



## *Constructing Youth Identities: Newspaper Coverage of Exclusionary Discipline*

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### **Abstract**

*The school reliance on exclusionary discipline drives behavioral inequities and sustains the marginalization of youth in schools. The narratives of punishment often extend beyond the walls of the school system and may be reinforced by news media discourse. Nevertheless, the relationship between news media discourse and the school disciplinary structure is an understudied area of research. Using critical discourse techniques—with a theoretical framework of critical race and news framing theories—we analyze news coverage of exclusionary discipline across (N = 64) newspaper articles. Our findings underscore news discourse with a hyper-focus on youth deficits, stigmatizing portrayals of violence and blame, and teacher resistance to discipline alternatives and reform. Discursive absence included a lack of youth and family voices and perspectives, and a disconnection from the systemic mechanisms that shape the disciplinary structure. We conclude with implications for educators, policymakers, and scholars—as we advocate for a re-invigorated focus toward the equitable support and inclusion of youth.*

**Keywords:** *exclusionary discipline; suspensions; media; newspaper articles; critical discourse analysis*

*If we focus on defiant or destructive behavior,  
the young person becomes the problem.*  
Brendtro et al., 2019, pp. 35

**T**he disproportionate reliance on exclusionary discipline continues to lead to the exclusion of youth from educational opportunities. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) revealed that students were excluded from school for a total of 11,205,797 days due to out-of-school suspensions during the 2017-2018 school year. Disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline are LGBTQ youth, youth with disabilities, and racially minoritized youth—Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Latinx—with higher rates and more severe punishment (see U.S. DOE, 2021). Exclusionary discipline can be understood as an umbrella term entailing suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and referrals to law enforcement (Wymer et al., 2020). Since 2017, some exclusionary practices have risen, including school-based arrests (+5%) and referrals to law enforcement (+12%; U.S. DOE, 2021). Furthermore, evidence suggests that exclusionary discipline does not positively impact student behavior nor improve school climate (Amemiya et al., 2020; Deakin & Kupchik, 2018; Okonofua et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2016).

Systemic factors such as media representations of discipline may influence the dominant discourses of youth identities and reform structures in schools (Annamma et al., 2019; Sugrue, 2019). For example, news coverage of youth behavior is often represented in a way that normalizes racism, justifying inequities, reifies stereotypes, and attributes blame onto students (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009). Rather than identifying systemic inequities as a potential root cause of educational deficits, the behavior of individual students is ascribed as the dominant factor driving exclusionary discipline (Bornstein, 2015; Collins, 2009; Harwood, 2006; Valencia, 2010). In conjunction, oppressive school structures and media representations may intertwine in pernicious patterns, ultimately sustaining and perpetuating educational inequities (Giroux, 2009).

Due to the growing awareness surrounding the limitations of exclusionary discipline practices and the inequitable outcomes for students, the U.S. Department of Education in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Justice (2014) offered guidance for schools to help reduce exclusionary discipline practices and policies. After only four short years, the Trump administration withdrew federal guidance for schools (U.S. DOE, 2018). In this paper, we take a step toward understanding mainstream news coverage of exclusionary discipline during one year of active federal guidance. We unpack how youth identities are constructed in the context of enduring educational inequities. Herein, exclusionary discipline practices, prevalence, and the media effects on educational inequity are reviewed.

### **Review of Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Public Schools**

The use of exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and referrals to law enforcement) may contribute to a cohesively punitive school structure. Nearly three million students are excluded from educational opportunities each year with disparities by gender identity, sexual orientation, dis/ability, and race (U.S. DOE, 2021). First—by way of gender—boys face the brunt of exclusion, accounting for 70% of suspensions (U.S. DOE, 2021). Second—student gender identity—has been linked to exclusion, with LGBTQ youth experiencing disproportionate removal (Snapp et al., 2015; Snapp & Russell, 2016). Third—students with disabilities—face exclusionary disparities, with the ramifications more severe at the intersection of race and ability (e.g., Black youth with disabilities; Annamma, 2017). Fourth—by way of race—an array of disparities negatively affects minoritized youth, particularly Black youth, but also Latinx and Indigenous youth face disproportionate rates of exclusion. Even more troubling, Black boys are overrepresented in *all* categories of exclusion, with rates of suspensions over 3.5 times their total enrollment (U.S. DOE, 2021). Black girls also experience disproportionate rates of discipline—excluded at two times their total enrollment (Morris, 2016; U.S. DOE, 2021). Finally, as identities converge and overlap, disparities are notably more severe (e.g., Black students with disabilities; Black and LGBTQ); Annamma et al., 2017; Snapp & Russell, 2016).

School reliance on exclusionary discipline begins in pre-school where disproportionality is higher than at any other grade level and continues through graduation (Wymer et al., 2020). In urban schools, 40% of Black boys experience exclusion from the classroom by age nine (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Black children have been arrested on school grounds and taken to the police station as early as *six-years-old* (Morris, 2016). Scholars have illuminated an array of contributors to exclusionary discipline, including oppressive school structures, educator biases, limited behavioral management training, lack of cultural sensitivity and inclusion, subjective-based interpretations of misbehavior, and adverse child experiences and trauma (Hirschfield, 2018; Jo-

seph et al., 2020; Kirkpatrick et al., 2020; Milner IV et al., 2018; Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Furthermore, zero-tolerance policies have radically altered the school environment, while solidifying the school reliance on discipline and safety measures that coalesce oppressive domains of capitalism and racism (Casella, 2018; Welch & Payne, 2018).

Zero-tolerance policies mandated disciplinary action for student possession of a weapon. These policies spread across the country in 1990s, then policies expanded to accommodate disciplinary action for drugs and alcohol, meanwhile administrator discretion emerged (Black, 2016; Hirschfield, 2018). Alongside the growing trends in exclusionary discipline, mechanisms of school surveillance have skyrocketed, leading to increases in metal detectors, security cameras, police officers, and oppressive surveillance tactics in classrooms (Fisher & Hennessy, 2017; Hope, 2018; Taylor, 2018). Collectively, surveillance tactics disproportionately target minoritized youth and are increasingly relied upon in urban schools, likely adding to the oppressive and alienating experiences that youth endure (Kupchik, 2016; Welch & Payne, 2018).

