

# The School Discipline Dilemma: A Comprehensive Review of Disparities and Alternative Approaches

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*In recent decades, K–12 school discipline policies and practices have garnered increasing attention among researchers, policymakers, and educators. Disproportionalities in school discipline raise serious questions about educational equity. This study provides a comprehensive review of the extant literature on the contributors to racial, gender, and income disparities in disciplinary outcomes, and the effectiveness of emerging alternatives to exclusionary disciplinary approaches. Our findings indicate that the causes of the disparities are numerous and multifaceted. Although low-income and minority students experience suspensions and expulsions at higher rates than their peers, these differences cannot be solely attributed to socioeconomic status or increased misbehavior. Instead, school and classroom occurrences that result from the policies, practices, and perspectives of teachers and principals appear to play an important role in explaining the disparities. There are conceptual and open empirical questions on whether and how some of the various alternatives are working to counter the discipline disparities.*

**KEYWORDS:** school discipline, zero-tolerance policy, school exclusion, exclusionary discipline, discipline disparities, restorative justice, PBIS, RTI, educational equity, suspensions, expulsions

Differences in the educational opportunities and outcomes of low-income and minority students (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Gordon, Piana, & Keleher, 2000; Skiba, 2015) have preoccupied policymakers, researchers, and educators and have placed a microscope on equity in K–12 education. In the past decade, school discipline policies and practices have garnered increasing attention because of the well-documented racial, gender, and income disparities in disciplinary outcomes (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015; Skiba, 2015). The disparities in disciplinary outcomes are fairly consistent across all settings and grades, indicating a systemic problem that starts as early as preschool (Skiba, 2015). School discipline policies may be intricately linked to the inequality of educational opportunities, experiences, and

outcomes (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014). Exclusionary discipline practices may affect an array of school and student outcomes, including school climate, student mobility, school engagement, and students' cognitive and noncognitive outcomes, as well as long-term labor market outcomes (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Welsh, 2017). Keeping students safe in schools and maintaining a productive learning environment by removing disruptive students remain a primary objective; however, disproportionalities in school discipline raise serious questions about educational equity in districts and schools nationwide. Striking a balance between school safety and school discipline is a policy challenge with significant education and social equity implications. (Supplemental Table S1, available in the online version of the journal, provides a glossary that defines the key terms used in the school discipline literature and throughout this review, and summaries of prior noteworthy reviews of the school discipline literature.)

Exclusionary discipline policies resulting in school exclusion through out-of-school suspensions (OSS) (suspensions are the most prevalent disciplinary outcomes) and expulsion are prevalent and systematic (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Mallett, 2016; Skiba, Arredondo, et al., 2014). Between 1973 and 2006, there was a marked increase in the rate of students in the United States being suspended or expelled, from 3.7% to 6.9% (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Fabelo et al. (2011) reported that nearly a third of all students experience an OSS or expulsion over the course of their K–12 schooling. Exclusionary discipline policies and practices disproportionately affect African American students and leave these students most vulnerable for entry into the school-to-prison pipeline (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Mallett, 2016; McNeal, 2016; Mendez, 2003). Disparities in school discipline for other racial/ethnic groups have been less studied, with mixed results (Skiba, 2015). Racial discipline disparities also seem to have widened in the past three decades (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). There have been policy responses to solve the school discipline dilemma. The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 and zero-tolerance school discipline policies are widely considered as responses to the mid-1990s' spike in school violence. In response to discipline disparities, there are emerging policy initiatives at the federal, state, and district levels as the search for alternatives to zero-tolerance policies intensifies (Fabelo et al., 2011).

It is particularly important to take stock of studies examining the contributors to discipline disparities, and the effectiveness of interventions that have been published between 2010 and 2017. This is an important period given the response of district, state, and federal policymakers to the long-standing racial and gender disparities and the field-driven wave of reform (Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017). Most reviews of the disparities were published around 2010, but as Gregory et al. (2017) noted, "The rapid pace of reform has outstripped research and documentation" (p. 254). Even though there is a large body of empirical evidence documenting and examining the disproportionalities in exclusionary discipline, there are no prior systematic reviews that provide a comprehensive analysis of the extant school discipline literature that investigates the interplay between discipline disparities, and the effectiveness of interventions designed to address disparities in exclusionary discipline. Disparities in disciplinary outcomes and alternative approaches to

exclusionary discipline are typically discussed in separate reviews. This is partly because empirical studies examining these facets of school discipline are scattered across a range of academic fields and a multitude of journals, resulting in a level of fragmentation among studies from different academic disciplines such as child development, education, psychology, criminology, race studies, social work, economics, and sociology. It is a timely moment to link the causes of discipline disparities and alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline to better understand what works and why.

This study provides a comprehensive review of the empirical evidence on the causes of the disparities in disciplinary outcomes and the effectiveness of emerging alternatives to exclusionary disciplinary policies and practices. Our review is guided by the following research questions: (a) What are the student-, classroom-, school-, and neighborhood-level contributors to the rates of and disproportionalities in exclusionary discipline outcomes? (b) To what extent have the alternatives to exclusionary discipline policies and practices reduced the rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes? This interdisciplinary, integrative review uniquely links disparities and interventions. This approach provides an opportunity to gain a richer understanding of whether the theory of action underlying the interventions counteracts the contributing factors to the high rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes. The insights are relevant and helpful for educational practice in elementary and secondary schools as policymakers and educators navigate the balance between safety and behavior management in schools. Gregory et al. (2010) encouraged further examination of the degree to which both teacher and school factors contribute to racial and ethnic patterns in school discipline. We update and extend their review by focusing on studies published since 2010 and expanding the focus to school, teacher, and community contributors, given that Gregory et al. (2010) focused predominately on student contributors. Our study complements the recent work of Gregory et al. (2017) by further probing the alignment between the causes of discipline disparities and targeted mechanisms of the interventions and by providing an extensive review of the most current empirical evidence on alternative approaches.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. First, how studies were chosen for this review is summarized. Following this, results are presented in two interrelated subsections that (a) explicate the depth and complexity of the underlying drivers of discipline disparities and (b) examine the nascent evidence on emerging alternatives to exclusionary school discipline across states and districts in the United States. A discussion of the practice and policy implications of the findings and directions for future research concludes this review.

## **Method**

### *Literature Search Strategy*

This article focuses mainly on peer-reviewed empirical studies of K–12 public school discipline in the United States published between 1990 and 2017. This time period is useful as it includes (a) studies before and after the wave of school shootings in the mid-1990s that amplified the demand for zero-tolerance policies, (b) more recent studies that examined teacher- and school-level contributors to

disparities in disciplinary outcomes, and (c) studies that investigated the effectiveness of interventions to reduce these disparities. Given the variation in research design and rigor as well as the interdisciplinary nature of the literature on school discipline, studies that typically satisfy the American Educational Research Association's standards for reporting research were included. Specifically, this review includes peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, theses and dissertations, and reports.

Studies were collected from various sources, and a multiphase process was employed to identify articles for inclusion in this review. We systematically searched databases from various academic fields, including education databases (Education Full Text and Education Resources Information Center), economics databases (EconLit), sociology databases (Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, and Criminal Justice Abstracts), psychology databases (PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES), and multidisciplinary databases (Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, and Academic Search Premier).

We developed effective full-text search strings. We included the plural forms of search words in each search string. When built-in filters were available, the search only included peer-reviewed empirical studies that were (a) written in English, (b) published between 1990 and 2017, (c) and located in the United States. Database searches were conducted categorically according to the two interrelated sections of this review and independently of each other. First, search terms were used to locate studies investigating discipline disparities. Separated by the Boolean term "AND," we paired "school discipline" with the following search words: "disproportionality," "disparity," "exclusionary discipline," "expulsion," "suspension," "race," "gender," "socioeconomic status," and "special education." The second search phase identified studies that examined the effectiveness of alternative discipline approaches. Separated by the Boolean term "AND," we paired "school discipline" with the following search words: "alternative approaches," "Response to Intervention," "Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports," "restorative justice," and "discipline reform."

#### *Inclusion Criteria*

More than 1,300 peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, theses, book chapters, and reports were flagged for possibly meeting the inclusion criteria. The retrieved papers included qualitative and quantitative studies. All of the retrieved citations were searched for duplicates, and the duplicates were removed. The authors independently screened the titles and abstracts of the initial list of articles to ensure that the articles were empirical studies addressing school discipline issues for public school K–12 student population in the United States and focused on one of two main areas: (a) the disparities in disciplinary outcomes or (b) the effectiveness of alternatives to exclusionary discipline policies and practices. For initial selection disagreements, the authors reviewed the full text of questionable articles and discussed the inconsistencies. The full text of the remaining articles was retrieved and divided between the authors. The articles were assessed for the inclusion criteria and flagged for inconsistencies. Studies were excluded for the following reasons: (a) did not focus on students in K–12 public schools in the United States, (b) were not written in English, or (c) did not address one of the two

forementioned areas of interest. (Exemplars of the excluded articles are provided in the online appendix, available in the online version of the journal.) Selection disagreements were discussed to make the final inclusion decisions. (A review of the inclusion criteria for each phase of the search process is presented in Supplemental Figures S1 and S2.)

Ancestral searches from the references list of the included articles were conducted to identify and select additional studies. Ultimately, 183 studies were included in our literature synthesis. (An online supplemental file provides a listing of all the included studies.) The multiphase process with several filters provides confidence that the review is comprehensive. The systematic process provides a measure of quality control and ensures the relevance and academic rigor of the research studies.

### *Information Retrieval Process*

We extracted the following information from the included studies: (a) location of the study, (b) unit and level of analysis, (c) outcomes, (d) research methods, and (e) main findings. (Findings of the literature synthesis are presented in Supplemental Tables S2 and S3, available in the online version of the journal.) The number of citations partly determined the length of discussion devoted to each article. Seminal articles were referenced repeatedly and found across multiple databases and thus were easily identifiable. Particular attention was paid to studies published after 2010. The vast majority of studies included in this interdisciplinary literature review are from scholarly, peer-reviewed academic journals, and most of the included studies document and explain discipline disparities. Although this review does not encompass the entire stock of scholarly literature on K–12 school discipline in the United States, this study offers a thorough overview of two important areas in the robust school discipline literature.

