"Why Are the Black Kids Being Suspended?" An Examination of a School District's Efforts to Reform a Faulty Suspension Policy Through Community Conversations

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Abstract

This article will explore a district's attempt to revise their suspension policy with the collaborative effort of community members and school-level educators. In this article, I will present my analysis of data from six forums where participants expressed their concerns and made recommendations on how to improve the policy. I will also use research that highlights best practices of reforming schools through community engagement to determine how, if at all, the district was able to enact change with their policy. My findings revealed that, across Community Conversations, participants viewed additional support—largely centered on improving instructional practices for teachers and providing professional development to both teachers and parents to reduce suspensions—as a necessity. Furthermore, the school district was somewhat successful in reforming their policy since they involved the community and school personnel and created a space for group collaboration; however, they struggled to build trust between groups, resulting in an absence of parents of color from forums.

Key Words: school district suspension policy, school reform, community engagement, disproportionate disciplinary practices, Black students, conversations, forums, policies, involvement

Introduction

This paper investigates a school district's attempt to address and change their suspension policy by engaging the community and school personnel in conversations. During the spring of 2013, child advocacy groups issued an official complaint against a school district for having disproportionate suspension rates for Black students. During the 2012–13 school year, 51% of the district's student population identified as Black, yet 80% of short-term suspensions were imposed on Black students (Department of Public Instruction [DPI], 2014). Data also showed that Black students were dropping out of school at higher and alarming rates.

Community members called on district administrators to address patterns of disproportionate suspension rates within their student population. As a result, the administrators created six Community Conversations—events where community members and school personnel could voice their opinions and make suggestions on how to improve the policy. I present the results from six Community Conversation forums and use a conceptual framework of *school reform through community engagement* to determine the effectiveness of the district's attempts to reform their suspension policy.

The study took place in an urban, southeastern U.S. school district with the pseudonym of Bluetown. This school district is within the top 10 largest districts in the state, with over 30,000 students attending 53 schools. During the 2014–15 school year, the district's racial/ethnic demographics were Black (49%), Hispanic (27%), and White (19%). The remaining 5% of students were identified either as Multiracial, Asian, American Indian, or Pacific Islander. In the same year, over half of the student population received free or reduced-price lunch (DPI, 2015). Academically, Black students were scoring behind their peers with 42% performing at or above grade level in English and 34% in Algebra II, as compared to 85% of White students performing at or above grade level in English and 74% in Algebra (Statistical Analysis System Institute [SAS], 2015).

In addition to the disparities between Black and White students' test scores, Bluetown did not compare well in teacher qualifications and retention. Compared to the state, this district had more teachers in elementary and high schools with advanced degrees, but fewer fully licensed teachers in all elementary, middle, and high schools (SAS, 2015). The teacher turnover rate was also higher than the state average, with around one-quarter of teachers leaving from the elementary (19%), middle (27%), and high (21%) schools for the year.

Statement of the Problem

In April 2013, the Advocates for Children's Services (ACS) and the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the Civil Rights Project of UCLA (CRP) filed a complaint against the Bluetown district, arguing that they were in violation of the Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Section 504 Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (ACS, 2013). Within the official complaint, both ACS and CRP alleged that the school district disproportionately and frequently suspended Black students. Throughout the document, ACS urged the district to rewrite their suspension policy to reflect nondiscriminatory practices and, further, to use out-of-school suspensions as a final resort only.

According to the class action suit, in 2009–10 the district suspended 14.1% of Black students, as compared to 3.3% of White students (ACS, 2013). The authors of the suit also investigated the rate of suspensions for Black students with a learning disability. Their findings showed that in 2009–10, 23.3% of these students across Grades K–12 were suspended. Specifically, in middle school, 37.2% of Black male students with disabilities were suspended at least once, compared to 12.5% of their White male peers (ACS, 2013).

Around the same time that ACS released the complaint, previous years' statistics showed similar patterns of suspension of Black students within Bluetown. In 2012–13, Black high school students exhibited an average of 18.66 per 1,000 students' reportable violent acts, which was in stark contrast to the state average of 7.20 per 1,000 students (DPI, 2014). According to the Department of Public Instruction (2014), Bluetown administered an average of 28.9% short-term suspensions to Black high school students. Data also indicated that 80% of short- and long-term suspensions in Bluetown were given to Black high school students, male or female. (Note: This figure could be inflated since the suspension rate was not at the individual level but by acts; for example, if a student were suspended three times, the data reflect three different suspensions, not one.)

