The Disproportionality Dilemma: Patterns of Teacher Referrals to School Counselors for Disruptive Behavior

Julia Bryan, Norma L. Day-Vines, Dana Griffin, and Cheryl Moore-Thomas

Disproportionality plagues schools nationwide in special education placement, dropout, discipline referral, suspension, and expulsion rates. This study examined predictors of teacher referrals to school counselors for disruptive behavior in a sample of students selected from the Educational Longitudinal Study 2002 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Findings demonstrated that students’ race predicted English teacher referrals; students’ gender, previous disciplinary infractions, and teachers’ postsecondary expectations for students predicted English and math teacher referrals. Implications for practice, policy, and research are discussed.

Keywords: disproportionality, teacher referrals, school discipline practices, racial disparity, school counseling

The issue of disproportionality, a phenomenon in which students relative to their proportion in the population experience overrepresentation or underrepresentation along a particular data point, plagues schools and many institutions nationwide. These data points include but are not limited to special education placement (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; MacMillan & Reschley, 1998; Patton, 1998), gifted education enrollment (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008), graduation rates (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004), school dropout, and suspension and expulsion rates (Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Researchers have developed several methods for computing disproportionality, such as the risk index, risk ratio, and the composition index; however, the composition index seems to be the most widely cited approach (Hosp & Reschley, 2003). The composition index compares the proportion of a particular racial/ethnic group in the population to its proportion in a particular category (e.g., suspension and expulsion). As an example, African American students composed 17% of public school students in 1997, yet African Americans accounted for 32% of all suspensions (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2000). The composition index suggests that if African American students were represented proportionately among the students who experience school exclusion, one would expect their suspension rates to approach 17%.

Recently, researchers have begun to examine in earnest disparities associated with the referral (for discipline problems), suspension, and expulsion of students of color (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Although certain research hypotheses identify risks, such as poverty experienced by some students of color, as possible explanations for these disparities, race appears to be a significant predictor of disparities in referral, suspension, and expulsion rates over and above socioeconomic status (SES) across all learning environments (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). These findings are important given the relation between school success and school disciplinary actions (see Morrison, Anthony, Storino, & Dillon, 2001; Reyes, 2006). Moreover, given the mandate issued by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA; 2005) National Model for school counselors to promote the academic, career, and personal and/or social development of all children—irrespective of their demographic characteristics—and to dismantle barriers to student success, counselors have a particularly compelling rationale for understanding how and why students receive counseling referrals for disciplinary infractions. In response to this important issue, the current study examined predictors of teacher referrals to school counselors for disruptive behavior in the specific contexts of math and English classes.

Racial Disparity in School Discipline Practices

Consistently, students’ race and gender predict disciplinary referrals and suspension and expulsion rates (see Gregory et al., 2010; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Reyes, 2006; Skiba et al., 2011). Published reports document that African American and Latino students are more than twice as likely as their White peers to experience school suspension (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003). This pattern of disproportionality related to school disciplinary practices...
may begin at the very start of children’s academic careers. A study commissioned by the Yale University Child Study Center (Gilliam, 2005) documented that expulsion rates for prekindergarten students participating in state-funded programs were more than 3 times higher than the expulsion rates for K–12 students in total. Disaggregation of the data suggested higher rates of expulsion for 5- to 6-year-olds, African Americans, and males.

Moving beyond early childhood education, a study that examined referral, suspension, and expulsion rates for middle school students in an urban school district found that African American males received a disproportionately higher rate of referral, suspension, and expulsion compared with their White counterparts (Skiba et al., 2002). Furthermore, the same study determined that African American students were more likely to receive office referrals for subjective offenses such as disrespect, excessive noise, threats, and loitering, whereas White students were more likely to receive office referrals for more objective offenses such as smoking, leaving without permission, vandalism, and obscene language (Skiba et al., 2002).

More recently, in the state of Indiana, a study examining out-of-school suspensions among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites demonstrated that, compared with Whites, ethnic minorities experienced higher suspension rates. For example, African Americans received suspensions at rates 4 times higher, whereas Hispanics received suspensions at rates 2 times higher than Whites (Rausch & Skiba, 2004). When data were disaggregated by urbanicity, African American students in suburban schools had the highest incidence of out-of-school suspensions compared with White students who attended schools in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

Similar trends seem to appear in national data. In a 2008 national study using data gathered from the University of Michigan’s Monitoring the Future study, findings indicated that between 2001 and 2005, there were only small racial and ethnic differences in school policy violations for offenses such as alcohol, drug, or weapons possession. In marked contrast, when less serious infractions were examined, African American males were 30% more likely to be referred and 333% more likely to be suspended or expelled for misbehavior than were their Caucasian counterparts (Wallace et al., 2008). Even after sociodemographic factors were controlled, such as mother’s education, intact household, and urbanicity, African American males were still 20% more likely to be referred and 270% more likely to be suspended for misbehavior than were their Caucasian counterparts. Similarly, African American girls were almost 200% more likely to be referred and 540% more likely to be suspended compared with White females. After sociodemographic factors were controlled, African American girls were 60% and 440% more likely than were their White peers to be referred and suspended, respectively.

Despite the salience of race in teacher referrals of students, teachers may not consider how race, ethnicity, and culture shape discipline in classroom episodes (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). It is interesting that in a study examining teachers’ implicit theories about disciplinary problems among African American students, teachers accounted for student behavior in five particular ways: (a) the normal adolescent development trajectory in which students search for autonomy; (b) low academic achievement that gives rise to poor impulse control; (c) deficit paradigms associated with cultural deprivation; (d) the structure, organization, and climate of the school; and (e) teachers’ attitudes and behaviors (Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Teachers did not discuss race, ethnicity, and culture as they relate to discipline. Teachers’ lack of discussion of race and ethnicity in their discussions of discipline is congruent with educators’ and researchers’ reluctance to discuss the presence and influence of racial tension in White teacher–minority student relationships (Stevenson, 2008). Yet, racially and ethnically diverse students are more likely to be disproportionally referred and suspended, severely punished for small offenses, stereotyped as unintelligent, and marginalized within schools (Noguera, 2003, 2008).

