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Who's Left Out of Learning? Racial Disparities in Teachers' Reports of Exclusionary Discipline Strategies Beyond Suspensions and Expulsions

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Abstract

We documented (1) the use of strategies, beyond suspensions and expulsions, that exclude young students from learning opportunities and (2) how teacher-reported use of these strategies varied according to student racial/ethnic composition. In a sample of 2,053 teachers and 40,771 kindergarten students, teachers reported on their use of five exclusionary strategies including isolated seating, removal from an activity, and loss of recess. Teachers reported substantive use of all exclusionary strategies and use varied depending on strategy. Teachers reported using certain exclusionary practices (break outside of classroom, loss of recess or free time, and limit talking) more frequently when they rated more Black versus White students to be lowest on self-regulation and social skills. Findings illustrate the value of looking beyond suspensions and expulsions in the early years to advance equity in young children's opportunities to engage with teachers, peers, and learning tasks at school.

Keywords: exclusionary discipline, classroom management, racial disproportionality, educational opportunity, kindergarten

Impact and Implications Statement

"Soft" exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., silent lunches, isolated seating) limit children's opportunities to engage in school. We do not know how often these discipline practices happen, or which children experience them most often. Kindergarten teachers reported (1) frequent use of soft exclusion and (2) using some of these practices more often when rating more Black students low in social-emotional skills, suggesting that Black students receive fewer opportunities to fully engage in learning.

Who's Left Out of Learning? Racial Disparities in Teachers' Reports of Exclusionary Discipline Strategies Beyond Suspensions and Expulsions

A kindergarten teacher makes her way around the classroom, talking with children at each small-group table as children are making patterns with blocks. While kneeling to talk with one group, she hears two students being very loud at another table. She turns to see Caleb throw a handful of blocks onto the floor. Mia yells, while Caleb pushes more blocks onto the floor. Their peers are watching to see what will happen next. The teacher comes over and asks what is going on. After listening she says: "I hear you are frustrated because you wanted those blocks and Mia was not sharing, but it's not safe to throw the blocks. Please pick up the blocks." "No!" Caleb says. "It looks like you need to take a break," the teacher says. She gestures to a solitary space in the corner, the "Calm Down Corner". Caleb stomps over, faces the wall, and is quiet. The teacher returns to the rest of her students and lesson.

Scenarios like this play-out multiple times a day in early childhood classrooms. How teachers respond to young students has an impact on their learning opportunities, now and in the future. In this paper, we examine teacher's report of their use of soft (less officially punitive) exclusionary discipline practices and whether teachers report the use of these strategies differentially depending upon the racial composition of students in their classroom.

Young Children's Active Engagement in School is Critical for their Early Learning

Young children learn by engaging fully in school. School engagement encompasses the behavioral involvement, cognitive investment, and emotional connection that children direct towards teachers, peers, and learning tasks (Appleton et al., 2008). Engagement is a primary proximal process through which children's learning is enhanced within schools and classrooms (Wang et al., 2019). When young children engage positively in the classroom—share positive

affect with teachers, cooperate with peers, and participate in tasks—, they do better in school—academically and socially (Robinson & Mueller, 2014; Williford et al., 2013). The links between positive classroom engagement and children's academic and social-emotional gains persist after accounting for classroom quality (Sabol et al., 2018). In contrast, when resistance, avoidance, or negativity characterize children's classroom engagement, children show lower academic achievement (Bulotsky-Shearer & Fantuzzo, 2011; Ladd & Dinella, 2009). Children's engagement with teachers, peers, and learning tasks in the early years of schooling are particularly critical because they set the stage for how children participate and connect to school in later years (Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Skinner et al., 2016).

Engagement is Contingent upon Opportunity

Engagement is shaped by context (Searle et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2019) and children have the most capacity to engage when they are afforded the *full opportunities* to interact with teachers, peers, and activities and learning tasks. This includes the opportunity to talk with peers, get excited, move around, or touch manipulatives (Alford et al., 2016; Powell et al., 2008). As young children's exposure to more scripted, teacher-directed instruction across activity settings increases (Markowitz & Ansari, 2020), there may be a mismatch between teacher expectations and the developmental capacities and interests of some students. For some young children, their level of talk or movement, most within developmentally typical demonstrations of self-regulation and social skills, may not match the expectations of a kindergarten teacher or what they expect from their students (Bassok et al., 2016; Blair & Raver, 2015).

