasing the risk of reporting misleading results.

The first variable, race, was measured by official record data of the participant as Caucasian, African American, or Hispanic, Asian American, or Native American. For the purpose of this analysis only White, African American and Hispanic students were assessed. Native Americans were omitted because of their small sample size, while Asian Americans were excluded based on their lack of relevance in prior studies of disproportionality in school discipline. These remaining three racial groupings were placed in one of two categories; students of color or non-students of color. African Americans and Hispanics were categorized as students of color, thus they were coded 1. White students were categorized as non-students of color, and they were coded 0.

The second variable, gender, was also identified using official record data. Here, participants were categorized as either a male or female. In this study, males were coded 1 and females were coded 0.

The third variable measured was SES. However, because there was no general measure of SES available in the data analyzed for this study; student lunch status (i.e., whether a student was eligible for free/reduced lunch) was used as a proxy for SES. While this indicator carries with it its own set of limitations (Entwisle & Astone, 1994); studies of racial disproportionality in school discipline have typically utilized student lunch status as an acceptable measure for SES (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Rocque, 2010). With this in consideration, a dichotomous variable for student lunch status was used in the present study as a measure of SES. Students who received free or reduced lunch were coded 1, and those who paid full price were coded 0.

School level was measured by grouping grade levels 3 through 10 into one of two categories; secondary level or elementary level. In alignment with the district's structuring of grade levels, sixth-grade through tenth-grade was identified as the standard secondary level and coded 1. Third-grade through fifth-grade was identified as the standard elementary level, and was coded 0.

The last variable, behavior role, was measured by official data records, which reported the student as an offender, participant, or instigator. Each of these groups was placed into one of two categories; direct involvement or indirect involvement. Those participants who were considered to be the offender or participant were categorized as having direct involvement in the committal of an offense, and coded 1. Those students

considered to be the instigator were categorized as having indirect involvement, and coded 0.

### **Bivariate Correlation**

**Continuous variable.** The continuous variable used for the bivariate correlation analysis was the number of assigned OSS days from elementary school. Because the focus here is at the elementary level (this level being of particular interest as determined by the logistic regression findings presented in the upcoming subsection), the number of days excluded from school- as a result of suspension- only account for elementary school participants. The number of assigned OSS days range in value from 1 to 20, where it was possible for the participant to incur one day of out-of-school suspension up to 20 days of out-of-school suspension.

**Dichotomous variables.** The dichotomous variable used for the bivariate correlation analysis was race. Here, it is coded slightly different than that which was used in the logistic regression. In the first correlation analysis, African American students were categorized as students of color and coded 1, and White students were categorized as non-students of color and coded 0. In the second correlation analysis, Hispanic students were categorized as students of color and coded 1, and White students were categorized as non-students of color and coded 0. In the interest of brevity, the findings for Hispanics were omitted due to their lack of statistical significance.

### **Results**

Table A2 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the logistic regression analysis used in the present study. The total sample size (N) consisted of approximately 8,594

participants. In this study, the majority of participants (91%) had received some form of non-exclusionary sanction while the remaining participants (9%) received some form of exclusionary sanction; both sanctions were imposed as a consequence for acts of disobedience. Additionally, Table A2 offers details concerning race, gender, socioeconomic status, school level, and behavior role. For each given predictor the population size (n) was reported. The n was determined by dividing the sum totals from each separate exclusionary and non-exclusionary category between the sample from each population (i.e., student of color and non-student of color; male and female; free reduced lunch and full priced lunch; secondary and elementary; and direct involvement and indirect involvement).

Table A3 presents the results from the logistic regression analysis. The findings, here, show how much more likely it is for a participant to receive an exclusionary sanction for acts of disobedience based upon a given set of factors. Three of the five factors- gender, school level, and behavior role- were found to have significantly predicted the likelihood of suspension. Statistical significance was determined using the standard .05 level as the benchmark. All significant findings reported indicate that there is a less than 5% chance that the relationship between variables occurred by chance.

Participants with direct involvement in a disobedience offense were 1.84 times more likely than participants with indirect involvement to receive an exclusionary sanction,  $B = 0.61$ ,  $Wald = 18.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $OR = 1.84$ . Interestingly, however, males were 0.81 times less likely than females to receive an exclusionary sanction for a disobedience offense,  $B = -0.22$ ,  $Wald = 5.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $OR = 0.81$ . Stated differently, the



estimated odds of a female student receiving a suspension and/or expulsion were 1.24 times greater than the estimated odds for a male student. This was calculated by taking the antilog of the Beta ( $\beta$ ) coefficient 0.22. Additionally, secondary schools were 0.76 times less likely than elementary schools to use an exclusionary sanction for a disobedience offense,  $B = -0.27$ ,  $Wald = 7.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $OR = 0.76$ . If taking the antilog of the Beta ( $\beta$ ) coefficient 0.27, then one could say that the estimated odds of receiving a suspension and/or expulsion for elementary students were 1.30 times greater than the estimated odds for secondary students.

The Hosmer-Lemeshow (H-L) test was the optimal inferential goodness-of-fit test to use in this analysis because of the binary structuring of the variables. This test is primarily responsible for assessing the overall fit of the logistic regression; that is, how well the regression is fit to the data. The H-L goodness-of-fit statistic is obtained by calculating the Pearson chi square ( $\chi^2$ ). The results yielded a  $\chi^2(7)$  of 41.44 and was not statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ). This suggests that the model was fit to the data well. Simply put, the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ), which implies that there is a good model fit to the data, can be considered tenable.

The Omnibus test of model coefficients can also be considered here within the discussion of goodness-of-fit. It tests whether adding the specified variables to the model increased the ability to predict disciplinary sanctions. From these findings it appears plausible to conclude that it is safe to reject the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) ( $p < .001$ ), which suggests that race, gender, socioeconomic status, school level and behavior role did not

increase the ability to predict the likelihood of receiving an exclusionary sanction for acts of disobedience.

Table A4 reports the findings from the bivariate correlation analysis using a one-tailed test. Here, race was tested for a possible correlation with the number of assigned OSS days in elementary school. The results reveal that race is significantly correlated with the number of assigned OSS days in elementary school. The positive point biserial coefficient ( $r_{pb}$ ) suggests that a greater number of assigned OSS days, or rather long-term suspension, is only slightly associated with African American elementary students ( $r = .08$ ,  $p < .05$ , point biserial correlation coefficient). However, when implementing a two-tailed test the relationship between race and the number of assigned OSS days is no longer significant.

### **Discussion**

The premise upon which this study was established serves two ends. First, it sought to diversify the study of exclusionary discipline practices by utilizing a slightly unconventional method to investigate potential predictors of school suspensions and/or expulsions. While the interest in exclusionary discipline practices is not new, the methods used in the study provide a rather different analytical approach- with the application of logistic regression- than that which has been typically used in prior studies (i.e., theoretical methodologies, discriminant analysis, ANOVA, multiple regression). Second, through the empirical evidence provided, there was an attempt to make a case as to why researchers should meticulously explore exclusionary discipline practices at the elementary level. Presently, a large number of studies tend to focus almost exclusively

on discipline practices at the secondary level. In doing so, it is quite possible that these studies are missing a significant piece to the puzzle of discipline by not closely examining what is being practiced, with respect to the distribution of exclusionary sanctions, in elementary schools.

From the results of the present study, two things are clear. One, gender, school level, and behavior role help to predict the odds of being suspended and/or expelled from school. Each of these predictors was statistically significant at the recommended .05 level (i.e.,  $p < .05$ ). In a practical sense, this can be interpreted to suggest that those students directly involved in the committal of an offense (acting as the offender or participant) were 1.84 times more likely than those students who were indirectly involved (acting as an instigator) to face suspension or expulsion for acts of disobedience. This finding is not too surprising when considering the general assumption that those students who are blatantly noncompliant will be more severely punished than those who merely encourage insubordination.

Notwithstanding conventional wisdom to the contrary, the findings relative to gender and school level were more telling. They reveal that male students, as well as students enrolled in secondary schools, were nearly 0.80 times less likely to be reprimanded with some form of exclusionary sanction in comparison to their female counterparts and students enrolled in elementary schools, respectively. There are a couple of possible explanations for this outcome, the simplest being that the results were a product of some unique set of circumstances specific to the district under consideration. Another possible explanation might be that less aggressive, non-physical

offenses, such as disobedience, are more pronounced among females; leaving the more aggressive, physical offenses, such as fighting attributable to males. Insofar as school level is concerned, suspensions and expulsions might be greater for elementary students because unlike secondary schools, there are very few- if any- options available that allow the teacher to temporarily remove the student from the classroom (e.g., in-school suspension/detention) when they misbehave. Therefore, in an effort to preserve the learning environment for other students; administrators may look to punish relatively minor offenses, such as disobedience, with a more extreme form of classroom removal- which in this instance, happens to be suspensions and/or expulsions.

While race and socioeconomic status were not statistically significant predictors, there is still reason to believe that these variables are important in explaining the nuances surrounding who gets suspended and expelled. In an effort to explain why these variables did not appear to be significant in this analysis, I turn to the measurement limitations related to the shortcomings of the dataset.

