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School Social Workers' Role in School Discipline: Understanding School Discipline and Juvenile Justice

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Staisha Hamilton

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2023

Abstract

School Social Workers' Role in School Discipline: Understanding School Discipline and

Juvenile Justice

by

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MSW, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2007

BS, Tuskegee University, 2005

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

Disproportionate disciplinary actions relating to school-based offenses for Black youth influence their early juvenile justice involvement. The continued excessive disciplinary actions involving Black male students in lower-level academic settings are concerning because, without being addressed, continuing disproportionate disciplinary action toward Black males can lead to future juvenile justice involvement and create a large-scale social work practice issue. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to focus on school social workers' perspectives of their role in addressing disproportionate disciplinary strategies and their understanding of the relationship between school discipline strategies and juvenile justice involvement. The theoretical framework of this project comprised of critical race theory. Data gathered through focus groups provided three main themes. The focus group's findings confirm school social workers were unclear in their role with school discipline and their proximity to providing interventions for school discipline relies on school administration. Also school social workers were unable to provide alternative discipline strategies to Black males and the social workers were tasked with initiating contact when truancy is an area of concern. School social workers can better understand the relationship between school discipline and juvenile justice by incorporating methods outlined in critical race theory and its influence on school suspensions. School social workers, administrators, and higher education instructors may benefit from the results of this study resulting in positive social change.

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Dedication

Mom, as I write this dedication, I am sitting at your bedside in the hospital. The visions of you watching me cross the stage as Dr. Hamilton are only a fleeting misconception of how precious time is. I am jarringly aware that this will be the last letter I write to you. The beautiful Queen and social justice warrior I once knew stares back at me, still strong, still fighting but withered. I am thankful for the many lessons you taught me. I am happy you always allowed me to explore my talents, strengths, independence, and unwillingness to conform. You are indeed my hero. I hope you are a fraction proud of me as I have always been of you. Thank you for continuing to fight for equality, women's rights, union rights, the disenfranchised, the environmentally fragile, and the marginalized. You did all this while fighting many unseen battles until the very end. Your torch will always be lit brightly in the spirits of the next advocates, activists, and organizers leading the charge. May the ancestors welcome you with open arms and applaud you. May your last sleep be that of beauty, knowing that you genuinely gave your all. May they rejoice, resounding, "well done, my good and faithful WARRIOR." Rest well, Queen; I love you.

This labor of love is dedicated to those who came before me. I am eternally grateful for the place you've held in my life while you were here in the physical form. I hope I have honored you with my dedication to my community, social justice, and creating a more sustainable world for little Black girls who look like me. To my tribe. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I am truly honored to have each of you in my life. Thank you for holding space for me to cry, scream, and "quit." Thank you for never

giving up on me and encouraging me during this tumultuous journey. My family, thank you for fostering an environment where higher learning was the standard. Thank you for always praying for me and over me. To MLB, thank you for always standing in the gap for me during this journey. Thank you for intuitively knowing when I needed more guidance, assurance, and someone to hold me accountable. Lastly, I want to thank the little girl I once was. I am proud of how courageous you are. I am proud of how you have learned to lead with love despite what the world looks like. I am proud of your resilience, dedication to yourself, and commitment to changing the narrative for every Black girl with a big name.

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To Dr. McLaughlin, I know we did not start this journey together, but I am genuinely grateful to have you at the finish line. I will forever be indebted to you. I appreciate every conversation and every word of encouragement. Thank you for being so understanding during some of my most difficult moments during this process. To Dr. Mavis thank you for your continued support and active participation as a member of my committee. I appreciate all of your feedback.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

Dutil (2020) defined the *school-to-prison pipeline* as a term used in the United States to adequately describe the route from the educational system to the criminal justice system for juveniles ages 8 to 15 (p. 171). Disproportionate disciplinary action related to school-based offenses toward Black males ages 7–12 influences juvenile justice involvement (Fadus et al., 2020). There is a prominent research gap regarding the school social worker's role in school discipline. Additionally, if school social workers are used to determine school disciplinary actions, the extant research does not suggest in what capacity these social workers assist in making the determinations. The research also does not indicate why social workers are not used when determining school discipline strategies alongside other school administrators. Despite consistent findings of Black students receiving increased disciplinary practices within academic settings (Mitchell et al., 2020), research regarding school social workers' role in determining school disciplinary strategies has remained relatively limited.

In this basic qualitative study project, I conducted a focus group comprised of six current or previous school social workers who had worked with Black male students ages 7–12. This study's outcomes have direct implications for positive social change by identifying how social workers can be used in determining school discipline strategies for Black males ages 7–12. The implications for positive social change can potentially decrease juvenile justice contact due to social work intervention.

Problem Statement

The social issue of concern in this project was how disproportionate disciplinary action related to school-based offenses towards Black males ages 7–12 influences their juvenile justice involvement. The extent of the problem has remained a consistent area of concern within southern states, specifically in North Carolina (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). National, state, and local data across all school levels demonstrate that school administrators and teachers discipline Black students more harshly than their White counterparts (McCarter et al., 2020; Mendoza et al., 2020). North Carolina follows national trends regarding racial disparities among school discipline (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). Without being addressed, continuing disproportionate disciplinary action towards Black males ages 7–12 could lead to ongoing interactions with the juvenile justice field, such as disproportionate representation and an increase in Black children entering the school-to-prison pipeline, thus further marginalizing an already vulnerable population (McCarter & Durant, 2020).

Creative strategies are needed to assist schools in implementing methods to support students (Jones et al., 2018). Correspondence with an educator and current vice principal at a North Carolina high school with over 20 years of experience, confirmed discipline procedures in North Carolina. He disclosed that teachers, parents, and administrators are critical players in school discipline procedures in North Carolina. Teachers oversee classroom behavior and are the first to identify the need for behavioral interventions. They are charged with implementing interventions before contacting school administrators. Although behavioral interventions can include changing a

student's seat, having a conversation with the student, removing a student from class, or calling home, according to this educator and vice principal, they do not include a school social worker's involvement. He stated that no current policy mandates or suggests teachers or administrators include school social workers in determining discipline interventions. He added that he was uncertain why school policy does not have school social workers incorporated in determining school discipline with school administrators and concluded that a teacher's last line of defense is contacting the school principal or vice principal. These administrators are the only individuals permitted to render consequences such as in-school and out-of-school suspension in North Carolina.

The school social worker's role is to understand the intersection between youth outcomes, socioeconomic status, race, and mental health while operating in an academic setting (Richardson et al., 2019). The school social worker's role is undefined regarding school discipline (Richardson et al., 2019). Examining the role school social workers play in academic settings can potentially change the trajectory for future juvenile justice involvement for Black males ages 7–12. By including school social workers in school discipline outcomes, appropriate evidence-based practices can be implemented in determining the best intervention or discipline strategies for Black males ages 7–12 enrolled in elementary and middle schools. These evidence-based practices could include trauma-informed practices, appropriate culturally based intervention strategies, and interventions based on social work theory. The use of these practices could potentially create an avenue that limits exclusionary discipline practices that already target a specific marginalized group. In conclusion, using school social workers in the determination of

school discipline can act as a preventative method that could ultimately change the number of males who enter the juvenile justice system through school-based offenses.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to identify how school social workers perceive their role in addressing disproportionate disciplinary strategies while also providing insight into their understanding of the relationship between school discipline and juvenile justice involvement. Additionally, the role school social workers have, if any, in determining school discipline strategies is critical in understanding how and if school social workers are used when determining school discipline strategies. Despite consistent findings of Black students receiving increased disciplinary practices within academic settings (Mitchell et al., 2020), research has remained relatively limited regarding the school social worker's role in determining school disciplinary strategies.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do school social workers perceive their role in addressing disproportionate discipline strategies toward Black males attending elementary and middle schools in North Carolina?