Disproportionate suspension rates within the district reflect a more pressing problem state- and nationwide. Within the state, Black male and female high school students lead with the highest rate of long- and short-term suspensions (DPI, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (USDEOCR, 2014), nationwide records show that during the 2011–12 school year, about 6% of White male students were suspended from schools as compared to 20% of Black male students. Research suggests that Black students are three times more likely to be suspended as compared to Whites (USDEOCR, 2014).

Skewed suspension rates across racial groups have also crossed genders. Historically, female students tend to be suspended at a lower rate as compared to

their male counterparts (USDEOCR, 2014). This disproportionate trend of suspensions is also present with 2% of White female students suspended compared to 12% of Black female students nationwide.

Literature Review

The research on the problem of frequent suspensions of Black students also suggests a possible solution of initiating school policy reform through community engagement. Within this review, I include research on outcomes of suspensions and studies that tested whether, statistically, Black students misbehave more than their peers. I then follow up with research on participatory school reform and use this literature to frame my argument that disproportionate suspension rates can be challenged and changed through policy reform and community engagement.

The Problem With Suspensions and the Myth Behind Black Boys' Behavior

Research shows that the phenomenon of overly high discipline, suspension, and expulsion rates for Black students is not new (Arcia, 2007; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2002; Skiba & Williams, 2014). According to scholars, this disproportionate streak has been consistent for the past 40 years (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba & Williams, 2014). Some suggest the racially disproportionate rates appeared directly after school desegregation (Arcia, 2007; Skiba et al., 2002).

The most pressing implications of school suspension concern the dropout rates and the Black–White achievement gap. Recent research conducted by Robert Balfanz and his colleagues indicated there is a relationship between student suspensions and dropout rates (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2012). Balfanz's study provided evidence to support the common sense notion that a student with more suspensions will be less likely to graduate compared to their non-suspended peers. On average, 75% of students with zero suspensions graduated from school. This rate decreased as the number of suspensions increased; 52% graduated with one suspension, 38% graduated with 2 suspensions, 30% graduated with 3 suspensions, and 23% graduated with 4 or more suspensions.

The Balfanz study may help to explain the racially disproportionate rates of high school dropouts. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2014) illustrate that Black students are more likely to drop out of school as compared to their White peers. Nationally, dropout rates are at an all-time low of 6.6%, with the distribution of dropouts fluctuating according to race: 4.3% of White students drop out, while 7.5% of Black students do so.

Similarly, school suspensions seem to affect the achievement gap. Researchers Suh, Malchow, and Suh (2014) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth and primarily focused on identifying the contributing

factors of a widened achievement gap between Black and White students. The researchers found that if all conditions between Black and White students remained the same, the achievement gap would have decreased by 2.62%. Their findings attribute the greatest impact on the achievement gap to suspensions. Over a period of 18 years, Black student suspensions increased by more than 30% as compared to White students, who showed only a 5% increase. In addition, they discovered that Black students received harsher penalties which ultimately resulted in a higher probability of dropping out of school. Researchers Fenning and Rose (2007) stated, "Suspension and expulsion, the most common responses in discipline policies, are not effective in meeting the needs of any student and, ironically, exacerbate the very problems they are attempting to reduce" (p. 539).

Recently, researchers have been attempting to understand why Black students are getting suspended. For the Equity Project at Indiana University, researchers Skiba and Williams (2014) conducted a variety of statistical tests to determine the extent that students of color "act out" as compared to White students. After controlling for factors such as student behavior and teacher ratings, the researchers concluded that there is little to no evidence to suggest that students of color misbehave at higher rates than their White peers. Thus, differential rates of suspension across racial groups cannot be justifiable (Skiba & Williams, 2014).

Researcher Arcia (2007) conducted a longitudinal study in which she analyzed suspension data from 69 schools during a three-year period in order to explain the rate of suspensions for Black students. Her findings revealed that the more experienced a teacher was, the less the likelihood that they would recommend the suspension of students. Arcia's research also showed that Black students were typically attending schools in high-poverty urban environments with less experienced teachers. She concluded that a teacher's years of experience might have more to do with high suspension rates for Black students than poor behavior.

In a similar study, researchers Skiba et al. (2002) reviewed disciplinary data from an urban, Midwestern school district's middle schools and discovered that Black students were more likely to be referred to the principal's office. This action led to Black students being suspended more than their non-Black peers. Results also showed that Black students were more likely to be suspended more than once.