Contrary to past studies (Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008), race was not found as a significant predictor in disciplinary outcomes. Race, for many social scientists and anthropologists, is not a biological construct but rather a social construct. With this in mind, finding an adequate way to capture the sociological dynamics associated with race is rather difficult. Any study that restricts race to groupings by mere ethnic categories is severely limited; therefore, it should be no surprise that race will, at times, appear to be insignificant, when it actually is quite meaningful. The same is true for socioeconomic status. While a student's lunch status seems more than an appropriate

proxy for socioeconomic status, it too is quite limiting. Without some form of numerical indicator for socioeconomic status, it is quite possible that the effects of this particular variable can be masked behind dummy codes (i.e., lunch status assignments) that may speak more to a district's financial prosperity/poverty than a parent's income level. Although race and socioeconomic status have been found to be negatively correlated with school discipline (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, Peterson, 2002), several other published studies have been less consistent in the reporting of their results (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Reschly, 1997). Skiba et al. (2002) suggest "apparent discrepancies between groups on one or more measures of school discipline could be simply artifacts of the method of data presentation or analysis" (p. 333). Specifically to socioeconomic status, many of these studies "indicated some change in the apparent extent of disparity depending upon the statistical criteria used, for both office referrals and expulsions" (p. 333). Further, Gregory et al. (2010) and others (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Wallace et al., 2008) have suggested that socioeconomic status, possesses limitations in explaining disproportionality in school discipline, whether statistically controlling for it at the school level or student level.

The second, and last point, one can glean from the results of this study is that race and long-term OSS days appear to be related in some way or another at the elementary level. Of particular interest is the finding that increases in the number of days a student is suspended from school are significantly correlated with African Americans. From the results of the correlation test, and consistent with the literature, it is reasonable to conclude that exclusionary discipline practices in secondary school are just as severe

in elementary school, particularly for African Americans. Future studies should seek to further explore the intricacies between these two variables (i.e., race and OSS days) at the elementary level, as it is possible that such research could possibly reveal more about racial disproportionality in discipline practices and why exactly exclusionary discipline is seemingly so exacerbated among African American students.

### **Conclusion**

If nothing else, the findings in this study should encourage education researchers to examine more closely the puzzle of discipline- which represents the uncertainty in determining which students have an elevated risk, or rather increased odds, of being suspended and/or expelled and why- at the elementary level. To date, little is known about disproportionality in school discipline in elementary schools. Yet, as researchers continue to expand their discourse in this area- as was done here; this phenomenon can be exposed and corrected quite possibly before students enter secondary school. Addressing discipline disparities, in this manner, can therefore potentially counter what is seemingly an overuse of exclusionary sanctions not just at the elementary level, but the secondary level as well.

With steady increases in the number of African American students being excluded from classroom instruction (e.g., due to the use of exclusionary sanctions for often subjectively defined/minor offenses) (Planty, Hussar, Snyder, Kena, KewalRamani, Kemp, Bianco, & Dinkes 2009), one has to ask: “Do we, as researchers, truly understand how suspensions and expulsions are imposed?” and “Are we, as researchers, fully cognizant of the academic implications resulting from these

exclusionary discipline practices?” If the answer is no, it is important that an attempt be made to further address these concerns. Discipline research, and similar studies, should move forward with this goal in mind.

CHAPTER III  
PUSHED OUT AND LEFT BEHIND:  
A DISTRICT-LEVEL ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTING IMPACT OF  
EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN  
ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

In recent years, a burgeoning body of literature has emerged acknowledging the connection between achievement and disciplinary action (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Gregory et al., 2010; Krlevich et al., 2010). Research has generally concluded that exclusionary discipline measures, such as suspensions and/or expulsions, have proven to be detrimental to the educational process; adversely impacting student achievement (Arcia, 2006). However, what if the relationship between achievement and discipline was positive, rather than negative- as is often illustrated? Broadly speaking, what if exclusionary discipline practices were actually being used, or rather misused, to improve student performance, rather than thwart it? This is the foundation upon which the present study has been developed. Using district-level data obtained from Colorado Department of Education and a series of multiple regression models, the researcher shows how suspensions and expulsions might be imposed upon a particular group of students in such a way as to positively influence a set of predetermined performance indicators- dropout rates, graduation rates, and high stakes tests. The results of this study revealed that exclusionary discipline practices imposed upon African American male and female students significantly increase the African American graduation rate, as well



as, general proficiency on high stakes tests. Ultimately, this means that the more African American students schools and school districts are able to ‘push out’ through the use of suspensions and/or expulsions; the higher their graduation rate, and the better their scores on high stakes tests.

### **Introduction**

Students that are suspended and expelled are likely to suffer from poor academic performance at- what initially appears to be- no gain for anyone; not the student, nor their classmates. For the suspended or expelled student, they tend to have higher percentages of grade retention (CRP, 2000), recidivism (Skiba et al., 1997), dropping out of school (Skiba et al., 2009), and lower high stakes test scores (Arcia, 2006). For their classmates, research has shown that exclusionary discipline practices are ineffective as a deterrent, useless in promoting a safer learning environment, and overall counterproductive (Mayer, 1995; Suarez, 1992; Raffaele Mendez, 2003). So to the informed observer, it is fairly puzzling why suspensions and/or expulsions remain one of the most frequently imposed disciplinary responses (Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

What if these responses were never intended to strictly address discipline issues, but rather disguised as a covert strategy on part of leading education officials to push a certain group of students out of school in an effort to improve overall student performance? This idea follows a utilitarian logic of the greater good, which encourages one to do what they must in order to maximize that which is good for the greatest number of persons. Admittedly, was this strategy not unethical; it might be applauded on the account that it does, in fact, function with the intent to improve student performance.

Yet, the truth of it all is that this practice is unethical- as it operates under the guise of racism (Rosborough, 2010).

### **Exclusionary Incentives under No Child Left Behind**

Immediately after taking office in January 2001, former President George W. Bush announced his plans to move forward with the passage of a bipartisan education reform, marked as the cornerstone of his Administration, entitled *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Just after a year of being in office, the former president signed NCLB into law. NCLB represented a significant shift in federal education policy; one which moved the emphasis away from the federal government's role as a funding source for low-income students to its position as a major force in the shaping of goals and outcomes in education (Fusarelli, 2004). Operating under the principle of standards-based educational reform- which is rooted in the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals functions as the starting place for increasing student achievement- the purpose of NCLB was to ensure that all children had a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education while reaching- at minimum- proficiency on state academic assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This type of legislative focuses on standards, testing, and accountability was the first of its kind seen in the history of U.S. federal education policy.

While NCLB seemingly has the purest of motives- strongly promoting the academic success of every child; critics often argue that it does just the opposite (Townsend, 2002). With NCLB's mandatory enforcement of high stakes testing, African American students- who have been known to perform poorly on high stakes tests (Jencks

& Phillips, 1998) – unsurprisingly, experience substandard academic outcomes. In analyzing the impact of NCLB on African American 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math performance, Lewis and colleagues (2008) concluded that this policy had no impact on achievement; namely because just 88% (reading) and 87% (math) scored at “basic” and “below basic” levels. From a projective standpoint, given the patterns displayed during the first five years of NCLB and the slow rate of change in African American student performance, it has been estimated that it will take an additional 45 years for this group to achieve “proficiency” in reading and math (Lewis, Hancock, James, & Larke, 2008). These projections, while obviously bad for African American students; are equally, if not more (depending on the context in which one is speaking), disastrous for schools and school districts.

Under the system of accountability, one of four major components of NCLB (the other three being parental choice, increased local control, and research based instructional approaches) (Knaus, 2007), school districts face substantial pressure to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals. The goals, here, are to not only intended to improve graduation rates, but to have all children- 100% of the student population- score at or above proficient levels in reading and math by 2014 (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2005). If AYP is achieved, rewards will be given for demonstrated success (e.g., given more federal money); if it is not, punishments will be issued for presumed failure (e.g., funding penalties, public school choice, or privatization) (Fusarelli, 2004). This being said, some states have refused to succumb to the pressure of NCLB standards; and voluntarily rejected federal funds. Others,

however, either obtained AYP through hard work and good leadership, did not meet AYP standards, or perhaps obtained AYP using more insidious strategies (Fusarelli, 2004; Ryan, 2004). It is this latter group that is most interesting.

NCLB, through the use of AYP, requires that each school make benchmark improvements on test scores and high school graduation rates for various low-performing subgroups; which have historically included low-income populations, students of color (with the exception of Asian American students), English-language learners (ELL), and/or students with disabilities (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Knaus, 2007; Ryan, 2004). Paradoxically, these are the same population of students who have been disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., out-of-school suspensions and/or expulsions) (CRP, 2000; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba, 2002; Wu et al., 1982). Might this all be circumstantial? According to Carroll (2008), this is a deliberate attempt to exclude certain students who perform poorly on high stakes tests, with the goal of improving test scores- thereby moving towards achieving AYP- without expending any additional resources (Carroll, 2008) or breaking any laws. This strategy, though clearly controversial, is often unchallenged since its objective goes virtually unnoticed (Rosborough, 2010).

The benefits of implementing this exclusionary strategy, while unethical, is strikingly attractive to schools that are at risk of failing to make AYP. Administrators, teachers, and those alike- who over utilize exclusionary discipline practices for the sole purpose of improving overall performance on state exams- have bought into the idea that with one less student scoring below the proficiency level, the overall percentage of

students deemed proficient increases (Ryan, 2004). Even more, because the rewards obtained from achieving AYP are the same- whether it was achieved through hard work or by strategically excluding low-performing populations- school districts tend to not interrogate schools about how they were able to meet AYP; but rather, they are just relieved that they were able to do so. Notwithstanding the rather perverse nature surrounding the acquisition of AYP incentives; the fact remains, it is still an incentive. As such, given the potential reprimands for failure to meet performance targets, it can be hardly denied that some school officials will do what they must, even if it violates ethical considerations, to avoid punishment (Baker, 2002; Fusarelli, 2004).

