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Lost and Turned Out

Academic, Social, and Emotional Experiences of Students Excluded From School

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This study examines the experiences of 37 students who were suspended or expelled from school and were attending an urban public alternative high school in the northeast. The analysis specifically focuses on the loss of classroom instruction time and its implications for academic achievement and on the socioemotional experiences of students excluded from the educational mainstream. This study draws on survey data and the author's own experience as a teacher at the school to show how school exclusion was related to students' academic and social and emotional well-being. Implications for further research on this topic are explored.

Keywords: school exclusions; school suspension; school expulsion; school discipline; alternative schools

On a Tuesday morning in February, a boy I had never seen before appeared in my classroom. He was wearing a short, white, down jacket with a hood. Wearing hoods was not allowed. He self-consciously tugged on its fur-lined edges to hide as much of his face as possible. Visible were his dark braids, the caramel-colored skin of his forehead, and his eyes, which were cast downward. He looked at no one.

"Hi. I'm Ms. Brown," I said, in greeting. "What's your name?"

He replied in a voice so small that it was almost imperceptible.

"I'm sorry. What's your name again?"

"Adilson," he said from behind his wall of fur.

"Welcome. What we're working on is a five-paragraph, persuasive essay. You can get started by. . . ."

As I explained the assignment, Adilson lifted his eyes. They were blue. They were clouded by the unmistakable veil of disorientation.

"I been out of school for three months," he said.

Adilson was one of the tens of thousands of young people suspended or expelled from U.S. public schools during the course of each academic year.

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They are disproportionately Black and Latino, poor and male. Many have attended struggling schools that have not served them well and have experienced significant academic difficulties and alienation from school (Gordon, Della Piana, & Keleher, 2001). Very often, these youth are already among the most socially and academically marginalized in our nation's school systems. As my study will show, these exclusionary disciplinary practices only further exacerbate these conditions (Skiba & Noam, 2002). The aim of this article is to examine some of the academic and socioemotional challenges of students who have been suspended and expelled from school and the implications for their schooling experiences.

Much of the current research on school exclusion focuses on the proliferation of "zero-tolerance" policies that make suspension and expulsion mandatory sanctions for the violation of certain school rules. This research focuses on documenting the misuse or overuse of these sanctions, particularly among students of color. This work has been particularly vital in drawing attention to race- and class-based disparities in school exclusion (i.e., suspension, expulsion, and other practices the push students out of school). Despite a growing body of research on school exclusion, little attention has been given to the experiences of the many students who continue to be cast out of "mainstream" schools, particularly in the U.S. context.

There are several possible explanations for this. First, research highlighting the perspectives of students themselves, which would provide valuable insights into the effects of school exclusion on the lives of young people, is thin. Second, many students who are suspended and expelled have not done well academically and/or have excessive absences. The perception that students with histories of academic failure and truancy simply "do not want to learn" may preclude a sense of urgency in examining the compounding effects of school exclusion on their academic achievement. In addition, emphases on students excluded from school through disciplinary action as "disciplinary problems," rather than as learners, can lead to a greater focus on punishment and behavior modification than on academic learning.

Last, the alternative programs to which many of these students are sent are relatively invisible. Though the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has focused great attention on low-achieving students, it has largely pertained to more conventional institutions. According to Munoz (2005), large-scale reforms like NCLB "have failed to effectively consider the social, material, pedagogical, and cultural experiences of students located in alternative programs" (p. 6). These students, removed from the mainstream, are relegated to the "hidden world" (Kelly, 1993, p. 2) of alternative education, where their plight receives relatively little consideration in educational research.

Every day, teachers are presented with students who have been out of school for disciplinary reasons, often multiple times and/or for significant periods. Their prior experiences of exclusion may have left them, like Adilson, academically despairing and extremely wary of the very people and processes on which they are dependent for school success. Effectively addressing these issues requires an understanding of what actually happens to students in the wake of school exclusion, some of which can only be learned from young people themselves. The aim of this article is to examine some of the academic and socioemotional challenges of students who have been suspended and expelled from school and the implications for their schooling experiences.

Literature Review

School Exclusion as Disciplinary Action

In recent years, rates of suspension and expulsion have "increased dramatically" (Skiba, 2000, p. 13) as a means for removing children deemed disruptive from mainstream learning environments. Although suspensions and expulsions affect a minority of students, their numbers are striking. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003), in 2000, U.S. public schools meted out well more than 3 million suspensions and nearly 100,000 expulsions. This represents a vast number of instances of a child being removed from their everyday classroom environment for some period.

The length of time that a student can be excluded varies across states, though there are some consistencies across public school systems. The length of a short-term out-of-school suspension is between 1 and 10 days. However, in some states, the range is shorter for students under a certain age. A "long-term" suspension is 11 or more days out of school. Some states place limits on the number of days a student can be suspended and, therefore, do not permit expulsions, defined as a "permanent removal from school" or from a school system (Rossow & Parkinson, 1999, p. 3). In the district in which this study was conducted, *expulsion* referred to the removal of a student from their "home" school, customarily, but not always, for the remainder of the school year. A school expulsion could become permanent if the home school principal refused to readmit the student. Though length of time is often used to differentiate suspension from expulsion (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Rossow & Parkinson, 1999), this distinction does not always hold true in practice. The truer distinction between the two appears to be

whether or not a school is committed to providing a student with continued services after his or her exclusion.