## **Results**

### *Numerous and Multifaceted Contributors: Explaining the Rates of and Disparities in Disciplinary Outcomes*

High rates of and disproportionalities in a range of disciplinary outcomes for Black students have been widely documented in the literature, including but not limited to more frequent office disciplinary referrals (ODRs), corporal punishment, suspensions, and inconsistency in the application of sanctions (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Hinojosa, 2008; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Rocque, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Wallace et al., 2008). Less attention has been paid to disparities in disciplinary outcomes for other racial and ethnic groups. For Hispanic students, the results are inconsistent (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Some studies highlight racial discipline disparities for Latino/as (Anyon et al., 2014; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wallace et al., 2008), whereas other studies have found no significant differences between Latino/a and White students' suspension rates (Skiba et al., 2011). Some scholars have suggested that Latino/a students may be underrepresented in exclusionary discipline in elementary schools but overrepresented in secondary schools

(Skiba et al., 2011). Racial discipline disparities for Native American students have been scarcely reported (Gregory et al., 2010). Wallace et al. (2008) found that Native American boys and girls were more likely than White boys and girls to be sent to the office or detained after school. Students with disabilities (SWDs) and non-heterosexual youth are also at risk for disproportionate disciplinary actions (Himmelstein & Brückner, 2011). Higher rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes have been documented for SWDs (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Losen, Hodson, Ee, & Martinez, 2014). Disproportionate discipline patterns have also been reported for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students (Himmelstein & Brückner, 2011; Poteat, Scheer, & Chong, 2016; Snapp & Russell, 2016).

The extant literature suggests that the rates of and disparities in exclusionary discipline outcomes are multiply determined, local, multifaceted, and complex (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). No single factor explains the discipline disparities as empirical evidence indicates that student behavior, student characteristics, and school-level variables all contribute to disciplinary outcomes. The starting premise for explaining the rates of and disparities in exclusionary discipline outcomes is student behaviors and/or attitudes: Students who are disciplined are those who are misbehaving. Although several studies have found that problem behaviors and/or attitudes are strong predictors of receiving some form of disciplinary action, misbehavior (the type and frequency of infraction leading to each incident of suspension or expulsion) does not fully explain the rates of or disparities in exclusionary discipline outcomes (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Students' race (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014) and socioeconomic status (SES) (Hinojosa, 2008; Noltmeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014) contribute to the likelihood of receiving exclusionary discipline. The literature suggests that race trumps other student characteristics in explaining discipline disparities. Race is one of the most significant predictors of OSS regardless of behavior (Huang & Cornell, 2017; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011), and race is a significant predictor of receiving exclusionary discipline after accounting for SES (Huang & Cornell, 2017; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). For instance, Black students from low-SES backgrounds are more likely to be suspended than poor White students, and Black students with middle and high SES are more likely to be suspended than White students with similar SES (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). (Supplemental Table S2 summarizes the studies that explain the disparities in exclusionary discipline outcomes.)

Several school-level variables also contribute to the rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes. School characteristics such as demographic composition (especially the percentage of Black students) (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Anyon et al., 2014; Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011; Losen et al., 2015; Rocha & Hawes, 2009; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Welch & Payne, 2010), average school achievement (Rausch & Skiba, 2005), and principals' perspectives (Mukuria, 2002; Skiba, Edl, & Rausch, 2007; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014) partly explain the rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes. Variations in the attitudes of principals shape the rates of exclusionary discipline, and the evidence suggests that principals who consider the context and have a clear philosophy that guides discipline use exclusionary discipline less often relative to principals who strictly adhere to

disciplinary policy (Mukuria, 2002). Teachers' classroom management skills (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014), teacher–student racial match (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al., 2010; Jordan & Anil, 2009; Kinsler, 2011; Lindsay & Hart, 2017), the lack of a representative bureaucracy (Blake, Smith, Marchbanks, Seibert, & Kim, 2016; Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011; Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty, & Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Meier, 1993; Meier & Stewart, 1992; Roch, Pitts, & Navarro, 2010; Rocha & Hawes, 2009; Staats, 2014), and teachers' perceptions, expectations, and bias (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al., 2010; Carter et al., 2017; Gershenson & Dee, 2017; Golann, 2015; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Gullo, 2017; Hines-Datiri, 2015; McNeal, 2016; Okonofua, Walton, & Eberhardt, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011; Staats, 2014) also play a critical role in the disciplinary process.

Overall, the findings of our review suggest that occurrences in the classrooms and schools due to the policies and practices of schools, teachers' characteristics and classroom management, and principals' perspectives play an important role in explaining discipline disparities. The disparities in disciplinary outcomes may be better explained by the behavior of teachers and principals in schools rather than student characteristics such as misbehavior, poverty, or race. Recent evidence suggests that school-level variables are the strongest predictors of disciplinary outcomes (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Skiba, Chung, et al. (2014) reported that students' race was not statistically significant in predicting OSS when percentage of Black students, school achievement, and principal perspectives on discipline are considered.

Notwithstanding, there is little empirical evidence to substantiate the notion that discriminatory behavior by teachers and school leaders is a significant driver of discipline disparities. Some scholars have highlighted that although there is evidence that school-level policies and practices contribute to the rates of and disparities in exclusionary discipline outcomes, the evidence concerning correlations between discipline practices and racial bias and discrimination is inconclusive (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Steinberg & Lacoé, 2017). The lack of conclusive evidence is partly attributed to the data and methods as well as the scope of the studies examining discipline disparities. Although there are numerous quantitative studies, most studies tend to focus on identifying discipline disparities rather than explaining the mechanisms (e.g., the ideologies embedded within discipline policies and the deep-seated beliefs of school personnel) influencing the disparities. There are few experimental and quasi-experimental studies, and the majority of the studies employ predictive models—and thus the results are descriptive rather than causal claims regarding discipline disparities. It is also plausible that extant data may not sufficiently capture the complexities undergirding school discipline, limiting the ability to provide evidence of discrimination in discipline policies and practices. It is likely that the information needed to establish the smoking gun of racial discrimination in school discipline is not a function of data (Skiba et al., 2002).

Data play an important role in unpacking the explanatory factors underlying discipline disparities. Most studies that examined the contributors to discipline disparities considered factors at two levels: student and teacher characteristics (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al., 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008;

Nichols, Ludwin, & Iadicola, 2006), student and school characteristics (Martinez, McMahon, & Treger, 2016; Noguera, 2003; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011), and student and principal characteristics (Mukuria, 2002). Only one study considered factors at three levels (infraction, student, and school) (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Studies that only consider school-level data neglect variables that are important in explaining discipline disparities (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). Rocque and Paternoster (2011) noted that “much of [the] research on racial discrimination in school is based upon analyses that fail to control for important variables, particularly student behavior, or have failed to simultaneously consider both individual student and school-level factors” (p. 637). The progression of research on school discipline, from using school-level data in isolation to the incorporation of student and teacher data, has revealed several critical mechanisms and enhanced the discourse regarding discipline disparities. In essence, taking a closer look into schools has led to a better understanding of discipline disparities and changed the conversation from what students are doing to how the myriad variables within schools may contribute to discipline disparities.

When a student misbehaves, the event can be managed in the classroom or students can be referred to school administrators, who issue a disciplinary outcome. Thus, a critical examination of disciplinary processes, from infraction to referral to administrative decision, is necessary for understanding the mechanisms that contribute to discipline disparities. Important considerations include the measurement of behavior and the reporting of disciplinary infractions. There may be differences in reporting (e.g., the types of behavior that elicit an official report); thus, similar behavior may be handled and/or reported differently within and across schools. Studies also measure and use behavior differently. In some studies, behavior and discipline records may be based on teacher ratings (e.g., Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, et al., 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Petras, Masyn, Buckley, Jalongo, & Kellam, 2011; Rocque, 2010), whereas others may include student reports (e.g., Huang & Cornell, 2017; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011) or administrator reports (e.g., Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Studies typically measure behavior in three ways: (a) the type of infraction committed (e.g., attendance, disruption, fighting, drug possession), (b) the frequency of misbehavior (e.g., first offense or repeated offenses), and (c) the disciplinary outcomes (e.g., suspensions and expulsions). Several studies have data on the reasons for referral and can pinpoint the behaviors that lead to disciplinary outcomes (Anyon et al., 2014; Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Some studies link behavior type and frequency to disciplinary outcomes (Huang & Cornell, 2017; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014), and others focus on the behaviors and infractions that initiate the discipline process (ODRs) (Girvan et al., 2017; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Smolkowski et al., 2016).

### *Student (Mis)Behavior*

It is reasonable to assume that discipline disparities are the result of the management of less severe behaviors and the use of discretion by teachers and school



administrators. The majority of the extant evidence largely suggests that the disciplinary challenges frequently faced by schools stem from less severe behaviors such as tardiness and absenteeism rather than more severe behaviors such as drug or weapon possession (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003). In contrast, Skiba, Chung, et al. (2014) used data from the 2007–2008 school year for all public schools in a Midwestern state and hierarchical linear regression to examine the factors (e.g., behavior type and frequency, student and school characteristics) that contributed to suspensions and expulsions and found that drug use/possession, fighting/battery, moderate infractions, and defiance/disruption, as well as the frequency of an infraction, predicted the likelihood of OSS and expulsions. Student behavior and attitude influence the likelihood of receiving exclusionary discipline; however, it is important to explore whether misbehavior and how it is addressed are consistent across student groups. The operative question is whether racial differences in receiving exclusionary discipline are due to higher rates of involvement in misbehavior that results in disciplinary outcomes (differential involvement hypothesis).

Numerous studies have revealed racial disparities in the relationship between infractions and punishment, which raises doubts about misbehavior as the primary contributor to the rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes (Anyon et al., 2014; Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, et al., 2010; Golann, 2015; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Rocque, 2010; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Wallace et al., 2008). The evidence indicates that the higher rates of exclusionary discipline experienced by Black students are not the result of higher rates of misbehavior or these students engaging in a greater variety of infractions or more severe infractions. Skiba et al. (2002) found that the higher rate of suspensions experienced by Black students were indicative of critical differences in how OSS is used to address the types of behaviors that lead to office referrals across student groups. Using the discipline records from middle school students in an urban district, Skiba et al. (2002) examined incidents leading to ODRs, OSS, and expulsion and reported that White students were referred more than Black students for objective behaviors (e.g., smoking, vandalism, leaving without permission, obscene language) and Black students were referred more than White students for subjective behaviors (e.g., disrespect, excessive noise, threats, loitering).

Recent studies have reinforced these findings (Anyon et al., 2014; Girvan et al., 2017; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Rocque and Paternoster 2011; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011). For example, Rocque and Paternoster (2011) used school-level data from 45 elementary schools, logistics regression, and negative binomial regression to examine (a) if students received ODRs for misconduct and (b) the number of times students were referred to the office, and they found a significant difference in the likelihood of Black students receiving ODRs and disciplinary action but insisted that discipline disparities were not explained by differences in behavior. Smolkowski et al. (2016) employed a multilevel logistics analysis to examine discipline patterns (e.g., time of day, location of infraction, behavior type) in ODRs across elementary schools in 45 states and

found racial and gender disproportionality for subjective behaviors in classrooms and for more severe incidents (e.g., African American students were 1.2 times more likely than Whites to receive a subjective ODR).