Teachers report that approximately 20% of young children in their classrooms experience significant social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Graziano et al., 2015). Teachers also describe being ill equipped to effectively support children's behavior in the classroom (Reinke et

al., 2014). This is not surprising as teachers receive limited pre-service training to promote children's self-regulation skills (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017) and the supports and resources available to in-service teachers in this area are scarce (Zinsser et al., 2016). As a result, teachers may resort to strategies that are effective in quickly getting the classroom "back on track" even if such strategies limit a child's opportunity to engage in learning.

At the most restrictive end, these strategies include the temporal (suspensions) or permanent (expulsions) removal of students from the learning opportunity. Black children experience these exclusionary and harsh discipline practices at disproportionately high rates as early as preschool (Giordano et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2019), and within the early elementary grades (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2011).

Before children are suspended and expelled, teachers and students engage in negative interactions, and children experience increasingly harsh and exclusionary discipline practices that are seemingly less extreme than suspensions and expulsions but nevertheless limit students' capacities to fully engage in the learning opportunities at school (Zinsser & Wanless, 2020). Teachers' use of exclusionary discipline practices (other than suspensions and expulsions) is an important part of the cycle of teacher-child exchanges that can eventually lead to suspensions and expulsion (Weinstein et al., 2004). In recent work within preschool classrooms, we found that a large percentage of children perceived by their teachers as displaying externalizing behaviors were frequently subjected to a variety of exclusionary discipline practices that limited their full engagement in learning opportunities (Author, in press). Teachers reported that 56% of these students were removed from the activity they were engaged in, 46% were sent to time-out, and 13% were removed from the classroom at frequencies of once or more each week.

In this study, we document other ways in which teachers may exclude young students from learning opportunities when responding to behavioral challenges. Examples of these practices include forced silent periods, removal of privileges, time-outs, or sending students to various other places in the school, such as other classrooms, the school nurse, or the counselor or assistant principal's office. Given that states and school districts are increasingly creating policies to eliminate suspensions and expulsions of our youngest elementary students (Colombi & Osher, 2015; Loomis et al., 2021), it is important to better understand the full range of exclusionary discipline practices as these practices may be used increasingly when suspensions and expulsions are no longer options.

Soft exclusionary practices (Wymer et al., 2020) have been scarcely documented within the literature, though a few studies confirm the existence of specific practices. Among the most-documented practices are (1) office disciplinary referrals (sending students to administrative staff for rule violations; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013) and (2) time-outs (removing a child from the learning activity for a period of time, without choice; Ryan et al., 2007). Observers in preschool and kindergarten classrooms qualitatively reported seeing children assigned to isolated seating, being required to sit out from activities in the classroom and on the playground, and receiving threats of removal from the classroom (Boonstra, 2021; Shalaby, 2017). Observers also reported that Black boys experienced these exclusions more often compared to White children (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006; Gansen, 2020). However, we do not know the frequency with which teachers use these types of time-outs in early schooling.

Young Black Students are Disproportionately Disciplined

Early racial disparities in rates of suspensions and expulsions for Black versus White children are well documented (e.g., Giordano et al., 2021; Gopalan & Nelson, 2019; Skiba et al.,

2011). One explanation to such disparities is that teachers' racial biases influence teachers' perceptions of and responses to challenging behaviors (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Okonofua et al., 2020; Zinsser & Wanless, 2020). For instance, early childhood teachers watch Black boys more closely than White boys when expecting challenging behaviors (Gilliam et al., 2016), and have been observed to use discipline and teaching practices inequitably with racially minoritized children (Curenton et al., 2020).

Current Study

Currently, we know little about the use of less officially punitive exclusionary discipline practices in early childhood classrooms, such as time-out or silent lunch. Looking beyond suspensions and expulsions is warranted to understand exclusionary discipline more comprehensively, identify classroom processes that may be leading to more severe discipline outcomes, and ultimately ensure that young children are afforded equitable opportunities to fully engage in early childhood classrooms. The present study uses teacher-reported data, collected in the context of a statewide kindergarten readiness assessment, to answer these questions:

1. How often do kindergarten teachers report using soft exclusionary discipline practices with students' whom they perceive as displaying the lowest self-regulation and social skills?
2. How much variation in teacher-reported use of soft exclusionary discipline practices is explained by differences between teachers, between schools, and between school districts?
3. Does teachers' reported use of soft exclusionary discipline practices vary by the racial/ethnic composition of students?

We anticipated that teachers would report using these practices more frequently in classrooms with a higher proportion of Black versus White students. We did not make an a priori hypothesis for Hispanic children given that the evidence for discipline disparities in Hispanic children has been mixed (Giordano et al., 2021, Skiba, 2015). To our knowledge, this is the first study to quantitatively examine the frequency of soft exclusionary discipline in kindergarten classrooms and to explore whether the use of these practices vary by the racial/ethnic composition of students in the classroom.

