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An exploration of the relationships between student racial background and the school sub-contexts of office discipline referrals: a critical race theory analysis

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research indicates that exclusionary school discipline practices disproportionately impact students of color. Some scholars have theorized that racial disparities likely vary across school sub-contexts, as implicit bias in perceptions of student behavior may be more influential in locations where students and adults have weaker relationships (e.g. bathrooms and hallways, compared to the classroom). Guided by Critical Race Theory, this study used administrative data from a large urban school district ($n = 20{,}166$ discipline incidents, 9,170 students, and 185 schools) to consider the relationship between student race and the locations where youth are disciplined. Results indicate that Black, Latino/a, and Multiracial youth were no more likely than White students to have a discipline incident take place outside the classroom. These findings suggest attention is needed to the role of systemic bias and colorblind policies and practices in discipline disparities.

Multiple reports have been issued by state, national, and nonprofit agencies calling for schools to reduce their use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Carter, Fine, and Russell 2014; Morgan et al. 2014; United States Department of Education 2014). Such exclusionary discipline practices are widely implemented by schools to manage student behavior, but evidence suggests they are ineffective and, in many cases, quite harmful. Youth who are suspended or expelled from school are less likely to graduate high school and more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system; a trajectory often referred to as the 'school to prison pipeline' (Rausch, Skiba, and Simmons 2005; Fabelo et al. 2011; Balfanz, Byrnes, and Fox 2014; Skiba, Arredondo, and Williams 2014).

At the same time, growing attention has been paid to racial disparities in these exclusionary discipline practices. Latino/a and Black students experience office disciplinary

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referrals, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion at much higher rates than their White peers (Wallace et al. 2008; Skiba et al. 2011; Hannon, DeFina, and Bruch 2013; Anyon et al. 2014). To rectify these disparities, leaders in the field have recommended educational policy reforms that primarily involve data disaggregation, tracking and oversight, student-teacher relationships, and young people's social and emotional skills (Losen, Hewitt, and Toldson 2014; Morgan et al. 2014; United States Department of Education 2014). These reports acknowledge structural issues such as unequal school funding, limited access to highly qualified teachers, and the concentration of security guards in schools serving low-income students of color in reproducing discipline gaps. Yet their recommendations for federal, state and district policy do not directly address most of these systemic concerns.

Instead, commonly recommended interventions to reduce discipline disparities focus on tiered student supports like mental health services, peer mediation, character development, and conflict-resolution programs (Contractor and Staats 2014; Gregory, Bell, and Pollock 2014; Losen, Hewitt, and Toldson 2014; United States Department of Education 2014). These suggestions are consistent with the practices that educators' report using to minimize suspensions (Anyon et al. 2016). Such approaches reflect a psychological or behavioral perspective of school discipline problems, in which misconduct is understood as an indicator of students' cognitive or developmental deficits. Some scholars have argued these youth-focused approaches are a form of social control that largely obscure the actions of school staff, discount institutional context, and ignore structural inequity (Astor, Meyer, and Behre 1999; Watts and Erevelles 2004). Indeed, emerging research indicates that the implementation of strategies like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) do not appear to reduce racial discipline disparities, and at times may exacerbate them, unless coupled with other race-conscious approaches (Vincent and Tobin 2011; Vincent et al. 2015).

Given the persistence of racial discipline gaps in schools who implement behavioral interventions with high fidelity, leaders in the field have called on school professionals to further disaggregate their school discipline data to identify new strategies that could have a greater impact on gaps between student groups (Osher et al. 2015). In light of studies indicating that discipline incidents happen in predictable places, researchers have suggested that a review of office disciplinary referrals by school sub-contexts may allow practitioners to detect patterns that could inform interventions (Astor, Meyer, and Behre 1999; Spaulding et al. 2008; Scott, Hirn, and Barber 2012; Osher et al. 2015; Robers et al. 2015). Such analyses could illuminate the contexts in which discipline problems take place, are understood, and responded to by adults in positions of authority. Some scholars have hypothesized that students of color may be more likely to have referrals for discipline incidents in 'unowned' school sub-contexts, such as the hallway or school grounds, where students and staff do not have consistent opportunities to build relationships and trust (Astor, Meyer, and Behre 1999; McIntosh et al. 2015). As a result, discipline referrals from these locations may be 'more likely to rely on potentially negative racial stereotypes than individualized knowledge about the specific students' (McIntosh et al. 2015, 10). The influence of racial bias and stereotypes on school personnel's perception of student behavior and discipline decisions has been established through several experimental studies, though they have involved randomization of vignettes about students with whom educators have little context (Chang and Sue 2003; Dunkake and Schuchart 2015; Okonofua and Eberhardt 2015).

