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## Administrators' Perception of Racial Disparities in Suspensions and Expulsions

Lonita S. Broome  
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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Lonita S. Broome

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2024

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Abstract

Administrators' Perception of Racial Disparities in Suspensions and Expulsions

by

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MA, Troy State University, 2001

BS, West Georgia College, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2024

## Abstract

Although research supports that nationally, Black students in Grades K-12 are three times likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers, there has been little progress in reducing the racial school-discipline gap. The problem addressed in this study was the racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions for Black students. The conceptual framework that guided this study was Critical Race Theory which specifies that systemic racism is embedded in American society, and the Social Justice Theory, which is built on the foundation that all students, regardless of their differences, should have the same opportunities. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand school administrators' perceptions of the suspensions and expulsions disparity between Black and White students. The overarching research questions addressed school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Utilizing a purposive sample, data was collected through semistructured interviews with nine administrators from Grades K-12 at a district in the study's state. Microsoft Excel was the data analysis tool used to code and organize data collected from the interviews. Excel was used to identify similar themes and relationships. Participants identified bias, culture, the code of conduct, and Black students committing more infractions than White students as contributing factors for the racial disparity in school discipline. Recommendations for more insight into the disparity include expanding the study to include teachers and focusing exclusively on one contributing factor to the disparity, like the code of conduct. The findings of this study have potential implications for a better understanding of factors that may contribute to the discipline gap between Black and White students.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this work to my grandsons, Cayden Williams and Jaylin Sims. You were born into a world where racism is embedded into our society. My prayer is that you will overcome all barriers and as educated and strong black men, you will make a difference. I want you to understand what obstacles you will face and more importantly, I want you to be equipped and prepared to overcome those obstacles and be great at whatever your passion is.

Additionally, I dedicate this work to my beautiful and sweet mother, Caroline Broome, she is my angel on earth; my father, Willie Broome, whose motivation I inherited, rest peacefully dad; the two people that know me from the inside out, my daughters, Alexis Sims and Jada Collier, you two are the love of my life and my biggest contribution to society. I am so proud to be your mother; my son, Jonathan Sims, you are blessing and I thank God for you. You are the educated and strong black man that serves as a role model to my grandsons; my sisters and biggest cheerleaders, Latonda Broome Milner and Lynn Broome George, you all consistently bring sunshine when my days are dark; my cousin/sister and biggest motivator, Veronica Purcel; my nieces and nephews (Kenneth, Bryan, Maya, Michael, Lauren and the babies Lil Mike, Dinero, and Journey); my aunts/heroines, Faye Williams and Gladiola Griffin; my best friends/sisters, Cint Gilstrap and Patrice Duncan, who encouraged and supported me daily; and best friend/brother, Alcindor Chambers, who constantly pushed me to the finished line. You all are truly the wind beneath my wings.

I would like to do a final dedication to every black person in the world who has or will experience racism in any form. This one is for you!

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

School discipline and safety are two critical areas of responsibility and concern where school administrators' perceptions influence the school's disciplinary practices (Heise & Nance, 2021a). To be effective, administrators should consistently analyze discipline data to ensure equitable discipline practices and to reduce inappropriate behaviors (Tookes et al., 2020). Historically, school discipline policies and practices have resulted in race-based inequities and in school suspensions and expulsions (McIntosh et al., 2021). These raced-based inequities have resulted in negative outcomes for Black students that decrease their access to education and increase their risk of interacting with the criminal justice center (Dutil, 2020). For decades, the disproportionate issuance of discipline referrals of Black students in Grades K-12 public education has been a longstanding and documented concern in education (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). Exclusionary discipline practices, such as zero tolerance policy, that strictly enforce students' removal from the learning environment have significantly contributed to racial disciplinary inequities (Curran, 2019). Despite documented racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions for Black students (Gage et al., 2019) and the critical role that administrators have in maintaining a safe and equitable school environment (Curran, 2019), there is a lack of data about how administrators perceived those racial disparities.

The high out-of-school suspensions and expulsions rates of Black students is associated with numerous adverse outcomes including loss of instructional time, lower graduation rate, and a higher likelihood of incarceration (Grace & Nelson, 2019).

According to Losen and Martinez (2020), a 2015-2016 national study of school districts, the loss of instructional days due to out-of-school suspensions for Black high school students was approximately five times higher than White high school students. Research has documented a correlation between school discipline, lower academic achievement, lower college enrollment rates, increased high school drop-out, and involvement in juvenile and adult criminal justice systems (Camacho & Krezmien, 2019). The social implications of this study is that it may illuminate the many issues that administrators face in this process and could possibly uncover some ways in which the process could be improved and the lives of all involved be elevated. The major sections of this chapter include the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, research questions, theory, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, significance, and finally a summary.

### **Background**

Inequities in education date back to the Plessy v. Ferguson 1896 Supreme Court ruling that upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation of education by enforcing the “separate but equal” concept for Black and White students (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020). The *separate but equal* concept continued until the 1945 Brown v. Board of Education lawsuit unanimous ruling that separate is unequal (Brown v. Board of Education, 2021). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) successfully ended segregation in education from the Brown v. Board of Education lawsuit. According to Palermo and Fusani (2021), Brown v Board of Education lawsuit focused on segregation and failed to acknowledge racism as the core

cause of socioeconomic segregation. As a result, the lawsuit failed to remove obstacles to equal education based on race (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020).

Over the last 30 years, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of Black students emerged as a new obstacle for the exclusion of Black students in their effort to obtain an equal education to their White counterparts (Dionisio & Gray-Nicolas, 2023). According to Losen and Martinez (2020), nationally, Black students account for 16% of Grade K-12 enrollment and 40% of suspensions indicating widespread disparities. Research on school discipline data indicates the prevalence of race-based inequities in suspensions and expulsions (Camacho & Krezmien, 2019; Losen & Martinez, 2020). Districts discipline policies are developed at the board of education and central office level and enforced at the school level. Building school administrators are responsible for interpreting disciplinary rules and guidelines from the board of education and district central office; reviewing student infractions and administering discipline fairly (Williams, 2022). Although school administrators play a critical role in determining the appropriate disciplinary actions for students, very few administrators have considered if their decision-making processes contribute to the racial school-discipline gap (Gullo & Beachum, 2020a).

Use of Exclusionary and punitive school discipline practices such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions have traditionally been used as a form of punishment for undesirable behavior and to deter students from repeating the same behavior (Bennett et al., 2022). Interestingly, Welsh et al., (2023) indicated that exclusionary and punitive school discipline practices do not change students' behavior. However, research supports

that children who experience exclusionary and punitive disciplinary actions are more likely to perform poorly academically, lose interest in education, and become part of the juvenile justice system (Marchbanks et al., 2018). According to Bell and Puckett (2020), out-of-school discipline practices result in a loss of instructional time and negatively impact students' academic performance. The disproportion in school discipline of Black students correlates with the overrepresentation of Black students in the juvenile justice system (Hirschfield, 2018).

Policies such as zero-tolerance are inflexible school code of conduct practices that enforces severe pre-determined punitive and exclusionary disciplinary consequences that increase the likelihood of students being involved in criminal activities (Wirtz, 2021). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, zero-tolerance policies were born from the legal system adoption of the Gun-Free School Act (Irby & Coney, 2021). The zero-tolerance policy required mandatory suspensions or expulsions from school for any behavior considered disruptive which included: bringing any weapon to school, including minor infractions such as butter knives and toy weapons; bringing alcohol or drugs on campus, including tobacco and over-the-counter medication; and for fighting, including minor scuffles, perceived threats, and insubordination (Curran, 2019).

Zero-tolerance policies created a culture with stringent discipline policies that justified school suspensions and expulsions of students for minor incidents and accidental infractions (Babb, 2019). The zero-tolerance policy negatively impacted Black students disproportionately (Curran, 2019). This policy's inflexibility and severe disciplinary consequences for Black students lead to the policy being referred to as the *school-to-*



*prison pipeline* (Woods, 2021). Scholars such as Grace and Nelson (2019) contributed these types of school policies and procedures to funneling school children from public schools into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

Inequitable school discipline practices drive inequalities across multiple educational outcomes including academically, socially, and mentally (Shores et al., 2020). A closer examination of racial discipline disparities supports that the Black-White student achievement gap is directly correlated with the Black-White student disciplinary gap (Pearman et al., 2019). Black students are more likely to be removed from the classroom for disciplinary reasons which negatively impacts their opportunities to learn and result in an increase in the achievement gap between Black and White students (Borman et al., 2022). Out-of-school disciplinary practices result in loss of instructional time (Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022), a decrease in student participation, and an increase in students' likelihood of dropping out of school (Dunning-Lozano, 2022) and pursuing criminal activities (Welsh et al., 2023). Wegmann and Smith's (2019) examination of racial/ethnic disparities in schools supports that previous student suspensions often lead to a repeat cycle of suspensions and expulsions (Borman et al., 2022).

Research documents racial disparity in school suspensions and expulsions (Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022). Research further documents the negative outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline practices and the ineffectiveness of out-of-school discipline practices in altering behavior (Chu & Ready, 2018). Although school administrators have a significant role in interpreting and assigning disciplinary actions, there is a *gap* in the literature that addresses how administrators perceive the racial

disparities in school suspensions and expulsions. The inequities in school discipline for Black students are an equity and social justice issue (Reed et al., 2020). Since administrators are the enforcers of disciplinary policies at their school, understanding their perceptions of the documented disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students will provide insight into their decision-making process. This study is needed because it is currently unclear how administrators handle this disciplinary issue, and any ideas they have for improving the situation.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that will be addressed in this study is the racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions for Black students. Despite documented racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions for Black students (Gage et al., 2019; Young et al., 2018), there is a lack of information about how administrators perceive these racial disparities. As a result of the disciplinary disproportionality of Black students, there is an achievement gap and a disciplinary gap that serve as a barrier for Black students to achieve educational equity and equal meaningful opportunity (Girvan et al., 2019). Dating back to the 1970s, documentation of consistent and ongoing inequities has placed Black students at a higher risk for disciplinary practices that excluded them from instruction (McIntosh et al., 2021). The civil rights data collection shows, as recently as the 2017-18 academic year (AY) nationally, Black students made up only 15% of student enrollment but accounted for 28% of students' out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Administrators should consistently review and analyze their discipline practices and strategies to ensure they are equitable and reduce undesirable behaviors (Tookes et al., 2020). Although administrators have identified limited disciplinary options, there is a gap in research regarding the lack of support from the district office, training, and communication as factors that guide their decision-making process (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019), this does not provide insight into administrators' perceptions of racial disparities. Understanding administrators' perceptions of their role in racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions for Black students can contribute to closing the discipline and achievement gap between Black and White students. The data from the study can be used to develop equitable policies, procedures, and strategies that reduce out-of-school disciplinary practices that result in racial disparities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to understand school administrators' perceptions of the suspensions and expulsions disparity between Black and White students. The disproportionate number of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of Black students have been shown to correlate with long-lasting negative effects including lower academic achievement, and increased likelihood of dropping out of high school and becoming a part of the juvenile justice system (Anyon, 2018). School administrators' perceptions of racial disparity in school discipline may contribute to knowledge of education policies regarding equitable discipline practices. The findings from this study may serve as an educational resource for the federal government to develop national strategies to reduce the high rate of suspensions and expulsions of Black students.

