

Addressing the hidden costs of preschool soft expulsions: Examining racial and disability inequities in early childhood exclusion

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Abstract: Soft expulsion, the unofficial removal of children from preschool due to perceived behavioral challenges, disproportionately affects children from marginalized communities, particularly those receiving special education services. Practices such as frequent early pick-up requests or suggestions that a program is not a “good fit” reflect systemic inequities, including implicit bias, insufficient trauma-informed training, and structural racism. Black boys and children with disabilities experience these exclusionary practices at higher rates, leading to long-term social-emotional and academic harm. Grounded in critical race theory, this paper critiques colorblind ideologies that obscure racialized and ableist discipline practices, perpetuating the ordinariness of racism in early learning. It examines how soft expulsions disrupt developmental trajectories and limit access to foundational learning experiences. This paper calls for anti-racist reforms, including policy changes, comprehensive anti-bias training, and resource reallocation to address these inequities. It advocates for culturally responsive, trauma-informed teaching and critiques accountability systems that fail to track soft expulsions. Policy recommendations include mandatory data collection, expanded mental health support, and restructuring teacher education to incorporate anti-racist and anti-ableist curricula. This work contributes to the broader discourse on equity in early childhood education, urging systemic change to ensure all children have access to inclusive, supportive learning environments.

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Introduction

Soft expulsion, the unofficial removal of children from preschool due to perceived behavioral challenges, disproportionately impacts children from marginalized communities, including those receiving special education services (Giordano et al., 2024; Loomis et al., 2022; O’Grady et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2020). Such inequities disproportionately burden children from global majority communities and those with disabilities, as evidenced by their higher rates of exclusionary practices in early learning environments (Allen et al., 2021; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Giordano et al., 2024; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Zeng et al., 2020). While soft expulsions remain largely invisible in official records, their cumulative impact on academic, social-emotional, and developmental outcomes is profound and long-lasting (Gilliam, 2005; Loomis et al., 2022; O’Grady et al., 2024). The United States (U.S.) remains the only country in the world that has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), leaving American children without the comprehensive legal protections and rights framework that guides policy in nearly every other nation. Given the critical importance of addressing these exclusionary practices, it is essential to examine how soft expulsions manifest specifically within the U.S. preschool system and understand their disproportionate impact on particular communities, especially Black children and those with disabilities, who face compounded forms of educational marginalization in

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American early childhood settings.

The Impact of Soft Expulsions on Marginalized Communities

Soft expulsions refer to exclusionary practices such as frequent early pick-ups, shortened schedules, or recommendations that a program is "not a good fit," which remove or limit a child's participation in early childhood settings without formal documentation (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Murphy et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2019). While traditional suspensions and expulsions have been widely documented, soft expulsions capture the subtle yet pervasive ways marginalized children are pushed out of early learning environments (Gilliam et al., 2016; Loomis et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2024). These practices disproportionately affect Black children, children with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds (Allen et al., 2021; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Giordano et al., 2024; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Zeng et al., 2020), reflecting broader systemic inequities that reinforce patterns of exclusion in early childhood education (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Love & Beneke, 2021). By examining the systemic inequities underlying soft expulsions, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on anti-racist pedagogy and equity in early years education. The paper will move beyond describing the problem to offering actionable strategies to dismantle systemic barriers, including anti-racist policy reforms, culturally responsive teaching practices, and trauma-informed interventions. To fully understand why soft expulsions disproportionately impact marginalized children, it is essential to explore the systemic inequities that drive these practices. It is important to note that disciplinary practices and accountability mechanisms vary markedly across international contexts, and this paper focuses on the U.S legislative and educational landscape. This leads us to consider the role of race and disability in shaping exclusionary discipline policies. The following section outlines the theoretical framework guiding this paper in grounding this purpose in a deeper understanding.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) and dis/ability critical race theory (DisCrit) provide a framework for understanding how racial and disability-based biases shape discipline policies, reinforcing the exclusion of Black children and children with disabilities (Annamma et al., 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Critical race theory posits that racism is a systemic force embedded within institutions, shaping policies and reinforcing inequities under the facade of neutrality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). This is evident in preschool discipline, where racial bias influences teachers' perceptions of behavior, leading to disproportionately high rates of exclusionary discipline for Black children, particularly Black boys (Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Dis/ability critical race theory extends CRT's critique by demonstrating how race and disability intersect to justify exclusion, subjecting Black children with disabilities to dual marginalization (Annamma et al., 2013; Love & Beneke, 2021). While policies claim to be race-neutral, they disproportionately place Black children in special education, increasing their surveillance and risk of exclusion rather than providing meaningful support (Allen et al., 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Gilliam et al., 2016; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023).

