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# Social Workers' Role in School Discipline of Black Male Students

Teresa L. Cooper
*Walden University*

# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Teresa L. Cooper

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Review Committee
Dr. Juanita White, Committee Chairperson,
Social Work Faculty

Dr. Dorothy Scotten, Committee Member,
Social Work Faculty

Dr. Carlton Huff, University Reviewer,
Social Work Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
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Abstract

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## Abstract

School administrators enforce various forms of school discipline, including office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions, as strategies to maintain safe learning environments for students and staff. Over four decades of research indicate Black male students experience more consequences and receive tougher school discipline than their peers of other races. School discipline potentially causes adverse outcomes for students. Schools employ social workers to support behavior and academic needs of students. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore lived experiences of school social workers in their role in school discipline of Black male students. The theoretical framework used for this study was role theory. Using semi-structured interviews, data was collected from five full-time school social workers employed in public schools addressed the research question about the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students. The six-phase thematic analysis process based upon Braun and Clark's approach was used to analyze data. Key themes produced from data analysis were special education duties, being an advocate, disparities in school discipline between Black male students and students receiving special education, buy-in to alternative approaches, administrators, and pandemic. Recommendations include professional development and education for school personnel about the role of social workers in school settings. School social work practice may benefit from the results of this study by encouraging social workers to be a part of the school discipline process potentially decreasing the rate of school disciplines among Black male students.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

## Introduction

As violence increased in schools, school districts employed more rigid discipline practices to help keep staff and students safe (Black, 2015; Kyere et al., 2018; Pigott et al., 2017). Since the 1980s, zero tolerance measures have taken precedence in addressing criminal behavior in schools (Kyere et al., 2018; Okilwa & Robert, 2017; Stahl, 2016). In 1994, Congress enacted the Gun-Free School Act, calling for schools to expel students for drug and weapon offenses (Aldridge, 2018; Rodriguez Ruiz, 2017). The Gun-Free School Act is an example of policies created to enforce zero tolerance measures used in schools to address student behavior infractions. According to Stahl (2016), the Columbine High School shooting generated increased use of zero tolerance policies in schools. Zero tolerance policies evolved in punishing criminal and noncriminal behaviors in schools (Kyere et al., 2018; Okilwa & Robert, 2017). However, issues associated with increased use of zero tolerance policies in schools are inconsistencies in practice and disparities in the number of Black male students experiencing adverse outcomes from zero tolerance polices (Aldridge, 2018).

Out-of-school suspensions and other forms of school discipline create obstacles for academic achievement for students (Teasley, 2015). School disciplines, such as suspensions and expulsions, place students at greater risk of high school dropout and involvement in the criminal justice system (Aldridge, 2018; Annamma et al., 2019; Anyon et al., 2018). Office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions interrupt access to education through loss of classroom time, social isolation from positive peer

relationships, and risk of legal involvement (Aldridge, 2018). There are more deleterious outcomes associated with school discipline measures than deterring future infractions (Bottiani et al., 2017). Suspension does not address the root of negative behaviors, nor does it reduce habitual behaviors (Whitaker et al., 2019). Therefore, school discipline disrupts and creates inequities in educational opportunities.

Social workers support and advocate for equal educational opportunities in public school settings (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2012; School Social Work Association of America, n.d.). Social workers work in public schools as interdisciplinary professionals to assist students with academic achievement (Thompson et al., 2019). Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2018) found that school social workers often felt marginalized. Sherman (2016) suggested schools should use social workers more. Host organizations, such as schools, present challenges for social workers because of discrepancies between professional roles, missions, goals, and values (Beddoe, 2019; Sugrue, 2017). However, schools limit the scope of social work practice in school settings (Beddoe, 2019). A potential implication for this study is that it may provide beneficial information contributing to the field of social work. Furthermore, information regarding the role of school social workers from this study is beneficial to public schools' stakeholders, including school professional staff as well as community, families, and students. Gregory and Fergus (2017) indicated Black male students are more likely to receive school suspension than peers of other races, thus urging attention to disparities in school discipline. Information from this study may provide an understanding of the

utilization of school social workers in school discipline of Black male students (see Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018).

In this chapter, I preview the research study. In Chapter 1, I discuss the background of this study, exploring school discipline and school social workers. I also discuss the research problem and the purpose of this study. I briefly describe the theoretical framework of role theory addressing the research question about school social workers' lived experiences relating to their role in school discipline of Black male students. Additionally, I describe the nature of the study and provide definitions of key concepts used in the study. Following the assumptions section, I state the scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of this study. Chapter 1 ends with a summary of the central details discussed in this chapter.

## Problem Statement

Black male students are two to three times more likely suspended from school than their peers of other races (Morgan & Wright, 2018). Zero tolerance policies and other discipline practices contributed to many Black males suspended and expelled from school (Thompson, 2016). Discipline policies and practices vary across school districts. A considerable number of disciplinary actions are discretionary, which means most discipline practices are subjective (McCarter, 2016). Discretionary and subjective use of discipline practices contributed to disparities in Black males receiving school discipline at a higher rate than White students (Girvan et al., 2017).

Students receive school discipline infractions for a variety of reasons, attributing to psycho-social factors. Bent-Goodley (2018) argued that an increase in maladaptive

behaviors displayed by students in schools is due to no one addressing the psycho-social issues of students. Psycho-social issues can influence adolescent behavior (Ungar & Hadfield, 2019). Social workers possess knowledge and skills to assess psycho-social issues, such as environmental influences, trauma, and mental health concerns, contributing to behaviors in adolescents (McCarter, 2016). The role of social workers varies between school districts based upon the needs of the school (Cuellar & Theriot, 2017). Variations in social workers' roles influence social work practice in schools (Bent-Goodley, 2018). Sherman (2016) suggested schools should use social workers more.

Social workers in school settings focus on students' academic needs (Dinecola et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2019). However, school social workers' roles vary between school districts based upon the needs of the school (Cuellar & Theriot, 2017). Host organizations present discrepancies in professional roles, missions, goals, and values of social workers in school settings (Sugrue, 2017). Discrepancies in the social workers' role affect the type and service delivery of interventions in schools (Bent-Goodley, 2018). Sherman (2016) suggested schools need social workers in an increased capacity of use. Social workers have limited to no involvement in school discipline (Beddoe, 2019). Richardson et al. (2019) reported social workers having positive impact on students when addressing emotional and behavioral concerns. The students were less likely to display behaviors resulting in school discipline (see Richardson et al., 2019). Allowing social workers more involvement in school discipline could increases effectiveness of social workers in school settings.

Much of the research mentioned above relates to school discipline and the outcome of discipline practices experienced by Black male students. Core principles of social work encourage service to address social problems and seek social change for vulnerable populations (NASW, 2017). Disparities in school discipline is a pervasive social problem. Social workers possess knowledge and skills bearing change at the micro, macro, and mezzo levels of systems (Bent-Goodley, 2014; Welsh & Little, 2018). Other studies related to school social work focused on school social workers' experiences in safety and violence prevention in schools, such as bullying (Cuellar & Theriot, 2017). However, there is limited information about the role of social workers in school disciplinary actions involving Black male students. Thus, I used a qualitative phenomenological approach in this study to explore the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students. Social workers have knowledge expanding their role to positively influence behavioral outcomes of students, addressing disparities in Black male students receiving school discipline (Cuellar & Theriot, 2017; Dinecola et al., 2015; Richard et al., 2019).

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of school social workers and their role in school discipline of Black male students. As early as preschool, Black male students receive various forms of school discipline more often than students of other races (Cook et al., 2018; Wright & Ford, 2016). Social work professionals have acknowledged subjective discipline policies and practices in school settings and how school discipline affected Black males (Mallett, 2015). Stalker (2018)

expressed that school social workers address issues affecting student success. The outcome of school discipline adversely affects students' success and is unevenly distributed, with Black male students disproportionality experiencing school discipline more often than White students (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). While several studies examined disparities in school discipline of Black male students, in this study, I investigated the lived experiences of school social workers with attention to their role in school discipline of Black male students.

## Research Question

What are the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students?

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical base for this study was role theory. Biddle (1986) discussed the term *role* as a concept in social sciences. In the early 1930s, Mead introduced the concept of role in the field of social psychology to describe how individuals perform within a culture, environment, or interaction (as cited in Zai, 2015). Theorists Linton and Moreno presented different social functions of the role concept, thus having varying ideas of role theory (as cited in Biddle, 1986). Linton and Moreno described the concept of role as a collection of expected behaviors associated with a particular status (as cited in Aggestam, 2006; Moreno & Zeleny, 1958). Linton (1942) annotated roles as positions or statuses, explaining positions and statuses assume social roles based on membership. Linton further explained membership of an organization or social group often involved classification and categorization of members based upon roles and positions coinciding

with a hierarchy. For example, certain tasks and responsibilities are associated with leadership roles.

Moreno and Zeleny (1958) opined role theory as roles (human behavior) developing through a system of interpersonal interactions in a group. According to Biddle (1986), role theory is a notion of people behaving in expected and sometimes different manners based on the situation and their respective social identities. There are five perspectives of role theory: functional, symbolic interactionist, structural, organizational, and cognitive (Biddle, 1986). I used the perspective of organizational role theory in this study. The perspective of organizational role theory is that a person's position or title in an organization demands several responsibilities, rules, duties, regulations, and behavioral patterns (Adebayo, 2006; Qian et al., 2018). Conflict can arise when individuals have varied responsibilities within a given role, and the expectations of the role vary between a person's position and the organization (Iannucci & MacPhail, 2018). Host settings contribute to the definition and influence of a person's role based upon the needs, desires, and goals of an organization, thus providing an expectation of behaviors for a given role (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2017; Isaksson & Sjöström, 2017; Matta et al., 2015).

This study's guiding framework was role theory, exploring the role of social workers in school settings and their involvement in school discipline. The role of school social workers is often guided by the mission, goals, and needs of the school, which primarily focuses on academia (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). However, Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2018) suggested there are opportunities for social

workers in school settings to use knowledge and clinical skills to address various needs for students. I used the theoretical framework of role theory in this study to explore the role of social workers in school settings and their involvement in school discipline, which can enhance school social work practice and promote a positive change in Black male students experiencing school discipline (see Cigrand et al., 2015).

## Philosophical Underpinnings

Creswell and Poth (2018) said that the beginning of inquiry in qualitative studies starts with philosophical underpinnings. Philosophical underpinnings provide the foundation for a qualitative research approach chosen by the researcher (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Salvador, 2016b). Qualitative research approaches have specific theoretical and philosophical underpinnings distinguished by paradigms (Salvador, 2016a). Often called *paradigm*, philosophical underpinnings are a philosophical way of thinking and describe a researcher's worldview (Burkholder et al., 2016; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Salvador, 2016a). Research paradigms are a set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and thoughts used to guide a researcher's inquiry and define the research process (Aliyu et al., 2015; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Salvador, 2016b). There are two main paradigms: positivism and interpretivism (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). Positivism, mostly associated with quantitative research, embraces reality derived from natural science (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Salvador, 2016b). An opposing set of beliefs is interpretivism, which focuses on reality, based on human senses and perspectives (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Salvador, 2016b). A paradigm consists of the following elements: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Aliyu et al., 2015; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Salvador, 2016a). Based on

the elements of the paradigm, the researcher chooses the appropriate approach to guide the study (Singh, 2019). For this research, I chose an interpretivism paradigm for this study to explore the perspective of lived experiences of school social workers.

Ontology comes from the Greek words “onto” and “logia,” which means the study of being or existence (Aliyu et al., 2015; Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Singh, 2019). Ontology focuses on the nature of reality and what we believe is real (Aliyu et al., 2015; Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Ontology is the essence of attributing meaning to the phenomena studied. Ranging from objective to subjecting in nature, there are multiple perspectives in the ontological assumption. A positivist set of beliefs is objective and assumes there is only one single reality grounded in scientific knowledge (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Salvador, 2016b), whereas an interpretivist set of beliefs is subjective and considers multiple realities (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Salvador, 2016b). Creswell and Poth (2018) posited that in qualitative studies, researchers embrace multiple realities to understand different perspectives of a phenomenon. The ontological position for this study is constructionism. Constructionism is an ontological position with reality is constructed through social interaction (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Rees et al., 2020). Hay (2016) noted the distinct difference in constructionism is that reality is constructed from a social world view rather than from a natural stance. In constructionism, reality is subjective and contingent on social aspects, including environment, structure, and identity (Hay, 2016; Theys, 2018). Walker and Shore (2015) explained how knowledge is a collective process constructed by individuals through interactions in their social worlds.

Developing knowledge through social interactions relates to role theory chosen as the theoretical framework for this study.

According to Abu-Alhaija (2019), ontology is the basis for epistemology. Epistemology focuses on how knowledge is obtained and communicated (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Singh, 2019). Epistemology involves the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon (Abu-Alhaija, 2019; Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Salvador, 2016b). There are two main assumptions of epistemology: positivism and interpretivism (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). A positivism perspective reflects that knowledge is derived from science to understand human behavior (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Differing, the nature of interpretivism is grounded in lived-world experience (Aliyu et al., 2015). The assumption of interpretivism lies in knowledge socially constructed through experience and interactions with others (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). The methodology chosen for this study was phenomenology, which studies lived human experiences. Knowledge for this study is based on the interpretivism of social workers telling their lived experiences in school discipline of Black male students.

Axiology comes from the Greek words “axios” and “logos,” meaning value theory (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016; Viega, 2016). Axiology deals with the role of values in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The essence of axiology is understanding what we do based upon values (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Melville et al., 2017). Values have various roles in research. Axiology

involves moral and ethical decisions implicated in the research process (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Wojewoda (2018) explained values as a filter for self-reflection.

In understanding the lived experiences of social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students, the constructivism ontological position assumes reality is socially constructed, and the researcher gains understanding from several realities experienced by school social workers. The interpretivism epistemological assumption accepts that knowledge is socially constructed and understood from human perceptions and experiences (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). The axiological assumption of this study was setting my values aside through bracketing, valuing study participants, completing this study in an ethical manner, and producing value-laden research contributing to the field of social work.

The nature of this study was a qualitative methodology using a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is a research tradition used in exploring social phenomena as a particular group experience (Aliyu et al., 2015; Burkholder et al., 2016; Teherani et al., 2015). Qualitative research includes data as words from narration of study participants to understand, describe, or interpret social events, behaviors, attitudes, and experiences (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Halushka, 2018). Information in qualitative research provides new insights, clarification, and in-depth descriptions of people's lived experiences through language instead of numbers or statistical models (Gerring, 2017; Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Qualitative research was appropriate for this study because participants provide rich, in-depth information to open-ended questions related to the research creating the ability to explore phenomenon from the perspective of participants

where there is limited knowledge (see Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Johnson, 2015). Using qualitative research instead of quantitative allows for more detail and flexibility in exploring the lived experiences of school social workers (Abedini et al., 2018).

