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Exclusionary Discipline in Early Childhood

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Abstract: The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine how the perceptions and experiences of teachers relate to the suspension and expulsion of preschoolers in Catholic schools. Results indicated that teachers have a range of experiences with suspension, from children being removed from the classroom temporarily to out-of-school suspensions lasting up to a week. Most participants also had experienced expelling a student because of behavior. Patterns that emerged from the data included a frequency of extreme behavior from some children, the application of various strategies in response to challenging behavior, the use of exclusionary discipline when other strategies did not work, and a resistance to change practices without additional supports. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Early childhood, discipline, social emotional

The work to create kind, caring and inclusive early childhood classrooms as part of a larger Catholic school community is now more essential than ever. Early childhood teachers in Catholic school settings have a unique responsibility of stewardship as they are the first to welcome families to a school and parish community. Data from 2022-2023 shows increased early childhood enrollment in Catholic schools, and as noted "This growth is a positive sign of the long-term viability of Catholic schools should they retain these students in kindergarten and beyond" (NCEA, 2023, p. 2) This period in a child's development is especially critical for supporting social-emotional competence. Many parents choose Catholic preschools explicitly for the purpose of meeting the spiritual, social, and academic needs of their children. There is

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growing interest and support for the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools as evidenced by resources such as the Program for Inclusive Education (PIE), offered through the Alliance for Catholic Education at the University of Notre Dame, and the 2020 special issue of the *Journal of Catholic Education* devoted to the topic of inclusion in Catholic Schools. In fact, in the introduction to the special issue Bonfiglio et al. (2020) noted that students with disabilities are underserved in Catholic education, for while approximately 1% of all students with disabilities (approximately 67,000 students) attend private schools, 40% identify as Catholic (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Several articles in this special issue highlight recommended practices to support the inclusion of children with disabilities. In addition to the small number of students with disabilities who attend Catholic schools, there are other students without diagnoses who struggle academically and/or behaviorally and also need to be meaningfully and successfully included.

However, despite the crucial role of early childhood programs in Catholic schools, there is a paucity of research dedicated to this sector of Catholic education. In one study designed to examine the landscape of early childhood programs in Catholic schools, researchers noted a high percentage of Catholic elementary schools that had preschool programs (Frabutt & Waldron, 2013). Participants in this study highlighted the notion that preschool programs offer an opportunity to connect with families and promote family engagement within the broader church community. However, these researchers found wide variance across programs in terms of program components, such as curriculum, and in teachers' backgrounds and qualifications. The researchers did not investigate student demographics, retention rates, program quality, or discipline policies and procedures, and subsequently, many things remain unknown about the Catholic early childhood landscape.

Despite how varied individual programs may be from one another, Catholic early childhood programs face many of the same challenges as the broader early childhood field, such as the use of suspension and expulsion as forms of disciplinary approaches. Students may be removed from classrooms on both a temporary and permanent basis. On a temporary basis, students may be removed from their classroom and sent to another location, such as a hallway or office, or even home if a caregiver can come for the child (often referred to as suspension). On the more extreme, permanent basis, students may be asked to leave the school entirely through expulsion, defined as the "permanent termination of a preschool child's participation in a preschool program for disciplinary purposes" (Office for Civil Rights, 2018, p. 72).

In his 2005 seminal study, Gilliam reported that pre-kindergarten students (ages 3–5) were expelled at a rate 3.2% higher than students in K-12th grade. Troubling rates of suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings have perpetuated. In fact, Zeng et al. (2019) shared data gathered from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health revealing approximately 4,842

suspensions and 479 expulsions weekly for children aged 3–5. Additionally of concern, rampant disparities exist in the use of these practices based on child demographics, with exclusionary discipline procedures disproportionately impacting boys, Black students, students with disabilities, and students who have experienced trauma (Children's Equity Project, 2022; Edge et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018; Zeng et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2020).

