

# Use of the Monarch Room as an Alternative to Suspension in Addressing School Discipline Issues Among Court-Involved Youth

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## Abstract

Suspension is commonly used in schools, yet these practices can adversely affect students' education well-being and do not improve student behavior. This study assesses the use of the Monarch Room (MR) intervention, a trauma-informed alternative to school discipline suspension policies, among 620 court-involved girls placed in residential care and enrolled in an urban-located public charter school. Teachers readily utilized the intervention as a first response to dealing with problematic behavior, and as a result, MR use significantly decreased reliance on suspension practices. Multiple stays in residential treatment and race were significant predictors of MR use.

## Keywords

school discipline, alternatives to suspension/expulsions, education well-being, court-involved youth

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## Introduction

Out-of-school suspension (OSS), a commonly recognized method of exclusionary school discipline, is generally recognized as the removal of a student from his or her daily academic routine for a temporary period (Christle, Nelson, & Jolivette, 2004). This may result in the student being excluded from school grounds or being placed in a designated campus area such as a classroom or school office. Both the federal and state departments of education are charged with creating the framework for policies regarding in-school suspension (ISS) and OSS. Findings from the State of Michigan and other states have illustrated that the use of OSS policies can result in time away from the school environment for nearly any inappropriate behavior (Michigan State Board of Education, 2014), and that “zero tolerance” OSS policies are applied liberally and most often with minority students (Milner & Lomotey, 2014; Richart, Brooks, & Soler, 2003). However, findings from the American Psychological Association’s Zero Tolerance Task Force in 2008 demonstrate little data to support any presumption of the effectiveness of OSS for any reason (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006).

As recently as 2006, more than 3.25 million students nationwide were suspended annually across the United States—with more than 100,000 of these occurring in Michigan alone (Planty et al., 2009). These national data translate to 7% of the school population missing at least one school day a year due to suspension—a figure that has doubled since the 1970s (Wald & Losen, 2003). Furthermore, a national study illustrated the use of suspension in students at the preschool level, with as many as 7,500 preschool students being suspended between 2011 and 2012, and 2,500 of those experiencing multiple suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014a). Such disciplinary practices can have an overwhelming impact on the educational well-being of students, and even more so for court-involved students (Burley, 2010; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004).

This article will explore this topic from the perspective of court-involved youth, primarily from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds, who have been placed in a residential treatment center located in a large, urban, metropolitan area in a Midwestern city of the United States. The following literature will highlight school suspension practices as they currently relate to students of color, female students, and court-involved youth, as well as the academic and psychosocial functioning of these students. This will be followed by a review of current trauma-informed school discipline and preliminary findings from an intervention study designed to address the lack of evidence-based, trauma-informed school discipline practices.

## Literature Review

### *Suspension and Race/Gender*

Several studies have confirmed that there is racial disproportionality in the use of school suspension (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Mendez, Knopf, & Ferron, 2002; Rausch & Skiba, 2004), where African American students are often suspended for more minor violations such as disrespect and appearing threatening (Verdugo, 2002). Similarly, Fenning and Rose (2007) further deduced that students living in poverty and in the ranks of special education were more likely to be recipients of punitive discipline than White, middle-class students. These conditions contribute to the negative educational trend affecting racial/ethnic minority students across the country: the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon is defined by the criminalization of these students, as well as the aforementioned zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline policies that systematically push students of color and disabled students out of the classroom (Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2013). This leaves them vulnerable to a significantly greater likelihood of juvenile justice involvement (Lawrence & Hesse, 2010), as students who were suspended or expelled from school are almost 3 times as likely to encounter the juvenile justice system in the subsequent year (Fabelo et al., 2011).

Gender disproportionality is also a well-documented issue with school suspension, as male students receive more school suspensions than female students overall (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014b). However, emerging data from a 2011-2012 study illustrate why female students among racial/ethnic minority population may need to become a group of greater interest in relation to school discipline. African American girls, in particular, received school suspensions at a rate of 12%, higher than girls from any other race and 6 times higher than the rate of suspension among White girls (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014b). Also, when compared with African American males, larger suspension disproportionality exists between African American and White female students, than African American and White male students. This suggests that the unequal use of suspension in racial/ethnic minority students may actually have a greater impact on female students than males among youth of color. Yet, this trend goes widely unnoticed, and therefore commonly untreated (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Furthermore, there is ample research to support the proposition that the school environment and culture, the perceptions and training of school staff, and educational biases are attributes of the glaring disparity in suspension statistics (Christle et al., 2004; Gordon, Della

Piana, & Keleher, 2000; Munn et al., 2001). It is not unexpected to learn that some research finds that minority students perceive discriminatory treatment by staff as a matter of *quid pro quo* (Fenning & Bonahan, 2006).

