Restorative Practices and Disproportionate Discipline of Black Girls: An Intersectional and Ecological Analysis

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Abstract: *This mixed-methods study examines the disproportionate discipline of Black girls attending a U.S. high school implementing restorative justice practices. Grounded in ecological systems theory and intersectionality, this study presents overall and within-gender disciplinary outcomes, with qualitative data providing context for these trends. Quantitative analyses, including a relative risk index and Pearson's chi-square tests, confirm significant overall and within-gender disparities in disciplinary outcomes. Qualitative findings reveal inconsistent discipline practices and classroom management challenges as pathways to inequity, exacerbated by subjective enforcement and punitive measures. The study underscores the need for consistent, equitable application of restorative practices and intentional relationship-building to address the complex interplay of race, gender, and discipline. We posit that school social workers can play a pivotal role in developing intersectional tier-2 restorative practices that center the lived experiences of Black girls to reduce inequitable school discipline outcomes.*

Keywords: *Disproportionate discipline, Black girls, restorative justice practices, school suspension, intersectionality*

Over 2.5 million U.S. students were subject to one or more suspensions during the 2017-2018 school year (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2019). The rates of these exclusionary disciplinary practices result in over 11 million days of school missed across the K-12 schools (USDOE, 2019). Often boys are the center of this conversation because of their high suspension rates; however, leaving the suspension outcomes of girls in the shadow of boys. Girls of all races make up 30% of overall suspensions across the nation; further, almost three-quarters (73%) of girls suspended are girls of color (USDOE, 2019). Specifically, Black girls make up 44% of all girls suspended each year, despite accounting for only 15% of girls enrolled in schools (USDOE, 2019). Suspensions are not simply missed school days, instead, they can result in poor academic outcomes (Brown, 2007; Toldson et al., 2015), repeat future suspensions (Dupper et al., 2009), conflict that can lead to strained student-teacher relationships (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Yassine et al., 2020), and a greater likelihood for incarceration (Cregor & Hewitt, 2011; Hill, 2018). This paper describes a need for an explicit focus on intervention strategies to address the disproportionate suspension of girls, and Black girls in particular.

Attempts to reduce the outcomes of punitive discipline in schools have come through the implementation of multi-tiered interventions such as Restorative Practices (RP). While the use of school-wide interventions such as RP have had some success in improving

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relational bonds and reducing overall disciplinary outcomes (Augustine et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2016), disproportionate suspensions have persisted (Augustine et al., 2018; Fallo & Larwin, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2018). However, school discipline research focused on Black girls specifically is underrepresented in the literature. Thus, this mixed-methods study contributes to the social work literature on school discipline by describing factors and processes contributing to the disproportional discipline of Black girls. While the field of social work has acknowledged the issue of racially disproportional suspensions (Teasley et al., 2023), social work has not delineated a clear response to discipline inequities impacting Black girls. This research uses an intersectional framework to understand the disproportionate discipline for Black girls, offering policy and practice implications for school social workers.

Background

High and Disproportional Suspensions

Since the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education,* scholars have studied the lasting effects of both school and residential segregation on the educational outcomes of students of color (Levine, 2019). Four notable areas of concern that influence Black students' educational experience are residential segregation, access to school choice, inequitable educational pathways, and racialized discipline practices. These four influential areas leave students of color without the same quality of education their White counterparts receive (Howell & Caisey, 2019; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Boys overall, especially Black boys, as well as students of color and those with disabilities, have historically and continue to be disproportionately suspended in U.S. schools (Epstein et al., 2020; USDOE, 2019). While it is often assumed that school suspensions are a direct result of breaking school rules, other factors have the potential to exponentially exacerbate discipline disparities. These factors include cultural mismatch between students and educators (Vavrus & Cole, 2002), race and gender bias (Morris, 2016; Skiba et al., 2002), and punitive discipline policies and practices (Hanson, 2005).

Nationally high and disproportional school discipline trends led to recommendations from the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice through a Guidance Package on school discipline (USDOE & United States Department of Justice [DOJ], 2014). This Guidance Package provided recommendations to address these discipline outcomes and, including the use of school-wide accountability and relationship building interventions such as positive behavior intervention systems and restorative justice practices (USDOE & DOJ,2014). Additionally, initiatives such as the federally supported *My Brother's Keeper* program gave national attention to address challenges faced by boys, especially the academic and discipline disparities experienced by Black boys (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). While boys require attention and intervention, Black girls are the only group of girls disproportionately suspended nationally (USDOE, 2019), yet their experiences are often missed or essentialized as they are grouped with Black boys or girls as a whole (Smith, 2019, p. 21). Indeed, a systematic review conducted between 2010-2016 found that research on Black girls represented less than 1% of published literature besides multicultural/urban education journals (Young, 2020). As such, Black

girls as a group are often under-discussed in the school discipline literature, with few evidence-based practice recommendations available.

