Overrepresentation of African American Males in Exclusionary Discipline: The Role of School-Based Mental Health Professionals in Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline

Alicia Darensbourg
Texas A & M University

Erica Perez
Texas A & M University

Jamilia J. Blake
Texas A & M University

African American males are at increased risk for experiencing disciplinary practices that exclude them from the school environment. It is believed that African American males' overrepresentation in the receipt of these practices contributes to their involvement in the criminal justice system as they approach adolescence and enter adulthood. The connection of exclusionary discipline with incarceration rates is termed the School to Prison Pipeline. Although some scholars have identified school-wide initiatives as having potential in curtailing African American males' overrepresentation in these punitive discipline practices, less discussion has focused on the role of school-based mental health professionals to address this issue. School-based mental health professionals possess a unique set of skills that may assist schools in decreasing African American males' exposure to exclusionary discipline practices and consequently reducing their risk for adverse outcomes. The purpose of this review is to provide school-based mental health professionals with specific recommendations for reducing this negative educational experience.

Introduction

The United States Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (2007) reported that in 2006 the number of inmates in state and federal prisons increased to over one and a half million from 2005 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). Thirty-five percent of state and federal male prisoners were African American even though African Americans constituted only 12.4% of the United States' population in 2006. These data suggest that

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jamilia Blake, Ph.D.,706 Harrington Tower MS 4225, Department of Educational Psychology, TAMU, College Station TX 77843.

African American males are three times more likely to be incarcerated than non-African American males (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). Zeiderberg & Schiraldi (2002) suggests that 52% of African American males who do not complete high school have been incarcerated at least once by the age of 30. Moreover, 68% of male prison inmates did not graduate from high school, with 35% of prisoners reporting behavior, academic problems, and academic disengagement as the main reasons for not obtaining their high school diploma (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). These statistics suggest that issues within the educational system may offer one explanation for understanding the overrepresentation of African American males in the United States justice system.

School to Prison Pipeline

Some research suggests that when African American males enter school their educational path is altered by situational variables (Brown, 2002; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Skiba & Petterson, 1999; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006; Skiba, Petterson & Williams, 1997). These situational variables include experiencing harsher discipline practices (Skiba & Petterson, 1999; Skiba, Petterson & Williams, 1997), being taught by unprepared teachers (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005), being referred for special education (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006), and a feeling of detachment from school (Brown, 2002). The combination of these factors within the education system have been purported to contribute to the overrepresentation of African American males in prison. This is referred to as the School to Prison Pipeline (Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Petterson, 2002; Walden & Losen, 2003; Zeiderberg & Schiraldi, 2002). The School to Prison Pipeline proposes that exclusionary discipline techniques (e.g. detention, out of school, suspension, disciplinary alternative education placements) experienced by African American males alienate them from the learning process by steering them from the classroom and academic attainment and toward the criminal justice system.

Although there appears to be a lack of empirical evidence that demonstrates a linear relationship between discipline practices that exclude African American males from school and entrance into the criminal justice system, a recent study examining the linkage between race, discipline referrals, and involvement in the criminal justice system found empirical support for the School to Prison Pipeline (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeire, & Valentine, 2009). Specifically, the issuing of exclusionary discipline practices to African American males in 53 counties in the Midwestern United States was linked to a relative increase in juvenile court referrals for these students. The strong associations evident between the disproportionate number of African American males who experience exclusionary discipline practices and the related increase in juvenile court referrals provides evidence of a School to Prison Pipeline.

Bearing this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to review the evidence surrounding unfair and exclusionary discipline practices implemented in schools and the effect of these practices on African American males' educational achievement and social adjustment. Recommendations for school-based mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors) to reduce the effects of exclusionary discipline on the School to Prison Pipeline are discussed.