### *Student Achievement*

There is empirical evidence that suggests that low student achievement is predictive of receiving exclusionary discipline. For example, Gregory and Thompson (2010) employed a hierarchical linear model to examine teacher perceptions of student behavior across classrooms for 35 Black students with a history of low achievement and found that African American students with higher GPAs (grade point average) were viewed as cooperative and were less likely to receive an ODR whereas African American students with lower GPAs were perceived as defiant and were more likely to receive an ODR. Skiba, Chung, et al. (2014) found that higher-achieving students were less likely to be suspended (OSS) or expelled.

### *Student Gender, Students With Disabilities, and Students' Sexual Orientation*

Numerous studies have found that male students receive suspensions and expulsions at higher rates than female students (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al., 2010; Hinojosa, 2008; Jordan & Anil, 2009; McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002). The overrepresentation of male students in exclusionary discipline has remained consistent over time as studies in the 1990s and 2000s have documented similar disparities. For instance, McFadden et al. (1992) found that male students disproportionately represented more than three fourths of all discipline referrals; Skiba et al. (2002) reported that Black males led their counterparts in all types of discipline infractions in elementary, middle, and high schools; and Skiba, Chung, et al. (2014) found that gender predicted the likelihood of OSS but not expulsions—male students were 1.24 times more likely to receive OSS than female students.

Brobbey (2018) synthesized the discipline literature pertaining to SWDs and reported that students with learning disabilities accounted for 11% of the population but 20% of all suspensions. The study also reported that (a) students with learning disabilities were more likely to be suspended than students without learning disabilities and (b) minority students with learning disabilities were more likely to be suspended than White students with learning disabilities. Within the SWD subgroup, Achilles et al. (2007) found that students with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and/or emotional behavior disorder (EBD) had a higher likelihood of exclusion when compared with students with learning disorders (LD). Bowman-Perrott et al. (2013) explored the patterns and predictors of exclusionary discipline using the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) data set from 2000 through 2006 and found that students with EBD, ADHD, and/or LD were more likely to experience suspension and expulsion. Losen et al. (2014) examined the factors that contributed to the higher rates of suspension for Black SWDs using data from the 2009–2010 Civil Rights Data Collection, ordinary least squares (OLS), and a Poisson-based regression analysis and found that Black students' identification of having emotional disturbance at the elementary school level predicted a 2.3% increase in the suspension rate for all Black elementary school students. The study also reported a 1% increase in

suspension rates for all Black and White SWDs who were exposed to novice teachers (with 1–2 years of experience).

Himmelstein and Brückner (2011) used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine the correlations between non-heterosexual youth in Grades 7 to 12 and risk of criminal (e.g., police stops, conviction, arrest) and school (e.g., expulsion) sanctions and found that (a) non-heterosexuality consistently predicted a higher risk (between 1.25 and 3 times higher) for police stops, school expulsion, juvenile arrest and conviction, and adult conviction; (b) non-heterosexual girls had a higher risk for school and criminal sanctions relative to non-heterosexual boys; and (c) non-heterosexual girls were up to 3 times more likely to be disciplined for the same infractions than heterosexual students in the same grades. Poteat et al. (2016) used cross-sectional data from the 2012 Dane County Youth Assessment to examine sexual orientation–based disparities in school suspensions and juvenile justice involvement and found that LGBTQ students were more likely to report suspension and juvenile justice involvement than heterosexual students. Within the LGBTQ subgroup, Chmielewski, Belmonte, Stoudt, and Fine (2016) found that LGBTQ students of color aged 16 to 21 years were nearly 1.5 times more likely than straight/cisgender youth of color to report that they had been suspended from school.

### *Student Race/Ethnicity*

Race is a significant explanatory factor for the rates of and disparities in exclusionary discipline outcomes (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Using teacher ratings and regression analysis, Rocque (2010) examined the correlations between race and ODRs across 45 elementary schools in one Virginia county and found that Black students were 2.27 times more likely to receive an ODR than other racial groups when controlling for behavior. Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al. (2010) used data from 21 elementary schools participating in schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS) and a multilevel modeling approach to examine the factors that contribute to racial disparities in ODRs and found that Black students were more likely to receive ODRs than White students when controlling for classroom-level covariates (e.g., teacher race/ethnicity, percentage of students receiving corresponding ODRs, the average class rating of student behavior) and student-level covariates (e.g., gender, teacher ratings of student behavior). Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al. (2010) identified race as a significant predictor of ODRs but not of OSS or expulsion. Skiba, Chung, et al. (2014) found that race was a significant predictor of OSS and expulsion regardless of behavior, gender, or SES. Similarly, Huang and Cornell (2017) reported that race remained a significant predictor of receiving OSS after accounting for student misbehavior.

The extant evidence suggests that race is a more significant predictor of disciplinary outcomes than gender (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Losen and Skiba (2010) reported suspension rates for Black males and females of 28.3% and 18%, respectively, the largest for any racial group. Similar to Black males, Black females are also suspended at higher rates than both White and Hispanic females (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al., 2010; Morris & Perry, 2017; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Wallace et al., 2008). Wallace et al. (2008) found that

African American female students had five times higher odds of suspension and expulsion than White females. Using data from the Kentucky School Discipline Study, Morris and Perry (2017) examined the correlations among race, gender, and ODRs for students in Grades 7 to 12 and highlighted that the disparity between Black and White girls was substantially larger than the disparity between Black and White boys: Black girls were three times more likely than White girls to be referred to the office, whereas Black boys were twice as likely as White boys to be referred to the office. Blake, Keith, Luo, Le, and Salter (2017) acknowledged the elevated suspension risks of Black girls but insisted that the risks were not experienced equally across all Black girls. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Blake et al. (2017) reported that darker-skinned Black female adolescents were almost twice as likely to receive an OSS as their White female counterparts; however, the disparity was not statistically significant when comparing lighter-skinned Black female adolescents with their White female counterparts. Blake and colleagues (2017) attributed the inconsistencies across skin tones to the fact that lighter-complexioned individuals are perceived as having phenotypic characteristics similar to those of Whites, which translates into greater social capital and privilege.

### *Student SES*

The existing evidence suggests that low-SES students receive exclusionary discipline at a higher rate than their peers and that poverty at the student-level has been linked to increased risk for ODRs and OSS (Jordan & Anil, 2009; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010; Petras et al., 2011). Family characteristics such as living in a two-parent household and the quality of home resources (e.g., a quiet space, books, and time allotted for homework) predict the likelihood of suspension (Hinojosa, 2008; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Petras et al. (2011) employed a multilevel discrete-time survival analysis to examine the correlations among OSS, aggressive behavior (e.g., harming other people and property, breaking things, theft, physical violence, lying, struggles with accepting authority, screaming at others, stubbornness, and bullying), and classroom behavioral context for students in Grades 1 to 7 and reported that low-income students were more likely to receive OSS when controlling for race, sex, age, and teacher ratings of student aggression. Skiba, Chung, et al. (2014) found that students' SES was a consistent predictor of OSS but inconsistent in predicting expulsion. The inconsistent contribution of SES suggests a less pronounced effect of poverty as an indicator of school discipline at both the student and the school level (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014).

Although student SES is predictive of receiving exclusionary discipline, several studies have largely dispelled the notion that discipline disparities are driven by poor kids misbehaving. Skiba et al. (2002) found that race and gender disparities persisted when controlling for SES. Wallace et al. (2008) examined a nationally representative sample of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students across 48 states and found that racial differences in the rates of ODRs and suspension were significant even after controlling for family structure, parents' education, and SES. Huang and Cornell (2017) also found that racial disparities persisted after

controlling for poverty. In essence, poverty does not solely explain the rates of and disparities in exclusionary discipline outcomes.

### *Teacher–Student Racial and Gender Match*

Because teachers are generally responsible for initiating the discipline process, it is important to explore how teacher characteristics and discretion contribute to discipline disparities (Nichols et al., 2006). Some scholars have posited that the disparities in suspensions and expulsions start in the classroom with disciplinary referrals (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Teacher judgment regarding the severity of misbehavior and whether or not misbehavior can be handled at the classroom level is influenced by (a) student behavior patterns, (b) the immediate context of the behavior, (c) teacher tolerance level and skills in behavior management, and (d) the resources available to the teacher for managing disruptive behavior (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Another key consideration in the role that teachers play in explaining the rates of and disparities in exclusionary discipline outcomes is the mismatch between the demographic composition of public school teachers and students. In the United States, there is a stark contrast between teachers and the student population in public education: The vast majority of teachers are White, middle-class women, and the student population is diverse and increasingly composed of minority children (Staats, 2014). The relationship between teacher race and school discipline has received increased attention as stakeholders ponder whether students receive less exclusionary discipline with a teacher of the same race. Some scholars theorize that the demographic mismatch may trigger teachers' biases, which in turn contribute to discipline disparities (Staats, 2014).

Using discipline data and student and teacher ratings from an urban high school, Gregory and Weinstein (2008) employed an epidemiological analysis and hierarchical linear modeling to examine behavior patterns in suspension referrals and the factors influencing defiant behavior; they found that (a) 67% of discipline referrals were identified as defiance to authority and (b) Black students represented 58% of the referrals for classroom defiance. Pane, Rocco, Miller, and Salmon (2014) conducted a micro-ethnography to examine the correlations between classroom interactions and exclusionary discipline practices and found that teachers' use of cultural power influenced classroom interactions. For example, teachers who enforced less cultural power were less likely to use exclusionary practices (Pane et al., 2014). In a two-part study, Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) presented male and female K–12 teachers with hypothetical situations of student misbehavior to examine whether teacher responses to misbehavior were driven by racial stereotypes; they found that (a) teachers were more likely to deem students' behavior as indicative of a pattern if they were Black and (b) misconduct of Black students was approached more harshly than identical misconduct by White students.

Jordan and Anil (2009) used discipline data from four middle schools, OLS, and logit regression to examine the correlations among race, gender, SES, special education classification, and the frequency of teacher referrals and found no significance in the likelihood of receiving an ODR for White teacher and Black student matches or for female teacher and female student matches. The study did,

however, find significance in the interaction between Black male teachers and Black students, suggesting that a Black student was 1.4 times more likely to be sent to the office by a Black male teacher than any other racial or gender combination of teachers and students. Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al. (2010) used a multilevel approach to examine how correlations among a student's behavior, classroom variables, and teacher ethnicity contributed to the overrepresentation of minority students in ODRs and found that Black students were more likely to receive ODRs, even after controlling for teachers' rating of behavior, teacher ethnicity, and other classroom variables. Ethnic matches between teachers and students did not reduce referrals for Black students. Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al. (2010) attributed their findings to potential cultural, contextual, or economic differences between Black students and Black teachers. In other words, cultural and SES mismatches may have counteracted the racial matches.

