OBJECTIVE VERSUS SUBJECTIVE DISCIPLINE REFERRALS

IN A SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Objective Versus Subjective Discipline Referrals in a School District

Seven percent of all students are excluded from school every year across the United States for violating school policies and procedures. Exclusion from school causes a number of problems for students such as higher dropout rates, grade retention, more of a likelihood of not graduating from high school, and a widening of the achievement gap. However, the literature review reveals a lack of exclusion research specific to Hispanic students. Therefore, this research study investigated the level of disciplinary referrals leading to student suspensions during the 2013-2014 school year in a southern California school district of 9223 students with a student demographic composed of 39% free-and-reduced meals, 24% English language learners, and 36% Hispanic. The research study analyzed not just referrals but differences between subjective versus objective referrals for Hispanic and White students. Risk ratio results indicated that Hispanic students were more likely to receive referrals that resulted in suspensions from school at two-and-one-half times the rate compared to their White peers for both subjective (RR = 2.572) and objective (RR = 2.600) referrals. While there was no difference, $p = .308$, between referrals labeled as subjective versus objective, Hispanic students were significantly more likely to receive objective ($p = .017$) and subjective ($p = .041$) disciplinary referrals that

resulted in suspensions compared to their White peers. The most significant factors that predicted overall student disciplinary referrals were English language learner status and free and reduced meals. In particular, English language status accounted for 60% of all referrals leading to a student suspension. Oppositely, factors that had the least predicted referral infractions were talented and gifted status, parent education level, and special education status. Results from this study provided school district staff with information that helped to revise district policy and procedures regarding the use of the suspension as an enforcement tool in student discipline, with particular focus on subjective versus objective referrals that could lead to student suspension. Implications of this research are discussed in relation to practice, procedures, and policies.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my mother, an immigrant from Mexico who cared for her two sons and taught us that through education, one can achieve a better life in the United States. To my wife, Cindy, who has been patient through my movements in my career, patient through my studies, and who has always been supportive in any endeavor that I have undertaken. To my two sons, Miguel and Diego, who I hope to have instilled in them a love of learning and instilled in them a will to persevere through any hardship that they may encounter in life.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Objective Versus Subjective Disciplinary Exclusions in a K-8 School District

Of the projected 50 million K-12 students in public schools in the United States in 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), 7% of these students will be excluded from their school on a yearly basis, and thus their education, for violations of school and/or district behavior policies (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). These exclusions from school, both suspensions and expulsions, cause several possible issues for students. Prior research has found that suspensions increased the probability of being involved in the juvenile justice system, a higher rate of grade retention, withdrawing from school (Sullivan, et al., 2009; Townsend, 2010), lower wages and lower rates of graduation, employment (Sullivan, et al., 2009), widening of the achievement gap, the likelihood of being placed in lower-level classes, and lower self-esteem (Townsend, 2000). Students who are excluded from school are denied their access to education due to their violation of school and district policies and practices, but many of these exclusions are subjectively enforced by teachers and administrators (Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009).

Problem Statement

Data compiled over time has asserted that student exclusion from school can have long-term negative effects on individual students as stated previously. There also has been research that has been conducted on how different minority subgroups have been impacted by student discipline practices in the United States (Losen, 2011; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Areas in which there is less research revolve around the use of different types of discipline infractions, either subjective or objective, and its relation to student

discipline. A question of whether student discipline trends are aligned to the use of either subjective or objective disciplinary referrals that can lead to student suspensions is important to answer to assess if there is the same level of disproportionality that is found. Different student factors have been identified as possibly having a greater impact on student discipline (Theriot, Craum, & Dupper, 2009). One of these student factors, race/ethnicity, has been shown to be a predictor to student discipline (Losen, 2011; Losen & Skiba, 2010). This study researched the viability of other student factors, specifically gender, English language learner status, school level, talented and gifted status, special education status, poverty level, and parental education level to assess if these factors provided predictability to student suspensions.

Purpose of Study

From the top leadership perspective within the district studied, it was informally noted that many students were being excluded from school, mostly along the lines of poverty and race/ethnicity. Moreover, there was high administrative turnover during the previous ten years. The lack of administrative continuity, both at the school site and at the district office level, may have exacerbated the large amount of variability across students and buildings in disciplinary practices leading to students receiving a behavioral referral that could lead to a student suspension within the district. It was important to me to understand whether the referrals were premised on systematic or implicit bias within the district.

Thus, this study had two specific goals. The first goal of this study was to inform school district and individual school site policies and procedures. Through an analysis of district suspension data in a California K-8 school district that had implemented the

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) system, the study assessed if there were significant differences in the suspension rates between Hispanic versus White students. It is important to assess if there was disproportionality in discipline data. Previous research has found that minority groups are overrepresented in suspension rates (Fabelo, et al., 2011) and that minority students are often subject to greater discipline, had more severe disciplinary actions by school district personnel imposed, and had greater numbers of overall suspensions than compared to their White peers (Skiba, et al., 2002; Skiba, et al., 2011).

The second goal was to provide information from the research findings to shape professional development training to help staff understand student data, student exclusion rates, and school policies. Through this structured professional development, the district could ensure to a greater extent that there was articulation across all schools and among all staff with regards to discipline policies and procedures. The findings also helped to revise school board policy and administrative regulations that drive student discipline with regards to the use of objective and subjective suspensions.

The following sections provide background information on student discipline rates in the United States, with a focus on the state of California. A review of current literature, focusing of school exclusion practices follow. A description of the research methods that were used, including background information on the school district to be studied and the population from which the data sets were collected, are then described. An explanation of how the data were analyzed, the strategies used to increase the validity of the study, and a description of potential study limitations are stated. Results for each

of the four research questions are described. Finally, the discussion section focuses on research implications, recommendations, and a summary conclude the dissertation.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Disproportionate Exclusion Rates

National data trends have shown increases in exclusion rates for students of all races (see Table 1). In particular, the K-12 student suspension rates have steadily increased over the last 40 years for non-White students (Losen, 2011). The gap between African American and White student suspension rate has more than tripled during this time frame, increasing from a difference of three percentage points to over 10 percentage points (Losen, 2011). Data show that Hispanic suspension rates have increased over time as well, with Hispanic students being suspended at more than twice the rate in 2006/07 compared to 1970/71 (Losen & Skiba, 2010).

Table 1

Percentage of Suspensions on the Rise by Race Across the United States

Student Suspensions	1972/73	1988/89	2006/07
White	3%	4%	5%
Hispanic	3%	5%	7%
Black	6%	10%	15%
American Indian	3%	5%	8%
Asian Pacific Islander	1%	3%	3%
Total	16%	27%	38%

This chart was adapted from Losen and Skiba (2010).

More recent research has shown that minority students have continued to have a higher rate of school exclusion than non-minority students (Fabelo, et al., 2011;

Kaufman, et al., 2010; Losen, 2011; Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009; Skiba, et al., 2011; Tobin & Vincent, 2011; Welsh & Payne, 2010). Recent national statistics have shown that African American students were more than two to three times more likely to be suspended than their White peers, whereas Hispanic students were 10% more likely to be suspended than their White peers (Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Norman, 2013). Data show that 17% of African American students were suspended from school during their K-12 educational experience, compared to 7% of Hispanic students and 5% of White students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin's (2010b) state of Ohio data found an even greater rate of disproportionality for African American students. Their data showed that African American students were suspended at a rate of 22.5% compared to White students that were suspended at a rate of 8.5% in relation to the total student population.

Similar results were found when considering expulsion rates. Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin's (2010a) results revealed that African American students had an expulsion incident rate that made them 2.5 times more likely to receive an expulsion than White students, with Hispanics at a 1.67 higher rate of expulsion than White students. Although there was some data from the Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin (2010a) study regarding Hispanic students, the data focused mostly on African American students.

In summary, disproportionate discipline was found to be much greater when reviewing suspension data and weaker when reviewing expulsion data. One inference for the more noticeable effect of suspension disproportionality is that suspensions are more subjective than expulsions. Expulsions involve more collaborate decision making at the

administrative level than suspensions, which are often unilaterally imposed at the school site level (Noltemeyer & Mcloughin, 2010a).

Rates of Exclusion in California

In California, school demographics vary greatly depending on region. However, as a state, the demographics are very diverse. In 2012, African American students constituted 6.5% of the state's student population, Hispanic students accounted for 52% of the state's school population, while White students comprised 26% of the student population. The suspension rates, as in other locations across the country, were disproportionate. African American students accounted for 19% of all suspensions, while Hispanic students reflected 54% of suspensions, and White students 20% of the suspension total (California Department of Education, [CDE], 2013). At the state level, Hispanic students were excluded relatively close to their actual population rate; however, aggregate data can mask local conditions.

Discipline Rates Across Academic Levels

Prior research has found a distinct difference in the type of disciplinary referrals that were given to students by their school level (Kaufman, et al., 2010). Elementary students had higher referrals for aggression, while middle school students had higher rates of referrals for disrespectful behavior, and high school students had higher referrals for attendance issues. As students mature through the education system, the referrals they received often reflected the developmental stage of their lives (Kaufman, et al., 2010). African American students, however, still were excluded at a higher rate than all others regardless of the school level (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2014).