Data on the rates of suspension and expulsion in Catholic early childhood programs are not publicly available. However, there are troubling indications that these rates may be high, given that Gilliam (2005) found that children in private programs were four times more likely to be expelled than children enrolled in public programs. This may be because privately funded programs, such as Catholic early childhood programs, do not have to follow the same directives as their publicly funded counterparts. For example, while 19 states have enacted policies to prevent suspension and expulsion in public programs (Children's Equity Project, 2020), these policies are not mandated for Catholic schools. Eight of these 19 states also include directives aimed at childcare programs that may be privately funded (Children's Equity Project, 2020). In the home state for this study, state-funded pre-kindergarten programs are prohibited from expelling students and are required to participate in preventative efforts such as supporting children's social emotional competence and work to prevent challenging behavior through mental health consultation and family engagement (Governor's Office of Early Childhood, 2020).

Several major professional organizations concerned with early childhood have condemned the use of suspension and expulsion with very young children, including the Children's Equity Project (2020), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; 2016), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/U.S. Department of Education (2014). These disciplinary procedures can have dire implications for young children and their families including missed educational opportunities, an adverse impact on social and emotional development, negative perceptions of school which may result in a higher likelihood of dropping out, a diminished sense of trust, and lasting trauma (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Palmer, 2020; Stegelin, 2018). As disciplinary practices, suspension and expulsion will not automatically result in decreased frequencies of challenging behavior or support the learning of new behaviors or skills by children (Palmer, 2020; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). This issue is a pressing social justice and equity concern, and it is imperative that all settings serving young children work towards eliminating the use of these exclusionary practices (Meek & Gilliam, 2016).

Method

In a larger previous study, the authors investigated the perceptions and experiences of teachers in privately funded early childhood programs, including childcare and faith-based programs, related to the use of suspension and expulsion (O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2021). The current study

included some participants from that sample, as well as additional teachers who were recruited solely for the current investigation, which focused only on Catholic preschool settings. Three research questions guided this exploratory study: (1) What experiences do educators in Catholic early childhood programs describe related to challenging behavior? (2) What experiences do educators in Catholic early childhood programs have related to suspension and expulsion? and (3) What do Catholic early educators perceive as factors that influence the decision to suspend or expel students in their settings?

Participants

Eleven early childhood teachers in Catholic schools participated in this study, eight of which participated in the previous study. All participants identified as Caucasian and female. Participant age varied, with one teacher identifying as being between 18–24 years old, five stating that they were between 25–34, three identifying as being between 35–44, one stating that she was between 45–54 and one identifying as being 55+. Years of teaching experience also varied, from three years to 19 years (M=10); seven teachers had ten or more years of experience. Teachers had diverse educational backgrounds, with one teacher holding an associate degree, seven with bachelor's degrees, and three with master's degrees. See Table 1 for participant demographic information; pseudonyms are used for participants to protect confidentiality. Seven participants were state certified in early childhood education (64%). Teachers reported an average class size of 19 students (range=10–25). All participants reported having students who were either receiving special

Table 1

Participant and Focus Child Demographics

Participant	Age	Years in Teaching	Years at Current Setting	Education Level	Student Gender	Student Race	Student was Expelled
Amy	35-44	11	6	M. Ed	M	Black	
Carrie	18-24	3	3	BS	M	Multi-Racial	
Diane	25-34	3	3	CDA	M	Multi-Racial	Yes
Julia	25-34	8	6	M. Ed	M	NR	Yes
Kate	25-34	10	9	BS	M	White	Yes
Emily	25-34	4	3	BS	M	Black	
Ava	45-54	17	1	BS	F	Black	Yes
Kay	25-34	10	6	BS	M	Black	Yes
Joan	35-44	16	6	BS	F	Hispanic	
Sara	35-44	10	2	BS	M	White	
Donna	55+	19	3	BS	M	NR	

Note *NR- student race not reported by teacher

education services or who they believed were in need of a referral for services in their classes. Seven teachers had 1–2 children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or who were eligible for special education services, while across the 11 participants, an additional 21 children were described as needing a referral for services.

After receiving approval from the university Institutional Review Board, a recruitment flyer was distributed to principals at Catholic schools that included an early childhood program in three dioceses in one state the Midwest. The flyer was also shared on social media. Principals shared information about the study to interested teachers, who then contacted the first author to verify eligibility. Participants were briefed on the definitions used in this study of suspension and expulsion and were asked to confirm that they (a) served as the lead teacher, (b) taught children aged 3–5 years old, and (c) had a child suspended or expelled from their classroom within the last two years. After confirming eligibility, the first author scheduled individual interviews with the participants. In appreciation for their time, participants received a $30 gift card following completion of their interview. Additionally, they were provided with a one-page list of resources related to addressing challenging behavior.