The ramifications of exclusionary disciplinary have been shown to stymie academic achievement due to increases grade retention, drop-out, juvenile justice involvement, and incarceration rates—more aptly depicted as the school-to-prison nexus (Fabelo et al., 2011; Mallett, 2016; Nocella et al., 2017; Noltemeyer et al., 2017; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Further, disciplinary tactics have not been shown to be effective in curtailing behavioral infractions (Okonofua et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2016). Conversely, these punitive strategies have been shown to *increase* student behavioral obstructions—contrary to the intended effects of discipline (Amemiya et al., 2020). Discipline is predominately administered for trivial offenses, including absenteeism, truancy, minor behavioral offenses, and subjective-based infractions—driven by biases and stereotypes—such as clothing and hairstyle variations (Anderson et al., 2019; Allen, 2017; Annamma et al., 2019; Neal-Jackson 2018; Neal-Jackson, 2020). These trends lead to the pathologization of students and may detach educators from a compassionate understanding of the developmental needs of students (Annamma, 2017). Collectively, these points underscore the need for relationship promotion to reduce biases and stereotypes, while strengthening teacher-student relationships to help curtail misbehavior (Okonofua et al., 2016).

In the classroom, the working conditions of teachers may confound equitable reform efforts and perpetuate the reliance on discipline. For example, the high-stakes test-based culture may demand unobtainable behavioral parameters of youth—which may be punitively reinforced by teachers due to their efforts to adhere to the rigid academic culture (Au, 2010; Giroux, 2009). Pre-service teacher education programs often lack crucial aspects of racial socialization, knowledge of racial stress, and behavioral management strategies (Matias, 2016; Milner IV, 2015; Stevenson, 2014). Additionally, teachers often experience difficult working conditions shaped by a rigid academic culture, high caseloads and overcrowded classrooms, low salaries, limited resources, and high-stress environments—evidenced by the recent working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mitchell, 2021). Clearly, teachers may benefit from elevated supports to help structurally re-align toward holistic mechanisms and relationship-rich classrooms (Mitchell & Greer, 2022). Finally, our understanding of youth behavior and disciplinary processes may be confounded by media narratives.

### **Media Influence on Education**

Longitudinally, the media has brought a sustained impact on school systems. First, the constructions of youth violence in the media helped to fuel the creation of zero-tolerance policies

in schools (Curran, 2019; Heitzeg, 2009; Jenson & Howard, 1998; Snyder & Sickmund, 1996; Stahl, 2009). This was achieved, in part, through the sensationalized media depictions of school shootings (Hong et al., 2011). Widespread societal fear—as facilitated by the media—reinforced stereotypes and biases, operationalizing the current structure of schools enmeshed in safety and surveillance-based tactics such as police (Casella, 2018; Kupchik, 2016; Welch & Payne, 2018). Even with the notable influence of the media on schools, there has been a dearth of literature that examines the relationship between news coverage and exclusionary discipline. Fields (2006) studied discipline as represented in the news, uncovering widespread bias related to selection, omission, headlines, names, photos, and word choices.

The portrayal of an “academic achievement gap” in the media serves to normalize academic inequities, positioning White students as superior, while circumventing structural explanations of inequities (Annamma et al., 2013; Eate et al., 2017; Gregory & Mosley, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The “suspension gap” conforms to a similar narrative that portrays White students as well-behaved, obedient, and a stature to aspire to (Borman et al., 2022). These deficit-based narratives have ties to racist ideologies that may be divorced from the structural context that drives these statistically inferred differences in “behavior.” Further, any notion of a gap reifies the idea that equity can be achieved if only these gaps were to close. As these deficit-based narratives dominant school systems and the research literature, they are then recapitulated by the mainstream news media (Giroux, 2022). As the achievement gap narrative ensues, a false and racist notion depicts minoritized youth as unable to keep up academically, often without consideration to the systemic realities of widespread oppression and racism (Gordon, 2016; Horsford & Grosland, 2013). These pathologizing and stigmatizing representations of youth may perpetuate biased narratives that, in turn, influence educators, tarnish relationships, and sustain the reliance on punitive disciplinary tactics (Annamma, 2017). Meanwhile, the corporate control of the media maintains a network of influence to reinforce these deficit-based narratives and sustain stereotypes (Saltman, 2016).

The ongoing racist, biased, and stereotypical depictions in film, news, television, and books seep into the school environment in pervasive and invisible patterns (Arntson, 2020; Bryant, 2020; Kendall, 2020; Kendi, 2019). For instance, White savior educational films (e.g., *Freedom Writers*) reinforce themes of violence, and narratives of impoverished and delinquent youth, while positioning proximity to whiteness as the only avenue for reform and intervention (Dixson & Linz, 2000; Yosso & Garcia, 2010). Media portrayals may drive stereotypical narratives of youth, potentially damaging relationships, fueling discipline inequities, and upending reform interventions (Gordon, 2016). That said, the relationship between media discourse and school practices is an underexplored area of research. As previous scholarship explores these distinct topics separately, we move towards an intersecting interrogation of media influence and punitive educational practices and structures.

### **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to analyze mainstream newspaper coverage of exclusionary discipline. Specifically, we examine the year following the U.S. DOE (2014) guidance for schools to reduce discipline and improve practices and policies. This point of time offers an important point of inquiry and analysis for several reasons. First, this was the first and only time period when the federal government offered support to schools in addressing and reforming punitive exclusionary climates in attempts to reduce disciplinary disparities. Second, little is known about how the

media may play a supporting or confounding role amid disciplinary reform interventions. We explore how media narratives are constructed amid federally supported reform efforts. Much can be learned from this time-period, to inform future and ongoing efforts to improve climate, reduce the reliance on discipline, while supporting young people and schools more holistically. Three research questions operationalize this study:

1. How are students of varied identities and experiences constructed in newspaper articles (e.g., race, culture, language, age, ability, sex, and gender)?
2. How are themes of discipline represented in newspaper coverage?
3. In what ways may the elements of race, power and privilege in these articles reinforce the punitive school environment associated with discipline (e.g., what voices, ideologies, and norms are represented)?