In response to findings about the role implicit bias in discipline decision-making, another body of recommendations for reducing disparities emphasizes the need for teachers and other school adults to improve their relationships with students of color in order to create a positive school climate (Gregory, Bell, and Pollock 2014; Losen, Hewitt, and Toldson 2014; Morgan et al. 2014; United States Department of Education 2014). The reasoning behind these approaches is that implicit bias will be reduced if relationships in the classroom environment are improved. Such logic is supported by results from a recent random control trial of a teacher professional development program demonstrating that when teachers improved their relationships with students of color, racial discipline gaps in their office discipline referrals were reduced (Gregory et al. 2015). From this point of view, interventions should aim to improve school staff members' ability to connect with individual students from non-dominant racial groups (Gregory, Bell, and Pollock 2014; Losen, Hewitt, and Toldson 2014; Morgan et al. 2014; United States Department of Education 2014).

Although reforms targeting relationship-building skills of school personnel shift attention away from student deficits to the practices of adults, they still represent a focus on the actions of individuals rather than systems. In fact, several of these recommendations are presented as though they are consonant with intergroup contact theory, but this framework actually emphasizes the importance of addressing contextual factors like power dynamics in order for relationship-building to lead to prejudice reduction. Four conditions for interactions between members of different groups are required for bias to be minimized: 'cooperation between groups, equal status, common goals, and support from authority figures in the institutions within which this interaction occurs.' (Watkins, Larson, and Sullivan 2007, 384). Indeed, empirical research indicates intergroup contact reduces prejudice primarily when all four of these conditions are present (Pettigrew and Tropp 2000). This literature suggests that relationship-building strategies may have limited impact unless paired with reforms that alter the larger social and institutional contexts that maintain racial hierarchies in schools.

The emphasis on policy reforms that support micro- and meso strategies arguably obfuscates systemic factors in American educational institutions that work to sustain bias and create challenges for relationship building with youth of color, such as school financing, racial segregation, high stakes testing, teacher quality, tracking, and special education placements (Christine 1993; Mendez, Knoff, and Ferron 2002; Eitle and Eitle 2004; Watts and Erevelles 2004; Arcia 2007). Teachers and school staff have individual agency, so reshaping their relationships with students of color will surely lead to reductions in racial discipline gaps, but disparities are also a reflection of larger racial and power dynamics that work in direct opposition to any intervention that strengthens relationships or the skills and beliefs of individuals. If these contextual conditions are not changed, it seems unlikely that interventions targeting individual implicit bias will be able to fully mitigate the enduring connections between student racial background and exclusionary discipline practices.

Still, an exploration of the relationship between race and office discipline referrals by incident location may provide useful information about what types of approaches could be most effective in reducing discipline disparities (Scott, Hirn, and Barber 2012). If patterns vary by location and student racial background, then the unique dynamics of these locations, and the adults who tend to monitor them (e.g. teachers in the classroom, administrators on school grounds, or security guards in the bathroom) might be important targets for differentiated interventions. On the other hand, if racial disparities are consistent throughout

all school locations, such a pattern could indicate the role of larger institutional policies and practices in sustaining implicit bias and racial discipline gaps. In this article, we use Critical Race Theory (CRT) and existing research to consider the relationship between school discipline disparities and structural or systemic racism in educational institutions. Then, we use quantitative data from a large urban school district to examine sub-contexts in which students of color are more or less likely to experience an office discipline referral. In the discussion section, we use CRT to make sense of the patterns that arise in our quantitative analysis. Finally, we discuss implications of our findings for school discipline research, practice and policy.

Theoretical framework: critical race theory

This research is guided by CRT, with a focus on the enactment of racism through color blind ideology. CRT emerged from legal scholarship that challenged the contemporary liberal order in the United States and asserted that race is the fundamental axis upon which society is organized (Fine 1991, Omi and Winant 1994; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; López 2002; Lewis 2003). CRT scholars argue that racism is deeply embedded in US institutions and reproduced at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Society is conceptualized as being organized along racial lines, structured in ways that promote inequality and impose privileged norms of behavior on racialized groups (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Similarly, critical race theorists in education argue that schools are racialized institutions in which power and privilege are enacted and mediate educational access and opportunity (Lewis 2003; Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007; Leonardo 2009; Apple 2012; Blaisdell 2015; Lewis, Diamond, and Forman 2015).

