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School Racial Climate and Discipline Practices: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

The disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline with African American students in American schools is systemic and well documented in the literature. School climate has been found to be related to suspension rates and as the literature has begun to demonstrate the differences in how African American students experience their school's climate when compared to White students, an area of intervention has revealed itself. As school psychologists begin work improving school climates with the intentional goal of reducing the racial discipline gap, they may find success by improving school climate, and more specifically, the school's racial climate. The current systematic review explored what relationship, if any, exists between school racial climate and discipline within K-12 schools. After a search of databases, six studies were selected. While none measured school racial climate explicitly as described in Byrd (2017)'s framework, the selected studies were included because they directly measure discipline in K-12 schools and school climate by racial group or as it affects racial discipline disparities. Results indicated that schools with an authoritative climate have fewer suspensions overall but not necessarily a smaller racial discipline gap; and several other aspects of school climate including positive student-teacher relationships, disciplinary structure, and African American students' perceptions of equity and sense of belonging are associated with smaller racial discipline gaps. Implications for future research and school psychologists' practice are discussed.

School Racial Climate and Discipline Practices: A Systematic Review

Introduction

School climate has been a growing area of interest in the field of education for decades (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). With increasing evidence of the student benefits of a positive school climate, more research has been conducted at both the local and national levels regarding the factors affecting school climate and school climate improvement efforts. While defining school climate has proven to be difficult, most definitions are similar to that of the National School Climate Council (NSCC; 2007) that describes school climate as “patterns of people’s experiences of school life (reflecting) norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (p. 5). Having a clear definition of school climate is crucial in school climate measurement and improvement.

Drawing on the NSCC definition of school climate, recent reviews of the literature have further defined dimensions of school climate and investigated methods used to study this variable. For example, Thapa et al. (2013) outlined the following dimensions of school climate: (a) Safety (i.e., the rules and norms of the school, physical, and social-emotional safety), (b) Relationships (i.e., respect for diversity, the school’s connectedness or engagement, social support, leadership, and students of different races/ethnicities perceptions of school climate), (c) Teaching and Learning (i.e., social, emotional, ethical, civic, and service learning; support for academic learning and for professional relationships; and teachers’ and students’ perceptions of school climate), (d) Institutional Environments (i.e., the school’s physical surroundings, resources, and supplies), and (e) the School Improvement Process (i.e., the school’s efforts to change practices or implement interventions to improve the academic success, social-emotional,

and behavioral well-being of their students). Similarly, Wang, and Degol (2016) identified four main domains of school climate: academic, community, safety, and institutional environment. Academic refers to the overall quality of academic environment, including instruction, leadership, curricula, professional development, and teacher training. Community refers to the quality of relationships, feelings of connectedness, community and family engagement, and respect for diversity. Safety refers to physical, social, emotional safety as well as fair and consistent discipline and order. Institutional environment refers to the physical school environment, structural organization such as class size, and availability of resources. While consensus has not yet been reached about the definitive dimensions that make up school climate, the aforementioned areas are discussed most frequently in the literature.

The research shows that school climate is influential in students' academic success, mental and physical health, and social and emotional well-being (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014). Previous studies have shown that schools who have more positive student perceptions of school climate have higher academic achievement, lower absenteeism, lower dropout rates, less truancy, and higher graduation rates (Wang & Degol, 2016). A positive school climate is also linked to less drug use and fewer self-reports of psychiatric problems in high school students (LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008). Positive school climate is also predictive of better psychological well-being as students enter adolescence (Virtanen et al., 2009). Furthermore, positive school climate is correlated with lower rates of student suspensions (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011) and is an effective method of risk prevention (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006) as students at schools with positive school climates tend to display less aggression or violence (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera 2010).

