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The Ecosystem of Racial Inequalities in Discipline in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Preschool children are suspended and expelled at a rate greater than school-aged youth, and exclusionary discipline practices are further inequitable across racial and ethnic groups. Denied the documented benefits of early childhood education, Black students are disproportionately excluded from US educational institutions beginning in early childhood, effectively preserving and reproducing racial inequities. Black students, especially boys, are the most likely to lose access to schooling due to exclusionary discipline. The disparities are dehumanizing and detrimental to students' opportunities to learn, as early educational experiences greatly influence development and future outcomes. Although there is a plethora of evidence concerning the significant role of space, place, and relationships in early childhood education, less is understood about how these act independently *and* interact to create racial and ethnic disparities in discipline within pre-schools. In this conceptual paper, we argue that decolonizing early childhood education requires a novel approach in how we think about racial inequalities in discipline that centers the conversation on context and incorporates the interrelated frameworks of geography of opportunity, ecological systems theory, and the youth control complex. Children's interactions with adults in school are situated in a particular space and place and within a complex nexus between the school, home, and neighborhood contexts. It is imperative to decolonize geographically stratified classroom management, manifested through exclusionary school discipline of young children, for the possibility of more equitable educational opportunity.

Keywords: *Context, Discipline Disparities, Early Childhood Education*

Introduction

Early childhood education is effective at improving young children's academic skills, furthering human capital development, and increasing adult earnings (Magnuson & Duncan, 2016). Access to early childhood education, even a moderately effective program, is essential to reduce later economic inequality, but low-income families have less access than more affluent families to high-quality preschool programs (Elango et al., 2015; Magnuson & Duncan, 2016). Additionally, research has found that Black children who have received high-quality early care and education make substantial and persistent academic gains; however, Black children are more likely to experience low-quality early care (Barnett et al., 2013).

Problematically, access to crucial early childhood education is restricted for the thousands of preschoolers who are suspended or expelled. As Gilliam and colleagues (2016) state, "Preschool expulsions and suspensions cause young children to lose their early educational placement or time in care, directly undermining their access to educational opportunities" (p. 2). Preschool children are suspended and expelled at a higher rate than school-aged youth (Gilliam, 2005). According to a recent U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights report (2016), of the 1.4 million children enrolled in public pre-K, 6,743 children received one or more out-of-school suspensions in the 2013-14 school year, and these data do not account for the experiences of children attending private preschools.

Exclusionary discipline practices are unevenly applied across racial and ethnic groups, further undermining the access of historically marginalized groups to educational opportunities. The 2017 Indicators of School Crime and Safety report documents that the percentage of public schools administering at least one serious disciplinary action (suspension or expulsion) was lower in 2015-16 than in 2003-04 (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018); yet despite this national downward trend in the use of exclusionary discipline, disparities in school disciplinary practices by race, gender, and socioeconomic status persist and are present across grade-levels, including preschool

and kindergarten (Gregory et al., 2010; Losen et al., 2015; Skiba, 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018a). Even with the increased attention to the negative effects of punitive school discipline policies and practices and the clear link to a loss of educational opportunities, the disparities are fairly persistent (Welsh & Little, 2018b).

Young Black children, especially boys, are most likely to lose access to schooling due to exclusionary discipline (Gilliam, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2014, 2016). Black preschool children are 3.6 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as compared to white preschool children (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Furthermore, Black children represent 19% of preschool enrollment, but 47% of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions; in comparison, white children represent 41% of preschool enrollment, but 28% of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016). These racialized and inequitable patterns persist throughout the K-12 schooling experience. Yet there is a dearth of research explaining why Black preschoolers have a nearly four times greater risk for exclusionary discipline than white children, complicating efforts to address disparities in expulsions and suspensions (Gilliam, 2016).

Racial disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline are compounded by a lack of early interventions (Murtha, 2017) and are detrimental to students' opportunities to learn, as quality early educational experiences greatly influence child development and future outcomes. Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings—most often without educational services—reduce opportunities for learning and remove necessary educational and mental health supports for preschool children, disproportionately Black children, during a critical period of rapid development (Stegelin, 2018). According to a meta-analysis, early education interventions have significant effect sizes in the areas of cognitive development, social development, and academic development for children with preschool experience before entering kindergarten (Camilli et al., 2010).

Therefore, exclusionary discipline reduces access to these documented benefits and contributes to an increased risk for school difficulties (Gilliam, 2005).

There are long-term negative effects of exclusionary discipline that have wide-ranging equity implications. Removing students from the classroom in the early years of K-12 schooling increases the likelihood of academic disengagement, chronic absenteeism, academic failure, and additional school disciplinary problems (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). Students who receive exclusionary discipline are also more likely to be pushed out of school (Brownstein, 2010; Fenning & Rose, 2007), engage in law-breaking behavior, and use illegal substances (Balfanz et al., 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011; Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). According to a joint policy statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics, expelling preschoolers “disrupts the learning process, pushing a child out the door of one early care and education program, only for him or her to be enrolled somewhere else, continuing a negative cycle of revolving doors that increases inequality and hides the child and family from access to meaningful supports” (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2016, p.2). As important as these long-term effects are, the dehumanizing impact of repeated discipline in the present denies Black children their childhoods and criminalizes Black boys in particular so that they are unable to embody a range of multiple boyhoods (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Racial discipline disparities in early childhood education reproduce racial inequality in the present, in addition to having detrimental future consequences for equality.

Purpose

Children’s interactions with adults in school are situated in a particular space and place, and within a complex nexus between the school, home, and neighborhood contexts. It is imperative to decolonize geographically stratified classroom management,

manifested through exclusionary school discipline of young children, for the possibility of equitable educational opportunity. It is likewise necessary to decolonize research and practice to ameliorate the harmful legacy of colonization and racism by looking to student-centered approaches to classroom management and to assets within communities of color.

