

# **School Discipline Disproportionality: Culturally Competent Interventions for African American Males**

**Evette A. Simmons-Reed**

*Ball State University*

**Gwendolyn Cartledge**

*The Ohio State University*

Exclusionary policies are practiced widely in schools despite being associated with extremely poor outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly African American males with and without disabilities. This article discusses zero tolerance policies, the related research questioning their basic assumptions, and the negative effects on students in special education and the larger society. Behavioral and academic interventions also are discussed relative to evidence of effectiveness, potential outcomes, and culturally responsive applications.

*Keywords:* African American males, culturally competent interventions, disproportionality, schoolwide positive behavior intervention supports, special education

School wide disciplinary practices are necessary for order and safety, and it is also necessary for maintaining control of students in schools (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Noguera, 2003). For almost four decades, an abundance of research findings and national and state data have documented that students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, particularly African Americans with and without disabilities, are overrepresented in school disciplinary sanctions compared to their enrollment rates across the United States (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Skiba et al., 2008; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011). Not only do students from CLD backgrounds in special and general education, especially students with severe emotional disorders (SED), learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) receive higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, and office disciplinary referrals, they are also more likely to be referred to special education and the criminal justice system and are thus, excluded from accessing the general education curriculum (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010; Krezmien, Leone, Zablocki, & Wells, 2010; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Vincent & Tobin, 2011).

Discipline is a complex construct that can mean step-by-step progress in some type of training and preparation to achieve a goal or effect; or, it can be a means to accomplish an end (Adams, 2000). When viewed in the context of the aforementioned definition, discipline in schools may be: (a) disproportionately delivered to obtain a desired effect or (b) be used to master a desirable end; that is, used to control a group or behaviors by maintaining predictability.

Discipline in the schools has been increasingly harsh, despite research findings refuting their effectiveness in reducing behavior problems, and most importantly, the negative impact on a diverse and progressively larger segment of our population. Educators and policy makers need to unite to find solutions that change the trajectory or direction of the lives of youth, especially African American males with and without disabilities (APA, Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Drakeford, 2004; Gregory et al., 2010; Noguera, 2003; Skiba & Peterson 2000; Townsend, 2000).

In this article, we discuss research findings regarding zero tolerance policies and other current school disciplinary practices refuting the underlying assumptions for the widespread use of exclusionary practices in schools. We then review decades of evidence on the impact of zero tolerance policies and other factors that contribute to the poor academic and behavior outcomes of (CLD) students, with emphasis on African American males with and without disabilities. Finally, we discuss emerging research on positive behavioral and academic culturally responsive interventions that have the potential to fulfill the promise of truly leaving “no child left behind.”

### **Current Disciplinary Practices in Schools**

Almost four decades have elapsed since the Children’s Defense Fund (1975) reported racial disproportionality in school disciplinary practices (Drakeford, 2004; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Despite criticisms that zero tolerance practices are: (a) ineffective in deterring school violence; (b) not well defined; (c) general in nature; and (4) often lead to varying interpretations of intent, context, and meaning of behaviors, widespread use of these punitive practices continue to be implemented in schools across the United States (Gregory, et al., 2010; Noguera, 2003; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Vincent & Tobin, 2011).

By 1998, 94% of all U.S. public schools utilized some type of zero tolerance policies (Krezmien et al., 2006; National Association of School Psychologist, 2001). Findings from data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2011) revealed that during the 2006 academic school year, 3.25 million or 7% of school age students in K-12 were suspended at least one time and 102,077 were expelled (Losen, 2011).

Researchers have validated the use of office disciplinary referral (ODR) data as a reliable measure to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, make program level decisions regarding interventions, and make informed decisions at the student, group, and system levels (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Kaufman et al., 2010). ODR data has been used to predict future school behavior, but have been criticized by some researchers because the validity of the data is predetermined or impacted primarily by school administrators (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004; Nelson, Benner, Reid, Epstein, & Benner, 2003). Other concerns are the lack of consistency in implementing policies in the schools and teacher interpretations of policies/behaviors (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Despite issues surrounding the use of ODR data, these data provide opportunities for the examination of institutional, school, and classroom behaviors to identify the extent to which these policies/practices contribute to overrepresentation and gaps in achievement.