Overall, the literature on suspensions suggests that individuals who are suspended more are less likely to graduate. Based on the suspension data available, it is not surprising that we see a higher rate of Black students dropping out than White students. In addition, researchers propose that the reasons Black

students are being suspended have less to do with them "acting out" and more to do with their teachers' fewer years of experience and higher numbers of office referrals. In the next section, I will review the literature on school reform and introduce a possible solution—reforming a suspension policy through community engagement.

The Solution to Disparate Suspension Rates—Reform

School reformists stipulate that fundamental reforms are necessary to permanently change flawed structures that are in place at the district and/or school level (Cuban, 2008; Fullan, 2009; Furco, 2013; Sanders, 2003). Cuban (2008) argued that these structures are in need of a "complete overhaul" and "not renovation" (p. 129). However, it is only through joint participatory action that true change can occur. Both researchers Furco (2013) and Fullan (2009) affirmed that all involved parties (e.g., parents, teachers, school administrators) must collaborate with the intended purpose of debunking and removing the flawed structure in place. Fullan (2009) stated, "Even more important, greater permeable connectivity, that is, more two-way interaction, communication, and mutual influence" is needed (p. 5). This method is in stark contrast to traditional top-down reforms that are dictated by district-level administrators and passively accepted and implemented by school-level educators.

Over the past decade or so, research on effectively reforming schools has consistently recommended the following strategies: (1) build trust, (2) create a space for engagement and collaboration, (3) include school personnel in the discussion, and (4) present a clear message and goal (Anderson, 2005; Cuban, 2008; Epstein, 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Furco, 2013; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011; "Parent and Community," 2014; Reform Support Network [RSN], 2014; Sanders, 2014; Zyngier, 2011). First, researchers asserted that one of the most important ways to reform a school is through building trust with the community and the schools' partners (Anderson, 2005; Cuban, 2008; Epstein, 2011; Furco, 2013; RSN, 2014). Furco (2013) stated that schools must establish "democratic partnerships that are meaningful, mutually beneficial activities and that are developed through shared values, trust, and mutual respect" (p. 627). In order to establish trust, schools first need to establish a cultural awareness of the community they serve. Furco (2013) argued that a lack of awareness of the partners and communities served by the school would limit the ability to build trust amongst all groups. Secondly, schools need to gain an understanding of the history between groups. Cuban (2008) argued that positive communication with the community could help eliminate negative stigmas about a school's intentions. Finally, in order to build trust with the community and local partners, schools need to listen intently but also respond respectfully. Constant communication is vital and can be achieved through informing

the community on events occurring within the school (RSN, 2014). During communication events, individuals could also express their concerns. More importantly, when the school takes action, it proves that the school is listening.

The second strategy to reform schools involves creating a space for engagement and collaboration. Researchers declared that there should be a designated physical space that is inclusive to all communities (Anderson, 2005; Cuban, 2008; Epstein, 2011; Furco, 2013; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011; RSN, 2014). A physical space is defined as a public area where informal or formal opportunities are available for the community to participate (RSN, 2014). However, it is not enough for the space to be available; it must also embody a welcoming climate where individuals feel that their opinions matter (Anderson, 2005; Cuban, 2008; Epstein, 2011; Furco, 2013; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011). Within this environment, "side-by-side policies" (Epstein, 2011, p. 18)—decisions that are jointly discussed and created by community members with district and school personnel—are encouraged, and community members must be viewed as a vital resource to the school (Cuban, 2008; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011).

The third strategy for reforming schools focuses on involving school personnel such as teachers, principals, and district administrators. Researchers Cuban (2008), Furco (2013), and Sanders (2014) agreed that school reforms are meaningless unless they include school and district personnel. In his book, *Frogs Into Princes: Writings on School Reform*, Cuban (2008) emphatically argued that teachers must be on board to assist with change since they are most likely to impact their students. Furco (2013) takes it one step further by stating that all educators within schools are important in school reform, but agrees with Cuban in saying that teachers play a major role. In contrast to Cuban, Sanders (2014) argued that administrators within the school and district are "influential players" (p. 234) and vital to school reform transitions.