### *Suspension and Court-Involved Students*

There is also evidence that court-involved students, such as those in foster care and the juvenile justice system, disproportionately experience school suspensions (Burley, 2010; Courtney et al., 2004; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010; Zima et al., 2000). Also, these students are generally assigned to special education services more often than their peers (Macomber, 2009; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004). One study found that students with disabilities make up only 12% of the student population but represent 20% of total OSS (Sundius & Farneth, 2008). This puts them at even higher risk of being suspended.

From a child welfare perspective, school suspension also affects foster parent recruitment and placement stability. Foster parents may choose to have a child removed from their home rather than risk losing employment due to the need to take off work to accommodate the child's school suspension. Students in foster care are put at a further academic disadvantage by this placement instability. A study of more than 600 foster care alumni found an average of 1.4 home placement changes per year. They also found that 65% of foster alumni experienced at least seven school changes from primary school throughout secondary school (Pecora et al., 2005).

One of the main provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (FCSA) was to implement mandatory education-specific case planning for youth in foster care, as well as funding for school transition costs. This is to promote youth educational stability and well-being by ensuring that youth regularly attend school, avoid unnecessary school mobility, and are transitioned with ease when school changes are unavoidable. Despite these measures, traditional suspension practices and "zero tolerance" policies may continue to complicate court-involved students' well-being.

### *Academic Impact of Suspension*

Richart et al. (2003) have noted that the interruption of students' education, caused by exclusionary discipline, is counterproductive, in that students lose valuable continuity in mastering the curriculum. Students who are suspended multiple times experience significant periods of absenteeism, exacerbating academic deficiencies and further alienating them from school because of

feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness (Casella, 2003). Imposing discipline measures that remove a student from the classroom and school reduces their opportunity to learn, negatively affects academic achievement and gains in the learning process (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003; Christle et al., 2004; Gordon et al., 2000; Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002; Hattie, 2002). These absences may add up to months, putting students at such an academic disadvantage that they may drop out of school because they are academically disengaged and feel hopeless (Gordon et al., 2000). OSS can also be linked to increased high-school drop-out rates (Arcia, 2006; Christle et al., 2004).

Studies have found that suspension is not effective at deterring poor student behavior (Fenning & Bohanon, 2006; Losen & Skiba, 2011). Instead, OSS is often a reaction to underlying symptoms of a variety of concerns and does not get to the causes of the inappropriate student behavior, which may be caused by trauma or by being placed in out-of-home care (Verdugo, 2002). Therefore, those who display the greatest need for academic assistance find themselves instead excluded from school. Still, schools may be incentivized to continue with such practices, as the reality of state testing being tied to federal dollars may benefit schools that remove students who are incapable of meeting academic performance benchmarks (Sbarra & Pianta, 2001). The implication is that using OSS will result in challenged students removing *themselves* from the educational system.

### *Psychosocial Impact of Suspension*

Cameron and Sheppard (2006) reported that conventional school disciplinary policies and practices not only fail to provide supportive academic environments but, conversely, have also been found to destructively affect a student's psychosocial functioning. It has been linked with the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and aggressive behavior inside and outside of school (Cameron, 2006). Cameron and Sheppard (2006) further proposed that oppressive school discipline policies have led to suppressed negative emotions, stigmatization and negative self-image, social rejection, and a loss of interest in both academics and relationships. Also, Sekayi (2001) utilized one-on-one interviews and surveys of 37 students as a basis for his final declaration that suspension causes a child to feel ostracized and indignant.

OSS can also lead to other mental and physical health safety problems, such as drug addiction, depression, home-life stresses, and even suicide ideation (Sundius & Farneth, 2008). The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2006) has stated that exclusionary school tactics

can result in shame, alienation, rejection, and an inability to sustain adult bonds. School suspension can also negatively affect student behavior and development of interpersonal and peer relationships (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006). Furthermore, a report developed by the U.S. Department of Education (2014) described the existence of a negative relationship between the number of OSS and later involvement in a variety of negative outcomes, including criminal acts that result in court interventions up to incarceration.