Exclusionary Discipline

The use of exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension, expulsion, and disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEP) can have negative effects on all children (Skiba, 2000). Disciplinary alterative education programs are out of school suspension programs designed for students with chronic or severe offenses that result in long term suspension outside of their regular educational setting. It appears that African American males inequitably experience exclusionary discipline practices in general, out of school suspension specifically (Mendez, Knoff & Ferron, 2002). African American male students are suspended 2 to 3 times more frequently than other students (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 1999). The utilization of exclusionary practices can lead to feelings of school disengagement (Brown, 2007) and perceptions of the education system as being unsupportive (Sekayi, 2001). As a result, students experience alienation from the educational community and begin to lose interest in learning (Brown, 2007; Wald & Kurlaender, 2003). Research specifically suggests that African American males who are frequently suspended or expelled become academically disengaged, increase their association with deviant peers, become resentful of school personnel, and experience a heightened sense of alienation according to recent research (McNeely, Nonemaker & Blum, 2002; Wald & Kurlaender, 2003). Furthermore, research indicates that African American males involved in DAEP's may be more likely to associate with deviant peer groups which may lead to an increase in criminal activity (Poulin, Dishion, & Burraston, 2001). In addition to early entry exposure to the criminal justice system, DAEP's may have the negative effect of normalizing the prison experience for African American males, consequently increasing future involvement in the criminal justice system.

Thirty years of research has demonstrated that an inequity exists between the number of European American and African American males punished through the use of exclusionary discipline practices (Costenbader & Markson, 1994, 1998; Fenning & Rose, 2007; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Petterson, 2002; Skiba & Petterson, 1999; Skiba, Petterson, & Williams, 1997; Wu, Pink, Crain & Moles, 1982). Suspension, a form of exclusionary discipline, has increased among all students from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million in 2000 in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In 2000, although African American students represented less than 17% of the student population in United States schools, they accounted for 34% of all suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Moreover, Wald and Losen (2003) reported that African American males were 2.6 times more likely to be suspended than European American males. These statistics lend credence to the School to Prison Pipeline. The alarming statistics of African American males in prison, those exposed to expulsion, suspension, and DAEP's, make this population especially vulnerable to the consequences of exclusionary discipline (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009).

Zero Tolerance Policies in Education

Many students who experience exclusionary discipline do so as a consequence of zero tolerance policies. Zero tolerance policies are discipline policies with predetermined consequences that are often severe and punitive in nature. Consequences are implemented regardless of the severity of the infraction, extenuating circumstances, or situation specificity

surrounding the infraction (Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, & Garcia-Vazquez, 2006). An example of zero tolerance occurred in November of 1998 in Pennsylvania when a 5-year old was suspended for wearing a 5-inch plastic ax as a piece of his firefighter costume for a classroom Halloween party (Skiba et al., 2000). Even though the small ax was a part of a Halloween costume, the prop fell in the schools' rigid category of "weapon" and the school enforced their zero tolerance policy of suspension for this very young student. Additional zero tolerance policies are enforced in varying school districts relating to drug possession, suspicion of drug use, verbal threats, fighting and sexual harassment (Skiba et al., 2000, Skiba & Peterson, 1999). In support of zero tolerance, followers state that when consequences are inconsistently allocated for inappropriate behavior administration is showing students that they are not serious about discipline (Skiba et al., 2006). Thus, the intention of zero tolerance policies is to provide a safe and secure learning environment in a fair and consistent manner. However, non-supporters argue that if the punishment is not consistent with the severity of the discipline infraction committed, then students fail to learn about rules and subsequent consequences for their behavior (Skiba, 2000).

In light of the controversy surrounding zero tolerance policies across the U.S. education system, the American Psychological Association (Skiba et al., 2006) developed a task force to examine the evidence of the effectiveness of zero tolerance. The Task Force outlined five major premises of zero tolerance and explored research to determine the accuracy of these assumptions. According to the Task Force, zero tolerance assumes that an increase in school violence warrants a "no nonsense" discipline strategy and that these strategies serve as a deterrent to inappropriate behavior. Additional assumptions of zero tolerance suggest students will be safer if those who violate school rules are removed from the school environment and if discipline is implemented uniformly. A final assumption of zero tolerance is that parents support these policies to improve school safety. The Task Force refuted each assumption based on their investigations of current evidence surrounding zero tolerance. Conclusions suggest that zero tolerance policies are not well understood by the public and do not benefit the students it is designed to serve.

