Transforming Early Childhood Discipline Policy through Collaborative Research and Evaluation

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**Abstract**

Nationwide, 17,000 three- and four-year old children are expelled or suspended from preschool each year (Zeng, Corr, O’Grady, & Guan, 2019). In response, advocates and researchers have called on policymakers to implement policies and legislation to prevent our youngest learners from entering the ‘preschool-to-prison pipeline’ before they have even begun formal schooling. This paper, co-authored by a team of academic researchers, advocates, and policymakers, includes findings from a multi-method, longitudinal study of the implementation of one state’s approach to curtailing early childhood expulsion, Illinois Public Act 100-0105. Original survey and interview data was collected for this study from early childhood program administrators throughout the state. Our findings have already been used to enhance practice, policy, and dissemination efforts, while also documenting barriers and a need for more data. By sharing how our multidisciplinary coalition collaborated to collect, interpret, disseminate, and translate findings from this study, we hope to inform the development of collaborative partnerships in the study of similar policies in other jurisdictions.

*Keywords:* Expulsion, early childhood, policy implementation, multidisciplinary coalition, equity

*Public Significance Statement:* This report describes the experiences of a multidisciplinary team seeking to end the expulsion of young children from child care and preschool programs in Illinois. Through our iterative collaboration, research on the implementation of a new legislation was translated and disseminated to stakeholders reducing unintended consequences and supporting children and programs state-wide.

Transforming Early Childhood Discipline Policy through Collaborative Research and Evaluation

Recent reports have uncovered a crisis in our nation’s early childhood care and education (ECCE) programs – hundreds of children are being expelled from public preschools and private child care programs each day, often for behavior that is developmentally typical (National Survey of Children’s Health, 2016). The rate of expulsion from U.S. public preschools is consistently three-times that of students in grades K-12 combined (Gilliam, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In response, the ECCE community has demanded policies to prevent this practice. Although there is ample evidence that exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspension and expulsion) is ineffective and harmful (American Psychological Association, 2008; Council on School Health, 2013), comparatively less is known about why, how, and from where ECCE expulsion occurs. States and municipalities aiming to comply with federal recommendations to curtail ECCE expulsion (Child Care and Development Block Grant, 2014), therefore, have had little guidance about how best to address their state’s early education system’s needs.

This paper presents preliminary findings from an ongoing longitudinal study through which a team of academic researchers, advocates, and policymakers, sought to better understand the ECCE expulsion policy, Illinois Public Act 100-0105 (IL PA 100-0105). After briefly reviewing the existing literature and policy landscape, we describe how a multidisciplinary coalition collaborated to collect, interpret, disseminate, and translate findings from this study. In the discussion, we explain how initial findings from this research have already been used to enhance practice and policy, while also documenting barriers and areas where additional evidence is needed.

**Exclusionary Discipline in ECCE Settings**

Research has consistently demonstrated that high-quality ECCE significantly improves children’s academic and social-emotional school readiness (Barnett, 2011; Child Trends, 2018; Hatfield, Burchinal, Pianta, & Sideris, 2016). When a child is suspended or expelled, they are deprived of these beneficial social and academic learning opportunities. Unfortunately, expelled children tend to be those who struggle emotionally (Cutler & Gilkerson, 2002) and therefore stand to benefit the most from a supportive early learning program where they can practice the social-emotional skills they will need for kindergarten and beyond. As in K-12, the children who are suspended or expelled from ECCE settings are disproportionately boys and children of color. Black children, specifically Black boys, account for nearly 50% of preschoolers expelled even though nationally, they represent less than 20% of all children enrolled (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Though children’s challenging behaviors (e.g., biting, throwing toys, excessive crying) tend to precede many exclusionary discipline decisions (Zinsser et al., 2017), research has highlighted the contextual and systemic factors associated with increased risk for exclusion. The concentric circles of influence in Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) make a suitable theoretical basis for our investigations of public policy’s influence on more proximal settings that shape children’s lives. This model simultaneously emphasizes the direct influence of transactions between the micro-system environment (e.g., home and school) and the developing child as well as the interactions among systems and settings at more distal levels such as changing cultural values and laws over time.

In line with the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) aspects of the environment most proximal to the child, such as large class sizes, have been linked to expulsion (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam and Shahar, 2006). Additionally, children’s expulsion is associated with inadequate training and pay for teachers, and high levels of stress and depression across the workforce which are transactions between the environment and the teacher that influence a child’s experience (Silver & Zinsser, 2020; Zinsser et al., 2017). Finally, we see that aspects of the broader culture and society, such as implicit biases and the allocation of funding for mental health and social-emotional resources have all been linked to children’s experiences of exclusion (Gilliam, 2016; Perry, Holland, Darling-Kuria, & Nadiv, 2011).

