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Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives on Referring Black Students for Disciplinary Action

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Abstract

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Action

by

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Ed S, Valdosta State University, 2017

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Schools have reported disparities in the use of discipline on a nationwide scale. The problem for this study was that early childhood teachers referred Black students for disciplinary action or exclusionary discipline at higher rates than their peers.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. Weinstein, Curran, and Tomlinson-Clarke's model of culturally responsive classroom management formed the conceptual framework that guided this study. The research question focused on teacher perspectives about referring Black students for disciplinary action. A basic qualitative design was used to capture the insights of 10 early childhood teachers through semistructured interviews conducted by telephone; a purposeful sampling process was used to select the participants. The criteria for participation were teachers who have taught racially mixed groups of kindergarten through third grade students and who were familiar with the discipline process. Emergent themes were identified through open and axial coding, and the findings were developed and checked for trustworthiness through member checking, rich descriptions, and researcher reflexivity. The findings revealed that (a) cultural awareness can mitigate discipline disparities, (b) diverse faculty members help mitigate discipline disparities, (c) teacher intervention can positively influence student behaviors, and (d) student home life can influence behavior. This study has implications for positive social change by cultivating a professional development approach to address the specific needs of a school population.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful children, Calvin Jr., Ahriah Braylee, and Averie Blair. Mommy completed this task hoping to inspire you to achieve remarkable things in life. Thank you for loving me unconditionally through one of the most challenging processes I have gone through. Whenever I wanted to give up, all I had to do was think of you and my promise to always lead by example. Having you is my greatest accomplishment. Thank you for constantly pushing me to be the best I can be.

To my husband, Calvin, thank you for supporting me through this journey. You allowed me to go through this process with love and encouragement. Thank you for your continued commitment to our family. We love and cherish you always!

To my mom, Dr. Linda Houseal, thank you for showing me what it is to be a strong woman. I will never forget the moment Rhea and I had the privilege of watching you walk across that stage and receive your doctorate degree. I remember thinking I would do the same thing one day, and how proud I was of you. I pray I can be half the example to my children that you still are to me. Thank you for paving the way for your daughters and grandchildren. You are a true pillar in our family. I love and cherish you more than you know.

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The Miles family, thank you all for consistently encouraging me. Grandpa Leroy and Grandma Florence would be proud of the legacy they left behind. With only a 3rd and 8th grade education, they supported 11 children, 10 of whom became educators. The sacrifices they made are a testament to the family we have become. The positive seeds they sowed will continue to be reaped by our many family members, as well as those who are still to come. I am blessed to be a part of a family that understands the importance of education. It is truly the key to success.

Thank you to my remaining friends and family for your continued support and encouragement. I appreciate the many thoughts and prayers you have given me along the way. I am forever grateful for the people God has put in my life to help guide me through this process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The significant discipline disparities amongst Black students and their peers are causing inequity in schools beginning as early as preschool (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021; Welsh & Little, 2018). Research shows that Black students receive disciplinary referrals at higher rates when compared to other subgroups (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). Specifically, data trends have suggested there is a consistent disparity in discipline referrals in early childhood and secondary schools between Black students and their peers (Quinn, 2017). Due to teachers' and administrators' conscious or unconscious bias, Black students receive more severe punishments than their peers (Gregory et al., 2017). Even though school districts are beginning to implement alternative practices to mitigate the quantity of exclusionary discipline practices, few studies focus on the discipline gap (Gregory et al., 2017). Researchers have identified various concerns about discipline disparities and how discipline referrals influence student performance (Blazar & Kraft, 2017; Gage et al., 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2021). Discipline referrals can affect students' academic performance, cause classroom inequity, and cause students to interact with the criminal justice system (Anderson & Ritter, 2018; Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

The results of this study may be used to inform professional development for teachers that assists them in modifying their discipline practices. The results of this study may contribute to positive social change by providing information for professional development coordinators and discipline administrators on early childhood teachers'

perspectives toward referring Black students for discipline referrals. The study's results may also be used to mitigate discipline disparities and encourage researchers to conduct more studies related to the identified problem.

In Chapter 1, I include background information aligned with the problem of early childhood teachers referring Black students for disciplinary action at higher rates than their peers, which leads to a gap in disciplinary practice. The problem statement is aligned with the purpose of the study on Black students receiving discipline referrals at a higher rate than their peers. I also include the nature of the study, definition of key terms, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study in this chapter. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Background

Black early childhood students are more likely to receive disciplinary action from teachers at higher rates than peers, even when displaying the same behaviors (Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Redding, 2019). The results from the 2017-2018 national surveys on school discipline revealed significant disparities in discipline regarding students of color across all grade levels (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2021). Black students, with or without special services, represent a large portion of discipline data, even though they represent a small population percentage compared to their peers (Gage et al., 2019).

Teachers' classroom practices and management are the leading identified causes of discipline disparities (Welsh & Little, 2018). There is a direct correlation between teacher expectations or perceptions and student academic performance (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). Teachers' unawareness of their negative racial beliefs can also influence the

differences in discipline among Black students and their peers (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). Further, the use of punitive discipline can hinder fostering supportive learning environments, climate, and culture of a classroom (Wesley & Ellis, 2017).

Students who encounter exclusionary discipline starting as early as preschool have a higher probability of poor academic performance, such as grade retention, dropping out of school, or following the school-to-prison pipeline pathway (Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Some schools have begun implementing social emotional learning (SEL) to combat discipline disparities; however, SEL does not include practices for teachers' individual beliefs or students' cultural differences (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Gregory and Roberts (2017) suggested that future researchers should consider teachers' beliefs to determine how teacher-student interactions influence the discipline gap.

Researchers have identified the existence of racial disproportionalities in discipline practices (Gage et al., 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2021; Welsh & Little, 2018). There must be an awareness of how negative or positive beliefs drive teacher decisions on acceptable behavior (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). This study is needed to explore teachers' perspectives on referring Black students, as well as how their perception of discipline referrals influences Black students' academic performance.

Problem Statement

According to Welsh and Little (2018), subgroup discipline disparities are causing inequity in schools as early as preschool. The problem is early childhood teachers refer Black students for disciplinary action or exclusionary discipline at higher rates than their

peers (Fadus et al., 2020; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Even though exclusionary discipline is common among schools, it is still ineffective and affects Black children disproportionately, thus negatively affecting their academic performance (Fadus et al. 2020). Wesley and Ellis (2017) defined exclusionary discipline as removing students from their learning environment, including in-school or out-of-school suspension. Exclusionary discipline can cause long-term and short-term adverse consequences (Gregory et al., 2017).

Researchers have gathered data to prove significant racial discipline disparities in grades K–12 (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021; Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Nowicki & US Government Accountability Office, 2018; Owens & McLanahan, 2020). Few studies, however, discussed early childhood teachers' perspectives and their beliefs pertaining to Black students, discipline, and academic performance (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). As such, there is a gap in practice based on the racial disparities in teacher-issued discipline referrals (Gregory & Roberts, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. The research paradigm that was used in this study is constructivism. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) defined the constructivist paradigm as understanding knowledge from the viewpoint of the observed person(s). For this study, early childhood teachers were defined as teachers who teach kindergarten through third grade. I interviewed teachers to identify their understandings, feelings, and concerns about Black students and discipline in the early

childhood setting. The data gained from this study may provide new information for teachers, leaders, and stakeholders that could be used for specific professional development focused on discipline disparities in early childhood education. The findings in this study may also be used to have a deeper understanding of strategies teachers use to mitigate discipline disparities.

Research Question

This basic qualitative research study addressed one central research question:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action?

Conceptual Framework

For this study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. The framework that supported this study was Weinstein et al.'s (2003) culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM). CRCM was introduced in 2003. When implementing CRCM, teachers must (a) understand their own beliefs, biases, and assumptions about human behavior; (b) acknowledge the cultural, racial, ethnic, and class differences that exist among people; and (c) understand the ways that schools reflect and maintain discriminatory practices of the larger society (Weinstein et al., 2003). Implementing this approach will bring awareness to cultural bias and limit the misinterpretation of behaviors from culturally different students (Weinstein et al., 2003). Strategies to consider when reflecting on the practices of classroom management to promote equity include (a) creating a physical setting that supports academic and social goals; (b) establishing expectations for behavior; (c) communicating

with students in culturally consistent ways; (d) developing a caring classroom environment; (e) working with families; and (f) using appropriate interventions to assist students with behavior problems (Weinstein et al., 2003). Culture in the classroom is multifaceted and consistently changing (Bennett et al., 2017). There are no set rules that will lead to a culturally responsive classroom, but it is still important to implement cultural responsiveness to address the needs of all students (Bennett et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

This framework was related to the proposed study because it focused on the beliefs and constructs of teachers managing a classroom of diverse students. Ladson-Billings (1995) posited that to learn more about teachers' cultural responsiveness, we must rely on their learned experiences and perspectives. As such, CRCM was used to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. CRCM was also used to develop the research questions and the interview protocol, as well as to implement open and axial coding.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze interview data. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set. The process of this thematic analysis occurred in phases of (a) being familiar with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, and (e) defining and naming themes (Nowell et al., 2017).

Nature of the Study

Qualitative methodology was used to understand the perspectives of the participants. A fundamental principle of qualitative research is that researchers sample

only until they have reached the point of data saturation or when new data begin to yield redundant information (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Malterud et al. (2016) noted that selecting five to 10 diverse participants might provide enough information to answer research questions in qualitative studies. I used a basic qualitative study design utilizing interviews to obtain a minimum of 10 to 12 early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. The criterion for participation included (a) being a current kindergarten through third-grade early childhood teacher; (b) teaching Black students alongside other subgroups consistently; and (c) having a familiarity with the discipline process within the participants' school. The Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood teachers' social media groups were used to recruit participants from around the United States for this study. I used semi structured face-to-face, Zoom, or telephone interviews to collect data. Snowball sampling was also used to obtain more participants.

Each interview was recorded using Otter, a transcription service. Following the interviews, I generated memos and reflected on the data for deeper analysis. This included open coding, analyzing data line-by-line, and organizing the codes into categories known as axial coding. Based on coding, I identified themes to answer the research question. I also implemented reflective journaling to limit bias throughout my study. A two-page summary of the findings was shared with each participant as a form of member checking.

Definitions

Exclusionary discipline: The removal of a child from their learning environment for a certain amount of time or permanently (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021).

Explicit bias: The conscious beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes held about a person or group of people (Wesley & Ellis, 2017).

Implicit bias: The unconscious beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes held about a person or group of people (Wesley & Ellis, 2017).

Racial discipline gap: Students of color experience adverse disciplinary action in school at disproportionate rates (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019).

Zero tolerance: Students who are a danger to their learning environment receive disciplinary action, such as expulsion or suspension (Alnaim, 2018).

Assumptions

I assumed the participants would understand this study's importance and be truthful in their perspectives. I also assumed the participants would understand the questions during the interview process. If participants did not understand specific questions, I assumed they would ask for clarity during the interview process. It was assumed that the participants expounded upon their experiences beyond the interview questions, and their responses were unbiased. I included follow-up questions within the interview protocol (Appendix B) to encourage participants to expand on their responses. It was assumed that the participants were genuinely interested in discipline disparities. Their willingness and genuineness mattered because participants who were not interested in the problem would elicit bias within the study. It was not assumed that teachers would

be participating for illegitimate reasons other than to provide their knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives of the problem. It was assumed that no circumstances would influence the participants' responses. Lastly, it was assumed that the teachers would participate in this study to serve as social change agents in their respective fields of education.

Scope and Delimitations

I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. The scope of this research was early childhood teachers in different states within the United States. This study was delimited to kindergarten through third-grade teachers who understood the discipline policies within their schools and who have or are currently teaching Black students and other subgroups. This study did not include teachers who taught beyond third grade, did not teach Black students consistently, or were unaware of their school's discipline plan.

To evaluate this criterion, the participants were asked to complete a demographic survey that the researcher reviewed to determine eligibility for the study. The beliefs and perspectives of the participants in this study did not serve as a representation of their specific school district, but as a representation of the United States. Even though the study was limited to a minimum of 10 to 12 participants, it may still provide school leaders with valuable insight into implementing or constructing discipline policies and procedures.

Kalu and Bwalya (2017) determined that transferability is achieved when the researcher can align the data and research conclusions for the reader to apply to other contexts, circumstances, or individuals. Steps must be taken to help ensure that the

work's findings are the result of the participants' experiences and ideas, rather than the researcher's characteristics and preferences (Shenton, 2004). To ensure transferability, detailed descriptions of data were provided. This allows the readers to compare other contextual factors based on the research provided.

<div align="center">**Limitations**</div>

Finding a small sample size of 10 to 12 kindergarten through third-grade teachers who met the participant requirements was a perceived challenge. Teachers are typically overworked and have limited availability for interviews. I addressed this issue by providing a wide range of time for teachers to participate in virtual interviews and remained flexible to accommodate their needs. It was still possible that participants would drop out due to time constraints or other factors. Because the study was limited to early childhood teachers' perspectives, I did not have the input of parents, upper-grade elementary teachers, or secondary school teachers. I am aware that these factors may also contribute to the research problem. The intent of this study was not to be extended to include their perspectives or beliefs. The perspectives and beliefs of parents, upper-grade elementary teachers, or secondary school teachers could also be an implication for further research.

Due to the nature of the study or other personal reasons, some participants were unwilling to honestly share their perspectives. I supported participants by making them feel comfortable. One strategy I used was ensuring confidentiality. The confidentiality of the participant was maintained by using alphanumerical codes. Additionally, participants were aware of my role within the study as a researcher and not an administrator. If at any

time participants wanted to withdraw from the study, they could do so without explanation. There was no monetary compensation for participating in the study. Also, participants were fully informed of the purpose, benefits, and potential risks of the study.

My personal biases could have affected the study. As an educator, I have experience with discipline disparities, as well as how limited cultural awareness can affect classroom management. Therefore, I did not recruit participants from my school district. Participants were recruited using the Walden University Participant Pool and teacher social media groups. Individual interviews took place using face-to-face, Zoom, or telephone interviews. Maintaining memos and reflective journals allowed me to keep my personal feelings toward the study minimized.

Significance

This study is significant because I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. Disciplinary actions implemented in early childhood settings include exclusionary disciplines, such as out of school suspension (OSS) and in-school suspension (ISS) (Jacobsen et al., 2019). The quality of a teacher-student relationship in early childhood education is also linked to behavioral student outcomes (Rucinski et al., 2018).