African American males appear to disproportionally suffer the consequences of zero tolerance policies, given that they experience increases in the allocation of discipline practices utilized when zero tolerance policies are broken. We suggest that the rigidity used when enforcing zero tolerance policies may affect African American males at higher rates due to the way they are viewed by school staff, their evidence of higher office referral rates, and the disproportionate allocation of exclusionary discipline they receive from their districts. Not only do African American males suffer from less time in an academic classroom due to exclusionary discipline as a result of zero tolerance policies, but research also indicates that involvement in exclusionary discipline leads to feelings of alienation from school, elevated dropout rates, and alarming incarceration rates (Brown, 2007; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Petterson, 2000; U.S. Department of Justice, 2003) contributing to the overrepresentation of African American males in exclusionary discipline that potentially lead to the School to Prison Pipeline. Although zero tolerance appears to play an important role in the School to Prison Pipeline, other factors that contribute to the Pipeline should be investigated.

Additional Explanations for Disproportionality

Additional arguments have been presented to explain the School to Prison Pipeline. One explanation proposes that because African American children are more likely to come from

impoverished homes (US Census Bureau, 2007) then they are more likely to misbehave and engage in non-compliant behavior (Hudley, 1993; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). A report from the National Research Council, *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education*, (2002) suggests that African American children who grow up in poverty are less prepared to meet the behavioral demands of school. Students from low-income homes report receiving more severe consequences than those who came from high income families for discipline infractions (Skiba et al., 1997, Skiba et al., 2000). Socio-economic status (SES) might, in part, explain the inequity in disciplinary infractions. However, Wu et al., (1982) indicates that African American males continue to be disproportionately represented in exclusionary discipline practices even when SES is controlled.

Another rationale given to explain the overrepresentation of African American males in the school discipline system is that African American males tend to display more disruptive behaviors than their peers. Whereas some researchers suggest that student behaviors differ by ethnicity, with African American males evidencing greater levels of aggressive and behavioral difficulties in school (Hudley, 1993; Hughes & Kwok, 2007), other researchers have failed to find support that African American males misbehave at significantly higher rates than European American males (McCarthy & Hoge, 1997; Wu et al.,1982). In contrast, researchers have discovered that African American males have a tendency to receive harsher punishments for less severe offenses than European American males (McFadden et al, 1992; Shaw & Braden, 1992; Skiba, 2001). For example, McFadden et al. (1992) reported that African American males received corporal punishment and more punitive types of punishment for non-violent offenses such as defying school authority and "bothering others." However, European Americans were referred more often for these behaviors but received less severe types of punishment than African American males.

Alternatives to Punitive Discipline

Scholars have proposed solutions to curtailing the effects of exclusionary discipline practices given its pervasive effect on African American males and its potential contribution to the School to Prison Pipeline. To address the detrimental consequences of zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline on African American males, Fenning and Rose (2007) propose that educational stakeholders focus attention on factors present within the educational system that can derail the School to Prison Pipeline for African American males. Less punitive and more proactive alternatives are suggested as strategies to decrease the contribution of exclusionary discipline in the School to Prison Pipeline. These include, but are not limited to, the implementation of interventions such as social skills training and anger management programs. Whereas these interventions target specific student needs, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) offers a more comprehensive approach to minimize school disruption by incorporating proactive alternatives, such as positive discipline, school management, and a tiered approach to addressing the increasing behavioral needs of students (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba et al., 2006, Sugai, Horner, et al., 2000; Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). PBIS also concurrently teaches appropriate alternatives to inappropriate behavior (Safran & Oswald, 2003).