Phenomenology is a form of qualitative methodology studying lived human experiences through different people's perceptions, meanings, thoughts, and feelings (Billsberry et al., 2019; Noon & Hallam, 2018). Transcendental (descriptive) and hermeneutic (interpretive) are two variations of phenomenology (El-Sherif, 2017; Jackson et al., 2018). Husserl (1982) discussed concerns with classifying sciences and questioned whether social sciences such as psychology should be treated like natural sciences. Husserl criticized psychology, noting phenomenology is not psychology because phenomenology deals with "consciousness" of mental processes and actions. Husserl believed psychology had foundational ideas of "naturalism," which excluded the ideas of reality and consciousness (as cited in Jennings, 1986). Husserl developed transcendental phenomenology as a method to explore the essence of a phenomenon and describe lived experiences as they appear in one's consciousness (as cited in Christensen et al., 2017). Husserl focused on description of lived experiences and meaning came from conscious acts (as cited in Giorgi, 2017; Skea, 2016). Transcendental phenomenology is used to explore a phenomenon from a dasein approach (Jackson et al., 2018). Dasein, coined by Heidegger, means "being there" (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). The concept of dasein is developing meaning of human existence in everyday life (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). The crux of transcendental phenomenology is understanding and describing experiences of a phenomenon as presented by study participants (Billsberry et al., 2019).

Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to bracket their "natural" perceptions and set aside preconceived thoughts to describe the study's participants' experiences in an authentic manner and maintain the integrity of the phenomenon experienced by participants (Billsberry et al., 2019; Gros, 2017). Setting aside biases allowed for me as the researcher and data collector to report information expressed by participants absent of my beliefs, thoughts, and experiences.

Heidegger was a student of Husserl but showed interest in interpreting lived human experiences (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). Heidegger (1962) believed interpretation was the bases to understanding lived human experiences. Heidegger focused on understanding lived human experiences as being part of the world they exist in (as cited in Neubauer et al., 2019). Heidegger thought that understanding lived human experiences is connected to their historical context and interpretation of being part of the world in which humans exist. Heidegger believed human experiences are influenced by the realities of the world (as cited in Neubauer et al., 2019). Heidegger developed hermeneutic phenomenology, focusing on understanding lived human experiences in relation to the world they exist in and rejected the idea of bracketing (as cited in Neubauer et al., 2019; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). The focus of hermeneutic phenomenology is on the interpretation of lived experiences (El-Sherif, 2017). Heidegger rejected bracketing, posturing the need for interpretation before understanding (as cited in El-Sherif, 2017). Husserl focused on understanding lived human experiences based on a description from one's "consciousness" or "internal experience" whereas Heidegger believed that the understanding of lived human experiences comes from interpretation of

their experience based on being in “life” (Heidegger, 1962; as cited in Husserl, 1982; Neubauer et al., 2019).

I used transcendental phenomenology research to describe the lived experiences of school social workers’ role in Black male students’ school discipline. The notion of transcendental phenomenology is that knowledge is conceived from description of an actual experience (Netland, 2020). Moustakas (1994) explained consciousness is an absolute reality, and things are understood as perceived in one’s consciousness. Using transcendental phenomenology allowed for the opportunity to analyze the meaning of shared lived experiences of school social workers’ role in school discipline of Black male students. Phenomenology was beneficial for this research because data collection and analysis derived from school social workers’ lived experiences. Neubauer et al. (2019) noted that phenomenology is beneficial as a strategy to learn from the lived experiences of others. The participants of this study provided words rather than numerical data associated with quantitative studies to give detail from their own perceptions and lived experiences. Data associated with quantitative methodology cannot provide the detail needed to describe the school social workers’ lived experiences for this phenomenon. Part of the data collection and analysis is for researchers to isolate bias to properly investigate the phenomena through bracketing or “epoche” (as cited in Neubauer et al., 2019). Transcendental is the process in which the researcher transcends their bias (Emmons, 2019) to see the phenomenon “freshly, as for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Therefore, transcendental phenomenology was appropriate because the aim of this study was to understand school social workers’ lived experiences.

Full-time school social workers certified or licensed to practice as a school social worker was the requirement to participate in this study. I recruited voluntary participants from professional organizations and social media. I collected data through interviews with selected school social workers meeting the criteria and analyzed the data using a qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, to transcribe and code interviews from study participants.

## Definitions

The following terms are key constructs used in the study. I provide conceptual definitions for the meaning of the terms.

*Black male student*: Any male of school-age enrolled in a K to 12 grade identifying as Black or African American with African ancestral origins (Agyemang et al., 2005; St. Mary et al., 2018).

*Expulsion*: A disciplinary action excluding a student from school for up to 12 months due to a severe behavior (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019).

*Host setting:* Organization or site dominated by other professionals (Beddoe, 2019).

*In-school suspension*: A disciplinary practice of removing students from a traditional classroom setting to a restrictive educational setting for a required length of time, typically ranging from half a day up to 10 consecutive days (Morris & Howard, 2003).

*Out-of-school suspension*: An exclusionary disciplinary practice of removing students from school for a period of time, ranging from half a day but less than the remainder of the school year (Huang & Cornell, 2018).

*Public school*: A noncharter, nonsectarian, institution supported by public funds offering free education services to students enrolled in grades Pre-k through 12th grade. A public school operates under the oversight of a publicly elected board or state educational agency with day-to-day operations supervised by school administrator(s) (California Department of Education, 2019).

*School discipline:* Strategies, including office referrals, out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, and expulsions used to provide consequences for undesired behavior or actions for students in school and school-related settings (Ugurlu et al., 2015).

*School social worker*: A social worker in a school-based setting trained to provide services to students, families, and other school professionals supporting and addressing needs of students to promote academic success (Maras et al., 2015).

*Zero-tolerance policies*: Uncompromising disciplinary action of the removal of students from school for drug, weapon, or violence-related offenses (Moreno & Scaletta, 2018).

## Assumptions

The essence of this phenomenological study was gathering information about the lived experiences from school social workers concerning the studied phenomena. Therefore, I assumed that the study participants possessed sufficient professional

knowledge about school social work to provide information related to the study and could articulate their lived experiences about their role as a social worker. Additionally, I assumed that participants would answer interview questions openly and honestly. Addressing these assumptions was necessary because these assumptions noted can influence the validity of the research (see Burkholder et al., 2016).

## Scope and Delimitations

Since social workers' introduction in school settings, social workers have maintained diverse roles in schools based upon the school site (Kelly et al., 2015; Richard et al., 2019). The role of school social workers varies. Hence, the scope of this study focused on the lived experiences of social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students. Scholars noted disparities in school discipline resulting in Black male students experiencing increased rates than their peers continue to be problematic in public schools (Kayama et al., 2015). Students of color, more so Black males, are at higher risk of receiving a form of school discipline (Gregory et al., 2017; McIntosh et al., 2018; Wegmann & Smith, 2019; Welsh & Little, 2018). The scope of this study examined school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students, capturing their lived experiences because school social workers face marginalization (see Sherman, 2016), have inconsistent roles (see Bent-Goodley, 2018), and have less direct services with students in public school settings (see Richard et al., 2019). The focus of this study was school social workers instead of other school professionals due to their professional attributes of assessing psychosocial factors and clinical skills among interprofessional teams in school settings (see Sherman, 2016). Research findings from this study are

likely to apply to other professions, including guidance counselors, school psychologists, administrators, and teachers, in school settings examining their role in school discipline of Black male students. In addition, potential transferability of this study includes school social workers in other geographical locations. This study offers the potential to contribute to the practice of school social work and future research on school social work.

## Limitations

A potential limitation of this study was the sample size. Qualitative studies use a smaller sample size than quantitative studies to gather rich, thick detailed information through in-depth data collection methods (Carminati, 2018; Rosenthal, 2016). The sample size for this study was 5 participants. Smaller sample size studies present concern of transferability of findings due to data from limited participants (Noon & Hallam, 2018). However, as Carminati (2018) expressed, larger sample sizes may be too cumbersome to produce deep detailed analysis. The participant representation was another potential limitation. In qualitative research, participants are purposefully selected based upon information they can provide regarding their unique experience or knowledge of the studied phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I primarily recruited school social workers through professional membership organizations and social media. Therefore, the generalizability of the research findings was limited to a small sample of school social workers and not representative of a homogeneous experience of all school social workers. The data collected from study participants may not reflect the lived experiences of all school social workers; however, the benefit of this study produced thick, rich descriptions from school social workers detailing their lived experiences, which is not found in

quantitative research (see Carminati, 2018). Researchers in future studies can gather data from school social workers in other avenues to better represent school social workers.

## Significance

Out-of-school suspension and other school discipline practices are punitive-centered and instill negative attitudes and actions against self, authority, and community (Perry & Morris, 2014). Cook et al. (2018) suggested that negative attitudes, mistrust, and lack of satisfaction with school are due to Black students being disciplined more severely for less severe and more subjective misconduct such as dress code violations while White students face discipline for objective offenses such as truancy. Given previous studies about pervasive disparities in school discipline among Black male students, Teasley (2015) suggested that social workers help reduce the number of Black male students experiencing out-of-school suspension and other school discipline outcomes.

Social work practice is grounded in addressing social problems. The mission and core values of the social work profession are rooted in addressing social injustices, empowering vulnerable populations, and advocating for social change (NASW, 2017). School social work emerged due to addressing student issues through a socioecological perspective, which places social workers in a vital role in schools (Elswick et al., 2018). The disparities in school discipline created the need to discuss school discipline outcomes as an issue for Black male students (Anyon et al., 2018). I intended to explore information about social workers' role in school discipline involving Black male students.

## Summary

Black male students experience disproportionate school discipline rates, leading to adverse outcomes in education (Wegmann & Smith, 2019). Supporting students with psychosocial factors is the bases in which schools partnered with social workers (Gherardi, 2017). School social workers are an underused resource in school settings to assist students (Sherman, 2016). Therefore, in this study, I explored the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students. Moreover, in Chapter 2, I provided a review of literature related to the issue of school discipline and Black male students. I explored literature related to school social workers and their role in school settings. In addition, more information about the study's purpose and theoretical framework is addressed in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I provided information about the methodology for this study. Chapter 4 focused on the results of this study. In Chapter 5, I offered additional discussions about the research findings as well as presented recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

Staff and students come to school with the expectancy of being in a safe environment conducive to learning (Fenning & Jenkins, 2019; Kyere et al., 2018; Pyo, 2019; The Aspen Institute, 2018). To uphold a safe learning environment, administrators use various school discipline practices (Fenning & Jenkins, 2019). However, the rate of school discipline practices differs across groups of students (Morgan & Wright, 2018). Roch and Elsayed (2020) discussed the likelihood of school administrators giving Black students suspension for the same or similar behaviors displayed by White students. As young as preschool, Black male students disproportionately receive school discipline more frequently and receive harsher consequences, resulting in longer times without teacher instruction (Cook et al., 2018; Wesley & Ellis, 2017; Wright & Ford, 2016). The most recent statistics offered by the Department of Education national civil rights data from the academic year 2013-2014 revealed that disparities continue to persist, with data showing between a 10% to 23% difference in Black students receiving various forms of school discipline (as cited in Nowicki, 2018).

School districts employ school social workers to assist students in addressing various needs to meet academic standards (SSWAA, n.d.). During the 20th century, the induction of school social workers (then called *visiting teachers*) provided support for a diverse population of students from low-income and immigrant families' transition into school settings (Sugrue, 2017). With the development of different public education policies such as No Child Left Behind, the role of social workers in school settings

evolved to be inconsistent and based upon the needs of the school (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Richard et al., 2019; Sherman, 2016). Harrison et al. (2018) found that school social workers reported most of their time involved individualized education program (IEP) related service deliveries. The NASW (2012) outlined foundational expectations of the role of school social workers comprising of helping students improve academic achievement, advocating for respect and dignity of all students, ensuring equity in educational opportunities, and supporting students' presence in the classroom. School social workers possess knowledge and skills to assess environmental and social factors contributing to behaviors displayed in school (McCarter, 2016; Sugrue, 2017). With social workers in school settings to address behavior concerns and support equal access to education for all students, school social workers are best suited in involvement with school discipline of Black male students (Sherman, 2016). In this study, I examined the gap in understanding the role of school social workers in school discipline of Black male students.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of school social workers and their role in school discipline of Black male students. Over the past few decades, an immeasurable amount of research reviewed disparities in school discipline. Disparities in school discipline is a problem directly bearing adverse educational, psychological, and social outcomes among Black male students (González et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2017; Hattar, 2018; Morris & Perry, 2017). Among other professionals in school settings, school social workers provide a different skillset in schools, promoting student learning and psychosocial functioning (McCarty-Caplan &

MacLaren, 2019; Stone, 2015). School discipline hinders learning opportunities and academic success, especially in Black male students receiving school discipline at disproportionate rates (Kyere et al., 2018; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). In this study, I explored the lived experiences among school social workers investigating the role of school social workers in school discipline among Black male students.

In this chapter, I outline the iterative search process used to research existing literature related to school discipline and the role of social workers in school settings. The theoretical foundation of this study is role theory, describing the role of social workers in school settings and their involvement in school discipline related to Black male students. Subsequently, a synthesis of current literature connecting key concepts and the problem are stated in this study. Chapter 2 ends with a summary of major themes from the literature review and a review of the gap in literature I sought to explore related to the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students along with an introduction to Chapter 3.

## Literature Search Strategy

The iterative search process for the literature review of this study involved identifying and reviewing scholarly findings related to school social work and school discipline. Primary key search terms searched were *school discipline*, *school social work*, *school based social work*, *visiting teachers*, *role of school social worker*, *social work in host settings*, *school-based professionals*, *zero tolerance policies, out-of-school suspension, expulsion,* and *school-to-prison pipeline* in Google Scholar, Academia, and multiple databases through Walden University Library including PyscINFO, ERIC,

SAGE Journals, JSTOR, Education Source, and SocINDEX with Full Text. The majority of the research was between 2015 to 2020. Older research included in this study highlighted seminal knowledge.

