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Bullying in grade school children and its connection to the school-to-prison pipeline

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Bullying in grade school children and its connection to the school-to-prison pipeline

Abstract

This thesis will explore connections made between the school-to-prison pipeline and bullying. Specifically, findings from a qualitative study conducted in 2016 will be presented and used to inform a review of the literature on bullying to explore connections between the two. The topic of bullying emerged as a prevalent theme among students who participated in the qualitative study by Hence (2017) titled, "Can You Hear Us Now? Engaging young African American Voices in Urban Communities and Schools". This study explored zero tolerance policies, school discipline practices, and its impact on the educational experiences of African American students. The study also examined factors that contribute to African American students entering the school to prison pipeline, as well as the role suspensions and expulsions play in increasing the likelihood of students entering the juvenile justice system. The findings on bullying led the researcher to explore research in this area to find a connection to the school-to-prison pipeline within K-12 schools, including the impact and role student-teacher relationships play in supporting students in schools. A review of the literature revealed a gap in the research, therefore this thesis uncovers a new area of inquiry as it relates to the connection between bullying and the school-to-prison pipeline. The qualitative study will be reviewed to provide context and to highlight the theme of bullying. An exploration of intervention models, recommendations, and strategies used to combat bullying in K-12 schools will also be presented.

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**BULLYING IN GRADE SCHOOL CHILDREN AND ITS CONNECTION TO
THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE.**

by

Alyssia Chantel Hence

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Eastern Michigan University

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Social Work.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will explore connections made between the school-to-prison pipeline and bullying. Specifically, findings from a qualitative study conducted in 2016 will be presented and used to inform a review of the literature on bullying to explore connections between the two. The topic of bullying emerged as a prevalent theme among students who participated in the qualitative study by Hence (2017) titled, “*Can You Hear Us Now? Engaging young African American Voices in Urban Communities and Schools*”. This study explored zero tolerance policies, school discipline practices, and its impact on the educational experiences of African American students. The study also examined factors that contribute to African American students entering the school to prison pipeline, as well as the role suspensions and expulsions play in increasing the likelihood of students entering the juvenile justice system. The findings on bullying led the researcher to explore research in this area to find a connection to the school-to-prison pipeline within K-12 schools, including the impact and role student-teacher relationships play in supporting students in schools. A review of the literature revealed a gap in the research, therefore this thesis uncovers a new area of inquiry as it relates to the connection between bullying and the school-to-prison pipeline. The qualitative study will be reviewed to provide context and to highlight the theme of bullying. An exploration of intervention models, recommendations, and strategies used to combat bullying in K-12 schools will also be presented.

Keywords: bullying, bullies, school-to-prison pipeline, teacher support, suspensions, expulsions, African American, student engagement, urban communities, *Rethink Discipline Legislation*.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will begin with an overview of the school-to-prison pipeline and the impact it has on the lives of African American youth. The history of legislation that gave credence to the disparate use of zero tolerance policies, new legislation that takes steps to address this disparity, and the role communities along with educational systems play in perpetuating this alarming trend will also be examined. A summary of findings from a qualitative study conducted in 2016 that explores risk factors associated with an increased likelihood of African American students entering the school-to-prison pipeline will also be included (Hence, 2017). In addition, this thesis will explore the role of bullying in the lives of youth, as this emerged as a critical finding from the study. The documentation of youth voices was important to this study, and their stories are included to underscore the importance of engaging youth voice in research, particularly for those youth who are on the margins. The themes that emerged from participants in the study included: instances of bullying; feeling a lack of support from adults when conflicts arose; and their need to protect themselves, which often resulted in disciplinary action.

Study implications illuminate the voices of youth within their recommendations that lead to a critical point of advocacy. Recommendations offered by youth targeted a need for educational and community supports, policy reform, and change in school practices that will seek to proactively address bullying to prevent student conflict from escalating to a point that would result in harsh disciplinary action. This thesis will ultimately raise awareness and inform policies/practices that negatively impact educational experiences of youth, with special attention to bullying and its connection to the school-to-prison pipeline.

BACKGROUND

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The process of many African American youth entering the criminal justice system is described as the school-to-prison pipeline. This phrase describes how students, primarily students of color, are deliberately funneled into the prison industry through a series of practices that begin early in their education, through the overuse of discipline in schools. As a result, there are disproportionate numbers of students behind bars as opposed to behind desks; for the African American community, this is extremely problematic.

Research has shown that African American students have been overly represented in the school-to-prison pipeline and constitute the predominate race in incarceration facilities, as compared to other racial groups (ACLU, 2015; Insley, 2001; Rudd, 2014). The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (2016) reports, “nationwide, African-Americans represent 26% of juvenile arrests, 44% of youth who are detained, 46% of the youth who are judicially waived to criminal court, and 58% of the youth admitted to state prisons” (p.1). These alarming statistics reveal the stark reality that threatens the future of many African Americans, who may be predisposed to a life that leads to destruction, incarceration, and hopelessness.

