How are Black Students Pushed Down the School-to-Prison Pipeline?

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Abstract

This study aims to incorporate conceptual and empirical knowledge about the School-to-Prison Pipeline and foster social change by implementing relevant and meaningful pathways to eliminate it in Florida. The research design provides two years of qualitative inquiry at a mid-sized university in Florida, involving the participation of 54 undergraduate students. Results indicate that our participants consider a series of factors responsible for funneling Black students into the prison pipeline, such as lack of educational opportunities in schools, a lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class, teacher and administrator biases, internalized racism, as well as structural racism. These findings suggest that it is imperative to help teacher candidates and school administrators develop a social justice mindset and educate them about the structural and historical inequalities and their effects on Black students' educational participation, so they confront educational inequities, instead of perpetuating them.

Keywords: BIPOC students; in-school factors; STPP; systemic racism; teacher bias

Introduction

School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP) refers to the process by which children are pushed out of school "into the juvenile, and eventually, the criminal justice system, where prison [becomes] the end of the road" (NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2005, p. 11). To Heitzeg (2009), STPP is a mechanism that worked to remove students of color from schools, likely resulting in incarceration.

This trend emerged in the early 2000s following a shift in school discipline from graduated penalties to Zero Tolerance Policies (Milner et al., 2021), an increase in school policing, and the emergence of laws requiring schools to refer youth to law enforcement for violating certain school rules. Puckett et al. (2019) argued that Zero Tolerance Policies result in student suspensions and expulsions, which have significant ramifications later in life. These policies often lead to student disengagement from school. In this regard, Zero Tolerance Policies can be seen as contributing to the STPP. Similarly, Mohammad (2019) explored the enduring association between Blackness and criminality in U.S. history, emphasizing that the negative treatment of Black students in schools is rooted in historical legacies such as slavery and segregation.

Consequently, the STPP is a disturbing trend that mostly targets students of color, specifically Black students, including youth struggling with trauma (Allen & White-Smith, 2014).

Therefore, in this study, we will examine what preservice teachers believe to be the causes responsible for funneling Black students into the prison pipeline. Researchers indicate that, unlike non-Black youth, Black students are disproportionately subject to harsh disciplinary punishments such as school suspension and expulsion (the Government Accountability Office, 2018) that alienate students from schools and further marginalize them. This is true from PK onward and applicable to boys and girls (Morris, 2016). In her book, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, Morris describes how historical legacies of oppression (from racialized gender bias to differential dress code policies) alienate Black girls in schools. These restrictions and biases affect Black female students' educational outcomes.

Excluded, marginalized, racialized students eventually find themselves in contact with the criminal justice system (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011). In this regard, STPP is like a passage that channels Black students from out of school to the criminal legal system. Most importantly, the current political climate ("the culture wars"), bans, and discriminatory legislation in Florida (Tanase & Kayaalp, 2023), directly affect Black students (including their identities and histories), making them more vulnerable compared to the other students of color and White students and legitimizes their mistreatment in schools.

Who is at Risk

Black male students continue to receive disproportionate disciplinary practices. Nationwide, 2.8 million K-12 students received one or more out-of-school suspensions (OSS hereon); of these 1.1 million were Black students; 610,000 were Latinx; 700,000 were students served by IDEA; and 210,000 were English learners (The US DOE Office for Civil Rights, 2016). The report on Equity and Opportunity Gaps revealed that as young as preschool, Black children are 3.6 times more likely to receive one or more OSS than White children (US DOE Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Black boys represent only 19% of male preschool enrollment, but 45% of them receive one or more OSS. Racial disparities in suspensions are equally apparent in K-12 schools: 6% of all K-12 students received one or more OSS. Of these, 18% were Black boys, and 10% were Black girls, but only 5% were White boys, and 2% were White girls.

Florida schools still rely on exclusionary discipline practices, mirroring the nationwide statistics: nearly 345,000 suspensions, 570 expulsions, and 7,000 alternative placements occur each year in Florida (Florida Department of Education, n.d.). Similar to the nationwide statistics, Florida's Black students are 2.5 times more likely to be pushed out of their school through exclusionary discipline (Florida Department of Education, n.d.; Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, n.d.).

The reasons for these exclusionary practices are diverse and range from Zero Tolerance Policies applied disproportionally to Black students (US DOE, Office of Civil Rights 2014), to teacher and administrator bias who punish Black students for more subjective behaviors, as well as the criminalization of school facilities (i.e., the transfer of power; schools transfer disciplinary problems to school resource officers (hereon SROs) who are retired or current law enforcement officers, and who interpret misbehaviors as criminal acts (Tanner-Smith & Fischer, 2016). Excluded from schools, students are more likely to drop out and/or to be arrested (Hirschfield, 2018). In conclusion, these exclusionary practices put more strain on at-risk students and their families, further disconnect them from the school environment, and stigmatize at-risk youth (Hirschfield, 2018).

Objectives

This study proposes to (a) incorporate conceptual and empirical knowledge about STPP in Florida, and (b) foster social change by implementing relevant and meaningful pathways to eliminate this vicious cycle and develop new forms of education that are humane, equitable, and just. We propose the following research questions: (i) How do pre-service teachers perceive STPP? (ii) What are the reasons for STPP and ways to eliminate it? (iii) How will the findings of this study affect research on teacher education?