As with time limits, distinctions between the types of infractions that merit suspension and expulsions are also unclear. In many school districts, particularly with the wide-spread adoption of zero-tolerance mandates, there is a clearly defined set of offences for which a student will be expelled. This customarily includes possession and/or use of a dangerous weapon or a controlled substance and assault and battery in school (Morrison et al., 2001; Schwartz & Rieser, 2001). Districts may also expel students arrested outside of school (Rossow & Parkinson, 1999). There are also other infractions outlined in school codes of discipline, for which the type of action to be taken—suspension, expulsion, or a nonexclusionary action—may not be clearly delineated. This often includes theft, vandalism, truancy, harassment, and disruption. This suggests a great potential for idiosyncrasies in the use of school exclusion.

In addition to its application, researchers also examine the effectiveness of exclusionary disciplinary action in relation to its purported purpose or purposes. The literature offers several purposes for suspending and expelling students, including punishing rule breakers, deterring misbehavior, and maintaining safety and order in school (Browne, 2001; Morrison et al., 2001; Taras et al., 2003). Most researchers agree that exclusion does, rightly or wrongly, punish students. Despite Rossow and Parkinson's (1999) contention that out-of-school suspension is viewed by many students as "an officially sanctioned school holiday" (p. 39), studies (including the present study) suggest that some students do feel punished by disciplinary exclusion (Morrison et al., 2001; Sekayi, 2001).

As a deterrent to misbehavior, the effectiveness of school exclusion is much more dubious. That their numbers have increased in recent years suggests that suspensions and expulsions are not dissuading rule breaking on any wide scale. Also, studies have consistently shown that "40% of school suspensions are due to repeat offenders" (Skiba, 2000, p. 16) and that a past suspension is a predictor of a future suspension. This was reflected in the present study, in which the vast majority of participants reported being suspended multiple times.

Exclusion as a strategy for school safety has also come into question. If a student poses a danger to another individual in school, removing him or her would undoubtedly be effective in addressing the immediate safety issue. However, Skiba and Knesting (2002) contend that at present suspension and expulsion polices and practices cannot be with any certainty correlated with greater "overall school safety" (p. 32) or improved student behavior. Researchers attribute this, and the suspension recidivism rate, to the fact that

school exclusion, in and of itself, offers students no help in addressing the behaviors that got them into trouble. Thus, some researchers advocate for curtailing the use of exclusion in favor of other strategies that stress prevention, early response, and behavioral and academic support for students at risk for disciplinary action (Gagnon & Leone, 2001; Morrison et al., 2001; Skiba & Knesting, 2002).

Among students subject to disciplinary exclusion, Latino and especially African American students, particularly boys, are overrepresented among those students excluded from school (Christle, Nelson, & Jolivette, 2004; Gordon al., 2001; Noguera, 2003), as are low-income students (Nichols, Ludwin, & Iadicola, 1999; Skiba & Knesting, 2002). According to NCES (2003), in 1999, 35% of Black, 20% of Latino, and 15% of White middle and high school students were suspended and/or expelled at some point in their schooling. The reasons given for these disparities vary, but current research disputes the notion that "black students and low-income students exhibit more anti-social behavior" (Rothstein, 2004, p. 101). For example, in a study of disciplinary records in an urban Midwest school district, Skiba (2001) found "no evidence that African-American students [were] punished more in school because they [acted] out more" (p. 182). Rather, he found that Black students were punished for "less serious, more subjective reasons" (p. 182) than were White students. Skiba and other researchers attribute racial/ethnic and class disparities to school-based factors such as institutional bias, school culture, teacher training, and school adults' beliefs and perceptions (Christle et al., 2004; Gordon et al., 2001; Munn, Lloyd, & Cullen, 2000).

Special-needs students are also overrepresented among those excluded from school. A 1996 report found that they were suspended at twice the rate of non-special-needs students and that those "identified as having an emotional or behavior disability were 11 times more likely to be suspended" (Christle et al., 2004, p. 510). Within the literature on school exclusion, there is less emphasis on teacher bias as an explanation for the overrepresentation of special-needs students than for Black students. There appears to be an assumption that special-needs students "are more prone to displaying behaviors that may lead to disciplinary actions" (Christle et al., 2004, p. 510). However, the disproportionality of Black males in special education, in which "teacher bias" (Cartledge, 2005, p. 30) has been identified as a significant factor, and their disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion indicate that teacher bias is indeed a factor in the overrepresentation of special-needs students among those excluded from school.

By law, all students recommended for exclusion must have due process. At the very least, they must be given notice of the charges against them and

have an opportunity to tell their side of the story. Expulsions and long-term suspensions are to be accompanied by formal hearings, at which, in most states, a student may present witnesses, have an attorney present, and cross-examine "hostile witnesses" (Rossow & Parkinson, 1999, p. 10). States vary as to the extent to which (if at all) these hearings are open to the public and documented, and there are few studies on how these proceedings actually unfold. However, research indicates that school and district administrators and officials wield a great deal of power in these proceedings. Suspensions and expulsions have been challenged in the courts on the grounds that due process was violated because of irregularities or misconduct in hearing processes. However, there is evidence that in recent years, the courts have been less likely to rule in favor of students and their parents or guardians in such cases.

There is evidence that avenues for recourse afforded to special-needs students have also been diminished. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a student with a documented disability cannot be removed from his or her present educational placement for more than 10 days if (a) the behavior that precipitated the disciplinary action is a manifestation of his or her disability and/or (b) if he or she was not provided appropriate services and supports, as outlined in his or her individual education plan (IEP). According to Turnbull (2005), the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA, which places more emphasis on students' and families' responsibilities, makes it more difficult to establish "manifestation" and to show negligence on the part of the school, in "[implementing] the student's IEP" (p. 325). Thus, it appears that school and district personnel have gained power in their ability to impose school exclusion as a disciplinary action, on both regular and special education students. This has led to the belief that schools are "able to once again discipline students as they see fit" (Rossow & Parkinson, 1999, p. 13).

