



The African American Male Student and Problems with Suspensions and Expulsions within Public Schools

Golsbie Ross

Higher Education, Trident International University, Cypress, California, USA
Email: rgolsbie@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify variables that influence the high rates of suspensions and expulsions of African American male students within the public school system. This position paper addresses the injustices within public education that targeted young African American males for placement into an environment where they are removed from the classroom and given “busy work” to occupy their time and not be in a learning environment. Researchers like Dr. Bell and other academic works are reviewed to stimulate conversations about this serious problem and address possible strategies that may help curb high expulsions and suspension rates of African American male students.

Subject Areas

Educational Technology

Keywords

The African American Male Student, School Suspensions, White Female Teachers

1. Introduction

The purpose of this position paper is to present relevant data about the high number of school suspensions and expulsions of African American male students within a public school setting. This paper further examined the general literature relating to school suspensions and how persistent problems between parents and teachers concerning school suspensions, expelling, and expulsions may force some parents to transfer their children out of public schools and

enroll their children into a more diverse academic setting.

Moreover, this paper will address both supporting and opposing viewpoints about teachers' and school administrators' justifications for suspending African American students. Viewpoints that support School officials' abilities to suspend, expel, and punish African American students with no racial bias or motivation, but suspensions were caused by negative behaviors materializing in the classroom (Eden, 2019, p. 8) [1].

In contrast, Shirrell *et al.* (2021) [2], in their examination of students' data from New York City, found that teachers of the same racial and ethnic backgrounds were less likely to suspend not only African American students but also Latinos and Asian American students.

Borman *et al.* (2021) [3] in their study of high suspension rates of African American students discovered that certain interventions and strategies like "self-affirmation" techniques helped many students of color to counter any negative stereotype behaviors exhibited by teachers to not affect them in the classroom environments. Self-affirmation strategies were highly inexpensive and may help many students look past their troublemaker labels.

Opposing viewpoints that support high expulsion and suspension rates of African American male students are wrong. (Rowley *et al.*, 2014) [4] mentioned that historically, African American male students have encountered negative stereotypes of themselves as incompetent for many years. (Skiba *et al.*, 2002) [5] found that "school expulsions and suspensions have gotten worse for African American male students after the school desegregation" period (p. 320). Gregory (1996) [6] reported that African American male students were more than sixteen percent more likely than white females to experience corporal punishment

Hurtado's (2001) [7] data collection found that a link exists between student-classroom interactions and diversity-related outcomes. African American students that interact with a more diverse student population and diverse faculty members increased the development of critical thinking skills and improved writing abilities.

Moreover, in Ford's (1996) [8] study of African American students, she stated that many non-teachers of color were not labeling students of color with the "gifted" title, but they were labeling middle class disproportionately white students with this title. Through the lens of African American teachers, many African American male students were identified as gifted, but with the rise of non-teachers of color within the public school system. Most black male students are going through underachievement in their academic endeavors and are being punished through expulsions and suspensions by public school officials.

Lastly, this paper will discuss data collection from Bell's (2020) [9] analysis of school expulsion, suspensions, and experiment from three cities with predominantly white schools. In addition, Mendez *et al.* (2002) [10] study entailed looking at a Florida and Miami-Dade County school district and found that the attitudes and practices of school administrators from these locations were linked to high school suspension rates. Bell's (2018) [11] examination of school adminis-

trators that adopted a zero-tolerance policy for misbehavior found schools serving low-income students that suspension rates were not equal across genders and races.

2. Review of the Literature

Shirrell *et al.* (2021) [2] stated that the usage of an ethnically matched teacher with a diverse student population will decrease the likelihood of a minority student being punished or disciplined for an alleged violation of a code of conduct.

School suspensions, expulsions, and expulsion are problematic for both the African American male student and the African American parent. Bell and Puckett (2020) [9] discussed the negative impact of school discipline actions on the academic achievement of African American students like completing both assignments and classroom projects.

