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Preventing the Use of Suspension and Expulsion in Preschool: Understanding Current Policy, Practice and Research

Title

Preventing the Use of Suspension and Expulsion in Preschool: Understanding Current Policy, Practice and Research

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How did you hear about SPR?

SPR member

Equipment Agreement

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Presentation Format:

PS

Theme:

Research, Policy, and Practice

Abstract:

Session Introduction: Estimates suggest that every school day approximately 250 preschoolers are suspended or expelled in the United States. Suspensions or expulsions are particularly salient among boys who make up approximately half of all preschoolers but represent 82% of all children who receive exclusionary discipline (ED). Furthermore, Black children are 2.2 times more likely to receive ED than their white counterparts. These statistics are particularly troubling given evidence that ED disenfranchises children while removing them from safe academic settings. This results in further problem behavior and academic challenges and is associated with eventual adult incarceration. Given the documented disadvantages associated with the use of ED in preschool, many agency and governmental policies are currently being discussed and changed in order to better serve children. One such policy is prohibition of ED. However, recent research suggests that prohibition is not sufficient to eliminate the use of ED. To most effectively prevent the use of ED, it is necessary to better understand contributing factors at the child, provider, and program levels.

The goal of this symposium session is to present a series of papers which each discuss various angles of the research, policy and practice of preschool ED. The symposium brings

together research from three different states and researchers with unique perspectives on the issues and solutions available based on unique local policies and practices.

The first paper, "Prospective Predictors of Exclusionary Discipline Use in Early Childhood Care and Education Programs," uses longitudinal statewide survey data from directors and owners of early childhood education centers to explore longitudinal predictors of the use of exclusionary discipline.

The second paper, "Intersecting Biases: How Child Race, Gender, and Disability Status Predict Early Childhood Educators' Rating of Expulsion Risk," uses an experimental research design to examine how educators' implicit biases about children's intersecting social identities relate to endorsement of exclusionary practices.

The third paper, "Expelled from Preschool: A Case Study of the Sammy Center's Strengths-Based Catchment Program for Children with 'Big Feelings and Emotions'," is a case study of one community-based program that is designed to actively address the needs of children who have experienced ED.

After the presentations, the chair will lead a discussion on ED practices and how they are influenced by research and policy. It is expected that SPR participants from a variety of fields will find value in the discussion on the links between research, policy, and practice.

Abstract id# 34999

Prospective Predictors of Exclusionary Discipline Use in Early Childhood Care and Education Programs

Abstract:

Introduction: Over two decades of research suggests that children in early care and education (ECE) settings experience exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspension and expulsion) at a higher rate than children in K-12 schools. Given the demonstrated negative long-term effects of exclusionary discipline (e.g., high school dropout, entrance into the carceral system), a number of states have implemented guidance or policies prohibiting the use of ED in ECE settings. Prohibition by itself is not proving to be sufficient, highlighting the need for strategies to address the factors that lead to the perceived need to utilize ED. However, information on the *prospective* predictors of ED usage is scarce. This study utilizes data from repeated statewide surveys of directors and owners of ECE programs over 3 years to identify individual- and program-level predictors that could be potential targets for programs to prevent the use of ED in ECE settings.

Methods: The current study uses longitudinal data from annually repeated surveys of 872 directors and owners of private and publicly-funded center-based and family- and home-based ECE programs. Path analyses were used to examine direct and mediated paths from predictors at Time 1 (T1) to use of ED either 1 year (Time 2; T2) or 2 years (Time 3; T3) later.

Results: At the individual level, director/owner use of ED in the past and high levels of stress positively predicted use of ED at T2 or T3. At the program level, having state or federal funding and the use of a social-emotional curriculum positively predicted ED usage. Whether a program was home- or center-based was also significantly indirectly associated with ED use. Director/owners in home-based programs had lower levels of stress which was then negatively associated with using ED. Different types of professional development and the flexibility of program policies did not significantly predict ED use.

Conclusion: As more states move to prohibit ED in ECE, this study provides possible points of leverage for prevention of the perceived need to use ED. Data suggests that reducing directors'/owners' levels of stress and providing adequate support in the form of state or federal funding could be two ways to decrease the use of ED. The negative association between directors'/owners' levels of stress and being a home-based program warrants further research to understand this association and what could be replicated in center-based settings. Implementing policy-level changes without additional research runs the risk of increasing stress on directors/owners and undermining their abilities to support children and families.

