Teachers' use of soft exclusionary discipline in kindergarten classrooms: Findings from Virginia

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INTRODUCTION

All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them reach their full potential[1]. Young children learn by talking with peers, getting excited while dancing, playing in the pretend area, or touching manipulatives. However, children who display behaviors that don't match the demands of the classroom are not always being provided with such opportunities. At the most restrictive end, children, and disproportionately Black boys, are suspended or expelled from the programs and schools that are supposed to serve them and their families[2]. As early as preschool, 17,000 children are suspended or expelled across the country each year[3]. Approximately 50% of these children are Black boys, despite Black boys representing nearly 20% of the preschoolers enrolled[4]. But children don't have to be suspended or expelled to be excluded from learning opportunities[5].

Children who display behaviors that teachers find challenging are sometimes asked to sit apart from other children at a separate desk, sent out into the hallway or to another classroom during instructional time, take a silent lunch while their peers are allowed to talk, or sit out on a bench while other children play freely during recess[6]. Although less severe than suspensions and expulsions, these discipline practices nonetheless limit children's opportunities to fully engage in school[7]. These "soft" (less severe) exclusionary practices are so routine in schools that are often considered acceptable and seen as inevitable[8]. As a result, we do not know how often these soft exclusionary discipline practices are happening, or which children are experiencing them most often. Understanding less severe but more routine and repeated ways of early exclusion can help policymakers and school communities ensure that each and every child is provided with equitable early learning opportunities.

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In the context of Virginia's statewide kindergarten readiness assessment during fall of 2019, nearly 2,500 teachers (~45% of the Virginia kindergarten teachers' population) completed a survey about their use of discipline practices in the classroom. The survey included questions about soft exclusionary discipline (e.g., asking a student to take a break outside of the classroom or docking their free time). In this brief, we describe the frequency with which kindergarten teachers reported using soft exclusionary discipline practices with children in their classroom whom they reported as demonstrating the lowest self-regulation and social skills. The brief also explores whether teachers use these practices more or less frequently depending on the racial/ethnic composition of students. Overall, findings indicate that soft exclusionary discipline practices are being used often in kindergarten classrooms, and they are used more frequently in classrooms where teachers rate more Black children as low in self-regulation and social skills compared to White children. These findings illustrate the value of looking beyond suspensions and expulsions to ensure that our youngest learners are receiving equitable learning opportunities in early schooling.

Overview of Sample and Data

The survey was provided to all kindergarten teachers in Virginia in mid-November of 2019. The survey was hosted using the Qualtrics online survey platform. Teachers received individualized links via email inviting them to complete the survey. The survey was accessible online for five weeks, and weekly reminder emails (four total) were sent to encourage participation.

This brief includes results from 2,053 kindergarten teachers who completed the survey (45% response rate). These teachers served 40,771 students, who represent 44% of the Virginia public kindergarten population. The teachers were 39 years old on average (SD = 11.52). Teachers were mostly female (96%), predominantly White (86%), and 51% of them hold a master's degree.

Teachers rated how often they used certain soft exclusionary strategies with students in their classrooms "who ha(d) the hardest time demonstrating solid self-regulation and social skills." The survey asked teachers how often they use soft exclusionary discipline practices (never, a couple times a year, once or twice a month, once a week, a few times a week, once a day, or multiple times a day).