Literature Review

Inside-of-School Factors

Researchers have long discussed the impact of school factors on school discipline disparities that continue to feed STPP. Mirroring societal injustices, STPP is funneling a high percentage of Black male students straight into the juvenile justice system. Do Black male students misbehave more (severely) than all the other students? Or rather, are Black male students targeted more (consciously or unconsciously) by their teachers and/or administrators, through the district and school disciplinary plans they have in place?

For example, Zero Tolerance Policies are disproportionally applied to Black students (US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). While initially developed and implemented to keep under control the drug abuse and use of weapons (Skiba & Rausch, 2006), these policies are currently administered for subjective offenses such as dress code violations, using foul language, or absenteeism (Milner et al., 2021). Zero Tolerance Policies generally result in in-school suspension (hereon ISS) and/or expulsion, which may further lead to school dropout (Fabelo et al., 2011), or to students being sent to alternative schools that partner with juvenile facilities (Carver et al., 2010). In the school context, this pattern starts with the teachers and school administrators and their overuse of subjective practices. This stems from a lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class (Milner et al., 2021).

Lack of Educator Preparation

While the teaching force is predominantly represented by White, middle-class females (82%), half of the student population is non-white (US Department of Education, 2016). Given this discrepancy between the teacher and the student populations (who may belong to different cultures, races/ethnicities, and SES), teachers may form assumptions about their diverse students, perceiving certain behaviors as inappropriate, disrespectful, or rude. As a result, "Black students are punished for doing something acceptable in their culture, but not in the culture of their white teachers" (Tanase, 2023, p. 6). To prevent and eliminate these misunderstandings, teacher educators should help equip preservice teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to teach diverse students (Gay, 2010).

Culturally responsive teachers understand the relationship between students' home contexts and behavior and consider their students' home environments when planning classroom management strategies (Tanase, 2020a; Tanase, 2020b; Pas et al., 2016). Operating in this frame of mind, teachers can recognize their biases and values and reflect on how this influences their inter-

actions with students (Weinstein et al., 2004). Since teachers' expectations for behavior are informed by cultural assumptions, they may inappropriately judge culturally defined actions as resistant (Hambacher et al., 2016). When teachers consider minority students as lacking, they "adopt and maintain deficit and pathological thinking about the academic potential of students who come from impoverished backgrounds" (Ulluci & Howard, 2015, p. 172). Teachers need to educate themselves about their students' cultural backgrounds (e.g., language, values, norms) and accompany this knowledge with the skills that help students dismantle the status quo (Gay, 2018).

Over a decade ago, Gay (2010) declared that teacher education programs, whether traditional or nontraditional, struggled to equip teachers with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions, and practices for urban school teaching. According to The Center for Technology in Education (n.d.), urban schools generally have larger enrollments than suburban and rural schools and mostly serve low-income students. Moreover, 40% of urban school students attend high-poverty schools, where more than 40% of the students receive free/reduced lunches. Additionally, because of the United States' history of segregation and racism, the majority of the students attending high-poverty schools are students of color from families of low socioeconomic status (Carleton, 2020). In the 20 largest urban school districts in the U.S., an average of 80% of students are non-white, and urban classrooms are composed of a diverse mix of students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

The urgency becomes for teacher preparation programs to introduce preservice teachers to the concept of Culturally Responsive Classroom Management (hereon CRCM) (see Milner et al., 2021) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (hereon CRP). Yet despite the overwhelming research findings pointing to the benefits of adopting a culturally responsive mindset, teachers are still not taught "to build on the historical context of a community and school, understand the socio-political landscape of the environment, or develop partnerships with family and community members of their students" (Milner et al., 2021, p. 45). This fact is confirmed by Kendrick (n.d.), who echoed 2019 high school graduates' perceptions that their White teachers lacked a cultural understanding. Similarly, Lew and Nelson (2016) found that recent teacher graduates of a teacher preparation program did not feel prepared for classroom challenges. According to Eckert (2013), "The lack of knowledge regarding how to train teachers for high poverty/high minority urban areas…have created a policy problem that is especially detrimental to the urban districts that contain a majority of the high poverty/high minority schools in the US" (p. 75).

Teachers who enter the profession without the proper training and experience in CRCM and CRP have greater job dissatisfaction and teacher turnover when teaching in culturally diverse settings (Coffey & Farinde-Wu, 2016; Durante, 2022). According to Durante (2022), without proper preparation and opportunities to explore self-biases, teachers are not properly prepared and do not remain in the profession. On the other hand, highly qualified teachers are better prepared to teach in diverse urban schools. Similarly, Tanase and Kayaalp (2023) discussed the significance of preparing and exposing teacher candidates to field experiences rich in culturally sustaining practices (Paris et al., 2017), through partnerships with urban schools.

The conclusion underscores the importance of teacher preparation programs in cultivating cultural responsiveness among candidates. By intentionally embedding culturally responsive teaching strategies, these programs equip future educators to value and honor the diverse cultures and lived experiences of their students (Allen et al., 2017).

