Reframing the Problem: New Institutionalism and Exclusionary Discipline in Schools

Rebecca W. Cohen
University of Texas at Austin

ARTICLE

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Abstract

Exclusionary discipline refers to any disciplinary action that removes a student from the typical classroom setting (i.e., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion). Such practices have long been embedded within the culture of public school discipline in the United States as a means to maintain safety and order in schools. While decades of research highlight an association between exclusionary practices and negative student outcomes, there is little evidence to suggest that exclusionary discipline either meaningfully addresses student misbehavior or improves school safety. In this paper, I use new-institutionalism's concepts of *rationalized myths* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and *institutional isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) as a theoretical lenses through which to deconstruct the persistence of exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools.

Introduction

In the mid-1970's, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) published two important reports related to the impact of exclusionary discipline on students, *Children out of School in America* and *School Suspensions: Are They Helping Children?* (CDF, 1974, 1975, respectively). With unprecedented support and cooperation from the federal Office of Civil Rights, researchers surveyed administrators, teachers and parents from across the country with a central purpose to better understand: how suspensions were used; why they were used; and what they meant for students. These studies offered the first large scale, systematic analysis of the use of exclusion in schools, and despite suspension's historically non-controversial status as a disciplinary practice, CDF researchers concluded:

[Suspensions] harm the children involved and jeopardize their prospects for securing a decent education… They have become a crutch enabling school people to avoid the tougher issues of ineffective and inflexible school programs; poor communications with students, parents, and community; and a lack of understanding about and commitment to serving children from many different backgrounds and with many different needs in our public schools. (CDF, 1975, p. 10)

More specifically, CDF researchers (1975) found that suspension and other forms of exclusionary discipline, which remove students from the typical classroom setting, were associated with decreased student academic success and an increased risk of juvenile delinquency. Further, these studies brought to light the disproportionate use and impact of exclusionary discipline on poor, minority and special education students. No significant relationship was established, however, between exclusionary practices and overall school safety, although this was a common rationale for the use of these punitive disciplinary strategies.

Thirty-five years later, and with volumes of literature to support the CDF's initial findings, a strong-held reliance on exclusionary discipline in schools persists across the country (Harvard Civil rights Project, 2000; Justice Center, 2011; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). While there are certainly cases in which student removal from a classroom is appropriate to ensure safety and protect the learning environment of students, such a severe response should, theoretically, be reserved for the most serious of disciplinary infractions. Yet, national studies on school safety show that rates of suspension and expulsion far exceed rates of reported crime in schools, which have plummeted over the past 15 years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007, 2009). Paradoxically, as schools become increasingly safe places, and as current research reinforces the negative findings of the CDF (1974, 1975) studies, acceptance and utilization of exclusionary discipline practices in schools remain as strong as ever (American Psychological Assocation [APA], 2008; Carmichael, Whitten, & Voloudakis, 2005; Texas Appleseed, 2007, 2010; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000, Justice Center, 2011).

Further complicating the issue of exclusionary discipline in schools is the developing establishment of a statistically significant relationship between exclusionary school discipline and future involvement in the juvenile justice system (Carmichael et al., 2005; Justice Center, 2011). As researchers bring new evidence to the table to support and ground the politicized concept of the *school-to-prison pipeline*, which describes a student trajectory from the classroom to the justice system triggered by exclusionary discipline responses in schools (Archer, 2010; Texas Appleseed, 2007, 2010), it becomes even more troubling that such responses remain steadfastly embedded as a disciplinary standard in schools.

In an effort to investigate and deconstruct the persistence of exclusionary discipline practices in schools despite decades of evidence that suggest such practices neither meaningfully address student behavior nor improve school safety, I will use new-institutionalism as a lens through which to view the problem. This framework, which will be elaborated later in this paper, is an institutional approach that views the school as the unit of analysis and will, thus, allow for an examination of school-level disciplinary behaviors (why and how schools engage in disciplinary practices). Rather than focus on the impact of discipline on students, as much of the research in this area does, the present analysis will shed light on why schools continue to engage in exclusionary discipline practices through the exploration of institutional-level impediments to change.