Disproportional Suspension of Black Girls

Data from the 2013-2016 academic years indicate that Black girls accounted for 8% of students enrolled, and 13% who received one or more out-of-school suspensions (Office of Civil Rights [OCR], 2016; USDOE, 2019). National data from the 2017-2018 academic year show that, compared to their white female counterparts, Black girls were 4.19 times more likely to receive out-of-school suspension, four times more likely to be expelled, 3.66 times more likely to face school-based arrest, and 5.34 times more likely to be transferred to another school for disciplinary reasons (Epstein et al., 2020). These trends are not solely driven by behavior but also by systemic inequities, racism, sexism, color-evasive practices, and punitive policies and practices (Anyon et al., 2014; Joseph et al., 2021; Wallace et al., 2008). The literature demonstrates that Black girls often receive school discipline for subjective interactions and infractions. Examples include hairstyles, clothing, tone of voice, disrespect, temper tantrums and others (Annamma et al., 2019; Morris, 2016; Smith, 2019). Black girls also have a greater risk of experiencing the long-term consequences of school suspensions including lost instructional time, poor academic outcomes, stigmatization, juvenile justice involvement, and school drop-out (Baumle, 2018; Hill, 2018; Morris, 2016).

Of note are Black girls' experiences with adultification, which may contribute to their disproportionate suspension. Adultification is the tendency to superimpose negative and more mature characteristics on a child. For Black girls, this practice begins as early as 5 years old and can lead to the perception that they are less childlike, more culpable and knowledgeable, and thus more deserving of blame and/or punishment (Epstein et al., 2017). Black girls' vulnerability to adultification lies in the intersections of race and gender that render their experiences different than those of White girls (who are the default when sexism is considered) and Black boys (who are the default when racism is considered). Indeed, among girls specifically, a multi-year national study on adverse childhood experiences (ex. abuse, neglect, violence) documented that Black girls had a greater risk for 6 out of 9 adversities compared with other girls of color and 7 out of 9 adversities compared with White girls (Joseph-McCatty et al., 2024). The basis of disaggregating data across race and within gender is rooted in intersectionality, which Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) describes as individuals experiencing greater disadvantages for holding multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1995; Suarez, 2021).

The disproportionate suspension of Black girls must be understood within the broader context of structural educational inequities, including residential segregation, inequitable school funding, inexperienced educators, high teacher turnover, and punitive discipline policies (Gregory et al., 2010; Kozol, 2012). These structural barriers compound the challenges faced by Black girls, and can result in their unique needs being overlooked in schools. Research highlights that interventions aimed at reducing school suspensions frequently fail to account for the intersection of race and gender, perpetuating disparities in discipline outcomes (Joseph et al., 2020; Annamma et al., 2019; Morris, 2016). This gap

in the literature underscores the need for educators and school social workers to not only implement school-based interventions like restorative practices but to also critically examine how these interventions are shaped by and interact with systemic inequities (Anyon et al., 2014; Joseph-McCatty et al., 2024). By addressing these underlying structural factors and incorporating an intersectional approach, practitioners can better mitigate the disproportionate suspension rates of Black girls and foster more equitable educational outcomes.

Restorative Practices as a Means to Address Disproportionate School Discipline

Restorative practices (RP) are a series of non-punitive multi-tiered interventions most recently used to curb high and disproportional suspensions. A core feature of the intervention is school-wide relationship-building to strengthen student-teacher relationships (Gregory et al., 2016). These practices are also a proactive way to reduce conflict as relationship and respect building require active efforts to learn student characteristics and experiences to put behaviors into context. Schools applying restorative practices seek to improve student accountability and ultimately address harm experienced between students and educators.

An important framework for understanding how restorative practices (RP) can be effectively implemented in schools is the *Social Discipline Window* (Costello et al., 2009; Wachtel, 2013). This model outlines four approaches to managing behavior based on the levels of control or support. The four quadrants are: "to" (high control, low support - punitive/authoritarian), "for" (low control, high support - permissive), "not" (low control, low support - neglectful), and "with" (high control, high support - restorative/authoritative) (Costello et al., 2009; Wachtel, 2013). The *"with"* quadrant is considered the most conducive to learning and positive development, as it fosters mutual respect, accountability, and student agency. Integrating this model into school RP efforts helps educators align discipline strategies with a more relational and growth-oriented approach.

Some schools also follow the 80/20 rule of restorative practices, which indicates that 80% of restorative practices should include affective statements and/or affective questions, while the remaining 20% should consist of classroom circles or formal conferences (Costello et al., 2009). Affective statements allow educators to communicate the feelings they experienced in response to a student's behavior. For example, when students are disruptive in class, a teacher may say, "when you are having side conversations while I am teaching, I feel frustrated because it interrupts the lessons and makes it hard for your classmates to pay attention." Similarly, affective questions can be used after an incident. An educator may ask, "What happened?" or "What were you thinking about at the time?"

Relationship building and/or responding to an incident can also take place in restorative practice circles. For example, check-in circles can be used so students can discuss current events or discuss how they are feeling about an event or the instruction they received (Costello et al., 2009). When applied consistently and with fidelity, RP have been useful in establishing stronger relationships among educators and students (Gregory et al., 2016; Lewis, 2009; Drewery, 2004). Ultimately, these practices are used to support the development of stronger socio-emotional skills, strengthened relationships, and improved

behaviors, which in theory can help reduce infractions and the use of school suspensions (Gregory et al., 2016; Lewis, 2009; Welsh & Little, 2018).

In addition, a study by Lewis (2009) found that the use of restorative practices improved student attitudes, ability to apologize, reduced violence, and created a stronger academic culture. Similarly, RP implementation in one school was associated with fewer suspensions for all, reduced punitive discipline ethos, as well as improved student-teacher relationships (Gregory et al., 2016). In a study across 29 high school classrooms, use of RP was associated with positive teacher-student relationships and reduced use of discipline referrals compared to classrooms not using RP (Gregory et al., 2016). Additionally, a study in a large urban school district using restorative practices as a less punitive disciplinary option during term one was associated with fewer referrals in the following term (Anyon et al., 2016).