Bell (2019) [12] examined high expulsion rates within public schools in the States of Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana and found African American students had higher rates compared to other students. Bell (2019) [12] examined the behavior of African American males and their interactions with African American male students in the classroom and found racial disparity exists between public school policy, curriculum, and special education programming.

Flenning *et al.* (2007) [13] discussed the overrepresentation of African American Male students in exclusionary classrooms and discussed that African American Male students were placed in high-track classrooms. Placement in high-tracked classrooms, prohibited adequate academic opportunities for students and hindered their ability to complete high academic achieving assignments.

Another factor affecting African American students was the “Get tough” policy.

Former president Bill Clinton’s initiatives on gun control created strict gun laws for individuals within the United States that targeted “soft” criminal offenders. But many school administrators use the same type of policy in their school districts. School officials seized upon these initiatives and created similar measures to deal with disciplinary problems. A Report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2018) [14] revealed data from the period 2013-2014, African American male students represented 7.9 percent of public school students, however, 25.2 of students that were suspended were young black males. One factor that explained the high suspension rate for African American male students was stipulated in the court case of (*Goss v. Lopez*, 1975) [15]. *Goss v. Lopez* (1975) [15] held that:

“Students facing temporary suspension from a public school have property and liberty interests that qualify for protection under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment” (p. 419). Moreover, Moss (2017) [16] also stated that suspended students exhibited the following behaviors as:

- *Students lose their self-esteem
- *Feel powerless and helpless

*Students have resentment and suspicion toward both teachers and principals

*Students withdraw from classroom activities by feeling stigmatized (p. 4).

Skiba, *et al.* (1997) [17] also suggested that the “Get Tough” school policy contributed to more detentions, suspensions, and school expulsions of African American students to such a degree that their academic learning was jeopardized, and schools began to invest in surveillance and security measures. Skiba *et al.* (2003) [18] stated that the increased surveillance usage contributes to more office referrals and school suspensions towards African Americans than other students. With a high number of referrals issued from white teachers based on “subjective reasoning”

Noltemeyer *et al.* (2010) [19] posit that when controlling for student poverty level, certain factors emerged from suspending African American students:

*African American students were recipients of high numbers of exclusionary disciplines.

*Urban, high-crime, and poverty schools used many unjust practices more frequently.

*Many urban school districts have a disproportionately high number of disciplinary practices and rural school districts have a low number of discipline referrals with a small student population and low poverty.

Noltemeyer *et al.* (2010) [19] analyzed 23 school districts from an earlier study and found that African American students were two to three times more likely than white students to disciplinary actions in a school setting

Another factor that increased the high expulsion rates of African American students was 1 white teacher’s low opinion concerning African American students. For example, a limited number of white teachers have displayed a hostile teaching style in front of some African American male students leading some of these students to rebel and act out. Borman *et al.* (2021) [3] mentioned that most misbehaviors increase when students of color feel as though inequalities and negative stereotyping are pervasive in the classroom. (Borman *et al.*, 2021 [3], & Okonofua *et al.*, 2016 [20]).

Rowley *et al.* (2014) [4] mentioned that African American male students historically have encountered negative stereotypes of themselves as being incompetent. Skiba *et al.* (2002) [5] found that “school expulsions and suspensions have gotten worse for African American male students after school desegregation” from the 1960s and the 1970s (p. 320).

Eden’s (2019) [1] study on suspension and expulsion rates of African American male students represented a viewpoint that supports teachers’ and administrators’ decision to suspend or expel disruptive student behaviors. Most negative behaviors displayed by some African American male students, according to Eden (2019) [1], had very little to do with subjective factors but rather socioeconomic factors like living conditions and being reared in a single-parent household tendency to “treat students that were sent to the administrator’s office,” differently (p. 7). Eden’s (2019) [1] argument concluded that “little research has been initiated to correlate school suspensions and academic achieve-

ment” of African American male students (p. 8).