A bioecological framing also helps us anticipate the negative ripple effects of a child’s exclusion. Families left suddenly without care must quickly find suitable care or risk missing work. More than half of Illinois residents live in regions labeled “childcare deserts” because there is such scarcity of licensed programs (Malik et al., 2018). Given the role of ECCE as a work support to parents, it is important to consider the impact of expulsion on whole family units, including increased stress and financial hardship due to missed or lost work opportunities (Southward et al., 2006). Lastly, given that there is no evidence that expulsion is an effective intervention to reduce challenging behavior (Lamont et al., 2013; Skiba & Knesting, 2002), children’s unmet needs will influence any new care arrangement if no additional supports are provided. Children who have been expelled are therefore more likely to be expelled again in the future and are at greater risk of school dropout, and involvement in the criminal justice system (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Raffaele Mendez, 2003).

**Federal Calls for State Action**

With evidence of the high rates and negative impacts of early childhood exclusion mounting, the U.S. Departments of Education (DOE) and Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a joint policy statement in 2014, recommending policy action, social-emotional programming, and unified data systems to support research and accountability. That same year, the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act, a federal flow-through funding source for state early childhood systems, strongly encouraged grantees to address the issue of suspension and expulsion through its guidance on effective state-level practices. Soon after, Head Start, the nation’s largest federally funded early childhood program, clarified its firm stance on the issue in their updated performance standards to forbid exclusionary discipline (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

To comply with this federal movement, states across the country are trying to limit the expulsion of young children from preschool and early learning programs. As of 2018, at least 20 states and the District of Columbia had made progress towards addressing early childhood expulsion, but approaches vary significantly (Grossman-Kahn, Reyes, Maupin, & Gilliam, 2018). Some states, such as Colorado and Louisiana, denounce exclusionary discipline in published administrative guides, reporting standards, and reimbursement requirements. Others, like Arkansas, are enacting systemic plans in accordance with the 2014 joint federal policy statement recommendations (Conners Edge, et al., 2018). At least ten states have successfully passed legislation on the issue (Padilla, Loomis, Davis, Cruden & Drazen, 2020). Yet, states vary in the breadth of their efforts, with many policies applying to only certain age-bands, funding types, or program types (e.g., only children enrolled in public school-based Pre-K).

***Illinois’ Early Childhood Expulsion Law.*** To date, IL PA 100-0105 is one of the most expansive pieces of early childhood expulsion legislation passed across the nation (Meek et al., 2020; Padilla et al., 2020). This law seeks to limit, if not end, the use of exclusionary discipline in any publicly funded or state-licensed early childhood program serving children between the ages of birth to five. Uniquely, the IL PA 100-0105 calls for coordination between the two state agencies that oversee nearly all early childhood programming in the state - the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Other components of the law specifically call out best practices in addressing expulsion by referencing professional development for providers (including explicit references to implicit bias training), family engagement, and exhausting available resources (e.g., Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (I/ECMHC), referrals to Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education, and the child’s primary health care provider). When IL PA 100-0105 went into effect in January 2018, ISBE and DCFS were charged with collaborating to write aligned administrative rules, in consultation with the Illinois Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD).

In order to work across multiple types of programs, IL PA 100-0105 was written in broad language, with the intention that specific guidance would be developed in coordinated agency administrative rules, where the majority of ECCE regulations live. Given that the legislation passed during a state budget impasse, there was also no funding allocated to increase supports to programs, support the implementation of the law, or evaluate the impact of the law. The state also currently has no coordinated data system that would allow policymakers to estimate expulsion rates or compliance across delivery systems (although joint planning efforts between DCFS and ISBE are occurring, under the guidance of GOECD). Early childhood advocates, including this paper’s co-authors at the Ounce of Prevention, GOECD, and Illinois Action for Children (in addition to experts at The Shriver Center on Poverty Law, Fight Crime IL, Erikson Institute, Latino Policy Forum, Ready Nation, and Voices for IL Children), contributed to the drafting of the law’s language and content, through a lengthy process of vetting potential language with various stakeholders, including families, early childhood programs, infant/early childhood mental health consultants, school districts, unions, institutes of Higher Education, and legislators.

Ultimately, the law stipulates that: 1) Programs are prohibited from expelling children from their program because of a child’s behavior; 2) Programs must exhaust all possible resources and supports to retain a child; 3) Programs must document all steps they have taken to address the child’s behavioral needs and to retain the child in care; 4) If the program ultimately cannot meet the behavioral needs of a child, providers must work with the family to identify and transition the child into an alternative and appropriate care setting, such that there is no loss of services to the child; and 5) Programs must collect and report data on children transitioning out of their program.

**The Present Study**

At present, Illinois is aggressively pursuing the goal of becoming the “best state in the nation for families raising young children” (Issa, 2019) by enacting sweeping reform of early childhood systems and policies. In many ways, the successful implementation of IL PA 100-0105 is one of the first efforts along this path. Given the groundbreaking nature of this legislation and the limited existing research on related policy efforts at the national level, it was imperative that we study the implementation of IL PA 100-0105 closely and over an extended period of time. In conceiving this implementation study and in accordance with the principles of community psychology, the principal investigator (the second and corresponding author) derived research questions guiding this study in response to the expressed needs and concerns of the early childhood community. Specifically, advocates and policymakers were concerned that without a baseline understanding of expulsion rates, there was no way to assess the effects of the law. Additionally, there were concerns that providers were ill-informed and unprepared to comply with the law which could lead to significant unintended consequences.

