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## **Disproportionate Discipline: Race/Ethnic and Gender Disparities in Rates of Lunch Detentions and Subjectivity in Teachers' Reasons for Those Punishments**

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DISPROPORTIONATE DISCIPLINE: RACE/ETHNIC AND GENDER DISPARITIES  
IN RATES OF LUNCH DETENTIONS AND SUBJECTIVITY IN TEACHERS'  
REASONS FOR THOSE PUNISHMENTS

by

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## ABSTRACT

The intent of school discipline policies, practices, and procedures is to shape student behavior to create an optimal learning environment for all students. However, school discipline falls short of this goal because it is rife with race/ethnic and gender disparities. These disparities contribute to inequitable academic and life outcomes that plague, in particular, African American children. This dissertation addresses these disparities through a thematic literature review, a quantitative analysis of inequities in rates of lunch detention, and a mixed methods analysis of subjectivity in reasons for lunch detention.

The literature review explains the problematic aspects of school discipline, the racial disproportionalities therein, and the ties between excessive discipline and negative outcomes for children. Implicit bias and peer contagion are explicated and offered as potential factors leading to the continuation of these racial inequities. Recommendations for ways schools can minimize the presence and impact of inequitable school discipline are offered.

The first empirical study examines racial and gender disparities in rates of lunch detention. Lunch detention is a ubiquitous under-studied lower-level discipline that directly precipitates upper-level disciplines. Results from ANOVA revealed that African American and male students received significantly greater rates of lunch detentions than their White, Hispanic/Latino, and female peers.

The second empirical study uses quantitative and qualitative analyses to explore subjectivity in teachers' reasons for assigning lunch detentions. Students were stratified into lunch detention frequency groups, and then rates of subjective reasons were analyzed using ANOVA regarding group affiliation and race/ethnicity of the students. This study found that 65% of lunch detentions were given for subjective reasons, and that students in the higher frequency groups received lunch detentions with the highest rates of subjectivity. Race/ethnicity could not be effectively analyzed because so few White students were in the higher frequency groups. The qualitative analysis found themes of teacher negativity/frustration, student talking, student avoidance of work, and student aggression/threat of violence to be illustrative of subjectivity in both group and race/ethnic lunch detention disparities.

The papers that constitute this dissertation form a cohesive pathway through which race/ethnic and gender disparities in school discipline can be more fully understood.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AYP.....	Adequate Yearly Progress
ELA.....	English Language Arts
IEP.....	Individualized Educational Program
IRB.....	Institutional Review Board
ISS.....	In-School Suspension
K-12.....	Kindergarten Through 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade
ODR.....	Office Discipline Referral
RTI.....	Response to Intervention
SES.....	Socioeconomic Status
SNAP.....	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
TANF.....	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

School discipline policies are designed to create a smoothly operating learning environment that promotes positive behaviors and discourages problematic behaviors (Maag, 2001), and functions to remove students who are disrupting the learning environment until they behave in ways that do not distract from the learning goals of the school (Klehr, 2009; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). School discipline is divided into upper-level and lower-level discipline punishments. Upper-level punishments include office discipline referrals (ODRs), in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions, and they are generally reserved for the most serious of offenses. Lower-level discipline punishments include lunch detention, being sent to the hall, having one's name written on the board, being sent to another teacher's room, having to sit in a specific area of the room, etc., and they happen when teachers are presented with student behavior that the teacher feels surpasses normal classroom management, but that does not reach the level of a referral to the office.

Though the intent of school discipline is to provide optimal educational opportunities for all students within the school, there are negative iatrogenic effects that occur as a result of students being punished frequently at school. Students who get into trouble at school and end up being suspended or expelled are significantly more likely to do poorly in school (Gregory et al., 2010; Noltemeyer et al., 2015), which reinforces the impression that children who get into trouble at school are weak students (McHugh et al,

2013). Students who are suspended from school are also significantly more likely to be held back a grade (Frymier, 1997), be expelled from school (Morrison et al., 1997), drop out of school (Bowditch, 1993; Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015), engage in violent behavior (Tobin & Sugai, 1999), end up in prison (Wald & Losen, 2003), have low income (Sum & Harrington, 2003) or no income because they are unemployed (Christle et al., 2007), and have significantly worse health outcomes (Lansford et al., 2016) than students who do not get into trouble at school.

### **Racial Disparities in School Discipline**

The damaging effect of school discipline on children's academic, social, and life outcomes is severe, and is cause for concern for all children. However, the issue is compounded due to the racial disproportionalities in rates and severities of school discipline. African American children receive a disproportionate number and greater severity of school discipline infractions than do White children (Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace et al., 2008). Nationally, African American children are suspended from school approximately 3.5 times the rate of White students, and in the 2011-2012 school year all the students who were suspended in 84 southeastern school districts and all the students who were expelled in 181 southeastern school districts were African American (Smith & Harper, 2015). The racial disparity in upper-level discipline is an enormous impediment to attainment of positive educational and life outcomes for African American children throughout the United States and, especially, in the southeastern region of the country where the data for the empirical studies in chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation are drawn.

Though there has been much outstandingly informative and vitally insightful research on racial disparities in school discipline, the studies have focused on upper-level disciplines and have not delved into the lower-level disciplines that so often precipitate the upper-level punishments. The primary reason for this focus is the ready availability of upper-level discipline data and the dearth of lower-level discipline data. ODRs, suspensions, and expulsions are required by the federal government to be tracked with fidelity, reported to the Department of Education – and housed in the National Center for Education Statistics, and made available to the public (Civil Rights Data, 2021; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), but there is no such mandate for lower-level disciplines. Some lower-level disciplines, such as having one’s name written on the board or being sent to the hall, are not recorded outside of the classroom, if at all, and other lower-level disciplines, like lunch detention, are often tracked with low fidelity and are not reported to the public (Home - SC School Report Card, 2021).

One of the primary novel elements in this research is the inclusion of data which show both the rates of and reasons for a rarely tracked, lower-level punishment: lunch detention. The lunch detention data used in this research is comprised of over 900 students who attended a racially diverse, urban middle school in the southeast during the 2015-2016 school year. The purpose of this research is to shed light on the racial and gender disparities in lower-level disciplines to help broaden our understanding of how and why these disparities in upper-level disciplines persist.

### **Lower-Level Punishment: Lunch Detention**

Lunch detention is a lower-level form of school discipline that is ubiquitous in schools throughout the country. In most school discipline structures, lunch detentions

occur quite frequently. In many schools, they are a step along the way towards a referral as students accumulate negative marks (demerits, counts, steps, etc.), but in other schools, they are given as unique punishments entirely at the discretion of the teacher.

A primary problematic aspect of lunch detention is that it is a public punishment in which the punished child is viewed by everyone who is in the cafeteria at lunch. This happens because, since students all need to eat lunch, the lunch detentions are most often held in the cafeteria at designated lunch detention tables, in full view of everyone in the lunchroom. Sometimes schools decide to have lunch detention in a designated room instead, but then those children still have to get lunch, and so they are marched into the lunchroom, given lunch, and then marched back out again in full view of everyone in the lunchroom. At the school from which the data for the empirical papers is drawn, the lunch detention students were even required to clean the tables once the non-lunch detention students had begun the dismissal process. This labor was seen as part of their punishment, and it was many years before the administration could be convinced that this was an unacceptable practice.

The public nature of lunch detention creates and reinforces the perception that the students who are in lunch detention are troublemakers. On an individual level, this is problematic because peer perception of a student as a troublemaker is a significant correlate to students dropping out of school (O'Connell & Sheikh, 2009). However, since African American students are significantly more likely to receive both upper-level discipline (Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace et al., 2008) and lunch detentions (as I find in my quantitative paper for this proposal), the public

perception of lunch detention children as troublemakers becomes significantly problematic on a racial level as well.

### **Program of Research**

To better understand school discipline practices, particularly the use of lunch detention, and the possible racial and gender disparities in school discipline, this dissertation consists of three related manuscripts: (1) a literature review of school discipline, the problematic nature of excessive discipline, racial disparities in school discipline, implicit bias and peer contagion as potential explanatory factors in the persistence of the disparities, and recommendations for practitioners for how to rethink school discipline and classroom management to reduce the disparities and subsequent problematic outcomes for African American children; (2) a quantitative analysis of racial and gender disparities in rates of lunch detentions; and 3) a mixed-methods examination of the subjective nature of teacher-stated reasons for students receiving lunch detentions, discussed in terms of differences both between frequency groupings and with regard to the race/ethnicity of the student. These projects shed new light on the racial and gender disparities in school discipline by introducing lower-level discipline data, in the form of lunch detentions, analyzing quantitative and qualitative examples of subjective reasons for school discipline, and using implicit bias and peer contagion as foundations for adding practical suggestions for what can be done to address these disparities.

The literature review (Fram, under review) discusses the issue of racial disparity in school discipline by first explaining what school discipline is, why students receive school discipline infractions, the constrained outcomes facing students who receive significant amounts of discipline infractions, the racial disproportionality of school

discipline rates and severities, the subjective nature of much school discipline, and the ways in which classroom environments exacerbate racial disparities in school discipline. The novel contribution of this review is its presentation of how both implicit bias (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) and peer contagion (Dishion et al., 1999) may help explain racial disproportionality in school discipline. The review closes with recommendations for teachers, administrators, and district decision-makers to consider when searching for ways to meaningfully address the racial disparities in their schools' discipline practices.

The second related manuscript (Fram, under review) is an empirical paper that examines rates of lunch detention for students by race and gender to see if those demographic characteristics produce significantly different rates of punishment and to see whether there was an interaction between race/ethnicity and gender. To address the research questions, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with a Bonferroni adjustment; the outcome variable was the total number of lunch detentions for each student, and the predictor variables were the race/ethnicity and gender of the students.

The third manuscript (Fram, under review) builds on the first empirical paper by examining the *reasons* for the lunch detentions that were the subject of the previous study. This paper focuses on African American and White boys because of both the results of a power analysis that removed other race/ethnic groups from the study due to a lack of sufficient number of students who received lunch detention, and because, though there were enough girls overall who received lunch detention, there were not enough White girls to warrant their inclusion in the study. African American girls had to be excluded as well because the findings regarding race would have been confounded by the

incompleteness of the significant gender variable. The remaining sample was split into frequency groups, based on the Response to Intervention (Johnson et al, 2006; Saeki et al., 2011) paradigm that has been utilized by other researchers to create similar cut points (Girvan et al., 2017; McIntosh et al., 2009). The lunch detention data for this paper focused on the subjective or non-subjective reasons for the detentions. Teachers and administrators used a common lunch detention form that had seven reasons to choose from when stating the reason for the punishment. Each of the reasons was classified as “subjective” (“excessive talking,” “disruption,” “disrespect,” and “consistent non-compliant behavior”) or “non-subjective,” (“tardiness,” “consistent breaking of class rule,” and “breaking of school rule”) (Girvan et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 1997). Because multiple reasons may have been chosen for each lunch detention by the teacher or administrator, and because the study examines subjectivity, if any subjective reason was selected, the lunch detention was included in the “any subjective reason” category. An ANOVA was conducted to check the hypothesis that students who receive greater numbers of lunch detentions would be assigned those punishments for subjective reasons at a greater rate than those students who received fewer lunch detentions. Then, another ANOVA was conducted to examine racial differences in the subjective reasons for each frequency group. This analysis revealed findings that precipitated analyzing a chi-square to better understand the distribution of the data. Then, a stratified random sample of lunch detention forms was selected to thematically examine the contextual narratives that were written at the bottom of each lunch detention form to determine patterns related to subjectivity within each frequency group. Thematic patterns were then examined to look at subjectivity within each race/ethnic group.



These studies connect the existing upper-level discipline research on racial and gender disparities in school discipline to lower-level discipline data, in the form of lunch detentions, and add depth to the discussion. The literature review explicates the issue of racial disparities in school discipline, adds the explanatory lenses of implicit bias and peer contagion, and offers practical recommendations for how teachers, school administrators, and district decision-makers can positively impact the situation to improve outcomes for African American children. The first empirical paper analyzes the racial and gender disparities in rates of lunch detentions, and the second empirical paper examines the reasons for the lunch detentions both quantitatively and qualitatively to reveal patterns in the subjectivity of the reasons both between frequency groups and as regards race. Together, these papers expand the knowledge base about racial and gender disparities in school discipline by examining the disproportionalities in lower-level discipline and connecting the disparities to explanatory variables that can be addressed practically by educators, administrators, and district decision makers to positively impact the experiences and outcomes of children.

## CHAPTER 2

### CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT VS. SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: A THEMATIC REVIEW OF RACIAL DISPARITIES IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fram, P. (2021). To be submitted to *Urban Review*

## **Abstract**

This thematic literature review explicates how school discipline policies, practices, procedures, and structures establish and reify learning environments that produce racially disparate outcomes for Black children, and it offers recommendations for addressing these inequities. The review provides an overview of school discipline structures, examines literature on school discipline and its problematic outcomes for non-White children, and discusses implicit bias and peer contagion as potential variables explaining the persistence of these racial inequities. Finally, the review suggests actions for teachers, administrators, and district decision-makers to positively impact the educational environment.

*Keywords:* school discipline, race, inequity, implicit bias, peer contagion

## **Introduction**

Our nation's public schools are at a crisis point in which the racial inequities and institutional racism that continue to tear at the fabric of our society are mirrored in the discipline structures within the schools that disproportionately impact the educational experiences and outcomes of African American children (Council on School Health, 2013; Gregory et al., 2010; Losen, 2013; Smith & Harper, 2015). The merging of school discipline practices with classroom management has produced a culture of threat that has normalized punishment as a response to a wide range of behaviors (Maag, 2001; Polirstok, 2015), and has impacted the rates and severities of discipline infractions and the accompanying negative school and life outcomes. Increases in school discipline have resulted in outcomes such as rises in violent behavior (Tobin & Sugai, 1999), dropout rates (Bowditch, 1993; Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015), and unemployment as adults (Christle et al., 2007) for numerous children, which have been significant factors in the school-to-prison pipeline - the term used to describe how children who get into trouble at school have increased likelihood of ending up incarcerated (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Wald & Losen, 2003). The overreliance on discipline to manage behavior has been extremely destructive for individual children, and the stark racial disparities in the rates and severities of school discipline have transformed the problem from a series of individual tragedies to a societal crisis against, in particular, African American children. Though much excellent research has been conducted over the past few decades on racial disparities in school discipline, and significant action has been taken, the fact that this problem still exists with such intensity (Smith & Harper, 2015) demands that we rethink the entire paradigm to see what may be missing in our

perspective that permits these inequities that society decries to persist even in the face of constant attention and effort by both researchers and front-line K-12 educators.

One possible impediment to addressing racial disparities in school discipline is the gap between research and practice - a divide that has characterized the relationship between K-12 teachers and university researchers for decades (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Cain, 2015; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Having successfully taught in K-12 public schools for over two and a half decades in geographically and demographically diverse regions of the United States, and now having taught at the university level while finishing my PhD in Educational Psychology and Research, I offer a unique and valuable perspective that may help bridge the gap between practice-oriented K-12 teachers and research-driven university professors. One initial insight I can share is that, even though the discipline outcomes at the schools where I have taught have been racially disproportionate, I have observed the teachers and administrators to be non-racist, and many of them to be actively anti-racist. At one former school, the administration was so concerned with racial disproportionalities in both academic and non-academic outcomes for African American students that they made eradicating those inequities the school's primary focus for many consecutive years, addressing strategies for creating more equitable learning environments at nearly every meeting throughout each year. However, even in such schools filled with non- and anti-racist teachers and administrators who are focused on addressing racial disparities in outcomes, racial disproportionality in school discipline persists. Why?

It is reasonable to conclude that the racial disproportionality in outcomes exists within the very retributive structure of school discipline because of the disconnect

between the teachers' intent and the effects of their actions and policies. Thus, this paper's goal is to (1) demonstrate how the structure of discipline establishes and reifies a learning environment that produces racially disparate outcomes and (2) propose recommendations for addressing these practices to mitigate the harm that racially disproportionate punishments wreak on African American children. To support my perspective, I first review the literature on school discipline to provide an overview of its structure within schools as well as the literature on racial disparities in school discipline to demonstrate the problematic outcomes associated with those inequities for non-White children. Then, I review the literature on implicit bias (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald & Krieger, 2006) as a potential explanatory variable for the teacher's role in disciplinary racial inequities, and I propose peer contagion (Dishion & Dodge, 2005; Dishion et al., 1999) as an explanatory variable that has been largely absent from the discussion regarding racial disparities in school discipline. Finally, I offer recommendations for K-12 teachers, administrators, and district decision-makers that I believe will positively impact the educational experiences of non-White children. The inequities that pervade the discipline systems in U.S. schools do not happen coincidentally and, given that administrators and teachers are doing their non- and anti-racist best to educate children equitably within the structure of schools, we must think critically about what might be at the root of the problem - and to find ways to solve it. This literature review, and my recommendations as both a long-tenured K-12 educator and as a researcher, are necessary and vital next steps towards a solution.