Subjective Teacher and Administrator Practices and Biases

There continues to be a discrepancy in the number of referrals students receive: K-12 Black students are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than White students (US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Black students, who represent approximately 16% of the U.S. public school population, account for more than 30% of the suspensions and expulsions (Haight et al., 2016; McCray et al., 2015). This trend starts in kindergarten and mirrors societal practices (i.e., a Black male has 1 in 3 chances of being sent to prison in their lifetime when compared to 1 in 17 chances for a White male) (The Sentencing Project, 2017). When analyzing statewide data from North Carolina, Shi and Zhu (2022) found that Black students are 0.4% more likely to be suspended than White peers and receive suspensions that average 0.05 days longer than White peers for the same behaviors. The researchers attributed these disparities to racial bias, specifying that "racial disparities are unlikely to be driven by differences in behavior" (p. 1); the problem, instead, was bias in the interpretation of and responses to student behavior depending on race. Nationally, Girvan et al. (2017), who reviewed office discipline referral records for more than one million students across more than 1800 U.S. schools, found that the primary causes of disproportionalities in exclusionary discipline were racial variances in those whom adults referred to the office for *subjective* behaviors.

Absent an understanding of cultural norms and practices, different forms of family engagement, and/or different forms of learning and behavior, teachers and administrators may marginalize students who do not adhere to the traditional White middle-class norms (Marschall & Shah, 2016), punishing Black students for behaviors that are subjective in interpretation. Some of these subjective behaviors include, among others, violating the dress code, unkempt hair, noise, and disrespect (i.e. back talk/being loud (Milner et al., 2021; Vavrus & Cole, 2002)). On the other hand, White students receive office referrals for objective behaviors, such as being late for class, smoking, and vandalism (Skiba et al., 2014). For example, teachers might correct talk among White students with a verbal reprimand, but they would consider a Black student loud and write a referral (Milner et al., 2021). Teachers who use loudness as a stereotype perceive Black (female) students as aggressive and having an attitude (Lei, 2003). Many teachers deem such behaviors defiant, rather than viewing them as student responses to their feelings of being disrespected (Baker, 2019).

In addition to the behaviors discussed above, researchers reflected on how dress code violations are inequitably applied to Black students. Pendharkar (2022) pointed out that more than 80% of U.S. school districts ban head coverings such as hats, hoodies, bandannas, and scarves. While some of these rules refer to hair coverings (i.e., such as the drags used by Black students to protect their curly hair), others refer to students' hairstyles (i.e. excessive curls or longer hair). These bans disproportionately impact Black students. Whether and to what extent dress code violations are enforced, is yet another contributing factor to the disproportionate number of referrals. Currently, schools that predominantly enroll students of color are more likely to enforce strict dress codes and to remove students from class. Pendharkar (2022) called this fact alarming, as more than 81% of predominantly Black schools and nearly 63% of predominantly Hispanic schools enforce a strict dress code, compared to about 35% of predominantly White schools.

The consequences for such behaviors are ISS and OSS or in some cases, school expulsion. Excluded from the classroom, the students are deprived of learning opportunities (Morris & Perry, 2016), they fall behind in their studies and may eventually drop out of school (Balfanz et al., 2015; Milner et al., 2021).

Racial discipline disparities have impacts outside of schools, too: more than one-third of males suspended for 10 or more days had been confined in a correctional facility in their twenties (Shollenberger, 2015). Similarly, Fabelo et al. (2011) found that suspension and expulsion tripled students' likelihood of juvenile justice contact within the subsequent year. For example, incarcerated youth had a 70–80% recidivism rate within two to three years of release (Mendel, 2011).

In conclusion, consciously or not, teachers and administrators punish marginalized students (i.e., Black and Latinx students) more than students from other ethnic groups. To some extent, the punitive approaches and exclusionary practices currently used in the US school system contribute to marginalized students being pushed down the juvenile detention system into the prison pipeline. These school factors contribute to students' academic success or failure. It behooves teachers to acknowledge and assess their own biases, reflect on the relationships they develop with all their students, and analyze any variations in their classroom interaction with marginalized student populations. Acting on assumptions and biases, failing to understand the core causes of racial discipline disparities, and particularly letting go of deficit-oriented explanations related to Black students' cultures, mindsets, and attitudes (Tanase & Gorski, 2025), educators will revert to exclusionary practices, instead of formulating meaningful solutions to the problem (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023).

Outside-of-School Factors

Research shows that macro-level factors (e.g., racism) and group categories (e.g., race, class, gender) influence both inside- and outside-of-school relations. "In-group choices" and teaching practices are made through group membership (Trent et al., 2019) in school cultures. The overrepresentation of Black students in disciplinary actions compared to non-Black students (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011) makes us consider race as an important punishment measure in schools. It should also be noted that the power imbalances in school relationships are much more complex and cannot be explained with only one signifier. Therefore, we need to examine other structural factors such as structural racism and inequalities to understand these complex relationships in the STPP link.

According to Essed (2013), "systemic racism is the interweaving of racism in the fabric of the social system" (p. 185). Essed highlighted the omnipresence of racism in societal institutions such as the education market. Systemic racism, in this regard, is embedded in and reproduced by the structures of the system (Hall, 2002a). It is thus difficult to target and eliminate it. As Anthias and Yuval-Davis (2005) argued, racist practices need not only to rely on an explicit notion of racism but "practices may be racist in terms of their effects" (p. 2). For example, the lack of Black role models at schools, the hidden curriculum, and recent bans (erasing Black history) in the educational system alienates and marginalizes Black students in school.