At the middle school level there was a dramatic difference in exclusion rates when race was involved. Based on Office of Civil Rights data from every state, 28.3% of African American middle school males were suspended at least once, compared to just 10% of White males. African American females were suspended at a rate of 18% compared to 3.9% of White females at the middle school level (Losen & Skiba, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In comparing exclusion rates between the grade levels, Skiba, et al. (2011) concluded that African American students were two times more at risk of being excluded from school at the K-6 level and four times more at risk of being excluded at the middle school level as their White peers. Hispanic students were excluded at a lower rate than both White and African American students at the elementary level, but were twice as likely to be excluded at the middle school level as White students. Regardless of the grade span, African American students still were excluded at a higher rate than any of their peers.

Exclusion and English Language Students

There is broad range of research that has focused on African American student exclusion rates in our nation's schools, but little research that has focused on other large subgroups of students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2014). The Hispanic student population grew to 24% of the overall student population, up from 16.7% in 2000, across the United States (Fry & Lopez, 2012). In California, the growth in the Hispanic student population has been even more dramatic, with Hispanic student enrollments increasing from 43.2% of the overall California student population in 2000 to 52.7% in 2013 (CDE, 2014b). The Hispanic student population has increased across the country and the limited research focusing on Hispanic students has found that this population is suspended from

school at a higher rate than White students (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Additional research specific to Hispanic student populations would provide statistical evidence on the issue, especially in a state like California with a majority of students coming from minority backgrounds.

In addition to the need to look at disproportionate discipline for subgroups other than African Americans, there is also a paucity of research in this area on English language learners. There were 4.7 million English language learners in the United States in 2011 (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). In California, of the 3.3 million Hispanic student population in 2013-2014, 1.2 million were classified as English language learners (CDE, 2014b). Data have found that students who are excluded from school have more difficulty in their academic skills, which is particularly problematic for English language learner populations (Arcia, 2006). Research has suggested that English language learners were suspended at a rate of one out every five students in 2009-2010 (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Arcia (2006) found that there was a direct connection between reading achievement scores and the student suspension rate. The lower the achievement scores of a student, the greater the chance of that student being excluded from school. This issue raises a critical question regarding the rationale for excluding students from school. The students being excluded are those students who need the most school support to succeed academically. It could be speculated that an increasing number of Hispanic students are more at risk of being excluded from school due to lacking English language skills and other academic skills in their first language.

Subjective Versus Objective Exclusion

School discipline is driven by school board policies and state regulations as stated in California Education Code (California Legislative Information, 2014). In the mildest form, school discipline is used to ensure that students understand school policies and procedures. In the most severe form, school discipline is used to exclude a student from campus for severe violations of school policies and state regulations. Within California, there is a great amount of flexibility in what classroom infractions are forwarded to the site administrator for discipline. Some discipline is subjective, while other cases can be considered objective.

Subjective suspensions. Subjective suspensions are defined as those suspensions where an adult used their judgment to determine if a student's behavior warranted a school suspension. These subjective behaviors require observing the student behavior and placing value judgment on that behavior to determine if the student behavior warranted a specific level of school discipline (Greflund, 2013).

Objective suspensions. California categorized the following behaviors as objective suspensions: "possessing, selling, or otherwise furnishing a firearm; brandishing a knife at another person; unlawfully selling a controlled substance; committing or attempting to commit a sexual assault; and possession of an explosive" (California Legislative Information, 2014). Objective suspensions are documented and processed per California Educational Code and are required suspensions (California Legislative Information, 2014), whereas the subjective suspensions are not required to be offenses that need to be suspended out-of-school or in-school, but students can be suspended by the individual school staff based on their own judgment.

Research on subjective suspensions. Prior research has shown that when committing the same or similar subjective behavior offenses, African American students are inclined to receive more severe disciplinary consequences (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010a; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010b; Skiba, et al., 2002). Two possibilities for the more severe punishment are that African American students focus their behavior on activities that call for a subjective judgment from adults in a school system that leads to discipline, or that African American students are being unfairly judged when it comes to such behavior (Losen, 2011). Schools have policies that speak to consistency in discipline practices. Most of these disciplinary practices are subjective, leaving the teacher to be the authority that moves a suspension forward in most disciplinary cases. If there are differences in understanding of what is appropriate or typical behavior by student or teacher, the teacher has the authority to interpret based on their experiences.

Welch and Payne (2010), found that schools more heavily populated with African American students were more inclined to use more severe discipline, such as suspensions, for similar infractions than those schools who had fewer African American students. Adults in the school system that had received more training in discipline policies were also more likely to respond more harshly to misbehaviors. Skiba, et al. (2002) in a study using data from 19 middle schools in a large urban school district found that White students were referred for discipline for causes that were more objective, such as vandalism or smoking, while African American students were disciplined for more subjective reasons, such as disrespect and excessive noise. This subjective use of

discipline becomes an equity issue as more students of color are being suspended in schools for the same offense.

In contrast, when reviewing suspensions for mandatory infractions, Fabelo, et al. (2011) found that there was much less variance between African American, Hispanic, and White students. This research, however, still found that a larger percentage of African American students were suspended for discretionary infractions compared to Hispanic and White students. African American students also had a higher probability of having their first offense be an out-of-school suspension when compared to Hispanic and White students. Fabelo, et al. used data taken from the state of Texas using information gathered from over 900,000 students coming from 1200 school districts and 3900 school campuses over an eight-year time span.

Although substantial research shows that minority students, particularly those students who are African American, are excluded at higher rates than their White peers (Fabelo, et al., 2011; Kaufman, et al., 2010; Losen, 2011; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010a; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010b; Skiba, et al., 2009; Tobin & Vincent, 2011; Welsh & Payne, 2010), there is less research that speaks to why these minority students are excluded more from schools than White students. The majority of the school teachers in the United States are White, of the 3.3 million public school teachers in 2011, 83% were White compared to only 7% Hispanic and 7% African American (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). Because of this varied demographic, cultural differences may lead to African American students to be viewed as displaying nonconforming behaviors at school (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010a). As schools become increasingly more diverse, there may be a cultural

disconnect in trying to understand student behavior (Townsend, 2000). The contribution of institutional, and possible individual, bias in disciplinary referrals has been suggested (Skiba et al., 2002). The contrasting backgrounds of teacher and student, whether the differences are racial, socioeconomic, or both, can cause misunderstandings that lead to disproportionate discipline (Townsend, 2000).

There has been evidence of cultural bias when reviewing suspension rates from across the United States (Losen, 2011). As minority students have been disproportionally suspended from school, these students have been denied access to their right to an equal education as compared to their White peers (Losen & Skiba, 2010). In a study conducted by Skiba, et al. (2002), African American students were more likely to receive office disciplinary referrals than White students. Not only was there disproportionate discipline, there was evidence that minority students were excluded for more minor offenses. Minority students were more likely to be suspended for subjective offenses, such as disrespect and loitering, compared to White students, who tended to be suspended for objective reasons, such as smoking or obscene language (Skiba, et al., 2002). Other research similarly reported that African American students were more likely to receive subjective exclusions than White students (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Cultural aspects that relate to ethnicity or race may have influenced how students engaged in school and how they behaved within an academic setting and thus on how these students were perceived within the school setting by the adults in authority (Monroe, 2005; Townsend, 2000). Subjective decisions were based on school staff members' definition of typical and atypical behavior, with the atypical behavior leading to disciplinary actions.

Zero tolerance policies may also contribute to an unreceptive educational environment, which may cause students to feel less engaged in their education (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Zero tolerance polices came from federal drug policies in the early 1980s to treat specific behaviors equally. By the early 1990s, these polices had been adopted across school districts in the United States and used to provide behavioral consequences to students. Although there are variations to zero tolerance policies across school districts, there is little evidence that they are effective. Repeat offenders constitute a high rate of those students excluded from schools (Skiba, 2000).

There was more research that focused on African American students compared to minimal research on Hispanic student misbehavior or institutional bias as it related to Hispanic exclusion rates (Townsend, 2000); this study began to fill that research gap. In particular, this study filled in a research gap by assessing if there were differences between subjective and objective referrals between student groups that led to disproportionate student discipline.

Research Questions

Because of the aforementioned lack of research surrounding Hispanic students, my study: (a) analyzed whether significant differences exist for Hispanic and White students by school disciplinary referrals that can lead to school suspensions, (b) investigated the use of subjective versus objective suspensions among groups of students, and (c) evaluated which factor (grade level [elementary-middle or primary-intermediate-middle], gender, number of incidents, English language learner status, talented and gifted status, special education status, socio-economic status [using free-and-reduced meals as a

proxy], and parent educational level), best predicted objective and subjective disciplinary referrals. My study addressed the following questions:

1. What is the risk ratio for suspensions for Hispanic students (when compared to White students) for (a) subjective and (b) objective offenses?
2. For students with one or more behavioral referrals, are there differences in the number of suspensions for subjective and objective offenses?
3. For students with one or more behavioral referrals, are there differences in the number of suspensions between Hispanic and White students for (a) subjective and (b) objective offenses?
4. Which factors (grade level [elementary-middle or primary-intermediate-middle], gender, number of incidents, English language status, talented and gifted status, special education status, socio-economic status [using free-and-reduced meals as a proxy], and parent educational level) best predicted the ratio of overall disciplinary referrals (combined subjective and objective) in a K–8 educational system?