Therefore, in this conceptual paper, we offer theoretical tools to frame future inquiries into the roots of racial discipline disparities in early childhood education that distinctly emphasize the various contexts in which these uneven patterns are produced. We propose and demonstrate how scholars should incorporate the theoretical frameworks of geography of opportunity (Tate, 2008), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), which has evolved into the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), and the youth control complex (Noguera, 2003; Rios, 2011) to understand the various layers in which disparities in preschool discipline are embedded. These frameworks decenter the children and center their context in defining the problem and locating responsibility for the remedy. Moreover, geography of opportunity and the youth control complex center a racialized lens within Bronfenbrenner's classic theory, which is prominent in studies of early childhood education. New theoretical frameworks that are "linked to structural conditions and arrangements in the schools and society" (Howard et al., 2012, p. 88) that produce racial disproportionality in discipline have the potential to dismantle the negative social imagery of Black males in the U.S. (Howard et al., 2012).

The majority of research on discipline disparities is concerned with K-12 schooling. However, early childhood education, which has historically recognized the important role of environments beyond the classroom, such as family (Douglass et al., 2015; Jeon et al., 2018; Nievar et al., 2014; Parcel & Bixby, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2017) and to some extent the neighborhood (Dupere et al., 2010; Froiland et al., 2013; Hanson et al., 2011; Kohen et al., 2008; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000, 2003; Theokas & Learner, 2006 and for a review see Minh et al.,

2017) for students' well-being, is particularly useful to demonstrate the interrelated contexts that contribute to racialized exclusionary discipline practices.

To attain substantial change in decolonizing the classroom, there is a need for deeper understanding of how varying contexts lead to racial injustice manifested through exclusionary discipline in early childhood education settings. Although there is a plethora of evidence concerning the significant role of space, place, and relationships in early childhood education, less is understood about how these act independently and interact to create racial and ethnic disparities in discipline within preschools.

Decolonizing early childhood education requires a novel approach in how we think about racial inequalities in discipline that centers the conversation on context and incorporates the interrelated frameworks of geography of opportunity (Tate, 2008), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), and the youth control complex (Noguera, 2003; Rios, 2011). As ecological systems theory, in isolation, is incomplete for Black communities, the integration of geography of opportunity and youth control complex provides an important racialized lens to focus Bronfenbrenner's classic theory to better elucidate the trajectories of Black children. Our model conceptualizes Black childhoods in the present-within communities, families, and geographic spaces from early childhood and beyond.

After establishing the importance of context within a discussion on preschool discipline disparities, we discuss the three theoretical frameworks in detail. We then review the literature on school-, district-, and neighborhood-level factors that relate to racial disparities in discipline in order to make a case for developing a conceptual framework that integrates the theories to decolonize school discipline—where discipline is no longer used as a tool to exert and reproduce white oppression and to dehumanize Black children. Finally, we conclude with implications for future research, practice, and policy.

The Case for Context

Classic child development theories and empirical research have demonstrated the importance of context and relationships in early childhood education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Denham et al., 2012; McGee & Pearman, 2014; McGee & Spencer, 2015; Waanders et al., 2007; Whitaker et al., 2015), yet fall short of specifically addressing racism. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development, a notable example of understanding the role of context in the early childhood classroom (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), has been applied to childhood education programs with success in supporting children's culture and encouraging relationships among teachers, children, and parents. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of education, another classic approach for understanding context in early childhood (Kozulin et al., 2003), is based on the principle that cognitive learning is developed through interactions with other people and is dependent on culture. According to sociocultural theory, children learn best when teachers and parents set shared goals for the development of their children and jointly participate in their learning environment.

Other early childhood education programs have adopted the developmental-interaction theory pioneered by Lucy Sprague Mitchell a century ago, which is also known as the Bank Street Theory and still rooted within a Vygotskian lens (Nager & Shapiro, 2000). The Bank Street Model has retained the focus on education as a developmental process and rests on the underlying assumption that social activity, cultural practice, and inseparability of the self from the social are essential for learning. A lesser known early childhood education model is the open classroom, or community learning theory, which promotes parent-teacher-child cooperation in the school setting and "develops a culture that transcends the individual and gives a sense of connection and ownership" (Rogoff et al., 2001, p.10). These aforementioned classic child development theories demonstrate the importance of context, but fail to critically examine and challenge the dominant Eurocentric conceptualization

of quality in early childhood education, leading to the exclusion of Black and other minoritized children from educational opportunities.

Conceptual Framework

There are various contextual layers in which disparities in preschool discipline are embedded; however, research has typically emphasized individual teachers' implicit biases and actions and school-level factors (Gilliam, 2016; Neitzel, 2018). As a result, a complete understanding of the etiology of disproportionality is lacking and scholars may be overestimating the effects of one context (e.g., schools) by ignoring the influence of another (e.g., neighborhoods) and interdependencies between contextual levels (Kirk, 2009). An emphasis on teacher-student interactions is too decontextualized and a purely structural understanding which would focus only on the impact of socioeconomic status, for example, is too deterministic (Hallet & Ventresca, 2006). In this way, we are aligned with the sociological symbolic interactionist understanding of schooling. We contend that racial disparities in discipline, which begin in preschool, come from local contextual environments (Gregory et al., 2011), the structure within the school, and the way that adults in the school building differentially respond to a student based on race and social class (Noguera, 2003; Quintana & Mahgoub, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014).

