Patterns in Recidivism and Discretionary Placement in Disciplinary Alternative Education: The Impact of Gender, Ethnicity, Age, and Special Education Status

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Abstract
This study examined the probability of (a) being placed in a disciplinary alternative education setting for mandatory versus discretionary reasons and (b) returning within the same year among an ethnically diverse sample (African American, Caucasian, Hispanic) of middle and high school students (N=270). Participants were compared based on ethnicity, gender, grade level, and special education status. Minority students were significantly more likely than Caucasian students to be placed in disciplinary alternative education for discretionary reasons and were more likely to return within the same school year. A similar result was revealed for high school students when compared to middle school students. Differences were found between boys and girls, but none were found between students who qualified for special education services and those who did not. The cultural and developmental implications of these findings are discussed, as well as suggestions for future practice and research.

Keywords: alternative education; discipline; zero tolerance

Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs) are schools designed to serve students who demonstrate difficulty functioning at their home campus. In contrast to educational and therapeutic alternative settings, DAEPs are aimed at correcting, or managing the behavior of disruptive students (Aron, 2003; Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1995). Considered not to be “schools of choice,” student entrance to a DAEP is initiated by administrative referral from the home school (Lange & Sletten, 2002). A nationwide survey of alternative schools and programs for children at risk conducted by the United States Department of Education indicated that there is a shortage of schools to meet the need. Furthermore, 54% of existing disciplinary alternative schools had exceeded maximum enrollment capacity during the 1999, 2000, and 2001 school years (Kleiner, Porch,
Despite the increase in placement of students in DAEPs, research exploring the connection between specific pathways of student matriculation and student characteristics does not exist. According to Katsiyannis and Williams (1998), the documentation of entrance and exit patterns for alternative education programs is important as it reduces “placements based on administrative convenience or isolation of ‘undesirables,’ denial of education services, and engagement in haphazard practices that lack planning and adequately trained personnel” (p. 282). In addition, understanding trends in student discipline provides useful information for those serving on discipline review committees, developing interventions, and attempting to improve the climate and safety of schools. Understanding reasons students were placed might lead to reduction in DAEP enrollment and increase success at the home campus.

*Mandatory versus Discretionary Disciplinary Placement*

Placement in a DAEP was initially considered mandatory for conduct punishable under Zero Tolerance policies. Zero Tolerance policies were implemented by the federal government in 1994 as a disciplinary mechanism to reduce violence in U.S. schools (Cortez & Montecel, 1999; Foley & Pange, 2006; Hosley, 2003; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998). Initially developed to extend gun control laws to schools, Zero Tolerance policies expanded the ability of administrators to engage in the “implementation of punitive and judicial forms of discipline” (Casella, 2003; p. 874). These forms of discipline include in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, placement in disciplinary alternative education programs, expulsion, and placement in juvenile justice programs. Offenses considered mandatory and subject to Zero Tolerance include felonies, terrorist threats, and assault or murder (Cortez & Montecel, 1999).

Although Zero Tolerance policies have been the target of much contention, an emerging outcome of these mandatory placement practices is also concerning—the philosophy that a greater variety of behaviors are now considered inappropriate and reason for placement in DAEPS. This philosophy is most reflected by students’ placement in DAEPs becoming increasingly discretionary and being extended to less serious violations of school codes of conduct and various other rule breaking/disruptive behaviors (Keleher, 2000; McCreight, 1999). A report by the Hogg Foundation (2006) indicated that for the 2005-2006 school year in the state of Texas, 70% of DAEP placements were at the discretion of the home school (one of the few states that publicly reports such data). The practice of mandatory placement
gave relatively clear categories for behaviors deemed punishable. Alternatively, discretionary placements entitle administrators to decide whether rule breaking behavior warrants alternative education, subjecting more students to potential for DAEP placement. While it is clear that the discretionary nature of DAEP placement is increasing, no attention has been given to the potential bias that may emerge from such a subjective practice.