*Zero Tolerance.* Since the passage of the Gun Free Schools Act (1994), federal policy adopted a zero tolerance for firearms, requiring a one-year expulsion for possession on school grounds (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). In an effort to maintain control, many states extended the federal policy to include less serious violations including: fighting, improper off campus behavior, and several other behaviors interpreted as disruptive (Krezmien et al., 2006; Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

The zero tolerance or “one-strike-you’re-out” policy is defined as the automatic expulsion of students who bring weapons or items that look like weapons to school or policies that mandate the application of predetermined consequences without consideration of the severity of the behavior, circumstances, or the environmental context (American Psychological Association [APA] Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Ashford, 2000;). Consequently, many of the disciplinary policies and practices used in schools often mirror, or in some instances, are harsher than those used with adults in the criminal justice system because school administrators are required to refer any weapon or drug violations to the courts irrespective of the mitigating circumstance or situation (Krezmien et al., 2010; Noguera, 2003).

School administrators justify using exclusionary practices as their primary method of maintaining order and control, even for minor infractions, based on several popular, but false, assumptions: (a) school violence is on the rise, (b) zero tolerance deters students from acting out, (c) zero tolerance provides students with a consistent message regarding expectations and consequences, (d) removing disruptive students creates a conducive learning environment for others, and (e) zero tolerance is supported by students, parents and people in the community (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010; Krezmien et al., 2006; Noguera, 2003).

The underlying assumption that school violence is on the rise because of the rash of school shootings in rural districts justify the widespread use of zero tolerance policies to keep students safe is arguably false and lacks empirical support (Drakeford, 2004; Noguera, 2003). In addition to the findings from the APA Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008), several other studies indicate that school violence remained steady or has declined since the mid 1980’s and has been on a downward trend since the mid 1990’s (Drakeford, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011).

The presumption and regular practice of removing disruptive students from school in an effort to create safer environments has also not been substantiated in the literature (APA, Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). In fact, data indicate the exact opposite. Overall, schools that implement zero tolerance practices frequently have higher rates of suspensions and expulsions, more negative school climates, poorer school management structure, and spend a much greater portion of school time focused on discipline problems (APA, Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Noguera, 2003). More importantly however, is the fact that research findings reveal that suspended students are more likely to be males who are academically at risk for failure, most likely receiving special education services, and typically from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (APA, Zero Tolerance Task Force; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). These youth are also more likely to have involvement in the criminal justice system (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

## Disproportionality and School Discipline

The literature is replete with a multitude of studies documenting the impact of exclusionary practices, like zero tolerance on youth. These studies reveal that African Americans, Latinos, students with disabilities, males, and low achievers have a higher probability for exclusion than youth from other cultural groups (Bowman-Perrott, et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Lo & Cartledge, 2007; Losen, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Townsend, 2000; U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011). For example, Losen (2011) reported that African American male middle school students were 28% more likely to be suspended at least once, almost three times that of the 10% for White students. In a 2014 “Dear Colleague Letter” from the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, the federal government pointed out that African American students without disabilities were three times more likely than White students to be expelled or suspended. Although, African American students made up only 15% of the students in their data collection, of this percentage, 35% were suspended once, 44% suspended more than once, and 36% expelled. Additionally, African American and Hispanic students constituted 50% of those involved in school-related arrests. These outcomes are more bleak for African American students with disabilities.

