

## **Does Longevity Matter?: Teacher Experience and the Suspension of Black Middle School Students**

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### **Abstract**

Decades of research have showcased the inequitable exclusion of Black students in urban middle schools via out-of-school suspensions. Black students exhibit the highest rates of suspensions when compared to their White peers according to the 2013 – 2014 Office of Civil Rights database. Urban middle school teachers are typically placed in high-stress situations, and are initially ill-prepared to manage classrooms, while their lack of experience as a teacher candidate could be exposing Black students to biased discipline practices, which may serve to reproduce societal inequities within the classroom. Although researchers have identified numerous factors which negatively impact Black students' suspension rates, this study sought to determine if there is a positive association between an increase in teachers' years of experience and lower out-of-school suspension rates for Black students in urban middle schools.

*Keywords:* Black students, teacher experience, school discipline

Since the release of the Children's Defense Fund (1975) report, scholars have attributed the inequitable suspension of Black students to teachers' deficit beliefs, antiquated and oppressive school code-of-conduct policies, lack of teacher preparation courses specializing on teachers' use of culturally responsive classroom management practices, and over militarization of schools through the increased involvement of law enforcement personnel because of the enactment of No Child Left Behind (2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) across the U.S. (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004; Losen, 2013; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Researchers have argued that teachers are the critical component that can reduce how, and when Black students are referred to the office for subjective, non-violent offenses (Gordon, Piana, & Keleher, 2000; Gregory, Clawson, Davis & Gerewitz, 2016; Monroe, 2005). How teachers perceive the actions, or inactions of their Black students plays a critical role in their ability to properly manage their classrooms; and for teachers, understanding the cultural contexts (i.e., tone, body language, and personal space) behind these actions takes years to ascertain.

The effective management of the classroom environment is often a skill which is mastered by teachers who have remained in the profession for a longer amount of time (Meister & Melnick, 2003; Yilmaz, 2004); however, the outcomes of effective classroom management can appear differently for teachers who are employed in urban middle schools. Urban middle school teachers

contend with a number of complexities (e.g., interacting and instructing students from high-poverty backgrounds, instilling culturally sustaining pedagogies without administrator and district level support, and having high levels of stress and frustration), and simultaneously they are learning how best to instruct students, who are in constant transition either into middle school or out of middle school and into high school (Albright et al., 2017). Still, researchers have found that the middle school timeframe for Black students is a hyper-critical period, as these students are exposed to higher rates of suspensions than in pre-school, elementary school, and high school (Sprague et al., 2001). To delve deeper into this pivotal academic period for Black students, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between urban middle school teachers' years of experience and the rates of suspension for Black students; to understand if out-of-school suspension rates are lower for schools whose personnel demographics include a higher percentage of veteran teachers. The implications from this study will serve to potentially impact the preparation of classroom management for teacher candidates, and teacher recruitment and retention in urban middle schools.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Middle School, Discipline, and Black Students**

Although this wide-spread issue has gained much-needed attention over the past few decades, Black students in the U.S. are still disproportionately suspended at higher rates (as much as three times as high in certain states) than their White peers (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Recent research studies have investigated further into this issue, finding that an even larger disparity exists between Black males and females; with Black female students experiencing higher rates of suspensions when compared to White females for primarily non-violent offenses like disrespect, defiance, assertiveness, and dress code violations (Blake, Butler, & Smith, 2015; Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017; Sprague et al., 2001). When exploring the reasons why this issue still prevails, researchers have pointed to oppressive school policies, culturally deficit instruction and curriculum, the lack of culturally competent courses and diverse field experiences in educator preparation programs, and teacher longevity (Fabelo et al., 2011; McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2014).

