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The Inequitable Consequences of School Disciplinary Policies on Black Girls in Ohio

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Abstract

Studies have examined the effects of school disciplinary policies and practices on Black boys. Much of this research highlights the degree to which many of these disciplinary policies and practices have affected Black boys in P-12 contexts in negative ways. A small and emerging body of scholarship has begun to investigate the effects of school discipline policies and practices in P-12 contexts on Black girls. The focus of this study was to investigate the effects of disciplinary policies on Black girls in comparison to girls from other races in the 15 largest school districts in Ohio. Drawing from recent out-of-school suspension data from the Office for Civil Rights Data Collection, we examined the degree to which Black girls were suspended out of school in the 15 largest school districts in Ohio. More specifically, out-of-school suspension rates (1 or more suspensions combined) for Black girls in relation to the suspension rates of girls from other racial backgrounds was analyzed. Findings indicated that Black girls were suspended at disproportionately higher rates in the majority of the districts in this study. Recommendations for practice are discussed.

Keywords: disproportionality, race, suspension, Ohio

Introduction

Several scholars (Billings, 2011; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Milner, 2015) have pointed out the devastating effects of school disciplinary policies on Black boys. Relatively few studies (e.g., Morris, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017; Wun, 2018) have examined the impact of school discipline policies and practices in P-12 contexts on Black girls. Consequently, the focus of this study was to investigate the consequences of disciplinary policies on Black girls in the 15 largest school districts in Ohio. Drawing from recent out-of-school suspension data from the Office for Civil Rights Data Collection (2016), the degree to which Black girls were suspended out of school in the 15 largest school districts in Ohio was analyzed. Out-of-school suspension rates (1 or more suspensions combined) for Black girls were analyzed and compared to the suspension rates of girls from other races. The questions that drove this study were:

1. How frequent were Black girls suspended in the 15 largest school districts in Ohio?
2. In what 3 districts were Black girls suspended the most (in relationship to girls from other races)?
3. In what 3 districts were Black girls suspended the least (in relationship to girls from other races)?

This study contributed to existing scholarship related to equity and justice issues involving Black girls in general and school disciplinary policies in Ohio in particular. Suspension rates in Ohio were examined for two reasons. First, the first researcher (T. Husband) is a former urban educator in one of the urban districts in our data sample. As such, he had observed anecdotal evidence related to Black girls being suspended more frequently than other student populations. This sparked an interest in examining this issue more closely from a systematic and quantitative perspective. In addition, generally speaking, Ohio has been slow to reform many of its zero tolerance disciplinary programs in most of the school districts in this state. Based on these two rationales, the researchers believed Ohio would serve as an opportunity and convenient focus for this study.

Literature Review

This study draws from Black Feminist Theory (BFT) (Collins, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991; Dillard, 2012; Evans, 2019) as a framework for explaining and understanding how frequently Black girls are suspended from school in multiple urban school districts in Ohio. Black Feminist Theory is comprised of a diverse and non-monolithic group of scholars and tenets. Four tenets of Black Feminist Theory are outlined and utilized in this study. The first tenet concerns the notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Essentially, BFT seeks to understand and examine the ways in which Black girls are impacted by multiple forms of oppression. The second tenet of BFT that was applied to this study concerned of the notion of objectivity (Collins, 2008). BFT acknowledges the fact that a significant portion of the historical discourse surrounding Black women is written by people other than Black women. As such, much of this discourse is deficit-oriented, racist, and sexist in nature. As a way of combating this issue, BFT welcomes and incorporates the first-hand and subjective experiences of Black girls and women as a lens through which knowledge is constructed and understood.

The third tenet of BFT that was applied to this study dealt with dialectical images of Black girls and women in schools and society in general (Dillard, 2012). In the media and academic scholarship, Black women and girls are often characterized and stereotyped in negative ways as being aggressive, angry, and even hypersexual (Evans, 2019). BFT seeks to construct more humanizing images and characterizations of Black women and girls by situating their actions within larger systems of oppression.