## Theoretical Foundation

Role theory was the theoretical foundation of this study. From psychology to international relations, various disciplines use role theory to explain behavior in different environments. The use of role theory describes how individuals possess multiple roles within certain positions, environments, interactions, and cultures, and how these roles influence behavior based upon expectations (Biddle, 1986; Gross et al., 1958; Qian et al., 2018). Along with setting expectations, social position influences behaviors of certain roles (McKenna & White, 2018). For example, in the role of a police officer, it is a normative behavior to carry a gun for safety and protection.

The underpinnings of role theory date back to the early 20th century in social science disciplines of sociology, psychology, and anthropology, with contributions from key theorists Mead, Linton, and Moreno analyzing individuals in social situations (Jakovina & Jakovina, 2017; Van der Horst, 2016; Walker & Shore, 2015; Zai, 2015). Mead (1934) believed that individuals take on roles of others through consciousness and gestures for regulation of their own conduct in simple social interactions. Linton (1936) suggested systematic categories for roles and statuses allowing for variations in social positions. Linton posited that individuals are defined by their socially developed role, and individuals can take on multiple roles (as cited in Jakovina & Jakovina, 2017).

Using the metaphor of theater, role theory compares individuals' behavior based on expectations and norms like actors performing scripts in a staged play (Bianchi, 2020; Van der Horst, 2016; Zai, 2015). Expectations guide behavior and actions of individuals, much like a script dictating the performance of an actor. Early ideas of role theory received criticism due to different assumptions and role concepts of the framework. However, Biddle (1986) attempted to synthesize the main concepts to reduce confusion about role theory. The basic principles of role theory summarize behaviors as characteristics of social interactions based on different and predictable patterns depending on situations and social environments; these behaviors define parts or identities of social participants, and individuals behave according to the understood and expected norms of a role (Biddle, 1986). Biddle (2013) explained the variations in the concept of role dealt with the phenomena associated with the use of *role*.

Role theorists mutually believe that people behave in expected and sometimes different manners based upon the situation and their respective social identities (Biddle, 1986; Jakovina & Jakovina, 2017; McKenna & White, 2018). Evolving from different notions introduced by contributing key theorists, there are five perspectives of role theory: functional, symbolic interactionist, structural, organizational, and cognitive (Biddle, 1986; Zai, 2015). For this study, I focused on the organizational perspective of role theory, explaining the role of social workers within public schools and how they engage in school discipline of Black male students.

Organizational role theory advanced from the works of Gross et al. (1958) and Kahn et al. (1964). Gross et al. disagreed with the assumption implying that individuals

agree with their expected behavior. Debunking the assumption of role consensus by previous theorists, Gross et al. proved disagreement among role expectations using a study with school board members describing their perspective of a superintendent's role differing from the role (tasks) the superintendent typically performs in the position. Gross et al. offered a different viewpoint about the relationship between expectations and behaviors of roles in positions.

Kahn and Katz (1966) challenged previous contributions to role theory because prior developments did not address social behaviors in larger social structures such as organizations. Previous role theorists focused on the concept of role at an individual level. In contrast, Kahn and Katz discussed roles as a collective concept, suggesting roles create and define social organizations. According to Kahn and Katz , roles are the expected functions connecting individuals in an organization and connecting individuals to hierarchies in an organization (as cited in Mafuba, 2015). Kahn and Katz incorporated Linton's (1936) role concept describing a role as status or collection of duties in explaining roles associated with organizations (as cited in Mafuba, 2015; Van der Horst, 2016).

Organizations consist of hierarchal relationships (Ip et al., 2018). As with most organizations, social positions in a hierarchical system hold status and denote expectations and norms of the position (Biddle, 1986; Worlu et al., 2016). Organizational role theory focuses on an individual's ability to interact within the levels of a hierarchy based on norms and formal expectations of the organization and informal demands from other social structures (Worlu et al., 2016; Zai, 2015). Roles in organizations are

preplanned tasks centered upon the expectation of the position in an organization (Biddle, 1986; Worlu et al., 2016). For example, the expected role of an office assistant in an organization is to answer the telephone. There are four primary assumptions associated with organizational role theory linked to interaction and the relationship between expectations and behaviors: role taking, role consensus, role compliance, and role conflict (Biddle, 1986; Worlu et al., 2016).

According to Katz and Kahn (1978), an individual's role is vital to the connection of the organizational social structure, and their role is the foundation for integration in the organization. The behavior of individuals and expectations from social structures is the basis in which people integrate in organizations (Levinson, 1959). Assumptions about agreement with expectations of roles classifies different outcomes from role participants. The assumption of role taking refers to individuals accepting role(s) given to them in a social structure (Worlu et al., 2016). Role consensus is slightly different from role taking. Role consensus is agreed upon expectations with predetermined roles (Biddle, 1986; Worlu et al., 2016). Role compliance indicates that an individual conforms to the defined position and carries out the expected norms (Biddle, 1986; Worlu et al., 2016).

Along with role conflict, there are other problematic concerns associated with role expectations and behaviors in organizations. When roles are not clearly defined, role ambiguity occurs, causing dissatisfaction in an individual's role, disagreements, confusion, and ineffective job performance (Matta et al., 2015; Qian et al., 2018). Role conflict occurs when there are multiple conflicting expectations for a given position (Biddle, 1986). Role conflict creates stress and difficulty fulfilling job requirements

(Biddle, 1986; Palomino & Frezatti, 2016) whereas role malintergration occurs when roles are not compatible and do not fit well together (Biddle, 1986; Jackson, 1998). Role overload transpires when an individual takes on too many expectations (Biddle, 1986). Role overload can happen voluntarily and involuntarily when an individual can request additional roles, or an organization delegates added roles to a position. The relationship between the expectations of an organization and responsibilities within given role(s) affect behaviors, job performance, outcomes within the organization, as well as unanticipated consequences for role participants and organizations (Mafuba, 2015; Palomino & Frezatti, 2016).

The role of social workers in public school settings progressed since the initial introduction of school social workers. School social work practice evolved as policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were enacted to provide students with access to free equal educational opportunities in public schools (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018. Research dedicated to the role of school social workers revealed inconsistencies in practice based on school jurisdictions, resulting in marginalization and role ambiguity (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018; Harrison et al., 2018; McCarty-Caplan & MacLaren, 2019; Sherman, 2016; Sugrue, 2017; Webber, 2018). Role theory has also been used in research to present information regarding school social workers' role as mental health providers in school settings along with providing various prevention interventions, such as bullying, teen pregnancy, and violence (Cuellar et al.,

2018; Gherardi & Whittlesy-Jerome, 2018; McCarty-Caplan & MacLaren, 2019; Sherman, 2016).

According to organizational role theory, roles are defined by the expectations, including goals, mission, and values, of an organization (Van der Horst, 2016; Zai, 2015). In a school setting, there are various professional roles integrated to carry out the expectations to promote the educational needs of students. Social workers in school settings are employed to assist with achieving the expectations of the public educational system, which is to provide education to school-aged individuals. School social workers are also guided by practice standards outlined by the NASW to promote interventions assisting equal educational opportunities as well as collaborating with stakeholders to address identified disparities in access to equal educational opportunities for all students (NASW, 2012). Previous research depicted the role of social workers marginalized and underused, partially attributing to the lack of clarity in social workers' role in school settings (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019; McCarty-Caplan & MacLaren, 2019). The expectations of the school and school district drive the role of school social workers (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). Using organizational role theory for this study assisted with understanding of the role of social workers in school settings and their engagement in school discipline of Black male students.

## Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

### Disparities in School Discipline

To maintain safety, order, and security, schools across the nation implemented various forms of school discipline to maintain a conducive learning environment

(Fenning & Jenkins, 2019; Kyere et al., 2018; Pyo, 2019; The Aspen Institute, 2018). Safety concerns in school include adolescent substance use, violence, and emotional and behavioral concerns (Afkinich & Klumpner, 2018; Astor et al., 2021). School safety can negatively affect interactions between students and staff as well as influence students' thoughts, attitudes, and feelings about education and school (Afkinich & Klumpner, 2018). School discipline is used to redirect undesired student behaviors (Anyon et al., 2018). School discipline teaches socially appropriate behaviors and moral values to students, particularly students of color from low-income neighborhoods (Kulkarni, 2017). Kulkarni (2017) noted that the presumptive idea behind school discipline suggested a lack of positive role models and guidance in the lives of low-income and students of color, implying that there is no one in the home to redirect and provide consequences to undesired behaviors, hence, leaving discipline and consequences as the school's responsibility.

Over 3 million students per academic year experience school suspension (Gage et al., 2019; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Frequently used forms of school discipline include office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. Another form of school discipline is corporal punishment, which is still legal in 19 states (Ford et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2017; Gershoff & Font, 2016). Ford et al. (2019) defined corporal punishment as intentional infliction of pain on a student to modify behavior, including paddling and spanking. Over the past 5 decades, school suspensions increased in frequency, especially in Black male students experiencing higher rates than other student demographic groups (Heilbrun et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2018; Mizel et al., 2016). Over the years, the use

of use of corporal punishment declined; however, Black male students are twice as likely to experience corporal punishment than White peers (as cited in Ford et al., 2019).

School discipline practices are subjective and inconsistent (Davis, 2017; McCarter, 2016; Teasley, 2015; Yang et al., 2019), resulting in Black male students experiencing disproportionate rates in receiving consequences due to behaviors and actions in public school settings (Nguyen et al., 2019; Roch & Elsayed, 2020; Stahl, 2016; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Education, 8% of student enrollment in public schools is Black male students; however, 25% of Black male students receive out-of-school suspension (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). As early as preschool, Black male students are more likely to experience school discipline (Aldridge, 2018; Cook et al., 2018; Gilliam et al., 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Wright & Ford, 2016). Black students in preschool are 3.6 times more likely to receive one or more school discipline actions than White peers (Gilliam et al., 2016) correlating to the overall trend of Black students in grades K-12 being 3.8 times more likely to receive one or more school discipline than White peers (Kyere et al., 2018).

Since desegregation of public schools, Black students faced unfavorable academic experiences including achievement and discipline gaps (Capers, 2019; Davis, 2017; Smith, 2019). Pentek and Eisenberg (2018) noted that around the same time schools were desegregated, the school resource officer (SRO) program started in public schools. SROs are armed, uniformed police officers (Pigott et al., 2017; Theriot & Orme, 2016) used to ensure safety and security in schools (McKenna & White, 2018). Over the past 20 years, various grant programs provided funding for SROs increasing police presence in schools,

especially in urban areas (Theriot & Orme, 2016; Weisburst, 2019). While the roles and expectations of SROs vary across school districts, researchers suggested SRO presence correlates to criminalization of student behaviors and disproportionate rates of Black students experiencing school discipline, especially in urban school settings due to the intervention of SROs addressing behaviors of students (Carter et al., 2017; Ispa-Landa, 2017; Marchbanks et al., 2018; McKenna & White, 2018; Pigott et al., 2017). SRO involvement in school activities ranges from friend to foe. SROs involvement extends from mentoring students to providing forms of punishment (Curran, 2019; McKenna & White, 2018). Objective behaviors including truancy, vandalism, or smoking are infractions in which White students are more likely to experience school discipline versus subjective behaviors such as insubordination, dress code violations, or disruption are offenses Black students are more likely to receive discipline actions (Carter et al., 2017; Gastic, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019; Washington, 2020). Moreover, Black students receive harsher consequences than White students when similar offenses are demonstrated (Carter et al., 2017; Gastic, 2017; Morris & Perry, 2017). The disproportionate rate of school discipline does not mean Black male students display more or worse behaviors than peers. With decades of research about school discipline, studies failed to demonstrate Black students displaying more negative behaviors than their peers undermining logic of disproportionate discipline rates (Davis, 2017; Huang, 2018). Furthermore, Davis (2017) stated school discipline is ineffective and does not meet the needs of students. Irby (2018) discussed four counterproductive characteristics of school discipline. Irby (2018) explained (a) school personnel overreact and broadly classify

school violence and misbehavior (b) school personnel fail to address root causes of misbehavior (c) school personnel nor students learn from disciplinary situations (d) policies and practices elevate student misbehavior.

Decades after Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, inequities of resources contributed to disparities in achievement and consequences among Black students in public schools. Public schools in urban communities generally include low-income students of color and engage in stricter school discipline practices (Marchbanks et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). With heightened security at urban schools, more often student behaviors are scrutinized and criminalized with greater punitive discipline measures (Edwards, 2016; Tefera et al., 2017). On the contrary, most mass school shootings occurred in non-urban geographic locations (Powell, 2019). However, Powell (2019) noted no significant differences in student behavior based on geographic location between urban and rural school settings.

Challenges in public schools, such as funding and teacher shortage, trigger stress and exacerbate intolerance and bias. Limited training opportunities, deteriorating school settings, and inadequate learning resources in public schools create and aggravate disparities in school discipline (Carter et al., 2017; Davis, 2017; Edwards, 2016). Kulkarni (2017) studied patterns of racial disparities in school discipline causing public charter schools in Philadelphia to view school discipline differently because staffing and funding were at risk. At least four decades of research details pervasive disparities in school discipline (Edwards, 2016; Gregory et al., 2017; Irby, 2018; Powell, 2019). Studies consistently outlined harsher consequences for Black male students having

different educational experiences than peers of other races contributing to academic and discipline gaps (Smith, 2019). Dr. Kunjufu (1985) suggested an attributing factor to the gap in educational experiences of Black boys causing failure to thrive in education is the lack of positive Black male role models in schools. Approximately 2% of teachers are Black males (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Bryan & Williams, 2017). Dr. Kunjufu (1985) reported a low probability of Black male students having a Black male teacher by fourth grade. Many teachers are middle-class White females (Carter et al., 2017). Most discipline referrals originate from classroom teachers (Nguyen et al., 2019). Amemiya et al. (2020) suggested teachers are more vigilant and unconsciously expect Black male students to display undesired behaviors. Studies suggested Black male students receive less office referrals and other school discipline when instructed by Black teachers (Gastic, 2017; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019; Powell, 2019). A study completed by Lindsay and Hart (2017) discovered an 18 % decrease in exclusionary discipline sanctions when Black male students are matched with a Black male teacher. Cultural differences between school personnel and Black male students contribute to subjective discipline referrals due to misunderstandings of slang, behavior expressions, and body language viewed as defiant and disrespectful (Edwards, 2016; Gregory et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019; Powell, 2019). Also, *the fourth-grade failure syndrome* is significant because the transition of Black male students to fourth grade incorporates different skills for students due to more independence, less nurturing teaching style, and challenging academics (Kunjufu, 1985). In a cyclical effect, students with academic

challenges display behavior problems, and academic challenges occur when students receive consequences for behavior problems (Kremer et al., 2016).