### *Trauma-Informed School Discipline*

One study of school culture found that years of teacher experience and/or level of collaborative leadership has a negative correlation with the number of OSSs received by students (Ohlson, 2009). These findings were attributed to the premise that when there is a sense of collaboration and mutual respect between the administrators and educators, there will be a greater willingness to address behavioral concerns before they reach the severity of requiring a suspension. Moreover, administrators who are accessible are naturally more involved in the school's lifeblood, and more likely to be cognizant and proactive to behavioral issues. Finally, the greater the perceptions of shared leadership, the more likely that a student's behavior is a "team" responsibility with collaboratively developed responses that ultimately benefit the youth.

Literature on trauma-informed teaching and the needs of traumatized students encourages such collaboration (Cole et al., 2005; Wolpov, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009) and mutual respect (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Specifically, school disciplinary policies and procedures should be consistent, clearly communicated to staff and students alike, and should strive to keep students engaged in safe and supportive classrooms. Furthermore, discipline policies and practices should appropriately address student behavior, but should do so with awareness of and sensitivity to childhood trauma that may be affecting such behavior (Cole et al., 2005; Wolpov et al., 2009). Finally, these policies should be supported by empirical evidence and evaluated for efficacy (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010). Unfortunately, research has not yet provided this support, as there are no evidence-based, trauma-informed alternative models to OSS discipline policies that currently exist.

### *Monarch Room (MR) Intervention*

The MR, the trauma-informed school discipline intervention of interest in this study, is informed by literature that states that student suspensions can be

counterproductive (Greenwood, 2001; Griffin, 2011). It was designed using theoretical models informed by the trauma-informed teaching literature (Cole et al., 2005; Wolpov et al., 2009) and sensory-integration theory (Roley, Bissel, & Clark, 2009), as an alternative to traditional school exclusionary discipline policies in efforts to increase the amount of time students are in the classroom and learning. When students experience escalated negative emotions or behavior in the classroom, and are unable to refocus, they may self-refer themselves or be referred by school staff to the MR. This intervention seeks to manage distractions that may inhibit classroom learning but is not viewed by staff and students as a punishment, but rather as a support. The MR is available throughout the school day and is managed by staff trained in counseling, trauma, and sensory-integration interventions to provide positive nurturing support to students while attending school. Once in the MR, various intervention strategies, including problem solving, talk therapy, and sensory-integration activities, are employed to assist students in de-escalating and regulating their emotions, so that they may return to the classroom. Certified occupational therapists also inform MR intervention strategies, providing training to teachers and MR staff on sensory-integration theory (Dorman et al., 2009), sensory tools, and related methods of helping students to self-soothe and self-regulate their behaviors.

## **Current Study**

### *Theoretical Framework*

The current study utilizes sensory-integration theory (Dorman et al., 2009) as a framework for exploring associations between the MR intervention and the academic well-being of court-involved youth. Occupational engagement and the use of sensory techniques in a safe and supportive environment may help students gain a heightened awareness of the connections between their sensory states (e.g., sight, sound), cognitions, emotions, and subsequent behavior. This may assist traumatized students with building positive coping skills, navigating potentially triggering environments, developing stronger interpersonal skills, and improving their overall psychosocial functioning, so that they can perform successfully in the classroom (Roley et al., 2009).

## **Method**

We examine secondary data to quantitatively measure the impact of the MR on the disciplinary patterns of a group of high-school girls enrolled in an alternative, “second chance” public charter school co-located on the same

campus as a large, child welfare, residential-based placement agency for abused, neglected, and/or adjudicated girls in a large, urban, Midwestern city in the United States. This study directly addresses the absence of evidence-based, trauma-informed models of alternatives to exclusionary discipline available in the literature. Our primary research questions are as follows:

**Research Question 1:** If given an alternative to traditional school discipline policies, will teachers utilize it?

**Research Question 2:** Does frequent school mobility (multiple entries in and out of the school) predict MR use?

**Research Question 3:** Do racial disparities exist in MR use?

**Research Question 4:** Did the MR intervention reduce the number of suspensions given over the observation period?

**Research Question 5:** Does number of school absences predict the experience of school suspension?

### *Sample Description*

All 620 participants in the study were enrolled in the public charter school between September 2011 and June 2014. This school works exclusively with female, court-involved students, who generally have a history of abuse and neglect, and were subsequently placed in residential treatment. Approximately 90% of the on-campus residents have a mental health diagnosis, and more than half receive accommodations under a special education/504 plan. The school strives to treat, heal, and educate its students by following a school discipline system that incorporates the students' treatment goals and strategies. Its emphasis is on reducing student disciplinary issues by providing an effective social-emotional learning environment, teaching self-regulation and social skills, and helping them control their emotions, make more responsible choices, and get along with others. The vast majority of students served (86%) were current residents, while some (14%) were young women who have returned to community living but continue to attend the on-campus school.