Student Perceptions of School Climate by Race and Ethnicity

As school psychologists intervene in their schools' climate as a conduit for improving student outcomes, it is important to note that research suggests that school climate can be experienced differently by individuals within the same school. For instance, Gordon (2018) found that there was a significant difference in school climate perceptions based on students' race identification. Students who identified as Asian perceived their school's climate to be significantly more positive than students who identified as multi-race non-Hispanic. While there were no other statistically significant differences between groups, there was a clear decline in school climate perception by group. Students who identified as Asian perceived their school climate most positively, followed by White students, Hispanic students, students who identified as 'other' or preferred not to answer, Native American students, African American students, and multi-race non-Hispanic, having the least positive perception of school climate.

Teacher-student relationships and students' global relationships with adults at their school overall are also important factors of school climate. Positive teacher-student relationships are linked to students' academic achievement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), social-emotional competence (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013), and academic engagement (Hudley, Moschetti, Gonzales, Cho, Barry, & Kelly, 2009). Previous research regarding perceived teacher-student relationships by race or ethnicity yielded mixed results. Some studies found that White students reported closer teacher-student relationships than students of color (Wyrick & Rudasill, 2009), and some found no racial or ethnic differences in students' perceptions of teacher-student relationships (Murray, Murray, & Waas, 2008), while others found that students of color reported more positive teacher-student relationships than their White peers did (Shaunessy & McHatton, 2009). For example, Liu, Savitz-Romer, Perella, Hill, and Liang, (2018) examined the racial and ethnic differences in perceived teacher-student

relationships at a high school with almost all White teachers. They found that White students were more likely to describe both their positive and negative teacher-student relationships based on their perception of the teacher's instructional effectiveness, whereas African American and Hispanic students were more likely to describe their positive and negative teacher-student relationships based on their perceptions of affinity or similarity with their teachers. Despite the differences in racial and cultural identities, there was a perceived affinity and a presence of positive teacher-student relationships between African American and Hispanic students and their White teachers. This may be due to the teachers' cultural competence and/or relationship building skills.

Racial Disparities in School Discipline

There is a wealth of research indicating that ethnic minority students, particularly African American students are disproportionately disciplined in American schools (Raffaele Mendez, L. M., & Knoff, H. M., 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002.). Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, and Leaf (2010) sought to identify factors that contributed to the overrepresentation of African American students receiving office discipline referrals. They found that even when controlling for the severity of the student's behavior by teacher rating, the teacher's ethnicity, and classroom environment, African American students were significantly more likely than White students to receive an office discipline referral. This study ruled out some of the factors that have been suggested may contribute to the disproportionate disciplining of African American students. For example, even when two students were exhibiting the same level of severity of behavior, the African American student was more likely to be disciplined than the White student. Additionally, while Bradshaw et al., (2010) hypothesized that a mismatch in teacher and student race or culture may be a contributing factor, they found that African

American students were more likely to be disciplined than White students even when their teacher was also African American.

In a more recent study, Ritter and Anderson (2018) analyzed seven years of student- and infraction-level data from every public school in Arkansas and found that African American students were more likely than their White peers to be disciplined for infractions in every category except drugs and alcohol. The categories with the greatest disparities between White and African American students were guns and minor violence/weapons, for which African American students were three times more likely to be written up. Eighty percent of the state's infractions fell into the category of minor nonviolent infractions, which includes disorderly conduct, insubordination, and other. Moreover, African American students were 2.34 times more likely than their White peers to be written up for minor nonviolent infractions. The risk of referral for this subjective category remained constant both across the state and within individual districts. Furthermore, African American students were 2.4 times more likely than their White peers to receive exclusionary discipline for the same infraction. The rate of overall disparity was greater across the state than within individual school districts, suggesting that some school districts may be implementing less discriminatory policies than others. Thus, racial disparities in disciplinary practices continue to be an issue in public education.

