Contributing factors that lead to inequalities in academic achievement between minority and non-minority K-12 students within the United States: A literature review

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Research Question: What factors lead to inequalities in academic achievement between minority and non-minority K-12 students within the United States?

Introduction

When children enter kindergarten, gaps in achievement between students of different socioeconomic, language, and racial backgrounds already exist. According to Valentino, achievement gaps between African American and Latinx American children compared to White children are about three years apart in learning at the start of kindergarten. The same gap applies between children of low and high socioeconomic background and between dual language learners and their native English-speaking classmates (Valentino, 2018).

Publicly funded prekindergarten has been discussed to aid children’s academic skills to reduce gaps in academic achievement, before children enter kindergarten, by preventing children from falling further behind their classmates in later grades. Valentino proposed that public pre-K can assist in narrowing the achievement gap if pre-K quality for low SES or minority students is higher than high SES or non-minority students, if low SES or minority students benefit more from public pre-K, and if public pre-K is attended more by low SES or minority students. Programs of high quality have the best outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Valentino, 2018). Moreover, the Coleman report suggested that resources for instruction including teacher quality, facilities, and curriculum have distinctive impacts on the academic achievement of minority and non-minority students (Smith, Trygstad, & Banilower, 2016).

The California Department of Education found that children who attend pre-K are more likely to do well academically and socially throughout the duration of their schooling and into their adult life. They were less likely to be placed in special education classes, drop out of
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school, or encounter law enforcement. Also, they attended college and avoided unemployment (Slaby, Loucks, & Stelwagon, 2005). Slaby et al. described pre-K as a mechanism to equal the playing field and prepare children to thrive in kindergarten. Pre-K focused on shared reading and the development of phonological sensitivity and oral language (Slaby et al., 2005).

A case study, conducted by Superintendent Robert Slaby in 1999, introduced a preschool program in the Salinas City School District aimed at preparing four-year olds for kindergarten. Within five years, eight elementary schools introduced preschool programs, and the results showed increased attendance, parental involvement, and academic performance. It was proposed that preschool programs provide safe and supportive environments while enhancing each child’s optimal development, self-esteem, sense of competence, and positive feeling towards learning (Slaby et al., 2005). However, even with the addition of preschool programs, the academic achievement gap between minority and non-minority K-12 students is still substantial.

Academic achievement gaps occur when a group of students exceed another group, and the difference in average scores is statistically significant (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). According to the National Education Association, racial and ethnic minorities, English language learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families are groups that experience academic achievement gaps. The ethnic groups affected are American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, African Americans, and Latinx Americans, but racial disparities in education follow a pattern where African American, American Indian, Latinx, and Southeast Asian groups underperform academically relative to Caucasian and other Asian Americans (American Psychological Association, 2019; National Education Association, 2019).
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The American Psychological Association suggest that educational disparities are present in early childhood and continue through K-12 education. They are reflected in tests scores assessing academic achievement, dropout rates, access to opportunities, and attainments like a high school diploma, college degree, or employment (Abramson, 2018; American Psychological Association, 2019; National Education Association, 2019).

Standardized test scores are the main tools of comparison for the gaps in educational achievement between Caucasian and non-Asian minority students. However, standardized test scores cannot depict the academic outcomes for minority students that are influenced by unequal access to key educational resources, including skilled teachers and a quality curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Students receive varying educational opportunities based on their social status, and society naturally blames the student or parent if they do not succeed.