In the sections that follow, I will first engage in a review of the literature on exclusionary discipline. After reviewing the literature, I will introduce new institutionalism as a theoretical framework and discuss its theoretical and historical underpinnings. Finally, I will apply certain components of new institutionalism to the context of school discipline in an attempt to reframe and gain insight on exclusionary practices and their long-standing hold on the way discipline is implemented in schools.

Review of Literature

Although the literature spans many decades, I will focus on studies, policies and disciplinary trends over the past 15 years. As such, much of the literature reviewed comes out of, or is in direct response to, a zero-tolerance policy context in schools. Zero tolerance, briefly, is a descriptor for a category of punitive policies born out of the 1994 Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA) that mandate predetermined consequences for certain behaviors without regard for context or mitigating circumstances (APA, 2008; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000).

In surveying the body of literature on exclusionary discipline practices in schools within a zero-tolerance policy context, the majority of research falls into one of three categories. The first category, which contains considerably more studies than the other two, includes research that looks at the disproportionate effects of exclusionary practices on students by race, socioeconomic status (SES) and special education status. A second set of studies deals with perceptions of discipline and safety from the point of view of different actors within the school, including students, teachers and administrators. The final and smallest subset of literature attempts to identify school-level characteristics that drive the utilization of exclusionary discipline practices in schools. The review of literature that follows will provide a synthesis and analysis of the research as it relates to each of the aforementioned categories.

Disproportionality

Suspension, expulsion and other exclusionary discipline practices are by nature reactionary. These practices do not address nor attempt to resolve root causes of misbehaviors in individual students. Rather, exclusionary practices serve to remove so-called *bad apples* for the benefit of the class, favoring the goals of classroom management and social control over the needs of individual students (Noguera, 2003). Overwhelmingly, the bad apples tend to be students who are minority (Black or Latino), male, low SES, and identified as in need of special education services (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Brownstein, 2009; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Kupchik & Ellis, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Stanley, Canham, & Cureton, 2006; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008).

Causes of disproportionality. Many researches have attempted to expose the underlying causes of the uncomfortable truth that schools punish minority, poor, low-achieving and special education students more frequently and more severely than others. Noguera (2003) attributed the disproportionality phenomenon to institutional priorities and understandings, citing schools' fixation on the maintenance of social order as the problem. The unfortunate implication is that the students who act out, or disrupt the social order, are likely those with unmet social, emotional or academic needs, and punitive responses for the sole sake of achieving order leave these needs unaddressed and these students perpetually underserved. In an institution that prioritizes order above all else, an action that jeopardizes order is punished without regard for cause of the behavior. Thus, the most vulnerable students are sanctioned at higher rates and left without the supports and services they need.

Other research identifies societal prejudices as the cause of the criminalization and over disciplining of poor, minority students. Monroe (2005) argued that societal biases coupled with class and cultural divides between students and teachers result in misinterpretations of student behaviors and misguided responses, particularly for students of color. A recent

multilevel study out of Johns Hopkins University offered statistical evidence for Monroe's claims, finding that controlling for student behavior and other classroom factors, Black students were still significantly more likely to receive disciplinary referrals than White students (Bradshaw, et al., 2010). In other words, Black students are more likely to be disciplined regardless of their behavior, which suggests that teacher perceptions and biases matter a great deal.

Casella (2003), on the other hand, framed the problem of disciplinary disproportionality in terms of concentrated poverty. Casella's research suggests that poor Latino and black students are at higher risk for exclusionary punishment due to structural factors associated with being poor, including exposure to high rates of violence at home and in the neighborhood, social isolation, and lack of access to transportation and job opportunities. Still other research is centered in a more deficit approach, pointing to things missing in students lives, such as male role models and self-discipline, as the major contributors to disciplinary problems in school (Moore & Ratchford, 2007).