We argue that theoretical tools emphasizing the relevant contexts of racial discipline disparities and the relationships among them can benefit future work that seeks to understand and challenge exclusionary discipline outcomes in preschool. In the next section, we present ecological systems theory in more detail (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), geography of opportunity (Briggs, 2005; Tate, 2008), and the youth control complex (Noguera, 2003; Rios, 2011) as promising frameworks to better understand how early childhood disparities in discipline begin and persist. We demonstrate how these interrelated concepts of spatial geographies, ecological frameworks, and youth control create a different, new way of thinking about early childhood contexts and racial inequalities in discipline.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is a powerful theoretical aid in understanding how children's proximal interactions with important socializing adults in key microsystem contexts (e.g., home, school) and the connections within the microsystems impact a child's academic and social development. As ecological systems theory posits, the extent to which children learn is a function of a two level system: (a) the relation between characteristics of the learner and their environment and (b) the interconnections between the family, school, and neighborhood environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Theoretically, children with enriched microsystems have access to more supportive adults who are concerned for their well-being and who can help support their development, academically and otherwise (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). More specifically, the model focuses on the quality of the child's environment throughout various spheres of the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. A child's individual traits, temperament, and other characteristics are at the center of the multidirectional ecosystem. Family is an example of a child's microsystem, and relationships between family and school constitute a child's mesosystem. The indirect influences from the more distant exosystem and cultural norms and values from the macrosystem affect the child and their relationships. Woven throughout the bioecological model are historical and temporal aspects of development that are considered the chronosystem.

Ecological systems theory has evolved into the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), yet remains a viable theoretical model to help us understand racial discipline disparities. Specifically, scholars must consider how the microsystem is related to disparities in discipline in early childhood settings and must better account for the interactions between contexts that produce racialized exclusionary discipline patterns. In a qualitative study, Haight et al. (2014) gathered the perspectives of recently suspended Black youth, their caregivers, and their educators

and found that participants revealed significant convergence in perspectives (e.g., the negative outcomes of suspension), but also expressed distinct perspectives (e.g., caregivers stressed the potential negative impact of suspensions on caregivers and on the quality of family–school relationships). The majority of current research on exclusionary discipline in early childhood has not adequately examined complex interactions of factors across multiple levels, such as the interrelations of inadequate school funding, teachers’ culturally-sensitive responses to youths’ behavior, and family–school relationships (Haight et al., 2014).

A longstanding theory that has expanded the reach of Bronfenbrenner’s work is the phenomenological variant ecological system (PVEST) (Spencer et al., 1997), which is more relevant to Black communities (McGee & Pearman, 2014). PVEST is a strengths-based framework with a cultural ecological perspective on identity development across the lifespan. PVEST has guided qualitative research examining the role of parenting during the K-12 years (McGee & Spencer, 2015) and identifying the resilience factors of internal motivation and family socialization (McGee & Pearman, 2014). What remains to be understood is how the roots of Black children’s identity, competence, and resiliency are developed within an early learning context of home, school, and community. The following theories of geography of opportunity and youth control complex expand Bronfenbrenner’s model to provide a holistic and comprehensive picture of Black boys’ school trajectories, which is lacking in the literature (McGee & Pearman, 2014).

Geography of Opportunity

It is evident that in the United States, there is inequitable access to opportunities across geographic spaces (i.e., spatial inequality), which scholars refer to as geography of opportunity (Briggs, 2005; Tate, 2008). The fact that opportunities are geographically stratified and clustered by neighborhood has important ramifications for children because it impacts their schooling experiences. Schools in under-resourced, often

racially segregated communities struggle to meet the needs of students from low-income neighborhoods (Cashin, 2014; Miller, 2012). Structural and interactional social forces are interdependent and reinforce each other within schools to generate patterns of inequality. These social forces are spatially distributed across and within social institutions and collectively afford and constrain educational opportunity through uneven geographies of opportunity (Tate, 2008).

Essentially, a spatial lens situates how structural and interactional opportunity gaps manifest through both enabling and disabling geographies of opportunity. Tefera et al. (2017) state that research should examine the spatial distribution of resources and opportunities in neighborhoods and communities in order to “create maps that capture the geographies of opportunity in which students and families live” (p. 202). This perspective accounts for the dynamic interplay between structural and interactional educational opportunity gaps that generate inequities and rejects deficit narratives about students and their families and communities. Nxumalo (2019) has recently extended this perspective to interrogate the inseparability of environmental concerns from the anti-Blackness and settler colonialism that shape place-based education in early childhood education. Nxumalo (2019) further offers possibilities for how Black and Indigenous place relations can be at the center of teaching and learning within current conditions of environmental precarity by refusing deficit constructions of Black children’s relationships with the natural world, affirming Indigenous land, life, and relations, and foregrounding intrinsic relationality with the more-than-human.

Additionally, low-opportunity communities of color should not only be conceptualized as places of marginalization, but also places of possibility by honoring the neighborhood assets within them, or opportunity in geography (Green, 2015). Such assets can be explored and documented in spaces where racial/ethnic disparities in discipline are expected but actually absent. This is important so that deficit-perspectives of Black and Indigenous students are not replaced by deficit-perspectives of their families and communities in understanding and addressing racial disproportionality in discipline.

Future research on racial disparities in school discipline can better account for varying geographies of opportunity by expanding upon the Bronfenbrenner model. Scholars must be innovative in how they conceptualize neighborhood–school processes (Johnson, 2012, pp. 503-504). This could include identifying geographically stratified and clustered opportunities as they relate to the proximity of community resources (e.g., libraries, parks, museums) to preschools. Researchers can theorize around and explore how these spatially constructed geographies of opportunity relate to exclusionary disciplinary outcomes in preschool settings. In addition, researchers can identify opportunities in geography (Green, 2015) by interviewing preschool providers and examining how they utilize community resources to support young children and provide them with high quality opportunities to learn. For example, an innovative collaboration between early childhood educators and local New York City libraries improved family engagement and strengthened connections between families, schools, and libraries (Casper & Lopez, 2018). Another preschool-library partnership was designed to jumpstart early childhood literacy, building off the theory that timing and quality of early experiences shape brain architecture (Romero & Armstrong, 2017). Furthermore, a lab school in Connecticut integrated traveling museum exhibits to incorporate art and playful learning into its curriculum (Raynolds et al., 2019). Early childhood educators in these aforementioned studies enthusiastically welcomed incorporating valuable community resources into their teaching. In summary, applied researchers can investigate how culturally responsive and sustaining community-based organizations and assets can be better connected to preschools to reduce the use of disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices so that young children have more robust opportunities to learn.