Figure 1
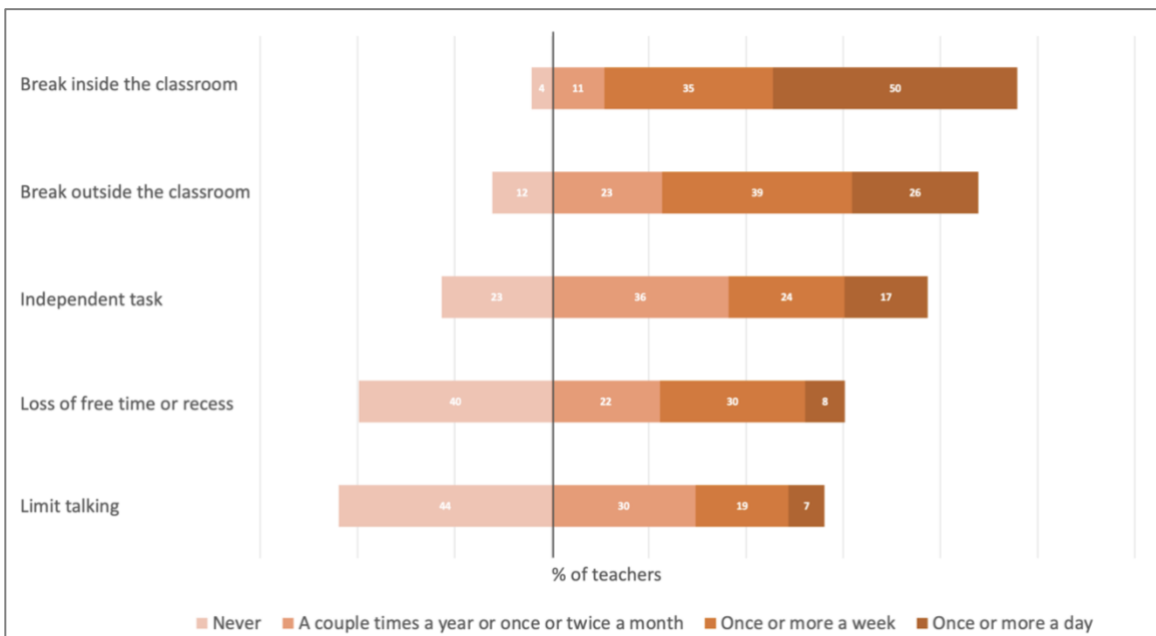*Survey questions related to certain soft exclusionary strategies*

Think about the two or three students in your classroom who have the hardest time demonstrating solid self-regulation and social skills. How often have you used the following strategies with these students?

	1. Never	2. A couple times a year	3. Once or twice a month	4. Once a week	5. A few times a week	6. Once a day	7. Multiple times a day
Student takes a break from the lesson or activity while remaining in the classroom.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Student takes a break from the lesson or activity outside of the classroom (for example, another teacher's classroom, principal's office, or counselor's office).	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Student completes a task independently while the rest of the students are in a small or whole group activity.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Loss of recess or other free time.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Limit talking (for example, silent lunch or work time) when otherwise talking would be allowed.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Many Kindergarten Teachers Reported Frequent Use of Soft Exclusionary Discipline Practices

More than half of the teachers (>50%) reported using each of the soft exclusionary practices with some frequency (Figure 2). Teachers reported asking a student to take a break from the

lesson or activity while remaining in the classroom as the most commonly used exclusionary practice. Most teachers (85%) used this strategy once or more each week, and 50% of teachers reported using this strategy one or more times a day. Teachers also reported frequently asking a student to complete a task independently while the rest of the students were engaged in small groups or a whole group activity. Sixty-five percent of teachers reported using this strategy once a week or more, and 26% of teachers reported using it once or more each day. Almost 40% of teachers reported sending a student outside of the classroom at least once a week, and 17% of teachers reported using the strategy once or more each day. Teachers reported using loss of recess and limiting talking more infrequently, with 40% and 44% of teachers reporting that they never used these strategies, respectively. Still, 38% of teachers reported restricting student's recess or free time at least once a week or more, and 26% of teachers reported to restrict children's talking when talking would otherwise be allowed.

Figure 2
Frequency with which kindergarten teachers report using soft exclusionary discipline practices

Note. Figure displays teachers' responses to the prompt, "Think about the two to three students in your classroom who have the hardest time demonstrating solid self-regulation and social skills. How often have you used the following strategies with these students?" Percentages based upon 1,720 respons

Teachers use some types of "soft" exclusion more frequently when they rate more Black versus White students low on self-regulation and social skills

We compared whether teachers reported using soft exclusionary discipline practices differently based upon the racial/ethnic composition of students whom they perceived as low on social and

emotional skills[a]. We examined whether teachers reported using these practices more often when they rated more Black versus White students as low on self-regulation and social skills (Figure 3).

Teachers reported using the three most severe discipline practices more often when they rated more Black students as low on self-regulation and social skills compared to White students. Particularly, teachers reported more often using (1) breaks outside of the classroom, (2) loss of free time or recess, and (3) limiting talking when they rated a higher proportion of Black versus White students as low on self-regulation and social skills. We did not find significant differences in how often teachers reported using breaks inside of the classroom and independent tasks based upon the racial/ethnic composition of students.