African American students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be suspended than those without disabilities and for longer periods of time (Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014). With the exception of Latino and Asian Americans, one in four males (20%) and one in four females (12%) from CLD backgrounds with disabilities, had received an out-of-school suspension (Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014). Bowman-Perrott and colleagues (2013) studied the exclusionary patterns for students with disabilities and found that students at greatest risk were those with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD), followed by those with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities (LD). Additionally, these data revealed that early grade exclusions (e.g., kindergarten and first grade) were predictive of subsequent later exclusions. It was also revealed that males were two times more likely than females to be excluded, and African Americans were two times more likely to be excluded than other race peers. Sullivan, Klingbeil, and Van Norman (2013) also examined disciplinary patterns for students with disabilities and obtained significant findings for race and disability, with rates for African American students being three times greater than those for White students. African American students with disabilities were most likely to be suspended and were 70% more likely than their other race peers with disabilities to have multiple exclusions.

Many critics of the disparity in school discipline data typically argue that African American students misbehave more often and have more serious infractions than other students. Losen (2013), however, refutes this argument, showing research that African American students are more likely to be suspended for discretionary offenses (offenses that may or may not require suspension based on safety concerns) than nondiscretionary offenses (carrying a weapon or drugs). In fact, White students were more likely than African American students to be suspended for weapons or drugs. In addition, African American students were more likely to have longer suspensions for minor offenses such as having a cell phone or disruptions. Rocque and Paternoster (2011) support this position with research conducted on data from more than 19,000 students in 45 elementary schools. Controlling for behavior, student demeanor, personality,

grades and other factors, the researchers found that Black students still were more likely to have disciplinary reports, pointing to race as a key factor. Other studies report similar findings, noting African Americans are referred to the office for minor offenses and for subjective reasons such as making noise, disrespectful behavior, and verbal threats; whereas, White students were referred for clear violations, including smoking and vandalism (APA, Zero Tolerance Task force, 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2010).

### **Disciplinary Outcomes of CLD Students With and Without Disabilities**

The frequent suspension of students from CLD backgrounds has been shown to significantly increase the risk of poorer academic, behavioral, and postschool outcomes (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Townsend, 2000). In an era of standards-based reform as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), schools are required to demonstrate progress towards reducing the achievement gap among students from CLD populations and their White peers (Wenglinsky, 2004). However, research findings have documented that the widespread use of suspension and expulsion methods as the primary school disciplinary practice for CLD students has contributed to the persistent gap in achievement (Gregory et al., 2010; Krezmien et al., 2006). African American males with and without disabilities, in particular, are at a greater risk for academic failure. Rocque and Paternoster (2011) contend that these excessive exclusions are fueling the school to prison pipeline. Although, African Americans and students with disabilities represent only 16% and 12% of the student enrollment, they are approximately two times more likely to be referred to law enforcement (27% and 25%) or to have a school-related arrest (31% and 25%) respectively. In comparison, White students represent 51% of the student enrollment, 41% of the referrals to law enforcement, and 39% of those arrested (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Research has documented that the continued poor outcomes only serve to increased behavior problems, lead to higher school dropout rates, substance abuse, and homelessness (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, 2014).

*Academic outcomes.* The negative consequences of missed academic instruction as a result of being suspended or expelled from school have been well documented in the literature (Gregory et al., 2010; Lo & Cartledge, 2006; Townsend, 2000; Vincent et al., 2011). In schools, Bradshaw et al. (2010) indicated that suspended students were more likely to be male, in special education, and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Gregory et al., 2010).

Findings also indicate that schools that report frequently utilizing zero tolerance policies and other “one strike you’re out” practices have higher rates of referrals to both the office and juvenile court system. They also reveal that suspended students are tracked into lower level courses, labeled as behavior problems, and referred to special education; they develop negative perceptions of school, become truant and eventually drop out (Gregory et al., 2010; Noguera, 2003; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Townsend, 2000). For example, African American boys, historically, receive at least one suspension that lead to missed instructional time and when exposed repeatedly to negative consequences, may potentially cement a cycle of academic failure and continued behavioral problems (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Generally, suspension results in students being denied access to instruction for one class period for up to ten days or more (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).