Colorblind discipline policies further obscure these inequities, reinforcing the perception that exclusionary practices are neutral rather than shaped by systemic racism and ableism (Allen et al., 2021; Boutte et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2018; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Critical race theory critiques this facade of neutrality, arguing that it conceals persistent inequities and allows exclusionary practices to continue without scrutiny (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Gilliam et al., 2016; Loomis et al., 2022). Together, CRT and DisCrit demonstrate how exclusionary discipline practices—framed as neutral—function as mechanisms of systemic racism and ableism in early childhood education (Annamma et al., 2013; Love & Beneke, 2021). While these frameworks provide critical insight into the forces driving soft expulsions, actionable strategies to disrupt these patterns remain underdeveloped (Giordano et al., 2024; Love & Beneke, 2021; O'Grady et al., 2024). The remainder of this paper addresses this gap by presenting a multi-tiered approach, including anti-racist policy reforms, anti-bias professional development, culturally responsive teaching practices, trauma-informed interventions, and strengthened family-school partnerships—all designed to reduce soft expulsions and foster more equitable early learning environments. While race and disability are the

primary focus of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that gender, particularly the intersection of race and masculinity, also plays a critical role in exclusionary discipline (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).

Addressing Systemic Inequities: Transformative Approaches

Anti-Racist Policy Reforms and Accountability Systems

Eliminating soft expulsions requires systemic reforms that confront racial biases, strengthen accountability, and ensure meaningful support for children at risk of exclusion (Giordano et al., 2024). These practices disproportionately impact Black children and children with disabilities, reinforcing structural inequities in discipline (Allen et al., 2021; Barbarin et al., 2019; Boutte et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2024; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Williford et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2020). While many schools have implemented non-expulsion policies, inconsistent enforcement and educator discretion often allow exclusionary practices to continue under different labels (Giordano et al., 2024; Loomis et al., 2022).

The lack of comprehensive data tracking is a key barrier to addressing soft expulsions. These practices remain largely invisible without mandatory reporting mechanisms that capture all forms of exclusionary discipline, making it difficult to hold schools accountable (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Giordano et al., 2024; Loomis et al., 2022). Disaggregated discipline data is essential for identifying patterns of bias and ensuring targeted interventions, yet many schools lack standardized tracking systems (Loomis et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2024; Williford et al., 2024). Even when non-expulsion policies exist, many educators remain unaware of their requirements, leading to inconsistent implementation (Giordano et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2019). Implementing these reforms is critical to ensure educators and administrators move beyond performative policies and adopt sustainable, equity-focused practices that challenge the disproportionate targeting of marginalized students. Data-driven accountability helps to shift school cultures away from exclusion and toward inclusion.

To address indirect removal tactics, schools should implement multi-stakeholder discipline teams. These teams—comprising administrators, mental health professionals, educators, and families—can ensure discipline policies are equitably applied (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Loomis et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2024; Novoa & Malik, 2018; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023). These teams help monitor discipline data, recommend culturally responsive interventions, and prevent implicit bias from influencing disciplinary decisions (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gilliam et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2019). Schools that actively engage teachers in behavioral intervention strategies see a decline in soft expulsions as educators become more confident in managing behavioral challenges without resorting to exclusion (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gilliam, 2005; Giordano et al., 2024; Steed et al., 2024).