Taken altogether, the ultimate trade-off for AYP attainment comes at the educational expense of low-performing students- this being particularly true for African Americans. Given their history of performance on high stakes tests and their pattern of overrepresentation for exclusionary discipline; school officials are tempted to push these students out and mask their decision to do so under the pretext of their zero tolerance approach to school discipline (Ryan, 2004). Since zero tolerance allows students to be severely punished, no matter how minor the offense; these officials- namely teachers- are able to justify why they decided to recommend the strictest of sanctions upon low-performing African American students for subjectively defined offenses (e.g., disrespect, disobedience, etc.), without necessarily divulging their larger intent- which is to keep these students from taking state exams and consequently jeopardizing their job. The motivation behind imposing exclusionary sanctions is embedded in a blame game; whereby school districts and schools blame teachers, and teachers blame students. Under

NCLB teachers assume a large portion of the responsibility in making sure that each of their students performs well on high stakes tests. However, teachers have claimed that NCLB holds them accountable for factors beyond their control- those external factors, specific to certain students, that are non-school related and create significant barriers to a student's academic progress (Carroll, 2008). In response, teachers have been known to shirk this responsibility by identifying low-performing African American students who they feel that they cannot help improve, and finding ways to exclude them as a way of offsetting the blame for their students' poor performance (Carroll, 2008; Hamilton, Stecher, Marsh, McCombs, Robyn, Russell, Naftel, & Barney, 2007). Having said this, excluding African American students- especially those who do not perform well academically- from much needed classroom instruction does them a disservice. Their educational needs are compromised, and many end up dropping out of school; all for what is apparently the greater good- as defined by school officials.

As has been noted, NCLB- while presumably drafted with the best of intentions- produces undesirable outcomes for African American students. These outcomes, though unintentional, are a direct result of NCLB's laudable, yet highly controversial, attempt to improve academic achievement for all children. Ironically, the same legislation that was intended to provide all students with access to a quality education has inadvertently led to the loss of learning opportunities for some. For this reason, a discriminatory element- one that predicated on African American students, and is reminiscent of institutional racism- can be found lying dormant at the heart of NCLB legislation. With increased pressure to meet specific testing goals and make AYP, desperate school officials resort

to excluding low –performing African American students- through the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices- as a strategic attempt to improve overall proficiency levels on high stakes tests. Masked under the perils of zero tolerance; this insidious exclusionary strategy goes largely ignored. As a result of missed instruction time, African American students fall behind in their classwork and eventually dropout of school because certain officials believed their education to be expendable and purposefully pushed them out of school in their attempt to serve the greater good, preserve their incentives, and keep their jobs.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This idea of an exclusionary strategy can be best interpreted through a critical race lens (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In using this framework, there is the general assumption that high stakes tests have been used as a tool of oppression against low-performing African American students. As evidence of this assertion, recall, teachers have admitted to employing a prejudicial profiling method to identify and exclude these students from their classroom. This process, by all standards, negates their access to- what is supposed to be- an equal education; which, in turn, are general grounds for speculating that such practices are not just discriminatory, but racist- since it carries with it a remnant of racial marginalization. In an effort to further grapple with this notion of racism, as it applies to the use of this exclusionary strategy, let us now turn to a discussion of critical race theory.

## **Critical Race Theory**

Grounded in legal scholarship, critical race theory (CRT) first emerged during the 1970's as a part of the earlier groundbreaking works of Derrick Bell (1984; 1987; 1992) and Alan Freeman (1978; 1988); who at that time was vehemently concerned about the failure of critical legal studies (CLS) - a legal movement that sought to examine how the law legitimates hierarchical structures in society (Crenshaw, 1988)- to adequately address the saliency of race in U.S. jurisprudence (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004), as well as, its failure to include the scholarly perspectives of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). The vein of CRT literature- which, during this time, served as a newly vamped strand of scholarship- sought to challenge the dominant discourse on race and racism, as it related to the law, by offering critical dialogue about how legal doctrine is used to oppress certain racial groups (Solorzano, 1997). Borrowing from CLS's general distrust of hegemonic systems, CRT rests on the premise that racism is a normal part of the American landscape (Bell, 1992). Central to the goal of CRT is the element of social justice, which unmask and exposes racism for what it truly is- a systemic problem that has, and continues to threaten the civil liberties of people of color.

Up until the early 1990's CRT had been used almost exclusively as a legal theory. It was with the theoretical musings of education scholars, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995), that this paradigm made its grand debut in the field of education. Launched as an analytic tool for understanding disparities in school; CRT in education engages the following two tenets: (1) racism is endemic, prevalent in all aspects of society- with schools being no exception (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004); and (2)



Whiteness is used to perpetuate school inequities by upholding and maintaining stratification (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These two tenets challenges the traditional claims that the education system is objective, meritocratic, colorblind, race neutral, and equal (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002); and with this, has largely been used to explain school resegregation (Orfield, 2001), academic tracking (Oaks, 2005), African American disparities in gifted and special education (Bonner, Lewis, Bowman-Perrott, Hill-Jackson, & James, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Web-Johnson, Green, & Beard, 2008), African American disproportionality in school discipline (Blake et al., 2010; Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010), and several other forms of racial inequity embedded in educational institutions (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

CRT, within the context of the present study, is used to deconstruct the relationship between exclusionary discipline practices- imposed upon African Americans- and student performance. Because African American students are no more likely to misbehave than other students; researchers (Skiba et al, 2002; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Wu et al, 1982) have speculated about if, in fact, the overrepresentation of African Americans for exclusionary discipline could be attributed to racial bias. While there is no conclusive evidence that such is the case, it is hard to dispute the substantial amount of subjectivity involved in the determination of whether an offense was truly committed. This, in essence, opens up the possibility that a school official's reasons for imposing exclusionary sanctions might very well be obscured by cultural misperceptions/stereotypes and fueled by one's own inhibitions and self-interests

(Carroll, 2008; RP, 2000; Monroe 2006; Rosborough, 2010; Ryan, 2004; Townsend, 2000; Weinstein et al., 2004). To this end, CRT is useful in that it provides a theoretical lens by which the plausibility of the existence of an exclusionary strategy can be unearthed, meticulously assessed, and ultimately dismantled.

### **Statement of Purpose**

Discipline scholars (Dupper, 2010; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Morrison & Skiba, 2001) know all too well the often subtle, unintended yet deleterious consequences that surface as a direct result of exclusionary discipline practices; especially for African American students. From lagging achievement to dropping out of school; African American disproportionality in school discipline functions at the very heart of several negative outcomes (e.g., bad grades, retention, recidivism, incarceration, etc.). Despite the- somewhat intuitive- link between suspensions/ expulsions and student performance, research in this area has remained relatively scant. Given this, the purpose of the present study is twofold: first, to identify disproportionality in school discipline among African American students; and second, to examine the relationship between exclusionary discipline practices imposed upon African American students and student performance.

The first, of the two objectives, seeks to identify possible overrepresentation in discipline for African American students. The second objective attempts to assess the impact of African American suspensions and/or expulsions on the dropout rate, graduation rate, and performance on high stakes tests. With the contribution of these two objectives, one can only hope that researchers will find value in assessing the plausibility

of this alleged exclusionary strategy and extend further analysis toward grappling with its implications.

### **Research Questions**

The present study is interested in the following overarching research question: *How does the overrepresentation of African American students for exclusionary sanctions impact student performance?* In the interest of clarity, this research question has been divided into two strands of inquiries. The first strand offers questions about disproportional representation in school discipline. The second strand offers questions about the impact of exclusionary discipline practices on student performance. These two strands of inquiries are as follows:

#### First Strand of Inquiries

RQ(3<sub>a</sub>): *Are African American students disproportionality represented for disciplinary action?*

RQ(3<sub>b</sub>): *Are African American students disproportionality represented for exclusionary discipline practices?*

RQ(3<sub>c</sub>): *Are African American females disproportionality represented for exclusionary discipline practices?*

RQ(3<sub>d</sub>): *Are African American males disproportionality represented for exclusionary discipline practices?*

#### Second Strand of Inquiries

RQ(3<sub>e</sub>): *What are the effects of exclusionary discipline practices on the African American male/female dropout rate?*

RQ(3<sub>f</sub>): *What are the effects of exclusionary discipline practices on the African American male/female graduation rate?.*

RQ(3<sub>g</sub>): *What are the effects of exclusionary discipline practices on performance on high stakes tests?*

From a general standpoint, these research questions yield two potentially important insights: (a) first, nearly four decades after the publication of the CDF (1975) report, it is quite possible that African American students are still markedly overrepresented for disciplinary action; and (b) second, in looking at the impact of exclusionary discipline on student performance it may be prudent to give further consideration to the existence of an exclusionary strategy.

## **Methodology**

### **Units of Analysis**

The data reported herein were drawn from approximately 182 Colorado (one of the largest states in the U.S.) school districts for the 2005-2006 academic school year. Each district in the state of Colorado operates under a relatively decentralized system; maintaining local control with minimal supervision from the State Board of Education (CDE, 2010b). School policies- especially those regarding discipline- may vary between districts. The school districts analyzed in the present study constitute a largely diverse sample with respect to race/ethnicity (White, African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American); socioeconomic status (low great affluence to considerable poverty); region (i.e., urban, rural, and suburban); and student enrollment (i.e., < 60 students, to < 80,000 students). Overall, this sample provides a good base on which to build inferences

about the broad-level impact of African American disproportionality in school discipline on student performance.