In a randomized control trial study across an entire school district, there was a reduction of overall and disproportional school suspensions for elementary school students (Augustine et al., 2018). Another study analyzed in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-school suspension (OSS) rates over 5-years of implementing of RP; it showed a 12% decrease in ISS from 19% to 7%, and OSS rates decreased from 12% in 2010 to 7% in 2015 (Mansfield et al., 2018). Overall, schools using RP observe less student misconduct, reduced number of injuries, decreases in suspensions, and overall improved behaviors (Lodi et al., 2022). However, while restorative practices can reduce disproportionality, this remains largely inconsistent across studies (Anyon et al., 2016; Augustine et al., 2018; Fallo & Larwin, 2022; Hashim et al., 2018; Lustick, 2017; Mansfield et al., 2018). Lustick (2017) suggests that the same cultural misunderstandings that exist with traditional forms of discipline also are present within restorative practices. Indeed, some educators may also have a lack of will to address how implicit and explicit forms of racism still inform persistent racial disparities (Lustick, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality

Efforts to understand the disproportional suspensions of Black girls have been informed by frameworks such as intersectionality, which describes how multiple aspects of one's identity interact within oppressive systems to create hyper-marginality (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality as a framework has been used to understand Black women's experiences with domestic violence and inequitable employment opportunities. It underscores how they are marginalized as women in their homes and rendered invisible as Black women in the workplace (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Applied to Black girls in the school context, it is important to examine if girls are rendered invisible in initiatives such as restorative practices yet marginalized in practice through school suspensions. To be rendered invisible in practice refers to the use of one-size-fits all school-based interventions to address race and gender disproportionality which ultimately sustains discipline inequity and marginality for Black girls. Morris (2022) offers that, "Behavioral protocols that mimic carceral systems, pedagogical practices that only

acknowledge Eurocentric values as valid,…may be leading to the undesired effect of alienating students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, such as Black girls" (p. 37).

An intersectional investigation of discipline disproportionality requires that Black students are not treated as a monolith. Minimally, within analyses, demographic data should be disaggregated to understand the trends that are unique to Black children across the gender spectrum. As such, an intersectional framework aids in framing how multiple axes of oppression (e.g., racism and sexism) across identity markers (e.g., race and gender) impact the lived experience of Black girls within schools. In 2015, national attention focused on the treatment of Shakara, a Black female high school student and foster youth in South Carolina. Shakara was violently ripped out of her chair and desk by the school resource officer (SRO) for not leaving the classroom for violating the cell phone policy (Simonpillai, 2021). This interaction left Shakara with a wrist fracture, and both Shakara and her classmate who recorded the incident were arrested for disturbance (Simonpillai, 2021).While the use of school resource officers is intended to maintain safety for students and educators, the use of a law enforcement officers for non-violent behavior has the potential to instigate violence, create punitive disciplinary action, and later incarceration (Turner & Beneke, 2020). In this case, this Black female student was likely subject to marginality and hegemonic imagery related to her gender, race, and foster care status, all of which may have informed the violence towards her. Thus, the application of interventions to address disproportionality for Black girls must reject hegemonic imagery and the tendency to view Black children as a monolith. Instead, interventions such as restorative practices should contextualize race and gender at minimum and embrace an equity framework that seeks to transform schools into places where healing and transformation can be facilitated (Morris, 2022).

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory (EST) was used to point to the relationship between developmental outcomes and the environment as developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). For example, a child's physical, socio-emotional, and academic development can all be connected to the people and locations that create an environment for that child. To understand this relationship, ecological systems theory is used to capture the external influences on behavior that individual/person-level theories or practices do not capture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rothery, 2016). Within schools, EST defines a school as an organizational social system which is based on interdependent individuals whose behaviors interact across spaces and power (Bourdieu, 1984; Greene, 2008). Applied to school suspension research, it is vital to not only look at behavior, but also the environmental factors that influence behavior and associated outcomes.

As such, a more equitable framing of discipline disproportionality would be to consider the role of school-level factors such as adult racial and gender dispositions, education policy, and overall school climate. School-level factors are also deeply intertwined and complicated by power relations within the setting (Bourdieu, 1984; Houston, 2002). Therefore, EST is used to frame systems of oppression such as racism and sexism as they

can have a significant bearing on one's access to resources (Rothery, 2016). School environments are not blank slates impervious to policy pressures nor are they neutral environments lacking belief systems that privilege or marginalize one group of students over another. Instead, they are social systems that each student experiences differently based on their identity at the intersections of policy, practice, and power. Since schools are nested settings that are affected by economics, the larger social system, and politics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Greene, 2008; Rothery, 2016), schools adapt to external demands and pressure (Ball, 2016; Greene, 2008; Rothery, 2016).

Most recently this has been demonstrated by politicians' claims of teaching critical race theory in K-12 schools and the subsequent banning of diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) initiatives due to fears of social indoctrination (Jayakumar & Kohli, 2023). This can ultimately affect students who benefit from DEI practices, educators who lead them, and practices aimed at reducing disparities. Thus, schools seeking to use RP to reduce disparities cannot focus on student behaviors alone; instead, it is critical to address institutional norms, adult beliefs and dispositions about discipline and minoritized groups, and the role of structural influences (e.g., punitive and inequitable discipline policies and practices). We suggest this because even schools using discipline reform interventions can still perpetuate inequities when racial bias, limited classroom management skills, and punitive practices are unaddressed (Ispa-Landa, 2018). While inequitable discipline practices can affect any student, the intersection of race and gender bias, punitive discipline policies/ practices, and limited classroom management skills can make Black girls structurally vulnerable to discipline and punishment.