## School Discipline

### What is School Discipline?

Traditional school discipline frameworks are characterized by school-wide punishment policies such as office referrals, demerits, lunch detentions, afterschool detentions, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions, among others. The intent of these punishment policies is to create a school environment in which problematic behaviors decrease and positive behaviors increase (Maag, 2001), and to remove disruptive students until they behave in more school-appropriate ways (Klehr, 2009; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). The theoretical foundation for much school discipline structure is Thorndike's operant conditioning and Law of Effect, which posit that behavior associated with negative outcomes is less likely to reoccur compared to neutral behavior or behaviors associated with positive outcomes (Thorndike, 1927). B.F. Skinner expanded on Thorndike's ideas, forming the ABC's of behavior in which an *antecedent* leads to a *behavior* that precipitates a *consequence* designed to either encourage or discourage the behavior (Skinner, 1965). Most school discipline is positive punishment, where the school attempts to reduce undesired behavior by punishing the child for aberrant behavior, or negative reinforcement, where the school attempts to forestall undesired behaviors by threatening the child with a consequence and allowing the child to escape the consequence for not exhibiting the undesired behavior (Maag, 2001). Though positive punishment and negative reinforcement can be effective momentary behavior modifiers, they do not generally elicit lasting positive behavioral change (Caldarella et al., 2020; Downs et al., 2019; Reinke et al., 2013; Sidman, 1993). Rather, these punishments are significantly more likely to produce the learned behaviors of

avoidance and escape, which lead to unintended negative outcomes like creating and reinforcing the impression on the child that school is not a welcoming place for experiencing learning and growth (Sidman, 1993). Consequently, students who are punished at school are more likely to experience heightened hostility and antipathy towards school, often leading to increased levels of punishable behavior (Brackett, et al., 2011) and increases in school dropout (Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015).

Reasons for school discipline can vary. Low-level offenses that generally produce relatively mild, coercive reactions from teachers include behaviors such as not staying in line, not turning in homework, talking out of turn, being out of one's seat without permission, and other similar behaviors that cause mild disruptions to the expected normal classroom functioning. Though these behaviors can be handled without low-level school discipline measures like demerits and lunch detentions, many teachers use these punishments anyway because they easily control the aberrant behavior in the moment (Maag, 2001; Polirstock, 2015). Higher-level offenses include behaviors such as fighting, bringing weapons or illegal drugs to school, destruction of school property, and other violent, criminal, or otherwise significant behaviors that cause major disruptions to the learning environment or may pose threats to people within the school. These high-level offenses usually result in students facing more significant disciplinary consequences, including suspension, expulsion, and even arrest (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Losen, 2013).

### **Consequences of School Discipline**

Though school discipline punishment may be useful in providing structure and a focused learning environment for some students, these disciplinary procedures can also



be problematic for students whose interactions with school discipline are frequent and/or highly punitive. Students who receive high-level disciplinary actions such as suspensions or expulsions are significantly more likely to struggle academically (Gregory et al., 2010; Noltemeyer et al., 2015), and students who have lower academic production in reading are suspended at significantly higher rates than students with higher reading scores (Arcia, 2006). This connection between frequent school discipline and low performance in school establishes and reinforces the impression within the school that students who get into trouble are academically weaker students (McHugh et al., 2013). Schools in which children perceive that the teachers have low academic expectations for their students have significantly higher rates of suspension (Gregory et al., 2011) and become environments where low expectations and high discipline rates become self-fulfilling prophecies (Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2000). Being suspended even once dramatically increases the likelihood that students will receive subsequent suspensions (Tobin et al., 1996) and students who are frequently suspended are also significantly more likely to leave school permanently (Bowditch, 1993; Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015) be retained (Frymier, 1997), and/or become expelled (Morrison et al., 1997). These consequences are predictors of negative outcomes like decreased lifetime earnings (Sum & Harrington, 2003), increased health risks (Lansford et al., 2016), and incarceration (Wald & Losen, 2003), which highlights the dire societal need to reduce the prevalence of school discipline, especially for minoritized populations who are already at higher risk for these undesirable outcomes.

## **Reasons for School Discipline**

School discipline issues are so closely tied to negative life outcomes that understanding how and why students receive discipline referrals is a critical element in creating more equitable outcomes for all children. Though many non-educators assume that suspensions and expulsions are reserved for serious or dangerous offenses, those upper-level punishments are frequently given out for more mundane and potentially subjective disruptive situations such as students being defiant or noncompliant (Skiba et al., 2014) and are rarely for violent offenses (Council on School Health, 2013). Noncompliant students exhibit behaviors such as “simple refusal, passive non-compliance (ignoring an adult's request), attempting to negotiate an alternative to the requested behaviour, failure to start a task within a given time, e.g., 5-10 seconds and performing at a level that is below the set standard when the student is capable of that standard” (Reynolds et al., 2011, p.106). A problematic product of discipline-oriented classrooms where students receive frequent referrals for nonviolent misbehaviors is that when students are referred to the office for those types of infractions, they are significantly more likely to receive subsequent referrals – particularly for harassment type violence (Tobin & Sugai, 1999). This escalation in the severity of problematic behavior increases the likelihood that children will experience negative outcomes – both within the school and in the child’s home community.

The classroom environment, itself, may be a significant factor in precipitating discipline referrals. Students who experience more positive school relationships are more likely to perform better academically and to get into trouble less often (Gregory et al., 2010). Positive and emotionally supportive relationships with teachers increase students’

relatedness to both the teachers and the school, and produce more positive student attitudes regarding school, increased motivation to learn at school (Ryan et al., 1994), and positive academic and school-culture outcomes (Saeki & Quirk, 2015). Consequently, teachers who create positive classroom emotional climates promote positive teacher/student relationships, which decrease discipline issues (Brackett, et al., 2011). However, when students perceive teacher bias precipitating school discipline disparities, students have increased negative academic and discipline-related outcomes (McHugh et al., 2013), as well as weakened school community culture (Hallinan et al., 2008). The lack of relatedness to teachers because of perceived teacher bias also can result in increased aggressive student classroom behaviors, which recursively produces both increased discipline from teachers and more aggressive behaviors from students (Stipek & Miles, 2008). Students who have aggressive classroom conflicts experience higher rates of alienation from teachers and the school, leading to disengagement from the positive aspects of the school environment (Stipek & Miles, 2008).

One common outcome for students who get into frequent trouble is retention, but this solution is highly problematic. Students who are retained in elementary school are more likely to not complete high school than are their non-retained peers (Jimerson et al., 2002) even after controlling for IQ and socio-familial variables that may have impacted the school's retention decision (Vitaro et al., 1999), and students who do not complete school are significantly more likely to become unemployed (Christle et al., 2007) or be imprisoned (Wald & Losen, 2003). Student retention is a decision that must be handled cautiously because of the potential for severe long-term negative outcomes for the child. While retention for academic reasons may have merit for reinforcing crucial elements of

learning, retention for discipline reasons that could be dealt with less punitively unnecessarily increases the potential for negative academic and life outcomes for the retained child, as well as for the child's subsequent peers, who must now engage with a behaviorally difficult older child who may significantly and problematically influence both classroom norms and peer behaviors.

While retaining students is not common, two frequent options that schools utilize for children with discipline issues are aggregating students with behavior problems into programs such as alternative schools or into in-school suspension (ISS) rooms. Though these programs effectively remove children with behavior issues from the learning environments of students who do not display those behaviors, alternative schools and ISS rooms are not recommended methods for changing students' deviant behaviors because discipline programs that create universal group interventions by removing students from the normal classroom environment to aggregate them with other students who have aberrant behaviors are ineffective in changing behaviors for students with chronic or severe problem behaviors (Tobin et al., 1996).

### **Racial Inequities in School Discipline**

#### **Disproportionate Discipline for African American Students**

Compounding the problematic nature of frequent school discipline on children's outcomes is that referrals, suspensions, and expulsions are racially inequitably distributed. Numerous studies have shown that African American students are punished both more frequently and with greater severity than are their White peers (Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace et al., 2008). Additionally, the rate of school discipline for African American students has increased in the 21st Century even

though the rates for White, Asian-American, and Latinx students have decreased during that same time span (Wallace et al., 2008). The UCLA Civil Rights Project published analyses of the 2011-2012 national suspension and expulsion data (Smith & Harper, 2015), finding that 10% of the nation's students were suspended from school, but that White students were suspended at a 6.65% rate, and African American students were suspended at a 23.20% rate – nearly three and a half times as often. This disparity was most prominent in the southeastern states, where over half of the suspensions for African American students occurred. In 84 southeastern school districts, 100% of suspended students were African American, and in 181 southeastern school districts, 100% of the expelled students were African American. In every southeastern state, a higher percentage of African American students were suspended or expelled than the percentage of African American students attending the schools, and in Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, African American students comprised over 60% of both suspended and expelled students during that school year (Smith & Harper, 2015). Why are African American students being disciplined at such higher rates than their White peers? To address this question, the subsequent three sections will discuss (a) subjectivity in discipline, (b) racial disparities in classroom relationships and environments, and (c) racial disparities in classroom structure.

### **Subjectivity in Discipline**

One reason these disparities exist is subjectivity in how teachers and administrators impart discipline on students. In addition to the overall disproportionality in rates of suspension and expulsion, African American students are also more likely than White students to receive referrals for subjective reasons (Skiba et al., 2002). Over half of

discipline referrals to the office are for nonviolent, subjective reasons – most commonly disrespect or non-compliance with the teacher, which are not violent, but are nonetheless often treated similarly to more violent offenses (Skiba et al., 1997). In my experience as a teacher, I have witnessed students given referrals for disrespect for behaviors such as responding “Yes” rather than “Yes, ma’am” when addressing a teacher, putting one’s head down in class, and for children talking quietly while working on assignments, as well as numerous other subjective behaviors often interpreted by teachers as disrespect. Teachers’ feelings of self-efficacy are integrally connected with their feelings of being respected by students and students’ parents (Milner & Hoy, 2003; Shaughnessy, 2004), so it is comprehensible why teachers would desire students to demonstrate respect for them in the classroom. However, because respect is subjective, students and teachers often view respectful behaviors differently. As discipline situations become more subjective, they also become more susceptible to bias in teachers’ responses to students’ actions (Staats, 2015). School discipline subjectivity is racially problematic because teachers are significantly more likely to perceive African American children as dangerous (Casella, 2003) or troublemakers (Bowditch, 1993) than their White peers and are also significantly more likely to have lower expectations for African American children than White children (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Many teachers also have biased expectations about students, based on race, ethnicity, or on problematic interaction norms students developed through prior dysfunctional relationships with teachers (McHugh et al., 2013). Acceptable and appropriate classroom behavior is vitally important for a positive learning environment, as well as for teachers to feel efficacious at work, but interpretations of

such behavior are subjective, and teachers' expectations of students may be biased, depending on the students' race or ethnicity.

### **Racial Disparities in Classroom Relationships and Environments**

Another reason why racial disparities exist in discipline practice may be due to problematic elements in student-teacher relationships. Teachers characterize their relationships with frequently disciplined students as conflictual (Stipek & Miles, 2008), and the conflictual nature of that relationship exacerbates both aberrant student behavior and teachers' negative perceptions (Stipek & Miles, 2008). Teachers have more negative relationships with African American students who they perceive as aggressive than with White students who they perceive as aggressive (Meehan et al., 2003), and African American students experience school as unwelcoming at higher rates than do White students, which increases non-conforming behavior and punishments such as referrals, suspensions, and expulsions for African American children (Brown-Wright & Tyler, 2010). Teachers' negative perceptions of African American students fosters a negative classroom environment for those students. Additionally, when African American students perceive that teachers have lower expectations for them, this precipitates further disruptions and increases school discipline infractions (McHugh et al., 2013), which serves to increase the perception of African American students as troublemakers. Though negative perceptions can be mitigated if teachers share students' ethnic backgrounds (Saft & Pianta, 2001), the percentage of African American students enrolled in public schools far exceeds the percentage of African American teachers (Madkins, 2011).

Students' alienation from the school environment is the foundation of a home-school dissonance that undermines African American students' relatedness to their

teachers and school. Home-school dissonance happens when students perceive that normative home behaviors and values are disrespected at school, especially by teachers. African American students experience greater home-school dissonance than do White students, which increases both teacher-perceived aberrant behavior and rates of school discipline for African American students (Brown-Wright et al., 2011). The prevalence of home-school dissonance for African American students produces amotivation, which leads to depressed academic and behavioral outcomes (Brown-Wright et al., 2011). Classroom relationships between students and teachers are strongly influenced by both groups' race/ethnicities, and when racial bias is either present or perceived by students to be present, this significantly negatively impacts school experiences, relatedness, and outcomes for African American children.

### **Racial Disparities in Classroom Structure**

When schools move from bureaucratically organized to communally organized classrooms, African American students' academic performance increases, and negative school discipline decreases (Hallinan et al., 2008). However, when classrooms predominantly have African American students, teachers are significantly more likely to create bureaucratically controlling classrooms than for classrooms that predominantly have White students (Monroe, 2005). These restrictive environments increase school discipline for African American students, recursively reinforcing the notion that African American students need more restrictive learning environments because they consistently misbehave (Monroe, 2005). Highly controlled classroom environments engender child/teacher relationships where children's perceived non-conforming behavior is viewed as deviant and punishable. Teachers are more likely to view normative African



American behavior, such as student/peer and student/teacher interaction styles, as problematic (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Neal et al., 2003; Ogbu, 2004) which creates an environment where African American identities are pathologized and frequently become cause for punishment (Gibson et al., 2014).

This racially oppressive classroom environment produces a perception of African American children in which teacher-determined non-normative behaviors become viewed as emblematic both by African American students, themselves, and by other members of the school community, the result of which labels African American children as inherently pathological (Gibson et al., 2014). This problematic public perception creates a school culture that is inherently damaging for African American children. Since peer assessment as a troublemaker correlates significantly with school dropout (O'Connell & Sheikh, 2009), pathologizing African American children's normative behaviors precipitates racially disproportionate school discipline and significantly poorer academic and life outcomes than their White peers.

### **Potential Explanations for Why the Racial Inequities Persist**

#### **Implicit Bias**

Implicit bias is preferencing that results from the unconscious framing of experiences, and that shapes the often-stereotypical ways that people view themselves and others (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Implicit biases begin developing in children before language acquisition and become stable around age 5 (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Doyle & Aboud, 1995). Young children's implicit biases and explicit attitudes often correspond, but their explicit attitudes become more egalitarian through adolescence due to development of second order thinking skills, increased empathy, and social desirability

bias (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Eisenberg et al., 1997; Hahn et al., 2014). However, though outward manifestations of bias decrease as the child ages, implicit biases from early childhood remain constant (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Dunham et al., 2006; Rutland et al., 2005). Young White American children develop racial bias against African American people and Native Americans (Doyle & Aboud, 1995), but when homogeneously grouped, they express significant ingroup positive bias rather than negative outgroup bias (McGlothlin & Killen, 2010), which precipitates power-consolidating behavior within the White ingroup rather than overt racist behaviors. Implicit biases may be unproblematic preferencing for flowers over insects (Greenwald et al., 1998), but they may also be sinister when biases become racialized. Americans' racial implicit bias preferences White people and disfavors African American people, even when subjects espouse explicit attitudes of racial egalitarianism or preferencing of African American people (Dasgupta et al., 2000). Implicit biases preference powered ingroups and depress opportunities for minoritized people.

In school, White implicit bias preferencing may seem benign, but choosing workgroups of other White children, sitting predominantly with other White children at lunch, and inviting other White children to play after school may appear to be individual choices in the moment, but they create behavioral patterns that establish and reify racial divisions within the school. Similar student behaviors may also be observed with other race/ethnic groups, but since economic power in American society is concentrated within the White community, exclusionary behavior among White students problematically intensifies a power disparity endemic to American society outside of school.

Implicit bias is also not limited to behaviors and choices of schoolchildren; rather, it is also intricately connected to adults within the school environment. Teachers demonstrate bias in judgements of students because their evaluations can be clouded by physical, interpersonal, cultural, and familial characteristics possessed by the students (Lipsky, 1971). For example, teachers are not intentionally racist when choosing to enforce dress codes, but those choices are often rife with racial contexts. This is problematic because, as stated earlier, student perceptions of teacher racial bias precipitate behaviors from African American children that often engender punishment from teachers and depress academic outcomes (McHugh et al., 2013).

To this point, I have defined school discipline and explained its consequences and reasons why students experience punishment, explored racial disproportionalities in discipline, as well as subjectivity in discipline circumstances and the relationships, classroom environment, and classroom structure. I then examined implicit bias as one explanatory variable for the persistence of racial inequities. In this next section, I propose a novel crucial factor that can elucidate exacerbatory elements of racial disparities in school discipline: peer contagion.

### **Peer Contagion**

As an experienced teacher, I have encountered numerous children whose behavior has been intermittently aberrant, and whose subsequent behavior could either become more like the compliant, well-behaved, and predominantly academically successful students or increase in deviant behavior to become more like the frequently troublemaking, less academically successful students. Often, these students' behaviors worsen, precipitating more frequent and severe punishments. When students' aberrant

behaviors influence other students to participate in similar aberrant behaviors, this is the foundation of peer contagion (Dishion et al., 1999). The consequences of school discipline punishment on students have been elucidated throughout this review, so understanding why these students gravitate towards more disruptive problematic behaviors can be a key to altering those behavioral trajectories towards more productive ends.