RQ2: Do school social workers believe they can provide alternative discipline strategies for Black males attending elementary and middle schools in North Carolina?

RQ3: Are school social workers in North Carolina aware of how suspension rates among elementary and middle school Black students impact juvenile justice contact?

Key Terms

Exclusionary discipline: Any moment a student is excluded from the learning environment, this can range in severity from asking a student to sit in the hallway to expulsion from school (Marcucci, 2020).

Juvenile justice system: Any court with jurisdiction over matters involving juveniles (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], n.d.).

OSS: A case requiring a student to temporarily be removed from school due to disciplinary action (Jones et al., 2018).

School-to-prison pipeline: A term used in the United States to adequately describe the route from educational systems to the criminal justice system for juveniles ranging from ages 8 to 15 (Dutil, 2020).

School resource officer (SRO): A sworn, local police officer employed within the school setting to manage school discipline (McCarter et al., 2020).

School social worker: A member of an interdisciplinary team who assists by providing leadership in forming school discipline policies, mental health interventions, and crisis management (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021).

Zero-tolerance policies: A predetermined set of consequences without consideration of the severity of the offense or the circumstantial context (McCarter et al., 2020).

Nature of Study

For this project, I employed a basic qualitative study design. The core components of a basic qualitative study are data collection via the interview process and the researcher's interest in further understanding a process, phenomenon, or worldview (Kyngäs, 2020). Qualitative research contributes to the social work knowledge base (Kyngäs, 2020). Using the basic qualitative research design assisted me in identifying the role school social workers have in determining school disciplinary strategies for Black males ages 7–12.

The data collection method in this study was focus groups. Focus groups increase the formal interview process (Tümen & Ahmed, 2021). Two focus groups were held for this study and provided a rich understanding of the school social worker's role in determining school disciplinary strategies for Black males ages 7–12. Each focus group was comprised of six school social workers, and the same participants attended each focus group. This group size can provide an optimal opportunity to capitalize on group dynamics and stimulate discussion (see Tümen & Ahmed, 2021). The selected school social workers had current or previous experience working in elementary or middle school settings. Using this criteria for selecting participants allowed school social workers' to discuss how they have or have not been able to assist in addressing exclusionary school discipline practices that potentially lead to juvenile justice involvement for Black males. I also used data from the current literature to address and explain disciplinary disparities, trends, and gaps in school discipline involving school social workers. With this study, I hoped to assist in clarifying how school social workers

can be strategically involved in implementing school discipline strategies for Black males attending elementary and middle schools.

Significance of the Study

School discipline is used to control which Black students are allowed in what educational spaces (Marcucci, 2020). Extant research does not fully explain why certain schools do not include school social workers in determining the disciplinary process for students; therefore, this study assisted in filling a significant gap in the literature regarding understanding precisely how school social workers can be used to determine school discipline. Furthermore, this study addressed an underresearched area concerning the role of school social workers as it relates to school discipline and juvenile justice. The results of this study may provide insights into how school social workers can be used within school settings, specifically as it relates to determining student discipline. School social workers have previously expressed concerns about school-based racial justice and equity issues, such as exclusionary school discipline (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2020). Identifying social work roles and school discipline strategies can provide a broader perspective to understanding school discipline and criminal justice for Black males.

Implications for Potential Social Change

This study creates an avenue for school social workers to directly influence the trajectory of Black males' juvenile justice involvement that directly results from school-based offenses. This positive social change implication not only creates direct transformations on the micro and macro levels, but it also has the potential to positively

impact the mezzo level through implementing social work practices rooted in an ethical premise and directly advocating for systemic change for marginalized groups. This positive social change is possible because school social workers have a unique understanding of the influence ethnicity, culture, and community have on positive child development, thus directly shaping youth outcomes (see Richardson et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was critical race theory (CRT). CRT was developed out of legal scholarship to address societal views, culture, and its correlation to categorizing race and power (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Joseph et al., 2020). Based on the epistemological framework of this theory, there is a strong focus on the normalcy of racism and racism as entrenched in institutions across the United States. CRT is used to advocate for disenfranchised groups (Bohanon, 2021; Crenshaw et al., 1996). CRT is employed to explore implicit biases based on historical racial prejudices, which consequently determine standards of appropriate behavior within schools (Baciu, 2020; Young et al., 2018). CRT is also used to explore in detail the role of race and racism in societal institutions, with one such institution being academia (Bohanon, 2021). This theory aligns with the problem under study and the purpose of this study because CRT is used to explore the prevalence of biases entrenched in school policies that create lasting outcomes that disproportionately impact marginalized groups.

CRT can be used to explain the role of school social workers and their understanding of the relationship between school discipline and juveniles because the theory allows for the assessment of systems of oppression and discrimination rooted in

educational policies and contributing to student outcomes, such as discipline strategies for students of color (Bohanon, 2021; Crenshaw et al., 1996). According to CRT, race should be heavily considered when exploring educational and judicial systems because these institutions aim to keep marginalized groups oppressed (Dutil, 2020). School social workers can potentially play a critical role in school discipline reform using a critical race perspective (Dutil, 2020). School social workers can use this theoretical framework to identify and potentially redefine their perspective roles in addressing disproportionate discipline strategies while providing insight into their understanding of the relationship between school discipline and juvenile justice.

Values and Ethics

Social workers are tasked with the responsibility of following both personal and professional ethical guidelines. The NASW (2021) provided ethical principles and standards that must be followed by every practicing social worker. Social justice is a specific component of social work values and ethics, and social workers work on behalf of marginalized and oppressed groups (NASW, 2021). This qualitative research study directly addressed the social justice need of identifying school discipline strategies for Black males. The NASW Code of Ethics guides clinical social work practice in this area by obliging social workers to call out policies that are complicit in perpetuating the increase of oppression within vulnerable populations. Understanding how social justice directly impacts social work is more necessary than ever (Mulvale, 2021). This study supports the ethical values of social justice because I directly and intentionally identified a research gap for a specific marginalized group.

Furthermore, due to the gap in the literature on this topic, social workers must become more aware of where their particular expertise is needed related to school discipline strategies. This study supports the values and ethics the NASW (2021) outlined by creating additional literature where gaps have been identified. School social workers can use the information obtained in this study to increase their knowledge and skills in advocacy and clinical practice, specifically within school settings.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

To locate the most up-to-date and robust information and articles pertaining to this study, I searched multiple academic databases accessed through Walden University Library, including Sage Journals, PsycINFO, ERIC, JSTOR, and ProQuest. The following keyword terms and phrases searched were *Black males, the school-to-prison pipeline, school social worker, school discipline, disproportionate minority contact, suspension, racism, Critical Race Theory, delinquency, and juvenile justice*. The literature obtained from numerous sources and academic journals was limited to relevant time frames (i.e., published within the past five years) and did not exceed publication dates of more than five years ago when possible. Additional information regarding statistics and data included information from the OJJDP website and the North Carolina Office of the Juvenile Defender (n.d.). I vetted these sites to obtain adequate and relevant data about juvenile delinquency and school discipline. I determined that the above information-gathering methods were appropriate because they provided detailed information and statistics aligned with my research topic.