The young people enrolled in the school over the observation period ranged in age from 14 to 18 years, and were enrolled in ninth through 12th grades. Seventy percent of the participants in the study were African American, followed by White (24%) and Hispanic (3%). The racial makeup of this population is also consistent with national prevalence rates obtained for the disproportionate amount of court-involved youth of color living in residential placement treatment facilities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Administration on



Children, Youth and Families Children's Bureau, 2014). As the school operates under a single-gender classroom philosophy, all of the students who participated were female. Approximately 44% of participants were court-involved due to juvenile delinquency, and the other 56% were placed as a result of abuse and neglect petitions. Fifty-seven percent of the girls in the study were experiencing their first stay in the residential treatment center. However, 43% of the girls experienced multiple stays (range = 1-5). The average time per stay was 133 days. Over the observation period, the school experienced a steady decline in enrollment. This is not surprising as there has been a decline in the number of young people placed in residential treatment settings across the state and nation. Those placed in residential treatment settings during the latter part of the study have been identified by the child welfare authority to have higher needs than students who were placed earlier in the observation period. A pattern was also observed of an increase in number of absences in the student body over time. This is likely because child welfare caseworkers were pulling these students out of school to address mental health and other needs identified in the students' child welfare case plans. For additional participant and school demographic information, see Tables 2 and 3.

### *Intervention Description*

The trauma-informed MR intervention provides students with brief, de-escalation support to assist students who are experiencing emotional distress or disruptive behavior in the classroom. The specific intervention strategies used in the MR include problem solving, talk therapy, and sensory-motor activities (i.e., fidget toys, weighted blankets, bean bags, and a stationary bike). The intervention is provided by a trauma-trained paraprofessional. This process of assisting the student generally occurs within a short period of time, approximately 10 min. Upon returning to the classroom, the student can demonstrate perseverance and emotional control, thus helping to create a safe and orderly environment where all students are free to learn. MR staff document each visit, the reason or trigger associated with the visit, and all intervention strategies used to help the student to de-escalate. Data from staff documentation of student visits are collected and reviewed weekly with the school administration.

### *Procedures and Data Collection*

The data analyzed for this study included administrative data collected and maintained by Clara B. Ford (CBF) Academy via PowerSchool® and the daily MR tracking logs (which were collected using Excel). These records

were matched using student name and school ID number, and then de-identified before being analyzed by independent researchers. Of the 738 total students eligible for participation in the study, 99 students were eliminated due to middle-school status, as middle schoolers did not have direct access to the MR. An additional 19 cases were omitted due to incomplete data that left the student administrative files unable to be matched with the Monarch log files, leaving a final sample of 620 student records available for analysis. This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board at Wayne State University.

*Independent variables.* The major independent variable of interest in regard to measuring suspensions was use of MR intervention. It was measured using a continuous variable (number of MR events). Other independent variables included race (African American, White, and Hispanic), number of school absences, and residential placement history (assessed by both number of stays in residential treatment and length of time of each stay).

The variables of interest in determining MR use included race, grade level, and number of stays (entries) into residential treatment.

*Dependent variables.* There were two outcome measures of interest: history of suspensions and history of MR use. Both these variables were captured using dichotomized, dependent variables. Suspension data were only available for Years 2 and 3 of the observation period, MR use was captured over all 3 years of program implementation.

## Data Analysis

The matched data were entered into SPSS statistical software, version 19, and data were explored using frequencies, descriptive statistics, and bivariate analysis. Significant variables derived from these bivariate tests were controlled for in the final binary logistic regression models in addition to the major variables of interest. Two-tailed tests were used in the analysis, and the alpha level was set at .05. Effect sizes were calculated for findings that drew statistically significant results.