Youth Control Complex

Early childhood education operates within a network of inequitable institutions that manage, control, and effectively incapacitate Black children in ways that preserve and reproduce racial inequities.

Schools are one of many socializing institutions that acutely criminalize Black children beginning in early childhood (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014) and put Black children on a trajectory toward negative police-contact, court-involvement, and/or incarceration. The various linkages between school discipline and the criminal justice system is often referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline, a term coined by legal advocacy organizations (Kim et al., 2010) and has been recently described as the Pre-K to prison pipeline (Powell, 2017). Rios's (2011) ethnographic research suggests that the relationship between schools and the criminal justice system is less linear than the metaphor of a pipeline suggests and more like a web.

Rios (2007) has termed the network of racialized criminalization and punishment deployed from various institutions of control and socialization as the "youth control complex." He shadowed a group of Black and Latino boys over several years in California and found that they contended with criminalizing forces throughout their day—on the street, during extra-curricular programs run by community organizations, at home, and in school. Moreover, the boundaries between these institutions were blurred as school personnel shared information about the boys with police officers, probation officers, community workers, and family members. The "youth control complex" (Rios, 2011) situates schools as one of many institutions and school discipline as one of many mechanisms that constitute the "ubiquitous system of criminalization molded by the synchronized, systemic punishment meted out by the socializing and social control institutions" (Rios, 2011, p. 40). Adults, including teachers, viewed the boys' behaviors through an individualistic lens and emphasized the importance of personal responsibility, rather than seeing the lack of opportunities offered by the youths' environment and how the boys' struggle for dignity often unintentionally reinforced their criminal label (Rios, 2011).

The youth control complex demonstrates how schools are racialized institutions of socialization. In their work on Black boyhood,

Dumas and Nelson (2016) describe how Black boys “cannot *be*” in society because the dehumanizing and prejudiced stereotypes that surround Black boyhood signal a “construction of the Other as not human, as less than human, and therefore undeserving of the emotional and moral recognition afforded to those whose shared humanity is understood” (pp. 28-29). This otherness is not explicitly outlined in school policies, but it is implicitly embedded in the everyday interactions adults and students have in school. According to Noguera (2003), schools socialize children “by teaching the values and norms that are regarded as central to civil society and the social order” (p. 344), yet the socialization process is fraught with racial tensions. Prejudices and stereotypes affect how educators treat students and how students are socialized within schools. Through the socializing function of schooling, adults and students explicitly and implicitly legitimize and adhere to notions of “normality,” “goodness,” and “obedience” (Noguera, 2003). These normative categories are racialized through stereotypes and prejudices that become implicitly and explicitly embedded into school practices, policies, and procedures and ultimately affect how students are served, treated, and controlled in schools. Ferguson (2000) found that Black boys’ behavior in an elementary school was hyper-visible to educators because educators held racially biased beliefs of the “criminal inclination” of Black males, which then led to disproportionately singling out Black children for discipline and failure. These interactions with teachers demonstrate that Black boys go through a process of adultification where their young age and innocence cannot protect them from being associated with criminality and challenging behavior (Brown, 2018).

By broadening our lens beyond schools, the concept of the youth control complex makes visible how school discipline is situated within a web of institutions that punish Black bodies, beginning at a very young age. The deployment of both material (e.g., surveillance cameras) and subjective (e.g., educator perceptions of Black boys as future criminals) tools of crime control in schools demonstrates

how school discipline has transformed in tandem with changes in the criminal justice system (Hirschfield, 2008; Simon, 2007). The post-industrial control of the poor through criminalization and mass incarceration has disproportionately impacted Black and Latinx communities (Alexander, 2010; Hinton, 2017; Wacquant, 2010). Zero tolerance policies, the reliance on punitive and exclusionary sanctions, and increased police presence in schools all reflect “the shift toward a crime control paradigm in the definition and management of the problem of student deviance” (Hirschfield, 2008, p. 80). To address the absence of nurturing and dignifying institutions, which has a criminalizing effect, Rios (2011) offers an antidote in calling for a youth support complex which would create a web of opportunities including, for example, ample mentorship, leadership development, college preparation, and educators with asset-based perceptions of Black and brown boys. Community programs that value children’s assets and cultivate their voices can potentially lead the way for schools in disrupting deficit-narratives about Black children (Kinloch et al., 2017).

Empirical Evidence on the Role of Context in School Discipline

Children from “disadvantaged communities of color” (Welner & Carter, 2013, p. 3) are living in fundamentally different neighborhoods and have access to fundamentally different preschools and educational opportunities than their white peers. In addition to variation in the level of quality in formal early childhood educational programs, there is generally less access to learning opportunities as a result of fewer learning-related resources in these neighborhoods and greater challenges associated with key out-of-school factors related to housing, nutrition, and safety (Welner & Carter, 2013). Preschool children are exposed to a context-specific system of education, often accompanied by systemic biases, at a critical time in their development with ramifications for their educational trajectory. As the models of early childhood development elucidate

and data on disciplinary trends in preschool settings indicate, having access to enriching preschools characterized by a supportive school culture and supportive relationships between educators, children, and caregivers can help reinforce child development, academically and otherwise (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The disproportionate exposure of Black children to punitive discipline in early childhood education (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014) can be traced to available support systems, teacher capacity, and context. Additionally, a plethora of empirical studies in the K-12 literature concerning racial discipline disparities indicate that there should be increased attention to the local contexts in which these inequitable patterns arise. Research about the relevant contexts of racial disparities and school discipline practices and policies has revealed the importance of school-, district-, and neighborhood-level factors. Although this body of scholarship is primarily focused on K-12 students, findings provide direction to scholars and practitioners investigating why Black preschoolers have a greater risk for suspension and expulsion than their white preschool peers.