School Climate and Discipline

While there are few studies that directly examine the link between school discipline policies and school climate, there is agreement in the field that this bidirectional relationship is influential in students' school experiences. Anderson (1982) was an early contributor in this area, reporting that school climate and student behavior are affected by each other. Later, Pang (1992) surveyed teachers in 29 schools regarding their perceptions of school climate and their attitudes

about the use of rewards and punishment in behavior management at school. Teachers in this study that rated their school's climate as more positive were more likely to report using rewards to manage classroom behavior and teachers working at schools with less positive school climate were more likely to report using punishment as a means of classroom management. Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson (2005) expanded this research, surveying 254 public secondary schools to measure perceptions of school climate and school disorder – which was defined as teacher or student victimization and student delinquency. Schools with more positive ratings of school climate were perceived as less disordered by students and staff and had fewer discipline offenses than schools with lower perceptions of school climate.

School resource officers are often used to assist administration with discipline, which has negatively impacted students' feelings of safety. School resource officers' roles are intended to promote safety in schools, provide legal education, and to serve as disciplinarians. While there is some research about adults' perceptions of school resource officers, there is considerably less known about students' perceptions of school resource officers. School resource officers were surveyed regarding their role with students and 64% indicated that they felt students viewed them as more of a resource than as a police officer (Hurley Swayze & Buskovick, 2014). Principals in east Kentucky felt positively about school resource officers' roles in school, particularly in their role as a violence prevention and reduction strategy (May, Fessel, & Means, 2004). Despite these perceptions, the research regarding school resource officers' contribution to school safety is mixed. While some studies found that the presence of law enforcement at school was associated with an increase in reports of serious violence in high schools (Crawford & Burns, 2015), serious and minor crime, and school expulsions (Na & Gottfredson, 2013), others

found their presence decreased school-related violence (Johnson, 2016) except in cases in which school resource officers carried guns or tasers (Maskaly, Donner, Lanterman, & Jennings, 2011).

Research about students' feelings of safety at school in relation to the presence of school resource officers is both limited and mixed. Theriot and Orme (2014) found in a national sample that the presence of resource officers was correlated with students feeling safe at school, whereas Reingle Gonzalez, Jetelina, and Jennings (2016) found that greater presence of resource officers correlated with students feeling less safe at school. Pentek and Eisenberg (2018) found that African American, multiple-race, and American Indian students with resource officers at their schools felt significantly less safe at school than did their White peers, had significantly less favorable perceptions of resource officers, and experienced school discipline at three times the rate of their White peers. While additional research about students' perceptions of school safety is warranted, the existing literature indicates that minority students do not always feel as safe at school as their White peers do.