The interplay between racism and schools makes us consider the relationship between educational policies and practices. Through regulations and legislation, Black students are excluded from school, which in turn reproduces inequalities in schools. According to Hall (2002b), racist practices in legal, political, and ideological structures provide the framework for other forms of oppression (e.g., marginalization) in societal institutions (e.g., education and housing). In this regard, systemic racism, as an ideology, transforms social structures, social relations, and identities. It has ideological, social, and economic impacts on Black students. Similarly, the current political climate in Florida, the denial of Black students' cultural differences and needs (Tanase & Kayaalp, 2023), has a direct impact on Black students' identities and the misrepresentation of their cultural

background and histories. This can legitimize their mistreatment and overrepresentation in disciplinary actions in underfunded public schools.

In sum, the STPP is a complex relationship affected by micro and macro-level factors (from subjective biases to historical inequalities). These components impact the quality of education Black students receive and how they are treated at schools.

Methods

Context and Participants

The participants of this study were fifty-four undergraduate students (81% female and 68% White) enrolled in a teacher preparation program from a mid-sized university in Florida. These preservice teachers had an average age of 23.1 years. These demographics are typical of students enrolled in the teacher education program. Most of the students had taken a diversity course (74%) and all participants took/were taking a classroom management course at the time this research was conducted. This suggests that most students were already exposed to field knowledge and diversity-related topics, which could have influenced their narratives.

Measures and Procedures

The instrument used in this study was a survey that contained 4 factual statements; each statement was followed by 2 questions.

1. Fact: National studies in the United States show that Black students are suspended and expelled from school at higher rates than white students. 1a. Why do you think Black students are suspended or expelled at higher rates than white students? 1b. What would you suggest as a way to address this disparity?
2. Fact: Research has shown that Black students are overrepresented in special education programs and underrepresented in gifted programs in US schools. 2a. Why do you think Black students are overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in gifted programs? 2b. What would you suggest as a possible solution for this disparity?
3. Fact: Black and Latinx teachers leave teaching careers more quickly on average than white teachers. 3a. Why do you think Black and Latinx teachers leave teaching careers more quickly on average than white teachers? 3b. What can be done to address this disparity?
4. Fact: The disparities in school discipline continue to feed the school-to-prison pipeline, with a disproportionate number of Black youth filling our jails and prisons. 4a. Why do you think Black people account for most of the prison population in the US? 4b. What can teachers do to prevent the school-to-prison pipeline?

This instrument was developed by Tanase and Gorki (2025). For this study, only the last statement was analyzed; the other statements are the subject of other research studies. This instrument, in addition to a demographic questionnaire, was administered at the end of the semester in which the participants were enrolled in EDG 4410, Classroom Management and Communications. This course was purposefully selected, as it incorporated readings, discussions, and assignments that deal with social justice/equity issues (including recent conversations about STPP).

To ensure that ethical considerations were followed, as one of the authors taught the students in 4 of the 6 sections of the course where data were collected over two years (Fall 2021-Fall 2023), the participants in the four sections were recruited after grades had been posted. At the end of the semester, the instructor-researcher emailed all her students, communicating the intent for this study and informing them about voluntary participation. She further explained that participants would not be compensated for their time and that their real names would not be used in the study to ensure confidentiality. In the course sections in which the researcher was not the course instructor, after obtaining permission from the course instructor, the researcher visited these classes, explained the study, and encouraged students who wished to participate to share their names and email addresses. A week after the class visit, the researcher contacted all the students who wanted to participate in the study, emailed them the survey, and established the end of the semester as a deadline. The study was conducted after obtaining IRB permission from the university.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we used a qualitative research design. The main goal of qualitative research is to explore and understand the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals or groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). The researchers use thematic analysis (Merriam, 2009) to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data. We conducted four rounds of coding. To ensure investigator triangulation, we first coded the data individually; this open coding resulted in 16 categories. In the second round, we discussed the similarities and inconsistencies in the categories via Zoom and aligned the individual codings. Four of the sixteen individually identified categories overlapped: the deficit perspective, external factors, school factors, and structural racism. In the third round, we conducted axial coding (Scott & Medaugh, 2017), breaking down the core categories into sub-categories and relating codes to each other. Together, we refined the four big categories, recategorizing them. We ended up with 2 major categories and 4 subcategories. These are the final two big categories: 1) internal factors, and 2) external factors. In turn, the internal factors category has the following sub-categories: a) inside-of-school factors, and b) internalized racism; the external factors category has the following sub-categories: a) systemic racism, and b) educational and economic inequalities. The last round of coding was conducted via email: after having placed the data from the 29 participants into the 2 main categories and the 4 sub-categories discussed above, we have both shared our results and reached a final consensus about our data.

Positionality

Identity is group membership. Individuals' identities and their social positions are determined by the social categories they belong to. Therefore, people's race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, language, religious affiliations, and citizenship status are significant factors in determining their identities (dominant and marginalized), social locations, and access to institutions and services. We argue that researchers' positionality (i.e., group membership) affects the research process (Tanase, 2020b). Therefore, we acknowledge that our subjectivity (e.g., beliefs and cultural background) shaped our research (Kayaalp, 2020).