### Theoretical Framework

To support and guide our analysis, we leverage Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013) and News Framing Theory (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). This intersecting theoretical framework helps us attend to preexisting educational structures and inequities, how news media discourse is framed, and the intersections and relations between these domains of inquiry.

#### Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used to frame the scope of this study, contextualize findings, and develop implications within the necessary context of ongoing educational inequities facing minoritized youth. Several tenets guide this approach. The first CRT tenet used to situate our analysis is the *permanence of racism*, which observes the endemic nature of racism in schools and society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Racism is evident in both covert and overt forms, including biases and normative structures (Gillborn, 2008; Gillborn, 2010). The second tenet of CRT we operationalize in this study is *social construction*, which frames race as a product of societal construction, thought, and relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Social construction is useful to assessing media constructions and the orientation of discourse, including color-evasive techniques, and strategic efforts to reinforce power and control. The third tenet of CRT deployed in our study is *interest convergence*, which illustrates that progress to alleviate racism may be stymied unless interests converge toward mutually beneficial goals (Bell, 1980). We consider how the media facilitates, disrupts, or discourages the attainment of mutually beneficial goals and action. The fourth tenet of CRT guiding our analysis is *intersectionality*, which situates the layers of experiences, intersecting identities, and overlapping systems of oppression that merge macro level structures and micro level practices to underscore variations in youth experiences and educator practices (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Intersectionality can help to illuminate the intertwined power structures and the variations in youth and educator perceptions—and how these aspects may be dictated by oppressive structures (Collins, 2019). The fifth CRT tenet we utilize is the *counter-narrative*, which aims to amplify underrepresented voices, often marginalized and silenced (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Counter-narratives can help to frame the extent of inclusion in news articles and the variation in narrative perspectives. Collectively, these tenets frame the importance of gathering and exploring youth and family perspectives.

## **News Framing Theory**

To optimize the theoretical lens of CRT, News Framing Theory is utilized. Frames shape meaning-making and interpretation, and as such are a useful analytical tool for understanding discursive representations (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Specific frames are used to construct news representations—a process subjected by a range of influencers and dominant ideologies (Fairclough, 1995). Variations in frames may be engendered by power structures as well as degrees of journalistic agency. Lecheler & de Vreese (2019) outline three levels affecting journalist agency, individual, organizational, and macro. These factors (e.g., where the news comes from) shape the autonomy and opinions of journalists to varying degrees, however the news coverage often follows predictable patterns and norms that may lead to homogenized reporting and institutional production (Cook, 1998). Power structures, dominant ideologies, and political factors may dictate frames in significant ways (Cook, 1998; van Dijk, 2008). For instance, the media often receives their by-lines or topic ideas in discursive form—whereby the intended reporting outcomes may be predetermined – confounded by varied journalistic autonomy (Cook, 1998; van Dijk, 1998). The combination of CRT and News Framing Theory is used to support the analysis of exclusionary discipline as represented in the media.

## **Methodology**

Our methodological framework entails critical discourse techniques with support from the theoretical lenses of critical race and news framing theories. This methodological framework guides our analytical inquiry of disciplinary themes represented in newspaper articles and helps to contextualize findings. Critical discourse techniques are used to examine the construction of disciplinary themes in mainstream newspapers. Discourse represents the structure of language and how meaning is conveyed to the reader (Gee, 2011). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is grounded in poststructuralism and explicates meaning by situating discourse within broader social, political, and contextual factors (Gee, 2011). There is a growing utility for CDA to assess how language-in-use may upend or facilitate social justice endeavors, by unearthing discursive impact across micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Jen et al., 2021; Willey-Sthapit et al., 2020). Tools to unpack this relationship and examine elements of power and privilege are embedded within CDA techniques through seven analytical angles to assess discourse amid historical, social, political, and cultural contexts.

## **Data and Sample**

To analyze newspaper representations of exclusionary discipline we obtained (n = 64) newspaper articles (see Supplemental Table 1).<sup>1</sup> Typically, suspensions are the most relied upon disciplinary approach in schools, and as such, we oriented our newspaper database search toward suspensions to capture their prevalence in newspaper articles. Using the NexiUni database, we gathered articles between January 1, 2015, and January 1, 2016, using search phrases that encapsulated “suspensions,” “exclusionary discipline,” and “schools” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The inclusion time period accounted for one year of time to transgress, allowing schools adequate time to adapt and implement changes based upon federal guidance. Our inclusion criteria

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1. Supplemental Tables 1 & 2 can be found in the Appendix.

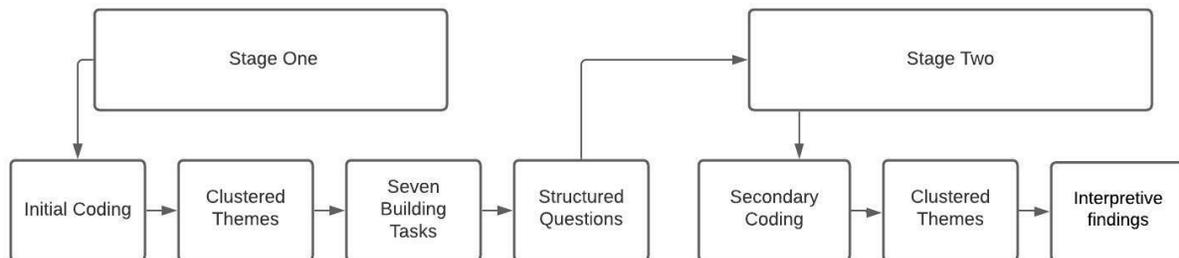
focused on data and geographical saturation to maximize substantive content with respect to the available articles.