## **Research Questions**

Academic achievement is positively associated with Black students' racial experience within schools (Croom, 2020). The incorporation of disciplinary practices such as zero-tolerance and deterrence-based discipline strategies that use punishment to correct undesirable behavior has contributed to a higher number of court referrals and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions of Black students when compared to their white counterparts (Roch & Elsayed, 2020). Administrators play a critical role in developing disciplinary practices by enforcing disciplinary policies and procedures (Williams, 2022). This study will explore school administrators' perceptions of the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. There is a gap in the literature that addresses how administrators perceive the racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions. The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ 1: What are school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?

RQ 2: What are school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in expulsions between Black and White students?

## **Conceptual Framework**

The underlying theories guiding the current study are critical race theory (CRT) and social justice theory (SJT). CRT and SJT helped explore and understand disproportionality among Black students from the perceptions of school administrators. CRT has frequently been used throughout education to identify and analyze inequitable discipline practices that result in disproportionality in student discipline for Black

students (Amiot et al., 2020). SJT in education is built on the foundation that all students, regardless of their differences, should have the same opportunities (Koçak, 2021). Each theory is explained in greater detail in the sections that follow.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Bell and Williams were the primary developers of the concept of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education in the 1970s. The developing framework was that systemic racism is embedded in American society and it contributes significantly to the disciplinary and achievement gaps between Black and White students (Vastine, 2020). CRT is grounded in education as a resource for examining inequities that disproportionately impact Black students compared to their White peers due to laws and policies supporting and reproducing racial inequities (Smith, 2020). One of the core pillars of CRT is the analysis of the impact educational policies and practices have on the construction of racial inequities (Dixson & Rousseau, 2018).

The use of CRT in education provides the equity lens for analyzing disparities in Grades K-12 education. CRT focuses on race and racism while examining the historical, social, and political environment (Smith, 2020). This study will explore administrators' perceptions of the discipline disparities between Black and White students. The study will identify and mitigate the inequities that correlate with CRT which takes a critical look into school districts to understand the origins of racial inequity and to eradicate them at the root (Fergus, 2021).

## **Social Justice Leadership Theory**

Social justice leadership theory in education, developed by American philosopher John Rawls in the 1970s, focused on eliminating marginalized students' educational and economic inequalities regarding factors such as race (Koçak, 2021). Rawl's social justice theory, emphasizes social justice leadership, requires those in the position of authority to address and eliminate marginalization in schools (Sarid, 2021). One of the main components of social justice leadership in education is improving the level of achievement of disadvantaged students such as minorities, and advocating for the rights and opportunities of all students (Kocak, 2021). According to Williams (2022), administrators play an instrumental role in developing equitable school discipline practices and creating a safe learning environment for all students. School administrators often use discipline to manage students' behavior in an effort to create a model student and discourage repeat behavior (Gullo & Beachum, 2020b).

Critics of exclusionary and punitive school discipline practices have documented that out-of-school discipline practices are counterproductive and do the opposite of their intent by exacerbating the negative behavior instead of altering it (Chu & Ready, 2018). Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions contribute to numerous negative outcomes for students including a loss of instructional time, lower graduation rates, and a higher rate of repeat disciplinary offenses (Hirschfield, 2018). Since Black students are three times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions or expulsion than their White peers, they are disproportionately subjected to the numerous negative outcomes associated with out-of-school disciplinary practices (Wegmann & Smith, 2019). This study will utilize the

social justice leadership theory of improving the level of achievement of Black marginalized students by analyzing the impact that out-of-school suspensions has on the achievement and disciplinary gap between Black and White students. Additionally, social justice leadership requiring those in the position of authority to address and eliminate marginalization in schools will be applied to school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in suspensions and expulsion between Black and White students.

### **Nature of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to understand administrators' perceptions of the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Qualitative research was selected due to the inquiry process of interviewing and collecting non-numerical data. Qualitative research involves exploring and collecting non-numerical data through interviews and observations (Lanka et al., 2021). This study will involve an inquiry process of interviewing 9 administrators who have worked in a school for three or more years where racial disparities in the discipline have been identified. The study will explore the administrators' perceptions regarding racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students.

The research will focus on administrators' perceptions of racial discipline disparities between Black and White students. Data will be collected from the 9 school administrators through open-ended semistructured interview questions. This study will explore administrators' experience based on their responses to interview questions. Quantitative research involves collecting and analyzing numerical data (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019) and is not an appropriate research design for collecting or analyzing non-

numerical data. Qualitative research is the most appropriate research design for the collection of non-numerical data and an attempt to understand the participants through an account of their experiences (Aspers & Corte, 2019),

I will use a purposeful sampling and thematic analysis to identify and explore prominent themes. Coding strategies will serve to label, organize, and sort data to identify different themes and relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Data from the open-ended interview questions will be reviewed and coded by grouping and synthesizing primary themes. This qualitative study will allow the collection and analysis of the data to answer the research questions on school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students.

### **Definitions**

The following terms are defined as they relate to understanding the conceptual framework and significance of the study. Some terms may seem common and unnecessary to define. However, it may be helpful to define each term as it relates to understanding administrators' perceptions of the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions.

*Administrators:* Administrators are school leaders that are responsible for making equitable decisions daily (Gullo & Beachum, 2020b).

*Disproportionate school discipline:* Disproportionate school discipline refers to racial disparities in school discipline between Black students and their peers, specifically White students (Lacoe & Manley, 2019).



*Exclusionary discipline:* Exclusionary discipline refers to school discipline practices that remove or exclude students from academic settings via suspensions and expulsions (Whitford et al., 2019).

*Expulsion:* Expulsion is a severe disciplinary school penalty that involves the removal of students from a specific school either permanently or for some time (Valdebenito et al., 2018).

*Marginalized students:* Marginalized students are students who are subjected to discrimination, harassment, persecution and experience or feel underserved and disregarded because of their identity or socioeconomic status. (Scherr & Mayer, 2019).

*Out-of-school suspension:* Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) involves the removal of students from school for a period of less than 10 days based on school policy. (Valdebenito et al., 2018).

*School-to-prison pipeline:* School-to-prison pipeline is an educational process that uses disciplinary practices to funnel students out-of-school into the juvenile justice system (Marchbanks et al., 2018).

*Zero-tolerance discipline:* Zero-tolerance discipline refers to inflexible school discipline policies and practices that mandate predetermined penalties for severe disciplinary issues (Curran, 2019).

### **Assumptions**

For this study, it is assumed that administrators, who will serve as participants, will be honest and trustworthy in answering the interview questions. Although it is impossible to confirm participants' honesty, I will make every effort to ensure

confidentiality and privacy will be maintained through appropriate procedures and processes. For this study of administrators' perceptions of their role in the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students, the participants' responses must be valid and accurate because the interview responses will serve as the data for analysis. Accurate and honest responses are also critical to the integrity of this study. Additionally, it is assumed that all participants will participate in this study voluntarily and that the sample population of this study represents the population being studied.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The research problem addressed in this study is the racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions of Black students. I selected this specific focus to better understand policies, procedures, or cultures that may facilitate or contribute to the racial disparities in the suspensions and expulsions of Black students. Additionally, I plan to explore the perceptions of administrators responsible for enforcing school disciplinary actions. Obtaining and objectively analyzing administrators' perceptions of racial disparities will help identify common themes and processes that may contribute to the inequities in school discipline.

The delimitations of this study include educators that serve or have served for three or more years as school disciplinary administrators in school(s) where racial disparities have been identified. This study will address their perceptions regarding their observation and experience with disparity in suspensions and expulsions of Black and White students. Administrators will be selected because they are responsible for school

discipline and safety. I will obtain data by conducting one-on-one virtual interviews with administrators from schools where racial disparities have been identified. The interviews aim to explore each administrators' perspective individually and collectively.

### **Limitations**

Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) defined research limitations as potential weaknesses in the study that are out of the researcher's control, but may affect the study's design, results, and conclusion. This study has a series of limitations. First, school administrators may not be forthcoming with responses on school discipline and discipline practices; therefore, ultimately skewing study results. Second, my personal bias could interfere with the validity of the study. Additional limitations include participants not being committed because they are volunteering, challenges with conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic restricting data collection in person, and time restraints associated with scheduling interviews and collecting data. A final limitation is the results of the study are based on the participants' perceptions.

I will incorporate multiple strategies in my research to enhance my study's credibility. To encourage administrators to be forthcoming with their responses on school discipline and school discipline practices, I will inform them of the coding process that will be utilized to ensure the confidentiality of their responses, identification, and schools. I will utilize Baksh's (2018) suggested reflexivity bracketing as a tool for being aware of personal biases and their impact on the research. To increase the level of commitment from participants, I will advise them on how their responses will contribute to the literature on racial disparities and may be instrumental in decreasing the

achievement and disciplinary gap between Black and White students. Another strategy to increase the study's credibility includes holding virtual meetings during the pandemic which will assist with time restraints.

### **Significance**

Much research has focused on racial disparity in school discipline for Black students compared to their White peers (Chu & Ready, 2018; Hirschfield, 2018; Pearman et al., 2019). Findings support that Black students are more likely to be perceived as problematic and receive a harsher punishment than White students for the same offense (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Nationally, elementary, middle, and high school students are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers (Larson et al., 2019; Wegmann & Smith, 2019; Young et al., 2018). Although research supports the presence of racial disparity for Black students, there has been little progress in reducing the racial school-discipline gap in suspensions and expulsions (Gullo & Beachum, 2020a). Research findings from this study may contribute to the literature on racial disparities in discipline by bringing attention to administrators' perspectives on factors that may contribute to racial disparity.

This study will address a gap in research involving administrators' perceptions of the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. School administrators will share their experiences with discipline policies and practices that may have contributed to racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions for Black students. This study is significant and original in providing insight into administrators' experiences and perceptions. Administrators' intent may be to maintain a safe school environment,

however, there is substantial evidence that school discipline practices are ineffective or equitably implemented (Fenning & Jenkins, 2018). Results from this study may bring awareness to school disciplinary policies, procedures, and practices that are biased. In addition, it may initiate extensive review and analysis of the policies and practices, professional development and revisions to discipline policies and practices inside and outside the classroom.

