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A Multiple Case Study of School Administrators on Use of Disciplinary Measures

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Abstract

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MEd, Mercer University, 1998

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Disproportionately high rates of out-of-school suspension and expulsion of African American children represent an ongoing issue in the U.S. public school system. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory was used as the theoretical framework for this multiple case study. The research question focused on the perceptions, perspectives, and experiences of a purposeful sample of 7 high school principals and what they believed were the reasons for persistently high rates of out-of-school suspension for African American students. The principals represented Title I and non-Title I schools located in urban, rural, and suburban regions of a southern state. Data from individual interviews and archival data were drawn from the U.S. Department of Education, Georgia Department of Education, and Georgia's Governor's Office of Student Achievement. The data were manually coded and analyzed for common themes. Analysis revealed that disrespect between students and teachers was the most common reason for disciplinary referrals for African American students and that there was a need for more positive student–teacher relationships, parental involvement, and the use of alternative methods including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Social-Emotional Learning Programs (SEL). This study may contribute to social change by informing policy makers and indicating potential strategies to support student achievement.

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Dedication

I am very thankful for the support of my husband, son, family, and close friends for helping me stay focused on my PhD journey. I also would like to thank Dr. Dick Percy and Dr. Barbara Benoliel for their guidance and mentorship throughout my process. Finally, I must thank God for allowing me to stay on my path and complete my goal of earning my PhD in Counseling and Human Services.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

There is evidence that the effects of exclusionary disciplinary practices for African American students have been exacerbated by zero-tolerance policies in school systems throughout the nation (Curran, 2016). Curran (2016) reported that zero-tolerance policies were predictive of a 0.5% increase in district suspension rates and no consistent decreases in principals' perceptions of problem behaviors. Curran also indicated that zero-tolerance policies had caused a Black-White suspension gap. Such zero-tolerance policies have shown harmful effects on young African American male students without disabilities, who represent the student population suspended most often (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014). The parents and guardians of these students see the effects of zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline practices/out-of-school suspensions and expulsions through their children's grades and their place in society later in life (Haight & Gibson, 2016).

Other authors have explored factors that may be involved in or related to out-of-school suspensions of African American students, including the family's socioeconomic status (McElderry & Cheng, 2014). According to McElderry and Cheng, students whose parents were on public assistance were at a higher risk of being suspended than those students whose parents did not need assistance. Poverty, the student's racial background, the school location, and school year were also found to be predictors of exclusionary disciplinary practices (Shabazian, 2015). Additionally, students' disability status and gender have been included as significant factors (Sullivan et al., 2013).

One author looked not only at the student's demographic but also at the teachers. Lindsay (2017) saw evidence that African American students had lowered rates of exclusionary discipline practices when they were matched with an African American teacher. Lindsay revealed that 16% of African American male elementary students that were placed with White female teachers faced a higher rate of exclusionary discipline actions than those students who were placed with female teachers of the same race. These research findings have explored factors that are associated with high rates of exclusionary discipline and identified school principals and administrators as the authorities in decision making about suspensions and expulsions in their high schools.

Problem Statement

Rates of-out-of-school suspensions and expulsions in the public-school system continue to reflect statistical overrepresentation of African American students (Curran, 2016). Researchers at Ohio State University (2014) looked at 72,000 public schools with students in kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12) and found that African American students made up 18% of the populations of the schools sampled. They also found that out of the 18% of the student population that was African American, 35% of these students had been suspended once, 46% had been suspended more than once, and 39% of African American students accounted for all expulsions (Ohio State University, 2014).

More recently, policy changes and school administrators' policy implementation have also been under scrutiny as they relate to suspensions and expulsions. Passero (2018) reported that increased rates of suspensions and expulsions are products of school zero-tolerance discipline policies that disrupt students' access to education and contribute

to students dropping out of school due to repeated and long periods of suspension. Another aspect of zero-tolerance policies was shown in a study by Flannery (2015) that revealed these policies to be a leading factor in the school-to-prison pipeline for students who had repeated long-term suspensions. In addition to Flannery, Passero (2018) concluded that these students were prone to be placed in the juvenile justice system due to their suspensions and were more likely to turn to criminal activity. Another study by Loveless (2017) found that African American students were 3 times as likely to be suspended or expelled more than White students.

Haight et al. (2016) concluded that disciplinary measures and out-of-school suspensions of African American students appear to be rooted in racial bias as perceived by students, parents, and some educators. McNeal's (2016) study looked at bias and its role in the implementation of zero-tolerance policies in public schools, the impact these policies have on African American students, and how these policies have propelled the school-to-prison pipeline as out-of-school suspensions remain excessive. Her study concluded that school personnel's unequivocal and inherent racial biases increased harm for students of color, as these students faced severe disciplinary penalties that removed them from their learning environments when they exhibited normal adolescent behavior (McNeal, 2016). Although there is significant literature that explores and explains racial issues and demographic factors related to school discipline rates, the problem is that there is missing information about how school administrators are perceiving and responding to suspensions in their schools.

Another possible piece of the problem involves the locations and kinds of schools that students attend. Logan and Burdick-Will (2017) examined racial disparities in enrollment in urban, rural, and suburban public schools, reporting that only 11-12% of African American students attended schools in rural and suburban districts, meaning that the majority of African American students were living in urban centers. Moreover, African American students are more likely to attend Title I schools as classified by the U.S. Department of Education (2015), which are given financial assistance by state and local agencies because a large percentage of their student bodies live in low-income households. The economic status of a school may be relevant to the problem of suspension and expulsion rates if schools with fewer resources have fewer alternatives to traditional disciplinary sanctions. While previous research illuminates significant findings about the factors that may result in higher exclusionary disciplinary rates for African American students, I have not found research concerning the thinking and decision processes of high school administrators representing different geographic settings and different economic standards on how they are responding to this issue in their schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the perceptions, experiences, and perspectives of a sample of Georgia high school principals of both Title I and non-Title I schools located in rural, suburban, and urban areas in order to understand how these administrators from a variety of school types and locations were responding to higher rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for African

American students (Bazeley, 2013; Matthew et al., 2014). A sample of Georgia high school principals revealed knowledge of the inner workings of their school's environment, the background of their students, as well as the culture of the people in the community based upon the location of the school. The principals reflected on their roles of being responsible for school discipline and how their decision-making authority had affected sanctions for disciplinary offenses in the school.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research question of the study was the following: What are the perceptions of school administrators of Georgia high schools regarding the use of suspensions for discipline of African American students, considering the demographic and economic situations in their area? Demographic data for the specific Georgia location informed the analysis of the cases.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which focuses on a multiple-leveled social environment that organizes interconnecting systems that touch on all aspects of life. Bronfenbrenner's theory was used as a means of organizing and exploring the levels of the social environment of Title I schools and non-Title I schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas. In the context of this study, the macrosystem was the larger social-cultural belief system and the educational system with laws and rules about discipline. The exosystem level included the school neighborhood as urban, suburban, or rural. The mesosystem level of the theory included the reach of the school environment and peer groups, and the

microsystem level included the background (i.e., family) of the students in the school. I

used Bronfenbrenner's Theory to tie the role of the school and social environments of

both Title I and non-Title I schools to their location (i.e., urban, rural, or suburban),

which was also described as the neighborhood of African American students. A

diagrammatic example of an application of Bronfenbrenner's theory to a social situation

appears in Figure 1.
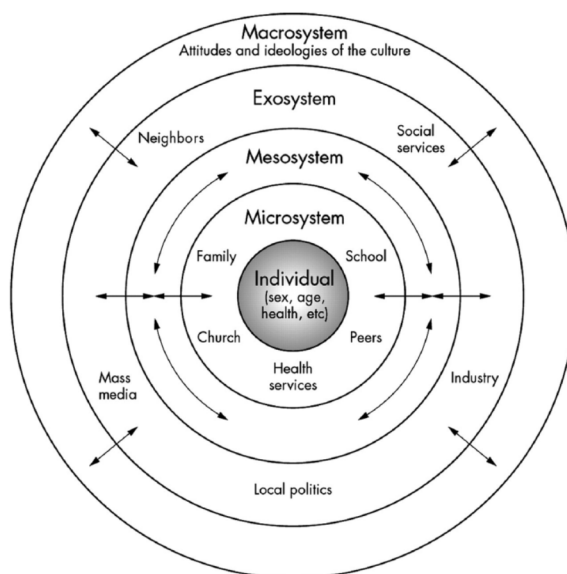
Figure 1. Depiction of application of Bronfenbrenner's multilevel social system from a
study. From "Understanding Female Migrant Child Labor Within a Cumulative Risk
Framework: The Case for Combined Interventions in Ghana," by L. G. Bermudez et al.,
2018, *International Social Work, 63*(2), p. 156 Copyright 2020 by SAGE Publications

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) aligned with the

research question and the focus of the study as a more specific examination of school

administrators' perceptions of the micro-, meso-, and exosystem in their location.

McElderry and Cheng (2015) applied the ecological theory by looking at elements

of the environmental background of students that could be determined as risk factors for

suspensions, such as their race/ethnicity, their gender, and the socioeconomic status of their mothers. Sullivan et al. (2013) used the ecological theory by examining sociodemographic elements such as the students' race/ethnicity, disabilities, gender, and socioeconomic status, and the school's characteristics as predictors and risks for school suspension. Another study using the ecological theory was conducted by Shabazian (2015) and addressed the significance of the location as well as the students' race/ethnicity and the gender composition of the school site as predictors for suspensions. The difference in the results of the Sullivan et al. study and the Shabazian study was that Sullivan et al. indicated that suspension risks were notably related to the gender, race, disability, and socioeconomic status of the student but that school-level demographics, operation, and teacher characteristics were not. On the other hand, Shabazian's results suggested that exclusionary disciplinary practices were associated with opportunity transfers and expulsions. The results also suggested that mixed exclusionary practices existed throughout the school district, with the least exclusionary actions taking place in higher income areas and the most exclusionary actions occurring in lower income areas (Shabazian, 2015).

This current study went a step further than Shabazian's study by introducing further differentiation of the economic status of the schools that these students attended, using categories of Title I and non-Title I, paired with their location, and the observations and perceptions of the principals of those schools on the problem of students' out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was a comparative, multiple case study (Gustafsson, 2017) of a convenience sample of school administrators from three Title I and three non-Title I public high schools that were in rural, suburban, and urban areas of the state of Georgia. Gustafsson concluded that context and purpose of a study can influence the choice of design for the study. This study was a descriptive exploration and comparison of the perceptions, beliefs, observations, and experiences of the principals of these schools in managing student discipline, including suspensions, and expulsions. The purpose of gathering data on their perspective was to focus on their experiences with what was happening in their schools, whether Title I or non-Title I, in regard to the school's environment, and the culture of the community that might affect the school's population, and its suspension rates.

Definitions

This study contains definitions that were distinctive to the research:

Exclusionary discipline practices: Disciplinary tools used in the U.S. educational system as behavioral consequences and determents of negative student behavior, which include out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Perry & Morris, 2014).

Zero-tolerance policies: The term *zero tolerance* originated in the criminal justice system, where it was applied to policies designed to deter drug and weapon infractions (Curran, 2019). In 1993, a considerable number of schools implemented zero-tolerance policies that were used to dissuade students from involvment with drugs, tobacco, weapons, and other disruptions within schools (Verdugo, 2002). In 1994, President

Clinton signed the Gun-Free Schools Act mandating that students be expelled for a full calendar year for the possession of any weapons, with such infractions resulting in mandatory referrals to criminal or juvenile courts (Verdugo, 2002). After the signing of the Gun-Free Schools Act, the implementation of zero-tolerance policies increased in schools throughout the country (Verdugo, 2002).

Out-of-school suspension: The process of excluding a student due to behavioral problems requiring the student's removal from the classroom for a short specified period of time or permanently. Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions are occurring at disturbing rates (Haung & Cornwell, 2018). Students lost approximately 11 million days of classroom instruction in 2015-2016 to out-of-school suspensions, with African American students losing more days of instruction than White students (Haung & Cornwell, 2018).

Racial bias: Through credible educational research, it was revealed that differential treatment of students by teachers because of the student's race contributed to racial inequities in academic achievement and other forms of racial rankings in schools (Warikoo et al., 2016).

Title I schools: Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA), provides financial assistance to local school districts and schools in which a high percentage of the student population comes from lower income families. Title I helps to ensure that all children meet expected state academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The federal government allocates funds through four statutory formulas that are largely

based on U.S. Census poverty assessments and the educational costs in every state (U. S.

Department of Education, 2018)

Assumptions

The participants in this study were two principals from each region of Georgia

(urban, rural, and suburban). Three of the participating principals represented Title I

schools, and the other three represented non-Title I schools. The participants were not

randomly selected, and they consented to participating in the study. It was assumed that

the participants were the disciplinary authorities in their schools and that they were

honest with their answers.

Scope and Delimitations

The delimitations in this study involved the targeted population of principals who

were heads of public Title I or non-Title I high schools in Georgia. These principals had

at least 5 years of school leadership experience. These principals needed to have a

working knowledge of the state of Georgia's zero-tolerance policies and needed to be

aware of methods of discipline other than exclusionary disciplinary practices.

Limitations

Limitations of this study were found because of the use of stratified purposeful

sampling. Because the participants were not randomly selected, this qualitative study

presented a smaller representation of the intended population. Therefore, the sampling

was smaller and had fewer variations in responses from the participants.

Significance

The study filled a gap in the literature on out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students by identifying what the principals of these schools believed were specific to students in Georgia that may have led to excessive out-of-school suspensions of these students. This case study may be of interest to educators, administrators, school counselors, and school district disciplinary boards because it may highlight different perceptions depending on the type of school that African American students attend, along with their location. This study placed more emphasis on the type of school and location (urban, rural, or suburban) as possible influences. The analysis of results in this study may lead to further discussion and research on critical issues that need to be addressed and possibly alleviated. Excessive suspensions and expulsions of African American students is a social change issue because of the potential for discrimination in institutionalized responses. The results of the study may also lead to further examination of the school disciplinary processes that influence youth development (Schirmer et al., 2016).

Summary

Continued use of exclusionary disciplinary practices for African American students in Georgia's high schools may lead to lower academic achievement, higher probability of dropping out of school, and increased probable encounters with law enforcement that lead to a criminal record for members of this population (Flannery, 2015; Passero, 2018). The first section of this chapter introduced the background of the phenomenon of excessive out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American

students. This chapter also stated the problem and various reasons why the phenomenon of excessive out-of-school suspensions of African American students is a problem. Next, the chapter presented the study's purpose, research question, theoretical framework, nature, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and significance. I examined the perceptions, perspectives, and experiences of Georgia high school principals of Title I and non-Title I schools located in each region of the state (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural) on what they believed were the causes of excessive out-of-school suspensions of African American students.