The sample was guided by the predominance of newspaper coverage and NexiUni database offerings of newspapers in the United States. Our initial search garnered 294 articles; however, articles were clustered around several newspapers. Florida and Pennsylvania had 114 articles between the two states, representing nearly half of the articles in the database. Considering the predominance of articles in these two states, we selected two newspaper outlets to represent both liberal (L) and conservative (C) leaning newspapers from each state (Florida and Pennsylvania). A total of 215 articles were screened and excluded due to lack of substantive content or relevance to our research questions. Seventy-nine articles were downloaded from NexiUni and then uploaded to Dedoose Analytic Software. An additional 18 articles were later excluded due to lack of substantive disciplinary content. Finally, an expanded search aimed to increase geographic diversity in our sample, through a targeted search of newspaper coverage in the western region of the U.S., leading to the inclusion of four more articles. Our sample of newspapers leaned liberal, however, both conservative and moderate news outlets were selected leading to (N = 64) articles across eleven newspaper outlets: *Tampa Tribune* (16%; C), *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (16%; L), *The New York Times* (16%; L), *Daily Oklahoman* (12%; C), *Tampa Bay Times* (16%; L), *Chicago Herald* (9%; L), *Pittsburgh Tribune* (9%; C), *Salt Lake Tribune* (2%; L), *Deseret Morning News* (2%; R), *The Bakersfield Californian* (1%; M), and *Spokesman Review* (1%; M).

## Analysis

All articles were uploaded onto Dedoose Analytic Software version 8.3.43. Data analysis process entailed two stages and seven sequential steps presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Critical Discourse Process**



First, each article was reviewed and inductively coded beginning with initial coding techniques (Saldaña, 2021). Initial stages of coding invoke the iterative process of gathering and denoting concepts and patterns within the text (Saldaña, 2021). This technique is useful to collecting and analyzing linguistic sequences to familiarize researchers with the text. Examples of initial codes include student behavioral problems; disobedience; teacher lack of control; discipline reform; and boys falling behind. In step two, initial coding techniques led to clustered coding to encapsulate substantive themes (Saldaña, 2021). Clustered coding techniques entail the process of moving from initial coding to overall categories of data (Saldaña, 2021). Third, Gee's seven build-

ing tasks are examined alongside developing themes and research questions (see Gee, 2004). Specifically, language-in-use is explored across factors of significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge (Gee, 2004). This stage is used to inform and develop structured questions—useful to move from substantive themes to dominant discursive trends (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009; see Supplemental Table 1). Once structured questions are designed, member checking and peer debriefing sessions established consistency through several stages of revisions to the structured questions (Supplemental Table 1). Subsequently, stage two of the coding process began. During the second stage of analysis – evaluating structured questions—themes of discursive absence were also noted. Specifically, any details of relevance that appear to be omitted from articles, including voices, perspectives, ideologies, and language (Gee, 2004; Richardson, 2006). This led the final step, putting all elements together, and interpreting the findings in the context of our research questions and guided theory.

### **Reflexivity**

The primary author is a White, male, doctoral candidate in social work. My scholarly interests were shaped by my ongoing disciplinary experiences in elementary and high school. In recognition that my “misbehavior” was often ostracized, subsequently leading to an array of mental health diagnoses—in effect, the school’s attempt to explain my behavior. Never questioned was the school climate, teaching pedagogy, relationships, trauma, or developmental needs. These experiences have fueled my desire to engage in research aimed at reducing the school’s reliance on discipline by promoting relationships amid equitable and inclusive schools.

The second author is a Black, male, doctoral candidate in education. His interest in this topic stems from his youth worker background within school and community-based education spaces. Working with young people from various backgrounds constructs the author’s perspective on analyzing the racial underpinnings prevalent across school discipline practices. Additionally, relating identity to minoritized youth primarily impacted by the school discipline provides some insight in understanding the experiences portrayed in the media. Awareness of these dynamics is critical when limiting researcher bias and moving forward in analysis. The researcher’s passion for uplifting student voices assists in continuously pushing for a reimagining of the education system we want to see.

### **Findings**

The findings from our critical discourse analysis of exclusionary discipline represented in newspaper articles are presented below. We utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT) for interpreting and contextualizing findings around the tenets of permanence of racism, social construction, interest convergence, intersectionality, and counter-narratives.

#### **Permanence of Racism**

The CRT tenet, permanence of racism helped to illuminate themes of racism within newspaper coverage, including explicit and implicit forms in the articles analyzed. For example, Article 51 quoted a student saying: “Were stereotyped because of our skin color and where we come

from”. Meanwhile, Article 64 noted a more explicit form of racism: “A second-grade Native American student from St. George, Utah, was sent to the principal’s office for violating the school’s dress code standards. The boy was sporting a mohawk as part of his family’s Native American culture.”

The presence of racist sentiment was noted in reference to practice and policy, across public and charter schools [Articles 11; 17; 33; 45; 51; 63; 64]. Article 17 noted police violence: “Videos of a White sheriff’s deputy throwing a Black high school girl to the floor of a classroom.” Article 63 conveyed a traumatizing experience for a Black student:

Louisiana eighth grader who was arrested and booked for six days because he had thrown some skittles on the bus the day before. A school resource officer handcuffed him, dragged him out of class and offered to beat the snot out of him. The boy was charged with interference with an educational facility, and assault. The kid spent six days in a juvenile detention center before finally seeing a judge.

This article appears to note the severity of this incident; however, the discourse is still framed in a way that downplays the incident and responsibility of the officer. Additional reports note how the student was removed during a social studies test, and that the officer “threatened to beat the fuck out of him or have his son, who is the same age, do it for him” (King, 2015).

Article 45 captured the intersection of behavior, mental health, and discipline:

...said her son, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, was suspended 19 times last year, in first grade, and missed 26 days. Success [Academy] said her son was intellectually gifted but struggled with behavior, often hitting, kicking, biting, and spitting at other children and adults.

Rather than providing the mental health support needed, her son was continually excluded from education at a disturbing rate. While this article offers only anecdotal evidence of disparate treatment, scholars have alluded to problems facing minoritized youth with disabilities, and the lack of support alongside disproportionate exclusion (Annamma, 2017; Annamma et al., 2013; Annamma et al., 2019). Meanwhile, trends of academic “pushout” have also been previously articulated in the literature (Morris, 2016). These trends were also detected in newspaper coverage, and especially noteworthy in the exclusionary practices within charter schools [Articles 11; 33; 45]. For example, Article 44 quoted an administrator: “If you violate our code of conduct, you will be suspended.” As exclusionary pushout continues within schools, barriers that excluded youth from getting into schools were also noted. Article 33 noted this pattern of disparate exclusion in access to charter schools: “There are parents that want their kids to get a quality education, and they are applying and not being able to get into these schools.”