Methods

This study seeks to contribute to the social work literature on school discipline by examining the factors that contribute to the disproportionate discipline of Black girls in the United States. Using a mixed-methods approach, we employed a relative risk index to calculate disproportionality, semi-structured interviews to capture participants' perspectives on discipline experiences, and critical race ethnography to frame classroom observations and contextualize data within the constructions of race and gender. This study draws on a larger study on school suspensions that received university and school-district IRB approval. In this paper we ask, what are the within-gender discipline trends and practices at a school implementing restorative practices? Additionally, what discipline practices and interactions inform the discipline outcomes for Black girls?

Methodological Approach

Research on racial disparities that do not adequately capture race and other identity markers risk producing results that are "colorblind" and inaccurate. Therefore, in this study, we used critical race ethnography (CRE) to bring attention to beliefs, values, and behaviors across race during observations (Duncan, 2002). Specifically, CRE was used to contextualize race, racial bias, and behaviors at the intersection of policy, practice, and environment. We applied a critical race ethnography (CRE) lens in our classroom observations to explore the conditions and contexts that shape when, why, and how specific

events occur, with particular attention to their implications for race, gender, and class (Emerson et al., 2011). Observations were also useful to obtain participant meaning making related to their presenting behaviors and the extent to which they connected with social expectations and the classroom environment. To capture such nuance, jottings that included identity descriptors were converted into fieldnotes to capture contextual interactions. Jottings allow for the writing of salient quotes and behaviors which assist in describing the social environment (Emerson et al., 2011). Where possible, dialogue was captured by writing down direct and indirect quotes to extrapolate meaning while avoiding summarization that could misrepresent the voice of participants in the setting (Emerson et al., 2011). Together, jottings, direct quotes, and indirect quotes were strategies used to understand how restorative practices and discipline practices intersected across race and gender and how this informed discipline outcomes.

Data Collection and Sample

Data were collected over a 9-month school year at a racially diverse mid-western high school implementing RP for the first time among 1,518 students. To recruit educators and staff participants, an email inviting research participation was first sent to all teachers ($n \approx$ 100) at the high school; however, no teachers responded. Next, snowball sampling was used by asking the restorative practices leader to inform staff about the study, this resulted in seven teachers agreeing to participate, though two were lost due to attrition. Lastly, requests for interview participation emails were again sent in the spring to teachers, administrators, and the school social worker. This yielded an additional 7 participants for a total of 12 participants (Table 1.). To honor confidentiality, classroom observations and interviews took place at times and locations requested by the participant; additionally, all participant names were replaced with pseudonyms and also given generalized titles (ex. teacher or administrator).

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of Case Study Participants- Educators, Administrators, and Staff*

Name	Position*	Sex*	Race
Ms. Holder	Teacher - Core Academic	Female	White
Ms. Wentworth	Teacher - Non-Core Academic	Male	White
Mr. Ryan	Teacher - Core Academic	Male	Asian
Ms. Jackson	Teacher - Non-Core Academic	Female	White
Mr. Medina	Teacher - Core Academic	Male	Black
Ms. Jensen	School Leader	Female	White
Mr. Wainwright	Administrator	Male	White
Mr. Russell	Administrator	Male	Black
Mr. Richmond	School Social Worker	Male	White
Ms. Lawrence	Officer 1	Female	White
Mr. George	Officer 2	Male	Black
Mr. Stephen	Officer 3	Male	Black

* Subject area and gender pronouns changed for anonymity

Quantitative data were obtained through attendance and discipline data provided by the school district. Total enrollment across sex was 797 boys and 721 girls—according to administrative data and not based on students' own gender identification not accounting for students who identify outside the gender binary. Across race and ethnicity, enrollment was Black (n=621), White (n=550), Asian (n=182) Latinx (n=74), and multi-racial, Hawaiian, Native-American which were coded as "other" (n=91; Table 2.).

Quantitative Analysis

Suspension data from the 2015-2016 academic year was used to examine disproportionate suspension outcomes across race and gender. A relative risk index (RRI) was calculated for each student group. The RRI is used by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, which describes a RRI as a valid measure of disproportionality (Tobin & Vincent, 2011). In this study, an RRI was calculated by first calculating a risk percentage dividing the number of students suspended by the number of students enrolled. Subsequently risk ratios were calculated by dividing the percent of each group's suspension outcomes by the percent of all other students who were also suspended (Bollmer et al, 2014; Iowa Department of Education, 2019). Smaller groups of students were combined into an "other" category as Bollmer et al. (2014) cautions statistical interpretation of small numerators. Risk ratios greater than 1 indicated that the student group was disproportionately suspended while risk ratios under 1 indicated that the student group was underrepresented in suspensions (Equation 1) (Iowa Department of Education, 2019).