Additionally, comprehensive policy reforms must explicitly ban suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education while ensuring robust enforcement mechanisms to prevent soft expulsions (Allen et al., 2021; Kulkarni et al., 2022; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Novoa & Malik, 2018). However, even with formal non-expulsion policies, soft expulsions persist when educators are not adequately trained, or schools lack structured oversight. Giordano et al. (2024) highlight the need for educator training, structured discipline monitoring, and accountability systems to ensure equitable policy implementation. For educators, these reforms create clearer guidelines and support systems that reduce reliance on exclusionary discipline, empowering them to address student behaviors through inclusive, equity-driven practices. For instance, instead of suggesting early pickup when a child has difficulty with transitions, teachers equipped with trauma-informed strategies might implement a visual schedule with culturally relevant images and work with families to understand the child's specific transition needs at home. Ultimately, anti-racist reforms must be paired with meaningful implementation support, equipping educators and administrators to dismantle exclusionary practices embedded in daily decision-making. While policy reforms lay the groundwork for change, addressing the emotional and developmental needs of children most vulnerable to soft expulsions is equally critical, which the next section will explore.

Trauma-informed and Mental Health Supports

Addressing discipline disparities requires more than tracking and accountability; schools must

invest in proactive interventions. Behavioral challenges often stem from unmet developmental and emotional needs rather than intentional defiance, yet many early childhood programs lack the resources to provide appropriate interventions (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Steed et al., 2024). This emphasizes a fundamental mismatch between exclusionary discipline practices and the root causes of behavioral challenges. Scholars emphasize that when schools lack trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate resources, educators are left without alternatives, reinforcing systemic inequities (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Steed et al., 2024).

Behavioral consultation services, such as Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC), have reduced disciplinary disparities (Giordano et al., 2024; Murphy et al., 2024). For example, Gilliam (2005) found that preschools with on-site mental health consultants experienced lower expulsion rates because teachers received direct support in de-escalating challenging behaviors. Without systemic financial investment, interventions like IECMHC are often limited to isolated programs rather than embedded district-wide strategies, which reduces their potential to disrupt the soft expulsion pipeline (Gilliam, 2005; Giordano et al., 2024). However, these services remain inconsistently available due to funding limitations.

Culturally responsive behavioral interventions are particularly crucial in reducing bias in disciplinary decisions. When teachers lack training in culturally sustaining practices, they are more likely to perceive Black children's behaviors as problematic, leading to higher rates of exclusion (Barbarin et al., 2019; Love & Beneke, 2021; Zeng et al., 2020). For educators, the absence of culturally responsive training exacerbates reliance on exclusionary practices, as implicit biases remain unchecked and culturally normative behaviors are often mislabeled as defiant (Barbarin et al., 2019; Love & Beneke, 2021; Zeng et al., 2020). Embedding cultural responsiveness into behavioral consultation services equips teachers with the awareness and tools to reduce disproportionality in discipline decisions.

Additionally, trauma-informed approaches are essential in preventing exclusionary discipline, especially for children who have experienced adversity. Bartlett and Smith (2019) found that children with trauma histories often exhibit behaviors that are misinterpreted as defiance, resulting in punitive disciplinary measures instead of appropriate emotional support. Schools that implement trauma-informed training for educators see reductions in exclusionary discipline as teachers develop a greater capacity to address behavioral challenges through supportive strategies rather than removal (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Gilliam et al., 2016; Love & Beneke, 2021; Zeng et al., 2020; Zinsser et al., 2019). Trauma-informed care does more than reduce exclusionary incidents; it transforms educators' mindsets, shifting discipline from punitive responses to empathetic engagement with students' lived experiences (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Gilliam et al., 2016). When educators consistently apply trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches, classrooms become environments where children's behaviors are understood within the context of their lived experiences rather than viewed as isolated incidents of misconduct. This transformation fosters trust between educators and students, builds emotional safety, and helps dismantle punitive mindsets perpetuating exclusionary discipline (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Love & Beneke, 2021; Zinsser et al., 2019). In doing so, educators are empowered to create learning spaces where all children, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds, are affirmed and supported. For example, when a Black boy exhibits what might traditionally be labeled as "aggressive" behavior during play, a culturally responsive educator would recognize this as potentially reflecting culturally valued assertiveness and work with the child to channel this strength appropriately rather than immediately implementing consequences or requesting family intervention.