Method

Participants

Data was collected as part of the statewide kindergarten readiness assessment in Virginia during the fall of 2019 where all kindergarten students in the state were assessed in the areas of self-regulation, social skills, and math in the fall and spring of the 2019–2020 academic year. Ninety-six percent (n = 88,439) of the population of kindergarten students in Virginia were assessed (N = 92,407; Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2021). In addition, teachers were invited to complete a survey following the assessment window (45.03% response rate). Teachers who completed the survey and their students were included in the present study.

Participants were 2,053 teachers and 40,771 students in 2,068 classrooms; 15 teachers taught in two different classrooms. As displayed in Table 1, teachers were 39 years old on average (SD = 11.52), mostly female (96%), and predominantly White (86%). Classrooms averaged 20 students (SD = 3.51) and were made up of 49% White (range = 0–100), 21% Black (range = 0–100), 17% Hispanic (range = 0–95), 7% Asian (range = 0–74), and 7% Other race/ethnicity (range = 0–37) students. Classrooms served an average of 39% of students from

families with low incomes (defined as student eligible for free/reduced meals, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], or Medicaid).

Participating students (N = 40,771) represented 44% of the Virginia kindergarten population. Children were an average age of 65.11 months (SD = 4.04, range 56–98), 51% were boys, and their racial/ethnic composition was: 48% White, 20% Black, 17% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 7% Other race/ethnicity (see Table 2).

Procedures

Study approval was obtained through the university IRB and data agreements from the Virginia Department of Education. In the fall of 2019, teachers assessed students' self-regulation, social skills, and math as part of the state's readiness assessment. Teachers were trained to conduct the assessments through the assessment initiative (either directly trained by the Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program [VKRP] staff or through a train-the-trainer model) and both in-person or online training options were available. Teachers completed the self-regulation and social skills assessments after at least four weeks of instruction to get to know their students and for students to acclimate to the kindergarten classroom. After the assessment window closed (mid-November), teachers completed an online survey that included items about their professional demographics, teaching beliefs and practices, and their feedback on the assessments. The survey was accessible online for five weeks and four reminder emails were sent to teachers to encourage participation. Teachers who completed the survey were able to participate in a raffle in which they could receive one of one hundred $50 gift cards.

Measures

Teacher-Reported Use of Soft Exclusionary Discipline Practices in the Classroom

Teacher-reported use of soft exclusionary discipline practices was assessed using survey items. Teachers were asked: "think about the two to three students in your classroom who have the hardest time demonstrating solid self-regulation and social skills. How often have you used the following strategies with these students?". For each item/strategy, teachers applied a 7-point Likert scale: 1 (*Never*), 2 (*A couple times a year*), 3 (*Once or twice a month*), 4 (*Once a week*), 5 (*A few times a week*), 6 (*Once a day*), and 7 (*Multiple times a day*). The items were adapted from a prior study (Author, in press) and included three proactive (e.g., "Acknowledge positive behavior") and five soft exclusionary strategies so that as a set the items would be perceived as neutral behavior management strategies. Soft exclusionary practices, of primary interest to the present study, included: (1) "Student takes a break from the lesson or activity while remaining in the classroom"; (2) "Student takes a break from the lesson or activity outside of the classroom (for example, another teacher's classroom, principal's office, or counselor's office)"; (3) "Student completes a task independently while the rest of the students are in a small or whole group activity"; (4) "Loss of recess or other free time"; (5) "Limit talking (for example silent lunch or work time) when otherwise talking would be allowed". These data were collected at the kindergarten teacher level, not for specific students.

Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Self-Regulation and Social Skills

The short form of the Child Behavior Rating Scale (Bronson et al., 1990; Matthews et al., 2009) is a widely used measure that assesses a teacher's perception of individual students' self-regulation and social skills (e.g., Doromal et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2019). Teachers apply a 5-point scale ranging from 1(*Never*) to 5 (*Always*) to rate an individual student's self-regulation (e.g., "Concentrates when working, not easily distracted") and social skills (e.g., "Cooperates with playmates") using 17 items, 10 for self-regulation and seven for social skills. In the present

sample, the CBRS demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach alphas of .96 for self-regulation and .92 for social skills.

Student and Teacher Demographics

Student data were collected via school records provided by the Virginia Department of Education. Teacher demographic data were self-reported via teacher survey.