Procedures

Data collection occurred during the fall of 2019 and early winter of 2020. All teachers were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire prior to their interview to gauge their experiences with suspension and expulsion and collect descriptive information about their backgrounds and classrooms. This questionnaire included 12 questions that addressed participant age, gender, ethnicity, length of time in their current setting, total number of years teaching, educational background, class size, number of students with an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) or who were eligible for services, number of students who were not currently eligible for services but that participants believed needed a referral for special education services, number of students who had been temporarily removed from the classroom (i.e., suspension), and number of students who had been expelled. Teachers then participated in a semi-structured interview, which took place either in person or over the phone, depending on participant preference.

The interview protocol was developed by the authors, and after pilot testing it was revised slightly for clarity and flow. During the interviews, teachers were first asked to describe their classroom and their students. They were then asked about the challenging behaviors they observed in their classrooms and how they responded when these behaviors occurred. Next, teachers were asked to describe in detail their experiences with suspension and expulsion. Finally, they were questioned about ideal supports that would make it more feasible to avoid suspension and expulsion. Interviews lasted an average of 41 minutes (range=19–68 minutes). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed; all transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by the first author.

Data Analysis

A collaborative thematic and constant comparative approach was used to analyze the data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The authors independently reviewed and coded each transcript. They then met to discuss their coding and reach consensus. As the authors discussed coding for each transcript, an understanding of the data emerged and evolved. Codes reflected categories anchored by the research questions, such as experiences with suspension and expulsion, supports used, supports needed to respond to challenging behavior, and barriers to eliminating suspension and expulsion as disciplinary procedures. Codes within each category were reviewed and discussed by the authors to ensure that data was represented accurately, and captured the breadth and depth of participant experiences (Saldaña, 2016).

Reflexive Statement

The authors reflected on their positionality throughout the study and met regularly to discuss the potential impact of researcher bias (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Both authors are practicing Catholics and attended Catholic schools for much of their education. The first author felt uniquely positioned to examine the issue of suspension and expulsion in Catholic schools because she had experience from two perspectives, both as a parent and as a practitioner. She taught preschool in a Catholic school for many years and also struggled with the use of exclusionary discipline with her own child at her home parish school. The second author has been involved in early childhood special education as a practitioner, teacher educator, researcher, and professional development provider for 40 years. Both authors advocate for the use of inclusive practices across early childhood settings. They recognize that suspension and expulsion cause harm to children and families and disavow the use of these practices. However, they also recognize that some teachers may feel inadequately prepared to promote social emotional competence (i.e., turn taking, emotional literacy, problem solving, anger management), and to prevent and address challenging behavior when it arises. The authors believe that to address the use of exclusionary discipline practices, a deeper understanding of classroom experiences that lead to the use of suspension and expulsion is necessary. While conducting the interviews, the first author relayed her empathy for teachers and disclosed some of her own experiences with suspension and expulsion to establish trust and rapport with participants. It should be noted that teachers who participated in this study did so with assurances that the interviews were a safe space to share their experiences, with the intention to highlight the concerns of some Catholic educators.

Findings

During interviews, after initial introductions, teachers were briefed on the definition of suspension as referring to children being temporarily removed from the classroom because of

behavior, such as being sent to the office or being sent home for the day, and the definition of expulsion as children being dismissed from the program because of behavior. Participants discussed their experiences over the past two years, including the suspension of 37 children across the 11 teachers. While all teachers reported suspending at least one child (M=3.4; range=1–7 children); nine of these 37 children who were mentioned were later expelled. Six teachers reported that suspensions did not result in an expulsion. When describing occurrences of suspension and expulsion, teachers were prompted to focus on one child as an exemplar. Data revealed that of the children teachers described, four were Black, three were White, one was multi-racial, and one was Hispanic; two teachers did not disclose the ethnicity of their target children, nor were they explicitly asked to disclose it. Most of the focal children were male (82%). Six of the focal children either were confirmed to have a disability or were suspected of having a disability, in need of referral for screening.