School Discipline

School discipline, particularly the practice of exclusionary discipline, is used to control which Black students are allowed in what educational spaces and leads to a disproportionate number of Black students involved in the juvenile justice system through school-based offenses (Marcucci, 2020). Black students receive increased disciplinary practices than their white counterparts within academic settings (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). Specifically, national data from the OJJDP (n.d.) indicates that across all school levels, school administrators and teachers discipline Black students more harshly than their White counterparts (Mendoza et al., 2020). Hattar (2018) found a correlation between school discipline and same-race teachers and suggested that exposure to Black teachers lowers the discipline rates for Black students. Current school discipline tactics directly result from the shift towards a punitive policy on crime, which began in the 1970s, initiating an era of mass incarceration (Skiba et al., 2022). However, determining school discipline strategies is often subjective (Williams et al., 2020). Research on the school social worker's role in establishing school discipline strategies is limited.

Exclusionary discipline is any moment a student is excluded from the learning environment and can range in severity from asking a student to sit in the hallway to expulsion from school (Marcucci, 2020). Exclusionary discipline strategies result from zero-tolerance policies and have a lasting impact that predicates significant life outcomes (Herschfield, 2018). Life alterations caused by zero-tolerance policies not only include juvenile justice involvement but often have a significant impact on the mental health of

Black boys (Marcucci, 2020). Schools play a significant role in how depressive symptoms are handled in Black boys, which usually present as disruptive, conduct-related behaviors that often interrupt academic delivery (Jones et al., 2018). The lack of attention focused on behaviors deemed as undisciplined requires specific interventions from others outside of the school leadership role (Jones et al., 2018). According to an educator and vice principal in North Carolina, school discipline determination sometimes solely rests on school leadership in North Carolina. It has not been determined if school leaders are adequately prepared and trained to understand the mental health issues involved with Black boys, racial bias, and school discipline. Hattar (2018) provided insight into how leadership lacks training on critical conversations regarding racial inequality within the educational setting. This is mentioned via findings that educational policies limiting Black males' educational opportunities increase incarceration rates. Due to the continued prevalence of disproportionality in current school discipline practices, there is a significant need to implement school social workers in the disciplinary decision process (Mendoza et al., 2020).

Behavior management and school discipline have been outsourced to agencies within the criminal justice system (Joseph et al., 2020). Providing outside sources, such as SROs, to determine discipline often leads to criminal justice involvement, which perpetuates law enforcement's intrusive role in the academic progress of Black boys attending elementary and middle schools (Mitchell et al., 2020). Collons (2021) found that a high OSS rate does not work or promote increased school safety or academic success in the future but instead does the opposite.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

Black children within public academic settings are already a marginalized group, which is defined as lacking equity readily available to their counterparts, and the school-to-prison pipeline directly impacts this group (Williams et al., 2020). Historically, schools have been deemed a place of social mobility; conversely, schools have acted as the catalyst for increasing risk factors for marginalized groups through components such as zero-tolerance policies (McCarter et al., 2020). Zero-tolerance policies increase external factors that influence adolescents' behaviors and how they are interpreted within larger systems (Collins, 2021).

The continued criminalization of developmentally appropriate adolescent behavior among adolescents of color is a growing concern. The strategic placement of police officers, often called SROs, inevitably correlates to the rise of in-school arrests (Anyon et al., 2018). Mallett (2018) suggested problems with current juvenile justice systems begin with police interactions with youth. The author also suggested a strong correlation between the school-to-prison pipeline and the overrepresentation of adolescents of color within the criminal justice system, which is a rising social justice issue that comes with grave repercussions.

The school-to-prison pipeline may be improved by cultivating the abilities of teachers and schools to develop cultural competence and provide safe, compelling, and engaging atmospheres (McCarter et al., 2020). Relationship building between students and administrators is meaningful and assists with understanding students, cultures, and linguistics (Anyon et al., 2018). By implementing specific strategies that encompass

teachers and schools to develop cultural competence, exclusionary discipline can be reduced substantially (see Anyon et al., 2018). The criminalization of adolescent behavior, particularly for Black children, creates drastic educational outcomes. Mitchell et al. (2020) identified a major shift in the influx of criminal consequences for developmentally appropriate adolescent behavior.

In conclusion, the school-to-prison pipeline becomes a direct social work practice issue because it continuously and willingly sacrifices education to criminalize and incarcerate these students despite evidence of the efficacy of discipline alternatives (Mendoza et al., 2020). School social workers must assist with interrupting patterns and policies that continuously and strategically keep marginalized groups oppressed. Disrupting the cycle of school punishment toward Black students is necessary to end the effect of the school-to-prison pipeline (Collins, 2021). Race plays a considerable role in the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline and socioeconomic status (McCarter & Durant, 2020). Given the significance of social workers within the school and community settings, the implementation of standard disciplinary practices that intentionally involve school social workers is needed now more than ever.

CRT

Scholars have attempted to identify the precipitating ideas and misconceptions that lead to Black students being overly represented in school discipline. Implicit attitudes and biases may influence teachers' disciplinary decisions (Marcucci, 2020). The origin of such biases has also been explored through a theoretical lens, with CRT providing the conclusion that education is the catalyst for Blacks' oppression due to the

educational system's foundational culture (Dutil, 2020). The impact of overt and/or covert racism can be identified in educational and criminal justice system policies. Developed by Crenshaw, Bell, and Delgado in the late 1970s, CRT was an attempt to explore links between the legal system and racism (Crenshaw et al., 1996). Although birthed by academic legal scholars, CRT provides a relevant scope of how legal and educational systems perpetuate racism and exclusion (Waxman et al., 2021).

CRT provides a framework for understanding the racist structure of school disciplinary procedures (Dutil, 2020). CRT is used to advocate for the disenfranchised (Joseph et al., 2020). Furthermore, highlighting the construction of race and the privileges that marginalized groups are denied can assist in future research for practice implications. Additionally, as a foundational framework, the use of CRT forces school officials to take a hard look at current policies rooted in "color blindness" and move toward more equitable practices for students of color (Bohanon, 2021). Without a proper transition of policy and protocol, students of color will continue to be subjected to inequitable treatment rooted in biased systems (Hattar, 2018).

Regarding social work practice, the absence of perspectives such as CRT limits social work scholars' engagement in consistently identifying and contributing to effective antioppressive practices (Mendoza, 2020). Expressly, within the school setting, eliminating discussions about racism prohibits an authentic application of teaching practices and the implementation of equitable discipline strategies (Bohanon, 2021). CRT's original goal in education was to create standard curriculum implementation, eventually eliminating subordination in education and including policies surrounding

discipline (Baciu, 2020). Data containing school discipline policies by race indicate prevalent biases that teachers and principals transfer through their disciplinary decision making (Mitchell et al., 2020). This evidence further establishes the critical need for school social workers to be among those who determine school discipline strategies.

The CRT framework aligns with social work practices, specifically in a school setting, by appropriately representing the interests of marginalized groups (Baciu, 2020; Crenshaw et al., 1996). Creating change within the academic setting with the direct assistance of social workers can have long-term benefits. When used as a framework for social workers in a school setting, CRT can improve the relationship between school administrators and Black students. By using CRT, social workers can advocate for improvements and explicitly highlight administrative stereotypes that permeate professional decisions surrounding school discipline (Baciu, 2020).