Equation 1: Risk Ratio Equation

$$Risk\ Ratio = \frac{Risk\%\ of\ Group\ Suspended}{Risk\%\ of\ all\ other\ groups\ suspended}$$

$$Risk\ Ratio > 1 = Overrepresentation$$

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data included classroom observations (n = 37), interviews (n = 8), a focus group (n=1) and school-based artifacts (n=3) which were analyzed to inform the suspension data outcomes. To organize the data, all sources of data from the same participant were grouped together to create a comprehensive case in NVIVO (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019). For each case, the lead author incorporated memos, several fieldnotes, an interview, and when relevant, photographs of artifacts from the school site. This structure allowed the lead author to identify data patterns chronologically. Engaging deeply with the data involved reviewing transcripts, literature, fieldnotes, writing memos, and initiating a process of coding and reflection with the second author. The lead author then moved between raw data and supplementary sources, employing inductive coding to fracture the data and refine the analytic process, as outlined by Bazeley and Jackson (2019), Galman (2018), and Green et al. (2007). Subsequently, pattern coding was used to generate meta-codes that drew

meaning (Saldaña, 2015) between behaviors, policies, and discipline outcomes. Qualitative analysis was conducted using NVivo in which a hierarchical linear coding approach was used to develop parent and child codes (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019). Four rounds of coding were carried out in an iterative process between the data, literature, and memo writing (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019). Emergent themes indicated a lack of consistent and equitable discipline outcomes and classroom management difficulties as a pipeline to punitive discipline outcomes. Pursuant to developing valid and trustworthy findings, we followed Siccama and Penna (2008) who recommend the use of interview recording and verbatim transcription, following interview protocols, and use of open-ended questions. To enhance the validity of the findings, we triangulated data by cross-verifying themes across multiple qualitative sources—classroom observations, interviews, focus groups, and school artifacts—alongside quantitative suspension data. This process ensured consistency in the observed patterns and provided a more robust, well-rounded understanding of the discipline practices and their impacts.

Quantitative Results

Although Black and White students had similar enrollment (Table 2), Black students had the highest suspension rates, with Black males representing 32% of students suspended and Black females representing 23% of students suspended during the intervention year. In contrast, White males and White females accounted for 16% and 11% of students suspended during the intervention year (Table 3).

Table 2. *2015-2016 Enrollment at Restorative High School and Unique Student Suspensions by Race and Gender*

	n (%)*					
	Enrollment at Restorative High School			Unique Student Suspensions		
Race	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**
Black	334 (22.0%)	287 (18.9%)	621 (40.9%)	119 (52.9%)	87 (58.8%)	206 (55.2%)
Asian	102 (6.7%)	80 (5.3%)	182 (12.0%)	19 (8.4%)	5 (3.4%)	24 (6.4%)
Hispanic	38 (2.5%)	36 (2.4%)	74 (4.9%)	15 (6.7%)	1 (0.7%)	16 (4.3%)
White	278 (18.3%)	272 (17.9%)	550 (36.2%)	59 (26.2%)	40 (27.0%)	99 (26.5%)
Other**	45 (3.0%)	46 (3.0%)	91 (6.0%)	13 (5.8%)	15 (10.1%)	28 (7.5%)
Total	**797 (52.5%)**	**721 (47.5%)**	**1518 (100%)**	**225 (60.3%)**	**148 (39.7%)**	**373 (100%)**

**Percentage is based on the total enrollment (n=1,518) or unique student suspensions (n=373)*
***Other = Multiracial, Hawaiian, Native American*

Examining suspension outcomes among all students during the intervention year, Black males had 1.57 (36%) risk for suspension while Black females had 1.24 (31%) risk of suspension. Suspension risk for White males was .79 (22%) and .52 (15%) for White females. Suspension risk for non-Black and non-White males during the intervention year was .96 (26%) while non-Black and non-White females had a .46 (13%) risk (Table 3).

Table 3. *2015-2016 High School Enrollment and Overall Suspension Risk*

Race & Ethnicity	Student Enrollment [Suspended] ♀	♂	Total	Suspension Risk[a] ♀	♂	Total
Black	287 [87]	334 [119]	621 [206]	30%	36%	33%
White	272 [40]	278 [59]	550 [99]	15%	21%	18%
Other[b]	162 [21]	185 [47]	346 [68]	13%	25%	20%
Total	721 [148]	797 [225]	1,518 [373]	21%	28%	25%

Notes: [a]*Suspension Risk = Suspended/Enrollment;* [b]*Other = Multiracial, Hawaiian, Native American*

Pursuant to our overarching research question to examine within-gender differences of suspension risk, a Pearson's chi-square test of independence was first used to detect for significant differences across race among females, χ^2 (2, 721) = 28.18, $p < .001$, and males, χ^2 (2, 797) = 16.49, $p < .001$, ever suspended during the intervention year (Table 4). Thereafter, within-gender risk ratios were calculated reflecting that Black females were 2.17 times more likely to be suspended than all other girls. The risk of suspension for Black girls was also greater than the risk experienced by Black males who were 1.57 times more likely to be suspended than all other males (Table 5). Altogether, both Black males and females were overrepresented in the overall disparity calculations (Table 3) and within-gender comparisons (Table 5); the within-gender analysis more sharply illustrates the extent to which Black girls faced heightened suspension risk at the case-study school.