Figure 3.
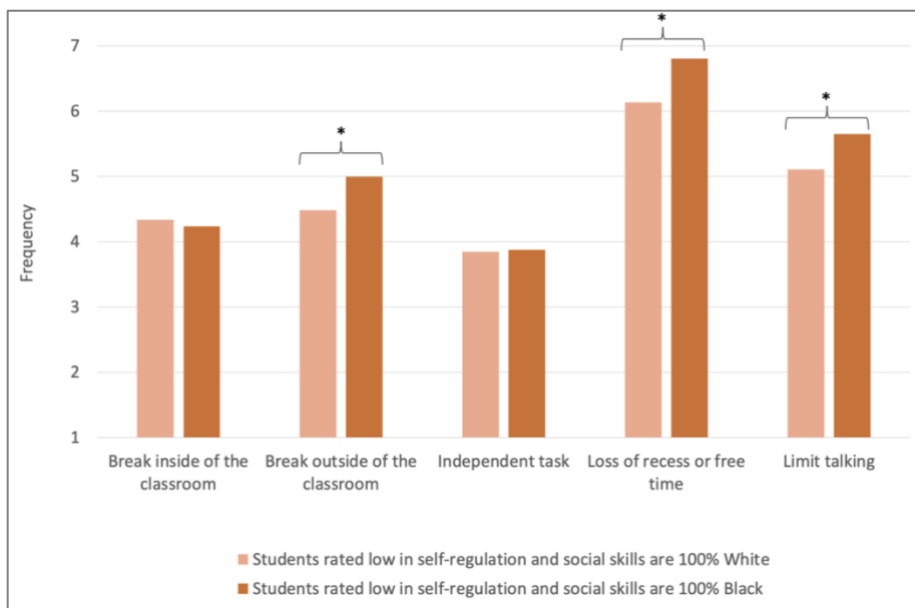
Note. Figure displays frequency estimates[b] for teachers' likelihood to use each practice when the racial/ethnic composition of students rated low on self-regulation and social skills is 100% White versus 100% Black. The asterisk indicates statistically significant differences.

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[a] We used data from the Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KEA) to approximate the sample of students that teachers were most likely to be reporting on. As part of Virginia's statewide KEA, teachers rated the self-regulation and social skills of all children in their classroom using the Child Behavior Rating Scale (CBRS). Using teachers' CBRS ratings, we selected the three students in the classroom that teachers perceived as displaying the lowest self-regulation and the lowest social skills, totaling up to six students per classroom (M = 4.72, SD = 0.78, range 3–6).

[b] Estimates are based upon OLS regression models with robust standard errors clustered at the school level. A separate regression model was estimated for each soft exclusionary discipline practice. All models controlled for [b] Estimates are based upon OLS regression models with robust standard errors clustered at the school level. A separate regression model was estimated for each soft exclusionary discipline practice. All models controlled for classroom-level proportions of English Language Learners (ELLs), boys, students with a disability, and students from families with low-incomes; classroom averaged teacher-rated self-regulation and social skills; teacher age, education, race/ethnicity, and number of students in the classroom. All models included division fixed effects. Multiple imputation was used to handle missing data.

CONCLUSION

Kindergarten students are between the ages of four and six. They are young children, and most will struggle to sit quietly during a 15-minute circle time, invade other children's personal space, forget rules in the heat of the moment, or run when they are supposed to walk at least some of the time. Our findings show that many times children experienced classroom management practices that excluded and limited engagement in the learning and social opportunities when the teacher perceived them as struggling to control their behavior or get along with their peer or teacher.

This was particularly pronounced when teachers perceived that more Black students were the ones having difficulty with self-regulation and social skills. This finding translates into Black students receiving fewer opportunities than their White peers to fully engage in the learning context to achieve their full potential.

The findings from this brief highlight the need to support students' social and emotional needs proactively and equitably in the classroom. For children whose teachers perceive them to display challenging behaviors, experiencing soft exclusion from learning may end up exacerbating rather than addressing their academic and social learning needs because they miss instructional time (when they are supposed to be learning foundational skills) and social opportunities (when they are supposed to develop a sense of belonging and contribute to the classroom community). Evidence-based, proactive, and inclusionary practices exist to work with these students and their families to best serve their needs in the classroom[9].

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Schools and teachers need support to ensure that they are equipped to meet the developmental, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of young learners. Policymakers may benefit from having data that look beyond suspensions and expulsions as they work to increase the quality and equity of students' early school experiences.

ENDNOTES

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