Peer contagion happens when children associate with peers who exhibit antisocial or deviant behaviors and then are increasingly likely to engage in similar disruptive and/or delinquent behavior, themselves (Dishion et al., 1999; Juvonen & Ho, 2008). Spreading delinquent behavior in schools is concerning because delinquent behavior is closely linked to problematic student academic and life outcomes (Bowditch, 1993; Gregory et al., 2010; Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Deviancy training is an aspect of peer contagion in which children display or discuss deviant behavior that is positively reinforced physically, verbally, or attitudinally, establishing deviant behavioral norms that are embraced by other children within the environment (Dishion et al., 1996). Deviancy training increases deviant behaviors like delinquency and violence (Dishion et al., 1999; Dishion et al., 2001; Dishion & Tipsord, 2011), use of alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco (Dishion et al., 1999; Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Palinkas et al., 1996), sex and binge drinking (Duncan et al., 2005), and other serious antisocial behaviors (Dishion et al., 1999). Students engaging in these deviant behaviors increases the rate and seriousness of the children's subsequent discipline infractions, thereby harming their social and academic outcomes.

Deviancy training is more significant among children who have moderate prior levels of delinquency than for children with little to no delinquency prior to interacting with the deviantly-behaved peers (Dishion et al., 1999) and can precipitate significant adjustment issues in adulthood (Dishion et al., 1999). Because discipline programs such as ISS and alternative schools aggregate students exhibiting significant discipline issues with students exhibiting less extreme behaviors, but whose behavior still violated school rules (Foley & Lan-Szo Pang, 2006), students exhibiting only *moderately* delinquent behaviors are significantly more likely to adopt more deviant behaviors when in those aggregated discipline situations. Even when in aggregated discipline programs designed to promote prosocial behavior and decrease antisocial deviant behavior, students experience iatrogenic effects that reinforce deviant behaviors (Cho et al., 2005). Though some studies (Mager et al., 2005) find opposing effects where aggregating students with significant deviant behavior reduces subsequent deviant behavior more effectively than in mixed group settings, the overwhelming preponderance of research supports peer contagion and deviancy training as problematic factors in children's school and life outcomes.

Peer contagion and deviancy training also occur in normative classroom contexts where students are ability-grouped in classrooms based on prior performance, academic testing, and/or overall perceptions of academic ability. For students in lower tracks, classrooms are more significantly characterized by lower expectations (Canestrari & Marlowe, 2010; Mayer et al., 2018) and greater discipline issues (Dodge et al., 2006) than for students in higher tracks. Similarly to school discipline, ability grouping often aggregates students who exhibit deviant behaviors by placing them in lower tracks, which

reduces students' academic achievement, motivation, self-esteem, and vocational outcomes (Gifford-Smith et al., 2005). This student aggregation can produce both short-term negative iatrogenic effects regarding deviant behavior (i.e., increased learned deviant behaviors as a byproduct of academic grouping) and problematic long-term effects (Dishion et al., 1999). The behavior of lower ability-tracked students may become more problematic because students perceive the classroom environment as having more behavior problems, less academic and social-support engagement from the teacher, and less peer support for positive social engagement within the classroom (Wang & Dishion, 2012). Students in ability-tracked environments also self-segregate friendship associations to reflect their classroom friend circles, thereby reducing friendships with students in high-tracked classrooms (Kubitschek & Hallinan, 1998) and decreasing their access to social capital associated with higher-performing academic students (Plagens, 2011). Proponents of ability-tracking argue that some students increase achievement because of instructional ease or greater student interest resulting from tailoring material to students' achievement levels (Hallinan, 1994b, 1994a); however, potential negative iatrogenic effects are often undervalued or ignored by these scholars, and when relationships with other children with highly delinquent behaviors predominate, even otherwise successful targeted interventions lose their efficacy (Leve & Chamberlain, 2005). In addition to regular tracking, even though the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act mandates a least restrictive environment, some students with behavior and/or emotional disabilities are still in isolated classroom experiences for at least part of their day (Lane et al., 2005). Aggregating these students exacerbates their behavior issues because of peer contagion (Müller, 2010) which significantly disadvantages students with

disabilities. Aggregating students through ability tracking, behavioral disabilities, and/or emotional disabilities encourages students and adults to label those students, which creates self-fulfilling academic and behavioral prophecies that are reinforced both by individuals within the group and by others within the school community (Dodge et al., 2006).

Another problematic element of peer contagion in schools is the aggression that develops within classrooms that aggregate students with behavior issues. Even as early as first grade, there is a significant relationship between aggregating students with highly aggressive behaviors and subsequent elevated classroom aggression and significantly diminished classroom climate quality (Thomas et al., 2011). Additionally, aggregating students with behavior issues creates a significant likelihood that the students will form friendship circles where aggressive behaviors are normalized (Powers & Bierman, 2013) and negative interactions with school discipline become normative. Aggregating these aggressive students may effectively isolate those students from non-aggressive students, but if the goal is to *reduce* aggressive behavior, this classroom composition is unlikely to produce the desired outcome. When students with highly aggressive behaviors are in classrooms predominated by less aggressive students, aggressive students' behaviors become less aggressive, and when students with less aggressive behaviors are in classrooms predominated by aggressive students, less aggressive students become more aggressive (Boxer et al., 2005). This is the principle of discrepancy-proportional peer influence in which aggressive students are supported to adopt less aggressive behavioral norms in classroom environments where aggressive children both view other students participating in prosocial norms and are missing a receptive cohort for engaging in

deviancy training. When classrooms are predominated by students with behavior issues, their influence in shaping other students' behaviors to mirror deviant norms negates the protective effects that students with prosocial norms usually provide for their peers (Macgowan & Wagner, 2005). Additionally, when competition defines classroom norms rather than more holistic group processes and/or individual goal-setting, this can significantly increase aggressiveness because classrooms with competitive norms are more likely to precipitate increasingly aggressive behavior among already highly aggressive students (Warren et al., 2005).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

As I have shown, African American children are disproportionately punished through school discipline even when teachers and administrators are non- and anti-racist, and these disproportionalities are exacerbated by implicit bias and peer contagion and lead to negative school and life outcomes. The question then becomes: What can we do to change this? Relying on both the literature and my experience, I argue that school and classroom policies, procedures, and practices must be reimagined to create more learning-friendly environments that can nullify the deleterious effects of implicit bias and peer contagion. School discipline and management policies should be redesigned to create educational environments that promote equitable learning and life outcomes for all students by minimizing structures that reinforce deviant behaviors that precipitate punishment. My two primary recommendations are: (1) separate school discipline from normal classroom management practices, thereby reducing the prevalence and severity of school discipline for all students and creating classroom experiences where minoritized



students have equitable opportunities to thrive; and (2) more proactively design programs and classroom populations to address the damaging effects of peer contagion.

### **Separate Classroom Management from School Discipline**

Separating school discipline from classroom management is essential for establishing positive learning environments for all students, especially minoritized students who are at greater risk of negative outcomes in classrooms with a punishment paradigm norm. Violent or otherwise problematic disruptions require actions from school adults that supersede normal classroom management. However, nonviolent, less problematically disruptive, and more subjective behaviors (e.g., disrespect) should be handled by teachers through positive classroom management techniques rather than through punishing students. For instance, if a student is noncompliant and refusing to work, a teacher may address this problem by writing a referral or lunch detention, hoping to change the student's behavior due to the threat of impending punishment. However, teachers may also forego punishment and utilize management techniques like engaging students in non-threatening conversations to determine whether the issue is that the student does not understand the material - or is tired because they have not eaten - or is upset because of a troubling event from earlier in the day - or any number of other factors. Engaging in caring dialogue is one of many management techniques that teachers may use in this situation, but these management techniques take time and effort and require teachers to have established a non-confrontational classroom culture where punishment is not normalized. When caring discussion, rather than punishment, becomes the norm, students are significantly more likely to respond positively, and the effect is more likely to last (Brackett, et al., 2011). Building supportive and caring relationships

with students increases students' experiences of relatedness to the learning environment (Ryan et al., 1994) and decreases home-school dissonance (Brown-Wright et al., 2011), thereby increasing children's positive school and life outcomes (Ryan et al., 1994; Saeki & Quirk, 2015). Additionally, reducing punishments for subjectively perceived aberrant behaviors reduces implicit bias's impact on racial disproportionalities in punishments. However, building caring, non-punitive relationships with students takes time and consistent effort, and positive outcomes can take months to form, so many teachers use more immediately impactful punishments (Maag, 2001; Polirstock, 2015) to control student behavior. Teachers need additional training and support to learn how to more effectively engage students and to feel more efficacious in eschewing school discipline punishments while guiding students towards making more school-appropriate behavioral decisions.

School administrative philosophies regarding classroom structure are crucial elements in separating classroom management from school discipline. I have worked in schools where administrators required a discipline rubric in teachers' syllabi to show students and parents types and frequencies of misbehaviors and corresponding levels of punishment. I argued strenuously against this policy each time because these rubrics establish punishment as normative before students have even entered the room, and links positive behavioral norms to avoidance of punishment rather than to establishment of a healthy learning environment. Also, since as I have shown, African American students are significantly more likely to be punished for infractions like those in such rubrics, punishment rubric-oriented classrooms establish themselves as unwelcoming places for African American students from the start. Malintent or not, teachers who use these

rubrics are impeding African American children's opportunities for equitable outcomes and are damaging the learning environment for all students.

Like discipline rubrics, overly delineated, punishment-oriented classroom rules are also environmentally problematic. When teachers enumerate behaviors that students are restricted from engaging in, the classroom ethos becomes predicated on avoiding consequences for negative behaviors rather than on positive engagement with the learning environment. My classroom has two rules: 1) Know and follow the school rules and 2) Treat all people with kindness and respect. The first rule allows children to feel secure because they can make sense of their environment within the overall school structure rather than contending with a teachers' seemingly capricious rule choices. The second rule allows students to visualize their classroom interactions as grounded in respect and kindness, thereby establishing caring dialogue rather than school discipline punishments as the response to difficult situations. Teachers must avoid reactivity to student behavior and see aberrant behavior as an opportunity to meaningfully connect with a child by showing honest caring and concern. Teachers should always remember that we may be teaching subject matter in the moment, but our primary responsibility is always to teach children – not just content.

### **Redesign Policies that Aggregate Students Who Have Aberrant Behaviors**

My second recommendation for schools to combat racial disparities in school discipline and the subsequent negative academic and life outcomes involves peer contagion. We must address the practice of aggregating students with serious behavioral issues into the same school, classroom, or punishment room environments. As I have shown, peer contagion produces numerous negative outcomes for students who are

aggregated with other students who have significant deviant behavioral issues (Boxer et al., 2005; Dishion et al., 1999; Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Duncan et al., 2005; Palinkas et al., 1996). When I started teaching, I thought my district's alternative school was for students whose learning needs were not met through normal school environments and who needed more individualized learning opportunities. This was not the case; rather, the alternative school was a highly restrictive environment for students who had been removed from their home school and could not return until they had demonstrated success in the alternative program.

Over many years teaching in diverse districts across the country, I have observed the problematic relationship that alternative programs create for both the punished students and the original school when the students return to that school environment. Returning students nearly always receive strict behavior contracts, and I have consistently observed school personnel express doubts about whether returning students will last because the students so often recidivate. Too frequently, I have observed school personnel express displeasure that students are returning because of their potential for disruptive and deviant training behavior, and I have too often heard school personnel state that they will closely watch returning students so as to write enough referrals to have the students quickly sent back to the alternative environment. Other students also frequently express anxiety about the returning students, and classrooms are subsequently often unfriendly places for returning students to be. Returning students, who already have demonstrated prior issues with fitting in to the original school's accepted norms, now face additional significant impediments to their success. Teachers, administrators, and students – including the returning students, themselves – anticipate punishable behaviors

from the returning students. It is no surprise, then, when returning students recidivize and are subsequently removed again from the original school (e.g., self-fulfilling prophecy; Brophy, 1983; López, 2017). Alternative schools should be what I imagined they were as a beginning teacher instead of being places where schools deposit unwanted behaviorally difficult children. We educators are either for educating all students - or we are not. Just because some children have significant challenges with difficult and disruptive behaviors does not mean that we should abandon them to restrictive alternative schools where those problematic behaviors become solidified as behavioral norms. Redesigning the paradigm of classroom management and school discipline will significantly impact these students' ability to be successful in their original school environment and allow us to redesign alternative schools to be true alternatives for students who need non-traditional educational structures.

Within the normal school environment, students who receive frequent or significant punishment are often aggregated into ISS rooms. In addition to the problematic issue of students missing positive classroom instruction, students in ISS also experience deviancy training because of the significant behavioral deviance of many students in that setting. Because African American students are disproportionately punished at a higher rate than White students (Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace et al., 2008), African American students problematically experience higher interaction with deviancy training through ISS. Instituting my first recommendation to create more positive and caring classroom environments will reduce the number of students in ISS, allowing ISS monitors to engage students in community-building activities during that time instead of focusing on control and punishment. One

monitor who I worked with tried to have ISS be about community-building, but the large number of punished students made that goal nearly impossible. Because students in ISS are disproportionately African American children and have greater home-school dissonance (Brown-Wright et al., 2011), transforming ISS into a community-building environment will have a significant impact on the academic and life outcomes for African American children.

Another problematic way that schools aggregate students who have difficult behavioral issues is through classroom composition. Tracking has traditionally driven this aggregation because students in lower-tracked academic classes often engage in more problematic behaviors and receive more discipline infractions (Dodge et al., 2006) than students in higher-tracked classes. African American children are disproportionately placed in special education (Ahram et al., 2011) and are also more likely to be placed in lower-tracked classes (Kelly, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Welner, 2002), as I have seen in schools where I have taught. In one racially diverse school, I taught the sole 8<sup>th</sup> grade honors English class, and 30 of 31 students were White. When I told the principal about this, he created an additional honors section, merging students from the existing class with the more diversely represented students, and producing two diverse honors English classes. Sometimes bringing racial disparities to the attention of well-meaning non-racist people in positions of power who have not previously recognized the problem can be impactful.

The problematic nature of tracking African American students into lower-level classes is compounded by the more restrictive and controlling atmosphere teachers create in those classes (Monroe, 2005) and the increased likelihood of a normalized threat of

punishment. These classes are significantly more likely to have behavior issues that precipitate punishment, which then reinforces the apparent need for increased restrictiveness. Since lower-level classes contain a higher proportion of students with deviant, punishable behaviors, aggregating these students increases the likelihood both of deviancy training (Dishion et al., 1996) and of decreased academic achievement (Gifford-Smith et al., 2005). African American students being disproportionately placed in lower-level classes that have more discipline issues increases the likelihood of negative academic and life outcomes for African American children.

The issue here is twofold. First, if tracking continues, classroom composition of lower-level classes must be controlled to minimize the proportion of African American students and students with significant deviant behaviors. If tracked classrooms do continue, they should be reimagined using the classroom management paradigm outlined earlier in this section. Second, serious consideration should be given to abolishing tracking other than for students with exceptionalities that require specialized resources. I taught in one district that was so small that there was no middle school tracking at all. My 30 eighth grade English and history students had reading levels that varied from 2nd grade to post high school. Another teacher and I team taught our 60 students, providing reading-level appropriate material that covered the same standards, often having students work in groups of both leveled and non-leveled types, depending on the activities. For one group of five exceptionally high reading students, I developed a college-style course on the American Revolution in consultation with the history department of a nearby university. Teaching in a non-tracked environment takes work, but the benefits can be

staggering because heterogeneous classroom composition allows schools to minimize racial disparities that exist in tracking-oriented schools.

### **Conclusions**

Racial disparities in school discipline are a blight upon African American students' educational experiences. These discrepancies exacerbate societal inequities that significantly negatively impact a wide range of life outcomes for African American children. Even in schools where teachers and administrators are overwhelmingly non- and anti-racist, these inequities persist due to problematic structural issues within the educational environment. When schools intertwine classroom management and school discipline, punishment becomes the norm, and African American children suffer disproportionately. Aggregating students with deviant behaviors allows peer contagion to exacerbate racial disparities in school discipline and leads to diminished educational and life outcomes for African American children.

As a teacher for over two and a half decades, I have witnessed these racial disparities and have developed a philosophy of educational best practices that is healthier for all students, and which significantly lessens the negative impact of school discipline on African American children. As a scholar, I have read the research of experts in the field, which has both broadened and focused my philosophy, and has led to my understanding of the pernicious role that implicit bias and peer contagion have on educational and life outcomes of African American children. Because I bridge the practitioner/researcher divide in the study of educational best practices, this review presents a nuanced and thoughtful perspective on how schools should reimagine management, discipline, and classroom composition to create inclusive, healthy, inspiring



classrooms for all children, and which will positively impact the educational and life outcomes for African American children in particular.

The overwhelming majority of teachers and administrators are people of good intent who want the best for all children. Racial inequities in school discipline are significantly impacted by implicit bias and peer contagion that work within the structure of school discipline to precipitate negative outcomes for African American students even when teachers and administrators explicitly attempt to create positive learning environments that address the racial inequities they observe. This review provides in-depth examination of the issue, multiple points of analysis, and recommendations for how to create healthier school environments that will positively impact the problem. It is a first step towards the goal of providing all children the best opportunities to experience their best lives.