Juvenile Justice System

Early Reconstruction was a period when several groups merged with what was formerly known as slave patrols to maintain control over African American citizens (Skiba et al., 2022). Slave patrols can be deemed the first policing agency in the United States, and during Reconstruction, many local sheriffs functioned similarly to slave patrols (Skiba et al., 2022). This method enforced segregation and the disenfranchisement of formerly enslaved people. The original juvenile court system was established in Chicago to help rehabilitate youth and divert children away from the adult system (Mallett, 2018). Diversion efforts were primarily placed in the form of training and industrial schools (Mallett, 2018). The progression of juvenile justice reform efforts has

consequently led to the transformation of training schools into youth prisons. Currently, youth and adult prisons are disproportionately saturated with Black children (Jones et al., 2018).

In the early 1900s, punitive zero-tolerance strategies directly resulted from portraying the youth of color as “super predators” and criminals and translated to an increase in both community and school arrests (Mallett, 2018). Policies that created tag lines, such as “tough on crime” and “war on drugs,” directly targeted marginalized communities, specifically Black communities (Skiba & White, 2022). Some scholars have argued that implementing “war on drugs” policies is the antecedent of zero-tolerance policies within schools (Williams et al., 2020). These policies, led by an administrative push to criminalize drug addiction, would initiate the dismantlement of the Black family by removing the community’s men (Skiba & White, 2022). School arrests increased, and youth of color were criminalized for displaying behaviors reflective of adolescent development; subsequently, schools quickly became a potent battleground in implementing zero-tolerance policies (Mitchell et al., 2020). The implementation of a 20-year policy of zero tolerance did not keep children or communities safer (Skiba et al., 2020). Consequently, the remnants of these beliefs became the prelude to adolescent criminalization that would have generational consequences. More specifically, juvenile incarceration is explicitly linked to the nation’s legacy of incessant subordination of Black Americans (Mallett, 2018).

According to data provided by the Juvenile Justice Report (2019), in Mecklenburg County, Black youth accounted for 32%–35% of the county’s population of youth ages

6–15 and made up 76% of the county’s population in 2015. The Juvenile Justice Report further suggested that, in North Carolina, Black youth accounted for around 23% of the population ages 6–15 and around 45% of the county’s population in 2015. The data suggested that Disproportionate Minority Contact within North Carolina directly correlates to current juvenile justice outcomes. These specific data also indicate an apparent connection between adolescents of color entering the juvenile justice system and the potential origin of contact with police. Consequently, racial disparities as a result of school-based court referrals directly contribute to racial disparities in court participation (Hirschfield, 2018).

Disproportionate Minority Contact

The OJJDP (n.d.) viewed DMC as the rates of contact with the juvenile justice system among juveniles of a specific group that are significantly different from rates of contact for White, non-Hispanic juveniles. DMC has been significantly researched for years; however, despite this existing research, the phenomenon continues to remain prevalent. DMC was prevalent in the current study because it provided additional support for using CRT. Race is a significant predictor of pre- and postdisposition detention placement and incarceration (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Mallett, 2018).

Additionally, DMC has signified a need for social workers to actively engage in school discipline strategies for Black youth. DMC, as it relates to school discipline, is multifaceted, with OOSs, alternative school placement, and school arrests contributing to the ongoing concerns surrounding DMC (Hirschfield, 2018).

Although these topics have been heavily explored in previous research, they remain prevalent and create a significant social justice issue. Additional research exploration of social work roles—specifically, that of school social workers—remains scarce. This gap in the literature suggests a need for increased intervention strategies within school settings that can be implemented by knowledgeable individuals such as social workers. Despite school social workers expressing concerns about school-based social justice issues, there continues to be a limited focus on explicitly addressing these issues with school social worker involvement (Dutil, 2020). McCarter et al. (2020) reported that school social workers are knowledgeable in this area and able to provide preventative measures to address the school-to-prison pipeline.

Summary

Black students receive increased disciplinary practices within academic settings in comparison to their white counterparts (Anyon et al., 2018). Research has remained relatively limited regarding school social workers' role in determining school disciplinary strategies, which is a significant gap in the literature. Furthermore, if school social workers are used in determining these disciplinary strategies, it is unclear if they are used consistently in school discipline issues. Limitations in understanding if school social workers know how school discipline strategies for Black children potentially impact their future juvenile justice involvement also exist. My findings in this literature review further affirmed this gap within the research and justified the need for social work involvement in determining disciplinary strategies within the school setting.

In the following section, I describe how the gap in the literature was addressed. In this study, I conducted a focus group with school social workers with current or past experience working with Black males ages 7–12 in the academic setting. My goals were to determine if school social workers are used in determining school discipline strategies for Black males ages 7–12 and better understand school social workers' current knowledge of how the school discipline of Black males ages 7–12 can lead to early juvenile justice involvement.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to assist in filling a gap in the literature regarding school social workers' role in determining school discipline strategies. Disproportionate disciplinary action related to school-based offenses towards Black males ages 7–12 influences their juvenile justice involvement and continues to be a prevalent social issue. The extent of the problem has remained a consistent area of concern within southern states, specifically in North Carolina (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). School social workers should have identified expectations and strategies that can assist with implementing school discipline strategies for Black males. Without addressing this issue, continuing disproportionate disciplinary action toward Black males ages 7–12 will lead to disproportionate representation and an increase in Black children entering the school-to-prison pipeline, thus further marginalizing an already vulnerable population (Jones et al., 2018). Hopefully, this study will lead to less punitive school discipline strategies with the assistance of school social workers.

In this section, I describe the methodology, participants, and outcomes of this study. This section also includes a discussion of the study's research design, data collection, and data analysis processes, and the ethical procedures used to protect all participants.

Research Design

The social work practice problem under study was to identify how school social workers understand their role in addressing disproportionate disciplinary strategies while

providing insight into their understanding of the relationship between school discipline strategies and juvenile involvement. This problem was addressed by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do school social workers perceive their role in addressing disproportionate discipline strategies toward Black males attending elementary and middle schools in North Carolina?

RQ2: Do school social workers believe they can provide alternative discipline strategies for Black males attending elementary and middle school in North Carolina?

RQ3: Are school social workers in North Carolina aware of how suspension rates among elementary and middle school Black students impact juvenile justice contact?

Evaluating the quality of research practice is a fundamental issue in most scientific domains and at many levels (Mårtensson et al., 2016). In this qualitative study, I collected data via the focus group process through the use of open-ended questions. A basic qualitative study design was the most suitable because I aimed to examine the social workers' perceived roles in addressing disproportionate school discipline strategies for Black males within elementary and middle schools in North Carolina. Use of the basic qualitative research design provided the best avenue to recognize the importance of the participants' contributions. Basic qualitative research help researchers examine opinions attitudes and perspectives (Tümen & Ahmed, 2021).

Proper evaluation methods must be implemented during information gathering to resolve social justice issues. As a result, it was necessary to understand the school social worker's role in determining school discipline because this is an identified gap in the literature.

Operational Definitions

Operational definitions are provided so the reader can understand the main concepts used in the study. I asked questions of the focus group that used these operational definitions. It was imperative that the language used within the study was clear and concise, so the participants could consistently understand the terms and concepts being discussed.