Inequities and disparities in education trace back to historical socially unjust ideologies and practices. Carter et al. (2017) suggested negative stereotypes of Black males emerged from slavery and progressed overtime, depicting Black males as inferior and dangerous; implying the need for discipline. Edwards (2016) endorsed a similar thought about "adultification" of Black elementary boys. Edwards (2016) explained teachers view Black male students, as young as elementary school-aged, as "dangerous and deserving of adult-like punishment" (p. 56). Black boys are often perceived and expected to behave older than their chronological age (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). Stereotypes held by school personnel, including administrators and teachers, skew the perceptions of student behavior (Edwards, 2016; McIntosh et al., 2018; Powell, 2019). With the same paradigm as Black male students characterized as inferior, some teachers possess lower expectations deeming Black male students having lower academic capacity (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). Negative perceptions increase the likelihood of Black male students receiving school disciplinary sanctions (Gregory & Roberts, 2017).

**Outcomes of School Discipline**

Deterring and transforming negative behaviors are intended goals of school discipline; presumably having positive outcomes on student behavior. Research consistently indicates disparities and negative outcomes in all grade levels, even as early as preschool (Welsh & Little, 2018). On the contrary, school discipline increases the likelihood of students engaging in maladaptive behaviors (Halushka, 2018). School

discipline is ineffective in meeting the nature of its intended goals and addressing root causes of behavior (Ellyon et al., 2020; González et al., 2019; Heilbrun et al., 2015; Smith, 2019). Studies connect the relationship between school discipline and poor outcomes (Gage et al., 2019; Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Outcomes associated with school discipline includes loss of vital instructional time, lack of opportunity for positive social interaction, disengagement in school, lack of trust in school authority figures, and risk of engaging in subsequential negative acts (Gage et al., 2019; Morgan & Wright, 2018; Teasley 2015). In addition, students who experience frequent school disciplinary actions are more likely to experience low academic performance, grade retention, school dropout, the criminal justice system, and adverse adulthood outcomes (Anderson, 2020; Anyon et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2018; Rosenbaum, 2020; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Eyllon et al. (2020) discussed additional collateral consequences of school discipline including mental health. School discipline increases the risk of emotional and mental health problems (González et al., 2019; Hattar, 2018). Students spend a significant amount of time at school. Removing students from key characteristics of school such as positive role models, educational opportunities, positive socialization, and nutritional meals disrupt their sense of structure, stability, and overall health (Eyllon et al., 2020; González et al., 2019). Experiences at school influences students' wellbeing and development just as their home environment contributes to students' behavior (Eyllon et al., 2020). When students feel connected to school and staff, students are less likely to display undesired behaviors, experience higher self-esteem, and perform better in academics (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). For example,

Garcia and Subia (2019) explained students, as well as at-risk students who participate in school sports have a greater sense of school connectedness improving their academic performance, self-esteem, social status, discipline, and health. School connectedness is a concept held by students believing peers and adults in school support and care about them, promoting positive educational and health outcomes (Lemkin et al., 2018). Lemkin et al. (2018) completed a study finding that schools with majority low-income students with increased school connectedness had better academic achievement and behavior. Gonzàlez et al. (2019) reported a strong relationship between academic disengagement and the number of school discipline infractions. Coles and Powell (2020) asserted Black students feel disconnected from school due to school disciplinary strategies. Pentek and Eisenberg (2018) also confirmed that school discipline breaks school connectedness causing negative outcomes. Therefore, with studies indicating Black male students receiving more disciplinary actions, Black male students are less likely to experience school connectedness without feelings of support from staff potentially triggering undesired behaviors.

**Zero-Tolerance Policies**

Wolf and Kupchik (2017) validated the need for measures to maintain rules along with safety and security in school; however, studies indicated school discipline is inconsistently enforced with negative and disproportional outcomes. Exclusionary school discipline such as zero tolerance policies contribute to disparities in school discipline creating negative outcomes (Aldridge, 2018; Annamma et al., 2019; Novak, 2018; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Zero tolerance policies are policies created by schools or districts

mandating predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses (Curran, 2019; Washington, 2020). The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights defines zero tolerance policies as policies resulting in mandatory expulsion of a student committing one or more specified offenses (Curran, 2019). Curran (2019) argued about the ambiguity in the definition of zero tolerance policies. It is the discretion of school districts and policy makers to conceptualize and interpret zero tolerance policies. Ambiguity in what constitutes as "consequences or punishments" and "specific offenses" (Curran, 2019; Stahl, 2016) as well as zero tolerance policies vary across different school districts contributing to subjective and inconsistent use of zero tolerance policies (Rodriguez, 2017). Broadly defining zero tolerance led to overuse by school districts for a variety of infractions including minor nonviolent behaviors (Curran, 2019; Heilbrun et al., 2018; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017).

Exclusionary discipline excelled after the prevalence of drugs and violence in schools (Novak, 2018; Pigott et al., 2017; Stahl, 2016; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). To curb increased violence and drugs in schools, school districts across the nation adopted zero tolerance policies implementing mandatory exclusionary discipline measures (Curran, 2019; Novak, 2018; Washington, 2020). After Nixon's campaign of "War on Drugs" gained momentum mitigating drugs and violence, the concept of zero tolerance was introduced in school discipline measures to deter drugs and violence in schools (Stahl, 2016; Williams, 2020). Initially, the adoption of zero tolerance in schools meant mandatory suspension and expulsion for drug, weapon, or assault related offenses (Curran, 2019; Stahl, 2016; Washington, 2020). Nonetheless, zero tolerance measures

exponentially increased in use in schools due to federal policies related to social and political factors (Curran, 2019; Novak, 2018; Stahl, 2016; Washington, 2020; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Under the Clinton Administration, Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act mandating students receive a one-year expulsion for possession of a firearm on school property (Curran, 2019; Stahl, 2016; Washington, 2020; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Followed by the Gun-Free Schools Act, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 allocated funding for law enforcement in schools (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Both federal policies attached funding for schools to provide safety measures. In order to maintain federal funding for schools, school districts expanded zero tolerance policies encompassing actions beyond drugs, weapons, and assault (Curran, 2019; Rodriguez, 2017; Washington, 2020; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Federal funding counted for 7 % of school districts' annual budget (Stahl, 2016). The use of zero tolerance policies drastically increased after the mass school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (Addington & Muschert, 2019; Stahl, 2016).

**School Discipline After Columbine**

April 20, 1999, changed school discipline with respect to safety and security in public schools across the nation (Curran et al., 2020; Stahl, 2016). On that day, two White male students injured 24 individuals as well as killed 12 students and a teacher (Morrow et al., 2016). Intense media coverage of the Columbine shooting contributed to public fear about safety in schools (Morrow et al., 2016; Stahl, 2016; Williams, 2020). This was known as the Columbine Effect. The Columbine Effect refers to the response and strong influence from the school shooting on anti-violence attitudes, practices, and

policies (Addington & Muschert, 2019; Muschert, 2019; Williams, 2020). After the mass school shooting at Columbine High School, social and political stance shifted the view of school safety, security, and discipline (Curran, 2019; McKenna & White, 2018). Columbine increased widespread fear of violence in schools as well as showing violence in non-urban school settings (Morrow et al., 2016; Muschert, 2019; Stahl, 2016). Columbine High School is located in a suburban community consisting of mostly White middle-class students (Muschert, 2019; Stahl, 2016). Negating the perception of violence in urban schools, the shooting at Columbine revealed the probability of violence in any geographic location (Muschert, 2019; Stahl, 2016). Increased vigilance towards violence in schools after Columbine led to expanded zero-tolerance policies and increased security measures including additional presence of law enforcement in schools (Addington & Muschert, 2019; McKenna & White, 2018; Stahl, 2016; Williams, 2020). Stakeholders pushed for changes in schools with hopes of preventing future incidents of school shootings (Curran et al., 2020). Days after Columbine, 275 school districts received grants from the Office of Community Policing Services (COPS) of more than $30 million used for law enforcement addressing drugs, crime, and discipline concerns in schools (ACLU, 2017). Schools across the nation increased security staff, equipment, and practices (Addington & Muschert, 2019). Such measures included security cameras, metal detectors, use of clear backpacks, school crisis plans, as well as restroom limits. (Curran et al., 2020; Stahl, 2016; Williams, 2020; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) highlighted safety and security measures in public schools from academic school years 1999-2000 to 2017-2018. Comparing the academic

school year after Columbine, 19.4 % of public schools used security cameras to monitor the school (NCES, 2019). Continuously increasing in use, 83.5 % of public schools used security cameras during 2017-2018 academic school year (NCES, 2019). After the mass school shooting at Columbine High School, harsher and more punitive school discipline practices took place in schools across the nation (King & Bracy, 2019; McKenna & White, 2018). Curran et al. (2020) argued many schools implemented measures and practices without evidence or consideration of adverse consequences. For example, Curran et al. (2020) showed an increase in schools limiting restroom access after Columbine explaining schools had no evidence linking restroom limits to preventing school shootings. Also noting, more security measures were implemented in schools with predominately students of color (Curran et al., 2020). Increased security strategies and enforced zero tolerance policies pushed students out of school perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline (Curran, 2019; Novak, 2018; Rodriguez, 2017).

**School to Prison Pipeline**

After Columbine, the prevalent use of severe punitive discipline for actions ranging from minor infractions to assaults subjected Black male students into the school-to-prison pipeline due to the disproportionality in school discipline (Aldridge, 2018; Amemiya et al., 2020; Novak, 2018). The school-to-prison pipeline concept suggests students with multiple school discipline infractions increase their risk of entering the criminal justice system (Marchbanks et al., 2018; Walker, 2020). Other characteristics of school-to-prison pipeline include policies and practices in K-12 schools used to criminalize developmentally appropriate behaviors displayed in school settings

(Marchbanks et al., 2018; Robinson & McCall, 2020; Washington, 2020). Increased security measures increased student arrests and placement in juvenile detention; directing students into the school-to-prison pipeline (Stahl, 2016; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). School discipline concerns, typically handled by school administrators and teachers, referred to law enforcement officers placed in school settings increased student arrests; hence criminalizing student behaviors (Curran, 2019; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018; Stahl, 2016; Walker, 2020). Numerous students enter the criminal justice system for school-related infractions (Robinson & McCall, 2020; Walker, 2020). According to Whitaker et al. (2019), schools with law enforcement reported 3.5 times more arrests than schools without police. Relying on law enforcement to handle school discipline accelerates students, especially Black male students, into the school-to-prison pipeline (Martinez-Prather et al., 2016). Limited training (Martinez-Prather et al., 2016) and varying role expectations (McKenna & White, 2018) for law enforcement in schools contribute to subjective and discretionary enforcement of school discipline (Washington, 2020). Research confirmed more Black male students are more likely to have engagement with law enforcement and criminal justice system due to zero tolerance policies, thus entering the school-to-prison pipeline (Fisher et al., 2020; Walker, 2020; Washington, 2020). Initially, law enforcement integrated in schools to mitigate crime and violence (Fisher et al., 2020; McKenna & White, 2018). However, law enforcement's role in schools evolved due to social and political factors such as the DARE program and safety initiatives responding to school shootings (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018; McKenna & White, 2018; Okilwa & Robert, 2017). Along with maintaining safety and engaging in

school discipline, law enforcement is perceived as educators and counselors in school settings to help ensure school safety (Fisher et al., 2020; McKenna & White, 2018). Law enforcement in school settings operate outside of the traditional law enforcement role with limited training related to being in the host setting of schools (Martinez-Prather et al., 2016; McKenna & White, 2018). McKenna and White (2018) suggested school policing by law enforcement officers contrast with traditional policing. Most law enforcement officers in school settings view school discipline through a traditional policing perspective; it is punitive rather than therapeutic (Fisher et al., 2020; McCarter, 2016). Research concluded inclusion of law enforcement in schools adds to a more punitive and criminalized environment pushing students, Black males, into the school-to-prison pipeline (Okilwa & Robert, 2017; Robinson & McCall, 2020). Studies even showed inclusion of police officers and zero tolerance policies are ineffective and do not make schools safer (Davis, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2020; McCarter, 2016; Whitaker et al., 2019). Studies showed a supportive relationship with school personnel creates safer school environments (Cuella et el., 2018; Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018).

"Defund the police" was a phrase introduced after the death of George Floyd advocating for funds allocated for police diverted to other areas including mental health and education (Jacobs et al., 2020). Schools need resources and trained professionals to assist with behavioral and mental health needs (Whitaker et al., 2019). According to Whitaker et al. (2019), 10 million students are in schools with a law enforcement officer, but no social worker who is a trained mental health professional. Police are not trained mental health professionals and often foster non-conducive learning environments by

"policing" and criminalizing student behaviors (Whitaker et al., 2019). Advocates of "defund the police" argue alternative solutions for law enforcement handling various responsibilities such as mental health interventions (Jacobs et al., 2020). Law enforcement addressing student behaviors and administering consequences is not effective in schools as shown by unintended outcomes resulting in more students of color pushed out of schools (Weisburst, 2019). Overall, more students of color attend schools with fewer resources and supports to manage behavior and emotional concerns resulting in law enforcement addressing student behaviors (Whitaker et al., 2019). Black male students receive school discipline and enter the school-to-prison pipeline due to unmet behavioral and emotional needs without anyone addressing the root cause of behaviors (Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Whitaker et al., 2019). The presence and funding for law enforcement and other security measures combined with limited support services such as counseling in schools provide a catalyst for Black male students entering the school-to-prison pipeline (Jacobs et al., 2020).

**History of School Social Work**

School social work is a specialized social work sector (Cuellar & Theriot, 2017; NASW, 2012). School social work emerged as a response to the wave of immigrant families, significantly increasing the number of school-aged children during the Progressive Era (Gherardi, 2017; Sugrue, 2017). Before school social workers, visiting teachers, hired by private agencies, assisted immigrant children assimilate into the culture and adjust to public education (Charles & Stone, 2019; Gherardi, 2017; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019). Visiting teachers started in New York, Chicago, Boston, and

Hartford (Charles & Stone, 2019; Shaffer & Fisher, 2017). Visiting teachers provided linkage between school and home, offered resources to students and their families, and addressed attendance to meet compulsory attendance laws (Charles & Stone, 2019; Gherardi, 2017; Gherardi & Whittlesy-Jerome, 2018; Shaffer & Fisher, 2017). Visiting teachers followed a social work practice model assisting children and families with social barriers challenging academic performance (Gherardi, 2017; Massat et al., 2016). Visiting teachers' background was not in social work but education; however, their role contrasted with traditional classroom teachers (Charles & Stone, 2019).