The positive and proactive approaches to discipline used in PBIS such as reinforcing appropriate behaviors, setting and clearly objectifying rules, teaching appropriate interaction

styles between students and staff are not new ideas. However, PBIS provides one method for integrating these empirically established strategies. Furthermore, this approach offers a variety of components that can be implemented given the schools unique needs and resources (Scott & Martinek, 2006). While PBIS evidences proactive change for students of all races, researchers have proposed that these strategies may have a significant effect on reducing the disproportionate rate of exclusionary discipline in African American males (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba et al., 2006).

PBIS views the cause of behavior as an interaction between the individual and his environment (Warren et al., 2006). Therefore, it is assumed that by changing the environment through the universal provision of proactive and positive responses to discipline, changes in student and staff behavior will occur and lead to reductions in disproportionate representation in punitive discipline practices. There is little if any empirical evidence that PBIS exclusively will decrease the School to Prison Pipeline or racial disparities in exclusionary discipline. Yet, based on preliminary evidence which suggests that the use of specific components of PBIS decreases office discipline referrals and increases positive school climate, PBIS may be an effective technique to consider (Netzel & Eber, 2003; Nelson, Colvin, & Smith, 1996; Oswald, Safran, & Johanson, 2005; Taylor-Green et al., 1997).

PBIS appears to be a viable alternative to current discipline practices in alleviating the discrepancy of African American males in exclusionary discipline. Thus, suggestions have been made to incorporate school-wide discipline practices that provide clear expectations of student behavior and consequences for unacceptable behavior (Monger, 2007; Netzel & Eber, 2003; Safran & Oswald, 2003). One component inherent to PBIS that can alleviate the affects of the School to Prison Pipeline includes using school data (i.e. school referral citations) to guide and evaluate student interventions (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Netzel & Eber, 2003; Safran & Oswald, 2003). In addition, PBIS is useful for creating collaborative discipline teams to create school-wide behavior expectations and recommended discipline practices (Bohanan et al., 2006; Netzel & Eber, 2003; Safran & Oswald, 2003). Furthermore, it is recommended to incorporate continued education on positive behavior and cultural competence for teachers (Monger, 2007; Netzel & Eber, 2003). Despite the advantages PBIS affords schools in managing student behavior, PBIS appears to be a school wide initiative in which the decision to adopt may be rarely made by school based mental health professionals, but instead by educational administrators at the district and school level. Given this information, school-based mental health professionals may have minimal influence over the discipline strategies that schools choose to implement. However, we suggest school-based mental health professionals implement specific strategies under the PBIS model to decrease the presence of disproportionate discipline within their schools.

Unique Contributions of School-based Mental Health Professionals

Data Based Decision Making. In order for school-based mental health professionals to intervene appropriately and effectively reduce disproportionate discipline, it is necessary to determine if unfavorable patterns in exclusionary discipline exist within the target school. A thorough investigation of discipline data is necessary. Specifically, discipline data can be examined for: (a) the prevalence of discipline referrals among specific teachers, (b) the demographics (i.e. race, gender) of students referred, and (c) the reason for referral. This information, when taken comprehensively, provides an accurate representation of discipline

patterns present within the target school (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). Examples of patterns to examine include the disciplinary infractions for which African American males are referred and how they differ from those of their European American peers, and the rates at which particular teachers refer students for discipline infractions.

Once the data have been collected and patterns examined, school-based mental health professionals can use the data to implement appropriate intervention strategies tailored to the discrepancies revealed through the analysis. This data based decision making can inform interventions in multiple ways. For example, if the data show a small percentage of teachers making most of the school referrals, then the school based mental health professional can consult with this specific group of teachers. This group consultation can focus on reducing discrepancy through behavior management strategies or cultural competency trainings. Likewise, if the data show that a particular teacher consistently refers African American males, the mental health professional, along with the target teacher, can jointly determine the reasons for the racial discrepancy in referrals. Strategies to reduce this overrepresentation through a comprehensive examination and appreciation of the differences in the student and the teacher's culture can be explored. In addition to using data to determine discipline patterns within a school, the continuous monitoring of this data is imperative to ensure that the implemented interventions are effective at reducing disproportionality (Lane, Wehby, Robertson, & Rogers, 2007; Lewis & Sugai, 1999).