The Excluded Student

Students on short-term suspension are customarily home (i.e., not in school or in some other institution or program) until their term is over, when they return to their regular school routine. During a long-term suspension or an expulsion, students may be home or in an alternative educational setting. Expelled students may or may not return to their home school. In the case of a permanent expulsion from a district, students may be home, may be in an alternative educational facility outside the district, or may be enrolled in school in another school district. If an arrest precipitated the expulsion, the

student may be in a correctional facility. There is also the increased likelihood that a student suspended or expelled will "drop out of school altogether" (Gordon et al., 2001). It is unclear if students, particularly overage students, are more at risk for dropping out during a suspension or expulsion term, but this would be reasonable to expect, especially if the student is disengaged, failing academically, and not in an alternative placement.

According to Rossow and Parkinson (1999), it is "common practice [nonetheless] to provide no alternative education for students on suspension or expulsion" (p. 47). Although some schools allow students to get schoolwork, "in most jurisdictions, students do not have a right to make up work missed during an out-of-school suspension" and, in fact, some schools "automatically reduce the grades of a suspended student" (Rossow & Parkinson, 1999, p. 49) to further punish them and to deter future misbehavior. A study of 272 public high schools conducted by the Government Accounting Office (2001) reported that "a large majority of special education students" but only "about one-half of regular education students received education services after expulsion" (p. 16). Presently, there is "very little consistent, wide-ranging evidence" (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 2) of the effectiveness of alternative educational programs for disciplined students, and research suggests that they widely vary in quality. Yet there is general agreement that students are better off in these placements than without a placement, as not being in school has been associated with greater risk of drug use and sexual and illegal activity and academic failure (Christle et al., 2004; Morrison et al., 2001; Taras et al., 2003).

Loss of academic instruction is one the most obvious consequences of exclusion. This can negatively affect academic achievement, especially when students cannot get school work or are not given another placement. This loss is expected during the official exclusion term, but there can be other, less apparent losses of instructional time. First, students recommended for a suspension or expulsion can be kept out of school until their hearing—time that may not be deducted from the official term. Although it may simply be considered "part of the punishment" (Rossow & Parkinson, 1999, p. 10), this time is also lost to students who are vindicated in their hearing. Second, delays in readmission to schools and/or districts after exclusion extend the time out of school. Researchers in the United States have yet to closely look at this issue, but in the United Kingdom, Mitchell (1996) found that such "'waiting time'" could significantly extend the official term of exclusion, contributing to students "becoming accustomed to a disrupted education" (p. 123) and having difficulties adjusting or readjusting to school, both academically and socially. Likewise, U.S. researchers also argue that time out of school, at all stages of the exclusionary process, has detrimental effects on

achievement and school adjustment (Christle et al., 2004; Gordon et al., 2001; Skiba & Knesting, 2002).

In the United States, research on how students as individuals are affected by school exclusion is also thin, but there are some notable studies. For example, Sekayi (2001) found that students in an alternative school felt "ostracized" by and resentful of "being pulled out of the 'regular' [school] environment" (p. 420). Likewise, Skiba and Noam (2002) suggest that students often experience expulsion as rejection. Sekayi found that such feelings caused "indignation" (p. 414) and resistance to school adults' attempts to teach, to control, and to gain the confidence of students. The research shows that negative feelings toward school adults are common among excluded youth. Thus, as pointed out by McCall (2003), "the ability to connect with students who fear or dislike teachers" (p. 117) is vital for adults who work in the alternative schools that serve this population.

As reported by researchers, disciplinary exclusion can also foster a sense of injustice among students, which Skiba (2001) discusses in relation to "disciplinary discrepancies" (p. 182) correlated with race. He found that Black students viewed such discrepancies "as conscious and deliberate, arguing that teachers often apply classroom rules and guidelines arbitrarily" (p. 182). Elsewhere, Skiba and Knesting (2002) suggest that students may actually "escalate their [unacceptable] behavior" in response to disciplinary action they feel is unjust or "confrontational" (p. 33).

In the United Kingdom, the body of research on how students experience school exclusion is far more extensive. As in the United States, British researchers have found an overrepresentation of Black (African Caribbean) students, particularly males (Blyth & Milner, 1996; Stirling, 1996), irregularities in how exclusionary disciplinary actions are applied, and a sense of injustice among excluded students. Munn et al. (2000) found that "pupils felt particularly aggrieved when they thought they had been 'picked-on,' singled out for serious punishment that was not meted out to others" (p. 3) and that

> sometimes, also, the pupils felt that the system was unfair because teachers in the school did not behave consistently. The pupils were aware that what happened as a result of an infringement of rules could be a bit of a lottery, depending on which teacher was involved. (p. 5)

The inconsistencies in the use of school exclusion as a disciplinary action, as discussed throughout this literature review, suggest the potential for students of any background to both receive and perceive differential and unfair treatment. It stands to reason that this would negatively affect

students' relationships with school adults and their faith in school disciplinary processes.