Despite the strong evidence supporting these interventions, a persistent barrier to their widespread adoption is the lack of consistent funding. Many schools rely on temporary grants or short-term initiatives to fund mental health and behavior support programs, leading to inconsistent implementation over time (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Gilliam, 2005; Loomis et al., 2022; Novoa & Malik, 2018; Zeng et al., 2020). Schools often default to punitive discipline methods without stable investment rather than sustaining proactive, intervention-driven approaches (Giordano et al., 2024; Loomis et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2024).

Understanding trauma and supporting mental health are vital steps, but without addressing the underlying racial and ableist biases in disciplinary practices, such efforts risk being incomplete.

Racial and Ableist Biases in Disciplinary Practices

Implicit racial and ableist biases significantly shape disciplinary decisions in early childhood settings, resulting in the disproportionate penalization of behaviors that deviate from white, middle-class norms (Allen et al., 2021; Love & Beneke, 2021; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Sabol et al., 2022). These biases contribute to the persistent overrepresentation of Black children and children with disabilities in exclusionary discipline. Scholars argue that traditional punitive discipline models not only fail to address underlying behavioral causes but also exacerbate trauma, emphasizing the need for trauma-informed strategies in early childhood disciplinary policies (Barbarin et al., 2019; Bartlett & Smith, 2019).

Research emphasizes prioritizing positive behavioral interventions and social-emotional skill-building for young children to create equitable discipline policies. Schools incorporating structured behavioral support see significant reductions in exclusionary discipline as educators are equipped with alternative strategies beyond punishment (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2011). For instance, a preschool implementing tiered behavioral support might use peer mediation circles when conflicts arise, teaching children to express their feelings using "I" statements and collaborative problem-solving rather than removing children from activities or suggesting they need a "break" at home. Ultimately, reducing soft expulsions in early childhood education requires not only policy reforms but also systemic changes in educator training, school accountability, and community partnerships (Allen et al., 2021; Kulkarni et al., 2022; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). These approaches signal a broader call for educational systems to prioritize equity-centered frameworks. Without this transformation, early learning environments risk perpetuating patterns of harm for historically marginalized children (Love & Beneke, 2021; Zeng et al., 2020). While trauma-informed and mental health supports directly address the developmental and emotional needs of young children, these interventions must be paired with professional learning that helps educators recognize and interrupt the biases driving exclusionary practices. The next section focuses on anti-bias professional development as a critical strategy for reducing soft expulsions and fostering equity in early childhood education.

Comprehensive Anti-Bias Professional Development

Even with trauma-informed interventions and mental health supports in place, the persistence of soft expulsions emphasizes a deeper issue, unexamined bias within classroom decision-making. Educators play a central role in shaping disciplinary outcomes, and without intentional anti-bias professional development, implicit racial and ableist biases will continue to influence perceptions of student behavior (Gilliam et al., 2016; O'Grady et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2019). Early childhood educators must be equipped to recognize and challenge these biases, shifting their daily practices toward equity-driven responses to disrupt exclusionary discipline patterns. Comprehensive anti-bias training is critical for transforming how teachers interpret and respond to behaviors, particularly for children from historically marginalized communities (Barbarin et al., 2019; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). While teacher preparation programs are expected to equip educators with effective classroom management strategies, they often fail to address the underlying factors that drive exclusionary discipline practices (Bartlett & Smith, 2019). This gap in training has real consequences: children who are repeatedly excluded from early education settings are more likely to experience academic disengagement, negative self-perceptions, and later involvement with the juvenile justice system (Andrew & Blake, 2023; Barbarin et al., 2019; Gilliam et al., 2016; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Together, this research highlights that anti-bias training is not a peripheral strategy but a foundational shift necessary to interrupt patterns of educational exclusion. Educators must be prepared to critically examine how systemic inequities influence their daily interactions with students.

One of the key barriers to equitable discipline is that teachers do not always recognize how bias influences their perceptions of student behavior. Research shows that teachers are more likely to interpret behaviors differently based on a child's race or disability status, often perceiving Black children and children with disabilities as more disruptive than their peers (Gilliam et al., 2016; Novoa & Malik, 2018).