Data Analytic Approach

Descriptive Analyses

Descriptive statistics described the variability in teacher-reported use of specific soft exclusionary discipline practices. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) were calculated to understand how much of the variability in teachers' use of soft exclusionary discipline practices was at the between-classroom, between-school, and between-district level.

Predictive Analyses

Outcome. To predict teachers' use of soft-exclusionary discipline practices, we kept each practice as a separate variable in that most of the bivariate correlations between practices were small (range r = .06–.44) and the internal consistency of the composite, as measured by Cronbach alpha, was moderate (.61; Taber, 2017).

Sample Selection. We selected the three students in the classroom that teachers reported as displaying the lowest self-regulation and the three students in the classroom that teachers reported as displaying lowest social skills, totaling up to six selected students per classroom (M = 4.72, SD = 0.78, range 3–6). We created this subsample of selected student (n = 9,424) to approximate the sample of students that teachers were most likely to be reporting on because teachers were specifically asked to answer the items for students in the classroom "who had the hardest time demonstrating solid self-regulation and social skills". As shown in Table 2, the

selected students overrepresented boys (50% of total sample but 67% of selected students), Black students (20% of total sample but 24% of selected students), students with disabilities (8% of total sample but 16% of selected students), and students from families with low incomes (37% of total sample but 45% of selected students).

Classroom Racial/Ethnic Composition. Our interest was to examine how students' race/ethnicity plays out in relation to soft exclusion. Because the outcome was at the classroom-level, we aggregated students' race/ethnicity up to the classroom-level for the subsample of selected students. Although different approaches to create classroom-level racial/ethnic composition variables exist (e.g., Rjosk et al., 2017), we used proportion scores of each race/ethnicity group in the classroom (i.e., White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Other). Proportion scores were preferable to compare across groups. Proportion scores were created for each classroom by counting all selected students per racial/ethnic group and dividing those counts by the total number of selected students with available race/ethnicity data.

Regression Models. We estimated a set of OLS regression models with discipline practices as the outcome using Stata version 14. The set fit five separate regression models, one for each type of soft exclusionary practice. All regression analyses used robust standard errors clustered at the school level to account for the nested structure of the data. Models included the race/ethnicity proportion scores as the main predictor; these proportion scores represent the racial/ethnic composition of students perceived by teachers as displaying reduced self-regulation and social skills. Proportion scores for Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Other were entered; White, as the largest sub-group, was treated as the reference. To isolate the unique contribution of classroom racial/ethnic composition to teacher-reported use of soft exclusionary discipline, student data were aggregated to the classroom-level and included as covariates: proportion of

English Language Learner (ELLs), boys, students with a disability, and students from families with low-incomes, and classroom averaged teacher-rated self-regulation and social skills. Models also controlled for teacher age, education ("Master's degree = 1", "Bachelor's or Associate degree = 0"), race/ethnicity (dummy codes for Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Other with White as reference group), and number of students in the classroom. Because school districts likely differ in many ways that are correlated both with teachers' use of soft exclusionary discipline practices and students' race/ethnicity and unobserved in the data—for example, district efforts to address school discipline or community wealth—models included district fixed effects to address potential omitted variable bias.

Missing Data. Missing data ranged from 0–17% across all variables and no cases had missing data for all study variables. We used multiple imputation estimated in the Blimp version 2.2.2 software (Keller & Enders, 2019) to handle missing data. Blimp implements a fully conditional specification algorithm with a latent variable formulation for incomplete categorical variables. Potential scale reduction factors (PSR; Gelman & Rubin, 1992) were generated to diagnose the stability of the regression parameters across iterations. PSR values reached acceptable levels (i.e., <1.05) and were used to determine the number of burn-in iterations for the imputation phase. Twenty separate imputed datasets were created following conventional guidelines (Graham, 2009).

Results

How Often Do Kindergarten Teachers Report Using Soft Exclusionary Discipline Practices?

We found variability in how often teachers reported using different soft exclusionary discipline practices with the students they perceived to demonstrate the weakest self-regulation

and social skills (see Table 3). Teachers reported to frequently ask a student to take a break from the lesson or activity while remaining in the classroom. Most teachers (85%) used this strategy once or more each week and 50% of teachers reported using it one or more times a day. Teachers also reported to frequently ask a student to complete a task independently while the rest of the students were engaged in small groups or a whole group activity. Sixty five percent of teachers reported using this strategy once a week or more and 26% of teachers reported using it once or more each day. Approximately 40% of teachers reported sending a student outside of the classroom at least once a week and 17% of teachers reported using it once or more each day. Teachers reported using loss of recess and limiting talking more infrequently, with 49% and 59% of teachers reporting that they never or infrequently (once or twice a month) used these respectively. Still, 38% of teachers reported restricting student's recess or free time at least once a week or more and 27% of teachers reported to restrict children's talking when talking would otherwise be allowed.

