Addressing Discipline Equity: The Inclusive Skill-Building Learning Approach (ISLA) an Alternative to Exclusionary Discipline

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Abstract

Exclusionary discipline practices are frequently utilized in schools despite decades of research indicating their ineffectiveness (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Muñiz 2021). Research shows that removing students from the classroom does not change student behavior, is administered disproportionately to historically marginalized and minoritized groups, and is linked to the school-to-prison pipeline and lower academic achievement (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). This study explores the impact of the Inclusive Skill-Building Learning Approach (ISLA), an instructional and restorative alternative to exclusionary discipline practices, on discipline disproportionality. Pre-intervention, implementation, and post-intervention discipline data for 6th through 8th grade students were collected to understand the relation between ISLA and disproportional discipline data by race and gender. The findings suggest that ISLA is an effective tool for reducing overall in-school and out-of-school suspension rates as well as the risk indices for out-of-school suspensions for students of color, yet there is still a need for intervention adaptations to address specific disparities in exclusionary discipline practices. Research findings, study limitations, and implications and directions for future research and practice are further discussed.

Keywords: achievement gap, discipline equity, disproportionality, exclusionary discipline, school-based interventions

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Exclusionary discipline is the practice of removing students from the classroom for different types of behavior infractions, ranging from disruptive or disrespectful behavior to more high-risk behavior concerning student safety. There are different levels of exclusionary practices that include a timeout in the classroom, being removed from class or a social setting, office disciplinary referrals, or more severe discipline such as in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspensions (OSS), and expulsions (Nese et al., 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) used to document behaviors that may deviate from school-wide expectations, and even though ODRs may not always result in ISS, OSS, or expulsions, all exclusionary practices impact students negatively. When students are removed and excluded from the learning environment, they are missing valuable instructional time and learning opportunities (Losen & Martinez, 2020; Nese et al., 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Exclusionary discipline is frequently utilized in schools to manage student behavior. Yet, there is over two decades of research indicating its detrimental impacts on students, school communities, and society in general (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Muñiz 2021; Nese et al., 2020; Skiba, Arredondo, et al., 2014; Zabel, 1986).

Effects of Exclusion

Research indicates that exclusionary discipline does not change student behavior or improve school safety, but instead leads to negative student outcomes (Losen & Skiba, 2010; McIntosh et al., 2014; Skiba, 2014). Studies show that students who experience exclusionary discipline have lower academic achievement (Losen & Martinez, 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2015), are likely to be suspended again in the future and experience more exclusion for behavioral

problems, drop out of school, and have future juvenile justice involvement (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Mallett, 2016; McIntosh et al., 2014). Exclusionary discipline policies are designed to remove certain students from classrooms and schools in order to ensure a positive learning environment for all other students and to improve school safety. Yet the data suggest that removal of students does not improve learning outcomes for students or enhance a positive school climate (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Skiba, 2014). Studies have demonstrated that schools with high rates of suspensions and expulsions have lower rates of school safety, poorer school climate, and lower academic achievement (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Data show that schools with high rates of exclusion have lower test scores, lower academic quality, and decreased graduation rates, even when controlling for factors such as poverty and other student demographics (Anderson et al., 2019; (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Novak, 2021).

While all students generally experience negative outcomes from exclusionary discipline, students from diverse or marginalized backgrounds experience exclusionary discipline disproportionately. Research indicates exclusionary discipline inequities based on race, ethnicity, disability status, gender, socio-economic status (SES), academic achievement, and sexual orientation (Girvan et al., 2017; Skiba, 2014; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014). These punitive forms of discipline are often administered more frequently to students of color such as Black, Native American, and Latinx students who then experience the negative outcomes at a higher rate (Liu et al., 2022; McIntosh et al., 2014; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Even more troubling is that studies show students of color are removed from the classroom more often for minor subjective problems such as being disrespectful (i.e. not listening, having head down on