This is not necessarily due to overt racism or ableism but rather the result of implicit biases (Sabol et al., 2022). These biases are not just abstract concepts; they have tangible effects on students' educational experiences. Novoa and Malik (2018) found that teachers frequently mistake disability-related behaviors for defiance, leading to unnecessary disciplinary action. Similarly, Gilliam et al. (2016) found that Black boys are more closely monitored for behavioral infractions, even when they have not engaged in any misconduct. The implications of these findings are clear: if educators are not trained to recognize and disrupt these biases, disciplinary disparities will continue, reinforcing patterns of educational exclusion. Moreover, teacher stress amplifies these biases (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Steed et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2019). When under pressure, educators are more likely to default to punitive discipline rather than considering the root causes of behavior (Murphy et al., 2024). This is particularly concerning because young children, especially those experiencing trauma, often exhibit behaviors that are expressions of unmet emotional needs rather than intentional misbehavior (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gilliam, 2005; Love & Beneke, 2021; Murphy et al., 2024). In other words, when teachers are stressed and lack training in self-regulation and trauma-informed care, they are more likely to perceive normal childhood behaviors as problematic.

Adding to this complexity, early childhood classrooms often operate on unspoken expectations of compliance and self-regulation, which are shaped by white, middle-class norms (Barbarin et al., 2019; Fenning & Rose, 2007). Love and Beneke (2021) argue that teachers must actively move beyond bias awareness to challenge these exclusionary norms. For instance, many classrooms emphasize quiet, seated participation, failing to account for children who learn best through movement or verbal engagement. When educators are not trained to recognize cultural differences in behavior and communication, they may unknowingly discipline children for failing to meet arbitrary expectations rather than for actual misconduct. This research signals a broader call for educators to reevaluate traditional discipline expectations rooted in dominant cultural norms. For example, an educator might misinterpret a Latinx child's animated storytelling and physical gestures during circle time as "disruptive" rather than recognizing it as a culturally valued form of expression, leading to unnecessary redirection or exclusion from group activities. Without this shift, even well-intentioned educators may perpetuate exclusionary patterns by penalizing culturally diverse expressions of learning and behavior.

A critical flaw in many teacher preparation programs is the lack of training on social-emotional learning (SEL) and non-exclusionary discipline strategies. Many early childhood teachers enter the classroom without the skills to help children regulate emotions and resolve conflicts, leaving them to rely on punitive discipline instead (Steed et al., 2024). This is particularly harmful for children who struggle with self-regulation due to trauma, disability, or environmental stressors. Research has shown that racial bias influences teacher-child interactions from an early age, and when combined with inadequate training in SEL and behavioral interventions, it fuels racialized discipline patterns (Barbarin et al., 2019; Gilliam et al., 2016). If these biases are left unaddressed, they feed into the school-to-prison pipeline, reinforcing long-term systemic inequities (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Murphy et al., 2024). While pre-service training is critical, it is not sufficient on its own. Research has shown that one-time implicit bias training is not enough to change behavior—bias reduction requires ongoing practice and reinforcement (Gilliam et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2024; Steed et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2019). For educators, ongoing reflection and practice in bias recognition are essential to moving from awareness to action. Embedding these reflective practices into professional development ensures teachers are consistently equipped to create inclusive classroom environments.

Recognizing bias is only the first step; educators must also be given the tools to challenge and correct these biases through ongoing professional development. If teachers do not have opportunities to reflect on their own disciplinary decisions, they may unknowingly reinforce racial and ability-based disparities (Fenning & Rose, 2007). One of the most effective ways to counteract bias in discipline is through regular, structured training that includes self-reflection, case studies, and peer discussions (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gilliam et al., 2016; Love & Beneke, 2021; Zinsser et al., 2019). For example, mental health consultation has increased teacher empathy and reduced exclusionary discipline (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Gilliam et al., 2016;

Steed et al., 2024). This suggests that providing teachers with structured opportunities to examine real-world disciplinary scenarios can lead to significant changes in behavior.

