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## **ALTERNATIVES TO SUSPENDING AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL MALES**

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## Alternatives to Suspending African American High School Males

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### Abstract

*The research site was one high school in the southern United States where African American males were suspended at greater rates than their counterparts. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the perspectives of high school administrators and teachers regarding alternatives to suspending African American males in one southern high school within a public school district. Guided by the social learning theory, the research question focused on the suspensions of these students. Data were collected through in-depth, semi structured, face-to-face interviews with a purposive sample of 6 high school teachers and 2 administrators, and coded and analyzed for emergent themes. The findings revealed that African American high school males might benefit from education programs such as character education programs to develop social, academic, and discipline skills. The findings of this study may be used for professional development for teachers and administrators regarding strategies to reduce suspensions of African American high school males, which might facilitate their graduation from high school and subsequent entry into higher education or the workforce.*

### Keywords:

*African American males, high school learning environment, suspensions of African American males, policy on discipline of African American males*

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### **Introduction**

African American males are suspended more than their counterparts (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010). Skiba, Eckes, and Brown (2010) reported bias is a factor regarding suspensions of African American males who receive unfair treatment and as a result respond negatively. High school administrators and teachers should make changes in discipline policies, practices, and procedures to improve school climate (Bowen, 2010; Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2009; Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Xitao, 2011; Jones & Gregory, 2011; Venable, 2009; Young, 2009).

### **Problem Statement**

African American high school males are suspended more frequently than their peers at the high school where the study was conducted. These students reported that the actions taken by teachers and administrators impacted their school and classroom behaviors. Faculty, support staff, and administrators reported that they have felt unsafe due to the seriousness and pervasiveness of discipline problems and concerns in the school. Faculty, support staff, administrators, parents, and students reported concerns with disruptive and distracting students' behaviors. These students have poor attendance and do not pass standardized test meaning they cannot graduate from high school. When these students are suspended, suspensions contribute to their truancy, which implies that these students have limited participation in extracurricular school activities and become academically disengaged.

### **Research Question**

The research question that guided the study was, What are the alternatives to suspending African American high school males?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this case study was based on the social learning theory of Bandura, which applies to people who behave in various ways based upon what they have experienced in life and in response to their learning environment. Bandura's theory was used to explain why (a) African American high school males who perceive uneven treatment regarding suspensions are likely to respond differently from students who perceive the opposite and (b) high school

administrators and teachers who have a certain attitude or predisposition about a group of students are likely to respond to that group of students differently and administer discipline unevenly.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

An assumption was that the participants, who were high school males teachers and administrators, were truthful and forthcoming in their responses to the interviews. A limitation was the small sample of participants. The scope of the study was to gather interview data from school administrators and teachers employed at one high school.

### **Literature Review**

According to Bear (2010), student discipline is about encouraging and motivating students to build principled character and teaching them self-control. Students need to be taught to control their behaviors via social and emotional learning (SEL) (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2010). SEL helps students make responsible decisions (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Durlak, Weissberg, Taylor, Dymnicki, & Schellinger, 2011) by teaching them self-control and how to behave appropriately. Appropriate behaviors are gained by modeling and discussing correct behaviors and inappropriate behaviors need to be addressed (Zirpoli, 2010). Suspensions of students with emotional/behavioral disorders have been problematic and controversial (Wagner & Antonis, 2010; Weber, 2010). African American students are receiving stricter suspensions (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010) for behaviors that interfere with teaching and learning (Harrell & Hollins, 2009).

According to American Federation of Teachers (2010), students should be given examples of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Teachers should be given training on students' behaviors (Streich, 2009) and how to encourage students to behave in classrooms (Hester, 2009). Encouragement and praise impact students' behavior because verbal praise reinforces good behavior (Kerr & Nelson, 2010) by promoting positive student-teacher relationships (Gable, Hester, Rock, & Hughes, 2009).

Teachers' and administrators' attitudes about discipline are indicators in predicting suspensions (Skiba, Trachok, Chung, Baker, & Hughes, 2012). African American males are suspended more than their

peers because of teachers' attitudes toward these students (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011).

School boards establish discipline procedures (Dupper, 2010). African-American males have experienced exclusionary discipline as a result of zero tolerance policies (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Graham & Prigmore, 2009; Gregory & Cornell, 2009) where zero-tolerance techniques have proven to have a negative impact upon student behavior and academic performance (Martinez, 2009).

School-wide positive behavior supports (PBS) have been implemented in school districts to improve students' behaviors (Sugai, 2009) where students receive interactions with education professionals regarding conflict resolution. Conscious Discipline is a program where the principles of classroom management, emotional intelligence, and character education are interwoven (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Hoffman, Hutchinson, & Reiss, 2009) based on the theory of emotional intelligence (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Gignac, 2010). Another program could be on cyber bullying to help students avoid harassment on the Internet from peers where students harass peers by text messaging, voice mails, emails, chat rooms, social networking sites, and instant messaging (Darden, 2009).