In a descriptive sense, male students accounted for a total of 51.3% (400,374) of all students enrolled in Colorado school districts, while female students averaged in at roughly 48.7% (380,334). The majority of the students were categorized as either White (62.5%) or Hispanic (27.1%). African American students comprised approximately 6% of the total number of enrolled students, leaving Asian American (3.3%) and Native American (1.2%) students to account for less than 4% of the remaining population.

Information on socioeconomic status was reported as the percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-cost lunch. Within the state, 33.7% of enrolled students qualified to receive free (27.4%) and reduced (6.3%) lunch. A substantial percent (66.1%) were deemed ineligible.

With respect to region, 85 districts were considered rural, 49 suburban and 43 urban. Five school districts were neither labeled, nor classified, as rural, suburban, or urban. Reasons for this omission are unknown.

There were a total of 1,918 schools in the state of Colorado. Of these schools 1,006 were elementary, 278 were middle schools, and 419 were high schools. In terms of specialized institutions, 123 were charter, 81 were alternative, 8 were special education, and 5 were vocational.

As a key element of this study, performance data (i.e., dropout rate, graduation rate, and high stakes testing) for each school district were examined for the respective academic school year. In the state of Colorado the total dropout rate was 4.5%. The

graduation rate was 74.1%. High stakes testing proficiency was 62% for 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and 43% for 4<sup>th</sup> grade math.

### **Procedures**

All data reported in this study was public information, in the form of electronic files, obtained from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE). From this information a customized database was developed; comprised of detailed statistics concerning district-level characteristics (i.e., percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch and the percent of student of color population), documented suspensions and expulsions, graduation rate, dropout rate, and CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program) proficiency achievement percentages for 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math. The data recorded was taken from each Colorado school district for the 2005-2006 academic school year.

### **Analysis**

To fully explore the impact of African American disproportionality in school discipline, Relative Risk Ratio (*RRR*) calculations and Multiple Regression analysis- along with accompanying descriptive correlations- were used. The *RRR* was employed to assess possible overrepresentation in school discipline for African American students. The Multiple Regression analysis and descriptive correlations were performed to examine the relationship between exclusionary discipline practices and African American student performance.

### **Relative Risk Ratio Calculations**

*RRR* calculations estimate possible overrepresentation or underrepresentation and therefore make it possible to determine if African American students were disproportionately impacted by exclusionary discipline practices. If the *RRR* is 1, then the risk of the target group- which is in this case, African American students- for receiving a suspension or expulsion is equal to that of the comparison group- White students. A *RRR* greater than 1 or less than 1 is indicative of overrepresentation and underrepresentation, respectively. The *RRR* is calculated by dividing the risk index (*RI*) of the target group by the *RI* of the comparison group (Hosp & Reschly, 2003).

Four *RRRs* were calculated to answer the first set of research questions presented in this study. The first two *RRRs* were calculated with the entire White student population serving as the comparison group. The third *RRR* was calculated with only White females serving as the comparison group. The fourth, and final, *RRR* was calculated with only White males serving as the comparison group. The first *RI* was calculated for African American students by dividing the number of African American students receiving disciplinary action by the total number of African American students within all districts; the same procedure was implemented to retain the *RI* for White students. The second *RI*- which is of most interest to this study- was calculated by dividing the number of African American students who were suspended and/or expelled by the total number of African American students within all districts. The former approach was replicated to obtain additional *RI*s (i.e., risk index for White students,

African American females, White females, African American males, and White males that were suspended and/or expelled).

### **Multiple Regression Analysis**

Multiple regression analysis allows for the prediction of an outcome based on the values of linear combinations of two or more predictors. This method of analysis, along with descriptive correlations, was used here to test for a significant relationship between exclusionary discipline practices and student performance. A total of eight multiple regression equation models were computed (see Appendix B). A detailed discussion of each of the variables included within these models is to follow.

**Dependent variables.** This study examined three separate sets of district-level student performance indicators- dropout rate, graduation rate, and high stakes tests. The first set of indicators, dropout rate, combines two measures of performance at the middle and high school level. These measures were the rate of dropout for African American males and females. The dropout rate was generated annually and serves as a function of the percentage of all enrolled students between grades 7-12 who leave school during a single school year. It was calculated by dividing the number of dropouts for the specified year (i.e., the total number of African American male, or female, dropouts during the 2005-2006 school year) by a membership base; which includes all students who were in respective membership any time during the year (i.e., the total number of African American male, or female, enrollment during the 2005-2006 school year) (CDE, 2009a).

The second set of indicators, graduation rate, combines two measures of performance at the high school level. These measures were the rate of graduation for



African American males and females. The graduation rate was reported for each graduating class (i.e., the Class of 2006). The rate was calculated by dividing the number of graduates (i.e., the total number of African American male, or female, graduates) by the membership base (i.e., the total number of African American male, or female, enrollment from 2002-2006). The membership base was derived from the number of students entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade, four years earlier (i.e., during the 2002-2003 year), and adjusted for students who transferred into or out of the district during the years covering grades 9-12 (CDE, 2009b).

The third, and last, set of indicators, high stakes tests, combines four measures of performance at the elementary level for the 2005-2006 academic school year. CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program) data was used to assess testing performance. The CSAP is a high stakes test, mandated under NCLB, and administered to students in grades 3-10 to determine if they are able to meet the Colorado Model Content Standards - an academic standard that reviews and defines mastery according to the expectation of what students need to know and be able to do (CDE, 2010a) - in four specific content areas (i.e., reading, writing, math, and science) (CDE, 2010c). Students who scored at the proficient level were thought to have demonstrated a solid academic performance on subject matter as understood by these academic standards (CDE, 2009c). Particular attention was given to 4<sup>th</sup> grade CSAP performance, as research has generally indicated that it is at this level of schooling that achievement, for African Americans, begins a downward spiral (Kunjufu, 2005). All things considered, the four measures of high stakes performance, used here, included CSAP 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading proficiency for African

American females, CSAP 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading proficiency for African American males, CSAP 4<sup>th</sup> grade math proficiency for African American females, and CSAP 4<sup>th</sup> grade math proficiency for African American males. CSAP proficiency was determined by the total number of students in a specified membership (i.e., African American males, or females) who scored at the proficient Achievement Level.

**Independent variables.** This study examined the district-level effects of one general predictor; exclusionary discipline practices. Models 1-4 analyzed the *independent* impact of exclusionary discipline practices for African American males and females; incorporating a separate measure of suspension and expulsion into each model. Models 5-8 analyzed the *collective* impact of exclusionary discipline practices for African American males and females; incorporating one overall measure of suspension and expulsion (i.e., exclusion) into each model.

**Exclusionary discipline practices.** The independent impact of exclusionary discipline practices for African American males and females was measured by taking the total number of students in each group membership that were suspended and the total number of students in each group membership that were expelled. The collective impact of exclusionary discipline practices for African American males and females was measured by taking the total number of students in each group membership that were suspended and the total number of students in each group membership that were expelled, and combining these two numbers together to create one value.

**Control variables.** Because the primary interest of this study focuses on the impact of exclusionary discipline practices on student achievement, the remaining

independent variables that were used in this study operated as control variables. These controls are deliberately held constant in order to observe the impact of a specific variable (i.e., exclusionary discipline practices) when predicting the outcome variable (i.e., student performance). This study designated three district-level independent variables as controls; prior high stakes tests, socioeconomic status (SES), and student of color (SOC) population.

***Socioeconomic status.*** By controlling for SES it is assumed that exclusionary discipline practices make a contribution to student performance independent of socioeconomic factors. Because there was no general measure of SES available in the data analyzed for this study; student lunch status (i.e., the percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch) was used as a proxy for SES. While this indicator carries with it its own set of limitations (Entwisle & Astone, 1994); studies of ethnic disproportionality in school discipline have typically utilized student lunch status as an acceptable measure for SES (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Rocque, 2010).

***Student of color population.*** Generally speaking, there is evidence that suggests that school districts with higher levels of SOC enrollment face a number of issues relative to student performance (Dee & Jacob, 2007; Ou, 2010). With this in consideration, this study controlled for the percent of students of color within each district. This percentage represents the measure for SOC population.

***Prior high stakes tests.*** It is commonly assumed that prior achievement; serves as a strong predictor of current achievement. This assumption is widely supported throughout the literature (Chen & Pajares, 2010; Sass, 2006). For this reason, in addition

to socioeconomic status and race; the models that use testing measures as an indicator of student performance (i.e., Models 5-8) also make use of the variable prior high stakes tests as a control. This variable is measured exactly like the high stakes tests student performance indicator, but for the previous academic school year; 2004-2005.

## **Results**

### **Disproportionality in School Discipline**

The percentage and number of African American and White students enrolled in the district and cited for disciplinary action are presented in Table B1. Interestingly, the percent of White males sanctioned, overall, appear to be proportional to their representation in the district. However, White females are seemingly underrepresented for disciplinary action (i.e., the percent of White females sanctioned, and receiving either an out-of-school suspension or expulsion, represent a little under half of their enrollment percentage), while African American males and females appear to be overrepresented (i.e., the percent of African American males sanctioned, and receiving either an out-of-school suspension or expulsion, represent more than half of their enrollment percentage; and the percent of African American females receiving out-of-school suspensions are slightly more than double their student enrollment). To further explore the notion of overrepresentation for African American students, let us now turn to the results of the *RRR* calculations- a more reliable determinant of proportional representation for disciplinary action (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, & Cuadrado, 2008).