To gather necessary data, I used the interview method in this qualitative case study to obtain the perspectives, perceptions, and experiences of the principals on what they believed were the causes of excessive out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. The study presented a clear picture of what may be happening in the schools, the students' homes, and the community environment as well as the school's location that may contribute to higher rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions through the eyes of the principals who run the schools daily.

Chapter 2 of this study is the literature review. In Chapter 2, I review recent literature pertaining to the phenomenon of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students. I highlighted the findings of other researchers on the disparity in the percentages of African American students who are given harsh disciplinary practices in the form of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, as well as those authors who examined the students' socioeconomic and home environment; racial

bias; the role of the teacher; the perspective of the teachers, parents, and students; and

alternative discipline plans that take the place of out-of-school suspensions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Rates of-out-of-school suspensions and expulsions in the public-school system continue to be a phenomenon that statistically reflects overrepresentation of African American students (Curran, 2016). The problem that was examined in this multiple-case study was the perceptions of administrators about ongoing excessive rates of out-of-school suspensions of African American students. I looked at the perceptions and experiences of a sample of Georgia high school principals representing both Title I and non-Title I high schools of geographic regions in Georgia (urban, suburban, and rural) on what they believed were reasons or causes for higher rates of out-of-school suspensions for African American students than for other students. In the literature review, I explored studies on disciplinary practices of African American students and provided a comprehensive view of various factors that have helped to influence the established phenomenon of excessive out-of-school suspensions.

In reading for this study, I also considered critical race theory (Anyon et al., 2018; Joseph et al., 2016; Simson, 2014) and how it may help explain the suspension rates of African American students. Critical race theory can be seen in studies similar in nature to those of Haight et al. (2016) and McNeal (2016), who focused on racial bias and the part it has played in the creation of zero tolerance disciplinary practices as well as the harm these policies have had on African American students. I considered using critical race theory as the framework for this study but rejected it as insufficient to support the experiences of the school principals in their environments. Sullivan et al.'s (2013) and

Shabazian's (2015) studies integrated ecological theory in examining the school's environment, location, and cultural/neighborhood environment as they contributed to the exclusionary discipline practices. There was a significant body of literature to support the current study, and several related studies paved the way. Studies comparable to ones conducted by Bottiani et al. (2016) and Gibson et al. (2014) provided insight into the views of students, teachers, and parents on harsh discipline policies, and actions directed toward African American students for minor infractions (i.e., talking back to the teacher or not following a teacher's directive) as well as more significant infractions (fighting, alcohol, and drugs). In addition, I examined Wesley and Ellis's (2017) study, which addressed how early in their educational experience African American students are subjected to exclusionary discipline practices, which then begin to show effects on these young children mentally and academically. While other theories and studies were valuable, as a starting point I determined that it was best to focus on ecological theory as it allowed examination at multiple levels. With that decision, I developed a strategy for the literature review.

Literature Strategy

I conducted a comprehensive search of the online libraries of Walden University, Georgia State University, and the DeKalb County Georgia Library System. The search engines used were SocINDEX, ProQuest, Galileo, Sage, and Google Scholar. The terms used during the search were *school-to-prison pipeline, excessive out-of-school suspensions of African American students, critical race theory, ecological theory, teacher bias, racial bias, discipline inequality, discipline disparities,* and *zero-tolerance policies*.

Other articles were found by looking at the reference sections of recent dissertations from the Walden Library. The literature found was used as groundwork for the continued exploration of how and why there is a continued phenomenon of excessive out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students.

Theoretical Framework

After considering both critical race theory and ecological theory as potential theoretical frameworks for my multiple-case study on excessive out-of-school suspensions, I chose Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) because it makes it possible to look beyond race and explore individuals' development through their environment. Ecological theory was used to interpret the principals' perceptions of the environment of Title I schools and non-Title I schools and the demographics of the students they served. The theory was used as an aid in gaining an understanding of the school's environment, the types of peer groups, and the students themselves in the school, which was described in the mesosystem level of the theory. The exosystem level of the theory aided in examining the neighborhood, and the macrosystem level of the theory involved examining the social and economic environment of the school and its students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory was used to connect the role of the school environment of both Title I and non-Title I schools with their location (e.g., urban, rural, or suburban), which can correspondingly be described as the neighborhood and its impact on exclusionary disciplinary measures/out-of-school suspensions of African American students.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was used in studies by Haight et al. (2014) and McElderry et al. (2014) to understand disciplinary exclusions associated with student characteristics, parent/guardian characteristics, parental/custodial involvement, location of the school, and service provision that related to occurrences of out-of-school suspensions. Haight et al. theorized that out-of-school suspensions were persistently racially disproportionate, resulting in multilevel social injustice and influencing child well-being issues. Participants in the Haight et al. study stated that they were committed to education, saw suspensions as a racial issue, and perceived that the students' academic achievements and teacher–student relationships were being harmed by suspensions. They emphasized that positive, nurturing teacher–student relationships could help change challenging behavioral issues (Haight et al., 2014).

Haight et al. (2014) also indicated that suspensions had a negative impact on family and school relationships, and they stated that there was a need for intercessions that stressed moral, spiritual, and overall support to students. They then emphasized that the students' perspective highlighted the role of their peers' behaviors in their suspensions and the impact suspensions had on their peer-to-peer relationships. Finally, Haight et al. revealed a need to provide and maintain a positive and safe learning environment for all students and implement various preventive approaches to challenging student behaviors, as emphasized by educators.

By incorporating Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, McElderry et al. (2014) used the location of the school and culture to achieve multivariate results that indicated that a student's age, gender, and race/ethnicity; a student's family receiving publicly

assisted funds and full-time employment; meeting with a guidance counselor; low

parental participation in an individualized education plan (IEP); educator contacts; and

receipt of nonschool/state health care services all amplified the likelihood of exclusionary

disciplinary practices. Their study also concluded that a student's mother's ability to

speak English, age, level of education, parental involvement, and satisfaction with school

lessened the probability of exclusionary discipline practices (McElderry et al., 2014).

Racial Disparities in Discipline

Racial disparities in discipline are a key component in the biases of educators and

administrators in how they determine the need and level of a disciplinary action applied

and its outcome on the student. According to researchers Heilbrun et al. (2015) and

Brown and Steele (2015), racial discrimination is a probable reason for African American

students having disproportionately high rates of out-of-school suspensions and

expulsions. Heilbrun et al. theorized that zero-tolerance disciplinary policies are more

discriminatory toward African American students and lead to these students having

higher rates of out-of-school suspensions. Brown and Steele (2015) based their study on

racial disparities or discrimination inside the elements of public Montessori schools and

their suspension rates compared to traditional elementary schools.

Although Brown and Steele (2015) and Heilbrun et al. (2015) both focused on

racial disparities in discipline, they took different paths in their theorizations of how and

why it takes place. Heilbrun et al. investigated the association of zero tolerance policies

and the principals' attitudes towards these policies as they relate to the suspension rates

of African American and White students. Their data revealed African American

suspension rates were almost 3 times the rates of White students and that principals'

commendation of zero-tolerance policies was associated with suspension rates of African

American and White students, but not associated with how great the discrimination and

disparities were. They also concluded that significant types of infractions such as

disruptive offenses resulted in suspensions of African American students, whereas

suspensions for alcohol and drug-related infractions were usually incurred by White

students (Heilbrun et al., 2015).

In another quest to understand racial discrimination/disparities in out-of-school

suspensions of African American students, Brown and Steele (2015) focused their study

on Montessori schools compared to traditional elementary schools. Their results indicated

that although there was significant statistical disproportion in suspension rates of African

American students in public Montessori schools and traditional elementary schools, the

consequences were less noticeable in Montessori schools. They concluded that the

Montessori schools were not immune to racial disparities in discipline and needed to

implement more culturally responsive classroom management techniques to aid in

curbing discipline issues (Brown & Steele, 2015).

Brown and Steele's (2015) findings differed those of Heilbrun et al. (2015), in

that the latter acknowledged disproportion in suspensions between African American

students and White students occurring in the type of infractions that were committed by

each group. Brown and Steele's study indicated a lower rate of disparities in out-of-

school suspensions in Montessori schools than in public schools, but Brown and Steele

acknowledged that Montessori schools were not immune to discriminatory disciplinary

practices and suggested that staff in these schools needed additional cultural training to serve their student body, as well as improved classroom management skills in the areas of communicating clear directives, providing positive reinforcement, keeping a positive attitude, and establishing a routine to minimize discipline problems.

Factors in Disproportionality in School Discipline

Although this study focused only on the perceptions of school administrators, I do not intend to imply that administrators exercise the sole influence on discipline. Racial disparities in school discipline result from many factors that contribute to outcomes that differ from racial group to racial group, and reflect not only the decisions of educators or administrators, but also influences within the students' environments outside of school institutions (Mizel et al., 2016). Mizel et al. (2016) and Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2015) conducted studies to understand factors in disproportionalities of school discipline for African American students compared to their White counterparts. Both Mizel et al. and Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity described potential causes of discipline and exclusion that fuel the phenomenon of the school-to-prison pipeline. Mizel et al.'s results indicated that parents of African American male students with lower levels of education were more disposed to receiving a suspension or expulsion. Their conclusions also specified that those students who were prepared for class, did their homework, and were inspired to learn were less likely to have disciplinary issues. Finally, their study suggested that there was a need to help students become more

engaged in their academics and in the school, as it could be proactive in addressing disproportionate disciplinary issues (Mizel et al., 2016).

Conducting a broader and more comprehensive study on probable factors in disproportionality in school discipline, Ohio State University's Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2015) investigated racial bias and its implications for the rates and factors of suspensions of students in Portland, OR; Oakland, CA; and a large urban school district in Ohio. Their findings indicated that African American students in Portland were 5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White counterparts and that African American male students in Oakland were suspended at 6 times the rate of White males. Their findings in Ohio indicated that the level of disparity in out-of-school suspension rates for African American and White students ranged from a factor of 1.9 to 13.33, with the overall disparity factor 4.0 higher than the national average. Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity's findings implied that implicit bias was connected as a contributing variable in many cases of racial disproportionality in school discipline. The researchers also found that lowered teacher and classroom expectations, perceived stereotypes, and unconscious bias were all factors that led to disproportionately high rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for African American students (Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2015).

Both the Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2015) and Mizel et al.'s (2016) studies indicated that discrepancies do exist in discipline, but their findings contrasted one another. Mizel et al.'s findings were more

academically centered, in that they focused on the students' academic preparation and how those who were more academically prepared and involved were less likely to have disciplinary problems. The study by the Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity was more comprehensive, with the researchers looking at statistics to determine how likely African American students, especially males, were to experience out-of-school suspensions, in addition to exploring issues related to teachers' low expectations and the unconscious racial bias of teachers and administrators.

Teacher, Student, and Caregiver Perceptions

Recidivism in suspensions appears to be linked to how different groups within the rubric of the school ecosystem view each other, resulting in views reinforcing perceptions that bias against African American students results in more punitive treatment than other student populations receive (Gibson & Haight, 2013). Another aspect of the out-of-school suspension cycle involves the perceptions of students, teachers, parents or caregivers, and administrators, as seen in studies by Bottiani et al. (2016), Gibson and Haight (2013), Haight et al. (2014), Cagle (2017), Khalif (2014), and the American Psychological Association (APA, 2016).

Students' perspectives on the discipline gap and excessive out-of-school suspensions were examined by both Bottiani et al. (2016) and the APA (2016). Bottiani et al. concluded that regardless of the students' grade level, gender, or socioeconomic background, the disciplinary process was considered less fair to students of color and that African American students did not feel a sense of belongingness and cultural inclusion. The APA study indicated that the students felt less welcome or had a less sense of

belonging in schools that had high rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of students that looked like them, as they did not believe that their culture was welcome in these schools. The APA study also revealed results similar to those of Bottiani et al. in indicating that regardless of grade level or socioeconomic status, there was a discipline gap and that disciplinary practices were harsher for African American students than other races (APA, 2016).

Previous research by Gibson and Haight (2013) and Khalifa (2014) on perceptions of exclusionary practices paved the way for Bottiani et al.'s (2016) study. Gibson and Haight and Khalifa's studies also included the perceptions of parents/caregivers. Gibson and Haight's results revealed that all of the parents interviewed expressed consensus that the punishments given to their children were harsher than the seriousness of most of their children's infractions warranted and saw these punishments as unreasonable and damaging to their children's academic success. They also concluded that suspensions led to some families losing interest in participating in teacher and faculty interactions (Gibson & Haight, 2013).

In more recent research on the perceptions of parents/guardians, Khalifa (2014) interviewed parents and students on the exclusionary disciplinary practices carried out specifically by two African American principals. Their respondents believed that these principals marginalized students of their own race and contributed to abusive and exclusionary practices against them and saw these actions as a direct reflection of the school district's biased policies (Khalifa, 2014). On the other hand, the two principals in question were also interviewed and rejected the parents' beliefs and placed blame any

cultural, social capital problems, or low student achievement on African American students themselves (Khalifa, 2014). Finally, the principals stated that responsibility for any disciplinary actions should be placed solely on the students themselves for their low achievement and behaviors, contending that no biased or abusive exclusionary disciplinary policies had been applied to students unnecessarily (Khalifa, 2014).

Keeping with the essence of obtaining a better understanding of the perceptions of those who see the effects of out-of-school suspensions, Haight et al. (2014) conducted another study that included co-author Gibson that also shared the perspective of the teacher along with those of the parents/guardians and students. Their combined effort of analyzing the perspectives of the parents/caregivers, students, and teachers garnered several eye-opening results where the participants believed cultural differences and racial bias were responsible for the highly unbalanced rate of suspensions of African American children. They saw the belief from caregivers/parents, and students that African American students faced harsher disciplinary consequences and are identified as those who are prone to have disciplinary problems. Their study also implicated from the perspectives of the students and their caregivers that racial bias contributes to a school-wide culture that characterizes African American students and their families. Finally, solely from the educators' perspective, the study revealed how they saw challenges in responding to the misbehaviors of the students including cultural diversity and that the Black population of the student body was overexposed to social problems like poverty that impacted school engagement (Haight et al., 2014).

In a final and more current study focused on the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents/guardians, Cagle (2017) examined why African American students were suspended more than their White peers as seen through the eyes of both teachers and students on the effects those suspensions had on the students. His results noted that the teachers and students believed discipline levels varied, and the students agreed that consequences for minor offenses were too strict. He also reported that the teachers disagreed with the students regarding the strictness of consequences for minor offenses and the administrators believed they had no recourse on school discipline because of the school district's policies. Finally, his results revealed a consensus from both the students and teachers that African American students seemed to get suspended more than Whites (Cagle, 2017).