### **Significance to Practice**

Previous researchers sought to understand the disparity in school discipline by analyzing the school disciplinary climate from the perspective of various stakeholders including teachers, students, parents, and school resource officers. However, there is a gap in the literature on administrators' perceptions of school discipline (Heise & Nance, 2021a). The results of this study can contribute to the gap in the literature on administrators' perceptions of school discipline. A better understanding of administrators' perceptions of their role in discipline disparities can lead to more appropriate school disciplinary programs for reducing inequalities in the existing disciplinary programs. Furthermore, after analyzing the results from the study, the data may be used to enhance policies and procedures that seek alternatives to exclusionary discipline approaches and counter discipline disparities.

### **Significance to Theory**

Black students are grossly overrepresented in Grades K-12 school districts nationwide exclusionary discipline (Gullo & Beachum, 2020a). Decades of research support that Black students are more than twice as likely to be suspended or expelled than

White students (Pearman et al., 2019). Previous research to address the discipline gap between Black and White students focused on various elements that may have contributed to the disparities including socioeconomic factors, culture, disability and ethnicity (Bryant & Wilson, 2020). The critical race theory argue that racism is embedded in school institutions and reflected in their discipline policies and practices (Anyon et al., 2018).

As enforcers of disciplinary policies, administrators serve an imperative role in interpreting and assigning disciplinary actions to students (Heise & Nance, 2021b). Despite administrators' critical role in school safety and discipline, there is limited literature on their perceptions of school safety (Heise & Nance, 2021b). Data from this study will contribute to the literature on administrators' perceptions of their role in the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Identifying patterns that emerge from this study can contribute to factors that may impact the discipline disparities between Black and White students. Understanding factors that influence administrators' disciplinary decisions will advance knowledge and facilitate theory development on the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students.

### **Significance to Social Change**

This study has the potential to contribute to positive social change. The disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students places Black students at a higher risk for educational, economic, and social problems (Tan & Hillen, 2021). There are several harmful effects associated with exclusionary disciplinary practices. Many of

the consequences of class exclusions hurt children's academic, social, behavioral, and emotional development (Sander & Bibbs, 2020). Specific negative outcomes for Black students who experience exclusionary discipline practices include lower academic achievement, lower college enrollment rates, increased high school drop-out and involvement in juvenile and adult criminal justice systems (Camacho & Krezmien, 2019).

Understanding administrators' perceptions of their role in racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions for Black students could contribute to closing the discipline and achievement gaps between Black and White students. The study's results may be useful to develop policies, procedures, and equitable strategies, and reduce out-of-school disciplinary practices. Analyzing administrators' trends regarding discipline practices and their interpretation of discipline policies can provide valuable insight to identify and address racial and ethnic disparities. The social change implications for Black students may include an increase in academic achievement, graduation rate, and college enrollment. Other implications for positive social changes include a decrease in crime and involvement in the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems.

### **Summary**

The ongoing discriminatory discipline practices for Black students in the American Grades K-12 public education system is a concerning phenomenon in the United States that has existed for decades (McIntosh et al., 2021). In this chapter, I provided background information on the problem of racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the perceptions of school administrators regarding the suspensions and expulsions disparity

between Black and White students. This study will be achieved through qualitative interviews with administrators to acquire their perceptions of the documented suspensions and expulsions disparity between Black and White students. Chapter 2 presents a thorough review and analysis of the literature regarding previous empirical literature on the structural inequities in the educational system.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **History of the Problem**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to understand administrators' perceptions of the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. The problem that will be addressed through this study is the racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions for Black students. Despite documented racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions for Black students (Young et al., 2018; Gage et al., 2019), there is a lack of information about how administrators perceive these racial disparities.

The ongoing discriminatory discipline practices for Black students in the American Grades K-12 public education system date back more than five decades (McIntosh et al., 2021). Despite decades of scrutinized and documented racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions for Black students (Gage et al., 2019), there continues to be a lack of information about how administrators perceive racial disparities. School administrators, responsible for discipline, are also responsible for interpreting their district's disciplinary rules and guidelines, reviewing student infractions, and administering discipline fairly (Williams, 2022). Although school administrators are critical in determining the appropriate disciplinary actions for students, very few administrators have considered if their decision-making processes contribute to the racial school-discipline gap (Gullo & Beachum, 2020).

Wegmann and Smith's (2019) examination of racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline concluded that Black students were three times more likely to be

suspended than White peers. The Critical Race Theory and Social Justice Theory are the conceptual framework of this study. The literature review examines the history of racial disparities in American Grades K-12 public education schools that result in a higher rate of suspensions and expulsions for Black students compared to White students. It further examines the history and role of administrators' perception of the disparity. The chapter will review the literature search strategy, the theoretical frameworks, and the literature review separated into clear subsections of literature.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The search for current, peer-reviewed articles and content in English was conducted utilizing a variety of databases, search engines, and key terms. I used the Walden Library and Research Center as my primary search strategy. The specific databases and search engines utilized included: University Library: ProQuest, EBSCO, ProQuest Dissertation & Theses Global., and Google Scholar. Additionally, I used the Education Source database, which covers all levels of education, the ERIC database maintained by US Department of Education, and the Thoreau Multi-Databases Search.

The following key terms and combinations of terms were used in this research: *disproportionate school discipline, school-to-prison pipeline, Grades K-12 school administrators, discipline, African American students, school suspensions and expulsion, racial student disciplinary bias, racial discrimination, and Black and White student discipline*. Variations of these terms were used until my search had reach saturation, which revealed limited literature on administrators' perceptions of racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions. The combined search of multiple databases produced more

than 9,000 results on various components of racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions. To reduce the number of results in my search, I narrowed the search range by dates from 2018-2021, which reduced the results by approximately 44% or 5,000 results. A review of the articles, journals and dissertations from the search of terms and combination of terms resulted in various data on racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions for Black students which contributed to the validity of this research study.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

To examine and understand racial discipline disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions among Black students through the school administrators' lived experience, Social Justice Leadership Theory (SJT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) are the conceptual framework for this study. CRT is appropriate for this study because it is built on the framework that racial inequities are embedded in our society at a systemic level and as a result account for racial disparities in education (Arcila, 2022). The SJT is appropriate for this study because it is built on the framework of equity in schools for all students, specifically those of marginalized groups, who have experience inequities in education (Sarid, 2021). This research envisions CRT to understand how racism has been traditionally overlooked and viewed as ordinary because it is deeply rooted in society (Grace & Nelson, 2019). SJT is a tool to transform traditional practices and cultures to challenge inequities in the discipline. Both theories are explained in greater detail in the sections that follow.

## Critical Race Theory

CRT in education is the framework used to explore racial inequities in Grades K-12 school discipline. CRT further explores the intersectionality resulting in the disproportionate suspensions and expulsions rates of Black students compared to their White counterparts (Wiley, 2021). Critical Race Theory's origin dates back to the late 1960s during a meeting of minority law professors, led by Bell from Harvard Law School and Boyer from Howard University, to address the segregation of American law and its impact on Black Americans (Greene, 2021). Although the group's initial foundational meetings aimed to address the exclusion of racial minorities from the legal profession, over 4-four decades later the movement has evolved to include all minorities.

The goal of dismantling exclusionary discrimination policies has broadened to include all workplaces including education. Derrick Bell reviewed the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case which was initiated by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to overturn the 1896 Supreme Court ruling that enforced separate but equal education standards for Black and White students. The NAACP argued that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional and although the ruling was unanimously overturned and ended school segregation in the country, Bell argued that the case was won to send a political message to the international community to create the perception that Blacks were treated equally in America and that instead of focusing on segregating schools, the focus of the case should have been enforcing the *equal* part of "separate but equal" doctrine (Trei, 2004).

Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) discussion on the CRT foundation in the

United States was built on three central propositions: using race as a primary factor in determining inequity, understanding that society is based on property rights, and how the intersection of race and property relates to school inequity. The first proposition identifies race as a factor in determining inequity. Research on school discipline data indicates the prevalence of race-based inequality in school suspensions and expulsions (Wegmann & Smith, 2019; Fisher, Dawson, Higgins, & Swartz, 2020, Gullo & Beachum, 2020a). The CRT framework serves as a conceptual base for exploring the role that race and racism play in the educational system.

### **Social Justice Leadership Theory**

Rawl developed the SJT in the 1970s to address the marginalized, oppressed, and special needs populations (Campbell, 2021). Social justice in education refers to providing equitable educational opportunities to all students regardless of their race or socioeconomic status (Koçak, 2021). Unequitable discipline practices resulting in discipline disparities between Black and White students conflict with social justice in education. The social justice theory has been utilized in various fields of study as a platform for advocacy for the most marginalized citizens (Joseph, 2020). Cinar and Nayır's (2022) research on the relationship between school principals' social justice leadership levels and students' belonging levels concluded that school administrators who exhibit social justice leadership, by acknowledging racial inequities and injustices and addressing them by developing inclusive policies and social structures, result in students with positive school attitudes and an increased sense of belonging.

Gümüş and Beycioglu (2020) identified the school structure and culture as two primary instruments for developing social justice environments. Education is considered a societal issue and within the last decade, the incorporation of social justice initiatives has become a common theme in education (Khumalo, 2019). The United States has implemented alternative models like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) as opposed to traditional punitive behavior punishments to modify the school environment through social changes that initiate behavioral changes in students, teachers, and staff (Oxley & Holden, 2021). PBIS is an evidence-based framework that consists of three prevention tiers designed to promote equity by supporting students' behavioral, social and academic needs by focusing on positive behaviors (Oxley & Holden, 2021).

Wang's (2022) study on social justice leadership theory and practice in education found that when school administrators position themselves in various roles, this directly promotes equity and justice for all stakeholders. The research questions of this study seek to understand administrators' perceptions of the documented disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. The use of the social justice leadership theory in this study will explore administrators' perceptions and identify themes that may exclude Black students from equitable educational opportunities based on their race. The discipline gap continues to grow beyond the teacher referral level to that of the administrator, with inequitable distribution of discipline severity despite similar behavior infractions (Gullo and Beachum, 2020b). Administrators' implicit bias, beliefs, and stereotypes directly impact school discipline and racial disparity (Gullo & Beachum, 2020b).