With excessive suspensions and expulsions early in education, African American students’ needs often go unaddressed, and the overuse of punishment for infractions that could have been resolved by alternative methods are often left unexplored. This raises the question of whether African American students are truly afforded an equal opportunity to receive a quality education. There are stark differences between races in the number of

suspensions and expulsions, and how discipline is applied (ACLU, 2015; Advancement Project, 2000; Rudd, 2014). It is a much more common experience for minority youth, including those with disabilities, to be barred from schools and/or arrested, as opposed to Caucasian youth who commit similar infractions and are disciplined far less stringently (ACLU, 2015). Common infractions for which many African American students may be punished include offenses such as attending school out of uniform and minor acts of insubordination (Anderson, 2015).

Zero Tolerance Policies. The Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA) of 1994 was written to promote safer school environments through the prohibition of 57 students carrying weapons in schools and on school grounds (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2016). Under the GFSA, students found with firearms were subject to automatic expulsion, leading to difficult consequences for those who were denied an education. The fact that African American youth are more likely to be incarcerated than white youth poses a catastrophic threat to the African American community. Research suggests that there is a demand for African American men in the prison industry, as shown by the predicted number of inmate beds, based on the evaluation of student behavior by the age of four (Barbarin, 2010). This leads Barbarin (2010) to assert, “The prison industry thrives on a steady supply of African American males, who account for 10% of all youth, but 60% of incarcerated youth under the age of 18” (p.1).

The adoption of zero tolerance policies marked a sweeping shift in educational policies across the country. Zero tolerance policies, along with the enactment of the 1994 Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA), have resulted in an increase in students being barred from schools at alarming rates. Despite the overarching goal of zero-tolerance policies and the

GFSA to create safer school environments through mandatory expulsions for weapon and drug violations, students of color have been adversely impacted, resulting in students being suspended and expelled at disproportionate rates (Insely, 2001, Orfield, 2012).

Though many educators utilize zero tolerance policies to justify excessive suspensions, these policies and practices have not demonstrated any substantial improvement in school safety (Advancement Project, 2000; Orfield, 2012). The detrimental impact of excessively suspending students is often disregarded, and the fact that zero tolerance policies can be viewed as the preface to a life of incarceration for many African American youth is often ignored. Rudd (2014) states, “[a] 2009–2010 survey of 72,000 schools (kindergarten through high school) shows that while Black students made up only 18% of those enrolled in the schools sampled, they accounted for 35% of those suspended at least once, while 46% of those suspended more than once represent 39% of all expulsions” (p. 1). Despite African American youth accounting for a small percentage of students enrolled in K-12 schools, they have been shown to have the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions among any racial group (Orfield, 2012; Rudd, 2014).

Upon examining racial and age groups, pre-school children and African American students are significantly impacted by the application of harsh disciplinary policies and are suspended at soaring rates. Klein (2016) states, “suspensions are disproportionately handed to black preschoolers, who are 3.6 times more likely than white children to receive out-of-school suspensions, according to the Civil Rights Data Collection” (p.1). A racial factor is present in school discipline, putting African American students at a disadvantage. With a path of suspensions trailing a student throughout their entire K-12

experience, they are deprived of quality instruction, which often leaves them unprepared for higher education.

The impact of zero tolerance policies also differs by gender. Research has shown a surprising difference in the experiences of African American boys and girls in urban communities (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). While it is much more common for African American boys to encounter racism in everyday occurrences than African American girls (Cooper, Brown, Metzger, Clinton, & Guthrie, 2012), evidence suggests that African American girls are more deeply impacted by zero tolerance policies than boys. Crenshaw et al. (2015) state that, “data released by the Department of Education for the 2011–2012 school year reveal that while Black males were suspended more than three times as often as their white counterparts, Black girls were suspended six times as often” (p. 16).

The impact of zero tolerance policies is not gender exclusive. Suspensions lead to greater academic costs for African American students, beginning with lengthy suspensions, which are often justified under zero tolerance policies. Hodson et al. (2015) report, “If the average suspension is conservatively put at 3.5 days, we estimate that U.S. public school children lost nearly 18 million days of instruction in just one school year because of exclusionary discipline” (p. 1). The amount of lost instruction time often results in students falling behind academically. Additionally, when students are barred from school for numerous days, they are more likely to become involved in dangerous activities that may result in negative consequences for their community. Research has shown parallels between excessive suspension rates and an increase in dropout and delinquency rates, which presents a greater threat to society as well as soaring economic

costs (Hodson et al., 2015). A great deal is at stake when students are suspended and removed from school.

Rethink Discipline. Promising new legislation in the State of Michigan, titled *Rethink Discipline* went into effect on August 1, 2017 and encourages the use of “restorative practices” in K-12 schools, with suspensions and expulsions serving as a last resort for students (Student Advocacy Center, 2016). Under the guidelines of the *Rethink Discipline* legislation, factors such as student age, disciplinary history, and disability must be considered before a student is suspended or expelled from school (Student Advocacy Center, 2016). This is an important initiative, as administrators are encouraged to thoroughly investigate infractions as well as the student’s history before punishment is applied. This would ideally include a thorough investigation of student conflicts that arise such as instances of bullying. The objective of the legislation is to reduce the frequency of suspensions and expulsions in K-12 schools. However, there is still a possibility of inconsistencies in disciplinary practices in schools, if schools do not adhere to the guidelines set forth by this legislation.