Bias is further exacerbated when educators lack training in trauma-informed care. Loomis et al. (2022) emphasize that without trauma training, teachers often misinterpret survival-based behaviors as willful defiance. Murphy et al. (2024) found that teachers without trauma-informed training were significantly more likely to use exclusionary discipline, reinforcing the urgent need for professional development. While ongoing professional development in implicit bias and trauma-informed care is crucial, it must be complemented by culturally responsive approaches to discipline. The next section will explore how culturally responsive discipline practices can help educators create inclusive environments that reduce exclusionary discipline and promote equity in early childhood education.

Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Teaching Practices

Efforts to eliminate soft expulsions and disciplinary disparities in early childhood education must extend beyond bias reduction and trauma-informed care to include culturally responsive and inclusive teaching practices. While implicit bias training raises awareness, it does not automatically translate into more equitable discipline practices unless paired with culturally responsive strategies, structured SEL implementation, and meaningful family engagement (Gilliam et al., 2016; Love & Beneke, 2021; Murphy et al., 2024; Steed et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2019; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). Without these supports, educators may continue enforcing exclusionary discipline despite their bias awareness. Addressing disparities requires embedding culturally responsive strategies directly into classroom routines, interactions, and curriculum—not just relying on isolated training. Evidence from previous research indicates that misinterpretations of behavior, gaps in SEL implementation, weak family-school partnerships, and teacher-student relationships all contribute to disparities in the exclusionary discipline (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gilliam et al., 2016; Steed et al., 2024; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). Addressing these issues requires a shift from punitive, compliance-driven discipline to relational, culturally affirming approaches that respect student identities and create inclusive classroom environments.

Many teachers interpret student behavior through dominant cultural norms, often mislabeling culturally influenced behaviors as disruptive (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Educators risk reinforcing inequities without adequate training in non-exclusionary and culturally responsive discipline strategies (Steed et al., 2024). Moreover, the informal nature of soft expulsions often goes unrecognized as exclusionary, allowing such practices to persist unchecked (Murphy et al., 2024). Even when formal expulsions are prohibited, a lack of teacher training and clear accountability measures enables the continued enforcement of exclusionary norms (Gilliam, 2005). Addressing this issue requires moving beyond policy reforms to provide educators with explicit, culturally responsive guidance for managing behavior equitably.

Social-emotional learning has been widely adopted as a strategy for improving classroom behavior and reducing suspensions, but its effectiveness depends on how it is implemented (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Gilliam et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2020; Zinsser et al., 2019). Loomis et al. (2022) found that culturally responsive SEL programs help reduce racial disparities by training educators to recognize and affirm diverse emotional expressions rather than viewing them through a deficit-based lens. Instead of expecting all children to regulate emotions similarly, culturally responsive SEL helps teachers understand how cultural differences shape students' responses to frustration, authority, and peer interactions. For practitioners, this emphasizes the importance of adapting SEL to reflect students' diverse cultural and emotional frameworks, promoting inclusive emotional learning rather than enforcing uniform standards of behavior. The effectiveness of SEL also depends on the level of institutional support provided to educators. Murphy et al. (2024) found that teachers in high-support environments, where SEL strategies were implemented alongside behavioral consultation and collaborative intervention strategies, were significantly less likely to rely on exclusionary discipline than teachers in low-support environments. This highlights the need for ongoing SEL training and mentorship so teachers can apply strategies equitably rather than reverting to punitive approaches when faced with behavioral challenges. For example, a teacher with ongoing coaching support might respond to a child who throws materials during a frustrating task

by first checking if the child needs sensory breaks, offering alternative ways to express frustration, and collaborating with families to understand triggers, rather than immediately removing the child or suggesting they're not ready for the classroom environment.

Steed et al. (2024) found that many early childhood educators lack structured training in SEL and non-exclusionary discipline strategies, leaving them unprepared to implement alternatives to punitive discipline. The Children's Equity Project (2020) further highlights this gap, noting that only 20% of early childhood educators received any SEL training in the past year, significantly impacting the consistency and effectiveness of SEL-based discipline approaches. Research also indicates that SEL training is most effective when integrated with anti-bias education and behavioral consultation—teachers who received both implicit bias training and SEL coaching were significantly less likely to expel students (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Gilliam et al., 2016; Loomis et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2024; Steed et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2019; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). To sustain these improvements, leadership at the district and school level must ensure that culturally responsive SEL and non-exclusionary discipline practices are integrated into professional learning communities, coaching cycles, and performance expectations. Ultimately, culturally responsive teaching practices create classroom environments where all children can thrive, and exclusionary discipline replaces inclusive, strengths-based approaches affirming students' diverse identities and developmental needs.