Referrals, Suspensions, and School Success

The data discussed earlier may have significant implications given their relation to students’ school success. Specifically, repeated referrals, suspensions, and expulsions result in lost time from class; disengagement and alienation from school; negative school climate; academic failure; subsequent school dropout; and, at the extremes, incarceration (Reyes, 2006). In a study of sixth- and seventh-grade students, data revealed that one or more suspensions in sixth grade were associated with suspensions in seventh grade, and students who scored below the 50th percentile on a measure of reading achievement were suspended at a higher rate than were students who scored at or above the 50th percentile (Arcia, 2007). Similar results were found in earlier studies that examined the relation between prior referrals and suspensions and lower levels of academic achievement (Morrison et al., 2001). Examining the educational, interpersonal, peer, and familial characteristics of middle school students with and without disciplinary histories, Morrison et al. (2001) found that, although students with no previous suspensions had higher levels of social responsibility or a desire to do what is right and higher levels of peer norms toward academic achievement than did their peers with disciplinary histories, students with previous office referrals had lower grade point averages than did students without previous office referrals. Moreover, students with no prior referrals or suspensions were more likely to be referred for a blatant act of aggression. In marked contrast, students with a disciplinary history experienced higher suspension
rates for attitudinal infractions. These findings seem to suggest that once a student gets suspended, he or she may be under higher levels of surveillance and smaller infractions may result in suspension.

Finally, in a study focused on dispositions and disciplinary referrals in the classroom, initial findings demonstrated that African American students were referred significantly more for defiance than were their White counterparts. African American students were also more likely to receive referrals from fewer than half of their teachers, suggesting that all teachers did not view the students in the sample as defiant. Teachers who exhibited higher levels of care and who maintained higher academic expectations for students were viewed by students as more trustworthy, and students were more accepting of these teachers’ authority, which suggests that a student’s behavior may be a function of both the student and the social context (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).

Given the influence of teacher perceptions and expectations and social context on educational and behavioral outcomes, it is important to consider the related research more closely.

Teacher Expectations

Research on teachers’ expectations and student performance shows that teachers’ expectations of student ability affect student performance (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Jussim & Eccles, 1992) and student outcomes (McDonough, 1997) and may possibly influence their reactions to students’ behaviors and referrals of students for (mis)behavior. This may have particular implications for students of color. A spate of empirical research demonstrates that teacher expectations have a tremendous impact on children from marginalized groups, especially poor and minority students. For example, in a study examining teacher perceptions of students’ academic achievement and motivation, teachers rated students who exhibited classroom behaviors consistent with mainstream, European American, middle-class norms (i.e., independence and competition) as having higher levels of achievement and motivation compared with students who exhibited Afro-cultural behaviors and learning orientations such as communalism and verve (Tyler, Boykin, & Walton, 2006). Furthermore, in a meta-analysis of teacher expectations and teacher referral effects, data suggested that teachers had more positive or higher expectations and made more positive and fewer negative referrals for European American students than they did for Latino and African American students (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007).

Teachers’ expectations of students may affect how they respond to students’ (mis)behavior and may lead to or reinforce patterns of misbehavior in classrooms and to subsequent discipline referrals. When teachers have low expectations of students, they may not place rigorous demands on students regarding behavior or achievement. A qualitative study of students’ and teachers’ perceptions of conflict and power in several physical education classrooms speaks to this notion more clearly (Cothran & Ennis, 1997). Specifically, a study of four Caucasian physical education teachers and their largely African American student population found that in order for students and teachers to achieve their respective goals, they maintained reciprocal power. Collectively, students in the study challenged and undermined teacher authority by (a) using the power of persuasion to entice teachers to schedule more desirable activities; (b) signaling other students not to participate in activities; (c) disrupting class by asking teachers to review instructions repeatedly; (d) whining, complaining, and questioning teacher directives; (e) talking and ignoring instructions; and (f) responding slowly, begrudgingly, or not at all to teacher requests. In exchange for student cooperation and fewer classroom disruptions, teachers made fewer demands on students, allowed students to deviate from the planned curriculum by assigning more desirable activities (e.g., football and basketball), and avoided tasks that students disliked. Teachers became disillusioned by the relative lack of support they received when they made disciplinary referrals to administrators and opted instead to manage their own disciplinary problems in nontraditional ways. The study’s authors also concluded that teachers may not know how to implement a culturally responsive curriculum that engages students of color (Cothran & Ennis, 1997).

Subject context effects and discipline. Gregory and Weinstein (2008) concluded that student behavior may be a function of both the student and the social context. Important to consider in this social context is the subject subculture of teachers and their discipline-specific classrooms. Teachers belong to different subject (discipline specific) subcultures (e.g., English, math, social studies, science). Although the research on subject context effects is scant and dated, findings suggest that each subject subculture or context comprises different beliefs, norms, and practices (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994, 1995). Teachers’ perspectives on teaching and learning may vary based on their subject context. Although little research exists on teachers’ attitudes toward discipline referrals by subject matter, it is possible that subject context may affect what teachers perceive as disruptive behavior, who teachers refer for disruptive behavior, and the level of tolerable disruptive behavior in classrooms. For example, research suggests that disruptive behavior is more prevalent in classrooms where displaying ability and performing better than others is valued as opposed to classrooms in which improving on past performance and understanding are stressed (Kaplan, Gheen, & Midgley, 2002). However, the lack of research on differences in teachers’ perspectives on teaching and learning by subject matter suggests the need for further inquiry.