**Student Characteristics and the Discipline Gap**

The discipline gap is an important concept to consider when contemplating the increasingly discretionary nature of placement in DAEPs. The discipline gap refers to the tendency for African American students to be overrepresented in discipline in proportion to their enrollment, Hispanic students to be proportionally represented, and Caucasian and Asian students to be underrepresented (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Not only does the discipline gap exist in relation to the proportion of student matriculation, but also in the eyes of students. Students of color report perceiving discrimination with regard to disciplinary treatment (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Ruck & Wortley, 2002).

The disparities in how discipline is handled for diverse student populations in other forms of discipline are well documented. This is particularly the case for office referrals and out-of-school suspension. For example, African American students are more frequently referred to the office than their Caucasian and Hispanic counterparts (McFadden, Marsh, Price, Hwang, 1992; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). These effects are noted even after controlling for the socioeconomic status of the students.

More germane to the mandatory versus discretionary exploration focus of this study are the varying reasons students are referred. While Caucasian students are frequently referred to the office for specific rule breaking infractions, (e.g. smoking, vandalism, leaving without permission), African American students are more likely referred for more subjective infractions (e.g. disrespect, excessive noise, threat; Skiba et al., 2002). When considering reasons for referral from a gender perspective, Skiba et al. found that boys are more likely than girls to receive an office referral for a range of major and minor offenses, with the exception of truancy.

The disproportionate rates and reasons for suspensions among students are relatively consistent with referrals. Skiba et al. found boys to be more often referred and subsequently suspended compared to girls. Mendez and Knoff (2003) reported a similar trend in higher male suspension. Costenbader and Markson (1998) and Mendez and Knoff noted that African American students, when compared with
Caucasian and Hispanic students, were disproportionately represented in the externally suspended sub-sample of their study. In the Mendez and Knoff study, African American students were disproportionately suspended for disobedience, disruptive behavior, fighting, and inappropriate behavior. Caucasian students were disproportionately suspended for tobacco, weapons, narcotics and alcohol possession. Finally, according to Mendez and Knoff, rates of suspension increase during middle school, and subsequently decrease in high school. Surprisingly, neither of these studies explored rate and reason for referral or suspension from the perspective of special education students as a subgroup.

With regards to proportionality of and reason for transfer to disciplinary alternative education settings, very little data exist regarding specific student characteristics. Nonetheless, in a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, urban districts (with higher proportions of minority students) were more likely than suburban and rural settings to have alternative schools for at-risk students, and districts with a majority of minority students were more likely to transfer students based solely on disruptive behavior versus other at risk characteristics, such as truancy, parenthood, or mental health needs (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). One might conclude from these data that minority students are at greater risk for being sent to DAEPs, and the reasons are more likely discretionary.

In contrast to students of color, the presence of special education students (with Individualized Education Plans) in disciplinary alternative education programs was relatively equivalent to the 12% nationwide average of students in special education (Kleiner et al 2002). Similar to increases in minority populations, however, representative proportion of special education students differed significantly by district size and geographic location (Kleiner et al). Differences in placement by location and size could reflect disproportionate ethnicity rates represented by varying districts.

**Recidivism and DAEPs**

In addition to record levels of enrollment, the “revolving door” of DAEPs is a potential concern. Although recidivism is important when we consider the effectiveness of interventions available at alternative education programs, little information is available regarding the recidivism rate of students enrolled in DAEPs and the demographic characteristics of those who do return. Rational choice theory, often cited when exploring criminal activity, would suggest that more severe forms of punishment might act as a deterrent to socially unacceptable behavior (Casella, 2003). In the case of school discipline, the
more severe punishment would be placement in a DAEP. However, the deterrent effect for either adult or juvenile delinquent populations is largely unsupported by research exploring choices of future behavior (Constenbader & Markson, 1998; Piliavin, Thornton, Gartner, & Matsueda, 1986). When asked if suspension would resolve the precipitating behavior, the highest proportion of responses among externally suspended students was “Not at all” while internally suspended students more often endorsed “A little bit” (Constenbader & Markson). This suggests that the most severely punished students were not likely to change their behavior based on the consequence.

In a survey of DAEPs in Pennsylvania, only 8% of students returned to alternative school during the same academic year; nonetheless, 37% continued the assignment through the following academic year (Hosley, 2003). Repeated return to DAEPs may also reflect the increased diversity of offenses considered subject to home campus removal.