Gaps in the research. On the whole, the practical relevance of proposed solutions in the literature is limited. Noguera (2003), for instance, proposed a *simple* shift in how schools conceptualize their role in society. Rather than operate as disciplinary institutions fixated on control and safety, he suggested that schools re-conceptualize their role as an extension of family. To achieve this end, Noguera (2003) called for the reprioritizing of character-building education in school curriculum. Another, more typical recommendation called for the implementation of culturally relevant curricula and mandated teacher training focused on cultural competence (Bradshaw, et al. 2010, Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al. 2002). Few studies, however, suggest specific intervention or prevention approaches to address the disciplinary gap.

A problem with proposed solutions across the literature is that they fail to take into account the bridge between theory and practice. While the recommendations are generally thoughtful and potentially useful, very few studies address the fiscal, political and philosophical feasibility of their recommendations. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why literature in the area of disciplinary disproportionality has been repeating itself for 35 years. While inciting change in the way schooling is done is no small feat, especially when it is on behalf of a particularly marginalized and criminalized population of students, omitting practical discussions around politically viable recommendations keeps both the research and reform effort treading water.

In addition to addressing practical, political issues, it is important that future research in the area of disproportionality broaden its scope. Research to date has been heavily focused on discipline practices as they relate to Black males. A noticeable gap exists in the research with respect to the impact of exclusionary discipline on females, generally, and of females of color, specifically. There is also a need to look more closely at the effects of discipline on Latino populations, taking into account variation within the population (e. g., 1st generation vs. 2nd or 3rd; documented vs. undocumented) (Gregory, et al., 2010).

Perceptions of Discipline and Safety

One of the major assumptions associated with exclusionary discipline practices is that getting rid of the bad apples will increases school safety and enhance the overall quality of the learning environment (APA, 2008; Noguera, 2003). Research shows, however, that excluding students from school has very little impact on school safety (CDF, 1975; NCES, 2007, 2009). Regardless of disciplinary practices, schools remain one of the safest environments for students (Ashford, Queen, Algozzine, & Mitchell, 2008), yet there is evidence to suggest that disciplinary practices do affect student, teacher and administrator perceptions of safety and fairness in schools.

Not surprisingly, Kupchick and Ellis (2008), found, using data from a nationally representative survey of students, that Black students perceive school rules to be less fair and dependable than do white students. This finding is consistent with the research on disproportionality discussed above, which suggests that Black students are disciplined at higher rates than White students (APA, 2008; CDF, 1975; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000). Similar perceptions of inconsistency and distrust in school discipline polices were expressed among a smaller sample of urban Midwestern high school students in McNeal and Dunbar's (2010) recently published study.

Further research is needed to fill the large gap in the research related to teacher and administrator perceptions of safety and the utilization of exclusionary discipline practices. It would be useful to see the extent to which teachers and administrators perceive exclusionary discipline actions as a measure of safety in their classrooms and schools. Additionally, it would be interesting to compare those perceptions to the actual rates of suspension and expulsion for minor vs. serious offenses.

Although the above findings regarding students' distrust in the consistency and fairness of school discipline practices may seem less-than-shocking given the research on the how exclusionary discipline practices are administered in schools, they are very important in thinking about future policy recommendations, reforms and interventions. Students' perceptions of school climate, particularly in secondary school are strongly associated with misbehavior (Wang, Selman, Dishion, & Stormshak, 2010). As such, when students feel distrusted and mistreated under punitive exclusionary policies and practices, they may become more likely to engage in misbehavior. Thus, the development of positive, supportive alternatives to punitive disciplinary responses in schools may prove more effective as behavioral interventions.

School Level Characteristics Driving Exclusionary Practices

As previously discussed, if a student is poor, Black and male he has a significantly higher chance of being suspended or expelled than other students (APA, 2008; CDF, 1975; Noguera, 2003; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000). While this information is alarming and unsettling, it is also limiting in terms of developing solutions. There is no way to change or reform student- level characteristics to decrease an individual's risk of experiencing exclusionary actions. If, however, focus is shifted to school-level characteristics, the opportunity for change becomes more viable. School level behaviors and characteristics are modifiable through shifts in school policy, personnel, and practices. With this in mind, a small number of researchers has begun to conduct empirical studies that look at the relationship between school-level characteristics and the utilization of exclusionary discipline practices (Arcia, 2007; Christle, Nelson, & Jolivette, 2004; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010).