### **Social Construction: Deficit-Based Portrayals of Youth Behavior**

The CRT tenet, social construction helped to identify the discursive framing of youth identities. Articles privileged deficit-based constructions of racial identities, often through depictions of violent, disobedient, and out of control students. Statistics were consistently used to reinforce the notion of misbehaving students in a decontextualized frame, ultimately serving to justify the reliance on exclusionary practices and disparate treatment. Article 18 offers an exemplar: “The number of suspensions in Pittsburgh Public Schools dropped by 15 percent over the prior year, but

still more than 9,900 suspensions were issued, nearly three-fourths of them to black students.” Importantly, the quote above alludes to a positive trend—not elaborated upon—and seemingly used to reinforce stigmatizing and fear-based depictions of Black youth. Meanwhile, the decontextualized constructions of discipline often rely on statistical representations, serving to individualize the problem to behavioral variations and dismiss any structural or alternative explanations. In other words, the hyper-focus on data may reify the notion that the cause of discipline is due to misbehaving students. This narrative overlooks alternative explanations, including structural or institutional, ultimately stigmatizing schools and youth. This statistical framing justifies punishment and reinforces notions of misbehaving youth.

Article frames often relied upon the use of slander, blame, and an array of deficit-based constructions to depict youth. For instance, “chronic behavioral problems,” “rampant behavioral problems,” “not cooperating,” and “class disruption” were all used and often portrayed in a decontextualized fashion [Articles 14; 26; 31; 37; 50; 61]. Article 26 offers an exemplary of this newspaper framing strategy: “...St. Petersburg’s poorest, predominantly black elementary schools struggled in often violent classrooms as teachers received little training and even less help in keeping order.” The need to maintain classroom “order” is often privileged—consistent with previous research (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). In this context, violence is framed as any youth deviance from the normative (i.e., obedient) classroom structure.

Importantly, these frames and quotes were often decontextualized from the enduring educational inequities affecting minoritized youth in schools. Further, there is zero attempt to understand the behavior of youth, nor the perspective of those insinuating the misbehavior of students. That is, even if youth are, in fact, misbehaving, there is an opportunity to understand the behavior and to offer resources and support for youth and educators. The overly simplistic and reductionist framing is disconnected from the lived realities of both teachers and students, and justifies the continued reliance on exclusionary discipline, framed as a necessary response to student problems. Vavrus and Cole (2002) note the consistent oppositional framing between students and teachers – this pattern was consistently identified in newspaper articles analyzed. Meanwhile, teachers were depicted as having zero control, with autonomy dwindling in the context of discipline reform initiatives: “When students know they can do anything they want and not be suspended, they're going to do it” [Article 57].

### **Interest Convergence: *Portrayals of Violent Classrooms***

The CRT tenet, interest convergence helped to recognize the facilitators of educational inequity, reliance on discipline, and barriers to discipline reform efforts. Articles often privileged top-down expert narratives and bottom-up teacher perspectives to convey systemic violence in the school system (see Supplemental Table 2). First, top-down constructions were utilized—referring to dominant ideology and privileged elites—to frame a troubled, violent environment within schools. Framing strategies began with sensationalized article titles, including: “Put Cameras in School Classrooms” and “Protect Order in the Classroom” [Articles 13; 20]. Article 13 pushed back against a student bill of rights and discipline reform efforts, blaming school board members for siphoning control from schools.

Second, bottom-up framing was utilized—referring to teacher perspectives, control, and resistance to reform—with discursive tactics that privilege the maintenance of a punitive disciplinary structure in schools. Although the range of actors quoted in articles was limited (e.g., limited

student voice), articles revealed teacher strategies used to maintain disciplinary control in the classroom. Meanwhile, diminishing teacher agency and control was noted in articles due to a confluence of factors (see Supplemental Table 2). First, the aforementioned social constructions of students provided imagery to justify a need for discipline, while painting teachers as the victims of chaotic classrooms. Second, discipline reform in schools, including student bill of rights, efforts to reduce the school reliance on discipline in the classroom may further diminish perceived teacher agency. As teachers lose agency (real or perceived), resistance to disciplinary reform may be a natural by-product. Thus, increasing teacher resistance to discipline reform efforts may occur – a factor often underscored in articles [Articles 2; 11; 20; 26; 31; 61; 66]. As the school’s hierarchy of power exudes, teachers may subconsciously strive for dominance and power, whereby disciplinary control will be sought. Although only one article mentioned schools as “sites of control,” our findings conform to the idea of institutionalized power and dominance (van Dijk, 1993; Foucault, 1975). Supplemental Table 2 provides exemplar quotes of the cognitive threats on teacher control and agency, alongside harmful student portrayals.

### **Intersectionality**

The CRT tenet, intersectionality helped to assess the range of student experiences, and the extent to which articles allude to the wide range of influencers on behavior, teacher perspectives, and discipline. Articles briefly alluded to the intersectional influence on discipline, including the role of trauma, mental health, and explanations of misbehavior. Regardless of these trends, articles paid minimal attention to the nexus of student identities. Additionally, experiences of discipline were often individualized and disconnected from systems of oppression and domination in schools. On a positive note, Article 32 noted the need for crisis prevention and training to reduce suspensions and expulsions. A few articles referenced the need for diversity and cultural sensitivity training [Articles 40; 44; 53]. Some articles discussed the need for alternatives to discipline [Articles 9; 19; 36]. Primarily, articles alluded to intersectionality regarding discipline disparities, although descriptions were rather cursory:

Twenty-four percent of high school students with a disability and 27 percent of the lowest-performing high school students received out-of-school suspensions in 2013-14...It is not unusual for minority students and students with disabilities to receive a disproportionate share of expulsions, detentions and visits to the principal's office compared to their white peers and peers without disabilities. [Article 64]

Article 11 noted the lack of attention to intersectionality and the implications on policy:

At three dozen schools, there were no special rules covering the suspension or expulsion of children with disabilities, which the group said violated federal law. And in 25 instances, charter schools could suspend students for long periods without a hearing, which the group said violated the United States and New York State Constitutions, as well as state law.