Using aggregates at the school-level, several studies have found that Black and Latino/a students are less likely to be suspended or expelled in schools with higher proportions of Black and Latino/a teachers (Grissom et al., 2009; Meier, 1993; Meier & Stewart, 1992). Using both survey and U.S. Census data, Rocha and Hawes (2009) found that the presence of minority teachers and racial/ethnic diversity within districts contributed to lower levels of discrimination and that schools with a representative and diverse teaching force had smaller racial discipline disparities. Roch et al. (2010) used school demographic data, discipline records, and a linear pooled model to explore the correlations between bureaucratic representation and discipline philosophies and found that schools with a diverse teaching force employed less punitive disciplinary practices and relied on rehabilitative approaches. Blake et al. (2016) analyzed a statewide data set of three 7th-grade cohorts over 5 years, using binomial logistic regression to determine whether student-teacher racial/ethnic matches accounted for students' risk for exclusionary sanctions (in-school suspension, OSS, alternative placement, or expulsion) and found that the risk of receiving any type of sanction increased in schools where the faculty and students were less similar racially and ethnically. For example, 7th- to 12th-grade Black and Hispanic students were more likely to be suspended if they were enrolled in schools where the teachers and faculty were less representative of the students' racial and ethnic identities (Blake et al., 2016).

It is important to note that the aforementioned school-level studies may confound how teacher demographics influence exclusionary discipline with other school characteristics that may be correlated with teacher attributes (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, et al., 2010; Jordan & Anil, 2009; Kinsler, 2011; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Only two studies have linked teachers to students at the individual/classroom level. Using 1 year of North Carolina data, Kinsler (2011) found that Black elementary students matched with teachers of the same race were less likely to be suspended than Black students matched to White teachers; however, the difference was not statistically significant. Lindsay and Hart (2017) used longitudinal student-level data from North Carolina and a variety of quasi-experimental methods to examine whether or not exposure to Black teachers correlated with disciplinary outcomes for Black students and found that teacher-student racial matches were associated with lower rates of OSS and expulsion for Black students. Although the magnitude of the results was not large, office referrals for

willful defiance, an indicator of teacher discretion, were consistently reduced. Lindsay and Hart (2017) posited a “gatekeeper effect” as a possible mechanism to explain their results.

### *Teacher Perceptions, Expectations, and Implicit Bias*

Teachers’ perceptions and expectations and their interactions with students’ perceptions and expectations may play a key role in discipline disparities. An implicit social contract provides the foundation for maintaining order in schools (Noguera, 2003). Because the values of education institutions do not align with the values of all students, it is likely that discipline is not rendered equally. Golann (2015) examined the experiences of teachers and students in a poor urban charter school using ethnographic fieldwork and observed that the teachers were enforcing both conformity and discipline. Golann (2015) attributed the correlations among culture, class, and discipline to the middle-class values embedded in public education. The promotion of middle-class values creates cultural mismatches in schools composed of minority students and/or students from working-class families because the values at school do not match the values at home (Golann, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). The mismatch may result in a clash between teacher expectations and what minority students view as appropriate behavior (Golann, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). Educational settings that subscribe to societal norms generate backlash from students who are unable or unwilling to act outside of their normative behaviors (Golann, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). Teachers view these behaviors as inappropriate, thus warranting some form of consequence. Likewise, students view these teachers as untrustworthy authoritarians (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). The dynamic produces a culture of control that impedes the success of both sanctioned and unsanctioned students (Perry & Morris, 2014).

There are differences in teachers’ perceptions along racial lines that plausibly contribute to discipline disparities. Research has illustrated that, in many instances, “teachers differ from one another in their ‘read’ of behavior and students calibrate their behavior across classroom settings” (Gregory & Thompson, 2010, p. 397; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Gregory and Mosely (2004) used semistructured interviews with teachers to examine how teachers theorized the causes of discipline with respect to race and culture and found that the teachers relied on a cultural deficit ideology when explaining the link between race, SES, and school discipline. In many instances, the teachers blamed the negative social forces working against Black students rather than the internal culture of the school as affecting racial and ethnic discipline patterns. Less than 10% of the teachers considered how racial issues were manifested in teacher beliefs and classroom practices. Gregory and Mosely (2004) argue that this color-blind approach has done more harm than good because it does not acknowledge the reality of racism within the United States and allows teachers to overlook the deep-seated beliefs that actually influence their practice. Hines-Datiri (2015) employed a case narrative to examine how the racially based perceptions of school leaders and teachers led to the arrest of two African American male students and found that both race and gender perceptions influenced the type of punishment rendered and the students being viewed as perpetrators. The study attributed the criminalization of minor

infractions committed by students of color to the discriminatory beliefs held by school leaders and teachers and the subjective conceptualizations of culturally appropriate behavior.

Teachers' theories regarding the causes of discipline patterns also explain the variations in teacher expectations for Black students given that teachers operating within a cultural deficit model would be less likely to have the same expectations across student groups (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Using nationally representative data of 10th-grade students from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 and a student fixed-effects strategy, Gershenson, Holt, and Papageorge (2016) examined whether student-teacher mismatch influenced teachers' expectations of students' educational attainment and found that Black teachers' expectations were 30% to 40% higher than those of non-Black teachers. The variation was larger for Black male students and math teachers. Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, and Shic (2016) presented 132 preschool teachers with hypothetical situations of student behavior to examine whether the teachers' implicit sex and race biases influenced their behavioral expectations; they found that (a) Black teachers held Black students to a higher standard than White teachers, (b) Black teachers recommended harsher forms of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions and expulsions) for all children, and (c) teachers expressed more empathy for misbehaving children with a troubling home life only if the race of the teacher and the student was the same—when the race of the teacher and the student differed, the teacher viewed the misbehaving student as difficult to fix.

Some scholars posit that the dynamics between students' and teachers' perceptions and expectations may result in a "vicious cycle"—one where over time biases from both teachers and students undermine the teacher-student relationship (Okonofua et al., 2016). Teachers who fear classroom disorder rely on harsher treatment for racially stigmatized students, and students' awareness of stereotypes in conjunction with a fear of not belonging could lead to racially stigmatized students disengaging from or mistrusting teachers (Okonofua et al., 2016). Gregory and Weinstein (2008) found that Black students admitted to being defiant when teachers exhibited very little care and low expectations, and Black students were perceived as defiant and were more likely to receive discipline referrals when teachers thought that they were not engaged in class. Using interview data from students who had experienced between one and six suspensions, Kennedy-Lewis and Murphy (2016) examined how middle school students responded to being labeled as "bad" and reported that the students rarely made explicit connections between their elementary teacher's perceptions about them and how they behaved. However, the students expressed that their past behavior infractions had led their teachers to presume that they were guilty and enforce ODRs. Using focus group and interview data from 31 LGBTQ students, Snapp and Russell (2016) examined teacher-student relationships and the overpunishment of LGBTQ students and found that suspended LGBTQ students had trouble returning to school because of being labeled as a troublemaker. A recent study found that a trust gap may adversely affect minority students—especially students of color in middle schools (Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Hooper, & Cohen, 2017). Students who lose trust in teachers because of perceptions of mistreatment by school personnel are less likely to attend college, even after accounting for prior achievement (Yeager et al., 2017). A



similar phenomenon may be at play in school discipline; Russell Skiba posited that the dynamic of “mutually assured discipline” captures an interesting interplay of different discipline approaches and student misbehavior (Williams, 2016).

Scholars have also highlighted that discipline disparities may be perpetuated by implicit bias (Gershenson & Dee, 2017; Okonofua et al., 2016). Both Black and White teachers’ perceptions and expectations may embody implicit biases and other biases rooted in stereotypes and identity cues (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, et al., 2010; Staats, 2014). Research suggests that unconscious bias is able to manifest and harm groups that are negatively stereotyped (Gershenson & Dee, 2017), and the lack of a representative bureaucracy may facilitate discrimination through implicit bias (Feistritzer et al., 2011). Although there is a growing body of research on implicit bias in criminal justice settings (Kang, Bennett, Carbado, & Casey, 2011), the literature in educational settings is not as robust or definitive. A handful of studies suggest that teachers’ implicit bias guides the perception and punishment of students (Carter et al., 2017; Gullo, 2017; McNeal, 2016; Staats, 2014). Gullo (2017) used survey data from the Implicit Associations Test, discipline records, and a nonexperimental cross-sectional design to examine the degree to which implicit biases of administrators (principals, assistant principals, and deans) influenced discipline decisions in 22 Pennsylvania schools and found that implicit bias influenced administrative decisions. For example, administrators who exhibited high levels of implicit bias selected more severe disciplinary actions for overall and subjective discipline infractions by minority students compared with administrators with lower levels of implicit bias.

#### *School Level, Location, and Type*

School level (elementary vs. middle vs. high), location (urban vs. rural vs. suburban), and type (traditional vs. charter) are pertinent considerations in the rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes. The rates of suspension and expulsion as well as disproportionalities in suspension rates among Black and White students are highest at the secondary level (Losen et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2008). Losen et al. (2015) found that Black/White disparities in OSS were largest at the secondary level, roughly 16.4 percentage points. The disparities in higher grades were also found in ODRs. African American students were 2.19 times more likely than Whites to be referred to the office in elementary school and 3.87 times more likely than Whites to be referred in middle school (Skiba et al., 2011). There are also critical differences in the use of exclusionary discipline across school locations. Using district-level data from 326 Ohio school districts, Noltemeyer and McLoughlin (2010) found that major urban high-poverty schools had higher rates of OSS for Black students after accounting for poverty. Additionally, the study highlighted that major urban high-poverty schools were notorious for utilizing exclusionary practices more frequently than rural districts with small percentages of students living in poverty. Varela, Peguero, Eason, Marchbanks, and Blake (2018) used seventh-grade cohort data from the Texas Academic Indicator System, the Public Education Information Management System, and the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission to examine the correlations among race/ethnicity, urbanicity, and school discipline practices and found that rural schools were less stringent than urban and suburban schools, urban

schools were more lenient than suburban schools, and rural schools were less lenient than suburban schools. There is also concern regarding the extent to which school type contributes to discipline disparities. During the 2011–2012 school year, the Center for Civil Rights Remedies reported that Black/White disparities in suspension rates were 6.7% in traditional public schools and nearly 10% in charter schools (Losen, Keith, Hodson, & Martinez, 2016).