METHODS

A qualitative study was conducted to explore the experiences of youth who were barred from K-12 public schools (Hence, 2017). The perspectives of students offered an in-depth view of the ways in which zero tolerance policies and other disciplinary practices impacted their educational experiences. An overview of the study will be provided with special attention given to bullying and its prevalence among students, including an examination of programs and initiatives to combat this social justice issue. The findings from the study coupled with a review of the bullying literature offers

beginning insights into the ways in which schools can work to prevent instances of student conflict. The voices of youth in the study offer important insights into the ways in which experiences of bullying may lead to suspensions and expulsions, which then may lead African American students down the path of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Research Goals

To explore the experiences of youth who were suspended or expelled, a qualitative research study was conducted (Hence, 2017). This study aimed to analyze the unique experience of African American students who experienced suspensions and/or expulsions, and to evaluate the impact this had on their education. The aim of this study was to place an emphasis on engaging youth voices. A second aim of this study was to analyze the role communities and community members play in the progression or regression of the participants' educational success, as it is imperative to assess the role urban communities play in the education of African American students and how members of the community may promote positive outcomes. A third aim of this study was to engage youth voices and perspectives in offering potential alternatives to zero tolerance policies. Lastly, this study aimed to increase participants' critical opinions of the zero tolerance policies that have affected their educational experiences.

Study Sample and Type

The narratives of four students from high schools in Southeastern Michigan are highlighted in this qualitative research study (Hence, 2017). The sample demographics of this study include youth ranging in age from 15 to 18 years old, and include 1 male and 3 females. Participants attended schools in lower-income communities. Participants for the study were recruited through the Student Advocacy Center, the distribution of flyers, and

by engaging in a snowball method of sampling. Students who had been suspended or expelled from public school were recruited and selected to participate in this study.

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from Eastern Michigan University's, Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Collection

The primary method of data collections was interviews. Face-to-face, in depth interviews were conducted in Southeast Michigan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to give participants an opportunity to share their stories and experiences in an exploratory manner. Each interview lasted an average of one hour and was conducted at an agreed upon location. After the interviews were conducted, they were closely listened to and transcribed verbatim. Upon transcribing the data, key elements from the interviews were identified. The researcher took notes during interviews and throughout the data analysis process to clearly understand and capture the meaning of what students wanted to convey. These one-on-one audiotaped interviews, explored a wide range of topics with participants including: (1) student perceptions and experiences of being suspended and/or expelled from school; (2) the ways in which schools and communities can support their success, (3) and how the incorporation of their ideas might improve school practices in the future.

Study Measures, Confidentiality, and Ethical Considerations

The parent/guardians of participants in the study were given consent forms and youth participants were given assent forms, in addition to a thorough explanation of the study that outlined the purpose, how the data would be used, and the person of contact should they have any questions or concerns. The informed consent forms participants signed outlined potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. In order to

protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms were assigned. During each meeting with individual participants, the researcher discussed the purpose of the study verbally and obtained consent from parents and assent from youth. Both the consent and assent forms were signed by the participant as well as their parent/guardian. In order to honor the ethical considerations in conducting research with youth, it was important to obtain assent from youth to encourage empowerment and to help the youth recognize that they are a critical component of the study. During the interviews it was critical to engage the youth participants through active listening and establishing trust in order to give them voice and an opportunity to provide their perspectives to validate their involvement and viewpoints in this research study.

Assent forms were written in developmentally appropriate language. The researcher also ensured that each participant was aware that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time. Assent and consent forms were stored in a locked file. Transcription data of interviews were stored on a password-protected computer. Youth in the study were under 18 years of age; therefore, parents/guardians were legally required to give consent for participation. The researcher worked closely with faculty mentor, Dr. Celeste Hawkins who has expertise in qualitative research.

Data Analysis

Interview data was transcribed and then analyzed using thematic coding, a qualitative research method that allowed the researcher to identify themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews. As the researcher, I listened to the interviews multiple times and took notes during the interview and data analysis process to record thoughts to

ensure all of the important details were included and accurately documented to foreground the voices of the participants. The completed transcripts were read and coded to identify patterns that emerged among the research participants. The participant narratives were a critical component of the data collection and served as an anchor to ground the study.

Themes that emerged from this study were used to determine which experiences students believed had a positive or negative effect on their education and community experiences. Research findings highlighted and identified strategies on promoting community engagement and supported collaboration among school systems to improve student outcomes (Hence, 2017).

FINDINGS

The findings from this study revealed several themes based on experiences that were common among participants. These themes included: (1) experiences of bullying and exclusion; (2) the students felt their voices were not heard; (3) they felt a lack of support from school faculty, and (4) they hoped to see improved relationships between students and staff (Hence, 2017). These areas will be discussed more in depth with attention given to connections to the literature on bullying. The inclusion of this literature was critical to assess how bullying behaviors and teacher responses to bullying could further perpetuate students' experiences of suspensions and/or expulsion. Given that the study also revealed the importance of active teacher involvement in student conflict to ensure students feel safe and supported, the literature on teacher responses to bullying will also be included. The participants' narratives are also included to provide important

context and underscore the importance of exploring the connections among bullying, suspensions/expulsions, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Theme 1: Bullying and Exclusion

Bullying is described as repetitive aggressive behaviors among students that involve a student dominating another student (stopbullying.gov, 2017). This encourages superior/inferior relationships among students. Bullying is also described as a perceived power imbalance between students (McCallion & Feder, 2013). For example, a student may use popularity to create a hierarchy amongst other students that classify some students as a part of the “in crowd” while excluding others.