It is also important to note that, during the past 20 years, many school systems have moved toward high school state assessments (Brown & Conley, 2007; Ullucci & Spencer, 2008). Many of these high-stakes assessments focus on math and
English competencies, which may serve as requirements for high school graduation, prerequisites for special state scholarships, or indicators of college credit for designated courses (Brown & Conley, 2007; Martino & Wilson, 2009). The significance of these two specific areas of study may further warrant the need for inquiry into the subject context effects and discipline in English and math at the high school level.

Therefore, in this study, we examined subject matter context effects by examining whether disciplinary referrals to the school counselor differed among English and math teachers. Furthermore, we operationalized teacher expectations as teachers’ postsecondary expectations (PSE) for students or how far teachers expected students to go in school. Teachers’ PSE for students may capture their judgments of students’ abilities and potential (McDonough, 1997). Furthermore, we examined subject context effects by examining whether disciplinary referrals to the school counselor differed among English and math teachers.

Teacher Referrals to School Counselors
To date, few studies have examined teachers’ referrals to school counselors (Adams, Benshoff, & Harrington, 2007; Jackson, 2000). Of particular note, one such study used the National Education Longitudinal Study 1988 to examine whether teacher referrals of high school students to the school counselor differed by family structure, gender, or race (Adams et al., 2007). The findings revealed that students from nonintact families, males, and African American students were more likely to be referred to the school counselor for behavioral concerns. However, the study did not examine other predictors of teacher referrals, such as teacher expectations and previous disciplinary infractions, in reference to the body of literature on disproportionate referrals in schools. Another study examined teachers’ assumptions underlying their referral of elementary age students (Jackson, 2000). Regardless of the reason for the teacher referrals, teachers relied on school counselors to solve the children’s problems.

These findings bring to light interesting implications and research questions. When it comes to disruptive behavior, although school counselors’ roles do not encompass disciplining students (ASCA, 2005), teachers may choose to refer students to school counselors as an alternative source of support. Although it is not disciplinary in nature, the support provided by school counselors could be meaningful and well aligned with the established professional roles of school counselors (ASCA, 2005). If teachers are referring students disproportionately to counselors for disruptive behaviors, then school counselors would be well served to know about many of the culturally relevant strategies suggested to address disproportionate referrals in schools, including building partnerships with families, developing culturally inclusive curricula, and implementing positive behavior support as proactive strategies for addressing disciplinary problems in schools (Bireda, 2002; Boethel, 2003; Bohanon et al., 2006; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gay, 2002; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Warren et al., 2003).

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study was to examine potential predictors of math and English teacher referrals for disruptive behavior to high school counselors. To do this, we used the disproportionality literature as our guide. Given the importance of math and English classes to the academic success of all students, examination of the referral patterns in these specific context areas was key. An overarching concern guiding this study was whether the pattern of teacher referrals to the school counselor for discipline mirrors the pattern of discipline referrals in schools in general. More specifically, we wanted to know whether school counselors provide counseling services to the same students whom teachers refer disproportionately for discipline to school administrators and may therefore be in a position to intervene early and positively in the disciplinary process. This study is important because if school counselors are seeing the students who are typically at risk for disciplinary actions and suspension (e.g., males, African Americans), these counselors can intervene proactively by developing programs and advocacy efforts that help students and school personnel overcome behavior patterns, subject context concerns, and attitudes or systemic barriers that interfere with academic success and persistence in school. Furthermore, if students are being referred to school counselors in the same disproportionate patterns that typically exist in schools, school counselors may be in a position to intervene with school administrators and staff to address the dilemma of overselection and oversanction of some groups of students. Indeed, teachers’ disciplinary referrals to school counselors may indicate that they are seeking school counselors’ guidance in addressing students’ behavior. If this is the case, school counselors need to be knowledgeable about strategies for addressing disproportionality and disciplinary problems in schools.

We addressed the following research questions using data from the Education Longitudinal Study 2002 (ELS:2002; NCES, n.d.):

Research Question 1: What student, school, and teacher variables predict teachers’ referrals of high school students to the school counselor for disruptive behavior?

- Which students are English teachers more likely to refer to the counselor for disruptive behavior?
- Which students are math teachers more likely to refer to the counselor for disruptive behavior?
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- Will there be significant interactions between students' race and gender and teachers' race and gender in disciplinary referrals to the school counselor?

Research Question 2: Are teachers referring students who are generally at risk for disciplinary action and suspension to the school counselor?
- Do students' previous at-risk behaviors and disciplinary infractions predict teacher referrals to the school counselor for disruptive behavior?

Research Question 3: Do teachers' PSE of students predict their referrals to the school counselor?

Method

Participants

We selected data from the base year, 2002, of the ELS:2002 (Ingels, Pratt, Rogers, Siegel, & Stutts, 2004), a national longitudinal data set collected by NCES to follow a cohort of 10th-grade students biennially beginning in 2002. We used data only from the 2002 data set because it is the only year that NCES collected data on teachers' disciplinary referrals to school counselors. Our samples comprised 4,607 tenth graders in English classes and 4,981 tenth graders in math classes in U.S. public high schools. These samples are overlapping in that math and English teachers teach some of the same students. Just over 50% of the schools were suburban, whereas almost 25% of the schools were rural and almost 25% urban.