## Literature Review

The use of exclusionary discipline practices that result in discipline disparities between Black and White students is an equity and social justice issue (Reed et al., 2020). Nationally, Black students' out-of-school suspension percentage is more than two times their enrollment percentage (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Research supports the prevalence of race-based inequities in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Chu & Ready, 2018). The loss of instructional time resulting from out-of-school disciplinary sanctions contributes significantly to lower academic achievement and increased incarceration for Black students (Pearman et al., 2019). The disproportion in school discipline of Black students correlates with the overrepresentation of Black students in the juvenile justice system (Hirschfield, 2018).

Previous research focused primarily on the racial disparities in school discipline and the impact different discipline reforms and policies have had on the disparities. This research is focused on the perception of internal factors, such as administrators' perspectives on the documented disparity in suspensions between Black and White students. Research by Liu, Hayes, and Gershenson (2021) found significant differences between Black and White students' referral rates and the rate at which administrators distribute punishment for the same incident. For example, Gopalan and Nelson's (2019) study on understanding the racial discipline gap in schools reported that nationally 18% of Black students receive one or more out-of-school suspensions and expulsions annually as compared to 5% of White students. School administrators' inequitable distribution of

punishment for White and Black students may be linked to negative racial stereotypes (Gullo & Beachum, 2020b).

### **Racial Inequalities for Black Americans**

The United States has a history of systemic racism that has adversely impacted Black Americans (Parrish, 2022). According to Dunning-Lozano (2022), American public schools fail to create an equitable culture of upward mobility for all children and excessively discipline Black students. CRT is built on the foundation that racial inequities are a major part of our society at a systemic level and as a result account for racial disparities for Black Americans (Arcila, 2022).

Racial inequities have manifested throughout history and are embedded in institutions, laws, policies, resource allocations, and administrative decisions (Blessett & Gaynor, 2021). Black Americans experience racism in all areas of their lives, adversely impacting their physical, mental, social, and socioeconomic health (Hutchins & Nelson, 2021). Racial healthcare disparities are a major factor contributing to Black women being four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related morbidity and mortality than any other racial group (Lin & Appleton, 2022). Thirty-one African American women's maternal healthcare experience support that Black Americans encounter barriers that impede them from receiving equitable treatment (Adebayo et al., 2022) The three major themes that emerged from Adebayo et al. (2022) study were (a) a racially insensitive healthcare system, (b) differential treatment, and (c) enduring a higher level of pain due to the perceptions and stereotypes of Black women being strong.



Other areas of historical and current racial discriminatory practices Black Americans have experienced are embedded in the educational, criminal, and judicial systems (Hutchins & Nelson, 2021). Researchers have identified a correlation between school discipline and prison, also referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline, for Black students in the United States (Powell & Coles, 2021). Scholars credit discriminatory school disciplinary policies and practices, such as zero tolerance and the presence of police in schools, as contributing factors that push students out of school into the criminal justice system (Fedders, 2021). Implementing zero-tolerance policies led to school resource officers on campuses, resulting in a disproportionate number of Black students being arrested and referred to the juvenile justice system (Woods, 2021). School police officers, also referred to as school resource officers (SROs), presence in schools increased by over 55% from 2005 to 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Anti-Blackness, racism, and racial-ethnic inequity are long standing pressing social issues that are embedded in United States' culture (Kiang et al., 2023). Racial inequities for Black Americans is a systemic crisis that has produced institutional racist outcomes throughout America (Elliott-Cooper, 2023). Institutional racism has had a devastating effect on Black Americans in all areas of their lives including health care, criminal justice center, and education (Clark et. al., 2022). Social activist movements like Black Lives Matter have formed to fight for the equal rights of Black American (Hudson, 2023). Disparities in school discipline policies and practices that disproportionately discipline Black students more frequently and severely than their White counterparts

continue to be an issue that negatively impacts the future of Black Americans (Sander & Bibbs, 2020).

### **School Discipline Policies**

In 1978, written school policies on discipline and codes of conduct emerged from a mandate by Congress requesting a safe school study on the frequency and seriousness of crime and violence in schools and recommendations for preventing the actions (Green et al, 2021). Federal, state, and local disciplinary policies have served an instrumental and historical role in encouraging out-of-school disciplinary action to punish inappropriate behavior (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020). The 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA 1994) was introduced by the Clinton administration and mandated that states receiving federal funding through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) incorporate laws requiring school districts to expel students in possession of a gun for a minimum of one year (Irby & Coney, 2021). In response to the 1995 Gun-Free School Act, states enacted an array of “zero tolerance” policies which were expanded to include automatic out-of-school disciplinary punishments for minor misconduct including disrupting class, tobacco, truancy, and skipping classes (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020). School leaders have a critical responsibility to educate students in a safe school environment. However, there are growing concerns that the use of exclusionary discipline policies needs to be curtailed (Anderson & Ritter, 2020).

K-12 public education has a history of enforcing more frequent and severe disciplinary decisions for Black students than their white counterparts (Gomez et al., 2021). Although the disciplinary infractions committed may be the same for Black and

White students, the disciplinary actions administered by administrators are more severe for Black students (Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020). As a result of the disparity in discipline, Black students are three times more likely to receive out-of-school disciplinary actions which leads to negative outcomes for Black students such as loss of instructional time, lower graduation rate, and fueling the school-to-prison pipeline (Wegmann & Smith, 2019). Although research supports that Black students are three times more likely to be removed from the learning environment than White students, there has been little progress on closing the disciplinary gap between Black and White students (Potera, 2021).

### **Zero-Tolerance Policy**

In response to the drastic change in school discipline over the past 25 years, many schools in the United States have adopted discipline policies and practices such as zero-tolerance policies to mandate harsh punitive penalties as punishment for students misbehaving (Woods, 2020). Zero-tolerance policies were initially created and implemented in response to dangerous student behaviors such as bringing a firearm to school (Roch & Elsayed, 2020). However, the policies have expanded to include minor nonviolent infractions as well (Helton, 2021). The policies mandate enforcing pre-determined severe punitive and exclusionary punishment in response to student misbehavior without consideration of the context or rationale for the behavior (Wirtz, 2021).

The goal of the policies was to maintain a safe school learning environment for students. More than three decades later there is no scientific evidence or data that zero-

tolerance policies improved school climate, improved student behavior, or made students feel safer (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Evidence and data support that zero-tolerance policies have significantly contributed to various negative outcomes including race-based inequities in school suspensions and expulsions (McIntosh et al., 2021) which primarily impact Black students by decreasing their access to education and increasing their risk of interacting with criminal justice center (Dutil, 2020).

Research data documents the disproportionate and inappropriate discipline of Black students through exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions and expulsions (Wirtz, 2021). Thayer's (2022) research and analysis of schools' zero-tolerance discipline policies concluded that the policies did not make schools safer but harmed Black students by increasing their suspensions and graduation rates. School districts expanded zero-tolerance policies as a discipline tool for non-violent and minor violations such as perceived disrespect and/or aggressive behavior, insubordination, drugs, alcohol, truancy, and loudness (Ford, 2021).

The broken window theory, which advocates that harsher penalties for minor offenses will deter students from engaging in major offenses, was used as justification for implementing zero-tolerance policies for minor offenses (Akkuş & Arslan, 2021). Under the expansion of zero-tolerance guidelines for minor infractions, administrators issued harsh punishments for minor offenses, such as a two-day suspension for a Black seven-year-old student chewing his Poptart to resemble a gun and saying "bang bang" and the arrest of a Black twelve-year-old student for writing "I love my friends Abby and Faith" on her desk (Helton, 2021).

Despite educators' denouncement of punitive discipline (Irby & Coney, 2021) and the correlation between out-of-school discipline with lower academic achievement, lower college enrollment rates, and increase involvement in juvenile and adult criminal justice systems (Camacho & Krezmien, 2019), school districts continue to enforce zero-discipline policies. Although research has shown that a zero-tolerance policy does not change students' behavior and is disproportionately used with Black students, administrators continue to respond to major and minor disciplinary offenses with punitive measures (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022). The policies apply to all students; however, Black students are monitored at a higher level of scrutiny than their White counterparts and therefore exclusionary discipline impacts Black students at a much higher rate (Wirtz, 2021). Exclusionary discipline policies and practices have strategically been used to sanction, remove, and criminalize Black students who are perceived as not conforming to classroom norms, behaviors, and expectations (Hines-Datiri & Cater Andrews, 2020). The impact of frequent and severe out-of-school disciplinary actions increases the academic and disciplinary gap between Black and White students. It significantly alters the academic course of black students by perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline (Khushal, 2022).

Although schools have an obligation to maintain a safe learning environment, the use of zero tolerance policies in schools has been a controversial subject since the policy was introduced in the late 80s with the Drug-Free Schools and Campuses Act (Lightfoot, 2021). The original purpose of the policy was to mitigate problematic behavior to prevent drug abuse and violence in school; however, due to the subjective interpretation of the

policy, students have been suspended and expelled for bringing water guns, nail clippers and cough drops to schools (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). The subjective nature of zero tolerance policies has resulted in the policy being disproportionately applied to Black students (Curran, 2019). A review of the literature shows there is a disproportionate number of Black students that are likely to be adversely impacted by zero tolerance policies contributing to their negative educational experience. Despite the controversy associated with zero tolerance policies, there is limited research on the relationship of zero tolerance with school safety (Huang & Cornell, 2021).

### **School to Prison Pipeline**

The use of zero-tolerance policies that remove students from the classroom is one of the primary factors contributing to the school-to prison pipeline (STPP). STPP is a metaphor that refers to educational discipline processes and policies that use exclusionary discipline practices to funnel students out of school into the juvenile justice system (Marchbanks et al., 2018). Darby (2021) refers to the school-to-prison pipeline as a failure in the education system that targets Black students by disciplining them harsher than others, referring them to law enforcement for minor behavior infractions, and ultimately pushing them out of school into the criminal justice system. Black students are more than twice as likely to be suspended or expelled than White students (Pearman et al., 2019). The high rate of out-of-school suspensions for Black students is a leading factor contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Morgan, 2021).

The most recent national discipline data resource shows Black students account for only 15% of the national school population; but, disproportionately account for 28%

of student discipline referrals to law enforcement and 32% of students arrested at school (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The disproportion in school discipline is also reflected in the nation's prison rate. Black Americans accounted for 13.6% of the national population (United States Census Bureau, 2022) and 38.4% of the national prison population (Federal Bureau of Prison, 2022). Exclusionary punishments like suspensions and expulsions remove students from the classroom which eliminates their access to instructional time and increase their likelihood of dropping out of school (Dunning-Lozano, 2022). Much research illustrates a link between students that consistently miss instructional time and criminal activity involvement (Bacher-Hicks, Billings, & Deming, 2021). Another mechanism that contributes to the STPP is disciplinary violations such as fighting and drug possession, which could result in school and legal sanctions for the same infraction (Welch et al., 2022).