In her 2007 study, Arcia compared suspension rates of 6[th-] and 7th-graders in K-8 settings to similar students in middle school settings in order to examine the effect of school setting on suspension,identifying a strong setting effect: 6[th-] and 7th-graders in middle school settings had substantially higher rates of suspension than those in K-8 settings, regardless of race, academic achievement and disciplinary history. Although a strong setting effect was identified, the study design prevented Arcia from identifying contributing characteristics within the middle school setting.

Unlike Arcia (2007), both Christle et al. (2004) and Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin (2010) made school characteristics the focus of their models. Christle et al. studied schools in Kentucky with particularly high and extremely low suspension rates and identified a number of school level characteristics associated with suspension, including low SES, high retention, low attendance and low achievement levels. Additionally, Christle et al. found that leadership, school ambience, and teacher expectations impact suspension rates in potentially positive ways.

Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin (2010) expanded on the Christle et al. (2004) model to look at the impact of school typology on exclusionary discipline practices. School typology refers to a combination of community and school factors including demographics, population density, community income levels, location, and school size (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010). The study found that, controlling for poverty, the interaction between school typology and race was significant. In other words, the relationship between typology and utilization of exclusionary discipline depended on race.

As mentioned above, one of the most promising aspects of school level studies is that school level characteristics lend themselves to policy solutions. The major limitation associated with this type of research, however, is that too few studies with sample sizes too small have been conducted. Christle et al. (2004) focused on only 20 Kentucky schools, and while Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin (2010) conducted a larger-scale study, they looked only at Ohio schools. In both cases, while there are valuable lessons to be learned, findings are not necessarily generalizable, thus leaving a need for more and larger-scale studies that further investigate the relationship between school-level characteristics and the utilization of exclusionary discipline practices.

Theoretical Framework

In the absence of studies that examine specific school-level characteristics associated with the utilization of exclusionary discipline practices, this paper will examine the broader institutional impetuses for school level disciplinary behaviors. In the sections that follow, I will give a general overview of the roots of institutionalism as a theoretical framework, focusing on how sociological institutionalism differs from other institutionalisms across the social sciences. I will then discuss my rationale for selecting sociological institutionalism over other forms and elaborate some of the distinctions between branches of institutionalism (new and old) within the field of sociology.

Background

A fundamental assumption underlying institutional thought is that institutions, as socially- constructed systems of organization, give rise to unique practices, norms, and values that are both, "contingent and contested" (Meyer & Rowan, 2006, p. 3). In other words, there are no pre-defined structures or ways of being that any given institutional environment must take on. Rather, there are countless forms under which institutional functioning may occur. In the case of school discipline, for example, a school may utilize strategies such as ticketing, exclusion, peer-based mediation, positive behavioral intervention, or any combination of these or other approaches. Given such variance within and across institutional environments, institutional theories provide helpful lenses through which to analyze why certain organizational forms are chosen over others and what the implications of such selections are for constancy and change within institutional systems (Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

Over the past century, institutional frameworks across the social sciences, from economics to political science, have evolved considerably to provide powerful insights into the nature and implications of organizational behaviors. For the purpose of this paper, I am most interested in sociological perspectives on institutional theory, which DiMaggio & Powell (1991), two of the pioneering researchers behind the new institutional movement, distinguish from other social science approaches in the following manner: "[W]hereas economists and political scientists offer functional explanations of the ways in which institutions represent efficient solutions to problems of governance, sociologists reject functional explanations and focus instead on the ways in which institutions complicate and constitute paths by which solutions are sought" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, p. 11).