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CHAPTER 3  
GETTING INTO TROUBLE: RACIAL AND GENDER INEQUITIES IN RATES OF  
LUNCH DETENTION<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Much research has been undertaken to study race/ethnic and gender disparities in rates of upper-level school disciplines such as suspensions and expulsions, and the negative impact excessive school discipline has on academic and life outcomes for children. This current study examines race/ethnic and gender disparities in rates of lunch detention, which is an extremely common but rarely studied lower-level discipline that directly precipitates upper-level disciplines. The sample consisted of 503 African American, 324 White, and 72 Hispanic/Latino students who attended an urban, race/ethnically diverse middle school in the southeast during the 20015-2016 school year. Results from ANOVA revealed that African American and male students received significantly greater rates of lunch detentions than did their White, Hispanic/Latino, and female peers and that Hispanic/Latino students did not have significantly different rates of lunch detention than did White students. Implications for practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* school discipline; lunch detention; race; gender; inequity

## Introduction

School discipline is rife with racial and gender inequities that disproportionately impact the educational, social, and health outcomes of African American children, and specifically African American male children (Council on School Health, 2013; Gregory et al., 2010; Jordan & Anil, 2009; Losen, 2013; Smith & Harper, 2015). Researchers have studied these inequities by looking at *upper-level discipline* data regarding office discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015). Equally important to this line of inquiry is examining *lower-level discipline* (i.e., recess detention, lunch detention, being sent to the hall, having one's seat moved) incidents but this data has been absent from the discussion. This is largely due to the fact that lower-level disciplines are not tracked with fidelity nor required to be included in school districts' reports to the government (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015) or to the public (Home - SC School Report Card, 2021) as is the case with the upper-level discipline infractions. These lower-level discipline infractions frequently lead to upper-level disciplines, so understanding why and when these more minor infractions occur can inform how schools design their discipline policies, procedures, and practices to create more equitable learning environments. To this end, this study examines rates of the lower-level discipline of lunch detention in a racially diverse urban middle school in the southeast with the study aims addressing: 1) the relationship between race/ethnicity and rates of lunch detention; 2) the relationship between gender and rates of lunch detention; and 3) whether there is an interaction between race and gender with regard to rates of lunch detention.

## **Problems with Excessive School Discipline**

School discipline has been fused with classroom management (Doyle, 1990; Emmer & Hickman, 1991; Polirstok, 2015; Wu et al., 1982), thereby normalizing punishment as a response to even mildly aberrant behaviors, which increases both discipline events and the negative school and life outcomes associated with large numbers of discipline infractions. Students who receive upper-level discipline (suspensions or expulsions) are more likely to have low achievement in school (Gregory et al, 2010), have increased violent behavior (Tobin & Sugai, 1999), be retained (Frymier, 1997), become expelled (Morrison et al., 1997), and they have increased rates of dropout (Bowditch, 1993; Jordan & Anil, 2009; Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Students who do not finish K-12 school are more likely to be unemployed (Christle et al., 2007), have problematic health outcomes (Lansford et al., 2016), or become imprisoned (Jordan & Anil, 2009; Losen, 2013), as characterized by the school-to-prison pipeline in which the racial disparities in the prison population are mirrored in the racial disparities in school discipline (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Losen, 2013; Mallett, 2016; Wald & Losen, 2003). Consequently, there is a pressing need to understand more fully the contextual processes of school discipline in order to minimize the negative academic and life consequences of excessive school discipline on students and to address the issue of racial inequity in the rates of discipline infractions.

Given that teachers are primarily responsible for classroom management and consequently are more likely to engage in school discipline practices, it is important to examine the contexts of teachers and schools to better understand the racial disparities in rates of discipline. Teachers perceive students who get into trouble frequently as

troublemakers and are more likely to punish them at a higher rate for subsequent misbehavior (Thomas et al., 2009), and teachers view students who get into trouble as being academically weaker than their non-troublemaking peers (McHugh et al, 2013). Teachers' attitudes towards children who they view as more likely to get into trouble may be influencing their decisions regarding whether or not to assign a discipline infraction consequence for a particular behavior. It is therefore vital to increase our understanding of school and classroom contexts surrounding teachers' discipline decision-making.

### **Gender and Racial Differences in School Discipline**

The problematic nature of the negative outcomes for students who experience high levels of school discipline is compounded by the racial and gender disproportionalities with which these discipline infractions are given to students. Boys receive school punishment more frequently than girls (Ispa-Landa, 2017; Jordan & Anil, 2009; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al, 2008), and African American students are punished at school more frequently and with harsher consequences than are White students (Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace et al., 2008). Additionally, the rate of punishment for African American students has increased in the 21st century even though the rates for White, Hispanic, and Asian American students have decreased (Wallace et al., 2008). In 2011, African American students were suspended from school at a rate approximately 3.5 times higher than that of White students, and in 84 southeastern school districts, African American students comprised 100% of suspensions, while in 181 southeastern school districts, African American students comprised 100% of expulsions (Smith & Harper, 2015). Because African American students are more likely to receive school discipline (Jordan & Anil, 2009;

McFadden et al, 1992; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wu, 1982), the severity with which even relatively minor referrals are treated can have a significant negative impact on their educational outcomes. Examining the relationship between rates of lunch detention and race and gender can mitigate this impact and improve the educational and life experiences of African American children, and specifically African American male children.

One explanation for why these gender and racial disparities in school discipline exist is a combination of the subjective nature of many office discipline referrals, and the influence of implicit bias on teachers' decisions to respond to student behaviors with school discipline infractions rather than through classroom management techniques. Many non-violent offenses, such as disrespect or non-compliance, are subjective and they are often treated similarly to more serious offenses (Skiba, et al, 1997) by being included as office discipline referrals. These referrals may be influenced by the implicit biases of teachers and administrators (Staats, 2015). Implicit bias is cognition that is formed by individual prior experiences that shape a person's attitudes and beliefs about the self and others, often creating stereotypes, and that occur without conscious framing (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). This potential bias is racially problematic because teachers are significantly more likely to have lower expectations for African American children than for White children (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007) and to see African American children as more dangerous (Casella, 2003) and more likely to cause trouble (Bowditch, 1993) than White children.

Implicit bias begins developing during infancy and can be observed as explicit attitudes by age six, but increased awareness of social norms and an elevation of second-



order thinking skills causes the explicit manifestation of bias to lessen by age ten (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Eisenberg et al, 1997). By the time a child reaches late teens, elements such as social desirability bias and empathy produce increasingly egalitarian explicit behaviors that conform to social norms regarding factors like racial/ethnic bias – even though the implicit biases remain constant throughout a person’s life (Baron & Banaji, 2006)

### **Examining Lower-Level Discipline**

The primary discipline data used in school discipline research focuses on suspensions and expulsions because that information is required to be tracked by the federal government (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015) and is therefore publicly available. However, suspensions and expulsions are upper-level disciplines that are relatively infrequently used when compared to lower-level disciplines such as being sent to the hall, having one’s name written on the board, or having one’s seat moved, which are more a part of the daily routine of many classrooms. In a similar way that expulsions are more serious and less common than suspensions, and suspensions are more serious and less common than office referrals (Smith & Harper, 2015), lower-level offenses are less serious and are more commonly used in schools than are any of the more serious, upper-level discipline infractions. One such lower-level discipline, lunch detention, is an intermediate step between simple classroom management and being referred to the office, and it is extremely common throughout the country compared to upper-level disciplines such as suspension and expulsions. Because lunch detention is not tracked with fidelity and is not required to be reported to the government or to the public, there has been a dearth of research on it. This is problematic because, if racial and gender disparities exist

within this form of discipline as they do within upper-level discipline, the extremely common nature of lunch detention would mean that African American students are being punished disproportionately with even more regularity than the existing research shows.

### **Current Study**

This study furthers the research on race/ethnic and gender inequities in suspensions, expulsions, and office discipline referrals by adding the element of lunch detention, which will enable us to see if the patterns of inequity for upper-level school disciplines are evident in lower-level disciplines as well. Establishing this pattern of inequities will help to shape the discussion of how to create more equitable school experiences for all students. This study analyzed lunch detention data from students who attended a racially and ethnically diverse urban middle school in the southeast during the 2015-2016 school year to examine the relationships between race/ethnicity and gender on the rates of lower-level punishment. Based on existing research on the racial disparities in upper-level punishment, it was expected that 1) Students of color would receive a significantly higher rate of lunch detentions than White students, 2) Male students would receive a higher rate of lunch detentions than female students, and 3) There would be an interaction between race/ethnicity and gender, with African American boys having disproportionately higher rates of lunch detention.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants and Setting**

The participants in this study were students who attended a racially and ethnically diverse, urban middle school in the southeast during the 2015-2016 school year. The middle school is located in a school district in which all students were eligible for free

lunch, but the percent of students at the school who the district classified as living with poverty (receiving TANF, Medicaid, or SNAP, or being either a foster child or homeless) was 56%. Though the draw for the school includes urban, suburban, and rural areas, the school is classified as urban because of its location in the city and the overwhelming percentage of attending students who live in the urban area of the draw. The school pass rate on the state exams for the 2015-2016 school year was 48% for ELA and 38% for math. Through the annual end of the year online school climate survey, 91% of parents and 70% of students reported being satisfied with the learning environment, but only 35% of teachers reported being satisfied; similarly, 91% of parents and 79% of students reported being satisfied with the social and physical environment of the school, while only 33% of teachers reported being satisfied.

All students who attended the school during the 2015-2016 school year were included in the study, and the total initial sample size was 947 students. Demographic data showing grade level, race/ethnicity, and gender were supplied to the research team by the school, but one student's data was not available, so that student was excluded from the study. All demographic classifications were determined by the parent/guardian as part of the intake procedures that they undertook when their student was enrolled in the school district. As Table 1 shows, the three largest race/ethnic groups were identified as African American (53.1%;  $n = 503$ ), White (34.2%;  $n = 324$ ), and Hispanic/Latino (7.6%;  $n = 72$ ), and the other race/ethnic groups – mixed race/ethnic background (2.9%;  $n = 27$ ), Asian American (1.9%;  $n = 18$ ), Pacific Islander ( $n = 1$ ) and Native American ( $n = 1$ ) – had far fewer students represented. The school had a fairly even gender distribution, with 52% ( $n = 490$ ) being identified as male and 48% ( $n = 456$ ) as female. In prior years, the

school had offered single-gender educational classes for ELA, social studies, and science, but this program had been discontinued prior to the 2015-2016 school year.

The demographic and lunch detention data were collected by the school as part of normal discipline record-keeping procedures. All teachers and administrators in the school used a common lunch detention form on which was written the name of the student who committed the offense, the date of the infraction, the teacher's name, the reason(s) for the offense, and details of the context of the punishable event. Teachers were required to complete all sections of the form and were permitted to select as many of the reasons for the lunch detention as were appropriate. The lunch detention forms were delivered to the grade-level lunch detention proctors before lunch each day and were used by the proctors both for attendance purposes and to cross-check student intake reports of the reasons for the lunch detention. The proctors typed the lunch detention information from the forms into a database and sent the paper lunch detention forms to the lunch detention supervisor. The lunch detention supervisor compiled and organized the data, cross-checking the paper records with the database, and shared the lunch detention data with the school administration to help track student behavior and teacher use of lunch detention. By the 2015-2016 school year, lunch detention data had been used by the school administration to inform policy and procedure decisions regarding discipline. Examples of these decisions include restricting the number of lunch detentions a teacher could give per day to 5, requiring teachers to write out contextual information about each lunch detention on each form, and creating consistency in the lunch detention practices by requiring teachers to choose the reasons for the lunch detentions from a pre-determined list of acceptable reasons for this form of punishment. Students were

supposed to be restricted to receiving no more than 6 lunch detentions per quarter (one student in the study received 7 for a quarter because the student was given their sixth and seventh lunch detentions on the same day by different teachers). If students were to receive additional lunch detentions, those infractions would be transformed to referrals, and the punishment level would increase. Because the data were collected as part of the normal discipline procedures of the school, the IRB declared the study as exempt. For this study, all data were de-identified to protect the identities of the participants.

## **Measures**

**Demographic Data.** As aforementioned, student demographic information was provided by the parent/guardian at the time of the student's enrollment with the district. School- and district-level demographic information was provided either by the school or was available to the public on the district and State Department of Education websites.

**Lunch Detention Rate.** The total number of lunch detentions each student received across the entire school year was summed, and the mean number of lunch detentions students received was 2.59 ( $SD = 4.557$ ), with a range from 0 to 25. Of the 946 students with available demographic data, 49% ( $n = 463$ ) received at least one lunch detention during the school year.

## **Analytic Strategy**

Because race/ethnicity is a variable of interest for this study, determining which race/ethnicity groups to include is a crucial first step for the analysis. There were 7 race/ethnicity groups present in the school population: White, African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, Mixed-race, Pacific Islander, and Native American. Only students with race/ethnicity data were included in the study (1 student was missing

this data). Furthermore, because of the low sample of Pacific Islander and Native American students (1 each), those students were removed from the analysis. A power analysis was conducted to determine the requisite number of students needed for each of the remaining five race/ethnic categories. Since the minimum number of cases required to achieve 80% power was 35, Asian American and mixed-race students were removed from the analysis (both groups had fewer than 35 students). The resulting final sample size that was included in the analysis was 899 students: 324 of which were White, 503 African American, and 72 Hispanic/Latino.

With the final sample, histograms were created of the lunch detention data for each race/ethnic group and gender to examine the shape of the data. The histogram for African American and male students showed both a more platykurtic kurtosis than that of the White and female students and contained many more subjects with multiple lunch detentions. There was also variability in the numbers of students who had multiple lunch detentions, which produced a histogram with multiple smaller peaks. The planned analysis was a two-way ANOVA with the outcome variable being total number of lunch detentions, and the predictor variables being the race/ethnicity and gender of the students. A Levene's Test was conducted, and since the data violated the homogeneity of variance assumption, a QQ-Plot was run on the outcome variable – which showed a heavy-tailed distribution. Transforming the data was considered, but since approximately half of the students did not receive any lunch detentions, standard Log transformations were not appropriate due to the zero values, and transforming the data by adding a constant to the Log was ruled out because it is not recommended for count data (O'Hara & Kotze, 2010) like the numbers of lunch detention dependent variable. Since two-way ANOVA is

robust to violations of homogeneity of variance - especially with larger sample sizes and when the skews for the samples are in the same direction – the data were not transformed. A Bonferroni adjustment was selected as the appropriate post-hoc test. It was anticipated that race/ethnicity and gender would be significant in the omnibus analysis, that African American and Hispanic/Latino students, as students of color (Brown et al., 2018; Lardier et al., 2019; Sheth, 2019) would each have significantly higher rates of lunch detention than White students, that males would be significantly more likely than females to receive lunch detention, and that there would be an interaction between race/ethnicity and gender.

## Results

For hypothesis 1, the ANOVA (Table 2) revealed significant differences between the African American, White, and Hispanic/Latino race/ethnic groups,  $F(2, 901) = 47.619, p < .001$ . Table 3 shows the Bonferroni multiple comparisons between the three race/ethnic groups' rates of lunch detention. African American students ( $n = 503$ ) had significantly higher rates of lunch detentions than either White ( $n = 324$ ) or Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 72$ ) students ( $ps < .001$ ). However, although Hispanic/Latino students showed a higher rate of lunch detention than did White students, these two race/ethnic demographic groups did not show significantly different rates of lunch detention from each other ( $p = .552$ ).

For hypothesis 2, the ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference in the rates of lunch detention for male ( $n = 490$ ) and female ( $n = 456$ ) students  $F(1, 234) = 12.400, p < .001$ , with males having a significantly higher rate of lunch detention than females.

For the third and final hypothesis, the ANOVA revealed that there was no significant interaction between race/ethnicity and gender,  $F(2, 18) = 0.949, p = .387$ , showing that the strength of the relationship between gender and lunch detention was not moderated by race/ethnicity.

## **Discussion**

The current study sought to investigate the rates of lunch detention for students from different race/ethnicity and gender groups. Results indicate that African American students had higher rates of lunch detention than White or Hispanic/Latino students and that males had higher rates of lunch detention than females. Additionally, results showed that White and Hispanic/Latino students did not have significantly different rates of lunch detention from each other. And contrary to expectations, there was no interaction between ethnicity and gender on rates of lunch detention.

Consistent with expectations, results revealed that race/ethnicity is a significant factor in rates of school discipline. Specifically, African American students were found to receive lunch detentions at a rate 3.32 times that of White students. This finding is consistent with existing studies of national rates of upper-level disciplines such as suspensions and expulsions (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Ispa-Landa, 2017; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015) but it broadens the discussion to include lower-level discipline. One important reason for including lunch detention, as a form of lower-level discipline, is the role of lower-level disciplines in precipitating upper-level ones. Schools across the country have policies that delineate the relationships between lunch detentions and office discipline referrals. From West Virginia (Discipline and Attendance Policy – Cameron High School, n.d.) to New York (Lunch Detention Policy - University



Neighborhood High School, n.d.) to Kansas (Policies / After School vs Lunch Detention, n.d.) to Utah (Crimson Cliffs Middle – Washington County School District Schools Sites, n.d.), and all across the country, schools and districts have policies that lay out the teacher/administrator-observed behaviors that constitute lunch detention punishment, as well as the number of lunch detentions that precipitate upper-level disciplines such as office discipline referrals, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions.