Based on the results of the study, different alternatives for disciplining students may be identified to help decrease the discipline gap and promote higher academic performance for Black students in early childhood settings. The results of this study may also be used to cultivate professional development for teachers, leaders, and stakeholders to assist them in modifying their discipline practices. A deeper understanding of the

discipline disparities may encourage teachers, leaders, and stakeholders to revisit discipline policies. Further, the new information learned may aid in making equitable policy changes that meet all students' needs. The study may contribute to professional literature by illuminating teachers' perspectives of discipline disparities and their influence on race, academics, and discipline.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced the study and provided background information on the problem of early childhood teachers referring Black students at higher rates than their peers. I also identified that exploring teachers' perspectives may provide deeper insight and elicit professional development to help reduce the discipline gap. The research questions for this study focused on exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. This study was a basic qualitative design. Data was gathered using semi-structured face-to-face, Zoom, or telephone interviews. Open codes, axial codes, and emerging themes were identified through thematic analysis. The study was delimited to kindergarten through third-grade teachers who teach Black students and other subgroups, and who understand the discipline policies within their schools. Participants were recruited using the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood teachers' social media groups. This study may be significant by providing new information for teachers, leaders, and stakeholders. Professional development coordinators may use the information from the study to focus on discipline disparities in early childhood education pertaining to Black students.

In Chapter 2, I will introduce the existing literature on the racial discipline gap to support the need for this study. I will also explain the literature search strategies and provide a more thorough explanation of the CRCM framework. Current and relevant research related to the study will be presented to identify a gap in practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The research problem is that early childhood teachers refer Black students at higher rates than their peers (Fadus et al., 2020; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Blazar and Kraft (2017) found that teachers and their teaching practices can affect student outcomes in discipline and academic performance. In early childhood settings, offenses that result in exclusionary discipline are minor, such as defiance or classroom disruption (Owens & McLanahan, 2020). Gage et al. (2019) studied national school discipline results for Black students and concluded that Black students, with or without special needs, represent a substantial portion of discipline data, even though they represent a small population percentage compared to their peers (Gage et al., 2019).

Thus, it was necessary to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives to understand why Black students receive referrals at higher rates. Santiago-Rosario et al. (2021) explored the discipline gap to understand elementary teachers' expectations of student behavior outcomes. The researchers found that Black students received almost 3 times more office discipline referrals than White students. There was a correlation between teacher expectations and student outcomes (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). There remains a gap in practice concerning the disciplinary outcomes and disparities based on the behavior of teachers and their perspectives (Welsh & Little, 2018).

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. I sought to explore the elements that contribute to the problem based on the perspectives of early

childhood teachers who teach kindergarten through third grade, and who teach Black students and other subgroups.

In Chapter 2, I thoroughly review the literature search strategy, conceptual framework, and literature to establish the relevant factors contributing to the identified problem. The literature review explores the problem's relevance and includes the history of the problem, current reasons for the problem, the influences of exclusionary discipline, teachers' perspectives, teachers' perspectives regarding exclusionary discipline, how student-teacher relationships influence student behavior, zero-tolerance discipline policies, how exclusionary discipline influences academic performance, alternatives to exclusionary discipline, positive behavioral interventions and supports, restorative justice, social-emotional learning, a summary and a conclusion.

Literature Search Strategy

Walden University's library research database was used to conduct an in-depth search and thorough review of both current and seminal research. The search included the following databases: Google Scholar, SAGE journals, EBSCOhost, Education Source, ERIC, and ScholarWorks. The search terms for this study included *culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, exclusionary discipline, elementary discipline disparities, early childhood discipline disparities, discipline gap, teacher perspectives on discipline, Black students and discipline, zero-tolerance policies, implicit bias, explicit bias, teachers and student relationships, teachers and cultural awareness, racial discipline disparities, school-wide positive interventions and support systems, restorative practices, social-emotional learning*, and *influences of exclusionary discipline.* Seminal

research articles and articles published within the last 5 years were selected for use in the literature review. Literature was used to identify appropriate information to support the research question and problem of the study. Scholarly literature provided more information on discipline disparities and the adverse effects on students. Themes were also identified within the literature review. Most of the articles included were published within the last 5 years with additional seminal research articles added.

Conceptual Framework

Culturally Responsive Classroom Management

Culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) is the conceptual framework of this study. The intent of CRCM is to provide teachers with equitable strategies that improve the behavioral outcomes of students and reduce discipline disparities (Larson et al., 2018). Weinstein et al. (2003) stated that teachers must develop knowledge, skills, and predispositions to effectively teach children from diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social backgrounds.

The fundamental goal of CRCM is to provide equity for all students in education (Weinstein et al., 2003). Because expectations of appropriate behavior are culturally influenced, teachers who lack cultural awareness competency are more likely to experience conflict with students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Weinstein et al., 2004). When cultural awareness is considered as a frame of mind, teachers can (a) identify their personal biases and values, (b) reflect on how their actions influence their expectations of student behavior, (c) and recognize that CRCM provides all students with equitable learning opportunities (Weinstein et al., 2004). The proposed study benefits

from this framework because research suggests that CRCM can promote classroom

equity and reduce discipline disproportionality (Larson et al., 2018).

CRCM is grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) that

has three criteria. Students must be (a) familiar with academic success, (b) develop and

preserve cultural competence, (c) and develop an awareness through which they contest

the status of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These propositions are also

dependent upon the teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers who understand their

students, families, and cultures can help cultivate these propositions (Renuka et al.,

2018). Ladson-Billings (1994) argued that culturally relevant pedagogy begins with

building good relationships with students.

Further, CRCM is grounded in culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002).

Culturally responsive teaching aims to improve diverse students' academic outcomes,

and is defined as utilizing racially diverse students' cultural characteristics, experiences,

and viewpoints as a channel for teaching them effectively (Gay, 2002). The essential

elements of culturally responsive teaching are developing knowledge about cultural

diversity, building caring learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse

students, and delivering instruction in a culturally relevant way to the student (Gay,

2002).

Research shows that Black students' academic performance is shaped by

expectations, race, and experience of teachers who use culturally appropriate strategies

(Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culture can influence students' and teachers' attitudes and

behaviors to contribute to the instructional process (Gay, 2002). Culture can influence

how students are disciplined and their academic performance. Teachers can remove this burden by maintaining a cultural awareness and allowing students to function in a way that is natural to their cultural conditions (Gay, 2002). Chowela & West-Olatunji (2008) asserted that teachers' lack of understanding between a student's culture and behavior may contribute to discipline disproportionality. Further, Larson et al. (2018) applied CRCM to investigate the use of early childhood and middle-grade teachers' proactive behavior management and culturally responsive teaching practices to ascertain whether they were correlated with student behaviors viewed in the classroom. The researchers determined that students are more likely to have positive student behavior when implementing proactive classroom management and culturally responsive teaching (Larson et al., 2018).

CRCM is aligned with teachers making judgments about student behaviors as informed by cultural assumptions (Bondy et al., 2007). This may cause teachers to judge cultural actions by students as inappropriate, thus leading to exclusionary discipline and disruption to the learning environment (Bondy et al., 2007; Thompson, 2007). Brown (2003) studied 13 effective 1st-12th grade teachers around the United States to identify CRCM strategies. The researcher determined that when teachers establish positive classroom climates, consistent expectations, and multiple forms of communication, they create an effective learning environment (Brown, 2003). These strategies also improve the academic performance of students (Bondy et al., 2007; Brown, 2003).

Literature Review

History of the Problem

The 1975 Children's Defense Fund seminal report was the beginning of identifying disparities in discipline among Black and White students across the United States, which created disadvantages for the Black racial group. Black students consistently received discipline referrals at higher rates than their peers, which has resulted in the loss of instructional time, poor academic performance, and higher risks of interactions with the criminal justice system (Gregory et al., 2016). Compared to White students, Black students received harsher disciplinary action, such as corporal punishment and exclusionary discipline strategies (Gregory, 1996; Shaw & Braden, 1990; Skiba et al., 2002). The overrepresentation of Black students in school exclusion was not correlated with the proportion of Black students enrolled, but quickly increased after school desegregation (Larkin, 1979; Thornton & Trent, 1988).

McCarthy and Hoge (1987) reported data concluding that teachers' perspectives of Black students' behavior resulted in a higher frequency of punishment than the behavior of White students. Additionally, McCarthy and Hodge (1987) found that other factors influenced the sanction of students. The significant factors were teachers' knowledge of students' past misbehaviors or punishments, teachers' perspectives of students' level of good behavior, and students' past academic performance (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987). Additionally, Rubovits and Maehr (1973) described White teachers as giving less attention and reinforcement to Black students. Howard-Vital and Irvine

(1991) determined that White teachers have negative expectations for Black students and are more likely to be out of cultural sync when compared to Black teachers.

Gay (2000) explained that Black students' misbehaviors are perceived as unlovable, problematic, and difficult to embrace when they fail to align with the dominant culture's values, norms, and rules. To reduce racial disparities across the United States, policymakers and school leaders began to reform school discipline practices by employing new policies, such as the zero-tolerance policy in 1990 (Ritter, 2018). More details of how zero-tolerance policies influence Black students will be given later in the chapter.

Current Reasons for the Problem

Discipline disparities have become a systemic problem across all grade level settings, starting as early as preschool (Welsh & Little, 2018). Current knowledge of discipline disparities in elementary settings has fostered school inequalities (Jacobsen et al., 2019). McDaniel et al. (2021) revealed that Black students are almost four times more likely to be suspended than their White peers, and they are typically underrepresented in rigorous academic settings. The U.S. Department of Education et al. (2021) discovered that from the 2015-2016 to 2017-2018 school year, disciplinary practices increased in school-related arrests, expulsions with educational services, and referrals to law enforcement. Additionally, Black students in preschool represented 18.2% of enrollment but received 43.4% of one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2021). Black students in grades K–12 represented 15.1% of the total population but received expulsions at more than twice their enrollment rate (U.S.

Department of Education et al., 2021). Across the United States, students missed

11,205,797 days due to exclusionary discipline practices (U.S. Department of Education

et al., 2021). Further, Black students led in school-related arrests, referrals to law

enforcement, and transfers to alternative schools during the 2017–2018 school year (U.S.

Department of Education et al., 2021). These punishments can interfere with students'

academic performance (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Even though federal and state policies

have changed to reduce discipline disparities between subgroups, no apparent evidence

suggests discipline disparities will be mitigated (Ritter, 2018).

Influences of Exclusionary Discipline

Clayback and Hemmeter (2021) define exclusionary discipline as removing a

child from their learning environment for a certain amount of time or permanently. Since

1975, the Children's Defense fund was one of the first organizations to identify the

overrepresentation of Black youth in exclusionary discipline practices (Fenning & Rose,

2007). This trend has continued to be evident in both past and present educational

statistics (Basile, 2020; Camacho & Krezmien, 2019; Fadus et al., 2020; Gregory et al.,

2017; Ritter & Anderson, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Exclusionary

discipline practices can influence students negatively, ultimately causing loss of

instructional time, poor social emotional regulation, and negative academic performance

(Bal et al., 2017).

There is also a direct correlation between exclusionary discipline and the increase

in disproportional incarceration rates, also known as the school-to-prison pipeline (Young

et al., 2018). Pesta (2018) conducted a study to address what happens after school

exclusion constructs the pathways toward criminal offending in adulthood. The researcher found that exclusionary discipline correlates with dropping out of school and participating in criminal offenses (Pesta, 2018). Because Black students are disproportionately represented in exclusionary discipline, they are more likely to drop out of school and participate in criminal offenses than other subgroups.

In elementary education, more research needs to be done on the long-term effects early exclusionary discipline has on students (Andrew & Blake, 2021). However, some research indicates that early exclusionary discipline can cause students to experience lower levels of academic self-efficacy, school attachment, and engagement (Anyon et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2014; Yeager et al., 2017). Students who experience exclusionary discipline early in age can experience harm due to interruptions in students' routines and social-emotional development (Jacobsen et al., 2019).

Jacobsen et al. (2019) focused on exclusionary discipline, racial disparities, and the relation between exclusionary discipline and aggressive behavior in elementary schools. The researchers found racial disparities between Black and non-Black students, where Black students are five to nine times more likely to be suspended than Hispanic and White students in early exclusionary discipline at the elementary grade level (Jacobsen et al., 2019). As a result, Black students are experiencing childhood inequality beginning at an early age. Fabes et al. (2021) conducted a study that examined the use of exclusionary discipline in U.S. public schools, grades prekindergarten–12. These researchers also identified that Black students are more likely to be suspended when compared to other subgroups in grades PreK-12. They concluded that exclusionary

discipline also promotes harsh consequences on students, such as loss of learning and teaching, limited social-emotional learning, poor academic performance, and limited access to school resources.

Teachers' Perspectives

Boylan et al. (2018) defined teacher perspectives as the mindset of teachers based on their point of view. Kotaman et al. (2018) defined teachers' perspectives as thoughts about themselves, their careers, and students. Clark (2020) reported that teachers' firsthand experiences and background knowledge determine how they perceive the world around them; thus, understanding teachers' perspectives may allow for the understanding of teaching practices. Teachers' perspectives also aid in creating effective learning environments for students (Gundogums, 2017).

According to Humphries et al. (2018), early childhood teachers can determine the classroom environment students experience based on their perspectives and beliefs. Teachers' perspectives are correlated to student academic performance and teacher practices (Hidalgo-Cabrillana & Lopez-Mayan, 2018). Additionally, research thows that teachers' social-emotional competence and their views of students' emotional competence also correlate to their approach to managing behaviors within the classroom (Shewark et al., 2018). Teachers are responsible for maintaining positive classroom climates, social-emotional growth, and academic achievement for all students while also being aware of their beliefs (Shewark et al., 2018). Understanding teachers' perspectives are important because they can provide knowledge of the proposed problem based on their experiences with the discipline gap among Black students.

Teachers' Perspectives Regarding Exclusionary Discipline

Blazar and Kraft (2017) studied the extent of teachers' influence on student behaviors and how teacher practices influence student behavior in elementary classrooms. The researchers found that teachers and their teaching practices can broadly influence student outcomes in discipline and academics. Teachers are often the first to refer students for disciplinary action (A. Gregory & Roberts, 2017). Their perspectives are an important aspect of understanding how their knowledge and beliefs influence student behaviors in the classroom.