The results of the *RRR* calculations, illustrated in Table B2, suggest that African American students were overrepresented for disciplinary action,  $RRR = 2.59$ . With

respect to exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., out-of-school suspensions and/or expulsions), the results indicate that African Americans were three times more likely than White students to receive an exclusionary sanction,  $RRR = 3.73$ . When assessing males and females separately, African American female students were four times more likely than White female students to receive an exclusionary sanction,  $RRR = 4.65$ . In regards to male students, African American males were three times more likely than White males to receive an exclusionary sanction,  $RRR = 3.47$ .

### **Exclusionary Discipline and Student Performance**

Multiple regression analysis and descriptive correlations were used to, first, observe the relationship between exclusionary discipline practices and student performance; and then, to assess the impact of exclusionary sanctions on measures of performance. Statistical significance was determined using the standard .05 level as the benchmark. All significant findings reported indicate that there is a less than 5% chance that the relationship between variables occurred by chance.

**Dropout rates.** The African American female dropout rate showed a slightly significant correlation with African American female expulsions ( $r = .16, p < .05$ , two-tailed). The Pearson coefficients ( $r$ ) in Table B3 suggest that a relatively small relationship exists between the dropout rate and exclusionary discipline practices for African American females. This relationship, however, disappears when expulsions among African American females are tested, via the use of multiple regression, as a potential determinant of African American female dropout rates (see Table B4). There were no statistically significant findings for African American males for either analysis.

**Graduation rates.** The impact of suspensions and expulsions on graduation rates tell a rather different story than that of the dropout rates. Suspensions and expulsions for both African American males and females were found to have a slight, significant correlation with their respective graduation rate (See Table B5 and B6). African American female suspensions ( $r = .19, p < .05$ , two-tailed) and expulsions ( $r = .25, p < .01$ , two-tailed) showed a definite, but small relationship with the African American female graduation rate. The same holds true for African American male suspensions ( $r = .19, p < .05$ , two-tailed) and expulsions ( $r = .23, p < .01$ , two-tailed) when observing their impact on the African American male graduation rate.

When estimating the effects of suspensions and expulsions on graduation rates for African American males and females, only expulsions appear to be significant (see Table B7). The results from the regression analysis reveal a surprisingly positive relationship between expulsions and graduation rates; which means that as expulsions increase, the graduation rate rises- of course, this being true if all other variables are held constant. Specifically, for African American females, the coefficient ( $\beta$ ) indicates that for every one unit increase in the number of expulsions, the graduation rate increases by .50 units ( $p < .01$ ). A similar increase occurs for African American males. The coefficient for this group indicates that as expulsions increase by one unit, the graduation rate increases by .51 units ( $p < .05$ ). An  $R^2$  of .16 and .13, for Models 3 and 4 respectively, suggest that a little more than 1% of the graduation rate is accounted for using the variables specified in Table B7.

**High stakes tests.** Of primary importance to the present study is the impact of exclusionary discipline practices on performance on high stakes tests. When analyzing this relationship, there is yet another dismal, more profound, illustration of the adverse effects of suspensions and/or expulsions uncovered. The correlation results, in comparison to the previous performance indicators, identified a more moderate, stronger significant relation between exclusionary discipline practices for African American males and females and Proficiency achievement levels on high stakes test (See Tables B8- B11). For African American females this means that a substantial relationship exists between the number of African American females excluded- by way of suspensions and/or expulsions- as a result of disciplinary action and the number of African American females who scored at the proficient level on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade CSAP reading ( $r = .53, p < .001$ , two-tailed) and math ( $r = .56, p < .001$ , two-tailed) exam. In regards to African American males, the correlation results can be interpreted to suggest that a substantial relationship also exists between the number of African American males excluded- via the use of suspensions and/or expulsions- as a result of disciplinary action and the number of African American males who scored at the proficient level on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade CSAP reading ( $r = .56, p < .001$ , two-tailed) and math ( $r = .59, p < .001$ , two-tailed) exam. The same discomfiting relationship, found here, between these variables is further confirmed in the findings from the multiple regression analysis.

Table B12 presents these results. Here it is evident that the relationship between African American females and males excluded as a result of disciplinary and performance on high stakes tests extends well past simple correlation; it also appears that

this exclusionary variable is a significant determinant- or rather, predictor- of the number of students deemed proficient on such tests. For every one unit increase in suspensions and/or expulsions for African American females, there was a .12 unit increase ( $p < .01$ ) in the number of students scoring at the proficient level for 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading; and a .05 unit increase ( $p < .001$ ) for 4<sup>th</sup> grade math. An  $R^2$  of .85 for Model 5 and an  $R^2$  of .99 for Model 7 suggests that more than 80% of the proficient level for reading and math can be explained by the corresponding variables (i.e., female exclusion, percent students of color, percent free/reduced lunch, and prior percent proficient for 4<sup>th</sup> grade CSAP reading and math) in Table B12. A similar zero sum pattern (i.e., where gains arise out of the result of losses) was detected for African American males. For every one unit increase in suspensions and/or expulsions for African American males, there was a .13 unit increase ( $p < .01$ ) in the number of students scoring at the proficient level for 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading; and a .05 unit increase ( $p < .001$ ) for 4<sup>th</sup> grade math. Again, an  $R^2$  of .85 for Model 6 and an  $R^2$  of .99 for Model 8 suggests that more than 80% of the proficient level for 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math can be explained by using the selection of variables (i.e., male exclusion, percent students of color, percent free/reduced lunch, and prior percent proficient for 4<sup>th</sup> grade CSAP reading and math) for each model. This positive relationship between exclusionary discipline and high stakes tests suggest that as the number of African American suspensions and expulsions rise, overall performance on 4<sup>th</sup> grade CSAP reading and math exams are related.



## Discussion

Given the evidence, it is hard to ignore that African Americans are markedly overrepresented for disciplinary action, specifically those discipline sanctions which warrant exclusion (i.e., through suspension and/or expulsions) and negate much needed classroom instruction. From the *RRR* analysis, it is clear; when compared to White students, African Americans are nearly three (males) to four (females) times more likely to be suspended and/or expelled. Stated differently, African American students face a greater risk of missing class, falling behind in their coursework, being retained, and eventually dropping out of school; all of which are consequences that have been conventionally linked to exclusionary discipline practices.

While there are quite possibly a plethora of reasons for the stark overrepresentation in school discipline for African American students; from what can be intellectually deciphered, it would be less than optimal to rule out the possibility that schools and school districts have strategically devised an exclusionary plan- one which allows low-performing, African American students to be excluded, through suspensions and/or expulsions, in an effort to meet proficiency demands established under NCLB, and therefore achieve AYP. In fully recognizing that Colorado school districts might be completely oblivious to such a strategy- though this is likely not the case; one must caution against completely disregarding this idea- especially on account of the statistically significant relationship found between exclusionary discipline and student performance. The results of this study suggest that increases in the number of African American students suspended and/or expelled lead to strikingly parallel increases in the

African American graduation rate and the overall number of students deemed proficient in 4<sup>th</sup> grade CSAP reading and math. Simply put, the more African American students schools are able to exclude, through the use of exclusionary discipline practices, the greater the gains in both the graduation rate and performance on high stakes tests for the given school district. By and large, it is unmistakable; these very gains, both in graduation rates and high stakes tests, greatly enhance a schools' likelihood of achieving AYP.

It should be noted that because the consequences of not making AYP are seemingly so severe, education officials might be tempted to do whatever it takes- whether ethical, or not- to avoid penalties. Given that dropouts are exempt from taking the CSAP there is somewhat of an incentive, be it unintentional, to encourage students to permanently withdraw from school if they are seen as a threat to the school's attempt to meet AYP goals. This is especially true for students who do not possess the necessary credits to graduate, scored extremely low on tests, or missed too many days out of school. Yet, from a legal standpoint, none of these reasons are legitimate causes to ask a student to voluntarily end their education; and school officials who instruct, advise, or encourage them to do so are in direct violation of the law. While many officials are keenly aware of the illegality of this exclusionary strategy; many remain undeterred, and consequently have continued its use.

Notwithstanding their attempts, when school officials are unable to convince low-performing students to dropout, more coercive means might be taken. This is where the overuse, or misuse, of suspensions and expulsions come into play. Taking matters

into their own hands, and hidden under the guise of zero tolerance; teachers and administrators have been known to exclude students- for relatively innocuous offenses through the use of exclusionary discipline practices. It is these same punitive measures that have been commonly attributed to increases in dropouts. Though exclusionary discipline practices were not a statistically significant predictor of dropout rates in this study; there is still reason to believe that these two are related as indicated by the correlation between African American female suspensions and expulsions, and the African American female dropout rate. This relational discrepancy is not too alarming since research has generally shown that states tend to fudge their dropout data (Hall, 2005); hence, those relationships that would normally be apparent are masked under incomplete and inaccurate statistics (The Education Trust, 2003).

On the whole, it is rather difficult to argue that this exclusionary strategy is not alive and well, infused in the education system, and disproportionately impacting African American students. Today, not only is there extreme pressure to meet AYP; but now states are being pitted against one another in a grab for approximately 4 billion dollars in what President Barack Obama's Administration has dubbed the *Race to the Top* (RTTT) Initiative (McCluskey, 2010). Like NCLB, RTTT- while designed with the purest intent- provides financial incentives to those states who achieve significant improvements in student outcomes. Because these funds are limited and awarded on a competitive basis; not everyone will meet the requirements needed to secure monetary benefits from this federal grant. From what was learned, here, in this study; wherever there are financial perks directly tied to a set of demands, there are bound to be

unintentional consequences that transpire as a result of attempts to meet the required expectations and secure such fiscal incentives. So, rather than discouraging the use of exclusionary strategies in this new presidential administration; RTTT, perhaps can be said to, perpetuate its existence.