### *School Racial/Ethnic Composition*

Numerous studies have confirmed the predictive relationship between school demographic composition (especially Black enrollment) and the rates of and disparities in exclusionary discipline outcomes (Anyon et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2011; Rocha & Hawes, 2009; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Welch & Payne, 2010). Welch and Payne (2010) found that schools with a large percentage of Black students were more likely to use zero-tolerance policies and impose harsh punishments. Losen et al. (2015) linked student demographics to school suspension rates, suggesting that schools with more than 50% Black enrollment suspended more than two thirds of their student body at least once. Anderson and Ritter (2017) used 7 years of student infraction data from Arkansas Public Schools, logistic regression, school fixed effects, and two-stage residual analysis to examine the factors influencing discipline infractions and the resulting consequences and found that school-level differences (e.g., percentage of Black students and percentage of students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch [FRPL]) had the most significant contribution to OSS, expulsion, and alternative placement. For example, schools with the greatest percentage of Black students implemented more frequent and longer suspensions. Unlike the majority of studies, Rocque and Paternoster (2011) found that the correlation between Black student percentage and school discipline was not clearly linear: Discipline reports increased with increased percentage of Black students but only up to a certain threshold, after which discipline reports declined. Rocque and Paternoster attributed this to the “benign neglect” hypothesis, which posits that White authorities disproportionately focus on minorities when the percentage of minorities increases but after a certain point the harshness of teachers’ responses to misbehavior declines as minorities begin to victimize one another.

### *School SES*

Mendez et al. (2002) found that the percentage of FRPL students in a school was strongly correlated with the school’s suspension rate: Schools with higher concentrations of students receiving FRPL were more likely to have larger suspension rates than those that did not. Noltemeyer and McLoughlin (2010) found that the percentage of economically disadvantaged students predicted suspension use. These findings are, however, inconsistent with the results of Skiba, Chung, et al. (2014). Skiba et al. (2014) found that a higher proportion of FRPL students in schools was not significantly related to OSS and predicted lower rates of expulsion.

### *School Achievement, Structure, and Support*

There are other characteristics outside of the demographic composition of schools that also explain discipline disparities. There is a negative relationship

between school achievement and rates of exclusionary discipline (Rausch & Skiba, 2005). Gregory et al. (2011) examined the correlations among academic expectations, rule enforcement, school support, and disciplinary outcomes using ninth-grade survey data from 199 schools and a multiple regression analysis and found that schools with high academic expectations, high consistency in rule enforcement, and a high sense of care and community had lower suspension rates for both Black and White students and smaller suspension disparities between Black and White students whereas schools with lower academic expectations, lower consistency in rule enforcement, and a lower sense of care and community had higher suspension rates for Black students and larger suspension disparities between Black and White students.

### *School Administrators*

School leadership appears to be an essential component of the rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). There is substantial variation in the disciplinary philosophies of principals within the same school district, and rates of suspension are linked to principals' attitudes (Mukuria, 2002; Skiba et al., 2007; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). The existing literature highlights that charter school principals implement discipline systems that support their specific mission (Hays, 2013). Using semistructured interviews with principals at four charter schools in Boston, Hays (2013) found that school leaders who were concerned with sending their students to college employed discipline systems that eliminated distractions whereas principals who were concerned with creating model citizens employed discipline systems that fostered civic habits. Skiba et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of administrative decision making in explaining racial discipline disparities, positing that African American and Latino/a students were more likely to receive suspension or expulsion for minor infractions, even after controlling for behavior and any previous disparity in classroom office referrals. Skiba et al. (2011) attributed differential processing at the administrative level as well as differential selection at the classroom level as contributors to this overrepresentation of African American and Latino/a students.

### *School Climate*

Using the high school version of the Racial Climate Survey, Mattison and Aber (2007) found that perception of the racial climate at school was a significant contributor to discipline disparities. Schools with positive perceptions of racial climate yielded student reports with higher grades and fewer detentions and suspensions. Shirley and Cornell (2012) examined data from the School Climate Bullying Survey in Virginia using chi-square tests and hierarchical regressions and found that middle school students' attitudes toward aggression and their willingness to seek help with personal problems or bullying predicted whether a student received a referral or a suspension. African American students were less likely to seek help from teachers and more likely to respond to aggression with aggression. African American students were also disproportionately at the receiving end of discipline referrals and suspensions—Blacks accounted for 20% of the school population but 60% of the referrals.

### *School Resource Officers*

The federal government has endorsed school resource officers (SROs) as a means of improving school climate, school safety, and student achievement (Theriot & Orme, 2016; Wolf, 2014). SROs are typically used in tandem with exclusionary or zero-tolerance discipline policies (Welch & Payne, 2010). Using survey data from a nationally representative sample of 294 public middle and high schools and OLS regression, Welch and Payne (2010) found that Black students were more likely to attend schools with greater use of school security measures and police presence. The prevalence of heightened security in schools with sizable concentrations of Black children can be attributed to racial threat—instances where Whites display intensified forms of control when outnumbered by Blacks (Welch & Payne, 2010).

A growing number of studies have provided empirical evidence on the effectiveness of SROs (Johnson, 1999; Theriot, 2009; Theriot & Orme, 2016; Wolf, 2014). The evidence on SROs is mixed, however: Earlier studies found positive effects, but more recent studies have raised several concerns. Johnson (1999) examined the correlations among an SRO program, school discipline problems, and school violence—using discipline records; interview data from students, school personnel, and SROs; and self-administered questionnaires—and found that immediate and major offenses decreased (from 3,267 in 1994–1995 to 2,710 in 1995–1996) following the permanent placement of SROs in schools. Students also reported feeling a sense of security while SROs were in their schools.

The findings of Johnson (1999) are not consistent with those of more recent studies. Theriot (2009) used 3 years of school-level longitudinal data from 28 schools located in the southeastern part of the United States to examine the correlations between SROs and school-based arrests in schools with SROs and schools without SROs; they found that (a) arrests for subjective charges such as disorderly conduct were more likely to occur in schools with SROs than in schools that did not have SROs, (b) schools with SROs experienced a 402.3% increase in arrests per 100 students, (c) the impact of SROs was not statistically significant when controlling for SES, and (d) SES emerged as the only predictor of arrest. Wolf (2014) used survey data from Delaware Public Schools and Spearman's correlation tests to examine whether school context contributed to SRO arrest decisions, and found that SROs considered students' behavior history as well as students' behavior in arrest decisions. The SROs also highlighted access to alternative disciplinary actions as influencing their arrest decisions. Using student surveys with middle and high school students, Theriot and Orme (2016) examined whether and how interactions with SROs influenced students' feelings of safety and found that interactions with SROs were not statistically correlated with students' feelings of safety. Instead, the study found correlations between students' experiences at school and their feelings of safety. For example, students who experienced increased victimization had decreased feelings of school safety in general.

### *Beyond Schools: District and Neighborhood Attributes*

Few studies have focused on the attributes of districts that may contribute to the rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes. As with schools, a district's

proportion of African American students (Curran, 2016; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Welch & Payne, 2010) and students in poverty (Losen & Skiba, 2010) is correlated with higher rates of suspensions. There is little research on how neighborhoods may contribute to discipline disparities. There is an assumption that large urban districts are impersonal and lack a sense of community whereas small rural districts are more personal and exhibit community stability, thus discipline may be more of a problem in urban communities (Green & Barnes, 1993). It is likely that perceptions of urban communities, similar to racial and gender perceptions, may influence the manner in which educators and principals address discipline. Whether these perceptions influence interactions in schools and discipline disparities is somewhat ambiguous.

*Eliminating Disparities? Examining the Effectiveness of Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline*

In response to the disparities in disciplinary outcomes, several alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline policies and practices have emerged in recent decades at the federal, state and district levels. Discipline reforms attempt to establish strategies that keep students in schools and counteract disparities using program- and policy-based interventions (Steinberg & Lacoé, 2017). Program-based approaches focus on initiatives that (a) try to improve school culture for the entire school and (b) provide school personnel with skills in behavior management and school discipline (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012; Caldarella, Shatzer, Gray, Young, & Young, 2011; Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lathrop, 2007; Flannery, Fenning, Kato, & McIntosh, 2014; Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2014; Gregory et al., 2016; Kevin et al., 2007; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013; Skiba & Sprague, 2008), whereas policy-based approaches focus on changing the policies that guide school and district responses to behaviors (Cornell, Allen, & Fan, 2012; Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; Cornell & Lovegrove, 2015).

Program-based approaches include but are not limited to (a) response to intervention (RTI), (b) the integrated comprehensive services model, (c) positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), (d) restorative practices (RPs), (e) the My Teacher Project (MTP), and (f) social-emotional learning (SEL). These approaches are not mutually exclusive and can be used collectively (Steinberg & Lacoé, 2017). RTI, RPs, and PBIS are popular school-level program-based initiatives (Steinberg & Lacoé, 2017). (See Supplemental Table S1 for more detailed descriptions of these programs; available in the online version of the journal.)

*Conceptual Underpinnings*

The alternative approaches target a variety of mechanisms including classroom management, instruction, student misbehavior, perceptions and bias, school climate, teacher capacity, teacher-student relationships, and student-student relationships (Cramer, Gonzalez, & Pellegrini-Lafont, 2014; González, 2012, 2015; McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2014; Watson, 2014). The operative question is whether the conceptual underpinnings of the alternative approaches address the underlying drivers of discipline disparities. Scholars have posited that the alternative approaches should target school-level and classroom-level

variables rather than student or family demographics (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). (Supplemental Table S4 links the targeted mechanisms to policy- and program-based alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline.)

Student misbehavior is targeted by popular program-based approaches such as RTI, SEL, and SWPBIS, even though it is not the main driver of discipline disparities. Student characteristics such as poverty, sexual orientation status, race, and gender are not explicitly targeted. Few interventions mention, view, or conceptualize race as a targeted mechanism, even though race is a significant contributor to discipline disparities. Skiba (2015) argued that most of the interventions tend to be color-blind or race neutral and concluded that these types of interventions will not assist in reducing racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes. At the classroom level, programs such as MTP target a variety of mechanisms such as student–teacher relationships, teacher referrals, and classroom management, which are related to the contributors to discipline disparities. Student–teacher racial matches are not directly targeted. Even though teachers’ interactions with students are the immediate focus, none of the interventions reference long-term initiatives to diversify the teacher workforce. Integrated models attempt to improve teacher–student relationships by addressing perceptions, expectations, and bias. MTP attempts to counteract the need for student–teacher matches and assists with the lack of student–teacher matches by targeting student–teacher interactions as well as student engagement, in the hope of improving student outcomes, particularly for African Americans. There is no focus on factors beyond the school, such as districts and neighborhoods. (Supplemental Figure S3 links the alternative approaches to the contributors to discipline disparities; available in the online version of the journal.)