Classroom teachers do not determine the severity of students' consequences; however, they can refer students for disciplinary action. Because there is an increasing awareness of Black students being excluded or suspended from early learning environments as early as preschool, Neitzel (2018) suggested that teachers may be unaware of their role in referring students for misbehavior. Teachers' unawareness can be described as implicit bias. Implicit bias is the unconscious beliefs or stereotypes that can influence a person's decision-making (Carter et al., 2017). This pattern is an identified predictor of discipline disproportionality (McIntosh et al., 2021). Halberstadt et al. concluded that implicit biases could affect teachers' views of students, including perceiving Black children as more aggressive than their White peers (2020). Even though teachers and administrators are becoming more aware of the racial inequalities in discipline, it will still take time for educators to eradicate their implicit biases and take the necessary steps to close the discipline gap (Neitzel, 2018). To begin the eradication of

racial discipline disparities, teachers must become comfortable discussing how race plays a role in discipline.

Redding (2019) studied the relationship between student-teacher racial matching and how teachers rate students' academic and behavioral outcomes. The researcher found that Black elementary and secondary teachers rated Black students as less likely to disrupt class than Black students assigned to teachers of another race. Hambacher (2017) explored elementary teachers' perspectives and their disdain for using punitive discipline practices with students of color. Teachers displaying care for students was an essential finding within the study. Because some teachers are aware of the negative influences exclusionary discipline can cause, they choose to improve the total child and not focus solely on a student's behavior.

Having an awareness of the racial discipline gap is not enough. Teachers and leaders must determine how to change their assumptions regarding discipline and race (Hambacher, 2017). It is suggested that the change begins with pre-service teachers. Whitford and Emerson (2018) suggested that bias can be reduced by incorporating empathy-inducing interventions. This course of action could potentially change the current climate and culture of empathy and implicit bias within the classroom.

How Student-Teacher Relationships Influence Student Behavior

Denham et al. (2012) posited that if young students encounter positive relationships with teachers, it will aid in developing their social-emotional skills. Social-emotional development includes self-management and responsible decision-making skills related to students' behavior (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021). Negative student-teacher

relationships caused amplified problem behaviors in young children, therefore limiting the improvement of their self-regulation skills (Pianta et al., 1995). Relationships with teachers beginning in early childhood education can provide students with the foundational skills to adapt to their school social environment (Moen et al., 2019).

Hamre and Pianta (2001) posited that young Black students experience more negative relationships with teachers when compared to their White peers. The perspectives of teachers and Black students can create a lack of trust, which diminishes the ability to form positive relationships between the two entities (Legette et al., 2020). Moen et al. (2019) studied how student-teacher relationships thrive in early childhood settings. To strengthen student-teacher relationships, the researchers determined that there must be a strong presence of emotional support (Moen et al., 2019). When students experience inviting, and respectful interactions with teachers have improved social competence, positive peer relationships, and fewer behavior problems (Mashburn et al., 2008).

Zero-tolerance Policies

Zero-tolerance can be defined as policies that use severe punishments for all offenses, no matter how minor (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). In 1994, the federal government passed the Gun-Free Schools Act. This act threatened the loss of federal funds if schools did not implement zero-tolerance laws (Martin, 2002). This new act aimed to increase the safety of students at school, but it is one size fits all approach negatively influenced students. This included increased exclusionary discipline, such as expulsion or suspension (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Zero-tolerance policies have expanded

beyond gun violence and include punishments for minor infractions (Huang & Cornell, 2021). This was done to remove what teachers and leaders deemed misbehaving students. Minor infractions can include inappropriate dress codes, tardiness, or class disruption. Teachers and leaders wanted to set an example for other students to refrain from committing the same offenses.

Zero-tolerance policies are still prevalent in schools across the United States (Henry et al., 2021). Skiba and Peterson (1999) found that zero-tolerance causes disproportionate minority representation among students, which consists of Black students. These policies have failed to improve student behavior and academic performance (Henry et al., 2021). Researchers have also concluded that zero-tolerance policies are linked to the school-to-prison pipeline (Sellers & Arrigo, 2017).

Increasing awareness of the effects of zero-tolerance policies is publicized along with some alternative interventions. However, there is apprehension about how to approach the change of these policies (Henry et al., 2021). Lacoe and Steinberg (2018) completed a study that explored the outcome of a Philadelphia school system's discipline policy reform. The researchers found that although a policy reform was attempted, it had minimal effects on the usage of exclusionary discipline or school suspensions (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). Kyere et al. (2018) suggested utilizing social workers to employ schools, students, and their families to encourage policymakers to create equitable and safe policies in a culturally responsive way.

How Exclusionary Discipline Influences Academic Performance

Exclusionary discipline is correlated with poor academic performance (Anderson et al., 2019). Because there are evident disparities in discipline among the Black subgroup, they contribute to the racial gaps in academic performance (A. Gregory et al., 2010). Anderson et al. (2019) studied all K—12 public schools in Arkansas, focusing on student demographics, achievement, and disciplinary data. The researchers determined that discipline policies that incorporate exclusionary practices elicit poor academic performance and can have a more severe influence on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Anderson et al., 2019). Because exclusionary discipline is developmentally inappropriate for students in early childhood settings, it diminishes the ability of students to cope appropriately while still learning school norms (Anderson et al., 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2019).

During the 2015-2016 school year, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) reported that over 11million instructional days were lost due to exclusionary discipline. Losen and Martinez (2020) studied OCR's national data. They concluded that for every 100 elementary students enrolled, Black students lost an additional 20 days of instruction compared to their White peers. These disparities have negative consequences for all students involved, such as poor academic performance. Disparities in exclusionary discipline also tarnish the value of educational doctrine (McNeill et al., 2016). It is recommended to reduce unnecessary removals, consider alternative practices to reduce loss of instruction, and use equitable approaches to improve cultural responsiveness (Losen & Martinez, 2020).

Researchers have identified that exclusionary discipline practices have many negative consequences, such as causing a racial achievement gap (see Morris & Perry, 2016). They also provided evidence that exclusionary discipline has a variety of long-term effects on students' social skills (see (Losen et al., 2017; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Vanderhaar et al., 2014; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016). Because of the influences of exclusionary discipline, the American Academy of Pediatrics determined this practice as counterproductive in reducing discipline disparities and should only be implemented in extreme circumstances on an individual basis (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013).

Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline

It is known that exclusionary discipline can have negative consequences as it pertains to students' academic performance, behavioral outcomes, and social skills (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Losen et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2014). Exclusionary discipline can also cause students to experience involvement in the juvenile justice system (Skiba et al., 2014). Even though teachers and leaders are attempting to implement alternative practices for exclusionary discipline, they must first address their implicit biases that influence how they interact with students (Garro et al., 2019). Action will also need to take place, such as changing the practices and procedures of teachers and leaders or making policy changes to close the gaps in discipline disparities (Garro et al., 2019).

Researchers have identified that Black students experience higher exclusionary discipline rates than White students (Cruz et al., 2021). School districts and states have

begun employing alternatives to address the disparities in discipline. Universal

alternatives that have emerged include positive behavioral interventions and supports

(PBIS), restorative justice practices, and social and emotional learning (SEL) (Cruz et al.,

2021). School-wide positive interventions behavioral interventions and supports

(SWPBIS) can positively influence behavioral and academic performance when

implemented with fidelity (Gage et al., 2018). Restorative justice practices can contribute

to the mitigation of discipline disparities (Mansfield et al., 2018). Incorporating SEL into

schools can improve students' academic and behavioral outcomes and classroom climate

(Bailey et al., 2019).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

PBIS is a multitiered framework that promotes positive academic and behavioral

performance through the organization and implementation of systematic evidence-based

support for all students (James et al., 2019). The goal of PBIS is to emphasize students'

positive behavior. Higher emphasis on positive behavior may encourage students to

refrain from participating in negative behavior once they see the benefits of behaving

positively. The PBIS framework comprises three tiers ranging from universal support to

intensive individual support. Tier 1 is the primary intervention for all students, tier 2

incorporates supplemental interventions, while tier 3 is the most intensive intervention

individualized for students (Noltemeyer et al., 2019).

The effectiveness of PBIS depends on the support of its implementation,

professional development, and staff engagement (Tyre & Feuerborn, 2021). It is most

effective when the framework is implemented school wide. Even though PBIS has

positive influences on students' behavior, there is limited research on how PBIS affects diverse student populations or the racial discipline gap. McIntosh et al. (2021) evaluated the effectiveness of a school wide PBIS framework focusing on racial inequities in school discipline in several elementary schools that have identified inequitable referrals for Black students. The researchers found that when teachers receive equity-focused professional development with consistent support when assessing their school discipline disparities, meaningful improvements can be identified in the racial discipline gap. The limitations of this study were the small sample size. COVID-19 restrictions limited the study to less than a year, and there was a smaller-scale focus on intervention and measurement of effectiveness (McIntosh et al., 2021).

More research is needed to determine if the effectiveness of PBIS in reducing racial discipline disparities is comparable across school districts. Specifically, there is still the question of equity-focused PBIS frameworks and their capacity to reduce the racial-discipline gaps for Black students in school districts (McIntosh et al., 2021). Results are indecisive when examining the influence PBIS has on discipline disparities. However, studies have shown that it is more sustainable when PBIS is implemented with other interventions (Good et al., 2011; Nese et al., 2016).

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice (RJ) is a philosophy that focuses on building meaningful relationships and how peoples' actions affect those relationships rather than violating school rules and laws (Hollweck et al., 2019). Implementing restorative justice practices can positively influence discipline disparities while fostering a positive climate and

culture in school settings. Instead of using punitive discipline, restorative justice focuses on restoring relationships through conversation and skill-building (Payne & Welch, 2017). Restorative justice institutes social-emotional learning for students (Wonsun et al., 2019). Teaching students how to regulate their emotions and solve problems early will strengthen those same skills as they transition to middle and high school. Because the restorative justice framework includes the teachings of social-emotional learning, students experience readiness and academic achievement (Hoffmann et al., 2020).

Academic achievement is a common goal of school districts nationwide. Disciplinary actions such as expulsion, suspension, or in-school suspension limit students' academic success. Schools that still implement these disciplinary actions put students at risk for poor academic achievement and dropping out of school (González et al., 2019). Schools that actively implement RJ strengthen their school communities and relationships among adults and students (Kervick et al., 2020). Instead of pushing students away from school, restorative justice practices may allow students to feel welcome and collaboratively plan to succeed in all developmental domains.

Even though restorative justice has positive influences, its capacity to address racial discipline disparities may be limited. Restorative justice practices reduce suspensions and referrals but do not correspondingly reduce racial discipline disparities among subgroups (Schiff, 2018). Zakszeski and Rutherford (2021) conducted a study that reviewed the literature on the state of school-based restorative practices. The researchers found that when schools adopt restorative justice practices, they experience favorable outcomes such as a positive school climate and a reduction in discipline referrals. More

research needs to be conducted on evidence-based practices integrating restorative justice in school-wide initiatives with comprehensive multitiered support systems (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021).

Social and Emotional Learning

SEL has five components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, and responsible decision-making (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Corcoran et al., 2018). Instead of continuing zero-tolerance policies, some school districts have begun incorporating SEL to address their discipline policies and respond to student misbehavior. SEL can positively influence school climate and culture, character development, and relationship building when implemented with fidelity (Haymovitz et al., 2018). Improving students' social skills can improve student behaviors without using punitive practices, such as exclusionary discipline.

Mahoney et al. (2018) completed four meta-analyses to determine the effectiveness of students in grades K—12 participating in universal SEL programs. The meta-analyses resulted in researchers studying outcome data from 356 research reports with the summarization of the long-term and short-term benefits. The meta-analyses identified and addressed four domains: SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behaviors, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Mahoney et al., 2018). Overall, the SEL program showed significant benefits for students in behavior, attitude, emotional, and academic outcomes (Mahoney et al., 2018). Researchers have also concluded that SEL allows students to build positive relationships with others and experience learning more effectively (Corcoran et al., 2018; Greenberg et al., 2003). SEL

does not address the discipline disparities between Black and White students, even
though it positively affects students' behavior outcomes.

Kennedy (2019) posited that SEL's positive outcomes vary by race and gender.
How SEL practices are implemented varies amongst school districts, and research is
limited to how the effects vary for diverse learners (Kennedy, 2019). SEL is limited to
mitigating discipline disparities because (1) there is no focus on adult behaviors, and (2)
the factors of power, privilege, and culture are not considered (A. Gregory & Fergus,
2017). Teachers' beliefs are correlated with school climate, students' behavior, and
academic performance. Because SEL does not focus on race and the social-emotional
competencies of educators, discriminatory behaviors are fostered, which leads to
excessive referrals of minority students (A. Gregory & Fergus, 2017). SEL can be
successful in closing the discipline gap when educators (1) omit race, gender, and other
social identities as descriptors, (2) treat people as individuals regardless of their social
identity, and (3) focus on the commonalities among people (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). To
address the issues of racial discipline disparities within school districts, educators must be
equipped with various tools that support positive student behavior.

Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter 2, I focused on the framework aligned with the study, provided
background on the extent of the problem of racial discipline disparities, and discussed the
influences of the phenomenon. I then provided research on the influences of exclusionary
discipline, explored teacher perspectives of exclusionary discipline, discussed zero-
tolerance policies, and explored alternatives to exclusionary discipline.

Researchers' evidence about racial discipline disparities indicates that further research is needed. Even though schools are implementing reforms for exclusionary discipline, students are still experiencing inappropriate discipline that causes the racial discipline gap to continue (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Ispa-Landa, 2018). There is a lack of current research to explain how teachers' interpersonal biases may play a role in racial discipline gaps and how it influences teachers' responses to Black students (Ispa-Landa, 2018). This gap in practice in the research contributes to the difficulty of addressing why teachers refer Black students for discipline referrals at higher rates than their peers. It also contributes to the difficulty of identifying how teachers perceive discipline influences the academic performance of Black students. The research literature related to my study showed a gap in practice in the professional literature about contributing factors toward teachers referring Black students for discipline referrals. In my research study, I will explore early childhood teachers' perspectives directly regarding the problem in my study. Based on the literature review, it is determined that regardless of the reforms school districts attempt to implement, there is still a significant racial discipline gap between Black students and their White peers (McIntosh et al., 2021; Schiff, 2018).