English classes. Of the 4,607 English students, 48.2% were female and 51.8% were male; with respect to race/ethnicity, 66.4% were White, 14.0% Hispanic, 12.5% Black/African American, 3.3% Asian, and 3.8% multiracial. Regarding English teachers, 75% were female and 25% were male; with respect to race/ethnicity, more than 88% were White, 5.7% Black, 1.1% Asian, 2.9% Hispanic, and 1.5% multiracial. English teachers referred 14.7% of their students to the school counselor for disruptive behavior.

Math classes. Of the 4,981 math students, 47.5% were female and 52.5% were male; with respect to race/ethnicity, 65.7% were White, 13.6% Hispanic, 13.9% Black/African American, 2.8% Asian, and 3.9% multiracial. Approximately 52.9% of math teachers were female and 47.1% were male; with respect to race/ethnicity, 86.5% were White, 5.3% Black, 2.4% Asian, 4.3% Hispanic, and 1.5% multiracial. Math teachers referred 13.8% of their students to the school counselor for disruptive behavior.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in this study were English teachers’ referrals to the school counselor for disruptive behavior and math teachers’ referrals to the school counselor for disruptive behavior. These were measured by two dichotomous items (no, yes) that asked whether the teacher had spoken to the counselor this year about the student’s disruptive behavior in school.

Independent Variables

Student variables. The student variables in this study were gender, race/ethnicity, SES, math achievement, and reading achievement. Gender was dichotomous (female, male), and race/ethnicity comprised five categories (Asian/Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Hispanic, multiracial, White). We did not include Native Americans in the study because of their small numbers in the sample. In our analysis, the reference categories for the student variables were male and White. Math achievement scores were used in the analysis of math teacher referrals, and reading achievement scores were used in the analysis of English teacher referrals. SES was a composite score derived by NCES to measure household income. We standardized both SES and achievement scores.

School variable. The school demographic variable we examined in this study was urbanicity, a variable derived by NCES to describe the school’s location. Urbanicity comprises three categories (urban, rural, suburban), with suburban as the reference category.

Teacher demographic variables. The analyses were done separately for English and math teachers; therefore, for each of the following variables, there is one each for English and math teachers. The teacher variables in this study were teacher’s race/ethnicity and teacher’s gender. Teacher’s gender was a dichotomous variable (male, female), and teacher’s race/ethnicity comprised five categories (Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, multiracial, African American, White). In our analysis, the reference categories for the teacher variables were female and White.

Students’ previous behaviors and disciplinary infractions. We used six variables derived by NCES to measure students’ self-reports of previous behaviors and disciplinary infractions that may put children at risk for further disciplinary actions or suspension. With each one measured on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 2 = 1 to 2 times, 3 = 3 to 6 times, 4 = 7 to 9 times, 5 = 10 or more times), the six variables were (a) how many times late for school, (b) how many times skip class, (c) how many times absent from school, (d) how many times got in trouble, (e) how many times suspended/put in school suspension, and (f) how many times suspended/put on probation.

Teacher expectations. Teacher PSE measured how far teachers expected students to go in school. It consisted of seven categories (1 = less than high school graduation, 2 = high school graduation, 3 = attend or complete 2-year college, 4 = attend but not complete 4-year college, 5 = graduate from 4-year college, 6 = obtain a master’s degree, or 7 = obtain Ph.D., M.D., or advanced degree) and was treated as a continuous variable in the analysis.
Data Analysis

We used the ELS:2002, a national longitudinal study that allows researchers to examine critical transitions that take place as high school students progress through high school, into postsecondary education, and into the world of work (Ingels et al., 2004). The ELS:2002 is a complex multistage study that sampled schools first and then sampled students within those schools (Ingels et al., 2004). Furthermore, to provide a sufficient number of minority students, we oversampled them. Analyses of complex samples such as the ELS:2002 must use procedures or software to correct for the smaller standard errors and increased probability of Type I error that result. The procedures or software take sample design effects into consideration and apply sampling weights to adjust standard errors. In the current study, we used SPSS (Complex Samples Version 17.0) to control for the sample’s design effects and apply the sampling weight. In this study, we used the base year questionnaire weight because all of the variables were selected from the base year, 2002. Our study is a predictive study and so is correlational in nature (Belli, 2009; Johnson, 2001). We used cross-sectional data, and so our results do not indicate causal effects.

Logistic regression. To examine potential predictors of math and English teacher referrals for disruptive behavior to high school counselors, we conducted two separate logistic regression analyses, one each for English and math students. Logistic regression is appropriate when the dependent variable is dichotomous (in this case, referred to the school counselor for disruptive behavior vs. not referred to the school counselor for disruptive behavior). Results provide logged odds (B) and odds ratios (ORs) for each independent variable. ORs are a transformation of the logged odds and are easier to interpret than the logged odds. An OR represents the increase or decrease in the likelihood of the criterion occurring (e.g., teacher referral to the school counselor) in one group (e.g., female, Black) compared with the odds of it occurring in another group (e.g., male, White). For standardized independent variables such as reading achievement and SES, the OR indicates the increase or decrease in the odds of the criterion for one standard deviation change in the independent variable (e.g., reading achievement, SES).