School-Level Factors

Within young children's contexts, available and coordinated support systems (e.g., mental health and behavioral consultation) (Albritton et al., 2019; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam, 2016; Silver & Zinsser, 2020) and teacher capacity, in terms of teacher levels of stress and well-being (Zinsser et al., 2019; Silver & Zinsser, 2020), are key factors related to exclusionary discipline. Silver and Zinsser (2020) found that when early childhood centers across a racially and ethnically diverse sample had access to and utilized infant/early childhood mental health consultation services, the association between teacher depression and their request for expulsion was attenuated. "Consultants often work to influence teacher and director narratives and perceptions of children's behaviors through a deeper, enhanced understanding of child development. Through this shift, assumptions that result in discipline may also be challenged" (Silver & Zinsser, 2020, p. 1143).

Yet the same study also found that teachers making multiple expulsion requests tended to be working in centers in low income/majority Black neighborhoods (Silver & Zinsser, 2020). Therefore, more research is needed in the areas of mental health/behavioral consultation and disciplinary disproportionality, as well as on the impact of such practices on Black preschool children (Albritton et al., 2019).

Research within the K-12 setting consistently documents that Black students face discriminatory social control practices in the form of disparate school discipline (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2011), which can be partly attributed to the context of their school composition. The racial threat hypothesis argues that as the percentage of white students decreases within a community or space, the degree of social control increases (Gregory et al., 2011; Payne & Welch, 2010; Thornton & Trent, 1988). Essentially, when white communities feel threatened, their response is to exert racist practices of social control. In regards to school context, racial composition has repeatedly been found to correlate with rates of disproportionate discipline (Payne & Welch, 2010). As the percentage of Black students within a school increases, the racial discipline gap widens (Gregory et al., 2011; Payne & Welch, 2010). Payne and Welch (2010) also found that schools with larger populations of Black students are more likely to use punitive disciplinary approaches and less likely to utilize restorative disciplinary approaches. In accordance with racial threat theory, Thornton and Trent (1988) examined rates of racial disproportionality in desegregated schools and found the most severe disparities in higher-status schools where there were the greatest increases in Black students and strong opposition to desegregation.

In addition to the composition of the student body, the racial composition of the staff has ramifications for disproportionate discipline, particularly with regards to racial/ethnic match between teachers and students. Carter (2013) notes that educational opportunity gaps are exacerbated when educators struggle to “comprehend the social realities, cultural resources, and understandings of Black,

Latino, Native American, and other nondominant groups” (p. 147). Educators’ belief systems can contribute to cultural dissonance and misunderstandings that fuel low expectations and underestimates of student ability (e.g., Gay, 2010; Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2001; Pollock, 2009). These belief systems are often encased within color-evasive frameworks that do not explicitly recognize racial inequalities. Compounding the issue, multiple researchers have found that educators’ belief systems about students, particularly Black and Latinx students, are often applied to students regardless of how they are presenting themselves, which in turn impacts student achievement and affects disparate disciplinary outcomes (Elhoweris et al., 2005; Peterson et al., 2011; Tobias et al., 1982; van Maele & van Houtte, 2011). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory makes it explicit why this is so problematic: young children’s interactions and relationships with early childhood teachers in preschool are crucial for learning and academic and social development.

Gilliam and colleagues (2016) found that when expecting challenging behaviors, early education staff gazed longer at Black children, especially Black boys. According to the researchers, “No behavioral challenges were present in the videos, suggesting, in part, that preschool teachers may hold differential expectations of challenging behaviors based on the race of the child” (Gilliam, 2016, p.11). The study’s findings also indicate that teacher-child racial/ethnic match had significant implications for how teachers rated the severity of the child’s behavior on a five-point scale ranging from one (not at all severe) to five (very severe). Specifically, when Black teachers rating Black children were provided with background information that included familial stressors that may be explanatory of child behavior, ratings of perceived severity significantly decreased. However, when the same background information for Black children was provided to white teachers, severity ratings increased (Gilliam, 2016, p. 12). Additionally, among a sample of 701 state-funded prekindergarten classrooms in 11 states, Downer et al. (2016) found that although there were no significant differences between preschool teacher

ratings of child behavior problems at the beginning of a school year based on teacher-child racial match, significant differences did emerge by the end of the year. Specifically, white teachers in comparison to Black teachers identified more challenging behaviors in Black boys and Black teachers reported fewer increases in problem behavior for Black boys than white teachers (Downer et al., 2016). Using the nationally representative Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Class of 2010–2011 dataset, Wright et al. (2017) show that kindergartners whose teachers' race/ethnicity matched their own received more favorable ratings of their behavior, which has implications for discipline. Overall, these findings suggest that the disparate impact of disciplinary processes in early childhood may be partly due to a lack of understanding of Black students' cultural context, including historical trauma, and teachers' implicit biases that remain unchallenged in the school context.