Rationale

I am drawn to sociological institutional theories because functional, rational-actor explanations of organizational behaviors seem to fall short in the discussion of exclusionary discipline in schools. From a rational perspective, it is difficult to pinpoint whose interests are served through the utilization of exclusionary responses. As discussed above, it is not clearly in the interest of school safety to discipline students through exclusionary measures, as schools tend to remain exceptionally safe regardless of the level of use of exclusionary tactics (NCES, 2007; NCES, 2009). Nor does is it seem to be in the interest of students subjected to exclusionary discipline practices, which has become increasingly apparent through the body of literature that points to the many negative student outcomes associated with suspension, and expulsion including dropping out, retention and increased risk of involvement with the juvenile justice system (APA, 2008; Carmichael et al., 2005; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Justice Center, 2011; Noguera, 2003). Additionally, it is not necessarily in the interest of teachers whose goal it is to maintain an orderly classroom environment. Research suggests that punitive exclusionary responses are ineffective as deterrents to misbehavior for both the students who are excluded and those who remain in the classroom, and only increase the likelihood of future disciplinary infractions for those subjected to such punishments (APA, 2008; Carmichael et al., 2005).

Further, if efficiency in schools is about maximizing opportunities for the successful and meaningful acquisition of knowledge and skills for *all* students, then the academic disruption caused by exclusionary discipline along with the well documented disproportionality problem associated with such practices (APA, 2008; Carmichael et al., 2005; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Justice Center, 2011; Noguera, 2003), seem squarely at odds with any school-level aspiration toward educational efficiency. The exception, of course, is for the most serious offenses, cases in which students pose a clear and immediate threat to themselves or others in the classroom. Yet serious offenses and mandated disciplinary referrals, at least in Texas, comprise a very small portion (3%) of overall disciplinary removals (Justice Center, 2011). The overwhelming majority of cases in which suspension, expulsion, or other forms of alternative placements are utilized, stem from discretionary referrals for relatively minor misbehaviors and violations of locally established codes of conduct (Texas Appleseed, 2007, 2010; Justice Center, 2011).

Thus, with rational-actor explanations offering such little insight into the long held reliance on and prevalence of exclusionary discipline practices in schools, I turn to sociological perspectives on institutional theories to provide more meaningful ways of understanding school behaviors around discipline. Sociological institutional theory is often categorized into two eras or branches of thought: old institutionalism and new institutionalism. While there are important differences between the two, old and new institutionalism are not entirely distinct, and, in fact, share a number of common assumptions and goals. As DiMaggio and Powell (1991) explain,

Both the old and new approaches share a skepticism toward rational-actor models of organization, and each views institutionalization as a state-dependent process that makes organizations less instrumentally rational by limiting the options they can pursue. Both emphasize the relationship between organizations and their environments, and both promise to reveal aspects of reality that are inconsistent with organizations' formal accounts. Each approach stresses the role of culture in shaping organizational reality. (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, p. 12)

As such, both old and new institutionalism provide the potential for more nuanced ways of viewing schools' disciplinary behaviors and patterns in a context constrained by federal, state and local policy, and influenced by outside or partnered organizations such as local law enforcement, alternative education providers and juvenile justice systems. Additionally these lenses allow for the investigation of environmental factors, including varying levels of local testing pressures associated with accountability demands, as well as school level biases (i.e., a tendency to over-discipline certain subpopulations); assumptions (i.e., the legitimization of punitive, consequence based approaches vs. supportive, intervention based models); and capacities (i.e., teacher levels of experience and access to disciplinary support) related to discipline. Yet old and new institutional lenses are not entirely interchangeable, and there are several reasons why I have selected to use new institutionalism as a theoretical basis for the investigation of the utilization of exclusionary discipline in schools.