As it pertains to school discipline and middle schools, research in this domain has yielded a number of interesting findings. For starters, the multiple transitions into and out of middle school (e.g., elementary school to 6th grade and 8th grade to high school) lead to an increase in assertive behaviors by students (Pennington, 2009). Maladaptive understanding of students' behaviors, by teachers and administrators have created a varied response to students' behaviors which has resulted in an increase in suspensions and expulsions in middle schools (Gottfredson, 1989). It is during the middle school years that students receive most of their disciplinary infractions (Sprague et al., 2001), which could either be a symptom of higher rates of misbehavior by Black students in urban schools, or teachers' and administrators' overreliance on exclusionary discipline interventions to correct student behavior. Disproving a previously widely held assumption that schools with a higher concentration of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, equaled higher rates of discipline infractions in urban schools, Skiba et al. (2011), utilizing a national data set determined that when socioeconomic (SES) was controlled, Black students were still the highest suspended group. Additionally, Witt (2008) analyzed federal middle school data and found that when controlled for ethnicity, Black students were just as likely to misbehave as their White peers.

When examining school discipline data for Black students at the middle school level, researchers have found similar conclusions in conjunction with possible indicators of why these disparities exist. Hilberth and Slate (2014) analyzed Texas middle school disciplinary infractions and concluded that with each grade level increase (6th, 7th, and 8th) there was an increase in the percentage of Black students receiving an out-of-school suspension in general education and in alternative education settings. Utilizing a multilevel analysis, Skiba et al. (2011) found that the beliefs and perspectives of administrators in schools may play a significant role in the inequitable dispersal of discipline rates between Black students and their peers. In addition to the administrators' beliefs, researchers have discovered that teachers and their deficit-based beliefs significantly impact the number of office referrals for Black students, which increases their risk to be suspended (Delpit, 2012; Gordon et al., 2000; Monroe, 2005; Natesan & Kieftenbeld, 2013; Weinstein, 2002). Although research has called for an increase in professional development seminars, which specifically focus on making teachers reflect on their own biases and increase their cultural competency/responsiveness towards Black students (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Natesan & Kieftenbeld, 2013; Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2009), practitioners have argued that these efforts, when in isolation, are not in-depth enough to change teachers' lifelong perceptions and beliefs without teachers remaining in the profession for an extended period of time (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009; Paris, 2012).

### **Middle School Teacher Longevity**

The U.S. is in the midst of a long-term shortage of teachers, with half a million teachers leaving the profession each year (Haynes, 2014). This has resulted in an increase in the number of novice teachers (0-3 years) entering the profession. While educator preparation programs across the nation have improved their efforts to recruit and matriculate teacher candidates into the profession, retention of teachers past their initial years of instruction has been impacted by states' reduction in salaries, an increased workload due to high-stakes testing, teacher burnout and absenteeism, and teacher attrition (Bayard, 2003; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2009; Fiorilli, Albanese, Gabola, & Pepe, 2017; Miller, Murnane, & Willett, 2008; Tingle et al., 2012). Another issue that impacts novice teachers and their willingness to remain in the profession is classroom management, as many enter the profession unprepared to handle this aspect of their position (Meister & Melnick, 2003). Greenlee and Ogletree (1993) explored this aspect and found that the lack of classroom management skills is a major contributor to novice teachers exiting the profession. Feng (2010) found that, frequently, novice teachers in urban settings were assigned to classrooms with the most challenging children, or the highest percentages of Black students, as compared to more experienced teachers. When merging the findings from the previously alluded to studies, a pattern emerges which suggests that in urban schools, the lack of veteran teachers could hamper school-wide efforts to eliminate or reduce suspensions disparities for Black students.

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Reproduction Theory**

Social reproduction theory asserts that historical societal structures and mechanism replicate the same instances of economic inequality in the following generation (Bourdieu, 1986). One part of social reproduction theory, social capital, revolves around an individual's or groups' connection to another individual or group, which allows access to certain items (e.g., privileged

social clubs, finances, institutional rights) for their own betterment. The assertion rests on the fact that individuals in higher socioeconomic brackets have greater access to these items, and they utilize their access to maintain their stature in society or improve it. Social capital places a heavy emphasis on who a person knows, rather than the individual's own merit or acquired knowledge (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Social capital is relevant to this study because as students interact with teachers who have taught for a number of years, the students are exposed to a wider array of individuals, inside of the school, who can serve as a support system within the school. This provides a behavior outlet so that teachers can refer the student to the support system rather than to the school administrators for a possible punitive punishment.