In contrast, other studies offer a different viewpoint on suspensions and expulsions of African American students. Okonofua *et al.* (2016) [20] mentioned that African American students are concerned about teachers’ perception of them and the disproportionate number of expulsions, suspensions, and remedial education programs they never endured. Amemiya *et al.* (2018) [21] reinforced the point that when schools support a strong diversity platform and cultural pluralism, many African American students’ attitudes improve with confidence about their academic abilities and the diverse environment.

Moreover, data from an Illinois independent publication called “ProPublica” stated that the “black population were 4.6 times more likely to be suspended than white students and are 2.6 grades behind white students”. One example of this point is a school located in the Bloomington; Illinois area called Bloomington High School.

Bloomington High School has witnessed African American students were 3.5 times more likely to be suspended and lag white students. Several African American male students are embedded in a system of racism and punished at a higher rate with school suspension. Morris *et al.* (2016) [22] stated that the high rates of school suspensions endured by African American males “have hindered academic growth and contribute to racial inequalities in achievement” (p. 68).

Skiba *et al.* (2002) [5] stated that countless studies have suggested that the rate of minority suspensions is high and has been pervasive or severe right after the implementation of school desegregation (p. 320). One problem with Bloomington High School as well as other public schools is the large number of suspensions given to African American Male Students. One objective in writing this report is to present data detailing school suspensions and punishment and alternative strategies that will help alleviate this issue. This potential implementation strategy serves two objectives,

First, created an internship program for African American Male Students to participate in local business and instilled strategies that promote students finding employment. Secondly, develop a points system for African American Male Students to follow to avoid problems and help them attend community college.

The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2022) noted in “Compendium of School Discipline Laws and Regulations for the 50 States Policies” that policies are fixable in dealing with issues associated with student misbehaviors. The following policy mentioned:

Subject to the limitations of all policies established or adopted under Section 14 - 8.05 [105 ILCS 5/14 - 8.05], teachers, other certificated educational employees, and any other person, whether a certificated employee, providing a related service for or concerning a student shall maintain discipline in the schools, including school grounds which are owned or leased by the board. And used for school purposes and activities. In all matters relating to the discipline in and conduct of the schools and the school children, they stand in the relation of parents and guardians to the pupils. This relationship shall extend to all activi-

ties connected with the school program, including all athletic and extracurricular programs, and may be exercised at any time for the safety and supervision of the pupils in the absence of their parents.

Skiba, *et al.* (2012) [23] reported that a large amount of research has documented that African American Male Students are overrepresented in exclusionary discipline, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion categories. The Government Accountability Office (2018) [14] reported that Black Male Students with disabilities were disproportionately disciplined at a higher rate in K-12 public schools and accounted for 15.5 percent of all public school students that were suspended from school.

To create a better learning environment certain step, need to be implemented into school procedures that will promote better academic achievement for African American Male Students. One example, or blueprint of a policy within Illinois statute 105 IlCS 110, 3.10. The policy reads. The following policy is taken from Illinois statute 105 ILCS 110/3.10 and from section 5'230 entitled (Maintaining Student Discipline)

1) Corrective action shall be based on an understanding of the student and said guidance procedures.

2) Corrective action shall include the opportunity for all students to deny or explain their misconduct or disobedience

3) Corrective actions shall include the opportunity for the improvement of the behavior of the individual or the group.

4) Corrective action shall include praise, encouragement, and recognition of the individual or a group and should not be destructive to the individual's personality or the group climate.

5) Corrective action shall be positive rather than punitive actions such as assigning extra schoolwork, threats, humiliation, sarcasm, and ridicule.