The final strategy schools can use to reform policies is to be clear about the message and the overall goal. It is difficult to carry out a school reform with a confusing message or a proposed solution that may not match the need. Researchers argued that a transparent, consistent message is critical ("Parent and Community," 2014; RSN, 2014). In addition, transparency needs to occur early, during initial meetings with the community. Furco (2013) stated, "A clear focus and understanding of the purpose of a partnership results in a more effective and successful organization that better meets the needs of stakeholders" (p. 205). Typically, a clear message and goal are centered on a genuine problem.

In the research on best practices for making fundamental reforms, there are several positive outcomes noted when a district or school creates a collaborative school environment for the community (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011; RSN, 2014; Zyngier, 2011). Some argue

that students' attendance, behavior, and academics improve (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011; Zyngier, 2011), and others suggest that the community becomes more empowered and begins to facilitate and lead change (Fenning & Rose, 2007; RSN, 2014). According to one study, holding frequent community conversations has an inverse effect on the number of disciplinary actions (Kirby & DiPaola, 2011). Another study conducted by Epstein and Sheldon (2002) focused on the impact of family–school partnerships on students' attendance rates in elementary school. Results from this study concluded that activities with both family and school personnel predicted an increase in attendance and a decrease in habitual absenteeism. Ultimately, a school district can improve students' behavior, attendance, and academics by creating a space for targeted family and community activities.

Overall, researchers caution that school reform takes time (Anderson, 2005; Cuban, 2008; Furco, 2013; RSN, 2014). Anderson (2005) stated, "Literature on school reform and school change has taught us that one source of schools' resistance to reform is their insularity, the ingrained nature of their culture and power structure" (p. 242). Regardless of stubborn environments, transforming a school's climate can occur with incremental changes over time.

Lastly, when schools invest time for reform, it creates an infrastructure that supports sustainability (RSN, 2014). Overwhelmingly, researchers declared that sustainability occurs when all groups are on board with continuing the reform (Epstein, 2011; RSN, 2014). This means that school personnel (e.g., teachers *and* administrators) and community members work together to maintain consistency. Both Epstein (2011) and researchers from the Reform Support Network (2014) argued that reforms are more lasting with input and assistance from the community.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to investigate a school district's attempt to address and reform their suspension policy by engaging the community and their staff. Accordingly, this paper focuses on the following research questions:

1. How did members from the community and school personnel address the suspension policy?
2. Based on literature on school reform through participatory engagement, to what extent did the Bluetown school district effectively use the community and their school personnel to reform their suspension policy?

This study was conducted within an urban school district located in the southeastern United States. District administrators conducted a series of six

Community Conversation forums in an effort to reform their current suspension policy. During these events, they gathered input on the district's suspension policy from the community and from school personnel. Four events were held for the community, and two were held for school personnel. During each forum, district administrators asked four questions of participants regarding how to address and improve the current suspension policy and practice. The following questions were asked at each forum:

1. What is working well with student discipline policy and practice?
2. What are your concerns?
3. What strategies can you recommend to the district to reduce suspensions?
4. How can the community assist/partner with the district to address the suspension rate?

Respondents from the community identified themselves as parents, as well as people from nonprofits, faith-based organizations, local businesses, government, higher education, and housing development communities. For the purpose of this paper, community is defined as an all-encompassing group of the individuals listed above. Respondents from the school personnel forums identified themselves as teachers, principals, and district leaders.

At the conclusion of the Community Conversations, district personnel asked me, an external evaluator, to synthesize the participants' responses and create a series of suggested next steps for the district to review. District administrators collected and prepared the data for my analysis. The administrators transcribed responses from participants, using a process whereby an individual transforms audio data into text (Creswell, 2008). I received de-identified, open-ended responses from all six Community Conversation events. In addition, I reviewed archival data to determine the setting of each event. During this process, if I had questions about the events, I contacted district administrators for clarification.

I analyzed a total of 1,240 open-ended responses from participants. I received 858 responses from community members, 176 from principals, 103 from teachers, and 103 from district personnel. First, I separated all open-ended comments based on the questions asked at the forum. I then undertook multiple readings of the open-ended comments in their entirety and coded texts at the smallest unit of meaning using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, I created a list of themes based on the codes identified from the data. Finally, I placed the codes into themes, linked coded open-ended comments to the appropriate theme, and tallied themes found across the data. In some instances, comments were assigned to more than one theme. Using this method, I was

able to determine the presence and frequency of themes and could assess which theme was most prevalent within the data.