## Results

Only 39% of the student body was exposed to the MR intervention (see Table 1). Of those students who used the intervention, the mean use was 10.36 visits over the observation period (or five visits per academic year). Race

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of the Sample by Intervention Use (N = 620).

	Monarch room users	Non-users	$\chi^2$ (df)	p<	r
	n (%)	n (%)			
Total	244 (39)	376 (61)			
Race			8.81 (3)	.01	.059
White	46 (19)	103 (27)			
African American	191 (78)	255 (68)			
Hispanic	7 (3)	16 (4)			
No. of stays			111.40 (2)	.001	.422
1	74 (30)	263 (70)			
2	94 (39)	90 (24)			
3+	76 (31)	23 (6)			
No. of suspensions					
0	217 (89)	376 (100)	43.50 (3)	.001	.241
1	18 (7)	0 (0)			
2	7 (3)	0 (0)			
3	2 (1)	0 (0)			
No. of absences	M (SD)	Median	Range		
Year 1 (n = 395)	8.62 (11.42)	4	0-70		
Year 2 (n = 296)	11.01 (14.48)	6	0-83		
Year 3 (n = 245)	12.82 (15.09)	10	0-98		

appears to be associated with MR use. White students make up 24% of the student population but only 20% of MR users. African American students make up 70% of the student body but account for 77% of all MR users. Hispanic students are proportionately represented in the intervention according to their percentage of the total student body. Students who experience multiple stays in the residential treatment center are also significantly more likely to use the MR than those who only experience one stay in residential treatment.

Finally, all of the students who experienced suspensions were exposed to the MR intervention prior to being suspended; meaning that attempts were made by the school to address behavioral concerns before resorting to putting students out of school.

Of the 620 students enrolled at CBF over the observation period, 347 (48%) students were enrolled over multiple years. Ninth graders seem to be the highest users of the MR intervention (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Grade Level of Enrollees Over Observation Period (Years).

	Monarch room users				Non-users			
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i> (%)	Non-users	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i> (%)
9	36	50	35	121 (54)	61	23	20	104 (40)
10	24	69	73	166 (48)	109	46	23	178 (52)
11	12	31	42	85 (42)	68	30	17	115 (58)
12	1	22	27	50 (42)	52	10	8	70 (58)

Note. As students were enrolled over multiple years, the total number of students per grade captured in the table is higher than the unduplicated student count (620). Year 1:  $\chi^2 = 30.06$  (4),  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .27$ . Year 2:  $\chi^2 = 7.66$  (4),  $p < .11$ . Year 3:  $\chi^2 = 35.02$  (4),  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .34$ .

**Table 3.** Demographic Characteristics of the Sample by History of Suspensions ( $N = 620$ ).

	History of out-of-school suspensions				
	Yes	No	$\chi^2$ (df)	$p <$	$R$
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)			
Total	27 (4)	593 (96)			
Race			2.46 (1)	.117	.06
African American	23 (5)	423 (95)			
Other	4 (2)	170 (98)			
No. of stays			17.79 (1)	.000	.17
1	4 (1)	333 (99)			
2 or more	23 (8)	260 (92)			
No. of absences			4.05 (1)	.044	.08
Below 10	19 (4)	503 (96)			
10 or more	8 (9)	90 (91)			

Table 3 depicts the characteristics of students who experienced suspensions and during the observation period. African American youth were more likely to be suspended when compared with their non-African American peers. Students who experienced multiple stays in residential treatment were also significantly more likely to experience OSS than youth who experienced a single stay. Students who experienced an average of 10 or more absences over the reporting period were more likely to have a history of suspensions than students who experienced an average of less than 10 absences.

**Table 4.** Predictors of Monarch Room Use (N = 620).

Predictor	$\beta$ (SE)	Lower	95% confidence interval	
			Estimated odds ratio	Upper
Constant	-1.66 (0.19)***			
Race	0.47 (0.19)*	1.10	1.60	2.34
No. of stays	1.34 (0.18)***	2.69	3.82	5.42
No. of absences	1.18 (0.26)***	1.95	3.25	5.43

Note. (Cox & Snell) .17, (Nagelkerke) .23, Model  $\chi^2(3) = 134.16$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

It is important to note that of the 27 total suspensions experienced over the course of the observation period, 26 occurred in Year 2. Suspension data could not be obtained for Year 1 of the observation period, as it was not consistently or reliably tracked by the school. Many of the students who experienced suspensions in Year 2 were repeat offenders. Nine students in the sample experienced two or more suspensions during Year 2, accounting for a total of 20 suspensions or 74% of all suspensions given that year. The number of suspensions significantly decreased in Year 3 of the observation period, with only one suspension given, and this student who experienced a suspension in that year was not given more than one.