The final tenet of BFT applied to this study dealt with social justice praxis. Briefly, social justice praxis is the concept of conducting educational scholarship for the sake of transforming oppressive structures and systems and improving the lived experiences of marginalized groups (Bae-Dimitriadis & Evans-Winters, 2017). Furthermore, findings from this study may be used to identify, resist, and possibly transform oppressive disciplinary practices and policies in school for the betterment of Black girls.

Outcomes of Disciplinary Practices on Black Girls

A number of scholars (Blake et al., 2011; Chesney-Lind, 2010; Losen, 2015; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Morris, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017; Paul & Araneo, 2019; Wald & Losen, 2003) have begun to examine the outcomes of disciplinary policies on Black girls. In a review of previous scholarship on this topic, two overlapping streams of inquiry were identified. The first category of inquiry on this topic (Chesney-Lind, 2010; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Paul & Araneo,

2019; Wald & Losen, 2003) suggests that Black girls are suspended more often than girls from other races. For example, a recent study (Morris, 2016) points out that Black girls in New York were suspended ten times more often than the White girls in the studied school system. While this data is important, more insight is needed regarding how often Black girls are suspended across multiple schools' districts within one state. This study responds to this void within the literature by examining the outcomes of school disciplinary policies on Black girls in the 15 largest school systems in the state of Ohio.

Rationales for Suspensions

Scholars (Blake et al., 2011; Losen, 2015; Morris, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017) identified implicit racial bias among teachers as one reason why Black students are suspended frequently from many schools. The vast majority of the teachers in the United States are White, middle-class females (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011). Bryan (2017) pointed out that most of these teachers have had minimum experience serving Black children. Consequently, many of these teachers act based on implicit racial biases toward Black girls. For example, a White teacher who implicitly perceives that a Black girl is naturally more *combative* or *difficult* than an Asian girl, will presumably refer a Black girl to the office to be suspended more often than an Asian girl.

Other scholars (Collins, 2017; Gibson, 2016) attribute the media as another chief reason why Black girls are frequently suspended from school. The media is often filled with unfavorable, detrimental, and stereotypical images of Black girls and women. Often, Black girls and women are portrayed as being angry, hostile, and/or hypersexual (Gibson, 2016). White teachers are often consciously and unconsciously impacted by this imagery (Collins, 2017). Frequently, teachers rely on this imagery when deciding whether or not to refer a Black girl for suspension. Ultimately, this process frequently leads to Black girls being suspended from schools more often than other groups of girls.

Methods

Our study employs a secondary data analysis research design (Heaton, 2008). Yin (2014) defines secondary data analysis as a research strategy that makes use of pre-existing quantitative data or pre-existing qualitative data for the purposes of investigating new questions or verifying previous studies. Accordingly, the current study analyzes out-of-school suspension data from the United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights Data Collection (2016) to determine how often Black girls are suspended in the 15 largest school districts in Ohio. Out-of-school suspension data from 2013 was involved in this study. Furthermore, at the time of the inquiry, suspension data from years beyond 2013 was not available.

Sample

A total of 11,859 students comprised the sample for this study. This number included the total number of girls who experienced at least one out-of-school suspension in grades P-12. Any female student receiving a suspension was included in the sample. We used a purposeful sampling technique (Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) explains that purposeful sampling encompasses recognizing and comprising a sample that enables a researcher to analyze a population with specific characteristics. Based on our research questions, we included data in the sample from the 15 most populated school systems in Ohio. The school systems involved in this study were: Columbus City Schools, Cleveland Municipal School District, Toledo City School District, South-Western City

School District, Akron City School District, Olentangy Local School District, Lakota Local School District, Hilliard City School District, Dublin City School District, Westerville City School District, Dayton City School District, Parma City School District, Mason City School District, Pickerington Local School District, and Hamilton Local School District.