Although not directly connected empirically, the persistent poor academic performance of African American males and students from CLD backgrounds is additional support of the potential pernicious effects of excessive exclusions on school success of African American students. Despite some progress toward closing the achievement gap among racial and ethnic groups, the most recent assessments reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014) from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) report showed that reading and math gaps are still substantial for African American students, with males showing the greatest disparities. In 2009, for example, the NAEP reported that compared to 33% of White males, only 9% of Black males in 8<sup>th</sup> grade had reading percentages at or above proficient levels. In 2011, the NAEP reported that compared to 34% of fourth graders who read at or above the proficient level, this was the case for only 11% of students with disabilities and 17% of Black students.

*Behavioral outcomes.* The racial patterns in high school discipline and achievement predict the number of African American men who are incarcerated, as compared to those enrolled in colleges or universities (Gregory et al., 2010; Ziedenberg & Schiraldi, 2002;). In the mid 1970's, the enrollment of African Americans in college steadily increased. Since that time, the rates of attendance for African Americans at postsecondary institutions of any type have declined, especially among African American males (Drakeford, 2004; Noguera, 2003). The phrase used to describe the direct relationship between schools, CLD students, and the juvenile justice system is "school-to-prison-pipeline" (Krezmien et al., 2010; Noguera, 2003; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011).

As discussed earlier, the Gun Free Schools Act (1994) and its zero tolerance mandates have significantly increased school-based referrals of CLD male students for much less serious offenses. General patterns persisted for race and gender, consistent with what is typically reported in the research literature (Krezmien et al., 2010; Noguera, 2003; Skiba et al., 2008). That is, Black males with or without special needs are referred disproportionately even though behavior research does not appear to justify these disproportionate referrals (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011).

In considering the research findings, educators and advocates need to be concerned about the patterns and cumulative effects of office and school referrals to the juvenile court system on all students, especially students with disproportionate referrals such as those with disabilities and African American males. Schools need to develop interventions, internal structures, and policies that will not only reduce referrals but also increase the overall school and later life success of the most vulnerable students. While the approaches for addressing the problem of disproportionality vary in format and implementation, we consider four culturally competent options germane to teachers—i.e., teacher factors, behavioral interventions, academic/reading interventions, and school policies/structure.

## **Culturally Competent Interventions**

### **Teacher Factor**

Failing to justify the disproportionate disciplinary rates for African American males by higher rates of problem behavior, Rocque and Paternoster (2011) speculated on the role of teacher

perceptions or stereotypes. The authors suggest that teachers perceive Black students' behaviors to be more hostile than those of other students, whereas, these students are seen as menacing and a racial threat. Empirical support is found in studies showing that teachers often give African American students, especially males, lower evaluations than warranted (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008), and they are more likely to be reprimanded for vague, more subjective behaviors such as defiance (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002). Males often complain, with some justification, that teachers often misperceive their behavior and punish them more severely than they do females (Farmer, Goforth, Clemmer, & Thompson, 2004) or non-minority males (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008). Day-Vines and Terriquez (2008), for example, observed that most of the referrals for their minority males were given for "defiance of authority," which was subjective and not clearly defined and had unevenly delivered consequences. These conditions can lead to resentment and further escalation of classroom problems.

The increasing numbers of White female teachers and students of color in the classroom creates conditions for cultural discontinuities, particularly for African American males with and without disabilities. Referred to as the "diversity gap" recent reports show that nearly one-half of the students attending public schools are from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds, while more than 80 percent of the teachers are White (Holland, 2014). These differences point to the need for teachers to increase their cultural competence, particularly focusing on socioeconomic and gender. Ferguson's (2001) study of African American elementary males describes the often misguided efforts of young males to assert themselves for male dominance. Ferguson also noted the complicity of the schools in derailing these youth through inadequate instructional programs, uncaring attitudes, and excessive punishment. Similarly, at the middle and high school level, Balfanz (2014) bemoans the "national tragedy" for Latino and African American males. According to Balfanz, the point in which these students become most vulnerable, the schools become weaker and the justice system harsher. Instead of punishment and indifference, Balfanz questions the beneficial effects of increased attention and school involvement.