According to Morgan (2021b), exclusionary school discipline policies are detrimental to Black students. Zero-tolerance school policies often result in students feeling socially isolated, which has also been identified as one of the factors that contribute to the STPP (Morgan, 2021). Fisher's et al., (2020) studied the relationship between students' race and suspension and the correlation of this relationship with school-level racial disparities in students' sense of school belonging. Their study found that school environments that incorporate a climate that improves the sense of belonging for Black students may reduce the school racial gap in out-of-school disciplinary punishments. Adolescence is a critical developmental period where students struggle with

a sense of belonging making this a vulnerable phase in their life (Rozek & Gaither, 2021).

Wong, Allen, and Gallo (2022) examination of the relationship between perceived teacher fairness and sense of school belonging confirmed that students' perceptions of teacher fairness have a direct impact on a positive teacher-student relationship and the student's sense of school belonging. Zero-tolerance policies have created hostile school environments that rely on student surveillance through multiple channels including metal detectors, locker searches, and school resource officers in schools (Hines-Datiri & Cater Andrews, 2020). Hostile school environments have been enhanced with the addition of police on the school campus. This initiative has paved the pathway to the disproportionate number of arrests and referrals of Black students introducing them to the school-to-prison pipeline (Woods, 2021).

With the implementation of zero tolerance policies and school resource officers, schools have gradually transferred disciplinary responsibilities from teachers and administrators to the police (Nance, 2022). Disciplining policies and practices that funnel students from school into the juvenile and criminal justice systems contributes to the criminalization of children and those most affected are Black children (Homer & Fisher, 2020). Students who have arrest records are less likely to graduate and more likely to become incarcerated as adults (Bacher et. al., 2021). School districts are now looking at alternative restorative justice approaches to school discipline that involves investing in students' health and well-being (Jacobs, 2022).



## **School Resource Officers**

School resource officers (SRO) are sworn police officers contracted to work in schools, or employed by a school district, with the main responsibility of maintaining safe and secure schools for students and staff (Fisher & Devlin, 2020). The concept of SROs initially emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s during a time when Black students were integrating into White schools (Turner & Beneke, 2020). By 1999, the US Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services issued a “COPS in Schools” grant awarding \$753 million to 3,000 schools to hire 6,500 SROs between 1999 and 2005 (Crosse et al., 2021). Flint, Michigan was the first state that assigned police officers to schools in 1950. This practice was quickly replicated by other school districts throughout the United States (Gleit, 2022). In response to several mass school shootings, sworn police officers were rapidly assigned to schools as a security measure to protect students and staff (Crosse et al., 2021). SROs are sworn officers with the legal power to use force, arrest and detain, and refer or place kids in the criminal justice system (Gomez, 2021).

Over the last fifteen years, the number of SROs in schools rapidly increased and SROs are now considered a critical part of the district’s organizational structure (Fedders, 2021). According to the Office of the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the percentage of schools with one or more security staff increased from 41.7% in 2005-2006 to 65% in 2021-2020. Debates about school-based law enforcement referred to as SROs have been ongoing since its implementation. Whereas proponents of SROs argue that SROs are best qualified and trained to respond to

behavior that threatens the safety of all, critics argue that SROs criminalize typical school behavior, resulting in the suspension, expulsion, and sometimes legal referral of students to the juvenile justice system (Ghavami, Thornton, & Graham, 2021). Although research studies on SROs' effectiveness are mixed, the national quantity of SROs continues to rise (Bowers, Welfare, & Lawson, 2022). Crosse et al. (2021) research compared 33 schools that enhanced SRO staffing to 72 schools that did not enhance SRO staffing. The results showed an increase in offenses and exclusionary reactions for Black students that attended schools that enhanced SRO staffing.

The United States Department of Justice (2022) identified limited positive impacts from school policing. The numerous harmful effects include physical harm, increased use of exclusionary discipline, arrests, and disproportionate impacts on Black students. While SROs are in a position to serve as mentors and to educate students on challenges they may face, such as bullying, sexual harassment, and substance abuse, the degree to which SROs participate and serve in preventative activities such as these is unclear (Stevens, Barnard-Brak, & Jackson, 2021).

The National Association of School Psychologists endorsed a positive framework for SROs built on the foundation for SROs to be utilized as educators and counselors in addition to law enforcers (National Association for School Psychologists, 2020). SROs' dual roles as officers and counselors place them in a unique position to serve as a valuable resource for students to confide in with concerns about violence (Crichlow-Ball, Cornell, & Huang, 2022). Wood and Hampton's (2021) study on the influence SROs have on teachers' perceptions of safety and security found that teachers perceived SRO as

a source of safety and security. However, teachers perceived students as being fearful and less secure in schools with SROs. Research shows a racial divide in students' perceptions of SROs with White students perceiving SROs more favorably than Black students (Crichlow-Ball, Cornell, & Huang, 2022).

The relationship between SROs and crime prevention is complicated and often results in different outcomes for different populations of students (Renbarger, Rehfeld, & Sulak, 2022). There is a great variation in the roles and job responsibilities of SROs among schools and school districts, which often leads to role ambiguity. This results in conflict between SROs and the community and the abuse of authority leading to inappropriate, unjustified, or biased disciplinary decisions (Debnam et al., 2022). One of the primary factors that determine the role SROs take on is based on students' characteristics (Gleit, 2022). Data shows SROs in schools with a majority of Black students performed more law enforcement-related functions than schools with a majority of White students; where, SROs perform more education-related functions (Crosse et al., 2021). An emerging theme from Fisher et al. (2022) analysis of interviews with 73 SROs from two different school districts indicated that SROs working in schools with a larger percentage of White students perceive potential threats as external; whereas, SROs working in schools with a larger percentage of Black students perceive potential threats as internal.

Studies show a correlation between SROs and increased disciplinary referrals to law enforcement agencies (Heise & Nance, 2021b) with Black students' experiencing higher referrals and arrests than their White peers (Irby & Coney, 2021). Increased SRO

staffing has been directly related to increased disciplinary offenses, arrests, and exclusionary punishment for Black students (Crosse et al., 2021). Homer and Fisher's (2020) examination of police in schools and student arrest by race found that having police in schools resulted in an additional arrest of 1.22 Black students and 0.38 White students. The examination concluded that the Black students' probability of arrest by SROs was stronger than their White peers. Gottfredson et al. (2020) examination of schools that increased SRO staffing with schools that did not increase staffing found that increasing SRO staffing did not improve school safety. Instead, it increased exclusionary responses to school discipline and an increase in the criminalization of school discipline. Taking into consideration SROs' authority and the negative criminal and legal implications for Black students, critics of SROs are using school discipline data to fight for the abolishment of SROs. They have been successful in eliminating police in schools in Denver, Portland, and Oakland (Gomez, 2021).

The collaboration between schools, law enforcement, and police officers' role in schools has been a controversial debate for years and with the uprisings against police brutality in recent incidents like the deaths of George Floyd and others, the controversy has elevated to an unprecedented high (Nance & Heise, 2022). Research does not support SROs as being effective; however, it does support that with the implementation of SROs there has been an increase in racial disparities, arrests, and detainments of Black students (Turner & Beneke, 2020). Students' first formal experience with the criminal legal system is often through their experience in school (Fisher & Widdowson, 2023).

Historical trends show that when students are arrested there is an increase likelihood of them falling victim to the school-to-prison pipeline (Lightfoot, 2021).

### **Suspensions and Expulsions by Race**

School suspensions and expulsions are punitive punishments that disproportionately affect Black students and may have long-term negative consequences for academic achievement and other indicators of well-being (Owens & McLanahan, 2020). The most recent report by the U.S. Department of Education and Office for Civil Rights (2018) indicates that nationally, Black students make up only 7% of the student population but account for 41.7 % of the population for students missing school due to out-of-school suspensions compared to White students that make up 22.9% of the population and account for 30.6% of the population for students missing school due to out-of-school suspensions. In 2013-14, the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) identified Black students as having a higher percentage of out-of-school suspensions than any other racial/ethnic group. The statistics for out-of-school suspensions for Black students doubled the percentage of the next highest racial/ethnic group. The United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019) briefing report on school suspensions identified a pattern of persistent racial disparities in exclusionary discipline for Black students, pushing them into the school-to-prison pipeline at a much higher rate than White students. Fisher et al. (2020) research on the relationship between student race and suspensions concluded that Black students are consistently suspended at a higher rate than their White counterparts.

Schools' use of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom has increased by approximately 50% over the last four decades (Owens & McLanahan, 2020). While some discipline cases may justify the removal of students from the classroom, a large portion of exclusionary disciplinary punishments are issued for students accused of non-violent minor infractions that do not pose a threat to other students (Wang, 2022). Decades of research have shown that exclusionary discipline practices that remove students from the classroom often result in devastating and long-term negative impacts on students' future (Okonofua, Perez, & Darling-Hammond, 2020). Studies lead researchers to believe that exclusionary school discipline punishments can significantly alter the developmental path of adolescents resulting in antisocial behavior (Gerlinger et al., 2021). Some of the long-term negative effects of exclusionary discipline sanctions impacted students' future academic performance, attendance, and behavior (Camacho & Krezmien, 2019).

Gerlinger et al. (2021) synthesized existing empirical evidence from 40 primary studies to analyze the correlation between exclusionary discipline practices and delinquent outcomes. Findings from the study revealed that exclusionary discipline practices may be counterproductive and exacerbates delinquent behaviors instead of changing them. Prior research supports that school exclusionary disciplinary practices may have a greater impact on increasing the probability of subsequent problematic behavior, resulting in students being channeled through the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Dong & Krohn, 2020). Harsh exclusionary discipline creates racial inequality for Black students due to the disproportionate use of this type of discipline practice for Black

students (Okonofua, Perez, & Darling-Hammond, 2020). Nationally, Black students are more likely than their White peers to be suspended or expelled for minor, non-violent offenses (Wang et al., 2022). Although research has shown that exclusionary discipline practices are unfairly and unevenly applied and that Black students are disproportionately targeted, school districts continue to use these types of discipline practices and the discipline gap between Black and White students continues to increase (Potera, 2021).