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODS

Setting

The school district in the research study was a K-8 school district in southern California with a student population of 9223 students. The school district was comprised of two preschools, twelve K-5 elementary schools, and four middle schools. The district is located in a suburban area close to a major U.S. metropolitan city. As shown in Table 2, the school district had a population of students involved in special programs that were proportionate to the rest of the state of California (CDE, 2014b; Ed-Data, 2014), with the free and reduced lunch rate being lower than the state average of 59% free-reduced meal count (Ed-Data, 2014).

Table 2

Student Demographics in School District

	Count	Percentage
Gender		
Male	4752	52%
Female	4471	48%
Grade Level		
K-5	6090	66%
6-8	3133	34%
Meal Program		
Free/Reduced	3614	39%
Special Programs		
Students Receiving Services	1017	11%
English Language Learners	2286	24%

Data from California Department of Education, 2013.

Participants

All 9223 students enrolled within the school district during the 2013-2014 school year were included in this descriptive study. The district was very diverse, with White students making up 43% of the population, Hispanic students comprising 36%, and Vietnamese students accounting for 13% of the overall student population. The district had become increasingly more diverse over time, growing from an overall minority percentage of 42% in 2000-2001, to a minority percentage of 57% in 2013-2014. The Hispanic student population had had the most increase, representing 29% of the overall student population in 2000-2001, to 36% of the overall student population in 2013-2014. The district had also decreased enrollment over time, from a peak of 9839 students in 2000 to a low of 9223 in 2013-2014. During the 2013-2014 school year, the enrollment decreased by approximately 200 students (CDE, 2014b).

Data Sources

All student data was extracted from data sets kept at the district level that was required to be submitted to the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) data bank that was hosted at the California Department of Education. Student data used for assessing disproportionality and reviewing subjective and objective suspensions was taken from the district data system that was submitted to the CALPADS system for the 2013-2014 school year.

School districts in California are required by state law to submit data each year into the CALPADS system. This data system was created to allow California to meet federal requirements and has been in operation since 2009. The CALPADS system is the core data bank to the K-12 data system in California and comprises student demographic,

program participation, grade level, course enrollment and completion, discipline and statewide assessment data (CDE, 2014a). Each district in California submits required data into the state CALPADS system year each spring. The data sets that were examined were derived from the spring 2014 CALPADS submission that was provided to the California Department of Education by the district being studied.

Definitions of Key Factors

English Language Status

All students whose language is not English must be assessed using the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) when they enroll in a public school. This assessment determines the language fluency of the student. Students are classified as being fluent English proficient (FEP) or classified as an English learner (EL). Those students classified as ELs must take the CELDT assessment every year until they are reclassified as fluent in English, where they would then be designated as reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP). RFEP students receive monitoring for two-years after exiting the EL program. Initially fluent English proficient (IFEP) students are those English language learner students that met the district's criteria for early to advanced English language skills. Students exit or are reclassified using the CELDT. There are four domains in the CELDT assessment: listening, writing, speaking, and reading. Students must score proficient in all domains prior to being reclassified (CDE, 2014c).

Talented and Gifted Status

Students that were identified as talented and gifted were qualified for those services using specific district instruments. All students were tested in the second grade, or upon their arrival in the primary grades if they were transfers to the district, to assess

their aptitude to be classified as a talented and gifted student. The assessment provided to students was the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, 8th Edition. A different instrument was used to assess students that were limited in their English language skills to allow them to qualify for these services. In the district studied, the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test was the instrument provided to students to allow for talented and gifted qualification. These assessments, along with district benchmark assessments, plus a teacher survey, qualified students into the talented and gifted program.

Special Education Status

Students qualified to receive special education services through a variety of assessments, dependent on what the special education service the student required. If a student experienced struggles in academics or behavior, a parent/educator team worked to create additional supports and/or interventions within the school setting. If these supports were not meeting the student's needs, the educator or parent/guardian requested the student be brought to the Student Study Team (SST). The SST team was comprised of school professionals that reviewed data and helped provide additional assistance in helping develop additional supports/interventions for the student. After implementing supports/interventions and reviewing data, the SST team could ask for additional assessments if the student was still not making progress, to determine if special education services were needed for the student. If the student did qualify for services, an individualized educational plan (IEP) was created by the IEP team. The IEP team was comprised of teachers, administrators, and the parents/guardians. This team created a plan for services that was most appropriate for the student. The plan was revisited by the IEP team on a regular basis to ensure effectiveness.

Free or Reduced Meals Status

Qualification into free or reduced meal status was dictated by parental income. To qualify for free or reduced meals parents must have completed a district form requesting free or reduced meals each year at the school level during student registration. The nutrition department at the district office then processed these forms. Parents were notified if they qualified for free or reduced meals after the first few weeks of school. Students were provided free meals until the process was completed.

Parent Education Status

Parent education level was defined by numbers one (1) through four (4). These numbers were derived from the student registration forms that were turned in every year to the district at the onset of the school year. Parents that indicated a *one* on the form had not graduated from high school, those that indicated a *two* were high school graduates, those a *three* had some college experience, and those who selected a *four* were college graduates.

Procedures

Extant data was used for this study. District discipline data based on class lists as of June 18, 2014, from the 2013-2014 school year was used to assess the level of disproportionality across the grade levels, between subjective and objective discipline infractions, and between student subgroups. Each student participant was analyzed through the use of a state identification number. Actual names of students and schools were omitted to provide confidentiality.

Behavioral Referral Measures

For the purpose of this study, a school suspension was defined as a disciplinary consequence for a specific student action which involved a violation of the district's code of conduct, which was based on California Education Code. A school suspension removed the student from the classroom or school setting for a specific time period (Morrison & Skiba, 2001). Blomberg (2004) defined in-school suspension (ISS) as a discipline action where a student was removed from the classroom, but kept in the school setting outside of the regular classroom for a period of time.

Coding of behavioral infractions. The school district in the study used a coding procedure for infractions that was adopted by the school district and aligned to the state of California expulsion codes. These codes are described in Table 3 and Table 4. The codes had been changed over time in the school district by district office staff and school site personnel to best meet the needs of the district and to ensure alignment to California Education Code. These codes are used by school personnel as an indicator on a school referral to what school policy a student was observed violating. If a teacher or classified staff member submitted a student referral, they processed the referral to the school administration office for further review. The infractions without an asterisk, nor an EXP prefix, are infractions that were used for minor school policy violations. The infractions with an asterisk were infractions that could lead to a suspension from school per California Education Code. Those infractions with an EXP prefix were infractions that could lead to a student expulsion.

Objective measures. The discipline data submitted were separated into those infractions that required a suspension out of school based on California Educational Code

and those infractions that were used to subjectively suspend students. Those infractions that, by California Educational Code, need to lead to students being suspended out of school were coded as objective in this study (California Legislative Information, 2014) and are found in Table 3. The areas that required a suspension and possible recommendation for expulsion are found under California Educational Code 48915 and include "possessing, selling or otherwise furnishing a firearm, brandishing a knife at another person, unlawfully selling a controlled substance, committing or attempting to commit a sexual assault, or possession of an explosive" (California Legislative Information, 2014).

Table 3

Objective Measures Used by the School District

Codes	Infractions
10	Bike safety
13	Eating out of the area
14	Forgery
16	Gum/Food
17	Inappropriate Dress
18	No Show/Detention
19	No Show/Friday School
20	Not Dressing Out for PE
21	Not Returning Forms
22	Classroom Tardiness
23	Truancy
30	*Caused/Attempted/ Threatened Physical Injury
31	*Used Force or Violence
32	*Possession/Sale/Furnishing Dangerous Object
33	*Possession/Use/Sale/ Furnishing Controlled Substance
34	*Offering/Arranging/ Sale of Controlled Substance
35	*Robbery/Extortion
36	*Property Damage
37	*Property Theft
38	*Possession of Tobacco Products
40	*Offering/Arranging/ Sale of Drug Paraphernalia
42	*Received Stolen Property
43	*Possession of Imitation Firearm

Table 3 Continued.