School Racial Climate

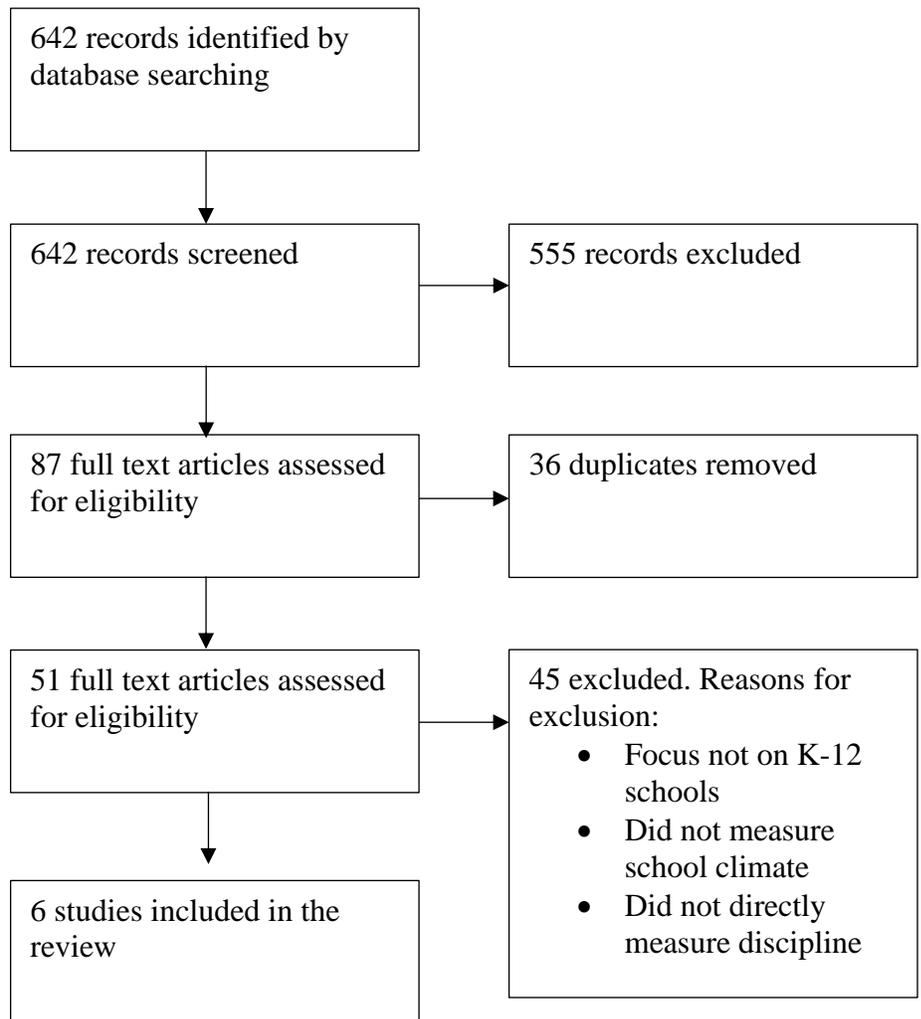
School Racial Climate refers to “perceptions of interracial interactions and the socialization around race and culture in a school (Byrd, 2017, p. 700).” While numerous studies regarding the role of race in students' school experiences have been conducted, the literature focuses almost entirely on unfair treatment and overt racial discrimination (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, Bámaca, & Zeiders, 2009). Byrd (2017) asserts that unfair treatment and discrimination are not synonymous. A student may feel that their school is generally fair and also perceive themselves as being discriminated against. Thus, Byrd (2017) highlights this difference by defining unfair treatment (or equal status) as a student's perception of the context of their school rather than their individual experiences.

Purpose of the Current Study

Expanding upon Wang and Degol's (2016) systematic review, the current study seeks to connect the gap between school climate, racial discipline disparity, and school racial climate research with a review of existing school racial climate literature. This systematic review will explore what relationship, if any, exists between school racial climate and discipline; and will provide school psychologists with a framework to utilize in their work promoting more equitable school climates.

Methods

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines and flow diagram (See Figure 1) were followed. Ethical approvals were not required. Studies included have a publication date of 2009 and later, are empirical, peer-reviewed, have a large sample size, and focus on school racial climate and discipline in K-12 schools. Studies were identified by searching electronic databases. This search was applied to PsycInfo, PsycArticles, PsycExtra, PsycTherapy, APA Books, PsycTests. Specific search terms included school climate and student outcomes, school climate perceptions and racial group, school climate perceptions and ethnic group, student teacher relationships and racial group, student teacher relationship and ethnic group, school safety and racial group, school safety and ethnic group, discipline policies and school climate, school climate and restorative practice, school climate and exclusionary discipline, exclusionary discipline and racial group, exclusionary discipline and student outcomes, and school racial climate. Studies were selected by review of title and abstract in relation to search criteria. The researcher summarized the main findings from the selected studies and its relation to other selected studies.

Figure 1*PRISMA Flow Diagram Outlining Search Strategy for Review*

Results

Characteristics of Studies

The initial search yielded 642 results with a publication date of 2009 and later. Overwhelmingly, the majority of these articles were focused on racial climate in higher education and in the workplace. 24 articles were identified at the K-12 level. After applying all inclusion criteria, 6 articles were selected to be included in this review. The majority of school racial climate research in K-12 schools do not focus explicitly on school racial climate but rather school climate as it pertains to and is experienced by different racial groups. While there is certainly a distinction, information gleaned from how racial minority students experience their school climate in comparison to their White peers can inform the status of school racial climate. Additionally, few studies directly measured discipline in K-12 schools as well as school climate; and no studies have directly measured discipline in K-12 schools and school racial climate. The selected studies were chosen because they directly measure discipline in K-12 schools and measure school climate by racial group or as it affects racial discipline disparities.