Gregory and Ripski (2008) found a significant association between teacher reported discipline approach and the behavior of African American high school students as reported both by teacher and student. That is, there was agreement between student and teacher on the approach used and effects. The authors surmised that when students trust the teacher's authority, the students are less likely to react negatively/aggressively to ambiguous teacher cues; probably more likely to give the teacher the benefit of the doubt. Another speculation, with some empirical support, is that a strong teacher-pupil relationship may play a protective role for African American [Black] children at risk for aggressive behavior. Gregory and Ripski (2008) further suggest that relationship building may be especially important for students who differ from their teachers by socioeconomic and race. Strengthening student-teacher relationships may help teachers better understand student's actions and their perceptions of discrimination and unfairness.

### **Behavioral and Academic Interventions**

*Social behavior.* The purposes of school disciplinary policies are two-fold. First, to improve and maintain the integrity of the school's physical and instructional environment. Secondly, to shape student behaviors to facilitate positive interactions and reduce misbehavior (Bradshaw et al., 2010 Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2010). Rather than an emphasis on failed exclusionary strategies,

interventions for pupil behavior need to stress prevention and skill development (Skiba et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

School Wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS) is a proactive, positive approach aimed at consistently teaching, reinforcing, and applying consistent behavioral consequences, while monitoring the performance of expected behaviors and collecting data for the purpose of making school-wide data driven decisions (Sugai & Horner, 2002; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). The key components of SWPBS are: (a) a statement of purpose that expresses the objective of the SWPBS that is positively phrased, focused on staff and students in all school settings, and is linked to outcomes, (b) clear operationally defined expectations and examples of desired behaviors that allow for consistent language across staff and students, (c) procedures for teaching expectations and the expected behaviors, (d) procedures for reinforcing expected behaviors such as tangible reinforcers or positive attention that occurs on a fixed and/or variable schedule, (e) procedures for preventing problem behavior that are on a continuum and include teaching replacement behaviors, and (f) procedures for record keeping and decision making that allows for analysis across students, time location, behaviors, consequences, and staff members (Sugai & Horner, 2002). This can be accomplished through a three-tiered approach (i.e., primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention) (Sugai & Horner, 2002). The first tier in the three-tiered approach is the primary prevention program. Systems used in this tier are general and are put in place for all students, staff, and settings; and will meet the needs of approximately 80% of students, many in special education. The secondary prevention tier addresses the needs of approximately 15% of the students. This tier can include small group lessons and more specific reinforcers for this population. In comparison, the tertiary prevention tier addresses the needs of approximately 5% of the population and is highly individualized for students with high intensity or high-risk behaviors such as those exhibited by students with serious emotional disturbance (SED). This tier typically includes a function-based approach to behavioral assessment and interventions, a person centered approach to planning instruction and supports, and a team based approach to problem solving.

In an analysis of data from schools implementing SWPBS, Vincent and Tobin (2011) found that schools that had the highest disciplinary reductions were those that also had the highest measures of implementation. They also found the greatest behavior effects in the high schools were in non-classroom environments, while at the elementary level, the greatest behavior effects were found in the classrooms. Vincent and Tobin (2011) suggested that this made intuitive sense because elementary level students are more directly impacted by classroom settings, but high school students are more directly impacted by non-classroom settings. Despite SWPBS, however, Vincent and Tobin found that African Americans were still excluded at a disproportionate rate and for longer periods of time (approximately 10 days), compared to their other race peers. A subsequent analysis revealed significant differences in racial and discipline data for elementary schools that implemented SWPBS, compared to those that did not implement the intervention. Among their various findings, the researchers observed that although African American students still evidenced disproportionate disciplinary referrals, the disciplinary referrals and the discipline gap declined over the three-years for African American students in schools implementing SWPBS. In contrast, schools that did not implement SWPBS showed disciplinary increases for African American students during this period. Although Vincent and Tobin (2011) included data



on students with IEPs, the effects of SWPBS were difficult to discern from these data due to the limited information that the schools provided about the disabilities of the students.