Juvenile: A youth at or below the upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction in a particular state (OJJDP, n.d.).

Methodology

I employed the snowball sampling strategy to recruit a population of school social workers who were currently or had previously worked in a public elementary or middle school setting with Black males ages 7 to 12. The participants were recruited via flyers that were placed near public locations surrounding elementary and middle schools, such as grocery stores. All participants met credentialing criteria as school social workers via the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Participants

The sample consisted of six school social workers who attended two focus groups. Three participants had a bachelor of social work (BSW) degree, two had a master

of social work (MSW) degree, and one participant did not share their educational status. Participants all had experience as North Carolina school social workers with current or previous school social work experience in elementary and middle school settings. Focus groups often range in size from six to 12 individuals and capitalize on group dynamics to stimulate discussion (Guest et al., 2017).

I started recruiting participants once I received approval for the study from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I emailed social workers who had responded to the flyer (see Appendix A). Some initial participants recruited other colleagues who met the assigned criteria to participate in the study. When the participants agreed to take part in the study, I emailed them a consent form explaining the nature of the study.

Instrumentation

I recruited a total of six participants for this study. All six participants completed two focus groups over the course of 2 weeks. Each participant engaged in discussions prompted by a series of semistructured, open-ended questions (see Appendix B). Using open-ended questions via focus groups is vital to information gathering (Tümen & Ahmed, 2021). Focus Group 1 focused on the following themes: demographic information, academic experience, school social work roles, school discipline, and juvenile justice. Focus Group 2 focused on preparedness, support, and feelings/attitudes. The focus groups allowed for rich dialogue with participants, and the information gathered assisted in bridging the gap in the literature related to the school social worker's

role in school discipline strategies. Additionally, the collected data helped me develop a framework for school social workers and their role in implementing school discipline.

Data Analysis

I obtained Walden University IRB approval on August 18, 2022. The IRB approval number was 08-18-22-0918956, which is valid until August 17, 2023. I started recruiting participants on August 31, 2022, and recruitment ended on September 30, 2022. Once participants were identified, I provided them with a consent form describing the nature of the study. Upon acknowledgment of consent, each participant received an identification number. All participants used this number during each focus group. The focus groups were scheduled one week apart. Each focus group was conducted via Zoom and lasted about 60 minutes. During the start of each focus group, I reviewed the group rules and informed participants that the meeting would be video recorded for data collection and analysis purposes.

The data collected from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim. The process of transcription took approximately two weeks, and coding the data took approximately 2.5 weeks. To assist in coding, I used the Nvivo data programming system to sort, organize, and analyze data. Braun and Clarke's (2013) 15-point checklist was used for thematically analyzing the data. This checklist provided flexibility and assisted me in conducting thematic analysis to develop patterns of meaning across the qualitative data set (see Braun et al., 2016). Using the Braun and Clarke's 15-point checklist assisted me in identifying each process by thoroughly creating steps to develop an appropriate thematic analysis.

Ethical Procedures

As a social worker, I made sure to adhere to IRB guidelines, ethics, and the NASW's values because a researcher operating unethically can have dire consequences, including potential legal and professional ramifications. All participants provided me with informed consent to assist in additional safeguards. The informed consent form included a description of the nature of the study, confidentiality guidelines, and my role as the researcher and their role as participant. Most importantly, the informed consent form identified the research project as voluntary. Additional safeguards included all data (i.e., participants' demographic information and their focus group responses) being stored in a locked safe. I am the only individual with access to the master key that provides entry into the safe. The collected data will be stored for a minimum of 3 years and appropriately destroyed afterward. All procedures outlined in my IRB ethics self-check protocol were followed.

Summary

In Section 2, I provided the data collection procedures. Section 2 also included a discussion of the ethical procedures and concerns as well as methods for recruiting participants and obtaining and analyzing data. The study outcomes and findings will be provided in detail in Section 3.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

I conducted this basic qualitative study to identify how school social workers perceive their role in addressing disproportionate disciplinary strategies while providing insight into their understanding of the relationship between school discipline and juvenile justice involvement. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do school social workers perceive their role in addressing disproportionate discipline strategies toward Black males attending elementary and middle schools in North Carolina?

RQ2: Do school social workers believe they can provide alternative discipline strategies for Black males attending elementary and middle schools in North Carolina?

RQ3: Are school social workers in North Carolina aware of how suspension rates among elementary and middle school Black students impact juvenile justice contact?

In this action research project, I used the qualitative method to answer the above research questions. Qualitative research assists in deepening and revealing an idea (Tümen Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). In this study, the participant inclusion criteria included current or previous North Carolina school social workers with no more than two years out of the field and current or previous school social work experience in elementary and middle school settings. All participants were required to have a North Carolina Department of Instruction Licensure. I recruited six participants who met the inclusion

criteria. The two focus groups comprised of the same six participants meeting via Zoom. The meetings were conducted via Zoom to adhere to COVID-19 protocols and allow for the participants' convenience. The participants included three social workers with BSWs and two with MSWs. All six of the participants were currently employed in a traditional academic school setting, and one participant was currently employed in an alternative school setting.

The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed into text. I stored all recordings and documents on an external jump drive, which is kept in a locked cabinet. Manual coding was used to code and categorize the collected data.. I used Braun and Clarke's (2013) 15-point checklist for thematic analysis to assist in developing patterns of meaning across the qualitative data set and because of its flexible nature (see Braun et al., 2016). Using the Braun and Clarke 15-point checklist helped me identify each process by thoroughly creating steps to develop an appropriate thematic analysis. Themes were noted and used to produce a final analysis of the research questions. In this section, I discuss the data analysis techniques, validation procedures, issues experienced during data collection, limitations of the study, and findings

Data Analysis Techniques

The original participant range for the focus group was six to eight individuals. I ended up recruiting a total of six participants. Due to scheduling issues with the participants, the focus group questions were broken up into two sessions. The same six participants attended each session. The participants included three BSWs, two MSWs, and one participant with an unknown educational status. Participants all had current or

previous experience as North Carolina school social workers with current or previous school social work experience in elementary and middle school settings. The participants had a wide range of school social work experience, ranging from 1 to 11 years.

Recruitment took approximately three weeks to obtain the minimum number of participants. Participants emailed me their signed consent forms before the initial focus group meeting. During the initial focus group meeting, participants provided their educational demographics, years of experience, and preferred race and gender.

I video recorded the focus groups via Zoom. Participants were informed and agreed to the focus groups being audio recorded. I then transcribed the collected data verbatim. The process of transcription took approximately two weeks, and thematically coding the transcribed data took approximately 2.5 weeks. To assist in coding, I used the Nvivo data programming system to sort, organize, and analyze data.

A basic qualitative design was the most appropriate design for this study because the purpose was to understand participants' individual experiences (see Tümen & Ahmed, 2021). This goal was achieved by asking participants open-ended questions in a focus group format. Using open-ended questions via focus groups provides a vital element of information gathering (Batt & Kahn 2021; Tümen & Ahmed, 2021). The focus group questions were prepared before each focus group and had been developed to eliminate my potential personal bias. A basic qualitative study was the most suitable because I aimed to examine the social workers' perceived roles in addressing disproportionate school discipline strategies for Black males within elementary and

middle schools. Basic qualitative research help researchers examine opinions attitudes and perspectives (Tümen & Ahmed, 2021).