How Much of the Variation in Teacher-Reported Use of Soft Exclusionary Discipline Practices Can Be Explained by Differences Between Teachers, Schools, and Districts?

ICCs are displayed in Table 3. Across practices, the ICCs indicated that most of the variation (ranging from 62–93%) was at the teacher level rather than the school or district level. The school-level ICCs were >.10 for three of the five soft exclusion practices, indicating substantial variability at the school level. Particularly, the ICCs were .12, 19, and .25, for asking a student to take a break outside of classroom, limiting a student's talking, and restricting a student's recess or free time respectively. The district-level ICCs was .13 for docking a student's free time or recess and .11 for limiting a student's talking, indicating that these two practices vary substantially between school districts.

Does Teachers' Reported Use of Soft Exclusionary Discipline Practices Vary by the Racial/Ethnic Composition of Students?

Table 4 presents results for the regression models examing the associations between the racial/ethnic composition of the selected subsample of students (i.e., three students in the classroom that teachers perceived as displaying the lowest self-regulation and social skills, totaling up to six selected students per classroom, n = 9,424 students) and teacher-reported use of soft exclusion. The racial/ethnic composition variables represent the racial/ethnic composition of students perceived by teachers as displaying reduced self-regulation and social skills. When compared to teachers who were likely reporting on a set of students with a higher proportion of White students, teachers who were likely reporting on a set of students with a higher proportion of Black students reported using three practices more often: breaks outside of the classroom (b = 0.52, SE = 0.25, p = .036), loss of free time or recess (b = 0.67, SE = 0.24, p = .006), and limit talking (b = 0.54, SE = 0.22, p = .016). No significant associations, at the $p < .05$ level, were found between the proportion scores of other racial/ethnic groups in a classroom (Hispanic, Asian, Other) and teacher-reported use of soft exclusionary practices.

Robustness Checks

Three sets of robustness checks explored whether the results were sensitive to our modeling decisions. First, we estimated the main predictive models without selecting a subsample of students. In this set of models, the students' racial/ethnic composition variables were created using *all* students in the classroom, and thus represent the classroom racial/ethnic composition (see Appendix Table A1). Results were robust to these two different ways of defining the students' racial/ethnic composition (selected students versus all students in the classroom). Second, we selected a subsample of three students per classroom with the lowest

math skills to create the racial/ethnic composition variables and re-estimated the main predictive models. We did this to provide some evidence of discriminant validity in that: (1) math skills are conceptually less related with discipline practices than social and emotional skills and (2) students' math skills were directly assessed, unlike social-emotional skills that were teacher-reported, implying there is no shared-method variance. Indeed, no significant associations between the proportion of Black versus White selected students and teacher-reported use of soft exclusionary discipline practices were observed (see Appendix Table A2). Finally, we estimated the predictive models using complete case analysis (see Appendix Table A3). Results were largely robust to how missing data were handled. The only exception was that the association between the proportion of Black versus White students and teacher-reported use of limit talking was not significant at the $p < .05$ level in complete case analysis ($b = 0.43$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = .07$).

Discussion

Suspensions and expulsions in early childhood classrooms, including their disproportionate use with Black and other racially/ethnically minoritized children, have been extensively documented (e.g., Giordano et al., 2021; Skiba et al., 2011; Zeng et al., 2019). However, the field is lacking data around exclusionary discipline practices outside of suspensions and expulsions. We need to understand the more routine ways of exclusion that nevertheless limit students' capacities to engage with teachers, peers, and learning tasks at school. Using data collected in the context of a statewide readiness assessment, we described: (1) the frequency with which kindergarten teachers report using soft exclusionary discipline practices, (2) how much of the variation in the use of these practices has to do with teachers, schools, and school districts, and (3) whether differences in the use of soft exclusion can be explained by the racial/ethnic composition of students in the classroom. We offer a quantitative

first look at soft exclusion in kindergarten classrooms that illustrates the value of looking beyond suspensions and expulsions to advance equity in young children's opportunities to engage with teachers, peers, and learning tasks at school.