Method

District Setting

The school district under study, which I will refer to as Central School District (CSD), is a large urban district in the northeast. In the 2004-2005 academic year, nearly 74% of all students in the district were designated as low income. Blacks made up 45.5% of the student population, Latinos 31.2%, Whites 14.0%, and Asians 8.9%. According to the most recent data (2000), Black students made up 70% of those suspended and expelled. Together, Blacks and Latinos, largely males, made up 89% of students subject to exclusionary disciplinary actions.

According to CSD policy, students could be suspended for up 10 consecutive days. Expulsion or long-term suspension could be for a term of 11 days to one full calendar year. There was no clear line of demarcation between those infractions punishable by suspension and those punishable by expulsion. According to the Code of Discipline, particular offences merited automatic expulsion, including firearms possession, assault, and distributing a controlled substance. Less "serious cases," including truancy, theft, weapon possession, or fighting, could result in suspension or expulsion, as decided by the principal. Despite the provision of hearings, school administrators had considerable discretional power in imposing exclusionary sanctions and in deciding whether or not students could return to their home school. Once expelled, students were officially withdrawn from CSD. At the end of their term, a parent or guardian (or students themselves, if they were 18 years of age or older) had to re-enroll them in the CSD school system.

School Setting

I will refer to the school under examination as Another Chance High School (AC). It served Grades 9 to 12 and had existed as an alternative program within CSD for 10 years before becoming a full-fledged, autonomous, and diploma-granting high school in the 2004-2005 school year. As the only alternative high school under CSD jurisdiction, AC was expected to and did, space permitting, accept suspended, expelled, and court-involved high school–aged adolescents from across the district.

In the 2004-2005 school year, the student body at AC was approximately 98% Black and Latino and more than 75% male. The vast majority of students were at AC as the result of being suspended or expelled. The nature of the district's disciplinary policies and practices, which was inexact and open to individual interpretation, was reflected in the wide range of infractions that brought students to the school. They ran the gamut from truancy to possessing a weapon, defacing school property, and chronic classroom disruption.

As was typical of most years, the student population at AC more than tripled over the course of the school year in which this study was conducted as students were cast out of other schools. Students also regularly transitioned out of AC, after serving suspension and expulsions terms, resulting in a student turnover rate that was approximately 75%. That is, by June, only about one fourth of regularly attending students had been at AC since the beginning of the school year.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected in the 2004-2005 academic year. In March, anonymous questionnaires were administered to 37 students (3 in 9th grade, 18 in 10th grade, 8 in 11th grade, and 8 in 12th grade). A total of 28 identified as Black, 2 as Latino, and 1 as White (5 did not identify themselves racially or ethnically), and 9 were females. I taught a technology class taken by the 9th and 10th graders ($n = 21$). The design of the questionnaire was in part informed by what I understood as pertinent issues among students as a teacher at the school. To reduce researcher bias on the instrument, the questionnaire was first piloted with 6 students and reviewed by 3 teachers in the building. In a focus group, the 6 students gave me feedback on the wording and usefulness of items and any confusion they had. For example, they suggested additional categories pertaining to why students are absent from school. Teachers helped me to develop categories of student experience. The students' mathematics teachers administered the revised questionnaires to reduce any potential effects my presence might have on students' responses. The questionnaire asked about experiences of suspension, expulsion, and time out of school and also asked participants to reflect on their current and prior schooling experiences, including relationships with school adults. Data from the close-ended questions was entered into SPSS to generate frequencies and cross-tabulations. Data from open-ended questions were transcribed and thematically coded. Both data sets were used to analyze the significance of school exclusion and prolonged absences on academic, social, and affective aspects of students' schooling experiences.

The data for this study were primarily derived from students' own reporting. Thus, particularly as it pertains to attendance and numbers of suspensions, they may not correspond with school records. Such comparisons are beyond the scope of this study. As in other studies of excluded students (Pippa, 1996; Pomeroy, 2000), the present study sought to highlight students' perspectives. These perspectives provide vital insights into participants' experiences of exclusion that need not be "validated" by (but can be informed by) "schools' official versions of what happened" (Pippa, 1996, p. 162). For example, a student's perception that he or she had been suspended 50 times has considerable significance for understanding his or her experience, even if school records reported only 10 suspensions.

# Findings

Lost Classroom and Instruction Time

Of participants, 97% reported having been suspended and 78% reported being expelled at some point in their schooling. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, most had been suspended multiple times. Nearly three fourths of students reported 10 or more suspensions, with 10 students claiming that they had been suspended too many times to recall (represented by the bottom bar in Figure 1). Of respondents expelled, most indicated only one occurrence, which, in most cases, directly precipitated their arrival at AC. However, 6 students reported being expelled more than once, with one student claiming to have been expelled four times, from four different schools.

Each expulsion reported above (a total of 40 among 29 students) resulted in at least one school transfer, which was evident in the questionnaire data. Only three respondents had been at AC since the beginning of ninth grade. Nearly half indicated that they had attended two different schools, and 13 reported attending three or more high schools.

The number of school transfers, however, did not always reflect the actual number of transitions between educational programs. After being expelled and before being placed at AC, many students were required to attend a 2-week counseling and intervention program. In this case, expulsion automatically precipitated two transitions, and for those who eventually returned to a conventional school, there were no less than three transitions. Also, arrest and incarceration virtually guaranteed transitions between programs. A number of participants had experienced a prolonged cycle of transitions that created barriers to their school success. One of those barriers was lost classroom instructional time.