To assess the model fit, or how well the predictors in the logistic regression model jointly predict the criterion variable, we used the Wald chi-square test for the overall model. Significance (p < .05) indicated that the model fits well. We did not use the Hosmer–Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test, which is typically used to test the model fit in logistic regression, because this test is inappropriate for use with complex samples due to increased Type I error (Graubard, Korn, & Midhune, 1997; Hosmer, Hosmer, Cessie, & Lemeshow, 1997). We also used the Wald chi-square test for each beta coefficient (the equivalent of the t test for each coefficient in multiple linear regression) to evaluate the effect of each predictor on the criterion (E. S. Lee & Forthofer, 2006). The Nagelkerke $R^2$ is the effect size and is an indicator of the strength of association between the predictor variables and the criterion variable. We used the Bonferroni procedure to correct for Type I error, so we tested the two logistic regression models at the .01 level of significance. Table 1 contains the logistic regression coefficients (i.e., logged odds), ORs, Wald chi-square statistics, and Nagelkerke $R^2$s evaluating the effects of the predictor variables on math and English teacher referrals to the school counselor for disruptive behavior.

Interactions. Guided by the disproportionality literature, we examined the two-way interaction between students’ gender and race (Wallace et al., 2008). We also examined the two-way interaction between teachers’ gender and race.

Results

Logistic Regression Analyses

Table 1 presents the results of the logistic regression analyses examining potential predictors of English and math teacher referrals of students to school counselors for disruptive behavior. Overall, female students were far less likely to be referred for disruptive behavior than were male students. In English classes, students’ race was a predictor of teacher referrals to school counselors, but not in math classes. In both English and math classes, teacher PSE and previous at-risk behaviors and disciplinary infractions were predictors of teacher referrals. There was a significant two-way interaction between students’ race and gender in English classes, but not in math classes.

Who are English teachers more likely to refer to the counselor for disruptive behavior? Females had 65% lower odds ($OR = 0.35$) of being referred than did males. Inversely, males had almost 3 times higher odds ($OR = 1.0/0.35 = 2.86$) of being referred in English teacher classes than did females. In English classes, Black students had 71% greater odds ($OR = 1.71$) of being referred than did White students. Furthermore, there was a significant interaction between students’ race and gender in English classes. When considering both race and gender, we found that Black females had more than double the odds ($OR = 2.24$) and multiracial females had 3 times greater odds ($OR = 3.22$) of being referred for disruptive behavior in English classes. In English classes, there was no significant interaction between teachers’ race and gender.

Who are math teachers more likely to refer to the counselor for disruptive behavior? Females had 49% lower odds ($OR = 0.51$) of being referred than did males. Inversely, males had twice the odds ($OR = 1.0/0.51 = 1.96$) of being referred in math teacher classes. There was no significant interaction between students’ race and gender in math classes, and neither was there a significant interaction between teachers’ race and gender in math classes.

Are teachers referring students who are generally at risk for disciplinary action and suspension to the school coun-
In English classes, students’ previous at-risk behaviors and disciplinary infractions were positive predictors of teacher referrals to the school counselor for disruptive behavior. In English classes, the more frequently students reported getting in trouble (OR = 1.70) or receiving in-school suspension (OR = 1.55), the greater the odds they had of being referred to the school counselor for disruptive behavior. Similarly, in math classes, previous at-risk behaviors and disciplinary infractions increased students’ odds of being referred to the school counselor for disruptive behavior. The more frequently the students reported getting in trouble (OR = 1.45) or being late (OR = 1.22), the more likely they were to be referred for disruptive behavior.

**Do teachers’ PSE of students predict their referrals to the school counselor?** English teacher PSE of students had an inverse relationship to teacher referrals. Higher teacher expectations resulted in 31% (OR = 0.69) lower odds of English students being referred for disruptive behavior. Similarly, math teachers’ PSE had an inverse relationship to teacher referrals to the school counselor for disruptive behavior. As

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<th>Math Teacher Referrals (n = 4,981)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
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<td>0.43</td>
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<td>0.26</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Multiracial female</td>
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<td>-0.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Gender × Race</td>
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<td>-2.57*</td>
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Wald chi-square 363.18 479.68
Nagelkerke R² 0.32 0.30

Note. An alpha level of .01 is used to control for Type I error. Results with p < .05 are not interpreted. Reference categories are male and White for student variables, suburban for urbanicity, and female and White for teacher demographics. Academic achievement comprises reading achievement scores for students in English classes and math achievement scores for students in math classes. OR = odds ratio.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
math teacher expectations increased, the odds of them referring math students to the school counselor were reduced by 42% ($OR = 0.58$).

**Discussion**

We used a national sample of 10th graders from the ELS:2002 to examine the student, school, and teacher variables that are potential predictors of teacher referrals of students to the school counselor for disruptive behavior. Specifically, we examined which students English and math teachers were more likely to refer to the school counselor for disruptive behavior. We also wanted to determine whether previous at-risk behaviors and disciplinary infractions and teachers’ PSE for students predicted teacher referrals to the school counselor for disruptive behavior.

We found that students’ gender was a predictor of both English and math teacher referrals, whereas race was a predictor of only English teacher referrals. Black students in general and Black and multiracial females were more likely to receive disciplinary referrals to the school counselor by their English teachers. Our findings are corroborated by a body of research on teacher referrals in general that document that disciplinary referrals in schools are not gender and race neutral (Brooks et al., 2000; Gilliam, 2005; Gregory et al., 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Rausch & Skiba, 2004; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). Furthermore, our findings suggest that students who are referred disproportionately (e.g., males and students of color) to administrators for disruptive behavior are likely being referred in similar proportions to school counselors.

Students’ previous at-risk behaviors and disciplinary infractions increased the likelihood of their referral to school counselors for disruptive behavior by both math and English teachers. Therefore, students who exhibit behaviors that interfere with instruction (e.g., tardiness, getting in trouble, assignment to in-school suspension) are also being referred to the school counselor. These results suggest that teachers believe that contact with the school counselor should address troubling behaviors in some measurable way. Our findings raise questions about how effectively professional school counselors are at developing and implementing individual and systemic interventions that remediate inappropriate behavior, stop the repeat of inappropriate behavior, and promote objective teacher referrals of male and minority students for disruptive behavior. Consistent with findings in this study is Arcia’s (2007) research, which demonstrated suspensions in sixth grade predicted suspensions in the seventh grade, and Morrison et al.’s (2001) study, which found that students with a previous history of suspensions later received higher levels of suspensions for attitudinal infractions.