While articles alluded to intersectional influences on discipline—most often at the intersection of race and ability—the discursive narratives were matter of fact and pushed back ever so slightly against problematizing the discipline rates of youth with disabilities. Overall, any alternative ex-

planations regarding the causes of exclusionary discipline were minimal. One article cited the intersection of race and poverty but reified the notion of youth misbehavior: “Boys tend to have more discipline problems than girls overall. But the difference is much bigger for Black and Latino children—and more than half of the difference is because of poverty and related problems” [Article 5]. Even as poverty is simplistically articulated as causal to rates of discipline, the narrative is still largely driven through a deficit-based lens, noting “discipline problems” and “related problems” although it is unclear exactly what this entails. Importantly, any connection to the systems of power and oppression that shape disparate intersectional influence was absent across articles.

### **Counter-narratives**

The CRT tenet, counter-narratives helped to examine where student voices or contrary perspectives were represented or omitted in newspaper coverage. Overall, the consideration of student perspectives, and coverage representing youth and family perspectives were rarely used. Article 25 considered the youth perspective from the deficit-based teacher narrative:

He [the student] wants to be suspended so he can go home, because the classwork is too difficult for him. Another said he would be ashamed to face a group of his peers to explain and justify the actions that got him suspended from school.

In this case, not only was the cause of discipline associated to the individual student, but it is conveyed as utterly intentional, in addition to the notion that the coursework is “too difficult” for him. The student perspective is non-existent. In other words, youth are only referenced to justify the continued reliance on discipline. The deficiency narratives are used to convey a pervasive theme of behavioral problems and student mediocrity. Collectively, newspaper coverage privileged administrators and educators, with students and families grossly underrepresented across articles. In addition, hearing more from teachers would also be beneficial to understanding the school environment, including both punitive and reform-based strategies. One administrator tries to clarify family challenges associated with discipline: “It's actually a crisis if you're a (working) parent of a young student and your child gets suspended from school” [Article 10]. The empathetic and in-depth consideration of youth perspectives was continually overlooked and downplayed amid portrayals of deviance.

### **Discussion**

From 2014-2018, the U.S. Department of Education provided guidance and resources for schools to reduce racial disparities in exclusionary discipline and improve school climate. The Trump administration rescinded federal guidance; however, this initiative has received limited scholarly inquiry (U.S. DOE, 2018). In this study, we explore the discourse of exclusionary discipline as represented in mainstream newspaper articles during the second year of the federal initiative, 2015-2016. Critical discourse analysis revealed persistent challenges in the school environment, including problematic constructions of youth identities, dominant concerns from teacher and administrators, and barriers to disciplinary reform alternatives. Summative findings highlight themes, including explicit and implicit forms of racism, deficit-based constructions of youth identities, and waning teacher autonomy and control. Meanwhile, alternative explanations of disci-

pline and behavior were underdiscussed. Specifically, references to structural inequities, intersectional influence, and youth and family voices were mostly absent across news coverage. Collectively, news framing tactics led to a conglomerate representation or intertextual discourse (Dunn & Neumann, 2016) that portrays youth—particularly racially minoritized youth—as disobedient and violent, with no choice for teachers but to maintain punitive practices. Furthermore, the discourse related to federal support often reinforced the deficit-based narratives of youth and depicted schools grappling with strategies to “handle unruly students” [Article 57].

Newspaper discourse often maintained ahistorical and de-contextualized representations, minimizing the understanding of youth behavior, and overshadowing potential alternatives to the punitive discipline structure. Students were framed as deviant or reckless and teachers were constructed within a state of constant fear while challenged to maintain order in chaotic classrooms (Harwood, 2006; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). In addition, alternative understandings of youth behavior, teacher disciplinary reform strategies, and the educating institution were often absent from discussion. Articles’ absence of structural considerations serves to reify the framing of youth disobedience (Joseph et al., 2021). For example, researchers have illuminated the role of educator bias in disciplinary practices, however as newspaper articles consistently constructed youth as “dangerous” and “out of control,” the focus on educator bias or relationship promotion – among other important structural influencers was circumvented (Allen, 2017; Annamma et al., 2019; Morris, 2016; Neal-Jackson, 2020; Raible & Irizarry, 2010).

Consistent with previous research, newspaper article representations of the classroom environment often constructed teachers and their classroom management strategies in ways that shape, sustain, and perpetuate punishment (Milner IV et al. 2018). For example, some teachers voiced *resistance* to discipline reform interventions and alternatives to discipline. Articles revealed that teacher resistance is largely due to fears of diminishing classroom control and teacher agency. Additionally, the way in which reform and interventions are implemented—often top-down without teacher consent and input—may exacerbate teacher feelings of dwindling control and agency. Further, there may be a link between teacher agency and behavioral management strategies; underscoring a need for culturally responsive management strategies aimed to facilitate engagement through positive framing and critical reflexivity (Milner IV, 2015). Kirkpatrick and colleagues (2020) note as little as one class or module in a behavioral management course may be all that is required for pre-service educators. Articles consistently circumvented any focus on classroom engagement, behavior management strategies, and competencies of teachers. Previous research has found that classroom engagement strategies may be effective in reducing “misbehavior” (Gregory et al., 2015). Yet, articles maintained a hyper-focus on youth deviance and deficiency-based narratives as both the causal explanation of high rates of punishment and the appropriate target of reform.