Lunch detentions may be given for such relatively minor offenses as tardiness (Glenbard North High School, n.d.; Lunch Detention Policy - University Neighborhood High School, n.d.), having an electronic device visible (Discipline and Attendance Policy – Cameron High School, n.d.; Gloucester County Institute of Technology, n.d.), not having one's ID (Northwood Middle School, n.d.; Policies / After School vs Lunch Detention, n.d.), and dress code violations (Attendance & Discipline / Discipline Code, n.d.; Student Handbook 2021-2022, n.d.), and are an early and vital link in the chain of discipline that leads to the starkly problematic and damaging outcomes associated with upper-level discipline. The fact that students are suspended from school for referrals that are precipitated entirely through an accumulation of lunch detentions (Discipline and Attendance Policy – Cameron High School, n.d.), is highly problematic because of the close correlation between students receiving upper-level discipline infractions and students becoming ensnared in the school-to-prison pipeline. When these upper-level disciplines are the result of multiple minor infractions, rather than of major disruptive ones such as fighting, weapon possession, or bullying, students whose behaviors are non-violent and relatively non-disruptive experience similar negative outcomes as those students exhibiting significantly more problematic behaviors. This study's finding of

race/ethnic disparities in rates of lunch detention should lead to close examination of the policies, procedures, and practices regarding lower-level disciplines.

The conversation regarding the differences in lower-level discipline between Hispanic/Latino students and both African American and White students is complex because the existing literature on rates of upper-level discipline for Hispanic/Latino students paints a seemingly contradictory picture (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Some studies show African American and Hispanic/Latino students receiving upper-level disciplines with similarly significant rates when compared to White students (Skiba et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2008), while other studies show African American students receiving upper-level discipline at significantly higher rates than White *and* Hispanic/Latino students (Horner et al., 2010). It has been suggested that a possible reason for these discrepancies is the varied nature of the Hispanic/Latino population (Garcia & Bayer, 2005) in which Hispanic/Latino students from different places of origin interact differently with schools regarding a wide range of issues, including discipline. However, considering that both African American and Hispanic/Latino students are regarded as students of color in the greater societal discussions regarding race/ethnicity (Brown et al., 2018; Lardier et al., 2019; Sheth, 2019), we hypothesized that African American and Hispanic/Latino students may be more similar to each other than to White students regarding school discipline and would therefore have similarly significant greater rates of lunch detention than the White students in the study. In this current study, though, the results reveal that African American students have a significantly higher rate of lunch detention than do *either* White *or* Hispanic/Latino students. Importantly and surprisingly, White and Hispanic/Latino students did *not* significantly differ in their rates

of lunch detention *from each other*. Much of the discussion nationally regarding schools has focused over the past few decades on disparities that reflect White privilege and the benefits that White students accrue in a society that preferences White people, their values, and their experiences of life (Leonardo, 2004; McIntosh, 1992; Schumacher-Martinez & Proctor, 2020). However, the finding in this part of the study appears to suggest that something else is going on with regard to lower-level school discipline and race/ethnicity.

Rather than having a discipline system that positively preferences White students as a product of White privilege at the expense of non-White children, this study shows lunch detention as significantly negatively impacting African American students in particular – even in relation to other students of color. Moreover, the fact that Hispanic/Latino students and White students do not show significantly different rates of lunch detention from each other suggests that the observed behaviors of both of those race/ethnic groups are viewed similarly within the school environment with regard to this low-level discipline. Rather than there being a unique preferencing for the observed behaviors of White students here, this study suggests that the observed behaviors of White students and Hispanic/Latino students are viewed with similar benevolence, that there is a negative discipline association linked to the observed behaviors of African American students, and that this may be impacting the disparities in lunch detentions. This finding is important for educators because addressing a school culture’s possible preferential view of the observed behaviors of White students is different than addressing a school culture’s potential anti-preferencing for the observed behaviors of African American students. Schools may need to revise the way they educate their teachers with

regard to concepts such as implicit bias and institutional racism as a step towards combatting the race/ethnic inequities in rates of lunch detention.

As expected, boys were significantly more likely to be given lunch detention than were girls, which is not surprising given the existing empirical evidence of gender disparities in upper-level school discipline (Jordan & Anil, 2009; Wallace et al., 2008). Boys have significantly higher rates of externalizing behaviors that may be observed by teachers as aberrant behaviors within the classroom environment (Olivier et al., 2018) such as conduct disorder and aggression (Maughan et al., 2004), hyperactivity (Keshavarzi et al., 2014), and non-compliance (Reynolds et al., 2011), whereas girls tend to have more internalizing behaviors (Olivier et al., 2020) such as anxiety (Lewinsohn et al., 1998) and eating disorders (Lewinsohn et al., 2002; Micali et al., 2013). The fact that boys are more likely to have externalizing behaviors that can be seen as disruptive within the classroom is likely a significant factor in boys' higher rates of school discipline. However, there are other factors that may also be impacting the gender disparities in rates of discipline infractions. Teachers view girls' classroom behavior more positively even in circumstances where the students have similar levels of achievement and motivation to perform well in class (Brandmiller et al., 2020). Additionally, teachers perceive boys as having lower educational competence and higher distractibility and negative emotionality within the classroom setting (Mullola et al., 2012). Perceptions like these may be causing bias and be negatively impacting teachers' impressions of boys' behaviors, thereby increasing the likelihood that the teachers will give the boys discipline infractions. There is also plenty of research showing that boys often behave in ways that are not conducive to quiet, controlled classroom environments, while girls are more likely to behave in

school-friendly prosocial ways (Baker et al., 2016; Olivier et al., 2018; Van der Graaff et al., 2018). If boys are behaving in ways that teachers view as problematic for the educational environment of the classroom, then parents need to help shape boys' behaviors to meet those expectations. If teachers are viewing boys' behaviors from a negatively biased perspective, then they need to become more aware of their potential bias and learn how to adjust their teaching practices as well as their classroom management procedures. It is likely that both parents *and* teachers must embrace their roles in addressing the issue of boys' actual and perceived behaviors because the high number of school discipline infractions that boys get is a significant factor in their engagement in the school-to-prison pipeline (Casella, 2003; Skiba et al., 2014).

Though there were strong main effects of race/ethnicity and gender on rates of lunch detention, contrary to expectations, the ANOVA did not show race/ethnicity as moderating the effect of gender. African American girls are frequently viewed as overly mature and are over-sexualized within a school environment in ways that White girls are not (Epstein et al., 2017; Neal-Jackson, 2018). It is reasonable to hypothesize that this adultification of African American girls would produce a moderating effect on the main effect of gender. However, in the study there is such a low number of lunch detentions overall for girls – and in particular White and Hispanic/Latino girls – that this may be impacting the ability to detect statistical significance both because the low *N* decreases the statistical power and because the 0.30 rate of lunch detentions for White girls may be producing a floor effect that would mask the interaction. Looking at the descriptive statistics can offer some context that may help clarify some of the relationships between race/ethnicity and gender that are not evident in the ANOVA. African American males'

rate of lunch detention per year (4.87) was 3.32 times that of White males (1.52) and African American females' rate (2.89) was 9.6 times the rate for White females (.30). Additionally, African American males received 16.2 times as many lunch detentions as White females, and African American females even received 1.9 times as many lunch detentions as White males. The fact that African American females received nearly twice as many lunch detentions per student as White males suggests that there may be more of an interaction between race/ethnicity and gender than is apparent in the low-powered ANOVA. This is relevant for schools that are searching to mitigate the disparities in school discipline because these findings can impact the types of programs school choose to institute to positively impact their students.

For instance, the school in this study had a sustained focus for multiple years of improving the educational outcomes for African American male students, who had been the lowest-performing students on the end-of-year state tests and were a consistently failing category in the school's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) matrix. The school had established a single gender program, in which it had placed significant resources. The school also had formed a Bowtie Club to provide social and academic support for African American male students. Both of these programs did an excellent job of focusing on the male experience, but they did not provide school-level resources to address issues of race and culture that may have more significantly impacted the experiences of the African American male students. For instance, the school could have introduced culturally relevant teaching practices such as including curricular and extracurricular reading materials that focus on African American culture, including African American members of the greater school community as mentors and as guest speakers, and increasing the

recognition of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) within the school community by integrating activities that work to the strengths of all students so that a wider range of abilities and strengths are valued. It is certainly valuable to address issues of gender, but the school would likely have seen a greater impact on the outcomes for their target population if a greater portion of their resources were spent addressing issues of race/ethnicity rather than gender.

In addition to the practical relevance of examining the overall rates of lunch detention, an understanding of school culture can be deepened through an examination of the disparities evident in Table 4, which demonstrates the skewedness of the data – in particular for White students. The vast majority of White male (75%) and female (96%) students received either no lunch detentions or 1 lunch detention during the school year, and only 10 male ( $n = 8$ ) or female ( $n = 2$ ) White students at all averaged at least 2 lunch detentions per quarter. This contrasts with the experiences of African American students, where only 40% of male students and 58% of female students had either no lunch detentions or 1 lunch detention during the year, and 94 African American students averaged 2 or more lunch detentions per quarter. Nearly a quarter of African American male students ( $n = 64$ ) averaged 2 or more lunch detentions per quarter, and 17% ( $n = 44$ ) even averaged at least 3 per quarter. The disparities in numbers of White and African American students who received at least 2 lunch detentions per quarter is troubling, in part, because of the public nature of lunch detentions.

Lunch detentions occur either in the cafeteria or in a designated lunch detention room, but in both cases, the students come to the cafeteria to get their lunches. They are punished in full public view of their peers – either through sitting at the lunch detention

tables or by being escorted in and out of the cafeteria by the lunch detention proctor – and by their teachers who, even if they are not present in the cafeteria, receive reports of which students are in lunch detention so that the teachers can make sure that the students go to their detentions. The public nature of lunch detention is especially problematic for students who regularly receive that punishment because they are more likely to be labeled as troublemakers, and perception of a student as a troublemaker correlates both with perception of a student as being academically weak (McHugh et al, 2013) and with student dropout rates (O’Connell & Sheikh, 2009). When those negative perceptions are connected overwhelmingly to African American students because of African American students’ overrepresentation in both the overall percentage of students in lunch detention and the percentage of students receiving multiple lunch detentions per quarter, this transforms into a school-level racial issue. Past research has shown that teachers are significantly more likely to perceive African American students as troublemakers (Bowditch, 1993) or as dangerous (Casella, 2003), and the public nature of lunch detention, combined with the disproportionate number of African American students receiving that punishment, may be a contributing factor in those perceptions.

The teachers at the school in this study reported very low satisfaction with both the learning environment (35%) and the social and physical environment (33%), even though the students reported much higher levels of satisfaction (70% and 79% respectively). It is possible that the low levels of teacher satisfaction may be related to a perception that African American students get into significant levels of trouble at the school, and that the public nature of lunch detention negatively impacts that perception. Making changes to the lunch detention policies, procedures, and practices at the school



may reduce the public impression within the school of African American students as troublemakers, and will likely have other positive academic, social, health, and environmental outcomes as well.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are some important limitations that should be examined when considering the findings of this study. First, this study draws its sample from a single school, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research might gather similar data from additional schools in other areas of the country. The existing research on upper-level discipline shows similar disproportionalities throughout the country (Smith & Harper, 2015), so it is likely that similar rates would also be found for lunch detentions nationally as well.

Another limitation to the study is that there may be other variables that are impacting the results and are not part of this analysis. For instance, since all students in the district were classified as qualifying for free lunch the year before this study commenced, the district stopped collecting and making available students' lunch status, which is used as a proxy for socioeconomic status (SES). This lack of data prevents this study from examining SES as a potential covariate. Future research may involve districts in which lunch status is an available variable for the research team, and SES may be examined. Another potential impacting set of variables that future research may find valuable is students' special education, 504, and IEP status. It is likely that students with behavior-related disabilities struggle with classroom behaviors, and because there is an overrepresentation of students of color classified as special education (Ahram et al., 2011), gathering that information may lead to important insights in future research.

This study also does not gather information about the race/ethnicities of the teachers who have assigned the lunch detentions. Since research has shown that African American students have better relationships with African American teachers than they do with White teachers (Saft & Pianta, 2001), and since African American teachers are significantly underrepresented in America's public schools (Madkins, 2011), it may be of critical importance for future research to examine teacher demographics as being a relevant factor in assignment of students' lunch detentions.

One of the undercurrents in this paper is the potential that perceptions of students by teachers may precipitate some of the disparities in rates of lunch detention, and that this may be the product of implicit bias. This study does not involve a test of implicit bias for the teachers, so it relies on existing research and theory to address the potential for perceptions to produce bias. Future research may involve assessing teachers' implicit biases using a tool such as the Implicit Association Test, and then incorporating those results into their analysis.

A final limitation is that the reasons for the lunch detentions are not analyzed to see whether there are patterns in which students of color receive lunch detentions for specific reasons. Analyzing the frequency of subjective reasons for the lunch detention assignments will add another dimension to this research on racial disparities in school discipline.

### **Conclusion**

This study offers compelling findings that broaden the discussion regarding the replication of patterns of racial and gender inequities in school discipline. The inclusion of lunch detention as representative of lower-level discipline brings into focus the

importance of understanding how racial inequities in this understudied discipline impact the racial inequities that pervade upper-level disciplines. This study represents an initial step towards a more complete understanding of how racial inequities persist in the discipline systems of America's public schools.

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Table 3.1  
*Frequency of Race/Ethnicities and Gender*

		<i>n</i>	%
White	Total	324	34.2
	Boys	168	17.7
	Girls	156	16.5
African American	Total	503	53.1
	Boys	265	28.0
	Girls	238	25.1
Hispanic/Latino	Total	72	7.6
	Boys	34	3.6
	Girls	38	4.0
Asian American	Total	18	1.9
	Boys	10	1.0
	Girls	8	.9
Mixed Race	Total	27	2.9
	Boys	12	1.3
	Girls	15	1.6
Pacific Islander	Total	1	.1
	Boys	1	.1
	Girls	0	0
Native American	Total	1	.1
	Boys	0	0
	Girls	1	.1

*Note.* Total *N* = 946

Table 3.2  
*Results of the ANOVA Predicting Rates of Lunch Detention*

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Race/Ethnicity	899	2.67	4.65	47.619***
White	324	0.94	2.59	
African American	503	3.93	5.36	
Hispanic	72	1.64	3.67	
Gender	899	2.67	4.65	12.400***
Boys	467	3.47	5.23	
Girls	432	1.80	3.74	

*Note.* \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



Table 3.3

*Results of the Bonferroni Multiple Comparisons for Race/ethnicity*

Ethnicity	95% Confidence Interval		
	Mean Difference	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
White vs. African American	-2.97***	-3.71	-2.22
White vs. Hispanic/Latino	-0.58	-2.12	0.61
African American vs. White	2.97***	2.22	3.71
African American vs. Hispanic/Latino	2.21***	0.90	3.53
Hispanic/Latino vs. White	0.76	-0.61	2.12
Hispanic/Latino vs. African American	-2.21***	-3.53	-0.90

*Note.* \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3.4

*Descriptive Statistics for numbers of Lunch Detention Per Demographic Grouping*

Race/Ethnicity	Gender	<i>N</i>	0 Lunch Detentions	1 Lunch Detention	<4 Lunch Detentions	8+ Lunch Detentions
White	Boys	168	93	33	149	8
	Girls	156	138	12	153	2
African American	Boys	265	70	38	150	64
	Girls	238	103	35	174	30

## CHAPTER 4

# YOU DID WHAT?!: A MIXED-METHODS EXAMINATION OF SUBJECTIVITY IN LUNCH DETENTIONS<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fram, P. (2021). To be submitted to *Sociology of Education*.