Patterns that emerged from the data included seeing frequent and extreme behavior from some children, trying various strategies in response to challenging behavior, using exclusionary discipline when other strategies did not work, and resistance to changing practices without additional supports. In the following sections each of these findings is described in detail.

Experiences with Challenging Behavior

To help understand contextual factors surrounding suspension and expulsion, teachers were asked to describe their classrooms, including both what they enjoyed about their students and what they found challenging. All teachers reported that they appreciated working with young students, as Emily shared, "I just enjoy that they love being at school . . . they come into the classroom with a big smile or just ready to start their day, especially at this age . . . they love everything you do with them." Donna noted, ". . . you work with them in a group, and you get to know their personalities so well and I always tell people the best job in the world is being a mom and the second-best job is being a preschool teacher because they kind of become your children for a year." However, teachers also reported feeling frustrated because of children engaging in frequent challenging behavior. Most teachers described seeing challenging behavior daily, with some noting that these types of behaviors occurred constantly throughout the school day. Behaviors that teachers found particularly challenging included not following directions, not listening, talking back, being defiant and disrespectful, not sitting still, and hurting other children. For example, Emily stated, "He is on purpose trying to act out. He knows you're not supposed to do it, but he's doing it just to get a rise out of you, I think . . . And I think that's something that I struggle with."

Responding to Challenging Behavior

Teachers reported trying various strategies in response to children's challenging behaviors. They mentioned having supports in place for the whole class, such as teaching "feeling words" (i.e., frustrated, excited, anxious, lonely) and teaching social emotional skills (i.e., turn taking, sharing).

Ava emphasized this: "They're very young, so I try to spend a lot of time more on the social emotional aspect as opposed to the learning all the letters and all that, just because I just feel like it's important."

Teachers also shared how they supported students by using visual schedules and embedding student choice as ways to prevent challenging behavior. Some teachers, like Julia, had specific materials to help lessen the occurrence of inappropriate behaviors, such as a cube chair: ". . . if he's being goofy and silly, and not being a listener, then I'll move that chair over. It's funny because he flips it to how he wants [to sit in it]. It's fine by me, and he'll sit, and he's quiet, and listens." Kate expressed how important it is to make accommodations for students who need extra support, while also noting her frustration that this mindset was not shared by her colleagues, saying:

> . . . it's possible. You just have to just think of what can help. And so, there are students with different 504 plans [document outlining supports for students as needed] and everything, and I said this recently at a meeting that I had here with . . . a leadership team. I said that our staff needs to understand that accommodations are not optional. It's things that you should be doing and that isn't always, I guess, happening.

Most teachers mentioned establishing their own classroom policies for discipline, with many noting that there were no school-wide policies. Several teachers described using behavior charts or systems, such as Kay who explained, "Green, you're good to go. Yellow means slow down and turn your day around and pink is okay, you have to talk to mom and dad." As part of a classroom behavior management policy, some teachers reported that they had a designated chair or spot in the classroom that they used for time out, such as Joan, who had what she called the "sad chair" for students to sit in, ". . . the sad chair is for everybody . . . which works tremendously because they just don't want to be in there." Donna mentioned having a 'peace corner' for her students to go to when they needed to calm down. Teachers also described how they integrated faith in their discipline procedures. For instance, Carrie shared, "We talk about Jesus and how he loves us. If a child is in time-out, I like to express that I love them, and that Jesus loves them, and we both want them to make better choices." Likewise, Kay recounted:

> I'll say something like, 'What if Jesus was right here? Would he like what you are doing?' or 'Is that how Jesus would want you to treat a friend?' Sometimes we do use that in a way just to hopefully get them to think, 'Oh wow, yeah. I know Jesus was so nice and so kind to everyone, I don't think he would want me to be that way.'

Finally, teachers mentioned receiving support from other staff such as their teaching assistants or principals when children engaged in persistent challenging behavior. However, this support did not necessarily equate with having direction or guidance as to how to respond to challenging behavior.

For example, Sara shared, "I did talk to my principal, but she basically said, 'Whatever you want to do is fine with me.'"