Teachers' Use of Soft Exclusion in Kindergarten Classrooms

Too often, we have forgotten that kindergarten students are very much young children. Our data show that children enter kindergarten between four and six years of age, with 7% starting school before their fifth birthday. The demands of the kindergarten classroom can be challenging for some children given the amount of time they are expected to listen, not talk, and sit still. Children often express their exuberance in learning through developmentally appropriate noise and movement that may not match what a teacher or an administrator envisions happening as part of a "well-maintained" classroom or what is perceived as model student behavior. The increasing tendency to expect preschool and kindergarten classrooms to look and function like upper elementary classrooms pushes teachers toward using strategies to get their classroom "back on track" quickly so that they can continue their planned instruction, even at the expense of some children's learning experience.

Teachers reported using soft exclusion frequently in their classrooms for the children whom they perceive as having the lowest social and self-regulation skills. Most teachers in the present study use breaks inside the classroom (85%) and separate a student from group work to work independently (65%) once or more each week. When teachers send a child to the room's calm-down corner, send a student to time-out, or ask them to work in at a solitary desk removed from whole group areas to avoid distractions, they are pushed away from the planned learning and their interactions with teachers and peers are limited. Teachers, administrators, and other specialists see these strategies as supporting a child's behavior. For instance, educators may

perceive that the calm-down corner is a way to teach children that taking deep breaths help them regulate their emotions and then quickly rejoin the classroom. Educators can also see these strategies as ways to maintaining the organization of the classroom—they help keep the pace and schedule of instruction and learning for *most* students. However, there is a cost for the students who are disproportionately experiencing these exclusionary strategies, with the resulting impact likely being the opposite of what was intended. For instance, a student is more likely to be sent to the calm-down corner without the skills or the scaffolds needed to take deep-breaths and is not quickly invited to rejoin the classroom. Thus, these strategies reduce positive engagement opportunities for the children experiencing them, conveying to their peers the message that the student is a "troublemaker", and ultimately excluding the child from their classroom community (Gansen, 2020).

On average, teachers reported using other exclusionary discipline practices with relatively less frequency. Forty percent of teachers reported using breaks outside of the classroom once a week, such as sending the student to other classrooms, or to the school nurse, counselor, or assistant principal's office. Similarly, 38% of teachers described restricting restrict student's recess or free time once a week. However, this averages masks considerable variability. Whereas 40% of teachers reported never restricting student's recess or free time, 8% of teachers in our sample described doing this minimally once a day. Taking away students' recess or free time further restricts their opportunities to engage in already limited free social interactions with peers (Ramstetter et al., 2010). Finally, 27% of teachers reported implementing silent lunches or other practices that restrict children's talking (when otherwise talking would be allowed) once a week. These practices exclude children from the opportunity to learn instructional content and to make social connections with their peers, undermining the behavioral involvement, cognitive

investment, and emotional connection that young students' direct towards school (Shalaby, 2017). Exclusions from learning opportunities undermine children's self-appraisals such as feelings of competence and self-worth (Searle et al., 2013), and reduced self-appraisals feed back into more negative engagement (Wang et al., 2019), which may exacerbate teachers' and schools' reliance on exclusionary discipline. Because children's early interactions with their teachers are predictive of their engagement, social emotional adjustment, and achievement in later grades (Ansari et al., 2020; Roorda et al., 2017), early childhood is a critical time for interrupting and preventing these cycles, particularly for Black boys (Rashid, 2009).

Most of the variability in teachers' reports of the frequency with which they use soft exclusionary practices resided at the teacher level as opposed to the school or district levels. As noted earlier, it is likely that teachers do not think about these practices as exclusionary, but rather perceive them as acceptable and even inevitable (Shalaby, 2007). This could be explained, in part, by historical classroom management models relying more on reactive rather than proactive strategies (Sprick & Borgmeier, 2010), along with teachers receiving limited pre-service training to promote children's social and emotional skills (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Numerous states have recently pursued legislation to reduce or ban the use of suspension and expulsion in early childhood education (Loomis et al., 2021). However, as mandates to reduce expulsion are not always paired with resources to implement alternative, evidence-based practice to support young children's behavior in the classroom, these policies may inadvertently increase the use of other forms of exclusionary discipline within the school or classroom.