Findings

In this section, I will present the findings from the Community Conversations and examine the extent to which the school system was capable of reforming their suspension policy. This section will be broken up into two parts based on the above research questions. The first segment of this section presents participants' responses from the Community Conversation which answer the first research question: How did members from the community and school personnel address the suspension policy? In the second segment, I will compare findings from the Community Conversation forum with the literature on participatory engagement and answer the second research question: To what extent did Bluetown school district effectively use the community and their school personnel to reform their suspension policy?

Responses From the Community Conversations

The following analysis of responses from both community members and school personnel addresses how they responded to the suspension policy. Here I will use data from the open-ended comments to reveal participants' problems with and solutions to the suspension policy.

What Is Working Well?

Beginning with the first question, district administrators asked participants what was working well with the current student discipline policy and practice. Overall, both community members and school personnel agreed that the district did an acceptable job of maintaining a positive school climate and communicating with parents and stakeholders. Participants attributed positive school climates to the district's use of nontraditional learning programs and interventions. Overwhelmingly, community members and school personnel (specifically principals) agreed that using nontraditional learning programs to support students was something that worked well. One individual stated, "[the district has] a broad range of extracurricular activities to engage students in positive ways, [like] clubs and sports." In addition, participants agreed that the district did a satisfactory job of using interventions for students in need. Participants across groups frequently mentioned the Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)[1] system as helpful and useful. One teacher stated, "PBIS provides consistency." Another district employee stated, "PBIS in schools [has been] implemented well." And one community member stated, "Schools try to identify issues early, be proactive in dealing with problems."

Ironically, with few parents present at the forums, 43 comments from community members described the district as doing a good job at communicating with parents and community stakeholders on schoolwide decisions. They also stated that their school sought to build relationships between families and school staff. One participant recalled the school opening its doors to educate parents about understanding student scores. The individual stated, "[the school is] transparent, and parents are encouraged to come into schools to examine data." Another member of the community addressed the importance of schools communicating with parents on both positive and negative issues. The participant argued that through this open and honest level of communication, families were more likely to trust schools and listen to feedback.

Although participants listed nontraditional programs, interventions, and collaboration with the community as things the district was doing well, the general sentiment from participants was that each of these categories could be improved. In addition, community members recognized that the school district was doing a good job of involving parents and community, while school personnel did not. Analysis of responses from the second question illuminated how participants requested improvement for support programs and communication between schools and the community.

Concerns With Current Policy and Practice

In response to the second question ("What are your concerns with the student discipline policy and practice?"), participants cited the need to update the current suspension policy, improve methods of support for their school personnel and students, and improve communication between schools and the community. Both school personnel and members of the community saw a need for improving the current discipline policy by addressing its lack of consistency, overuse, and perpetuation of negative stigmas. A total of 45 comments from community members and 19 from school personnel surmised that consequences for poor behavior were not consistent across gender, race, social class, and mental ability of students. One community member stated, "[the policy represents] inequity in the application of school behavior/discipline policy across the district with race and disability." Similarly, a district employee stated the district had a "lack of consistent discipline action; equity is inconsistent within racial groups and students with disabilities." Participants argued that school personnel subjectively applied consequences to undesirable actions. Even a teacher noted that the current policy lacked the ability to "maintain consistency with expectations and consequences."

In addition to addressing the lack of consistency, participants spoke about how schools tended to overuse the suspension policy, using it at times that were

not warranted. Members of the community argued that too many students were "pushed" into the court system without supports from interventions. One participant stated, "[there is an] overuse of suspension as a way of correcting students' misbehavior and not using other interventions."

Participants also indicated that the inconsistent and overused suspension policy perpetuated unfairly negative stigmas on Black students. Members of the community argued that the policy continued to treat the "most vulnerable population of students" poorly. A smaller group of 18 comments from the community centered on the theme of profiling and negative stigmas. Participants agreed that individuals across the district attached negative labels to alternative learning programs and nontraditional schools, which ultimately impacted students in need. In contrast, the topic of profiling only came up in one instance within the school personnel comments. One district employee acknowledged the presence and usage of stigmas and stated, "Sometimes students are profiled based on previous history."