School Racial Composition and Discipline Inequality

According to Linsey (2016), Edwards (2016), Freeman and Steidl (2016), and Hughes et al. (2017) the racial composition of a school is one of the key contributing factors in discipline inequalities and disparities among African American children. In understanding this correlation, Linsey's study concluded the higher the composition of African American students in the school population, the odds were increased for suspensions or expulsions, and differential effects of the behavior of the students. His study also revealed that African American students were more likely to experience disproportionate disciplinary actions on their behavior in racially homogeneous settings regardless if that setting is Black or White (Linsey, 2016). Edwards' also saw a correlation between the racial composition of a school and racial inequality in discipline.

Edwards also looked at the philosophy of the threat framework, which suggested that increased enrollment of African American students corresponds to increases in punitive school policies. Edwards' results indicated that the higher the percentage of African American students in a school is related to increased probabilities of suspension and expulsions, and the variance effects of behavior moderately these relationships. He also stated that more research is needed to be conclusive on the matter (Edwards, 2016). .

Taking a different path than Edwards (2016), similar research was conducted by Freeman and Steidl (2016) who chose to find the correlation between a school's racial composition and discipline equality. They examined what they called a two-part social problem which consists of obstinate segregation, the division of school districts, and the inordinate use of harsh disciplinary actions on African American students. Their results revealed that schools or school districts that had a higher concentration of segregation had lower probability of racial disparities in their discipline and suspensions for African American students who the complexities of the consequences of African American students being segregated in education. Finally, their findings suggested that racial inequality can happen in many forms and integrated school districts needed to be more diligent in implementing policies and practices that bring about awareness of reducing racial discipline disparities (Freeman & Steidl, 2016).

The most current research concerning the racial composition of schools and discipline equality agreed with previous studies Linsey (2016) and Edward (2016) that disproportionate discipline practices against African American students can be brought on by the racial composition of the school and the discipline inequities Hughes et al.,

2017). Their study suggested that schools with larger racial and ethnic populations had a higher percentage for suspensions of African American and Hispanic students but lower suspensions for White students. The study also revealed intergroup contact between African American and White students at a higher level and Hispanic school board members were related a lower probability of suspensions for all students of color. Finally, the researchers suggested that cross-group contact between African American, White, and Hispanic school board members does measure the impact of school racial and ethnic context on school suspensions (Hughes et al., 2017).

School Location

Finn and Servoss (2014) and Shabazian (2015) both investigated the rates of out of school suspensions of African American students based on the school's location. According to Finn and Servoss, in-school suspensions of students eventually led to more out-of-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions were more prominent in schools located in high-crime neighborhoods in which the environment was not favorable to positive educational and social outcomes. The study also revealed that African American and Hispanic students had a much higher probability of being suspended than their White peers but not due to any difference in their behaviors and African American and Hispanic males were also more certain to be disciplined than females. Finally, they stated that higher levels of school security were seen in schools with higher amounts of suspensions and in urban areas (Finn & Servoss, 2014).

Later research regarding the correlation between the school's locations and higher suspension rates of African American was conducted by Shabazian (2015). His research

suggested that opportunity transfer, suspension, and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions varied in districts with lower rates of exclusionary practices in areas with higher incomes and was higher in lower income areas. Finally, he concluded that suspensions were related to opportunity transfers and expulsions and that poverty, student race/ethnicity at the school and school year were factors of exclusionary practices (Shabazian, 2015).

Colorism

Colorism is the discrimination of a person based on their skin tone and the lighter the person's skin tone, the more that person is accepted into mainstream society (Harris, 2008). Because of previous research on the increase of the suspensions of African American adolescent girls, Blake et al. (2017) and Hannon et al. (2013) both examined the role of colorism to explain their suspension risks. Blake et al.'s study indicated that colorism was a key predictor of suspension risks. They also noted that African American adolescent/teenage girls with darker complexions stood a 2 times greater probability of being disciplined with an out-of-school suspension as White adolescent/teen girls. Furthermore, the results uncovered that lighter complexion African American female students were, they were not prone to having as high a probability of being disciplined with an out-of-school suspension (Blake et al., 2017).

In an earlier study on understanding colorism and its relationship of increased rates of out-of-school suspensions of African American students, Hannon et al.'s (2013) study indicated that students having darker complexions increased the prospect of the suspension of African American adolescence/teens. With a more in-depth look at their

data, the researchers discovered the results painted a picture of a disproportionate number of African American females were 3 times more likely to be suspended because of their skin tone than those with lighter skin tones. Finally, the results indicated bias in school discipline went far beyond a wide range of categories of race that included added differences in complexion (Hannon et al., 2013).

Discipline, Race, and Family Income

I found only one study that explored the relationship between discipline, race, and family income. In trying to understand the complexities of why African American students are more prone to be suspended than their White counterparts, Barrett et al. (2018) explored these disparities by looking at race (Black/White) and their family income. To gain this understanding, they decomposed gaps across districts, schools in the same districts, and within schools. Their results revealed that Black and poor students were disciplined more often and with harsher consequences than their White counterparts. Their study also revealed the disparities were seen throughout the school districts, across schools, and within the schools and Black students were more likely to receive longer suspensions after being involved in interracial fights/conflicts and saw this as a degree of intentional discrimination (Barrett et al., 2018). This is an area where further research would be of value. The current study will include race, family, income, and geographic location.

School Environment/Climate

A school's environment/climate can shape the behaviors of its students as well as determine how harsh the disciplinary actions will be (Huang & Cornell, 2018).   Peguero

and Bracy (2014) and Kotok et al. (2016) theorized that the school environment and climate affect the disciplinary actions in a school. Peguero and Bracy revealed that strong school sanctions or disciplinary actions were reinforced by the school climate, order, and justice a student could receive which lead to a high probability of students dropping out of school. Their results also highlighted the significance of careful planning and the implementation of school discipline and safety policies (Peguero & Bracy, 2014). With similar results as Peguero and Bracy, Kotok et al. discovered in their study that schools with equitable disciplinary processes had a lesser probability of students dropping out; whereas schools with the inequitable disciplinary process were more likely to have a higher percentage of students dropping out of school (Kotok et al., 2016).

Role of the Teacher and Teacher Beliefs

Because teachers have daily interactions with students, their attitudes and expectations of those students can affect the severity of the disciplinary consequences if a disciplinary referral is sent to the principal's office (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Hinojosa's (2008), Lindsay and Hart's (2017), and Gregory and Roberts' (2017) studies all examined the role of the teacher in the discipline process and suspensions of African American students. According to Hinojosa's study when a teacher had high and positive expectations of their students, the probability of behavior and discipline problems leading to suspensions were very low. The results also indicated the opposite for teachers whose relationship with their students were negative through their interactions and expectations with the students as their behaviors were more unfavorable and disciplinary actions were taken that led to suspensions. The researcher's final assessment of her results indicated

that teachers who have positive expectations of their students helped in reducing school suspensions (Hinojosa, 2008).

Another factor in the role of the teacher and his/her beliefs and discipline could be their racial bias (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Their study indicated that a teacher's racial bias could bring about harsher disciplinary actions and out-of-school suspensions of African American students. They found reliable evidence that children being exposed to teachers of the same race was associated with decreased rates of suspensions for African American students. Their results held true for all grades K-12 for both male and female students and that same-race teachers reduce discipline referrals behavioral issues on all grade levels. They discovered this fact suggested that the discretion of the teacher is critical when and if a student receives a discipline referral (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

In an expansion on their research of teacher bias and the role of the teacher, Lindsay and Hart (2017) conducted another study that found there is a need for same race teachers by looking closer at the needs of Black male students. Their study revealed when young African American male students were paired with African American teachers rather than White teachers, the probability of their rate of being suspended or expelled was reduced 2-3%. They described this as the Race-Matching Effect. Their study also provided evidence that elementary students were less likely to be suspended or expelled when their teachers were the same race. Their study indicated there is a dire need for more teachers of color in our public schools to be matched with students of color to lessen the probability of suspensions and expulsions these students (Lindsay and Hart, 2017).

Finally, in a study conducted the same year as Lindsay and Hart's (2017) study, Gregory and Roberts (2017) stated the role of the teacher, teacher beliefs, and his/her role of discipline referrals and suspensions of African American students was seen as an awareness of how the teacher's racial beliefs and attitudes had an impact on their students' disciplinary consequences. Their study was used to train teachers how to set aside their negative attitudes and beliefs that African American students' behaviors were more disposed to classroom disturbance and violence and consciously to build positive relationships and attitudes towards their students to lessen the probability of referrals that led to suspensions of these students. Finally, the researchers learned through previous studies, and their own observations that teachers who had been through teacher bias and belief training presented more positive attitudes and relationships with their students which lessened referrals and suspension (Gregory & Roberts, 2017).

Consequences and Effects of Suspensions/Zero-Tolerance Policies/School-to-Prison Pipeline

Exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools stem from zero-tolerance policies that can bring unintended consequences with life-changing effects that can lead to the school-to-prison pipeline (Curran, 2016). Seven studies conducted by Cuellar and Markowitz (2015), Curran (2016), Monahan et al. (2014), Noltemeyer et al. (2015), Huang (2015), (Morris & Perry, 2016), and Khan and Slate (2016) all investigated how out-of-school suspensions created unintended consequences that allowed students more opportunities to commit crimes while on their suspensions. According to Cuellar and Markowitz's study, African American male students were at a higher risk of committing

criminal offenses and being arrested than White male students while they were suspended from school.

In another instance, zero tolerance laws were implicated in an increase of a 0.5 percentage point in district-wide suspensions, and there were no indications of a consistent decrease in principals' insights of problematic behaviors (Curran, 2016). His results also revealed that theoretically the African American-White suspension gap is attributed to the laws that are predictive of higher increases of suspension rates for African American students (Curran, 2016).

A likely consequence of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, or forced absences is the higher probability of students being arrested (Monahan et al., 2014). Monahan et al. stated that skipping school/truancy also presented another probability of students being arrested. They cited that this was more prevalent among students who did not have a history of behavioral problems. Finally, their study indicated that disciplinary actions in the school such as suspensions, place youth at risk of being arrested and placed in the juvenile justice system especially for those who have a history of behavioral and disciplinary problems (Monahan et al., 2014).

In taking another look at out-of-school suspensions and their consequences, Noltemeyer et al. (2015) cited there is an inverse relationship between achievement and suspensions and that participant characteristics and type of suspension considerably affected the connection between suspensions and the outcome variables. It was also discovered that primary factors to students receiving out-of-school suspensions was due

to their misconduct and deviant attitudes, but African American students, in general, did not misbehave or promote deviant attitudes any more than White students (Haung, 2015).

Consequences of out-of-school suspensions of African American students come at a risk that is not just pertaining to the severity of the punishment or that it may not modify the student's behavior, but it affects them academically (Morris & Perry, 2016). Their results revealed school suspensions accounted for one-fifth African American students and their White peers in academic performance. They also suggested that exclusionary disciplinary practices hinder academic growth and add to racial disparities in academic achievement (Morris & Perry, 2016).

In a final look at consequences of out-of-school suspensions, Khan and Slate (2016) specifically focused on sixth-grade African American and Hispanic students in Texas public schools regarding their socioeconomic status, how they were assigned in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and their placement in alternative disciplinary educational programs. They found substantial statistical differences in the data for each disciplinary consequence within each racial/ethnic group and with students who were substantially economically underprivileged received more incidents of all disciplinary consequences than their ethnic/racial peers who were not economically underprivileged. Consequently, they uncovered that a lack of equity was seen in the allocation of disciplinary consequences to all sixth-grade students according to their economic status. They noted that because of their findings, administrators and education leaders were advised to improve their discipline programs to achieve a higher level of equity in the assignment of disciplinary consequences to their students (Khan & Slate, 2016).

Types of Schools That African American Students Attend

The types of schools that African American students attend have been documented in studies conducted by The National Center for Education Statistics (2017), National Center for Education Statistics (2019), Geiger (2017), Perzigian et al. (2017), and Musu-Gillette et al. (2016) which show they attend public, public charter, and private schools. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that 57% of African American students K-12 attend public schools in the U.S., and 11% attend private schools and The National Center for Education stated that 1.9% of African American students are homeschooled. Musu-Gillette et al. stated 28% of African American students in the public-school system attend public charter schools opposed the traditional public school. Geiger added that 44.1% of African American students attended public K-12 schools where over half the student population was primarily African American.

Finally, Perzigian et al. (2017) stated that African American students also attend alternative schools with the public-school system. They recognized that urban school districts were expanding their offerings of nontraditional placement options of schools for students who exhibit academic and behavioral issues or for students that are in search of a specific curricular emphasis or instruction. Their results indicated there was significant disproportionality in the demographics of the students in the different school types with the inclusion of an overrepresentation African American students, disabled students, and male students in segregated and restrictive schools. The results also indicated that White and female students had an overrepresentation of self-selected and advanced alternative

schools and underrepresentation of Hispanic and Asian students in remedial alternative schools (Perzigian et al., 2017).

Predictors for Disciplinary Actions/Referrals

The race/ethnicity of students plays an explicit role in determining how African American students are affected by presumptions of specific kinds of disciplinary actions compared to other groups (Martinez et al., 2015). Martinez et al. examined individual and school-level predictors of student office disciplinaries (ODRs). Their results indicated that individual-level characteristics were substantial in predicting student disciplinary referral while accounting for school-level factors. They also revealed that race/ethnicity was clearly associated with office disciplinary referrals for aggressive physical behaviors. Finally, the study indicated that schools with moderation effects had lower student-teacher ratios and more ODRs for physically aggressive behaviors of primary school students and schools with higher student-teacher ratios had more ODRs for minor infractions at the middle school level (Martinez et al., 2015).

Elementary and Preschool Suspensions

Exclusionary discipline measures can start as early as pre-school for African American children and can result in the introduction of a child's disillusion in the education process and school-to-prison pipeline (Adamu & Hogan, 2015). Cyphert (2015) and Adamu and Hogan both explored how young African American children were introduced to referrals and exclusionary discipline measures in schools. Cyphert's findings showed that preschoolers were not just being suspended and expelled, but it was happening to African American students at a disproportionate rate than other students and

African American boys were disciplined more than anyone else. Cyphert's research statistics identified that the "school-to-prison pipeline" literally begins as early as preschool. Next, the study highlighted the policies and procedures that have exacerbated preschool expulsions such as zero-tolerance policies, and behavioral issues of some of the preschoolers. Cyphert theorized on unconscious racial bias by teachers and administrators, which may lead to the higher number of African American preschool students being suspended and expelled. The researcher also discussed the detrimental impact of these suspensions on the preschoolers and the chances for success that many legal challenges to racially unbalanced preschool expulsions and suspensions will place on them through the judicial system (Cyphert, 2015).