Acts of bullying are described as: hitting, punching, pushing, biting, spitting, spreading rumors, etc. and all other acts of being intentionally cruel to another person. The goal is to cause intentional harm. Students who perpetrate bullying are referred to as bullies. Merriam-Webster’s (2017) defines a bully as, “a blustering, browbeating person; *especially*: one who is habitually cruel, insulting, or threatening to others who are weaker, smaller, or in some way vulnerable” (p.1). There must be a pattern of repetitive bullying behaviors to be labeled as a bully. Due to the stigma of being labeled a bully, students who are found to be bullying other students are referred to as “the child who bullied” (stopbullying.gov, 2017). This suggests that the student who is bullying another student could change their actions. In addition, students who are victims of bullying are now encouraged to not consider themselves victims but rather “a child who was bullied” (stopbullying.gov, 2017). This statement encourages victims of bullying to consider themselves as a survivor of bullying. These new perspectives of “bullies” and “the bullied” are great examples of empowerment.

Bullying is an imperative topic to explore due to the severity of modern day bullying and the consequences it could have on students. There are many consequences of bullying that occur in schools. The Center for Disease Control (2015) states, “youth who bully others are at increased risk for substance use, academic problems, and violence later in adolescence and adulthood. Compared to youth who only bully, or who are only victims, bully-victims suffer the most serious consequences and are at greater risk for both mental health and behavior problems” (p. 1). Students on both sides of bullying are affected when bullying occurs in schools, however, this is especially true for students who are on the receiving end of bullying. As the findings from the qualitative study conducted by Hence (2017) revealed, unaddressed bullying was an underlying cause of suspensions and expulsions among participants. In addition, other forms of bullying have evolved over time. Due to the evolution of technology, frequent use of texting, and use of social media platforms, students often have unlimited access to other students. A modern-day form of bullying that has emerged, which is even more detrimental to students, is referred to as cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is bullying that occurs electronically (McCallion & Feder, 2013). This form of bullying could be very dangerous, as it allows students who bully others to have 24-hour access to the students they are targeting. Cyberbullying takes the form of harassment with the use of cell phones, websites, and social media sites. (McCallion & Feder, 2013). Cyberbullies may also use an array of methods to inflict fear such as blackmail of leaking nude photographs or sharing sensitive information. Cyberbullying, in addition to bullying that occurs in schools, has compound risk factors for students who are being bullied. One concern is that a potential detrimental consequence of bullying is a

student committing suicide. However, Stopbullying.gov (2017) suggests that students who commit suicide may have additional factors that led to their suicide. Additional factors that may have contributed to a student committing suicide may be depression, anxiety, and a lack of a sense of belonging. While research does not support a direct causal link between bullying and suicide, the prevalence and impact of bullying in schools is still undeniable and is indeed a national problem in our schools.

Swearer et. al. (2010) states, “bullying is now recognized as a widespread and often neglected problem in schools around the world, and one that has serious implications for children who are victimized by bullies and for those who perpetrate the bullying” (p.38). To add, the academic performance of bullies and victims of bullying is hindered by the act of bullying (Swearer et. al, 2010). Therefore, everyone involved is impacted by bullying. According to stopbullying.gov (2017), “in one large study, about 49% of children in grades 4–12 reported being bullied by other students at school at least once during the past month, whereas 30.8% reported bullying others during that time” (p.1). These numbers are only reflective of students who reported being bullied and do not account for students who may be suffering in silence.

The findings from the qualitative study revealed a pervasive theme of bullying which influenced how youth responded in situations that threatened their safety (Hence, 2017). Youth expressed feelings of hopelessness and believed they had limited options when the adults who were entrusted in their care failed to protect them. Though none of the participants directly stated that they were bullied, events occurred in their school lives that highly suggested they were, indeed, victims of bullying. The presence of bullying in each of the participants’ school life created unsafe environments for the students. Each

participant disclosed an instance of bullying that had a delayed response from staff. Additionally, students feared speaking with administrators regarding disputes with their peers, due to their fear of receiving punishment. Each account of bullying from students within this study resulted in students taking justice into their own hands. These actions contributed to a chaotic and unsafe school environment.

The narrative of a 15-year-old female 10th grade student, whom we will call “Shantia,” provides an example of the victimization that occurred due to bullying and that resulted in her expulsion. Her story was initially disregarded, until it began to spiral out of control. Shantia shares:

... (Chuckle) Yeah, okay, I was suspended. Well, I guess I was expelled the, well not this year, last year I got expelled ‘cause I had to bust this girl in her face. Ummm, so I mean, what happened was, it was a whole bunch of girls that was in VO Tech (VO-Vocational) with me and they kept messing with me all the time. So, like they put dye on my car, they put a candy bar in my gas tank, and you know, I had told on them, but because I couldn’t prove that, you know, I couldn’t prove it, didn’t nothin’ happen to them. Then when I busted her in the face they wanted to expel me. And I don’t understand that. I think that’s so stupid...