Schools recognized the diverse student population and shifted perspective from charitable assistance to mental health, bringing community-based practice into schools (Charles & Stone, 2019; Shaffer & Fisher, 2017; Sherman, 2016). An influx of social workers emerged in schools when federal guidelines required access to free public education to all children, including individuals with disabilities (Gherardi, 2017). Legislation, including the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, mandated programs and services for students with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities; providing federal and state funds for staffing in schools to providing support to students with special needs (Gherardi, 2017; Sherman, 2016). Schools selected social workers to help accommodate students with disabilities because of social workers' multidimensional approach to problem solving (Sherman, 2016), clinical skills (Gherardi, 2017), and ecological perspective (Charles & Stone, 2019). Funding for school social work positions through EAHCA and IDEA shaped pivotal roles of social workers in

public school settings (Gherardi, 2017; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019; Sherman, 2016).

**Social Workers' Role in School**

Role(s) of school social workers evolved since social workers entered public schools over a century ago (Harrison et al., 2018). Social workers in schools maintain connections between school, home, and community by addressing needs and barriers of academic success of students (Beddoe, 2019; Gherardi, 2017; Massat et al., 2016; Sherman, 2016). The social workers' purpose in schools continuously deals with assisting students with disabilities (Sherman, 2016). Finigan-Carr and Shaia (2018) noted social workers' capacity to contribute more in school settings is often dismissed to perform tasks associated with providing support to students with special needs and attending IEP meetings. Schools are host settings for school social work practice. Dane and Simon (1991) defined host settings as entities in which social work practice is not the dominant function or profession. Generally, the dominate culture, mission, and purpose of host settings define and guide the role(s) of social workers (Beddoe, 2019). Roles of professionals in school settings are centered around education of students. While social workers' background includes specialized, multifunctional clinical skills, school districts hire social workers to focus on factors preventing students from learning and promoting equal educational opportunities for students (Massat et al., 2016; NASW, 2012). Social workers in school settings long struggled with role identity in host settings due to differences in values, competing ideologies, professional marginalization, and role ambiguity (Shaffer & Fisher, 2017; Sugrue, 2017). Sugrue (2017) argued the expansion

of school social worker roles grew from connecting home and school for academic success to assisting schools adjust to the needs of students. The needs of schools and students often conceptualize school social workers' role (s) (Richard et al., 2019). One of the challenges with school social work practice is inconsistent roles (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Harrison et al., 2018). The role of school social workers varies from schools to school districts (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Sherman, 2016). Harrison et al. (2018) highlighted other challenges of the role(s) of social workers in schools because of being in a host setting, including school administration, value of social work profession, geographic location/school setting, conflicting roles with school counseling and school psychology, funding, and different student needs.

Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2018) implied the role of school social workers benefits some students; suggesting school social workers help with students challenged in academic performance due to nonacademic problems; but neglect other students. Findings from a mixed-methods study completed by Harrison et al. (2018) showed the only consistent role of school social workers were tasks related to IEP services. According to the NASW (2012), school social workers support students with academic achievement using an ecological perspective linking school, home, and community (NASW, 2012; Thompson et al., 2019). Efforts of school social workers are centered around ensuring students are physically, emotionally, and mentally capable to learn and maintain provided educational opportunities (NASW, 2012).

Despite the expansion of social workers in school settings, research indicated social workers' role in schools continue to lack clarity (Isaksson & Larsson, 2017; Kelly

et al., 2015; McCarty-Caplan & MacLaren, 2019; Richard et al., 2019) and overlooked in the interprofessional setting of schools (Beddoe, 2019). Research attributed school administrators' limited knowledge about the role and profession of school social workers (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019) and often not differentiated from school counselors (McCarty-Caplan & MacLaren, 2019) as contributing factors limiting the role of social workers in school settings. Beddoe (2019) noted similar challenges for school social workers in other countries. Funding is another factor related to the marginalization of the role of social workers in schools (Richard et al., 2019; Sherman, 2016). The NASW (2012) recommended the ratio of one school social worker to 250 students and one school social worker to 50 students with intensive needs. Richardson et al. (2019) reported the ratio in North Carolina is one school social worker to 1,427 students. Therefore, various factors guide school social workers' role in assisting students and schools (Richardson et al., 2019).

**School Social Workers and School Discipline**

Researchers argued schools underutilize school social workers (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Kelly et al., 2015; McCarty-Caplan & MacLaren, 2019; Richard et al., 2019). Social workers possess skills and knowledge largely neglected in school settings (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019). Due to their clinical skills and knowledge of evidence-informed interventions, historically school social workers provided support for students with at-risk behaviors and emotional needs (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018; Gherardi &Whittlesey-Jerome 2018; NASW, 2012). In addition to educational related tasks, the NASW (2012) outlined various responsibilities for school social workers.

According to the NASW (2012), school social workers should identify, collaborate, and intervene on social justice issues presenting at schools and affecting population subgroups. The NASW (2021) recently submitted the 2021 Blueprint of Federal Social Policy Priorities to the Biden Harris administration outlining 21 social issues deemed as urgent areas needing policy solutions. As part of the call for healthy development for all youth, the NASW (2021) asked for the Biden Harris administration to address unmet social, emotional, and behavioral needs in school settings contributing to academic achievement, especially with COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating concerns for low-income and students of color. School social workers' ability to identify and address in-school as well as out-of-school factors such as social, emotional, and behavioral concerns promote social and academic success (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018; Isaksson & Larsson, 2017). Students, especially Black males, with emotional and behavioral concerns receive school discipline at disproportionately higher rates (Government Accountability Office, 2018; Morgan et al., 2019). Social workers are unique professionals in school settings because they provide mental health strategies as well as identify behaviors because of home and school settings influencing academic outcomes (Cuellar et al., 2018; Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018; Richardson et al., 2019). Therefore, school social workers possess skills to identify root causes of behavior and address social, emotional, and behavioral issues to mitigate the rate of school discipline for Black male students (Cuellar et al., 2018; Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018; Richardson et al., 2019). Richardson et al. (2019) completed a study contradicting previous research finding the lack of school social workers in an urban school district in North Carolina related to increased suspensions of

Black males and confirmed issues associated with school social workers assisting with decreasing discipline disproportionality of students of color. Limited research exists on the lived experiences of social workers in school settings role in school discipline of Black male students.

## Summary

Decades of research found disparities in school discipline with Black male students experiencing disproportionate rates of all forms of school discipline (Edwards, 2016; Gregory et al., 2017; Irby, 2018; Powell, 2019). Various contributing factors for disproportionate rates of school discipline include inconsistent implementation of zero tolerance policies (Aldridge, 2018), law enforcement in schools "policing" behaviors (Carter et al., 2017), and subjective office referrals (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). School discipline is overall ineffective and have deleterious academic and social outcomes on students (González et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2017; Hattar, 2018; Morris & Perry, 2017). Social workers have vital roles in school settings (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). However, the role(s) of school social workers vary among school districts (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Sherman, 2016). This present study provided information to fill a gap in literature as little is known about school social workers lived experiences in school discipline of Black male students. The methodology of this study is outlined in Chapter 3.

# Chapter 3: Research Method

## Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain insight into the role of school social workers in the discipline of Black male students. I explored the lived experiences of school social workers' role in Black male students' discipline in public school settings. As early as preschool, Black male students receive various forms of school discipline more than students of other races (Cook et al., 2018; Wright & Ford, 2016). While many studies addressed subjective discipline policies and disparities of Black male students receiving school discipline, there is limited knowledge about the role of school social workers involvement in Black male students' discipline. Social workers' position in schools are to promote academic achievement; assist with students' social, emotional, and behavioral well-being; and ensure equity of educational opportunities (NASW, 2012). School social workers help address school attendance, barriers in academic achievement, mental health, and behavioral concerns (Richardson et al., 2019). Researchers have indicated that the role of school social workers is ambiguous (Sugrue, 2017), inconsistent (Bent-Goodley, 2018), and misunderstood (Richardson et al., 2019). This study may provide insight in the role of school social workers through their lived experiences in school discipline of Black male students.

This chapter provides information about the selected methodology for this phenomenological study to explain the chosen approach. Chapter 3 includes information about the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of this

study. This chapter also contains information about the treatment of the data collected. Chapter 3 concludes with a summary of the main points of the chapter.

## Research Design and Rationale

### Research Question

What are the lived experiences of school social workers regarding their role in school discipline of Black male students?

### Design and Rationale

The research methodology for this study was qualitative. Quantitative and qualitative methods are traditional research methodologies used mostly in social sciences (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Gerring, 2017). Quantitative methodology is an objective approach using numbers for data to test new ideas, measure change, and extend knowledge (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Burkholder et al., 2016). Researchers use qualitative research to interpret or understand phenomena based upon feelings, opinions, thoughts, and experiences of individuals to measure data (Kennedy, 2016).

Qualitative research is a methodology used to explore social phenomena and gain understanding from people's experience of the social phenomena (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Tuffour, 2017). Alase (2017) called qualitative research "participant-oriented" because of the exploratory nature of the experiences of participants as data sources. Qualitative research was appropriate for this study because qualitative research provides greater understanding to this studied phenomenon than quantitative methods by gathering in-depth information from natural language of participants from their responses to questions about the studied topic (Johnson, 2015; Mwangi & Bettencourt, 2017). Using

qualitative research instead of quantitative provided more detail and flexibility in exploring the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students in public-school settings rather than predefine variables associated with quantitative studies (see Abedini et al., 2018).

There are five general qualitative approaches: ethnography, grounded theory, case study, narrative research, and phenomenology (Kennedy, 2016; Mwangi & Bettencourt, 2017). Phenomenology is a form of qualitative methodology studying lived human experiences through participants' own meanings, thoughts, and feelings (Noon & Hallam, 2018). The German philosopher, Husserl, developed modern phenomenology research during the early 20th century (Fry et al., 2017; Giorgi, 2017). Husserl explored the relationship between numbers and what they represented; however, Husserl believed that concrete numbers did not adequately explain the meaning of human experiences (as cited in El-Sherif, 2017; Fry et al., 2017). There are two distinct philosophical thoughts of phenomenology: transcendental (descriptive) and hermeneutic (interpretive; El-Sherif, 2017; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018; Skea, 2016).

Husserl developed descriptive phenomenology to describe lived experiences. The central idea in descriptive phenomenology is intentionality (Skea, 2016). Husserl focused on acts of consciousness to describe the meaning of human experiences (as cited in Christensen et al., 2017; Giorgi, 2017; Skea, 2016). For Husserl, humans are part of the world in which they interact with objects (Christensen et al., 2017; Creely, 2018). The interactions or lived experiences create acts of consciousness (intentionality) and give meaning for knowledge (Christensen et al., 2017; Creely, 2018; Tassone, 2017).

In descriptive phenomenology, it is important for researchers to engage in the process of epoché to bracket their own perceptions and presumptions about the studied phenomenon (Giorgi, 2017; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). Bracketing is essential in mitigating researcher's bias to understand the phenomenon exclusively from participants' worldview (Burkholder et al., 2016).

As a student of Husserl, Heidegger rejected the concept of bracketing and developed interpretive phenomenology using hermeneutics (as cited in Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2018; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). Heidegger posited that knowledge of lived experiences comes from interpretation prior to understanding (as cited in El-Sherif, 2017; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). Heidegger believed that interpretation of the world in which individuals exist, "being in the world," is key to understanding "everydayness" of human experiences (as cited in El-Sherif, 2017; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). In descriptive phenomenology, researchers intentionally remove traces of their natural attitude to reflect the authentic essence in the meaning of the phenomenon (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018) whereas in interpretative phenomenology, researchers' views influence the interpreted meaning of the phenomenon (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018).

Researchers choose methodologies best suited to address research questions and intent of study (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Phenomenology was more appropriate for this study because the I sought to explore the lived experiences of school social workers. Other research designs did not provide rich detailed information derived from lived human experiences. For example, the focus of basic qualitative research is an

interpretation of a broad range of feelings, opinions, and attitudes about a phenomenon, while phenomenological studies provide in-depth information from individuals experiencing the phenomenon (Kennedy, 2016; Percy et al., 2015). In narrative research, researchers focus on life stories (Creely, 2018; Kennedy, 2016). Narrative research was not appropriate for this study because the intent of this study was to gain an understanding of a phenomenon rather than understanding study participants (Butina, 2015). I chose descriptive phenomenology for this study to explore the lived experiences of school social workers gaining an understanding on the perspectives of their role in school discipline of Black male students.

## Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is different in quantitative and qualitative studies. Clark and Vealé (2018) noted in quantitative studies that the researchers' role is detached and objective, and in qualitative studies, the researcher is active and subjective. The researcher is the main instrument in data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation (Clark & Vealé, 2018; Mohajan, 2018; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008). My role as the researcher in this study was the primary source for data collection and analysis.

Cumyn et al. (2019) encouraged researchers to have a continued awareness of research participation issues. A researcher's role in phenomenological studies involves the exploration and interpretation of lived experiences and the effect of the lived experiences on participants (Alase, 2017). Due to the nature of the researcher's role in qualitative research, the researcher must be cognizant of their own bias. Ravitch and Carl (2016) encouraged researchers to intentionally acknowledge, account, and address bias.

Bias of the researcher can influence each phase of the study (Fry et al., 2017). However, bracketing and reflexivity are methods in qualitative research used to mitigate bias. Johnston et al. (2017) described bracketing as a way for researchers to dismiss fixed beliefs, assumptions, experiences, feelings, and prior knowledge to focus on the research. Reflexivity refers to increased awareness and sensitivity to predisposed thoughts and practices (Shadnam, 2020). Biases are unavoidable; however, reflexivity and bracketing allow researchers to reflect on their subjectivities and communicate the researcher's stance on the studied phenomenon (Clark & Vealé, 2018; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Additionally, reflexivity involves conscious questioning and rethinking about predisposed thoughts and practices (Shadnam, 2020). There was potential for unintentional bias because of my prior experience as a school social worker intern in a public-school setting. I spent 2 academic years as a school social worker intern for my practicum experience when I earned a Master of Social Work. I no longer have a professional relationship with my previous practicum site, nor do I have a professional relationship with study participants.