Codes	Infractions
44	*Sexual Assault
48	*Aided or Abetted Injury
49	*Sexual Harassment
50	*Committed Act of Hate Violence
52	*Made Terrorist Threats
60	*EXP - Caused Physical Injury
61	*EXP - Possession of a Knife or Dangerous Object
62	*EXP - Possession of a Controlled Substance
63	*EXP - Assault/Battery of a School Employee
64	*EXP - Possession/Sale/ Furnishing Firearm
65	*EXP - Brandishing a Knife
66	*EXP - Sale of a Controlled Substance
67	*EXP - Sexual Battery
68	*EXP - Possession of Explosive
69	*EXP - Arson
80	*EXP - Offering/Arranging/ Sale of Soma

Subjective measures. Infractions that may lead to in-school suspension were labeled as subjective for the purpose of this study and are described in Table 4. These infractions can be submitted by any school personnel. School teachers in California have the ability to suspend students out of their classrooms without administrative approval for the day of the infraction and one additional subsequent day (California Legislative Information, 2014). The teacher needs to notify the building administrator as soon as possible of their desire to remove the student from their classroom, make a recommendation to the building administration for a suspension outside of school, and make contact with the family of the student if the student is being suspended in school (California Legislative Information, 2014). The building principal has the ultimate decision to suspend students out of school.

Table 4

Subjective Measures Used by the School District

Codes	Infractions
41	Defiance - Non-compliance/ Insubordination
2	Pushing/Shoving/Roughhousing
3	Physical Contact/aggression
4	Disruption/Disrespect
5	Inappropriate language
6	Teasing/Taunting
11	Bus Ticket (infraction on the bus)
12	Cheating
15	Graffiti
24	Vulgar Language
39	*Obscene Acts/Profanity/Vulgarity
41	*Disruption/Defiance
45	*Harassment/ Intimidation of Witness
46	*Hazing
47	*Bullying
51	*Harassment or Intimidation

A multilevel method was used to define and distinguish between subjective and objective infractions. At the first level, a cadre of three practitioners, including the researcher, helped to define subjective versus objective infraction classifications based on the California Education Code. The three practitioners questioned whether the infractions fell into either the subjective or objective category. Two practitioners were university professors and researchers in a major western state university. One was a professor in special education and clinical sciences who specialized in positive behavior supports, school systems change, and evidence-based interventions in schools. The other college professor worked in educational leadership and specialized in curriculum design and assessment and administrator/teacher-leader training. The third practitioner was the researcher with 25 years of experience working within schools at the K-12 level in Oregon and California.

The classification was done through a process of utilizing the California Education Code definitions as a guide. The practitioners had difficulty classifying three infractions: caused, attempted, threatened physical injury; obscene act, profanity, vulgarity; and offering, arranging, sale of drug paraphernalia. These three infractions were all subject to possible suspension from school per California Educational Code (California Legislative Information, 2014).

At the second level, six principals, four from the elementary level and two from the middle school level, within the school district studied were asked to provide their professional expertise regarding the specific infractions that the practitioners had difficulty in classifying in order to understand if suspensions were objective or subjective. The principals met with the researcher and were asked to review the infractions in question. The principals reviewed the infractions, had discussion on whether the referrals were subjective or objective, and were all in agreement to how the infractions should be coded. These principals varied in experience within the school district and within education.

- Principal One was a 19 veteran elementary school principal at three different elementary schools within the school district studied and had been a teacher for 12 years in the district.
- Principal Two had two years of elementary principal experience within the district and had four years of central office experience as a director of curriculum and five years of experience as an elementary principal, both in another local district, and had also taught for 10 years outside of the school district.

- Principal Three had been an elementary principal for 12 years in the district and had been an elementary teacher within the district for 15 years.
- Principal Four had been an elementary principal within the district for eight years and an elementary teacher for 12 years in another local school district.
- Principal Five had been a middle school principal for three years, a middle school assistant principal for four years, and an elementary and middle school teacher for ten, all within the district.
- Principal Six had been a middle school principal for two years within the district, a high school assistant principal for four years, and a middle school and high school teacher for six years outside of the school district.

After weighing in input from all of the stakeholders, all infractions were coded as subjective or objective for the purposes of this study. The practitioners were very clear in how the infractions were coded for each specific infraction. This multilevel agreement added to the validity of subjective versus objective classification.

Statistical Analysis

Question One

The number of students with (a) at least one behavioral incident or (b) subjective versus objective infractions were calculated for Hispanic and White students. The risk ratio compared the risk index of the Hispanic group to that of the White group. The United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, recommended that a risk ratio be used to understand the risk of a group of students face for a given event compared to others (Data Accountability Center, 2011). The formula below (Lipsey & Wilson, 2000) was used to calculate the risk ratio where a = the number

Hispanic students that received one or more referrals; *b* = the total number of Hispanic students in the school district that did not receive any referrals; *c* = the number of White students that received one or more referrals; and, *d* = the total number of White students that did not receive any referrals in the district.

$$\text{Risk Ratio} = \frac{a / (a + b)}{c / (c + d)}$$

Question Two

Means, standard deviation, and a single factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) were calculated to examine the relationship that may exist between the mean number of objective behavioral referrals and the mean number of subjective behavioral referrals. An ANOVA was the statistical method applied. A single factor ANOVA is an omnibus test used to determine if a difference between the means of the two independent groups exists. All ANOVA calculations were done using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Question Three

Means, standard deviation, and a single factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) for Hispanic versus White students were calculated to examine the relationship that may exist between students with at one or more objective and subjective behavioral referrals that could lead to a school suspension. An ANOVA was the statistical method applied. A single factor ANOVA is an omnibus test used to determine if a difference between the means of the two independent groups exists. All ANOVA calculations were done using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Question Four

For Question Four, a multiple-regression analysis estimated the independent and joint relations between student's objective and subjective disciplinary referrals and eight factors (grade level [elementary-middle or primary-intermediate-middle], gender, number of incidents, English language learner status, talented and gifted status, special education status, socio-economic status [using free-and-reduced meals as a proxy], and parent educational level).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this chapter, the results associated with the four study research questions are provided. However, before providing the statistics by question, I will provide my study's descriptive statistics.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics for the research questions are provided in Table 5. Table 5 provides the frequency and percent for each of the variables used. In the frequency table, subjective and objective referrals were defined by using California Education Code and using practitioner input to distinguish between subjective and objective referrals. If the type of referrals were not readily defined through the California Educational Code, the codes were defined by practitioners in the field of education.

The data from the frequency tables that raised questions prior to any data analysis was the disproportionality in male (n = 474) compared to females (n = 111) in the amount of disciplinary infractions that were distributed. Other data sets that disproportionate included the amount of referrals received by Hispanic students (n = 365) compared to White students (n = 176), when the overall Hispanic population in the district was 36%, but they accounted for 62% of the total disciplinary infractions. Students designated at some level of English language learner (n = 348) had a very disproportionate number of referrals leading to school suspensions and accounted for 60% of these referrals. Lastly, the number of disciplinary infractions at the elementary level (n = 120) compared to the middle school level (n = 465) was very disproportionate. Frequency tables for all research questions are listed below in Table 5.

Table 5

Frequency Data Table for All Research Questions

Measures	Study Sample	Percent	District Total
Gender			
Female	111	19.0	4471
Male	474	81.0	4752
Race/Ethnicity			
Hispanic	365	62.4	3366
White	176	30.1	3931
Other	44	7.5	1926
Grade			
K	17	2.9	1136
1st	7	1.2	956
2nd	11	1.9	937
3rd	14	2.4	1005
4th	30	5.1	992
5th	41	7.0	1062
6th	139	23.8	1022
7th	189	32.3	1034
8th	137	23.4	1077
Elementary / Middle School			
Elementary	120	20.5	6088
Middle School	465	79.5	3133
Primary / Intermediate / Middle			
Elementary	49	8.4	3029
Intermediate	71	12.1	3059
Middle School	465	79.5	3133
Number of Behavioral Incidents per Student			
1	272	74.1	
2	45	12.3	
3	16	4.4	
4	16	4.4	
5	9	2.5	
6	3	0.8	

Table 5 Continued.

Measures	Study Sample	Percent	District Total
Number of Behavioral Incidents per Student			
7	3	0.8	
8	1	0.3	
9	1	0.3	
10	1	0.3	
Subjective / Objective			
Objective	279	47.7	
Subjective	306	52.3	
Total Combined Referrals			585
English Learner Status			
English Only	237	40.5	6937
RFEP/IFEP	73	12.5	1194
English Learner	275	47.0	2286
Talented and Gifted (TAG)			
Not TAG	567	96.9	
TAG	18	3.1	
Special Education (SpEd)			
Not SpEd	437	74.7	8206
SpEd	148	25.3	1017
Free and Reduced Meals (FARMs)			
Not FARMs	188	32.1	5482
Free/Reduced	397	67.9	3741
Parent Educational Level			
1.0 (some high school education)	225	38.5	
2.0 (high school graduate)	106	18.1	
3.0 (some college education)	95	16.2	
4.0 (college graduate)	79	13.5	

Question One

Question one asked whether significant rates of discipline disproportionality by Hispanic versus White students for one or more incidents across the school district studied existed by objective and subjective referrals. For this study, risk ratios (RR) described the multiplication of the risk that occurred with use of the district's subjective/objective referral system. Table 6 shows the complete RR statistics for both subjective referrals and objective referrals.