Whereas *old institutionalism*, according to DiMaggio and Powell (1991), views the organization itself (i.e., a school, hospital or court) as the locus of institutionalization, vested interests as the source of institutional inertia ,and organizational behaviors as manifestations of values and norms; *new institutionalism* conceptualizes the professional field or sector (i.e., education, medicine or law) as the locus of institutionalization, the pursuit of legitimacy as the source of organizational inertia, and, organizational behaviors as an expression of embedded routines and rituals (adapted from table 1.1, p. 13). Although Selznick (1996), a prominent proponent of old institutionalism, rightfully warns against the establishment of clear-cut divisions between institutional theories (i. e., old and new) that overstate discontinuities and create fissures in the field that preclude cooperation and progress, this study will focus primarily on the institutional ideas put forth by the scholars credited as the developers of new institutionalism: Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983). This choice is less about taking sides in the old vs. new debate than probing the ideas of institutional legitimacy and isomorphism, associated with new institutionalism, which hold particularly interesting potential for the exploration of school discipline practices.

New Institutionalism and Exclusionary Discipline

One of the underlying assumptions of new institutionalism is that "organizations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150). In other words, increasing the bottom line, whether in terms of profits or high school graduates, is not necessarily the driving force behind organizational decisions, work activities, and the institutionalization of rules and norms. Rather, from a new institutional perspective, a central goal of organizational activity is to acquire societal, professional and political approval, and ultimately, legitimacy, even if at the expense of organizational efficiency. Two key concepts that aim to explain organizational behaviors in light of this pursuit of legitimacy are Meyer and Rowan's (1977) *rationalized myths* and DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) *institutional isomorphism*. In the following section, these concepts will be further explored and applied to the exclusionary school discipline context.

Rationalized Myths

At a basic level Meyer and Rowan (1977) describe rationalized myths as the structural manifestation of "widespread understandings of social reality" (p. 343). These understandings may take the form of organizational rituals, rules, and beliefs, and, in practice, often function as uncontested truths. Rationalized myths, however, are rarely supported by empirical evidence or systematic, objective evaluation. Rather, these institutionalized understandings are shaped and reinforced by social factors, including public opinion, political agendas, the pursuit of prestige and the law (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Two defining properties of rationalized myths are a) the characterization of "social purposes as technical ones," and the establishment of rules with which to pursue these pseudo-technical goals (p. 343); and b) a likelihood to be "taken for granted as legitimate apart from evaluations of their impact on work outcomes" (p. 344).

Exclusionary discipline as rationalized myth. Both defining properties of rationalized myths (the characterization of social purposes as technical goals, and legitimacy apart from evaluation) are locatable in the context of exclusionary discipline in schools. They are particularly prominent in the organizational behaviors and beliefs associated with the emergence and widespread implementation of zero-tolerance policies. Zero tolerance, which supports the rigid enforcement of exclusionary consequences for a predetermined set of offenses, first emerged in the educational policy arena during the mid-1990's. The punitive practices associated with zero- tolerance policies, specifically, swift disciplinary removals for major and minor infractions alike, have become institutionalized as organizational norms in many states, districts, and schools across the country. Yet, as is typical of rationalized myths, the purported benefits of this disciplinary approach are not substantiated by evidence of improved school safety or student outcomes.

Social purposes as technical goals. Zero-tolerance policies demonstrate Meyer and Rowan's (1977) first defining property of rationalized myths (the characterization of social purposes as technical goals) in the way they gained traction as a viable policy solution for school discipline across the U.S. In the case of zero tolerance, the social purpose framed as a technical problem was the management of a seemingly threatening upsurge in crime and violence on school campuses. The confluence of the publication of several high-profile reports predicting a violent crime wave led by *juvenile superpredators* (DiIulio, 1995; Fox, 1996 and a string of well-publicized school shootings (Richland High School, TN, in 1995; Frontier Middle School, WA, in 1996; Columbine High School, CO, 1999), created a socially, politically, and, eventually, legally endorsed problem of out-of-control students and unsafe schools. This problem, however, was not supported by or reflected in the juvenile crime and school safety data from that era; between 1994 and 2002 the rate of violent teen crime, both on and off campus, plummeted to a 30-year low (Butts, 2003; NCES, 2007, 2009).