While examining out-of-school suspensions of pre-school and elementary students, Adamu and Hogan (2015) stated African American boys accounted for two out of three suspensions, and girls of color also had a much higher number of suspensions than White girls. Their study also discovered because Americans are placing their children in school at a much earlier age than five, statistics revealed that these early childhood learning centers are the starting point for the school-to-prison pipeline, especially for African American children. Adamu and Hogan found that preschoolers ages 3-5 were the most susceptible to corrective non-developmental disciplinary actions and that African American preschoolers are only 18% of preschoolers across the country but account for 42% of the preschool suspensions. They also stated that there are dire consequences that result from using exclusionary discipline practices on children younger than age five as it affects their relationships with their peers, teachers, and the institution

of education. Finally, the researchers indicated that the students begin to see educational institutions as a place where they are not welcome or supported that can lead to further disciplinary problems later in their academic lives (Adamu & Hogan, 2015).

Sociodemographics and School Characteristics

Gregory et al. (2011) and Sullivan et al. (2013) both saw sociodemographics and the school characteristics as probable factors in the disproportionate rates out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students. Both Gregory et al. and Sullivan et al. believed the makeup of the student body and the quality of the school influenced the behaviors of the students. Gregory et al.'s study specifically concentrated on authoritative schools and how its characteristics affected disciplinary outcomes of African American students. Their multivariate analyses revealed that authoritative schools with low academic qualities had higher school-wide suspensions, especially for the African American student body. Furthermore, their study revealed that schools which had low levels of structure and support for the students had higher levels of racial disparities in disciplinary actions. Finally, they stated their study highlighted that schools with risky settings as part of the characteristics of the school may not have the appropriate tools to foster the developmental needs of its students and may contribute to disproportionate disciplinary measures for African American students (Gregory et al., 2011).

In contrast to Gregory et al.'s (2011) approach, Sullivan's et al.'s (2013) study did not have a specific type of school to examine but instead looked at 39 schools ranging from Grades K-12. They examined school policies that sanction (i.e., retention rates,

special needs education) through the characteristics and indicators of the

sociodemographics of the schools to understand which students are more susceptible to

suspensions. Their results indicated suspension risks were substantially connected to

gender, race, disability, and socioeconomic status compared to teacher qualities, school

level demographics, and performance all school variables were not related. Both studies

indicated that the sociodemographics and the school characteristics may be a contributing

factor to disproportionate rates of out-of-school suspensions of African American

students (Gregory et al., 2011 & Sullivan's et al., 2013).

Explanation of the Black/White Suspension Gap

The explanation of why there is a suspension gap between African American and

White students has long been explored, but as no concrete reason has been given, Huang

and Cornell (2017) set out to understand this phenomenon. They understood that the

problem did exist but did not see very many studies which explained why the suspension

gap and higher rates of out-of-school suspensions of African American students existed.

At the completion of their study, they found that different behavioral characteristics that

lead to suspensions like threats, fighting, drug abuse, or other higher risk behaviors did

not explain racial differences in self-reported suspensions. Finally, their study concluded

that the presence of bias did not support the differential hypothesis theory or other

findings in the study but did reinforce the concern regarding racial inequalities in the

higher rates of suspensions and expulsions of African American students (Huang &

Cornell, 2017).

The Effects of School Suspensions in Adulthood

The long-term consequences of exclusionary discipline measures persist and have greater negative consequences after African American students leave school and into adulthood (Wolf & Aaron, 2016). Researchers Wolf and Aaron conducted a study of the ongoing issues and consequences of the school-to-pipeline, which incorporated higher suspension rates of African American students, especially African American males. The results of their study indicated that students who were suspended had increased probabilities of being involved in criminal activity by 31%, becoming a victim of a crime by 22%, and possible incarceration as an adult as high as 72% (Wolf & Aaron, 2017).

School Suspensions and African American Girls

The effects of exclusionary disciplinary policies on African American girls and its inequities and the consequences of out of school suspensions can be seen at all grade levels (Slate et al., 2016).   Slate et al.'s study on this phenomenon found that inferential statistical procedures generated statistically substantial differences in disciplinary outcome assignments to African American girls at each grade level. They stated that every grade level that African American girls received had higher ratios of out-of-school suspensions than any other race. They also stated that there was a considerable increase of suspensions of African American girls from grades 6-9, which are both considered transitional years for all students. Finally, the researchers saw a distinct lack of equity demonstrated in the allocation of disciplinary consequences to African American girls at all grade levels (Slate et al., 2016).

Ways to Address Racial Discipline Disparities

Carter et al. (2017) recommended that multi-level approaches to combat racial disparities may need to be implemented to stem the tide of exclusionary discipline measures to break the school to prison pipeline, as it affects African American students. Carter et al. sought information to find productive and positive ways to discuss racial disparities in discipline openly. Their first recommendation was that there must be a willingness to unequivocally acknowledge the role of race and the disparities it brings in disciplinary actions to African American students. They also recommended that we must engage in conversations about race, facilitate discussions about race between the faculty, staff, and students, and implement race-conscious interventions and evaluations in their schools and school districts (Carter et al., 2017).

Reassessing School Discipline Practices and Using Alternative Methods

Finding alternative forms of disciplinary practices must become a priority in alleviating the high rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students (Skiba, 2013). Anyon et al. (2014), Thompson (2016), Hernandez-Melis et al. (2016), and Skiba (2013) all agreed there was a need to reassess the use of exclusionary discipline practices in our school and to find alternative methods. While evaluating zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline practices, Skiba saw little evidence that suspensions and expulsions had any positive effects on student behavior or school safety. He noted that these policies led to missed educational opportunities for the students that were given exclusionary disciplinary consequences and that adverse outcomes for these students were highly probable. He found that African American

students were at a higher risk to the adverse outcomes of suspensions and expulsions such as the students disconnecting academically, dropping out of school, and possible contact or placement in the juvenile justice system. Because of his findings, he developed a successful plan that would implement schoolwide behavioral planning and improved classroom management, social, emotional learning counseling sessions for the students, gaining parent and community involvement, mental health early screenings, and effective and ongoing collaborations between the juvenile justice system, education, and law enforcement. He also stated that developing a successful preventive school discipline model would require comprehensive long-term planning, and a wide variety of ideas and strategies that would aid in constructing a sound alternative plan (Skiba, 2013).

Zero tolerance discipline policies are heavily used in both the criminal justice system as well as school systems and can be a contributing factor to a time in this country where there is one of the highest incarceration rates in the world and minorities are overwhelmingly incarcerated at higher rates than Whites (Thompson, 2016). Thompson stated that high out-of-school suspensions and expulsions rates are the results of zero tolerance policies that affect minorities in the school system at a much higher rate, especially African Americans. He also mentioned that students are more likely to be introduced to the criminal justice system if they have been suspended or expelled; thus, the school-to-prison pipeline can continue to be enabled.   Finally, through Thompson's study of the Miami-Dade School District, he revealed the success of their pilot alternative discipline plan in reducing some types of discipline issues using the following strategies: 1). Restoration justice by rehabilitating the offender and correcting the harm that

occurred; 2) Positive behavior support in which is a behavioral based intervention method used to improve communities, families, and schools, that create auspicious surroundings and situations that lead to environments where learning can occur without negative behavior (Thompson, 2016).

Reassessing zero-tolerance disciplinary policies are a priority when the student's racial background and racial makeup of the school are continuing risks that are persistent in the decision-making process when dealing with exclusionary disciplinary practices (Anyon et al., 2014). Their study suggested there is a great need for restorative practices and other alternatives to exclusionary disciplinary practices as well as continued attention to racial inequality in school discipline outcomes and other ways will enable students to have more access to education without excluding them from the classroom (Anyon et al., 2014). Finally, Hernandez-Melis et al.'s. (2016) reevaluation of the ongoing use of the zero-tolerance policies, it was revealed that students with two referrals should be given an alternative method of intervention. They indicated that the alternative method helped to lengthen the time frame between referrals for those students and at least one intervention session could help reduce the probability of the student having future referrals (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016).

Summary

The Chapter 2 literature review explored many facets of exclusionary disciplinary practices, also known as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions and how they pertain to African American students. It examined the zero-tolerance discipline policies and their effects on African American students' access to education, as well as the long-term

effects of students who become involved in criminal activity and eventually encounter the criminal justice system. This literature review also delved into the perceptions of the students, teachers, and caregivers on exclusionary discipline policies, racial bias, the school environment, and the school climate as well as the role of teachers and their beliefs. This present study examined the perceptions, observations, and experiences of Georgia principals from both Title I and non-Title I schools on what they believe are causes for excessive rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions specific to Georgia as well as what they believe can be alternative measures in reducing the suspensions. In chapter 3, I detailed how the proposed case study will add new information to inform the issues raised above in chapter 2.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the perceptions, experiences, and perspectives of a sample of Georgia school principals of both Title I and non-Title I schools located in rural, suburban, and urban areas in order to understand how these representatives from a variety of school types and locations were responding to higher rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for African American students (Bazeley, 2013; Matthew et al., 2014). The research question of the study was the following: What are the perceptions of school administrators of Georgia high schools regarding the use of suspensions for discipline of African American students, considering the demographic and economic situation in their area?

Research Design and Rationale

The current research explored the perceptions, perspectives, and experiences of a sample of cases of Georgia high school principals of Title I and non-Title I schools on what they believed were reasons for the ongoing phenomenon of disproportionate out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students in their schools. A multiple case study was used to gain a greater understanding of how the discipline environment, culture, student population, location, and students' socioeconomic background at the school may be factors in suspensions of African American students. Case study was appropriate because it was grounded in the frontline experiences and perceptions of the principals of these schools who managed the disciplinary problems that led to suspensions on a day-to-day basis.

Methodology

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this case study was to conduct the interviews of the participating principals of both Title I and non-Title I schools representing urban, suburban, and rural school districts, and collect and analyze information related to the case, including any artifacts and school records. To limit bias or confirmation bias, I had to be aware of my own preconceived beliefs and not bring them into the interview process while considering all responses from the participants. While conducting the interviews, I assured the participants that there were no right or wrong answers, and I sought to put them at ease to speak freely as the interviews proceeded.

Setting

The setting of this multiple case study consisted of three Title I and three non-Title I high schools. There was to be representation of two schools from each region of Georgia (urban, rural, and suburban). Due to the last-minute cancellation of an urban non-Title I principal who had planned to participate, the setting changed such that only one urban school was represented, which was classified as Title I. The remaining participants were three Title I suburban principals, one non-Title I suburban principal, one non-Title I rural principal, and two rural principals representing both Title I and non-Title I schools. The high schools represented by the participants housed Grades 9-12, and the school populations reflected the demographics of each region. The demographics for the urban schools reflected Barret et al.'s (2018) finding that African American students disproportionately attend public schools, as well as the statement of the National Center

for Education Statistics (2017) that 57% of African American students in Grades K-12 attend public schools in the United States, while 8% attend Catholic schools and 11% attend other religious schools. The National Center of Education Statistics (2019) has reported that 1.9% of African American students are homeschooled. The demographics for the suburban and rural schools reflected the findings of Logan and Burdick-Will (2017), who reported that only 11-12% of African American students attend schools in rural and suburban districts, meaning that the majority of African American students live in urban centers.

Participants

The participants of this multiple case study were the principals of five Title I and two non-Title I high schools in Georgia. The principals and their schools represented the three regions of Georgia (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural). The sample for the study was chosen to represent a cross-section of schools and principals in three different regions to gain insight into differences and similarities in the participants' perspectives on the causes of excessive out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students. The total sample of seven administrators aligned with Yin's (2013) recommendation that a case study requires a sample that meets the needs of the study, and there is no defined ideal number of participants. By selecting a sample of Georgia high school principals, I was able to the gain participants' firsthand knowledge of the inner workings of their school's environment, the background of their students, as well as the culture of the people in the community based upon the location of the school. The principals reflected on their role of being responsible for school discipline and their

decision-making authority concerning sanctions for disciplinary offenses in their schools.

The method used for sampling in this study was stratified purposeful. The stratified

purposeful sampling method was used to assess differences in any key component

associated with the phenomenon that may be varied as well as to detect the differences

that may also appear in the analysis (Harsh Suri, 2011). The method was helpful for this

case study because it makes it possible to capture major variations in samples rather than

only identifying commonalities within samples. This type of sampling also adds

credibility to research (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data Collection and Instrumentation

In order to collect data, I recruited participants for the study by creating a new

Facebook page titled "Research Study of Georgia School Principals' Use of Disciplinary

Measures." I posted a flyer on the Facebook page inviting those interested to contact me

by email to receive more information about the study (see Appendix F). When potential

participants expressed interest in the study, they received information and the consent

form for their review and signature. When a consent form was returned to me, I contacted

the participant to make an appointment for an interview at a location convenient to the

participant. I collected narrative data using an interview protocol as the guide for

semistructured interviews in keeping with a case study approach.

The case study research approach was used to focus on one or a few instances,

phenomena, or units of analysis, but was restricted to one observation (Given, 2008). The

use of the case study approach also allowed me to form a clearer picture of the subject

matter, as one of case study's strengths is the ability to gain an in-depth view of the

subject (Given, 2008). To increase the validity of data, Yin (2013) stated that it is best to use several data collection methods. I used archival data, artifacts, and interviews. I used open-ended questions during the interviews, as suggested by Nishishiba et al. (2014), which allowed participants a chance to answer in a way that made them feel comfortable and made it possible to engage in additional dialogue. I collected archival data from the U.S. Department of Education and the Georgia Department of Education on the out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates of African American students in the schools of the principals whom I interviewed. The interviews were conducted in person, via Skype, or on the telephone because of convenience and access, and the interviews were recorded.

Procedures

Data were collected through interviews, artifacts, and archival data. First, I conducted face-to-face, Skype, and telephone interviews with principals of Title I and non-Title I high schools in Georgia concerning their perspectives on and experiences with what they believed were factors in the excessive suspension and expulsion rates of African American students compared to their White counterparts. The principals represented schools from urban, suburban, and rural Georgia. I then presented archival data to the principals on the suspension and expulsion rates of African American students in the state of Georgia. This information was used along with an interview guideline as suggested by Nishishiba et al. (2014) to start a discussion using open-ended questions to gain a clearer understanding of the environments of the schools that the principals were representing. I took notes and recorded the interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed, the participants were given a chance to review and corroborate their

responses to enhance the accuracy and validity of the data. The participants reviewed the

results and received a copy of the study once it was completed.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis process, all data were collected and stored in NVivo 12

qualitative data software. The recorded audio interviews were manually transcribed due

to software incompatibility between the recording software and NVivo. They were

transcribed into Microsoft Word documents and uploaded into NVivo software. The files

were then categorized and analyzed such that the data produced the codes needed to see

common themes and conceptions across the interviews. During the coding process, I used

the descriptive and value coding approaches as described by Saldana (2011). As outlined

by Saldana, I used the descriptive coding approach as I examined the interview

transcripts and field notes, looking for primary common nouns, and I used the value

coding approach as I identified and interpreted the participants' values, attitudes, and

beliefs toward the subject matter. Next, I used those common themes, conceptions, and

characteristics of what the principals of the Title I and non-Title I high schools believed

were ongoing and persistent reasons for the excessive out-of-school suspensions and

expulsions in Georgia and created a detailed summary to present in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

According to Connelly (2016), trustworthiness involves the degree of confidence

in the data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study. Connelly

stated that researchers should establish the protocols and procedures necessary for a study

to be worthy of consideration by readers. Connelly also outlined the criteria for

trustworthiness as having credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Connelly, 2016). I examined data from several resources in interpreting the data. Next, once the data were transcribed, I validated the information by allowing the participants to review their transcribed interviews before publishing the study.