The RR for objective referrals, 2.572 for Hispanic students, implies that Hispanic students are two-point-five-seven-two times more likely than White students to get an objective behavioral referral. Because the estimate of RR does not follow a normal distribution, 95% confidence intervals were calculated. Therefore, the Hispanic population's objective RR is likely to be between 1.994 and 3.318. The Hispanic population's objective RR is greater than 1, indicating that there is a significantly greater risk for getting an objective referral. See Table 6 for complete objective risk ratio statistics.

The RR for subjective referrals, 2.600 for Hispanic students, implies that Hispanic students are two-point-six times more likely than White students to get a subjective behavioral referral. Again, because the estimate of RR does not follow a normal distribution, 95% confidence intervals were calculated. Therefore, the Hispanic population's subjective RR is likely to be between 2.034 and 3.322. The Hispanic population's subjective RR is greater than 1, indicating that there is a significantly greater risk for getting a subjective referral. See Table 6 for complete subjective risk ratio statistics.

Table 6

Hispanic Student Objective and Subjective Discipline Referral Data

Objective Referral Data	N
a (the number of Hispanic students that received objective referrals)	175
b (the total number of Hispanic student in the school district with no referrals)	2797
c (the number of White students that received objective referrals)	85
d (the total number of White students in the district with no referrals)	3628

Subjective Referral Data	N
a (the number of Hispanic students that received subjective referrals)	190
b (the total number of Hispanic student in the school district with no referrals)	2797
c (the number of White students that received subjective referrals)	91
d (the total number of White students in the district with no referrals)	3628

Risk Ratio for Objective Referrals	Calculations
Risk Ratio for Objective Referrals	2.572
Risk Ratio 95% Confidence Interval for Objective Referrals	1.994 to 3.318

Risk Ratio for Subjective Referrals	Calculations
Risk Ratio for Subjective Referrals	2.600
Risk Ratio 95% Confidence Interval for Subjective Referrals	2.034 to 3.322

Question Two

Question Two explored whether there were significant differences between the mean number of objective versus the mean number of subjective referrals for students with one or more incidents. Table 7 shows the mean for objective referrals was 0.938, with a standard deviation of 1.266, and the mean for subjective referrals was 1.057, with a standard deviation of 1.423. The *ANOVA* disclosed no significant differences, $p = .308$, between the mean subjective and objective referrals for one or more incidents.

Table 7

ANOVA for Differences Between Subjective and Objective Referrals

Referral type	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval for Mean Upper Bound	Min	Max
Objective	260	.938	1.266	.079	.784	1.093	0.0	10.0
Subjective	281	1.057	1.423	.085	.890	1.224	0.0	9.0
Total	541	1.000	1.350	.058	.886	1.114	0.0	10.0

ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.896	1	1.896	1.040	.308
Within Groups	982.104	539	1.822		
Total	984.000	540			

Question Three

Question Three asked if there were significant differences for Hispanic students with one or more referrals versus White students with one or more referrals by objective referrals and by subjective behavioral referrals.

The first part of Table 8 shows that there was a significant difference, $p = .017$, for mean objective referrals for students with one or more referrals. The 203 Hispanic students that received one or more objective referrals had a mean of 1.798 and a standard deviation of 1.571. The 124 White students that had one or more objective referrals had a mean of 1.419 and a standard deviation of 0.989.

Table 8 also illustrates that there was a significant difference, $p = .041$, for mean subjective referrals for students with one or more referrals. The 103 Hispanic students

that received one or more subjective referrals had a mean of 1.932 and a standard deviation of 1.676. The 67 White students that had one or more subjective referrals had a mean of 1.463 and a standard deviation of 1.005.

Table 8

ANOVA of Means of (a) Objective and (b) Subjective Behavioral Referrals for Hispanic and White Students

Means Table for Objective Referrals by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Hispanic	203	1.798	1.571	0.110	1.581	2.015	1.000	10.000
White	124	1.419	0.989	0.089	1.244	1.595	1.000	7.000
Total	327	1.654	1.390	0.077	1.503	1.806	1.000	10.000

ANOVA for Objective Referrals by Race/Ethnicity

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	11.038	1	11.038	5.796	.017
Within Groups	618.913	325	1.904		
Total	629.951	326			

Means Table for Subjective Referrals by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Hispanic	103	1.932	1.676	0.165	1.604	2.260	1.000	9.000
White	67	1.463	1.005	0.123	1.218	1.708	1.000	5.000
Total	170	1.747	1.464	0.112	1.525	1.969	1.000	9.000

ANOVA for Subjective Referrals by Race/Ethnicity

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	8.943	1	8.943	4.254	.041
Within Groups	353.181	168	2.102		
Total	362.124	169			

Question Four

Question four investigated which factors (grade level [elementary-middle or primary-intermediate-middle], gender, number of incidents, English language learner status, talented and gifted status, special education status, socio-economic status [using free-and-reduced meals as a proxy], and parent educational level) best predicted subjective/objective disciplinary referrals in a K–8 education system. All of the descriptive statistics utilized in the statistical analysis for Question Five are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics for Student Factors

Factors	Mean	Std. Dev	N
Subjective/Objective	.480	.500	327
Elementary/Middle	.777	.417	327
Primary/Intermediate/Middle	1.679	.644	327
Male/Female	.208	.406	327
Number of Incidents	1.654	1.390	327
English Language Status	1.080	.930	327
TAG	.043	.203	327
SpEd	.245	.431	327
FARMs	1.358	.915	327
Parent Education Level	2.450	1.544	327

In all, 327 students had scores across all measures. The correlations for the students ranged from a high of -.531 for parent education level and English language

status to a low of -.003 for primary, intermediate, middle school grouping and English language status, as indicated in Table 10. Moreover, only 13 of the 45 possible correlations were significantly different than zero, $p < .05$.

Table 10

Correlations Between Factors

Factors	*Sub/Obj*	*Elem/Mid*	*P/I/M*	*M/F*	*Number of Incidents*	*EL Status*	*TAG*	*SpEd*	*FARMs*
Elem/Mid	.045								
P/I/M	-.006	.931							
M/F	.035	.039	.068						
Number of Incidents	-.069	.120	.122	-.057					
EL Status	-.109	.006	-.003	.037	.055				
TAG	-.052	.005	.012	-.108	-.013	-.213			
SpEd	-.034	.100	.085	-.064	.014	.143	-.015		
FARMs	.073	-.031	-.028	-.044	-.009	.507	-.182	.065	
Parent Educ Level	-.018	-.006	.004	-.027	.021	-.531	.154	.005	-.422

Sig. (1-tailed)

Factors	*Sub/Obj*	*Elem/Mid*	*P/I/M*	*M/F*	*Number of Incidents*	*EL Status*	*TAG*	*SpEd*	*FARMs*
Elem/Mid	.210								
P/I/M	.460	.000							
M/F	.261	.239	.109						
Number of Incidents	.105	.015	.013	.152					
EL Status	.025	.454	.476	.251	.163				
TAG	.174	.467	.417	.025	.410	.000			
SpEd	.268	.035	.062	.125	.404	.005	.394		
FARMs	.095	.287	.305	.214	.438	.000	.000	.120	
Parent Educ Level	.372	.460	.473	.312	.352	.000	.003	.466	.000

Elem/Mid (Elementary/Middle School)
TAG (Talented and Gifted)
SpEd (Special Education)
P/I/M (Primary/Intermediate/Middle School)
M/F (Male/Female)
EL Status (English Language Status)
FARMS (Free and Reduced Meals)

The ANOVA statistics indicated that at least one of the independent variables used in the regression significantly predicted ($p < .008$) the Subjective-Objective referrals. See Table 11 for the ANOVA statistics.

Table 11

ANOVA[a] for Subjective/Objective Referrals

Measures	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	5.515	9	.613	2.552	.008[b]
Residual	76.106	317	.240		
Total	81.621	326			

a. Dependent Variable: Subjective-Objective Referrals
b. Predictors: (Constant), parent education level, primary-intermediate-middle (P/I/M), male-female (M/F), special education status (SpEd), number of incidents, talented-and-gifted (TAG), free-and-reduced meals (FARMs), English language status (EL Status), elementary-middle (Elem/Mid)

Additionally, the R^2 coefficient indicated that for all Hispanic and White students, 6.8% of the variance could be explained by parent education level, primary-intermediate-middle grouping, male-female, special education status, number of incidents, talented-and-gifted, free-and-reduced meals, English language status, or elementary-middle grouping. See Table 12 for detailed information.