Table 4. *Results of Chi Square Test for Suspensions Within Gender Across Race During Intervention Year*

Suspension Classification	Black ♀	♂	White ♀	♂	Other Race ♀	♂
Never	200 (70%)	215 (64%)	232 (85%)	219 (79%)	141 (87%)	138 (75%)
Ever	87 (30%)	119 (36%)	40 (15%)	59 (21%)	21 (13%)	47 (25%)

Table 5. *2015-2016 Within Gender Suspension Risk*

Race & Ethnicity	Suspension Risk[a] ♀	♂	Total	Between Race & Gender: Suspension Risk All Others[b] ♀	♂	Risk Ratio[c] ♀	♂	Within Gender: Suspension Risk All Other ♀	♂	Risk Ratio ♀	♂
Black	30%	36%	33%	23%	21%	1.3	1.66	14%	23%	2.17	1.57
White	15%	21%	18%	27%	25%	0.55	0.84	24%	32%	0.61	0.66
Other[c]	13%	25%	20%	26%	24%	0.5	1.04	23%	30%	0.56	0.86
Total	21%	28%	25%	28%	21%	0.73	1.34	28%	21%	0.73	1.34

Notes: [a]*Suspension Risk = Suspended/Enrollment;* [b]*All Other Risk= Risk of non-reference group;* [c]*Risk Ratio = Suspension Risk/All Other Risk;* [d]*Other = Multiracial, Hawaiian, Native American*

Qualitative Findings

Inconsistent Discipline Practices as a Pathway for Inequity

Between classroom observations, the lead author observed hallway interactions as these provided unique opportunities to witness how staff addressed students referred to as "chronic hall walkers." These students were identified by name and grade on a list posted

on the school's hallway walls. Since both restorative practices and traditional disciplinary actions could be applied in these scenarios, hallway observations became a crucial site for data collection. Most notable in hallway interactions were inconsistencies in the way discipline was meted and the limited use of restorative practices.

The lead author began to note the inconsistencies during a fall observation day where she noted the hall-to-classroom transition patterns and how staff applied school discipline policy. The bell rang and students continued to linger in the hallway, Ms. Lawrence, a female security officer stood at the top of the stairs while waving her hands and sarcastically asking, "So don't nobody have class? Nobody has class?" A Black girl standing in front of her sarcastically said "no." The officer replied, "No, you got class but everyone is standing right here like it's outside!"

> On this day, there were about 25 students in this section of the hallway landing. On other days, there could be nearly 100 students in the hallway after the final bell. The third and final bell indicates that class has just started and now any student in the hallway is late. While in the hallway, I hear another officer blow his whistle to get the students' attention indicating that it was time to head to class. (Field note)

According to the student handbook, students caught in the hallways can receive a variety of disciplinary outcomes which include a warning or phone call to a parent for a 1st offense, use of restorative practices after school for 1-hour detention for a 2nd offense, in-school suspension with restorative practices for a 3rd offense, and finally suspension if a fourth offense were to occur. However, no students in the hallway during my observation that day received any such outcome reflecting an inconsistency between policy and practice.

The concept of inconsistency was also apparent during a focus group interview with three high school security officers. Officer Lawrence described how students were able to get their suspensions reduced through parental advocacy. However, not all parents knew how to navigate the school discipline system successfully enough to reduce their child's suspension length. In this interview, one officer stated:

> *We had two boys fight here [and] they got 10 days [suspensions], but then their parents fought [it] so then they got 3 [days]. But their parents knew the steps to go through. They were White. We had Black girls that were fighting, and they were honor roll, high honor roll and honor society students [who] got into a fight, which they shouldn't have; but the girl is getting jumped so they jumped in - they got 10 days. The parents didn't know what to do so a teacher came to me and said this is not fair. Can you say something….? So I talked to the administrator [who] said it would [be] taken off. I saw the parents, the administrator [only] called some of the parents... No one ever got back to them so the girls ended up doing the whole 10-days. That's not fair, because the boys have never been in trouble and the girls have never been in trouble. First mistake in all their career [in] high school and they're good kids. And I said to the [administrator], "what can I do to make parents aware that these are the steps to take?" And the administrator was like, you can't, you're not allowed to tell them just like I am not. So how are they supposed find the information?...They should be able to find the information*

because it's out there somewhere. But the reality is they're not. So since we know that they're not and we know that the majority of the White kids' parents know what to do, and the Black kids don't. How can we be a better help to get the information out, so it could be a fair playing ground, and…no answers.

Overall, both interview and observation data confirm the inconsistent application of disciplinary outcomes. These inconsistencies came both in the form of not regularly applying the restorative or traditional discipline outcomes as outlined in the student handbook. Inconsistency was also demonstrated when Black girls who got into a fight received a longer suspension then White boys who also got into a fight. Together, the inconsistencies between policy and practice leave room for inequity.

Classroom Management Difficulties as a Pipeline to Punitive Discipline Outcomes

Classroom management strategies influence students' disciplinary experiences, especially when minor behavioral issues result in more severe disciplinary actions. Educators' challenge in managing classroom behaviors can lead to consequences such as suspensions for behaviors like phone usage. In the case of Black girls in this study, inconsistencies in the application of discipline practices, along with varying disciplinary approaches, were observed to affect their interactions with teachers and the outcomes of those interactions. Specifically, during a RP circle conversation with the restorative practices leader, Ms. Holder, a teacher, Mr. Wentworth, described the behavior challenges he was managing:

RP Leader: *So what is the most common issue that you are dealing with?*

Mr. Wentworth: *Phone usage for sure. I have a two-strike rule. If I ask them a third time they have to put it in the bucket upfront but many of them do not. So then eventually I have to call security. I honestly don't mind, but if admin walks in here, I can get in trouble.*

During this meeting, the teacher identified four Black female students he felt were a part of this "core group" giving him a difficult time in the classroom. Thus, in a separate circle apart from Mr. Wentworth, the restorative practices leader, and a central office equity team member attempted to understand the girls' perspective.