desk, or not following directions) or disruptive (i.e. tapping pencil on the desk or making other noise, speaking out of turn or not raising hand before speaking), and experience harsher punishment compared to their White counterpart (Girvan et al., 2017; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Smolkowski and colleagues (2016) found that in elementary schools, African American students were more likely to receive subjective office disciplinary referrals than White students. In addition, African American students were at greater risk for subjective ODRs than White students in the classroom compared to other settings such as the playground, lunch rooms, or hallways (Smolkowski et al., 2016). Ritter and Anderson (2018) examined disproportionality in referral (i.e., removal from class or another place) and exclusionary discipline rates across schools and districts in Arkansas for K-12 students. They found that African American students were more than twice as likely to be referred for minor nonviolent offenses, including subjective infractions such as disorderly conduct, insubordination, and other not specified infractions, compared to their white peers even within the same school districts. Once referred, they were 2.4 times more likely than their White counterparts to receive exclusionary discipline for the same minor infractions, even when controlling for student level characteristics such as grade level, Free and Reduced Lunch status, and special education status (Ritter & Anderson, 2018).

Disproportional Effects of Exclusion

Research links exclusionary discipline practices and policies to the school-to-prison pipeline and future incarceration (Mallett, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014), which has a negative impact on society as a whole. Based on data from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), more than 47,000 youth were incarcerated on any given night in 2015. In most of these cases (73%), the arrests were for non-violent offenses (i.e. use or possession of

substances, theft) and the majority of those incarcerated (69%) were youth of color (Bates & Swan, 2018). Not surprisingly, research attributes some of these disparities to educational policies that enforce exclusion and harsher punishments for typical adolescent behaviors that impact students of color at a higher rate, creating pathways from school to the juvenile justice system, knowns as the school-to-prison pipeline (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Mallett, 2016; McCarter, 2017). The resources allocated to incarceration could be better used addressing the root causes of school-to-prison pipeline such as diversion programs (Goldstein et al., 2019), and addressing education policies that eliminate exclusionary disciplinary procedures that target youth of color excessively (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Bates & Swan, 2018; Skiba, Arredondo, et al., 2014).

Furthermore, disproportionate use of exclusionary practices in the classroom contributes to widening the achievement gap for students of color (Losen & Martinez, 2020; McIntosh et al., 2014, 2021). Losen and Martinez (2020) use the 2015-2016 U.S. Department of Education (DOE) discipline data to report the disparate impact on educational opportunity measured in days of instruction lost due to OSS. In this national overview, secondary school students were recorded to lose the most days due to OSS, five times higher than elementary rates (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Rates of lost instruction for racial groups revealed stark differences, with White students having lost 21 days per 100 students enrolled, compared to 103 days lost for Black students, 63 days lost for Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students lost, 54 days lost for Native American students, and 30 days lost for Latinx students. When the data are disaggregated by race and gender, even more disturbing disparities are observed. Black males lost the most days of school compared to any other group at 132 days lost per 100 students enrolled, and Black females had the second highest rate overall at 77 days lost, which was seven times higher than White females who lost 11 days of instruction at the secondary level (Losen & Martinez, 2020).

And the trend hasn't changed much over the last decade. In a 2010 report utilizing DOE discipline data on 18 of the nation's largest school districts, findings showed that Black males had the highest rates of suspensions, followed by Black females (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Furthermore, some districts suspended over 50% of Latinx and White females (Losen & Skiba, 2010).

These disparities demonstrate how the opportunity gap is strongly connected to the racial, and even gender biases that play out in exclusionary discipline administration. Thus, to close the opportunity gap in our education systems and create more equitable learning opportunity for all students, it is necessary to address the discipline gap. The research highlights the need for not just alternatives to exclusionary discipline but also the importance of addressing the issue for specific groups. While there is currently significant research on the harms of exclusion, there is still a need for more research and collection of discipline data, particularly with full disaggregation of data by race and gender (Losen and Skiba, 2010). In addition, a better understanding of disaggregated data and disparities would allow researchers and practitioners to create and implement more targeted interventions and improve current interventions that address the needs of specific groups such as students of color, and female students.