Figure 1

Suspensions
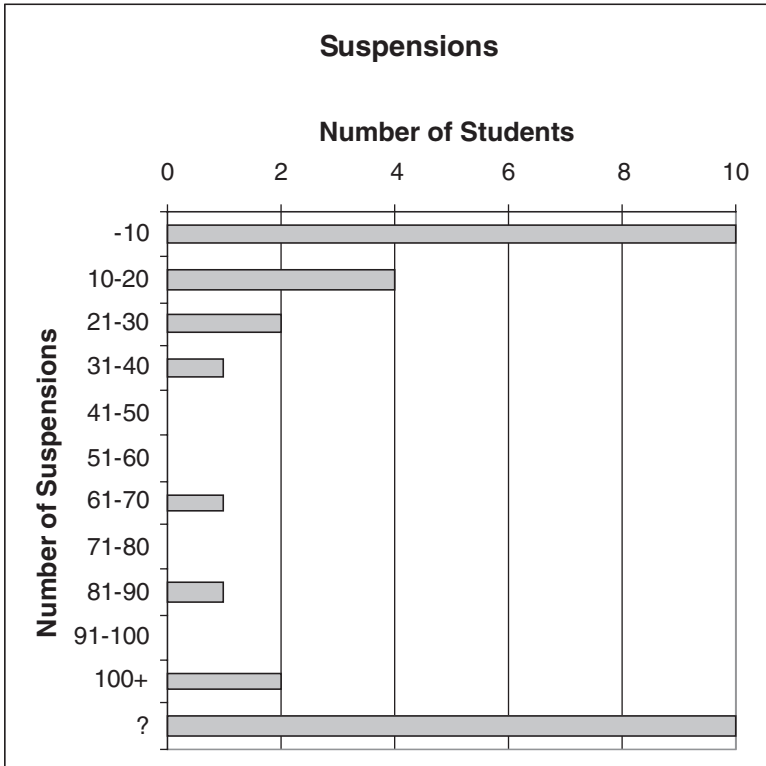
School exclusion, which is imposed with the explicit intention of removing students from school, necessarily results in lost instructional time. However, this seemingly self-evident but seldom-discussed fact needs to be stressed, particularly in relation to youth in alternative educational programs, many of whom have been suspended and expelled multiple times. Considering the questionnaire data, it is evident that suspension terms can add up to significant periods. There were also more hidden losses that resulted from school exclusion. Often, there was lag time in transitions between schools and programs, time when students were not attending any educational program. As mentioned

Figure 2
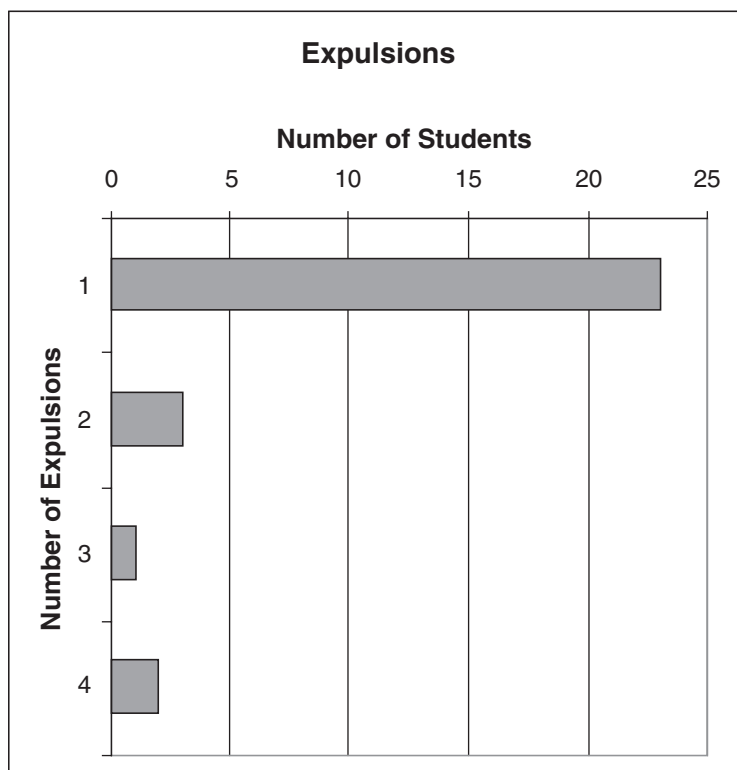
earlier, expelled students were withdrawn from the CSD system, and if underage students did not have a responsible or available parent or guardian to re-enroll them or they were legal adults and did not take the initiative, they could indefinitely remain without a school assignment. This is exemplified in the case of Adilson, who had been out of school for 3 months, having not re-enrolled at the end of a 1-month expulsion.

As shown in Figures 3 and 4, many respondents had had prolonged absences from school, more than half of which they attributed to expulsions, suspensions, and school transfers. More than half reported having had an

Figure 3

Reason Given for Prolonged Absence
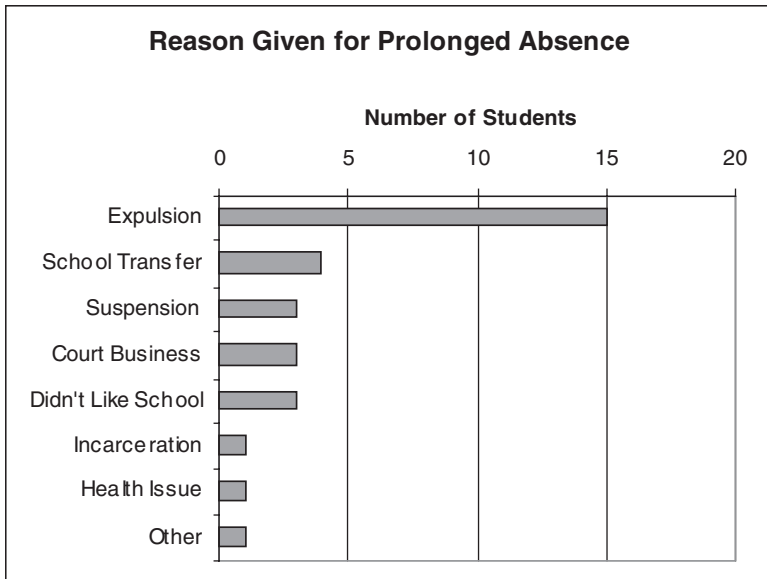
absence of 1 month or longer, and 5 students indicated that they had been out of school for 6 months to a year. Using the conservative end of each range, this adds up to a staggering total of *6 years, 1 month, and 3 days* of lost instructional time among the 35 respondents.