Transferability

Transferability is to the extent to which the results of a study are seen as useful to persons in other settings (Connelly, 2016). The content of this study may be used in other school districts and by their personnel for exploring out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students as seen through the perspectives and experiences of the principals interviewed. I am not proposing that this study be generalized to other states.

Dependability

Connelly (2016) refers to dependability as the stability of the data over time and the conditions of the study. To ensure dependability, an audit trail of process logs and peer-debriefings with a colleague will occur (Connelly, 2016). I kept a journal of notes, used an audio recorder, transcribed data, included peer debriefing, and had an independent review of the data by colleagues, following Connelly's (2016) recommendations.

Confirmability

To decrease researcher bias and increase confirmability, I kept detailed notes on the interviews and checked them against the data transcribed from the audio recordings of the interviews (Connelly, 2016). I then followed Connelly's steps and used peer member

checking to review the data as coded, and I created themes to ensure that the findings were consistent. Finally, I reviewed the data with the study participants to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts of their interviews (Connelly, 2016).

Informed Consent and Ethical Considerations

To ensure that there were ethical protections for the participants in this case study, I worked within the guidelines set by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The rights and privacy of the participants were respected and outlined in a formal letter to the participants. The letter also included information on the study as well as a formal consent form for the participants with a guarantee of anonymity. The letter and signed consent forms were given to the IRB. Data collection for the study began after IRB approval. I interviewed the principals of both Title I and non-Title I schools face to face, using Skype, or via telephone. The questions were open ended so that I could form a full picture of what the principals' perceptions and experiences were concerning possible reasons for disproportionate rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students. Once the study was complete and the participants had validated their responses, I published the study upon the approval of the IRB and my committee and department chair.

Ethical Procedures

I informed the participants of the case study of the minimal risks involved. They were assured that there were no reasons for them to be concerned for their safety. The participants were also advised that there would not be any gifts or payments given for their participation in the study. Further, they were informed that their personal

information would not be shared with anyone outside the study. I assured them that participant anonymity was a priority in this case study so that they could feel comfortable in speaking and answering the interview questions freely. I also informed the participants how their interview data and personal information would be stored in NVivo, noting that these data would be password protected and that I would be the only one who had access to the data collected.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to gain an understanding of possible causes of excessive out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students through the perspectives and experiences of Title I and non-Title I school principals located in urban, suburban, and rural Georgia. I used face-to-face, Skype, and/or telephone interviews for convenience and access, and I used archival data during the data collection process. Follow-up interviews were not needed. NVivo was used to categorize and analyze the collected data and perform the coding needed to obtain the common themes and conceptions of the study. I abided by the guidelines set by the ethical standards of the Walden University IRB, and consent forms were presented to the participants before interviews were conducted. Seven participants were used in this multiple case study. Five participants were principals from Title I schools, and two principals represented the non-Title I schools. Each region of Georgia (urban, suburban, and rural) had representation. There was one urban non-Title I principal, three suburban Title I principals, one suburban non-Title I principal, and two rural principals who represented both Title I and non-Title I schools.

Chapter 3 addressed the study methodology, data, research design, purpose, rationale, data analysis process, consent forms, validation, and reliability. It included an explanation of ethical considerations and procedures. Next, Chapter 4 consists of the results of the case study, along with data collected and a summary. Finally, Chapter 5 consists of the analysis of the results, as well as the study's limitations, suggestions, and conclusions.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the perceptions, experiences, and perspectives of a sample of Georgia high school principals of both Title I and non-Title I schools located in rural, suburban, and urban areas in order to understand how these representatives from a variety of school types and locations were responding to higher rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students (Bazeley, 2013; Matthew et al., 2014). The research question of the study was the following: What are the perceptions of school administrators of Georgia high schools regarding the use of suspensions as a means of discipline for African American students, considering the demographic and economic situation in their area?

Georgia high school principals across the three regions of the state (urban, rural, and suburban) were interviewed to convey their perceptions and professional experiences of reasons that they believed were contributing factors to the continued higher rate of African American students being suspended and expelled from school. They also discussed alternative methods for lowering suspensions and bringing about positive behavior not only in those students who were being suspended, but also schoolwide. These interviews were conducted face to face and via Skype for those who were located an hour or more away from my home base in Atlanta, GA. In this chapter, I reviewed the collection of data from participants in the study and outlined the findings and results from the content analysis of the collected data.

Demographics

There were seven participants in the study, and they were all Georgia high school principals from both Title I and non-Title I high schools. The demographics of my study changed, in that my original goal was to interview three principals from Title I schools and three from non-Title I schools, with one from each region (urban, suburban, and rural). It did not work out that way, as one participant decided not to participate on the day that the interview was scheduled. He was representing the urban non-Title I school. Consequently, I only had 2 non-Title I participants. They represented rural and suburban region schools. Each principal had more than 10 years of experience in education. They had a combined average of 25.3 years of experience in education and 9.3 years as a principal. One participant was from an urban Title I high school, two participants were from rural high schools (both non-Title I and Title I), and four participants were from suburban high schools, including one non-Title I school. All of the participants answered 15 interview questions about their perceptions and experiences of (a) what changes they had seen over the past five years in their district and school in discipline and disciplinary actions, (b) the most common reason for discipline referrals, (c) how they interpreted why African American students seemed to be more susceptible to referrals and suspensions, and (d) their views on and alternative methods to decrease suspensions and expulsions. The identities of the participants, their school, and school districts were confidential for the purpose of the interviews and for the final analysis.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Type of school	Region	Gender	Race	Yrs. in education	Yrs. as a principal
Title I	Urban	Female	AA	22	9
Title I	Rural	Male	AA	28	15
Non-Title I	Rural	Male	White	30	3
Title I	Suburban	Female	AA	28	10
Title I	Suburban	Male	AA	29	19
Title I	Suburban	Male	AA	23	3
Non-Title I	Suburban	Male	AA	17	7

The data on the general information of the seven participants revealed how long they had been in education, their length of time as principals, and a description of their student and faculty population. The seven participants had an average of 25.3 years of experience in education. They also shared an average of 9.4 years of experience as principals, with 19 years being the longest experience. The data also revealed that the student population of the Title I schools had a predominantly African American student body of 50% and over except for the rural Title I school, in which the student body was approximately 43% African American and 50% White. The non-Title I rural school had a majority White student population, and the suburban non-Title I school had the most diverse student population, which was 30% African American, 30% White, 30% Hispanic, and 10% other.

In an overview of the faculty population, the Title I schools were predominantly African American except for the rural Title I school. At the rural Title I school, the

student population was 75% White and 25% African American. The non-Title I rural

school had a predominantly 99% White teacher population, with one African American

teacher. The non-Title I suburban school's faculty population was representative of its

school population at 30% White, 30% African American, and 10% other.

Data Collection

In keeping with Given (2008), a case study research approach was used. The use

of the case study approach allowed me to gain a more in-depth understanding of what

Georgia high school principals believed were specific reasons for the continued high rates

of suspensions and expulsions of African American students. I collected data for this

study, recruiting participants by creating a new Facebook page entitled "Research Study

of Georgia School Principals' Use of Disciplinary Measures." I posted a flyer on the

Facebook page, inviting those who were interested to contact me by email to receive

more information about the study. I also enlisted the assistance of the administrator of the

Georgia Association of Secondary School Principals (GASSP) website. He offered to

send the recruitment flyer to the association's members and signed a cooperation

agreement letter acknowledging his assistance. The flyer is attached as an appendix.

Once participants expressed interest in the study, they received information about the

study by email and a consent form for their review and signature. When a consent form

was returned to me via email, I contacted the participant to make an appointment for an

interview at the location of the participant's choice. I collected narrative data using an

interview protocol as the guide for the semistructured interviews in keeping with a case

study approach.

To increase the validity of data, Yin (2013) stated that it is best to use several data collection methods. I used archival data from the U.S. Department of Education and the Georgia Department of Education and the interview method. Open-ended questions were used during the interview process, as suggested by Nishishiba et al. (2014), which allowed the participants a chance to answer in a way that made them feel comfortable and facilitated additional dialogue. Archival data from the U.S. Department of Education and the Georgia Department of Education, along with the most recent statistics on the out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates of African American students from the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2019), shown in Table 2, were presented to the participants before the interviews by email and in person. The principals did not see any irregularities in the statistics presented to them from the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, the Georgia Department of Education, or the U. S. Department of Education.

Table 2

Georgia Public School Percentages of Disciplinary Incident Occurrences

Self-identified race	Percentage rate of students
Black	59.70%
White	25.00%
Hispanic	10.45%
Biracial	4.00%
Asian	0.70%
Native American	0.10%

Note. Data from Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2019).

Four of the interviews, which occurred within 40 miles of my home location, were conducted face to face in the principal's office or the school library. These locations were chosen for the convenience of the participants. Two of the interviews were conducted via Skype after school hours due to concerns of convenience and distance, as these participants were over 2 hours away from my home location. One interview was conducted via telephone because this was the only way to access the participant at the time available. The interviews lasted an average of 1 hour, were audio recorded, and were stored on my computer in a file with NVivo. Manual transcription was done because my audio recording app was incompatible with NVivo. The transcribed data were then transferred from Word documents for analysis using NVivo.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis process, all data were collected into the Samsung Voice Recorder app, manually transcribed into Word document files due to software incompatibility with NVivo, and stored in NVivo 12 Pro qualitative data software. Text query was used to isolate specific words and terms that frequently appeared in the data and was entered to analyze the data, producing codes. As I looked at the codes that were generated, I used the descriptive and value coding approaches, as described by Saldana (2011), which allowed me to examine the coded interview transcripts and field notes and look for primary common nouns as I identified the participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs toward the subject matter. The most frequent codes were disciplinary actions, location, culture, parent participation, trust, positive discipline, referrals, training, leadership, communication, and the teacher-student relationship. Once the codes were

identified, I manually reviewed them, recognized recurring patterns, and identified the three themes listed below. I discuss these themes further on in this chapter.

- Theme 1: Trust/positive student–teacher relationships

- Theme 2: Parental involvement

- Theme 3: Intentional alternatives to out-of-school suspensions (OSS) through the use of social-emotional learning (SEL) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Trustworthiness

According to Connelly (2016), trustworthiness is the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study. Connelly stated that researchers should establish the protocols and procedures necessary for a study to be worthy of consideration by readers. She outlined the criteria for trustworthiness as having credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Connelly, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that for a study to have trustworthiness, credibility must first be established when the researcher has confidence in the truthfulness of the findings. Next, the researcher must ensure transferability, whereby the results have relevance in other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the next step, the researcher must establish dependability by proving that the findings are consistent and can be repeated. Finally, Lincoln and Guba explained, the researcher must show confirmability by ensuring that the results were influenced by the participants and not by the bias or interests of the researcher. I followed Lincoln and Guba's steps in establishing trustworthiness as I examined data from several sources and validated the information once it was transcribed

by allowing the participants to review their interview transcripts before publishing the study.

Credibility

This multiple case study was conducted within the ethical parameters of Walden University's IRB. The recruitment of participants was conducted using Emmel's (2013) description of purposeful sampling. This approach allowed me to gain an understanding of the participants' real-life experiences and perceptions as principals in Georgia high schools as they pertained to what they believed were causes of ongoing higher suspension rates for African American students. These participants were chosen for this study because of their position in the school system and their firsthand knowledge as principals of the reasons for the ongoing phenomenon of suspension rates of African American students. Purposeful sampling also involves the identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposeful sampling allowed me to compare and contrast data from participants who were in different regions of the state of Georgia (Palinkas et al., 2015). Several sources were used to safeguard reliability, and to confirm accuracy of the data, member checks were used. During the interviews, the participants were very forthcoming and comfortable in answering the interview questions.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the results of a study are seen as useful to persons in other settings (Connelly, 2016). The content of this study may be used in other

school districts and by their personnel for exploring out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students, as seen through the perspectives and experiences of the principals interviewed. I am not proposing that this study be generalized to other states.

Dependability

Connelly (2016) referred to dependability as the stability of data over time and the conditions of a study. To ensure dependability, as described by Connelly, an audit trail of process logs and peer debriefings with a colleague occurred. I kept a journal of notes, created audio recordings, transcribed data, included peer debriefing, received an independent review of the data by colleagues, and followed Connelly's recommendations.

Confirmability

To decrease researcher bias and increase confirmability, I kept detailed notes of the interviews and checked them against the data transcribed from the audio recordings of the interviews (Connelly, 2016). I then followed Connelly's steps and used peer member checking to review the data as they were coded, and themes were created to ensure that the findings were consistent. Finally, I reviewed the data with study participants to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts of their interviews (Connelly, 2016).

Results

The results discussed in this section fell into categories based on the analysis and coding of the data. The categories were then clustered into the three themes that were listed previously. The results of the study aligned with the research question: What are

the perceptions of school administrators of Georgia high schools regarding the use of

suspensions as discipline of African American students, considering the demographic and

economic situation in their area? The results are responses from the participants that

reflect the participants' perceptions, firsthand knowledge, and experiences of what they

believed were reasons for or factors in the continued higher rate of suspensions and

expulsions of African American students.

Changes in School Disciplinary Offenses

The participants in their separate interviews all seemed to express consensus that

over the past five years, overall discipline problems had been on the decline. They all

attributed this decline to teachers being trained to make a concerted effort to get to know

and understand their students. They suggested that good student–teacher relationships

were one reason for the decline in discipline problems, with lower referrals contributing

to this trend. However, principals at both non-Title I schools were seeing an increase in

vaping and drug use. Principals at both the rural and suburban non-Title I schools stated

that although the incidence of fights and other discipline problems was decreasing,

vaping and drug use had become significant problems for their schools and districts.

Another growing problem seen by several of the Title I and both non-Title I schools was

social media causing friction between students because of what students posted online

about their peers.