In the past, most minority students were taught in segregated schools funded at rates lower than those serving non-minority students, and they were excluded from higher education institutions (Darling-Hammond, 1998). When the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that racial segregation of public schools was unconstitutional, there was an improvement in racial educational disparities (Center for Education Policy Analysis, 2019). The end of legal segregation and equalized spending made a significant impact for student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Darling-Hammond found that the gap in minority and non-minority student test scores, on every major national test, narrowed significantly between 1970 and 1990. The scores of African American students increased 54 points between 1976 and 1994 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), while scores of Caucasian students remained the same (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Even so, the progression of narrowing racial educational disparities is still slow and unequal.
Darling-Hammond found that two-thirds of minority students still attended schools that were predominantly students of color with most of them located in inner cities and underfunded. Also, these schools had fewer resources compared to schools serving mostly non-minority students. Schools with high concentrations of low-income and minority students received fewer instructional resources, and school-district restrictions increased these inequalities by segregating low-income and minority students within schools. The school-district restriction policies left minority students with fewer and low-quality books, curriculum materials, laboratories, and computers. In addition, they had larger class sizes, less qualified and experienced teachers, and less access to high quality curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 1998). In result, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was created to improve the academic achievement of students in poverty, minorities, students receiving special educational services, and English language learners (Lee, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2004b). The NCLB was designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

According to the U.S Department of Education, the NCLB Act increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools by implementing statewide accountability systems covering all public schools and students. It challenged state standards in reading and mathematics by introducing annual testing and progress objectives for third to eighth grade students, ensuring all students reach proficiency within twelve years. The NCLB Act provided more choices for parents and students, specifically students attending low-performing schools. It allowed students to attend a better-performing public school, if their school failed to meet state standards, and it made districts provide transportation to the new school. The NCLB Act increased flexibility for states, school districts, and schools. It gave states and school districts
flexibility in the use of federal education funds in exchange for strong accountability in performance results. Lastly, the NCLB Act initiated a stronger emphasis on reading. It increased the federal investment in evidence-based reading instruction programs in early grades (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a). The NCLB Act was in effect from 2002 to 2015. It was a revised version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 (Lee, 2019).

Based on Lee’s analysis of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the NCLB led to inclusion because students with different learning and thinking abilities were included in the general education curriculum. Schools gave in-need students more support, and the graduation rates for students with specific learning disabilities increased from 57 percent in 2002 to 68 percent in 2011. However, the NCLB Act focused highly on standardized testing and pressured schools and teachers to perform well which resulted in firing school staff and closing schools that were not performing well (Lee, 2019). While the NCLB Act led to more interventions aimed at improving the academic performance of different groups of students, the shutdown of public schools had negative impacts on student performance and created distress within communities (Ansell, 2011; Rosales, 2015). Even with the passing of the NCLB Act, there are still present achievement gaps in the K-12 educational system that separate the performance levels of minority and non-minority students.

Narrowing the academic achievement gap can be tough if children do not have equal access to high quality programs between different socioeconomic, language, and racial groups (Valentino, 2018). In turn, academic inequality can have substantial future impacts. Academic inequality is associated with adverse health, economic, and social outcomes that may limit quality of life due to low quality education. Low quality education is associated with poor health,
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unemployment, and lack of voice. According to Drew, education is important for learning about personal health and hygiene especially for health topics such as basic hygiene, disease and infection, pregnancy, and sexual health. These health topics can become an issue for individuals who do not have adequate knowledge about them. Moreover, jobs are given to the most qualified people. Without a high school diploma or college degree, chances of obtaining a job are low, and unemployment can lead to poverty. Additionally, people with low quality education are overlooked and underestimated due to assumptions of not having adequate skills or confidence to speak up resulting in low quality jobs (Drew, 2019).

Nevertheless, minority students are just as capable of becoming high achievers, but there are structural barriers within society that must be considered when addressing inequalities in academic achievement. Previous research has found various factors attributing to inequalities in academic achievement between minority and non-minority K-12 students within the United States. These factors included socioeconomic status, school quality and effectiveness, educational opportunities and resources, and teacher qualifications. Many more factors were identified, but new or missed studies could be available to further support this topic. Therefore, more research should be performed to close the information gap on what factors contribute to inequalities in academic achievement among this population. Thus, the purpose of this literature review is to identify major factors that contribute to inequalities in academic achievement between minority and non-minority K-12 students within the United States.