Prolonged absences can wreak havoc on students' academic progress, which was noted by many respondents. When asked how absences from school, because of suspensions and expulsions, affected their education, they wrote:
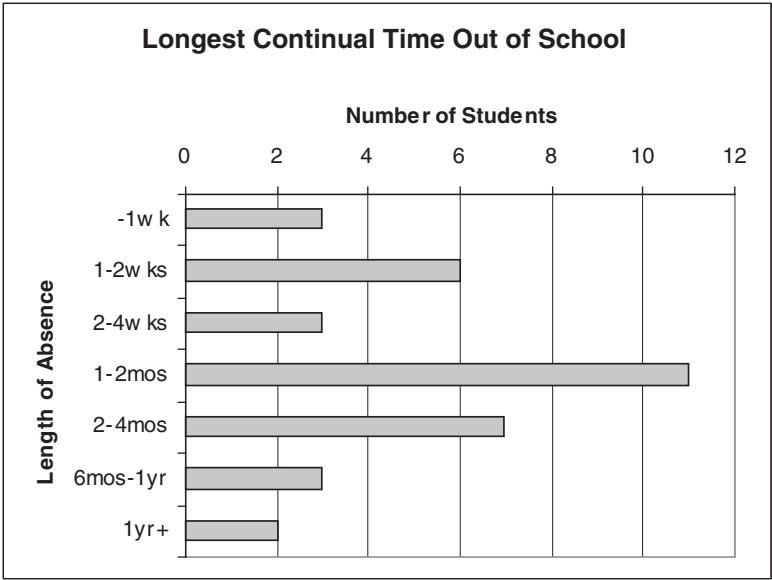
It effected my education because I was out of school for 8 months and I got kept back. (15-year-old, Black male, 9th grader)
I missed out on new important things in class. (17-year-old, Black male, 10th grader)
Because I didn't really see what was going on in the first month [at the alternative school]. (15-year-old, Black male, 10th grader)
Alot because I almost missed a whole year. So I lost out on a year's education. (17-year-old, Black male, 10th grader)

Figure 4

Longest Continual Time Out of School

Number of Students

Chart showing Length of Absence (y-axis) versus Number of Students (x-axis, 0 to 12):
- -1wk: 3
- 1-2wks: 6
- 2-4wks: 3
- 1-2mos: 11
- 2-4mos: 7
- 6mos-1yr: 3
- 1yr+: 2

It affect [me] it a lot because I would miss work and when I go back I won't
know what we doing. (16-year-old, male, 10th grader)
Because while I was out of school I missed a lot of things I could of learned.
(17-year-old, Black male, 11th grader)

According to respondents, these absences caused them to miss out on
valuable learning, to fall behind in their schoolwork, to fail classes, and to
be kept back. This was reflected in the school, where many students were
not on grade level and had significantly underdeveloped academic skills,
particularly in writing, reading comprehension, and mathematics.

## Social and Emotional Experiences

The data indicate that rates of school exclusion were related to perceptions
of school adults and disciplinary policies and practices. Figure 5 shows the
percentages of students reporting that they had good relationships with school

Figure 5

Percent of Students Reporting
Good Relationships With Adults
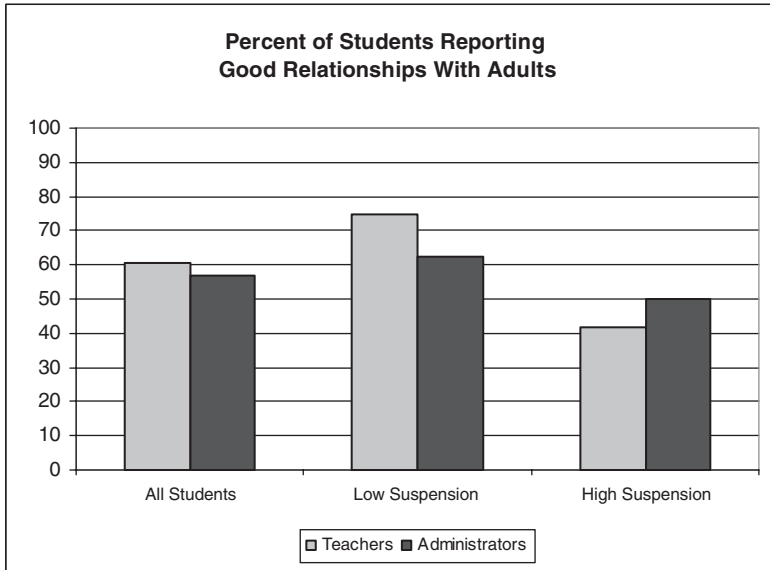
adults at AC by the number of suspensions throughout their schooling. "Low-suspension" students were those reporting 40 or fewer (16 total); "high-suspension" students were those reporting more than 60 or reporting more suspensions than they could recall (12 total).[1] The low- and high-suspension categories reflect how the numbers of suspensions reported were clustered, as depicted in Figure 1. Though it is possible that those students reporting too many suspensions to recall may have experienced 60 or fewer, they are included in the high category because of students' perceptions that they had been suspended many times. As Figure 5 illustrates, high-suspension students were less likely than low-suspension students to report good relationships with both teachers and administrators. This is particularly true in the case of teachers, where they were nearly half as likely to report good relationships.