Abstract id# 35001

Intersecting Biases: How Child Race, Gender, and Disability Status Predict Early Childhood Educators' Rating of Expulsion Risk

Abstract:

Introduction: Preschool children are expelled at three times the rate of K-12 students. Racial, gender, and disability disparities persist in the use of exclusionary discipline, such that Black children, boys, and children with disabilities are most likely to be pushed out. Children at the intersection of these marginalized identities may be most likely to experience exclusion, though most previous early childhood research has explored identities separately. To address this gap, we explored how educators' implicit bias related to child race, gender, and disability status related to ratings of exclusionary practices.

Methods: We randomly selected 1,000 early childhood educators from a larger study to complete a survey during April 2024; 610 educators consented and were eligible to participate (61% response rate). Educators were randomized to one of eight standardized vignettes of a child showing challenging behavior, varying on gender, race, and disability status. Educators then rated the severity of the child's behavior, the child's expulsion risk (Gilliam & Reyes, 2018; $n=12$; e.g., "Some mornings I find myself hoping that this child will be absent from my classroom."; $\alpha = .85$), and their likelihood of using exclusionary ($n=9$; e.g., Send the child to a separate area of the classroom alone; $\alpha = .83$) teaching practices in response to this child's behavior.

We used regressions to predict behavior severity rating and exclusionary practices with vignette condition race, gender, and disability main and interaction effects. We also controlled for teacher race, experience, role, classroom age range, and program setting and clustered standard errors to account for the nesting of teachers within programs.

Results: In predicting behavior rating severity, we found a main effect for condition race and two two-way interactions, model $F=3.19$, $R^2=.09$, $p<.001$. Educators rated behavior severity *lower* when presented with a White child, a White boy, and a boy with a suspected disability. In predicting expulsion risk, we found a main effect for child race, a two-way interaction, and a three-way interaction, model $F= 2.79$, $R^2=.09$, $p<.001$. Educators rated exclusion risk *lower* when presented with a White child, a girl with a suspected disability, and a White boy with a suspected disability. In predicting likelihood of using exclusionary practices, we found no main or interaction condition effects after controlling for covariates.

Conclusions: This study and previous research suggest that implicit biases relate to teachers' decisions to exclude young children. Future research should explore ways to

change teachers' beliefs and biases to prevent exclusionary discipline and support teachers to equitably support all children in their classrooms.

Abstract id# 35002

Expelled from Preschool: A Case Study of the Sammy Center's Strengths-Based Catchment Program for Children with "Big Feelings and Emotions"

Abstract:

Introduction: Exclusionary practices are widespread across the United States but are less visible and understood in early childhood. Exclusionary practices, employed in a child's first introduction to educational institutions are critical for shaping parenting interactions with daycare and preschool expectations, but most importantly, set a negative course for child readiness that exacerbate rather than ameliorate socio-behavior needs of children. Exclusionary practices during this critical developmental period are more detrimental for children in home environments with limited resources to offset the impact of exclusion.

To date, most of what we know about exclusion is focused on this practice in preschool and daycare environments such as HeadStart and private programs, sometimes employing national data. But where do excluded children go when these institutional arrangements fail families? Aside from kin and other private solutions, there is little knowledge of what we call "catchment programs" that work to actively address institutional failures and, most importantly, remove the disproportionately private costs of these failures.

Methods: We provide a case study of one such catchment program, the Sammy Center, est 2022 (SLC, Utah), that seeks out children that have been activity removed from mainstream services due to behavioral problems deemed too disruptive for conventional services. We outline the role of a "strengths-based" approach rooted in the Pyramid Model and trauma-informed care using parent interviews and child observations paired with preliminary quantitative results documenting behavior change over the course of two program years.

Results: Preliminary results for the Sammy Centers most disruptive students reveal that behavioral interventions have prevented or significantly reduced behavioral escalations. By tracking the occurrence of challenging behaviors and implementing targeted interventions, the Center also finds a rise in healthy social-emotional learning (SEL) behaviors over time. Preliminary qualitative evidence demonstrates why this approach is uniquely effective.

Conclusion: Catchment programs like the Sammy Center can also alleviate private care providers, where many mothers and caregivers are negotiating both elevated stress at home and home/work life balance in many households, especially homes with severe financial struggle. The Sammy Center demonstrates how critical a committed behavioral care program can be for the most vulnerable families denied access to other, more conventional options. Catchment programs reveal both the institutional failures of mainstream preschool and childcare solutions in early childhood, but also the promise of adopting more positive programming designed to build confidence, connection, and self-regulation for children not only at school, but at home.

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