Methods

In this literature review, the original search for the first ten articles consisted of articles found from a variety of databases within the University of Georgia Galileo Library Database System. The databases used included SocINDEX, Business Source Complete, PsycARTICLES,
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and Education Research Complete. These databases were chosen to provide a broad view on the subject. Since the study focuses on the factors that contribute to inequalities in academic achievement between minority and non-minority K-12 students within the United States, perspectives from each subject area offered great information to head start research within this field. Collectively, the specified databases provided information on sociology, policy, psychology, and educational research. Several search terms were chosen to receive a broad view of articles.

The terms “educational disparities” and “adolescents” were most common throughout all searches and provided five research articles. Articles were selected based on the abstract. Information that provided a glimpse on factors that positively or negatively influenced academic achievement among minority students were included in the article selection, but an abundant number of articles were still given. For that reason, more precise terms were used to narrow down the search. Therefore, search terms used to obtain the next five articles included “academic inequality,” “academic OR educational,” “disparity OR inequality,” “adolescent OR student,” “minority,” and “academic achievement gap.” A combination of these search terms were used in the article selection process and resulted in five articles.

A more concise article selection process was conducted after reviewing the types of research that were available for this research topic. Three specific databases were used, and they included Education Research Complete, ERIC, and PsycINFO. The Education Research Complete database was chosen to provide research articles on all areas of education, from early childhood to higher education, multilingual education, health education, and testing. The ERIC database was chosen to provide research articles on a variety of educational levels including urban education, elementary and early childhood education, education management, etc. The
PsycINFO database was chosen to provide research articles on behavioral science and mental health.

Through the Education Research Complete database, three search terms yielded the next four research articles. These search terms included “disparity OR inequality,” “achievement,” and “minority.” This search, after factoring in restrictions, resulted in 164 articles. Four research articles were chosen to be included in the research article sample. Through the ERIC database, three search terms yielded the next five research articles. These search termed included “disparity OR inequality,” “achievement gap,” and “minority.” This search, after factoring in restrictions, resulted in 67 articles. Five research articles were chosen to be included in the research article sample. Through the PsycINFO database, the same search criteria yielded the last research article. This search, after factoring in restrictions, resulted in 29 articles. One research article was chosen to be included in the total of twenty research articles.

Articles were limited to scholarly peer reviewed journals from academic sources. The publication dates were between 2009 to 2019 to keep data current. Articles excluded other geographical areas and focused mainly on the United States. This was to ensure that comparisons of educational systems within the United States would not get compared to educational systems of other nations. Lastly, research articles only focused on K-12 students, excluding undergraduate and post graduate college students, to understand the predisposing, reinforcing, or enabling factors that lead to inequalities in academic achievement between minority and non-minority K-12 students within the United States.

Results
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The purpose of this literature review was to identify major factors that contribute to inequalities in academic achievement between minority and non-minority K-12 students within the United States. The major factors were identified as school quality, teacher effectiveness and school support, educational opportunities, and student behavior and discipline.

School Quality

One factor was identified as school quality. School quality refers to how successfully a school supports the development of their students (Hanselman & Fiel, 2017). Structural measures of school quality includes child-staff ratios, class size, full- versus half-day, classrooms material, and teacher credentials. Structural measures indirectly predict children’s academic outcomes through their impact on classroom processes (Valentino, 2018).

White and Asian students have more academic advantage compared to African American and Latinx students in terms of the quality of their schools (Hanselman & Fiel, 2017). Three studies found that minority children are less likely to attend high quality programs compared to their non-minority peers with lower rates of learning (Caughy, Mills, Brinkley, & Owen, 2018; Hanselman & Fiel, 2017; Valentino, 2018). On average, African American students were found to attend the lowest-growth schools and schools high in poverty compared to White students (Condron, 2009; Hanselman & Fiel, 2017). Caughy et al. found that the proportion of children attending below average schools, in terms of effectiveness, was significantly higher among African American children, and they were twice as likely than Latinx children to attend charter schools. Researchers found that charter schools were less effective in supporting reading achievement for low-income ethnic minority children living in an urban area (Caughy et al., 2018). In another study, African American students were more likely to attend minority
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segregated schools, schools located in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and city schools compared to White students (Condron, 2009).