Validation Procedures

Focus groups present an increased level of engagement in the formal interview process (Tümen & Ahmed, 2021). Additionally, the use of open-ended questions can increase response quality (Dźwigoł & Dźwigoł, 2020) . Small group sizes can provide an optimal opportunity to capitalize on group dynamics and stimulate discussion (Bett & Kahn, 2021). Upon completing the data collection phase, I analyzed the data to create themes and subthemes. Over 26 codes were initially developed from the data collection, and these were reduced to seven central themes and 15 subthemes. I used member checking to validate data to ensure the accuracy of each participant's responses. All six participants were provided with the option of attending a voluntary follow-up session. Before the follow-up session, I provided each participant with a copy of their responses to the focus group, so they could confirm the information was transcribed and analyzed accurately and ensure that the findings were objective and credible.

Credibility is a vital component of qualitative research because it holds the researcher accountable for appropriately conveying the message from participants. Credibility is heightened when the participant can affirm the data are correct by reading the researcher's interpretation (Batt & Kahn, 2021). Credibility also enhances trustworthiness on the part of the researcher by allowing the participant to review and confirm statements, which gives the participant a unique voice in the research process.

Credibility assists in decreasing bias on the part of the researcher. I established credibility by using the research method of data source triangulation. Triangulation enhances a study's rigor and assists the researcher in gaining a better understanding of a particular phenomenon (Moon, 2019). Additionally, triangulation in qualitative research assists with reducing bias from the researcher or using single methods such as focus groups (Dźwigoł & Dźwigoł-Barosz, 2020).

Limitations

One of the limitations identified in this study was the participants' abilities to be honest due to potentially knowing and working with other participants. Due to potentially knowing and working with other participants, the participants in this study may not have been comfortable voicing their opinions freely and accurately without bias. Another limitation was the participants' geographical locations. The sample pool only encompassed a small sample size of school social workers in North Carolina. Additionally, all of the participants identified as female. Including a male participant would have added a level of diversity within the data. An additional limitation encountered was that Participant 6 had technical difficulties with her connection during the first group and could not engage with the entire focus group.

Regarding participant race, four participants identified as African American, one participant identified as White, and one identified as Afro-Latina. Having a culturally diverse group of participants provided additional information surrounding cultural relevance and the importance of school discipline. Despite the composition of the focus groups and the limitations mentioned above, the participants seemed vulnerable and

honest in their responses. The participants engaged with me and each other during the focus groups and acknowledged specific gaps associated with their specific roles and responsibilities related to school discipline strategies.

Findings

Participants

I recruited six participants for this study, and each attended both designated focus groups. All of the participants identified as female, with four participants identifying as African American, one participant identifying as White, and one participant identifying as Afro-Latina. The participants' social work credentialing varied. Two participants reported having an MSW degree, while three participants reported having BSW degrees. One participant's years of experience and social work degree level were unknown. All participants identified having school social work experience in North Carolina. Table 1 depicts the participants' demographic information.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

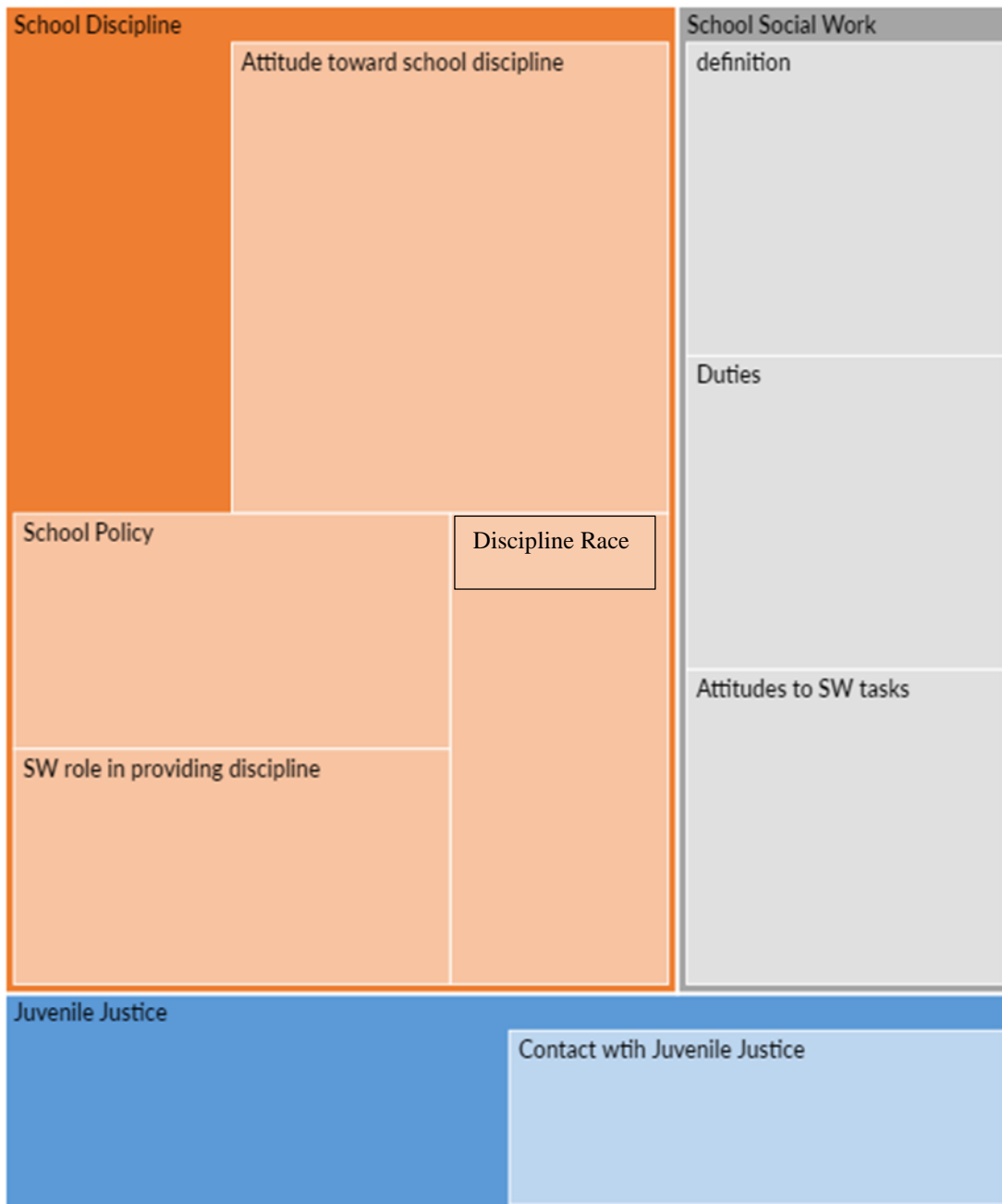
Participant	Gender	Race	Social work education	Years of experience
#1	Female	African American	BSW	1
#2	Female	White	BSW	8
#3	Female	African American	MSW	10
#4	Female	African American	MSW	11
#5	Female	Afro Latina	BSW	10
#6	Female	African American	Unknown	Unknown

Note. BSW = Bachelor of Social Work; MSW = Master of Social Work.