Cultural capital is the acquisition of social assets that promote mobility in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). It is comprised of the embodied state, the objective state, and the institutionalized state. The embodied state is the knowledge that individuals acquire over time, through socialization and forms of education. These long-lasting dispositions of the mind often reproduce themselves as individuals begin to seek out additional knowledge or experiences that strengthen their embodied state. Along with the embodied state, there is the objectified state, which represents the physical items that present to society the status of a person. For example, purchasing a high-end brand computer, or having a high-end brand of clothing gives off the impression that an individual from a high SES bracket. Lastly, there is the institutionalized state which refers to the qualifications, credentials, or titles that exemplify competency and authority in society. Examples of this are college degrees, high school diplomas, vocational technology certifications, and so forth

Relating to education, which has long been held as a structure that assists students to transcend inequality, Bourdieu contends that education is actually a structural mechanism that promotes inequality through disproportionate funding for urban schools, the lack of culturally or racially affirming curriculum(s), and the increased employment of underprepared teachers in these settings (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). When viewing the issue of school discipline through this theoretical framework, one would question if the conditions (e.g., a larger population of novice teachers with limited classroom management skills) within urban schools are reproducing a segment of students who are being locked out of equitable learning environments (e.g., the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized state of cultural capital) by over relying on suspensions as behavior management interventions. Furthermore, as teachers remain in the profession longer, they are more involved with professional development training and seminars that are designed to improve their pedagogical instruction and content knowledge (Deglau & Sullivan, 2006), which are extrinsic forms of cultural capital that can benefit the academic proficiency of students in their classroom and create a new status quo of high achievement. The retention of high-quality, experienced teachers is a form of social reproduction, if they can instruct in such a manner that reduces classroom disruptions and promotes Black students' acquisition of knowledge towards the obtainment of the institutionalized and objectified state (i.e., graduating from middle school).

## **Methodology**

The aim of this research study was to examine the relationship between out-of-school suspension rates for Black students in urban middle schools and teacher longevity. Researchers contend that novice teachers enter the field without the necessary classroom management skills and are more eager to refer students to the administrator's office (Kee, 2011; Weinstein,

Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). Alternatively, research suggests that teachers who have more professional years of experience, actually rely more on pedagogical and subject matter content to manage their students which reduces their need to remove students from the class (Caples & McNeese, 2010). Thus, the hypothesis for this study states:  $H_0$ : *There is no significant relationship between rates of suspensions for Black students and teachers' years of experience*; and  $H_1$ : *There is a significant relationship between rates of suspension for Black students and teachers' years of experience*.

The data utilized for this particular study was collected from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR) database, and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). Each data set is from the 2013-2014 academic year (NCDPI, 2017; OCR, 2016). The first data set, the number of unduplicated counts of out-of-school suspensions for Black students and White students in North Carolina public middle schools, was collected from the OCR database. This study investigated middle schools from four racially diverse school districts in North Carolina, determined by which schools contained a Black student population that exceeded 50% of the total school enrollment during that academic year. A high proportionality of Black students was chosen as a filter, because it increased the chances of teachers having to discipline Black students versus students from other racial categories (i.e., White, Latinx, Asian, etc.). Of the 98 middle schools which operated during that academic year, 27 schools met the requirement. Traditionally, disparities and inequities in the U.S. schooling system have fallen along class and racial lines; thus, the higher rates of Black enrollment signal a higher possibility for these schools to exhibit characteristics of being labelled as urban (Milner, 2012). The second dataset consists of the percentage of teachers employed by years of experience (0-3 years, 4-10 years and more than 10 years), which was collected from NCDPI. NCDPI considers novice teachers to contain between 0-3 years of experience, and veteran teachers to be of the 4-10 years of experience category or the more than 10 years category.

