

The Out-of-school Suspensions of Black Students: A Racial and Social Justice Issue

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Abstract: This report summarizes a study of out-of-school suspensions of black youth. Youth who were suspended, their caregivers, and educators participated in individual, semi-structured, audiotaped interviews. Participants from all groups expressed a commitment to youth education, viewed suspensions as a racial issue and described youth behaviors using language from the criminal justice system. Youth perspectives included the peer group as a context for their behavior. Caregivers described the negative impact of suspensions on the family-school relationship. Educators described system-level barriers to implementing what they considered to be better practices for responding to youth misbehaviors. Implications for addressing racial disproportionalities in out-of-school suspensions are discussed. The research on which this article is based was supported by a grant from the University Metropolitan Consortium, which is coordinated through CURA.

Racial disproportionality in out-of-school suspensions is a persistent social-justice and child-wellbeing issue. Suspensions involve removing children from school for up to 10 days, often for relatively minor misbehaviors such as fighting, noncompliance and disrespect.¹ Suspensions are largely ineffective in their goal of deterring inappropriate student behaviors, but they do harm their well-being, health, and academic achievement; and facilitate entry into the juvenile justice system.² Nationally, black children are three times more likely than white children to be suspended,³

¹ L.M. Raffaele Mendez, H.M. Knoff, and J.M. Ferron, "School Demographic Variables and Out-of-school Suspensions Rates: A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of a Large, Ethnically Diverse School District," *Psychology in the Schools* 39,3 (2002): 259-277.

² For review and discussion see W. Haight, P.A. Gibson, M. Kayama, J.M. Marshall, and R. Wilson, "An Ecological -systems Inquiry into Racial Disproportionalities in Out-of-school Suspensions from Youth, Caregiver and Educator Perspectives." *Children and Youth Services Review*, 46, (2014): 128-138.

³ D.J. Losen, *Discipline Policies, Successful Schools, and Racial Justice* (Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2011). Available at nepc.colorado.edu/publication/discipline-policies.



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In the United States, black students are three times more likely than white students to be suspended, yet black children are no more likely than other children to engage in rule-breaking behaviors at school.

yet black students are no more likely than other students to engage in unsafe or rule-breaking behaviors at school.⁴ In short, suspensions act as a barrier to upward mobility and meaningful employment through school success historically emphasized in black families.^{5, 6, 7}

The research that we describe here is the first to simultaneously examine the perspectives of black youth, their caregivers, and their educators on specific incidents of suspensions. Exploring the experiences and meanings of

suspensions for those who are directly involved provides an important lens for considering how youth, caregivers, and educators can work together to reduce suspensions of black youth.

Method

We collected data from September 2012 to July 2013 from suspended students, their caregivers, and their educators in the Twin Cities metro area. We invited all of the students with suspensions to participate along with their caregivers and educators, and approximately half of students and caregivers agreed as did 80% of educators.

A total of 78 informants completed in-depth, individual, audiotaped interviews. There were 31 black youth, aged 11-17 (mean = 14.4), 28 caregivers, and 19 educators. Youth received suspensions for physical fights (52%), disruptive behaviors (19%), theft (13%), disrespectful behavior toward educators (10%), and making threats (6%). Twenty-one (68%) of the youth were male and 13 (42%) received special services for emotional and behavior disorders or

⁴ For example, see the review by A. Gregory, R. Skiba, and P.A. Noguera, "The Achievement Gap and the Discipline Gap: Two Sides of the Same Coin?" *Educational Researcher* 39,1 (2010): 59-68.

⁵ P.B. Baker, "The Impact of Cultural Biases on African American Students' Education: A Review of Research Literature Regarding Race Based Schooling," *Education and Urban Society* 37,3 (2005): 243-256.

⁶ J.F.L. Jackson and J.L. Moore, "African American Males in Education: Endangered or Ignored?" *Teachers College Record* 108,2 (2006): 201-205.

⁷ J.D. Nichols, W.G. Ludwin, and P. Iadicola, "A Darker Shade of Gray: A Year-end Analysis of Discipline and Suspension Data," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 32,1 (1999): 43-55.

specific learning disabilities. Caregivers included 24 mothers (86%), three fathers (11%), and one grandmother (3%). Twenty-four (86%) caregivers were African American and 4 (14%) were African immigrants. Eleven (58%) of the educators were white, seven (37%) were black, and one (5%) was Latino. Eight (42%) were general-education teachers, eight (42%) were administrators (principals, behavior deans, and the district superintendent), two (11%) were special-education teachers and one (5%) was a lunchroom supervisor.