Research has consistently shown discipline disparities among Black and White students starting as early as preschool (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021; Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Welsh & Little, 2018). Researchers have explored varied factors contributing to the problem, but there are no clear answers to solve the problem. However, it is known that teacher beliefs, implicit bias, and the lack of cultural awareness are potential factors. Some researchers stated that the history of structural racism, cultural

competence, and the conditions of oppression would need to be addressed before eradicating the issue of racial discipline disparities (A. Gregory et al., 2021).

An evident gap in practice exists in research regarding early childhood teachers' perspectives on referring students for disciplinary action. Most of the research focused on middle and high school-aged students. More research needs to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on why Black students are referred for disciplinary action at higher rates than their peers. There also needs to be a focus on the academic performance outcomes of Black students who receive disciplinary action.

In Chapter 3, details of the methodology applied to this study are provided. This includes the research rationale and design and the role of the researcher. Other elements of the methodology include participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, data analysis, data collection, and the data analysis plan. The elements of trustworthiness, which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, are established. Details on the ethical procedures and the protection of participants are also included.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. Exploring this topic may provide new information for teachers, leaders, and stakeholders. The results of this study may provide a deeper understanding of the discipline disparities and encourage teachers, leaders, and stakeholders to revisit their discipline policies. Additionally, this study may help teachers and leaders cultivate professional development specific to their school's needs regarding the racial discipline gap. In Chapter 3, I provide specific details regarding the research design, rationale, and role of the researcher as well as the methodology, concerns of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

This basic qualitative study addressed the following research question:

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action?

A basic qualitative research design was appropriate for this study because qualitative research is a way of understanding the nature of reality and knowledge (Stenfors et al., 2020). One of the primary purposes of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of situations based on the perspectives or viewpoints of the research participants (Farghaly, 2018). A quantitative approach was considered for the study; however, quantitative research can be defined as separating facts from feelings or beliefs (Farghaly, 2018). A quantitative approach was not appropriate for this study because its process included gathering numerical data, which isn't the concern of this

research question. Grounded theory was also considered for this study. Grounded theory is a method used to develop or construct a theory based on data gathered from participants (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Grounded theory was not appropriate for my study because there was no intention to develop a theory based on the results of the study. I intended to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action.

A basic qualitative study was used for this study because the perspectives that were explored were based on the knowledge and beliefs of the participants themselves. The knowledge and perspectives of the participants will aid in gaining a deeper understanding of the identified problem. Because I used interviews in the study and no other processes of collecting data, a basic qualitative research design was the most suitable for this study.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I had the responsibility of planning and implementing the study. This included collecting, analyzing, and evaluating data to present my interpretation of the findings. My experience in discipline disparities includes teaching in early childhood settings, leading PBIS teams, and upholding the discipline policies within my school as an administrator. I have an undergraduate degree in early childhood education with a certification to teach preschool through 5th grade, followed by a master's degree in early childhood education specializing in early childhood mathematics. I also have a specialist's degree in leadership education, where performance-based activities such as observing and analyzing discipline practices are implemented. An endorsement in

gifted education also adds to my experience in the academic performance of Black students and other subgroups.

As a Black teacher, leader, and student, I can identify with the experiences and perspectives of educators and Black students. I have taught early childhood education for eight years and served as an assistant principal for one year. In my experiences, I have recognized discipline disparities among Black students within my school settings. At the same time, because of my background, there is potential bias within my study. I managed bias by documenting my personal feelings as I completed the study using a reflective journal and taking field notes consistently throughout this process. I did not have any personal or professional relationships that could potentially influence the participants in this study. As a leader within my school, I also wanted to prevent potential conflicts of interest or power differentials. To do this, I did not seek out anyone to participate who works in the same environment as me. Additionally, no incentives were provided to increase participation in the study.

Methodology

Participant Selection

I used purposeful and snowball sampling to reach teachers who (a) currently teach kindergarten through third grade, (b) teach Black students, as well as other subgroups consistently, and (c) have familiarity with the discipline process within their school. This criterion was chosen because I focused on the discipline disparities of Black students within early childhood education. The Walden University Participant Pool and early

childhood teachers' social media groups were used to recruit participants from around the United States for this study.

The sample size for this study was 10 participants. Even though there are no specific guidelines for identifying the correct sample size, I must have enough information to answer the research questions and reach data saturation (see Gill, 2020). As the study progressed, I determined more participants were not needed based on the quality of information gained from the teachers' experiences and perspectives using snowball sampling.

Instrumentation

This study's data were collected using semi-structured face-to-face, Zoom, or telephone interviews. The interview questions (Appendix A) were developed based on the research questions, literature topics, and literature discussed in Chapter 2 and CRCM. The interview questions were created to explore teachers' perspectives on referring Black students for disciplinary action. The interview protocol form (Appendix B) was used to gather demographic data, record key details, notify participants of the study's expectations, and ask each participant the same interview questions. Follow-up questions were also included. I used discretion when asking follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. Finally, the responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to answer the research questions.

An expert on this topic was consulted to evaluate the interview questions and ensure content validity. This expert was a Black female who has worked in early childhood and secondary education for over 35 years. She has a doctorate degree in

leadership education and has served in leadership positions for the past 15 years. She has further experience working with colleagues to mitigate discipline disparities within her school district. She also works with district leaders focusing on the achievement gap of subgroups. Based on her educational experience, I determined that she was qualified to evaluate the interview questions. After her evaluation, she determined that the instrument measured what it is intended to measure. Table 1 shows the alignment of the interview questions to the research question and conceptual framework.

Table 1

Interview Question Alignment With Research Question and Conceptual Framework

Interview Questions	Alignment
How many years of teaching experience do you have?	Demographic information
What grade do you currently teach?	Demographic information
How many years have you taught in kindergarten, first, second, or third grade?	Demographic information
What discipline policies does your school currently implement?	RQ1
Why do you think Black students disproportionately receive discipline referrals for their behaviors compared to their same-age White peers?	RQ1
What are your experiences of referring Black students for disciplinary action specifically?	RQ1
Why do you think Black students are more likely to receive harsher punishments for misbehavior compared to their peers?	RQ1
What are the current discipline strategies for students at your school?	RQ1
What behavioral management strategies do you implement within your classroom?	Conceptual framework: CRCM
Do you believe culturally relevant classroom management can positively influence the discipline gap? Why?	Conceptual framework: CRCM

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood teachers' social media groups were used to recruit participants from around the United States for this study. Snowball sampling was implemented to recruit more participants as needed. The

contact for recruitment was made through email or telephone. Participants received a detailed description of the study and an informed consent form. Each participant was emailed an informed consent document requesting their consent to participate in the study. No further action occurred until I received each participant's consent to proceed. If I did not receive their consent, I followed up with the participant a maximum of three times. Participants had access to my Walden email and cell phone number to contact me. Following my attempts, if I did not receive their consent, it was assumed they were not interested in participating in the study. Those who provided their consent were given flexible days and times for interviews. As the interviewer, I remained flexible in providing times that fit the participants' schedules.

It was expected that the face-to-face, Zoom, or telephone interviews would last up to an hour. I recorded and transcribed the interviews using an online transcription service. Field notes were also used to reflect and notate occurrences. After transcription, the data were reviewed thoroughly, and revisions were made based on the efficiency of notes taken during the interview. I also referred to my reflective journal to identify any biases that may have occurred as I completed this process. A summary of findings was sent to each participant to check for accuracy.

Data Analysis Plan

Multiple data collection methods can be used in qualitative research. Interviews, observation, and field notes, focus groups, a review of documents and archival data, questionnaires, and participatory data collection methods can each be considered when analyzing data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To answer the research

questions, data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews are used to gain specific insight into individuals' lived experiences and understand how participants make sense of and construct reality about the phenomenon, events, engagement, or experience in focus (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The strength of conducting interviews is an opportunity to gain and better understand the participants' perspectives. The researcher can also record the interaction and insert dialogue into the research as pieces of data. A transcription service, Otter, was used to transcribe the audio recordings and to help identify recurring keywords within the recording. I also read the transcripts several times to accurately transcribe and identify common patterns, topics, ideas, and themes. Once the transcripts are organized and transcribed, Lester et al. (2020) suggests notating the experiences that participants share. Notating the experiences allowed me to understand the analysis of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Generating memos and reflecting on the data for deeper analysis can allow the researcher to identify limitations and determine if further research or data collection needs to occur (Lester et al., 2020).

Before coding, I used a process identified as precoding to help organize qualitative data. Following this, I began to open code data to help with qualitative data analysis. Coding is a researcher's interpretation of a portion of language or visual data (Saldaña, 2021). To advance in the research process, Williams and Moser (2019) suggests using both open and axial coding strategies. This approach prompts the researcher to constantly compare data and apply data reduction and consolidation techniques (Williams & Moser, 2019). Because the qualitative data are presented in

words, Clark and Vealé (2018) explained that coding is the transitional progression between data collection and analysis.

As such, it is important to find codes marked more than once. After implementing open coding and analyzing data line by line, I organized the codes into categories known as axial coding. I was able to identify emerging themes to answer the research questions based on the categories. To identify themes, the researcher should link two or more concepts highlighted by the interviewee and then reason how they are aligned (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I analyzed the emerging themes to verify that the data supported the themes. Then, I ensured that the themes were coherent and checked for overlapping themes, subthemes, and other potential themes in the data.

There may be discrepancies in data. As a researcher, it is important to identify misinterpretations or alternative explanations (Patton & Schwandt, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This can be described as a negative or discrepant case analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). Discrepant findings found within this study were identified and discussed in detail. Quotes and responses of participants were also included to provide a deeper insight into the participants' perspectives and experiences.

Trustworthiness

The quality of research is dependent upon its trustworthiness and credibility. Trustworthiness can be defined as researchers' procedures to ensure quality, rigor, and credibility (Frey, 2018). Frey (2018) suggested participant validation as means the researcher can use to ensure trustworthiness. To achieve this, data or results are returned to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Birt et al.,

2016). This is also known as member checking. I implemented member checking by sharing a two-page summary of the study findings with each participant, and I asked for additional input if they had any.

Credibility can be defined as believable and appropriate research, specifically regarding the level of agreement between participants and the researcher (Mills et al., 2012). To establish credibility, researchers should strive for data saturation by collecting and analyzing data on an ongoing basis, consistently comparing to see if new ideas, constructs, and themes arise, or if the same notions reemerge (Mills et al., 2012). Examples of this include documenting field notes, random sampling, maintaining memos to limit bias, coding, categorizing, and identifying themes that emerge during data analysis. Additionally, it is suggested that the researcher adopt appropriate, well-recognized research methods and develop an early familiarity with the culture of participating organizations (Shenton, 2004). I ensured credibility by acknowledging my personal biases, which could influence the findings of the study. I also maintained in-depth reflections and memos to ensure data collection and analysis relevance.

Transferability exists when findings can be transferred to other contexts (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Korstjens and Moser (2018) defined transferability as the reader implementing transferability judgment to assess whether the researcher's findings apply to their own settings. A thick description was provided to support the transferability of this research. Thick descriptions focus on the detail and richness of the data to provide a sense of reality for the readers to have a deeper understanding of the study (Rose &

Johnson, 2020). Using intentional sampling methods, transferability will also be improved (Cypress, 2017).

Dependability occurs when the analysis is consistent and can be repeated (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Korstjens and Moser (2018) described dependability as participants' involvement in evaluating the study's findings, comprehension, and recommendations. These are supported by data received from the participants of the study. To ensure dependability, I managed data by maintaining a journal of reflective notes, sampling, and data analysis. I also used member checking within this study. Rose and Johnson (2020) defined member checking as sharing the collected data with participants and obtaining feedback.

Confirmability occurs when the data can support the analyses (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Other researchers can confirm the research findings to establish that the data and interpretation are derivative of the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Cypress (2017) recommended having consistent self-awareness of my role as a researcher and identifying when my biases, beliefs, or assumptions are brought into the study while concluding they cannot be completely detached. I strengthened confirmability by maintaining a reflective journal documenting my personal bias and assumptions during the research process.

Trustworthiness is the overall impression connected with the researcher's endeavor (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability cannot exist without the other. They are aligned to ensure the quality of the researcher's work. Action must be taken to help ensure that the study's findings are the result of the participants' experiences and ideas rather than the researcher's

characteristics and preferences (Shenton, 2004). Transferability, dependability, and confirmability can be achieved when there is a detailed description of the phenomenon, an in-depth methodological description to allow the study to be repeated, and the recognition of shortcomings in a study's methods and their potential effects (Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Procedures

It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure no harm will occur and a proper plan is in place to protect the participants of a study. Ravitch and Carl (2016) described relational ethics or a relational approach as an understanding of the need to allow yourself to become vulnerable and to engage in research with a receptive sensibility. This means the researcher is willing to change their opinions, approach to their research, and critical aspects of their research as they learn with and from the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Woodgate et al. (2017) suggested maintaining a mindful presence, which guides the researcher through a quality research process. Some characteristics that can develop highly within a researcher include openness and curiosity, empathy and acceptance, and receptive attention and deep listening (Woodgate et al., 2017). I implemented these characteristics within my research as I interacted with participants and analyzed data.

Ethical procedures were followed based on Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Recruitment, consent, and data collection procedures were implemented based on the guidelines. An invitation letter and informed consent document were sent to all participants. Participants were notified of how data would be collected, confidentiality procedures, and the amount of time allotted to the interview.

Participants were sought once I received approval from Walden IRB. Following approval, the participants were sent an invitation and informed consent. The participants' consent was verified through email based on their response to the invitation and informed consent document. I instructed the participants to respond with the words "I consent" to verify their participation in the study. Interviews were not conducted until the participants accepted the informed consent.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time without a required explanation. There was no monetary compensation provided for their participation in the study. Any information disclosed during the study, such as participants' identities, privacy, and interview data will remain confidential. Participants were fully informed of the purpose, benefits, and potential risks and were allowed to ask questions throughout the process. The benefits and influences of social change were expressed to participants to increase educators' interest in the study.