In this study, teacher expectations were negative predictors of both English and math teacher referrals to the school counselor; that is, teachers referred students for whom they had lower expectations at higher rates. These findings are supported by research that indicates that teachers’ expectations and biases are powerful predictors of student outcomes (McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Stevenson, 2008). Furthermore, our findings appear consistent with data from earlier work that showed teachers had more favorable perceptions of students who exhibited behaviors consistent with European middle-class norms (e.g., valuing of individualism, ambition, and future orientation; see McMahon, Paisley, & Molina, 2011) than those who ascribed to more Afrocentric cultural norms, such as communalism and verve (Tyler et al., 2006). Although our results suggest that teacher expectations affect the likelihood that they refer students, future research should examine whether students’ behavior is a mediator between teacher expectations and teacher referrals.

In sum, the results of this study suggest that, to some extent, English and math teachers may differ in whom they refer to the school counselor for disruptive behavior; that is, subject context may affect disciplinary referrals. Moreover, students’ race appeared to be a significant predictor of referrals in English teachers’ classrooms but not in math teachers’ classrooms. It is interesting that gender, students’ previous disciplinary infractions, and teachers’ expectations were consistent predictors of teacher referrals across both math and English classes. Our study does not address why students are being disruptive. However, it is clear that school counselors are a key part of the student referral process, and they will therefore need to carefully assess why students are disruptive in class so that they can provide individual and systemic interventions that meet students’ needs and systemic interventions (e.g., prosocial skills programming, professional development on classroom behavior management or culturally appropriate communication styles, partnering with family and community stakeholders), which remedy school issues. School counselors who look at student referrals as isolated cases without making note of the systemic implications will not recognize the gravity of disproportionality and its underlying causes and may not address student behaviors and teacher referrals for student behavior with appropriate systemic and focused interventions needed to counteract the pervasive problem of disproportionality.

**Limitations**

Despite the important implications of this research for school counselors and school policy makers, some important limitations must be noted. The first, and perhaps most significant, is that the study uses a secondary data set. Therefore, although the data source is extensive, we were restricted to the data collected and to the constructs as defined by NCES (Bryan, Day-Vines, Holcomb-McCoy, & Moore-Thomas, 2010). For example, the dependent variable asked if the teacher had spoken to the school counselor about the student’s disruptive
behavior in school. We used this variable as a measure of teacher referral to the school counselor for disruptive behavior. Although teachers typically refer students to the school counselor in formal (e.g., by referral form, at a meeting) and informal (e.g., by conversation in the hallway) ways, a limitation is that we cannot be sure that speaking to the counselor constituted a referral. However, other researchers interpret this variable as teacher referrals to the counselor (e.g., Adams et al., 2007). In addition, we were limited to data from 10th-grade students and, because information was not collected on disciplinary referrals in a later year, we could perform only cross-sectional analyses. It is possible that some variables may have been omitted from the data set that could serve as stronger predictors of teacher referrals to the school counselor (e.g., teachers’ expectations of student behavior or academic ability, students’ perceptions of teachers’ discriminatory treatment). Furthermore, none of the included variables specify the timing, frequency, quality, or other details of the teacher referrals to the professional school counselor, nor do the data specify the type of disruptive behavior. Although our findings are consistent with previous research, this important missing information may have provided further insight on the findings of this study and future research. Another caveat is that the results may more readily apply to students in suburban contexts given that 50% of the sample in the current study matriculated in suburban schools. Finally, our study was predictive in nature and is, therefore, correlational like all quantitative nonexperimental studies (Belli, 2009; Johnson, 2001). Indeed, the study uses only cross-sectional data and so makes no inferences about the causal effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable. Nevertheless, despite the limitations, this large nationally representative data set allowed us to examine a set of potential predictors of teacher referrals to school counselors for disruptive behavior that provides support for previous research on the topic and lays the groundwork for future primary source studies that further explore the dilemma of disproportionality in school counseling and schools (Bryan et al., 2010). Next, we discuss the role school counselors may play in implementing school-wide approaches suggested in the literature to address disproportionate patterns of disciplinary referrals in schools that are reflected in teacher referrals to school counselors.

Implications for School Practice and Policy

Findings from this study suggest that teachers’ referrals to school counselors reflect the same disproportionate trends in disciplinary referrals that exist in schools in general. The fact that students’ gender and race continue to predict whether students receive disciplinary referrals is a reflection on school systems that still struggle to remove barriers to equitable disciplinary practices for all students. These findings also seem to suggest that English and math teachers look to school counselors for support in handling students’ behavior. Although school counselors should not discipline students, they can play a major role in advocating for equitable and objective disciplinary practices and interventions because they work firsthand with the students who are the subjects of these referrals. Interventions must be intentional, focused, and powerful enough to facilitate healthy teacher relationships with Black and male students, remediate inappropriate behavior, halt repetitive inappropriate behavior, and promote objective teacher referrals of male and minority students for disruptive behavior, as well as of students who have had previous disciplinary infractions. In order for this to occur, school counselors will need to promote and advocate for systemic disciplinary approaches that specifically address the disproportionality dilemma facing male students and students of color. Some promising school-wide behavior approaches include school, family, and community partnerships (Boethel, 2003; Bryan, 2005; Warren et al., 2003); culturally relevant disciplinary strategies (Bireda, 2002; Day-Vines & Day-Hairson, 2005; Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008; Gregory & Mosely, 2004); and positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS; Bohanon et al., 2006; Fenning & Rose, 2007). Furthermore, school counselors must be open to using creative and innovative nontraditional approaches to help students develop prosocial skills and behavior (Brinson, Kottler, & Fisher, 2004).