## **Data Analysis**

Simply examining the disaggregate number of out-of-school suspension rates of Black students in isolation, only reaffirms the deficit-based theories which suggest that Black students are more prone to violence and disobedience, which is the reason why they are being removed from school. In an effort to capture a complete analysis of teachers' years of experience in conjunction with Black students' suspensions, this study utilized the relative rate index (RRI) to better understand the difference between normalizing rates of suspensions, and suspensions that are the result of fabricated conditions. The formula for RRI is:

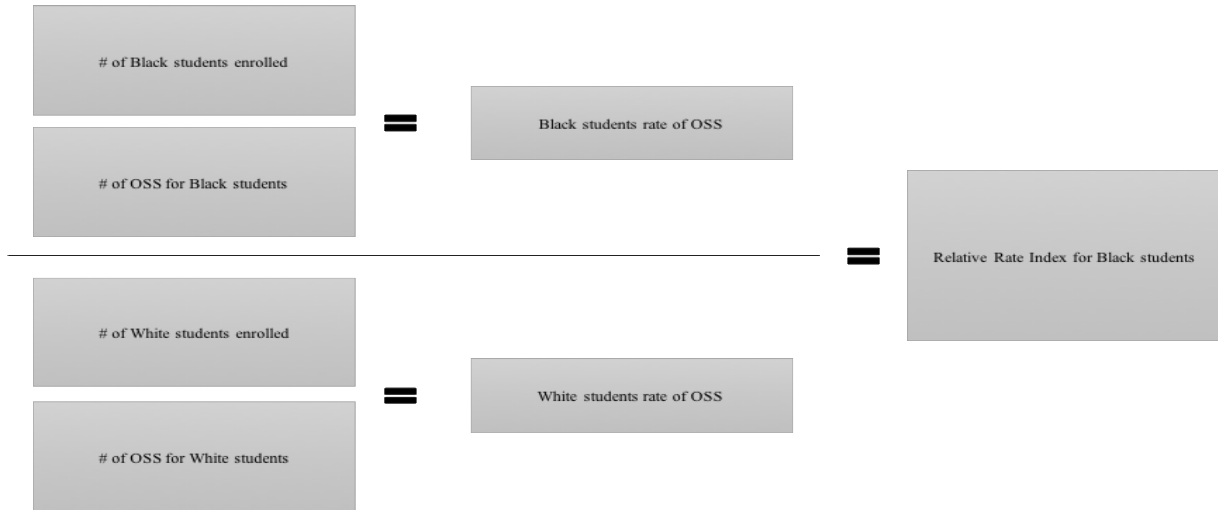


Figure 1. Relative Rate Index Formula

Ideally, finding an RRI for Black student suspensions of 1.0 would suggest that Black students are being suspended at equal rates as White students in that particular middle school. If a school received an RRI of 3, it would suggest that Black students are three times as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension. The higher the RRI, the higher the chance that what is occurring is not due to random chance, thus indicating that the result is statistically significant. A bivariate correlation (Pearson correlation) was calculated to measure the strength of linear association between the RRI for Black students out-of-school suspensions and each years of experience category. The assumption is that the smaller RRIs will be associated with schools with fewer novice teachers.

## Findings

Table 1.1: Student Enrollment by Race and Teacher Years of Experience

School	Student Enrollment			Teacher Years of Experience		
	White	Black	Black Percentage of Total Enrollment	0-3	4-10	10+
School A	69	501	0.69	0.34	0.52	0.14
School B	59	762	0.67	0.50	0.20	0.30
School C	38	613	0.57	0.43	0.18	0.38
School D	83	459	0.60	0.37	0.39	0.25
School E	38	484	0.60	0.30	0.38	0.32
School F	160	612	0.64	0.27	0.37	0.37
School G	33	815	0.73	0.41	0.27	0.32
School H	287	900	0.62	0.40	0.32	0.28
School I	61	370	0.54	0.42	0.30	0.28
School J	79	551	0.59	0.48	0.24	0.28
School K	90	357	0.60	0.07	0.53	0.40
School L	154	398	0.55	0.23	0.40	0.37
School M	68	188	0.53	0.23	0.46	0.31

School N	79	453	0.70	0.23	0.39	0.37
School O	51	399	0.76	0.26	0.34	0.40
School P	35	321	0.79	0.23	0.43	0.33
School Q	166	371	0.52	0.38	0.28	0.34
School R	55	320	0.70	0.24	0.39	0.37
School S	113	512	0.65	0.42	0.31	0.27
School T	23	434	0.62	0.23	0.48	0.29
School U	58	396	0.66	0.25	0.38	0.38
School V	26	252	0.53	0.14	0.42	0.44
School W	238	435	0.51	0.20	0.49	0.31
School X	9	586	0.78	0.19	0.38	0.43
School Y	38	314	0.67	0.15	0.51	0.33
School Z	282	692	0.52	0.27	0.43	0.30
School AA	145	539	0.54	0.17	0.52	0.30