To ensure that the findings of this study were meaningful to those most likely to utilize them, a coalition was convened of early childhood community stakeholders to devise research questions, provide feedback instrumentation, assist with the study design, analysis, and interpretation of results. This coalition included staff from the GOECD, the Illinois Head Start Association, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and Illinois Action for Children, as well as faculty from ECCE training programs, master practitioners, and early childhood program administrators. Feedback was sought iteratively throughout each study wave and coalition members identified outlets for and assisting in disseminating results to additional stakeholders.

In the present study, we focus on findings from this collaborative, longitudinal, mixed-method study that have or will translate into practice and policy changes. Specifically, we present here a brief overview of the larger study’s methods by study year and highlight findings related to the coalition’s priority questions: 1) How many children are being excluded from Illinois early childhood programs and how do exclusion rates differ across child and program characteristics? 2) How knowledgeable are administrators of the new law? 3) What barriers do programs face in accessing resources stipulated in the legislation? and 4) How have exclusion rates changed over time since the passing of PA 100-0105?

In this initial paper focused on the translation of findings into practice and policy changes, we will share preliminary results from the ongoing study, with an eye towards areas of concern, confusion, and inequity. The aim of this paper is to inform the development of collaborative partnerships in the study of similar policies in other jurisdictions. To that end, we present a brief overview of our methodology, highlight key findings, and discuss how this collaborative research is already transforming practice and policy in Illinois and beyond.

**Methods**

**Procedures & Participants.**

***Year 1 (2017-2018).*** Over the summer of 2018, an online survey was disseminated via regional and state-wide child care and early childhood provider listservs made available through the coalition and existing partnerships. To participate, respondents had to serve in an administrative role in an Illinois early childhood program serving children between birth and five years of age. Administrators from 154 early childhood programs throughout the state participated in the Year 1 online survey. Most were center-based, partially privately funded, and in urban areas. Given the novelty of both our overarching research topic and the legislation within Illinois, our research team felt that a mixed-method approach would be the best methodological approach to understand providers’ expulsion legislation experiences. A subsample of survey participants willing to be re-contacted (*N*=105) were intentionally recruited to maximize variation across two key variables of interest to the coalition: knowledge of the law and center location, for a total of 25 administrator interviews.

***Year 2 (2018-2019)***. In September of 2019 we emailed the Year 2 survey link directly to administrators who had agreed to be contacted about future studies. Thirty-six (34% of those contacted) completed the entirety of the second survey. In addition, the survey link was also disseminated on the same listservs and networks from Year 1 and 58 additional administrators provided data (Year 2 *N*total = 94). Details about the repeat participants and the full Year 2 sample can be found in Table 1. A notable difference in Year 2 is the increased participation by Home-Based providers, both in the Year 2 full sample and the repeat participants. Additionally, a smaller proportion of programs that participated in both years accepted any private tuition payments (i.e., more were fully publicly-funded).

**Measures**

***Year 1 (2017-2018) Online Survey.*** Administrators were asked to report on program characteristics, such as program type (e.g., center-, school-, home-based, etc.), funding streams (tuition-based, publicly-funded, or blended funding), their ExceleRate rating (Illinois’ Quality Rating Improvement System), and their program’s ZIP code, from which urbanicity was dichotomously coded (urban vs. non-urban) using 2013 Census track definitions. Additional survey items captured staff and child demographics.

To understand rates of exclusionary discipline, administrators were asked to report how many times in the past 12 months the following occurred as a result of behavioral concerns: 1) a parent was asked to pick up their child early from school (early pick-ups), 2) a parent was asked to keep their child at home (suspensions) temporarily, or 3) a child was asked to permanently leave the program (expulsions). Administrators also reported on how knowledgeable they were about the new law (on a 5-point Likert scale), their program’s prior experience with I/ECMHC, and their anticipated changes to practice in response to the law. To ascertain disproportionality of exclusion, administrators were also asked to provide the gender, age, and race of expelled children using a series of Likert scales (i.e., “What proportion of the children asked to leave your program permanently were…. Female” 0= “None”; 5= “All or Almost All”). Unfortunately, a high number of administrators skipped the enrollment (20%) and/or excluded child demographic (15%) questions. Further, when these items were completed, many responses were illogical (e.g., reporting that a single child was expelled, but that “half” of expelled children were boys). For these reasons, we dropped planned child characteristics analyses from Year 1 and revised our methodology for Year 2 as is discussed below.

***Year 1 (2017-2018) Phone Interviews.*** Semi-structured telephone interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes depending on the expansiveness of participants’ responses. All interviews were professionally transcribed. Analyses presented here focus narrowly on three interview questions pertaining to anticipated changes to policies and transition practices to comply with the legislation as well as experiences with mental health consultation services. These questions were prioritized by coalition members and *a priori* codes were developed in collaboration with coalition members and based on preliminary analyses of survey data. For example, codes were applied to responses to a question about whether and how their management of children’s challenging behavior has changed in response to the law as follows ‘no changes planned’, ‘changes planned but not yet implemented’, or ‘changes already made’. For the latter two codes, five sub-codes based on legislation language were then applied to describe the type of change (e.g., increase teacher training). A random sample of 25% of transcripts was selected for dual-coding by the two lead authors’ and agreement for codes across these three questions was high, (*PA* = 93%; Mean κ = 0.87 (range 0.74 – 1.00); Syed & Nelson, 2015). Nevertheless, coders held regular consensus meetings to discuss any points of uncertainty.