Identified Themes

A total of six North Carolina school social workers participated in the focus groups. Each participant shared their experiences and perceptions associated with their understanding of their role as school social workers in addressing disproportionate discipline strategies toward Black males attending elementary and middle schools. Additionally, the participants openly discussed their thoughts on providing alternative disciplinary strategies within the school setting. I initially developed over 26 codes from the collected data before narrowing them down to seven central themes and 15 subthemes. The participants spoke about three prominent themes during both focus groups: school discipline, social work, and juvenile justice. The major subthemes included attitudes toward school discipline, school policy, discipline race, social work role in providing discipline, the definition of school social work, school social work duties, attitudes toward social work tasks, and contact with juvenile justice.

The themes and subthemes correlated to this study's aim to better understand school social workers' role in understanding school discipline and juvenile justice. Furthermore, the themes and subthemes identified in the focus groups filled the gap in the literature regarding school social workers' role in determining school discipline strategies. Figure 1 shows the most prominent themes and subthemes the group addressed. The darker portion of the figure represents the three prominent themes: school discipline (represented in dark orange), school social work (represented in dark grey), and juvenile justice (represented in dark blue). The subsequent subthemes are identified in a lighter color and placed near the prominent themes.

Figure 1*Prominent Themes and Subthemes*

Theme 1: School Discipline

When asked if there was anything specifically related to school discipline outlined in the school policy, four of the six participants stated, “No.” Participant 3 stated, “Although I do not have specific policies for managing school discipline, protocols for handling discipline are in place because I am in an alternative setting.” When discussing social work roles surrounding school discipline, participants provided their unique experiences related to prevention and interventions. Participant 5 stated, “I do a lot of check-ins.” Participant 4 added, “I feel a lot of times I get students sent to me to talk about what’s going on at home, life, and things like that.” Participant 5 added, “I provide a lot of support and reassurance and explain what’s happening at home is not their fault.” Lastly, Participant 1 shared, “We can’t suspend students, but we can talk to them and let them know we are here.”

The focus group results related to school discipline have a direct correlation with the premise of the study in identifying and acknowledging that school social worker’s roles are unclear. Furthermore, school social workers’ perceived role in identifying school discipline strategies is subjective and largely dependent on the school social worker’s experience. Similarly, the focus group reported that there is no clear referral process on how school social workers acquire students on their caseload. Additionally, there is no identified policy in which school social workers are engaged in assisting school officials with school discipline strategies.

Subtheme: Discipline Race

When asked which group of students receive the most frequent discipline or are disciplined for the most prolonged periods, including in-school suspension and OSS, all participants identified Black students. This finding indicates Black students are likelier to be disciplined in elementary and middle school. Participant 5 stated, “There’s a higher rate of suspensions among minority students.” The other five participants agreed with this statement and related it to their current school settings. The consensus of the group coincides with RQ3. The connections between discipline race and RQ3 confirm school social workers might not be explicitly aware of how suspension rates among elementary and middle school Black students impact juvenile justice contact; however, they are aware of the disproportionate discipline that directly impacts Black students in their respective school settings.

The participants were clear in their responses. Many participants shared similar experiences in traditional school settings; however, alternative settings provided different experiences requiring more social work intervention. Despite not having specific school policies surrounding school social workers’ role in navigating school discipline, school social workers have been able to generate intervention strategies that meet their students’ specific needs. School social workers also appear to have been offered some autonomy in creating specific interventions for the students they serve. The participants’ consensus indicates that school administrations, such as the assistant principal and principal, dictate how innovative and involved school social workers can be in reducing and eliminating suspensions due to school discipline.

Theme 2: School Social Work

As stated above, the findings showed that school social workers do not have a specific policy outlining their tasks and duties relating to school discipline. Each school social worker reported adhering to the tasks outlined in their job description.

Additionally, the Department of Public Instruction provided the school social worker job description being used. Despite the different needs of the students, school social workers are expected to adhere to the duties outlined in their job description even though there are no clear policies or job tasks that distinguish the school social worker's role in relation to discipline.

The participants could explain their specific roles and duties during the focus group. Participant 3 stated, "Each of us does school social work differently." Participant 1 stated, "It's getting into the classroom and doing stuff that is probably not written in my job description." Participant 2 added, "I do daily lunch duty for fourth grade." Participant 5 added, "Yeah, for me, we do mental health check-ins with our students in the mornings." School social workers were able to identify unconventional moments during the school day when rapport building is created and interventions such as processing are used. This level of engagement from the school social worker has the potential to assist in the event that discipline is ever needed.

As there is no clear policy regarding the school social worker's role toward school discipline, school social workers rely on the NASW code of ethics to determine the best course of action in creating sustainable interventions for school discipline. Furthermore, the participants in this research study report highly rely on professional experience and

clinical consultation with each other in determining best practices for school discipline. Lastly, the participants' consensus indicates that school administrations, such as the assistant principal and principal, dictate how innovative and involved school social workers can be in reducing and eliminating suspensions due to school discipline.

Theme 3: Juvenile Justice

Regarding the juvenile justice system, one participant working in the alternative setting had the most consistent contact due to the school's structure. Participant 4 added, "I have an opportunity to help prevent (juvenile justice involvement) in my setting." However, all participants identified reporting truancy as a component of their job. This involves the school social worker contacting the district truancy office, which is a direct extension of the juvenile justice department. Participant 3 shared, "Uh, in my opinion, we are the ones that actually get DJ involved in my position because I'm the one that does the referrals." This information was alarming and concerning for me as a researcher.

Summary

This section provided details regarding the recruitment process, data analysis techniques, validation procedures, and participants' demographics. This section covered issues with the data collection process and identified themes concerning the research questions. The focus group's findings confirm school social workers are unclear in their role in addressing school discipline strategies. The findings also suggest school social workers' proximity to providing interventions for school discipline relies heavily on school administration. Also, it is not outlined in school policies and can prevent school social workers from providing alternative discipline strategies to Black males attending

elementary and middle schools. Moreover, although school social workers are aware of the consequences of juvenile justice involvement, they are tasked with initiating contact when truancy is an area of concern.

The focus groups provided insight into how school social workers viewed their roles and duties. Also, this section provided information regarding the unwritten tasks and duties school social workers have. The section provided insight into school social work interventions, collaboration, and attitudes toward discipline. The most unanticipated data was that school social workers are often introduced to the juvenile justice system for students experiencing truancy issues. The following section includes the implications and recommendations for social work practice and its ethical application.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify how school social workers perceive their role in addressing disproportionate disciplinary strategies while providing insight into their understanding of the relationship between school discipline and juvenile justice involvement. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do school social workers perceive their role in addressing disproportionate discipline strategies toward Black males attending elementary and middle schools in North Carolina?

RQ2: Do school social workers believe they can provide alternative discipline strategies for Black males attending elementary and middle schools in North Carolina?

RQ3: Are school social workers in North Carolina aware of how suspension rates among elementary and middle school Black students impact juvenile justice contact?

The key findings in this study showed that school social workers do not have straightforward policies that guide them on how or how often they should be involved in school discipline. Hattar's (2018) findings showed that Black students receiving increased disciplinary practices within academic settings; however, previous researchers have not provided adequate information on how school social workers can be best used in providing therapeutic assistance and alternatives to harsh disciplinary practices. The results of this study indicated that school social workers often have innovative ways to

intervene in school discipline. The study results also showed that there are no clear school policies regarding the school social worker's role in school discipline, so school social workers are not required to intervene regularly in discipline matters. McCarter et al. (2020) confirmed that school social work roles are unclear, and this can be attributed to the ambiguous role that researchers have determined school social workers have. Previous researchers have acknowledged that school social workers' fragmented and inconsistent role has been a standing issue that must still be addressed (Richardson et al., 2019).