In the context of this study, Author 1 is a White, female, college professor in the US. The second author, a college professor, teaches DEI-related courses at the same university as Author

1. While she identifies herself as an ethnic, religious, and language minority, her minoritized position makes her an insider and an outsider at the same time–depending on the context, time, and place. She has contributed equally to this study, from data analysis, and findings to conclusion.

Results

Internal Factors: How Schools are Failing our Black Youth

In essence, the data showed that schools are failing our youth through a lack of proper education and educational programs, as well as through a lack of teacher support and teacher biases, often leading to over-disciplining minority students.

Inside-of-School Factors

Inadequate programs and funding, as well as teacher biases and negative behaviors towards the youth of color, were considered the main school-related factors that push students down the prison pipeline. For example, Participant 1 (hereon the word participant is replaced with P) commented on the courses offered in low-income schools: "many children in suburb schools have had drug prevention courses in elementary schools. We need to give the same intervention to lower-income schools…Black people inhabit prisons because they are not intervened at a younger age like White children." Similarly, P18 believed that Black people account for most of the prison population because of the lack of support for these students:

> Sports has taken men from all walks of life, yet to get your son or daughter into sports you need to be able to financially afford it, and it's not cheap…There needs to be more after-school organizations that teach life skills, that build an individual's character, and show them a future beyond their circumstances.

Similarly, P34 links students dropping out of school to a lack of school support: "If they are not supported in school, they drop out of school." Lastly, P36 reflected that Black youth are not given a chance:

> Black youth often grow up in low-income areas where the school system does not necessarily care for Black youth, due to low funding, which in turn accounts for the Black prison population. By not having funding and resources, school systems in the U.S. often give up on Black students.

In addition, this participant noted how the school system is geared towards White culture "due to testing bias that only benefits the White population." Similarly, P20 believed that schools do not give Black students the proper tools to be successful in life: "…it seems the best way to deal with Blacks in this country is to throw them out of school and then lock them up later. The School-to-Prison Pipeline is what our country sets them up for." Lastly, P28 commented that most schools prepare students to work rather than educate them:

> Uniforms, designated periods, regulated eating times and bathroom breaks; conformity at its finest perpetuates racism and much more, such as the commonly known dress code for

example. The argument is that it is for structure but it is clear to see that really isn't the case, especially since this pipeline is so easily identified.

The participants reflected that this system prepares students for a designated life and ensures students become compliant. If students are non-compliant, they are punished. Similarly, P34 commented: "If the school is not opening the minds of students to a life greater than their circumstances, then they are going to end up stuck in the same place."

Other participants believed that students are pushed through the prison pipeline by teacher biases and severe disciplinary practices. While P5 believed the students don't receive the discipline they need at home or school, "then they go into the regular world and they think they're allowed to act however they want," P15 argued that students "are overly and unreasonably punished in school for minor actions, and they develop negative views of school…It shows them that everything they do, even if it is simply talking to a classmate, is wrong." P15 concluded that teachers do not recognize norms that do not belong to their own culture, viewing them as disrespectful and/or abnormal, and severely punishing youth of color.

Similarly, P19 concluded that teachers and the community don't give the kids a chance: "The Black students can make one mistake in their youth and White adults give up." P27 commented that some teachers have negative attitudes towards students, "telling students that they won't amount to anything," further leading to low self-esteem. Two participants argued that students need teachers who believe in and advocate for their students. P18 noted, "it would take a person with compassion, and genuine love without bias or prejudice, someone who truly wants to make a difference, such as the woman in Freedom Writers," while P19 commented: "Black students need someone to fight for them."

Internalized Racism and Negative Self-Perceptions

The above-mentioned factors contribute to Black students' internalized negative feelings, which may result in students giving up on themselves. P5 commented that students "go into the world with people already not believing in them." In addition, P15 reflected that students develop negative self-perceptions and negative attitudes towards school, as "they are unreasonably punished in school for minor actions…students see that everything they do is wrong, even if it is simply talking to a classmate." On the other hand, P20 reflected on how teachers treat students differently: "White students are practically begged to do well in school both behaviorally and academically, but Black students are expected to beg for their education." The result, according to P20, is the self-fulfilling prophecy: "When you feel like the system is against you, you're more inclined to deliver the results they expect from you already." Similarly, P23 stated: "The entire country is biased against people of color…children have an expectation that they will end up in prison. With this mindset, they will drop out of school and end up in trouble." Lastly, P27 stated that "Black students, especially male students, mostly believe that they will never be more than where they were raised." As these beliefs are heightened by teachers' bias towards Black students, the latter are more likely to drop out or not graduate.

Another contributing factor to students internalizing racism is the fact that people generally give up on our Black youth, blaming them and their environments for their life circumstances. For example, P6 inquired at what point someone becomes responsible for breaking a cycle:

> There is a stereotype for Black people, how they act, how they dress, etc. This stereotype is taught by cycles—a child acts a certain way because of the way their parents taught them. IF children are being taught that it is okay to live below the poverty line (accept things like unemployment without trying to find a job), disrespect authority, not go to/finish school, THEN that child can live their life the same way as their parents…

In addition, P29 reflected that when students do not receive proper education from schools, this "can lead to poor decisions or circumstances where the students feel forced to do some sort of crime to be able to survive." Lastly, P53 largely attributes this to the environment in which the students grow up, such as "Black students' culture, gang culture, and the environment in which they live."