When a student's behavior does become unacceptable, then teachers should discuss the matter with the student to redirect them away from negative behaviors. If no remedy appears, then the school principal should be consulted to help resolve the situation. The School Superintendent shall develop a plan consistent with state laws dealing with the rights of students and inform parents or guardians of every student of the alleged incident defined by 105 ILCS 5/27-23.7

3. Implications and Discussions

Data from this report revealed important information concerning African American Male Students, student discipline, and school suspension. Morris *et al.* (2016) [22] documented a strong relationship exists between school suspension and achievement, but their "study could not prove a causal link between suspension and achievement" (p. 83). Moreover, one factor why African American Male Students are being suspended at a rapid rate is partly due to teachers' education administrators' interpretation of the discipline codes. According to Bell (2018) [11], many African American male students are being punished and suspended by some teachers due to their prejudicial thinking.

A report by a New York School District stated that “between the year 2006 thru 2017, African American male students were three times more likely to be suspended compared to students with a disability”.

The former Chief Justice of New York City Courts created a task force called the *Kaye Task Force* that examined strategies to keep children out of the court system. One purpose of the task force was to develop recommendation initiatives to limit punitive measures, address racial disparities in the use of punitive measures, and support adequate learning environments.

Owens *et al.* (2020) [24] study of school suspensions revealed mechanisms that explained racial disparities. The three factors were - school sorting, differences in student behaviors, and differences in the treatment of students with similar behaviors. Schools sorting schools serving a high minority population should incorporate a zero-tolerance policy [for dealing with students misbehaving.

Owens *et al.* (2020) [24] also found that when it comes to misbehaviors that are questionable, teachers are more than likely to rely on stereotypes that guided their decision-making.

One important point revealed by researchers was that when students become angry about being suspended, teachers are likely to exaggerate the role of behavioral differences of students in accounting for school suspensions.

According to Bell (2019) [12], black students engaged in increased negative behaviors due to harsh treatment received by school officials in the form of harassment and discrimination. Because of this factor, some students have formed subgroups based on that group’s code of conduct. This code of conduct was derived from the urban streets and is a form of retribution that promotes violence. African American students’ racial attitudes toward teachers and school administrators are highly influenced by the student’s self-perception of whether they have been wrongfully punished. This form of internal dispute is manifested in one single variable and that is the racial attitude of the teacher.

Many African American students viewed both teachers and school officials negatively. One reason why this perception is accurate has to do with how African American students view fairness and justice. To improve self-perception, school officials must stop biased punishments and promote more positive interactions with African American students.

The Washington Post (1987) [25] reported that within the Prince County area, out of 17,000 suspensions in the 1986 school year, about 77 percent were African American students. Moreover, the school superintendent cited that most suspensions came from “insubordination and disrespectful offense” (Pernell, 1990. p. 120) [26]. A Civil Rights Attorney called these petty offenses an attempt to channel African American children away from real educational opportunities. For example, in the (Hawkins v Coleman, 1974) [27] case African American students and thus parents filed a class-action lawsuit challenging schools’ disciplinary policies that were racist. The court found that racism was evident in the administration of discipline as the primary factor (p. 123).

A settlement was reached before trial and another case happened in (Ross v. Saltmarsh, 1980) [28] case. The Children’s Defense fund and Mid-Hudson Legal Services sued the New York School System for racial disparities among African American and Latinos Students. A settlement was reached in these cases, and numerous steps were implemented to alleviate expulsions and mistreatments. Requirements that were included in the case were

- 1) Modification of the district’s discipline code, including clarification and reduced the use of methods that remove students from the classrooms
- 2) Design of in-school alternatives to suspensions
- 3) Greater involvement by students, parents, student advocates, and guidance counselors in the discipline process.
- 4) Assistance to teachers with high discipline referral rates
- 5) Tutoring for students with achievement-related behavior problems
- 6) Referral of students for psychological services.
- 7) More interracial participation in extracurricular activities
- 8) Exploration of new ways to group students academically so that their classrooms have a good balance of minority and white students.

Fenning *et al.* (2007) [13] document that for over thirty years, “African American Male Students were more likely to be pushed out of school through exclusionary discipline consequences” than any other ethnic group (p. 536).