RP Leader: *So what's going on in Mr. Wentworth' class?*

Nadiene: *I don't really like him, he needs to slow down, he does too much…*

Courtney: *He is nice but doesn't know how to manage the class, he thinks we're hard, but he stoops to our level. He rolled his eyes at me, so I thought "oh I quit."*

Michelle: *He is trying to skip the student-teacher level, but he can't. I was doing better with the other teacher. I liked him when he was helping…*

RP Leader: *Is he better one-on-one?*

Students [In Unison] *Yes!*

Courtney: *He gets really frustrated too easy.*

Nadiene: *He doesn't give us enough time to finish what he is doing. He erases the board so quick…*

This restorative circle highlighted a fundamental issue they experienced: the accelerated teaching pace of Mr. Wentworth. The girls also went on to describe the punitive nature of his discipline approach, stating:

Erica: [In a low tone with a smile] *I don't like that he tries to take everyone's phone.*

RP Leader: *But is that a school rule?*

Erica: *Yes, but he is strict with it. He calls security on us!*

RP Leader: *Are you ok if we talk with him later today?*

Students: *Yes*

Courtney: [With a slight smirk] *He'll probably cry.*

Overall, by observing this restorative circle it was revealed that Mr. Wentworth's disciplinary style varied between calling school security for minor issues and showing a more permissive demeanor. This fluctuation in discipline was noted by students, who expressed frustration with his approach during their interactions

The role of classroom management style and its relationship to discipline outcomes was also noted during afterschool detention. Over the course of the school year, the lead author noticed a consistent presence of Black girls in afterschool detention. These girls encountered detentions for behaviors like hallway roaming, cell phone use, and classroom disruptions which were behaviors witnessed across all students. Of note, the very act of missing detention or breaking a rule during detention resulted in an automatic 1-day suspension. Ms. Jackson described that those suspended for such infractions were simply getting a "day off from school." An instance of this was evident during a detention hall session when a Black female student was expelled from the detention session and received a suspension for using her cell phone:

[Context: A Black female student pulls out her phone during detention. She is sitting right next to Ms. Jackson the detention hall monitor.]

Ms. Jackson: *You got to be kidding*!

Black Female: *My mom is calling to see if I am ok, she is worried about me.*

Ms. Jackson: *Doesn't matter, you're out!* [Said under her breath].

Black Female: [Smiles and stays seated].

Ms. Jackson: *Out!*

Black Female: [Hesitates to get up as though unsure. She then more assuredly gets up and walks out while saying] *Well I'm not getting suspended because you guys don't have my mom's new number.*

After the detention, the lead author asked Ms. Jackson about the student's comment, and she said, "when the calls go to the homes of students that have detention, many house numbers are out of order or are old numbers. Sometimes the kids erase the messages. So, her mother may not know if she has a detention or suspension because we don't have her number."

Throughout the observations, classroom management and disciplinary practices varied, with some students, particularly Black girls, receiving punitive responses for minor behavioral issues such as cell phone use. These disciplinary actions, combined with inconsistencies in how policies were applied, were frequently noted. Even in a school implementing restorative practices, these inconsistencies were evident, suggesting that not all discipline was administered according to the established guidelines.

Discussion

Black girls are disproportionally suspended nationally (USDOE, 2019), and this trend was evident at the case-study school. Quantitative analyses revealed that Black girls were 1.24 times more likely to be suspended than all students and 2.07 times more likely than all other girls. These comparative suspension rates underscore the importance of examining both between-race and within-gender disparities to fully understand how race and gender intersect in school discipline. Notably, the heightened suspension risk for Black girls exceeded that of Black boys, who were 1.57 times more likely to be suspended than their male peers. These findings suggest that schools implementing restorative justice (RJ) must disaggregate discipline data by both race and gender to develop accurate baselines and effective interventions. While overt race and gender biases may not always be measurable, discipline outcomes—when viewed through an intersectional lens, offer critical insight into how Black girls are perceived and treated within school systems.

As demonstrated by the qualitative findings, undergirding the disproportional outcomes were the inconsistent application of discipline, the inconsistent and punitive application of restorative practices, and the punitive nature by which discipline was administered. Research by Arum (2003) suggests that when discipline practices are inconsistent, a lack of integrity is communicated, and administrators command less respect from the students who are adversely affected. It follows that when discipline practices are punitive and inequitable, not only do they not serve to change behaviors, but it is likely that students will be defensive because of the inequitable treatment they have experienced. This defensiveness was demonstrated when the Black female student was asked to leave detention after answering a phone call from her mother, which exacerbated her original punishment into a suspension. As described by the student, her mother was unaware that she was in after-school detention and therefore was looking for her. Yet, her abrupt dismissal from detention communicated the punitive nature of the discipline practices in the school which allowed her to be suspended for speaking to her mother concerning her location. Therefore, receiving a suspension for answering her phone may have left the student feeling unfairly targeted for a minor infraction. In line with adultification, suspending this student focused on her culpability versus her need to ensure her safety to her guardian. Within an ecological framework, we suggest that focusing on student

culpability is connected to punitive discipline policies that focus on infractions versus supportive accountability.