Despite the decreasing rates of juvenile crime, the disturbing images of violent school shootings that saturated news media outlets served to substantiate the myth of the juvenile superpredator in the public and political consciousness, and ultimately allowed state and local education agencies to frame school violence as a real and imminent threat to the educational process and safety of all students. It was this *characterization of a social purpose as a technical one* that legitimated the perceived need for states to leverage the 1994 Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA) as a means to bring more punitive disciplinary policies into schools.

The GFSA borrowed a *tough-on-crime* philosophy from the criminal justice system and mandated that all states receiving federal education funds expel, for a minimum of one year, any student found in possession of a weapon on school grounds. Although the GFSA (1994) required only state-level zero-tolerance policies for possession of a weapon at school, states and local districts took great liberty in interpreting and expanding federal guidelines to include a much more extensive list of offenses, both major and minor, that would trigger strong and swift exclusionary discipline tactics. Thus, from a new institutional perspective, it could be argued that zero-tolerance policies extended across states and local districts with a great deal of initial support based, at least in part, on the following rationalized myth: students, especially adolescent, low-SES males (DiIulio, 1995), are becoming an increasingly volatile population, and any sign of deviant behavior poses a threat and requires tough, immediate, exclusionary consequences.

Legitimacy apart from evaluation. The philosophical shift that accompanied the implementation of zero-tolerance policies (from exclusionary discipline as an ultimate consequence for the most serious offenses to exclusionary discipline as a precautionary measure used to deter non-offenders and prevent future infractions) is associated with decreased academic success, increased risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system, and, as discussed above, disproportionately affects male, minority, and those identified as special education students (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Brownstein, 2009; CDF, 1975; Gregory et al., 2010; Harvard Civil rights Project, 2000; Kupchik & Ellis, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002; Stanley et al.,2006; Wallace et al., 2008). Despite national- and state-level trends that reveal the ongoing over-disciplining of the aforementioned subpopulations, these punitive exclusionary policies remain steadfast in schools across the country. In other words, zero- tolerance policies and the assumptions associated with them demonstrate Meyer and Rowan's (1977) second property of rationalized myths, *legitimacy apart from evaluation*.

Unlike with academic indicators, schools are not ranked, rated, sanctioned or supported based upon disciplinary practices. In the absence of formal review and evaluation mechanisms, districts and individual campuses have the opportunity to develop their own processes of organizational evaluation, reflection and reform. In Texas, some districts and campuses do better than others at minimizing disciplinary disproportionality and keeping overall removals low, in some cases opting for more supportive approaches to discipline altogether, but there are not enough schools engaging in meaningful evaluation and reform to shift overall state trends (Texas Appleseed, 2010; Justice Center, 2011). As Meyer and Rowan (1977) explain, "inspection and evaluation can uncover events and deviations that undermine legitimacy. So institutionalized organizations minimize and ceremonialize inspection and evaluation" (p. 359). Perhaps as a means of maintaining organizational legitimacy and perpetuating the rationalized myths associated with exclusionary policies, districts and campuses minimize or entirely disconnect the negative implications of exclusionary discipline from day-to-day practice.

Isomorphism

Reframing exclusionary discipline as a rationalized myth begins to shed light on why these practices have endured over time and continue to evade meaningful organizational reflection and reform efforts. It does not, however, explain how exclusionary policies and practices spread across the educational field, shaping the disciplinary behaviors of schools across the nation. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) offer a concept that explores the ways in which certain beliefs and

practices span organizational boundaries to manipulate and define approaches for an entire field: They call this tendency toward the homogenization of organizational behaviors *institutional isomorphism.* In their influential paper, *The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields*, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) offer three different catalysts for institutional isomorphism: coercive, mimetic and normative. In this section I will briefly describe each of the three isomorphic forces and how they relate to the spread of exclusionary discipline practices in schools.

Coercive. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), "coercive isomorphism results from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent" (p. 150). Whether this dependence is based upon financial, political or professional needs, an organization's decision to conform is often connected to its pursuit of legitimacy. In certain cases, coercive isomorphic change may occur as a direct result of legislative mandate. In the context of school discipline, for example, the GFSA (1994) may be viewed as a coercive isomorphic force in that it called for a specific procedure (expulsion for a year) in response to a particular offense (possession of a weapon on campus), and schools were required to comply if they received any federal education funds. This political measure thus initiated the convergence of school disciplinary responses across the entire field.