The implications that stem from the use of this exclusionary strategy- both previously, under the Bush Administration and possibly even now, under the Obama Administration- are all the more reason why this approach should be further assessed. Considering that two of the primary foundational principles of American education are to ensure that all students have access to quality schooling and that they each learn the essential skills needed to catapult them to the frontline of global leadership- essentially outcompeting workers around the world; one has to ask, “Why is it even necessary for the federal government to incentivize states to produce student gains?” Accountability, in this regard, may not need to be rewarded-*per se*; just required. By removing these incentives, one essentially removes the power of this exclusionary strategy. Given this powerlessness, more students are likely to have access to school and subsequently increase their learning opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

Taken altogether, this study is paramount, in that it shows how exclusionary discipline practices are closely related to student performance. Because African American students are markedly overrepresented for suspensions and/or expulsions, this study posed a very simple, yet thought-provoking question concerning this subgroup; *how does the overrepresentation of African American students for exclusionary*

*sanctions impact student performance?* In grappling with this inquiry, what I found is thought to be rather provocative. With the exception of dropout rates, increases in the number of African American students suspended or expelled positively impacted graduation rates and overall performance on high stakes tests. This is certainly no coincidence. These two performance indicators are also the two primary components assessed when determining if a school or school district has met the necessary requirements to achieve AYP. Drawing from a new strand of legal discourse that studies the perverse incentives and the unintended consequences of NCLB, an attempt to explain these findings suggested that a highly controversial exclusionary strategy has been widely integrated into school districts' plan of action to meet AYP goals. Albeit unethical and illegal, the benefits of utilizing this strategy are seemingly far greater than its consequences; hence, the reason why it ceases to exist- remaining alive and well today.

In summary, the ability to systematically demonstrate how officials- if they wanted- could push students out of school, either directly or indirectly, without drawing any undue attention and expending any additional resources; all for the purpose of serving the larger student population, making AYP, and staying employed- is both groundbreaking and timely. To date, very few-if any- studies have used empirical evidence to make the connection between exclusionary discipline practices and student performance. This study does such, and for this reason has made a large contribution; potentially having major consequences not just for the study of African American disproportionality in school discipline, but African American education as a whole. As

NCLB continues to undergo constant reform under the present- and future- presidential administration; policymakers overseeing reauthorization efforts should be fully cognizant of the implications that the initial legislation has for African American students. Above all, failure to fully understand how this exclusionary strategy operates and works to negate African American student performance will undoubtedly ensure that these students will not only continue to be pushed out, but that they will also be left behind.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD

The ultimate aim of this dissertation was to provide a context in which the relationship between African American disproportionality in school discipline - the overrepresentation of students for exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., out-of-school suspensions and/or expulsions) - and student performance could be systematically investigated. In making use of both district- and individual-level data, obtained from Colorado Department of Education and a single urban school district within the same state, the compilation of studies presented, here, were able to confirm the following: (a) at the individual-level, long-term OSS was indeed correlated with African American elementary students; (b) at the district-level, African Americans are suspended and expelled at rates that drastically exceed that of their White counterparts; and (c) also at the district-level, exclusionary discipline practices for African Americans are closely linked to student performance. Considering these findings, how these two studies are linked and their individual contribution to the advancement of educational scholarship and discourse will be discussed in this concluding chapter. As a final thought, given what we now know about African American disproportionality in school discipline, suggestions for the direction of future studies- looking specifically at how research in this area can move forward- will also be provided.

### Detailed Summary of Findings

There were a total of three overarching research questions- one of which presented two strands of inquiries- that guided these two separate, yet interrelated studies. Each question and its corresponding response- that was obtained through a series of empirical investigations- is listed below:

#### Study One

RQ (1) *What factors are important in predicting the likelihood of being suspended and/or expelled from school?* Gender, school level, and behavior role were statistically significant predictors of the likelihood of being suspended and/or expelled from school for acts of disobedience- a rather minor, subjectively defined offense. Female students, students enrolled in elementary school, and students with direct involvement in the committal of the disobedience offense were each more likely to face suspension and/or expulsion when compared to male students, students enrolled in secondary school, and students with indirect involvement, respectively.

RQ (2) *Are suspensions and race correlated?* Suspensions and race are significantly correlated. A greater number of assigned OSS days, or rather long-term suspension, is in some way associated with African American elementary students.

#### Study Two

RQ (3) *How does the overrepresentation of African American students for*



*exclusionary sanctions impact student performance?* Increases in the number of African American students suspended and/or expelled lead to strikingly parallel increases in graduation rates and performance on high stakes tests.

#### First Strand of Inquiries

RQ (3<sub>a</sub>): *Are African American students disproportionality represented for disciplinary action?* Yes, they are overrepresented. African American students were two times more likely than White students to be disciplined.

RQ (3<sub>b</sub>): *Are African American students disproportionality represented for exclusionary discipline practices?* Yes, they are overrepresented. African American students were three times more likely than White students to be suspended and/or expelled.

RQ (3<sub>c</sub>): *Are African American females disproportionality represented for exclusionary discipline practices?* Yes, they are overrepresented. African American female students were four times more likely than White female students to be suspended and/or expelled.

RQ (3<sub>d</sub>): *Are African American males disproportionality represented for exclusionary discipline practices?* Yes, they are overrepresented. African American male

students were three times more likely than White male students to be suspended and/or expelled.

## Second Strand of Inquiries

RQ(3<sub>e</sub>): *What are the effects of exclusionary discipline practices on the African American male/female dropout rate?* The African American female dropout rate, at both the middle and high school level, was significantly correlated with African American female suspensions and expulsions.

RQ(3<sub>f</sub>): *What are the effects of exclusionary discipline practices on the African American male/female graduation rate?* The African American male graduation rate, at the high school level, was significantly correlated with African American male suspensions and expulsions. Likewise, the African American female graduation rate, at the same level, was significantly correlated with African American suspensions and expulsions. African American male and female expulsions, taken separately, were found to be statistically significant predictors of the African American male and female graduation rate, respectively. Essentially, the more African American

males and females are expelled, the better the high school graduation rate for each corresponding group.

RQ(3<sub>g</sub>): *What are the effects of exclusionary discipline practices on performance on high stakes tests?* Overall performance on high stakes tests, at the elementary level, was significantly correlated with African American male and female exclusion (i.e., suspensions and/or expulsions). Additionally, the number of African American males and females excluded were both found to be statistically significant determinants of the number of students deemed proficient in 4<sup>th</sup> grade CSAP reading and math. Altogether, the more African American males and females are suspended and/or expelled, the better the overall performance on high stakes testing in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

### **The Link between Studies and Their Individual Contribution**

The findings from this dissertation study are not only unprecedented, they are cutting-edge. The first study, described in Chapter II, reveals that female students and students enrolled in elementary school are more likely to be suspended and/or expelled for acts of disobedience in comparison to male students and students enrolled in secondary school, respectively. Until now, research has generally concluded quite the opposite- suggesting that African American males, in both middle and high school, face

an elevated risk of being suspended or expelled (Lewis et al., 2010; Skiba, et al., 2002). However, by looking at race and gender individually, in addition to, comparatively assessing differences by school level; a significant piece to the puzzle of discipline has been uncovered. From this study, it is clear that disproportionality in school discipline has broad implications. No longer can discipline disparities be exclusively attributed to African American males in secondary institutions; but rather, through this study, one can see how disproportional representation in exclusionary discipline can be a function of other factors- ones which make female students and students in elementary school increasingly vulnerable to both suspensions and expulsions.

The second study- highlighted in Chapter III- empirically assessed the impact of exclusionary discipline practices on student performance using an interdisciplinary approach which merged legal discourse with discipline scholarship. Given the findings from the first study, it was important to incorporate female students and elementary schools into this analysis. That being said, the second study assessed the district-level effects of suspensions and expulsions for both African American males and females in elementary, middle, and high school. The findings from this study are extremely provocative, in that, it provides strong evidence of an exclusionary strategy; one which illegally pushes low-performing African American students out of school in an effort to meet the demands established under NCLB and therefore achieve AYP. By far, the largest-yet the most discomfiting- result stemming from this study is the positive effects of African American male and female exclusion (i.e., suspensions and/or expulsions) on overall student performance on high stakes testing. While several studies have

connected exclusionary discipline practices with achievement; very few have systematically assessed this alleged relationship, and even fewer have looked specifically at the district level impact of exclusionary discipline among African Americans on standardized assessments mandated under NCLB. Because this study demonstrates how schools and school districts might be tempted to use- or rather misuse- suspensions and expulsions to boost their claims of making significant improvements in student outcomes; a conscious effort must be made on part of policymakers to not incentivize success. With the reauthorization of NCLB at hand, and the implementation of the RTTT Initiative, school districts are further encouraged to make use of this controversial method. Yet, considering the groundbreaking findings from this study one can only hope that the intent of this exclusionary strategy will be exposed and ultimately dismantled for the sake of making sure that all students have access to a quality education, and that no child- whether suspended or expelled- is left behind.

### **Directions for Future Studies**

Future studies looking to contribute to the body of work on disproportionality in school discipline should move forward understanding the importance of methodology, research design, policy and efficacious interventions. This subsection will provide recommendations that speak to each of these areas.