As a school with a restorative justice focus, the outcome of this interaction could have been altered had a restorative practice question, like the following were asked: "Why do you think it is appropriate to answer a phone call during detention?" or an affective statement such as, "When you answer a phone call in detention, it makes me feel that you have no regard for the rules." Through statements and questions like these, the detention hall monitor can communicate that cell phones are not allowed in the afterschool detention hall while also learning that the student needed to communicate her location to her mother because she did not make it home yet. This exchange would have allowed for rapport building and mutual accountability as the detention hall monitor previously admitted that robotic calls to parents about after school detention did not always reach parents. Thus, the subjective nature of school discipline practices coupled with inequitable discipline practices have deleterious effects on the outcomes of Black girls.

Likewise, the subjective and inconsistent enforcement of discipline policies became a pathway of inequitable discipline impacting Black girls. This was evidenced by the security officer that described how a group of Black female students received a 10-day suspension while White males who had committed the same offense only received a 3-day suspension. Ultimately, a culture of inconsistency can continue to foster inequitable discipline practices even in schools seeking to create reform through restorative practices. According to Morrison (2018), "perceived unfairness contributes to noncompliance with discipline" (p. 22). It follows that when RP is administered in a way that is equitable, students will be more apt to understand and have respect for the established rules as opposed to engaging in what can be perceived as oppositional behavior.

The impact of inequitable discipline practices also adversely affected the student/teacher relationships as demonstrated by the interaction between Mr. Wentworth and a group of Black girls in his class. Instead of maintaining control of his classroom environment and employing the relational tools of RP, Mr. Wentworth vacillated between a punitive and permissive approach which in turn correlated with a lack of respect from the "core group," as he described them. While students should be accountable for showing respect to their teachers, inconsistent classroom management and punitive disciplinary styles can fracture relational ties between students and teachers, potentially spiraling into additional unwanted behaviors (Darensbourg et al., 2010). Consistent with the RP concept of the "social discipline window", educators build robust student-teacher relationships and supportive classroom environments most effectively when their disciplinary strategies emanate from the "with/restorative/authoritative" quadrant, blending high control with high support (Costello et al., 2009, pp. 7-8). Conversely, a display of high control without adequate support lands educators in the "to/punitive/authoritarian" quadrant which can create further classroom conflict (Costello et al., 2009, pp. 7-8).

Further, a few girls articulated his fast-teaching pace saying, "he needs to slow down" and "he doesn't give us enough time to finish" which appeared to be a significant component of the conflict he had with this group of Black girls. Numerous studies have outlined that students who feel academically disengaged often manifest disruptive

behaviors (Toldson et al., 2015; Tyler-Wood et al., 2004). Ideally, had these girls felt more included within the instructional environment, they may have demonstrated fewer behavioral issues.

Overall, the literature establishes that relationship-building is a critical component of restorative justice practices (Buckmaster, 2016; Drewery, 2004). Indeed, Anyon and colleagues (2018) found that when relationships were built, exclusionary discipline practices were less utilized. Instead, discipline was viewed "as an opportunity for growth and problem solving, rather than punishment" (p. 225). It follows then that when classroom relationships are adversarial, classroom disruptions and rule breaking are more likely to occur (Yassine et al., 2020), particularly when students feel singled out as a core group of problematic students. By establishing meaningful relationships with the girls, the motivation behind their behavior may have been better understood and their relationship with Mr. Wentworth could have been strengthened, as opposed to increasing the rift between the teacher and the group of girls.

Practice Implications

As the only group of girls disproportionally suspended across the United States, schools implementing restorative justice practices with Black girls may need to customize some elements of RP practices for Black girls. As a multi-tiered intervention where universal practices are available to all students, tier two practices could be facilitated by school social workers and can include small group circles that focus on Black girls' lived experiences in the community and the school setting. The circle conversations can be data driven or be based on the topic requests from Black girls. The goal would be to create a more inclusive approach to restorative practices that would allow educators to understand how Black girls are interacting with each other, educators, policies, and the school environment. Finally, just as restorative practices should incorporate the gendered and racialized lived experiences of Black girls, discipline policies, practices, and analyses should account for their experiences as well. Ideally, school social workers can help facilitate this and aid administrators by identifying policies and practices that perpetuate inequitable practices impacting Black girls.

Limitations

Data for this study were collected during the first year that the case-study school implemented restorative practices. Since whole school-change can take 3-5 years, data collected do not represent restorative practices at its optimal functioning. Nonetheless, this research demonstrates how RJ is permeable to ecological factors such as punitive discipline and unclear and inconsistent discipline practices. We contend that these barriers can be present in schools using RJ practices at any year of implementation.

Conclusion

Reducing high and disproportional suspensions for Black girls goes beyond reducing unwanted behaviors. High and disproportional school suspensions are a multi-faceted

phenomenon enmeshed in policy, punitive practices, behavior, and social constructions of identity. As such, responses to these disparities must likewise be multifaceted and customized to the needs of the Black girls. As the only group of girls disproportionally suspended across the country, a behavior-centered or one-size fits all intervention cannot be the only attempt to reduce disproportionality for Black girls. Instead, administrators and school social workers can collaborate to employ intersectionality and provide educators with culturally relevant classroom management strategies, assess for inconsistencies (inequity) in policies, and develop discipline practices that focus on support and change versus punishment.

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