Fundamental to CRT is the belief that institutional policies and resulting practices favor, support, and benefit one racial group over all others (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Educational institutions in the United States have been birthed, developed, and sustained based on the values and cultural practices of the White majority racial group. Schools are centers of learning, not just about subjects such as math or grammar, but also about social rules and ideologies that reinforce inequality (Anyon 1980; Watts and Erevelles 2004; Leonardo 2009; Apple 2012). As a result, adults and young people of all racial identities are conditioned to recognize Whiteness as desirable and deserving. Schools then become the location of social lessons and consequences about non-White racial conformity, sustained and enforced by alleged colorblind policies.

A central claim of CRT is that notions of colorblindness are key tools in the reproduction of racial disparities. They argue that 'race-neutral' school policies and practices are actually steeped in inequity and racial favoritism and its counter stance, racism (Fine 1991; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; López 2002; Lewis 2003; Leonardo 2007). The unequal distribution of economic, cultural, and social capital intersects in schools to reproduce racial inequality without the use of explicitly discriminatory laws or practices. For example, Leonardo (2007) argues that the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act attempted to address educational disparities for 'disadvantaged' students through seemingly neutral 'standards-based' education reform that punished schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress and were often populated with students of color. NCLB failed to address larger racial disparities and did 'not make visible the structural obstacles that children of color and their families face, such as health disparities, labor market discrimination and the like' (269). In this way, NCLB

reproduces educational inequalities because it fails to address root causes and ignores how race operates in schools to (re)produce disadvantage. In fact, Leonardo argues that NCLB or 'No Caucasian Left Behind' reproduces white privilege, and is really an enactment of whiteness as policy to preserve whiteness as property (Harris 1993).

Thus, schools are sites where dominant ideologies about race and discourses of color-blindness conceal the subtle ways in which racialized school practices grant access and privilege to some, while creating barriers and challenges for others (Pizarro 1999; Lewis 2003; Staiger 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007; Hurd 2008). Colorblindness creates an environment where racialized hierarchies thrive even when race is not named (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Ultimately, colorblind ideology serves to maintain White power and privilege while obstructing efforts to address racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Leonardo 2009).

Much of the research on racial dynamics in schools from a CRT perspective focuses on colorblind institutional policies and 'everyday' practices that result in disadvantage for Black and Latina/o students. For example, quantitative research on the relationship between structural inequalities and disparities in school discipline outcomes have demonstrated that race-neutral policies such as zero-tolerance discipline codes, the presence of security guards, neighborhood-based enrollment policies that lead to school segregation, and the disproportionate placement of unexperienced teachers in schools serving low-income students of color are associated with wider discipline gaps (Mendez, Knoff, and Ferron 2002; Eitle and Eitle 2004; Arcia 2007; Skiba, Arredondo, and Williams 2014). However, these studies are limited in their ability to explain *how* such colorblind policies create discipline gaps and perpetuate a 'racialized hierarchy that privileges Whites and marginalizes non-Whites' (Blaisdell 2015, 2).

Qualitative research suggests that 'race neutral' school discipline policies lead to disparities because they are often based on White, middle-class cultural standards (Christine 1993; Vavrus and Cole 2002; Monroe and Obidah 2004; Watts and Erevelles 2004; Morris 2005; Monroe 2006). For example, Blaisdell (2015) found that students were often subjected to discipline for failing to adhere to 'White norms' or forms of classroom participation that are based on White cultural behaviors. Thus, Black students were disciplined for culturally informed behaviors that were viewed as non-White, without naming race. Similarly, Morris (2005) argues that the reproduction of racial inequality in school discipline through everyday practices can be accomplished through the privileging of dominant forms of racialized masculinity and femininity in school discipline codes. In his analysis of an urban school in Texas with a large population of students of color, Morris (2005) found that the school's preoccupation with the dress code and behavior led school teachers and administrators to view Black girls as not 'ladylike' and Latino/a and Black boys as 'dangerous.'

These themes are echoed in López's (2002) analysis of educational experiences of second generation Dominicans and Haitians. She found that young men of color were often racialized as hoodlums, subject to suspicion. Latina and Black women were racially discredited as sexually promiscuous 'mamacitas.' Alternatively, Morris found that the forms of dress that White and Asian American boys and White girls engaged were viewed as 'harmless' and 'well-mannered.' Morris argues that these assumptions often subject youth of color to the disproportionate use of 'strict and punitive' discipline, which 'inadvertently transformed the expression of youth identity, encompassing relatively innocuous stylistic rebelliousness, into a mode of subversive opposition' that did little to engage them or connect them to school

but does much to emphasize their lack of belonging (2005, 43). In these circumstances, discipline practices can become almost exclusively a form of labeling and social control.