In looking at the discipline problems seen by the participants, Suburban Title I

Principal 3 stated,

The main reason for the spillover of conflict in the neighborhood environment being carried into the school came from negative social media posts, especially on Instagram, that made the targeted student look bad or something derogatory about a family member was posted.

The Rural non-Title I Principal stated,

Our school has very limited discipline issues but a particular problem that has gone through the roof over the past few years is vaping. We see a huge percentage of our students using electronic cigarette devices. Kids who come from non-tobacco using families are vaping and becoming addicted to it.

Finally, the Title I Suburban Principal 2 stated,

Because this is a non-traditional school/alternative school, I have been seeing an increase in younger students in the school. With the younger students comes a lot of immature behavior, talking back and failure to follow instructions. These are mainly 10th graders age 16. Many of the students in the school are over 18 years old.

Changes to Policy and Procedure

The principals interviewed discussed the fundamental changes that were taking place due to statewide initiatives to curtail out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. They all discussed measures such as PBIS and SEL. These measures were developed to aid both teachers and students in curbing discipline problems as well as curbing the harsher disciplinary actions that often accompanied some of the discipline referrals. Through PBIS, teachers now have specific protocols that must be followed before a

discipline referral can be sent to the office if the offense is minor, like talking back to the

teacher, being tardy, and school uniform infractions. The teacher must first consult with

the student and give a warning or detention. A phone call to the parent/guardian is done if

the student does not comply with the warning or detention. If the parent consult is not

effective, then a discipline referral is required. The administration will then decide upon

a cleanup detail around the school for after school or even during their connection

classes. If none of these measures work, the student may be placed in in-school-

suspension. The idea is to get to the root of the student's real problem and give them the

support they may need. PBIS measures also keep the student in school and in class so

they can continue to learn. Social-Emotional Learning is another tool that many of the

participants discussed.

SEL methods are discussed every week in a schoolwide initiative and are run with

the help of not just the teachers but the counseling department as well. The teachers and

staff are trained in the program that teaches the student better decision-making strategies

when they are faced with situations that may lead to arguments, fights, and other

confrontations that can have them automatically suspended or expelled. SEL sessions

allow the students the ability to speak their minds and be open and honest about what is

happening in their lives, neighborhoods, and the school environment itself. It does not

matter what the subject is that the students need to address because SEL allows the

students to become more in touch with feelings and gives them strategies to handle those

feelings positively.

Another intervention was described by Suburban non-Title I Principal. He discussed the measures used to aid special needs students. Those children with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) are not allowed to be suspended more than ten days per school year if they commit an offense that requires them to have an out-of-school suspension. These students are sent to an alternative school for several days to give them a proverbial "time out." They are still given their daily instruction by qualified teachers that allow them to continue their daily studies without being in their traditional classroom. This is another measure to lower the out-of-school suspension rate of students.

Finally, all the participants agreed that students who do commit offenses such as fighting, major classroom disruptions, or have drugs or a weapon, still receive an automatic out-of-school suspension pending a discipline tribunal appearance. The discipline tribunal consisting of various district-wide principals and assistant principals decide how long the suspension should be depending upon other offenses the student may have documented. If a mandated move to an alternative school is needed, or if a student needs to be expelled from the district permanently, the tribunal will make that decision.

While discussing the changes in the policies and procedures in discipline, the Title I Urban Principal stated,

> SEL is a great tool for my students because it lets them talk about their feelings that they have managed to keep at bay and act like they do not exist, especially my male students.

Also discussing the changes in the policies and procedures in discipline, Title I Suburban Principal 1 stated,

> We are making sure we are working on a positive school climate for our children. All these things working together impact discipline. Everyone is working to make sure that discipline problems are down and so there is an increase in academic achievement.

Common Reason for Referrals and Teacher-Student Relationships

The participants were all on one accord as they stated the most common reason for discipline referrals was disrespect from the student. They all concurred a student might seem to disrespectful because of a student answering a teacher in a tone not deemed respectful, or the student is seen as disrespectful because of what they may say to that teacher. The principals also stated that the problem of disrespect most commonly comes from a lack of understanding of the student, the culture of the student on the part of the teacher, and the lack of a positive student-teacher relationship. The principals believed this common referral could be decreased if a positive student-teacher relationship is created. The also noted that there are other reasons disrespect may occur, but it may be avoided if both the teacher and student could build a trusting relationship.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, both the non-Title I principals noted that a more common cause of referrals is now stemming from vaping and drugs. The Rural non-Title I Principal stated,

> The main discipline problem in my school today is vaping.

Both non-Title I principals also mentioned that social media is also a significant factor in some of their referrals when it comes to conflicts between students as it spills over into the classroom and school environment. The non-Title I Suburban Principal also stated,

> If there are any issues between students and teachers it sometimes occurs because of a cultural misunderstanding from the various cultures represented in the school by both students and faculty.

Response to Disciplinary Incidents

The participants were asked to describe the range of disciplinary actions given to students from the most minor of incidents to the major ones. The principals stated that various steps could be taken when it comes to disciplinary measures. All the participants again described the new measures implemented by the state, such as PBIS and SEL, allow varied responses to discipline problems that may not necessarily merit an out-of-school suspension. Some of those measures are a student/teacher consultation, a warning, a parent phone call or conference, detention, and in-school-suspensions. If none of the measures work, then a discipline referral is made, and the school administrators then take the next step in what they deem the most suitable for of discipline needs to take place whether that is a work detail during their connections or after school or possibly an out-of-school suspension depending upon how severe the problem has become.

The Rural non-Title I Principal stated,

Students who continue to have behavioral problems may also receive counseling a and an SST (Student Support Team).

The participant explained the measure is used to aid the student and parents in behavior modifications as well as aiding them academically to help reduce their problem. The participant also stated,

> Mentoring is another measure used to help these students who end up getting out-of-school suspension because of their continued behavioral issues and that there is an outside counseling group that aids with mental health issue as well.

The Suburban Title I Principal 3 went into detail on how that district handles students who have been in physical altercations once they returned to school from out-of-school suspension. The participant stated,

> We have used a probation contract between students if they've had an altercation which is basically a restraining order on both students. They literally must stay away from each other per the contract. This keeps the students from further altercations and disruptions in the school and keeps them in school and not on out-of-school suspension.

Most Common Reasons for Referrals of African American Students and Disciplinary Responses

The participants were asked what they believed was the most common reason(s) for African American students to receive discipline referrals. The responses from all the Title I participants cited the most common reason for discipline referrals of African American students were being disrespectful or talking back to the teacher. They once again cited that this problem usually stemmed from a lack of communication and a teacher/student positive relationship and trust factor problem. The non-Title I

participants stated their African American students rarely received referrals. The Rural non-Title I Principal stated,

> They had a handful of African Americans in their school at literally 1%, and those students did not get in trouble.

The Suburban non-Title I Principal stated,

> Most of my African American students are bused from the south end of the district into the school because it is a public charter high school and they know that they have a certain criterion that must be upheld for them to stay in the school. Low grades and misconduct could cost them an opportunity in the highly rated school and send them back to their home school.

From another perspective, the Suburban Title I Principal 3 stated,

> The most common reasons for referrals of Black students were disrespect and both verbal and physical altercations**.**

The participants were asked what types of disciplinary actions were taken for students who were written up for referrals for disrespect or showing some type of disrespectful behavior. They again, all lauded to the state-mandated measures PBIS and SEL that are used to help students stay in school for most minor infractions and look to build a better relationship between the teachers and the students. Using SEL, students are trained on how to make better decisions that will not end in altercations with other students, through arguing, or physical violence. The students are taught strategies that will help them channel their anger and walk away from unwanted situations and behaviors.

The Culture of the Community

The participants were asked what role they believed the culture of the community played in managing student behavior in the school. All the participants, through their interviews, except two, seemed to agree that the culture of the community does have some influence over the students and the school climate. These principals stated that whatever happens in the community does influence the mindset of the students. The culture in the community consists of the parents and their neighbors. If there is a culture of gangs, drugs, and violence, that is a mindset that the school must change with positive measures to ensure none of that spills over into the school. The Rural Title I Principal cited,

> The culture of a small town allows for better relationships with the teachers as
> well as the students because everyone knows everyone, and the church is a central
> part of the community.
> In contrast, the Rural non-Title I Principal stated,
> The school is the center of the culture and community in this district. The school's
> sporting and community-based activities such as raffles, and bake sales bring
> the community to us. In my opinion, the school is the center of all cultural
> activities, and it drives the culture of the community.

The Suburban Title I Principal 1, stated,

> The outside community does not influence my school because of the leadership
> within the school. The school culture is a positive influence in the students' lives,
> and the administration team, along with the faculty, help to create a positive

schoolwide environment that does not promote or tolerate any negative culture

Issues from the neighborhood inside the school.

Role of the School Location

Another question posed to the participants was concerning the location of their

school and if it played a role in any of the behavioral problems that may or may not occur

in their district. For several of the Title I and the suburban non-Title principals, they

believe the school location does influence the behavior of the students. They stated that

the socioeconomic status of the community in the location of the school could dictate

several things. They noted that the lack of funding in the school district could leave

students without the necessary materials and technology needed to succeed in society

today. They also cited that those schools in locations with more financial resources allow

their students an advantage of being more successful academically. The participants also

noted that the parents' education and socioeconomic level has a bearing on the students'

desire to achieve more and to reach higher levels educationally and economically than

their parents if they are in a low-income location. Those who are in a more middle to

upper-class location tend to know already what is expected of them both academically

and in their quest for economic success because of the examples their parents have

provided, as stated by the Suburban non-Title I Principal.

The Rural Title I Principal stated,

The school's location promotes a closer-knit community, and student success is

based on the "It Takes a Village" syndrome because everyone knows everyone. The

Rural non-Title I and Suburban Title I principals 1 and 2 stated that the location did not influence student behavior. Suburban Title I Principal 2 reported,

Because his non-traditional school setting where the students made a concerted choice to get their own means of transportation to come to the school, makes the location of the school irrelevant to behavior in their school setting.

Suburban Title I Principal 1 reiterated as she did on community influence,

The location was not a factor in the students' behavior because the leadership in the school promotes positive schoolwide behaviors and fosters it with activities that promote positive energy throughout the school.

How Principals Explain the Overrepresentation of African American Students

Another question posed to the participants was their understanding of what made African American students more susceptible to receiving referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. The Urban Title I, Rural Title I, and Suburban Title I 3 principals all cited that African American students are more susceptible to receiving referrals due to not having a good teacher-student relationship and a lack of trust between the two. The Rural non-Title I Principal mentioned,

African Americans students believe they must be their own advocates when a teacher calls them out on a behavior that is not deemed appropriate for the classroom. These students tend to try to explain what happened, and the teacher, because of their lack of knowledge of the student's culture, does not understand the student means no disrespect but is only trying to explain. The teacher sometimes sees this as talking back and being insubordinate.

The Urban Title I Principal also cited,

> African American students might be more susceptible to referrals because many
> of the students do not know how to control their emotions in different situations
> and can make things worse when they are trying to explain themselves, and the
> teacher does not understand their side of the story.

In contrast to the other principals, the Title I Suburban Principal 1 along with both non-Title I Rural and Suburban principals do not see their students as being susceptible. The Rural non-Title I principal stated,

> My African American students do not get in trouble.

The Title I Suburban Principal1 stated,

> I don't see a susceptibility in my students because of the high expectations that
> are taught to the students as soon as they begin each school year.

The Suburban non-Title I Principal stated once again,

> Because of the high expectations mandated to be in the school for his students
> being bused in from the south end of the district, they know they must make good
> decisions both academically and in their behavior.

Principals' Ideas of What Can Be Done

Next, the participants were asked what they believed could be done in their school districts to help alleviate the overrepresentation of African American students being suspended and expelled. They all stated, as mentioned previously, the new intervention and prevention measures like PBIS and SEL that have been mandated by the Georgia Department of Education and implemented in most school districts throughout the state

that were strategically important in combating the suspension problem. These

intervention and prevention measures were designed to decrease the number of

exclusionary disciplinary actions such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions using

Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL).

The administrators and faculty are trained in both PBIS and SEL. PBIS has

several levels of intervention measures that begin with building a positive teacher/student

relationship. It also mandates that several steps are taken before a teacher can write a

discipline referral, especially if it is for a minor offense. The teacher must consult with

the student and give a warning. If that does not work, the teacher must call the student's

parent/guardian and conference with them on the undesired behavior of the student. The

teacher is also allowed to give detention along with calling the parents, and finally, if the

behavior does not stop, a referral can be written, and the discipline administrator will

decide which punishment is appropriate for the infraction. The administrator can place

the student in in-school-suspension, or on a detention/work detail around the school. If

the problem has not been rectified, the administrator has the discretion where he/she can

place the student on out-of-school suspension (OSS).

The Suburban non-Title I Principal number stated,

I have seen a decrease in out-of-school suspensions since the implementation of

PBIS because the steps get parents more involved in the process as well as

lowering the probability of an out-of-school suspension over a minor offense.

Parent participation is also fundamental in ensuring the student is on track both

academically, socially, and emotionally. Because of my location in an affluent

area, there is an abundance of parent involvement and volunteering.

The Rural Title I Principal mentioned,

Parental involvement is my number one deterrent in keeping my students out of

trouble and in school. Because our community is so small, most kids here, Black

and White, don't like to disappoint their parents and elders. The last thing they

want us to do is call their parent because they were doing something, they knew

they didn't have any business doing.

Finally, the Suburban non-Title I Principal 3 stated,

Not only is parental involvement important but so is communication on the part of

the teacher and the administration with the parent. Communication, awareness,

and making sure the teachers are aware of their behaviors of how to act and react

when the student does something out of compliance. Training and professional

development must be there to aid the teacher in how to handle these types of

situations. We must make sure the students, parents, and educators are aware of

social-emotional learning (SEL). These pieces must be in place to help alleviate

those infractions.

All the participants again discussed SEL. Using SEL, the faculty and

administrators have been trained to have weekly sessions with the students that allow

them to get in touch with their emotions and speak on any subject that seems to be

bothering them during the session. Several exercises are used to help the students to

make better choices as they learn how to harness their emotions into something positive

instead of retaliating in an unwanted situation as well as allows the students to build positive relationships with their teacher and administrators.

Alternative Disciplinary Practices

Finally, the participants were asked if there were any alternatives better than exclusionary discipline practices. As stated throughout the interviews, the participants all discussed the state-mandated prevention and intervention measures, PBIS, and SEL. Both measures were designed to help decrease the need for out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. These programs help to build positive relationships between the students, teachers, and administrators. PBIS ensures that all steps have been taken on the teachers', students', parents', and administrators' part before a disciplinary action of out-of-school suspension or expulsion is given to a student. They also stated that SEL allows the students to get in touch with their emotions and feelings and aids them in learning how to control them and make better decisions when it comes to acting on what they feel. They are taught how to deescalate a situation and walk away from it without having any form of an altercation. They are also taught how to deal with grief, depression, and other feelings they may be experiencing due to their circumstances at home, neighborhood, school environments, and peer pressure.