Concerns about Challenging Behavior

Most teachers reported that strategies they used to prevent challenging behavior did not always work, and that behaviors would continue or escalate. They described the impact some students' challenging behavior had on their peers such as other students copying undesirable behavior and concerns from other parents, who were discouraged by their children imitating these behaviors. Teachers also spoke of behaviors interfering with the other students' ability to learn. For example, Julia shared, "You have this one kiddo who is not able to, for whatever reason, self-regulate their own emotions along with all of the other students, and then it's kind of inhibiting all of the rest of the kids and their education." Safety for staff and the other children was also a major concern for teachers, as Ava explained:

> It was really just the safety of the other children because he threw books . . . it was scary. I had to explain it to the parent because she was like shrugging it off and I said, 'Well, let's put things in size perspective. If an adult picked up an adult-sized chair and threw it across the room, it would be very scary for another adult. So, let's think about children, all the same size, picking up chairs, over the head, and throwing them.' I said, 'It's very scary, scary for the other kids' . . . that was my biggest issue.

The Relationship Between Families and Challenging Behavior

Teachers identified parents as a source of difficulty in resolving concerns about children's challenging behavior, due to a variety of family factors including long working hours and inconsistency between home and school environments. For example, Joan shared, "I could do a million things here, but her home life is not great . . . when she walks out this door, she's going back to the same nonsense that's going on at home. That's never going to change." Other teachers expressed challenges in working with families to address children's behavior, such as Donna who noted, "The last school I was in, some of them didn't speak English and that put a really damper into the problems and then I've taught with African Americans and they're totally different." Ava also expressed concern that some behaviors stemmed from a child's home environment when she shared, "I can only imagine that they must have come from homes like that, where everybody argued or yelled at each other. It was a low-income area, so it's a very different demographic."

Experiences with Suspension and Expulsion

As teachers shared their experiences with persistent challenging behavior, it was obvious that many participants reached a point where they felt the best option was to remove a child from the classroom

temporarily. Often, this meant the child would be sent out in the hallway or to the principal's office. For Diane, this culminated with one student being out of the classroom most of the day. At times, parents or caregivers were asked to pick up a child early. Diane explained this as she recounted:

> If he really could not calm down and could not get himself composed, then mom and dad is the best option because there is no hope for him, for us to be able to do anything with him or for him during the rest of the day.

Ava similarly noted "There were a couple times where I actually had the parent come pick them up just because it just had happened so many times that I didn't know what else to do and I thought, maybe if he went home?" Carrie shared that she hoped being sent home early would help her student see the consequence of his behavior, yet for him, "he would just come back and like he'd maybe say 'sorry' for the behavior he did, but it wouldn't be long before he would do something else naughty or the same behavior."

For some teachers, expulsion became the only choice when challenging behavior reached a certain level of intensity or frequency. Seven teachers who had experienced expelling a child within the last two years described expelling nine students in total. Diane explained how her student who ended up out of the classroom most of the day was eventually expelled: "He was physically harming [others] all of the time. At that point it wasn't a hit or miss. It was randomly throughout the day. It was consistent, every day, all day. Being sent home wasn't changing it." Some teachers mentioned incidences where parents pulled children from the program preemptively when continued enrollment did not seem sustainable.

While many teachers relied on suspension and expulsion, there were a few teachers who expressed the belief that if their school was not able to meet a child's needs, they should help facilitate a transfer to a more appropriate setting and not place the onus on families to find an alternative educational setting. For example, Amy shared "I think if it's truly a situation where it's not the best place for the student, then I think it's the school's responsibility to help the family figure out where the best place would be for the student." In a similar vein, Kate explained how one of her students transferred to a public school:

> [His mother] understood because we had been really working . . . we kind of all were like teary about it . . . we know the family really well. And she knew how much we cared. And we're trying to help him . . . to see what was going to be the best for him. And I felt this was not the best for him . . . throughout the process . . . they came and observed him and everything. And so, then he did qualify to go to one of our public schools for their early childhood . . . he then transitioned there and had an IEP and everything . . . And I think he did really well there . . .

Kate also shared that the class maintained a relationship with this student, that he came back for their Valentine's Day party and that the students all talked positively about him. She noted, "They were happy to see him. They didn't have like these negative thoughts of him, like, 'Oh, he's bad.' That's one thing I'm big about . . . Sometimes you make bad or sad choices, but he's not bad. None of us are bad."