### **Population and Sample**

The population for the study was high school administrators and teachers who were employed for at least 3 years at the research site, which was one high school within a school district. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers and administrators from the research site. The sample consisted of those who agreed to participate by signing a consent form.

### **Data Collection**

Six high school teachers and two administrators agreed to participate by completing the informed consent form, giving a sample of eight participants from one high school. All interviews were conducted in a private conference room in the library at the high school. An interview protocol was used. Each semi structured interview lasted approximately 50 minutes and was audio taped. A research log was used to document all communications with the participants. A reflective journal was also used to record field notes throughout each semi

structured interview. Both the log and reflective journal assisted in cataloging the collected interview data. Aliases were assigned to each participant such as the alias *Participant 1*.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

Data from the interviews were organized and prepared for analysis by reviewing the participants' responses. During the data analysis, all interview transcripts were reviewed and compared to the audio tapes for accuracy, and coded for common themes.

Participants 1 to 6 were teachers. Participants 7 and 8 were school administrators.

Participant 1 stated emphasized that in-school suspensions could help African American high school male students. Participant 2 emphasized that these students could benefit from enrolling in the character education program. Participant 3 emphasized that these students could benefit from enrolling in after-school programs for high school credit recovery. Participant 4 stated that after-school programs could be beneficial to these students to recover credits, pass standardized tests, and improve their behavior. Participant 5 stated that the character-education program could benefit these students to earn high school credits because they are falling behind academically, and to improve their characters. Participant 6 stated that these students could benefit from the character-education program in order to stop fighting, which causes bodily harm, and to be involved in community educational programs. Participants 7 and 8 were administrators. Participant 7 stated that after-school programs could be useful to those who are frequently suspended such as the character education program for these students to earn or recover high school credits because the district's goal is for all students to graduate from high school. Participant 8 stated that programs such as character education focusing on behaviors regarding fights, either school or cyber bullying, drugs, truancy, and profanity could help these students. All participants suggested education programs to help African American high school males improve their academic skills by earning or recovering school credits and improving their perceptions about schooling.

### **Discussion**

Patterns were common among the eight participants' responses regarding suspensions of African American high school males. The theme was that the participants suggested after-school programs for African American high school males to improve their school discipline. The Participants reported that alternatives to suspending African American high school male students are (a) in-school suspensions and (b) enrollment in after-school programs such as the character education program to help students develop academic and discipline-related skills.

The findings revealed alternatives to suspending African American high school male students such as programs offered during or after-school hours to help students improve their discipline skills. The findings revealed the need to support American high school males through school programs to develop social, academic, and discipline skills. The character education program was suggested as a possible program to help African American males develop social, academic, and discipline skills. The findings revealed that strategies are needed to reduce the suspensions of African American high school males at the research site.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study are in agreement with the findings of Bear (2010) who reported that education stakeholders could encourage and motivate students to build character. African American high school males could benefit from the character education program (Durlak et al., 2011). The participants strive to (a) decrease suspensions and increase retention and graduate rates (Weber, 2010; Wagner & Antonis, 2010), (b) provide a learning environment that supports academic achievement (Rosas & West, 2009), (c) manage disruptive (Graham & Prigmore, 2009; Harrell & Hollins, 2009), (d) refer students to that could help African American males improve their perceptions about schooling (Lee et al., 2011; Morgan, 2010; Skiba et al., 2012). The findings revealed that school programs should be designed for African American male students to be motivated to recover credits (Daniel & Bondy, 2008; Hendricks, Sale, Evans, McKinley, & DeLozier-Carter, 2010; Martinez, 2009).

School district administrators could provide teachers with professional development (PD) opportunities on diversity and how to use alternatives to suspensions such as in-school suspensions to help

these students develop social, academic, and discipline skills. Ongoing PD for teachers and school administrators may help these students graduate from high school. The findings of this study can be used to support continued advocacy for school administrators and teachers to receive PD on student discipline, classroom management, and understanding student diversity. A district-wide PD program for teachers and school administrators on diversity might help the school district create a safe learning and teaching environment. These findings are positive contributions to the field of discipline in high schools to support districts in decisions related to the discipline of African American high school males.

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### Biodata



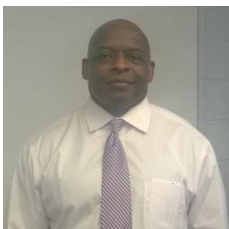
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Peter has program and project management experiences including the development and evaluation of graduate and undergraduate programs and courses for industry and institutions of education. Peter has conducted research for large school districts related to (a) the evaluation of the effectiveness of professional programs for teachers on student achievement as measured by standardized mandated testing, (b) the development of district-wide policies and procedures based on test scores in science, math, reading, and language arts literacy; and (c) schools and district performance of instructional practices and enhanced curricula. Peter has also conducted research for large graduate colleges and universities related to (a) interactions between online students and instructors, synchronous and asynchronous communication in the online learning environment, (b) the development of policies and procedures for online course delivery, and (c) enhancement of curricula.

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