The 15 largest school districts in Ohio were selected to ensure that the sample would include significant numbers of Black girls for analysis purposes. We used data related to girls who were suspended at least one time in the 15 school districts. Data related to district enrollment numbers were obtained from the Office for Civil Rights’ (2016) database and based on student enrollment numbers during 2013. Table 1 details the total number of students from each school district that comprise the sample for this study in comparison to the total number of girls enrolled in each district. Table 2 provides a summary of the number of girls suspended in each of the 15 school districts. Table 3 provides a summary of the number of girls that were enrolled in each racial group.

Table 1. Total Number of Students Enrolled in the 15 Largest School Districts in Ohio

Rank in Terms of Student Enrollment	District	Total Number of Students Enrolled in 2013	Total Number of Girls Enrolled in 2013
1	Columbus City Schools	49,656	24,383
2	Cleveland Municipal School District	38,417	18,508
3	Toledo City School District	21,111	9,983
4	South-Western City School District	20,334	9,914
5	Akron City School District	19,978	9,806
6	Olentangy Local School District	18,076	8,821
7	Lakota Local School District	16,036	7,992
8	Hilliard City School District	15,577	7,551
9	Dublin City School District	14,441	6,882
10	Westerville City School District	14,424	6,960
11	Dayton City School District	14,098	6,816
12	Parma City School District	10,858	5,236
13	Mason City School District	10,682	5,148
14	Pickerington Local	10,603	5,084
15	Hamilton Local	9,853	4,719

Table 2. Total Numbers of Girls Suspended out of School in the 15 Largest School Districts

Name of the School	Number of Girls Who Were Suspended in 2013
Columbus City	4,026
Cleveland Municipal	2,257
Cincinnati City	163
Toledo	1,197
South-Western City	410
Akron City	1,597
Olentangy Local	39
Lakota Local	86
Hilliard City	118
Dublin City	107
Westerville City	183
Dayton City	982
Parma City	226
Pickerington	121
Hamilton City	347
Total	11,859

Table 3. Number of Girls Enrolled in Each Racial Group

District	Total Enrollment	White Girls	Black Girls	Hispanic Girls	Pacific Islander	Asian	American Indian	Two or More Races
Columbus City Schools	50,359	6,296	13,792	2,126	6	748	75	1,340
Cleveland Municipal School District	38,551	2,685	12,365	2,655	14	206	68	515
Cincinnati	33,159	4,114	10,463	567	32	247	36	973
Toledo City School District	21,209	3,939	4,020	1,085	0	56	14	1,001
South-Western City School District	20,642	6,682	1,142	1,372	6	257	16	439
Akron City School District	20,137	3,692	4,418	354	12	545	22	724
Olentangy Local School District	18,293	7,118	329	212	12	783	14	353
Lakota Local School District	16,499	5,787	827	459	5	505	17	392
Hilliard City School District	15,813	5,737	454	474	14	420	12	340
Dublin City School District	14,694	4,480	308	368	6	1,302	2	416
Westerville City School District	14,642	4,262	1,599	377	14	194	24	490
Dayton City School District	14,130	1,777	4,400	255	4	25	12	343
Parma City School District	11,116	4,370	213	364	0	124	4	161
Mason City School District	10,864	3,594	198	191	6	934	13	212
Pickerington Local	10,773	3,123	1,029	251	150	160	14	357
Hamilton City	10,078	3,425	518	520	33	15	12	196

Findings

The first phase in the data analysis process involved collecting data from the Civil Rights Data Collection (2016) Using enrollment data from the Civil Rights Data Collection, we identified the 15 largest school districts in the state of Ohio. The data from 2013 was used because the data from 2015 and beyond was not available at the time of the study. The data related to out-of-school suspensions were extracted (1 or more combined) involving girls in each of these 15 districts and input the data into a codebook in SPSS version 25 for analysis. Based on the research questions that drive this study, the data were disaggregated and organized according to the seven racial categories used in the Civil Rights Data Collection. The racial categories used to organize and analyze the data were: Black; White; Hispanic; Pacific Islander; Asian; American Indian; and two or more races. After inputting the number of girls who were suspended in each racial group in each of the 15 districts in this study, the percentage of girls who were suspended was tabulated and organized by each of the seven racial groups listed above.