Risk of Bias

There is a risk of bias within study selection because the study selection process was conducted by the researcher alone. The researcher consulted with her thesis chair and committee regarding search terms to use and results in an effort to reduce the risk of bias.

Description of Studies

Three studies were conducted in high schools and three took place within middle schools. Five of the studies collected state-wide data, surveying 53 to 423 schools and between 5,035 and 75,081 students. One study surveyed 400 students within one school. Average school racial compositions ranged from 18% to 37% African American students, with one survey recruiting

exclusively African American and White students to complete the survey. All studies compared aspects of school climate to suspension rates for African American and White students. All studies surveyed students and one surveyed teachers as well. Three studies measured schools' authoritative school climate, which includes adult support and school structure. One other study also examined structure in the context of disciplinary structure. Other aspects of school climate examined include willingness to seek help, prevalence of bullying, academic engagement, student belonging, and perceived equity. In addition to surveying students, one study observed classrooms and recorded the proportion of teacher positive behavior support verbalizations to total verbalizations. Table 1 provides a summary of included study characteristics.

Study Findings

Racial Discipline Inequality All six studies demonstrated that racial discipline inequality is prevalent and significant. Across studies, African American students on average were anywhere from 2.2 to 4.5 times more likely to be suspended than White students. After controlling for sociodemographic variables like school enrollment size, poverty level, and school racial composition, African American students were still significantly more likely to be suspended than White students. This is consistent with previous research. While schools with more positive school climates had smaller suspension gaps, they were still present and significant.

Authoritative School Climate and Racial Discipline Inequality Three studies examined authoritative school climate and racial discipline inequality. Two surveyed students using the Authoritative School Climate Survey and one used a combination of the Supportive School Climate scale, the Academic Press scale, and the Experience of School Rules scale. Heilbrun, Cornell and Konold (2018), Huang and Cornell (2018), and Gregory,

Table 1*Characteristics of Selected Studies*

Reference (Year)	School Type	Number of Schools	Total Number of Students	Grades Surveyed	Teachers Surveyed	Racial Makeup: % African American	School Climate Factor Measured and Measurement Tool Used	Method of Measuring Discipline
Bottiani et al (2017)	High Schools	58	19,726	Ninth through Twelfth	No	55.8% (Only surveyed African American and White students)	Equity, Student Belonging; Maryland Safe and Supportive School Climate Survey	School-level suspension rates collected
Gregory et al (2011)	High Schools	199	5,035	Ninth	No	30%	Adult Support, Adult Academic Expectations, Consistency of Rules; The Supportive School Climate scale, The Academic Press scale, The Experience of School Rules scale	School-level suspension rates collected
Heilbrun et al (2018)	Middle Schools	423	39,364	Seventh and Eighth	Yes (n=9,621)	18.2%	Disciplinary Structure, Adult Support, Student Willingness to Seek Help;	School-level suspension rates collected

Huang & Cornell (2018)	Middle Schools	302	75,081	Sixth through Eighth	No	18%	Authoritative School Climate Survey Disciplinary Structure, Adult Support; Authoritative School Climate Survey	School-level suspension rates collected
Larson et al (2019)	High Schools	53	17,115	Ninth through Twelfth	No	37%	Academic Engagement, Disciplinary Environment; Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools Survey	School-level suspension data collected, analyzed by risk ratio and risk difference
Shirley & Cornell (2011)	Middle School	1	400	Sixth through Eighth	No	20.2%	Willingness to Seek Help; The School Climate Bullying Survey	Suspension and discipline referral history accessed from student files

Cornell, and Fan (2011) found that authoritative school climate was predictive of overall suspension rates. While Huang and Cornell (2018) did not find a relationship with the suspension gap, Heilbrun et al. (2018) found that discipline structure, an aspect of authoritative school climate, was significantly negatively associated with the suspension gap, explaining an additional 3.9% of the variance [$F(7, 367) = 24, p < .01$]. Gregory et al. (2011), however, did not find that discipline structure was associated with the suspension gap; instead they found that supportive student-teacher relationships in which the teacher held high expectations of the students were most associated with smaller suspension gaps ($\beta = 5.16, p < .05$).