Wirtz (2021) identified implicit bias toward Black students as one of the primary factors contributing to the discipline gap between Black and White students. Exclusionary sanctions for minor infractions are disproportionately applied to Black students and increase their likelihood of being referred to the criminal justice system (Gerlinger et al., 2021). Studies have shown a direct relationship between students that experience exclusionary discipline sanctions with an increased risk of becoming a part of the juvenile and criminal justice system due to the increased likelihood of students dropping out of school (Welch et al., 2022). Bacher-Hicks, Billings, and Deming (2021) examined middle-school suspension rates in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools and their influence on criminal activity in adulthood. Findings showed a strong correlation between students who attend schools with high suspension rates and an increased likelihood of dropping out of school and being arrested and jailed as adults. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2022), Bureau of Justice Statistics 2019, characteristics of federal prisoners identified 20,497 Black inmates as having a college degree compared to 140,413 not having a HS diploma or GED.

The racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions are also reflected in educational disparities between Black and White students (Rosenbaum, 2020). Exclusionary discipline is associated with lower academic achievement (Anderson, 2020). Black students are twice as likely to face exclusionary discipline sanctions than their White peers and once suspended, their likelihood of dropping out of school increases (Erickson & Pearson, 2022). Furthermore, students who receive out-of-school disciplinary punishments experience multiple negative academic consequences including falling behind academically, decreased school engagement, low academic achievement, an increased possibility of repeating a grade, and/or dropping out of school (Okonofua, Perez, & Darling-Hammond, 2020).

Exclusionary discipline punishment removes students from the normal school environment which results in a loss of instructional time (Erickson & Pearson, 2022). U.S. Department of Education's (2018) most recent Civil Rights Data Collection found that in 2017-2018 Black students accounted for 7.4% of the student population and 41.7% of missed instructional days due to out-of-school suspensions. White students made up 22.9% of the student population and accounted for 30.6% of missed instructional days due to out-of-school suspensions.

Data from 2019 recorded approximately 700,000 arrests of school-aged youths nationwide (Office of Juvenile Justice, 2020). Of the school-aged youths arrested in 2019, 34 percent were Black which is an overrepresentation of the 14.6 percent of the U.S. population that is considered Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The U.S. Census (2021) listed White school-aged youths' arrest as 60 percent underrepresented. The



nationwide suspensions and expulsions percentages shows similar racial disparity between Black and White students (Fisher & Widdowson, 2023). Black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than White students that commit the same disciplinary infraction (Wegmann & Smith, 2019). Despite decades of research and documentation on the racial disparity between Black and White students, the disciplinary gap continues to grow and be a concern in education (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018).

### **Administrators and School Discipline**

Institutional policies and practices such as zero-tolerance policies create a racially hostile school climate that adversely affects Black students (Bell, 2020). Despite administrators' critical role in school operations, there is limited research on their perceptions of racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions in school discipline (Heise & Nance, 2021a). On all levels of government, (national, state, local), research shows that school administrators discipline Black students more harshly and frequently than White students for the same infractions (Darby, 2021). Administrators are granted discretion in handling disciplinary actions and can implement restorative discipline practices such as parental meetings, interventions, and in-school suspension (Bacher-Hicks, Billings, & Deming, 2021). Administrators serve a vital role in creating equitable school discipline practices, cultures, and norms for all students (Wirtz, 2021).

Findings from research facilitated by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019) show that Black students do not commit more disciplinable offenses than their White peers, but receive significantly harsher and longer punishments than their

white peers that commit the same offense. Research shows that Black and White's administrators traditionally punish Black students more harshly, for the same offense, than White students (Roch & Elsayed, 2020). The high and disproportionate rates of suspensions and expulsions Black students experience reflect the administrators' implementation of school district's policies and practices on discipline (Morgan, 2021). When a school has a neutral discipline policy that does not reference race; but, the school applies the policy in a discriminatory manner, the Obama Administration classifies this type of practice as "intentional discrimination (Liu, Hayes, Gershenson, 2021). Thus, the overrepresentation of Black students in exclusionary discipline referrals for non-violent and non-drug-related infractions represents a history of racism in U.S. schools (Kyere, Joseph & Wei, 2020).

As research continuously and consistently substantiates racialized discipline disparities in school discipline for Black students, scholars question if educators' implicit biases contribute to discipline disproportionalities in schools (Bell, 2020). Implicit bias describes the automatic and unintentional way we subconsciously judge the world around us (Uwakaneme, 2022). An example of racial biases in school discipline practices is when disciplinary sanctions for the same behavior vary based on student race (Shi & Zhu, 2022). Implicit bias has been documented in teachers' disciplinary decisions. However, there is limited research on administrators' implicit bias and they play a primary role in determining disciplinary outcomes (Gullo & Beachum, 2020a). Experimental research has discovered that a student's race has an influence on a teacher's perceptions of a series of misbehaviors and their disciplinary response (Perez & Okonofua, 2022)

To prevent racial disciplinary disparities, administrators must stay aware of strengths, weaknesses, and limitations in their schools' disciplinary practices and environment (Martinez, 2020). Roch (2019) examined administrators' behavior in different racial environments to determine if the race of the administrators or the racial makeup of the district impacted the disciplinary gap between Black and White students. Results suggest that Black and White administrators punished Black students more harshly than White students and only punished Black students less harshly in environments where Black students and Black administrators were the majority. Administrators' and teachers' inconsistent and inequitable application of discipline sanctions has significantly contributed to the discipline gap between Black students and their White peers (Williams, 2022). Perez and Okonofua's (2022) investigation on how teachers sharing their perceptions of a student's character influences discipline decisions showed that Black students are automatically perceived the same as White students with a bad reputation. Without information on the student's behavior, teachers assume the Black student would misbehave and get suspended. Shi and Zhu's (2022) examination of heterogeneity by infraction type and classification of infractions as objective (truancy, dress code violations) or subjective (insubordination, disruptive behavior) revealed that subjective infractions exacerbate racial differences and administrators' discretion over punishment severity increases bias. Administrators should create a supportive and equitable environment for all students and educate teachers on protective factors to improve students' classroom behavior (Wirtz, 2021).

School discipline frequently starts in the classroom with teacher referrals (Curran, 2019). Teachers are often the first responders to disciplinary infractions and school administrators are often the final decision-maker for exclusionary discipline (Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020). While documented racial disparity in exclusionary discipline has existed for decades, the contributing factors for its pervasiveness has not been clearly identified (Fennings & Jenkins). Despite administrators' critical role in exclusionary discipline decisions, there continues to be a lack of information about how administrators perceive racial disparities in disciplinary actions between Black and White students.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This study will fill the gap noted in this literature review of the racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions for Black students by discovering factors that administrators perceive as contributors to the disparities. In this Chapter, I identified major themes from the literature that have influenced the racial disparity in exclusionary school discipline practices for Black students; consequently, placing them at risk for various negative future outcomes including lower academic achievement, lower college enrollment rates, increased high school dropout and involvement in juvenile and adult criminal justice center. Researchers have found a history of credible and recent evidence of racial inequalities in schools and the adverse effects of the oppression of Black students. School discipline policies such as zero-tolerance have proven to be ineffective in changing students' behavior or improving the school climate, but have been effective in creating a pathway for Black students referred to as the "school-to-prison" pipeline that removes them out of the classroom into the criminal justice system. Additionally,

SROs were placed in schools and normal adolescent misbehaving was criminalized and this further exacerbated the “school-to-prison” pipeline for Black students. A review of the history of suspensions and expulsions showed that Black students are two to three times more likely to be suspended or expelled for the same infractions committed by their White counterparts.

While it is known, based on research, that nationally Black students in Grades K-12 are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers, it is not known why there has been little progress in reducing the racial school-discipline gap. Although administrators play a key role in disciplinary outcomes, there is little research on their perceptions of the disparities. Research supports that administrators’ implicit biases impact their decision-making and contribute to the discipline gap. This study will add to the literature to decrease the school discipline gap by extending knowledge on administrators’ perceptions of racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions. The evidence from the literature supports that using a qualitative approach will be appropriate to address the racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions for Black students. The next chapter outlines the research methodology and research design in addition to the instrumentation and trustworthiness issues.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand administrators' perceptions of the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Nationally, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their White peers for the same discipline violation (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Exclusionary discipline sanctions result in harmful future outcomes for students, decreasing their access to education and increasing their risk of interacting with the criminal justice center (Dutil, 2020). Research has established a correlation between exclusionary discipline techniques, like suspensions and expulsions, with increases in drop-out rates, lower academic achievement, and students being channeled through the school-to-prison pipeline (Dutil, 2020; Bell & Puckett, 2020; Borman et al., 2022). Administrators' pivotal role in school disciplinary decisions and understanding administrators' perception of racial disparities are important because Black students are at a higher risk of receiving exclusionary discipline sanctions (Wirtz, 2021).

The discipline gap between Black and White students exceeds teacher referral. This gap reflects administrators' inequitable distribution of discipline severity despite similar behavior infractions (Gullo and Beachum, 2020b). For this study, I wanted to understand administrators' perceptions of racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students and what factors influenced their decision-making. Gullo and Beachum (2020b) indicated that administrators' implicit bias, beliefs, and stereotypes directly impact school discipline racial disparity. Additionally, I wanted to

understand what administrators considered when rendering disciplinary decisions and what factors in their decision-making may have contributed to the racial disparity.

Chapter 3 includes a description of the qualitative research design, the rationale for this study, my role as the researcher, the methodology, procedures I used for participant recruitment and selection, and data collection procedures. Additionally, I specified the data analysis processes and discussed issues of trustworthiness, which include: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical procedures. I concluded Chapter 3 with a summary of the main objectives of the research method processes.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research questions for this basic qualitative study were as follows:

RQ 1: What are school administrators' perceptions about the documented the disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?

RQ 2: What are school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in expulsions between Black and White students?

To answer the research questions, I conducted semistructured, in-depth, and virtual one-on-one interviews with administrators. These administrators currently or have previously worked in the study's state, with documented racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. School districts in the study's state were selected based on their documented disparities in suspensions for Black students and diversity in size and location, as specified in the Governor's Accountability Office report on K-12 discipline disparities (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018).

Participants from school districts within the study's state were selected based on the highest percentage of Black students suspended and expelled during the 2017-18 school year. The 2017-2018 school year was the most recent year statistics were listed by the National Center for Education Statistics. Interviewing administrators gave insight into their perceptions of the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students.

I contemplated qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research approaches to determine the most appropriate approach for this research. The selection of a research approach should be based on the type of data needed to answer the research questions (Novosel, 2022). Ramlo (2020) characterized quantitative research as unbiased due to the statistical analysis of the data. Qualitative research is characterized as subjective due to interpreting individuals' experiences (Scalcau, 2021). The mixed-method approach is characterized by combining qualitative and quantitative research due to the need to capture quantitative and qualitative data (Wasti, 2022).