Insofar as the methodology is concerned, future investigations should consider applying a mixed methods approach that makes use of quantitative, as well as, qualitative methods (e.g., regression analysis, multilevel modeling, focus groups, in-depth interviews etc.). These methods are particularly advantageous especially when

such *modes* of analyses are better suited to thoroughly address the research question at hand. Being mindful of this, it is highly recommended that researchers incorporate this integrated approach into studies which address the inequitable outcomes associated with school discipline.

Additionally, it is important that future research attempt to employ a longitudinal design; one that follows students as they matriculate from one educational level to another and gathers data over the course of multiple years of schooling. This will enable assessments of disproportional discipline patterns and trends over time; therefore making it possible to assess questions related to the frequency in the use of school suspensions and expulsions for individuals or certain groups of students. Additionally, future studies should look to further grapple with the issue of race as it relates to disproportional school discipline. Different measures of the construct should be explored, and the focus of analysis should be extended beyond discussions of African American students.

With respect to policy, the impact of exclusionary discipline practices on student performance should be further examined- in the era of the RTTT Initiative. Understanding this relationship might reveal more about the existence of the exclusionary strategy and its implications for education today.

As a final recommendation, future studies should make a point to articulate a set of efficacious interventions designed to reduce racial, gender, or institutional gaps in school discipline. Yet it should be understood that effective interventions are usually not drafted in isolation. Consequently, researchers must collaborate- or partner with- key educational stakeholders in developing strategies if they are to truly work. The

effectiveness of these interventions are contingent upon their ability to bring about awareness of the potential bias surrounding the disciplinary process, as well as, their ability to offer ways in which the deleterious consequences- often attributed to exclusionary discipline practices- can be mitigated.

### **Final Thoughts**

Nearly a decade of research has provided evidence of a discipline gap in urban schools; yet, despite the attempts made by some of the most notable researchers to expose this phenomenon- the gap has done all but narrow. In comparison to the early 1970's, African Americans are presently twice as likely to be suspended in comparison to White students (Skiba & Losen, 2010). Hidden under the mask of zero tolerance, these students are being pushed out of school and into the streets; thus, making them more susceptible to criminal behavior (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). The implications behind disproportional discipline practices for African American students are considerable. That being said, it is time that researchers change their approach to the study of the overrepresentation of African American students for exclusionary discipline; taking less of a passive role, and more of an active role in solving this puzzle of discipline. Placing, objectivity and neutrality aside, researchers must begin to develop a consciousness for advocacy. They must get from behind their desk and out into the field; working side-by-side with practitioners. Only then will there be marked improvements in the narrowing of the discipline gap, and quite possibly better educational outcomes for African American students disproportionately affected by suspensions and expulsions.

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## APPENDIX A

Table A1

Midwestern Urban School District Discipline Sanctions, 2005-2006

<b>Sanction</b>	<b>Discipline Category <sup>a</sup></b>
Out of School Suspension	Exclusionary
Out of School Suspension- 1 Day	Exclusionary
Out of School Suspension- 2 Days	Exclusionary
Out of School Suspension- 3 Days	Exclusionary
Out of School Suspension- 4 Days	Exclusionary
Out of School Suspension- 5 Days	Exclusionary
Out of School Suspension- 10 Days	Exclusionary
Out of School Suspension- 15 Days	Exclusionary
Out of School Suspension- 20 Days	Exclusionary
Extended Suspension- 5 Days	Exclusionary
Extended Suspension- 10 Days	Exclusionary
Suspension with Expulsion Recommended	Exclusionary
Expulsion	Exclusionary
Expulsion Affirmed	Exclusionary
Expulsion and Referred by Hearing Officer	Exclusionary
Expulsion and Referred to Alternative	Exclusionary
Negotiated Withdrawals	Exclusionary
Systematic Exclusion	Exclusionary
Alternative to Suspension	Non-Exclusionary
Assigned Community Service	Non-Exclusionary
Assigned In School Detention	Non-Exclusionary
Assigned Saturday School	Non-Exclusionary
Attendance Contract Developed	Non-Exclusionary
Classroom Suspension/ Teacher Removal	Non-Exclusionary
Conference (Parent and Student)	Non-Exclusionary
Conference (Student)	Non-Exclusionary
Develop Behavior Contract	Non-Exclusionary
District Transportation Privileges Revoked	Non-Exclusionary
Expulsion Denied	Non-Exclusionary
In School Suspension	Non-Exclusionary
Other Action Taken	Non-Exclusionary
Parent Attendance instead of Suspension	Non-Exclusionary
Phone Conference (Parent)	Non-Exclusionary
Referred to CARB (Community Attendance)	Non-Exclusionary
Referred to Counselor	Non-Exclusionary
Restricted Lunch	Non-Exclusionary
Restricted Recess	Non-Exclusionary
Warning	Non-Exclusionary

*Note .* <sup>(a)</sup> The exclusionary discipline category represents those sanctions whereby students were either suspended and/or expelled off-campus. The non-exclusionary discipline category represents those sanctions whereby students received some form of disciplinary action that occurred on-campus.

Table A2

*Descriptive Statistics*

	Total Sample (N= 8594)		Discipline Sanction for Acts of Disobedience			
			Exclusionary (n= 755)		Non-Exclusionary (n= 7839)	
	N	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Race<sup>a</sup></b>						
Student of Color	6589	76.7%	611	80.9%	5978	76.3%
Non-Student of Color	2005	23.3%	144	19.1%	1861	23.7%
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	6197	72.1%	580	76.8%	5617	71.7%
Female	2397	27.9%	175	23.2%	2222	28.3%
<b>SES<sup>b</sup></b>						
Free/Reduced Lunch	4539	52.8%	431	68.1%	4108	63.9%
Full Priced Lunch	2594	30.2%	202	31.9%	2322	36.1%
<b>School Level</b>						
Secondary	6226	72.4%	512	67.8%	5714	72.9%
Elementary	2368	27.6%	243	32.2%	2125	27.1%
<b>Behavior Role</b>						
Direct Involvement	8099	94.2%	673	89.1%	7426	94.7%
Indirect Involvement	495	5.8%	82	10.9%	413	5.3%

*Note.* (a) Students of color considered in this data include only African American and Hispanic students. (b) missing data on 1531 students.

Table A3

*Logistic Regression Analysis Results*

Independent Variables	$\beta$	$Se\beta$	Wald's $\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$e^{\beta}$ (OR, odds ratio)	
Race (1 = Students of Color, 0 = Non-Students of Color)	0.07	0.11	0.36	1	0.550	1.07	
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	-0.22	0.10	5.01	1	0.025 *	0.81	
SES (1 = Free/Reduced, 0 = Full Priced)	0.13	0.09	1.94	1	0.164	1.14	
School Level (1 = Secondary, 0 = Elementary)	-0.27	0.10	7.95	1	0.005 **	0.76	
Behavior Role (1 = Direct Involvement, 0 = Non-Direct Involvement)	0.61	0.14	18.51	1	0.000 ***	1.84	
Constant	-2.24	0.13	320.06	1	0.000 ***	-	
Test			$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>		
Overall model evaluation (Omnibus Test of Model Coefficients)			41.44	5	0.000 ***		
Goodness-of-fit test							
Hosmer& Lemeshow			5.571	7	0.591		

Note. Cox & Snell  $R^2 = .006$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .013$ .

\* $p < .05$   
\*\* $p < .01$   
\*\*\* $p < .001$



Table A4

*Point Biserial Correlation Results*

Variables	$r_{pb}$	
	1	2
(1) No. Assigned OSS Days	1.00	
(2) Race	0.08 * (0.031)	1.00

*Note* .  $r_{pb}$ , point biserial coefficient. No. OSS Days (mean = 1.74, SD = 1.55).  
 $p$ -values reported in ( ).

\* $p < .05$  (one-tailed)

\*\* $p < .01$  (one-tailed)

\*\*\* $p < .001$  (one-tailed)

## APPENDIX B

## MULTIPLE REGRESSION EQUATION MODELS

$$Y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \varepsilon_i \quad [1]$$

$Y_i$  = African American female dropout rate

$\alpha_i$  = Constant

$X_1$  = Number of African American females suspended

$X_2$  = Number of African American females expelled

$X_3$  = Percent Student of Color

$X_4$  = Percent Free/Reduced Lunch

$$Y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \varepsilon_i \quad [2]$$

$Y_i$  = African American male dropout rate

$\alpha_i$  = Constant

$X_1$  = Number of African American males suspended

$X_2$  = Number of African American males expelled

$X_3$  = Percent Student of Color

$X_4$  = Percent Free/Reduced Lunch

$$Y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \varepsilon_i \quad [3]$$

$Y_i$  = African American female graduation rate

$\alpha_i$  = Constant

$X_1$  = Number of African American females suspended

$X_2$  = Number of African American females expelled

$X_3$  = Percent Student of Color

$X_4$  = Percent Free/Reduced Lunch

$$Y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \varepsilon_i \quad [4]$$

$Y_i$  = African American male graduation rate

$\alpha_i$  = Constant

$X_1$  = Number of African American males suspended

$X_2$  = Number of African American males expelled

$X_3$  = Percent Student of Color

$X_4$  = Percent Free/Reduced Lunch

$$Y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 X_i + \beta_3 X_i + \beta_4 X_i + \varepsilon_i \quad [5]$$

$Y_i$  = Percent African American female CSAP 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading Proficiency

$\alpha_i$  = Constant

$X_1$  = Number of African American female exclusion

$X_2$  = *Prior* Percent African American female CSAP Reading Proficiency

$X_3$  = Percent Student of Color

$X_4$  = Percent Free/Reduced Lunch

$$Y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 X_i + \beta_3 X_i + \beta_4 X_i + \varepsilon_i \quad [6]$$