Student-Teacher Relationships and Racial Discipline Inequality Four of the six studies examined some aspect of student-teacher relationships and racial discipline inequality. Three examined adult support, or the degree of warmth and support from teachers as perceived by students. While Heilbrun et al. (2018), Gregory et al. (2011), and Huang and Cornell (2018) found that adult support was significantly and negatively associated with overall suspension rates, only Gregory et al. (2011) found that it was significantly and negatively associated with the discipline gap as well ($\beta = 5.16, p < .05$). Moreover, Gregory et al. (2011) measured student-teacher relationships in the context of academic expectations and found that schools with teachers who were supportive and had high expectations for their students also had significantly smaller suspension gaps. Another way to measure student-teacher relationships is student's willingness to seek help from adults. Two studies examined willingness to seek help and racial discipline inequality. Heilbrun et al. (2018) found that students' willingness to seek help was negatively associated with overall suspension rates [$F(5, 367) = 26, p < .001$], but not the suspension gap, and Shirley and Cornell (2011) found that students' willingness to seek help

predicted receipt of a discipline referral ($\beta = -0.11, p = .05$) but not suspension ($\beta = 0.05, p > .05$)

Fairness of Rules, Equity, and Racial Discipline Inequality Four of the studies examined school rules or the way they are enforced. Huang and Cornell (2018) and Heilbrun et al. (2018) examined disciplinary structure, or fairness of rules and consistency in implementing school rules. While both studies found that discipline structure was significantly and negatively associated with overall suspensions, only Heilbrun et al. (2018) found that it was also related to a decrease in the suspension gap [$F(7,367) = 20.2, p < .01$]. Larson, Bottiani, Pas, Kush, and Bradshaw (2019) examined a similar construct, disciplinary environment, which evaluates students' perceptions of fairness of rules and consistency of consequences. Larson et al. (2019) found that disciplinary environment was significantly and negatively associated with racial discipline disproportionality ($\gamma = -0.05, p = .03$). Gregory et al. (2011), however did not find a significant relationship between disciplinary structure and racial discipline inequality. Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Mendelson (2017) measured student perceived equity, which is less about discipline and more about equal treatment of all students regardless of race or gender and overall cultural inclusiveness. Bottiani et al. (2017) found that African American students' perceived equity was significantly and negatively related to the suspension gap ($\gamma = -0.54, p < .001$).

Belonging, Academic Engagement, and Racial Discipline Inequality One study examined student belonging and one examined academic engagement. Bottiani et al. (2017) examined students' feelings of belonging and found that African American students' feelings of belonging were significantly and negatively associated with the racial suspension gap ($\gamma = -0.50, p < .001$). Larson et al. (2019) found that schools with higher academic engagement had significantly lower racial suspension gaps.

Discussion

Previous school racial climate research is missing students' perceptions of their schools' formal curricula and informal racial socialization. Researchers have historically focused on the racial compositions of schools and have largely ignored students' perceptions of racial and cultural messages at school. Some researchers have acknowledged the presence of racial and cultural messages overtly or covertly sent in schools (Howard, 2001), but did not directly examine how students perceived these messages.

Another limitation in the literature is that school racial climate has previously been understood as a unidimensional construct (Simmons, Wittig, & Grant, 2010). Labeling a school's racial climate as either positive or negative does not tell the whole story and is not useful to a school looking to improve their school racial climate. Using a multidimensional approach is a more appropriate means of capturing all features of an environment and allows for analysis of different features that may be more impactful to different students depending on their individual characteristics.