These studies suggest that school policies limiting forms of student expression to White standards, without validating non-dominant ways of being, or offering youth the opportunity to learn code switching strategies, may actually worsen discipline problems and related disparities. The consequences for students of color who breach social norms result in exclusionary practices that impede access to educational and economic success. Ultimately, the behaviors of students of color are viewed as problematic when in reality they may be an expression of racial identity. These expressions of racial identity may also be developmentally normative for adolescents of color as they have an additional plane from which to individuate and resist social control (Steinberg 2010). As long as Whiteness is accepted as the standard by which students of color will be judged, it seems unlikely that efforts to reduce implicit bias or improve student-teacher relationships will be fully successful.

The role of teacher preparation and training is reflected in Blaisdell's (2015) study, which found that when attempting to rationalize the lower levels of academic achievement for students of color, teachers and school administrators often relied on cultural deficiency arguments that blamed students, their families, and their cultural orientations for their academic failures. This finding is echoed in other studies which reveal the ways in which school administrators and teachers blame Black and Latino/a cultures or families for their children's academic deficits and discipline problems (Matute-Bianchi 1991; Ogbu 1991; Reyes 2006). Yet research indicates that parents of color have fewer resources, and are given less opportunities by school staff, to challenge exclusionary discipline decisions (Reyes 2006; Kupchik 2009). Consequently, many students' biggest advocate, their parents, are not equipped nor given the same opportunities to negotiate the school system in defense of their child. At the same time, these families are assigned blame for discipline problems, often resulting in the alienation of the child and parent from school.

Taken together, there is a significant amount of scholarship that demonstrates the ways that schools are racialized institutions in terms of policy and everyday practices that shape discipline disparities. These practices create environments that advantage White students and disadvantage Black and Latina/o students, resulting in dire social and economic consequences (Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007). In the current study, we identify the locations in schools in which students of color were most likely to be disciplined as a way to highlight limitations in current conceptualizations of implicit bias and draw attention to patterns that appear to reflect broader institutional policies that lead to interconnected racial disparities across school locations.

Research question

This study considered the school sub-contexts and racial patterns that correlate with discipline incidents in a school setting. Specifically, the following research question guided the present study: What is the relationship between student race and the sub-contexts in which youth are disciplined? Drawing on CRT as our framework, we hypothesize that students of color will be equally likely to be disciplined in spaces outside of the classroom as they are within.

Research design

Setting

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is the largest urban school district in Colorado, serving predominantly low-income and students of color. In response to concerns voiced by community members, parents, and students, DPS reformed its discipline policy in 2008. The reforms aimed to reduce the use of suspensions, law enforcement referrals, and expulsions in response to student misbehavior and to eliminate racial disparities in discipline practices. Rather than relying on exclusionary sanctions, the policy encourages schools to implement restorative and therapeutic interventions as resolutions to student misconduct and to only refer students to law enforcement when legally mandated to do so by state regulations. It also provides a framework for schools to develop a graduated discipline systems that increase consequences with the seriousness of student offenses. Although a goal of the policy is to reduce racial discipline gaps, the intervention strategies are colorblind. Since the introduction of these policy changes, the district has lowered suspension and expulsion rates by nearly 40%, with reductions benefitting students of all backgrounds, particularly at the secondary school levels. These trends are impressive because they have taken place during a time when the overall district population has increased by 14%, placing it among the fastest growing school districts in the nation (DPS 2013).

Despite these successes, recent DPS data reveal that Black and Latino/a youth are still more likely than their White peers to experience a discipline incident and an exclusionary sanction (out-of-school suspension or a law enforcement referral), even after accounting for confounding variables like special education participation, free and reduced lunch eligibility, and the seriousness of the offenses (Anyon et al. 2014) In fact, these discipline *gaps* have increased over time, when factors such as student behavior, poverty, and school composition are taken into account (Anyon et al. 2014). Thus, school district officials and local stakeholders are eager to understand the conditions that exacerbate racial disparities and can point to promising interventions. To meet these needs and inform the knowledge base on school discipline more broadly, a researcher-practitioner partnership between DPS and investigators at the University of Denver was established in 2012.