Present Study

Patterns in the referral and suspension of diverse students have been given a significant amount of attention in school disciplinary literature. The same attention has not been given to DAEPs. This attention is warranted due to policies, such as Zero Tolerance, related to placement in DAEPs, and the critical nature of DAEPs in disciplinary hierarchy. DAEPs remove students from home campus instruction and isolate them from their peers. Transferring students to alternative placements may place them at additional risk given that mobility is highly predictive of dropout (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Tobin & Sprague, 2002). Understanding how vulnerable subpopulations gain access to DAEP settings is critical. The present study will provide a preliminary description of group differences in reasons for placement and recidivism in DAEP settings.

Method

Schools

The participating schools are disciplinary alternative programs from both an urban and suburban district in the Southwest. Included from the urban district were two schools. School A serves high school students, grades 9 through 12, with a balance between African American and Hispanic students (n = 117). Of the students attending, 60.7% were classified as economically disadvantaged. School B serves middle school students, grades 6th through 9th with a predominately African American population (n = 109). Approximately 73.8% of the students attending school B were classified as economically
disadvantaged. Included from the suburban district was one school (school C) which serves all disciplinary referrals in grades 6 through 12 (n = 43). School C’s population includes a relatively equal balance between African American, Hispanic and White students. Approximately 62% of the students attending school C were economically disadvantaged. As these schools have a rotating population, racial group statistics were based on an academic snapshot conducted by the state for the 2004-2005 school year. Table 1 reports school populations and places school population in the context of district population. In addition, it should be noted that the majority of the Hispanic students in this region are of Mexican origin.

Participants

Participants were 269 adolescent (grades 6-12) consecutive enrollees to the three disciplinary alternative education schools. For schools A and B, all students in attendance during the time frame of data collection were included. For school C, all students enrolling were invited to participate. Rate of participation was 78% for school C (43 of 55). Participants were predominately male (72.60%, or n = 196). The ethnicity of the students was predominately African American (52.59%, or n = 142), Hispanic (36.30% or n = 98), and White (11% or n = 29). Forty-seven percent of the students were in grades 6-8 and the remaining 53% attended grades 9 through 12. Twenty-five percent of the students qualified for special education services.

Procedure

Samples were taken from students in attendance during the last six weeks of the spring semester in 2005 (schools A and B) and 2006 (school C). Consent and assent to collect data were obtained from parents and students during alternative school intake. Information for this study was collected from the respective schools and individual participants as part of a larger study.

Measurement Variables

Reason for placement. Reason for placement in DAEP was divided into two categories, mandatory and discretionary. These categories were based on state definitions on type of offense committed for placement.

Mandatory. According to The Safe Schools Act contained in Chapter 37, Sections 37.001-37.022 of the State of Texas Education Code, a student “shall be removed from class and placed in a disciplinary alternative education program” for any of the following acts committed on or within 300 feet of school property or at a school-related
event: (1) any conduct punishable as a felony; (2) conduct that meets the Penal Code definition of an assault causing bodily injury; (3) use, possession, sale, or delivery of alcoholic beverages or illegal drugs; (4) abuse of a volatile chemical as defined by the Health and Safety Code; (5) conduct that meets the Penal Code definition of public lewdness or indecent exposure; (6) off-campus violent felony conduct, as found by a court or jury, or as determined by the superintendent based on ‘reasonable belief’; (7) conduct that meets the Penal Code definition of retaliation against any school employee, regardless of where the conduct occurs; (8) conduct that meets the Penal Code definition of ‘false report’ (for example, a bomb threat) or ‘terroristic threat.’ Behaviors of this nature were subsequently coded as mandatory placement in DAEP.

**Discretionary.** All behaviors that did not fall under the above categories and were driven by administrative decision coded as discretionary placements in a DAEP.

Mandatory versus discretionary designation was provided from the district for school C. For schools A and B, specific offenses (i.e. truancy, drugs, gang involvement) were provided from the district. The two investigators separately categorized these offenses as either mandatory or discretionary based on state definitions. After the answers were categorized, a Pearson product moment correlation was run to compare the scores. Inter rater reliability was 98 percent. For any discrepancies, the two raters discussed until 100% agreement was established.