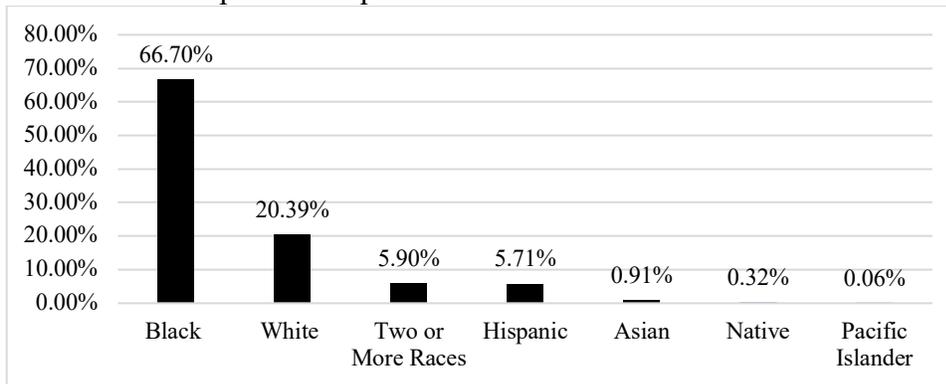
During the second phase of data analysis, the average number of times Black girls and girls from other racial background were suspended across the 15 school districts was analyzed. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the means and standard deviations for suspensions of Black girls and girls from other racial backgrounds. The goal of this phase was to determine the average number of suspensions issued to Black girls in comparison to girls from all of the other racial groups.

During the third phase of data analysis, the percentages of suspensions that were issued to Black girls and girls from other racial groups across the entire data sample were analyzed. The overall percentages of suspensions that were issued to Black girls and girls from other racial backgrounds across the entire data sample were calculated. The goal was to determine the overall degree to which Black girls were suspended in greater or lesser proportions than girls from other racial backgrounds.

The study findings indicated that Black girls were suspended at disproportionately higher percentages than girls from other racial groups in 2013. More specifically, 67% ($n = 7,907$) of the total 11,859 of suspensions in these 15 school districts involved Black girls. In contrast, only 20% ($n = 2,417$) of the suspensions involved White girls. At the same time, 6% ($n = 700$) of the suspensions in these 15 districts involved girls whose racial identity was comprised of two or more

racess. Similarly, 6% ($n = 678$) of the suspensions in these 15 school districts involved Hispanic girls. Roughly 9% ($n = 109$) of the suspensions involved Asian girls. Less than 1% of the suspensions involved Native American girls, 0.32% ($n = 38$) and Pacific Islander girls 0.06% ($n = 8$). Figure 1 provides a summary of the overall percentage of suspensions in each racial group.

Figure 1: Overall Percentages of Out-of-School Suspensions Experienced by Girls in the Composite Sample



Our second research question was: In what 3 districts were Black girls suspended the most (in relationship to girls from other racial backgrounds)? To answer this question, the researchers returned to the previously mentioned analysis of the disaggregated suspension rates in each of the 15 individual school districts that comprised the data sample. The analysis of the percentages of suspensions involving Black girls and girls from other racial backgrounds indicated that Black girls comprised the greatest percentage of suspensions in the following three school districts: Cincinnati Public Schools, Dayton City School District, and the Cleveland Municipal School District. More specifically, approximately 86% ($n = 140$) of the out-of-school suspensions (involving girls only) in Cincinnati involved Black girls. Approximately 81% ($n = 794$) of the out-of-school suspensions (involving girls only), in the Dayton City School District involved Black girls. Approximately 78% ($n = 794$) of the out-of-school suspensions (involving girls only) in the Cleveland Municipal School District involved Black girls. Table 3 provides a description of the student enrollment demographic information for these three school districts. Furthermore, Figures 2-7 provide a detailed summary of the percentages of out-of-school suspensions for each of the 7 racial groups in the aforementioned three school districts.