The participants' consensus indicates that school administrators, such as the assistant principal and principal, dictate how innovative and involved school social workers can be in reducing and eliminating suspensions due to school discipline. The findings of this study extend the knowledge in social work because there is limited extant research concerning how school social workers address the disproportionate school discipline strategies for Black male students in elementary and middle school settings.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

Social workers are tasked with the responsibility of following both personal and professional ethical guidelines. The NASW (2021) provided ethical principles and standards that must be followed by every practicing social worker. Social justice is a specific component of social work values and ethics because social workers work on behalf of marginalized and oppressed groups (NASW, 2021). With this study, I addressed the social justice need to identify school discipline strategies for Black males by determining the need for defining school social workers' role in assisting with discipline

strategies. The NASW Code of Ethics guides clinical social work practice in this area by instructing social workers to call out policies that are complicit in perpetuating the increase of oppression within vulnerable populations. Understanding how social justice directly impacts social work is more necessary than ever (Mulvale, 2021). This study supports the ethical values of social justice because I addressed a gap in the literature concerning a specific marginalized group. Furthermore, due to the gap in the literature, social workers must become more aware of where their particular expertise is needed related to school discipline strategies.

Another NASW (2021) code relevant to this study is the importance of human relationships. According to the NASW, social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities. This study directly addressed the importance of relationship-building for school social workers. School social workers' relationships with the administration, students, and families catalyze school policy that allows school social workers to have a more innovative and active role in assisting with more therapeutic and culturally sound discipline strategies that could positively affect Black students who are subjugated to harsher and more frequent discipline in school. Research has confirmed that race is prevalent in policy, practice, and school bases; therefore, the unique experiences of people of color should be valued (Joseph et al., 2020). This social work principle aligns with the current study's findings and provides insight into the importance of strengths-based, relationship-building approaches.

This study may also help clarify how school social workers can implement therapeutic alternatives to school discipline within their respective school settings. School social workers can use the findings of this study to increase their knowledge and skills in advocacy and clinical practice, specifically within school settings. Although the study does not provide specific tasks of the school social workers role in school discipline, it allows for future discussion in creating much-needed policy reform.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

In this subsection, I present action steps for clinical social work practitioners based on the findings of this study. The participants' focus group responses provided insight into what was needed in their respective schools and how school social work practitioners could better serve their populations. Participants reported that administrative support regarding therapeutic interventions contributed to school social workers' involvement in school discipline. Administrative support from the assistant principal and principal was prevalent in how often and how comfortable school social workers felt in assisting with school discipline. The focus group responses also highlighted ongoing concerns regarding the race and ethnicity of most school-based infractions. National, state, and local research has continued to provide detailed information on how Black children, specifically Black boys, are overrepresented in school discipline and juvenile justice contact, suggesting data across all school levels indicates that school administrators and teachers discipline Black students more harshly than their White counterparts (Skiba et al, 2020). Although research on this general topic is prevalent,

scholarship on the school social worker's role regarding intervention, prevention, and practice is explicitly limited, so further research is needed.

Although this study can act as a guide to assist social work practitioners in the school setting, more research is needed that can assist in creating a specific blueprint for school social workers on the micro- and macrolevels. Research informs policy, and current policy regarding school social workers' role within traditional settings is nonexistent, yet it is essential in combating the disproportionate number of Black children who succumb to suspension and juvenile justice involvement.

The findings of this study will continue to influence my skills and awareness as a social work practitioner because they allow for a better understanding of school social workers' roles and attitudes toward school discipline. As a social work practitioner, I can advocate for policy change that encourages the use of multidisciplinary teams, including team members such as social workers, when implementing policies surrounding school discipline. Additionally, conducting this study has brought awareness to how school social workers in North Carolina report truancy, which is a conduit to the Department of Juvenile Justice. School policies surrounding this practice should be reevaluated because they could potentially pose a conflict of interest for school social workers. Social workers are tasked with advocating for marginalized groups, meaning initial contact with the juvenile justice system via truancy may prevent protection among disproportionately disciplined groups, such as Black males.

The focus group participants met the inclusion criteria and were qualified and knowledgeable. I obtained additional participants for this study through the snowballing

sampling method. The snowballing method is frequently used in qualitative research and widely used to access hard-to-reach populations (Parker et al., 2019). There were no limitations to this study that impact its usefulness or trustworthiness. The findings of this study were provided to all participants in a one-page summary to further ensure reliability and trustworthiness. Researchers have a moral responsibility to offer participants the opportunity to review the result of the study they participated in (Fernandez et al., 2005). The study will also be published as a peer-reviewed article to be reviewed by others.

Implications for Social Change

This study's implications for positive social change include creating an avenue for school social workers to directly influence Black male students' trajectory towards juvenile justice involvement that directly results from school-based offenses. This study not only creates direct micro- and macro level change but can also positively impact mezzo level change by helping implement social work practices rooted in ethical premises and directly advocating for systemic change for marginalized groups. This positive social change is possible because school social workers have a unique understanding of the influence ethnicity, culture, and community have on positive child development, thus directly shaping youth outcomes (see McCarter et al., 2020). Specifically, social work professionals should be included in implementing policy protocols within the school settings while creating additional education within their respective schools on the correlation between increased discipline and juvenile justice involvement. Additionally, school social work programs would benefit from including a social justice track within their school programming to better equip social workers with

the skills needed to assist in disrupting systemic policies that create barriers to marginalized groups.

Summary

Disproportionate disciplinary actions relating to school-based offenses for Black youth influence their early juvenile justice involvement. The continued excessive disciplinary actions involving Black male students in lower-level academic settings are concerning, and without being addressed, this continuing disproportionate disciplinary action toward Black males can lead to future juvenile justice involvement and create a large-scale social work practice issue. Addressing disproportionate discipline strategies can be beneficial. I conducted this qualitative study to determine school social workers' perspectives of their role in addressing disproportionate disciplinary strategies while providing insight into their understanding of the relationship between school discipline strategies and juvenile justice involvement. The results provide insight into the perceived role of school social workers when creating interventions or making therapeutic decisions surrounding school discipline. The findings also provide a social work perspective of the identified problems associated with the gap between social work intervention and school discipline. Administrative support is key in addressing in-school interventions for marginalized groups. School social workers' role in reporting truancy is a finding that may require additional research to determine if school social workers are the cause of initial juvenile justice contact in some instances. Additional training at the local, state and national levels from organizations, such as the NASW, would be beneficial in creating

new policies and training surrounding the role of school social workers when dealing with school discipline issues.

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Appendix: Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions: 60-90 min sessions

Focus group one: (Relationships/ Rapport/ Role)

1. How long have you been a school social worker?
2. What race do you identify with?
3. What is your academic credentialing?
4. What is school social work?
5. What specific tasks do you have as a school social worker?
6. What is your role as it relates to school discipline strategies?
7. How do school social workers prevent juvenile justice involvement?

Focus group two: (Additional thoughts/ feelings)

1. How has your academic work prepared you in your role as a school social worker?
2. How has your academic work or job training prepared you for assisting in implementing school discipline strategies?
3. How can you be better supported by social work organizations?
4. How can your school better support you?
5. What help would you like from other social workers?
6. How do you want to be used in the future as it relates to school discipline strategies?