In addition, class size was found to decrease academic achievement and widen the gap in reading by 3.1 percent (Beck & Muschkin, 2012). Also, it was found to have a meaningful difference between African American and White students (Rochelle & David, 2011). In one study, Latinx children had an additional 1.6 students in their classrooms, on average, then White students (Valentino, 2018). In another study, White students were more likely to have a higher student-teacher ratio than African American students indicating a smaller class size (Rochelle & David, 2011).

*Teacher Effectiveness and School Support*

One factor was identified as teacher influence and school support. Teachers have great influence on the quality of students’ learning because they shape the content, presentation, and social environment of instruction at school, and assignment to an effective teacher is an important source of school learning opportunities. The quality of the relationship built between student and teacher parallels with how much students gain from instruction (Hanselman, 2018; Valentino, 2018). Furthermore, school support measured by caring, high expectations, and equity are considered essential to the social, emotional, and school outcomes of youth. Caring refers to the regard for students as individuals, and high expectations refers to the support for students’ ability to meet a high standard of academic effort (J. Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelsohn, 2016).

A study found that assignment to a more effective teacher predicts an increase in learning and is more beneficial for all students (Valentino, 2018). Another found that teacher qualifications accounted for an eight percent growth in reading achievement among primary
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school students. Students with a regular certified teacher scored 5.2 points higher in kindergarten and improved their reading skills over time (Easton-Brooks & Davis, 2009).

However, African American and Latinx students were found to have teachers with fewer years of experience relative to their counterparts, and first-year teachers were associated with lower achievement among African American students (Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Valentino, 2018). Teacher benefits were significantly smaller for African American and Latinx students compared to White students in both mathematics and reading, and differences in teacher characteristics widen the gap in reading by 3.1 percent (Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Hanselman, 2018).

Additionally, students’ perceptions of unequal treatment, exclusion, and discrimination by teachers and other adults in school play a role in poor outcomes among minority youth. A study found that being African American was significantly negatively associated with the levels of care and equity students perceived from teachers and school. African American students perceived lower levels of care from their teachers and reported significantly lower levels of equity, on average, compared to White students in most racially and ethnically homogenous schools (J. Bottiani et al., 2016).

Moreover, research suggested that well-prepared teachers with higher income taught in suburban schools, while urban and rural schools were more likely staffed by novice teachers (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Smith et al., 2016). In a study conducted in California, teachers’ wages varied across school districts. In the San Francisco Bay area, average salaries ranged from $54,000 in Oakland, which served majority of low-income students of color, to about $90,000 in Portola Valley, which served predominantly high-income White students. Oakland and San Francisco fell near the bottom of entry-level pay, while suburban districts
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serving the most advantaged students were found near the top. It was found that a one percent point increase in average adjusted teacher salaries is associated with a three percent decrease in the proportion of uncredentialed teachers, four percent reduction in turnover, and two percent reduction in the proportion of inexperienced teachers. In addition, district scores on the state Academic Performance Index increased significantly as the proportion of teachers without full credentials decreased (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

In the same study conducted in New York, the lowest median salaries were paid in school districts that served 100 percent minority students, while the highest salaries were paid in suburban districts that served predominately White students. It was found that districts serving the highest proportions of minority students have twice as many uncredentialed and inexperienced teachers, and the percentage of teachers without permeant credentials is significantly related to the proportion of students failing the New York state tests in English language arts and mathematics. Similarly to California, a one percent increase in median adjusted teacher salary is associated with a three percent decrease in the proportion of teachers without a permanent credential, two percent reduction in the proportion of inexperienced teachers, and a 1.5 percent decrease in the proportion of teachers with a BA +30 or below (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Low salary districts disproportionately serve large proportions of minority students. Thus, low salary districts have class sizes that are 20 percent larger than high salary districts and are more likely to have less resources available for instruction (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). So, it is important to note that learning opportunities are not all teacher caused, and there are factors present outside of their control. These can be classroom and school resources not at the teacher’s disposal. Teacher-related learning opportunities helped struggling White students
catch up to their peers but struggling African American and Latinx students were left behind. It was found that struggling White students have a variety of advantages that help with school, while struggling minority students faced barriers to obtain these opportunities (Hanselman, 2018).