There is evidence that suggests that behavioral interventions, including social skill instruction, can be effective in improving the school behaviors for African American students with special needs (e.g., Lo & Cartledge, 2006; Lo, Loe, & Cartledge, 2002). Robinson-Ervin (2012) conducted a social skills intervention with African American middle school students with behavior disorders. Six urban middle-school students with EBD were taught social skills on following directions. To make the instruction culturally relevant, the instructor personalized the intervention, using situations, materials, and practice exercises that reflected the students' experiences and backgrounds. Specifically, the researcher first determined from school personnel the behavior most critical for school success needed by these students (i.e., following directions). An interactive instructional social skill lesson was developed so that students could understand the rationale for the skill through reading and discussing a relevant story (i.e., Pandora's Box). The students also were given an opportunity to identify times and conditions under which they did/did not follow directions. The lessons were delivered through the computer using Adobe Captivate so that each student could respond individually and privately. Another aspect of socially competent instruction is to use in the social skill practice groups socially competent peers from the student's peer group reflecting the student's race, age, and gender. A third feature is the use of culturally relevant materials, such as literature. In this study, the researcher used a "Black Card" (credit card taken from the Hip Hop culture) that was popular with these students and a classroom simulation of the corner store. The students obtained reward points on the card to purchase items from the corner store. Another example of cultural relevance was displayed when the researcher used real life school experiences of students as tools for practice during social skill practice lessons/role plays. The instruction occurred weekly over a period of three to seven weeks. A single-subject multiple probe design showed positive results for all students ranging from modest to large effects. The greatest returns occurred for students with the highest level of participation.

An important consideration of social skill instruction, which is an essential component of SWPBS, is that students often need to be taught the specific behaviors desired in schools and other environments. This intervention is based on modeling the desired behavior, eliciting the imitation of the modeled behavior, and giving the student many opportunities to practice the desired skill. The newly desired behavior needs to be taught over an extended period of time and rewarded over an even longer period of time. Although many studies show positive results following social skill interventions, a realistic understanding is that these behaviors will not persist unless teachers and other significant adults in the student's life consistently teach and reinforce these skills throughout the student's schooling. Strategies for teaching and reinforcing desired social behaviors should be part of the pre-service and in-service curriculum for both special and general education teachers.

*Academic.* The implementation of academic interventions targeting procedures related to reading, the structure of academic instruction, and provision of academic supports are all essential to promoting the academic success of students from CLD backgrounds, including students with disabilities. School failure, including special education placement, is often associated to a combination of problems relating to reading and behavior. These problems

typically lead to finding some place to “put” the child, which involves either exclusion from school or placement in special education. A general consensus is that to prevent or minimize this risk, we need to help students become proficient in reading (Hock et al., 2009; Joseph, 2008).

Others recommend improving academic instruction by increasing the time that CLD students receive (including those with disabilities), in English and Math (Balfanz, 2014). Peer mentoring and the implementation of evidence-based practices are also recommended (Balfanz, 2014). Additionally, teachers can demonstrate a caring attitude by making students feel welcome in their classroom and calling them at their homes when they do not attend school. To extend their learning outside the classroom, teachers can provide support for homework through direct help from themselves or via a connection to a homework help resource such as the library (Balfanz, 2014).