**Recidivism.** Recidivism was determined by evaluating entrance dates for students at the end of the school year. Students with more than one date for the school year were categorized as recidivists. This information was provided by the school district.

**Demographics.** Data provided from the schools through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) were used to obtain student ethnicity, gender, and special education status. Ethnic groups used in this analysis included African American, Hispanic and Caucasian. Students were either categorized as receiving special education services or not; as a result, the students’ specific special education conditions were not used. Grade level was indicated by either middle (6-8th) or high school (9-12th).

**Results**

Descriptive statistics were calculated to obtain a general profile of the sample. For the overall sample, 80% of students were placed for discretionary reasons. Fifty-three percent were recidivists. To explore the relationships between ethnic, gender, grade level, and special
### Table 1
Ethnic Composition of Districts and Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District/School</th>
<th>African American (%)</th>
<th>Hispanic (%)</th>
<th>Caucasian (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>District 1</strong></td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School A (n = 117)</td>
<td>45.9 (54)</td>
<td>45.9 (54)</td>
<td>8.2 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B (n = 109)</td>
<td>69.1 (75)</td>
<td>25.5 (27)</td>
<td>5.5 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>District 2</strong></td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C (n = 43)</td>
<td>30.6 (13)</td>
<td>38.8 (17)</td>
<td>30.6 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Study (n=269)</td>
<td>41.5 (142)</td>
<td>41.9 (98)</td>
<td>14.8 (29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The data are from the 2004-2005 Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) publicly available through the Division of Performance Reporting at the Texas Education Agency. Retrieved February 1, 2007 (http://www.tea.state.tx.us/)

### Table 2
Logistic Regression Statistics Showing the Odds of Student Characteristics for Reason for Placement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Overall N</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Wald $\chi^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.400</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.307</td>
<td>1.491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Level</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.480</td>
<td>15.25</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.337</td>
<td>0.704</td>
<td>0.402</td>
<td>0.714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.491</td>
<td>22.95</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>12.075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.871</td>
<td>4.138</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>2.389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.020</td>
<td>4.304</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>2.773</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Comparison reference groups include: boys for Gender, high school for Grade Level, general education for Special Education, and Caucasian for ethnicity. Goodness of fit test Hosmer-Lemeshow: $p = 0.304$. 
versus general education status differences (independent variables) to the reason for placement and recidivism (dependent variables), two binary logistic regressions were conducted. Mandatory was used as the criterion variable (mandatory = 0, discretionary = 1) and recidivism was used as the criterion variable (recidivism = 0, no recidivism = 1). In each model, African American and Hispanic students were compared to the Caucasian reference group. Model fit for all the binary logistic regression models was appropriate based on the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test.

The first logistic regression revealed significant ethnic differences among groups for reason of placement. Compared to Caucasian students, Hispanic students were 12 times more likely to be placed in DAEP for discretionary reasons, odds ratio (12.08), \( p < .0001 \). Compared to Caucasian students, African American students were 2.39 times more likely to be placed in DAEP for discretionary reasons, odds ratio (2.39), \( p < .05 \). Compared to high school students, middle school students were less likely to be placed for discretionary reasons, odds ratio (0.23), \( p < .001 \). Special education students, when compared to general education students, were no more likely to be placed in alternative education for discretionary or mandatory reasons. Similarly, there were no significant differences between the likelihood of boys being placed for discretionary reasons than girls. This information is reported in Table 2.

### Table 3

**Logistic Regression Statistics Showing the Odds of Student Characteristics for Recidivism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Wald ( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.834</td>
<td>7.730</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>2.303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Level</td>
<td>-1.036</td>
<td>14.499</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.816</td>
<td>1.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1.412</td>
<td>11.581</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>4.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1.215</td>
<td>8.804</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>3.369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.013</td>
<td>5.440</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.363</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Comparison reference groups include: boys for Gender, high school for Grade Level, general education for Special Education, and Caucasian for ethnicity. Goodness of fit test Hosmer-Lemeshow: \( p = 0.956 \).*
The second logistic regression also revealed significant ethnic differences among groups regarding recidivism. Compared to Caucasian students, Hispanic students were 4.1 times more likely to return to DAEP within the same school year, odds ratio (4.10), \( p < .005 \). Compared to Caucasian students, African American students were 3.37 times more likely to return to DAEP during the same school year, odds ratio (3.37), \( p < .005 \). Significant gender differences were also found. Compared to girls, boys were 2.3 times more likely to be recidivists, odds ratio (2.30), \( p < .01 \). Compared to high school students, middle school students were less likely to return, odds ratio (.36), \( p < .001 \). Special education students were no more likely to return to DAEPs during the same school year than their general education counterparts. This information is reported in Table 3.