Educational Opportunities

One factor was identified as educational opportunities. Throughout the majority of time spent in school, the highest achieving African American students either lose advantage or fail to gain advantage relative to White students even when in the same social class (Bécares & Priest, 2015; Robinson, 2010). For example, it was found that African American males achieved lower scores than White males across all social classes on math, reading, and science assessments (Bécares & Priest, 2015). A cause of this could be that as students with different educational opportunities undertake formal schooling, the results can increase or decrease academic inequalities.

Three studies found that minority students are more likely to be academically segregated to lower levels of instruction based on their learning abilities (Archbald & Farley-Ripple, 2012; Nomi, 2010; Smith et al., 2016). For example, Archbald and Farley-Ripple found that African American and Latinx students had lower probabilities of moving onto higher mathematics including honors integrated 3, pre-calculus, or honors pre-calculus (Archbald & Farley-Ripple, 2012). Moreover, ability grouping was a method used to respond to student diversity, and it is more common at the high school level (Nomi, 2010; Smith et al., 2016). Schools using ability grouping had high enrollments, a lower mean SES, a higher proportion of minority students, lower literacy skills, and more heterogenous literacy skills than schools without ability grouping. In comparison, schools with low likelihoods of using ability grouping had low enrollments, a
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higher mean SES, fewer minority and non-English speakers, and higher initial ability students with homogenous cognitive skills (Nomi, 2010).

Nomi found that ability grouping lead to lower reading achievement and lower average achievement in schools that used the method, and the negative effects were significantly greater among low initial ability students. Teachers tend to divide students into smaller instructional groups when classrooms are heterogenous with many students with low skills. Ability grouping has the possibility of increasing achievement inequalities because it leads to lower achievement among low initial ability students while students with high initial ability are less likely to be affected. Research suggested that ability grouping increases achievement inequalities through differential allocation of opportunities to learn. Thus, students in low ability groups are taught fewer challenging materials and are held to lower expectations by teachers than those in high ability groups (Nomi, 2010).

Moreover, Smith et al found that minority students are overrepresented in classes with low-achieving students compared to classes with high-achieving students, and low achieving students have less opportunity than high achieving students. Students perceived by their teachers as low achieving had less access to science teachers who were well prepared to encourage students in science, teach diverse learners, and implement science instruction. In addition, low achieving students were less likely to be taught by teachers who were active in professional development (Smith et al., 2016).

*Behavior and Disciplinary Action*
One factor was identified as student behavior and discipline. Research suggest that punitive discipline, particularly school suspensions, worsen student outcomes, and minor infractions intensify adolescents’ problem behavior (Amemiya, Mortenson, & Wang, 2019).

Two studies found that minority students, specifically African American, received more disciplinary actions and school suspensions than White students even with no significant differences in school attachment, school misconduct, or impulsivity (Amemiya et al., 2019; J. H. Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2017). In schools with high suspension gaps between African American and White students, African American students perceived lower levels of equity, lower levels of sense of school belonging, and higher levels of adjustment problems (J. H. Bottiani et al., 2017).

Moreover, Peguero and Shaffer found that engagement in misbehavior at school increased the odds of dropping out. Compared to White males, minority males were more likely to drop out of school and had the lowest levels of academic self-efficacy (Peguero & Shaffer, 2015). Thus, it was found that minority students were less likely than White students to have higher education goals, specifically Latinx students (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013).

Findings suggests that racial disparities in minor infractions can correlate to racial disparities in the criminal justice system which have an impact on academic achievement among African American students, specifically males (Amemiya et al., 2019; Legewie & Fagan, 2019). Legewie and Fagan found that, as African American males grow older, they begin to experience negative effects of living in areas subject to increased police activity. For fifteen-year-old students, exposure to policy activity decreased test scores and increased the test score gap between African American and White students. In addition, exposure to policy activity reduced
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the attendance rate of African American males but had no effect on other groups (Legewie & Fagan, 2019).