### Implications

The deficit-based constructions of youth identities in mainstream newspaper coverage may affect both the future development of youth in schools and the treatment they receive. Stereotypes and biases are perpetuated by the persistence of fear-based depictions of groups, therefore as the narratives of disruptive and violent students ensue, stereotypes and bias may be reinforced (Annamma et al., 2019). In the articles analyzed, we noted consistent depictions of disruptive students, meanwhile this discourse intersected with racialized portrayals of youth, such as the over-reliance on quantitative statistics. Further, youth and family voices and perspectives were absent across

articles. The lack of youth voice has been noted during disciplinary processes in schools, ultimately serving to align with teacher perspectives and administrative control (Neal-Jackson, 2020). The conglomerate of deficit-based constructions, minimal structural or institutional emphasis on inequities, and teacher resistance to move beyond the punitive structure may sustain and perpetuate the disparate and exclusionary treatment of youth. The impact may be most detrimental for minoritized youth. Meanwhile, the intertextual nature of exclusionary discipline discourse may justify the continued school reliance on punitive measures. As youth continue to be depicted from a deficit-based lens, exclusionary practices are justified, and disciplinary alternatives are negated from discussion (Love & Beneke, 2021). The only alternatives to the disciplinary structure were posed with reference to reforming students, teaching them appropriate behavior, and operationalizing their obedience in classrooms. That is, youth were framed as the problem and strategically positioned as the target for reform.

Articles noted ongoing teacher resistance to discipline interventions and reform alternatives, which offers several implications for school disciplinary research and reform. First, more research is needed to better understand teacher perspectives on discipline, regarding punitive strategies, reform, and alternatives to discipline. For instance, what are the components of teacher resistance to disciplinary alternatives? The teacher perspective is necessary to understand and value because they play a crucial role in both operationalizing discipline and implementing reform or alternative measures. Thus, successful reform can either be supported by or hampered by teachers. Furthermore, if discipline reform interventions proceed in the face of teachers and without their input and perspective, then barriers are likely to occur.

The teacher perspective is vital to uplift because they are often forced to manage classroom behavior, facilitate interventions and reform endeavors, often from a top-down (i.e., researcher or administrator imposed) purview. Furthermore, the equitable treatment of youth in classrooms begins with equitable treatment of teachers through valuing their autonomy and persistent dedication to education. Thus, we must be cautious not to reify the oppositional stance between teachers and students that is often commonplace in schools (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Moving forward, interests must converge to reduce the reliance on discipline, and design reform interventions of mutually beneficial nature. That is, how are youth and teachers playing a role in the construction of reform interventions, and how can both groups benefit from such endeavors. If interests are aligned and co-constructed, then relationship barriers can be abolished.

### **Recommendations**

In light of our findings and in alignment with previous research that outlines the negative ramifications of exclusionary discipline on positive youth development, three recommendations are offered: (a) enhanced support for teachers and youth, (b) examining and understanding the school environment, and (c) cultural shift toward inclusion. We propose these strategies to help engender cultural shifts rather than impose additional control-based reform that siphons teacher and youth autonomy in an effort to re-align with holistic mechanisms of support that move beyond punitive, pathologizing, and reactionary responses to youth behavior. This shift must be supported through narrative and perspective shifts regarding youth behavior. Finally, our recommendations are aimed at schools rather than media outlets—as the media tends to replicate dominant perspectives and practices (Cook, 1998).

## **Enhanced Support**

Enhancing support for teachers and youth must be within our continued mission in schools and classrooms. This recommendation is not novel; however, the mechanisms and strategies of support can be reinvigorated. For example, the difficult working conditions that teachers endure coupled with the limitations of pre-service education (Matias, 2016) underscores the need for additional support-based professionals in classrooms, such as school social workers. We suggest school social workers given their ecological, trauma-informed, and justice orientations in training, practice, and utility for procuring support-based classrooms (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020; Crutchfield et al., 2020; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). Neither youth nor teachers should face blame regarding the punitive reliance on discipline, however both parties could be supported in environments that promote relationship-rich curriculums and positive youth development (Brendtro et al., 2019). Additional support in classrooms could aid teachers in building and incorporating youth voice (Bell, 2010), youth participatory action paradigms (Radina & Schwartz, 2019), trauma-informed student focus (Joseph et al., 2021), and relationships and cultural responsiveness (Milner et al., 2019; Okonofua et al., 2019). School mental health professionals (e.g., school social worker) may offer a critical role in this capacity, potentially supporting teachers in the classroom, and better understanding behavior at a time of disciplinary action (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Griffith & Tyner, 2019). Collectively, as youth are increasingly heard and respect takes precedence over punishment – empathy, patience and understanding can occur to build relationships and sustain inclusivity. However, enhanced support must be supported and sustained by a re-examination of the school environment.

## **Examining and Understanding the School Environment**

Mechanisms of enhanced support in classrooms for youth and teachers must be coupled with a deepened examination and understanding of the school environment. Meeting and addressing the needs of youth begins with understanding their behavior through non-judgmental and inclusive frameworks (Brendtro et al., 2019). For example, the continued reliance on high-stakes testing sustains an alienating, oppressive, and exclusionary culture, while also diminishing teacher agency and autonomy (Au, 2010; Giroux, 2022). Understanding the school environment means a deepened attention to dominated norms, cultures, values, beliefs that perpetuate a reliance on punitive, pathologizing, negative, and deficit-based tendencies—much of which we saw recapitulated in news media discourse (Annamma et al., 2019; Love & Beneke, 2021). In this study, we analyzed media representations of discipline, however even amid the abundance of deficit-based and discriminatory narratives of discipline, it is important not to blame journalists or the media. This snapshot in time is important to understand and inform future reform efforts because even considering the federal government's stated mission to help schools realign toward more equitable and inclusive practices, the pushback, resistance, and enduring deficit-based trends endured. Clearly, one of the most important areas of reform that should align with federal frameworks aimed at equity and disciplinary reduction efforts are the shifts in discourse. Discursive shifts begin by shifting our thinking of youth and moving beyond antiquated frameworks rooted in deficit, pathology, and criminality.

## **Cultural Shift Toward Inclusion**

In light of the previous two points, changes in discourse, practices, perspectives, and treatment of youth may benefit from a more holistic and all-encompassing shift. Thus, future efforts in disciplinary reform may consider the influence of language, prevailing ideological perspectives, culture, and discursive trends. This means, we cannot abolish punitive practices without examining the beliefs, values, and perspectives that underlie these efforts. A narrative that frames young people as needing to be fixed or controlled must be uprooted and replaced with a narrative of empathy, understanding, and opportunity for growth. Behavior offers a window into the needs of youth, and the more we punish and exclude behavior that fails to adhere with the dominant culture of obedience, the more we will alienate and oppress the development of youth (Mate & Mate, 2022).