The binary regression model for MR use was tested for model fit using the Hosmer and Lemeshow test, which was not significant, suggesting good fit,  $\chi^2(3) = 1.73, p < .63$ . The referent categories for each predictor are equal to 0 (non-African American, one stay, and less than 10 absences). Race was a significant predictor of MR use. African American students were 1.6 times more likely to use the MR than non-African American students. Reentry into residential treatment (as measured by number of stays) also significantly predicted MR use. The odds of MR use were 3.8 times more for students who had experienced multiple stays in the residential treatment center than for students who only experienced a single stay. Number of absences was also a predictor of MR use. The odds of MR use were 3.3 times more for students who experienced an average of 10 or more absences over the observation period (see Table 4).

The binary regression model for history of suspensions was tested using the Hosmer and Lemeshow test,  $\chi^2(6) = .01, p < 1.0$ , which was nonsignificant, suggesting goodness-of-fit. The referent categories for each predictor are equal to 0 (non-African American, one stay, and less than 10 absences). Total number of visits to the MR over the observation period was also added as a covariate into the model. Reentry into residential treatment (as measured by

**Table 5.** Predictors of Suspension ( $N = 620$ ).

Predictor	$\beta$ (SE)	Lower	95% confidence interval	
			Estimated odds ratio	Upper
Constant	-4.97 (0.61)***			
Race	0.50 (0.52)	0.60	1.66	4.60
No. of stays	1.41 (0.51)**	1.52	4.10	11.05
No. of absences	-0.36 (0.49)	0.27	0.70	1.80
No. of monarch room events	0.08 (0.01)***	1.06	1.09	1.12

Note. (Cox & Snell) .10, (Nagelkerke) .31, Model  $\chi^2(4) = 76.15$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

number of stays) significantly predicted a history of suspensions. The odds of having a history of suspensions are 4.1 times more for students who had experienced multiple stays in the residential treatment center than for students who only experienced a single stay. The average number of MR events a student experienced over the observation period also significantly predicted having a history of suspensions. As the number of visits to the MR increases, the odds of having a history of suspensions also increased. Race and number of absences were not significant predictors of suspensions (see Table 5).

## Discussion

This study supports the concept that when teachers are given alternatives to suspension to address school discipline issues, they will use them. The data demonstrate that there was an association between the implementation of the MR intervention and a reduction in the use of suspension as a method of school discipline over the observation period. Factors that have predicted use of suspension in the literature were also predictors of MR use (i.e., in this case, frequent school mobility, defined by repeated entries in and out of the school, predicted MR use, as well as race and number of school absences). Grade-level factors have not been clearly described in the literature with regard to suspension use. The current study observed that ninth graders were more likely to be referred to the MR than students enrolled in 10th, 11th, or 12th grades. This is a promising finding, as the literature purports that success in ninth grade is a predictor of high-school graduation (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2013). Reducing the length of time ninth graders are out of school (i.e., in the MR room and not suspended) maximizes their ability to receive a high-school

diploma. The finding that students who experience higher numbers of school absences also experienced higher levels of MR use and higher numbers of suspensions is not surprising. Students with higher numbers of school absences are more likely to academically disengage in school and lose hope (Gordon et al., 2000). This study supports the conclusions of researchers that purport that alternative interventions to suspension can be successfully employed to help address disruptive behavior in the classroom (American Psychological Association, 2006). Harsh punitive responses to addressing problematic behavior do more harm than good. However, trauma-informed discipline that encourages self-regulation through occupational engagement can provide supportive connections for students to assist them in modifying their own behavior. The idea that forcing seemingly problematic students out of school so that students who do not exhibit externalizing behaviors can learn is a myth, as trauma-informed alternatives such as the MR can be successfully employed and do not result in chaotic school environments.