In contrast, Yudof (1975) [29] argued a different actualization for the high rates of expulsion for African American Male Students. Yudof (1975) [29] stated that “it is not so much that black behavior has changed radically as it is that reactions of school officials in desegregated schools’ ‘ that was a pivotal point in high expulsion rates. Moreover, Yudof (1975) [29] argued that the high rates of expulsion had more to do with “cultural norms” than anything else (p. 386). Boozer *et al.* (1992) [30] also argued that the landmark case (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954) [31] curtailed the state’s dissemination of] data on school quality based on race.

The ruling in the Brown case provided states with “a powerful incentive to suppress information that might hasten legal action against states” and local schools (p. 270). This factor reaffirmed what Bell (2019) [12] suggested in his data collection of a local school district, in that school districts have become empowered like a Judiciary Committee in determining policies dealing with African American male students.

One illustration is the introduction of the zero-tolerance policy. The zero-tolerance policy within public schools allowed school administrators to suppress school information concerning discipline data. According to Bell (2019) [12], the overreaching of school administrators on federal mandates laws gave school districts enforcement powers to prevent students and parents from ligations in the court system. A study by Koester *et al.* (2017) [32] found biased empirical evidence from the usage of new eye-tracking technology. In using eye-tracking technology, certain white female teachers were gazing longer at black students to

look for behaviors that might be interpreted as offensive to hand out more forms of punishment.

Bell (2019) [12] highlighted the point that many school districts deny him entry into their schools for research observations. Many schools, to avoid any future lawsuits against their school district, would block any outside individuals from observing that school policy concerning minority students. Bell (2019) [12] pointed out that schools in Michigan and Illinois had adopted a Restoration Justice program that offers parents and students an opportunity to avoid harsher punishment set by zero-tolerance policies.

4. Limitation and Discussions

Bell's (2019) [12] discussions concerning school expulsion and discipline policies were insightful and meaningful. The evolution of school discipline policies has evolved since the (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954) case. A report by the Government Accountability Office (2018) [14] revealed that 39 percent of students suspended from school during the 2013-2014 school year were African American Students. Yudof (1975) [29] discussion was insightful because in the Supreme Court case (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent school district*, 1969) [33] in which the court upheld that the federal court was empowered to overturn school discipline decisions from the public schools.

Boozer *et al.* (1992) [30] stated that the (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954) [31] case slowed down outside agencies in receiving statistical data from states concerning how well states were doing on school quality based on race. School disciplinary policies appear to empower local school districts in a way to avoid any future litigation cases and block most external entities such as parent boards or other external educational agencies from pursuing a case against a school district.

Fenning *et al.* (2007) [13] stated that research consistently demonstrated that African American Male students are overrepresented in exclusionary disciplines mainly due to policies that are not clearly defined or consistent with the definition of behavior like "classroom disruption." The lack of clarity from terms like classroom disruption has created a pipeline for students of color to be punished based on subjective interpretation of existing school policies.

Bell (2019) [12] reiterated a point that during the school year from (2016 to 2017) in the state of Michigan, he interviewed African American students from a high minority population and found that many students handle the problem of being punished or expelled differently by adopting a new set of rules for themselves. For example, this group of African American Students adopted a social norm called the "code of the school." The "code of the school" identity helped many African American Students develop a new status for themselves with their peers that created a new reputation of toughness and respect from their peer group. School expulsions for this group seem to help this category of students build a new social status of acceptance within the urban community.

5. Conclusions

Future research dealing with African American Male Students should address a more in-depth study of the “code of the school” symbol, as well as the topic of school expulsions. Current information about this topic is widespread and should be condensed to address possible solutions that might assist African American Male Students’ status in dealing with the issue of school expulsions and suspensions.

Data from Bell (2018) [11] provided the educational community with insight into this topic and a new-found inspiration to conduct future research to stop school expulsions. My future focus will be conducting research in urban schools to gain a better understanding of the complexity of this issue and provide possible resources from private agencies that may be helpful to students and parents in overcoming this serious problem.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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