Cultural competency training. If it is determined that African American males are overrepresented in office referrals, cultural competency trainings may help to reduce disproportionate discipline practices. Scholars suggest that teacher referral biases actually contribute to disproportionate discipline referrals as opposed to students' actual behavior (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Through their contact with a diverse population, teachers can reflect on their own beliefs about families, cultural traditions, expectations, and other qualities that distinguish themselves from their students. This can result in a cultural mismatch between students and teachers, thereby creating an environment where students feel excluded, disengaged, and alienated from the educational process (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008).

Townsend (2000) suggests changes in cognition are needed to reduce exclusionary discipline attributed to cultural differences between teachers and students. Specifically, school professionals need to address their perceptions of African American males and what constitutes appropriate classroom behavior. Teachers may view African American males as individuals who do not fit into school norms (Cassella, 2003). Students who do not conform to a teacher's perceptions of educational norms are often labeled as being 'dangerous' or 'troublemakers'. This view by teachers coupled with anxiety and/or fear can lead teachers and educational administrators to react more punitively toward African American males. The perception of 'losing control' of a classroom rather than a student's behavior can lead teachers to make rash decisions leading to increased exclusionary discipline practices (Skiba & Petterson, 1999). Through teacher trainings, school-based mental health professionals can alter these cognitions. Specifically, we suggest that school-based mental health professionals provide direction for teachers to understand communication styles and decrease stereotypes about African American males.

Differences in communication styles between African American males and teachers contribute to a vast number of office referrals (Bireda, 2002; Tucker, 1999). For example,

African American males may engage in 'over-lapping speech' in which they may interrupt their teacher's statements or attempt to finish their teacher's sentences before the teacher has completed the statement (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). African American students' use of over-lapping speech, which may be fueled by student enthusiasm or verbal impulsivity, could be perceived as disrespectful by teachers.

In addition, young African American males are often portrayed in the media as criminals who should be feared and avoided (Monroe, 2005). Consciously or unconsciously, teachers may react to African American males in the classroom in ways that are consistent with these stereotypes. Media stereotypes coupled with loud, intense communication and the use of gestures, common within African American culture (Bireda, Cartledge, & Middleson, 1996), can often be perceived as intimidating, thus requiring a firm defense (i.e. discipline referral). Information about the influence of stereotypes, differences in communication styles, and how teachers perceive African American males can be derived through: 1) small group or individual discussions with teachers; and/or 2) direct observations within the classroom. School-based mental health professionals can intervene by asking teachers to (a) keep a private reflection journal to express thoughts that may be considered socially unacceptable and allow teachers to reflect on those thoughts regularly, (b) highlight the successes of African American children, community leaders, professionals, and teachers to their students, and (c) invite successful African American faculty to describe their interpersonal relationship styles with students and its effectiveness.

Additional strategies include helping the school community to acknowledge the accomplishment of African American students in all areas of life such as religious service, defending a student against a bully and athletic accomplishments. Assisting teachers in the development of a strengths-based approach to interacting with students could also be a useful strategy. For example, teachers could be encouraged to make a list of the positive qualities of those students they see as most challenging or disruptive. Further, teachers can also acknowledge positive qualities in students on a regular basis (i.e. "I am so glad you asked that question", "That's an interesting way to think about this subject, thank you for sharing", "I like your enthusiasm about this topic). Furthermore, using audio recording, with student permission, to conduct candid 'town hall' style meetings with students can be undertaken. During town halls, students can be asked about their perception of teacher biases or impartial behavior. They can also be asked to provide teachers with feedback about their concerns. This process could be used to increase cultural competency of teachers (Center for Disease Control, 2009).