Figure 2. Percentage of Out-of-School Suspensions Experienced by Girls in Cincinnati Public Schools

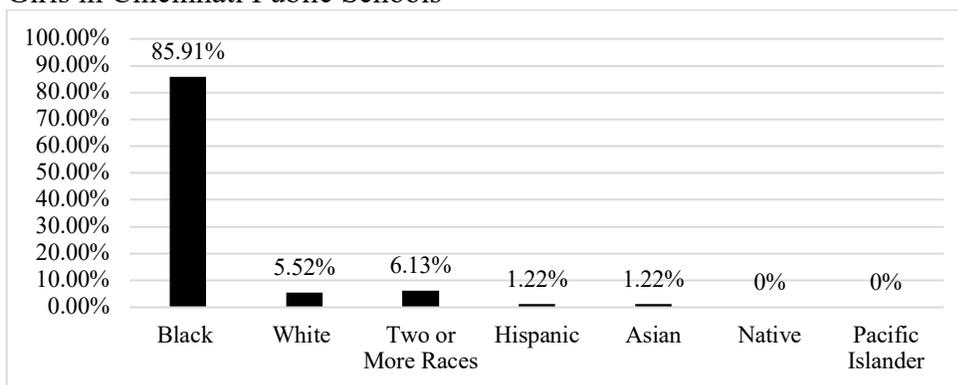


Figure 3. Percentage of Out-of-School Suspensions Experienced by Girls in Dayton City Schools

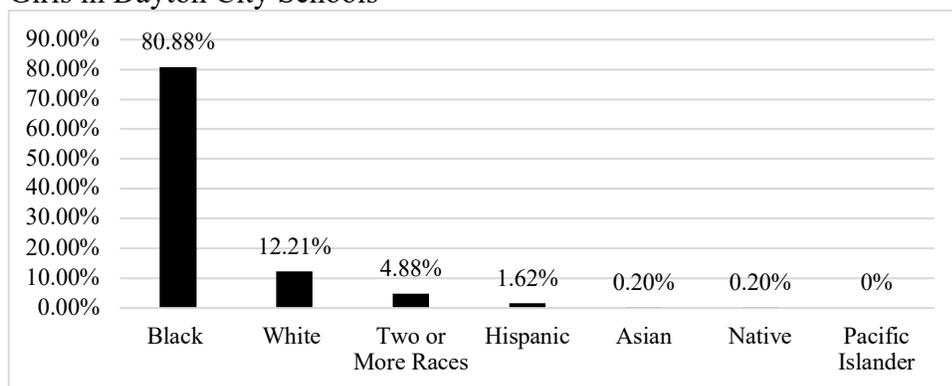
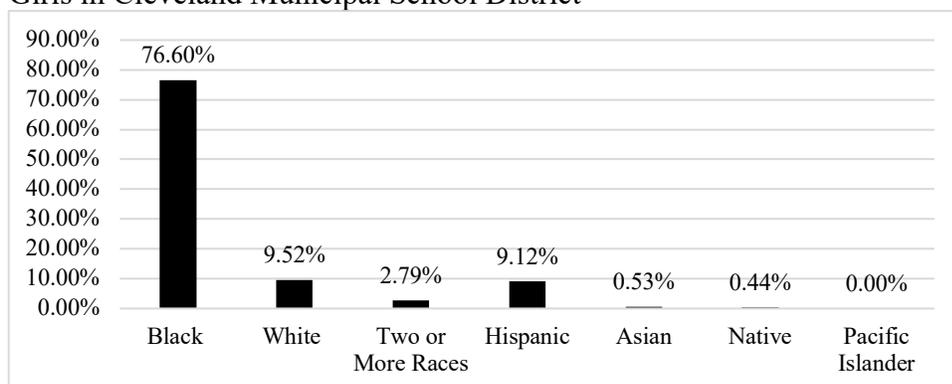