Positive Behavioral Interventions Supports (PBIS)

The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a research-based framework for supporting students' behavior, academics, and social, emotional, and mental health needs (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Cho Blair et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2011; Noltemeyer et al., 2019). PBIS models emphasizes preventive strategies for classroom management, such as teaching, modeling, and reinforcing appropriate behaviors versus waiting

for misbehavior to occur then to react and respond (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Nese et al., 2020; Nese, Kittelman, et al., 2021; Nese, Santiago-Rosario, et al., 2021; Sugai & Horner, 2009).

Even though PBIS strategies are associated with decreased disciplinary referrals, disproportionality in exclusionary discipline still remain high within schools implementing PBIS especially for African American students (Gregory et al., 2021). In addition, there is a need for systems within the PBIS model that provide instructional supports to students when they are sent out of class, and classroom-level supports to teachers to prepare them to reconnect with their students when they return to class (Hunter et al., 2017; Nese et al., 2021; Pas et al., 2015; Reinke et al., 2014). Typically, when students are sent out of class because they engaged in subjective behaviors such as disrespectful or disorderly conduct, they miss crucial in-class learning opportunities, receive little to no support for that lost instruction or guidance on appropriate classroom behaviors, ways to reconnect and make amends with their teacher, or instruction an appropriate process for re-entering the classroom (Nese et al., 2020). This leads to falling behind on academics, more problem behaviors in the future, and an increased likelihood of future disciplinary referrals (Losen & Martinez, 2020; Skiba & Losen, 2016). There is a clear need for alternative processes for when students are removed from classrooms to address these issues. In addition, the decision to remove students from a learning environment falls on teachers or another adult, making individual implicit bias a key factor for disparities in exclusionary discipline (Girvan et al., 2017). Teachers generally engage in exclusionary practices because they earnestly want to improve student behavior and classroom environment however, exclusionary discipline ultimately produce the opposite result (Girvan et al., 2017). Teachers, administrators, and students can all benefit from an alternative that provide classroom supports and strategies to neutralize teacher implicit bias, and offers continued instruction and skill-

building opportunities for students that are actually effective for practical behavior change (Nese et al., 2020; Nese, Santiago-Rosario, et al., 2021).

The Inclusive Skill-Building Learning Approach (ISLA)

The Inclusive Skill-Building Learning Approach (ISLA) is a universal intervention for middle schools that can be implemented within the PBIS framework. ISLA was developed to change educator behavior, improve student behavior, improve student-teacher relationships, and reduce exclusionary discipline practices and address loss of instructional time by: (a) providing skill-building supports to improve student social and behavioral problem-solving, (b) improving teacher and administrator practices and school systems, and (c) restoring student-teacher relationships (Nese et al., 2020). Low-level student behavior is prevented or managed in the classroom with student teacher relationship-building, teaching class-wide expectations, and graduated discipline (e.g., reteaching, redirecting, parent contact, behavioral contracts; Furjanic et al., 2021). And when a student is removed from class, they go to a designated space to meet with an ISLA interventionist who provides coaching through the following ISLA Process: ISLA triage (i.e., determine whether behavior is a safety concern), student debrief (i.e., the student's understanding of the incident), behavior skills coaching (i.e., teach, model, and reinforce alternative skills), reconnection conversation and card (i.e., provide coaching for how to converse and reconnect with teacher upon going back to class), and classroom reentry (i.e., ISLA support staff guide student in the reconnection conversation; Nese et al., 2020). ISLA is an universal intervention targeting all students to improve academics, enhance positive student behavior, prevent other challenges.

Prior research on ISLA indicates that it is effective in reducing exclusionary discipline, has high acceptability ratings by school staff and administrators, and improves overall school