Table 12

Model Summary for r-Squared Coefficient

R	*R^2*	*Adjusted R^2*	*Std. Error of the Estimate*	*Change Statistics*		*df1*	*df2*	*Sig. F Change*
				R^2 Change	*F Change*			
.260[a]	.068	.041	.490	.068	2.552	9	317	.008

a. Predictors: (Constant), Parent Education Level, P/I/M, M/F, SpEd, Number of Incidents, TAG, FARMs, EL Status, Elem/Mid

Table 13 provides the unstandardized and standardized coefficients for the multiple-regression results with subjective-objective referrals as the dependent variable

and parent education level, primary-intermediate-middle grouping, elementary-middle grouping, male-female, special education status, number of incidents, talented-and-gifted, free-and-reduced meals, and English language status scores as the predictor variables. Statistically significant results were found for four predictor variables: (a) elementary-middle (p = .007), (b) primary-intermediate-middle (p = .013), (c) English language status (p = .001), and (d) free and reduced meals (p = .014). Additionally, the standardized coefficients indicated that the elementary-middle grouping (β = .407) was relatively more predictive than primary-intermediate-middle grouping (β = -.375), English language status (β = -.234), and free and reduced meals (β = .161) for students.

Table 13

Coefficients[a] *Between Subjective and Objective Referrals and Student Factors*

Factors	Unstandardized Coeff B	Std. Error	Standardized Coeff Beta	T	Sig.
(Constant)	.685	.127		5.394	.000
Elem/Mid	.488	.179	.407	2.718	.007
Primary/Interm/Mid	-.291	.116	-.375	-2.504	.013
Male/Female	.060	.068	.049	.883	.378
Number of Incidents	-.020	.020	-.055	-.998	.319
EL Status	-.126	.038	-.234	-3.319	.001

Table 13 Continued.

Factors	Unstandardized Coeff B	Std. Error	Standardized Coeff Beta	T	Sig.
(Constant)					
TAG	-.140	.138	-.057	-1.011	.313
SpEd	-.020	.065	-.017	-.304	.761
FARMs	.088	.035	.161	2.473	.014
Parent Educ Level	-.019	.021	-.060	-.907	.365

a. Dependent Variable: Sub/Obj

Finally, Table 14 provides further information pertaining to the regression analysis regarding the semi-partial correlations. The semi-partial correlation for English language status (-.180) was larger than elementary-middle (.147), primary-intermediate-middle (-.136), and free and reduced meals (.134). Squaring the semi-partial correlation coefficients revealed that English language status accounted for 3.240% of the variance, elementary-middle accounted for 2.161% of the variance, primary-intermediate-middle accounted for 1.850% of the variance, and free and reduced meals accounted for 1.796% of the variance.

Table 14

Correlations Between Factors

Factors	Zero-order	Partial	Semi-partial
Elem/Mid	.045	.151	.147
Primary/Interm/Mid	-.006	-.139	-.136
Male/Female	.035	.050	.048
Number of Incidents	-.069	-.056	-.054

Table 14 Continued.

Factors	Zero-order	Partial	Semi-partial
EL Status	-.109	-.183	-.180
TAG	-.052	-.057	-.055
SpEd	-.034	-.017	-.016
FARMs	.073	.138	.134
Parent Education Level	-.018	-.051	-.049

Summary of Results

My study's risk ratio indicated that Hispanic students had more than two-and-a-half times the risk for objective referrals (2.572) and for subjective referrals (2.600) than their white peers. While there was not a significant difference, $p = .308$, between referrals labeled as subjective versus objective for all students, Hispanic students mean objective referrals were significantly higher than their White peers ($p = .017$), as were their subjective referrals ($p = .041$). When assessing for factors that predicted student referrals, English language status accounted for 3.240% of the variance, elementary-middle grouping accounted for 2.161% of the variance, primary-intermediate-middle grouping accounted for 1.850% of the variance, and free and reduced meals accounted for 1.796% of the variance. Oppositely, factors that had the least impact on predicting a referral infraction were talented and gifted status (0.303% of the variance), parent education level (0.240% of the variance), male/female status (0.230% of the variance), and special education status (0.026% of the variance).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I provide (a) a summary of the analyses presented in the previous chapter, (b) a review of the findings, (c) a review of the conclusions, (d) a discussion of the practical implications, (e) and suggestions for future research.

Summary of Results

The driving goal for this dissertation was to find if there was disproportionality in how discipline was enforced in a K-8 school district. My research questions focused on Hispanic and White students and their subjective and objective referrals.

Disproportionate Discipline

My results indicate that Hispanic students were more than two-and-a-half times more likely to receive an objective referral (risk ratio = 2.572) and a subjective referral (risk ratio = 2.600) than their White peers. Research has stated that there has been an increase in the disproportionality of suspensions among minority students, particularly African American and Hispanic students, when compared to White students over the last 40 years. (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Losen & Skiba, 2010). This trend has steadily continued over time, and has impacted all minority groups, but particularly African American, Native American, and Hispanic students (Losen, 2011). In my study, Hispanic students were more likely to be suspended from school than their White peers in the school district studied. The use of discipline towards minority students compared to non-minority students was found in several other studies (Fabelo, et al., 2011; Kaufman, et al., 2010; Losen, 2011; Tobin & Vincent, 2011; Welsh & Payne, 2010). My study results were consistent with the previous research.

Subjective and Objective Referrals

Hispanic students were significantly more likely to receive multiple objective referrals (p = .017) and subjective referrals (p = .041) than their White counterparts, which follows previously cited research. For example, Skiba, et al. (2012) found that minority students were more likely to be disciplined over subjective reasons compared to White students who were more likely to be disciplined for objective infractions. Losen's (2011) research focused on African American students and why there seemed to be a greater amount of subjective behavioral referrals from this specific minority group. Losen concluded that African American students were either focusing their misbehavior on activities that tended to be more subjective or that the African American students were unfairly being judged for their behavior.

Again, my study extended previous research by showing that Hispanic students were also more likely to receive objective and subject referrals that resulted in suspensions. A possible reason for the disproportionality between subjective and objective referrals is that teachers and administrators understand the use of the district code of conduct and use it with fidelity when used as a discipline enforcement tool.

Interestingly, my study did not find differences between overall subjective versus objective referrals within the district. A possible reason for the lack of difference between objective and subjective disciplinary referrals was in the possible variability in the data sets used. As stated earlier, teachers in California have the opportunity to write subjective referrals that can lead to student suspensions out of school without administrative approval that can lead to students being suspended out of their classrooms for one day. The ability to remove students from class without a multi-step

administrative process required in the objective referral process might have an impact on the amount of subjective referrals that are given in the district.

Because of the possible variability of the data, there was no method to understand if the discipline referral data was consistent across the district or if the data was specific to certain schools and/or to specific classrooms. Thus, the implicit versus systematic bias question could not be answered. Different data would need to be analyzed to determine if particular schools and/or classrooms had higher rates of subjective and/or objective disciplinary procedures. Without this information, it is difficult to determine if the rate of discipline was consistent across the district.

Exclusion rates between grade levels has been found to vary. In research conducted by Skiba, et al. (2011), African American and Hispanic students had greater rates of school exclusion than White students as they progressed through the school levels. Regardless of the school level, African American students were more likely than other students to be suspended from school campuses. My study's frequency data (see Table 5) did show increases in referrals and suspensions as the students moved across the grades. Primary grade level age students were least likely to receive a disciplinary referral while middle school students were the most at risk of receiving referrals. My study reinforced previous this research in which minorities were disciplined at a greater rate than non-minority students as they progress through the school levels. In my study, Hispanic students were more than twice as likely to receive a disciplinary referral and school suspension as White students.

Factors Influencing Suspensions

The factors, other than school disaggregation factors (elementary-middle grouping and primary-intermediate-middle grouping) that influenced suspensions in my study were English language learner status, which accounted for 3.240% of the variance, and free and reduced meal status, which accounted for 1.796% of the variance. Arcia (2006) found that English language learners were more likely to receive a school suspension. National data trends have also indicated that English language learners across the United States are more likely to receive a disciplinary infraction and school suspension than those students who were not categorized as English language learners (Losen & Martinez, 2013). My study findings were consistent to previous research. A possible reason for the high suspensions rate among English language learners is the lack of student understanding of school policies, procedures, and consequences to violating these policies and procedures due to their language barrier. This possible lack of understanding may lead to higher discipline rates.

As previously stated, of the overall factors that were investigated to assess their predictability towards disciplinary referrals that could lead to a school suspension, the English language status of a student was alarming in the district studied. Of the number of referrals that were distributed, regardless if they were subjective or objective, 60% of the referrals went to students who were English language learners. This is a very concerning percentage and a higher percentage than I found in other research (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Further research is needed to investigate why this factor leads to an overwhelming amount of referrals leading to school suspensions. It is important to understand whether implicit or systematic bias is an underlying factor. This information

will help inform the district in seeking intervention programs specific to English language learners.

As noted above, free and reduced meal status was the second significantly predictive factor. My research study reaffirmed that those students that are most in economic need were also most likely to receive a disciplinary referral and a suspension from school. These findings are reflective of previous findings, in which students most in need economically receive the harshest discipline in school settings (Skiba, et al., 2011). Skiba, et al. (1997) found that students from low-income households had a higher rate of school disciplinary referrals than those students who were not from low-income households.

The above two findings, English language learner status and free and reduced meal status, are particularly important because they are highly reflective of the student population within the school district that I studied. The district studied is comprised of a 24% English language learner rate and a 39% free and reduced meal rate. These results mirror previous research in which English language learners and students from poverty are excluded from schools at a higher rate (Arcia, 2006; Losen & Martinez, 2013).