Figure 4. Percentage of Out-of-School Suspensions Experienced by Girls in Cleveland Municipal School District



Our third research question was: In what 3 districts were Black girls suspended the least (in relationship to girls from other racial backgrounds)? An analysis of the percentages of suspensions involving Black girls and girls from other racial backgrounds indicated that Black girls comprised the least percentage of suspensions in the following three school districts: South-Western City School District, Dublin City School District, Olentangy Local Schools District. More specifically, approximately 10% ($n = 42$) of the out-of-school suspensions (involving girls only) in the South-Western City School District involved Black girls. Similarly, approximately 19% ($n = 21$) of the out-of-school suspensions (involving girls only) in the Dublin City School District involved Black girls. To this end, approximately 21% ($n = 8$) of the out-of-school suspensions (involving girls only) in the Olentangy Local Schools District involved Black girls. Figures 6-8 provide a detailed summary of the percentage of suspensions as disaggregated by each racial group in these three aforementioned districts.

Figure 5. Percentage of Out-of-School Suspensions Experienced by Girls in South-Western City School District

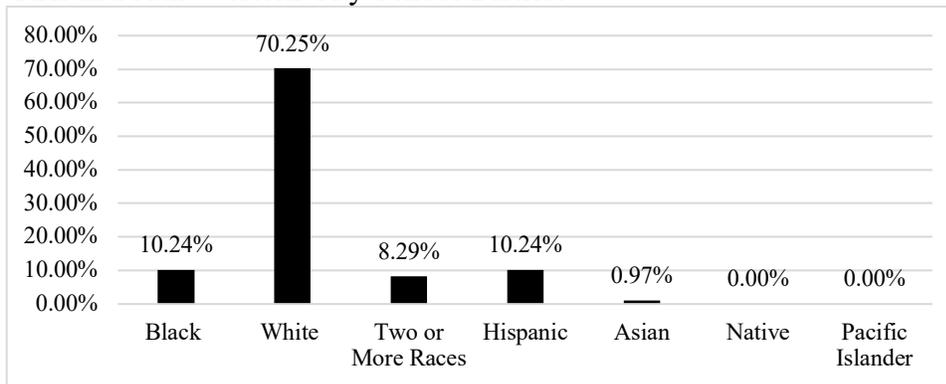


Figure 6. Percentage of Out-of-School Suspensions in Dublin City Schools by Racial Group

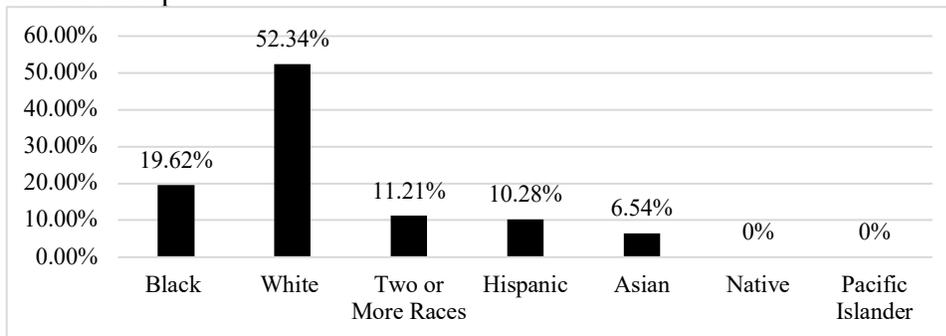
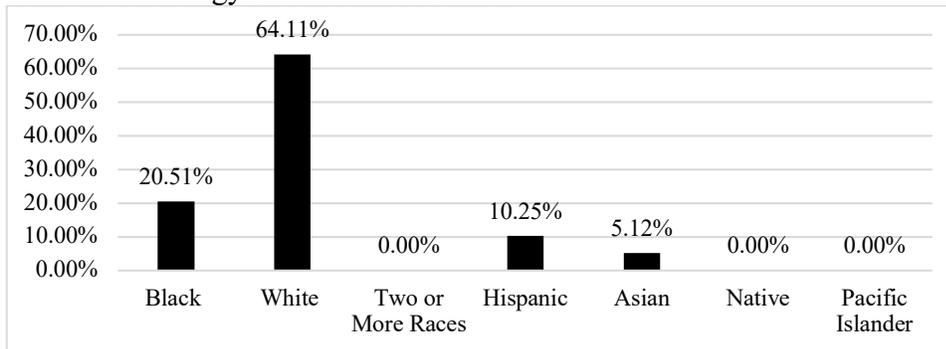