Racial Disparities in the Use of Soft Exclusion in Kindergarten Classrooms

We found that teachers reported using certain exclusionary practices (i.e., break outside of the classroom, loss of recess or free time, and limit talking) more frequently when they rated

more Black versus White students to be lowest on self-regulation and social skills. This finding was robust even when classroom-level measures of teachers' perceptions of students' self-regulation and social skills were accounted for. In other words, even when teachers' perceptions of students' self-regulation and social skills are held constant, having a higher proportion of Black versus White children is associated with teachers using the most severe exclusionary practices more often. Removing a child from the classroom, losing free time, and limiting social interactions are particularly restrictive practices and this disproportionality is alarming. Teachers using exclusionary discipline practices more often with Black versus White students is consistent with research showing that when the child is Black, teachers are more likely to misinterpret typically engaged learning behavior (e.g., an excited expression of surprise, joy, disappointment or frustration, or moving around the classroom to learn more) and attribute such behavior as non-compliance or disobedience (e.g., Boonstra, 2021; Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua & Eberhart, 2015). These results are also consistent with recent research demonstrating that Black parents received more complaints about their children's behavior from childcare providers compared to White parents, after accounting for children's observed disruptive behavior (Sabol et al., 2021). Although the effect sizes are small, they can have a significant impact over time as these exclusionary experiences accumulate across days, weeks, and school years and are disproportionately experienced by a subset of students (e.g., children whose behavior does not fit the expectations of the teacher or demands of the classroom setting or children whom teachers perceive as disruptive, challenging, or non-compliant). In fact, one theme that has surfaced recent educational discussions in the context of Covid-19, is the extent to which Black students and families are more likely to prefer remote learning, when compared to White students and families (Miller, 2021; Zamarro & Camp, 2021). One possible explanation is that Black students

may be having more opportunities to fully engage in the context of remote learning, as these types of exclusionary strategies may not be as easy to implement virtually.

Limitations

We present several limitations of this work. First, the items used to assess teacher-reported use of soft exclusion were not collected for each student. Rather, we asked teachers to report on how frequently they use a set of strategies with students in their classrooms who had the hardest time demonstrating solid self-regulation and social skills. Therefore, racial disparities at the student-level could not be explored. Instead, we approximated the racial composition of the students that teachers were most likely referencing by selecting a subsample of students whom teachers reported to display the lowest self-regulation and social skills. The subsample of students was selected to examine the research question about racial inequities in the frequency with which teachers reported using these practices. This approximation could be inaccurate (e.g., perhaps teachers completed the survey thinking about students who were not in our selected subsample). However, robustness checks showed that the results held when using the racial/ethnic composition of all students in the classroom. Second, discipline practices were assessed using single items, which are considered more subject to random measurement error than multiple-item scales. Third, although this is a large sample of teachers and students, it is a convenience sample and was not selected to be representative of the state where the data were collected nor of the larger population of teachers in the U.S. Forth, this study does not provide data about why these practices are used disproportionately.

Conclusion

We presented the frequency with which a large sample of kindergarten teachers reported to use soft exclusionary discipline practices with students whom they perceived had that lowest

self-regulation and social skills and examined the differences in teacher- reported use of these practices based upon the racial/ethnic composition of students. These results (1) expand our understanding of the strategies that exclude children from learning beyond suspensions and expulsion, (2) raise awareness of the urgency to address the social-emotional, and behavioral needs of our youngest learners, and (3) provide additional evidence of how opportunities for young learners are inequitably experienced based on race/ethnicity. Educators at all levels must consider the impacts of discipline strategies that remove certain children from the academic and social learning opportunities in the classroom or the playground. More investment is needed to support educators and leaders to use inclusive, sensitive, and anti-racist strategies that increase the engagement of the focal student (the student who is the focus of the use of the strategy). To ultimately advance equity in young children's learning opportunities, more data is needed to understand the use of these soft exclusionary strategies and more research is needed to understand why certain strategies are being inequitably used based upon student race/ethnicity.

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Table 1.

Teacher (*n* = 2,053) and *classroom* (*n* = 2,068) *characteristics.*

	n	%	*M*	*SD*	Missing
Teacher characteristics					
Age			39.21	11.52	
Female	1,959	96.22			78
Race/ethnicity					133
White	1,662	85.89			
Black	141	7.29			
Hispanic	68	3.51			
Asian	24	1.24			
Other	40	2.07			
Highest level of education					
Master or higher	1,043	51.15			
Bachelor	991	48.60			
Associate	5	0.25			
Classroom characteristics					
Race/ethnicity					
Proportion White			0.49	0.28	
Proportion Black			0.21	0.23	
Proportion Hispanic			0.17	0.19	
Proportion Asian			0.07	0.11	
Proportion Other			0.07	0.07	

Table 1 (continued).

N students	19.72	3.51
Proportion ELL	0.14	0.2
Proportion disability	0.09	0.11
Proportion boys	0.51	0.09
Proportion poverty	0.39	0.24
Age in months mean	65.11	11.52
Self-regulation mean	3.54	0.43
Social skills mean	4.12	0.37

Table 2.