The factors that had the least predictability for referrals leading to suspensions were talented and gifted designation (M = -.052) and those students receiving special education services (M = -.084). My results for students receiving special education services ran counter to national trends that have shown that students receiving special education are more likely to receive a disciplinary referral and are more likely to be suspended from school (Cameron & Sheppard, 2006). A possible reason for the difference in data between this district and the national data is that this district is a K-8

school district and not a unified K-12 school district. National research trends show that elementary students are less likely to receive discipline compared to middle and high school students (Kaufman, et al., 2010).

Implications for Practice

Implications of the findings surround the use of discipline disproportionally among students based on specific factors. In this study, eight different factors were assessed to determine if one or more of these factors determined a greater probability of receiving a suspension from the regular school setting. These factors included grade level [elementary-middle or primary-intermediate-middle], gender, number of incidents, English language learner status, talented and gifted status, special education status, socio-economic status [using free-and-reduced meals as a proxy], and parent educational level.

Implications for Disproportionality Between Ethnic/Racial Groups

As prior research (Fabelo, et al., 2011; Kaufman, et al., 2010; Losen, 2011; Tobin & Vincent, 2011; Welsh & Payne, 2010) has suggested, Hispanic students had a higher rate of both subjective and objective disciplinary referrals that can possibly lead to school suspensions than the White students in the district studied. Implications for this finding include additional training to have staff have a greater understanding of suspension policies and procedures to ensure that students demonstrating only specific student behaviors are receiving a suspension from the regular classroom setting (Theriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2010). These trainings should target all grade level staff and then target those specific schools and/or staff that may need additional trainings where suspensions are found to be disproportionate.

The training would also look at the attributes of each infraction so that all administrators and teachers understand what constitutes and what does not constitute an infraction. The next step in this area, after defining the infractions, would be training and data review so that discipline is distributed in an equitable manner across all student groups. Staff would review the data on an ongoing basis and respond when data does not appear consistent or when anomalies are present. This review by all central office and site administrators would help to calibrate the use of discipline across the grade levels, both vertically and horizontally, to support the consistent use of discipline at all school campuses. This calibration can involve a quarterly review of data points by the school sites and district office administration and a report to the Board of Education on a yearly basis.

Intervention programs that have been effective in reducing overall disciplinary referrals should be investigated. The school district in the study had the PBIS program in place for seven years prior to the study being conducted. PBIS is one program that has proven to be effective in creating a positive school environment and subsequently, lowering the overall discipline rate of given schools and school districts (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2010; Bradshaw, Mitchell & Leaf, 2009; Eber, Upreti, & Rose, 2010). However, my findings indicate that ensuring that the staff are continually re-trained on PBIS practices and are using the program with fidelity would benefit the school district. Other programs, such as Restorative Justice (Karp & Breslin, 2001) and Safe and Responsive Schools (Skiba, Ritter, Simmons, Petterson, & Miller, 2006) might also prove to be effective in reducing student disciplinary infractions. Reviewing other programs and possibly adding other programs to impact specific students would provide

additional support to those students. This behavioral support would help students be more successful throughout the school day.

As I noted above, the district would benefit from having a consistent training program for PBIS. The program would help support schools in the continued implementation of the PBIS program, ensure staff new to the district understand the PBIS structure, and allow the schools to keep the culture that PBIS creates active in the individual school sites.

Implications for Policy and Procedure

A review of policy and procedures by the school district would support more effective use of discipline in the school district. Students are suspended from school for violating a school or district policy or procedure that is defined by California Education Code. The district uses state codes and definitions found in the California Education Code to enforce discipline on students (California Legislative Information, 2014). A review of the codes and definitions and how they are actually interpreted by site administrators would benefit the district. This would help in the calibration of enforcement of the district policies and procedures and how they are used to discipline students across the school sites.

Student data should be reviewed on a consistent basis, both at the individual school level and at the overall district level. District and school staff should be aware of data trends in the district and at individual school sites. Through this review of data, district and school staff can assess trends that may need to be addressed if particular groups of students, particular classrooms, or individual students are disproportionally being disciplined. If disproportionality is found, the district and/or school can seek a

rationale to why it exists and assess how to correct the disproportionality. This review would also be beneficial in assessing the effectiveness of intervention programs that are in place and assess if there is a need for additional intervention programs.

Implications for Parent Communications/Trainings

Parent communications and/or trainings regarding discipline policies and procedures would benefit both the school district and the community (American Psychological Association Zero Policy Task Force, 2006). By having school districts educate families to the norms and expectations of a school campus, parents and guardians can support the school policies and norms by reinforcing the school rules at home. Parents and guardians can also advocate for students if issues arise through the disciplinary process if the parents/guardians have questions regarding behavioral infractions and/or student discipline enforcement. Advocacy from parents/guardians for school support for students can involve the implementation of school intervention programs outside of what is currently being implemented at the school site and possibly individual intervention programs for specific students.

Students should be constantly educated on school policies and procedures. Every student and family in the district studied was provided a copy of a code of conduct that described expected behavior expectations and that defined the consequences for not following school and district policies and procedures. The school district would benefit from consistent communication to all students in the school district in their native language. This communication could be provided at the onset of the school year for all students and be reinforced throughout the school year. In particular circumstances, individual or small group instruction would be beneficial to provide clear behavior

expectations and to allow students to fully understand the disciplinary measures that could be taken if students violate school and/or district policies and procedures.

Building additional communication processes through the school system will provide a better means for two-way dialogue between the families and schools. This dialogue is important in developing a collaborative interaction to help support students academically and behaviorally. Through this team approach to addressing student concerns, students, families, and schools will benefit through the constant dialogue and immediate action to individual students' needs. All students have the fundamental right to be educated. Schools and school districts need to work hard to ensure that they are meeting the needs of all of their students.

Implications for Cultural Competency Trainings

School staff could benefit from cultural competency training to help support all student whom they serve. Research has found that there may be a cultural disconnect between school teachers and the students that they serve (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010b; Townsend, 2000). Behaviors that teachers may feel are not the norm and counter to school policy may, in fact, be culturally acceptable in the environment from which the students come from (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010b). The majority of school teachers in the school district studied come from a particular ethnic/racial group, largely White, and largely middle class, which is aligned to the national data (NCES, 2009) and there may be a lack of understanding in working with students that come from very diverse backgrounds, including students that are second language students, students that come from poverty, and students that come from a different cultural background than the teaching and administrative staff that make up the school staff (Townsend, 2000). Staff

training in how to have a better understanding of the different cultures that make up an individual school would promote a more positive overall environment.

Policy and Procedure Conclusions

Results from this study can provide school district staff with information that could help in revising district policy and procedures regarding the use of the suspension as an enforcement tool in student discipline. In particular, school staff could review the use of both subjective and objective suspensions across the school district and assess if there were issues with disproportionality in student discipline. If disproportionality was found, the school district could review the data and assess to what extent disproportionality occurred between different minority populations. Other local education agencies could use the results of this study to help other school districts assess and refine their own suspension practices. In particular, this study will enforce the need to ensure that each local education agency has explicitly defined the behavioral infractions to confirm that there is consistency in their definition across the academic levels, ensure that there is consistency in their use across the grade levels, and to develop a process in which data is constantly being reviewed at both the school site and district office level.

Research Limitations

The research study had limitations. Because my study was descriptive in nature, it had three major limitations. I grouped those limitations into internal validity issues, external validity concerns, and construct validity problems.

Validity Limitations

Internal validity. Certain internal validity problems were found in my sampling plan. Internal validity concerns included, (a) history, (b) instrumentation, (c) mortality,

and (d) data (Parker, 1990). History becomes an issue as teachers were accustomed to writing office referrals that lead to student suspension in isolation, and bypassing the school administration for direction. This becomes an issue with teaching staff excluding students using individual judgment and not having to go through a multi-level process for exclusion. There is a lack of reliability in the process for exclusion.

Instrumentation was also an issue. The referral process is both subjective and objective. The subjectivity in defining behaviors leading to a suspension across staff and across all of the schools within the school district causes inconsistency. Teachers and administrators were able to define the behaviors at their school site or individual classrooms and may not be articulated to other schools or classrooms.

Mortality (as defined as student mobility) was another issue found. Student mobility in the school district causes disciplinary referrals that lead to student suspensions to vary depending on what specific student or groups of students are enrolled at any time. There may be an increase or a decrease in suspension referrals depending on the cohort group of students found in the school district throughout the school year.

Data is potentially problematic because of the use of self-reported data from all schools within the school district was a possible impact on the study. Schools were reliant on personnel to input the data into the district data systems. Although the data is verified at the state level for accuracy under each specific infraction area in the CALPADS system, the accuracy of the self-reporting in the district data system was left up to the individuals inputting the data at the school site level. Issues may include inconsistency in data inputting; there may have been a lack of articulation of similar infractions into the correct infraction code across schools.