An 18-year-old 12th grade male student, whom we will call “John,” suggested that he was indeed bullied, but felt that he was unable to address his concerns with school faculty. This led to his expulsion for bringing an unloaded firearm to school. The student stated that he never intended to use the weapon to do any harm to another student, but instead intended to use it as a means of convincing other students to leave him alone:

I was expelled in May of 2015, um, because a lot has happened during that time from me losing my dad...So after that, I was stuck in a place of depression and hopelessness state and going through a lot of stuff even though I was playing football, doing the best I could, receiving all this attention on a college level, and people really liked me, and doing good things. Some people were jealous and envious of me. So, threats came my way. Seniors started feeling like I was messing with their girls. Then I heard on the seniors' last day, [which] was the next day, I was going to end up getting jumped. Long story short, I went home that night put a BB gun in my backpack, but it was empty, just in case anything happened. I would use it as a scare tactic, but I think it went too far. Because the day before that I hadn't told my assistant coach, who is the building assistant because if I brought up something like that I would have been suspended from the team indefinitely. I did not want to risk that and so that's why I brought the BB gun, and they caught me with it and I got arrested and ended up expelled...

John claimed that he did not feel safe disclosing the threats he had received from students and decided he had to protect himself. This narrative suggested that bullying often goes unnoticed by teachers and staff. Some students are afraid to speak with administrators about events that occur in their lives, even when the need is urgent. The student felt that bringing a firearm to school was the only way to protect himself, reflecting his lack of feeling safe and secure on school grounds.

Themes 2, 3, and 4: Voices silenced, lack of student support, and desire to build better relationships.

The remaining themes all shared a connection to the literature on teacher responses to bullying (Hence, 2017). Research reveals that teachers report fewer instances of bullying than students (Holt et. al, 2011). The differences in reporting may be due to several reasons as discussed by Holt et. al (2011), stating, “teachers in the United States might not have historically reported bullying because it was not brought into the media spotlight as a salient issue until a number of school shootings occurred in the U.S in the 1990’s. Until that point, teachers might have dismissed bullying behaviors as non-hurtful interactions or a ‘rite of passage’” (p.120). This statement suggests that bullying was normalized in schools and was not considered a dire issue in schools as it is today. Today bullying and school shootings are on the rise.

Students and teachers also define bullying differently, thus impacting teacher responses to bullying. As Holt et. al (2011) reveal, “in sum, even if teachers observe episodes that are indeed manifestations of bullying (e.g., social exclusion), if these behaviors are not consistent with the teachers’ definition of bullying, teachers will not classify them as such when asked about bullying frequently within their schools” (p. 121). This creates inconsistencies in the way bullying is resolved in schools. Additionally, the likelihood of students reporting bullying may decrease, if they do not feel reporting bullying to teachers and school officials will resolve their problem (Holt et. al, 2011).

It is also important to consider school climate or environment when examining teacher responses to bullying. School climate consists of the physical layout of the

building, student and staff attitudes towards education, and school values/beliefs (Holt et. al, 2011). These aspects of a school environment shape the way students interact among each other and how teachers respond to bullying.

Voices silenced. Students who are faced with potential punishment for an infraction may feel silenced and denied the opportunity to advocate for themselves. All four participants shared the experience of not being allowed the opportunity to share their perspective of what occurred during a dispute, whether it was with another student or a faculty member. A 16-year-old female 11th grade student, “Bridgette,” states:

...Yeah, talking about something that happened a year ago, I wasn't even here so how does that not click in your brain that something is wrong here? So, she called down a friend that supposedly told, and the friend said I did tell, but he [the administrator] made me leave the room so I couldn't hear anything her and her friend were saying. I was like outside waiting in a chair by his office. So, they are in there taking and then I think like after next hour they were done talking and he [the administrator] calls me in and said, “she said you said it, and you're suspended.” I'm like, what? That's not even fair, how are you even not going to hear my story, but you heard both of their stories, that doesn't make sense to me, if there was a fight that happened before I was here, and I still haven't heard about it, how am I suspended? I was like, I told you way before me and [name redacted] had problems...

Bridgette's narrative is an example of an instance in which administrators appeared to be premature in their use of punishment. This participant felt their voice often received

little consideration in decisions that affected them tremendously. However, this student felt it was critical to be included in decisions of their discipline.

Participants also stressed that teachers and administrators often seemed to lack an understanding of the hurdles they were currently facing in their personal lives—factors which might be taken into consideration when expulsion is recommended for incidents that could be better resolved using alternative methods. Participants stated that they felt more personal support should be provided to students within their schools which could lead to risky behaviors.

Lack of student support. The participants reported experiencing a great deal of pressure to conform to their peer group's behavior. This study revealed a student following the negative behaviors of their friends. A 16-year-old female student in the 11th grade, "Charlotte," reports:

...This thing I realized is as you get older, people start to not care like...I remember elementary school teachers spent a lot of time with you...in middle school it's like, hmmm, you'll get it...then high school teachers are like, I don't give a dang, I'm getting paid anyway. I had a teacher tell me, "I'm getting paid for this anyway." I felt like, well, since you're getting paid for this, then peace...