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. A team of researchers independently and through discussion then developed a set of codes summarizing the views of youth, caregivers, and educators.

Results

Three major categories of findings from this study are the psychosocial correlates of suspensions, the social-language analysis of suspensions, and the social construction of behaviors into suspendable offenses.

The Psychosocial Correlates of Suspensions. In discussing their experiences of suspensions, informants considered pathways to suspensions, emotional and relationship consequences of suspensions, and recommendations to mitigate suspensions.

Pathways to Suspensions. Generally, the students, caregivers, and educators agreed about the official reported incident leading to suspension, but disagreed about contributing factors, especially from the students' perspectives.

- ▶ Students' explanations of contributing factors to their misdeeds went beyond the official reasons cited for the suspension referrals to the broader context, often of the peer group. Their perspectives included they misbehaved and were responsible for their actions; they misbehaved, but were justified in their actions (usually seen as self-defense); and they were unaware that their misdeeds were suspendable offenses.
- ▶ Caregivers typically questioned "official" school interpretations of student behaviors and questioned the educators' commitment to their children. In many cases, caregivers viewed children's misdeeds as age typical; a result of following the wrong crowd of peers, underlying emotional problems, or reacting to

family crises; or as justifiable acts of self-defense.

- ▶ Educators described a variety of reasons for the suspensions, including students' inappropriate play, rivalries among peers, and underlying behavioral problems. They also described system-level challenges to responding to children's misdeeds in more productive ways. These challenges included over-crowded classrooms that make relationship building difficult and inadequate support services such as counseling.

Emotional and Relational Consequences of Suspensions. Most informants experienced intensely negative feelings and deterioration in relationships as a result of the suspensions.

- ▶ Suspended students described feelings of anger and upset from being suspended. Students' relationships with their peers/friends and caregivers at home also became strained. Students reported that they were treated differently by educators after returning to school and were avoided by certain of their peers. In addition, students felt that the suspensions had negatively impacted their school performance due to missed assignments, and that they had problems making up work after returning to school.
- ▶ Caregivers expressed anger, upset, and frustration not only about the interruption in their children's education, but also because of the potentially negative impact of suspension on their children's educational future.
- ▶ Some caregivers described relationship changes with their children. Despite their unwavering support for their children being in school, caregivers varied in their reactions to the misdeed. Some caregivers described that they had developed mistrust of their children and begun monitoring their attitudes and providing instructions, such as to think before acting.
- ▶ Caregivers generally imposed sanctions or punishment for the misdeed. In rare cases, a caregiver viewed the suspension as a timely warning to the child to change his or her behavior, or reported that a sibling had a negative reaction to the suspension.
- ▶ Typically, the suspension resulted in strained relationships between

caregivers and educators. Caregivers initially reacted with strong, vocal opinions of their disagreement with suspensions.

- ▶ Consequences expressed by caregivers varied slightly between those who self-identified as African immigrants and those who self-identified as African Americans. Although both expressed a lack of agency, the contexts were different. Some African American caregivers reported being unable to act immediately on the request of the educator or assertively on behalf of the child. African immigrant caregivers expressed frustration with educators' inability to provide effective discipline because of fear of litigation, as well as their own inability to act in traditional ways because of what they perceived to be prohibitions on physical discipline.
- ▶ Educators also experienced consequences from the suspensions similar to students and caregivers, including intense negative emotions and deterioration in relationships. They felt frustration with the students' misdeeds or the length of time it took for the underlying problem to be recognized. Some educators were concerned that students' behaviors disrupted their ability to teach other students, or to maintain standards of behavior in the classroom. Others were clearly frustrated with students' misdeeds and expressed that "students needed some days" away from the school and other students. Others expressed strong opinions that the school had to enforce rules and policies about students' behavior and misdeeds to keep the institution operating effectively and efficiently.
- ▶ Some educators also expressed concerns about the tone and words used by caregivers, which they viewed as ranging from verbally aggressive to verbally abusive (typically characterized by the use of curse words).