Classroom management strategies. Another way for school-based mental health professionals to reduce the School to Prison Pipeline and disproportionate discipline practices within a target school is to provide teachers with classroom management strategies. For example, if discipline data reveals that teacher's use referrals with certain students more frequently than other teachers, school-based mental health professionals can provide strategies for the teacher to decrease excessive referrals. In such cases, school-based mental health professionals can intervene by offering staff development sessions that provide (a) teachers with guidance in determining the type of infractions that warrant office referrals and those that call for classroom intervention and (b) specific interventions that could be implemented to handle minor infractions within the classroom (Netzel & Eber, 2003). These interventions may include (a) providing teachers with an understanding of the variables affecting student behavior such as avoiding class work, getting attention, being bored, feeling academic frustration and (b) helping

teachers feel confident in their ability to teach behavior in the same way that they teach academics (Netzel & Eber, 2003).

Additional interventions may include classroom management techniques such as seating that maximizes teacher access to students, a specific expectation of discipline, consequences that are implemented for all students, an examination of the different behaviors that are an annoyance to a specific teacher and those that truly interfere with learning, or the creation of an educational environment of predictable consequences. Teachers can develop a list of activities in which students should participate when their work has been completed to reduce idle time (Scheuermann & Hall, 2008; Sprick, 2006). They can also provide an activity or expected assignment for students to participate in when they enter or leave a classroom (Sprick, 2006). Supplying students with a written explanation including step-by-step instructions for transitioning between tasks and a reinforcement schedule for the appropriate transition may also be an effective classroom behavior management strategy that can be suggested to teachers (Sprick, 2006).

Nelson et al., (1996) indicate that teachers are more likely to feel confident when they are provided with specific guidelines for implementing classroom discipline practices. Therefore, it is conceivable that teachers who feel less confident in their abilities to implement discipline in their classrooms are more likely to refer students to the office to handle discipline problems. In order to increase teacher efficacy in implementing discipline within the classroom, school based mental health professionals can meet with teachers and conduct individual consultations. Consultation can be focused on an individual student or more broadly on troublesome behaviors that disrupt instruction (e.g., "I noticed you're having trouble with defiance from this group of students", "I noticed that Johnny was sitting outside today. That must be a difficult situation"). If schools have limited numbers of school based mental health professionals, pairing a teacher with strong classroom behavior management techniques with a teacher struggling in this area could provide additional support (Center for Disease Control, 2009). In addition, the school based mental health professional may provide a resource area that includes videos, journal articles, and books containing information on classroom management techniques. This type of information database may encourage teachers to seek the information instead of coming directly to the mental health professional. This database may also serve to decrease teachers' feelings of embarrassment or inadequacy for obtaining information on additional management techniques. Other strategies that may be helpful for teachers having difficulty with classroom management include: (a) the development of a team of teachers to provide guidance and effective strategies within their own classroom to other teachers struggling with discipline (Center for Disease Control, 2009), (b) praising and acknowledging teachers for their gains in a reduction of discipline referrals, and (c) regular staff development to address discipline issues affecting the school and teachers (Netzel & Eber, 2003).

Fostering school belonging. The majority of interventions and strategies discussed are designed for teachers to help decrease office referrals and seek alternative discipline practices. The purpose of these interventions and strategies is to reduce disproportionate referrals of African American males. However, given that students who are often disciplined punitively at school feel ostracized, disconnected (Brown, 2007; Sekayi, 2001), it is important that these students reconnect with not only their teachers, but also their school community. This can be done by providing after-school sports, academic programming, or regular family reading nights. These school and community wide initiatives can help students and families feel more connected

to school. Fostering students' feelings of inclusiveness can help African American males see school as a place where they can be successful. Interventions that can be implemented with these students include reconceptualizing student leadership within classrooms (e.g. designating a student to be the liaison between students and the teacher), recognizing positive qualities of students (e.g. level of influence of peers), and placing students who are more likely to be referred for discipline in classroom to a school leadership position (Center for Disease Control, 2009).