Besides addressing overall concerns with the suspension policy, participants suggested improving methods of support for students. When speaking about support, community members and school personnel expressed an interest in attending trainings and increasing the use of alternative programs. Both school personnel and the community welcomed trainings from churches, local businesses, and universities. Coincidentally, both groups believed that trainings from these organizations would further assist students in need. Both the community and school personnel had an investment and similar interest in supporting students through trainings. One community member asserted that it would be beneficial to invite parents to workshops that centered on strategies to help their child with schoolwork. In addition, another principal agreed that teacher trainings would be useful to address those students who struggled with behavior issues. Similarly, teachers requested trainings that taught best practices in classroom management. They requested "district-level support for PBIS," "training to address student behaviors," and "parent and teacher awareness training."

Another method of support for students as indicated by participants focused on increasing the number of alternative programs within the district. Both school personnel and community members agreed that there was a lack of alternatives to suspension for elementary and middle school students. Several principals noted that often when the school suspends an elementary school student, they are sent home without the ability to continue working on school assignments. A principal stated, "[We] need more placement options for elementary students with severe behavior problems." Participants argued that an alternative program for these students would ensure that they do not fall

behind in their schoolwork. Participants also argued that alternative programs should replace suspensions. One respondent stated that it was imperative to "increase options for all students."

Finally, participants focused on improving communication and involvement with the community and parents. Counter to their responses on what was working well, community members argued that there was a lack of communication in general from school personnel. One participant requested more information regarding behaviors. The individual stated, "The community needs conversation about acceptable school behavior for all students." Another individual stated, "[There is] not enough communication between parents and administrators in terms of discipline."

As indicated earlier, school personnel stated that use of PBIS was working well within schools. In contrast, members of the community found the implementation and use of PBIS to be unclear. One individual stated, "Parents are not aware of PBIS, and there is confusion of the program from school to school."

Overall, both school personnel and the community were likely to articulate a concern with the current suspension policy, and talk centered on its misuse. In addition, members of the community were more likely to address the lack of communication from school personnel, specifically regarding student behavior, while school personnel were more likely to express that the current policy needs a set of clear expectations. The next section synthesizes participants' responses to recommendations for improvement, which ultimately reflected their above-listed concerns.

Recommendations for Improvement

The third question district administrators asked participants was, "What strategies can you recommend to the district to reduce suspensions?" The most common theme that emerged (with 78 comments) centered on the need to implement additional forms of support for students. The most consistent response between school personnel and community members was the need for additional support. As noted in the previous section, participants defined support as trainings and alternative programs. Both school personnel and the community agreed on utilizing teacher and parent trainings to assist students. School personnel agreed that trainings could better prepare them to support students with disruptive behavior. A principal requested having professional development on how to manage the top 10% most difficult students. One community member stated, "[Schools should] invite parents for workshops on strategies to help their kids while the students are being tutored." According to participants, trainings could come from churches, businesses, or local universities, but the idea on all sides was that the community and school would collectively get involved to train individuals on how to further assist students.

As indicated earlier, participants agreed that there was a lack of communication between the school district and the community. Participants recommended improvement through consistent and meaningful communication between schools and the community. Participants argued that communication was not one-directional but should start and continue with either schools or the community. One member of the community stated, "[There should be] more direct involvement between parents and teachers—home visits by teachers to learn more about home situations." Another individual recommended that schools use "a variety of methods" (e.g., phone, text messages, face-to-face, etc.) to reach out to parents and the community.

As expected, both school personnel and community member participants argued that the district should improve their student supports by increasing parent and teacher trainings and introducing more alternative programs for students. Responses were consistent across both community members and school personnel. In addition, participants recommended having a consistent line of communication between schools and the community. In the next section, I describe how participants envisioned a role for community members to support the district.

How Can the Community Assist the District?

Administrators asked participants the final question, "How can the community assist and partner with the district to address the suspension rate?" Overall, participants agreed that the community needed to help maintain a positive, collaborative relationship with the district and support the district with resources. Participants described developing a healthy reciprocal relationship between schools and the community. Through this relationship, schools could depend on the community to meet their needs. District personnel declared that the community and the school system should work as "one network" in order to support the whole child, family, and community. A district school employee stated, "Engage community experts in the development of a school [program]." Another community member indicated that the district should form a task force in the schools in order to discern the needs of students. Based on their findings, the task force would then reach out to the community and local agencies for support. Participants also recommended using neighboring universities and colleges for additional support. One individual suggested, "pairing/partnering with local colleges and universities with students for role models and peer support."