***Year 2 (2018-2019) Online Survey.*** Shortly after the release of the report of Year 1 findings, members of the coalition advised the research team on the content and scope of a follow-up study. The new survey asked administrators to report on practices and experiences during the 2018-2019 school year. The survey repeated many questions from the Year 1 survey, but per stakeholder’s requests, we expanded the questions on expulsion to better capture mechanisms for excluding a child. In Year 2, administrators specifically reported on the number of children displaying challenging behaviors who were non-voluntary dis-enrolled (i.e., expelled); had a planned transition into another program; and whose family voluntarily withdrew them (a proxy variable for a soft expulsion or being encouraged to leave). We additionally included more structured scenario-based assessments of administrators’ knowledge of key components of IL PA 100-0105, including questions about what types of programs must comply with stipulations, what practices were allowed and disallowed, and planned reporting requirements.

An additional significant difference between the Year 1 and Year 2 surveys was in our collection of child-level demographic data. Specifically, in the Year 2 survey administrators completed demographic questions for each child who was permanently excluded. Although analysis of these data is ongoing, we report below some preliminary results of the most pressing coalition questions pertaining to change over time, the mechanisms of exclusion, and the characteristics of excluded children.

**Results**

**Baseline Rates of Exclusionary Discipline and Systematic Variance by Program Characteristics**

Based on the stated needs of coalition members, the first priority analysis using Year 1 survey data was to determine how pervasive expulsion was and whether there were any patterns in which expulsion was most likely. All three types of exclusion (e.g., early pick-ups, suspensions, and expulsions) were fairly common during the 2017-2018 school year. Nearly half (48%) of programs had sent at least one child home early, and a third had suspended (32%) or expelled at least one child (35%). Across all participating programs, administrators reported that 93 of the 9,040 children under the age of six in their care (or 10.29 per 1,000 children enrolled) had been permanently excluded from their programs due to challenging behaviors. On average, this represented nearly 2% of each program’s total enrollment.

Year 1 data also revealed several systematic variations in the exclusionary discipline by program characteristics. As ANOVA results in Table 3 depict, center-based and publicly funded programs on average expelled significantly more children. Comparisons using the proportion of enrollment expelled showed similar results. There were no differences in expulsion rates by urbanicity. Expulsion rates also differed by the demographic characteristics of children enrolled. Heterogeneous programs with no racial/ethnic majority expelled on average more children as compared to programs serving a dominant racial/ethnic group, although it should be noted that this analysis excluded the 26 programs (17% of sample) that failed to provide demographic data for at least 80% of their enrolled students.

**Dissemination of Information, Gaps in Knowledge, and Planned Preparation**

Although on average administrators reported moderate levels of knowledge of IL PA 100-0105, there were significant differences in levels of knowledge based on program characteristics. Administrators with greater self-reported knowledge were more likely to be from programs that received at least some public funding, as compared to programs with no public funding (*F*(2,139) = 6.42, *p <* 0.001), and from programs that had previously worked with a mental health consultant, compared to those that had not (*F*(2,141) = 11.29, *p <* 0.001). Home-based programs were the least knowledgeable on average, compared to center-based programs and programs affiliated with a school district or Head Start (*F*(3,139) = 3.01, *p* = 0.03).

ANOVA comparison groups of low-knowledge (below the mean) and high-knowledge (above the mean) administrators significantly differed in their rates of expulsion (see Table 3), with those who had expelled more children also self-reporting higher knowledge. In follow-up interviews, these comparison groups also differed with regards to their sources of information about IL PA 100-0105. Those who felt more knowledgeable indicated that they had received information from their funder (ISBE), licensing body (DCFS), or from an advocacy organization, such as the Ounce of Prevention Fund. Over a third of interviewed low-knowledge administrators reported that the recruitment materials for the present study were their first notification about the legislation. Sixty percent of interviewed administrators recalled accurate information about IL PA 100-0105, but only a quarter referenced specific aspects of it (e.g., documentation or resource use requirements). At the same time, 32% cited inaccurate information about the law (such as that it only applied to children with developmental disabilities).

Despite nearly a third of administrators reporting that there were children currently enrolled in their programs who were at risk of being expelled, most (58% of those interviewed) indicated that they likely would not make any changes to their practices or policies in response to the legislation. The remaining respondents only cited planned changes to their documentation practices, not mentioning substantive changes to their behavior management, disciplinary, or classroom support strategies. As evidence of possible unintended consequences of the legislation, a quarter of survey respondents (26%) indicated that they would change their admissions policies in response to the new law. For example, several indicated restricting the ages of children they would admit or more carefully screening children’s behavior before enrolling them. A smaller proportion (17%) indicated they would likely change their hiring practices, with several reporting in open-ended responses that they were struggling to hire qualified and experienced staff who could successfully manage children’s behavior.