Statistical data is not required to answer the research questions. Therefore, quantitative and mixed methods studies were not an appropriate approach for this study. I chose a qualitative approach because it was most appropriate for exploring and interpreting an individual's lived experiences (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019). I considered several qualitative designs under the qualitative approach, including phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and basic study (Agazu, Dejenu, & Debela, 2022). Grounded theory and phenomenological inquiries are not appropriate for this study because they seek to develop a theory from data that is collected. These methods do not



allow the researcher to learn about participants' perceptions or better understand how they perceive their reality (Cleson et al., 2021). Ethnography involves observing a group in a specific setting to understand their cultural habits and behavior (FitzGerald & Mills, 2022). Cultural habits and behaviors were not a focus of this study. Therefore, the ethnographic design would not serve as a suitable selection for this study.

I chose the basic qualitative research design which is the most common and is an interpretative study that seeks to reveal and interpret meanings (Agazu, Dejenu, & Debela, 2022). A basic qualitative study approach includes exploring a specific phenomenon through the experience of others by investigating multiple perceptions to gain a deeper understanding (Ramlo, 2020). This approach is appropriate because I sought to explore administrators' perceptions to better understand how they view their reality on the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. My study's procedures for collecting, analyzing, and recording results were aligned with the basic qualitative research design meanings (Agazu, Dejenu, & Debela, 2022).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a professional working in the field of education, I have attended numerous professional development meetings where the disparity in discipline between Black and White students was the main subject of the meetings. As a mother of Black children, this topic is of great interest to me. I have served over 15 years in multiple financial support roles in education, ranging from a buyer to Chief Financial Officer. I have not held a supervisory role over school administrators in my current or past roles. As a researcher, I do not, nor have I ever, had any supervisory role over any of the participants. I have not

had any personal or professional relationships with the participants that could potentially influence the participants in this study or create a personal bias for myself.

I served as the primary data collection instrument for this basic qualitative study. I conducted semistructured interviews with school administrators and translated their responses before organizing and sharing the transcripts for participant review and approval. Prior to conducting interviews, all of the participants were sent an email with the informed consent form attached and they all verbally consented (see Appendix B). Furthermore, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, they had the option to withdraw at any time, and their identity and responses will remain confidential. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities and the names of schools and districts.

Participant bias can occur if there is a relationship between the researcher and the participant. To prevent participant bias, I wrote an email to potential participants explaining who I was, my role as a professional in the field of education, and any possible prior relationship that could exist based on my role. Participants had an opportunity to review and make changes to my interpretation of their responses. I also identified my biases to ensure the research's transparency and trustworthiness. As a Black woman, educated in the public education system and a professional in the field of education, I have a personal bias. I have experienced and witnessed the disciplinary struggles and challenges Black students face in public education. To mitigate my personal bias, I used a method called bracketing to document my reflection. Bracketing is writing memos or notes to document personal bias or reflection after each interview

(Janak, 2022). I used the journal to record my emotions and experiences throughout the study to ensure my personal opinions did not impact the findings.

### **Methodology**

This section discusses the participant selection logic, instrumentation, recruitment, and data analysis plan. Details on the recruitment phase includes the process, logic, and participant qualification. More in-depth information is provided on the data collection tool and analysis plan. The methods that were used in the research, the research design, and the justification for the design choices will be identified.

#### **Participant Selection**

Participants who met the qualifications were purposefully selected. The participants were school administrators in the selected study's school district with three or more years of experience. The school administrators were in a school where racial discipline disparities for Black students were identified in the 2018 Governor's Office of Accountability report. School administrators were asked to confirm their years of experience as an administrator via the consent form. Furthermore, the consent form required confirmation of participants' work experience in a position where they either determined, made the recommendation, or forwarded for consideration disciplinary actions for student suspension or expulsion. Administrators, in districts that qualify for this study, will be contacted by email.

For this basic qualitative study, I collected primary data from semistructured, virtual interviews with administrators in school districts where the number of Black students suspended or expelled is overrepresented compared to the total population of

students in the school. The participants were purposively selected based on their present or past position as disciplinary administrators and their school's disciplinary data. In selecting my sample size, I considered several concepts including generalization. I eliminated generalization due to its statistical component which is frequently misapplied to qualitative research and does not apply to qualitative research including qualitative interviewing (Cobern & Adams, 2020).

Hennink and Kaiser (2022) recommended saturation as an indicator for identifying the appropriate sample size for qualitative research. Hennink and Kaiser's (2022) research analyzing multiple approaches to assess saturation, concluded that saturation can be achieved with 9-17 participants. Although there are no guidelines on determining a specific sample size, an appropriate amount of data should be gathered to answer the research questions and reach data saturation (Gill, 2020). For this research study, saturation was met with 9 participants.

To qualify as a participant in the study, individuals had experience as a disciplinary administrator who presently or previously worked in a K-12 leadership role for 3 or more years. Volunteers for this study were solicited based on their school disciplinary records of racial disproportionality as documented by the Government Accountability Office and the National Center for Education Statistics. Administrators in these school districts were sent emails that asked them to volunteer, with an incentive of a \$5 Starbucks gift card for participating. All interested volunteers were required to answer three questions to determine their qualifications to participate in this study.

## **Instrumentation**

The primary research instrument for this study was the researcher. I developed an instrument to ascertain responses to the research questions. The research committee and an equity and multicultural education expert thoroughly analyzed the instrument. An expert on this topic was consulted to evaluate the interview questions and ensure content validity. The expert is a Black female who served as the Equity Director at a school district in the study's state and has over 20 years of experience. She is affiliated with the National Association for Multicultural Education, has a doctorate in Multicultural Education, and has a Doctor of Law. She has served in leadership positions for the past 15 years. She is committed to dismantling institutional and systemic racism within education. She also works with colleagues to mitigate discipline disparities within her school district. Based on her educational experience and professional background, I determined she was qualified to evaluate my interview questions. After her evaluation, she provided feedback on the instrument's capacity to obtain the data necessary to answer the interview questions. Table 1 shows the alignment of the interview questions to the research question and conceptual framework.

As the researcher, I developed the interview questions based on the research questions (Appendix A) and literature topics. The interview questions were created to collect administrators' perspectives regarding exclusionary discipline practices for Black students at their school. Interviews were critical in exploring views, beliefs, opinions, and experiences regarding the racial disparity between Black and White students in suspensions and expulsions.

I held one-on-one, semistructured interviews with 9 administrators with experience working as disciplinary administrators in a public K-12 environment in the United States. Each interview was held through a virtual platform and lasted 45-60 minutes. Sah, Singh, and Sah (2020) identified Zoom and Microsoft Teams as acceptable virtual communication tools for collecting research data. Each participant was asked the same series of interview questions. Prompting follow-up questions were asked for additional clarification. Each interview was audio recorded and included a debriefing session at the culmination of the interview.

**Table 1***Interview Questions Alignment with Research Questions*

Interview Questions	Alignment
What are your perceptions about the documented racial disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?	RQ1
What factors impact your decision-making when it comes to suspending a student?	RQ1
Why do you think there is a disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?	RQ1
What are your perceptions about the documented racial disparity in expulsions between Black and White students?	RQ2
What factors impact your decision-making when it comes to expelling a student?	RQ2
Why do you think there is a disparity in expulsions between Black and White students?	RQ2
How do you see your role in resolving student discipline situations that may threaten or harm others?	RQ1, RQ2
How do you ensure that your disciplinary decisions/recommendations are applied the same for all students?	RQ1, RQ2
What are the behavioral incidents/scenarios that resulted in out-of-school disciplinary actions for students that you disciplined?	RQ1, RQ2
Does your school have any restorative disciplinary practices that do not involve suspensions or expulsions?	RQ1, RQ2

**Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

To participate in this study, potential participants were required to meet the following criteria: (a) must have worked in a school district in the study's state with documented racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White

students and (b) must have experience as a disciplinary administrator who presently or previously have worked in a K-12 leadership role for 3 or more years. The resource for recruitment was through email. Participants received a detailed description of the study and an informed consent form. An email with an attached informed consent form requesting participants' consent to participate in the study was sent to each participant. Participants responded to the email with their intent to participate. All participants responded to the email within three business days. Participants had access to my Walden email and personal cell phone number to contact me. There were no follow up attempts. All participants were interested in participating in the research study.

Those who responded with their intent to participate were reminded that their participation was voluntary, advised of the \$5 Starbucks card that will be emailed to them after participation, and asked to provide days and times for virtual one-on-one interviews. As the interviewer, I adjusted my schedule to fit the participants' schedules. Virtual interviews were scheduled for 45 minutes to one-hour time frames. Participants were advised that interviews would be recorded via the virtual platform. A minimum of 9 separate virtual interviews were conducted and transcribed. Notes were taken to document comments and my observations. After transcription, the data was thoroughly reviewed and revised based on notes taken during the interview. As the researcher, I used bracketing throughout the interview process to mitigate my personal biases and preconceived notions so I could understand the phenomenon exclusively from the participants' perception. A summary of each interview was sent via email to each participant for their review to ensure the transcripts accurately summarized the interview.



All personal names and identifiers were removed to protect the identity and confidentiality of each interviewee. At the conclusion of the interview, each participant was debriefed and given an opportunity to ask questions.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The key concepts explored in this study were school administrators' perceptions of the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. School discipline and safety are two critical areas of supervision for school administrators (Fenning & Jenkins, 2018). Viewing these concepts from the lens of school administrators provided insight into trends and influences that may impact administrators' decision-making strategies when assigning disciplinary actions. In addition, conducting interviews was an opportunity for me to gain specific insight into administrators' lived experiences and better understand their perspectives.

Virtual interviews were conducted via the virtual platform, Microsoft Teams. Ten minutes after the completion of each interview, I received, via Microsoft Teams email, the virtual recording of the interview and the transcript. The recording, transcript, and researcher's notes were used to ensure interviews accurately reflected participants' responses. To conduct a credible analysis, it was imperative that the interviews accurately reflected participants' responses prior to starting the coding process. Coding is an essential part of qualitative research. Before coding, transcription of audio/visual data is a critical prerequisite (Parameswaran, Ozawa-Kirk, & Latendresse, 2020). After receiving the emailed recording and written transcript of each interview, I thoroughly read each transcript. I compared each transcript to the recording and my notes and edited the

transcript as needed. After sending the transcripts to each participant for their review and receiving confirmation that the transcript accurately reflected their responses, I began the coding process.

I utilized Microsoft Excel for coding and data analysis. Utilizing Excel, I manually coded the data. Open coding was utilized to organize the data into discrete parts and identify them by codes. Based on the participants' responses, I highlighted interview data in different colors and made comments regarding the appropriate code to identify the data. The organization of data into codes was based on what participants said and not what the words meant (Allsop et al., 2022). In this phase of coding, similar words, phrases, and comments were coded together. I exercised caution in coding the actual data from the participant.