### **Interventions with School Policies/Structures**

To successfully address the problem of disciplinary disproportionality for African American males with and without disabilities, schools should consider and employ significant reforms at the policy level related to academics, discipline, mentoring, and school resource officers. The U.S. Departments of Justice and Education (2014) offers several solutions that target these areas. First, provide compensatory, comparable academic services to students receiving in-school or out-of-school suspensions, as well as those expelled, placed in an alternative school, or otherwise removed from academic instruction. Next, revise discipline policies to provide a clearer definition of infractions to ensure that consequences are fair and consistent to reduce the likelihood that students from CLD backgrounds and the most vulnerable group of CLD students (i.e., those with disabilities) are receiving a “free and appropriate public education” (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

Additionally, schools and districts must support the development and implementation of policies that support proactive strategies for teaching, including the use of appropriate supports and interventions that encourage and reinforce positive student behaviors and utilize exclusionary discipline as a last resort. Also, a school official should be appointed as a discipline supervisor to ensure that the school implements its discipline policies fairly and equitably to all students, including CLD students with or without disabilities. Additionally, at least annually, schools and school districts should conduct a forum that provides students, teachers, and administrators the opportunity to discuss and provide input on matters relating to discipline and the school’s discipline policies. They should also evaluate the school resource officer’s interventions and practices to assess their effectiveness in helping the school meet its goals and objectives for student safety and discipline. Finally, create a plan for improving teacher-student relationships and develop on-site mentoring programs.

### **Conclusion**

The need to reduce the discipline gap and disproportionality of African American students both with and without disabilities is critical for the continued progress of our society. The fact that 20 years of research findings, collectively, contradict the assumption that zero tolerance policies keep schools safe, document correlations between schools that frequently utilize exclusionary

practices by showing that they have higher rates of referrals and spend more time dealing with discipline problems. However, educators and the court systems are slowly experiencing a paradigm shift that is integrated, culturally sensitive, and outcome oriented.

The persistent gaps in both achievement and discipline result in negative academic, behavioral and postschool outcomes for CLD students, especially African American males with disabilities. African American males, including those with disabilities, have the poorest outcomes of all students in our schools. It is clear that we remain “a nation at-risk” due to the persistent disproportionate discipline and achievement outcomes experienced by students from diverse cultures. Therefore, the emphasis needs to be on proactive and positive interventions that consistently teach, reinforce, evaluate, and monitor the performance of expected behaviors.

While CLD youth are the most targeted for disciplinary infractions because they reside in urban districts where delinquency and zero tolerance policies are most practiced, African American students, with and without disabilities, experience the most negative outcomes, even after controlling for socioeconomic status. In examining data from subcategories, for example, students from CLD backgrounds and those with disabilities, it was revealed that students graduate at rates that are 15% to 20% lower than the national average of 83% (Building a Grad Nation, 2014). Thus, the current levels of academic and disciplinary disparity mean too many students are being poorly served. All schools should aim for the inclusion and success for all students, including students with disabilities, rather than excluding those who don't fit a predetermine model for behavior, learning, or cultural standard.

By using evidenced-based practices, teachers can provide a higher delivery of quality instruction that has proven effective in producing desired outcomes. Evidenced-based interventions are grounded in rigorously tested conceptual and theoretical models. Educators are increasingly being pressured to deliver high quality instruction in an ever increasingly reduced amount of planning time along with limited materials and supports, while somehow producing student test scores that meet or exceed proficiency. Effective instruction alone will not resolve all the issues and challenges experienced by urban districts; however, as suggested by a growing number of researchers, sound practices combined with cultural awareness and culturally responsive teaching will aid immensely in the opportunity to “close the gap” in both discipline and achievement among students from CLD backgrounds, with and without disabilities.

#### AUTHOR NOTES

**Evette A. Simmons-Reed, PhD**, is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Ball State University. Her research interests include transition into adulthood for youth with disabilities, self-determination, and disproportionality in school discipline. **Gwendolyn Cartledge, PhD**, is a Professor Emeritus of Special Education at The Ohio State University. Her research interests include social skills instruction, early reading interventions with urban and culturally/linguistically diverse learners, emotional and behavioral disorders, and reducing disproportionate representations of students in special education.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Dr. Evette A. Simmons-Reed, Ball State University Teacher's College, Department of Special Education, Teachers College (TC), Room 722, Muncie, IN 47306. E-mail: [egasimmonsree@bsu.edu](mailto:egasimmonsree@bsu.edu)

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