I was aware that my experience and knowledge about school social work practice as well as having a school-aged Black son could influence my thoughts about this study's central phenomenon. Therefore, cultural and personal connection to the study could contain bias and thoughts about the study. Hence, I bracketed my personal feelings and experiences to maintain integrity of the study. Karagiozis (2018) stated that being aware and acknowledging personal histories creates accountability of the researcher. Strategies used for bracketing include writing memos, establishing boundaries, debriefing, and

reflexive journaling (Ataro, 2020; Hopkins et al., 2016). I used debriefing interviews with individuals not connected to the study or research process as a means of bracketing. To ensure confidentiality and privacy of participants, no information about participants or data was shared.

## Methodology

### Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study was school social workers. The sample for this study was school social workers who self-identified as meeting the criteria for participation. I used criterion and snowball sampling to select school social workers for participation in this study. The criteria for participation in this study involved licensed or certified school social workers employed full-time in PreK to 12th grade public schools. Requirements to be a school social worker vary by state. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, the criteria to be a school social worker is certification received from the Commonwealth of Virginia as a school social worker, possessing a master's level degree in social work, and completing a specific number of practicum hours performing duties as a school social worker or full-time employment (Virginia Law, 2020).

Criterion sampling is a form of purposeful sampling in which participants are chosen based on predetermined criteria due to participants' knowledge and lived experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015). Snowball sampling is a process of participant recruitment through networking (Bailey, 2019). I initiated participant recruitment by posting a recruitment flyer to professional organizations and groups encompassing school social workers via social media and prospective websites. For example, according to the

current president of the Virginia Association of School Social Workers, there are approximately 400 school social workers on the mailing list. Therefore, professional organizations and social media are reasonable sources to obtain an adequate number of participants for this study. However, in the event I was unable to obtain an adequate sample size from professional organizations and social media, I used snowballing as a method to gather additional participants. I asked selected participants to refer and ask other school social workers meeting criteria to participate in this study. Upon initial contact with participants, I inquired about employment as a school social worker to determine eligibility for participation in this study. Joseph et al. (2018) noted that recruitment via networking is a viable resource in gaining participants for research. Using the snowball sampling method allows for greater access to individuals meeting criteria. Moser and Korstjens (2018) suggested a sample size of no more than 10 participants; however, I conducted interviews with school social workers until saturation was met. Saturation is met when no new information or themes arise in interviews from study participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

**Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

Inclusion for this study included school social workers who were (a) certified or licensed as a professional school social worker, (b) employed full-time as a school social worker, (c) had at least 1-year full time experience as a school social worker, (d) participated voluntarily, and (e) were willing to allow recording of their interview for data collection and analysis purposes. Demographics, including age, gender, and race, were not considered for inclusion or exclusion of study participation.

## Instrumentation

Instrumentation are mechanisms used by researchers to collect information from study participants. Common tools used in qualitative studies include focus groups, individual interviews, questionnaires, and participant observations (Burkholder et al., 2016; Mwangi & Bettencourt, 2017; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Interviews are the most common approach to collect data for qualitative studies (Billsberry et al., 2019). Individual interviews are the most appropriate instrumentation for phenomenological studies because researchers can capture rich thick descriptions of lived experiences related to the research topic (Ataro, 2020; Billsberry et al., 2019; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Mwangi & Bettencourt, 2017). I used semistructured interviews as the means to collect data for this study. Semistructured interviews provide structure to guide and prompt communication and allow participants flexibility to provided detail about lived experiences and feelings regarding the studied research (Peesker et al., 2019). I developed an interview guide for the semistructured interviews creating open-ended questions to prompt dialogue between the interviewer (researcher) and participants. In qualitative research studies, researchers develop questions related to the research topic gathering information from study participants about their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and perspectives (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semistructured interviews are effective for qualitative research studies and are conducted via face-to-face, telephone, online, individual, or group settings (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Typically, interviews are conducted face-to-face between the researcher and each study participant. Due to COVID-19, the institutional review board (IRB) mandated no

face-to-face interviews used for data collection until permitted for safe interactions (Walden University, 2020a). Therefore, I collected data by interviewing study participants via online platform, Zoom. Moser and Korstjens (2018) suggested that interviews should last between 30 to 90 minutes. I arranged interview times convenient for study participants, allotting an estimated 45 to 60 minutes for each interview, to gather in-depth, detailed information related to the lived experiences of each school social worker. The allotted time frame for each interview allowed enough time to review the study, ask probing questions, and debrief participants (see Brown & Danaher, 2019). I suggested interviews take place during nonschool hours for confidentiality and comfort of study participants speaking freely about lived experiences (see Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Interview questions focused on the studied phenomenon of the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students. Prior to interviewing participants, I gained consent from volunteers to participate and record interviews. Zoom has a recording feature as part of the video conferencing platform. As a back-up, I recorded each interview using an audio recording device.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative studies includes themes emerging from interviews describing beliefs, thoughts, and feelings from participants' lived experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I used thematic analysis to analyze the qualitative data from participant's interviews. Thematic analysis is a type of data analysis used in qualitative studies identifying patterns in data called themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis

is beneficial in qualitative studies because it highlights similar key points in data from participants' perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017).

Manually completing data analysis is complicated and time-consuming (Sutton & Austin, 2015; Woods et al., 2016). Qualitative data analysis software assists with identifying frequently stated quotations or phrases from participant interviews. Common statements or phrases are grouped together to form themes for data analysis (Sezgin et al., 2019). Therefore, I used a qualitative data analysis software such as MAXQDA to transcribe and code interviews from study participants. Qualitative data analysis software is more efficient and more accurate at coding and analyzing data in qualitative research (Woods et al., 2016). Qualitative data analysis software assists with identifying frequently stated quotations or phrases from participant interviews. Common statements or phrases are grouped together to form themes for data analysis (Sezgin et al., 2019). To maintain integrity of data, I used member checking to verify data and treatment of discrepant cases. After data was transcribed and coded, I identified and analyzed themes evolved from codes. Themes from participants' interviews were used in data interpretation needed to support research (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Data analysis for this study shaped meaning to the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the degree of confidence in data, analysis, methods, and quality of a qualitative study (Connelly, 2016). Trustworthiness deals with validity and quality in qualitative research (Burkholder et al., 2016; Connelly, 2016; Lemon & Hayes, 2020;

Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Trustworthiness is the equivalent of validity and rigor for quantitative studies (Carminati, 2018; Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Established by Lincoln and Guba, trustworthiness is criteria used to ensure confidence and quality of a qualitative study using credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Carminati, 2018; Connelly, 2016). Trustworthiness is the foundation for valid and reliable research, and various strategies used to establish trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Abedini et al., 2018; Hadi & Closs, 2016).

**Credibility**

Credibility is similar to internal validity in quantitative research (Burkholder et al., 2016; Carminati, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Credibility refers to research findings representing an accurate depiction of the phenomenon or "truth value" of the study (Connelly, 2016). Appropriate strategies to establish credibility for this research were data triangulation, saturation, and prolonged engagement (Hadi & Closs, 2016, Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Morse, 2015, Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data triangulation signifies the use of multiple sources to obtain enough data to provide quality and in-depth information (Kortjens & Moser, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Prolonged engagement involves spending ample time with participants to build rapport and gather rich, thick information during interviews (Kortjens & Moser, 2018).

**Transferability**

Transferability is used to evaluate the ability of qualitative research findings to be applied or transferred to use in other contexts or settings (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Transferability is parallel to external validity and generalizability in quantitative studies

and can be achieved by including thick descriptions (Kortjens & Moser, 2018; Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Morse, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Thick descriptions refer to thorough and detailed descriptions of the study (Connelly, 2016; Kortjens & Moser, 2018; Morse, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Thick descriptions include descriptions of the study's setting, participants, and evidence to support findings (Burkholder et al., 2016). I provided thick descriptions as a strategy to establish transferability by including an in-depth description of each part of this research, including participants, the research process, and conclusion for transferability.

**Dependability**

Dependability is consistent with reliability in quantitative studies (Connelly, 2016). Dependability means research findings are consistent over time and consistent across methodology, data collection, and research findings (Kortjens & Moser, 2018; Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Tong & Dew, 2016). Suggested strategies to achieve dependability include triangulation and audit trail (Burkholder et al., 2016). To achieve dependability, I recorded each interview and kept all notes, including interview transcripts, coding notes, and raw data (Nowell et al., 2017).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is similar to objectivity in quantitative research (Carminati, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Confirmability refers to making sure researcher bias is eliminated or acknowledged in qualitative research (Burkholder et al., 2016). Connelly (2016) asserts confirmability is the degree in which research findings and analysis are neutral and can be repeated. Confirmability aims to ensure data and research findings are not

biased by the researcher (Kortjens & Moser, 2018). There are various ways to establish confirmability, including audit trail, member check, and peer debriefing. Member checking by providing transcripts of interviews to participants for verification and feedback is a means to ensure confirmability (Kortjens & Moser, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

## Ethical Procedures

Ethical considerations are part of producing valid research (Pietilä et al., 2020). Due to the nature of qualitative research, ethical considerations are important because of the "person-centered" research approach (Alase, 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The purpose of ethical considerations is to protect participants' rights and dignity by maintaining privacy, confidentiality, and no harm (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure the protection of human participants in qualitative research (Alase, 2017).

Participation in this study was voluntary. Before participant recruitment and data collection, I obtained approval from Walden University IRB. IRB approval was obtained on August 09, 2021 (IRB # 08-09-21-0665461). The IRB ensures all research studies comply with ethical standards and United States federal guidelines (Walden University, 2020b). I informed participants of the study's purpose and intent, advised them of their rights, and obtained informed consent to participate in the study. Participants had the right to excuse themselves at any stage of the research process and not answer any questions they choose not to. To protect participants' privacy, I ensured confidentiality by removing and not using any identifying information of participants in the final study. I

assigned codes to correlate with each participant, such as P1, P2, P3, etc. to respect the participants' privacy. I stored data on a password-protected cloud-based technology service in which I am the only one to have access to. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend securely archiving data for five years. After five years, I will destroy data by deleting the saved file on the computer.

## Summary

Phenomenological studies provide insight to shared lived experiences (Kennedy, 2016). Chapter 3 highlighted the chosen research design, role of the researcher as primary data collector, methodology, instrumentation used for this study, recruitment of study participants, plan for data analysis, strategies to establish trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. This descriptive phenomenological study aimed to explore lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students. Study participants included full-time school social workers. As the researcher, my primary role was data collection by interviewing school social workers and analyzing the data using software to code and identify themes from responses of study participants. Different strategies including triangulation, prolonged engagement, producing thick rich detailed documentation, and memos are used to establish trustworthiness in this study. Ethical procedures outlined by Walden's IRB is used throughout the study to protect study participants of no harm. Chapter 4 focuses on results of the study.

# Chapter 4: Results

## Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the role social workers perform in the school discipline of Black male students. I explored the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students in public school settings based upon the research question: What are the lived experiences of school social workers role in school discipline of Black male students? Disparities in school discipline continue to challenge Black male students, resulting in poor academic and social outcomes (Gregory et al., 2017). Social workers are part of an interdisciplinary team of professionals in schools trained in mental health and other clinical skills, providing various supports to students (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). Core ethical principles of social work practice include advocating for vulnerable populations, addressing social problems, and challenging social injustices (NASW, 2021). Social workers have key positions in schools to address social issues such as the school discipline of Black male students (Crutchfield et al., 2020). Social workers possess skills associated with understanding diversity and equity awareness, trauma, and complex social issues, and fostering relationships (Sosa, 2019). In this chapter, I present the results of the research question asking school social workers about their lived experiences in school discipline of Black male students. Chapter 4 outlines the findings of the phenomenological research study detailed in Chapter 3. This chapter contains information about recruitment, participants of the study, data collection, analysis of data, evidence of trustworthiness, and results.

## Recruitment

After I received approval from Walden University's IRB, I recruited volunteer participants for this research study. I posted invitation flyers on social media Facebook groups seeking school social workers meeting inclusion criteria. Also, I randomly selected school districts across the county. Using publicly available contact information found on school districts' websites, I emailed school social workers inviting them to voluntarily participate in this study. I attempted to email large professional organizations with members potentially meeting inclusion criteria, but most replied stating they did not share recruitment invitations with members to participate in research for various reasons, and one organization required a monetary fee to disseminate the recruitment invitation to their members.

Individuals who expressed interest in the study obtained my contact information from the invitation flyer and emailed me to express their interest in volunteering to participate in the study. I responded to the volunteer's emails by reviewing inclusion criteria. Once volunteers confirmed inclusion criteria, I emailed the Informed Consent form for volunteers to review and agree to participate in the study. I coordinated with participants to schedule a convenient time for them to meet for an interview. Due to the COVID-19 protocol established by IRB, I conducted all of the interviews via the online platform, Zoom. I emailed all participants an online link to connect to Zoom for their individually scheduled interviews.

## Demographics

The sample for this study included five participants. I reviewed the inclusion criteria for participation in the study via email at initial contact with volunteers to ensure participants met inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria for participation in this study were full-time school social workers with at least 1-year of experience. Participants included one Black male, two Black females, and two White females. Participants reported a range of school social work practice between 1.5 to 15 years of experience (see Table 1). To maintain confidentiality, specific information related to the identities of the participants, their school districts, and geographical location were not collected.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

| Participant | Gender | Race | Years of service | Self-reported description of school district |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **P1** | Female | White | 8 | Urban |
| **P2** | Female | White | 7 | Mixed |
| **P3** | Male | Black | 3 | Urban |
| **P4** | Female | Black | 1.5 | Low-income |
| **P5** | Female | Black | 15 | Suburban |

## Data Collection

Data collection followed as outlined in Chapter 3. I obtained approval from Walden University IRB on August 09, 2021 (IRB # 08-09-21-0665461). Data collection occurred via the online platform Zoom, as outlined in Chapter 3. I used the IRB-approved interview protocol as the instrument to facilitate data collection with participants (see Appendix A). Interviews for data collection occurred between August 20, 2021 and September 01, 2021. Participants consented to have interviews recorded. Interviews were recorded via the record feature on Zoom. Participants scheduled interviews at various times based on their availability. Interviews occurred between 12 pm EST and 5 pm EST. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. I asked semistructured open-ended interview questions based on the Interview Protocol. Depending on the feedback from each participant, additional follow-up questions were asked for more detail about the participant's lived experiences as a school social worker in the role of discipline of Black male students. I presented in Chapter 3 the plan to transcribe the interviews using qualitative data analysis software; however, after each interview, I manually transcribed each interview and reviewed the data for content accuracy, emerging themes, and possible saturation. Saturation was met after three interviews; however, I conducted two additional interviews because the interviews were already scheduled. No unusual circumstances happened during data collection.