One recommendation to fulfill a cultural shift toward inclusion is to move beyond the deficit-based narratives of youth and toward asset-based appraisals (Love & Beneke, 2021; Mitchell & Greer, 2022; Valencia, 2010). As we begin to develop a recognition for student strengths, skill sets, and move away from judgement and fear-based descriptions, student-teacher relationships and classroom climate will likely improve (Sterrett, 2012). An asset-based focus may also be useful in discipline reform interventions, rather than continuing to rely on “fixing” student deficits and curtailing their “problem behaviors.” Further, teachers should not be expected to bear the brunt of reform interventions, and as noted earlier, should be supported in the promotion of positive and relationship-rich classrooms. We must support an enhanced perspective on exclusionary discipline from a well-rounded perspective that supports culturally informed and youth-centered classroom strategies to build compassion, engagement, and understanding (Milner IV et al., 2018). To do this, the focus on structural inequities should be strengthened, including a deepened understanding of normative behaviors that deviate from typical patterns of obedience – to become more accepting and tolerant of neurodiversity, cultural differences, and commonplace youth behavior (Brendtro et. al, 2019; Mate & Mate, 2022). Shifting the narrative means strengthening our understanding, and re-defining how we talk, act, and think about the discourse that we create.

## **Limitations**

This study should be understood in the context of a few limitations. First, the low sample may not offer representativeness and limits generalizability. However, this unique sample does allow for a localized view on disciplinary discourse, including mechanisms of reform and school-based challenges. Second, the data gathered is several years old and may not represent the most current trends in schools. Our aim was to review data after the Department of Education’s (2014) guidance to address discipline inequity. Furthermore, more research is needed to understand changes in schools to address discipline since the federal guidance was offered in 2014. The sample obtained was impacted by database limitations, which led to a disproportionately urban sample, and although, political newspaper variation was sought, articles were more than 50% liberal. Nevertheless, even with the majority slightly skewed newspaper sample, the coverage was disproportionately negative, which is a disappointing finding given the predominance of liberal news sources. Fourth, the influence of a global pandemic is likely to change the infrastructure of schools, impacting student behavior and themes of discipline for the foreseeable future. COVID-19 may confound the relevance of this data; however, it also frames a continued need to better understand students, behavior, and student experiences in pre and post pandemic schools (Mitchell, 2021).

Our findings should be interpreted within the context of these limitations; however, we encourage more research in this area.

### Conclusion

Schools are still deeply enmeshed with deficit-based systems that negatively construct youth identities and target them in need of reform. These trends may stimulate teacher resistance to disciplinary alternatives and further justify the continued reliance on a punitive disciplinary structure. While the barriers to education equity may be substantial, there is hope in sight through an informed awareness and assessment of the educational landscape. As we continue to shift the paradigm away from student deficits and toward student assets, we can re-align schools toward equity. At the height of these endeavors toward equity include harnessing the voice of students, families, educators, in order to cohesively unite our efforts toward compassion, well-being, and inclusive support throughout the school system.

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### Appendix: Supplemental Tables

**Table 1: *Discourse of Exclusionary Discipline: Structured Questions***

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- How are school suspensions and discipline constructed? (significance; practices)
- What identities, voices, and discourse are being privileged to uphold the status quo? (identities; politics)
- What factors are implicated as contributors to school suspensions and discipline? (practices; connections)
- What changes in the school system are being considered? (signs systems and knowledge)
- How are student voices being constructed in these texts? (identities; relationships)
- How are schools represented and portrayed in these texts? (relationships; connections; politics; identities)
- What role does school leadership play in shaping reform discourse? (connections; relationships; politics)
- How is the perfect student idealized or constructed in these articles? (significance; identities)

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**Table 2: *Findings of Critical Discourse Analysis: Sustaining the Punitive Disciplinary Structure***

Sub-Themes	Exemplar Quote	Article
Teacher control	“Order in the classroom shouldn’t be scarified.”	20
Teacher control	I hear from fellow teachers that students are taking liberties with smaller infractions like wearing hats or having their cellphones out, and they feel more empowered by our inability to write them up for smaller infractions, which can lead to bigger infractions	2
Teacher control	Some teachers say they feel pressured to ignore some disciplinary infractions as they work under policies that are meant to cut down on the number of suspensions.	20
Teacher control	New policy is sought to scrap the district’s existing code of conduct in favor of a new disciplinary policy that would reduce the number of offenses for which a student can be suspended and the length of those suspensions. Last week, a group of teachers from Roosevelt Middle School in the Oklahoma City district told The Oklahoman that student misconduct went largely unchecked over several months of the just-concluded school year at the direction of district official	66
Teacher control	He doesn’t think teachers will get the support they need to carry out student interventions	4
Teacher control	It’s worth a try, even if it puts more burden on over-stressed teachers and administrators to solve problems they didn’t create.	14
Teacher control; Student portrayal	Meanwhile, more than half of teachers who took the union survey said they are required to tolerate offending behavior	31
Teacher control	“Teachers already have enough to do.”	31

Teacher control; student portrayal	Teachers filed complaints about a lack of support when they reported being bitten, scratched and kicked by students	50
Teacher control; student portrayal	Teacher was "seriously injured" during a recent fight at the high school and another school employee was threatened by a student	44
Teacher control; student portrayal	Many describe chaotic classroom settings and said they feel like babysitters who spend more time trying to control defiant students than planning and teaching."	31
Teacher control; student portrayal	Greater focus on keeping students in school has led to disruptive and unchecked student behaviors.	61
Teacher control; student portrayal	We're told that referrals would not require suspension unless there was blood," a teacher reported. "Students who are referred and do not seem to worry about consequences are seldom taken out of class, even for a talk with an administrator.	31
Student portrayal	Kelly Elementary School in Wilkinsburg reported 43 incidents to the state last year, including complaints of assault, disorderly conduct, fighting and rioting. Bellevue Elementary School in the Northgate School District reported 10, including one bomb threat and two threats to a student or school staff member. Penn Hills Elementary School reported 52 incidents, including vandalism, arson, theft, and possession of a knife.	50