Figure 6 shows how students reported when asked if they felt that school adults at AC cared about their well-being. Only a very small percentage of participants felt that adults were "very concerned" about their well-being. However, high-suspension students were more than 3 times more likely

Figure 6

Percentage of Students Reporting That School Adults Care About Their Well-Being
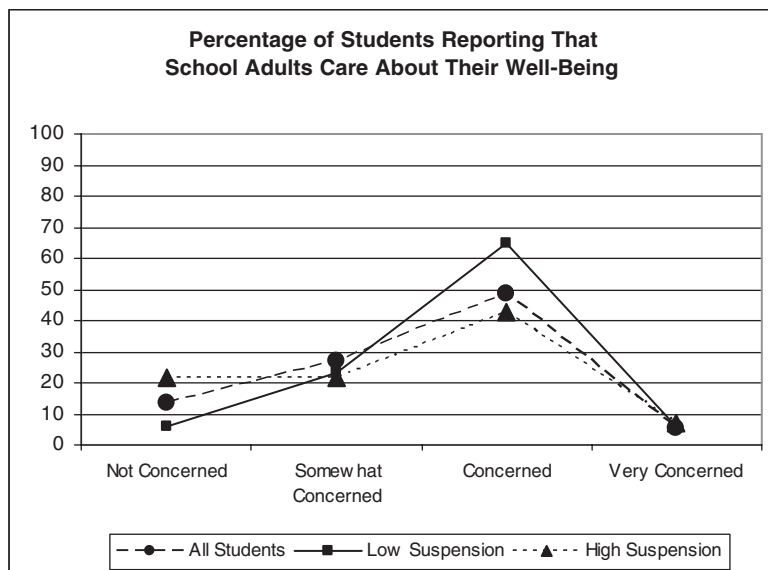
than low-suspension students to report that adults were "not concerned." Accordingly, low-suspension students were more likely to report that adults were "concerned" about their well-being than high-suspension students. It is also important to note that the overwhelming majority of respondents reported believing that doing well in school was "important" (30%) or "very important" (65%) to their future success.

Data from the open-ended questions provided insight into how school exclusion affected participants' perceptions of their schooling experiences in other ways. Many felt that they had been unfairly treated in their previous schools, particularly around the terms of exclusion, as evidenced by the quotes below. When asked how they would change district rules about suspension and expulsion, respondents wrote,

> We get suspended for dumb things. (17-year-old, Black male, 11th grader)
> Just change it so you can't [be] expelled so easy. (15-year-old, White male, 10th grader)

You could only get suspended only for serious things. And you could only get expelled if you consistently get in trouble with serious actions and proven you did whatever you did. (17-year-old, Black male, 11th grader)

That their should be no expulsion unless enough people were there to witness what happened. Teachers or students should vote should this person get removed from the school or not. (17-year-old, Black female, 11th grader)

If suspended only up to 3 days. If expulsion only for one year and students should be able to go back to the same school. (17-year-old, Black male, 11th grader)

Expulsion would be that you only have to go to a alternative school for 2 weeks then go back to your regular school. (15-year-old, Black male, 10th grader)

Three prominent issues arose in students' critiques. First was the perception that suspensions and expulsions were too liberally imposed and often unduly harsh. Second, many respondents felt that students were often found guilty of and suspended or expelled for infractions without sufficient evidence. Last, many felt that permanent banishment from their home school was an unreasonable punishment. These perceptions of unfairness likely fostered ill feelings toward school adults, as the arbitrators of these policies and may be reflected in the fact that respondents were less likely to report that they had good relationships with school adults before coming to AC. Many students came to AC with a wariness of adults. This was compounded for those students who had had limited opportunities to build lasting, positive relationships with school adults because of multiple transitions.

Discussion

It must be acknowledged that for many students, the issues highlighted in this study—academic difficulties, irregular attendance, and distrust in or poor relationships with school adults—often existed before their exclusion from school. In fact, they are among the reasons for which students are commonly removed from schools (McCall, 2003). However, school exclusion can have exacerbating effects. Herein lies the tragic irony, when the interventions aimed at students' troubles actually compound them. As they are "intended primarily to punish the offender" (Taras et al., 2003, p. 1207), suspension and expulsion as disciplinary actions are strategies for sanctioning "problem" students, not alleviating students' problems. As such, this study found that among students surveyed, school exclusion precipitated a variety of conditions that were extremely detrimental to their schooling experiences.

Most apparently, it led to absences (often prolonged) from school, which sometimes extended beyond students' official terms of expulsion and long-term

suspension because of delays in admission or readmission processes. Students and parents or guardians do have responsibility in these processes. However, when schools completely abdicate their responsibility, the likelihood that excluded youth such as Adilson will experience a prolonged or even permanent disconnection from school undoubtedly increases. Multiple exclusions resulted in what I call "school transience": prolonged cycles of being in and out of school or shuttling between different schools and programs. I use *transience* because it denotes not only "mobility" but also the condition of being "transient"—without a consistent school "home" that can provide academic stability, security, and opportunities to build strong relationships with adults.