Conceptually, our study raises questions on whether and how some of the various alternatives are working to counter the causes of the disparities in disciplinary outcomes. Overall, there seems to be a mismatch between the theory of action of the alternative approaches and the causes of discipline disparities. The existing evidence identifies several causes of discipline disparities but suggests that school- and classroom-level factors as well as students’ race are the most significant contributors to the disparities. The vast majority of the alternative approaches are most concerned with assisting students with assimilating to the school culture rather than crafting the school culture to fit the social, emotional, and cultural needs of students. As such, schools focus more on achieving behavior management through conformity and less on addressing the biases and cultural clashes that may be driving discipline disparities. However, the evidence suggests that remedies to discipline disparities should focus on the disposition and biases of teachers and school leaders’ behavior management rather than student misbehavior. RTI attempts to restore student behavior, SWPBIS attempts to restructure disciplinary practices, SEL targets misbehavior via teaching students social and life skills, and RPs attempt to restore and repair relationships affected by misbehavior (Skiba, 2015). It is important to note that a handful of alternatives endorse culturally responsive teaching models and the cultural needs of students—for example, the 10-principle research-based framework proposed by Gregory et al. (2017), Double Check, and the Manhood Development Program (MDP) in Oakland, California (Bottiani et al., 2012; Brown, 2004).

The extant literature illustrates that minority (mainly African American) students are most vulnerable to school exclusion, but few alternative approaches explicitly acknowledge interventions for addressing cultural and/or racial mismatches and biases. The systemic practices in schools typically cater to the needs and norms of the dominant culture, thus disenfranchising and marginalizing minority students (Cramer et al., 2014). Because racial and gender inequality is intricately embedded within varying levels of schooling, interventions should encourage school personnel to consider the degree to which “race, culture, gender, power and prestige” contribute to the issue of equality in schools (Gregory et al., 2017, p. 254). Furthermore, it is unlikely that interventions targeting one component of schooling (e.g., classroom factors) will dismantle racial and gender discipline disparities (Gregory et al., 2017; McIntosh et al., 2014). To disrupt racial and gender discipline disparities, Gregory et al. (2017) called for interventions that address the varying aspects of schooling (e.g., deep-seated beliefs and attitudes, interactions, curriculum rigor, cultural applicability, access to supports, and collaboration).

### *Empirical Evidence*

The majority of studies employed quantitative approaches, and few studies used qualitative methods. Numerous studies focused on program-based approaches and their impacts on the rates of disciplinary outcomes (Anyon et al., 2016; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Cornell & Lovegrove, 2015; Flannery et al., 2014; Gregory & Clawson, 2016; Gregory et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2016; Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Preety, 2014; Schotland, MacLean, Junker, & Phinney, 2016) and other student and school outcomes (Anyon et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2012; Caldarella et al., 2011; Fairbanks et al., 2007; González, 2012; Kevin et al., 2007; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013; Osher, Poirier, Jarjoura, Brown, & Kendziora, 2015). Studies have also examined (a) school responses to policy changes (Jain et al., 2014), (b) the relationship between policy changes and students’ behavioral and academic outcomes (Curran, 2016; Fabelo et al., 2011; Mendez, 2003; Rausch & Skiba, 2005), and (c) how alternative approaches may affect students who did not commit disciplinary infractions (Perry & Morris, 2014). (Supplemental Table S3, in the online version of the journal, summarizes studies in an emerging body of research on the effectiveness of alternative policy- and program-based approaches to exclusionary discipline policies and practices.)

The existing evidence indicates the potential of program-based approaches such as SWPBIS and RPs to reduce the rates of ODRs and suspensions, but there is little evidence of the success of these programs in eliminating disparities in disciplinary outcomes. Skiba (2015) highlighted a gap in the extant literature as it pertains to research-validated interventions and posited that research has yet to explain and/or test whether the alternative approaches reduce disparities. Steinberg and Lacoé (2017) attributed the gap in the literature to (a) interventions being implemented quicker than they are assessed and (b) the lack of rigorous evaluation of discipline reform alternatives. Disaggregation of discipline data by student subgroups is important, but only a few studies have used disaggregated data; thus, little is known regarding each intervention’s effectiveness in reducing discipline

disparities. Similarly, there is little evidence on the specific underlying mechanisms that lead to a reduction in discipline disparities. Given that the evidence suggests that interventions may be reducing the rates of exclusionary discipline more so than closing discipline disparities, it is even more important to consider not only to what extent but also how the various alternatives are working to counter the discipline disparities. The growing number of experimental studies investigating the effectiveness of the alternative approaches is encouraging as experiments are typically regarded as the gold standard of causal evidence. The first round of studies on the alternatives have predominantly focused on the “what works” question, but increasing attention is being paid to the mechanisms of why alternative approaches succeed or fail.

### *Response to Intervention*

Using a quasi-experimental design, Fairbanks et al. (2007) examined the check-in/check-out (CICO) program (a targeted behavioral intervention used in RTI) as a behavior support for 10 students in two second-grade classrooms and found a decrease in ODRs for each of the students receiving the CICO intervention. Teachers also reported less frequent and less severe student misbehaviors following the implementation of CICO (Fairbanks et al., 2007). Kevin et al. (2007) also conducted a quasi-experimental study to examine the degree to which students who participated in the CICO intervention experienced changes in misbehavior and found that students receiving the CICO intervention averaged 1 ODR every 8 days, compared with an average of 1 ODR every 5 days when they were not receiving the intervention. There is a growing interest in using RTI to reduce discipline disparities among culturally and linguistically diverse students via the Double Check framework, but there have been few evaluations of this intervention (Bottiani et al., 2012).

### *Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports*

Although there is suggestive evidence that PBIS reduces the rates of suspensions, implementation of the program and disaggregation of data have emerged as key considerations in assessing the effectiveness of PBIS. A growing number of studies have found that the implementation of PBIS was correlated with decreases in ODRs (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Flannery et al., 2014; Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011), suspensions (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, et al., 2010; Skiba & Sprague, 2008), and misbehavior (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Flannery et al., 2014). Bradshaw, Mitchell, and Leaf (2010) examined the effects of SWPBIS on student outcomes in 37 elementary schools, using data from a 5-year longitudinal randomized controlled trial, and found that schools that were trained in SWPBIS experienced significant decreases in the (a) percentage of students receiving major or minor ODRs and (b) the overall rate of major and minor ODRs. The study also reported decreases in the rates of suspension in the schools trained in SWPBIS compared with the nontrained schools, where the suspension rates remained unchanged. Using the same data in a separate study, Bradshaw et al. (2012) examined the effects of SWPBIS on behavior problems and found that the implementation of SWPBIS had significant effects on behavior problems, concentration issues, social-emotional functioning, and prosocial behavior.



With respect to ODRs, the study also found that schools implementing SWPBIS had decreases in referrals compared with schools that did not.

At the high school level, Flannery et al. (2014) examined the correlations between PBIS and problem behaviors using a multilevel growth model and found that the implementation of PBIS was associated with decreases in ODRs. The study reported that the frequency of ODRs declined as the fidelity of PBIS implementation improved. Schools with PBIS had significant decreases in misbehavior, whereas schools without PBIS experienced increases in misbehavior. SWPBIS has also been associated with improving perceptions of school climate (Caldarella et al., 2011; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013; Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Caldarella et al. (2011) employed a quasi-experimental design to examine how SWPBIS contributed to school climate and school outcomes in two middle schools and reported improvements in punctuality, attendance, and school climate and reductions in ODRs. Mitchell and Bradshaw (2013) employed multilevel structural equation modeling and school climate surveys to examine how SWPBIS contributed to student perceptions of school climate and found that increased use of SWPBIS was correlated with higher scores on classroom order, discipline, fairness, and student-teacher relationships.

Although the existing evidence illustrates the potential of SWPBIS, several scholars suggest that validity checks, system-level demonstrations, and disaggregated results by student subgroup, rather than an overall rate for all students, are still needed (Skiba, 2015; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). Skiba et al. (2011) acknowledged that PBIS employed graduated systems of discipline but insisted that the only way to explicitly examine the effects of PBIS is to disaggregate the disciplinary outcomes. Less than a handful of studies have employed strategies to disaggregate the disciplinary outcomes tied to PBIS (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2015; Vincent et al., 2011; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). Vincent and Tobin (2011) examined the correlations between SWPBIS and ODRs resulting in OSS and expulsion across various ethnic groups with and without disabilities in 77 schools (traditional public schools and alternative schools); they found that (a) the implementation of SWPBIS did not benefit all students equally (e.g., alternative school students experienced major increases in ODRs following the implementation of SWPBIS, and elementary and middle schools experienced very little change following implementation) and (b) SWPBIS was not statistically significant when the results were disaggregated: African American students in schools with SWPBIS still experienced a disproportionate rate of OSS compared with all other ethnicities. At the elementary level, Vincent et al. (2011) examined how SWPBIS contributed to disciplinary outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students with and without disabilities, using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, discipline records, and descriptive statistics, and found that Black students continued to be overrepresented in ODRs even in schools where SWPBIS decreased the overall rates of ODRs. Bradshaw et al. (2015) examined whether correlations between SWPBIS and student outcomes varied across students' social-emotional characteristics, using school-level data and a latent profile analysis, and found that both at-risk and high-risk students enrolled in SWPBIS schools were less likely to receive ODRs than at-risk and high-risk students enrolled in non-SWPBIS schools.

In response to the findings that SWPBIS does not improve and/or address racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes, culturally responsive models of PBIS are increasingly being implemented (Vincent, English, Girvan, Sprague, & McCab, 2016). Vincent et al. (2016) partnered with a high school that implemented PBIS to field test training for schoolwide positive and restorative discipline and found that there were higher rates of perceived racial fairness and decreases in ODRs following the implementation of the program. The study also highlighted that ODRs decreased to zero for African American, Asian, and multiracial students following implementation.