External Factors

The data indicate that preservice teachers can articulate how economic and educational disparities, including discriminatory housing policies, and inequalities in the justice system are the outcomes of structural and systematic racism that impact the STPP relationship. Preservice teachers discuss economic and educational disparities in a cause-and-effect relationship. That is, educational disparity in underfunded predominantly Black schools is the outcome of economic inequalities (funding inequalities) and discriminatory housing policies such as racial segregation and redlining. Racially segregated housing limits Black students' opportunities and access to institutions. Therefore, educational inequalities, and minoritized students' academic struggles should be seen as part of structural issues of society.

Participants also report that racial profiling, misrepresentation, biases, and stereotyping of Black people also intersect with structural racism and inequalities in the justice system. Structural racism, in this regard, embedded into the structures of societal institutions, affects not only the decision-making processes, policies, and practices but also the perceptions and attitudes toward Black people in the justice system (Banaji et al., 2021).

Structural Racism in the Justice System

Participants' accounts indicate that racial profiling, misrepresentation, and stereotyping of Black people (e.g., violent, potential criminals) are the outcomes of systemic and structural racism. Participants report that systemic racism influences the justice system. As a result, Black people are disproportionately subject to mistreatment and double standards in the justice system.

The following excerpts from our participants confirm the relationship between systemic racism, the stereotyping of Black people, and inequalities in the justice system. For example, P4 highlighted the relationship between the misrepresentation of Black people and inequalities in the justice system:

> Black people are thought to be more violent, delinquents, and menaces to society. Anyone who is portrayed or thought to have those aforementioned traits is going to be seen as a threat to society/public and will be treated, seen, and judged as such by police officers, judges, and juries.

The following statements show how systemic racism goes hand-in-hand with biases that influence law enforcement officials' approaches and mainstream people's opinions. P5 stated:

> Individuals who are Black are more likely to be charged with a crime than let go, even if the crime is the same. Black individuals are more likely to be stopped, arrested, and even harassed by police. There is racism running rampant throughout the justice system.

Similarly, P36 expressed the unfairness in the criminal justice system and Black people's demonization by law enforcement officials:

> These are unfair drug charges and racism in our legal system. A White person can murder someone and get off with a scratch while a Black person gets arrested and because of this bias in our system, we lock them away for years.

Additionally, P47 echoed: "This is related to prejudice and racism within the American justice system. African Americans are more likely to be profiled by law enforcement and also receive harsher prison sentences." Lastly, P34 added:

> The amount of Black people in prisons is racially motivated. There are a multitude of occurrences where we see that Black people are not treated the same as White people when it comes to how cops handle their arrests and in general, how people are quicker to blame the Black person rather than a White person.

Other participants emphasized the double standards in the justice system and explained that Black people face racial profiling due to White supremacy and historical inequalities going back to slavery. For example, P32 stated:

> There is a long dark history behind the School-to-Prison Pipeline that relates to larger concepts such as previous and current government regulations and nationwide stereotypes. Black people account for most of the prison population in the U.S. because of negative stereotypes perpetrated by government initiatives and these stereotypes that affect Black children today can be traced back to times of slavery and racial persecution.

Similarly, P12 added on the interrelationship between structural racism and historical inequalities in society:

> Black people account for most of the prison population in the U.S. because cops intentionally target Black communities. There are far more raids and cops in Black neighborhoods and Black people tend to be pulled over while driving more often than White people. It's systemic racism that was included when Black people gained freedom from slavery.

In addition, P29 confirmed the relationship between White supremacist ideologies and Black people's criminalization:

>Black youth tend to be overpoliced and wrongly and unjustly harassed and profiled as a threat and/or a culprit without evidence and/or proof. It's an occurrence that happens constantly to suppress and terrify the Black population into submission in an effort to gain control and uphold the foundations of White supremacy.

Finally, P26 explained Black people's struggles with police brutality in the justice system: "Black men are also disproportionately stopped and questioned by police and are often accused of crimes they did not commit, see the number of innocent Black men that have been shot by police," while P56 echoed: "like teachers, the police continue to racially profile people of color whether it be on purpose or not. This is just due to either a lack of education or passed down beliefs from their friends/ family members."

Income Inequalities, Educational Disparities, and Housing Policies

Participants' accounts show that income and educational inequalities, including housing segregation, are the results of structural racism. While income inequalities and racially segregated housing policies and practices limit Black students' educational participation and opportunities, biased curriculum, and culturally offensive teaching exclude Black students and affect teachers' and school administrators' perceptions of their minoritized in underfunded inner-city schools.

The following excerpts from our participants highlight the interrelationship between structural racism, educational inequalities, and the STPP link. Participants' statements also indicate that biases towards Black students and offensive teaching practices push Black students out of schools. P45 reported:

>The school system is failing youth because rather than helping them when they make mistakes they are just isolating or removing from them their schools. This results in them having a lack of support to help them stay on track. However, this does not go to say that prejudices and racism don't take place against black youth which can result in harsh and unjust treatment and imprisonment.