Data sources

Study questions were answered by merging incident-level school discipline data with student-level demographic variables and school-level data on racial and grade composition. This data was downloaded from the student information system used by DPS for the last nine years. All district administrators, faculty, and support service providers receive an induction training, followed by booster sessions focused on data entry and software functions. Discipline building leaders (e.g. deans, student advisors) must go through an additional certification process on the behavior management screens in the student information system, where discipline incidents are recorded. School leaders, teachers, social workers, and school psychologists all have universal access to student information system data at their school site. Although this type of administrative data has limitations due to fidelity issues in data entry, students' and teachers' self-reports of discipline incidents are correlated with official discipline referral records, suggesting this source of information has adequate reliability and validity (Langhout and Annear 2011; Pas, Bradshaw, and Mitchell 2011).

Table 1. Demographics of disciplined students (sample) compared to overall student population (student-level).

	Disciplined students (n = 9170)	All students (n = 86,559)
Race		
Black	25.54	15.13*
Latino/a	60.24	59.95
Multiracial	2.97	3.13
White	11.25	21.79*
Gender		
Male	65.97	51.20*
Female	34.03	48.80*
English Language Learner	37.43	43.23*
Free and Reduced Lunch Eligible	84.65	69.06*
Special Education	20.5	11.69*
Grade Level		
Preschool and Kindergarten	3.15	10.06*
1st grade	4.08	9.36*
2nd grade	4.96	8.99*
3rd grade	5.05	8.44*
4th grade	5.76	8.12*
5th grade	7.22	7.61
6th grade	12.75	7.67*
7th grade	12.97	6.94*
8th grade	12.93	6.62*
9th grade	12.26	7.32*
10th grade	9.47	6.41*
11th grade	5.30	5.43
12th grade	4.11	7.03*

Notes: *$p < .001$ based on a two-sample test of proportions.

Study population

The cross-sectional dataset used in this study included information about all students in grades K to 12 ($n = 9426$) who experienced one or more discipline incidents ($n = 22,474$) in DPS schools ($n = 185$) during the 2012–2013 school year. Asian ($n = 144$), Pacific Islander ($n = 14$) and Native America ($n = 98$) students were dropped due to low numbers, resulting in a final sample of 9170 students with 20,166 discipline incidents. The sample of disciplined students was 60% Latino/a, 11% White, 25% Black, and 3% Multiracial. Sixty-six percent of students with a discipline record were male, while 37% were English language learners. Eighty-five percent of the sample were eligible for free and reduced lunch whereas 21% were in special education. In contrast, the general student population was 60% Latino/a, 22% White, 15% Black, and 3% Multiracial. Fifty-five percent of all students were male, 43% were English language learners, 70% qualified for free and reduced lunch, and 12% were in special education. Using two sample tests of proportions, disciplined students were significantly more likely than the overall student population in DPS to be Black, male, in special education, English proficient, or in grades 6–10 (Table 1). Disciplined students were significantly less likely to be White, female, English-Language Learners, of higher socioeconomic status, in general education, and in grades 1–4 or 12 (Table 1).

Measures

Incident-level

Discipline incident-level records included information about where the offense took place and the nature of the offense. As illustrated in Table 2, discipline incidents took place in the

Table 2. Proportion of office disciplinary referral locations by race (incident-level $n = 20,166$ and student-level $n = 9170$).

Location	All Disciplined Students (n = 9170)	Black (n = 2342)	Latino/a (n = 5524)	Multiracial (n = 272)	White (n = 1032)
	%	%	%	%	%
Athletic Field (n = 143)	.71	0.49	0.68	0.84	1.51
Auditorium (n = 141)	.70	0.76	0.64	1.34	0.65
Bus (n = 395)	1.96	2.24	1.61	2.17	3.06
Cafeteria (n = 781)	3.87	4.43	3.56	5.18	3.61
Classroom (n = 9954)	49.36	51.61	49.12	48.66	44.25
Grounds (1426)	7.07	5.71	7.56	5.18	8.83
Gym (n = 639)	3.17	3.67	2.93	2.84	3.16
Hallway (n = 2642)	13.10	13.25	13.55	11.2	10.59
Library (n = 143)	.71	0.86	0.64	0.84	0.90
Off campus (n = 842)	4.18	3.61	4.12	6.22	4.01
Office (n = 320)	1.59	1.69	1.6	1.15	1.84
Other locations (n = 698)	3.46	3.52	3.42	3.61	3.18
Playground (n = 1452)	7.20	5.88	7.34	9.43	10.2
Restroom (n = 590)	2.93	2.28	3.22	3.01	3.34