Retrieved from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, *Statistical Profile Race, Sex, and Grade* <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/resources/data/>

Using a descriptive analysis, School P contained the largest percentage of Black students enrolled at 79%, whereas School W contained the lowest at 51%. School V exhibited the highest percentage of employees (44%) who had more than 10 years of teaching experience; whereas, School A contained the smallest percentage of teachers in this category (14%). In regards to the percentage of novice teachers employed, 50% of the teachers employed in School B were considered novice, which was the highest, and School K had the smallest percentage of novice teacher employed (.07%).

Table 2.1: *Out-of-School Suspensions by Race, and Black Student RRI for 2013-2014 Academic Year*

School	Black	White	Relative Rate Index
School A	52	5	1.432335
School B	94	7	1.039745
School C	88	22	0.247961
School D	64	4	2.893246
School E	58	16	0.284607
School F	22	4	1.437908
School G	115	10	0.465644
School H	85	7	3.872222
School I	46	13	0.583368
School J	70	2	5.018149
School K	37	5	1.865546
School L	37	10	1.431658
School M	37	10	1.338298
School N	58	19	0.532357
School O	46	7	0.839957
School P	16	13	0.134196
School Q	34	7	2.173277
School R	49	4	2.105469
School S	67	16	0.924194
School T	31	0	7.142857

School U	31	2	7.828283
School V	25	0	9.920663
School W	28	10	1.531954
School X	28	8	0.053754
School Y	25	10	0.302548
School Z	67	4	6.825867
School AA	52	4	3.497217

Retrieved from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. (2016). Civil rights data collection (CRDC), 2013 to 2014 [Data set]. Retrieved from <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>

After calculating the RRI, Black students at School V had the highest probability of being suspended (9.9 times), and School X exhibited the lowest probability of suspending Black students (.05 times). Interestingly, School P had the highest percentage of Black student enrollment and exhibited the second lowest probability of suspending Black students (.13 times). Of the 27 schools in this sample, only nine exhibited risk ratios at or below the 1.0 threshold, which suggests that there is no disparity occurring for Black students.

Table 3.1

*Pearson Correlation Relationships Between Teachers Years of Experience and Black Students' Relative Rate Index*

Years of Experience	Relative Rate Index	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
0-3 Years	-0.170	0.289	0.11163
4-10 Years	0.146	0.382	0.09707
10+ Years	-0.161	0.328	0.0627

*Note.* Schools in the sample were (n=27). Correlations in the table indicate that there was no statistical significant relationship between the years of experience for teachers of any subgroup, and the relative rate index of Black students' out-of-school suspension.

The hypothesis for this study sought to surmise if there was a relationship between years of experience for teachers and the rates of suspensions for Black students. According to the data, teachers in the 0-3 and more than 10 years categories of experience, had a weak negative relationship with rates of suspensions ( $r^2 = -.023$ ,  $-.161$ ). However, teachers whose experience in the field placed them in the 4-10 year range, were found to have a weak positive relationship with rates of suspensions ( $r^2 = .146$ ). Still, with each data category and rates of out-of-school suspensions, there were no statistically significant relationships found. According to the data, the average percentage of teachers who are considered experienced, (i.e., having more than three years of teaching experience), was larger than the novice teacher percentage, with 0-3 years exhibiting .289%, 4-10 years showing .382% and 10 or more years being at .328%.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between teachers' years of experience and Black students' rates of suspension at urban middle schools in four racially diverse southeastern school districts. There is a possibility that urban schools who employ a larger percentage of teachers in these categories (0-3, and 10 or more years) are reproducing lower suspension rates for Black students as indicated by the weak relationship between those individual categories and rates of suspensions. The data also indicates that employing more teachers whose



experience situates them in the 4-10 years of experience category is weakly positively attributed to reproducing exclusionary discipline outcomes, such as suspension at urban middle schools. Additionally, Black students are still being suspended at higher rates when compared to their White peers in middle schools, which is consistent with studies fielded over the past 30 years (Losen, 2013; Skiba et al., 2002). Under the social reproduction theoretical lens, the characteristics that are connected with novice teachers and more experienced teachers (e.g., lack of classroom management and culturally responsive practices versus an abundance of culturally responsive practices and classroom management skills) is not translating into recognizable trends of high or low suspensions in urban middle schools. Furthermore, while no statistically significant relationship was determined between the RRI of Black students and each category of experience for teachers, the findings do require that future research must investigate what other factors are impacting rates of suspensions for Black students at the critical juncture of middle school.