$Y_i$  = Percent African American male CSAP 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading Proficiency

$\alpha_i$  = Constant

$X_1$  = Number of African American male exclusion

$X_2$  = *Prior* Percent African American male CSAP Reading Proficiency

$X_3$  = Percent Student of Color

$X_4$  = Percent Free/Reduced Lunch

$$Y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 X_i + \beta_3 X_i + \beta_4 X_i + \varepsilon_i \quad [7]$$

$Y_i$  = Percent African American female CSAP 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Math Proficiency

$\alpha_i$  = Constant

$X_1$  = Number of African American female exclusion

$X_2$  = *Prior* Percent African American female CSAP Math Proficiency

$X_3$  = Percent Student of Color

$X_4$  = Percent Free/Reduced Lunch

$$Y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 X_i + \beta_3 X_i + \beta_4 X_i + \varepsilon_i \quad [8]$$

$Y_i$  = Percent African American male CSAP 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Math Proficiency

$\alpha_i$  = Constant

$X_1$  = Number of African American male exclusion

$X_2$  = *Prior* Percent African American male CSAP Math Proficiency

$X_3$  = Percent Student of Color

$X_4$  = Percent Free/Reduced Lunch

Table B1

*Discipline Percentages by Race and Gender*

Analysis	Female Students		Males	
	African American	White	African American	White
% of enrolled (N = 780,708)	2.92 n = 22,824	30.3 n = 236,569	3.04 n = 23,709	32.22 n = 251,523
% sanctioned (N = 72,655 )	3.93 n = 2,856	12.73 n = 9,247	8.09 n = 5,880	35.98 n = 26,141
% out-of-school suspension (N = 71,180)	4.63 n = 3,297	10.17 n = 7,241	10.86 n = 7,731	33.06 n = 23,529
% expelled (N = 2,548)	2.12 n = 54	8.75 n = 223	10.52 n = 268	35.83 n = 913

*Note.* Percent sanctioned includes all students that received disciplinary action within the district.

Table B2

*Relative Risk Ratio Results*

Group	Risk Index <sup>a</sup>	Relative Risk Ratio	Interpretation
Disciplinary Action			
African Americans	0.19 (0.07)	2.59	Overrepresentation
Exclusionary Sanction			
African Americans	0.24 (0.07)	3.73	Overrepresentation
African American Females	0.15 (0.03)	4.65	Overrepresentation
African American Males	0.34 (0.10)	3.47	Overrepresentation

Note: <sup>a</sup> Risk index of the comparison group is shown in ( ).

Table B3

*Correlation Results: African American Female Dropout Rate, 2005-2006*

Variables	1	2	3
(1) Black Female Dropout Rate	1.00		
(2) Black Female Suspension	0.13 (.075)	1.00	
(3) Black Female Expulsion	0.16 (.036) *	0.93 (.000) ***	1.00

*Note.* African American Female Dropout Rate (mean = 1.56, SD = 5.66). *p*-values reported in ( ).

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed)

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed)

\*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed)

Table B4

*Multiple Regression Analysis Results: African American Dropout Rate, 2005-2006*

Independent Variables	Dropout Rate	
	Model 1 AA Females	Model 2 AA Males
	$\beta$	$\beta$
African American Female Suspension	-0.42 (-1.10)	—
African American Female Expulsion	0.20 (0.99)	—
African American Male Suspension	—	-0.01 (-.039)
African American Male Expulsion	—	0.07 (0.27)
SOC Population	0.18 (1.94) *	0.15 (1.58)
SES	-0.10 (-1.10)	-0.15 (-1.59)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.02
N	181	181

Note. *t*-statistics reported in ( )

\**p* < .05  
 \*\**p* < .01  
 \*\*\**p* < .001

Table B5

*Correlation Results: African American Female Graduation Rate, 2005-2006*

Variables	1	2	3
(1) Black Female Graduation Rate	1.00		
(2) Black Female Suspension	0.19 (.012) *	1.00	
(3) Black Female Expulsion	0.25 (.001) **	0.93 (.000) ***	1.00

*Note.* African American Female Graduation Rate (mean = 21.11, SD = 37.57). *p*-values reported in ( ).

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed)

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed)

\*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed)



Table B6

*Correlation Results: African American Male Graduation Rate, 2005-2006*

Variables	1	2	3
(1) Black Male Graduation Rate	1.00		
(2) Black Male Suspension	0.19 (.012) *	1.00	
(3) Black Male Expulsion	0.23 (.002) **	0.95 (.000) ***	1.00

*Note* . African American Male Graduation Rate (mean = 19.15, SD = 34.77). *p* -values reported in ( ).

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed)

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed)

\*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed)

Table B7

*Multiple Regression Analysis Results: African American Graduation Rate, 2005-2006*

Independent Variables	Graduation Rate	
	Model 3 AA Females	Model 4 AA Males
	$\beta$	$\beta$
African American Female Suspension	-0.31 (-1.65)	—
African American Female Expulsion	0.50 (2.60) **	—
African American Male Suspension	—	-0.34 (-1.46)
African American Male Expulsion	—	0.51 (2.17) *
SOC Population	0.30 (3.43) **	0.29 (3.25) **
SES	-0.35 (-4.06) ***	-0.27 (-3.06) **
R <sup>2</sup>	0.16	0.13
N	182	182

Note. t-statistics reported in ( )

- \* $p < .05$   
 \*\* $p < .01$   
 \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table B8

*Correlation Results: Reading Proficiency and African American Females, 2005-2006*

Variables	1	2
(1) High Stakes Testing Reading Proficiency	1.00	
(2) Black Female Exclusion	0.53 (.000) ***	1.00

*Note* . Reading Proficiency and African American Females (mean = 236.91, SD = 517.10).

*p* -values reported in ( ).

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed)

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed)

\*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed)

Table B9

*Correlation Results: Reading Proficiency and African American Males, 2005-2006*

Variables	1	2
(1) High Stakes Testing Reading Proficiency	1.00	
(2) Black Male Exclusion	0.56 (.000) ***	1.00

*Note* . Reading Proficiency and African American Males (mean =236.91, SD = 517.103).  
*p* -values reported in ( ).

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed)

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed)

\*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed)

Table B10

*Correlation Results: Math Proficiency and African American Females, 2005-2006*

Variables	1	2
(1) High Stakes Testing Math Proficiency	1.00	
(2) Black Female Exclusion	0.56 (.000) ***	1.00

*Note* . Math Proficiency and African American Females (mean =178.40, SD = 381.01).  
*p* -values reported in ( ).

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed)

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed)

\*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed)

Table B11

*Correlation Results: Math Proficiency and African American Males, 2005-2006*

Variables	1	2
(1) High Stakes Testing Math Proficiency	1.00	
(2) Black Male Exclusion	0.56 (.000) ***	1.00

*Note* . Math Proficiency and African American Males (mean =178.40, SD = 381.09).

*p* -values reported in ( ).

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed)

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed)

\*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed)

Table B12

*Multiple Regression Analysis Results: High Stakes Testing Proficiency, 2005-2006*

Independent Variables	4th Grade Reading		4th Grade Math	
	Model 5 AA Females	Model 6 AA Males	Model 7 AA Females	Model 8 AA Males
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
African American Female Exclusion	0.12 (3.00) **	—	0.05 (9.06) ***	—
African American Male Exclusion	—	0.13 (3.17) **	—	0.05 (9.35) ***
Prior High Stakes Testing Proficiency	0.85 (20.49) ***	0.85 (19.98) ***	0.97 (170.96) ***	0.97 (169.66) ***
SOC Population	0.03 (0.47)	0.03 (0.47)	0.13 (1.91) *	0.01 (1.92) *
SES	0.00 (-.028)	-0.002 (-.034)	-0.01 (-1.37)	-0.01 (-1.35)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.85	0.85	0.99	0.99
N	134	134	134	134

Note. t-statistics reported in ( )

\* $p < .05$   
 \*\* $p < .01$   
 \*\*\* $p < .001$

## APPENDIX C

**TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY  
DIVISION OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES - OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE**

1186 TAMU, General Services Complex  
College Station, TX 77843-1186  
750 Agronomy Road, #3500

979.458.1467  
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<http://researchcompliance.tamu.edu>

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Human Subjects Protection Program

Institutional Review Board

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**DATE:** 13-Aug-2010

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** BUTLER, BETTIE RAY  
77843-3578

**FROM:** Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board

**SUBJECT:** Initial Review

---

**Protocol  
Number:** 2010-0559

**Title:** The Puzzle of Discipline: An Examination of Discipline  
Disproportionality

**Review  
Category:** Exempt from IRB Review

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It has been determined that the referenced protocol application meets the criteria for exemption and no further review is required. However, any amendment or modification to the protocol must be reported to the IRB and reviewed before being implemented to ensure the protocol still meets the criteria for exemption.

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**This determination was based on the following Code of Federal Regulations:**  
(<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm>)

45 CFR 46.101(b)(4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

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**Provisions:**

This electronic document provides notification of the review results by the Institutional Review Board.



## VITA

Bettie Ray Butler

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## Research Interests

## Education Policy

Disproportional School Discipline Practices  
 Race/Ethnicity and Zero Tolerance

## Urban Education/ Academic Achievement

Cultural Pedagogy and Student Performance for K-12 Students of Color

## Politics of Education

Representative Bureaucracy and Academic Achievement

## Education

Ph.D. (2011)

Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas  
 Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture  
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B.A. (2004, *Summa Cum Laude*)

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