Furthermore, a school's average socioeconomic status and urbanicity may also predict the extent of its racial discipline gap. High poverty, urban schools have the most acute rates of disproportionate discipline, while disparities are least evident in rural, small, and low-poverty districts (McCloughlin & Noltemeyer, 2010; Noltemeyer & McCloughlin, 2010; Payne & Welch, 2010). Suburban, low-poverty schools are more likely to offer alternatives to punitive sanctions (Casella, 2003; Fenning & Rose, 2007), highlighting how a school's financial and social capital shape its disciplinary practices. This disparity in disciplinary practices is illuminated in gentrifying schools where educators cast the behavior of a few white middle-class students as "good" and "innocent" in relation to the culpability of "bad" Black, low-income students, solidifying students' reputations and treatment in school from the earliest grades (Freidus, 2020).

Institutionalizing alternatives to punitive discipline often occur at the school level (Osher et al., 2010). In the aggregate, schools that rely on positive rather than punitive approaches to discipline tend to have low suspension rates (Christle et al., 2005). Anyon et al. (2016) specifically found that discipline practices are shaped by

the schoolwide disciplinary culture and the availability of alternatives to exclusionary sanctions.

School culture contextualizes disciplinary practices and patterns. Schools that are academically focused and maintain high academic expectations exhibit lower levels of racial disproportionality in discipline (Gregory et al., 2011; Gregory et al., 2010). Schools that lack rigor and adequate academic support tend to rely heavily on suspensions and have larger racial discipline gaps (Christle et al., 2005; Gregory et al., 2011). The physical environment may also shape or reflect discipline practices, as schools with more welcoming layouts tend to have lower suspension rates than schools with more institutional designs (Christle et al., 2005).

Moreover, the type of school governance structure may impact discipline practices and thereby disproportionality. Some studies show that charter schools dole out harsher punishments than traditional public schools (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). Brown and Steele (2015) found that both traditional public schools and Montessori schools had racially disproportionate discipline patterns, but they were less extreme in Montessori schools. They propose that school structures that foster teacher-student relationships, such as teachers looping with their class, and greater behavioral freedom may help explain their findings (Brown & Steele, 2015). Often determined by the administrators, school policies and procedures shape the severity of discipline practices schoolwide, such as the frequency with which students are given suspensions and how color-evasive regulations may be used to target Black students (Christle et al., 2005; Fenning & Rose, 2007).

District-Level Factors

In addition to school-level factors, prior research suggests that disproportionality in discipline may vary by school district due to a range of demographic, organizational, cultural, and political factors (Losen & Whitaker, 2017). District discipline policies are responsive to demographic change (Turner, 2015), and disparities in discipline can correlate to student demographics (Ramey, 2015). From a study of

6,000 U.S. districts, Ramey (2015) found that districts with larger populations of Black students and economically disadvantaged students were more likely to utilize exclusionary and punitive sanctions than to refer students to receive educational supports under Section 504 or IDEA. This pattern may also be driven in part by the comparatively fewer resources that majority Black and high poverty districts have to support students (Ramey, 2015).

Moreover, district administrators create the policy and organizational infrastructure on which educators' daily discipline decisions are built. Codes of conduct provide school actors with the range of possible disciplinary responses and communicate district priorities and values. Rather than dictating practice, disciplinary codes act as resources that guide and provide legitimacy for daily decision-making (Anyon et al., 2016; Irby, 2013; Mallet, 2016). Districts create the structures and provide the sites for disciplinary administrative processes, such as suspension hearings. With more resources than individual schools, districts are central to (re)training educators to embrace less punitive disciplinary paradigms and practices (Anyon et al., 2016; Dubin, 2016). If inclusive of developmental principles and of cultural practices, districts can create a top-down social environment that positively influences young children's opportunities to learn (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Nager & Shapiro, 1999).

Neighborhood-Level Factors

Although there has been less research on how the neighborhood context relates to racial disparities in discipline (Welsh & Little, 2018a), findings from a few studies indicate that community characteristics play an important role in the use of exclusionary discipline (Armstrong et al., 2015; Kirk, 2009). For example, Kirk's (2009) multilevel analysis of middle school students in Chicago, which included student, school, and community-level predictors of student suspension, showed that structural and compositional features of neighborhoods are implicated in school discipline. In his analysis, Kirk (2009) operationalized school collective efficacy as cohesion, trust, and shared expectations for social control among

teachers, and he operationalized neighborhood collective efficacy as shared expectations for social control, social cohesion, and trust among neighborhood residents. Whereas Kirk (2009) found little difference in the likelihood of suspension between schools in Chicago neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy, he found that in Chicago neighborhoods with low collective efficacy, suspensions increased if school collective efficacy was also low. Specifically, within neighborhoods with low levels of collective efficacy, students in schools with low levels of collective efficacy were more than three times as likely to be suspended than students in schools with high levels of collective efficacy.

There is a need for studies to examine the role of neighborhoods in racial/ethnic disparities in preschool disciplinary outcomes to better understand them. While between-school variation often explains much of the racial disparities in the occurrence of exclusionary discipline (Anderson & Ritter, 2016), aspects of between-school variation may be heavily influenced by communities. Disentangling community and school influences remains a major challenge for future work (Armstrong et al., 2015). According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2017), child development is affected by multifaceted environmental influences, so this disentangling can provide a clearer understanding of neighborhood-level effects on access to high quality, equitable early childhood education and of racial/ethnic discipline disparities in preschool settings. Furthermore, more research is essential to determine the appropriate indicators to use in creating a measure of neighborhood risk or advantage, as a variety of different indicators have been used across recent studies (Froiland et al., 2013).

Incorporating Context into Early Childhood Education

Despite some efforts to incorporate context into studies of early childhood education, the field remains dominated by a positivist worldview that is reliant upon scientifically determined notions of child development (Soto & Swadener, 2002). Racism is normalized through this framing and manifests in everyday practices (Brown et al., 2010).