climate (Furjanic et al., 2021; Nese et al., 2020). In one pilot study conducted during the 2015-2016 academic year, ISLA reduced overall rates of ODRs, ISS, and OSS as well as minutes of lost instruction after just one year of implementation (Nese et al., 2020). ISLA was found to reduce overall rates of ODRs (*ES* = 0.15 to 0.18), ISS (*ES* = 0.13 to 0.15), and OSS (*ES* = 0.06 to 0.15) as well as minutes of lost instruction (by 92% to 93%) after just one year of implementation (Nese et al., 2020). Another two-year study that examined the collaborative process used to refine the ISLA intervention, found that fidelity and acceptability of ISLA improved when community members were involved in the iterative intervention development process. A more recent study utilizing 10 new schools and quasi-experimental methodology, assessed the impact of ISLA's relationship building strategies on classroom behaviors and school discipline practices. Results showed that ISLA's WOW[1] strategy decreased in-school and out-of-school exclusionary practices, increased students' active engagement in classrooms, and decreased overall disruptive behaviors. At the ISLA schools, the WOW strategy was associated with a large increase in students' active engagement (ES = 1.17), and a large decrease in students' disruptive behaviors (ES = -0.74), compared to students in control schools (Nese, Nese, et al., under review). However, none of these studies examined disaggregated data on race and gender, an important area for future research.

Previous research on ISLA has demonstrated its potential to reduce overall exclusionary discipline, keep students in the classroom and decrease lost instructional time (Nese et al., 2020; Nese, Nese, et al., under review), improve classroom learning environments (Furjanic et al., 2021; Nese, Santiago-Rosario, et al., 2021), and has a high acceptability rating among teachers,

[1] WOW is a three step research-informed strategy that can be used to create positive classroom environments: Welcome students, Own your classroom environment, and Wrap up class with the intention (Nese, Santiago-Rosario, et al., 2021).

administrators, and school staff (Furjanic et al., 2021). However, currently there is no research that examines ISLA and its impact on reducing racial and gender disparities due to exclusionary discipline. This study aims to address this gap in research by exploring ISLA and its potential impact on reducing disparities caused by exclusionary discipline.

Purpose of the Present Study

The current study analyzed longitudinal data from two different middle schools over three years and explored the relation between ISLA implementation and exclusionary discipline practices as well as disciplinary disparities by race and gender. Specifically, the following research questions were explored.

1. Are the overall rates of exclusionary discipline practices (ODR, ISS, OSS) reduced after ISLA implementation?

2. Are there differences based on race/ethnicity in the rates of exclusionary discipline practices (ODR, ISS, OSS) after ISLA implementation?

3. Are there differences based on gender in the rates of exclusionary discipline practices (ODR, ISS, OSS) after ISLA implementation?

Method

Participants and Settings

Participants included 6th through 8th grade students from two public middle schools in the Pacific Northwest, each located in a "small city" (NCES, 2018). For this study, students of color were those that identified as Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black, Latinx, or multiracial (two races or more).

School A had an enrollment of 587 students during 2017-2018 school year (pre-intervention), 313 identified as males and 274 identified as females, and 225 identified as

students of color. During 2018-2019 (implementation) school year there were 600 students enrolled, 295 identified as males and 305 identified as females, and 221 identified as students of color. Lastly, during 2019-2020 (post-intervention) school year there were 596 students enrolled, 300 identified as males and 296 identified as females, and 215 identified as students of color. According to the 2018-2019 NCES data, approximately 70% of the students qualified for free and/or reduced lunch, 36% of the students identified as students of color, and the school received Title I supports (NCES, 2018).

School B had an enrollment of 497 students during the 2017–18 school year (pre-intervention), 225 identified as males and 272 identified as females, and 146 identified as students of color. During 2018-2019 (implementation) school year there were 517 students enrolled, 257 identified as males and 259 identified as females, and 162 identified as students of color. Lastly, during 2019-2020 (post-intervention) school year there were 515 students enrolled, 272 identified as males and 241 identified as females, and 176 identified as students of color. According to the 2018-2019 NCES data, approximately 64% of the students qualified for free and/or reduced lunch, 31% of the students identified as students of color, and the school did not receive Title I supports (NCES, 2018).