## **Abstract**

Racial disparities in rates of upper-level school discipline have been explicated frequently, but this study examines racial disparities from the novel perspective of subjectivity in lower-level discipline. This study employs a mixed-methods approach to examine teachers' reasons for assigning lunch detentions to 270 African American and White male middle school students during the 2015-2016 school year. ANOVA was conducted to determine both whether students who were given more lunch detentions were more likely to receive them for subjective reasons such as excessive talking and disrespect and whether there were race/ethnic differences in rates of subjectivity. For the analysis, students were separated into three lunch detention frequency groups: (low) 1-4, (moderate) 5-13, and (high) 14-25, and then into frequency by race/ethnicity groups. To better understand the context surrounding subjectivity in lunch detention referrals, a thematic analysis was conducted on teacher narratives explaining the contexts of the infractions leading to the lunch detention. Implications for practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* school discipline; lunch detention; race; inequity, subjectivity; mixed method

## Introduction

For many students of color, navigating the discipline structures within their schools can be a daunting experience. African American students are disproportionately punished at school (Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace et al., 2008), and this disparity is mirrored in the inequitable negative outcomes that African American students endure (Frymier, 1997; Lansford et al., 2016; Sum & Harrington, 2003). These disparities are complicated by the subjective nature of much school discipline (Skiba et al, 2014). Racial disparities have been the subject of previous research (Skiba et al, 2002; Smith & Harper, 2015), but those studies have used upper-level discipline data on office discipline referrals, suspensions, and/or expulsions such as are contained in the public records available through the federal Department of Education (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). What is unknown is whether the racial disproportionalities in subjective reasons for upper-level punishments are also present in more commonly used lower-level disciplines that often precipitate upper-level punishments. To address this gap in the literature, the current study examines the lower-level discipline of lunch detention and employs a mixed-methods design to address four research questions. First, are there differences in the rates of lunch detentions given for subjective reasons for students who receive a low number of lunch detentions and students who receive a high number of lunch detentions? Second, are there differences in the rates of lunch detentions given for subjective reasons for students from different race/ethnic groups? Third, using qualitative narrative reports, how do teachers characterize the reasons for lunch detention between low and high frequency lunch

detention groups? And fourth, using the same qualitative narrative reports, how do teachers characterize the reasons for detention by race?

### **Racial Differences in School Discipline**

African American children receive punishment at school more often and with greater severity than do White children (Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace et al., 2008). In 2011, African American children were suspended from school nearly 3.5 times as frequently as their White peers, and 100% of suspended students in 84 southeastern school districts and 100% of expelled students in 181 southeastern school districts were African American (Smith & Harper, 2015). Frequent punishment in school can create and reify the impression within children that school is an unfriendly place (Sidman, 1993), thereby leading to further increases in school discipline infractions (Brackett, et al., 2011; Brown-Wright et al, 2013; Tyler et al., 2010). This can create a recursive discipline loop that increases the alienation that many African American children feel towards school and negatively impacts their school experiences.

Higher rates of school discipline correspond with a range of problematic outcomes such as increased school dropout (Bowditch, 1993; Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015), student retention (Frymier, 1997), expulsion (Morrison et al., 1997), violent behavior (Tobin & Sugai, 1999), unemployment as adults (Christle et al., 2007), and academic underperformance (Gregory et al., 2010; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Negative school outcomes, such as students being retained, expelled, or dropping out, lead to highly destructive life outcomes such as lower income as an adult (Sum & Harrington, 2003), increased problematic health outcomes (Lansford et al., 2016), and imprisonment (Wald & Losen, 2003). When students who get into trouble also underperform in the

classroom, this establishes and reinforces the perception within the school that children who get into trouble are less capable students than their peers (McHugh et al 2013). This perception lowers teachers' expectations for students who get into trouble, further increasing discipline rates (Gregory et al, 2011; McHugh et al., 2013) and establishing a self-fulfilling prophecy that students who get into trouble will increasingly receive punishment and will have low academic performance in their classes (Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2000). Consequently, teachers are more likely to have lower expectations for African American children, who have higher rates of school discipline infractions, than for White children (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007).

### **Subjectivity in School Discipline**

The problematic nature of the racial disparities in rates and severities of school discipline is compounded by the subjectivity of many discipline infractions. Suspensions and expulsions occur subsequent to office discipline referrals, a large portion of which are for nonviolent, subjective reasons such as noncompliance and disrespect (Skiba et al, 1997), but which are nonetheless often addressed in a similar manner to the relatively infrequent violent offenses (Council on School Health, 2013; Skiba et al, 1997). Noncompliance, which encompasses such behaviors as ignoring the teacher, being slow to start on an assignment, underperforming on a task, refusing to follow the teacher's directives, and negotiating alternatives with the teacher (Reynolds et al, 2011), demonstrates the highly subjective nature of many office referrals. African American children are significantly more likely than White children to receive office discipline referrals for subjective reasons (Skiba et al, 2002), which is a likely significant factor in the racial disparities in rates and severities of school discipline infractions. The

subjectivity of most office discipline referrals increases the potential for teacher bias in interpreting the observed behaviors of the punished students (Staats, 2015). This potential for bias is compounded by teachers' greater likelihood to view African American children as troublemakers (Bowditch, 1993) or as being dangerous (Casella, 2003) compared to White children. Consequently, teachers develop more negative relationships with African American students who teachers view as aggressive than for similarly perceived White students (Meehan et al, 2003). In essence, teachers may be responding to the same observed student behavior differently depending on how teachers subjectively view students (Sugai et al, 2000).

### **Current Study**

The overwhelming majority of research that has been done on school discipline has focused on upper-level discipline infractions, such as office discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions, because of the readily available nature of upper-level discipline data. There is a requirement that these forms of discipline infractions be tracked by schools and school districts, and that the data be reported to government agencies and be made available to the public (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Several studies have analyzed the rates and severities of these upper-level discipline infractions by demographic groups such as those defined by race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and special education status (e.g., Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Jordan & Anil, 2009; Krezmien et al., 2006; Skiba et al., 1997; Skiba et al., 2002). In contrast, lower-level discipline infractions are significantly under-studied because they are not required to be tracked or reported to the government or to the public. Neither school report cards nor the Office of Civil Rights includes information on lower-



level discipline infractions as a definable characteristic of schools (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Civil Rights Data, 2021), which significantly limits the public's understanding of the importance of these lower-level discipline infractions on the experiences of children within the schools.

Lower-level discipline infractions include such elements as being sent to the hall, receiving lunch detention, being sent to another teacher's room, or having one's seat moved. Students receive lower-level discipline infractions much more frequently than upper-level discipline infractions because they are given for more common and often more mundane behaviors such as talking out of turn in class, being out of one's seat, running in the hallway, being tardy to class, and having dress-code violations (Attendance & Discipline / Discipline Code, n.d.; Glenbard North High School, n.d.; Lunch Detention Policy - University Neighborhood High School, n.d.; Student Handbook 2021-2022, n.d.).

This study analyzes data on one such lower-level discipline infraction: lunch detention. Lunch detentions occur when teachers or administrators identify observed behaviors that they determine to be aberrant and that they feel warrant a more significant response than the normal classroom management procedures allow, but that are not serious enough to precipitate an office discipline referral. Exploring the subjective nature of lunch detentions will allow us to understand more clearly the racial disparities in rates of school discipline.

This paper explores quantitatively the subjectivity of the teacher-stated reasons for assigning lunch detentions and then examines qualitatively the contextual explanations teachers provided for the lunch detentions. First, this study examines

whether students who received greater numbers of lunch detentions have a higher proportion of those infractions for subjective reasons than students who received only a few lunch detentions. This study tested two key hypotheses. First, students who received more lunch detentions were expected to have a higher rate of subjective reasons for the lunch detentions than students who received fewer lunch detentions. Second, African American students who received high numbers of lunch detentions were expected to have a higher rate of subjectivity for those lunch detentions than White students in the same lunch detention frequency range. The qualitative part of the study examined thematic patterns in both the lunch detention frequency groups and the race/ethnicity groups to elucidate the quantitative findings regarding subjectivity in reasons for teachers' assigning of lunch detentions.

## **Methods**

### **Participants and Setting**

The sample consists of students from an urban middle school with an ethnically and racially diverse population in the southeastern United States who attended during 2015-2016. The school is characterized as being urban even though some students who attended the school lived in the surrounding suburban and rural areas and were bussed to the school. All students in the district were classified as qualifying for free lunch the year prior to this study because of the overall poverty level for the district, so lunch status was not available to be collected for much of the sample. As a result, the socioeconomic status for individual students was not discernible. However, the school district classified 56% of the students at the school as living with poverty because their families received assistance in the form of SNAP, TANF, or Medicaid, or they were either homeless or a

foster child. For 2015-2016, 48% of the school's students passed their end of year state exams in ELA and 38% passed in math, which were both above the average score for both the district and the state. The yearly school climate survey for this school year produced strange results. Whereas in the two years prior to 2015-2016, 98% of teachers had expressed satisfaction with the learning environment as well as with the social and physical environment, those percentages dropped to 35% and 33% respectively for the year of this study. Student satisfaction also dropped slightly for learning environment from 80.5% to 70% but stayed virtually the same for social and physical environment. The school had a total enrollment of 947 students, and demographic data were collected for 946 of the students. Race and gender are two relevant constructs for the scope of this study, so those demographic elements are of particular interest. There were 456 (48%) female and 490 (52%) male students, 503 (53.1%) African American students, 324 (34.2%) White students, 72 (7.6%) Latinx students, 27 (2.9%) mixed-race students, 18 (1.9%) Asian American students, 1 Pacific Islander student, and 1 Native American student.

Since this study only concerns students who received lunch detention, the 483 (51%) students who did not receive lunch detention were excluded from the study. A power analysis was conducted with the remaining students, and to achieve at least 80% power, each race/ethnic category had to contain a minimum of 24 students. Only African American and White students had greater than 24 students who received lunch detention during the year, so the other 5 race/ethnic categories were excluded from the study, leaving 423 students: 270 males and 153 females. However, examination of subgroup lunch detention rates revealed that White girls only had a sample size of 18 participants

who had received lunch detention, which was less than the recommended minimum subgroup sample size, based on the power analysis. Because gender is a significant factor in rates of punishment in school (Jordan & Anil, 2009; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008), removing White girls from the sample precipitated also excluding African American girls from the study as well. Thus, the final sample for the study was 270 African American or White male students who received lunch detention during the 2015-2016 school year.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

All students within the school had their lunch detention data collected as part of the regular procedures for the school, so the IRB declared the study as exempt. As part of the effort to protect student identities, all data were de-identified and the name and location of the school were obscured. Teachers and administrators utilized a common form on which they wrote the student's name, the date of the infraction, the teacher's name, the reason(s) for the lunch detention, and a narrative description of the punishable event. Teachers and administrators selected as many reasons as were applicable for the lunch detention from seven categories: (1) tardiness, (2) excessive talking, (3) disruption (and the place being disrupted), (4) disrespect (to peer or teacher), (5) consistent non-compliant behavior, (6) consistent breaking of class rule, and (7) breaking school rule. They were also required to complete a narrative explanation of the context at the bottom of the form. Lunch detention forms were delivered daily to the teacher who was proctoring lunch detention for each grade, and the proctors were responsible for both inputting the data into a database and collecting the forms to be sent to the lunch detention supervisor. The lunch detention supervisor coordinated the databases for each

grade, kept the paper records with which to cross-check the database, and compiled and organized the data to share with the school administration.

## **Measures**

**Demographic Data.** Student demographic information was provided by the parent/guardian at the time of student enrollment with the district. School report card and district information was provided either by the school or was found on the district and State Department of Education websites.

**Subjective Lunch Detentions.** Each of the seven lunch detention reasons was classified as being *subjective* or *non-subjective*. The following reasons were classified as subjective in alignment with the field: (a) excessive talking, (b) disruption, (c) disrespect, and (d) consistent non-compliant behavior. Non-subjective reasons included (a) tardiness, (b) consistent breaking of class rule, and (c) breaking of school rule (Girvan et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 1997). Because some lunch detentions had multiple reasons, and others were submitted with no reason given, four categories of subjectivity emerged: 1) “subjective” (all reasons for the lunch detention were subjective); 2) “non-subjective (all reasons for the lunch detention were non-subjective); 3) “mixed” (both subjective and non-subjective reasons were selected); and 4) “no reason given” (the teacher submitted the lunch detention form with no reason selected, and neither the proctor nor the supervisor was able to gather the information from the assigning teacher). Because this study examines subjectivity, and any subjective reason given could influence the teacher’s perspective in assigning the punishment, the “subjective’ and “mixed” categories were merged into an “any subjective reason” category. Within student, the number of lunch detentions that had any subjective reason was summed and then divided by the total number of lunch

detentions for that student to create a proportion score for each student of lunch detentions that contained any subjective reasons.

### **Analytic Strategy**

The analytic strategies in the current study were chosen to address the nested nature of the data (detentions nested within students) and the lack of independence of the data which prevented lunch detentions from being treated as a count variable. To address these issues, the proportion of each student's lunch detentions that are in the "any subjective reason" category was calculated, and these proportions – rather than a count of each lunch detention – were used in the quantitative analyses.

To address the first hypothesis in this study, the students in the sample were separated into three frequency groups. Students who received between 1 and 4 lunch detentions formed the *low frequency* group ( $n = 161$ ). Students who received between 5 and 13 lunch detentions comprised the *moderate frequency* group ( $n = 75$ ). Lastly, students who received 14 or more lunch detentions were in the *high frequency* group ( $n = 34$ ). The cut points for the groups were selected after examining research that used similar cut points for office discipline referral (ODR) data (Girvan et al., 2017; McIntosh et al., 2009), since ODR's are the closest parallel discipline data source to lunch detentions in the literature. The cut points in those studies emerged from the Response to Intervention (RTI) model that is a standard resource within the educational community for addressing academic and behavioral concerns within schools. In RTI, students are split into three tiers: Tier 1 comprises approximately 80% of the students, including those students who do not receive any discipline infractions throughout the school year, and is viewed as being part of the normal academic and behavioral workings of the school; Tier

2 comprises approximately 15% of the students and is the category for children who need a moderate level of academic and/or behavioral support; and Tier 3 is comprised of approximately 5% of the students and is viewed as a category for children who need significant academic and/or behavioral support. The data for this study have been split into frequency groups that mirror the RTI model percentages and are calculated from the total population of the school

To compare the proportion of subjectivity across the three frequency groups, an ANOVA was conducted. For this analysis, the predictor variable was the frequency group, and the dependent variable was the proportion of any subjective reason for lunch detention.

To examine whether race/ethnicity moderated the association between frequency groups and the proportion of subjectivity, a two-way ANOVA was conducted. Frequency groups, race-ethnicity, and the interaction between the two were entered into the model predicting the proportion of subjectivity. The “low frequency/African American” group has 101 students, the “low frequency/White” group has 60 students, the “moderate frequency/African American” group has 64 students, the “moderate frequency/White” group has 11 students, the “high frequency/African American” group has 34 students, and the “high frequency/White” group has 4 students. Once these group sizes were recognized, a chi-square was conducted to further examine the racial disparities.

The qualitative aspect of the study involved a thematic analysis of the narrative sections of the lunch detentions. The two goals of this part of the study were 1) to explore differences between the narrative expressions of subjectivity in teacher-stated reasons for lunch detention between students in different frequency groups, and 2) to explore the

differences between the narrative expressions of subjectivity in teacher-stated reasons for lunch detention between African American and White students.

The thematic analysis followed a series of steps. First, a preliminary review of a subset of the lunch detention forms was conducted to establish an initial set of emergent open coding. Second, six frequency by race/ethnicity groups (e.g., low frequency group/White students, low frequency group/African American students) were established. Third, a stratified random sample of 10 lunch detention forms from each of the six groups was selected, scanned into NVivo, and coded using an emergent design technique. Additional samples from each of the 6 groups were drawn 5 at a time until saturation was reached with the emergent coding. A total of 120 lunch detention forms were eventually examined, with 20 randomly selected from each frequency by race subgroup. The data were analyzed to characterize the subjective nature of the lunch detentions for each frequency group and for each race/ethnic subgroup within the frequency groups.

## **Results**

Descriptive statistics for students in the sample regarding lunch detentions that included any subjective reasons are included in Table 1. The mean for lunch detentions for subjective reasons per student was 4.10 ( $SD = 4.53$ ) with a range from 0 to 20, and the average proportion score per student was .65 ( $SD = .34$ ) with a range from 0 to 1.

Before running the ANOVA to test the first hypothesis, a test for homogeneity of variance was conducted. Given that the Levene statistic was significant, the subsequent ANOVA was run with a Brown-Forsythe test because of its robustness with unequal sample sizes and with a Games-Howell post hoc test. The results of the ANOVA indicate significant differences in the proportion of subjectivity in lunch detention between the



frequency groups, ,  $F(2, .480) = 4.217, p = .016$ . The Games-Howell post hoc test revealed significant differences between the low frequency group and both the moderate ( $p = 0.32$ ) and high ( $p < .001$ ) frequency groups (see Table 3). No significant difference was found between the moderate and high frequency groups.

For hypothesis 2, the number of White and African American boys in each frequency group was first examined. The descriptive statistics in Table 5 show very low numbers of students in the White/moderate frequency group ( $n = 11$ ) and the White/high frequency group ( $n = 4$ ). A chi-square analysis revealed significant differences in the number of students in each group (see Table 6),  $\chi^2 (3, N = 433) = 51.897, p < .001$ . There was no significant interaction between frequency groups and race,  $F(2, .016) = 0.136, p = .873$ , and the main effect of race/ethnicity was also not significant,  $F(1, .009) = 0.082 p = .775$ .