Data security is an additional strategy to implement when preventing ethical concerns. Any information obtained from the participants will be kept confidential. The information was used for the purpose of the research study. Alphanumerical codes, such as participants' names, schools, or districts, were assigned to defer identifying information. All information will remain secure on a password-protected drive and computer. The data will be stored for at least 5 years from the completion of the study. Following the time frame, all the data will be destroyed and deleted.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I reviewed the methodology for this basic qualitative study. I also addressed other elements that included the role of the researcher, participant selection, recruitment procedures, and instrumentation. Details were provided on data collection and analysis. Implementing trustworthiness throughout the study is also provided in detail. Participant confidentiality and data security were outlined based on Walden University's IRB protocol guidelines. In Chapter 4, I provide the results of this study, the setting, data collection, and data analysis. Evidence of the study's trustworthiness by discussing how I ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are also included.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. I attempted to recruit participants from the Walden University Participant Pool, but I was not able to successfully find any participants. Alternately, I was able to obtain participants by using teacher social media groups and snowball sampling. Consent forms were sent to potential participants via email for them to review what the study entailed before they agreed to participate in the study. Participants who agreed to participate in the study responded to the email with "I consent." We then discussed their availability for interview. I remained as flexible as possible to conduct the interview at a time and date that worked best for the participants. All the interviews were carried out via telephone.

I used the transcription application Otter to record the participants' interviews and transcribe their responses. Otter is an application that records and transcribes simultaneously. As I was listening and reading the transcripts, some words that the application transcribed were not accurate. Because of this, I made the proper edits to convey the exact words of the participants. Once the transcripts were accurate, I began to identify codes. Those codes were then grouped into categories based on their similarities. Some categories included home life, culture, and interventions. From the identified categories, I was able to identify emerging themes. Chapter 4 is composed of the analysis of data, which includes a description of how participants were selected, demographics, and data collection and analysis procedures.

Setting

For the study, 10 US-based early childhood teachers shared their perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. Each teacher shared their personal experiences and perspectives for this research study. An alphanumeric code was provided for each participant to ensure confidentiality. The participants for this study included 10 early childhood teachers who, at the time, taught grades K-3. Each participant taught Black students along with other subgroups.

I conducted all 10 semi-structured interviews from my home and work office via telephone. Face-to-face and Zoom interviews were also an option, but the participants preferred telephone interviews. Participants were recruited using both social media and snowball sampling. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 3 to 18 years. Each teacher was assigned an alphanumerical code to maintain their confidentiality. For example, my first participant was referred to as T1, and the second participant was referred to as T2. There were no unexpected situations that affected the analysis of the results of this study. Table 2 includes a summary of participants' identifiers, years of teaching experience, grades taught, and gender.

Table 2

Research Participants

Participant	Years of Experience	Grades Taught	Gender
T1	17	3rd	Female
T2	9	3rd	Female
T3	11	Kindergarten and 1st	Female
T4	18	2nd	Female
T5	13	3rd	Female
T6	12	1st	Female
T7	13	Kindergarten	Female
T8	3	3rd	Female
T9	17	3rd	Female
T10	18	2nd	Female

Data Collection

Once approval was received from Walden University's IRB, I began collecting data. The IRB approval number was 06-14-22-084821. The initial step in obtaining participants was posting the study to Walden University's Participant Pool, as well as to teacher social media groups. In the end, I did not recruit any participants using the participant pool; however, I was able to recruit them via social media. After the first participant was obtained, I used snowball sampling to obtain more participants for this study. After identifying the potential participants, a consent form was sent to each participant via email. The consent form explained the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits, and a confidentiality notice. Once the potential participants responded with "I consent," we discussed a date and time that was suitable for them to be interviewed.

The data collection process took eight weeks to complete. All 10 participants chose to complete the interview via telephone. I interviewed each participant only once for approximately 30-45 minutes. The same interview questions were asked to each

participant. By asking the same questions, the data were more reliable. This also aided in completing the analysis process.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the purpose of the study and assured each participant I would maintain their confidentiality. I gave the interviewee time to discuss any concerns they had before conducting the interview. No participants indicated they had any concerns at the time of the interview. Once the interview began, I started with three demographic questions to understand how much experience each had in the classroom and what grades they taught. Their experience ranged from 3 to 18 years in grades K-3. During each interview, I used the interview protocol guide to record notes. I also used a reflective journal to record my personal thoughts and feelings. The phone calls were recorded using Otter, a transcription application. The application recorded and transcribed the audio simultaneously. After the interviews, the transcriptions were edited to ensure accuracy. No visuals were obtained during the interviews.

After completing each interview, I thanked the participants for volunteering. I reminded them that I would maintain their confidentiality, and I would be the only one to have access to the interview recordings, transcriptions, and notes. I also informed them that after collecting and analyzing all the data, I would send a two-page summary of the study's findings. I concluded the interview by giving the participants an opportunity to ask me any questions. I mentioned that if they did not have questions at that time, they could notify me via the contact information provided to discuss the study further.

The transcription application, Otter, was used to transcribe the audio recording. I edited each transcript word for word to ensure I captured what was stated during the

interviews. All the digital recordings are stored on my password-protected computer. They will remain there for at least 5 years. After that, they will be deleted and destroyed. I followed the steps that were described in Chapter 3 to conduct the research, and there were no unexpected occurrences during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

In this basic qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action by conducting semi-structured one-on-one interviews. I asked 10 open-ended questions in the same order. Follow-up questions were also asked to gain more clarity of the participants' responses. During the interviews, I used Otter to audio record and transcribe the interview into written text. I then reviewed each transcript line by line and edited the transcript to ensure the participants' words were transcribed accurately. After ensuring the transcripts were correct, I began to analyze the data line by line again. During this time, I had the opportunity to become more familiar with the data.

The data were analyzed based on the study's literature and conceptual framework. To aid in answering the research question, open coding was applied to identify repeated words, phrases, and concepts. During the coding process, I maintained a code book and applied definitions to the codes with excerpts from the participants. This helped me to code accurately and use the same code for similar words throughout the transcripts. After that, all the codes were gathered and placed into an Excel spreadsheet. From there, I began to categorize the codes. The categories were used to complete a second cycle of coding, also known as axial coding. Each second cycle code was identified with specific

colors. This was done to help me go through each transcript quickly and efficiently. After the second cycle coding, I was able to do a code count and identify themes by broadening and collapsing the categories. After identifying the themes, I did another cycle of coding by coding the categories with identified themes. No unusual situations occurred during the data analysis process.

Step 1: Familiarizing Myself with the Data

To ensure the transcripts were accurate, I compared each audio recording with the written transcript. Each interview was analyzed in the order that the interviews were completed. The participants were given an alphanumeric code, such as T1 and T2, to maintain their confidentiality. The transcripts were read and listened to numerous times to gain a deeper understanding of the data. While reading and listening to the transcripts, I took detailed notes. The transcripts were then uploaded into an Excel spreadsheet, where I put each transcript on an individual sheet. Within the sheet, the transcript was broken into columns, which contained a narrative excerpt, open codes, second cycle codes, and final theme. Open codes were completed simultaneously with the code book. The first cycle codes were broken into categories. The second cycle codes were completed using the categories followed by a code count and theme identification.

Step 2: Generating Codes

Open and axial coding were used to analyze the interview data. For open coding, I read each transcript and made notes. I then reread the transcripts line by line to pull excerpts of key words, phrases, and concepts that were relevant to the conceptual framework and research question. The excerpts were placed in a column on an Excel

sheet labeled "quotes." For each pulled excerpt word, I generated a code. The codes were

inputted into an additional column that was labeled "open codes." Once the codes were

generated, I transferred them onto my code book template using Excel. The codebook

template consisted of the code, participant identifier, a brief definition, examples, type of

coding, and cycle of coding. When I found myself struggling with identifying a code, the

codebook helped me determine the code that would fit best based on the brief definition.

Additional rows were added for new codes that were identified. The codes were grouped

in a color-coded format based on similarities and characteristics. The colors had no

significant meaning other than to keep the codes organized and assist with the axial cycle

of coding. I defined this process as pre-categorization, understanding that the categories

would most likely change. Based on the data, 49 open codes were identified. Table 3

shows an example of eight of the open codes, participant identifiers, and examples of

excerpts from the data to validate where the code came from.

Table 3

Examples of Open Codes

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Progressive Discipline	T1	"I have very few rules in my classroom. Even though we have progressive model, they understand and know because they have a handbook."
	T3	"Whatever the student has done, that determines what level of infraction will be considered."
Teacher Interventions	T5	"I did a lot of like goal setting so that they have specific goals and it's not just like what is your reading goal but like, personal goals."
	T7	"I try to do all that I can as a teacher, you know, to try to reach that need before writing up or you know, taking an extra course of action."
Parental School Involvement	T3	"Because we can't seem to get the parents on board or it almost feels like it's a competition between or a power struggle between the parents and the teachers."
	T6	"I've contacted parents over and over and nothing else has worked."
Missing Fathers	T3	"My student that I talked to the parent about yesterday, I learned that his father was murdered, that's completely out of their control."
	T7	"We didn't have a present father in the household."
Development Needed in Cultural Awareness	T1	"I think teachers need to have a cultural awareness class that they are required to take before they teach a diverse class."
	T8	"It has worked negatively against us to not make our teachers and anybody in any public field, culturally aware and to be culturally sensitive."
Lack of Understanding	T8	"They see it as something that they don't understand and therefore it is disruptive."
	T2	"They'll be quick to send them off without really trying to understand."
Lack of Effort	T1	"A lot of it is because they're not trying. They don't want to."
	T4	"I don't think that it's something that they want to fix."
Student Races	T9	"I'm not so quick to write my students up. It doesn't matter what race they are."
	T7	"I do see a lot of Black kids get written up more so than White kids or other races."

After completing open coding, I used axial coding to reexamine the initial codes and identify categories. Using an Excel sheet, I grouped the codes together based on their similarities and characteristics. Codes that had similar meanings were then condensed. Codes that had the same meaning were combined. Each category was named based on the types of codes that the category contained. After the axial coding phase, there were 15 categories. Excel was used to list all the codes that were generated from the open coding

phase. Table 4 shows a sample of the open codes, categories, and the participants'

identifiers, and quotes from the data.

Table 4

Examples of Open Codes and Categories

Category	Code	Participant	Excerpt
Home life or Background	Home life or Background	T5	"I would say just in my experience with the ones that I've dealt with, I feel like a lot of it is home life and their background."
	Missing Fathers	T3	"I also think the lack of fathers in the home has a big part in students from that culture."
Cultural Awareness Deficits	Development needed in Cultural Awareness	T1	"Until there is cultural awareness and a balance, education will always have an issue."
	Lack of Cultural Awareness	T8	"In my personal opinion, I think there is a lack of cultural awareness.
Benefits of Cultural Awareness	Understanding	T4	"I think you can reach children based on cultural awareness. You just have to know how to understand them."
	Shared Culture	T7	"I care about the things you like, what you don't like, what's appropriate in your culture, what's not appropriate in your culture."
Limited Understanding	Lack of Understanding	T3	"I think they are referred more often because of the lack of understanding."
	Unable to Relate	T9	"I feel like Black children are treated more harshly because teachers not able to relate to them."
1st Level Interventions	Teacher Intervention	T2	"Sometimes when we both need a break from each other, so I will send them to my co teacher."
	SEL Intervention	T1	"I try to use the social-emotional model learning in my classroom."
2nd Level Interventions	Parental School Involvement	T8	"If the student cannot get past those behavior issues, we do contact the parent."
	Administrator	T4	"We will take the problem to an administrator after we've dealt with it in our classroom first."
4th Level Intervention	Behavior Specialist	T5	"We do have a behavior specialist that comes to our school as needed to observe students that consistently misbehave, but that is more for our EBD students."
	Tiered Intervention	T10	"If the student continues to act out, we follow our tier two and tier three interventions. If they get referred to the RTI team, then we come up with a plan for that student."
School-wide Interventions	School Program	T6	"We do this program where students start off on five stars each day and then make good choices throughout the day. They can move up to six stars which is a superstar"
	School Rewards	T9	At our jacket jam, where we have various activities, such as the waterslide, basketball, volleyball, a lot of different activities during their exploratory time. They get to participate if they do well throughout the 9 weeks. "

Step 3: Searching for Themes

Once the axial coding was complete, I reviewed the categories for emerging themes. The categories were grouped together based on similar meanings and characteristics. The emerging themes were then identified for each group of categories. There were four themes that emerged from the analysis: (a) cultural awareness development is necessary to help mitigate discipline disparities, (b) more diverse teachers are needed to help mitigate discipline disparities, (c) teacher interventions can have a positive influence on student behaviors, and (d) students' home life or background experiences can influence behavior. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the four themes and research question.

Step 4: Reviewing the Themes

During this step, I reviewed the codes and categories to ensure the themes had enough data to support them. I wanted to ensure the themes were clear and could be distinguished when compared to other themes. I did this by considering whether each theme formed a clear pattern from the codes and categories. I was intentional while determining if the themes answered the research question. I continued to review the transcripts to see if the themes were aligned with the data. This allowed me the opportunity to code additional data I did not capture in the initial stages of data analysis. I used the Excel spreadsheets to filter categories and label themes beside them. I then looked at all the categories and themes side by side to determine if they were aligned.

Step 5: Defining and labeling Themes

No additional revisions were made during this step. The themes were identified to answer the research question of this study based on the results of the data analysis. Notably, four themes emerged from the data analysis in response to the research question.

The participants perceived that cultural awareness development is necessary to help mitigate discipline disparities. All the participants agreed that cultural awareness is important because it tells the student that you care about where they come from. Students also need to see teachers who look like them. As such, more diverse teachers are needed in education. Most of the participants stressed the fact that some Black students learn better from Black teachers. They also expressed that some White teachers have a challenging time understanding Black students' behaviors.

Participants agreed that teacher interventions can have a positive influence on discipline disparities, a perspective that comes from their personal interventions implemented in their classroom. They all shared in some capacity that each classroom is different; therefore, the strategies they used must be adapted. Students' home life or background can also influence how students interact in school. The participants expressed that students who grow up in single-parent homes, live in poverty, or have missing fathers struggle with certain aspects of school, such as emotional self-regulation. From the participants' perspectives, these factors directly influenced how the students behaved at school. Table 5 shows a sample of the categories and themes that emerged during thematic analysis in relation to the research question.

Table 5

Themes & Categories for RQ1

Themes	Categories
A: Cultural awareness development is necessary to help mitigate discipline disparities.	Cultural Awareness Deficits Benefits of Cultural Awareness
B: More diverse teachers are needed to help mitigate discipline disparities.	Limited Understanding Demographics
C: Teacher interventions can have a positive influence on student behaviors.	1st Level Interventions 2nd Level Interventions 3rd Level Interventions 4th Level Interventions Referral Decision Process School-wide Interventions Progressive Discipline Interventions PBIS
D: Students' home life or background experiences can influence behavior.	Home life or Background

Step 6: Producing the Report

The last step was to complete a summary analysis of the themes and write about the results. After completion of the analysis, the four themes were verified to determine if the research question was answered. There was no evidence discovered of inconsistent findings in the data, so no further analysis was needed. The four themes identified were used to provide information on the research question: RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action?