Family-School Partnerships to Prevent Exclusion

Family engagement is a critical but often overlooked factor in preventing exclusionary discipline. However, many schools fail to engage families proactively, only reaching out after behavioral issues escalate (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Gilliam et al., 2016; Love & Beneke, 2021; Murphy et al., 2024; Steed et al., 2024; Zinsser et al., 2019). For educators, this reactive approach creates missed opportunities to build trust with families before disciplinary challenges arise. Research suggests that shifting to structured, ongoing collaboration with parents—rather than reactive engagement—reduces exclusionary discipline rates and strengthens school-community relationships (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Loomis et al., 2022; Novoa & Malik, 2018; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Sabol et al., 2022; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022).

Loomis et al. (2022) emphasize that parental involvement in pre-expulsion policies and transition planning helps reduce exclusionary discipline by ensuring families have a voice in decision-making. This supports educators in approaching discipline through collaborative, rather than punitive, pathways. Schools that take a structured approach to parent engagement—rather than waiting until discipline issues arise—see stronger family-school relationships and better outcomes for children (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Murphy et al., 2024; Novoa & Malik, 2018; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Sabol et al., 2022; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022).

Another barrier to effective family engagement is educator perceptions of parents. Murphy et al. (2024) found that teachers who viewed parents as 'unresponsive' were more likely to justify exclusionary discipline, believing that school-based interventions were the only way to address behavioral issues. This finding emphasizes how implicit biases can influence how teachers perceive students and how they engage with families. Structured professional development that challenges deficit-based views of families and emphasizes strengths-based, culturally responsive partnerships is essential.

Zulauf-McCurdy and Zinsser (2022) found that structured parent-teacher engagement programs protect against preschool expulsion. Schools that establish regular parent check-ins, home-school communication strategies, and shared decision-making processes experience lower rates of exclusionary discipline and stronger parent trust. For educators, building strong partnerships with families shifts discipline practices from exclusion to collaboration, empowering families as co-partners in supporting children's developmental and behavioral needs.

Rather than positioning discipline as a school-driven process, culturally responsive engagement fosters a collaborative approach where educators and families work together to support children's development. When parents and teachers co-create behavior intervention plans, teachers report feeling

more supported in addressing challenging behaviors without resorting to soft expulsions (O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). Culturally responsive and inclusive teaching practices do more than reduce disciplinary disparities—they transform classroom environments into spaces where all children feel respected, valued, and supported in their growth (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Gilliam et al., 2016; Love & Beneke, 2021; Murphy et al., 2024; Steed et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2020; Zinsser et al., 2019). For educators, fostering these collaborative partnerships creates a critical feedback loop—strengthening trust with families, improving student behavior outcomes, and reducing educators' reliance on exclusionary practices. When partnerships are prioritized, educators shift from reactive discipline to proactive, equity-driven strategies, reducing soft expulsions and reinforcing inclusive school climates. For educators and administrators, family-school partnerships are just one critical lever for reducing exclusionary practices. However, without systemic accountability and consistent data collection, even well-intentioned reforms fail to dismantle soft expulsions entirely. The following section critically examines the structural failures in current accountability systems that allow these inequities to persist unchecked.

Critique of Current Accountability Systems

Despite their prevalence in early childhood education, soft expulsions remain largely undocumented due to inadequate accountability mechanisms, highlighting a significant systemic failure (Loomis et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2024; Steed et al., 2024). Existing policies primarily focus on formal expulsions and suspensions, overlooking the more subtle, informal practices that effectively push children out of educational environments. Many teachers and administrators remain unaware of or fail to adhere to non-expulsion policies, often relying on personal beliefs and discretion rather than institutional guidelines, allowing soft expulsions to persist under the guise of mutual agreements between schools and families (Children's Equity Project, 2020; Gilliam et al., 2016; Loomis et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2024; Novoa & Malik, 2018; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Steed et al., 2024).