On the other hand, P12 explained the relationship between the mistreatment of Black students in schools and society due to stereotyping and racial profiling:

>Black people account for most of the prison population in the U.S. because of the stereotype that Black people are more violent than White people. In schools, this causes harsher punishments for Black students. Harsher punishments can lead to less adequate education in some cases because the Black students facing the punishments can be expelled or forced into OSS, which ultimately forces them to miss crucial instruction.

P49 also explained the harmful relationship between educational inequalities due to stereotyping: "When Black students are punished more often than they are labeled as trouble, it is something that follows them for the rest of their lives. This either becomes a label they begin to believe or people around them believe." P18 also believed that school culture and teaching practices fail to accept and treat Black students fairly in classrooms: "Black kids are treated differently even if not intentionally compared to many other groups. I feel that people think of them differently."

Similarly, P43 explained that culturally offensive teaching, not knowing and valuing the identities and cultural backgrounds of Black students, alienates Black students in schools: "Teachers aren't allowing most Black youth to express themselves creatively and the teachers don't give much effort to truly know their students." On the other hand, P42 reflected on the cultural clash between White teachers and Black students, which leads to the exclusion of Black students: "White educators do not understand the cultural differences between them and Black students, causing them to view their culturally acceptable behavior as unacceptable. This means that Black students get punished more often than White students."

Participants also argued about the Euro-centric, monocultural, White-centric curriculum's effect on Black students and their alienation in classrooms. P40 reported:

> Schools have historically only given out educational material and literature about White people. Many schools have very few minorities among students or staff. When a child only sees or hears about one race, how will they ever be able to be 'culturally sensitive'? Even if a school is diverse with minorities, there are still obstacles to systematic racism.

The data also indicate that discriminatory policies (e.g., housing and education) increase the racial divide between the groups and mostly target the Black community. Discriminatory housing policies limit Black students' access to quality education (due to funding inequalities) and lead to economic disparities between dominant and minoritized groups (Tanase & Kayaalp, 2023). P10 addressed the housing policies and their effect on the Black community in Jacksonville:

> I learned about the red lining of districts [in Jacksonville], the government separating the neighborhoods and communities by building I-95 through them and evicting most of the downtown Black population from their homes and businesses and promising to build up downtown but never doing so. With a mix of the government making these choices and the plethora of racist people out there, unfortunately, Black people are targeted.

Similarly, according to the participants' accounts, discriminatory housing policies overlap in economic disparities and racial profiling. That is, Black students from working-class families in lower-income neighborhoods are subject to more policing which increases their chances in education and life. P17 commented, "There are more police in lower-income areas so they 'find more crime' whereas in high-income areas there might be the same amount, but nobody is looking for it." Another participant (P18) echoed the relationship between structural racism and income inequality and criminalization of Black youth in lower-income neighborhoods:

> Cops wait in low-income areas to ticket people for minor things, like jaywalking; the people who get these tickets are in a minority group, and due to the fact that the area is low-income, they cannot pay the tickets and eventually wind up in prison. This is a vicious cycle because the retention rate in US prisons is very high.

In addition, P35 explained the relationship between income and educational disparities and structural racism: "if teachers and school systems were properly funded and supported—if crime went down and neighborhoods were built up, it would not be like it is, but again, institutional racism," while P37 emphasized the impact of economic inequalities on educational disparities and marginalization of Black students in the US educational system:

Black youth often grow up in low-income areas where the school system does not necessarily care for Black youth, due to low funding, which in turn accounts for the Black prison population. By not having the funding and resources, school systems in the US often give up and do not try to give Black youth a chance.

Discussion

Internal Factors

Largely, our findings confirm that preservice teachers possess a solid understanding that important structural inequalities lead to the STPP. A series of school factors, such as subjective teacher practices and biases, a lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class, Zero-Tolerance Policies, as well as the lack of educational opportunities, perpetuate societal injustices, funneling a high percentage of Black male students straight into the juvenile justice system (Hambacher et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2021). Similarly, our participants believed that lack of educational opportunities, teacher bias, and negative behaviors and attitudes towards youth of color continue to be responsible for pushing students down the prison pipeline.

Some of the participants believed that some urban teachers hold biases against youth of color, punishing them for minor actions harsher than they would White students for more severe behaviors (Haight et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2021). These biases are due, in part, to a lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class. Absent such preparation, teachers view customs different from mainstream norms of behavior as disruptive and they severely punish youth of color (Hambacher et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2021). On the other hand, such biases might be explained as racial discipline disproportionality (Gregory et al., 2011; Ispa-Landa, 2018). That is, educators are interpreting students' behaviors and referring them to the most serious discipline (Ispa-Landa, 2018).

On the other hand, participants also related inadequate funding to the lack of educational opportunities for students of color. For example, some participants commented that Black students are not given the proper tools to succeed in life, being prepared for the workforce, rather than for a well-rounded education. Other participants commented on the quality of the courses offered in lower-income schools (i.e. lack of drug prevention, courses, and free courses). These findings mirror previous research findings: the schools attended by Black urban students are situated in low-income areas of the town, and are generally characterized by lacking safe buildings, small class sizes, well prepared teachers, high-quality curriculum, and advanced courses (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Milner et al., 2021).