Discussion

As stated before, regardless of school attachment, school misconduct, or impulsivity, African American students were more likely to receive more disciplinary actions and school suspension than White students, and racial disparities in suspensions happen across the country (Amemiya et al., 2019; J. H. Bottiani et al., 2017). A potential explanation is that minority students are more likely to have teachers who endorse more authoritarian beliefs than their non-minority peers (Valentino, 2018). Another explanation is that teachers’ response to minor misconduct are racially biased. Research indicated that teachers form negative judgements of African American students more quickly than White students. In result, African American students are punished more for usual adolescent behavior (Amemiya et al., 2019).

However, major disciplinary actions may escalate adolescents’ misconduct at school rather than deter it, and punishment for minor offenses evoke defiant behavior (Amemiya et al., 2019). These defiant behaviors may result in suspension then arrest and incarceration. Given that teachers respond to misconduct based on race, racial disparities in discipline from elementary to high school disproportionately removes African American youth from schools and can set students up to enter the criminal justice system in adulthood (Amemiya et al., 2019; J. H. Bottiani et al., 2017).

Additionally, high levels of racial disparity in discipline may create a more negative school climate for African American students than White students within the same schools. In result, African American students feel lower levels of inclusive treatment and belonging. When
African American students are more frequently removed from school than their White classmates, it can send a message to all students about the degree in which African American students are welcomed and accepted (J. H. Bottiani et al., 2017).

Academically at-risk students are usually the ones who are placed in the school discipline cycle. These students include those who have prior history of misbehavior, low GPAs, impulsivity, and are economically disadvantaged (Amemiya et al., 2019). Additionally, instead of traditional disciplinary actions like counseling and detention, schools are becoming more dependent on suspensions, expulsions, and law enforcement to punish students. Racially isolated schools that primarily educate students of color are more likely to use the harshest means of discipline. These practices harm academic achievement for all students while increasing the chances of being retained a grade, dropping out, and becoming involved with the juvenile and criminal justice system (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2018). In result, these children are criminalized, isolated, and end up in the school-to-prison pipeline.

The school-to-prison pipeline is a national trend where children are pushed out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice system for minor offenses, and many of these children have learning disabilities or history of poverty, abuse, or neglect (American Civil Liberties Union, 2019; Rehabilitation Enables Dreams Inc., 2019). These children would benefit more from additional educational, mentor, and counseling services, but instead they are isolated, punished, and pushed out (American Civil Liberties Union, 2019). In result, children are deprived of meaningful educational opportunities, future employment, and participation in democracy (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2018).

Minority students are at the highest risk for the school-to-prison pipeline because they are suspended or expelled 3.5 times greater than White students, even for subjective offenses.
compared to more concrete offenses conducted by their White peers (Rehabilitation Enables Dreams Inc., 2019). Furthermore, the American Civil Liberties Union suggest that minority students are put at a higher risk for the school-to-prison pipeline due to their exposure to failing public schools, zero-tolerance discipline, policing of school hallways, disciplinary alternative schools, and court involvement and juvenile detention. The pipeline begins with insufficient resources in public schools. Overcrowded classrooms, ineffective teachers, and insufficient funding secure students in disadvantaged educational environments which increase disengagement and decrease academic achievement. Schools adopt zero-tolerance policies that impose severe punishment regardless of circumstances due to systemic pressures of test-based accountability which increase expulsion and suspension rates. These disciplinary policies push students down the pipeline and into the juvenile justice system (American Civil Liberties Union, 2019).

In addition, schools increase reliance on police rather than administrators and teachers to maintain discipline which subject students to school-based arrests for non-violent offenses like disruptive behavior. The rise in school-based arrests create a path from classroom to jailhouse and exemplifies the criminalization of children. In some districts, students are sent to disciplinary alternative schools that may fail to provide adequate educational instruction. Consequently, students return to their regular schools unprepared and fall behind their fellow peers, or students are pushed through alternative school into the juvenile justice system. Students who become involved in the juvenile justice system face many barriers to reentry into traditional schools and life, and majority of these students do not graduate high school (American Civil Liberties Union, 2019).
Disproportionate racial disparities in the academic school system can lead to adverse effects that impact the lives of many minority students, and one of these effects is prison. It will take extensive educational reform that addresses school environments, curriculums, disciplinary methods, and more to combat the inequalities that are deep-rooted in the educational system.