**Barriers to Compliance and Using Evidence-Based Approaches**

The law specifically cites several recommended approaches to managing and supporting children who display challenging behaviors, including the use of mental health consultation services. Despite Illinois’ free, statewide I/ECMHC system available to all child care programs, only 44% of respondents indicated that their program had previously worked with a consultant. In follow-up interviews, most of those with consultation experience (59%) reported positive perceptions, and only 12% reported negative perceptions of the consultation process. The most commonly cited challenge (29%) associated with consultation was excessive wait times. Some administrators reported waiting “several months” for a consultant to come to observe a child. Respondents consistently called for greater access to consultation services. Notably, in the Year 1 survey, programs that reported prior experience with a consultant tended to expel more children on average in the preceding year than those that had not worked with a consultant. This mean difference approached significance (*F*(1,146) = 3.10, *p* = .08, see Table 3).

The new legislation states that if, after exhausting all resources, a program still needs to remove a child from their care, the administrator must, with consent from the parents, create a transition plan that “ensures the continuity of services” with another program. Coalition members were keen to understand whether and how programs were prepared for this new stipulation. Interviews revealed a misunderstanding of what constituted a planned transition. Although 72% of interviewed programs reported that they had previously planned a child’s transition out, when further queried, it was clear that their definition of a transition plan differed from that stipulated in the law. More than half of these administrators (52%) indicated that their planned transition constituted providing parents with a recommendation about where to enroll their child. Despite the stipulation in the law, nearly a third of all interviewed administrators (32%) indicated they had no plans to assist with the transition process. As one respondent said, “It’s just not going to happen. I’m going to tell them you have a few weeks and they will have to find [another program]”

**Longitudinal Change in Exclusionary Discipline**

By comparing the right- and left-hand sides of descriptive statistics in Table 2, we see that overall and in both the full and longitudinal samples, rates of exclusionary discipline have decreased since Year 1. Proportionally, almost half as many children were sent home early in Year 2 than Year 1 and declines in suspensions and expulsions are even more precipitous. In the school year during which the legislation was passed (2017-2018), 12.61 out of every 1,000 children enrolled in the full sample were expelled, one year later, the rate dropped to just over two per 1,000 enrolled. Similarly large decreases were also seen in rates of early dismissals and suspensions.

**Mechanisms for Exclusion**

With the addition of questions on planned transitions and voluntary withdrawals, however, it is evident that a number of children are still being excluded from care. When summed together, expulsions plus the other mechanisms of exclusion (transitions and voluntary withdrawals) in the full Year 2 sample are approaching the same levels as in Year 1 (i.e., 11.37 per 1,000 children or 2% of enrollment) Looking at just participants in the longitudinal sample, we still see marked declines in the original three exclusion measures (sent home early, suspended, or expelled), but rates of transitions and voluntary withdrawals remain high.

**Persistent Knowledge Gaps**

Responses to the scenario-based questions assessing administrator knowledge of 100-0105 indicated a persistent misunderstanding of the law by administrators. For example, nearly a quarter (23%) believed that home-based providers were not required to comply with the law. A smaller proportion (13%) thought that the law only applied to preschool-aged (3-5 years old) children. Of concern, a majority (60%) believed providing families with a list of local programs successfully met the law’s requirements for a “planned transition.”

**Characteristics of Excluded Children**

Participating programs in Year 2 excluded a combined total of 77 children during the 2018-2019 school year but only provided demographic information on 51 children (66%). Table 4 presents administrator reported demographic data for all enrolled children and excluded children (in total and by mechanism) for whom complete data was available. From these descriptive data we can see patterns of over-representation. For example, while just over half of children enrolled in participating programs were boys, they made up 86% of children excluded. At the same time, girls were slightly over-represented among those voluntarily withdrawn by their parents. Black children were similarly overrepresented across all mechanism of exclusion and when White children were excluded, they were more likely to be voluntarily withdrawn. While infants and toddlers were underrepresented in all mechanisms of exclusion, five-year-olds were over-represented across all mechanisms and four-year-olds were over-represented, especially among those transitioned. Although these data are more complete than those collected in Year 1, the sizeable amount of missing data and misunderstanding of what constitutes a “transition” under IL PA 100-1005 as was reported above, dictate that we should be cautious in interpreting these child-level results.

**Discussion**

Preliminary findings from this ongoing longitudinal study highlight the important role that collaborations can play in crafting policy-informed research and facilitating research-informed policy. Through the use of rich coalition of advocates, policy-makers, and researchers, we devised a study that directly addressed policy-makers’ urgent information gaps and advanced the scientific literature on early childhood expulsion. Given the translational focus of this paper, this discussion will highlight the interpretations of the study’s findings by advocates and policy makers and action steps taken by the coalition to translate findings into meaningful policy and practice adaptations.