The association of school mobility (re: in this case, the experience of multiple stays in the residential treatment center adjacent to the school which resulted in enrollment, disenrollment, and reenrollment in the observed school) and MR use is also consistent with findings in the literature, in that students with more school changes are more likely to be referred for behavioral interventions. This supports our knowledge of the negative educational outcomes associated with multiple school placements (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2004). This issue is especially salient for court-involved students, who commonly encounter school instability (Pecora et al., 2005), which may mean that behavioral interventions, such as the MR, are even more important for addressing their needs in school.

Data on racial disparities in MR use are also well aligned with the current literature on racially disproportionate use of school discipline. It is unclear as to what specific factors led to the higher likelihood of African American student use of the MR. This may be due to teacher perception of student behavior or student characteristics that result in higher rates of self-referral among this population. However, the benefit of this discipline strategy is that students step away only briefly from the classroom, rather than being removed for several days and missing out on valuable instructional time. This means that while students of color may be more likely to utilize the MR, they are not also put at the disadvantage of losing necessary academic instruction due to emotional or behavioral issues.

An additional promising finding, however, was that race was not a significant predictor of suspension. Thus, alternatives to suspension, like the MR, can serve to address race disparities that plague current suspension statistics. Given previous research that describes the correlation between

the suspension of ninth graders and the twofold increase in dropping out (Balfanz et al., 2013), it is critical that alternatives to suspension are employed with this population in particular. In the current study, ninth graders were overrepresented in referrals made to the MR as the first defense in responding to problematic behavior, a practice that is consistent with the evidence that recommends that suspension be used as the last rather than first line of defense.

### *Implications for Policy and Practice*

As suspension data are underreported, it seems appropriate for states and school districts to be required to publicly report disaggregated data annually, including number of students suspended, number of incidents, reason for OSS, and days of lost instruction. These data should be reported by grade level, race/ethnicity, gender, and disability status. Suspension rates should be included as factors used by schools and districts to measure the performance of secondary schools and as early warning systems to target interventions and supports.

These findings also support the idea that public investments should be made in promising interventions supported by research, such as the MR, to address and improve current systemic approaches to school discipline. As noted above, there is a critical need to find alternative methods to removal from the classroom, especially removal from the school, when responding to challenging behaviors and emotions, particularly among youth from court-involved backgrounds. Many teachers do not understand these youth's prior and current life experiences and how those of a traumatic nature may manifest in their daily lives. It can be particularly problematic in the school context where pressures are high to be on task and engaged for many hours at a time, students are in close and constant proximity to a large number of peers and have to negotiate many personality differences, and the student–teacher personality match may be imbalanced. Coupling these three conditions with potential academic struggles and the situation is ripe for excessive frustration, misunderstanding/misinterpretation, and use of traditional methods for dealing with behavioral problems, such as suspension. In addition, suspension, which is often intended to function as a punishment for undesired behavior, may actually function as reinforcement for those youth who have a powerful urge to escape and avoid being pressed to demonstrate academic skill in class. Related to this, it would be wise if resources were allocated to provide teachers with trauma-informed training in addressing classroom management when working with youth who have come from challenging life circumstances.



## *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

One limitation of this study is the lack of information collected regarding special education status as it is a known variable to be associated with increased suspensions. Further study may also be warranted to determine the factors associated with the racial differences observed in this study. In addition, findings may be different among crossover, court-involved student populations. Finally, the addition of a comparison group would strengthen the rigor and evidence associated with the impact of the MR. Future research would benefit from exploring the impact of these variables in relation to alternative school discipline practices.

## **Conclusion**

In response to perceived and actual discipline problems in our public schools, state governments have responded with what have been coined as “zero tolerance” policies, which in effect allow administrators to exclude children from school for a sweeping range of behaviors, of which many manifest as a result of trauma exposure. Many researchers consider use of OSS as a means to address problematic behavior to be a case of the pendulum swinging too far in the other direction. The rate of OSSs has skyrocketed over the past 15 years, and research has determined that this has resulted in a variety of negative consequences.

School exclusion (and higher levels of school absences) alienates students and exacerbates inappropriate behavior in school, which may result in increased high-school drop-out and juvenile delinquency rates. Finally, perhaps the greatest consequence of OSS is how it is biased negatively toward at-risk student populations, including African Americans, special education, and court-involved students. It is the desire of these authors that the information contained herein be used to keep the doors of our schools open to greater numbers of court-involved students as we vanquish the use of OSS from the disciplinary repertoire and embrace alternative models, like the MR, that are trauma informed and designed to maximize rather than reduce seat time in schools.

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