Procedures

Training for school teams and staff began in the Fall of 2018. Following iterative refinement of the ISLA curriculum with key community members at both middle schools (i.e. general educators, behavior coaches, special educators, school administrators, school psychologists, counselors, educational assistants, and students), school teams were provided 2-days of training on ISLA. School teams consisted of at least one instructional assistant, behavior support specialist, administrator, and grade level representative (6^{th}, 7^{th}, and 8^{th}). After this, the

research team in collaboration with the school teams provided monthly professional development to all school staff as part of their school-wide ISLA implementation. Implementation started with foundational preventative school-wide supports including building relationships and effective responses to low-level student behaviors in the classroom, followed by education and training on targeted supports for students sent out of class (ISLA Process) and last, assessments of fidelity (Furjanic et al., 2021; Nese, Santiago-Rosario, et al., 2021).

Fidelity of Implementation

Fidelity of ISLA implementation was measured using the ISLA Implementation Checklist, which measure implementation of school-wide components. Items in the Implementation Checklist cover three areas of implementation: School-wide systems, ISLA systems, and ISLA practices. Some of the components measured under school-wide systems include consensus among school personnel on prioritizing instructional alternative to exclusionary discipline, implementing school-wide preventative practices related to student behavior, establishing a representative team that includes diverse staff, and having an efficient data system in place for collecting and reporting on student behaviors, and conducting reviews of the data for data driven decision making. Some of the components measured under ISLA systems components include implementation of school-wide break system for helping students de-escalate during instructional time, re-entry routine which includes a reconnection conversation with the teacher when the student returns to class, and a formal office referral process for sending students to the office and documenting each incident. Lastly, some of the components measured under ISLA practices include items such as implementation assessment, fidelity by staff in implementing the ISLA process with students, and use of ISLA tracking sheet to track supports provided to students when they are sent out of class. At monthly meetings, the

school team in collaboration with the research team would update the ISLA Implementation Checklist to account for the components of ISLA that were implemented in their schools. The monthly meetings were pre-scheduled School-Wide Team Meetings, similar to PBIS Team meetings, and occurred once a month for one hour. ISLA implementation was discussed as an agenda item at the meetings. During the meetings, ISLA progress was monitored, behavioral data and ISLA data were reviewed, in addition to other school-wide initiatives. For the 2018-2019 school year, both schools implemented above 80% of ISLA components.

The ISLA Self-Rating Fidelity Tool was used to measure fidelity of implementation of the out-of-class ISLA Process. ISLA interventionists or school behavior support staff (those who were trained on and delivered the out-of-class ISLA Process) documented the extent to which they delivered the five components of the ISLA Process to students (triage, debrief, behavioral skills coaching, reconnection conversation practice and card development, classroom reentry support with reconnection). This was intended to be completed every time a student is sent out of their classroom and to the ISLA room, which is generally the main office. Across both schools, self-reported fidelity data were collected on 744 events from 296 students (about 30% of the responses unreported/missing), and ISLA implementation fidelity varied by component: 62% were coached on the appropriate behavior skill, 31% completed a reconnection card, 15% completed the reconnection conversation with their teacher, 54% completed the ISLA debrief, and 34% practiced the reconnection conversation (of 514 reported events; Nese, Santiago-Rosario, et al., 2021).

Measures

Data on student problem behavior were collected from the School-Wide Information System (SWIS), a web-based data collection system that schools across the U.S. use to track

incidences of problem behavior and exclusionary discipline actions (May et al., 2013). Schools generally track three types of exclusionary discipline practices in SWIS: ISS, OSS, and expulsion. ISS involves removing students from the classroom but keeping them on school grounds, typically in a room with a supervising adult, for one or multiple school days. OSS involves removing students from school grounds for one or multiple school days. Expulsion involves permanently removing students from their school, with no option of returning.