This narrative illuminated the importance of positive student–teacher relationships. The student also disclosed that she often skipped school and spent time with her partner smoking marijuana due to teacher lack of support. This narrative also highlighted the possibility of teachers being disengaged in student conflict, if they are only concerned about "getting paid". Yet, the study found that students, indeed, desired to form healthy

relationships with their peers as well as teachers to build a stronger sense of community in their school.

Desire to build better relationships. Students revealed that they desired to build better relationships with educators, through open and honest communication about their lives, and the experiences of their teachers, especially in relation to school (Hence, 2017). In the qualitative study, bullying was shown to have adverse impacts on peer relationships as well teacher student relationships. Each student expressed feelings of intimidation, feeling disregarded, and feeling that school staff were not invested in their education as well as ensuring that they were in a safe learning environment.

This could be especially true for students who encounter bullying and require a safe place or person to share their experiences. John captured this sentiment by suggesting that faculty should “keep it real” with students, which would promote the improvement in communication between students, staff, and parents that is necessary for student success. Students provided recommendations as to what changes must take place to improve the educational experience for African American students who, under other circumstances, might be stigmatized or labeled as “disadvantaged.”

Students also suggested that training should be required for teachers to learn how to effectively resolve disputes among students, especially in instances of bullying. The respondents believed that too often bullying escalated because teachers, staff, and administrators generally ignored it. In addition, students recommended that faculty should be properly trained to interact better with students. Students reported that the teachers who took the time to get to know them and spoke candidly with them were often

their favorite instructors. They felt supported and believed that teachers took an interest in them as individuals.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the qualitative study supported a closer examination of bullying and the prevalence it has in daily interactions among grade school children (Hence, 2017). The findings suggested that bullying had a huge impact on participants and their ability to learn and interact with other students. The literature was examined to explore bullying and the intervention practices/programs used in schools to combat bullying among grade school children, in hopes that important connections to suspensions and expulsions would be made.

It is important to examine possible interventions to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, including those interventions focused on bullying. The school-to-prison pipeline and bullying are both social justice issues that are of great concern as many African American students continue to struggle academically, socially, and emotionally. Many students require additional support and protections to gain better educational outcomes that will also provide a sense of security. The interviews resulted in recommendations about how students might be better supported. As Bridgette states:

Umm...I think in school there should be just maybe more ways for us to talk to adults about what is bothering us. It's just most of the time adults always feel they are right and they aren't trying to hear what we have to say. Like, they could be wrong and even lie on you, but nothing even happens. The students get the consequences, not the adults, and sometimes they are wrong.

To address this issue, several anti-bullying initiatives were examined in the hopes that the implementation of these programs might alleviate students' feelings of exclusion and assist in their voices being heard.

Anti-bullying Initiatives

There are anti-bullying programs being implemented in schools across the U.S to address the problem of bullying. However, the success of these programs varies upon school climate, parental involvement, discipline in schools, classroom rules/norms, and the degree of supervision of students (McCallion & Feder, 2013). The effectiveness of anti-bullying programs can only be stated on an individual school basis. Currently there is an anti-bullying movement that has formed world-wide to address bullying and give survivors of bullying a platform to share their experiences in bullying. Nobullying.com (2017) states:

The anti-bullying movement has been created in response to the steady increase in bullying across not only the United States but the world. Countries across the globe participate in anti-bullying activities, training sessions and legislation. What is anti-bullying? In a way, the anti-bullying movement gives a voice to the otherwise voiceless. It provides bullied kids (and young adults) with a sense of dignity and self-worth along with a plan of action (p.1).

This is a great initiative to end bullying given that bullying is a social justice issue that may continue to grow. The goal of the anti-bullying movement is to encourage bullying prevention and for students to practice empathy when interacting with their peers (nobullying.com, 2017). Forms of legislation, programs, organizations, and "best practices" are created to assist in ending bullying. Because one form of bullying

prevention is not enough to end bullying, different outlets have been implemented. Anti-bullying organizations and groups conduct workshops and informational trainings on identifying and responding to bullying so that bullying is resolved more effectively (nobullying.com, 2017). Each state has its own separate laws for bullying. McCallion and Feder (2013) state, “As of the date of this report, 49 states have at least one anti-bullying law, although the content of these laws varies considerably. Most of these laws direct school districts in the direction of adopting anti-bullying policies” (p.7). Thus, the protocol for addressing bullying in schools is still inconsistent among schools in the U.S because there is not a federal standard in how bullying is resolved. However, evidence-based practices have been used to resolve bullying. Enclosure (2013) states,

Efforts to prevent and address bullying behavior should be embedded within a comprehensive, multi-tiered behavioral framework used to establish a positive school environment, set high academic and behavioral expectations for all students, and guide delivery of evidence-based instruction and interventions that address the needs of students, including students with disabilities. In such a framework, policies and practices would be aligned and consistently implemented school wide. (p.1)

There are also separate agencies that seek to end bullying in schools. Stopbullying.gov, U.S Department of Education, and Health Resources and Services Administration all provide information and encourage policy change on the issue of bullying. McCallion and Feder (2013) state, “the federal partners work to coordinate policy, research, and communications on bullying topics.. .In addition, with leadership from the U.S Department of Education (ED), the federal partners have sponsored three

anti-bullying summits attended by education practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and federal officials.” (p.12). These alliances among federal government representatives reflect a keen awareness and concern over the impact of bullying on our youth. There is not a criterion that students must meet to participate in these programs. In fact, stopbullying.gov is an online resource that anyone could use because it is an online website, and funding for these initiatives or programs are in the form of federal grants. It is also important to consider what school-based programs have been shown to be effective in addressing bullying that occurs in grade schools. The researcher has provided an example of a school-based initiative that has found success in getting students, teachers, and families active in the role of ending bullying.