Mimetic. Mimetic isomorphism refers to the process of modeling after, or imitating, outside organizations when problems from within present particular uncertainty. As DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explain: "when organizational technologies are poorly understood, when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organizations may model themselves on other organizations" (p. 151). It could be argued that mimetic isomorphic processes are, in part, responsible for the adoption of the belief system that underlies the widespread zero tolerance approach to school discipline.

As mentioned above, under zero-tolerance frameworks, students may be subjected to exclusionary discipline for any number of violations of a district-developed code of conduct; from bringing a weapon to school to using vulgar language in class (Texas Appleseed, 2007, 2010). The tough-on-crime approach to school discipline, which has become the signature of zero tolerance, was not generated from within the education sector. Rather, zero tolerance policies' punitive methods were borrowed from the criminal justice system.

In the criminal justice context, the tough-on crime-approach to law enforcement comes from Kelling's (1982) broken window theory, which assumes that small crime, if untended, begets more serious crime, which ultimately results in the deterioration of neighborhoods and communities. In a context ripe with public fear and political pressure surrounding the 1990s string of violent school shootings and the emerging myth of the juvenile superpredator (DiIulio, 1995), schools turned to the criminal justice systems for ideas on how to manage school discipline. Mimetic processes, in turn, informed a philosophical shift in school discipline that favored harsh, punitive consequences and criminalized minor student misbehaviors.

Normative. Normative isomorphic pressures are associated with the impact of professionalization on the spread of organizational behaviors across a field. Most professions provide systems of socialization for their members through which professional norms are developed and dispersed. Such systems may include formal educational training (i.e., law school, medical school, teacher-training programs) and professional associations (i.e. American Bar Association, American Medical Association, United Federation of Teachers). In the case of school discipline, teacher-training programs, especially alternative-certification programs in which training is severely condensed, are notoriously deficient in providing alternative theories in school discipline and behavior management. In the absence of strong professional support in colleges of education and alternative-certification programs, educators are more likely to experience professional socialization on the job, where punitive and heavily exclusionary discipline strategies are widely supported.

Conclusion

For the past three and-a-half decades, research has replicated and validated the results of the CDF's original (1975) report on exclusionary discipline. Throughout the years, studies have continued to highlight the harmful affects of exclusionary discipline practices on student opportunities and academic outcomes, as well as emphasize the extent to which these practices are disproportionately utilized on minority and special education students. Given the substantial body of research on the issue, it seems puzzling that these policies and practices persist in schools across the country. In this paper, I introduce and apply a new institutional theoretical framework to the problem of exclusionary discipline in an effort to gain new insight on why and how these practices emerged and remain steadfast in schools today.

As prominent new institutionalists, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) contend, "fundamental change occurs under conditions in which the social arrangements that buttressed institutional regimes suddenly appear problematic" (p. 11). A new institutional lens sheds light on the problematic arrangements that buttress the institutionalized practice of exclusionary discipline in schools. These problematic arrangements, as discussed in the analysis above, include (a) the criminal justice source of mimetic isomorphism for zero tolerance, which assumes students, the very individuals schools were built to serve, pose a serious threat to the educational process; (b) the institutionally enabled absence of organizational self-reflection, which allows for problems such as disciplinary disproportionality to go unchallenged; and, (c) a lack of coordinated, professional socialization around issues of school discipline, which keeps educators underprepared for and unaware of less harmful disciplinary alternatives.

As both political and academic interest in school discipline expands, there is a need for empirical studies that delve deeper into the identification of the above mentioned and other institutional enablers of exclusionary discipline. New institutional frameworks hold great potential for this type of research, and ultimately, for the exposure of deep cracks in structurally unsound buttresses that continue to hold up exclusionary discipline in schools.

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