Analyses

Descriptive statistics of exclusionary discipline practices (OSS, ISS, expulsion) are reported for the pre-intervention, implementation, and post-intervention periods. Because the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown closed schools on March 13, 2020, we removed exclusionary discipline incidents that occurred on or after March 13 in the pre-intervention and implementation school years so that comparisons could be made across years. We chose not to report events per month per 100 students because exclusionary discipline events are not similar distributed across the school year (i.e., seasonality effects; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020; McIntosh et al., 2010). Instead, we report the percent of students in a school that received exclusionary discipline in each year. For specific groups (i.e., Nonwhite, White, male, female) we report the risk index, the proportion of students in the group that received exclusionary discipline (i.e., the number of in-group students with at least one exclusion divided by the total number in-group students enrolled; Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; Girvan et al., 2019). To compare risk across years or groups, we use Cohen's probit d' (Cohen, 1988) as a standardized-risk difference effect size metric (Girvan et al., 2019, Eq. 4). Effect size estimates are a simple and robust way of calculating group or pre/post differences, allowing the magnitude of the difference and its practical significance to be more readily understood (Kraft, 2020). Probit d' is the difference

between two proportions, p_1 and p_2, that have been transformed into standard normal deviates, and is suggested as a useful standardized effect size to compare exclusionary discipline proportions (Girvan et al. 2019). Cohen (1988, p. 184) advised against using his magnitude of effect sizes conventions (small = .20, medium = .50, large = .80) in favor of values provided by theory or experience in the specific area. Traditional benchmarks do not accurately evaluate the magnitude of effect size estimates across the social sciences, especially in education intervention research, as study design, specific characteristics of the study, theoretical frameworks, and consistency of results all shape magnitude of program effects (Kraft, 2020; Lipsey, 2012). As such, Lipsey et al. (2012) reported the average effect size of whole-school treatments as 0.10 (*SD* = 0.33), and Kraft (2020) reported effect size magnitudes for academic outcomes of < 0.05 as small, 0.05 to < 0.20 as medium, and >= 0.20 as large.

All data analyses and visualizations were conducted and created in the R programming environment (R Core Team, 2022) with the following R packages: ggthemes (Arnold, 2021), here (Müller, 2020), janitor (Firke, 2021), knitr (Xie, 2022), lubridate (Grolemund & Wickham, 2011), tidyverse (Wickham et al., 2019).

Results

Overall Rates of Exclusionary Discipline

Figure 1 shows the proportion of students with at least one exclusionary event (ISS and OSS) for each school across years. Of the 587 students enrolled in School A during pre-intervention, 8.5% (*n* = 31) received at least one ISS, 13.5% (*n* = 41) received at least one OSS, and there were no expulsions recorded. During the 2018–19 Intervention year, of the 600 enrolled students, 6.5% (*n* = 34) received at least one ISS, 10.0% (*n* = 35) received at least one OSS, and there were no expulsions. The associated effect sizes for the decreases in ISS and OSS

rates from pre-intervention to implementation were probit $d' = –0.14$ and –0.18, respectively. During the 2019–20 post-intervention school year, of the 596 enrolled students, 6.7% ($n = 31$) received at least one ISS, 8.2% ($n = 32$) received at least one OSS, and 2 students received expulsions. The associated effect sizes for the changes in ISS and OSS rates from implementation to post-intervention were probit $d' = 0.02$ and –0.11, respectively.

Of the 497 students enrolled in School B during pre-intervention, 12.1% ($n = 38$) received at least one ISS, 9.1% ($n = 25$) received at least one OSS, and 1 student was expelled. During the 2018–19 implementation year, of the 517 enrolled students, 9.9% ($n = 39$) received at least one ISS, 6.8% ($n = 22$) received at least one OSS, and there were no expulsions. The associated effect sizes for the decreases in ISS and OSS rates from pre-intervention to implementation were probit $d' = –0.12$ and –0.16, respectively. During the 2019–20 post-intervention school year, of the 515 enrolled students, 13.8% ($n = 48$) received at least one ISS, 20.2% ($n = 48$) received at least one OSS, and there were no expulsions. The associated effect sizes for the increases in ISS and OSS rates from implementation to post-Intervention were probit $d' = 0.20$ and 0.66, respectively.