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Explanation of Themes

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The data collected from the interviews of the seven Georgia high school principals on their perspectives and experiences of what they believe are the reasons for continued higher rates of African American students receiving out-of-school suspensions

and expulsions helped to create the following themes. Below these themes are summarized.

Theme 1: Trust/Positive Student–Teacher Relationships

This theme emphasizes how disrespect may occur because of a lack of understanding or communication between the teacher/faculty member and the student. The principals all stated that positive relationships and trust must be built between the teacher/faculty member and the students. They also believed fewer referrals of disrespect would occur if a trust factor and understanding were present between the teacher/faculty member and the student. Several of the principals attributed the building of trust, and positive teacher relationships begin with positive classroom management skills and setting positive expectations for the students. Rural Title I Principal stated,

A young White middle-class teacher does not understand the culture of the Black community, and it often creates a communication problem between them and the students.

Theme 2: Parental Involvement

All the principals stated in their interviews that parental involvement is vital in a student's academic success. When there is good communication between the teacher, parent(s), and the students, many problems can be alleviated, and a student being placed on OSS may not happen, especially if the offense is minor. The parent(s) and guardian(s) have more influence over the students than anyone else and can help the students stay on track if they as the parents form an alliance with the school and student to ensure academic success. Urban Title I Principal stated,

When the parent is more visible at the school, and communicates with the teacher

on a regular basis, the child is more than likely to have fewer discipline

problems.

Theme 3: Intentional Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspensions

Out-of-school suspensions (OSS): The principals all mentioned the use of Social

Emotional Learning (SEL) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as

programs that look at ways to keep students in school and not have out-of-school

suspensions.   PBIS, which is now a Georgia statewide initiative, has steps/protocols that

must be taken before a student can be given a harsh disciplinary action like OSS. In using

the steps of PBIS, the teacher must first confer with the student and find out what the

problem is and enlist a warning or detention. Their next step is the problem persists is to

conference with the parent. If parental contact does not curtail the problem, and all the

steps have been documented, a disciplinary referral is required. It is then up to the

assistant principal or principal to either give some type of work detail after school, in-

school-suspension (ISS) for non-violent offenses or OSS if a violation of some form of

disrespect or classroom disturbance has continued. The key to PBIS is to keep the

students in school if possible. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is a program used to help

the students develop emotionally and learn how to make better decisions while dealing

with anger and grief. The principals stated that this is a program where classroom

sessions are conducted to train the students on what is appropriate behavior for all types

of situations that they may encounter instead of using violence and harsh language.

Suburban Title I Principal 3 stated,

PBIS is a reason for the decline in suspensions for minor infractions in my school.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 4 was to report the results of the data collected and how the data correlated and answered the research question: What are the perceptions of school administrators of Georgia high schools regarding the use of suspensions as discipline of African American students considering the demographic and economic situation in their area? The answer to this question is there was no specific or perfect answer to be given because the data were based on the perceptions and experiences of Georgia high school principals as they perceived the causes of the ongoing problem of African American students still having higher rates of out-of-school suspensions than their White and Hispanic peers.

Through the three themes of the study, 1). Trust/Positive Student-Teacher Relationships; 2). Parental Involvement; and 3). Intentional Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspensions I have documented in Chapter 5 my interpretation of the findings of the study and have cited the study's limitations. I have also documented the recommendations as dictated in the literature and the study of the need for better teacher/student relationships and more and better alternatives to zero tolerance disciplinary practices. Finally, I drafted a conclusion on what the study can do to help promote positive social change in the future.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives and experiences of Georgia high school principals on what they believed were the key contributing factors to continued high rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students. The principals represented each region of Georgia (urban, suburban, and rural) and both Title I and non-Title I schools. Initially, the study was to include six participants, with two from each region, representing one Title I and one non-Title I school from each region. Due to one urban non-Title I principal's last-minute cancellation, the study consisted of two non-Title I principals and five Title I principals. These participants also represented one urban, two rural, and four suburban regions of the state of Georgia. Their interviews provided insight into their understanding and experiences of why the phenomenon of high rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students continues. They also discussed alternative measures that are being taken statewide to help mitigate the problem for African American students by keeping them in school and in class.

Interpretation of Findings

The three themes derived in this study through the coding and clustering analysis process, as detailed in Chapter 4, were (a) trust/positive student–teacher relationships, (b) parental involvement, and (c) intentional alternatives to out-of-school suspensions. The themes were seen consistently throughout the results, as the participants repeatedly described the need for more positive student–teacher relationships as a gateway or

starting point toward curtailing discipline referrals. If there is a positive relationship between the two, there will be an understanding of the student and mutual respect formed that will lessen the probability that a student may be disrespectful because of trust built by the teacher. Parental involvement, the second theme, was also viewed as an asset for both the students and school. When there was consistent parental involvement, the participants stated that they saw fewer behavioral problems and more academic success for students. Finally, in relation to the theme of intentional alternatives to out-of-school suspensions, all of the participants agreed that because of the Georgia Department of Education's implementation of PBIS and SEL, discipline referrals and suspensions had decreased, even though statistics from the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2019) still indicate that African American students represent 59.7% of discipline occurrences, compared to White students at 25%.

The key findings of the study revealed that the most common event that led to disciplinary referral was disrespect from the student. The participants also noted that students' disrespect was a possible product of lack of a positive teacher–student relationship. The participants indicated that teachers must build positive, trusting relationships with their students, as such relationships allow teachers to see and understand the whole student. If there is trust in the teacher–student relationship, the student will be less likely to be disrespectful, and the teacher will know more about that student's situation both at home and at school, which will give insight into that student's total needs. This finding corroborates the results of studies by Sparks (2019) and Lindsay and Hart (2017), who concluded that there is a need for better teacher–student

relationships. Sparks stated that positive relationships between teachers and students generate higher attendance rates and academic engagement from students, better grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates. Lindsay and Hart and Gregory and Roberts (2017) also described the need for positive teacher–student relationships as involving teachers' need to work on their own bias toward the culture and/or race of students. These researchers stated that teachers' attitudes and low expectations of their students arising from teacher bias due to the student's race had been a factor in higher discipline referrals and suspensions of African American students.

Another key finding revealed in the study was the perception that the use of social media had become a significant cause of student conflicts over the past several years. Participants explained how social media had become a tool for students to bully other students, as well as how inappropriate or negative posts about students or their family members could lead to conflict in the neighborhood that spread into the school environment. The participants described social media as a relatively new element in student conflicts and discipline referrals. Participants' descriptions of the effects of social media and how social media are used as a tool for bullying correlated with the findings of Horner et al. (2015) about how cyberbullying on social media affected high school students through feelings of sadness, embarrassment, anger, fear, and loss of trust in others.

The participants from both non-Title I schools also emphasized how drugs and vaping had become a serious problem in their schools. They described how they followed policy under which immediate suspension occurred if a student was found

vaping or with drugs. Curran (2019), Bottiani et al. (2016), and Haight et al. (2014) discussed the immediate suspensions of students for drug use because of zero-tolerance discipline policies. Heilbrun et al. (2015) noted that more drug problems were found in schools with more White students than in those with a predominately African American student body.

Other key findings indicated by the participants concerned the culture of the neighborhood and location of the school. Finn and Servoss (2014) and Shabazian (2015) both conducted studies that concluded that school location was a prominent factor in higher suspension rates for African American students because many of the areas in which African American students lived had higher crime rates and lower socioeconomic status. Most of the participants' perceptions agreed with Finn and Servoss and Shabazian that the culture and location of the community influence students' behavior. The participants also noted that the students' family/home and neighborhood environments could and did have some bearing on how the students saw themselves and the world around them. Again, most of the participants were in consensus that the school location was important, especially when it came to the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood and that of the students' parents/guardians. A school's location in a lower income area could affect the funding of the school and the supplies needed to teach the children in the district. In contrast, in wealthier districts, schools might have access to all the newest and most innovative technologies that aid students in their day-to-day academic work.

Also significant for understanding the problem of African American students' higher rates of suspensions and expulsions is what the Georgia State Department of

Education and the school districts around the state are doing to keep these students in school. Like researchers Anyon et al. (2014), Thompson (2016), Hernandez-Melis et al. (2016), Skiba (2013), and the Georgia Department of Education (2017), participants saw the urgency and need to reassess the use of exclusionary discipline practices in the school and to find alternative methods. Skiba saw little evidence that suspensions and expulsions had any positive effects on student behavior or school safety. Skiba also noted that these policies led to missed educational opportunities for students who were given exclusionary disciplinary consequences and that adverse outcomes for these students were highly probable (Skiba, 2013). The Georgia Department of Education introduced a statewide initiative to use PBIS and SEL as methods that would help reduce the number of discipline referrals written and the high amount of out-of-school suspensions that occur because of referrals.

All the principals were in consensus on how their school districts were implementing the state-mandated intervention and prevention programs of PBIS and SEL. PBIS is designed to help teachers and students through the discipline process. Teachers must go through several steps before they can write discipline referrals for small infractions. A teacher must first confer with the student and the student's parent/guardian, and the teacher also has the option to give the student detention. If those measures do not work, the teacher can then write the discipline referral, and the principal or assistant principal of discipline has discretion over what the next steps should be, including in-school suspension. The last step in this disciplinary process is out-of-school suspension. SEL is used to help students manage their emotions. SEL is used in a group

classroom environment where students are taught how to make better decisions when dealing with anger and other emotions. The students consider scenarios in which they might be confronted with tough choices of whether to walk away from a fight or avoid a confrontation with other students that might cause a school disruption that would lead to an out-of-school suspension or expulsion.

Finally, all the participants were in consensus that the most critical component in reducing discipline referrals and lowering out-of-school suspensions was through parental involvement. The participants agreed that parental involvement is essential in the academic success of a student. The parent/guardian's involvement helps to build positive relationships with the teacher and administrators. If the parents are involved in their child's academic tenure, the students are more apt to become successful during their educational journey from kindergarten to 12th grade. A parent's perspective is needed throughout the school's environment through volunteerism and giving feedback to the teacher and administration on the needs of their child. The principals' comments were corroborated by the findings of studies conducted by Ucus et al. (2019) and Yang (2018). Ucus et al. concluded that the more the parents are involved in a child's education process, the more successful their academic career will be parental involvement reduces behavioral issues that may lead to disciplinary actions. Yang's results indicated that the more involved the parents are in their children's academic life, the better their students' chances are for academic success. Yang also stated that consistent parental involvement in their education process brought about better classroom behavior and a more positive attitude towards school and academia.

Other findings regarding the school location agreed with the results of studies conducted by the Ohio State University Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity' (2015) and Finn and Servoss (2014). Four out of seven participants in this study agreed that the school location does affect the student. Ohio State University Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity' and Finn and Servoss both stated that more disciplinary issues and suspensions occur in schools in neighborhoods with higher crime rates, which are mainly in urban areas and require more school security. The participants in this study stated that the location could affect how the students react to their environments because what is happening in the neighborhood may be brought to the school. They also relayed the fact that schools in more impoverished areas have less access to monies needed to purchase up-to-date resources to aid students in their pursuit of academic success.

Barrett et al. (2018), Mizel et al. (2016), and Gibson (2014) all saw the socioeconomic status as a factor in discipline issues. They noted the higher the income level of the student's family, saw fewer out-of-school suspensions. The findings in this study also revealed that the education level of the parent/guardian and economic status does have a bearing on student achievement and discipline issues.

Finally, like Skiba (2013) and Thompson (2016), the participants all stressed the need for alternative methods too harsh exclusionary disciplinary practices. They discussed the use of Restorative Justice and programs that rehabilitate the offender as alternative methods to zero-tolerance policies and out-of-school suspensions. Every participant in this study addressed the state-mandated prevention and intervention

alternative methods being pushed throughout the school districts in Georgia as PBIS and SEL.

In contrast to this study, none of the studies I reviewed in the current literature have discussed disrespect as a critical factor for students receiving discipline referrals and the disciplinary consequences that accompanied the behavior. All the participants in the study were in consensus that disrespect was the primary reason they saw for discipline referrals. As previously stated, the participants believed building a trusting and positive teacher-student relationship is the best way to alleviate or at least curtail these types of referrals.

The interpretation of the findings corresponded with the theoretical framework of the study. Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) focused on a multiple-leveled social environment that organizes interconnecting systems that touch on all aspects of life. The theme of intentional alternative to out-of-school suspension aligns with the macrosystem level of the theory. The macrosystem level examined the larger social-cultural belief system and the educational system with laws and rules about discipline, was reflected as the participants discussed the rules and regulations of their schools and the disciplinary actions taken as needed for the various infractions that are committed. The theme emphasized the alternative methods of discipline using PBIS and SEL. The exosystem level of the theory was described by the participants described as the culture and neighborhood location of the school (urban, suburban, or rural) and how it affects their students' behavior and the school environment. The theme of trust/positive student-teacher relationships aligned with the mesosystem level of the theory. The mesosystem

level of the theory is seen as the participants discussed the reach of their schools'

environments and peer groups and their effect on the students. The student-teacher

relationship is part of the school's environment that can influence a student's behavior in

a positive or negative manner. Finally, the theme of parental involvement aligns with the

microsystem level of the theory. The microsystem level of the theory explores the

participant's background (i.e., family) of the students and how it affects their behavior

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theme revealed the importance of parental involvement in

positive student behavior and academic success because the participants saw parental

involvement as a positive measure concerning the students' behavior and academic

achievement.

Limitations of the Study

The original scope of the study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of

6 Georgia high school principals. The principals were to represent both Title I and non-

Title I schools as well as one of the three regions of the state (urban, rural, and suburban).

The principals representing their regions would also represent one Title I and one non-

Title I school in those regions. One of the study's limitations was there were only two

non-Title I representatives and only one representative of the urban region, which was a

Title I school. The urban non-Title I principal decided not to participate in the study on

the day of the interview. The study was able to have the representation of two non-Title I

principals from a suburban and rural school. The study also had a larger representation of

4 suburban school principals' perceptions and experiences, including one non-Title I.

