

## **AN INTERVIEW WITH KAITLIN ANDERSON: DIFFERENCES IN DISCIPLINE**

**Michael F. Shaughnessy, Robin Wells**

*Eastern New Mexico University,  
Portales, New Mexico, USA*

Kaitlin Anderson is Distinguished Doctoral Fellow in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, 212 Graduate Education Building College of Education and Health Professions, Fayetteville, AR 72701. She can be reached at: kaitlina@uark.edu

In this interview, she responds to questions regarding schools in America and disparities in discipline procedures.

1) Dr. Anderson, what first prompted you to investigate "disparate disciplinary outcomes"?

It's difficult for anyone who reads the news to not be aware of some of the racial disparities in school discipline policies, but my interest in this issue stems from the question: "are certain students being punished more harshly than their peers of different races, who commit the *same infractions* and in the *same types of schools*?"

Most of the numbers we see frequently just focus on outcomes, which are often naively critiqued by just blaming the issue on the fact that certain kids are just "bad kids." The problem with this view point is that, according to my research, there are still disparities even conditional on the type of infraction and within the same school.

2) From where did you get your data and who analyzed it?

The Arkansas legislature passed Act 1329 which required an annual report on discipline disparities in the state, and the Arkansas Department of Education provided my colleagues at the Office for Education Policy with the data to conduct these analyses. Myself and other researchers at the Office for Education Policy, including Dr. Gary Ritter, conducted the analysis.

3) There seems to be a disconnect - only 15 percent of students across the nation are black, but 35 percent suspended once are black, 44 percent more than once are black and 36 of expelled students are black. Do you have any plausible explanation or hypothesis?

Most of my work with the Arkansas data has focused on providing a descriptive story using the data available, and I haven't had the time yet to conduct the qualitative analysis of *why* these things are occurring. In the future, we hope to conduct interviews within schools that appear to have either high or low rates of disparities to identify why these things are occurring.

4) Are the circumstances or the "offenses" of the students different for students of color than those of students who are white or of a higher degree of concern to warrant the increased level of suspension/expulsion?

In our research, we do control for the type of infraction committed whenever possible. However, some of the most frequent categories such as insubordination and disorderly conduct are very subjective, and can be a label attributed to a wide range of actual observed behaviors. While there is some uncertainty within category, the data provided by the Arkansas Department of Education at least allow us to identify what type of consequence was committed, and then only compare students referred for the same type of infraction.

5) What about the length of punishment or the length of suspension?

According to our research (forthcoming), African American students in the state of Arkansas receive about an extra half a day of suspension per incident, for the same type of infraction, relative to their white peers across the state. It's important to note that this half a day even controls for the student's number of previous infractions that year. Within school, the disparity is smaller (about 1/10 of a day per incident), but still statistically significant. This means that all else equal, African-American students with similar behavioral records, *even in the same schools*, are receiving longer punishments (and missing more class) than their white peers.

6) Are the majority of educators in the schools in Arkansas white rather than educators of color; were you able to identify this possibility for those students who were suspended or expelled?

This is likely a factor. Unfortunately, much of the data on the race of educators in each particular school is somewhat difficult to obtain, and with the data provided to us by the Arkansas Department of Education, we are unable to identify the teacher that referred any particular student. At the state level, however, we know that the vast majority of certified staff in schools (about 85%) are white (source: <https://adedata.arkansas.gov/>).

7) Are you able to identify specific school districts where a higher percentage of suspensions/expulsions occur and then identify why this may be occurring?

We do have the ability to identify schools, but are hesitant to identify schools with a high rate of suspensions and expulsions. There are two reasons to be cautious about identifying schools in this way: 1) these are self-reported data, so it could be that identifying schools with rates of suspensions or expulsions simply are those who are the most thorough with reporting and 2) it is unclear whether a high number of suspensions or expulsions is actually worrisome.

To explain the second point further, I mean that of course, ideally we have schools where students are not missing important instructional time due to suspensions or expulsions, but we also need to make sure that schools are safe and learning is able to happen. A school with low rates of suspensions and expulsions could be a signal of a school with a great climate and low rates of misbehavior, or one where students are acting wild but there is no accountability. A school with

high rates of suspensions and expulsions could be a signal of over use of exclusionary discipline, or just a signal of a tightly run ship.

For this reason, rather than pointing fingers at schools with high or low rates, it is likely better to focus on identifying schools and/or districts that appear to have larger disparities based on things like race, poverty, or special education status, and this is something we are continuing to work on.

8) What prompted you to gather this type of information?

As mentioned previously, the Arkansas legislature passed Act 1329 which required an annual report on discipline disparities in the state, and the Arkansas Department of Education provided my colleagues at the Office for Education Policy with the data to conduct these analyses. Myself and other researchers at the Office for Education Policy, including Dr. Gary Ritter, conducted the analysis. The report called for a relatively simple (and also a somewhat misleading type of information): the number of students in particular districts in different subgroups (i.e. racial groups) receiving a certain type of punishment at least once. I say this is somewhat misleading because it can vastly underestimate racial disparities due to some students receiving suspensions or other disciplinary consequences multiple times throughout the year.

9) Do you know if the students suspended or expelled were receiving services through special education (had been identified as having some type of disability; and what those disabilities were)?

According to our research, looking at the recorded infractions for seven years (2008-09 to 2014-15), we can see that about 18% of the infractions are recorded for students receiving special education services. 19% of the cases of out of school suspensions, and 19% of the cases of expulsions are related to students receiving special education services. Compared to the percentage of students receiving special education services across the state (about 11%), this indicates that the outcomes are disproportionately related to special education students.

Sivan Tuchman and I are currently working on another report in which we are looking in more detail at the intersection between special education services and disciplinary outcomes.

10) Do you know if the students suspended or expelled had a "history" educationally of "disruptive, challenging, or negative" behavior?

We can see past recorded behavior in the same dataset, however we do not have more of a qualitative story about the background of their behavior.

11) What was the age range for the students who were suspended and/or expelled?

We see out of school suspensions and expulsions at every grade level (including kindergarten, and very rarely pre-k), however the bulk of these disciplinary consequences occur in grades 6-11 (about 72% of suspensions and 73% of expulsions)

12) Did the state of Arkansas contract with the Department for Education Reform to gather this information and/or was this study completed through a federal grant?

This research began with a Memorandum of Understanding with the state to conduct the reporting required by Act 1329, but we have also received permission to use the data to answer additional research questions.

13) Will you be pursuing further or additional information about this data?

Absolutely, we are working on several different research questions related to predicting the type of punishment and the length of punishment, as well as the types of schools and/or districts that appear to be the worst offenders in terms of racial disparities or the exemplars in terms of fair discipline. In future work we hope to conduct some qualitative studies (most likely principal and teacher interviews) in a variety of schools to identify either best practices, and/or challenges in disciplinary practices in the states. Sivan Tuchman (also at the Dept. of Education Reform) and I are also using these data to describe the intersection between the discipline process and the special education referral process, essentially identifying whether a student's discipline history or his academic achievement is more predictive of special education referrals.