<div align="center">

Results

</div>

I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action through a basic qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. In

this section, I present the results of the data that I collected from 10 interviews with early childhood teachers in which I asked 10 open-ended questions. I designed the interview questions (see Appendix A) to answer the research question.

The research question focused on early childhood teachers' perspectives of Black students and disciplinary action. Questions 1 through 3 addressed demographic information. Questions 4 through 8 addressed the research question. Questions 9 and 10 addressed the conceptual framework, CRCM. The themes identified were (a) cultural awareness development is necessary to help mitigate discipline disparities, (b) more diverse teachers are needed to help mitigate discipline disparities, (c) teacher interventions can positively influence student behaviors, and (d) students' home life or background experiences can influence behavior.

Theme 1: Cultural Awareness Development is Necessary to Help Mitigate Discipline Disparities

Most of the participants agreed that implementing cultural awareness development is necessary to help mitigate discipline disparities. Cultural awareness development was coded 32 times amongst nine of the participants. When T1 was asked about Black students and her perspective of them receiving harsher punishments, she simply said: "Because of cultural awareness." She went on to say: "I think teachers need to have a cultural responsiveness class that they are required to take before they teach a diverse class." My interpretation of this is that more development in cultural awareness may help with the issue of discipline disparities amongst minority subgroups. T3 spoke

more about how the culture of Black students is misunderstood. She said, "I think they are referred more often because of the culture and a lack of understanding."

T2 seemed to be passionate about cultural awareness. She shared that cultural awareness is not incorporated consistently within her school and that when information is shared, it is not always presented in an age-appropriate manner. She stated:

It seems like White is right and anything other than that is either watered down or is not spoken of at all. There have been some instances where we have these Time magazines that spoke on COVID, the shootings that have been going on, and to me, I feel like it could be presented in an age-appropriate manner. I felt like for my kids, that was a little too far advanced for them to understand. So, there must be more honest conversations.

T3 and T4 discussed the importance of CRCM, but they were both honest in stating that they did not know what it would look like. T3 stated:

I think it will help, but I am not 100% sure that I know what that looks like. But just keeping in mind that children's culture, home life, you know, the way they were raised and things like that would help us make informed decisions on how to respond to their infractions while trying to be fair at the same time.

Similarly, T4 noted, "Maybe that is some training that could be had for staff. I do not know how that would go. I do not know if anybody would be receptive to that."

T6 shared that she actively tries to incorporate cultural relevance in her classroom. She stated

I try to include a lot of that in my lesson plans. So, I definitely feel like it would

have a positive impact because a child will feel valuable in the classroom. That

will make them want to work hard because they feel it inside and that will drive

them internally to do the right things and have appropriate behavior at school.

Similarly, T7 stated

I think so because if you implement awareness, you are letting them know I care

about you and your culture. I want to know what is appropriate in your culture

and what is not appropriate in your culture. That is letting them know that their

culture is important.

She went on to share her personal experience of cultural awareness and how she tries to

teach herself new things about cultures she is not familiar with.

I have had a few Hispanic students in the past and I do not know a lot of Spanish,

but I would try to learn little words. You know, just different things or fun

Spanish books or just certain things to incorporate some of their culture to let

them know I care about you too.

T8 asserted the following.

I do especially because we do live in a very diverse country. I think that has

worked negatively against us to not make our teachers or anybody in any public

field, culturally aware and to be culturally sensitive of other people's cultural

traditions and religions. Somebody who has been immersed in that culture, who

understands that culture, again, is more tolerant and they understand that is not

what he is saying. So, I think that being more culturally aware, and culturally

sensitive is very important as far as the behavior gap.

T10 stated

I feel that kids respond to what they are familiar with. You can reach children

based on cultural management strategies, but you just must know how to reach

them. Everybody is not going to respond to sternness. So, I do believe in different

management styles for different children.

Theme 2: More Diverse Teachers are Needed to Help Mitigate Discipline Disparities

Participants expressed that more diverse teachers could help mitigate discipline

disparities. They shared through their experience, teachers who are of the same race as

their students have a better understanding of the behaviors and may have a higher

tolerance for negative behaviors. Eight of the participants spoke about how teachers'

limited understandings determine how they manage student behaviors. Limited

understanding was coded 27 times amongst eight of the participants. Because there is not

a large diverse population of teachers, diverse students do not get the privilege of

learning from teachers who look like them or have a clear understanding of where they

come from. T2 made a statement that stood out to me during her interview.

Teachers have different personalities, especially if they're of a different race.

Dealing with our students, they tend to want to do something completely outside

of what should be done without really trying to understand the whole reason

behind why they're doing or acting the way they are. Versus with us, we can

understand because as a Black teacher we're the same color that they are.

T1 stated:

> I think there is an issue with why more Black students are being referred
> discipline-wise and the fact that we have 97% more White teachers compared to
> 3% Black. We have more White teachers referring more Black students because
> they do not understand their culture. They could be saying something funny, and
> they think it is hurtful. It is because they just do not understand them. And a lot of
> it is because they are not trying. They do not want to.

T1 also spoke about challenges the Black population faces in professional settings. She
said, "Based on graduation rates, Black students are not going into education because of
all the hoops they have to jump through just to get in. The salary is why I believe they are
not coming into education."

She continued to speak about her experiences when Black teachers do enter the
profession. She said:

> Because racism is alive, a lot of times White teachers have issues listening to
> Black teachers. Not only do Black students have issues, but Black teachers have
> similar issues. The same way that Black students are being treated at a non-
> professional level, Black teachers go through the same type of issues in their
> professional settings.

T8 explained

> There is a certain tolerance that African American students do not get as their
> White counterparts. I feel like because of the cultural differences and lack of
> tolerance, that is not accepted if you are going against your colleague in

protection of a student because they feel like you should be bonded together professionally.

T9 expressed

I feel like Black children are treated more harshly because teachers are not able to relate to them or show empathy. They do not understand our culture. I think I have seen enough to know that our children need more representation of my race and to see other people who look like them, doing positive things.

T4 expressed

I have seen some people in my building treat African American students differently than they treat other students. I have had students talk to me about it, and I have gone on their behalf to their teacher. Their teachers did not see the things that they have done to their students, but I brought it to their attention, and it made them stop and think. I feel like sometimes people might not realize what they are doing.

T10 stated, "There are teachers that are in schools that are not familiar with how to teach Black students, and they do not know how to communicate with them or how to discipline them."

Theme 3: Teacher Interventions can have a Positive Influence on Student Behaviors.

All participants spoke about the diverse types of interventions they implemented. They all spoke about progressive discipline, but what really stood out during the analysis phase is that they all implemented their own interventions based on the needs of their students and the classroom environment. Teacher intervention was coded 70 times

amongst the 10 participants. They spoke about how they intervene when they are experiencing problem behaviors and the steps they take if the problem behaviors cannot be resolved. This may include contacting parents, involving administrators, and even having a behavior specialist intervene. Of all the interventions mentioned, the participants expressed that getting to know their students, or building positive relationships, was a fundamental intervention when attempting to establish positive behaviors in their classrooms. They shared that teachers who did not have a positive relationship with their students, specifically Black students, experienced more negative behaviors. T1 shared, "I try to use the social-emotional model in my classroom, so we can talk and build a relationship with students."

> T3 stated
>
> I like that my school system has started to implement more social emotional learning interventions so that we can work on building better relationships with all of our students, but more so particularly with African American students. We can get to know them better and build those relationships. That way, they will be more responsive to our authority.

Similarly, T7 stated

> I have this mentality if a child does not like you, they cannot learn from you. So, I really tried to establish good healthy relationships with my students. Even some of my ones that you consider difficult. I really want to get to the core to see what it is they like and what they do not like.

Participants expressed that building relationships allows them to understand students' backgrounds. This gives them a deeper insight to possible triggers to be cognizant of when interacting with students. T10 expressed the following.

You have to have a relationship with your kids and you have to get to know them. In order to do that you really need to have a relationship with their parents too. You need to understand what's happening at home and that will give you an eye opener to what the child is going through or what the child might be thinking at the time

Similarly, T4 stated

I take time to of course, to first have a relationship with the child. I always feel like relationships are the first step because I feel like if a child loves you and they know that you love them, they will do anything for you. I also feel like if you have a relationship with the parent, the parent knows that you care about their child.

T7 stated the following.

I try to see if my kids are active in sports or extracurricular activities. I feel like that makes our relationship even stronger. I try to establish good relationships with their parents as well.

Adding similar thoughts, T10 shared

I feel like you have to have a relationship with your kids. When I notice little things about them, I know how to reach them. It is all about having a relationship with your children and getting to know them.

Other interventions that teachers that participants shared were their perspectives of PBIS, attempts to involve parents, seeking support from administrators, and involving behavior specialists for severe behaviors. T1 stated

A lot of people think PBIS is rewarding kids to behave well, but I think PBIS actually teaches kids how to behave because we're putting in action. If you behave well, you will get rewarded. Even on a professional job if you behave well, you are going to be rewarded.

T4 expressed

We follow the PBIS methodology and we try to focus on stopping a problem before it starts. When they have discipline problems, we will try to figure out what is going on with them and try to correct the problem. If the problem continues, we will contact the parent first. Then we will take the problem to an administrator after we've dealt with it in our classroom first.

T5 stated:

We expect all the kids to follow our PBIS expectations. Of course, we have those kids that have a hard time, so we just try to work with them one-on-one. We do have a behavior specialist that comes to our school as needed to observe students that consistently misbehave, but that is more for our EBD students.

Theme 4: Student's Home life or Background Experiences can Influence Student Behaviors

Most of the participants focused on the background and home life of Black students. Codes pertaining to students' home life or background were coded 82 times.

This includes the level of parent involvement at home, students living in single-parent homes, students whose parents, particularly fathers, are incarcerated, and students who experience poverty. T3 expressed her thoughts concerning the retaliation of teachers based on the lack of support received from parents of Black students. She was passionate about how parent involvement has evolved and shared her perspective of how it has affected the behavior of Black students. T3 expressed

> I think sometimes we as teachers take it out on the students that have no control over things being the way they are. This may be because of the lack of understanding of a child's background, lack of understanding their culture, and not understanding why families from that culture do things a certain way. We perceive it as a lack of support from parents of a certain culture.

> Similarly, T5 shared

> I would say just in my experience with the ones that I have dealt with, I feel like a lot of it is home life and background. A lot of the students that I have worked with had major discipline problems. Their parents did not have an education, so they were more apt to misbehave because they just were not taught at home.

T10 explained:

> With my Black students I noticed they had different things that might have been going on at home that was a result of their behavior here at school. I do feel like because this is a low economic school, the environment that we are in, our parents work a lot. There are a lot of factors, such as home-life, that contribute to our students' behavior and how they function in school.

T6 shared that she tries to self-reflect and think about the type of home life her students are experiencing. She said, "I take into perspective that these children come from very hard lives. So, I kept in my mind that home life is interfering with how they are when it comes to school." T7 shared:

I think home life has a lot to do with it. It is not that he was not disciplined at home because my mom did discipline, but we did not have a present father in the household. I also think with a lot of our students, we have a lot of them that do not have present father figures, or they do not come from two-parent homes.

T3 stated the following.

A lot of the homes in our African American culture are single-parent homes. So even though they are more educated, they are still they are still missing that male nurturing from the father. A lot of the fathers are not there because they are incarcerated.

T5 shared an experience she had with one of her students who came from a single-parent home. She shared that as she learned more about his background, she could take the necessary steps to help improve his behavior.

I had a kid that was a real behavior problem. I could tell there was not a lot of structure at the house. He and my son were friends, so he started coming to our house once a week with my husband and he turned around really good. I think the male figure was the main thing because his dad is in prison.

Discrepant Cases

During data analysis, I did not find any evidence that opposed the findings. I did not do any further analysis. If inconsistent data had been identified, variances between the findings would have been found, I would have reviewed the data and reported the findings.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness

The quality, rigor, and credibility of a study is described as trustworthiness (Frey, 2018). Adler (2022) contended that trustworthiness assesses the transparency of research. Trustworthiness was established by consulting an expert to assess the interview questions for content validity. This expert was a Black female who has worked in early childhood and secondary education for over 35 years and has served in leadership positions for the past 15 years. She has worked with colleagues to decrease discipline disparities within her school district. She has also worked with district leaders focusing on the achievement gap of subgroups. Her expertise allowed me to identify any potential biases within the study. Tables were also used to establish trustworthiness. Tables allow the researcher to show transparency pertaining to data collection and analysis (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020). Evidence of trustworthiness will be identified using credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is the appropriate and believable research between the researcher and participants (Mills et al., 2012). To establish credibility, I maintained a reflective journal

to document my thoughts, feelings, and biases I experienced throughout the process of this study. This allowed me to be reflective and focus on the data, and not my own thoughts and opinions of the identified problem. Maintaining a reflective journal holds me accountable for implementing trustworthiness. Data was also returned to the participants to check for accuracy. This is known as member checking. A two-page summary was shared with each participant with the findings of the study. At this time, participants had the option to discuss the study further if needed. There were no known disagreements or remarks regarding the results of the study and none of the participants asked for further information or discussion.

Transferability

Transferability is using knowledge gained from a study and applying it to a new study to create new knowledge (Stahl & King, 2020). To ensure transferability, detailed descriptions of data were provided. This includes details about how the participants were chosen how the data was collected. Information about the setting, sample size, criteria, sampling methods, demographic information, and excerpts from the interview guide were included. Contextual details were provided to give readers the opportunity to establish whether the study is transferable to another setting.

Dependability

Dependability is established when the study is consistent and can be repeated (Rose & Johnson, 2020). To establish dependability, I used an interview protocol guide during the interviews. The interview protocol guide was used to make sure I asked the participants the same questions in the same order. Open-ended questions were asked that

focused on the topic of the study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed word for

word for accuracy. I also recorded notes throughout the interview process that included

thoughts, sampling strategies, analysis, and data organization.