Where much of the research regarding school discipline has focused on identifying factors that negatively impact Black students, there is a glimmer of positive information in this data. School P exhibited the lowest rates of suspension for Black students and was able to employ the largest percentage of teachers whose experience is 10+ years. Under the lens of social reproduction, School P has created a culture within the building that retains teachers and maximizes Black students' learning opportunities by not relying on suspensions as behavior interventions. Both of these outcomes are contrary to research (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002) that suggests that urban schools cannot keep Black students in the classroom, because school administrators are challenged with retaining high-quality, experienced teachers.

Several factors could be impacting these two aspects, such as teachers' exposure to professional development, teacher recruitment and retention strategies employed by district administrators, the type of instructional support services and resources provided, and how School P incorporates/enforces their culturally sustaining classroom management into their code-of-conduct policy. Any combination of these factors demonstrates School P's willingness not only to value the cultural capital that Black students bring to their school, but it signals their effort to strengthen the embodied state (i.e., the acquired knowledge and skills through experiences) of novice teachers by having them surrounded with veteran teachers. Moreover, future studies into different aspects of this school would explore the literacy and mathematics achievement of Black students, the rate of matriculation for Black students into secondary education environments, the characteristics of Black students transitioning into School P from elementary school, and if these factors are the result of socially equitable practices being enacted by the teaching staff.

As a whole, these urban middle schools are not a reproduction of societal structures, as the mean for years of experience favors veteran teachers, more than novice teachers. Explicating this trend through social reproduction analysis, the retention of teachers past their novice years indicates that the structure of these schools supports the development of novice teachers. Future research would require an in-depth qualitative approach that explores the experiences of veteran teachers at these schools, who remained past their initial 0-3 years.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations to this study. Although the sample for the study consisted of 27 schools, one limitation is the sample size of this study. Future studies, utilizing a larger sample could potentially establish an association between teachers' years of experience and rates of

suspensions for Black students in urban middle school. Also, this study analyzed schools where Black students were the majority demographic, while excluding schools that did not meet this requirement. A mixed racial composition could impact the rate of suspensions for Black students, which could produce different results as it pertains to the retention of veteran teachers. It is possible that if this study was conducted using a different metric to define urban, (e.g., the percentage of free-and-reduced lunch students, and the SES of houses in each particular zip code), that different schools would be eligible, which could alter the findings of this study. The results from this study only represent four school districts in North Carolina, which limits the ability to generalize the findings to school districts outside of these four districts, and outside of the state of North Carolina.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the reduction of suspensions for Black students in middle school continues to require affirmative solutions rooted in high performing environments. The purpose of this study was to ascertain if there was an association between teachers' years of experience and out-of-school suspension rates for Black students in urban middle schools. The findings did not identify any significant correlation between these two variables; however, one specific school did defy historical trends by employing a higher percentage of teachers who have more than 10 years of experience, and under-suspending Black students. The indications from this finding may have implications for teacher candidate education. Educator preparation programs should continue to include classroom management courses and expose teacher candidates to opportunities that allow them to practice their classroom management techniques in culturally diverse schools (Stough & Montague, 2015). Furthermore, an additional avenue that educator preparation programs can explore is the hiring of high-quality veteran teachers to serve as mentors for teacher candidates. This places teacher candidates around teachers who perpetuate a culture of inclusiveness as it pertains to classroom management, which should serve to reproduce future teachers who ascribe to this philosophy. The combination of these two items can act as a buffer, which reduces the attrition of novice teachers who often leave urban schools due to their inability to manage their classroom. Finally, the inconclusiveness of this study offers the opportunity to further investigate factors in education that affirm or negatively impact Black students in their quest to obtain equitable education opportunities in U.S. public schools.

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