For the qualitative section, themes of (a) teacher negativity and (b) student talking were identified and analyzed in relation to the lunch detention frequency groups. Themes of (a) student avoidance of work and (b) student aggression/threat of violence were identified and analyzed in relation to race/ethnicity. The theme of teacher negativity was present in 23% of the lunch detention forms for the low frequency group, 21% for the moderate frequency group, and 40% for the high frequency group. Teacher negativity included pointed descriptions of verbal conflicts with students and teacher use of exclamation points, underlining, and belittling comments describing students' behaviors with terms such as "failure", "random", and "unnecessary". The theme of student talking was present in 34% of the sample for the low frequency group, 38% for the moderate frequency group, and 54% for the high frequency group. Student talking included general

“talking” as well as “continued talking while I’m teaching after warning”, “told repeatedly to be quiet”, and “talking during a test.” The frequency of themes also differed depending on student’s race. The theme of student avoidance of work was present in 6% of the 60 lunch detention forms of White students and 25% of the 60 forms for African American students. Student avoidance of work included teacher mentions of students “sleep[ing]”, “refus[ing] to sit/stand/participate”, “listening to music” instead of working, and being “out of seat.” In 12% of the forms of White male students, the theme of student aggression/ threat of violence emerged as a theme. In contrast, this theme only emerged from 2% of the African American boys’ lunch detention forms. Student aggression/threat of violence included a student “slap[ping] another student in the face”, threatening to “tussel [sic]” with a teacher, and tripping a “student while going up the stairs.”

### **Discussion**

This study sought to investigate the impact of subjectivity in the rates of lunch detention and to characterize those differences by frequency subgroup and by race/ethnicity. Results indicate that students who received greater frequencies of lunch detentions had a higher rate of subjective reasons for those infractions than students who received lower rates of lunch detention, and that students in the highest frequency group had over 3/4 of their lunch detentions given for subjective reasons. Additionally, the low frequency group had significantly lower rates of subjectivity than either the moderate or high frequency groups. Contrary to expectations, there was no significant difference between the subjectivity rates of White and African American students within each frequency group.

Lunch detentions are of particular importance both because they are public and also because they precipitate upper-level discipline infractions. It is incredibly common for schools throughout the country to have policies in which a certain number of lunch detentions equals an upper-level discipline infraction (Discipline and Attendance Policy – Cameron High School, n.d.; Student Handbook 2021-2022, n.d.), which means that a large proportion of upper-level discipline infractions are for a combination of mild behaviors rather than for more extreme behaviors such as fighting, bringing weapons to school, or bullying. The problematic nature of this transformation of lower-level discipline into upper-level discipline is compounded by the significant racial disparities that are evident in rates of lower-level discipline infractions such as lunch detentions (Fram, under review).

Consistent with expectations, the subjectivity of lunch detentions was significantly higher for the higher frequency groups than for the low frequency group. Studies have shown that teacher expectations of student behavior are influenced by prior student behaviors (Brophy, 1983; Perez & Okonofua, 2022), and that when teachers have lower expectations for students, those students frequently live down to those expectations (Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2000). Students who are in the higher frequency groups have demonstrated both to the teachers and to themselves that they have behaved more frequently in ways that have resulted in punishment than other students, and so it is likely that members of the school community would have the expectation that those students would continue to behave in ways that merit subsequent lunch detentions.

The significant subjectivity is expected, based on the findings in the existing literature on upper-level discipline (Skiba et al, 1997), but the findings in this current

study show far more subjectivity than in studies on upper-level discipline. In their seminal study, Skiba et al (1997) show subjective reasons for office discipline referrals (disobedience and disrespect) to comprise 39% of the overall infractions. This high rate of subjectivity is quite concerning because of the extremely problematic educational and life outcomes associated with high rates of school discipline (Bowditch, 1993; Lansford et al., 2016; Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Sum & Harrington, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003). In this current study, however, the overall rate of subjectivity in reasons for lunch detention is 65%, which is a much higher rate than is found in the upper-level disciplines and is extremely concerning in part because of the direct connection between numbers of lunch detentions and instances of upper-level discipline (e.g., Crimson Cliffs Middle – Washington County School District Schools Sites, n.d.; Discipline and Attendance Policy – Cameron High School, n.d.; Lunch Detention Policy - University Neighborhood High School, n.d.; Policies / After School vs Lunch Detention, n.d.). When lunch detentions are given out for such high rates of subjective reasons, the precipitating upper-level disciplines and the corresponding negative academic and life outcomes also become integrally connected to subjectivity. The public's impression that children who are given upper-level disciplines at school have committed a significant offense and may deserve the severe consequences is eroded by the findings of this study in which a shocking percentage of the lunch detentions that eventually mature into upper-level disciplines are subjective in nature.

The problematic nature of the overall subjectivity of lunch detentions is exacerbated by this study's findings regarding the elevated rates of subjectivity for students who get greater numbers of lunch detentions. The rate of lunch detentions for

subjective reasons in the low frequency group is 60%, and this rate elevates even significantly to 70% ( $p < .05$ ) for students in the moderate frequency group and 76% ( $p < .001$ ) for students in the high frequency group. The extraordinarily high rates of lunch detentions for subjective reasons for students in the high frequency group suggests that the students who are most likely to have lunch detentions turn into upper-level discipline infractions are the very ones who are receiving lunch detentions with the highest rate of subjectivity.

An examination of the minimum percentage of subjectivity for students within each of the frequency groups reveals additional problematic findings. Students in the low frequency group had subjectivity ratios between 0 and 1, which means that some of the students did not have any lunch detentions given for subjective reasons. However, the moderate frequency group did not have any students with 0 subjective lunch detentions, and their ratios were between .2 and 1. But it is in the high frequency group that the minimum ratio is the most problematic. In this group, the minimum ratio is .5, which shows that the lowest percentage of subjective reasons for lunch detention that *any* student in this group had is 11 percentage points higher than the *average* percentage of subjective reasons for ODRs in the study by Skiba, et al (1997). On average, the students who get into the most trouble in this current study are being punished for subjective reasons over three quarters of the time, and *none* of them have the majority of their punishments be for non-subjective reasons. The literature shows that students who get into trouble are viewed by teachers as students who are likely to get into further trouble (Thomas et al., 2009), which may precipitate an unintentional bias that explains some of the significance in the rate differences between the low frequency group and the higher

frequency groups. Since studies have shown that teachers are susceptible to implicit biases (Staats, 2015), it is possible that teachers' implicit biases may be impacting the disparities in rates of subjectivity in lunch detentions for the different frequency groups.

Implicit bias is a subconscious understanding of a person's experiences and relationships that often manifests in inter-relational stereotypes that can precipitate unconsciously biased behavior towards others (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). In this study, a teacher's perception of the teacher-observed subjective behaviors of a student who the teacher is aware gets into trouble frequently may be biased by the teacher's preconceived notion of the student as a troublemaker. Subjective behaviors are ones that a teacher may or may not view as problematic and are behaviors for which the teacher may or may not decide to punish. This study shows that, when teachers are presented with observed student behaviors that are open to subjective interpretation, teachers are significantly more likely to punish students who more frequently get into trouble than those who do not.

It was hypothesized that race/ethnicity would have both a main effect and an interaction with frequency group on rates of subjectivity in lunch detentions because of existing research showing teachers' pejorative views regarding African American interaction styles (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Neal et al., 2003; Ogbu, 2004) and previous scholarship's findings that African American students receive higher rates of upper-level disciplines for subjective reasons than do White students (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 1997). However, neither of these hypotheses in this study were supported by the findings in the ANOVA. To better understand how race/ethnicity is impacting relationships in this study, a closer examination of the data is required. The Bonferroni multiple comparisons

show significantly higher rates of subjectivity in the lunch detentions in the African American high frequency group than the African American low frequency group, but no significant difference between any of the other African American or White groups were found. Additionally, no significance was found in the interaction between race/ethnicity and frequency group with regard to the subjectivity of the lunch detentions. However, the findings are severely limited by the low numbers of students in the White moderate frequency ( $n = 11$ ) and White high frequency ( $n = 4$ ) groups and the significant disparities in the distribution of students in the frequency by race/ethnicity groups. These disparities were not present in the low frequency groups but were markedly present in the moderate and high frequency groups, as well as the group that did not receive any lunch detentions at all. White students were overrepresented in the group of students who did not receive any lunch detentions and were underrepresented in both the moderate and high frequency groups. In fact, White students were so underrepresented in the moderate and low frequency groups that the findings that race/ethnicity and frequency group do not interact cannot be interpreted because of the dramatically low  $n$  for White students in those frequency groups.

Though the interaction cannot be interpreted, the significantly disparate numbers of White and African American students in the no lunch detention, moderate and high frequency groups is a consequential finding. The significantly higher rate of subjectivity in the reasons for lunch detention for African American students in the high frequency group (77%) compared to the subjectivity rate for African American students in the low frequency group (59%) suggests that teachers are interpreting the observed behaviors of African American students who teachers identify as troublemakers with a significantly

higher rate of subjectivity than African American students who teachers do not identify as troublemakers to the same degree. Existing research (e.g.: Bowditch, 1993; Casella, 2003; Meehan et al, 2003) has demonstrated negative perceptions of African American students with regard to behavior and school discipline within school environments, but this finding in the current study provides a further edifying lens through which these negative perceptions may be more fully understood. The findings establish a link between the negative perceptions of African American children and the exceptionally high rates of subjectivity of the teachers' interpretations of observed African American student behavior.

The qualitative section of this current study provides some context with which to understand more completely the quantitative findings regarding subjectivity. Existing studies have demonstrated that negativity within a classroom environment precipitates negative consequences for students (Brackett, et al., 2011; Stipek & Miles, 2008). For students who are in the high frequency group, teachers express negativity/frustration nearly twice as often (40%) in their written details of the lunch detention context as for student in the low (23%) or moderate (21%) frequency groups. An example of negativity/frustration includes a teacher disciplining a student in the moderate frequency group for consistent non-compliant behavior: “[Student] was told repeatedly to sit down and do his work and disobeyed every time.” Here, the teacher shows frustration and negativity by characterizing the student as a recalcitrant who “disobeyed every time.” This example of negativity/frustration is connected to the “Student Talking” variable as well, and the much higher rate of talking as being a precipitative factor in the subsequent lunch detention for the high frequency group (54%) than either in low (34%) or moderate



(38%) frequency groups may be influencing the high frequencies of lunch detentions for these students by exacerbating the negativity/frustration of the teachers toward the students who talk so much in class. Student talking may be interpreted by teachers in a number of subjective ways (Glock, 2016), and the teacher negativity towards students in the high frequency group is likely subjectively influencing teachers' decisions to punish students.

Frustration and negativity are even more clearly evident in another quote from a teacher disciplining a student in the high frequency group for disrespect and consistent non-compliant behavior: "Failure & refusal to follow procedures during a fire drill! & Using school resources to "trash" my school." The exclamation point emphasizes the teacher's frustration, while the statement that the student set out to "'trash' my school" highlights the negative feelings that the teacher is expressing towards the student at the moment of writing the lunch detention. The teacher sees the school as belonging to the teacher – and the student as being responsible for "trash[ing]" the teacher's domain. The markedly higher rate of negativity/frustration in the lunch detention forms written for the high frequency group may help explain some of the significantly higher rate of subjectivity in the reasons for that group's lunch detentions as seen in the first section of this paper.

The first part of the analysis regarding race/ethnicity focuses on "Student Avoidance of Work," which is a set of behaviors that often emerge when students do not understand the material being presented in class. Teacher reactions to student avoidance behaviors can range from increasing positive engagement with students in ways that positively impact student understanding (Turtura et al., 2014) to increasing discipline

infractions to modify avoidant behavior. In this current study, African American students (25%) were over four times as likely as White students (6%) to receive lunch detentions for the observed behavior of “Student Avoidance of Work.” Types of avoidance found in the study include non-interactive behaviors in which the students either just sit and do not work or engage in individual behaviors that they feel more comfortable doing (e.g., sleeping, listening to music) and more interactive social behaviors such as wandering around the class. An example of non-interactive avoidance is evident in a quote from a teacher disciplining an African American student for consistent non-compliant behavior and consistent breaking of class rule: “[Student] will not leave hood off his head and tries to sleep in class almost every day.” Existing scholarship has shown that behaviors such as consistent sleeping in class likely signify serious issues impacting the student outside of the class that must be addressed for the student to be successful. The teacher in this sample reacts to the observed behavior punitively rather than by helping find the underlying cause of the behavior. It is also likely that the wearing of the hood is exacerbating the response from the teacher because of the stigma associated with African American boys and wearing hoodies (Aghasaleh, 2018).

Another example of avoidant behavior is evident in this quote from a teacher disciplining an African American student for consistent non-compliant behavior: “Listening to music when instructed not to do so.” Again, this teacher punishes the observed behavior rather than looking for the precipitating cause of the behavior. Students are significantly less likely to engage in avoidant behaviors - such as listening to music in class - if they are positively engaged in what is happening in the class (Turtura et al., 2014). The teacher might utilize programmatic adjustments such as culturally

relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) to more positively impact African American student engagement rather than responding with punishment.

When examining the racial differences in teachers' responses to "Student Aggression/Threat of Violence," it is important to see the data from within the context of existing research. Studies have shown that White students are suspended or expelled for aggressive/violent behavior at a markedly lower rate than are African American students (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). African American students, however, do engage in aggressive/violent behaviors at least as often as do White students, but the finding in this current study is that White students are given the lower-level consequence of lunch detention 6 times more frequently than are African American students in this sample. This is relevant because it shows that White students in this sample are receiving lower-level consequences for aggressive/violent behavior than are African American students, for whom aggressive/violent behaviors produce the disparate rates of upper-level disciplines noted in existing scholarship. One example of aggressive/violent behavior in the sample is when a teacher wrote a lunch detention that was classified as disrespect to a peer: "[Student] was playing around in the hallway and "accidentally" slapped another student in the face." The child hit another student in the face, and the teacher demonstrated doubt as to the student's claim that it was accidental by placing "accidentally" in quotations. Though there is not direct evidence that the consequence would have been more severe if the violent child had been African American, school discipline matrices throughout the country designate hitting another child as an upper-level offense (e.g.: Glenbard North High School, n.d.; Northwood Middle School, n.d.s),

and no African American child in the sample is shown to have committed such an offense that resulted only in receiving a lunch detention.

Student threats of violence against teachers are extremely serious and too often result in actual violence (Maeng et al., 2020). Threats of violence against teachers create an unstable environment in the classroom that undermines the teachers' authority and ability to keep the students both learning and safe, and they are taken quite seriously by school administrations. In this sample, a teacher wrote a lunch detention for disrespect for a White student who issued a threat to the teacher: "[Student] disrupted class with a comment. When I commented back, he responded with 'If you wanna tussel [sic], we can tussel'." A tussle is an intense physical struggle with an opponent and is a violent and clearly inappropriate interaction to suggest having with a teacher. In this case, the teacher recognized that the student's words were threatening, but the response was to treat the offense in a similar way to sleeping in class or talking to friends by giving the student a lunch detention. The fact that the student who issued the threat was White may have played a role in the minimal response from the teacher. White students are viewed as less threatening and less violent than African American students (Casella, 2003), and that subjective and biased threat assessment may have influenced the teacher's decision to assign a lunch detention rather than writing a referral to the office with an immediate removal of the threatening student from class.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study has some limitations that may be relevant when considering the findings. One limitation is that the sample for the study was drawn from only one school. This limitation creates several related issues. First, the sample drawn from this one school

may not be representative of students from other areas of the country or from schools with markedly different demographics. Future research might improve the generalizability of the research by gathering samples from a wider range of schools in different states and with greater race/ethnic diversity.

A related limitation is the small number of White students in the moderate and high frequency groups. Because of the lack of sufficient numbers of White students who received larger numbers of lunch detentions, the quantitative analysis cannot confidently examine and make claims regarding the race/ethnic aspect of the study. This limitation can also be addressed by adding additional schools that either have a greater proportion of White students or a larger student body.

A third limitation of the current study is that only male students were included in the sample. Though the reason for excluding the female students is logical, their omission limits the relevance of the findings. Female students experience school discipline quite differently from male students (Ispa-Landa, 2017; Jordan & Anil, 2009; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al, 2008), and their absence from the study both reduces the generalizability of the quantitative findings and the relevance of the qualitative findings for the female student population. Again, adding more school sites from which to draw samples would perhaps address this limitation, but it is probable that, based on existing scholarship, the White girls in the additional school sites would also be underrepresented in school discipline infractions.

A final limitation is that the gender and race/ethnicity of the assigning teachers are not addressed. Existing research shows that the gender (Gong et al., 2018) and race/ethnicity (Saft & Pianta, 2001) of teachers have significant impacts on the

experiences of children in the classroom. Future studies can address this limitation by gathering demographic information about the teachers in the schools.

### **Conclusion**

This study furthers the discussion regarding inequities in school discipline by adding two salient elements. First, the quantitative examination of subjectivity in lunch detention, which is a lower-level discipline infraction, deepens our understanding of the both the overall degree of subjectivity in the assigning reasons for lunch detentions and the increasing amount of subjectivity for students who receive a larger amount of discipline infractions. Second, the qualitative section provides necessary context through which the relationship between subjectivity and both the elevated rates of punishment for the high frequency group and the race/ethnic disparities in rates of punishment can be understood with greater nuance and clarity. This study presents analyses of subjectivity in lunch detention that establishes a new direction in the study of inequities in school discipline.