Resistance to Changing Practices

During the interviews, teachers discussed factors which inhibited them from keeping children with persistent challenging behavior in the classroom. Some teachers mentioned a high level of stress associated with students, while teachers also reported feeling overwhelmed, helpless, and frustrated. Overall, most teachers expressed a sense of uncertainty regarding what else to do when confronted with persistent challenging behavior and the need to keep children in the classroom. When asked what their reaction would be if suspension and expulsion were no longer options, many teachers expressed hesitancy to change practices. For example, Diane shared:

> If I'm being completely honest, I would probably be really annoyed and mad about it [if suspension and expulsion were not options] because I knew where I was at mentally and it was not okay where I was at mentally with that child.

She went on to add that she also felt that if the one child had remained, other parents would have pulled their children, adding "I don't think the other children would have continued at this school. They definitely would have went somewhere else." Teachers shared that they could not envision changing practices without additional support. For example, Kay explained:

> If tomorrow there was like, 'No, we can't expel [from] preschool anymore,' it could be a really big problem. Especially if we don't have the correct resources for them in a Catholic school. We don't have social workers, we don't have psychologists. You don't have special ed teachers.

Other teachers shared that perhaps children could stay enrolled, but not included with their peers, if there was an option for a self-contained classroom. For example, Joan thought "We would've had to make some sort of alternative classroom. Maybe he could have participated in lunch. But gym, any of those really non-structured events, he just could never handle. Like playtime, and gym, and recess, and things like that."

Throughout the interviews teachers discussed the need for additional support, such as professional development in addressing challenging behavior. A few teachers expressed a desire for resources to prevent challenging behavior in the classroom, such as sensory materials and picture

books promoting social emotional skills. Some teachers also mentioned not having a teaching assistant, and how having another adult in the classroom would help. Other teachers reflected on how additional support staff would be a solution, but noted financial concerns associated with extra personnel. For example, Ava shared:

> Back a long time ago, when my kids were all in Catholic schools, the funds were here, we had a reading resource [teacher], they had extra aides around the building to always help but now I feel like we operate on bare bones.

Discussion

This study expands the literature on early childhood programs in Catholic schools by focusing on teachers' experiences with challenging behavior, and in particular with suspension and expulsion. Eleven participants discussed their experiences with challenging behavior, including how they responded and their concerns, incidences of suspension and expulsion, and supports they felt they needed, within Catholic school settings. Four issues that arose from the findings merit further discussion including the need for: a) professional development regarding challenging behavior, b) collaboration and family engagement in responding to challenging behavior, c) further guidance and support, and (d) systems collaboration.

Need for Professional Development

Teachers in the current study explicitly stated that they needed more training on how to prevent and respond to persistent challenging behavior. In fact, challenging behavior has been identified as the top training need of early childhood teachers (Children's Equity Project, 2020). Additionally, in a national study, only 20% of teachers reported receiving training in social emotional development in the past year (Children's Equity Project, 2020). Research has shown that an increase in training that helps prevent and respond to challenging behavior leads to a decrease in the use of suspension and expulsion (Children's Equity Project, 2020). As suspension and expulsion are adult responses to challenging behavior, and ineffective in changing children's behavior as they do not teach children what to do instead of "acting out," professional development focused on evidence-based, multi-tiered systems of support such as the Pyramid Model (Hemmeter et al., 2006) are effective in increasing adults' capacity to both prevent challenging behavior from occurring in the first place, and to respond with alternatives to removal from the classroom. Both Edge et al. (2018) and Vinh et al. (2016) demonstrated that teacher training on the Pyramid Model led to a significant reduction in suspensions and expulsions and resulted in increased teacher confidence and competence in responding to challenging behavior. In fact, implementing evidence-based practices to support students who exhibit challenging behavior through a tiered model such as the Pyramid Model (Hemmeter et al., 2021) benefits *all* children

(Smith et al., 2020). Additionally, professional development in a tiered system of support, such as the Pyramid Model, could prevent teachers from getting to the point of even considering suspension or expulsion because they would now have access to a toolkit of preventative strategies and ways to promote social emotional competence.