From an early age, Black children become associated with cultural deprivation theories and notions of inferiority that do not recognize their full humanity and potential (Goodwin et al., 2018; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Even the concept of “developmentally appropriate practice” and quality practice in early childhood education, defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, views children, families, and communities from racially minoritized backgrounds through a colonialist Eurocentric lens (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018, p. 209). This reproduces deficit-oriented assumptions that minoritized children are biologically inferior, lack a “proper” upbringing, fall short of preschool readiness, and are “at risk” [*sic*] (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018, p. 205). These paradigms in early childhood education, buttressed by the notion of “developmentally appropriate practice,” uphold “deep-seated, uninterrogated assumptions, values and beliefs of cultural normativity that perpetuate coloniality” (Dominguez, 2017, p. 227; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Additionally, young Black children and their families are often seen as needing more help, intervention, and assistance. This racist, deficit-oriented narrative is challenged by the reality that Black caregivers are aware of educational inequities, respond by becoming advocates, motivators, and even early teachers for their children, and rely on community resources to procure sophisticated opportunities for their children (McGee & Spencer, 2015).

We argue that the interrelated concepts of spatial geographies, ecological frameworks, and youth control create a different way of thinking about early childhood contexts and racial inequalities that centers the conversation on context to decolonize the early childhood classroom. In isolation, ecological systems theory is incomplete for Black communities. We are able to conceptualize Black childhoods in the present, within communities, families, and geographic spaces by integrating geography of opportunity and the youth control complex with Bronfenbrenner’s classic theory to better elucidate the complex trajectories of Black children.

Additionally, although scholars have juxtaposed the notions of geography of opportunity and youth control, without the inclusion of ecological systems theory, these frameworks are inadequate for early childhood education, a period during which socializing adults in key microsystem contexts (e.g., home, school) and the interactions between these contexts are critical to a child's academic and social development. While scholars have made significant contributions when situating local spatial opportunity (e.g., neighborhood) within a broader ecological context, relying heavily on Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems theory (Johnson, 2012), they fail to incorporate the strong ties between schools and institutions of control. For example, O'Connor and Fernandez (2016) elucidate that the varying culture and organization of schools, or opportunity within schools, frame minoritized youth as academically and behaviorally deficient, which increases their likelihood of special education placement. O'Connor and colleagues (2007) discuss the problematic limitations of conceptualizing race in ways that "underanalyze institutionalized productions of race and racial discrimination" and consequently mask the heterogeneity of the Black experience and its relationship to differentiated academic opportunity (p. 541).

Together, the three frameworks of ecological systems theory, geography of opportunity, and youth control complex decenter the child and instead center the context and interdependencies between contexts. In conjunction, they have the potential to reduce racial disproportionality in discipline and dismantle the negative social imagery of Black males in the US (Howard et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Racial discipline disparities in early childhood education are the result of both structural and relational components that are interdependent and reinforce each other to generate patterns of inequality that dehumanize and negatively impact young students' educational trajectories. In this paper, we have provided a strong rationale for why researchers, practitioners, and policymakers should

both examine and address discipline disparities in early childhood in a contextually focused way. We have shown how models of early childhood education and empirical studies on the relevant contexts of racial discipline disparities suggest the need for conceptual tools that account for the multiple, interrelated contexts in which inequitable discipline practices and policies are produced. The three frameworks we discussed—ecological systems theory, geography of opportunity, and the youth control complex—provide roadmaps for future research. This is consistent with recent research that has reframed the conversation on unequal educational outcomes to consider how schools and society more generally do, or do not, provide students with adequate and equitable opportunities to learn (e.g., Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Gorski, 2017; Milner, 2010). Welner and Carter (2013) contends that educational opportunity gaps are the result of “the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational—and ultimately socioeconomic—outcomes” for students (p. 3).

We suggest the following avenues of mixed-methods research, which examine how context and disparities intersect using the theoretical frames provided in this article. First, scholars should consider the exchanges within and between systems or levels (Welsh & Little, 2018b) using the analytical method of multilevel modeling (Skiba et al., 2014). Multilevel modeling, also referred to as hierarchical linear modeling, can tease out how each social contextual system of the family, school, and neighborhood uniquely contributes to exclusionary discipline and also how these systems interact to impact disparate discipline (Eriksson et al., 2018). We encourage scholars to include assets among families and within communities in the multilevel models, in addition to the more frequently used measures of inequity (e.g., poverty rate, vacancy rates). Second, we suggest that scholars examine how social ties and social cohesion within and between the school, family, and community environments relate to disparate exclusionary discipline practices. Third, the field would benefit from an investigation of institutional webs (e.g., local

American Civil Liberties Unions) and how variation in levels of support between institutional webs contribute to discipline disparities. Future research on racial disparities in school discipline can better account for the network of socializing institutions by focusing on the strength of ties between schools and institutions of control (e.g., law enforcement, probation) versus institutions of support (e.g., community centers, libraries) by using methods such as social network analysis. Examining school discipline in relation to the degree of nurturing or criminalizing resources in the local context may also include mapping community assets or conducting community inventories. We would expect racial disproportionality in school discipline to be acute in environments where the youth control complex is extensive, and less extreme or absent where the youth support complex is robust. Applied researchers can investigate how to strengthen nurturing community resources and their connections to schools and how to weaken or break ties between schools and institutions of control. Finally, observational, perceptual, and ethnographic data will allow scholars to understand how youth navigate and experience their various contexts and to uncover community assets that may have been overlooked through a mainstream gaze and not accounted for through quantitative research designs. Moreover, qualitative methods will shed light on the development and character of relationships between adults and youth within their institutional and policy environments, pointing to the multilevel mechanisms that lead to or potentially combat racial disproportionality in discipline.