Bully Busters Program. The Bully Busters Program is a school-based intervention program that allows students, parents, and teachers to have an active role in preventing and intervening in bullying. As Home et al. (2011) state, “the overall goal of the Bully Busters Program is to effect change in the social system so that bullying does not occur” (p. 228). With this program, students and teachers have a proactive response to forms of bullying. For this program to be successful, students must perceive bullying as something that defies the social norms of their school. Teachers must also become more responsive to bullying and have a systematic approach to resolving bullying. Teachers must also build a strong support team among themselves to support each other and encourage the use of effective interventions for bullying that occurs in classrooms (Home et al., 2011). This approach may be helpful for teachers, as bullying could also take place during instruction and could explain why disruptive behaviors occur in the classroom. During Bully Busters training meetings, teachers continue to be made aware of the problem of

bullying by discussing problems with students in the classroom, assessing what is effective, creating new interventions, and providing support to the colleagues (Horne et al., p. 2011). Here, teachers effectively brainstorm ways to end bullying while having an outlet to share their experiences.

Teachers also have a critical role in setting classroom norms that will guide student conduct. Horne et al. (2011) reveal, “the foundation of the Bully Busters Program is *respect*” (p. 230). Respect is a social norm that applies to both students and teachers. The Bully Buster program has three core values that shape student perception of other students that encourage respect. As Horne et al. (2011) state, “all children can learn, all people in school deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, and there is no place for violence, aggression, or bullying in our schools” (p. 231). Teachers also teach students new skills, using a solution-focused approach to problems, including the use of the big questions (Horne et al., 2011). This allows teachers to be proactive in helping students who need additional guidance in how they interact with other students or address reasons why students are negatively interacting with students.

Schools also engage parents in ending bullying in schools. Horne et al. (2011) report “parents attending the parenting program learn about the steps the school is taking to minimize bullying at the school and what their child will be learning about the Bully Busters activities. The group also provides an opportunity for parents to interact with school counselors or other personnel leading or assisting with the program and to provide feedback about the way bullying is handled at school” (p. 233). This reinforces the idea that successful student outcomes require a community partnership between parents and school staff.

As the qualitative study revealed, John felt strongly about the lack of community presence and involvement in his school (Hence, 2017). He suggests that his local community and neighborhood should become more involved in initiatives that support education. He believed that schools should meet directly with families, since so few parents attend parent-teacher conferences and School Board meetings. In his words:

To me the school is the community. It's our job to go out into the neighborhood to get the parents. In this area, appearances are everything. It starts with the environment. They have the relationships teachers don't with their kids. So, it's up to us to go to them because they are not coming to us. So, we must start the relationship with them [people in the community]. When we do that, bring in the community and neighborhoods. We give everyone the ability to change things.

The Bully Busters program has been shown in research studies to have success in reducing bullying that occurs in schools that follow the program, while including families in the process. Schools that participate in the program leave the training more aware of bullying as they are taught about bullying prevention methods, characteristics of bullying dynamics among students, and intervention strategies, including ways to help survivors of bullying, ways to help students with stress management, and ways to practice stress reduction for themselves (Horne et al., 2011). Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of the program, as the program was used along with other bullying initiatives (Horne et al., 2011).

CONCLUSION

It was very interesting to examine the themes that were common in the responses from participants despite their different ages, different perspectives, and unique

educational experiences (Hence, 2017). Many participants experienced out-of-school suspension due to their response to their experience of bullying within their school. The interview data revealed that bullying had an active presence among youth and posed a threat to educational outcomes, student safety, productivity, and school climate. This finding from the study prompted further research on bullying and the impact it has on students, especially those who are victims of bullying. Participants in this study also felt they lacked protection from other students and expressed a strong desire to be heard. Participants shared feelings of anger and frustration about their experiences of having to take justice into their own hands, which led to their suspension and/or expulsion. This also led some students to feel marginalized due to the decisions of authority figures in their schools to unfairly apply discipline. Given these findings, the literature on teacher responses to bullying was also examined.

New research aimed to discover effective intervention practices being used to prevent and intervene in bullying that occurs in schools is needed. The researcher found that many resources are made available online regarding information on bullying, bullying prevention strategies, and bullying interventions. The Bully Busters Program is an example of a school-based initiative that provides training services to teachers in grade schools. Teachers participating in this program learn how to become more aware of when bullying is taking place and ways to effectively approach bullying when it occurs in schools, while creating a support system among colleagues.