### *Restorative Practices*

The existing evidence links RPs to decreases in ODRs (Anyon et al., 2016; Gregory & Clawson, 2016; González, 2012; Jain et al., 2014) and suspensions (González, 2012; Schotland et al., 2016). González (2012) used North High School in Denver, Colorado, as a case study to examine a school-based restorative program for one school year and found that (a) ODR averages were reduced from nearly two per student in the first semester to one per every 5 students in the second semester and (b) OSS was reduced by 89% for close to 40 students. Since their implementation in 2005 in the Oakland Unified School District, Jain et al. (2014) reported that schools employing RPs have experienced (a) reduced ODRs, (b) improvements in the way students resolve conflicts with teachers and peers, (c) suspensions reduced by 37%, and (d) closing of Black/White discipline disparities (from 25% in 2011–2012 to 19% in 2012–2013). González (2015) examined the correlations between RPs and racial discipline disparities in a Denver school district and found that suspension rates for the district decreased from 10.58% to 5.53% over 7 years. The study also found that the suspension rate for African Americans decreased by 7.2 percentage points and Black/White discipline disparities decreased from a 12-point gap to an 8-point gap. Using school- and classroom-level data from Davidson Middle School, Schotland et al. (2016) examined how RPs reduced suspension rates across racial and ethnic groups and reported that suspension rates dropped from 294 across 162 students to 73 across 48 students 5 years after implementation. The study also found that the (a) relative risk of being suspended decreased from 11 to 3 for Latino/a students and (b) discipline disparities narrowed considerably between Latino/a and White students; however, Latino/as maintained a greater risk for suspension than Whites.

Using a multilevel logistic regression and school-level data from K–12 students in Denver, Anyon et al. (2016) examined the correlations between RPs and student discipline outcomes and found that students who received RPs for consequences in the fall semester were less likely to be referred to the office or receive suspension in the spring semester than students who did not receive RPs. The study highlighted that the results were consistent across racial groups and that racial disparities in suspensions persisted for Black students. Gregory and Clawson (2016) used school- and classroom-level data from two large and diverse high schools to examine whether RPs contributed to closing racial and gender disparities; they found that RPs led to decreases in referrals for Black (2%), White (2%), and Latin (10%) males but racial and gender disparities in misconduct and defiance referrals were still maintained.

Research has also highlighted the correlations between RPs and improvements in achievement (González, 2012, 2015; Jain et al., 2014). A high school in Denver reported that 30% of the students enrolled in restorative justice programs reduced their failing grades by more than half (González, 2012). Using descriptive analysis, González (2015) examined survey, questionnaire, and interview data collected by Denver Public Schools in 2003 and 2004 and observational data from 2009 through 2013 and found educational improvements in standardized test scores in math, reading, and writing in all grades (3–10), except the 8th grade, after the implementation of RPs. Between 2006 and 2010, González also identified increases in ACT scores (from 15.4 to 17.6), improved graduation rates (11.1% to 51.8%), and decreases in dropout rates (11.1% to 6.4%). There is also evidence linking RPs to improvements in school attendance and punctuality (González, 2012) and school climate (Jain et al., 2014). Anyon et al. (2014) examined the correlations between RPs and multilevel risk and protective factors and found that race and school racial composition remain enduring risk factors in discipline decisions, even in schools implementing RPs.

### *Culturally Relevant Interventions*

Watson (2014) used portraiture, observations, interviews, document analysis, and data from the Office of African American Male Achievement to examine whether the MDP improved outcomes for Black males and found that students in the MDP experienced decreases in suspensions and increases in attendance and GPA (from 1.7 to 2.12). Of the MDP students, 30% were reading at or above grade level over 2 years, and 8% improved from below grade level to grade level or above. Students in the MDP also experienced improvements in sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

### *Social-Emotional Learning*

Osher et al. (2015) examined the relationship between Cleveland Metropolitan School District's Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies program, which places emphasis on SEL, student support teams, early identification, and planning centers, and school safety, discipline, and conditions for learning. The study found that this program was associated with improvements in (a) learning conditions for students in Grades 5 through 12, (b) districtwide student attendance (by 1.5 percentage points), (c) student behavior (the number of disobedient/disruptive behaviors decreased from 131.8 to 73.9), (d) OSS (decreased by 58.8%), and (e) disciplinary incidents such as disobedient/disruptive behavior, fighting/violence, harassment/intimidation, and serious bodily harm (decreased by 35.9%). The study also reported significant reductions in the rates of OSS across racial/ethnic groups and improvements in students' feeling of safety over time. Rather than penalize misconduct, Robert W. Coleman Elementary, a school in Baltimore, Maryland, recently replaced detention with meditation, where misbehaving students are encouraged to recenter and refocus via breathing practices and meditation in the mindful meditation room (Holistic Life Foundation, 2016). Since the implementation of this intervention, the school has had zero suspensions, and other schools in Baltimore have experienced similar results (Holistic Life Foundation, 2016).

### *My Teacher Project*

Using school- and classroom-level data from 82 secondary teachers, Gregory et al. (2014) employed a randomized controlled trial to examine whether the MTP reduced racial disparities in the classroom after 1 year and found that the teachers who matriculated through the MTP issued fewer ODRs than the teachers who were not a part of the program and that teachers in the MTP issued ODRs for White and Black students at equal rates. The study also reported that there was a smaller Black/White disparity in discipline for African Americans enrolled in the classes with MTP teachers. Using the same randomized controlled trial, Gregory et al. (2016) examined data from the second year of MTP coaching and a follow-up year and found that the teachers in the treatment group issued between 0 and 8 referrals and the teachers in the control group issued between 0 and 12 referrals. The study also found that the teachers in the treatment group had a lower use of referrals, especially with Black students. When compared with the teachers in the control group, the teachers in the MTP had no racial discipline disparities in their classroom; Black students were more than twice as likely to receive a referral as non-Black students in the control classroom.

### *The Virginia Threat Assessment*

Using school-level data from 201 students and a quasi-experimental design, Cornell et al. (2011) examined whether the Virginia Threat Assessment reduced the use of long-term suspensions and found that schools implementing the model experienced a 52% decrease in long-term suspensions and a 79% reduction in bullying infractions pre- and posttraining when compared with schools that were not using the model. The comparison group showed little change in suspension rates and a slight increase in bullying infractions. Cornell et al. (2012) used a randomized controlled study to examine the effect of the Virginia Threat Assessment on disciplinary outcomes and found that the students in the treatment group were more likely to receive mental health counseling and a parent conference, rather than a long-term suspension or alternative school placement, when compared with the control group. Cornell and Lovegrove (2015) employed a regression analysis of school-level data from 1,795 K–12 schools to determine if the Virginia Threat Assessment reduced suspensions and found that schools implementing the model experienced a 22% decrease in long-term suspensions and a 10% reduction in short-term suspensions.

### *Policy Changes*

Policy changes have responded to evidence of racial disparities in subjective ODRs and generally target teacher discretion and teacher-student interactions rather than student misbehavior. For example, policy changes in the Los Angeles Unified School District ban the use of suspensions for willful defiance, in an attempt to decriminalize school discipline policies (Gregory et al., 2017; Watanabe & Blume, 2015). The evidence on how policy changes contribute to disciplinary outcomes is scarce. Some scholars posit that there has been a reduction in suspension rates that can be plausibly attributed to changes in the code of conduct (Gregory et al., 2017; Steinberg & Lacoé, 2017). Emerging evidence from the school district suggests that there may be both positive and negative responses to

policy changes. Since the policy change districtwide, school suspensions decreased from 8% in 2007–2008 to 0.55% in 2014–2015, and days lost as a result of suspension decreased from 75,000 to 5,025 (Watanabe & Blume, 2015). In contrast, many teachers contend that the ban on suspensions triggered an increase in belligerent behavior and classroom disruption (Watanabe & Blume, 2015).

### **Discussion**

In this study, we contribute to the ongoing national discourse on K–12 school discipline by taking stock of the extant literature on (a) the factors that contribute to the rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes and (b) the effectiveness of emerging alternatives to exclusionary discipline. Discipline disparities are caused by multiple factors; however, recent evidence underlines the importance of classroom- and school-level variables. Black students are disciplined more irrespective of behaviors, and the vast majority of disciplinary infractions for which students receive a disciplinary consequence are subjective. This suggests that student–teacher matches and interactions, teacher discretion, as well as cultural mismatches play a key role in explaining the discipline disparities. Despite the robust empirical evidence on the contributors to discipline disparities, there is no “smoking gun” or evidence of bias and discrimination on the part of teachers and school leaders. This is due to several factors, including the difficulty of establishing causality, the lack of experiments, and the lack of an integrated theoretical framework.

Several alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline have emerged; but the nascent empirical evidence suggests that policy- and program-based approaches have decreased the use of OSS and the number of ODRs, but discipline disparities appear somewhat impervious to these approaches. Even though suspensions have been trending downward for all groups, disparities in disciplinary outcomes still exist, and this is concerning. In other words, the interventions do not appear to have greater benefits for the traditionally disadvantaged groups most in need of reprieve (e.g., African Americans). The fact that alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline have not led to differential benefits for students who have been disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline raises important conceptual and empirical questions about the complex path to reducing disparities in disciplinary outcomes.

There are several plausible reasons why alternative approaches are not effectively reducing discipline disparities. First, the evidence indicates that the implementation of the alternative intervention and the degree of cultural responsiveness are key factors in the effectiveness of alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline. Indeed, Gregory et al. (2017) highlighted the centrality of culturally conscious implementation in discipline reforms. Interventions that target school climate and teacher–student interactions in a culturally responsive manner seem to have the potential to reduce discipline disparities.

Second, there may be a questionable theory of action underlying alternative approaches. A plausible reason why these interventions may not be effectively reducing discipline disparities is a misalignment between the theory of action underlying the interventions and the root causes of the disparities. As the search

for alternatives to exclusionary discipline policies and practices continues, it is important to ensure that the theory of action underlying interventions is aligned with the root causes of the disparities. Several insights from the findings of this review support this notion, including the (a) insufficient attention to issues of race and culture in the interventions, (b) predominant focus on student misbehavior, and (c) insufficient application of conceptual and theoretical frameworks to probe the notion of discrimination and bias. On the other hand, it is important to note that the cause and the intervention do not need to be aligned to potentially reduce the disparities. In theory, there is the possibility of spillover effects of interventions or a recursive feedback effect, whereby the root causes of discipline disparities and the interventions may not be perfectly aligned yet the disparities may be reduced. For example, the focus on establishing positive student–teacher relationships that characterizes RPs may lead to a reduction in implicit bias. The perfect combination of targeting beliefs and attitudes and addressing behaviors is an open empirical question. Whether perfectly aligned or not, in either case, a strategic confluence of interventions will likely contribute to the reduction of discipline disparities.