Professional development related to special education, and teaching children from diverse backgrounds (i.e., race, ability, language differences, family structure, socioeconomic status), needs to include an emphasis on changing adult and child attitudes and behaviors to value diversity (Children's Equity Project, 2022). Negative attitudes from participants in the current study about children's race and socioeconomic status could be addressed through training on implicit bias and an increased awareness of the disproportional use of exclusionaly discipline practices with children from certain demographic backgrounds. For it is only when we provide safe and supportive settings where individuals are encouraged to talk openly about power and privilege that we can begin to ensure accountability within schools as places that are equitable and inclusive. Organizations such as the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI) regularly release free materials for practitioners to support equity (c.f., DEC, 2021; Fox, 2022; NAEYC, n.d.).

Need to Foster Partnerships

As suggested by Frabutt and Waldron (2013), by welcoming families with young children into a school community with a positive early education experience, programs can secure future enrollment and assure a school's vitality. However, when exclusionary practices such as suspension and expulsion are used, those relationships and opportunities are threatened or severed entirely. Noteworthy, family engagement and teachers' perceptions of families have an impact on the use of exclusionary discipline, as negative views of families are associated with higher expulsion rates (Children's Equity Project, 2020). Also, Zulauf and Zinsser (2019) found that teachers who had expelled a child in the past year had negative perceptions of that child's parents. As noted earlier, a few participants in the current study expressed deficit views of families and home environments, most likely making it extremely difficult to partner together to address children's challenging behavior. Particularly disconcerting is that views expressed by some participants regarding family demographics was indicative of implicit bias, such as the assumption that families in lower income areas engage in yelling more frequently than other families. The privilege and power of the White teachers in this study juxtaposed with the disproportionate exclusion of children of color, boys, and children with or suspected of having disabilities highlights the need to address bias and concerns around equity (Children's Equity Project, 2022). Teacher training and support both to examine biases and learn about culturally responsive practices is needed and should be a required component of teacher education programs and professional development offerings (Children's Equity Project,

2020; NAEYC, 2019). Teachers might also consider ways to foster partnerships with families to address challenging behavior, such as providing parent training and information on challenging behavior and preventative strategies (Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019; Joseph et al., 2021). It is important to note that developing positive, authentic, and responsive relationships with families cannot be achieved if teachers are not aware of the harm of racist and ableist perceptions, practices, and policies.

Systems Collaboration and Inclusion

Highlighting the evolving makeup of Catholic early childhood classrooms, 21 children in the classrooms of participants in the current study were identified as possibly needing a referral for screening for special education services. However, the role of Catholic schools in partnering with families and public-school systems for evaluation and service provision seemed murky to many participating teachers. For young children with delays and disabilities, early access to services is crucial (Rosenberg et al., 2008). As mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), it is each state's responsibility to create a system to identify children who may need special education services (Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2017), a process referred to as Child Find. This mandate covers all children with disabilities who reside within the state, regardless of educational setting. For instance, a child attending a private preschool can be screened through their local public school district if a delay or disability is suspected. Proactive outreach is an important component of Child Find, and information about screening procedures and locations must be easily accessible to families. Therefore, all teachers and administrators employed by Catholic programs need to be familiar with the Child Find procedures in their state.

Additionally, beyond referral and screening, Catholic schools might consider how to best support the inclusion of young children with disabilities in their early childhood programs. It is concerning that children may be excluded from a faith-based education based on their disability status, developmental delays, or their behavior. The exclusion or expulsion of young children with disabilities or those in need of additional support is antithetical to the church's message of welcoming (Carter, 2020). There are resources available to support Catholic educators wishing to facilitate meaningful access for students with disabilities, such as the Program for Inclusive Education (PIE) through the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE, n.d.).

Need for Guidance and Support

Despite the importance of the early childhood programs within their schools, participants reported feeling ignored and unsupported by school leaders and structure. A lack of support for responding to challenging behavior and leaving participants unsure of what else to do align with what has been identified as a contributing factor to suspension and expulsion rates (Gilliam & Reyes, 2018). Participants in the current study shared a desire for additional guidance in

establishing and implementing disciplinary policies. They also described how working conditions, such as having additional adult support in the classroom, and reducing the adult-to-child ratio could help them feel more supported and less isolated.