School transience and prolonged absences, which result in lost classroom instructional time, can cause significant disruptions in students' academic progress. Participants in this study associated these factors with failing and being retained, falling behind in their school, and being "lost" on their return to school. These obstacles were evident in the context of AC and presented significant challenges to learning and teaching. Many students struggled with schoolwork, some with more success than others. Some students, rather than confronting embarrassment and despair about their academic skills, resisted doing schoolwork. Still others, disaffected by negative schooling experiences, caused significant disruptions in the school.

For teachers in alternative schools and programs that serve excluded students, the transient nature of this population contributes to difficult working conditions. At AC, students coming from multiple schools and transitional programs and lock-up facilities, with widely disparate academic skills and schooling experiences, appeared and disappeared throughout the school year. Ensuring that all of these students successfully adjusted to and academically progressed within the school environment was a formidable task that required significant attention to the relational aspects of schooling.

As stated by Lange and Sletten (2002), "A series of suspensions, missed classes, disciplinary actions and academic failures leave this group of students weary of the school experience and distrustful that the education system can be a tool for their success" (p. 11). Among students at AC, school exclusion fostered distrust of both school adults and disciplinary procedures and contributed to perceptions of school as a place where they would be neither cared for nor treated fairly. Students with high numbers of suspensions were most likely to feel that they did not have good relationships with teachers and that staff did not care about their well-being. As researchers contend, for many students, particularly those marginalized and/or at-risk, feeling cared for by school adults is important to their willingness to academically engage (Nieto, 1999; Perez, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Thus, at AC, the necessary

work of fostering academic success, mending fractured trust in school adults, and restoring faith in the processes of schooling was considerable for both students and staff.

Study Limitations

Because of the small sample size of this study, findings obviously cannot be generalized to all excluded adolescents, nor can they be generalized to all excluded students enrolled in AC during the year of the study. Part of what accounted for the limited sample size was the fact that questionnaires were administered only at the school site, and many students did not regularly attend school (a common problem in alternative schools). Students with sporadic attendance tended to be more disconnected from school and may have differently experienced school exclusion than those in the sample. It would be preferable to include students in all attendance categories, including those who had dropped out altogether. In addition, although the sample was not disaggregated by grade and grade level was not significantly correlated with numbers of suspensions and/or expulsions, a more even representation of each of the four grades may have produced different results.

How participants experienced suspension and expulsion was shaped, in part, by policies and practices related to suspension and expulsion, which vary across U.S. public school districts. For example, in cases where the grades of excluded students are automatically reduced or where students are not provided the provision of an alternative educational setting, how they report on the impact of exclusion on their academic achievement may differ. Last, although this study produced some compelling data, questionnaires can provide only limited information about students' experience. Further research on this topic should include in-depth interviews with students to better discern how they experience exclusionary disciplinary practices.

Conclusions

Schools and districts must reinforce their commitment to students in trouble through strategies that advance, rather than hinder, their academic and socioemotional development. Although it may sometimes be necessary to remove a student from school, withholding educational services, intentionally or inadvertently, is antithetical to the goal of "assuring access to equal educational opportunity for every individual" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). It is detrimental to both students who fall behind in their work and teachers who must help them catch up. In addition to reducing the rates of disciplinary

exclusion, we also need ways to better support students who are not in school or are in an alternative placement as the result of being suspended or expelled and to keep them connected to the processes of schooling.

To effectively address this issue, more must be known about what happens to young people who are excluded from school. It is clear from this study and others that some experience school exclusion in ways that have detrimental academic, social, and emotional effects, and many questions remain unanswered. What is the nature, the extent, and the impact of those effects on students? In what ways are they manifest in the educational environment? Why is it that some students who have experienced prolonged absences and school transience completely disconnect from schooling whereas others do not? For instance, what brings an adolescent like Adilson, with multiple "risk factors" for dropping out—poor, Black, overage, on probation, retained twice, suspended multiple times, expelled—back to school after 3 months?

Current research has been vital in drawing attention to misuses and ineffective uses of suspension and expulsion, particularly as it pertains to low-income, special-needs, and "minority" male students. To understand the effects of school exclusion on students themselves, this research must be extended to include a wider range of information on the processes and experiences of school exclusion. It would be advantageous to collect information on the nature of the infractions and/or allegations that precipitated exclusion and the details of suspension and expulsion processes. These factors could be examined in relation to students' relationships with school adults and their perceptions about disciplinary procedures. It would also be helpful to examine the above factors in relation to disability status and academic achievement and family history. In addition, the preponderance of males calls for closer examinations of the role of gender, especially in relationship to race/ethnicity. It would also be beneficial to look across districts to make comparisons between students' experiences of exclusion as they relate to particular policies and practices pertaining to suspension and expulsion.

Last, more studies are needed that focus on students' experiences from their own perspectives, as was done in present study. Without this information, we will remain limited in our understanding of how disciplinary exclusion affects students' academic, social, and emotional well-being. Excluded students hold valuable insights that researchers and practitioners can draw on to improve the schooling experiences of those most vulnerable to academic failure and to social marginalization within and beyond our nation's public school systems.

Note

1. The low- and high-suspension categories reflect how the numbers of suspensions reported were clustered, as depicted in Figure 1. Although it is possible that those students reporting too many suspensions to recall may have experienced 60 or fewer, they are included in the high category because of students' perceptions that they had been suspended many times.

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