Overall findings reveal that participants agreed that the current use of nontraditional learning programs, alternative schools, and interventions are positive; however, they are not meeting the needs of all students. Specifically, participants would prefer to see a new suspension policy that is consistent, not

overused, and does not use negative stigmas. In addition, both school personnel and the community would like an increase in the number of alternative programs as a substitution for suspension and trainings on how to best support students with varying needs. Members of the community expressed an interest in receiving more consistent information from the schools and being more involved in decisions that impact the district. School personnel described communication flowing from one direction and encouraged community members also to reach out to the district. Finally, the community described wanting to support the district by giving them resources and trainings to better prepare teachers and parents.

Alignment With the Research

From the literature, I concluded that the necessary components of school reform are building trust, creating a space for engagement, including school personnel, and being clear about the message and goals. In this segment, I will address the second research question: Using literature on school reform through participatory engagement, to what extent did the Bluetown school district effectively use the community and their school personnel to reform their suspension policy?

As previously mentioned, a school district must build trust with the community by establishing a cultural awareness, understanding the history of relationships between groups, and listening (Anderson, 2005; Cuban, 2008; Epstein, 2011; Furco, 2013; RSN, 2014). Based on open-ended data from Community Conversations, archival data, and follow-up conversations with district administrators, it was difficult to determine the extent to which Bluetown established trust with the community. First, participants from the community forums indicated that improved communication between school personnel and the community would ultimately result in enriched feelings of trust—suggesting that trust was absent. Secondly, the demographics of the forums may indicate a lack of trust. Community Conversations events largely encompassed members from nonprofits, faith-based organizations, local businesses, government, higher education, and housing development communities. However, few participants identified themselves as a current parent of a student in the district. In addition, the demographics of participants largely reflected a White, middle-class, English-speaking population, which ironically did not represent the students and parents of the school district. One community member asserted that the forums represented individuals who may be out of touch with the issue. The participant recommended that future forums should be housed in high-needs locations: "Host Community Conversations in communities where more students are affected by these issues." Out of the

four events conducted within the community, only one event occurred on a bus line, making it difficult for those without vehicles to attend the discussion. Also, the Spanish-speaking population represents just over a quarter of the district's population, and yet none of the events had a presence of Spanish-speaking individuals or translators. With little representation from parents, individuals of color, and individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, one could assume that trust between the district and its parents may be lacking, and the path towards building that trust may be hindered by a lack of communication among the groups.

Although the district may not have built trust with the community, they were able to listen to participants and respond. Results from the Community Conversations were presented at a public school board meeting. Members from the community attended the board meeting and shared their feelings. They also encouraged the board to have more events like that one. The board agreed that the Community Conversations did not represent the community and insisted upon hosting additional events that would include all diverse members of the community. Unfortunately, a follow-up Community Conversation on the topic of suspension did not occur until nearly three years later (December 2016). It appeared that Bluetown's board members listened to the responses from the meetings but were slow in following up with the community. Follow-up research should seek to find out which recommendations were actually implemented and to what degree they were effective in reducing disparities among students.

Next, the literature suggests that in order to reform schools, a space needs to be created that can foster engagement and collaboration. Findings from archival data and discussions with district leaders reveal that Bluetown was able to create spaces for engagement and collaboration with the community. District administrators created six forums for the community and school personnel to gather and discuss the suspension policy. The locations of the community events were at a development center, two high schools, and one historically Black church. As stated earlier, only one space was located on a bus line. The remaining open forums were located throughout the school district. Although the research suggests that these spaces be designated for continual use (Anderson, 2005; Cuban, 2008; Epstein, 2011; Furco, 2013; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011; RSN, 2014), findings uncover that these spaces have not been used to address the suspension policy.

The third theme that emerged centered on including school personnel in the discussion around school reform. In addition to the four Community Conversations, Bluetown's administrators created two additional spaces for teachers, principals, and district personnel. However, it was not made clear how these

individuals were chosen to participate in the discussion on suspension, which indicates that perspectives from school personnel may be selective and may offer little diversity in viewpoint.

The final theme from the literature indicated the schools must be transparent about communicating the reform process to the community. Messaging should be used to get the word out on the purpose, goals, and reason to create change. Results from archival data show that Bluetown's district administrators advertised the Community Conversations via local news stations and online messaging. It was not entirely clear who received the message and when the message was sent out, but based on the demographics of the participants, it was apparent that a certain racial and socioeconomic group received the message. In addition, the overall goals of the conversations were not clear. From discussions with the district administrators, it appeared that they deemed these conversations to be the final discussion on suspensions. In contrast, participants from the community expressed enthusiasm for starting the conversation on suspensions and intended to have additional follow-up discussions. One community member emphatically affirmed, "Continue to listen and hold community meetings." These conflicting perspectives indicate that the goal was not clear.