**Discussion**

In a report on school discipline, The Hogg Foundation pointed out important factors that needed to be addressed more adequately by school districts to assess the impact of disciplinary practices, particularly for students in special education. Included among these were the following (Hogg Foundation, 2006):

- The number of special education students in DAEPs annually
- The age distribution of children in DAEPs
- The race and/or ethnicity of children in DAEPs
- The number of discretionary and mandatory placements of youth in DAEPs
- The number of multiple placements of youth in DAEPs

The current study investigated proportional variances between DAEP placement and groups of students attending three disciplinary alternative education centers. The results support previous findings that disparity exists among groups in disciplinary actions. In particular, trends in discretionary reasons for DAEP placement mirror many trends in behavioral office referral and out-of-school suspension in that ethnic minority adolescents were more likely to be placed in alternative education for discretionary reasons, and more likely to return for subsequent assignment in the same academic year. When compared to middle school students, high school students demonstrated similar patterns.

The finding that Caucasian students are more likely to be placed for easily definable offenses that require placement supports previous findings that students who are members of ethnic minority groups are more likely to receive office referrals for a variety of reasons (Skiiba et al., 2002). Even more significant is that Hispanic students are
more likely than either African American or Caucasian students to be placed for administrator determined (i.e., discretionary) reasons. Previous research has focused on disparity between African American and Caucasian students. The results of this study suggest that not only should the differences between majority/minority be explored, but also specific experiences of Hispanic youth. The high level of Hispanic adolescent involvement in gangs and experience of truancy is well documented. It could be that the behaviors such as truancy or those related to gang involvement are not mandatory for expulsion, but in the eyes of administrators are no less severe in the scope of disciplinary response and remediation.

The developmental implications of DAEPs have not been previously explored; however, these preliminary findings suggest that investigation in this area is warranted. Previous findings from correctional facilities indicate that the prognosis is poor when the juvenile delinquent is a child as opposed to an adolescent (Katsiyannis & Archwamety, 1997). The result that middle school students are less likely to repeatedly return is, subsequently encouraging. The tendency for older students to be penalized more often for infractions that lead to discretionary placement may not be unusual if we considered the higher expectation for behavior likely placed on older adolescents.

Although it is difficult to contrast the mandatory versus discretionary comparison used in this study with previous researchers’ classifications of behavior, findings in this study did differ from previous literature regarding differences in reasons of disciplinary action of boys versus girls. In this study, no differences were found between the reasons for which boys and girls were assigned to DAEPs. Previous literature finds that boys are more often referred and suspended for a range of disruptive reasons (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). This might suggest that this higher level of discipline may present a different level of consideration for how administrators view punishment. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the boys still had a greater likelihood of returning to DAEPs. This could mean that the offenses boys engage in may be less amenable to remediation, boys themselves are less amenable to remediation, or that there may be some differences in severity or acceptability in behavior of boys versus girls. Further research is needed to explore possible explanations.

The limited information available about special education disciplinary practice makes the finding that those students who qualify for special education had an equivalent chance of being placed for discretionary reasons or returning to DAEPs significant. There are several factors that likely influence this result. In this study, students were included regardless of qualifying condition or presence of an
Individualized Education Plan. This outcome may be different if, for example, students with protections that require closer consideration of behavioral causes (i.e. emotionally disturbed students with behavior intervention plans) were excluded. In addition, the moniker of special education and its relationship to manifestation determination may be significantly influencing administrators’ decisions. One might even expect that students in special education would be disproportionately less likely to be placed for discretionary reasons.