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Table 4.1

*Descriptive Statistics for Lunch Detentions Given Containing Any Subjective Reason*

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Lunch Detentions with Any Subjective Reasons	270	4.10	4.53
Proportion of Lunch Detentions with Any Subjective Reasons	270	0.65	0.34



Table 4.2

*Descriptive Statistics for the Proportion of Lunch Detentions Given Containing Any Subjective Reason for Low, Moderate, and High Frequency Subgroups*

Frequency Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
Low	161	0.60	0.41	0.00	1.00
Moderate	75	0.70	0.19	0.20	1.00
High	34	0.76	0.10	0.50	1.00
Total	270	0.65	0.34	0.00	1.00

Table 4.3

*Results of the Games-Howell multiple comparisons for Frequency Subgroups*

	<i>95% Confidence Interval</i>		
Frequency Group	Mean Difference	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low vs. moderate	-0.10*	-0.19	-0.01
Low vs. high	-0.16***	-0.24	-0.07
Moderate vs. high	-0.06	-0.12	0.01

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 4.4

*Descriptive Statistics for the Proportion of Lunch Detentions Given Containing Any Subjective Reason for Low, Moderate, and High Frequency Race/Ethnicity Subgroups*

Frequency Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>
Low/White	60	0.61
Low/African American	101	0.59
Moderate/White	11	0.72
Moderate/African American	64	0.70
High/White	4	0.69
High/African American	30	0.77
Total	270	0.65

Table 4.5

*Results of Chi-Square for Number of Students within Each Race/Ethnicity Subgroup*

Race/Ethnicity		No Lunch	Low	Moderate	High	Total
		Detentions				
White	Count	93	60	11	4	168
	Expected	63.2	62.5	19.1	13.2	168
African American	Count	70	101	64	30	265
	Expected	99.8	98.5	45.9	20.8	265
Total		163	161	75	34	433

*Note.*  $\chi^2 (3, N = 433) = 51.897, p < .001$

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This dissertation includes three manuscript papers that have a common theme: school discipline. More fully understanding school discipline is vitally important because children's experiences of discipline are so closely tied to their academic and life outcomes. The first manuscript is a thematic literature review that lays the foundation for the subsequent empirical manuscripts. The second manuscript uses data gathered from a race/ethnically diverse public middle school in the southeast during the 2015-2016 school year to examine race/ethnic and gender disparities in lunch detentions. The third manuscript uses data from the same school and year to examine the subjective nature of the teacher-reported reasons for the lunch detentions. The goals of these manuscripts are to fill in the gap in existing research regarding lower-level discipline, to examine subjectivity in lower-level discipline, and to create a well-researched context for structural reforms in school discipline policies, practices, and procedures.

Existing research has focused on upper-level disciplines such as office discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions because those types of infractions are required to be tracked with fidelity by schools and school districts and supplied to both the state and federal governing agencies. These agencies make these data available to the public, so researchers use upper-level discipline data as the basis for their scholarship. However, upper-level disciplines are frequently precipitated by lower-level disciplines that are not tracked with fidelity and are therefore generally not used in research. Examples of lower

level disciplines include being sent to the hall, being given lunch detention, being sent to another teacher's classroom, and having one's seat moved in class.

Lunch detention represents an important facet of school discipline to study because students receive lunch detentions for more minor and more common offenses (e.g., Attendance & Discipline / Discipline Code, n.d.; Discipline and Attendance Policy – Cameron High School, n.d.; Glenbard North High School, n.d.; Lunch Detention Policy - University Neighborhood High School, n.d.; Northwood Middle School, n.d.; Policies / After School vs Lunch Detention, n.d.; Student Handbook 2021-2022, n.d.) than they do for upper-level discipline infractions, and lunch detentions directly precipitate upper-level consequences like being suspended from school (e.g., Crimson Cliffs Middle – Washington County School District Schools Sites, n.d.; Discipline and Attendance Policy – Cameron High School, n.d.; Lunch Detention Policy - University Neighborhood High School, n.d.; Policies / After School vs Lunch Detention, n.d.; Student Handbook 2021-2022, n.d.). Consequently, students who accumulate lunch detentions for minor offenses are given the same discipline outcomes as students who commit major disruptive and/or violent infractions.

### **Overall Findings**

The first manuscript of this dissertation was a thematic review paper which laid the foundation for the empirical papers that followed. School discipline was described as problematically interwoven with classroom management, thereby establishing punishment of students as a natural part of classroom functioning. This is problematic, in large part, because of the myriad negative consequences suffered by children who are punished frequently at school (Bowditch, 1993; Christle et al., 2007; Frymier, 1997;

Gregory et al, 2010; Jordan & Anil, 2009; Lansford et al., 2016; Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). This review examined the structure of, consequences of, and reasons for school discipline, and the race/ethnic aspects school as relate to school discipline. It then examined implicit bias and peer contagion as potential explanatory factors in the persistence of the race/ethnic disparities in school discipline and offered recommendations for ways schools could address those race/ethnic disparities.

The second manuscript expanded the discussion of race/ethnic and gender disparities in school discipline by adding the element of lunch detention gathered from students in a public, coed, racially and ethnically diverse urban middle school in the southeast during the 2015-2016 school year. This study examined the rates of lunch detention for different race/ethnic and gender groups to see if there were significant differences in how often students from those groups received lunch detentions. Results revealed significant differences in rates of lunch detentions by gender and race/ethnicity, but no interaction effect was found. Specific findings were that male students had significantly higher rates of lunch detention than female students and that African American students had higher rates of lunch detention than either White or Hispanic/Latino students. The results for gender were expected and were consistent with existing research on upper-level discipline (Jordan & Anil, 2009; Wallace et al., 2008). Expectations for differences between race/ethnic groups were partially supported. Consistent with existing literature on upper-level discipline (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Ispa-Landa, 2017; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015), African American students had the highest rates of lunch detention. However, an interesting finding emerged for Hispanic/Latino students. Counter to expectations, they had a significantly lower rate of

lunch detention than African American students and no significant difference in rates than White students. This finding reflects the complexity of the research on Hispanic/Latino students (Gregory et al., 2010; Horner et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011) and helps to characterize the nature of discipline in the school community from which the data were drawn.

Though the interaction between race/ethnicity and gender was not significant, descriptive statistics of the rates of lunch detention for different race/ethnic by gender subgroups show compelling findings. The rate of lunch detention for African American males (4.87) was 3.32 times higher than that for White males (1.52) and the rate for African American females (2.89) was 9.6 times higher than that for White females (.30). However, the rate of lunch detention for African American *females* was 1.9 times higher than the rate for White *males*. Additionally, 75% of White male students and 96% of White female students received either 0 or 1 lunch detention during the school year, while only 40% of African American male students and 58% of African American female students had only 0 or 1 lunch detention. These findings suggest that race/ethnicity has a more substantive effect on rates of lunch detention than does gender.

Another pressing issue regarding lunch detentions is the subjective nature of the reasons for this consequence (i.e., disrespect, talking, disruption, consistent non-compliant behavior) which was the focus of the third manuscript. Teacher subjectivity in assigning school discipline is highly problematic because it can unduly influence the frequency and severity of the discipline events, and frequency and severity of school discipline are highly correlated with significant negative academic and life outcomes for children (Bowditch, 1993; Christle et al., 2007; Frymier, 1997; Gregory et al, 2010;



Jordan & Anil, 2009; Lansford et al., 2016; Losen, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Using a mixed method design, this manuscript examined whether subjectivity in lunch detentions differed between those who experienced different rates of detention (low, moderate, and high frequency groups) and between African American and White boys.

The quantitative results indicate significantly different rates of subjectivity in teacher-assigned reasons for lunch detention between the frequency groups. Specifically, the low frequency group had significantly lower rates of subjectivity compared to the moderate and high frequency groups. This finding partially supports the hypothesis that the highest frequency group would have the highest rate of subjectivity, but there was no significant difference between the high and moderate frequency groups. However, the rate of subjectivity overall and for each lunch detention frequency group was startling. Whereas the subjective rate for upper-level disciplines is close to 40% (Skiba et al, 1997), the rate of subjectivity for lunch detentions found in this analysis was 65%. The rate of subjective reasons was even higher for students in the moderate (70%) and high (76%) frequency groups, and while some students in the low frequency group had lunch detentions with no subjective reasons, the lowest percentage of subjectivity for students in the moderate frequency group was 20% and for the high frequency group was 50%. These findings suggest that the subjectivity of the reasons for lunch detention is dramatically higher than for upper-level disciplines, and that for students in the highest frequency groups, the rate of subjectivity is the greatest.

Results indicate that subjectivity in lunch detention did not significantly differ between White males and African American males. This was counter to expectations, but closer examination of the data offered some insight into discrepancies between the

groups. Specifically, the low numbers of White students in the moderate ( $n = 11$ ) and high ( $n = 4$ ) frequency groups dramatically decreased the power in the analysis to detect effects.

The qualitative part of the analysis produced themes within the frequency groups and within the race/ethnic groups. Themes of teacher negativity and student talking were common themes in the lunch detention forms of the high frequency group compared to the other two groups. When comparing themes across race/ethnic groups, interesting patterns emerged. The theme of student avoidance of work was found in more lunch detention reasons for African American males compared to White males. In contrast, White males had more lunch detentions for aggression/threat of violence compared to African American males.

### **Implications and recommendations**

The primary implications from the first manuscript literature review were recommendations for practice and research. The first recommendation for practice was to alter the structure of discipline within the schools by separating classroom management from school discipline. By separating classroom management from school discipline, the ethos of schools would change dramatically from being punitive to becoming more positively engaging, and fewer discipline infractions would be written because teachers would be utilizing more prosocial methods of classroom management to direct the behavior of the students. The second recommendation was to reduce the potential for peer contagion of behaviors associated with poor outcomes by restructuring aspects of the school to no longer aggregate students whose behaviors frequently get them into trouble. Schools can minimize the opportunity for peer contagion of perceived aberrant behaviors

by avoiding programs and school policies such as in-school suspension rooms, tracking students into lower-level classes, and removing students from their in-person home schools to attend alternative schools. Changing these programs and policies would limit the aggregation of students who exhibit behaviors that the schools would like to discourage and would therefore minimize the effect of peer contagion on the students in the schools. Peer contagion happens when students who exhibit behaviors that the school sees as aberrant teach those behaviors to students who had previously not exhibited them to a problematic degree if at all. This phenomenon happens when students with the undesirable behaviors are aggregated in groups that also include students who do not engage in those behaviors.

One implication from the second manuscript is that lower-level disciplines such as lunch detention should be more central to the research on race/ethnic and gender disparities in school discipline both because they have such an impact on the upper-level disciplines that have been the focus of existing research and because making changes to the ways that schools implement lower-level disciplines would be both practicable and impactful.

Another implication involves the finding that Hispanic/Latino students show significantly different rates of lunch detention than African American students, but no significant differences from rates of White students. As students of color (Brown et al., 2018; Lardier et al., 2019; Sheth, 2019), it was expected that Hispanic/Latino students' discipline rates would more resemble African American than White students', supporting the idea that disparities between African American and White students are a product of institutional and societal benefits reflecting societal preferences for White people's values

and experiences of life (Leonardo, 2004; McIntosh, 1992; Schumacher-Martinez & Proctor, 2020) rather than societal anti-preferencing for those of African Americans. This finding, however, suggests that, regarding lunch detentions, African American students' experiences are distinct from both White *and* Hispanic/Latino students.

A third implication regards the different ways boys and girls experience school discipline. Boys receive lunch detentions at a significantly higher rate than girls, but potential reasons for this difference require distinct interventions. Some of the difference in lunch detention rates could be the result of teachers' implicit biases, viewing girls' behaviors (Brandmiller et al., 2020) and educational, emotional, and attentional capacities (Mullola et al., 2012) more positively than they do boys'. It is also possible that girls often behave more functionally in class than do boys (Baker et al., 2016; Olivier et al., 2018; Van der Graaff et al., 2018). To address potential bias, increasing teachers' awareness and adjusting their teaching and classroom management to more actively engage students may lessen the disparities in discipline rates. If actual behavior is the issue, parents will need to be more active in shaping boys' behaviors to become more appropriate and functional within the school environment. Because both are likely factors in lunch detention disparities, both teachers and parents should address this issue.

The finding that African American females received lunch detentions at a rate 1.9 times that of White males highlights the importance of race/ethnicity in school discipline. This finding suggests that programs addressing race/ethnic diversity should be a higher priority than those addressing gender if reducing school discipline disparities is the goal.

One final implication from this second manuscript is that the public nature of lunch detention heightens its impact from a race/ethnic perspective. Because so many

students in lunch detention are African American, this exacerbates the perception of African American students as troublemakers (Bowditch, 1993). This perception is problematic because it influences many other aspects of students' school experiences. Since lunch detentions are so public, schools should rethink classroom management and school discipline to find other ways to address teacher-observed problematic behavior.

The third manuscript also investigates lunch detention, but it furthers the discussion by adding the element of the subjectivity of teacher-selected reasons for the discipline infractions. The finding of high rates of subjectivity in teacher reasons for assigning lunch detentions is problematic. The 65% subjectivity in lunch detentions overall demonstrates the need to restructure schools' discipline policies, procedures, and practices. The high rate of subjectivity allows teachers' attitudes, biases, and moods to inequitably impact educational experiences for children. That the rates of subjectivity increase significantly as the student's discipline profile places them in the moderate frequency (70%) or high frequency (76%) groups furthers the clarion call for school discipline reforms.

These quantitative findings are bolstered by qualitative findings in the study. Teacher negativity is disproportionately present in African American students' lunch detention forms. When teachers show frustration and negativity towards students, it increases the influence of subjectivity on their decision-making regarding student punishment. Reducing teachers' reliance on punishment would significantly lessen the impact of teacher negativity/frustration on the discipline outcomes of students.

The student avoidance of work findings show disproportionalities in discipline for behaviors that teachers may choose to address non-punitively. Rather than punishing

students for sleeping in class, teachers could more actively engage students or work with school support staff to see if troubling issues that the school can assist with are negatively impacting the student. Either way, punishing students for this behavior is problematic – especially when the punishments are disproportionately for African American students.

The finding in which White students are punished with lunch detentions for aggression/threats of violence is also troubling. Hitting students and threatening teachers are behaviors that normally precipitate either a referral or a suspension, and threatening a teacher often leads to involvement with the police. That the White students in this study only received lunch detention for these behaviors suggests either that the assigning teachers did not view these *offenses* as warranting upper-level discipline or did not view these *students* as deserving upper-level discipline. It is unlikely that teachers would perceive violence and threat of violence as minor offenses, so it is more likely that the assigning teachers subjectively assessed these *students* as not deserving upper-level discipline. This is a concerning finding. Existing research shows that African American students are punished at much higher rates for aggressive/violent behavior than are White students (Mendez & Knoff, 2003), and that may be the result of teachers subjectively viewing the aggressive/violent behaviors of White students as more acceptable.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

One strength of the studies in this dissertation is the data from which the empirical studies were drawn. Lunch detention data is difficult to gather for research because it is neither frequently tracked with fidelity nor shared with researchers. Having access to the data opens up a line of research that should impact the direction of future studies to include a greater focus on lower-level disciplines. Another strength of this dissertation is

the connected nature of the papers. The literature review sets the stage for the empirical studies that then flow naturally from one paper to the next. The first empirical paper establishes the disparities in rates of lunch detention, and the second empirical paper moves the discussion further by examining the subjectivity in the reasons for those lunch detentions. A third strength is the inclusion of the qualitative data as illustrative of the subjectivity shown in the quantitative part of the second empirical paper. The qualitative data reveal patterns of disproportionality and provide depth of understanding of those disproportionalities through the explication of their narratives.

Despite these strengths, there were several limitations to acknowledge. One limitation of the second and third manuscripts is that the data all come from a single school, which limits the generalizability of the quantitative findings. This also decreases the sample size and lowers the power of the analysis to detect effects. Future studies should include more schools in different areas of the country to broaden the regional and demographic relevancies and to increase the power of the analysis. A second limitation is that the race/ethnicity and gender of the assigning teachers are not known. Race/ethnicity (Saft & Pianta, 2001) and gender (Gong et al., 2018) of the teacher are significant factors when examining relationships between teachers and students. Because subjectivity is such an important concept for this dissertation, knowing the race/ethnicity and gender of the teacher could add another layer of understanding as to the subjectivity of the assigning of lunch detention. Relatedly, the students' perspectives on the reason for lunch detentions is unknown and this limitation should be addressed in future research. Lastly, a limitation of the third manuscript is that data from African American and White male students. The reasons for limiting the sample to these students is logical but unfortunate.

Not having a more inclusive range of race/ethnic groups and not including girls in the study limits the generalizability of the findings and the relevance for the female population. Future studies should expand the research by adding more schools.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation has sought to provide a clarifying look into race/ethnic and gender disparities in school discipline by examining an understudied upstream aspect of the school discipline structure: lunch detention. Through both quantitative and qualitative means, the primary contributions of this dissertation to the literature are the addition of lunch detention to the research on subjectivity and race/ethnic and gender disparities in school discipline and the corresponding research-based recommendations for practice to address these inequities. The findings have important implications for schools because they suggest necessary reforms to the school discipline structure for schools to become more welcoming and inclusive places of learning for all students.



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