Moreover, the cultural disconnect between the teacher and student populations exacerbates the challenges in teacher student-relationships; while Black teachers represent only 20% of the workforce (White et al., 2019), over 50% of the public-school students are students of color (US DOE, National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.). When White teachers lack the cultural preparation to understand race and class, they disproportionately punish students of color for behaviors less severe than those displayed by White students (Morris & Perry, 2016). All these factors lead to sub-par preparation of students of color.

To address these disparities, teacher preparation programs must prioritize culturally responsive training that equips educators to understand and challenge systemic biases related to race and class. This includes fostering self-awareness of implicit biases, providing in-depth training on

equity-centered classroom management, and incorporating curriculum content that highlights diverse perspectives.

Programs should also create opportunities for preservice teachers to engage with students of color, gaining firsthand insights into the lived experiences of their students. Additionally, embedding ongoing professional development focused on cultural competence can ensure that educators remain committed to equity throughout their careers. By adopting these strategies, teacher preparation programs can better support preservice teachers in addressing biases, reducing disproportionate disciplinary practices, and fostering inclusive learning environments that empower students of color.

In addition, some of our participants believed that students (their behaviors, their circumstances, and environments) are responsible for them ending up in the juvenile justice system. This deficit mindset, in which one blames the victim, is used to explain the academic failures of low socioeconomic students of color (Valencia, 2010). Academic failure is seen as solely the fault of the student rather than the fault of a broken system (Clycq et al., 2014). Teachers who embrace this perspective believe that Black students fail because they are not as smart and as hardworking as White students, and/or they hold the students' environments responsible for academic and behavioral challenges (McKay & Devlin, 2016). Demoralized and targeted, constantly being dealt harsh disciplinary practices, Black students may internalize these negative perceptions, lose interest in school, and eventually drop out (Mittleman 2018; Morris & Perry 2016; Owens, 2020; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017).

External Factors

Our participants' accounts confirm the interplay between structural and systemic racism rooted in historical inequalities and STPP. Educational and income disparities push Black students out of school and society and intersect with structural and systemic racism. In this regard, educational disparities (e.g., poor quality education in predominantly Black schools in inner-city neighborhoods) and racism (e.g., Euro-centric offensive teaching) are the outcomes of discriminatory housing policies (redlining and gentrification) and income inequalities (Tanase & Kayaalp, 2023). Similarly, some participants discuss the relationship between social class and policing. In this regard, working-class Black students in lower-income neighborhoods are subject to policing and racial profiling more than non-Black students from middle-class families.

Similarly, our participants argue that racial profiling, biases, and stereotyping of Black individuals go hand-in-hand with structural racism in the criminal justice system. Structural racism as an ideology and practice (Essed, 2013) affects not only policies but also law enforcement officers' practices and approaches toward Black youth. Misrepresentation of Black people through stereotyping practices (violent and potential criminals) and historical misconceptions rooted in slavery make them easy targets of police brutality and victims of racism.

Conclusions and Implications

In the United States, Black students are more likely than White students to be suspended/expelled from school and/or punished (The Government Accountability Office, 2018). Our participants attributed this differential treatment of Black students to a variety of factors, such as lack of educational opportunities, lack of educator preparation in understanding race and class, teacher and administrator biases, internalized racism, as well as macro-level factors such as structural and

systemic racism and its outcomes, including educational and economic disparities, racial profiling, policing, criminalization and stereotyping of Black students.

Our findings warrant the following conclusions: firstly, to break the cycle of discouragement and to prevent both educators and students of color from giving up on themselves, students need teachers who understand the relationship between students' culture and behavior, and consider their students' cultural backgrounds (including values, norms) when planning classroom management strategies and activities (Tanase, 2020a; Tanase, 2020b; Pas et al., 2016). Conversely, when teachers lack the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use CRT in their classrooms, the achievement gap between students of color and their White peers increases (Bell et al., 2022), and students of color are at risk of dropping out of school and/or being pushed into the juvenile justice system (Milner et al., 2021).

This conclusion warrants the following implications for teacher education preparation: firstly, it is essential to equip teacher candidates with the knowledge and skills necessary to serve a diverse student body effectively (Wiseman, 2012). This includes fostering cultural competence, developing inclusive teaching strategies, and ensuring that teachers can address the unique needs of students from various backgrounds. Second, teacher preparation programs must emphasize the importance of cultivating a social justice mindset among teacher candidates (Rojas & Liou, 2017). By doing so, educators will be better positioned to identify and challenge systemic educational inequities (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016), fostering a more equitable learning environment for all students.

Additionally, the persistent cultural mismatch between the student and teacher populations often contributes to challenges in classroom management and student engagement. To address this issue, teacher education programs must prioritize efforts to diversify the teacher workforce by actively recruiting and supporting teachers of color (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Gershenson et al., 2017). Increasing the representation of educators from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds can foster stronger student-teacher relationships and improve educational outcomes for historically marginalized students. Finally, beyond teacher preparation programs, school administrators and policymakers must consider the long-term effects of structural and historical inequalities on working-class Black students, particularly those in inner-city schools. These systemic barriers impact students' educational opportunities and overall participation in the academic environment. Addressing these challenges requires policies that not only support equitable resource distribution but also acknowledge and rectify the longstanding disparities that affect students' academic success and future prospects.

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