Exclusionary Discipline for Nonwhite vs. White Students

We computed the risk index—the percent of a group that received exclusionary discipline for Nonwhite and White students (i.e., the number of in-group students with at least one exclusion divided by the total number in-group students enrolled), and Cohen's probit d' based on those the risk indices (Nonwhite vs. White). Figure 2 shows the risk indices for exclusionary discipline (ISS and OSS) for Nonwhite and White students for each school across years. Nonwhite students had a higher risk index than their White counterparts for 4 of the 12 comparisons (2 schools × 3 years × 2 exclusionary practices); three in the pre-intervention year,

School A OSS (probit $d' = 0.02$), and School B ISS (probit $d' = 0.06$) and OSS (probit $d' = 0.15$); and one in the implementation year, School B ISS (probit $d' = 0.04$). Of these four comparisons, the only effect size magnitude of note was for School B OSS during pre-intervention (probit $d' = 0.15$); the other three were near zero. These results suggest that there were no meaningful disproportionality effects; that is, Nonwhite students were generally not a higher risk of exclusion than White students.

Exclusionary Discipline for Male vs. Female Students

We also computed the risk index for male and female students, and computed Cohen's probit *d'* for the risk indices (male vs. female). Figure 3 shows the risk indices for exclusionary discipline (ISS and OSS) for male and female students for each school across years. Male students had a higher risk index than their female counterparts for all 12 comparisons, and the effect sizes ranged from probit $d' = 0.22$ to 0.89, indicating meaningful disproportionality effects comparing male to female students. Table 1 shows the probit d' effect sizes for ISS and OSS rates for male compared to female students for each school across years. In general, the effect size estimates decrease from pre-intervention to implementation, but then increase implementation to post-intervention (except School B ISS).

Discussion

We examined the relation between ISLA implementation in middle schools and reductions in overall and disproportional (by race and gender) exclusionary discipline practices. Results are reported with effect sizes (probit *d'*; Cohen, 1988).

Results indicate that there was a decrease in overall exclusionary discipline in School A, more for OSS rather than ISS. In School B, while there was some decrease in both ISS and OSS from pre-intervention to implementation, the rates increased for both ISS and OSS in the post-

intervention year. In School A, rates of ISS decreased only slightly from pre-intervention to implementation year and even less post-intervention year; more notable change was observed for OSS rates which decreased by almost half from pre-intervention to post-intervention year. The reduction of ISS from implementation to post-intervention year was associated with a small probit *d'* effect size .02, and OSS reductions from implementation to post-intervention year were associated with *d'* = –.11, a medium magnitude of change. In School B, there were some decreases in ISS and OSS rates from pre-intervention year to implementation year, however both ISS and OSS jumped up during post-intervention year. The associated effect sizes for changes in ISS and OSS rates from implementation to post-intervention year were associated with probit *d'* effect size .20, and *d'* = .66, respectively, both reflecting meaningful increasing disciplinary rates. If the schema for effect size magnitude suggested by Kraft (2020; < 0.05 small, 0.05 to < 0.20 medium, and >= 0.20 large) hold for behavioral outcomes, our results and the effect sizes reported here indicate that ISLA is a promising school-based intervention for reducing and even preventing exclusionary discipline such as ISS and OSS in middle schools.

The spike in ISS and OSS rates in School B were likely the result of multiple factors including change in administration and increased issues related to substance abuse in the community which spilled over into the school. In follow up interviews with staff after the conclusion of data collection, school staff noted that the year presented difficult issues with students and substances on campus, creating pressure on the administration for harsher zero tolerance disciplinary action for issues related to substance use and possession. ISLA staff continued their efforts and worked with the administration to avoid the use of zero tolerance practices and instead use the ISLA Process plus more intensive wraparound supports for students engaging in substance use. While these efforts by the intervention team were in process, the

COVID-19 pandemic took full effect and many schools around the country were shut down. This resulted in all students being sent home indefinitely, before the ISLA Process could be fully utilized to address the emerging substance use issues in School B.

It is common practice in schools across the country to employ zero tolerance and harsh punishments for issues related to substance use (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Curran, 2019; Skiba & Knesting, 2002). However, issues related to substance use demonstrate a greater need for providing wraparound supports to students rather than exclusion because removal from school increases the likelihood of continued engagement with illicit substances (Copeland et al., 2018; Duncan & McCrystal, 2002; Lloyd, 1998), and thus further training for school leadership. Future research should continue to examine the larger issue of substance use in communities as well as prevention programming in schools and training on alternatives to zero tolerance practices for administrators.