Discipline Policies

Most participants in this study reported that they were largely left on their own to implement discipline policies and procedures at the classroom level. A lack of clear policies has the potential for biased interpretations of behavior and making inequitable and inappropriate disciplinary decisions (Children's Equity Project, 2020). Teachers in the current study reported using practices such as time out which are recognized as harmful and ineffective (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Gartrell, 2001). Established policies may also be problematic, even in programs considered to be high quality. For example, Garrity et al. (2017) asked 282 administrators of NAEYC accredited programs to share their discipline policies. In the participating early childhood settings that identified their program type, 14.2% were for-profit private, 43.6% identified as nonprofit private, 8.2% were faith-based, 8.9% identified as public, and 25.1% were labeled as 'other.' The researchers rated the policies using a 26-item checklist looking at nine key features of discipline policies such as clearly outlined procedures, evidence-based discipline practices, and developmentally appropriate behavioral expectations. They found that most programs did not describe evidence-based practices in their discipline policies, and over half of the programs received less than half of all possible points on the checklist. None of the participating programs received the highest possible score, with the highest scoring program still 10 points below a perfect score. These findings reveal that the problem is not a lack of recommended practices, but a need to ensure evidence of embracing those practices through program policies that encourage implementation with fidelity. NAEYC (2019) calls for programs to "establish clear protocols for dealing with challenging behaviors and provide teaching staff with consultation and support to address them effectively and equitably" (p. 9).

Work Environment

The frequency, intensity and duration of children's challenging behavior left teachers who participated in the current study feeling stressed, which can lead to burnout and teacher turnover (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Zinsser et al., 2016). Working conditions such as having a large class size contributes to higher levels of teacher-student conflict (Mantzicopoulos, 2005). Noteworthy, a few teachers in the current study reported having no assistant or additional adult in support in the classroom, despite recommendations for no more than a 1:10 ratio (Office of Child Care, n.d.). In addition to larger class sizes, higher adult-child ratios are associated with increased rates of suspension and expulsion (Children's Equity Project, 2020). The Children's Equity Project (2020) recommends increasing access to mental health professionals and improving compensation to mediate teacher stress. Giving teachers these tools and resources can help them be better prepared

to promote social emotional competence, prevent challenging behavior, and provide individualized attention and appropriate responses to challenging behaviors when needed. These steps in turn positively influence teacher-child, and teacher-parent relationships, leading to positive outcomes for children and their families.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations worth noting. While the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize, this small sample may not be representative of the broader landscape of experiences of early childhood teachers in Catholic schools. As participation was voluntary, teachers were interested in sharing their stories, possibly out of frustration. Therefore, the sample of teachers who were interviewed may have had a vested interest in talking about suspension and expulsion. Also, participants were from one state that has a law prohibiting the use of expulsion in funded preschool programs, and while not applicable to private settings, this may have influenced teachers' perceptions of the use of this disciplinary practice. Additionally, research was conducted prior to the pandemic, so teachers' circumstances and perspectives might be different in the current climate.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this exploratory study offer several directions for practice. As arbiters of social justice, the Catholic early childhood community has an opportunity to lead by example of how to be culturally responsive and inclusive, in all aspects of early childhood programming including disciplinary policies and procedures. As noted by participants, the needs of students are changing, and it is important for teachers to have access to quality professional development so they can meet the needs of *all* students. Also, program leaders should examine their disciplinary policies and procedures, evaluate them for bias, and look to programs that have reduced suspension and expulsion rates for guidance. All program staff should recognize the potential impact of implicit bias on their interactions and relationships with children and families and reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs regarding challenging behavior (NAEYC, 2019). The Children's Equity Project (2020) urges program staff to mitigate the use of suspension and expulsion through culturally responsive practices, the use of positive behavior support and tiered models of support for young children with challenging behavior such as the Pyramid Model (Hemmeter et al., 2021), and mental health consultation.

Conclusion

The results from this study provide insight into the concerns and frustrations of 11 early childhood teachers in Catholic schools. By elevating their perspectives regarding challenging behavior, program administrators can consider how support for social emotional skill development

and ways to address challenging behavior can improve the quality of education offered in Catholic early childhood programs. The need to develop a strong infrastructure in Catholic schools (i.e., access to informational and personnel resources) so that *all* children receive a high quality, positive, and individually appropriate education cannot be dismissed. Inclusive, equitable policies and procedures aimed at keeping children in their classrooms will allow programs to authentically embody Catholic ideals, reflect the core values of welcoming and belonging, and best meet the needs of the children and families they serve.

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