Student characteristics for the full sample of students and for the subsample of students rated by teachers as demonstrating the lowest social-emotional skills in the classroom.

	All students (n = 40,771)				Selected students rated lowest in social-emotional skills subsample (n = 9,424)			
	n	%	M	*SD*	n	%	M	*SD*
Age in months			65.11	4.04			64.68	4.23
Boy	20,680	50.72			6,357	67.46		
Race/Ethnicity								
White	19,631	48.15			4,279	45.41		
Black	7,977	19.57			2,268	24.07		
Hispanic	7,022	17.22			1,642	17.42		
Asian	2,919	7.16			489	5.19		
Other	2,882	7.07			673	7.14		
Disability	3,372	8.27			1,485	15.76		
ELL	6,045	14.83			1,550	16.45		
Poverty	15,271	37.46			4,234	44.93		
Teacher-rated SEL skills								
Self-regulation			3.55	0.84			2.70	0.75
Social skills			4.13	0.72			3.40	0.77

Table 3.

Percentage of teachers on each frequency category and teacher-, school-, and division-level intraclass correlation coefficients by soft exclusionary discipline practices.

	Never	A couple times a year	Once or twice a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Once a day	Multiple times a day	Teacher ICC	School ICC	Division ICC
Student takes a break from lesson or activity while remaining in the classroom.	4.13	3.72	7.09	8.90	25.87	12.09	38.20	.90	0.07	0.03
Student takes a break from lesson or activity outside of the classroom.	22.62	18.78	17.67	10.06	13.78	8.08	9.01	.84	0.12	0.04
Student completes a task independently while the rest of the students are in a small or whole group activity	12.21	8.14	14.59	15.64	23.49	13.20	12.73	.93	0.05	0.02

Table 3 (continued).

Loss of recess or other free time.	39.65	9.36	12.91	12.27	17.62	5.23	2.97	.62	0.25	0.13
Limit talking when otherwise talking would be allowed.	43.84	15.17	14.48	8.55	10.58	4	3.6	.70	0.19	0.11

Note: Percentages were estimated including missing data (n = 343; 17%); teacher ICC = (1 – school ICC – division ICC).

Table 4.

Associations between students racial/ethnic composition and teacher-reported use of specific soft exclusionary discipline practices using a selected subsample of students who teachers rated lowest in social emotional skills. compositions.

	Break inside		Break outside		Independent task		Lose time		Limit talking	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Selected students racial/ethnic composition										
Proportion Black	-0.10	0.21	0.52*	0.25	0.03	0.24	0.67**	0.24	0.54*	0.22
Proportion Hispanic	-0.10	0.29	0.08	0.33	0.00	0.33	0.27	0.30	0.33	0.31
Proportion Asian	-0.47	0.41	-0.66	0.43	-0.05	0.44	-0.14	0.41	-0.04	0.41
Proportion Other	0.37	0.32	-0.15	0.40	0.25	0.40	-0.16	0.34	0.15	0.35
Covariates										
Teacher characteristics										
Age	0.00	0.00	-0.02***	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.02***	0.00	-0.01***	0.00
Master's degree	0.10	0.09	-0.04	0.09	0.17	0.09	-0.01	0.09	0.02	0.10
Race/ethnicity										

Table 4 (continued).

Black	-0.19	0.17	0.19	0.20	0.83***	0.19	-0.16	0.17	0.40	0.20
Hispanic	-0.54*	0.26	-0.23	0.28	0.42	0.27	-0.08	0.28	0.20	0.25
Asian	0.06	0.37	-0.75	0.38	0.34	0.43	0.10	0.36	1.06*	0.49
Other	0.18	0.26	-0.21	0.31	0.64	0.33	0.20	0.29	0.07	0.30
Student characteristics aggregated at the classroom-level										
N selected students	-0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02
Proportion ELL	0.07	0.27	-0.24	0.31	-0.22	0.33	-0.46	0.30	-0.53	0.31
Proportion disability	0.19	0.19	0.56**	0.20	0.25	0.21	-0.31	0.19	-0.23	0.19
Proportion boys	0.38*	0.19	0.71**	0.22	0.24	0.22	0.15	0.20	0.17	0.19
Age in months mean	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.02
Self-regulation mean	-0.02	0.11	-0.04	0.13	-0.09	0.12	-0.28*	0.12	-0.10	0.11
Social skills mean	-0.59	0.10	-0.70***	0.12	-0.41**	0.12	-0.18	0.12	-0.25*	0.11

Note: White is reference group for classroom racial/ethnic composition and teacher/race ethnicity; coefficients are unstandardized; models include division fixed effects.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$