Many times, African American males may struggle academically and they may not view school as a place where they can excel. By demonstrating alternative ways to seek positive attention and gain a sense of pride, African American males may reduce their discipline infractions and increase their sense of school belonging. It is conceivable that some students may feel more valued in the classroom environment and school community. Other interventions that may increase feelings of school belonging include (a) acknowledging strengths in students (have teachers make a list), (b) recognizing accomplishments in areas outside of academics (Scheuermann & Hall, 2008), (c) developing a 'brag board' where students accomplishments can be displayed, (d) having teachers take an interest in students outside of academics such as asking about favorite sports teams, music group (Scheuermann & Hall, 2008), or (e) attending extracurricular activities (e.g., skateboarding, dancing, break dancing competition) (Scheuermann & Hall, 2008).

Conclusions

The overrepresentation of African American males in exclusionary discipline practices and negative feelings toward school suggest that the School to Prison Pipeline continues to negatively impact their experience within the educational system. This paper provided a review of the literature surrounding the School to Prison Pipeline. More specifically, it addressed how school-based mental health professionals can reduce the disproportionate discipline of African American males. Much of the extant literature on this topic suggests that PBIS may serve as a tool to dismantle this Pipeline (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba et al., 2006, Sugai, Horner, et al., 2000; Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). While PBIS may assist with reducing exclusionary discipline practices, the decision as to whether a school should adopt PBIS rests on administrators. However, school-based mental health professionals possess a unique set of skills that may assist in the dismantling of the Pipeline using components of the PBIS model. Proposed intervention strategies that school-based mental health professionals can use to change the trajectory of African American males within the educational system include: a) the review of discipline data to make informed decisions about whether student interventions are necessary; and b) an assessment to determine whether teacher consultations would better address issues surrounding disproportionate discipline practices towards African American males.

We recommend that school-based mental health professionals use consultation with teachers to implement cultural competency trainings and to educate them on specific classroom management techniques when the school discipline data suggests that these techniques are warranted. Additionally, school-based mental health professionals are in a unique position to provide teachers with strategies that foster school belonging among African American male students who often feel ostracized by the educational system (Brown, 2007; Sekayi, 2001).

Although this paper provides guidance for school-based mental health professionals to implement components of PBIS, a gap exists within the literature between these strategies proposed and empirical research which supports the effective methods for dismantling the

School to Prison Pipeline. Thus, future research should examine the school-based mental health professional's ability to intercede in the educational paths of African American male students.

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Alicia Darensbourg is a doctoral candidate in school psychology in the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. Ms. Darensbourg earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology with minors in Sociology and African American Studies from Louisiana State University. Her research interests surround academic achievement discrepancies in ethnic minority populations. She can be reached at adaren2@.tamu.edu.

Erica Perez is a doctoral candidate in school psychology in the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. Mrs. Perez earned a master's degree in clinical psychology from the University of Texas - Pan American. Her research interests include trauma in immigrant children and disparities in the education of minority education. She can be reached at ericaperez@tamu.edu.

Dr. Jamilia Blake is an assistant professor of school psychology in the Department of Educational Psychology in the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. Dr. Blake earned her doctoral degree in Educational Psychology at The University of Georgia. Her research interests surround peer-directed aggression in ethnic minority populations and females, the relation between peer-directed aggression and children's psychological/social adjustment and academic achievement. Dr. Blake"s teaching interests include emotional and behavioral assessment, cultural competence, and crisis intervention. She can be reached by e-mail at jjblake@tamu.edu. Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be sent to Jamilia Blake, Ph.D., 706 Harrington Tower MS 4225, Department of Educational Psychology, TAMU, College Station, TX 77843.