**Findings Validate Policy Efforts**

Across the board, results from the study validated initial efforts in crafting the legislation. Differences in exclusion rates across a range of child care program types provide support for policymaker’s adamancy about IL PA 100-0105 applying to ECCE programs across the board. While many states have passed legislation that only applies to publicly funded programs, these data suggest the importance of also including child care, as well as the birth to five age range. When results were presented to the Early Childhood Interagency Team charged with implementing the legislation across agencies, there was robust discussion by policymakers about the different mechanisms at play. For example, in a mixed-delivery system, variation in funding may be impacting a program’s ability or desire to retain a child displaying challenging behaviors. Public funding streams, like the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) reimbursements and Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) public preschool funds, typically provide less money per child than a program would receive from tuition-paying parents and it is rarely enough to support best practices in meeting children’s social-emotional and behavioral needs. Therefore, children and their families paying tuition may be particularly coveted, increasing a program’s likelihood of working with them through challenging behaviors. In a similar vein, even though home-based child care programs are expelling children less often, interviews indicated that they are often where children end up when they have been expelled from center-based care. It is critical that resources and information be funneled to home-based programs to support the needs of children and the adults who care for them.

In December 2019, the Governor established the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding, with the goal of rethinking how resources are distributed across the state to more equitably fund ECCE programs. This funding commission is currently in progress and will continue to meet through January 2021. Findings from this study support the need to think critically about how funding mechanisms are associated with outcomes for children and families, and it is our hope that this data be used to highlight that.

**Translating Confusion into Action**

Coalition members used findings of administrators’ confusion and inaccurate knowledge about the law to facilitate broader dissemination of information about the legislation and to bolster recommendations to state agencies as rules were being drafted and available for public comment. In response to the widespread lack of information and confusion about how to comply with IL PA 100-0105, captured by this study, public awareness presentations and a Training of Trainers (ToT) series was created. Statewide, 188 professional development providers attended a workshop on the legislation and related best practice recommendations. This study informed the way in which the workshop leaders (co-authors on this paper) presented information to participants and the inclusion of findings in the presentation helped to validate the experiences and frustrations of the early childhood practitioners in attendance.

Our findings around unintended consequences and potential “workarounds” that programs might use also greatly informed advocates’ public comments of the rules being drafted by ISBE and DCFS. Members of the coalition along with other organizations who had read the report submitted public comment to the state agencies asking for the following based on study findings: increased clarity in language, especially around the planned transition; increased access to supports for programs, children, and families; documentation resources such as uniform forms and templates; and access to trainings on the stipulations of the legislation and best practices. Capturing the experiences of early childhood program administrators through a research study created a systematic way for these critical voices to be heard throughout the administrative rulemaking process.

Lastly, findings regarding administrators’ confusion around the term “planned transitions” also informed our public comments to ISBE and DCFS. Future iterations of this survey will be revised in accordance with the definition agreed upon during the rule-writing process.

**Reinvestment for Accessibility**

Findings from this study also shed light on some of the barriers that programs experienced accessing the prevention resources outlined in the legislation, especially I/ECMHC. Our study highlighted the fact that there is a statewide need for more mental health consultants. The scarcity both resulted in programs forming negative impressions of the intervention and in the resource being misused as a crisis intervention rather than the long-term, proactive/preventative, relationship-based support it is designed to serve as (Perry, Holland, Darling-Kuria, & Nadiv, 2011). Findings informed the prioritization of infrastructure and professional development around mental health in the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (PDG B-5) Renewal that was awarded to Illinois this past December. Additionally, when results were presented to the state’s Children’s Mental Health Partnership leadership team meeting in 2019, it reinforced the need for state-wide consolidation under a shared model of service delivery to ensure equity. Qualitative interviews provided evidence for one of the concerns of stakeholders from the law’s inception. That is, that by deliberately calling out mental health consultation in the law, programs may be led to misunderstand the service model. Findings reinforced the need to be intentional about working with the Illinois Mental Health Consultation Initiative Leadership Team to clarify Illinois’ model and the intent behind consultation services.

**Progress and Perspective Two Years In**

Year 2 data provide some positive indications that since the passage of IL PA 100-0105, there has been a decrease in the use of exclusionary discipline practices in Illinois child care and preschool programs. Two years past the signing of the bill into law and despite a budget impasse and numerous agency head turnovers, there is evidence of progress. At the same time, as we have seen with K-12 expulsion policy changes (Losen et al., 2015), reductions in overall rates in exclusion have not eliminated gender and racial disparities. Even accounting for limitations in the child-level data, children who were older, Black, or boys were overrepresented among those excluded. Without Year 1 demographic data we cannot specifically determine if disparate rates have changed but such analyses will be conducted with subsequent years of data. At present though, these results suggest that superficial nods toward equity, such as referencing racial and gender disparities and implicit bias training in the legislation will likely be ineffective. Accountability and data systems to track not just overall rates of exclusion but proportionality of disciplinary procedures will be critical to ensure equity in ECCE.

The longitudinal nature of this study also points to multiple instances of persistent confusion and misinterpretation. It is clear that, two years in, programs need greater guidance about how to interpret the legislation and the intent behind it. Findings around points of confusion will continued to be used in the rule-writing process and in the development of training materials for providers and state agencies.

**Limitations & Next Steps**

In order to support policymakers and researchers alike, we believe it is important to include a transparent discussion of the limitations and missteps in this ongoing study. Our low retention rate across the two years raises concerns about selection bias and the fact that perhaps the respondents who had not reduced their exclusionary disciplinary practices chose not to respond to our Year 2 survey. This is a common challenge with the use of convenience samples and we are looking forward to a future statewide data system in which we can be obtain information from all ECCE programs across the state on an annual basis.