Notes: Pearson chi^2(39) = 211.80; Pr = 0.000.

following locations: athletic field, less than 1%; auditorium, less than 1%; bus, 2%; cafeteria, 4%; classroom, 49%; grounds, 7%; gym, 3%; hallway, 13%; library less than 1%; off campus, 4% ($n = 842$); office, 2%; other, 4%, playground, 7%; and restroom, 3%. Chi-square analyses revealed significant racial differences in office referral locations overall (all students compared to each other): chi^2(39) = 211.80, $p < 0.001$ (Table 2). In multivariate analyses, locations were recoded into dummy variables, with classroom incident location serving as the reference group. The variable for the seriousness of the offense committed was an ordinal variable reflecting the eight levels of offenses in the district's discipline matrix (values = 1–8). The vast majority of student offenses were level 1, which included disobedience, defiance, or repeated interference (30%), level 2, including other violations of the code of conduct and bullying (20%), or level 5, detrimental behavior (42%).

Student-level

Demographic student-level records included variables that reflect state, federal, and local policy mandates for data collection by educational agencies. Student racial categories were: (1) Black or African American (non-Hispanic); (2) Hispanic or Latino/a; (3) White or Caucasian; and, (4) Multiracial. White students served as the reference group. Student race is determined by parents when registering their children for school. Additional student-level variables available in the dataset were all dichotomous and included gender, free and reduced lunch eligibility (eligible or not), special education status (active Individualized Education Program or not), and English-language proficiency (English-language learner or not).

School-level

School-level covariates included the proportion of the student body that are students of color and grade configuration: high schools (9–12), middle schools (6–8), and alternatively

configured schools (e.g. K-12 or K-8), compared to elementary schools (K-5). These school-level covariates were included in light of findings from previous studies documenting a relationship between school racial composition, grades served, and discipline outcomes (Payne and Welch 2010; Skiba, Arredondo et al. 2014). Specifically, secondary schools and highly segregated schools tend to use punitive discipline sanctions more widely, a practice that is associated with racial disparities in suspension and expulsion (Payne and Welch 2010; Skiba, Chung et al. 2014).

Data analysis

Study questions were answered by merging incident-level discipline data, student-level demographic information, and school-level covariates, with student id and school number as the matching variable. Using the merged dataset, a three-level multinomial logistic regression was employed using Stata 13 to identify the discipline incident locations (independent variables) that were associated with student racial background (dependent variable). Multinomial logistic regression was selected because it has less strict assumptions regarding normal distribution of predictors and variance within each group than other approaches, such as discriminant factor analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell 1996). The multilevel model accounts for the hierarchical nature of the dataset, with discipline incidents (level 1) clustered within students (level 2), who were clustered in schools (level 3) (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008).

Results

Overall, there were *no* locations in DPS schools where students of color were *more* likely to be disciplined than the classroom, compared to White youth. In other words, students of color were equally or less likely than White students to be disciplined in 'unowned' school spaces compared to the classroom. However, patterns of racial differences in the locations of student discipline incidents, were not consistent across student groups. Compared to White students, Black youth were significantly less likely to have a discipline incident take place on an athletic field (RRR = .49, $p < .05$), on school grounds (RRR = .67, $p < .001$) off campus (RRR = .58, $p < .001$), on the playground (RRR = .73, $p < .01$), or the restroom (RRR = .69, $p < .05$). Latino/a youth were significantly less likely than White students to have a discipline incident take place on the bus (RRR = .55, $p < .001$). There were no statistically significant differences between Multiracial and White youth with respect to discipline incident locations. To summarize, for Black students, the trend was that they were less likely to be disciplined in five out of thirteen spaces outside of the classroom, whereas for Latino/a and Multiracial youth, they were equally likely to have discipline incidents in the classroom and other school spaces (Table 3).

Discussion

Study results indicate that the overrepresentation of Black, Latino/a and Multiracial youth in office discipline referrals is a widespread pattern that manifests across a variety of school spaces. Findings replicate one other descriptive study of race and office referral locations that did not account for confounding factors (Scott, Hirn, and Barber 2012). In the current

Table 3. Adjusted relative risk ratios from multilevel multinomial logistic regression of factors predicting the disciplinary referral of students from different racial backgrounds (n = 20,166 incidents, 9170 students, 185 schools).