In regard to policy reform, the Rethink Discipline legislation enacted in August 2017 could potentially be a new form of protection for Michigan students by recommending that consequences for infractions have a positive impact on students, such

as offering counseling, community service, and having students pay their debt to society in the form of restitution (Student Advocacy Center, 2016). These punishments are less harmful and promote restorative practices that should be enforced on a national scale. In addition, instances of bullying would be effectively mediated using a thorough investigation of student conflict, conducted by teachers and school staff.

The qualitative study also achieved its goal of increasing the critical civic praxis of the students who participated (Hence, 2017). Students were involved in a social justice issue and raised awareness of how disciplinary practices impacted their lives. Through the engagement and incorporation of student perspectives, the study provided students with the opportunity to discuss experiences that have come at a great cost for them, their schools, and communities. Additionally, in consideration of their personal experiences, the study provided students with the opportunity to speak out against, and possibly advocate for change in policies that are unjustly enforced in schools. Students were also allowed the opportunity to suggest alternative remedies and offer recommendations to increase community involvement in their schools. The students shared their experiences with student conflict and feeling unheard in the hope of increasing teacher engagement. John was a participant who felt a special obligation to encourage other students to resist peer conflict and become leaders.

The interviews resulted in a series of suggestions for disciplining students without disrupting their education (Hence, 2017). As the data collected in the study revealed students often fell behind academically when suspended from school. Despite the State of Michigan's steps to combat the school-to-prison-pipeline with the enactment of the *Rethink Discipline Legislation*, there are still far too many students who are at risk

nationwide. This legislation offered new protections that could potentially help students stay in school, rather than being pushed out. The suggestions provided by the participants of this study, along with the enactment of the Rethink Discipline Legislation in Michigan schools, however, hold great value and promise in promoting positive student outcomes and reducing suspensions and expulsions.

Author's Note

In the Winter 2018 Semester, the researcher had the opportunity to study abroad in Blue Fields, Jamaica in a Service Learning Project facilitated by the EMU School of Social Work. During my study abroad experience, the researcher was able to draw comparisons between school-based interventions that are being used in the United States and Jamaica to assist educators in recognizing, monitoring and intervening in bullying situations to decrease the number of students who are suspended or expelled from schools. The researcher facilitated a three-day training on peer mediation at the Belmont Academy of Excellence, as requested by school officials. Students who attended the training ranged from ages 13-17. Many of the students were active peer mediation counselors in their school and were selected by faculty to be peer mediation counselors. These were students who displayed strong leadership skills in their school.

During training sessions, students learned the process of mediating conflict from the perspectives of disputants and peer mediation counselors. The students learned the Six-Step Process of Peer Mediation and practiced peer mediation using simulations of conflict. The Six-Step Peer Mediation process included disputants agreeing to mediate, gathering each disputant's point of view, focusing on the interest of disputants, creating fair alternatives, evaluating options, and lastly creating an agreement. The final

agreement was in the form of a contract, stating the role each disputant will uphold in being accountable to resolving their problem. Students who attended the training on all three training days were given certificates of peer mediation training completion. The researcher found this method to be a viable option to consider, as it relates to intervening in student conflicts that occur in U.S schools.

Belmont Academy students conducted themselves in a way that was vastly different from how students often conduct themselves in U.S. schools. There was a general value among students to respect themselves and their peers. Because students at Belmont Academy were conditioned since basic school, elementary school in the U.S, to desire to maintain healthy relationships among peers, bullying was rarely encountered.

The researcher also had the opportunity to gain knowledge of school systems in Jamaica from school officials. After the training, the researcher grew with curiosity to learn how Belmont Academy was able to achieve student success in the areas of student conduct and high achievement. Belmont Academy was built in 2009 and held a ranking of 13th on the island in scholastic student achievement.

A conversation the researcher had with a school official from Belmont Academy revealed that the school found success in student outcomes because of their school's strong sense of community with families in the community. The school prioritized parents taking an active role in the learning of their students. Because the school has the support of parents, Belmont Academy and parents share the role of guiding students. That related closely to the sentiment of John in the earlier study and his desire for schools to build a community partnership with parents. The education of youth is repeatedly viewed

as requiring a community effort. Therefore, suspensions and expulsions are considered only at Belmont Academy in the most extreme cases.

The school dynamics of Belmont Academy were like U.S schools that use the Bully Busters program. However, respect and integrity are heavily enforced in the homes of Belmont Academy students as well. While the Bully Busters program shows promise, it could be found to be unsuccessful if parents/guardians do not fully support the program or do not encourage values of respect and integrity in their homes. In addition, student behavior in schools in Jamaica appeared to reflect a cultural norm as opposed to a school-based intervention.

Thus, students leave Belmont Academy prepared to be leaders in their career fields. An unfortunate reality of Jamaican school dynamics is that for many young boys in Jamaica, their education is sacrificed if their family is unable to pay for them to continue school. Most people who move on to pursue career endeavors are women. In addition, many of Jamaica's brightest students move to the U.S to pursue higher education. Many of these individuals will never return to Jamaica. This emphasizes the need for African Americans students to be engaged in schools as opposed to entering the criminal justice system, as many students of color internationally are not afforded the opportunity to learn.

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