We disaggregated exclusionary practices by race and gender and calculated the risk indices (i.e., the number of in-group students with at least one exclusion divided by the total number in-group students enrolled) across schools and years. Nonwhite students had a higher risk index compared to their White counterpart in 4 of the 12 comparisons, three of which were during pre-intervention year. By the post-intervention year, Nonwhite students did not have a higher risk index for any of the comparisons. Thus, while racial disproportionality was not an emergent issue for these schools, the results suggest that ISLA is associated with some reductions in disproportionality. Future research should utilize randomization and control group research designs to further investigate causal links between ISLA and reducing racial disparities in school discipline. Even though the ISLA intervention has repeatedly been associated with

reductions in overall exclusionary discipline (Nese et al., 2020), future research should explore implementation in schools where disproportional discipline rates are a specific concern.

Consistent with prior research, the findings indicate that males are more likely than females to receive exclusionary discipline, emphasizing the challenges of addressing gender disproportionality in school discipline (Kaufman et al., 2010; Martinez et al., 2016; Smolkowski et al., 2016). Our results show that ISS rates minimally changed or didn't change at all for males and females across years after implementing ISLA, while OSS rates for males in both schools decreased notably from pre-intervention to implementation. These findings show that disproportionality was reduced from pre-intervention to implementation, indicating that ISLA was associated with a reduction in the gender disparity gap. While OSS rates began to climb again post-intervention when ISLA supports were faded, so did the gender disparity gap. Overall OSS rates remained low for School A post-intervention compared to pre-intervention, but OSS rates increased significantly in School B post-intervention, likely due to the increased issues with substances in School B. Though some reduction in disproportionality was observed for males, specifically for OSS, no such changes were observed for females across years for ISS and OSS. Our findings show that female students were still receiving exclusionary discipline at similar rates even after the intervention, highlighting the need to better understand how interventions are operationalized equitably across genders. Future research could examine the fidelity of ISLA supports delivered at the student level to explore gender differences.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of this study that should be noted when considering implications of the findings. First, this study utilizes a small sample from two schools in two small cities in the Pacific Northwest. The sample lacks racial and ethnic diversity as the schools

are representative of a predominantly White locale and state. We define Nonwhite students as those who identified as Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black, Latinx, or multiracial (two races or more), and this group only represents 31% to 36% of the total schools' population. Therefore, results of this study may not generalize to all schools or student demographics, specifically urban and more racially diverse populations across the United States. In addition, because certain racial groups such as African American students experience harsher exclusionary discipline and in higher frequency (Girvan et al., 2017; Ritter & Anderson, 2018), future studies should examine ISLA outcomes for specific racial groups. In addition, future research using more diverse samples from various regions and schools is needed to understand how this intervention is applicable across different demographics.

A second limitation is that causal inferences cannot be drawn from the results. The cohorts were different groups of students over the course of three years which could have affected the results due to cohort effects. Furthermore, there were changes in district/school policies over the time observed for this study that could have affected results. For example, one of the schools in this study shifted towards a zero-tolerance policy around substances in schools, thus increasing instances of suspensions and exclusionary measures. In addition, ISLA implementation fidelity could mediate the magnitude of results, and is an important issue to consider in practice and to explore in research. Future research should utilize quasi-experimental and randomized control group designs to better understand the impact of ISLA intervention in schools.

Last, future research should examine the effectiveness of ISLA in reducing exclusionary practices among students with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth, and students with other intersecting historically marginalized identities to inform intervention adaptation. This could be

completed utilizing student and educator voice to continue to ensure the adaptations are culturally, linguistically, and cognitively appropriate for the population.

Conclusion

Exclusionary discipline continues to be a harmful and ineffective practice for addressing student behavior in schools. The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of research that indicate that alternatives to exclusion, like the ISLA intervention, are effective in changing educator to reduce exclusionary discipline practices and building student social and behavioral skills. Future research and practice should continue to explore disaggregated exclusion data and examine ways to adapt and refine ISLA for diverse groups.

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