Byrd's School Climate for Diversity – Secondary Scale (2017) allows for analysis of differences in students' awareness and perceptions of racial and cultural messages at school. Byrd (2017) sought to expand upon previous school climate research by establishing a framework for school racial climate and creating a scale to measure it. Students are presented with the stem, "Think about your school. How true are the following questions?" and are asked to rate how true the item is for their school on a five-point Likert scale. The response categories are: not at all true (1); a little true (2); somewhat true (3); very true (4); and completely true (5). Both the framework and scale consist of two domains: intergroup interactions and school racial socialization. The intergroup interactions domain focuses on the interactions between members

of different racial and cultural groups at school and the school racial socialization domain captures the ideas conveyed at school about race and culture.

While there are currently no studies directly studying Byrd's (2017) framework of school racial climate at the K-12 level and discipline disproportionality, six studies were identified that examined racial discipline disparities and school climate, three of which examining differences in school climate perception by race. Although the existence of a relationship between school racial climate and discipline is not able to be determined at this time, important information was gleaned from this systematic review and will be beneficial in both informing future research and practice of school psychologists.

Consistent with previous research, this systematic review highlights the continued gap in discipline between White and African American students, with African American students receiving suspensions at much higher rates than their White peers. Authoritative school climate was significantly and negatively related to overall suspensions and in some cases, the racial suspension gap. In studies with a significant association, gaps decreased but were not eliminated. Student-teacher relationships remain an important factor of school climate. Student-teacher relationships in which the teacher has high support and high expectations for the student appears to be significantly related to lower suspension rates, whereas students' willingness to seek help from adults at school was not as robust a predictor of suspensions. Having fair and consistently implemented school rules is related to lower overall suspension rates, but mixed results were found in relation to the suspension gap. Importantly, Bottiani et al. (2017) found that African American students' perceived equity and feelings of belonging were significantly and negatively associated with the racial suspension gap.

Implications for Future Research

Existing research demonstrates the relationship between school climate and overall suspension rates, highlighting the importance of student-teacher relationships, disciplinary structure, perceived equity, feelings of belonging, and academic engagement. There is some evidence of a relationship between each of the aforementioned constructs and the suspension gap, but more work must be done to establish clear relationships. Despite the work that has already been done with school climate, race remains the largest predictor of suspensions. When attempting to understand a consequence whose antecedent is best explained by race, it follows that one would need to examine racism in the system explicitly rather than the environment as a whole. Bottiani et al. (2017)'s examination of African American students' perceived equity and feelings of belonging are a direct measure of part of a school's racial climate and are similar to the Equal Status subscale of Byrd's school racial climate framework. Future research should be conducted to examine the relationship between Byrd's school racial climate framework and the suspension gap.

Implications for School Psychologists

School psychologists are uniquely trained and positioned to assist their schools in creating more equitable climates and decreasing the use of exclusionary discipline and the racial discipline gap. The National Association of School Psychologists (2020) has released a framework for effective school discipline and includes guidelines in promoting equity with school-wide, culturally responsive discipline practices. NASP's (2020) framework, along with the data from this systematic review support the implementation of positive and effective discipline. This includes fair, clear, consistently and equitably applied rules, positive behaviors that are explicitly taught, modeled, practiced, and reinforced, and culturally responsive practices. School psychologists are uniquely positioned as members of school multi-disciplinary teams and

have data collection and analysis skills that are instrumental in creating and implementing equitable discipline policies.

This systematic review also highlighted the importance of the relationships between students and the adults in their school environments. NASP (2020) noted the importance of providing professional development to increase teachers' confidence and ability in managing classroom behavior. School psychologists have the knowledge and training to assist in providing professional development so that teachers and faculty are better equipped to manage behavior, diminish the effect of bias in discipline, and examine the impact of privilege, implicit bias, and racism in their schools. School psychologists should also consider how they can use their role to encourage discussion of racism, privilege, and implicit bias within classrooms.

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