Not only do context-focused frameworks provide guidance for future research, but they also have implications for practice. Understanding racial discipline disparities in context makes clear that they cannot be solely confronted at the level of educators' individual biases by university preparation programs or in-service professional development initiatives. Instead, the approach must be more holistic. Connections between educators, families, and nurturing community institutions can be strengthened by school

leaders who prioritize school-community relations. Long-standing partnerships with criminalizing institutions, such as probation and law enforcement, should be re-examined and purposefully weakened by school and district leaders.

Teachers play a critical role in educational opportunity. Recent scholars have found that high-quality teacher–child relationships have a positive effect on academic achievement, and this effect may be stronger for lower-income and Black children compared to more affluent, white students (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011; McCormick et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2010). Boutte (2015) encourages reflective action among educators to interrupt the oppression of Black children in the education system. A strengths-based approach and teacher-family collaboration are essential. Specifically, Boutte et al. (2019) challenge educators to address the various forms of anti-Black violence in the classroom, including physical, symbolic, linguistic, pedagogical, and systemic. They offer the solution of revolutionary love where educators would treat Black children like their own. Instead of trying to “save” them, they would resist and dismantle the existing violence and find cultural, caring and encouraging practices to keep Black students in the classroom. Using a critical race theory lens, Bryan (2018) proposes to challenge the dominant narratives of young boys by using counter storytelling and educating teachers about whiteness and hegemonic masculinity.

Additionally, teachers must be supported with a strong infrastructure of alternatives to punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices, such as restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and positive behavioral interventions and supports, and receive adequate training in how to make successful use of them. Counselors, social workers, and other mental health professionals should be on staff to regularly support students and educators who are struggling with particular student behaviors. Often working with limited budgets, a network of early childhood centers may share these professionals, or they could be funded by municipalities or states.

Policymakers must focus on policies that improve opportunities in schools and neighborhoods. As Anyon (2005) argues, education policy must be considered as more than regulations regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and testing to include policies that better neighborhoods and family well-being, such as poverty reduction and desegregation efforts. Haslip and Gullo (2017) succinctly summarize this when they state, “we need...systems-thinking to protect holistic child development, where family and community well-being are recognized as inseparable” (p. 263). A federal policy banning the use of exclusionary discipline in preschool is a necessary first step, but this must also be accompanied by direct engagement among early childhood educators and policymakers on how racism and cultural bias are structured into practices, beliefs, and policies (Anyon et al., 2018; Bornstein, 2017; Dubin, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016) that lead to disparities in discipline (Losen & Whitaker, 2017). Early evidence in K-12 education shows that district disciplinary reform may bring overall reductions in suspension rates, but racial disproportionality persists (Anyon et al., 2016).

Policymakers can provide specialized financial support to early childhood programs that demonstrate cultural responsiveness and hire educators from the local community who have the ability to understand the cultural context of children’s lives and who can use that knowledge to respond to their educational needs. As Wright and colleagues (2017) state, “the disparate impact of disciplinary policies on students of color could be alleviated by hiring teachers who share the same cultural background and experiences as their students and who may interpret externalizing behaviors in the context of students’ cultural backgrounds” (p. 968). Policymakers can learn from states that have invested in innovative and affordable ways to recruit and prepare cohorts of early childhood educators who actually reflect the communities they serve (for a review, see Gardner et al., 2019).

Moreover, as regulators of early childhood institutions, state-level policymakers can introduce greater accountability for institutions that push-out Black students through repeated suspensions or expulsions.

By providing data disaggregated by race for attendance, disciplinary actions, and program completion, preschools can be held responsible for discipline disparities as they risk losing their certification. Likewise, policymakers should provide due process infrastructure for preschool families to challenge their child's treatment. Although accountability and due process are limited in their ability to ensure educational equity, some augmentation of oversight in the early childhood landscape would benefit the field, which is under-regulated when compared to compulsory K-12 education.

To decolonize school discipline is to no longer allow it to be used as a tool to exert and reproduce white oppression and to dehumanize Black children. We must disarm schools and educators by eliminating punitive and exclusionary disciplinary sanctions and by supporting alternatives that decenter control and prioritize relationships in classroom management (Milner et al., 2018). Districts need policies that prohibit suspensions and expulsions and schools need to adopt practices such as peer mediation and restorative justice circles that shift power from the adults to the children in developing and reinforcing behavioral norms in the school community. Preschoolers are capable of engaging in restorative practices, and restorative practices have been successfully integrated within the preschool environment, providing young children with methods to deal with challenging situations and with greater understanding of their behavior (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2011). A recent experimental study found that preschoolers as young as three preferred to restore items taken by a puppet by returning them to the original possessor rather than intervene by making the items inaccessible to the puppet, focusing on how the outcomes affected the original owners and less on the consequences (Riedl et al., 2015). The authors conclude that "intervening on the behalf of others begins with a concern for the victim before becoming focused on consequences for the perpetrator" (Riedl et al., 2015, p. 1734). It is important to remember, however, that restorative justice cannot thoroughly account for the deleterious effects of teacher bias (Wesley & Ellis, 2017).

Decolonizing discipline in early childhood education requires more than equity between white students and Black students, as the comparable dispensation of punitive sanctions would not transform school discipline and it would possibly justify its use. We must not strive to see Black children like white children, but rather as themselves, in their own humanity and potential. Moreover, the decolonization of school discipline is only meaningful if it provides increased access to decolonized curricula and pedagogy. The language and culture of the children in the classroom must be valued by educators and reflected in the curriculum. Future scholarship on disproportionality in preschool discipline must balance its focus on equity, which remains relevant to holding schools accountable for the treatment of Black students, with striving for more fundamental change in how school norms are developed and enforced and the quality of educational opportunities provided to Black students.

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