Implement Culturally Relevant Disciplinary Practices and Interventions

Several researchers have concluded that after controlling for other variables, the disproportionate referral rate of students of color may be attributed to racial bias (Rausch & Skiba, 2004; Wallace et al., 2008). It may be that teachers lack skills in understanding how to work in culturally responsive and affirming ways when interacting with ethnic minority students who display disruptive behavior. Also, teachers may not be aware of and know how to handle the racial tension in teacher–Black student relationships (Stevenson, 2008). As school districts grapple with the problem of the overrepresentation and oversanction of some groups of students in discipline referrals (e.g., African American students), some of them have begun to search for and implement school-wide disciplinary policies and strategies that engage whole schools and school stakeholders in addressing the problem. Because it seems that school counselors see students that are disproportionately referred by teachers, school counselors should be included at the table in discussions about relevant discipline and behavioral policies and programs and on teams that oversee the implementation of disciplinary interventions. School counselors are in a position to help implement interventions as well as to provide feedback on whether the implementations are working and equitable.
In schools where zero-tolerance discipline policies still exist, counselors can be proactive in advocating to revisit these policies and in promoting multisystemic interventions, such as PBIS (Bohanon et al., 2006; Fenning & Rose, 2007); culturally relevant disciplinary practices and interventions (Bireda, 2002; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008; Gay, 2002; Gregory & Mosely, 2004); and school, family, and community partnerships (Boethel, 2003; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Warren et al., 2003). Although zero-tolerance policies were developed to keep students safe, they only serve to escalate referral, suspension, and expulsion rates, especially for male students and students of color (Gregory et al., 2010). School counselors can advocate for a discipline panel, similar to ones held on college and university campuses, that weighs disciplinary offenses and decides on proper punishment for nonviolent offenses without relying on exclusionary practices such as out-of-school suspensions. Panel members should include parents, teachers, school staff, and students in cases where students are developmentally able to participate. Given the positive correlations between lower grade point averages, office referrals, and out-of-school suspensions, school counselors must work in tandem with other school staff to develop more equitable discipline practices that prevent loss of school time.

The importance of culturally relevant disciplinary programs is exemplified by a program designed to promote prosocial behavior and decrease suspensions and discipline referrals among African American and Latino students in an urban high school (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008). Day-Vines and Terriquez (2008) described a strengths-based school discipline initiative aimed at reducing the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates of African American and Latino male high school students. Using a partnership program, a school task force composed of adult and youth stakeholders devised a series of interventions that included student-led efforts to improve discipline policies and procedures. Essentially, a group of students were selected and trained in public speaking as well as data collection, analysis, and dissemination to make a compelling argument. Once trained, they administered surveys to faculty and staff, conducted focus group sessions with their peers about student rights and responsibilities, and presented research findings during faculty in-service training sessions. The administration provided more intensive support for teachers with excessive referrals. The outcome of this initiative led to a more than 75% decrease in disciplinary infractions. Schools can institute similar programs to help stem the growing tide of disciplinary problems and help students develop prosocial behavioral skills.

The school-wide PBIS intervention model, a three-tier model that uses empirically based interventions, has also had some promising results in promoting prosocial behavior among students (Medley, Little, & Akin-Little, 2008). When using PBIS, a problem-solving team not only works together to identify environmental factors that support students’ negative behaviors but also collaborates to develop strategies and interventions that will decrease those behaviors (Colvin, Ka-meenui, & Sugai, 1993). The most positive feature of an effective school-wide system of PBIS is that it can create changes in attitudes and behavior in students and staff and bring about universal expectations of behavior for school staff (Medley et al., 2008). However, implementing PBIS successfully has proven to be challenging. For example, research suggests that getting teacher buy-in regarding implementing some of the PBIS strategies, such as teaching students behavioral expectations, has presented some challenges (Bohanon et al., 2006). School counselors could play a role in consulting with teachers to help them adhere to the interventions that work, such as teaching students behavioral expectations and helping them monitor their own expectations of or theories about students (Gregory & Mosely, 2004).

PBIS is based on the premise that school environments or climate have a significant impact on student learning and behavior. Environments that are characterized by teachers and other school personnel with low academic expectations and beliefs about the intellectual inadequacy of students of color can cause these students to have low self-concept and expectations of themselves (Moore & Owens, 2009). School counselors should consult with teachers on communicating high expectations for African American students. Although data suggest that PBIS has had some success in urban school settings, researchers underscore the need for collaborative teams and teachers to receive professional development in cultural competence (Bohanon et al., 2006; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Warren et al., 2003). Indeed, unless disciplinary interventions are undergirded with cultural competence on the part of teachers and collaborative teams that implement PBIS, teachers may still refer African Americans, males, and multiracial female students to school counselors and administrators in disproportionate numbers.