Recommendations

This study revealed that these participants believed the most common reason for discipline referrals among African American students was disrespect. The two specific recommendations that were documented in the literature review, as well as discussed by the participants in this study, were the need for building a trustful and positive teacher/student relationship as well as a continued effort to use alternative methods in addressing zero-tolerance disciplinary measures and policies. The literature and the participants suggest teachers must continue to implement more preventative intervention programs such as PBIS and SEL. PBIS will help both the teacher and the student. Through PBIS, the teacher will make every concerted effort to stop the acceleration of out-of-school suspensions due to smaller infractions through conferencing with the student, parental contact, and detention. The expansion of the use of SEL will be helpful to the students as they will be given the tools to help them become more in touch with their emotions and how to navigate making better decisions when confronted with situations that could typically escalate into heated arguments or even violent encounters such as fights. Another recommendation is to have cultural sensitivity training for all teachers, even if they are African American. Sensitivity training for African American teachers is also needed because bias is not limited to teachers being the same race. African American teachers can also have bias based on their differing socioeconomic status from the students they teach and differing cultural values of between the teachers and the students within the African American community. These recommendations, as seen in the literature and through the perspectives and experiences of the participants, can

help decrease the number of discipline referrals that lead to the suspensions and expulsions of African American students.

Implications

The results of this study could have a positive impact on African American students, their school communities, and their neighborhoods. This study revealed what the participants believed is an ongoing problem, and the most common reason for discipline referrals is disrespect. They attributed this to some students not having a stable positive, trusting teacher-student relationship. Because a student's level of disrespect can escalate if there is not an established positive teacher-student relationship, students will likely be given a referral depending upon the severity of the level of disrespect; the student could thereby end up with in-school to out-of-school suspension. If programs such as PBIS and SEL or others like them are implemented in school districts throughout the country, more positive teacher-student relationships can be built. This will allow teachers to have a better understanding of their students' academic needs as well as having a better insight into the student's background, which may explain their behavior positive and negative. A greater understanding of the student and the steps of PBIS may create a drop in discipline referrals that lead to out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.

The most positive side of decreasing suspensions and expulsions of African American students is that they remain in school in a positive learning environment that will help produce stable, productive citizens. If students can stay in school and thrive to their fullest potentials, they will be able to enter society with an education and skills that can contribute to their communities. Wolf and Aaron (2017) stated that this would aid in

keeping the crime rates down. The results of their study indicated that African American students, especially males who were suspended, had a 31% increased probability of being involved in criminal activity, a 22% greater chance of becoming a victim of a crime, a 72% greater incidence of possible incarceration as an adult (Wolf & Aaron, 2017).

The practical implications of this study give precedence to the need for more prevention intervention programs that lower the probability of students being suspended and that build better teacher-student relationships. Programs like SEL also allow students to navigate their emotions and teach them how not to give into their impulses and make better decisions such as walking away from fraught situations or circumstances. With positive initiatives and programs like PBIS and SEL, the student, their families, the school environment, and the home community will all benefit, which would bring about positive social change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study was conducted to gain a greater understanding of why African American students are still being suspended and expelled at higher rates than other students through the perspectives and experiences of Georgia high school principals. They perceived that the number one reason for discipline referrals of African American students was disrespect and that without a positive, trusting teacher-student relationship, perceptions of disrespect will occur and can escalate into a referral being written, followed by in-school or out-of-school suspension. This study indicated a strong need for more preventive intervention programs like PBIS and SEL that can help decrease the probability of students being suspended as well as teaching the students how

to make better decisions during angry and emotionally charged situations they may encounter. Understanding what must be done to keep these students in school and help them become successful young adults, both academically and socially, we build a stronger and more positive school and community environment. This is a step in the right direction of promoting and building positive social change.

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Sage

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How many years have you been in education?

2. How many years have you been a principal?

3. Please describe your student population.

4. Please describe your faculty population.

5. What changes have you seen in discipline problems over the past five years.

6. What changes have you seen if any in disciplinary actions over the five years in your school and district?

7. What are the most common reasons for discipline referrals?

8. What is the range of the disciplinary actions given for them?

9. What do you see as the common reasons for referrals of African American students in your school?

10. What kinds of disciplinary actions are being taken with these students?

11. What role does the culture of the community play in managing student behavior in the school?

12. What role does the school location play on the behavior problems that may or may not occur in your district?

13. What is your understanding about African American students who seem to be more susceptible in receiving referrals, suspensions, and expulsions?

14. What do you believe can be done in your school, district, and community to help alleviate the overrepresentation of African American students being suspended and expelled?

15. Are there any alternatives you see that are better than exclusionary disciplinary practices?

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Recruitment Letter

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Michele Jones-Pace and I am a doctoral student at Walden University inviting you to participate in a multiple case study of school administrators' use of disciplinary measures. The study will focus on the perceptions, experiences, and proposed solutions of Georgia high school principals of both Title I and non-Title I schools located in rural, suburban, and urban areas on the higher rates out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students. This study will ultimately be used to aid in gaining an understanding from the principal's perspectives of what could be causes of these suspensions are and what could be done to curtail them.

The case study will include two high school principals from each region of Georgia (urban, rural, and suburban). There will be three principals representing Title I high schools and three representing non-Title I high schools from the three regions. The data will be collected through an in-person or telephone interview that will not last more than one hour. All data collected will be kept confidential. The school district, school, and participant's name will all remain anonymous. The only information that will be in the study regarding the school is which region it is located, its Title I status, and the number of students in the district.

If you are interested in participating in the study, read and sign the attached consent form. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at or email _____. My doctoral chairperson is Dr. Barbara Benoliel, and you can contact her at _____.

Sincerely,

Michele Jones-Pace
Ph.D. Candidate
Walden University

Appendix C: Cooperation Letter

Cooperation Agreement

To Whom It May Concern:

As the administrator of _____, I am willing to assist Walden University doctoral student, Michele Jones-Pace, with her dissertation study. In my role, I will email the recruitment flyer to her targeted audience of Georgia High School principals using the email list for our organization. I accept and understand that her research is a multiple case study on the perceptions, experiences, and proposed solutions of Georgia high school principals of both Title I and non-Title I schools located in rural, suburban, and urban areas on the higher rates out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of African American students. I also understand the data collected and analyzed for this study will be used to aid in gaining an understanding from the principal's perspectives of school suspensions and expulsions.

I understand the case study participants will include two high school principals from each region of Georgia (urban, rural, and suburban). There will be three principals representing Title I high schools and three representing non-Title I high schools from the three regions. The data will be collected through an in-person or telephone interview with the participants and will not last more than one hour. All data collected will be kept confidential. The school district, school, and principal's name will all remain anonymous. The only information that will be in the study regarding the school is which region it is located, its Title I status, and the number of students in the district.

Below is my signature agreeing to assist Ms. Jones-Pace by using our the GASSP website database and emailing potential participants for the recruitment of her study.

Sincerely,

Signature

_____

Date: _____

Appendix D: PBIS Details

Georgia Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
District Implementation Process

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is an evidence-based, data-driven framework proven to reduce disciplinary incidents, increase a school's sense of safety and support improved academic outcomes. More than 1,200 Georgia schools and 27,000 nationwide have been trained in PBIS. Implementation of PBIS is saving countless instructional hours otherwise lost to discipline. The premise of PBIS is that continual teaching, combined with acknowledgement or feedback of positive student behavior will reduce unnecessary discipline and promote a climate of greater productivity, safety and learning. PBIS schools apply a multi-tiered approach to prevention, using disciplinary data and principles of behavior analysis to develop school-wide, targeted and individualized interventions and supports to improve school climate for all students (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports) (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Appendix E: SEL Details

What is Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowle dge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relatio nships, and make responsible decisions. Researchers have come to understand the connections between academic performance and SEL, as well as the importance of attending to the many facets of student learning experiences in an effort to educate the whole child.

1. Students can learn cooperation and teamwork through participation in team sports and games.

2. Students can deepen their understanding of a current or historical event by analyzing it through a set of questions based on a problem-solving model.

3. Cross-age mentoring, in which a younger student is paired with an older one, can be effective in building self-confidence, a sense of belonging, and enhancing academic skills.

4. Having one member of a pair describe a situation to his partner and having the partner repeat what he or she heard is an effective tool in teaching reflective listening. (Georgia Department of Education, 2019)

Appendix F: Facebook Page Recruitment Flyer

https://www.facebook.com/Michele-Jones-Pace-101160017909868/?modal=admin_todo_tour
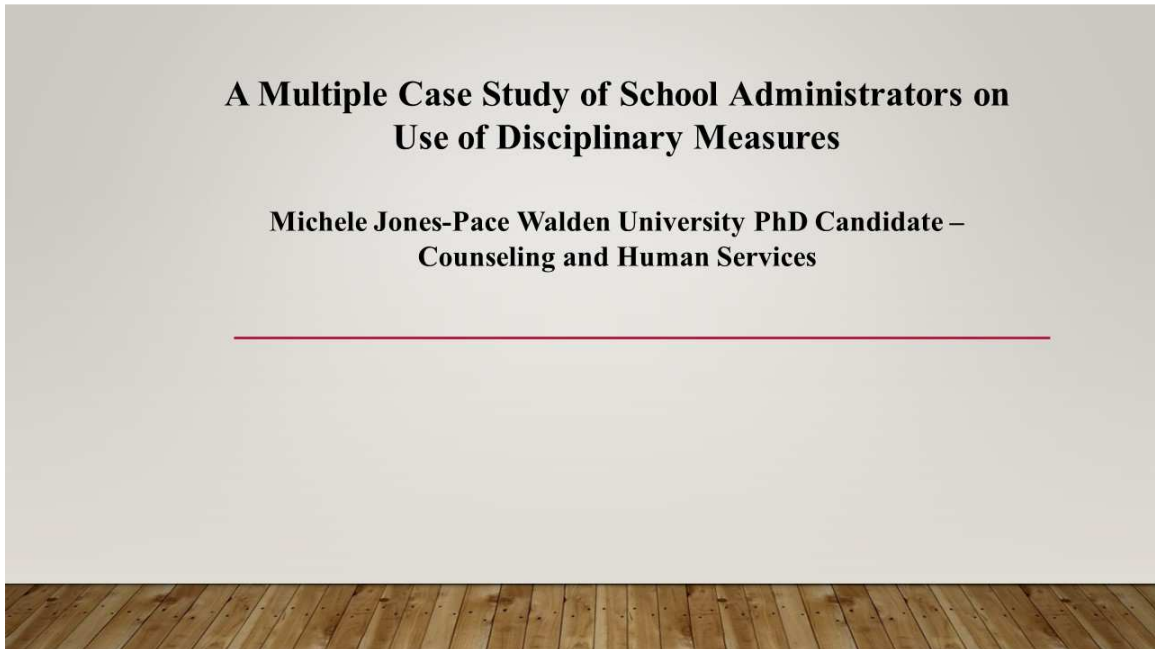
Michele Jones-Pace

August 7, 2019 ·

This page is dedicated to the recruitment of Georgia high school principals for a multiple case study on the use of disciplinary measures. If you are a Georgia high school principal and interested in participating in the study, please inbox me for more information. Thank you in advance for your participation.

Indicator 15
Retention, Suspension, and Expulsion

Between 2000 and 2016, the percentage of students retained in a grade decreased from 3.1 to 1.9 percent. This pattern was observed among White, Black, and Hispanic students.

This indicator examines racial/ethnic differences in the percentages of students who were retained in a grade,1 received one or more out-of-school suspensions, and were expelled by race/ethnicity. Retention, suspension, and expulsion are all associated with negative outcomes, such as an increased risk of dropping out of school.2 Suspensions and expulsions are disciplinary actions taken by a school or district in response to a student's behavior. Retention, however, can be related to both disciplinary and academic issues; a student might be retained because of behavioral issues or because the student is not academically ready to progress to the next grade level.

The Current Population Survey asks parents to report the grade in which their child is enrolled in October of the current school year, and the grade in which their child was enrolled in October of the prior school year. Retention rates include students in kindergarten through grade 12 in public and private schools.

In 2016, about 1.9 percent of students in kindergarten through grade 12 were retained in the same grade in which they were enrolled in the prior school year. This percentage was lower than the percentage of students retained in 2015 (2.2 percent). Between 2000 and 2016, the percentage of students retained decreased from 3.1 to 1.9 percent. This pattern was observed among White, Black, and Hispanic students.3 However, in all years between 2000 and 2016, a higher percentage of Black students than of White students were retained. The percentage of Hispanic students who were retained was also higher than the percentage of White students retained for most years over the same period, although the percentages of White and Hispanic students retained in 2016 were not measurably different.

In 2016, the percentage of Black students retained in kindergarten through grade 12 (2.7 percent) was higher than the percentage of White students retained (1.7 percent) but was not measurably different from the percentage of Hispanic students retained (1.9 percent). Among those in kindergarten through grade 8, a higher percentage of Black students (2.6 percent) than of White and Hispanic students (both 1.5 percent) were retained. Among those in grades 9 through 12, there were no measurable differences in the percentages of White, Black, and Hispanic students retained.

For White and Hispanic students in 2016, the percentage of kindergarten through 8th-grade students who were retained in grade (both 1.5 percent) was lower than the percentage of 9th- through 12th-grade students who were retained (2.2 and 2.7 percent,

respectively). The percentage of Black students in kindergarten through 8th grade who were retained was not measurably different from the corresponding percentage of those in 9th through 12th grade.

Students may be suspended (in- or out-of-school)4 or expelled (with or without educational services)5 for disciplinary purposes. The Civil Rights Data Collection provides data on the number of public-school students who were disciplined during the 2013–14 school year by the type of disciplinary action (e.g., suspension, expulsion). The remainder of this indicator discusses the percentages of public-school students who received an out-of-school suspension and were expelled, by race/ethnicity.

More than twice as many male students (7.3 percent) than female students (3.2 percent) received one or more out-of-school suspensions in 2013–14. This pattern of higher percentages of male than female students receiving out-of-school suspensions was observed for all racial/ ethnic groups. For example, 17.6 percent of Black male students received one or more out-of-school suspensions compared with 9.6 percent of Black female students. The percentage of Black male students who received out-of-school suspensions (17.6 percent) was the highest of male students from any racial/ethnic group. This percentage was nearly twice the percentage of the next highest racial/ ethnic group—American Indian/Alaska Native male students with 9.1 percent—and was more than twice the percentage of male students from any other racial/ethnic group. A similar pattern was observed among female students, with Black female students receiving the highest percentage of out-of-school suspensions (9.6 percent).

About 111,000 students were expelled in 2013–14, amounting to 0.2 percent of public-school students. The percentages of Black and American Indian/Alaska Native students who were expelled (both 0.4 percent) were higher than the percentages for students of all other racial/ethnic groups. Among other racial/ethnic groups, 0.3 percent of students of Two or more races, 0.2 percent of White students, 0.1 percent of Hispanic and of Pacific Islander students, and less than 0.1 percent of Asian students were expelled. As with the percentages of students who received out-of-school suspensions, a higher percentage of male (0.3 percent) than of female (0.1 percent) students were expelled. This pattern of higher percentages of male than female students receiving expulsions was observed for all racial/ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).