Recommendations to Mitigate Suspensions. We asked all informants for recommendations for avoiding suspensions in the future. They responded with strategies that we categorized as being related to student behaviors, caregivers, educators, and schools. The majority of recommendations targeted school policies and procedures (Table 1).

Social-Language Analysis of Suspensions. The concept of narrative inequality refers to the systematic

privileging of some voices or social perspectives (e.g., youth, caregivers, educators) over others.⁸ “Social voice” refers to the systematic use of language to align oneself with particular groups (e.g., groups in power and authority, or groups of affiliation, such as peers). When we employed social-language analysis to examine informants’ narratives about suspensions, we found the widespread use of a “criminal justice” voice to refer to the misbehaviors of children in school. Such language sends a powerful message that may impact black students’ criminalized social- and self-identities.

- ▶ A total of 51 criminal justice and legal terms were spontaneously used 474 times by 59 of the 78 participants.
- ▶ Educators used such language to justify punitive actions.
- ▶ Caregivers used such language to resist sanctions placed on their children.
- ▶ Students spoke through the perspective of the criminal defendant using terms such as “crime” and “prisoner” to describe their behaviors and experiences.

The Social Construction of Behaviors into Suspendable Offenses.

Critical-race theory emerged in the legal literature as a means to address the effects of race and racism.⁹ We asked informants to comment on any role of race in suspensions. Our analysis suggested that some educators’ negative misinterpretations of black youth behaviors and modes of communication contributed to the social construction of black youth as aggressive, threatening, and behaviorally/emotionally “explosive.”

- ▶ Students and their caregivers generally felt that a number of factors associated with race influenced the rate of suspensions for black students. In particular, students noted that prejudicial beliefs and behaviors on the part of educators, preferential treatment for white students, and the systematic targeting of black students for disciplinary infractions were

⁸ Miller, Kovan, and Lin, “Language Socialization and Narrative,” 2012.

⁹ J. Decuir and A. Dixon, “‘So When It Comes Out, They Aren’t That Surprised That It Is There’: Using Critical Race Theory as a Tool of Analysis of Race and Racism in Education,” *Educational Researcher* 33,5 (2004): 26–31.

Table 1. Recommendations to Mitigate Out-of-school Suspensions

Target of Recommendation	Recommendations
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To exercise self-control by walking away, using common sense, and avoiding arguing with educators ■ To go to school to learn, not to play
Caregivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To be actively involved in school and the education of children ■ To teach children to refrain from disagreeing with educators in favor of allowing their caregivers to handle the situation ■ To provide incentives to children for positive behaviors
Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To develop relationships with students to avoid problems ■ To provide students with adult guidance when problems do arise ■ To increase their knowledge about differences relative to culture and race
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To increase communication by listening and talking to students, to thoroughly investigate misdeeds, and to get to “know” the students as people to gauge why they behaved in particular ways ■ To provide training to educators in dealing more effectively with students’ behaviors and in communicating their negative behaviors to caregivers ■ To contact and communicate with caregivers* ■ To find alternatives to suspension policies, including in-school suspensions ■ To provide more services, such as after-school tutoring and convening meetings between caregivers and educators prior to dealing with misbehavior of students ■ To reduce class sizes and provide additional staff to assist teachers with their duties

*Interestingly, some caregivers wanted educators to contact them immediately when their children misbehaved, whereas others wanted educators to limit communications with them over minor misdeeds and instead assertively deal with these issues at school.

factors that contributed to disproportionalities in suspension.

- ▶ Caregivers expressed a belief that educators systematically excluded black children, who exhibited what they perceived as problematic behaviors, from the educational environment via suspensions.
- ▶ Caregivers also tended to emphasize educators’ lack of cultural competence or cultural knowledge as a primary contributing factor to the disproportionate number of black youth receiving suspensions.
- ▶ Coinciding with these observations, some educators and students attributed disproportional suspension rates to problematic behavioral characteristics specific to black students. In particular, informants noted that African American youth were more confrontational with teachers, and more physically and verbally

antagonistic with peers and classmates, than other students.