Overall, the Bluetown school district made some advances toward reforming their suspension policy by creating a space for engagement and including school personnel in the discussion. At first glance, it appears that the district gained trust with the community; however, parents, individuals of color, and non-native English speakers were largely not present—showing that the messaging was not consistent across all groups. In addition, there was confusion about the overall goal of the Community Conversations, since district administrators and community members believed the goal to be different.

Implications

Community Conversations created collaborative environments for both community members and school personnel to engage on topics related to disproportionate suspension rates. Participants expressed feeling involved in the discussion of disciplinary actions. Both groups represented different perspectives but shared similar voices on the topic of suspensions. The forums delivered an immediate lesson, that having an open conversation between school personnel and community members is not enough to rouse policy reform. Change is more likely to occur once trust is built, school personnel are included in the discussion, and the message and goal for reform are clearly outlined, in addition to creating a space for engagement. All four of these items are necessary components for change.

Although it is clear that community members and school personnel agreed on ways to address the suspension policy, the topic of racism and bigotry failed to enter into the discussion. Skiba and Williams (2014) debunk the myth that Black students misbehave more than their White peers and suggest such stereotypes and biased perspectives may be the reason that more Black students are being referred to the principal's office. I would suggest having more open and honest discussion as to why Black students are being suspended at higher rates and paying special attention to cultural differences, privilege, and overt and covert racist foundational practices.

While the research on school reform through community engagement is brimming with action steps for both the school and community, one shortcoming of the literature became evident during the application of the theory to this case. In the extant literature, the term "community" represents several groups; the term can be deduced to mean an ambiguous cluster of parents of school children, business groups, individuals living in the school's neighborhood, and even local universities and colleges. One thing that became clear is that there needs to be a better disaggregation of who constitutes the community. When I found that a majority of participants in the Community Conversations represented everyone except the parents, some questions arose: Does radical reform require members from the neighborhood to be involved? If local businesses and postsecondary schools are present, are parents also needed to fundamentally change school policies? Additional research should examine and determine which groups within the community are truly vital in changing policies and sustaining a reform.

Conclusion

In this study, I sought to determine how members of the Bluetown community and school district addressed their suspension policy and how the Bluetown school district effectively used the community and their school personnel to reform their suspension policy. My analysis of the six forums showed that participants viewed additional support as a necessity, using professional development disseminated to teachers and parents as a means to reduce suspension. In addition, findings revealed that participants' responses largely centered on improving instructional practices for teachers and altering the suspension policy to ensure consistency across all racial groups. Both school personnel and community members shared a similar dialogue. My analysis of the reform process showed that the Bluetown school district was somewhat successful in reforming their policy, since they involved the community and school personnel and created a space for group collaboration. However, they

struggled to build trust between groups, resulting in an absence of parents of color within forums. There also seemed to be a disconnect: Participants from the Community Conversations believed that this forum was the beginning of future conversations with the district on suspensions, while district administrators believed the forum to be a final discussion.

In this study I learned that reform takes time and that change can occur with the right people at the table. Future research can help determine who comprises the right group. Records show that this was the first time the district had led a discussion that centered on addressing disproportionate suspension rates. For the sake of sustaining a districtwide plan for reforming a suspension policy, hopefully this district will continue to have many more conversations.

Postscript

Almost two years after I analyzed the data from Bluetown, I returned to the state database to assess if suspension rates among Black students decreased since the Community Conversations. Data from the 2015–16 school year revealed some gains and some shortcomings for suspensions across the district. The overall number of suspensions for the district decreased by over a third, with over 2,000 fewer incidences (DPI, 2017). Additionally, the percentage of Black male suspensions decreased from 58% in 2012–13 to 54% in 2015–16. At the beginning of this article, I noted that during the 2012–13 school year, Black students made up 80% of suspensions in Bluetown (DPI, 2014). However, recent data uncovered that during the 2015–16 school year, Black students, in general, accounted for 82% of all suspensions (DPI, 2017). The data illustrates that suspensions overall are on a steady decline, but it also suggests that Bluetown still has work to do in targeting suspension reduction specifically for all Black students.

Endnote

[1]PBIS is a nationally known, data-driven program used within schools to help promote positive behavior of students by tailoring supports to their individual needs.

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