Comparison group = white students, classroom event location		Black (n = 2342)	Latino/a (n = 5524)	Multiracial (n = 272)
Athletic field	RRR	.49*	.74	.72
	CI	(.27, .89)	(.43, 1.27)	(.27, 1.93)
Auditorium	RRR	1.23	1.03	1.92
	CI	(.62, 2.44)	(.52, 2.01)	(.77, 4.81)
Bus	RRR	.72	.55***	.65
	CI	(.51, .1.03)	(.39, .78)	(.35, 1.22)
Cafeteria	RRR	1.31	.94	1.34
	CI	(.97, 1.77)	(.70, 1.26)	(.85, 2.11)
Grounds	RRR	.67***	.91	.67
	CI	(.54, .83)	(.74, 1.12)	(.44, 1.02)
Gym	RRR	1.11	.81	.83
	CI	(.81, 1.53)	(.59, 1.10)	(.47, 1.45)
Hallway	RRR	1.11	1.18	1.02
	CI	(.92, 1.33)	(.99, 1.42)	(.74, 1.39)
Library	RRR	1.02	.65	No multiracial youth were referred from the library
	CI	(.56, 1.86)	(.36, 1.18)	
Off campus	RRR	.58***	.89	.82
	CI	(.44, .75)	(.69, 1.15)	(.50, 1.33)
Office	RRR	1.28	1.20	1.65
	CI	(.78, 2.10)	(.73, 1.95)	(.78, 3.47)
Other locations	RRR	.83	.86	.87
	CI	(.61, 1.13)	(.64, 1.16)	(.51, 1.48)
Playground	RRR	.73**	.84	.91
	CI	(.58, .92)	(.68, 1.04)	(.64, 1.28)
Restroom	RRR	.69*	.99	.95
	CI	(.49, .98)	(.72, 1.35)	(.55, 1.62)

Notes: Statistical control variables included students' gender, free and reduced lunch eligibility, English language proficiency, eligibility for special education, grade, school racial composition (% Latino/a, % Black, and % Multiracial), school grade composition (high school = reference group), and the seriousness of the offense committed.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

research, these patterns persisted even after controlling for the nature of the discipline incident, school racial composition and student identity markers like gender, ability, and socioeconomic status. Moreover, in contrast to recent hypotheses presented by other scholars, discipline disparities were not *worse* in more anonymous school spaces than in the classroom (McIntosh et al. 2015). Results therefore do not offer empirical support for arguments that implicit biases are stronger when school adults and youth do not know each other well (Miller 2002; Paluck and Green 2009; McIntosh et al. 2015). Instead, our study indicate that students of color in this district were actually less likely than White youth to be referred to the office from several 'unowned' school spaces such as grounds, bathrooms, and off campus (Astor, Meyer, and Behre 1999). In other words, the location where students of color were at highest risk for an office disciplinary referral was the classroom, from teachers with whom they likely have the most contact on a regular basis. Study results therefore suggest systemic biases in discipline policies and practices are greater than the sum of prejudicial decisions made by individual teachers, administrators, and support service providers who have weak relationships with students of color.

Interpreting our quantitative findings to be signals of systemic bias is consistent with the principles of CRT and is also supported by overwhelming qualitative evidence that

colorblind institutional policies and practices serve to reproduce racial inequalities in school discipline (Lewis 2003; Morris 2005; Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007; Blaisdell 2015; Lewis, Diamond, and Forman 2015). Such an analysis reveals the potential limitations of 'race neutral' behavioral and relational strategies for individual prejudice and bias reduction when they are implemented in isolation of structural reforms. Although popular recommendations for discipline reform are framed as responsive to the needs of youth of color, they tend to be colorblind in their implementation (e.g. United States Department of Education 2014). Moreover, they do not address the conditions of egalitarianism, collectivity, and cooperation that provide the foundation for individual implicit bias reduction (Pettigrew and Tropp 2000). These four conditions rarely exist in any of the spaces where students of color and educators interact, which may explain the pervasiveness of racial disparities in office discipline referrals throughout most school locations.

Current recommendations in the school discipline literature that focus on tiered student support services and teacher training on relational strategies therefore obscure the power dynamics that sustain racism and prejudice in schools. The district that was the focus of this study has engaged in sustained discipline reforms for over eight years that rely on alternative approaches to out-of-school suspension like counseling and universal social emotional learning programs (Anyon et al. 2014). District-level discipline policies do not mandate training for educators on implicit bias or culturally responsive pedagogy, eliminate colorblind codes of conduct that criminalize the dress and mannerisms associated with youth of color (e.g. banning hoodies, hats, and particular hairstyles), or address structural concerns such as resource allocation, teacher preparedness, or school segregation. They did not change the reality that students of color in this district attend hyper-segregated schools with fewer resources and less qualified teachers facing extreme pressures to raise student achievement as measured through standardized tests that normalize Whiteness (Darling-Hammond 2007; Leonardo 2007).