External validity. My study had external validity issues around (a) sampling/data and (b) generalizability. The sampling model for the research study was a nonprobability design using a convenience sample (Parker, 1990). Because district extant data for the 2013-2014 school year was used and was readily available, my study should not be used to make claims or decisions to other years.

The other threat to external validity centered on generalizability. Using this specific school district as a sample may only generalize to a similar school district. This problem exists both at the student and the staff level. The study may not generalize to a school district with a different subgroup of students or teachers. The school district in the research study was a K-8 school district in southern California with a student population of 9223 students. The school district was comprised of two preschools, twelve K-5 elementary schools, and four middle schools. The district is located in a suburban area close to a major U.S. metropolitan city and had declining enrollment for the previous five years prior to the study. The student demographics in the district were varied, with 36% of the student population being Hispanic and 13% of the population being Vietnamese. Forty-five percent of the student population in the school district is White. With the aforementioned description, this study can only be generalized to a school district with similar demographics.

Construct validity. Not all of the variables in the study were operationally defined – specifically the office discipline referrals that are subjective in judgment. For example, subjective referrals leading to suspensions were ill defined. These referrals were left to be implemented at the judgment of teaching and administrative staff and may not have been thoroughly articulated across the school district. This limitation may have

caused differences in behavioral interpretations across schools that led to student suspensions.

Confounding levels of constructs were present in the study. Certain subjective infractions had a range of consequences. For example, the infraction of disrespect could lead to a very minimal consequence, such as a student discussion regarding appropriate behavior with the principal, to an out-of-school suspension. Because of this wide range of consequences, it is difficult to assess the overall impact that one infraction might have on the overall data analysis. Using a common definition across schools, for each infraction code, would systemize the application of behavioral infractions. Furthermore, having staff validate infraction data through peer collaboration and feedback would enable the school district to have a more detailed understanding of how infractions are being distributed across the K-8 system.

Future Research

In the review of the literature and in the research that was studied, there were some aspects to the previous research that could benefit from additional investigation. One of the areas that lacked detail is in the centering of research around the Hispanic student population. There is a great breadth to the research on African American students and disproportionate discipline rates (Skiba, et al., 2002), but there is a lack of research on other minority groups, specifically Hispanics (Gregory, Skiba, & Nogeura, 2010). More research on whether great discipline disproportionality exists across other minority groups would help support school districts in assessing their practices and their policies to ensure equity.

A more regionalized approach to understanding the student data and to conduct a deeper investigation into the subgroups within a particular minority group, such as Hispanics students, would be helpful (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). For instance, Hispanic students can encompass several different ethnicities. In the United States, there is a great variance in the Hispanic population regarding their country of origin. On the West Coast and in the Southwest, the majority of Hispanics originate from Mexico. On the East Coast, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans are the dominant Hispanic group. In Florida, Cubans are the dominant Hispanic group (Pew Research Center, 2013). Each ethnicity can have different cultural norms that translate to different behaviors.

While this school district had full PBIS implementation for the previous seven years prior to the study, more research on whether PBIS truly impacts the overwhelming disproportionality in discipline towards minority students would benefit school districts that have moved towards implementing a school-wide behavioral prevention program. Of keen interest is research that specifically targets the incidents or discipline towards student subgroups prior to the implementation of any behavioral prevention program compared to data after program implementation has been achieved. The fidelity of program implementation is of key interest as is the data that details the varied disciplinary infractions imposed on students.

The use of subjective and objective discipline needs to be studied further. I found little research on the use of subjective versus objective discipline in school districts. More research in defining both subjective and objective discipline referral practices and policies across school districts would benefit school staff in better understanding their given policies and procedures as well as better informing families of what consequences

could be imposed on students for specific rules violations. There is some research indicating that minority students are more likely to be disciplined for minor infractions compared to their White peers (Skiba, et al., 2002; Welch & Payne, 2010). A more in-depth study of the use of subjective and objective referrals would help in developing appropriate staff training to how to use school board adopted policies and procedures.

Another aspect in the review of literature and in the research that was studied was in determining if key factors other than race and ethnicity can play a role in predicting student suspensions. Students come to school with a variety of possible risk factors. Those risk factors range from being a second language student, being a student from poverty, to being a student that has had high mobility. Research on determining which risk factors could play a role in predicting student suspensions would help schools in developing intervention structures to help those students with risk factors that are more likely to influence student discipline in schools.

Finally, the role of the educator in student discipline also needs further study. The training that staff receives on policy and procedures are critical in helping them understand how to enforce district and school policies and procedures. Policy and procedures should be consistently enforced to ensure that all students are treated in a fair manner. Trainings on how to interpret policies and procedures and also in how to calibrate between school levels and between individual grade levels would promote a more equitable manner of enforcing school and district policies and procedures. This training would be beneficial for all staff, including site and district administrators.

Conclusion

All students have a right to a free and appropriate education. Research has shown time and time again that particular subgroups of students are more likely to be disciplined than others (CDE, 2013; Fabelo, et al., 2011; Kaufman, et al., 2010; Losen, 2011; Losen & Skiba, 2010,; Skiba, et al., 2011; Tobin & Vincent, 2011; Welch & Payne, 2010). This study helped a school district to have a better understanding of student data to make changes to policies and practices. Through the constant review of information, more students should be treated in a more equitable manner.

Based on the findings from my study, I would suggest two specific goals for the district. The first goal would be to reform the school district and individual school site policies and procedures. The study assessed for disproportionality in discipline consequences, school suspensions in particular, between Hispanic students and White students. There is research that has shown that minority students are more likely to have received greater consequences, had more serious discipline actions by school personnel imposed, and had a greater number of suspensions than compared to their White peers (Skiba, et al., 2002; Skiba, et al. 2011). Of particular interest is in the use of subjective and objective suspensions and whether there is disproportionality found when investigating school site and district discipline data sets. Through an assessment of data, a school district can evaluate if their policies and procedures are adequately addressing the needs of the school district. If there is an issue with student disproportionality in student discipline, the school district can make changes to staff training programs, add additional student supports, and revise policy and procedures to ensure that all students are treated equitably.

A second goal would be to further assess particular factors (grade level, gender, ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, individual school, or English language status for example) that best predicted a suspension, whether subjective or objective. Students come to schools with varied backgrounds. If specific risk factors put students more at risk of not succeeding in our schools, then schools need to make certain that there are intervention programs in place to allow student to succeed. There has been research that has shown that specific minority groups and males are given more disciplinary referrals and are suspended for more subjective reasons compared to White students and females (Skiba, 2002). English language learners are also more vulnerable to being disciplined at a greater rate than mainstream students (Arcia, 2006). Student discipline has also been found to increase as students make their way through the grade levels (Skiba, et al. 2011). School districts can use previous research and assess their own student demographics to determine what risk factors may contribute to increased student discipline and plan accordingly.

I suggest these two goals because my results indicated that specific student factors, in particular race and poverty and English language status, contributed to higher rates of student discipline in the school district studied. Hispanic students were more than twice as likely (RR = 2.572) to receive an objective disciplinary referral or a subjective disciplinary referral (2.600) that could lead to a school suspension than White students. Hispanic students were also more likely to receive more than one suspension compared to their White peers. This is aligned to previous research as previously stated, but not aligned to the overall state of California suspension rates. In California, 52% of the student body population is comprised of Hispanic students, and the suspension rate

for the state equates to 54% Hispanic (CDE, 2013). The district studied had a high rate of suspension compared to the California suspension rate, but was aligned to previous studies in other areas of the United States in which Hispanics were suspended at a higher rate.

Of great concern is that the students most in need of support in the district studied, those students that come from poverty and those who are second language students, are the students that receive more disciplinary referrals. This concern raises more questions. Is the staff in the district studied consistent in its discipline practices? If not, then how does the district provide support to ensure that the practices are consistent? The issue of training comes into play. All staff need to understand the behavioral policies to ensure that there is consistency in practice. Does the district have a venue to review disciplinary data at the site and at the district level? Data review is a critical component to help understand the needs of any educational system, this school system is no different. Through data review, school and district staff can develop intervention programs specific to individual or specific groups of students.

The school district studied had updated school board policies and school procedures. These policies and procedures were reviewed by the administrative team on a yearly basis at the beginning of the year. A more thorough review of district policy and procedures and a periodic review of student discipline data by all staff in the district, including the Board of Education, would help the district make decisions in how policy is being enacted at the ground level, in its classrooms by teaching and support staff.

In conclusion, my research helped the district better understand student data and the practices that had occurred at the school district over time. The disproportionality in

discipline among Hispanic students in student suspensions compared to White students enforced the need of the school district to review its discipline policies and procedures. Staff training on understanding what behaviors would lead to a student suspension and calibrating the enforcement of disciplinary referrals across the school levels and between the grade levels was essential to identifying where the areas of improvement in the school district were with regards to staff training. The goals of addressing issues of practice and of policy must be met if the district were to take on a stronger approach to reviewing student data, training of staff on policy and procedures, and in providing supports to that staff were assessing student behaviors more equitably among students.

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