Significant gaps in tracking teacher-reported behaviors lead to soft expulsions, resulting in these informal disciplinary measures going unnoticed and unaddressed (Sabol et al., 2022; Steed et al., 2024). The decentralized nature of preschool discipline policy enforcement further exacerbates these issues, with minimal federal oversight contributing to highly inconsistent state policies. This variability in state-level expulsion practices and data reporting standards emphasizes the necessity of national standards and structured data tracking (Gilliam, 2005; Loomis et al., 2022). Ohio, for instance, demonstrates that rigorous accountability and data reporting requirements can effectively reduce exclusion rates, serving as a model for national implementation (Loomis et al., 2022).

Addressing these systemic accountability gaps requires comprehensive reforms, including mandatory data collection for all exclusionary practices, clear reporting requirements, and robust oversight mechanisms (Loomis et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2024; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). Without explicit federal mandates and standardized tracking of both formal and informal disciplinary actions, soft expulsions will continue disproportionately affecting marginalized children, perpetuating long-term educational inequities (Loomis et al., 2022; Love & Beneke, 2021; Murphy et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2020). Ensuring equitable and inclusive early learning experiences necessitates addressing these accountability failures directly and comprehensively. For educators, the absence of standardized accountability systems creates an environment where exclusionary practices can operate unchecked, often leaving teachers without clear structures to prevent soft expulsions. Consistent, data-driven oversight protects students and empowers educators with the tools and guidance to foster equitable learning spaces. Such systems allow teachers and administrators to identify exclusionary patterns early, reflect on disciplinary trends, and intervene before informal removals escalate into soft expulsions.

Conclusion and Call to Action

This paper has examined how soft expulsions in early childhood education are deeply rooted in systemic racism, implicit bias, and structural inequities, disproportionately affecting Black children, children with disabilities, and those from marginalized backgrounds. While formal preschool expulsions

have gained attention in recent years, soft expulsions remain an under-examined but equally harmful practice that limits children's access to early learning opportunities and reinforces cycles of educational exclusion. Simply banning formal expulsions in insufficient, systemic reforms must address the root causes of exclusionary discipline, including lack of teacher training, implicit bias, and insufficient behavioral support (Murphy et al., 2024; Novoa & Malik, 2018; Williford et al., 2024). As the sole country worldwide without ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), the United States must urgently develop robust children's rights protections that would make practices like soft expulsions not just professionally discouraged, but legally actionable violations of children's fundamental rights to education.

Creating truly inclusive early learning environments will require a coordinated federal policy framework that prohibits exclusionary discipline and funds teacher professional development, culturally responsive behavioral supports, and policy enforcement mechanisms (Murphy et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2020). Beyond policy, meaningful change requires a shift in early childhood education practices. Anti-bias training, trauma-informed approaches, and strengthening parent-teacher relationships have been identified as key strategies for reducing soft expulsions and fostering more equitable learning environments (Williford et al., 2024; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). Future research should explore how anti-racist interventions in early learning settings can disrupt exclusion patterns and ensure that all children, regardless of race, ability, or socioeconomic background, have access to a supportive and inclusive education (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2024). Future research may also benefit from cross-national comparisons to further understand how systemic inequities in early childhood exclusion manifest globally. Although this paper did not fully explore gender as an analytic lens, future research should examine how race, gender, and disability interact to influence early childhood exclusion. Importantly, interventions should consider the interconnected nature of teacher capacity, school climate, and policy enforcement. Without this multi-level approach, soft expulsions will persist as a hidden driver of inequality in early education. Creating an equitable early childhood education system requires more than just eliminating formal expulsion; it demands a fundamental reimagining of disciplinary policies, teacher preparation, and school climate. By investing in proactive support, policy accountability, and educator development, we can move toward a future where no child is unfairly excluded from learning opportunities (Loomis et al., 2022; Novoa & Malik, 2018; Zeng et al., 2020).

Declarations

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