## Data Analysis

I conducted a thematic data analysis for this phenomenological study. I followed the six-phase thematic analysis process based upon Braun and Clark's approach (as cited

in Xu & Zammit, 2020). The six-phase analytic process included the following steps: familiarize yourself with data, generate initial codes, look for themes, review themes, define and name themes, and produce the report (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Thematic data analysis was helpful in this research study because the process allowed for examining similarities and differences in data, outlining different perspectives from study participants, and structuring data in a meaningful manner (see Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic data analysis was used to make meaning of lived experiences by organizing repeated patterns in data creating into themes (Sundler et al., 2019).

To familiarize myself with the data during the first phase of data analysis, I manually transcribed the interviews and reviewed the data multiple times. While reviewing the narrations from the interviews multiple times, I identified common words and phrases called codes. *Codes* are words or phrases that capture the essence of the studied phenomena (Maher et al., 2018). When I reviewed the transcripts, I used a highlighter, marking common words and phrases found in data from each interview. As an additional level of analysis, I uploaded each transcription in the data analysis software, MAXQDA. I used the word frequencies feature in MAXQDA to identify common words found in the data. Codes identified from the software were similar codes I recognized when I manually identified similar words and phrases found in the data. Codes derived through inductive coding were as follows: administrators, teachers, special education, emotional learning, meetings, attendance, suspension, pandemic, disparities, advocate, discipline, culture, therapeutic, McKinney Vento, and home visits. Inductive coding refers to the process of creating codes from raw data without predetermined categories,

theories, or variables (Chandra & Shang, 2017). After I reviewed the inductive codes, I categorized codes to form themes. I identified similarities in the codes and grouped the codes based on similar patterns known as categories to form themes (Chandra & Shang, 2017). The themes emerged from the coded data were as follows:

- special education duties
- being an advocate
- disparities
- buy-in to alternative approaches
- administrators
- pandemic

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

To evaluate validity and rigour in qualitative studies, Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed criteria to determine trustworthiness (as cited in Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Criteria used to establish trustworthiness in qualitative studies includes an assessment of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability demonstrated in the study (Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017).

Credibility refers to the meaningfulness of the findings of the study (Sundler et al., 2019) and ensures the findings reflect the intended measure of the research (Maher et al., 2018). I demonstrated credibility through prolonged engagement with participants and the data. Suggested by Hadi and Closs (2016), prolonged engagement is a strategy used to promote credibility in qualitative studies. I engaged in prolonged engagement by allocating an appropriate amount of time with each participant during interviews,

gathering detailed information about school social workers' lived experiences in their role in school discipline of Black male students. I also showed prolonged engagement by reviewing the data numerous times to familiarize myself with that data.

Transferability relates to the generalizability of research (Nowell et al., 2017), the ability to transfer findings of the study to other settings or contexts (Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Maher et al., 2018). Daniel (2019) suggested the use of transferability provides evidence in the integrity of research findings. To ensure transferability in this study, I provided thick descriptions. Using thick descriptions in qualitative research allows for readers to capture real-life settings and understanding of lived-experiences of the participants perspectives (Daniel, 2019).

Dependability in qualitative research studies reinforces consistency in research findings (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Dependability is the concept that other researchers would find similar patterns in findings if the study was replicated (McGinley et al., 2021). Dependability ensures the stability of future studies (McGinley et al., 2021). I demonstrated dependability by using an IRB approved interview guide, providing the same foundational interview questions asked to each volunteer participant. Audit trail is a strategy used to ensure dependability in qualitative studies (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; McGinley et al., 202; Nowell et al., 2017). An audit trail is a means of record keeping, demonstrating the researcher's steps and decision making throughout the study (Carcary, 2020). Notes from raw data, transcripts of participant interviews, and generated codes served as audit trails used in this study to ensure dependability.

Confirmability refers to research being neutral (Kyngäs et al., 2020; Lemon & Hayes, 2020; McGinley et al., 2021). Nowell et al. (2017) posited that confirmability is ensured when criteria for credibility, transferability, and dependability are met. Ensuring confirmability requires evidence that findings and analysis reflect data from participants without bias from the researcher (Kyngäs et al., 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure confirmability, I used triangulation, which is a widely used strategy to ensure confirmability in qualitative studies (Hadi & Closs, 2016; Lemon & Hayes, 2020). According to Fusch et al. (2018), triangulation is a method to address bias in qualitative research. In data analysis, I manually transcribed and coded each participant's interview as well as using qualitative software, MAXQDA, for coding to ensure trustworthiness.

## Results

The results of this phenomenological study came from interviewing five full-time school social workers who work in public school settings by exploring the following research question: What are the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students? Participants provided thick rich details about their lived-experiences as school social workers in their role in school discipline of Black male students. The findings presented through themes emerged during data analysis. Six themes related to the studied topic emerged during data analysis.

### Theme 1: Special Education Duties

Participants described their typical responsibilities as a school social worker. All participants identified responsibilities addressing special education duties. Three out of the five school social workers reported the majority of their time was devoted to special

education tasks including attending eligibility and (IEP meetings. P4 expressed, "Compared to other tasks, special education is 90% of my responsibilities." P5 stated, "Biggest part of the job is special education. It is roughly 80% of my responsibilities. I complete social histories and Behavior Intervention plans. Three out of five days I am in eligibility meetings." P1 reported a different experience. She discussed her experience in advocating for involvement in other opportunities. P1 stated,

> [Responsibilities] evolved over the years because of my interests but doing social histories for special education. Then doing individual and group counseling. Now I am the co-lead on social emotional learning for the division that we have a curriculum that we follow. Spend a great deal of my time doing social histories for special education and working with students on social skills, but all of my responsibilities are spread equally.

P2 reported that in her last 2 years as a school social worker, she has less involvement in special education duties because she is not part of the McKinney Vento team that focuses on homelessness of students. In that role, P2 still performs school social work tasks, such as addressing attendance, connecting students and their families to resources, as well as conducting home visits. P2 expressed when she initially became a school social worker, the first 5 years were spent in the traditional role completing special education duties. P3 shared the experience of time spent on "a lot of special education" duties, including completing social histories and eligibility meetings.

In a study completed by Harrison et al. (2018), school social workers reported special education duties as the highest percentage of time spent on tasks related to school

social work duties. Finigan-Carr and Shaia (2018) concurred that social worker's role in schools is often compressed to handling IEP and special education related tasks. School social workers reported they want to do more social work activities in schools including groups, connecting with families, and partnering with community services (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018).

**Theme 2: Being Advocate**

Social work is grounded in advocacy. Participants were asked about advocating for Black male students regarding school discipline. P1 and P3 reported they are encouraged to advocate for Black male students regarding special education. P1 stated, "Being in the profession, I understand this (Black males) is the population that I need to advocate for, but it does not come from my department." P2 reported having conversations with the social work department chair but acknowledged it was about having "hard conversations with administrators to challenge disparities" in school discipline. P4 reported not being encouraged to advocate for Black male students regarding school discipline within the social work department but disclosed being a member of a local Black social worker group and discussed advocating for Black male students in the local chapter. P5 responded not being encouraged to advocate for Black male students regarding school discipline. P5 explained, "80% is White families in the school district. As a social worker, it is innate for use to be aware of it [social injustices] and advocate for Black male students when you can."

**Theme 3: Disparities**

This theme emerged through follow up questions inquiring about the studied topic. Supported by literature, Black male students are more likely to experience school discipline than their peers of other races. All of the school social workers acknowledged disparities in school discipline in their perspective school districts. P2 acknowledged witnessing situations in which Black students received more suspension days than peers of other races for the same infraction. P5 stated, "which says a lot about the school district because there are not many Black males in the school district". P4 reported, "Any given day four or five Black males are suspended". P4 described an instance in which she initiated contact with a student believing this intervention prevented a possible school discipline. P4 explained,

> My school has a lot of security and an armed police officer. A student was in the hallway when the student was not supposed to be. The police officer confronted the student (Black male) about being in the hallway. The interaction with the police officer agitated the student escalating the situation. I saw the situation transpiring and brought the student to my office. I used strategies in his Behavior plan. The student went back to class.

P4 further explained everyone is not aware of the students who have behavior plans. She expressed, "Even students with behavior plans, teachers do not follow them or do not have a copy of them, or not aware students have behavior plans."

P1 expressed,

> The whole time that I have been here, I have seen five or six White students suspended. I do know that our Black students are suspended more frequently than Latino students. We see disparities between our special education students and general population students. Our special education students are suspended more frequently than the general population students.

Participants discussed disparities in students who receive special education services experience suspension at greater rates than other students. P2 reported, “All of the students suspended had IEPs”. Black male students disproportionately receive special education services than peers of other races (Elder et al., 2021; Wright & Ford, 2016). Students receiving special education services for disabilities associated with emotional disturbances (ED), specific learning disabilities (SLD), or speech or language impairments (S/LI) are more likely to be suspended (Morgan et al., 2019). Black male students are more often identified with one or more of the aforementioned disabilities at a higher rate than White students (Elder et al., 2021). Therefore, correlating with data from participants, Black males receiving special education services increases the likelihood of being suspended from school or receiving another form of school discipline (Harper et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2019). McCarter (2016) reported Black students with documented disabilities were three times more likely to be suspended than students of other races with documented disabilities. Furthermore, approximately three-fourths of students receiving special education services received at least one school suspension (McCarter, 2016).

Students identified as having a disability with an IEP can have a manifestation meeting to determine if the behavior displayed relates to their disability resulting in suspension from school (PACER Center, Inc., 2020). In 2004, Congress revised the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Trapp, 2021). Criteria was added warranting alternative disciplinary placement if concluded that a student with an IEP displayed behavior related to their disability or if the school failed to implement the student's IEP causing the disciplinary action (PACER Center, Inc., 2020; Richard & Hardin, 2018; Trapp, 2021). When asked about input with school discipline, participants reported limited to no input in school discipline. P1 and P5 mentioned their involvement in Manifestation meetings. P1 reported,

> Over the last few years, I have been part of teams that talked about the issue (school disciple of Black males). I am invited to go to MDR (Manifestation Determination Review) meetings. That's the most direct influence I have. I provide information about social factors, but no one is asking me if a kid should be suspended. I wish they would because I would say no.

P5 explained, "Generally do not have any input. I have sat in manifestation meetings, but manifestation meetings are after suspension. That is reactive instead of proactive".

**Theme 4: Buy-In to Alternative Approaches**

The theme highlighting buy-in to alternative approaches emerged throughout interviews as participants identified research, evidence-based strategies used as behavioral interventions including social-emotional learning and restorative justice. There is effort to move away from punitive discipline with interventions introduced in

schools; however as noted by Lyubansky and Barter (2019), challenges associated with implementing alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices are buy-in by administrators as well as teachers. P1 explained that administrators did not prioritize social emotional learning until 2019. P1 further stated that there was a culture of sending students home but that temporarily solves the problem. Social emotional learning disrupts the culture of sending students home. P1,

> [SEL training] able to hold people accountable with social emotional learning. The expectations will be higher in managing classrooms and reaching out for help because of additional supports. We are trying to step away from exclusionary practices because that is what we have been doing. That's not working because they come back and do the same thing.

P2 reported witnessing older administrators being "jaded". P2 explained, "When [older] administrators were teachers, they didn't have the type and amount of trainings that is provided today like diversity and therapeutic approaches. With older administrators retiring, there is a shift in approaches." P3 expressed,

> You see 90% of Black male students suspended. Interventions like restorative justice offers alternatives to out of school suspension. Not all teachers buy into alternatives. Not all teachers buy into the philosophy especially at the elementary level where there happens to be more young White female teachers.

P4 also discussed the paradigm of older teachers believing in the culture of sending students home to address behavior issues. P4 noted that younger teachers are more likely to reach out to school social workers for assistance.

P4 reported,

> Younger teachers are using school social workers. Older teachers are rigid. There is a culture of students are to be seen and not heard. Students get frustrated and want their voice to be heard [causing display of negative behaviors]. Older teachers are not considering factors that impact behaviors.

**Theme 5: Administrators**

The theme about administrators emerged throughout data collection. All participants explained administrators having the authority and gatekeepers of student discipline in schools. P2 stated, “Some administrators get it. They get those students come from low-income homes, poverty, and experience life challenges. Some administrators, like at the elementary school level, have more room to address behaviors without school discipline”. Additional, P5 acknowledged have some input with administrators when administrators asked about students with social factors. P5 reported she was able to provide input for administrators to consider alternatives to school discipline depending on the infraction and the history of the student. P3 stated, “Administrators do not ask for input in school discipline”; however, P3 also noted, “As a Black male, administrators often ask me to meet with students who have frequent suspension”; adding most of the students P5 met with were students receiving special education services.

Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2018) pointed out that administrators have varying perceptions about the role of social workers in schools.

P5 explained,

> Administrators do not fully understand our role. Because we are school social workers, they often forget the school piece of it and associate us with social services or child protective services. Because of that, there's often education that has to take place about the purpose behind what they're asking us to do. A lot of times it has to do with home visits. If it were up to the administrators, a home visit will be done for everything and often it's not purposeful. It is more for nosy reasons or to confirm what they may think is going on within the home.

P4 echoed the same statement adding, “Sometimes you have to remind administrators what the role is”. P3 expressed, “Administrators values school psychologist because they provide quantitative data, and they view that as scientific evidence because they do not know what school social worker can do”.

**Theme 6: Pandemic**

The Covid-19 pandemic shifted school personnel’s roles causing challenges and disruptions in all school functions. The theme about the pandemic arose throughout interviews. P1 discussed the importance of social emotional learning to assist students with returning back into the classrooms after virtual learning during the pandemic. P1 expressed, ”Social emotional learning is needed to supplement our children’s social emotional skills to get them to self-regulate and feel good in the classroom.” P2 explained the pandemic and pandemic related factors will contribute to school discipline. P2 reported,

> There is a sense of anxiety with teachers coming back to in-person. Everyone is scared. Covid numbers are increasing, not enough staff, and kids waiting an hour

> for the bus. There will be less tolerance for behaviors and send students home to reduce the risk of [Covid]exposure.

P3 reported thoughts about difficulty managing behaviors of students because students do not want to go back to in-person learning and students have been away from socialization. P4 discussed experience as a school social worker during the pandemic. P4 stated,

> During the pandemic, I spent more time focused on attendance because a lot of students found employment. During the pandemic, I dealt with educating teachers. Teachers would kick kids off Zoom for dress code violations- wearing their hood over their head or not turning on lights/video on. Teachers would not admit students in virtual class if their full name was not displayed on Zoom. Some students did not know how to change their names in Zoom. This resulted in students having no shows for attendance and work not completed.