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved when the data can support the analyses (Rose &

Johnson, 2020). The data is relevant to the perspectives of the participants, and not my

personal biases, beliefs, motivations, or interests. To establish credibility, I maintained a

reflective journal. The reflective journal allowed me to be aware of my personal thoughts,

feelings, and biases. The journal prevented me from influencing the results of the study.

The process of coding, interpreting the data, and identifying emerging themes during the

data analysis were identified and clearly explained.

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Summary

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In this chapter, I reviewed the process of data analysis and shared the results of

the study. I sought to answer the research question which explored early childhood

teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. Using semi-

structured interviews, 10 early childhood teachers shared their perspectives for this basic

qualitative study. Through thematic analysis, four themes emerged: (a) cultural awareness

development is necessary to help mitigate discipline disparities, (b) more diverse teachers

are needed to help mitigate discipline disparities, (c) teacher interventions can positively

influence student behaviors, and (d) students' home life or background experiences can

influence behavior. The themes indicated early childhood teachers' perspectives of

referring Black students for disciplinary action. Trustworthiness, credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability were established during the collection and analysis of the data. Completing the data analysis allowed me to answer the research question: RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action?

The first theme was (a) cultural awareness development is necessary to help mitigate discipline disparities. Participants expressed that cultural awareness is imperative in aiding in the mitigation of discipline disparities among Black students. Some discussed how they implement cultural diversity in their classrooms. Other participants were honest in stating that cultural responsiveness and awareness is needed, but they did not know what it should look like in their classrooms. The perspectives pertaining to this theme can be difficult to understand. From my own assumption, all classrooms are different. They are made up of different races, ethnicities, and cultures. The highlight of this theme in my understanding is that the attempt to implement cultural responsiveness and awareness in the classroom outweighs the fears of not knowing how. It is still important to develop this skillset in early childhood education.

Participants shared that when they have built relationships with their students, they understand their behaviors. They also discussed that when teachers improve their relationships with students, student behavior improves. Teachers who fail to build relationships experience more negative behaviors and develop a low tolerance for students who exhibit those negative behaviors. Lastly, some participants mentioned the importance of having a positive relationship with the parent(s) as well. This allows the teacher to have a deeper understanding of their students' home life and background.

The second theme was (b) more diverse teachers are needed to help mitigate discipline disparities. Most of the participants discussed that as Black teachers, they can understand the behaviors and language of Black students in a way that their colleagues of a different race cannot. Some participants spoke about Black students' use of Ebonics or AAEV (African American English Vernacular) and their mannerisms. Teachers of a different race may not understand the language or behavior of Black students because they have not experienced it in their own lives. Some participants also discussed that as a minority in their field, they are not comfortable enough to speak up for Black students that they know are receiving an unfair punishment because it would be perceived as going against their colleagues. Because of this, they explained the importance of needing more diverse teachers in the field of education.

The third theme was (c) teacher interventions can positively influence student behaviors. Even though teachers follow their school's discipline policies, such as PBIS, SEL, or a progressive discipline model, they still rely heavily on their own individual interventions in their classrooms. Many of the participants spoke about the power of building relationships and how that helps improve behavior in their classroom. They still understand that the implementation of rules and procedures are necessary, but it is invalid if you do not understand the child you are teaching.

The fourth theme that emerged was (d) students' home life or background experiences can influence behavior. Most of the participants focused heavily on the background of students. This includes the level of parent involvement in and out of school. The participants discussed that most of the Black students they taught came from

single-parent households and did not have a father figure in the home. This decreases

parent involvement because the single-parent is working to provide for their children.

The participants shared that many contextual factors influence the behaviors of our Black

students, some they are not aware of.

In Chapter 5, I will interpret the findings, limitations to the study,

recommendations, and implications. An analysis of the results for each theme will be

given with an explanation of how they are aligned with the research question. Limitations

of the study will be provided in detail. The recommendations for addressing the

limitations and topics for further research will be provided followed by implications for

the study and opportunities for social change. The study will be completed with a

conclusion and final thoughts.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. Data were gathered using one-on-one semi-structured telephone interviews. The 10 participants were early childhood teachers who taught grades kindergarten through third. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) cultural awareness development is necessary to help mitigate discipline disparities, (b) more diverse teachers are needed to help mitigate discipline disparities, (c) teacher interventions can positively influence student behaviors, and (d) students' home life or background experiences can influence behavior. Chapter 5 includes findings that align to the current literature and conceptual framework. The implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are also provided.

Interpretation of the Findings

After acquiring approval from Walden University's IRB, I began the process of data collection. The following research question was used to obtain qualitative data for this study: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action? The participants were asked 10 questions about their perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action with the goal of answering the research question.

The findings of this study indicated that cultural awareness development is necessary in education. Teachers may have biases, implicit or explicit, that need to be addressed so that students can receive an equitable and quality education. There is also the challenge of not having enough diverse teachers in the education field. Students who

experience teachers who look like them can experience positive student outcomes (Goldhaber et al., 2019). Teacher interventions can also influence student outcomes. Overall, the positive or negative interactions that students share can influence the quality of student-teacher relationships (Nemer et al., 2019). Participants shared that building positive relationships with students was an important strategy implemented to promote positive behavior. When focusing on building student-relationships, teachers gain a deeper understanding of students' home life or background experiences. Participants said that this too can influence the behavior of a student.

I assessed the interpretations of the findings through current literature and the constructs of my conceptual framework: Weinstein et al.'s (2003) culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM). CRCM encourages teachers to understand their own beliefs, biases, and assumptions about human behavior. Teachers should also acknowledge the cultural, racial, ethnic, and class differences that exist among people, and understand the ways that schools reflect and maintain discriminatory practices of the larger society because this limits the misinterpretation of behaviors from culturally different students.

Theme 1: Cultural Awareness Development is Necessary to Help Mitigate Discipline Disparities

There are many perspectives of what cultural awareness is and how it can be effectively implemented in the classroom. All 10 of the participants noted cultural awareness as being beneficial in their classrooms. Cultural awareness can be linked to Gay's (2000) culturally responsive teaching and Ladson-Billings' (1994) culturally

relevant pedagogy. CRCM is grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy, which has three

criteria; students must be (a) familiar with academic success, (b) develop and preserve

cultural competence, (c) and develop an awareness through which they contest the status

of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRCM is also grounded in culturally

responsive teaching, which aims to improve diverse students' academic outcomes (Gay,

2002).

While analyzing data, cultural awareness development was a theme that emerged.

It was determined that cultural awareness development is necessary to help mitigate

discipline disparities. All participants agreed that cultural awareness is needed in the

classroom to improve the discipline gap; however, some expressed they did not know

what that looked like. Clearly, there needs to be a shift in how we approach cultural

awareness and responsiveness. Cochran-Smith and Keefe (2022) posited that teachers,

school leaders, and other relevant stakeholders must be willing to have tense

conversations and be uncomfortable when trying to undo systemic and structural aspects

of school that embrace inequities. Additionally, Andrews et al. (2019) posited that many

teachers enter the field of education with few opportunities to learn their own social

identities, which impedes their thoughts about who they will be teaching. This includes a

limited understanding of students' culture.

Because culture is the foundation of how learning takes place, as educators, we

must recognize the critical aspects of students' backgrounds and how they experience

learning (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Weinstein et al., 2004). Brown et al., (2018)

determined that classroom instruction should reflect the way students learn to enhance

their learning environment. Cultural awareness practices are also beneficial in improving

the behavioral outcomes of students and reducing discipline disparities (Larson et al.,

2018). T1 stated the benefits of implemented cultural awareness into learning

environments.

> When kids know you are on the same page with them culturally, they are going to
>
> follow what you are saying. I think teachers really need to understand why diverse
>
> kids behave the way they do. Once they understand you will have less discipline
>
> referrals for minority kids.

According to Segura-Robles and Parra-González (2019), culture can consist of a

person's belief systems, knowledge, rules, habits, and abilities that are derived from

specific communities. As teachers interact with students who may come from many

different cultures, it is important to understand how culture and curriculum are

implemented in early childhood settings because children inherit their cultural values

based on their surroundings and interactions (Yang et al., 2022). This is why cultural

awareness development is necessary. Just like students, teachers have their own set of

belief systems that can shape their perspectives. Teachers who are culturally competent

are better equipped to provide more equitable instruction for students with broad

backgrounds (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019).

T3 spoke about how perspectives or belief systems may cause Black students to

receive harsher punishments compared to their peers. She stated

> I think they are referred more often because of the culture and a lack of
>
> understanding of culture. I know for me as a teacher and my personal experience,

students of the African American race and culture tend to get harsher reprimands than their peers. I don't know that it is intentional, but they tend to get the harsher punishments for a reason like it is ingrained in us to treat them a little bit harsher than the other students.

Additionally, cultural responsiveness and awareness can look different in each classroom. Teachers would benefit from professional development that prompts them to explore their beliefs, values, assumptions, dispositions, biases, and experiences related to diversity (Samuels, 2018). When teachers are responsive to students' needs, they feel more valued, enjoy learning, and feel successful in their learning environment (Abacioglu et al., 2020). In addition to students feeling valued, T6 noted the following.

If all schools would intentionally try to implement more cultural awareness and just show a variety of what a family looks like, I think that will really help children feel good inside at school. That will promote what we want to see and hear at school. There is no one size fits all.

T9 shared her experiences of how she incorporates culture into the classroom.

I know for Black History month I do African dance as the lesson plan throughout the month of February. I do the same thing in the month of May. That is the Hispanic holiday. It is good to celebrate their culture. This lets them know that you love their culture. That will close that discipline gap.

Theme 2: More Diverse Teachers are Needed to Help Mitigate Discipline Disparities

More diverse teachers are needed to help mitigate discipline disparities. There are benefits when teacher diversity reflects the demographics of students. Participants shared

that there is a need for students to see adults who look like them and are successful.

These teachers have an advantage because they have a better understanding of students'

backgrounds and experiences because they too have similar backgrounds. Participants

continued to share that when teachers share the same experiences, backgrounds, or

cultures of their students, they can intervene in the discipline process and help lessen

behavior issues. Similarly, Nevarez et al. (2019) stated that when diverse teachers are

recruited, they are a) leading for social justice through local and global civic engagement,

b) developing an inclusive school culture, c) implementing culturally relevant pedagogy,

d) becoming cultural translators and transformers, and e) becoming role models. Diverse

teachers can share cultural perspectives with students, which allow them to relate to and

advocate for students (Magaldi et al., 2018). T2 shared her thoughts on the need for more

diverse teachers, stating, "We can understand because as a Black teacher we are the same

color that they are. You have a better advantage with them." Similarly, T8 stated

> There are certain things that kids may say or do that may not directly affect me. I
>
> may not see anything wrong with it, because I am of that same culture. My White
>
> counterpart may not understand that.

When students of color are assigned to teachers who look like them, those

students may have a more positive experience. Students can experience higher academic

performance, as well as positive behavioral outcomes (Redding, 2019). Kraft (2019)

suggested that teachers who share the same race and cultural competencies of their

students can influence students' growth mindset, perseverance, and motivation in class

(Kraft, 2019). T9 shared her thought about the deficits of students when they don't see teachers who look like them. She shared the following.

> Our children need to see more. I think the reason students are falling behind is because they do not see people that represent who they are or where they come from. They are not able to feel comfortable in their learning environment.

Even though the diversity in schools is consistently rising amongst students, there is still a lack of representation in teacher diversity (Nevarez et al., 2019). There needs to be consideration for the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. Students who experience teachers of the same race will have better behavioral outcomes, such as fewer suspensions (Cheng, 2017). Overall, teachers of color contribute to improved academic success, behavior, and social emotional learning, but the rate at which the United States has increased the diversity in the teacher workforce is minimal (Smith et al., 2022).

There are some barriers to consider for teachers of color that have been present for many years. Teachers of color do not receive consistent support in secondary or postsecondary school (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019). There are also little to no opportunities to see fellow educators who look like them. School and district leaders need to gain a deeper understanding of the beliefs and attitudes of their staff to help reduce insensitive racial climates and recruit more teachers of color (Duncan, 2018). Goldhaber et al. (2019) posited that before determining effective strategies to recruit more diverse teachers, we must first determine what is contributing to the lack of diversity.

Theme 3: Teacher Interventions can have a Positive Influence on Student Behaviors

The third theme that emerged was that teacher interventions can have a positive influence on student behaviors. The participants shared that when positive relationships are established, students experience fewer severe behaviors. Positive relationships also aid in the development of social emotional skills (Housman et al., 2018). T10 shared that relationships building is an intervention she uses in her classroom. She said, "We try to do teacher interventions and build those relationships with the student to stop the behavioral issue." Research showed because students are still developing their behavioral and self-regulation skills, teachers' relationships with students help shape those foundational skills at a pivotal point in time (Ansari et al., 2020; Camangian & Cariaga, 2021). T1 revealed the following.

I really do not refer students to discipline unless they are hurting themselves, hurting others, or even hurting me. I try to use the social-emotional model learning in my classroom. I think that is why I have less issues of referring because they know I care, and I am trying to understand the why behind their behavior.

Demonstrating their own experience with intervention, T4 shared

I build relationships with my children. I let them know what's expected of them. I feel like once you let them know what's expected, then they will live up to your expectations. When you set the tone for your classroom, children will respect it.

T5 shared:

At recess, I talk to four kids every day, at least one at a time. They just want to tell

you their stories. That is the best way for me to get to know them because it is

straight from them, and I do not have to infer what is going on. It helps me

because I am better able to gear toward what I feel that child needs.

Gagnon et al. (2019) conducted a study on a teacher's ability to build

relationships with students, determining that when there is a conflictual relationship with

the child, the teacher experiences stress in response to the child's negative behaviors. The

relationship becomes strained and can influence students' behavioral, social, and

academic outcomes (Westerberg et al., 2020). T2 noted this was the case for them.

Sometimes when we both need a break from each other, I will send them to my

co-teacher. I've also had these little slips of paper that said I wish my teacher

knew and that really helped since they do not know how to verbalize how they

feel.

Taylor and Hardy (2021) also stated that teachers' implicit biases against Black

students can harm students both socially and academically. As stated in the literature

review, teachers' implicit biases can affect how Black students are perceived (Halberstadt

et al., 2021). This can cause Black students to have different learning experiences when

compared to their peers. As such, a greater priority needs to be put on student-teacher

relationships. There needs to be an understanding of why some student-teacher

relationships are prioritized over others (Taylor & Hardy, 2021). Kim et al. (2018) stated

that the biases may be due to teacher personalities, which can influence the behavior and

learning of a student. This is also aligned with the severity of punishments students

receive. Similarly, T9 shared about how teachers fail to relate to Black students. She stated that this was due to the teacher and their own perspectives or experiences.