Third, issues pertaining to culture and race may not be adequately addressed in the alternative approaches. Race tends to play a larger role in the discussion of discipline disparities than the discussion of alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline. There appears to be a preference for race-neutral policies when the role of race should not be overlooked or underdiscussed in crafting solutions to the discipline dilemma (Carter et al., 2017; Skiba, 2015). Targeting racial bias and discrimination may be necessary but not sufficient for reducing discipline disparities. Several scholars have posited that racial stereotypes and biases against low-income and minority students, and cultural clashes may play a central role in explaining discipline disparities (Fabelo et al., 2011; Golann, 2015; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Gregory & Thompson, 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Nichols et al., 2006; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Staats, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). This notion is compounded by a predominantly White female teaching force being tasked with managing the behavior of an increasingly diverse student population; thus, predisposed biases regarding Black students, especially Black males, may dictate the management of Black students, which ultimately leads to disproportionate outcomes. The adoption and implementation of zero-tolerance discipline policies further disenfranchises groups that are already marginalized (Gordon et al., 2000). Carter et al. (2017) contended that racial disparities in school discipline are the product of U.S. history and the divisions of yesteryear shaping the biases of today. The consequences of simmering racial divisions in society may be manifested in schools' policies and practices. The resistance to and/or avoidance of race exacerbates racial hierarchy as well as a culture of racism (Brown, Bloome, Morris, Power-Carter, & Willis, 2017). The results of this review underline the importance of adopting a race-conscious approach in alternatives to exclusionary discipline that have been advanced by several scholars (Carter et al., 2017; Gregory et al., 2017; Skiba, 2015).

Fourth, alternative approaches may not fully address the array of possible contributors to discipline disparities. The underlying causes of the disparities in disciplinary outcomes are plural, layered, and multidimensional. It is conceivable

that for interventions to be effective they need to be commensurate and thus be multiple and multifaceted. The findings of our study suggest that the disparities in disciplinary outcomes are intricately linked to how learning is organized in schools. The school discipline dilemma is not solely about student misbehavior and teachers' behavior management skills but also about how learning takes places in classrooms and schools. It expands into other issues such as curriculum and identification with cultural norms; thus, the school discipline dilemma and solutions, in many ways, are by-products of larger issues in K–12 schooling such as teacher diversity and the cultural capacity of teachers. As Gregory et al. (2010) pointed out, discipline disparities and the achievement gap are opposite sides of the same coin and achievement and discipline are related in complex ways. Low achievement and low income status are likely contributors to discipline disparities. Thus, addressing achievement through the quality of instruction or engaging nature of the curriculum is an important consideration for reducing discipline disparities. Similarly, given the significance of the relationship between low SES and disparities, addressing the correlates of low-income status will also likely reduce discipline disparities.

The results of this review also underscore the importance of the diversity of faculty in schools, and teacher discretion and rapport with students. Thus, some solutions to address the disparities in disciplinary outcomes may be long-term, such as improving teacher diversity and preparation. Preservice teacher programs lack the capacity to effectively prepare teachers for multicultural classrooms, even though new teachers need to have the capacity to easily adapt to multicultural environments and develop classroom management skills for diverse learners (Brown, 2004). Teacher preparation programs provide an opportunity to assist teachers in coordinating classroom conversations that disrupt inequalities within classrooms (Brown et al., 2017).

### *Policy Implications*

First, policymakers ought to strongly consider repealing and replacing zero-tolerance policies at the federal, state, and district levels. The empirical evidence indicates that these policies are not beneficial for school safety or school discipline. Curran (2016) estimated that state zero-tolerance laws accounted for 10% of the racial disparities in school discipline. Despite the evidence that supports correlations between school discipline and the criminal justice system, little has been done to advance reform efforts (McNeal, 2016). Kim, Losen, and Hewitt (2010) suggested reexamining the laws that influence the entry point to prison, stating that laws could be used to effectively reduce the number of adolescents caught in the school-to-prison pipeline. Cramer et al. (2014) suggested that schools could be more proactive in combating the school-to-prison pipeline by using integrated education models. Specifically, the study suggested that schools move away from approaches that embody deficit-based perspectives and toward inclusive integrated learning models.

Second, our findings suggest that alternative approaches could more effectively target relationships within schools and relationships between schools and communities. There is a prevailing sense that some of the discipline disparities stem from a disconnect between educators and students—students' lives and

reality and educators' perceptions. Perceived bias and mistrust reinforce each other; thus, building trust may eventually dissipate biases, lead to better relationships, and allow teachers and school leaders to think and act empathically rather than punitively. Program-based approaches such as RPs focus on relationship building and community and can be used as a proactive strategy to establish a culture of connectivity. However, the extant literature suggests that restorative-based approaches are generally used as a reactive response to misbehavior and are not inclusive to all students. RPs are currently largely implemented in an attempt to repair relationships for individuals who engage in misbehavior and implicitly assume that students who are not engaging in misbehavior have solid relationships with teachers. If the school climate facilitates relationship building for the entire school community, it will (a) allow all students to be a part of the conversation, (b) invite teachers and school leaders into the lives of all students and not just students who engage in misbehavior, and (c) create a culture of connectivity. Thus, policymakers ought to consider and craft innovative programs that give teachers and school administrators a larger window into their students' lives through policies, programs, and systems that bridge the trust gap and shared experiences between teachers and students, humanize students, and foster stronger school-community ties. Policymakers should explore and prioritize proactive ways to improve interactions among teachers, school leaders, and students.

Third, the importance of data in addressing school discipline cannot be overstated. As richer and disaggregated data have become available, a clearer view of the causes of discipline disparities, the relationship between disparities and student outcomes, and the efficacy of alternative approaches have emerged. The federal mandate under the Every Student Succeeds Act requiring states and districts to collect data on discipline outcomes is a step in the right direction. There should be a greater focus on disaggregation in data collection. The Office of Civil Rights should also consider moving to annual rather than biennial data collection. Additionally, policymakers should be attuned to the possibility that the data may illustrate the intended results but reforms may have unintended consequences. In the wake of school discipline reforms, the number of suspensions decreased by almost 20% from 2011–2012 to 2013–2014 (The Brown Center Report, 2017). This is good news, but there may be cause for concern as one unpacks the underlying reasons for the dip in discipline. For instance, there may be less than desired changes in reporting and behavior management. Students may be experiencing unreported school exclusion as teachers and school personnel game a broken system. Hence, careful consideration of the benchmarks for the success of alternative approaches is necessary in light of possible gaming and manipulation, similar to the responses to test-based accountability. To explore the potential for gaming, qualitative research could offer a greater understanding of whether or not the decline in disciplinary outcomes aligns with the dynamics within schools.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

First, researchers should broaden their focus to student subgroups other than Black students to examine disparities across racial/ethnic categories and sexual orientation. The overwhelming majority of the literature has focused on Black students. Other minority students, such as Native American students, warrant



greater attention in future research. Researchers should also focus on Hispanic students given the mixed results and the fact that Hispanic students are the fastest-growing subgroup in K–12 student enrollment. Future research may also pay greater attention to intersectionality, which may add a layer of complexity to the factors underlying the rates of and disparities in disciplinary outcomes. Similarly, the definition of infraction categories is also an area worthy of further attention (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014).

Second, noncognitive outcomes are understudied throughout the extant literature. Even though it is likely that school discipline affects students in noncognitive ways, the extant literature provides little understanding of the relationship between students' social and emotional outcomes and exclusionary discipline. In addition, more studies of student behavior would also be useful given that few studies have directly observed the rates of misbehavior by different students in the classroom (Skiba, 2015). Direct observation of student behavior coupled with greater attention to students' voices may provide a richer understanding of the drivers of discipline disparities.

Third, there has been little attention paid to the possible spillover effects or externalities of school discipline, and it may be helpful to consider the ways in which exclusionary discipline policies and practices may hurt or help students who don't misbehave. A key yet relatively unexplored assumption of school discipline policies and practices is that punishments act as a deterrent not only for those who receive it but also for those who observe it. Students who are not targeted by discipline reform may be indirectly exposed to various alternative methods, but the possible effects remain largely unknown. Externalities have been found in other equity-related phenomena such as student mobility (Welsh, 2017); thus, it is plausible that there are also spillover effects in school discipline. A better understanding of the relationship between school discipline and school exclusion and the behavior and actions of students who do not engage in misbehavior may assist with (a) understanding the interworkings of school exclusion and (b) adopting discipline approaches that are inclusive of all students.

Fourth, the extant literature has paid little attention to the role of parents and their interactions with schools in the disciplinary process. Perceptions of parents may affect how teachers and administrators view and treat students. Parental involvement overall and in the disciplinary process may partly explain the discipline disparities. Similarly, there is room for a richer understanding of the role of school leaders (both principals and assistant principals) and the nuances behind school leaders' perspectives. The role of assistant principals has received little attention even though these school personnel may play a critical role in the disciplinary process. Although studies have focused on principal perspectives, to date, scant attention has been paid to school leaders' characteristics outside of their attitudes and disposition to discipline.

Fifth, the role of implicit bias in school discipline is underresearched (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Arguably, school discipline is derived from societal norms that are not conscious of culture. It is important to examine whether the implicit bias embedded within school discipline perpetuates an antiminority rhetoric. Few studies have examined how the notion of school discipline aligns with forms of discipline within the broader context of society. In combating issues with discipline

disparities, it would be wise to start with an extensive examination of the source, such as discipline codes. Additionally, few studies have examined beyond school characteristics (e.g., districts and neighborhoods) to explain discipline disparities and outcomes. Future studies may consider districts and neighborhoods as a mechanism of the disparities in disciplinary outcomes to better understand them.

Sixth, the rates of and disparities in exclusionary discipline are undertheorized. Most studies do not have a theoretical framework, and the theoretical implications of their findings have not received much attention. It is important to firmly ground studies in theory and use empirical findings to refine this explanatory framework. Researchers ought to focus on developing and refining an integrated theoretical framework. This is important to advancing the literature in a systematic and orderly fashion, gauging the effectiveness of alternative approaches over time, and establishing intentionality. It will also assist in ensuring that alternative approaches are addressing disparities and a stronger alignment between the theory of action underlying alternative approaches and the causes of discipline disparities.

Finally, there is a need for further evaluation studies of alternative school discipline policies and practices on student and school outcomes (e.g., school safety and the quality of instruction). It is equally important to get a better sense of not only whether alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline are working but also why (mediating and moderating mechanisms). Future studies may also delve deeper into several limitations of these alternative approaches, such as resources at the district and school levels (e.g., financial and personnel), that may be pertinent considerations in their implementation. Alternative approaches may not supplant the punitive policies and/or practices in schools but rather coexist with them. The existing evidence highlights the benefits of alternative approaches in isolation, irrespective of other school policies and/or programs (Ispa-Landa, 2017). It is important to examine how other policies and/or programs within schools contribute to how the alternative approaches are understood and how their implementation redresses racial disparities in school discipline (Ispa-Landa, 2017). In sum, even though there is a robust school discipline literature, there is much room for a richer understanding of the disparities, harms, and interventions as policymakers, educators, and stakeholders progress toward solving the discipline dilemma.

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