The Rehabilitation Enables Dreams Inc. suggests many possible solutions to reduce inequalities in the educational system. They suggest that school administrations should create nurturing environments that promote student achievement and success, redesign discipline policies and practices, engage parents and families, and use local resources to help students develop their social and emotional skills (Rehabilitation Enables Dreams Inc., 2019). In an examination of the California Assembly Bill 420, aimed at reducing the number of suspensions issued to students for willful defiance, Dankner recommended training all those in the education of students in appropriate disciplinary practices and the development of a concrete accountability system whereby schools would be required to keep track of all disciplinary actions issued, to whom they were issued, and the reasons for which they were issued. With this practice, schools can monitor what offenses students are being suspended for and effectively address student behavioral issues (Dankner, 2019).

Moreover, Dankner recommended clearly defining willful defiance to avoid continuously expanding zero tolerance policies that have weighed minor and serious offenses on the same scale, thereby reducing a school’s ability to suspend for misdemeanors. Furthermore, the California Assembly Bill 420 introduced an education finance bill which established a grant program to support students at risk for dropping out of school by implementing evidence-based programs to keep students in school (Dankner, 2019). The goal was to increase student engagement and improve school climate.
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Additionally, RED suggested disciplining students inside the school system instead of the criminal justice system (Rehabilitation Enables Dreams Inc., 2019). For example, instead of suspending or expelling a student for disrupting a class, a student may write an apology letter to the teacher or stay after school to help the teacher prepare for the next day, thus keeping students in the classroom rather than pushing them onto the street and criminal justice system (Dankner, 2019).

The school-to-prison pipeline cannot be solved by one approach. It needs to be tackled by all angles that have the child’s best interest at heart. Many students, specifically minority students, have deep rooted causes to their behavioral problems, and educational curriculum and discipline should include a combination of evidence-based methods to ease each student’s troubles. Also, administrators and educators should provide appropriate assistance to meet their students’ needs. Disciplining students while keeping them in the classroom with minimal juvenile justice contact will decrease the funneling of students into the school-to-prison pipeline while increasing graduation rates and improving school safety (Rehabilitation Enables Dreams Inc., 2019).

Limitations and Implications

This literature review provided information about the major factors that contribute to inequalities in academic achievement between minority and non-minority K-12 students within the United States, but there were still some limitations. Since this literature review only acquired research from twenty articles, there could be other factors that contribute to inequalities in academic achievement among this target population. The topic is more complex than what can be addressed in twenty articles. In addition, in the time this literature review was written, more studies could be currently occurring. Lastly, the research conducted in majority of the articles
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were based on non-experimental, cross-sectional data. This data was based on interviews and surveys, which can introduce selection and response bias. More research should be conducted to fully grasp the magnitude of this inequality within this target population so a competent plan for decreasing the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students can be developed, thus reducing the funneling of students into the school-to-prison pipeline. Then researchers could draw insightful conclusions to propose more effective evidence-based programs to better academically assist K-12 minority students in the United States.

Conclusion

This literature review identified four contributing factors that lead to inequalities in academic achievement between minority and non-minority K-12 students within the United States. Factors were identified as school quality, teacher effectiveness and school support, educational opportunities, and student behavior and discipline. Prevention programs geared to education reform should consider these factors which would ultimately decrease the rate in which students enter the school-to-prison pipeline. Future policies and programs that consider these factors would most likely have the greatest impact in reducing inequalities in academic achievement among this target population. In addition to prevention programs, the implication of social support for students with behavioral trouble in school could remarkably increase academic achievement and decrease rates of infraction. Minority K-12 students have the highest exposure to academic inequalities and are more likely to receive disciplinary actions, but through comprehensive education reform and social support, they can have the opportunity to acquire quality education and pursue opportunities beyond K-12 schooling.
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