Figure 7. Percentage of Out-of-School Suspension Experienced by Girls in Olentangy Local School District



Conclusions

Data from this study indicated that Black girls were more likely to be suspended from school than girls from other racial backgrounds in most of the 15 largest school districts in Ohio. Research indicates (Billings, 2011; Losen, 2015; Milner, 2015) that schools may combat this trend in three ways.

First, it is necessary for schools to revise and reform the current disciplinary policies. Many of the disciplinary policies in schools (serving high numbers of Black girls) impact Black girls at

disproportionately higher rates (Crenshaw, et al., 2015). It is absolutely vital for schools to regularly conduct equity audits of the disciplinary policies and practices that are instituted and enacted in schools and classrooms (Skrla et al., 2004). In essence, equity audits encourage educators and administrators to examine the degree to which particular disciplinary policies and practices have a disproportionate effect on specific student populations (e.g., Black girls, White girls, Asian girls, etc.).

Educators and administrators might also prevent, resist, and reverse the outcomes associated with these disciplinary policies by implementing more social and emotional learning programs in the schools (Spivak, 2016). Frequently, schools neglect to formally teach students the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to resolve conflict in a healthy and constructive manner. Rather, schools expect students to resolve the intrapersonal conflicts that emerge in their lives with little or no intervention from adults. This expectation is impractical and unrealistic for most children. For this reason, developing and implementing social and emotional learning programs with strong conflict resolution components will help Black girls learn the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to settle social conflicts that arise at school in a positive and constructive manner.

Finally, Black girls are more likely to exhibit fewer disciplinary issues in classrooms that are based on culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning (Gay, 2018). For this reason, it is critical for teachers to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogies into their classrooms as a means of creating affirming, inclusive, and supportive educational experiences for Black girls (Gay, 2018; Lakhwani, 2019; Lin, 2018; Piquemal et al., 2019). Gay (2018) defines culturally responsive pedagogy as an approach to teaching and learning that uses social and cultural knowledge, language patterns, reference points, and ways-of-being to help students understand and acquire the formal knowledge and skills presented within school curriculum. Culturally responsive teaching affirms the experiences, norms, linguistic styles, and background knowledge that Black girls bring to the classroom. As a result, student engagement is increased, and disciplinary challenges are minimized and/or completely eliminated.

Limitations and Future Research

The evidence from this study revealed that Black girls were suspended at significantly higher rates than girls from other racial backgrounds in most of the 15 largest school districts in Ohio that comprised the sample for this study. Black girls received the highest percentage of out-of-school suspensions in 9 out of the 15 school districts involved in this study. Although this study provided important findings related to suspension rates and Black girls in the specific school districts, there were limitations in this study that necessitate additional research. This study investigated the suspension and expulsion rates associated with Black girls in districts where significant numbers of Black girls are enrolled. Additional studies on this topic might consider the degree to which the findings from this study are consistent or inconsistent in school districts with significantly small numbers of Black girls enrolled.

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