Establish Culturally Responsive Curricula and Cultural Competence

School counselors should advocate for more culturally responsive curricula and teaching in the classroom, because African American children learn best in environments that are both personal and relational (Gay, 2002). Culturally relevant pedagogy helps students see the “contradictions and inequities that existed in their local community and the larger world” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 382) and requires that teachers develop skills to understand students’ culture and their ways of experiencing the world (Milner, 2009). For example, our findings demonstrate that English teachers refer a disproportionate amount of African American students to school counselors for disruptive behavior. It could be that English classes may not be capturing the attention of African American students. Researchers of student engagement among African American
children advocate for using culturally responsive material to engage students in the learning process. For example, C. Lee (2007) used a pedagogical approach she termed cultural modeling, whereby she introduced students in an urban high school who were reading below grade level to canonical works of literature (e.g., Shakespeare) by scaffolding instruction. For example, she taught symbolic elements in Shakespeare by having students first identify the symbolism embedded in rap music; later poetry, novels, and film; and finally Shakespearean plays. Her ability to help students make connections in culturally appropriate ways between existing knowledge and new knowledge facilitated academic achievement.

In addition to applying culturally relevant pedagogy in the classrooms, teachers should also be able to affirm the identity of African American students (Moore & Owens, 2009). As teachers’ perceptions and biases may play a significant role in disciplinary referrals, school counselors should be proactive in providing professional development on cultural competence to teachers and other school staff and helping them examine the racial tension and biases that exist in teacher–Black student relationships (Stevenson, 2008). Professional development workshops should include providing an insight into the cultural manners, behaviors, and communication styles in African American communities and exhibited by African American children. Several experts have noted the importance of recognizing that, for many African American students, the culture of the home and the culture of the school remain unsynchronized (Bireda, 2002; Gay, 2002; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). That is, behaviors that are acceptable at home may result in disciplinary infractions in schools. If teachers understand the cultural norms shaping African American children’s behaviors and communication styles, then they may be less likely to refer African American students for subjective offenses such as disrespect, excessive noise, threats, and loitering. For example, African American students may have distinctive communicative styles that do not conform to the norms and expectations of school settings (Bireda, 2002; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Gay, 2002; Monroe, 2005). This communication style, which may be characterized by loud, intense, and confrontational speaking, could be regarded as rude and inappropriate in school settings, whereas it may have merit and use in other settings. This communication style has often led to increases in disciplinary referrals for African American males (Bireda, 2002; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Noguera, 2008). To illustrate further, Gay (2002) documented interactive communication styles characteristic of many African American students, such as call–response patterns in which the listener participates as the speaker talks. Teachers may construe children talking during instruction as rude, disrespectful, and insolent behavior that warrants reprimand. They may not appreciate this as an acceptable form of communication within the African American community. School counselors could work with teachers and other school personnel as they understand the cultural relevance and merit of this communication style and implement instructional and counseling-based programs and approaches that broaden students’ communication repertoire.

Develop School–Family–Community Partnerships

Building positive connections between students, their families, schools, and communities and caring teacher–student relationships are integral to helping students develop prosocial behaviors (Smith & Sandhu, 2004). Disciplinary policies and interventions must incorporate partnerships with parents and family members—especially of male students, students of color, and students who have had previous disciplinary infractions (Warren et al., 2003). School personnel too often view families, especially minority families, through a deficit lens, which puts them on the periphery of schools and relegates them to recipients of services (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Yet, it is recognized that parent support and partnerships are critical to programs that work with minority children (Boethel, 2003) and promote positive academic-related behaviors (Bryan, 2005; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). Disciplinary interventions must include parents and youth in deciding on and implementing programs to stem disciplinary problems (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008; Warren et al., 2003). Certainly, school counselors can play a role in promoting a strengths-based perspective among school staff and enabling families to be active in school programs that promote positive behavior (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Bryan and Henry (2008) found that placing African American elementary school students in strengths-based mentoring programs led to a decline in disciplinary referrals over one academic year.

School counselors should partner with community stakeholders in a variety of different ways in their efforts to address disproportionality and the negative effects of suspensions. For example, the church is a prime support in many African American communities. School counselors could work in tandem with the church and parents to develop church-based parenting or school success workshops that promote positive behavior in school as well as to provide resources for students who have been suspended from school. The church and school could collaborate on tutoring and mentoring programs for suspended students during the day to help them stay abreast of information missed while away from school, as well as a place to go to during suspensions. Schools may want to collaborate with faith-based, school-based, and community-based mentoring programs to promote prosocial and school success behaviors among males and African American youth. Counselors could also develop liaisons with community stakeholders to provide parenting workshops. Parent-
Implications for Future Research

The fact that teachers are referring some students to school counselors for disruptive behavior in disproportionate numbers is reflective of a wider systemic problem. As research in this area moves forward, it must examine the effectiveness of systemic and gap-reducing interventions to address the pervasive and ubiquitous problem of disproportionality (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). More specifically, given that teachers are referring students to school counselors for disruptive behavior, it would be important to examine what preservice training programs are doing to prepare school counselor trainees to work with students, parents, and teachers regarding disruptive behavior. Perhaps preservice training programs can be instrumental in providing school counselor trainees with the requisite skills to better address issues related to disproportionality. Preservice training programs can position prospective school counselors to recognize ethnic variation in communication patterns, implement instructional- and counseling-based programs and approaches that broaden students’ communication repertoire and promote prosocial behavior, and identity systemic strategies and interventions to address disproportionate referrals in schools (Gregory et al., 2010).

Finally, future research should also examine within-group differences among students. In fact, a growing number of researchers have questioned standards of practice that rely on Caucasian students as the reference group for empirical research (Miller & Sheu, 2008; Milner, 2009). Although between-group comparisons help to identify racial disparities, a consideration of ethnic variations in students’ behavior may help to reduce the focus on deficits associated with ethnic minority children. Moreover, given the fact that other researchers have attributed disproportionality in the dispensation of punishment to cultural miscommunication and racial tension in student–teacher relationships, more research that examines the precise nature of miscommunication and the dynamics of these relationships is warranted.

References