Further, through Year 1 and Year 2 of this study we learned difficult lessons about obtaining comprehensive data on the race/ethnicity of children who were expelled. As was discussed above low and incomplete repose rates to questions about expelled child characteristics rendered Year 1 data unsuitable for analysis. Our adjustments in Year 2 did yield more viable data but it is likely that our estimates of disproportionality are significantly biased due to missing data. Specifically, administrators failed to report on the race, ethnicity, gender and age of 34% of excluded children in Year 2. Finally, a number of Year 2 reported transitions are likely miss categorized given the low administrator knowledge found in the scenario-based questions.

Each of these limitations has informed the development of the next wave of surveys but more importantly are poised to inform the methods of future state-wide expulsion data collection in and outside of Illinois. As the state agencies work with GOECD to think about a statewide system to collect data on exclusionary discipline, both the survey items and methodological challenges experienced in this ongoing study will prove beneficial. For example, we have highlighted the importance of asking questions related to expulsion in language that providers use (e.g., “ask a child to permanently leave your program …”) as well as the importance of collecting data on a variety of ways in which a child may be leaving a setting. Our data quality issues pertaining to child race/ethnicity and revised methods will also help to inform a statewide data system. Further, these methodological implications have already spread beyond Illinois. Researchers and policymakers from multiple other jurisdictions, including Arkansas and Oregon, have consulted with the team and revised their approaches based on our experiences.

**Conclusion**

The value of the intentional and early formation of a research-practice-policy coalition to inform the design, interpretation, and dissemination of this implementation evaluation cannot be overstated. Without open lines of communication and the willingness of state agencies to be vulnerable to challenging results, the coalition would not have gleamed these valuable results that are actively being translated into increased knowledge, improved services, and enhanced funding. At the same time, findings paint a complex picture. Illinois continues to be at the vanguard of early childhood policy, and sometimes, being a trailblazing state means that lessons are learned through mistakes and missteps. But without mechanisms to capture the voice of providers on the frontline, instances of misunderstanding, anxiety, and avoidance would go undetected. This coalition is facilitating a feedback loop that continues to reap benefits for the state’s legislation and rulemaking process while validating the experiences of providers. Although the number of laws around exclusionary discipline in early childhood around the country has continued to increase over recent years (Meek et al., 2020; Padilla et al., 2020), research on its implementation and impact has not kept up. It is our hope that this study serves as a roadmap for other states or jurisdictions who have implemented policies to ensure that their legislative actions are maximizing benefits and minimizing unintended consequences.

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|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 1  *Characteristics of Participating Programs* | | | |  | |
|  | 2017-2018 Survey (N=154) | 2018-2019 Survey (N=94) | Repeat Participants (N=36) | | 2017-2018 Interview  (N=25) |
| **Program Type** |  |  |  | |  |
| Center-Based | 65.0% | 64.9% | 59.1% | | 80.0% |
| School-Based | 13.0% | 5.2% | 2.3% | | 8.0% |
| Home-Based | 17.5% | 28.9% | 34.1% | | 8.0% |
| Other | 4.5% | 1.0% | 4.5% | | 4.0% |
| **Geography** |  |  |  | |  |
| Cook County | 36% | 33% | 40.9% | | 46.2% |
| Non-Urban | 27.6% | 41% | 22.7% | | 73.1% |
| **Quality Rating** |  |  |  | |  |
| Bronze | 16.9% | 11.3% | 13.6% | | 7.7% |
| Silver | 18.2% | 13.4% | 18.2% | | 19.2% |
| Gold | 20.1% | 21.6% | 18.2% | | 26.9% |
| **Funding** |  |  |  | |  |
| Accepts some tuition | 62.3% | 72.0% | 56.8% | | 73.0% |