Implications

There are several competing ideas that might warrant exploration as a result of the findings of this study: (1) the few Caucasian students who reach the level of removal from schools are engaging in more extreme or severe forms of behavior (i.e. requiring mandatory suspension), yet are more easily reformed (i.e. lower recidivism); (2) ethnic minority and older students are systematically involved in more disruptive behavior which is repeated again and again; (3) the threshold of tolerance for inappropriate behavior demonstrated by children of color and older students is lower. While the results of this study only speak to probabilities, it is clear that ethnic and developmental patterns in DAEP placement require some attention and additional exploration to determine underlying causes.

The results from this study elucidate the necessity for measures that target the needs and behaviors of children of color and those who interact with them. Monroe (2005) supports a school context explanation for discipline discrepancies. According to Monroe, cultural differences in communication, including verbal and nonverbal expression, between teachers and students, and the inability for school personal to see the limits of their own cultural lenses and privilege may be at the root of disciplinary inequities. However, when asked to consider the discipline gap, teachers rarely suggest cultural issues and instead consider the difficulty to be within the individual student (Gregory & Mosley, 2004). The findings of this study, which support that students are sanctioned differently for subjective behaviors, might provide insight into these competing views.

Potential directions

In light of the study findings, several opportunities exist for those seeking to reduce the negative effects of Zero Tolerance policies, and those in the role of advocating and intervening for adolescents disproportionally at-risk for disciplinary sanction. One potential direction includes creating a realistic dialogue regarding cultural differences, the way they play out in the classroom, and the impact student/
teacher differences have on student engagement and behavior. For example, teachers have lower academic expectations, are less likely to use encouraging language, and are more likely to criticize African American and Hispanic children (Chang & Sue, 2003; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). The interaction styles between children of color and their teachers are also more negative. In addition, some children of color value varying aspects of their identity (i.e. nonacademic; Roth, 2005), perceive unfair treatment (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Ruck & Wortley, 2002), and in general (as do all children) benefit from clear and consistent rules (Fenzel, 2009). It would be important for advocates to work with school personnel to help them understand how these factors reduced student motivation, engagement, and increase negative interpersonal interactions—all of which might lead to behavior that causes discretionary referral to disciplinary alternative education programs.

Another potential direction would be to work on developing clear expectations and definitions for discretionary reasons for placement on home campuses. These definitions could include guidelines that eliminate, or at least minimize, the potential for culturally-based variations in styles of communication and interaction as a reason for alternative school referral. In particular, working with disciplinary hearing committees provides an opportunity to make such changes system-wide. This might include advocating for training or employing hearing officers adept at recognizing potential cultural issues, systematically incorporating questions that address such conflicts in the disciplinary review process, and developing remediation plans for schools that consistently demonstrate patterns related to certain types of discretionary placements.

Finally, given the concern with repeated re-admittance to alternative schools, focus should also be placed on working with students. Increasing focus at the alternative school on having students understand what it means to work with culturally different administrators at their home campus might help them more successfully matriculate at their home campus upon returning. Such instruction might include understanding school expectations and what internal and external factors are likely to place them at increased risk for disciplinary placement.

Limitations

While trends in reasons for placement and recidivism were found in this research, it should be noted that this study was conducted in a limited geographical area. Although this was helpful in consistently defining discretionary versus mandatory descriptions, and equivocating types of disciplinary settings, it does limit the generalizability of
these findings. Also, the need to aggregate many offenses into two categories limits the contextual information within each infraction, and does not necessarily speak to the severity of the offense in the eyes of the administrators or society in general. There are several other contextual variables regarding schools and students as individuals not examined in this study that could significantly influence the results. Much of the information desired by the researchers, such as SES and achievement level could not be obtained consistently from districts and subsequently had to be omitted. Finally, the authors recognize that aggregating data across school years, settings, and slightly different recruitment methods introduce some potential error. As stated above, the authors were seeking representation from both urban and suburban districts. While differing methods for obtaining participation may introduce some error, district requirements dictated data collection methods. Because the participation rate for school C was relatively high, and data were treated in an aggregated manner, this limitation was considered to have been minimized.

References