P4 reported the need to educate some teachers about possibility of students not wanting their environment/background displayed for various reason. P5 explained less involvement in direct student engagement due to virtual learning during the pandemic. In addition, P5 reported being less aware of student issues since students were not in schools. This concern was nationally highlighted in the news with the concern. School personnel are mandated reporters and identify more child welfare cases than other entities (Ho & Fassett, 2021). During the pandemic, there was an 18% decrease in child welfare reports and investigations across the nation (Ho & Fassett, 2021).

## Summary

School social workers participated in this phenomenological study providing data about their lived experiences through semi-structured interviews answering the research question: What are the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students? Essentially, all participants identified school social workers limited to no role in school discipline of Black male students. School administrators handle school discipline and invite school social worker's input as administrators see fit based upon administrators knowledge of school workers knowledge and skills. Through data collection and data analysis, six themes emerged: special education duties, advocate, disparities in school discipline between Black male students and students receiving special education, buy-in to alternative approaches, administrators, and pandemic. Chapter 5 will provide further discussion about the studied topic including interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and conclusion.

# Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

## Introduction

Each academic school year, millions of students experience various forms of school discipline, ranging from office referrals to out of school suspension (McCarter, 2016; Morgan et al., 2019). Decades of research have highlighted data revealing that Black male students are more likely suspended than peers of other races (Bottiani et al., 2017; Elder et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2019; Richard & Hardin, 2018). School discipline increases the likelihood of deleterious outcomes, including involvement in criminal justice system, dropping out of school, and a lower quality of life in adulthood (Elder et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; McCarter, 2016; Morgan et al., 2019). School discipline disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, including Black male students (McCarter, 2016).

Social work practice is grounded in assisting vulnerable and marginalized populations. Social workers have a crucial presence in schools. School social workers perform a variety of tasks working with administrators, students, and students' families. Primarily, the needs of students, administrators, and teachers shape the role of social workers in school settings. Social workers provide specialized skills knowledge and skills in school settings. Specialized skills include insight assisting with behavior, mental health, and emotional support.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of school social workers and their role in school discipline of Black male students. Over the past 40 years, scholars reviewed disparities in school discipline. Disparities in school

discipline directly contribute to negative educational, psychological, and social outcomes among Black male students (González et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2017; Hattar, 2018; Morris & Perry, 2017). School discipline hinders learning opportunities, academic success, and ultimately perpetuates disparities in adulthood, especially in Black male students receiving school discipline at disproportionate rates (Kyere et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). In this study, I proposed the following research question: What are the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students? In this chapter, I discuss the connection between literature and results of the study, limitations, as well as recommendations for future research and implications for social change.

## Interpretation of the Findings

The themes emerged from data collection confirmed and extended knowledge found in literature. This study contributed data supporting existing research discussing the continued disparities in school discipline with participants, acknowledging that Black male students receive more school discipline than peers of other races, as witnessed in their perspective school districts. In this study, I explored a gap in knowledge about the lived experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students. Overall, school social workers discussed having little to no role in school discipline of Black male students. P5 voiced that teachers often do not notify school social workers of student issues unless related to attendance or special education. Other study participants shared similar sentiments about their role in school discipline of Black

male students, reporting school social workers are not involved in the school discipline of Black male students.

As members of an interdisciplinarian team of professionals in public schools, social workers assist students with emotional, social, and mental health needs. School social workers understand how social, environmental, emotional, and physical factors influence student's behaviors (McCarter, 2016). A vast amount of research highlighted the pervasive concern of disparities in school discipline. Students display behaviors for various reasons; thus, when psychosocial issues are not addressed, students receive infractions for unaddressed behaviors.

All participants stated that administrators handle school discipline. P2 expressed a few administrators in the school district "get it." P2 explained,

> Depends on the administrators and where they are at. Schools on the east end have students from families facing life challenges, poverty, etc. Administrators understand social-economic factors in the east end. Administrators collaborate with social workers with kids with social-economic factors.

P5 was the only participant who reported the opportunity provided by administrators having some input in considering alternatives depending on the infraction and history of the student. P4 reported intervening with a Black male student after observing an interaction with in-school law enforcement. P4 believed this interaction changed the outcome trajectory between the Black male student and law enforcement. Using this example of school social workers intervening on behalf of Black male students, school social workers can provide interventions with positive outcomes.

Richardson et al. (2019) suggested the opportunity for social workers in schools to advocate and support social and emotional challenges of students in an attempt to decrease discipline problems.

Key findings of this study aligned with literature supporting the notion that the social workers' role in schools primarily involves tasks related to special education. Participants discussed their role also consisting of traditional duties, including home visits and addressing attendance related concerns. The interpretation of the findings aligned with the theoretical framework of role theory used in this study. Role theory focuses on the behavior and actions of individuals based upon their role in particular environments, positions, interactions, and culture (Biddle, 1986; Gross et al., 1958; Qian et al., 2018). Organizational role theory helped explain the experiences of social workers in host settings of public schools. Hierarchal establishments base roles on the expectations and mission of the organization (Worlu et al., 2016). The role of social workers, defined by the mission and purpose of schools, includes identifying factors and assisting with resources for the academic success for all students (Richardson et al., 2019). Challenges reported from school social workers in this study related to role ambiguity and role conflict.

The role of school social workers varies from district to district. The role of school social workers as noted by study participants was unclear. Findings from this study indicated limited knowledge about the social worker's role in schools. The only consistent element acknowledged by social workers in this study was involvement in special education. School social workers are equipped to handle more than special

education related duties and attendance concerns, as presented by participants in this study. Social workers in schools are underutilized, marginalized, and overlooked because of the lack of clarity in social workers' role in schools (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019; McCarty-Caplan & MacLaren, 2019; Richardson et al., 2019). School social workers in this study confirmed that not all administrators know the role of social workers in schools, leading to role conflict. P3 shared, "As a Black male, administrators often ask me to meet with [Black male] students who have frequent suspensions. Most of the students are special education." P4 echoed a similar notion stating, "Sometimes administrators will ask for assistance if there is an African American student because the student can relate [to the social worker]."

School social workers in this study shared their lived experiences with school discipline of Black male students. Findings confirmed the literature outlined in Chapter 2. Being skilled professionals present in schools, social workers are not sought for assistance with school discipline issues. Addressing social, emotional, and physical causes of behavior could reduce the disproportionality rate in Black male students receiving school discipline. Research suggested that social workers in schools have the knowledge and ability to intervene, advocate, and collaborate with administrators, thus providing less punitive outcomes for Black male students.

## Limitations of the Study

Limitations of a study relate to weaknesses potentially influencing the research findings (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). This study had several limitations. Qualitative studies use much smaller sample sizes than other methodological study designs to allow for in-depth

rich data to understand the studied phenomena (Carminati, 2018; Gill, 2020; Rosenthal, 2016). A limitation to trustworthiness that arose from this study was sample size. The sample size for this study was limited to five participants due to saturation. Data saturation actually occurred after three participants; however, I chose to interview two additional participants because they were previously scheduled, and I wanted to confirm saturation. Another limitation to this study was generalizability. The research findings were limited to the data collected from the interviews of the study participants and may not represent the lived experiences of all school social workers. In addition, participants did not provide geographical information related to the state or school district they worked or lived in to help maintain confidentiality. The school social workers' experience may vary based upon geographical location. Data collected in traditional phenomenological studies are typically obtained in-person (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Due to COVID-19, data collection occurred using technology via Zoom. Archibald et al. (2019) pointed out a limitation using Zoom as well as other videoconferencing platforms is quality and reliability issues. During interviews with P3 and P5, there were issues with technology quality and reliability related to brief moments of freezing, requiring participants to repeat information. Despite the limitations to this study, there were no issues of trustworthiness. Future research may address these limitations for research expansion for additional knowledge.

## Recommendations

Future research is recommended to include exploring disparities in school discipline as a social injustice issue. There is evidence supporting continued disparities

for Black male students experiencing lengthier and harsher consequences in schools. I also recommend for research investigating social workers educating administrators and other school personnel about their role and skills. Participants in this study discussed the lack of knowledge about the role of social workers in school settings. Awareness and knowledge about the role of school social workers create potential for social workers to identify, support, and advocate for students, preventing and reducing behaviors and school disciplinary actions. Additionally, future research may explore the perceptions and knowledge of administrator and other school personal about the role of school social workers addressing student issues beyond attendance and special education.

## Implications

The potential impact for this study includes positive social change at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels of social work practice. School discipline contributes to deleterious present and future outcomes, including academic delays, emotional and social issues, and potential legal involvement (Anderson, 2020; Anyon et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2018; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). The findings from this study are in line with literature supporting the need for social workers' involvement in school discipline, changes in school social work practice, and advocating for vulnerable populations, including Black male students.

### Positive Social Change

Out-of-school suspensions and other forms of school discipline create obstacles for students' development and success. School discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions, place students at greater risk of adverse outcomes. More negative outcomes

are associated with school discipline measures than deterring future infractions. Many Black male students are pushed out of school due to discipline practices. Continued efforts addressing school discipline promote equity and success for all students. Promoting opportunities for school social workers to intervene, support, and advocate for Black male students create better outcomes, deterring the negative behaviors and avoiding school discipline, which contribute to additional adverse consequences. Implications for social change at the micro level include social workers engaging and providing opportunities to educate staff about their role, knowledge, and skills in helping reduce maladaptive behaviors and school discipline infractions.

The ratio recommended by the National Association of School Social Workers is one social worker per 250 students (as cited in Richardson et al., 2019). Participants were not certain of the exact social worker to student ratio in their perspective school district but noted the number of students was significantly higher than the recommended number. Being assigned to multiple schools was a concern voiced by participants. Participants stated limited ability to develop relationships with students as well as having an awareness of students' needs and issues in the school. Therefore, an implication for positive social change at the mezzo level involves hiring more social workers in schools to allow for more engagement with students, families, and school personnel. The need for more social workers in schools is evident by higher student ratios, limited engagement with individual students and families, and performance of tasks narrowly related to special education and attendance. Morrison (2016) suggested school social workers had a more positive effect on student outcomes when they were assigned to one school.

School discipline is subjective in practice and disproportionality affects Black male students at a greater rate than other students. Disparities in school discipline is a national concern. Participants reported awareness of disparities in school discipline in their school districts. Implications for social change at the macro level include advocacy. Social workers practicing in school settings can participate in activities for new policies and change in policies. Getting involved in activities such as lobbying for policy reform and funding for resources, partnering with community stakeholders, being on local school boards as well as holding school administrator positions can allow for school social workers to advocate for macro level social change.

**Theoretical Implications**

Role theory was used in this study to explore school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students. The data provided by school social workers in this study revealed role conflict as part of social workers' experience in school settings. Collectively, school social workers in this study agreed that more education is needed regarding their role. Role consensus relates to an agreement between parties in expectations of roles (Biddle, 1986). Educating and advocating about social workers' role in schools empowers the role of school social workers. Educating and advocating about the role of social workers allows for collaboration and partnership with administrators and other school personnel to assist and support students with behaviors. While there may not be role consensus, it is imperative for cohesion so social workers can work with school personnel as interdisciplinary team members in school settings to support all students.

## Implications for Social Work Practice

Ethical responsibilities for social work practice are understanding and being aware of inequities, addressing social problems, and working for social change on behalf of marginalized populations (NASW, 2017). School social workers perform various roles in school settings. This study can serve as a basis supporting school social workers' role in school discipline. Cultural competence in social work practice involves the ability to recognize social injustices and deliver culturally appropriate skills that address emotional, mental, and physical concerns. Individualized interventions provided by social workers can redirect student behaviors that often result in school discipline. Social workers in school settings can advocate for changes in disciplinary practices.

## Conclusion

Nearly 3 million students receive out-of-school disciplinary actions during an academic year (NCES, 2019). Black male students receive the highest percentage of out of school suspensions than any other racial group. Limited attention has been directed at addressing the root causes of behaviors displayed by students in schools that lead to disciplinary actions. After every school shooting, attention to gun control reemerges. However, limited focus is on the cause directing individuals to choose violence. There is not enough attention to factors influencing maladaptive behaviors, and as school social workers in this study acknowledged, school discipline is reactive. Engaging school social workers with students is a proactive measure to address undesired behaviors, decrease disparities, and decrease overall disciplinary actions. In this study, I attempted to promote skills and knowledge of school social workers supporting Black male students.

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# Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear:

My name is Teresa Cooper. I am a Doctoral student at Walden University in the Social Work program. I invite you to participate in a voluntary research study about school social workers. The purpose of this study is to examine experiences of school social workers' role in school discipline of Black male students. Participation in this research study is confidential involving a 45 to 60-minute individual interview via video call due to COVID-19. The individual interview is scheduled on a day/time of your convenience. If you are interested in participation in this study, please communicate via email to express your interest. A follow-up email will be sent to request availability for an interview, consent forms to be completed, and additional information about the study. Other than possible discomfort in answering questions, risks will be minimal. Upon completion of the interview, participants will be emailed a $10 Starbucks gift certificate as a token of appreciation for participation.

Please feel free to email about any questions. I greatly appreciate taking the time to consider this opportunity.

Respectfully,

Teresa Cooper

# Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Name of Interviewee:
Participant # (used for confidentiality and anonymity)
Date of Interview:
Time of Interview:

Opening Statement: Thank you for participating in this research study. To facilitate notetaking and accuracy, I ask permission to audio record our interview. Can you please sign the informed consent form to participate in the study and audio consent to be recorded?

Do you have any questions before I proceed?

Disclaimer: The researcher is required by law to report if any information is revealed about abuse or neglect.

Please remember you can stop the interview and choose to discontinue participation at any point of the study.

**Demographic Questions**

- Gender of school social worker:
- Years of experience as a school social worker:
- What is the geographical description of the school district you are employed in?
- What is the school social worker to student ratio within your school district?

**Interview Questions**

1. Describe your typical responsibilities as a school social worker.
2. Describe your experience with school discipline in your role as a school social worker/with Black male students.
3. How much input do you have with school discipline with Black male students?
4. As a social work department, are you encouraged to advocate for Black male students regarding school discipline? If so, describe your experience.
5. Discuss communication and interactions between you and other school professionals about school discipline of Black male students.
6. Describe how school discipline is managed in your school/school district.
7. Before we conclude this interview, do you have anything you would like to add or think we have not discussed?

Closing Statement: Again, thank you for your time and participation in this interview. If needed, I will contact you for a follow up interview. I will provide a copy of the transcribed interview for review and feedback. Provide participants with toll-free telephone numbers listed in consent form for support if needed.