> In my opinion, it depends on if the teacher can relate to the child, and if they can show empathy. It does not matter what race they are, but I feel like Black children are treated more harshly because teachers are not able to relate to them or show empathy.

Teacher-student relationships are an important factor in education, and colleagues need to be aware of how this affects not only Black students, but all students. Implicit or explicit biases that teachers encompass can lead to racial achievement gaps, increase school dropout rates, and increase school discipline rates, often leading to incarceration (Schiff, 2018). Teacher-student relationships can affect Black students disproportionately (Chin et al., 2020). Research has shown that students receive disproportionate disciplinary action, such as exclusionary discipline (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019). Even though researchers have determined exclusionary discipline can have negative consequences on student outcomes, there is still little known about the long-term effects it can have on students (Andrew & Blake, 2021).

Theme 4: Students' Home Life or Background Experiences can Influence Student Behaviors

Students have other contextual factors that can influence how they interact in school, which include their experiences at home. Children who experience severe challenges, such as divorce, death, or incarceration of a family member are at a greater risk for poor behavioral and academic outcomes (Greiner et al., 2022). Students'

homelife or background experiences were coded 31 times by all 10 participants. Participants shared that students' home environment can affect their outcomes at school, speaking directly about the level of parent involvement and how it can have influence over students' behaviors. Parents who exhibit high expectations for their children can positively influence students' achievement in school, regardless of their economic status (Boonk et al., 2018). However, students who come from higher social class backgrounds have an advantage because they begin school with higher academic skills and resources when compared to students who come from a lower socioeconomic class (Kainz, 2019). Berkowitz (2022) stated that students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may experience exclusion and negative judgements from teachers and peers.

Along these lines, T3 shared a personal experience she had with one of her students. She discussed the importance of putting all the pieces together to really understand the child. One of the important pieces she talked about was student backgrounds.

Had I not known that piece of information, I might make a judgement that wouldn't be best for him and how I respond to him, his choices, and his conduct. Having more conversations with our parents, to get a better understanding of our students' background, needs to improve among teachers.

Similarly, T7 shared her thoughts.

The first thing I think about is my student's home life and what they are experiencing, before I even go into trying to discipline. I like trying to get to the

root of the problem. So, I think home life has something to do with the behavior
issues.

Students who have absent fathers can experience issues with behavior (Meng et
al., 2020). These behavioral issues can be exacerbated if students also come from
disadvantaged communities, such as living in environments that consist of substance
abuse, incarceration, and violence (Kim & Glassglow, 2018). These disadvantages can
make it difficult to raise children, while negatively affecting the success students
experience in school settings (Deer et al., 2020). T3 shared along those lines.

I think the lack of fathers in the home plays a big part in students' behavior. There
are a lot of single mothers raising children by themselves. with African American
culture, there's a lot of single parenting, and I feel like that just it hurts the child
as a whole.

Even though the backgrounds and home life of students may differ, parental
involvement is associated with positive student behavioral engagement in the classroom
(Bryce et al., 2019). Increased parental involvement allows teachers and parents to
communicate about the contextual factors that are influencing the student's behavior at
home and in the classroom (Caridade et al., 2020). One in three Black children under the
age of five experience poverty, which is four times as likely for White children (Baker &
Brooks-Gunn, 2020). Children can experience deficits pertaining to their developmental
domains when they are exposed to socioeconomic disadvantages (Baker & Brooks-Gunn,
2020).

Limitations of the Study

Possible limitations in this study included the availability of participants, sample-size, and researcher bias. This study was limited to kindergarten through third-grade teachers who taught Black students and other subgroups. With the stressors of recovering and adapting to COVID-19, it was difficult to find teachers who were willing to participate in the study. The study was also conducted during the beginning of the school year. Teachers were preparing for their students to return back to school while also completing tasks required by their district. Because of this, their availability was limited. I understood that the stressors of beginning a new school year would cause potential participants to be swayed from partaking in the study. To address this limitation, I provided a variety of times for the participants to choose from. The participants also had the opportunity to choose what platform they wanted, such as face to face, Zoom, or telephone. All participants completed the interviews via telephone.

Ten participants shared their perspectives in the study. This may have been due to participants feeling uncomfortable discussing the identified problem. To address this limitation, I was open about the study and willing to answer questions as needed. Because educators are mostly made up of females, it was hard to find males to participate. Male teachers who were potential participants did not fit the identified criteria.

As a Black educator, I had my personal perspectives regarding the discipline of Black students, specifically those students in early childhood and elementary school levels. In my region, we also share the same issue as it pertains to disparities in discipline. It is important to note that the demographics are slowly changing in my

region. Black and Hispanic populations are slowly increasing, showing a larger percentage of the minority subgroups. However, we have a high population of White teachers compared to Black. As an administrator, I too have noticed that more Black students are referred when compared to their peers. To address my personal biases, it was important for me to maintain a reflective journal during the collection and analyzation of data. This allowed me to uphold the integrity of the study and not insert my own assumptions and biases. My intentions were solely to interpret the perspectives of the participants. Utilizing the reflective journal allowed me to uphold the element of trustworthiness. To ensure the dependability of the identified themes, I implemented thematic analysis. Audio recordings and transcripts of each participant were also maintained. This allowed my interpretations to remain unbiased.

Recommendations

I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. Participants included in this study identified that cultural awareness development is necessary to help mitigate discipline disparities. Cultural awareness development needs to be at the forefront of teachers' instructional strategies. District leaders and school administrators need to invest in developing this skill within their staff. Without cultural awareness, equality and equity will be difficult to achieve. Increasing teacher diversity is also important in mitigating the identified problem. Teachers need to understand that the interventions they use can heavily influence the behavior of their students. My assumption is that issues may arise when teachers are trying to identify which interventions are appropriate for students. This is why relationship building is

important. It provides teachers with an opportunity to learn their students. Professional development on how to develop strong teacher-student relationships is important as well.

Participants stressed that students' home life and background experiences can influence student behaviors. Failing to understand where students come from and the type of support they have at home can negatively impact the teacher's ability to teach the whole child. It also diminishes a teacher's ability to build a healthy relationship. Students who experience teachers who look like them and come from similar cultural backgrounds have an opportunity to flourish in all aspects of their education. Teachers that share these backgrounds have a better advantage because they understand their students on a deeper level compared to the teachers who do not have similar backgrounds. The participants communicated that teachers who share similar backgrounds with their students are more tolerant of certain behaviors and provide more lenience when it pertains to negative behaviors. The study's findings support the gap in practice concerning racial disparities in teacher issued discipline referrals. They also support the gap in practice related to the disciplinary outcomes based on the behavior of teachers and their perspectives. I have included recommendations for future research.

I recommend a follow-up study that includes more diverse participation specific to gender. Even though there were diverse participants, having more males could reveal findings that would improve the understanding of teacher's perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. Another recommendation would be to explore the strategies teachers use to mitigate discipline strategies.

Discipline can also influence the academic performance of students (Bal et al., 2018). Students who consistently experience exclusionary discipline are missing valuable instructional time. Bal et al. (2018) stated that exclusionary discipline can exacerbate behavior while simultaneously diminishing instructional engagement. Exclusionary discipline is also known to systematically push students into juvenile systems, and eventually adult justice systems (Novak, 2018). Students who experience chronic exclusionary discipline and end up in the justice system is also known as the school to prison pipeline (Barnes & Motz, 2018). Even though there is an understanding of the negative impacts exclusionary discipline can have on students, it is still prevalent in school across the United States (Henry et al., 2021). A study that focuses on how exclusionary discipline affects academic performance would be valuable to teachers and leaders. Focusing on the loss of instructional time due to exclusionary discipline would also be beneficial.

There are also professional development opportunities that school and district leaders can implement. Specifically, professional development regarding cultural responsiveness and awareness in the classroom. Leaders can also focus on relationship building strategies with teachers, students, and parents.

Lastly, school and district leaders need to develop a plan to recruit and retain diverse teachers. Conducting staff interviews with their current diverse teachers can give them a new perspective of why there is a lack of diverse teachers within their district. These recommendations are focused on mitigating the discipline gap and promoting equality and equity in classrooms.

Implications

The goal of this study was to understand early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. This study may contribute to positive social change by providing professional development coordinators, school and district leaders, and teachers with a different approach to mitigating discipline disparities. The study may also prompt stakeholders to provide development for teachers that may consist of new strategies and mindset shifts regarding the behavior of Black students. I also want to continue to highlight the importance of teacher diversity. Students need to see adults who look like them and who are thriving in our society. Lastly, the information learned from the data analysis may be used to develop new policy recommendations, approaches to eradicate discipline disparities, or new research studies related to the identified problem.

Participants

Participants in this study shared their personal views on Black students and disciplinary action. Their most repeated views consisted of cultural awareness development. They also focused on teacher diversity. More diverse teachers are needed to help mitigate discipline disparities. There also needs to be a focus on teacher interventions. When teachers intervene first, they can have a positive effect on student behaviors, specifically if they have built a relationship and understand the whole child. Teachers must also realize that students' home life or background experiences can influence the way in which a student behaves. Suggestions for positive social change include early childhood teachers leading professional development through collaboration

and sharing strategies on how they build relationships with students. It is also important that they seek knowledge from teachers of diverse cultures. This will prompt teachers to become culturally aware and identify their personal biases that may be affecting their relationships with students who come from differing cultural backgrounds.

Leaders

Leaders could use the findings of this study to determine incentives for recruiting and retaining diverse teachers. They could also focus on developing learning opportunities focusing on the disparities of Black students and how it influences their academic performance. As leaders focus on these issues, it will be important for them to seek the knowledge of their teachers who are in the classrooms. They have an advantage because they have firsthand experience with teaching students daily. Suggestions for positive social change include discovering more strategies for teachers to enhance the learning experience for all students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of referring Black students for disciplinary action. The results of my study filled a gap in practice. The results of this study demonstrated the challenges teachers face when referring students for disciplinary action. Teachers indicated that relationships with students must be genuine. Some teachers struggle with this because of their personal backgrounds and unconscious biases. Because we all have biases as educators, cultural awareness development is necessary. Teachers must be cognizant of their own biases while responding to the diverse needs of their students. This can be

challenging and will take consistent practice. Cultural awareness and responsiveness will prompt teachers to learn about their students' backgrounds. This includes interactions with their students' parents. Teachers shared that most of the negative behaviors their students portrayed because of their home life. Their students experienced absent fathers and working mothers that struggled to be involved in their child's school environment. They identified that the misbehavior was possibly a symptom of the true problem. Teachers also indicated that more diverse teachers are needed. Diverse teachers can relate to students who have similar backgrounds as themselves and can provide insight to teachers with differing backgrounds

The results of this study provide evidence that teachers need additional training and resources to serve Black students and possibly other students of color. The findings of this study fill the gap in practice by contributing to an increased understanding of discipline disparities in teacher issued discipline referrals and the disciplinary outcomes based on the behavior of teachers and their perspectives. My hope is that the results of this study will lead to a deeper understanding of the challenges in discipline disparity. There is a need to focus on the discipline disparities that begin early in age for Black students. The information from my study may inform relevant stakeholders on the importance of professional development and training based on the mitigation of discipline disparities in early childhood education.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

2. What grade do you currently teach?

3. How many years have you taught in kindergarten, first, second, or third grade?

4. What discipline policies does your school currently implement?

5. Why do you think Black students disproportionately receive discipline referrals for their behaviors compared to their same-age White peers?

6. What are your experiences of referring Black students for disciplinary action specifically?

7. Why do you think Black students are more likely to receive harsher punishments for misbehavior compared to their peers?

8. What are the current discipline strategies for students at your school?

9. What behavioral management strategies have you implemented within your classroom?

10. Do you believe culturally relevant classroom management can positively influence the discipline gap? Why?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Guide

Date:

Time:

Interviewee Code:

Preliminary Interview

- Thank you for participating in this study. I know that your time is valuable, and I will work as efficiently as possible to complete the interview promptly.

- I want to remind you that the purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on referring Black students for disciplinary action.

- Elements of Consent

  o Background Information: This study is being conducted by myself, Adriuna Johnson. I am a doctoral student at Walden University, and I am a former elementary classroom teacher and current assistant principal in an elementary school. This is my 9th year in education.

  o Risks and Benefits: There are potential risks of participating in the study. Participants may feel uncomfortable discussing the issues of race and discipline. The benefits include contributing to positive social change by providing potential data analysis to professional development coordinators and discipline administrators on early childhood teachers' perspectives and the influences of discipline in

early childhood settings. The information learned may encourage

new policy recommendations, new approaches to eradicate

discipline disparities, or encourage new research studies related to

the identified problem.

- o Confidentiality: Any information that is obtained from participants

  will be kept confidential. The information will only be used for the

  purpose of the research study. Alphanumerical codes will be

  assigned to deter identifying information, such as participants'

  names, schools, or districts.

- o Data: All information will remain secure on a password-protected

  drive and computer. The data will be stored for at least 5 years if

  the dissertation is approved. Following the time frame, all the data

  will be destroyed and deleted.

- o Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may

  withdraw from the study at any time with no explanation needed.

- Provide an Opportunity for Questions

- Begin Recording

- Begin the Interview

Post-Interview

- Thank the interviewee for participating.

- Remind interviewee of data treatment and confidentiality.

- Remind the participants that they will receive a summary of the findings for review.

Interview Questions

1. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

2. What grade do you currently teach?

3. How many years have you taught in kindergarten, first, second, or third grade?

4. What discipline policies does your school currently implement?

5. Why do you think Black students disproportionately receive discipline referrals for their behaviors compared to their same-age White peers?

6. What are your experiences of referring Black students for disciplinary action specifically?

7. Why do you think Black students are more likely to receive harsher punishments for misbehavior compared to their peers?

8. What are the current discipline strategies for students at your school?

9. What behavioral management strategies have you implemented within your classroom?

10. Do you believe culturally relevant classroom management can positively influence the discipline gap? Why?

Follow-up prompts that I will keep visible as I interview each participant:

– What did you mean by…?

- Tell me more about…

- You mentioned…

- Tell me more…

- Can you expand more on …?