Table 2

*Rates of Exclusionary Discipline*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Year 1** | | | | | **Year 2** | | | | | |
|  | **2017-2018 (N=154)** | | | | | **2018-2019 (N=94)** | | | | | |
| **Full Samples** | Total | *M* | SD | per 1,000 | *M* % enrollment |  | Total | *M* | SD | per 1,000 | *M* % enrollment |
| Enrollment | 7373 | 47.87 | 41.86 | -- | -- |  | 6774 | 69.12 | 127.57 | -- | -- |
| Sent Home Early | 460 | 3.07 | 5.23 | 62.39 | 8.00% |  | 163 | 1.72 | 4.24 | 24.06 | 2.78% |
| Suspended | 184 | 1.23 | 2.75 | 24.96 | 4.14% |  | 45 | 0.48 | 1.39 | 6.64 | 1.29% |
| Expelled | 93 | 0.62 | 1.05 | 12.61 | 2.24% |  | 14 | 0.19 | 0.63 | 2.07 | 1.12% |
| Planned Transition | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |  | 20 | 0.26 | 0.62 | 2.95 | 0.09% |
| Voluntary Withdrawal | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |  | 43 | 0.54 | 1.01 | 6.35 | 1.19% |
| **Repeat Participants (*N*=36)** | Total | *M* | SD | per 1,000 | *M* % enrollment |  | Total | *M* | SD | per 1,000 | *M* % enrollment |
| Enrollment | 1541 | 42.81 | 33.42 | -- | -- |  | 2203 | 48.96 | 36.46 | -- | -- |
| Sent Home Early | 88 | 2.44 | 5.99 | 57.11 | 6.13% |  | 75 | 1.64 | 2.97 | 34.04 | 3.83% |
| Suspended | 45 | 1.25 | 3.75 | 29.20 | 3.42% |  | 33 | 0.73 | 1.86 | 14.98 | 2.36% |
| Expelled | 23 | 0.64 | 0.99 | 14.93 | 2.04% |  | 11 | 0.31 | 0.86 | 4.99 | 1.81% |
| Planned Transition | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |  | 14 | 0.37 | 0.75 | 6.35 | 1.15% |
| Voluntary Withdrawal | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |  | 31 | 0.72 | 1.2 | 14.07 | 1.56% |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 3  *Year 1 (2017-2018) Mean Differences in Expulsion Rates by Program Characteristics* | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  |  | ***N*** | ***M*** | | ***SD*** |  | **SS** | **df** | **Mean Sq.** | **F** | **η2** |
| **Program Type** | |  | |  |  | Between | 14.78 | 3 | 4.93 | 4.71\*\* | 0.100 |
|  |  |  | |  |  | Within | 146.44 | 140 | 4.05 |  |  |
|  | Center-based | 95 | | 0.83 | 1.12 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | School-based | 19 | | 0.16 | 0.50 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Home-based | 23 | | 0.13 | 0.34 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Funding** | |  | |  |  | Between | 6.51 | 2 | 3.26 | 3.00\* | 0.040 |
|  |  |  | |  |  | Within | 155.25 | 143 | 1.09 |  |  |
|  | Accept No Tuition | 53 | | 0.87 | 1.29 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Partial Private Pay | 74 | | 0.58 | 0.94 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | All Tuition | 19 | | 0.21 | 0.54 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Location** |  |  | |  |  | Between | 1.63 | 1 | 1.63 | 1.47 | 0.010 |
|  |  |  | |  |  | Within | 160.54 | 145 | 1.12 |  |  |
|  | Urban | 106 | | 0.7 | 1.16 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Non-Urban | 41 | | 0.46 | 0.67 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Population Served** | |  | |  |  | Between | 13.974 | 4 | 3.49 | 4.33\*\* | 0.123 |
|  |  |  | |  |  | Within | 99.244 | 123 | 0.81 |  |  |
|  | Racially Diverse | 19 | | 1.16 | 1.39 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Majority Black | 26 | | 0.35 | 0.75 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Majority White | 72 | | 0.53 | 0.77 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Majority Latino | 9 | | 0.11 | 0.33 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Knowledge of Law** | |  | |  |  | Between | 14.63 | 1 | 14.63 | 14.15\*\*\* | 0.092 |
|  |  |  | |  |  | 143.64 | 139 | 1.03 |  |  |  |
|  | Below Average | 49 | | 0.20 | 0.45 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Above Average | 92 | | 0.88 | 1.21 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **I/ECMHC Experience** | |  | |  |  | Between | 3.38 | 1 | 3.83 | 3.10+ | 0.021 |
|  |  |  | |  |  | Within | 159.18 | 146 | 1.09 |  |  |
|  | None | 86 | | 0.5 | 0.99 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Any | 62 | | 0.81 | 1.11 |  |  |  |  |  |  |

*Note*. \* *p=*.05, \*\* *p*=.01, \*\*\* *p<.*01, + *p<.10*

Table 4

*Year 2 (2018-2019) Demographic Characteristics of Excluded Children*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Total Enrollment | All Excluded | Transitioned | Expelled | Withdrawn |
| *N children* | 6774 | 51 | 13 | 12 | 26 |
| **Gender** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Girls | 47.70% | 14.30% | 0.00% | 9.90% | 24.00% |
| Boys | 52.30% | 85.70% | 100% | 90.10% | 76% |
| **Race/Ethnicity** |  |  |  |  |  |
| White | 54.01% | 59.60% | 58.30% | 54% | 65.20% |
| Black | 17.18% | 27.70% | 25% | 27% | 30.40% |
| Asian | 10.00% | 6.40% | 0.00% | 18.20% | 4.30% |
| Other/Multi | 3.06% | 6.40% | 16.70% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 16.21% | 8.30% | 0.00% | 16.70% | 15.40% |
| **Age** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Bith-2 | 35.86% | 7.80% | 0.00% | 25.00% | 3.80% |
| 3 Years | 29.39% | 29.40% | 31.00% | 16.70% | 34.60% |
| 4 years | 27.12% | 37.30% | 53.80% | 25.00% | 34.60% |
| 5+ | 7.64% | 25.50% | 15.40% | 33.30% | 26.90% |

*Note:* Although administrators reported a total of 77 exclusions, demographic information was only provided for 51 children. Categorization of mechanism of exclusion is based on administrator report.