Discussion and Recommendations

The pathways to suspensions are complex and interrelated. It is important to note that all informants in this study experienced negative emotional consequences to suspensions. Suspensions are interventions that call students’ and their caregivers’ attention to unsanctioned behaviors, yet the emotional costs of suspensions are so tremendous that they rip the fabric of relationships among students, caregivers, and educators, resulting in distrust and compromising future interactions. Given that educators, in the minds of students and caregivers, represent the public school system, suspensions cause distrust at the level of family-school relationships that hinders schools’ ability to educate students.

Given the adversarial, emotional nature and severe consequences of suspensions, we recommend oversight and review of all suspensions by a committee comprised of educators, caregivers, and students. Furthermore, the emotionality inherent in suspensions calls for policy revisions in which a third party (e.g., counselor or social worker) acts as a mediator to engage the adults—caregivers and educators—in establishing mutual goals for the student. Adults need to be aware that their emotions feed not only the emotions of students, but also the continued negative relationship between students and their educators. Students would benefit from being listened to, with the aim of developing alternative ways to deal with situations instead of using those that resulted in the referral for a suspension.

Results from the social-language analysis revealed stances taken by informants in their experiences of suspensions and how the language they employ forms bridges or barriers to effective communication. It seems that the language of the criminal-justice system is inherent in educational policies governing discipline of students, and is then used by educators, caregivers, and students. We recommend serious reflection and sensitivity not only to what is being communicated to developing children, but also in how those messages are being communicated. Is a criminal justice language appropriate or desirable in a public school setting? We also recommend that written policies be reassessed because they set the tone for treating students as if they had committed a crime instead of displaying inappropriate behavior. It would be beneficial for educators and caregivers to use the social language of authority to collaborate on one unified message to students relative to appropriate behaviors at home and at school, respectively.

Human beings socially construct their world and their experiences in it; thus, it is not unusual for dynamics reflected in the use of different social voices to occur at school. When such dynamics become racialized and result in suspensions, they become problematic. It has long been argued that educators who lack cultural knowledge can misinterpret black youth behavior as maladaptive or disordered. The misattribution of negative labels to normative black youth behaviors fosters an environment wherein black youth identities are criminalized and punished.



The language used for school discipline is often the same type used in the criminal justice system. The use of such language sends a powerful message that may damage students' self-identity.

As a result, disruptive, disrespectful, and violent behaviors are encoded as endemic to black youth, who are subsequently regarded as inherently pathological. It seems that, intuitively, the social construction of the behaviors of black students began prior to their entering school in general. However, a difference exists between the larger societal view that is negative and a view by blacks that is context and culturally sensitive. Although cultural sensitivity is needed, it ought to include the context in which students live. Generally, the differences in the social vantage points of educators, students, and caregivers are such that it becomes difficult to (un)stereotype behaviors of black youth, there is a lack of acknowledgement of diversity within black youth behaviors, and caregivers find it difficult to fully advocate for their children and actualize their value in education because they lack a strong working relationship with educators.

If suspensions are to be mitigated, adults in the lives of students must band together to become familiar with each other prior to a misdeed. Making a connection that is not associated with suspensions may serve to increase knowledge across differences so that educators can see the strengths of caregivers and vice versa. In addition, educators must view the behavior of black youth with an acknowledgement of the tendency to socially construct it as violent and assess such behavior in light

of an actual concrete threat rather than a perceived threat. Conflicts encountered by black youth are a natural point of intervention to learn mediation and negotiation skills that will prepare them in their future places of higher education and work.

In summary, we can no longer afford to allow society to exclude from education the black youth who will be our next generation of workers. Adults, caregivers, and educators collaborating across differences without the tension of suspensions can begin to focus society in a more positive direction in its view of black youth. Caregivers would benefit from assuming a stance that shows their value of education by working more closely with their children about inappropriate behaviors and obtaining help with problematic behavior, which may also help build relationships between educators and students. Educators would benefit from the painful realization that humans are socialized in an oppressive society, and that dismantling prejudicial beliefs and actions is a lifelong personal and professional journey worthy of pursuit as a responsible citizen. In preparing to take their rightful place as productive adults, students must learn how to be responsible for themselves, follow directions, and form relationships with others. At the same time, they must be taught the reality of living as a black youth who must remain in school and deal with conflicts. This difficult task

requires not only the support of caregivers and educators, but also a shift in society's views of black youth. Staying in school instead of being pushed out of school through suspensions is the key.

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