The key tenets of CRT suggest that hundreds of years of racial injustice are unlikely to be rectified primarily through 'race neutral' behavioral interventions or by school adults becoming more invested in learning about the lived experiences of students of color. It seems unlikely that racial disparities in school discipline will be eradicated unless colorblind institutional policies and practices that maintain opportunity gaps and add to the historical education debt are also addressed (Ladson-Billings 2006; Carter and Welner 2013). At the same time, our findings do not suggest that individual's implicit biases are immaterial to discipline outcomes, or that relationships between students and school personnel are not relevant targets for intervention. Indeed, in other publications using different data sources, we have argued that relationship-building has been one of several key strategies for school discipline reform in this district (Anyon et al. 2016). However, our research in DPS also indicates that racial disparities in discipline outcomes are common even in schools where students of color report positive relationships with adults (Anyon et al. 2016). Therefore, our claim is only that the consistency of racial discipline disparities throughout school buildings and across a large reform district does not map onto typical dynamics of inter-personal contact and relationship building between individual students and adult authority figures in different school spaces. Instead, they appear to be an indicator of systemic bias at an institutional level, suggesting that broader policies and practices are at play, not just the behaviors or beliefs of building-based educators. Individual implicit bias among school staff should therefore be understood in relationship to the larger context of racism. To be

successful, reforms will likely need to address macro dynamics related to power, privilege and oppression that are often acknowledged or alluded to in the school discipline literature but left unaddressed in recommendations for policy change.

Limitations

Findings from this study are only generalizable to other school districts that have similar policy contexts and serve a comparable population of students in an urban setting. Additional research using data from multiple districts, ideally with different policy contexts, would substantially further knowledge development. Strengths of this study include the breadth of covariates used in statistical modeling (e.g. student- and school-level poverty, number and type of office referral reasons/behaviors, proportion of the student body that are youth of color) that may confound the relationships examined in our analyses. On the other hand, the investigation was limited by lack of data that would help differentiate between institutional and individual practices, for example, assessment of racial bias among adults making the office discipline referrals, or the degree to which schools implemented colorblind policies and practices that may impact discipline outcomes, such as culturally unresponsive instruction and discipline policies that punish students for subjective reasons (e.g. defiance and disrespect). Additionally, our data did not include information about the adult who made an office discipline referral from a particular location; such data would provide stronger evidence that adults with different roles (and relationships with youth) at the school tend to make referrals from distinct spaces.

Other limitations to study design that should be taken into account include the reliance on an administrative dataset that was not triangulated with qualitative or other quantitative sources. Finally, this study was correlational and does not provide evidence of the *cause* of different patterns of disparities in different school spaces. Students of different racial backgrounds were not randomly assigned a discipline location for their incident, which may have led to some kind of selection bias, in which students of color were more or less likely to be referred for discipline incidents from a particular source for reasons other than their racial background (although our analyses did control for the type of behavior). Thus, our discussion only provides hypotheses about underlying mechanisms based on principles of CRT.

Conclusions and implications

Situated with the frame of CRT, this study revealed that there are consistent patterns of racial disparities in discipline throughout all school locations, regardless of the lower likelihood of strong youth–adult relationships in 'unowned' school spaces. Our interpretation of widespread disparities in office discipline referrals across school sub-contexts as indicators of systemic bias suggests a both/and approach may be necessary to realize the goal of eliminating racial discipline gaps. In addition to student-, teacher-, and school- level interventions, ending the school-to-prison pipeline will likely require structural changes to federal, state, and district policies and practices including, but not limited, to those directly related to the use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion. This analysis reflects a core tenet of CRT: that social institutions, not just individuals, reproduce inequality. In terms of directions for future scholarship, the school discipline literature would be strengthened by empirical research on the effectiveness of race-conscious discipline policies or practices in

schools, along with systems-level interventions like youth activism, organizing and advocacy for educational justice. Research that considers the interconnectedness between implicit bias, school discipline outcomes, and larger institutional policies, such as the reliance on standardized tests for the assessment of students' skills and school performance, may also be necessary to counteract the colorblind ideology reflected in many discipline reform initiatives.

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