Coding is used to assemble, categorize, and organize collected data (William & Moser, 2019). Williams and Moser (2019) recommended the use of both open and axial coding strategies to consistently compare and contrast data and consolidate as needed. Axial coding was my second step of coding. After analyzing data and codes that contain multiple words, the codes were categorized into categories known as axial coding. The categories were then assessed to identify themes or patterns to answer the research questions and purpose of the study. There were no discrepant cases.

### **Trustworthiness**

In the scientific community, quantitative research is more credible than qualitative research due to its statistical nature (Adler, 2022). Whereas quantitative research relies on quantifiable measurements; qualitative research relies on descriptions such as words and

observations (Alder, 2022). Qualitative research has four critical criteria that contribute to the trustworthiness of the researcher (Tracy, 2019). These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section will discuss each of the four criteria in further detail.

### **Threats to Validity**

#### **Credibility**

One of the most important criteria in establishing trustworthiness is credibility. Generating credible evidence to inform practice, change policy, and contribute to theory is a primary purpose of research (Fleming et al., 2021). Triangulation and member checking are two techniques used in qualitative research to establish credibility. Triangulation involves cross-checking research with multiple methods and sources to increase its credibility (Stahl & King, 2020). Member checking involves sharing the data, interpretations, and conclusions with participants to check the accuracy of the data. I ensured credibility by acknowledging my personal biases and sending data results to participants for their review and approval. Additionally, utilizing saturation for sample size also increased the credibility of the research.

#### **Transferability**

Transferability exists when readers have evidence that the research findings can be transferred to other situations, times, and settings (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Qualitative inquiry expands understanding by transferring findings from one context to another (Stahl & King, 2020). Rose and Johnson (2020) defined thick description as a strategy

that focuses on the detail by describing observations and interpretations to enrich the data and provide a sense of reality for the readers to have a deeper understanding of the study. Thick descriptions were used in this study to support the transferability of the research.

### **Dependability**

Dependability occurs when the research findings are consistent and can be duplicated by future researchers (Tracy, 2019). In-depth methodological descriptions will provide steps necessary for future research to replicate the study. To ensure dependability, I maintained a journal of reflective notes and data analysis to manage the data. Additionally, I incorporated an audit trail consisting of the coding processes. After the conclusion of the research, details specified what codes clustered together to form themes.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability exists when the findings are based on data, not the researcher's bias (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I utilized bracketing to identify personal biases. Microsoft Excel was also used as the transcription software to assist in the reflexivity process. Additional strategies to eliminate bias included recording interviews and participants reviewing and approving their transcripts.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethical behavior with integrity, called responsible practice, requires researchers to be honest, accountable, and professional in all research areas (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2021). I was responsible for protecting the participants by creating an environment free from harm or danger. One of the most effective resources for ensuring an ethical study is

the review and approval of the study by an ethics review board (When People Matter, 2021). Solicitation of participants began after the approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Ethical procedures were followed based on Walden University IRB guidelines. The IRB is a committee established to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research studies conducted on behalf of the university. The recruitment, consent, and data collection processes followed the procedures outlined in the guidelines. Additionally, site permission, as required by the school district, was obtained before conducting data collection or analysis. Once site approval was obtained, I emailed all participants an invitation and informed consent form. The informed consent form provided details on the study, the participants' role, the research purpose, method of data collection, confidentiality statement, and the amount of time allocated for the study.

Participants confirmed by email with their intent to participate and interviews were scheduled. The informed consent form specified that there was no compensation for this voluntary study; however, a \$5 Starbucks gift card was given to each participant as an appreciation for their participation in the study at the conclusion of the interview. All information disclosed during the study remained confidential to protect the participants' identity. Participants were informed of their choice to discontinue participation in the study at any time. No participants withdrew from the study.

The informed consent form listed any potential risk. Participants were allowed to ask questions throughout the interview process. Data collected throughout this study was used exclusively for the research study and the data was secured and labeled to conceal

the participant's identity. To ensure confidentiality, data was kept secure by saving data to a password-protected device and using codes in place of names. Data will be kept for a minimum period of five years as required by Walden University. Five years after the completion of the study, all the data will be destroyed and deleted. The contribution this research may make or have on social change was expressed to participants to increase their interest in the study.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 provided a comprehensive account of the research methodology used for this basic qualitative study. The chapter started with an analysis of the research method and design and the rationale for selecting the research design. I also addressed the role of the researcher, participant selection, recruitment procedures, and instrumentation. Additionally, details were provided on data collection and analysis followed by components of the study that supported its trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The study concluded with the ethical procedures that would be followed to ensure the protection and confidentiality of the participants and the data.

Chapter 4 will briefly provide an overview of the study's purpose and research question. The chapter will also address the settings, data collection, and data analysis. The next section of Chapter 4 will elaborate on the study's trustworthiness and the implementation of transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Chapter 4 will conclude with an analysis of the results of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand school administrators' perceptions of the suspension and expulsion disparity between Black and White students. I interviewed nine urban administrators from the Southeastern region of the United States to gain a better understanding of their perception of the racial discipline disparity for Black students. The following two research questions guided this study:

RQ 1: What are school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?

RQ 2: What are school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in expulsions between Black and White students?

Chapter 4 outlines the findings of the basic qualitative research study detailed in Chapter 3. The chapter begins with a description of the study's settings and the demographics of the participants. Additionally, this chapter provides a review of the data collection process and data analysis along with evidence of trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with the results of the study, summary, and conclusion.

### **Setting**

The setting was an urban, predominately White, school district located in the Southeastern region of the United States. According to the district's financial & demographics planning report, the school district has 5,600 students and 10 schools. Of the 5,600 students, 21.5% are Black, 60.7% are White, and 17.8% are other races. Black students only account for 21.5% of the population, however, disproportionately account for 81.4% of disciplinary referrals, whereas their White counterparts account for 60.7%

of the population and 14% of disciplinary referrals. The urban administrators who participated in this study were currently or had previously served in roles as disciplinary administrators for this school district. Nine administrators met the qualifying criteria and consented to participate in the study.

### **Demographics**

Participants were administrators in the selected school district with three or more years of experience in a school where racial discipline disparities in suspensions and expulsions for Black students were identified in the 2018 Governor's Office of Accountability report. Of the nine participants, two were female and seven were male. The racial make-up of the participants was five Black administrators and 4 White administrators. Two of the administrators led an elementary school, four led a middle school, and three led a high school. Participants reported a range of school discipline experiences between 5.5 to 16 years. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code to maintain their confidentiality. For example, my first participant was referred to as P1, and the second participant was referred to as P2. There were no unexpected situations that affected the analysis of the results of this study. Table 2 includes a summary of participants' identifiers, years of experience, gender and race.



**Table 2***Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>Administrative Experience</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>
P1	8	Female	White
P2	10	Male	White
P3	14	Male	Black
P4	5.5	Male	White
P5	15	Female	Black
P6	7	Male	Black
P7	16	Male	Black
P8	11	Male	Black
P9	16	Male	White

**Data Collection**

The data collection process was as outlined in Chapter 3. I obtained IRB approval from the district I collected data from on July 13, 2023. After receiving that approval, I submitted the district's IRB to Walden University and obtained Walden University IRB approval on July 14, 2023 (IRB # 07-06-23-1009113). Participants were recruited via email. The email included a summary of the research study, reasons why they should participate, and qualifications for participants. An email, with the consent form attached, was sent to 12 potential participants.

Nine participants responded with their consent to participate. After receiving the approval consent from the nine participants, I responded with an email asking the participants for their preference of a virtual or in person meeting and dates and times that were suitable for them to be interviewed. Once scheduling was confirmed, individual interviews lasting between 30 and 40 minutes were conducted. Some participants showed

more passion about the topic and expressed in depth responses. Depending on the feedback from each participant, additional follow-up questions were asked to obtain more details about the participant's lived experiences as an administrator of discipline.

The data collection process took approximately eight weeks to complete. Eight participants chose to complete the interview via a virtual platform and two chose in person. I interviewed each participant only once for approximately 30 minutes. I used the IRB-approved interview protocol (see Appendix A) as the primary instrument to facilitate data collection with participants. The interview questions were open-ended and semistructured.

One-on-one virtual interviews using Google Meet video conferencing on a password-protected laptop, was conducted in the privacy of my office, with the door closed. Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and all participants agreed to the recording. Additionally, I took notes during the interviews. For the two in-person interviews, one was conducted in the privacy of my office and one was conducted in the privacy of the participant's office. The in-person interviews were recorded on a password protected cellular phone using the voice memos application. I also took notes.

There were minimal to nonexistent variables of interview conditions. Each participant received the consent form and verbally agreed to the conditions of the consent form prior to the start of the interview. The research-developed interview protocol served as a guide for the interview, ensuring consistency in the questions asked. At the beginning of each interview, the protocol included an introduction to the study,

participant's role in the study, assurance of the confidentiality of the study, and a reminder that their participation was voluntary and they had the right to opt out of the study at any time for any reason without prejudice. I gave the participants time to address any concerns or questions they had before conducting the interviews. No participants indicated any concerns or had any questions before the interviews.

Participants were informed of the coding process that I would utilize to ensure the confidentiality of their responses, identification, and schools. I also used a reflective journal to record my personal thoughts and feelings. After the virtual interviews, the videos were saved to my password-protected computer and the in-person recordings were saved to my phone. Google Meet sent me an email of the interview transcription which was also saved to my password-protected computer. At the conclusion of the interviews, I thanked the participants for volunteering and reminded them that they would receive a \$5 Starbucks gift card. I also assured them again of the confidentiality of the study and that I would be the only one with access to the interview recordings, transcriptions, and notes.

I advised each participant that I would thoroughly read and edit the transcriptions to ensure accuracy and email them a copy of the transcription to ensure their responses were recorded accurately. Each participant was advised that they would receive a summary of the study's findings after I collected and analyzed the data. Participants were then given an opportunity to ask me any questions. No participant asked any questions.

After completing all nine interviews, I thoroughly read over all of my notes and reviewed the transcriptions, videos, and audio recordings multiple times. I reviewed each transcript word for word and edited as needed to ensure I captured what was stated during

the interview. I then emailed each transcript to the appropriate participant and gave them a date and time to respond with any corrections. I advised the participants that if I did not receive a response from them by the specified date and time, I would assume the transcript accurately reflected what was said during the interview. One participant returned the transcript with additional corrections. All other participants confirmed that their transcript accurately reflected what was stated during the interview.

All the digital recordings are stored on my password-protected computer and cellular phone. They will remain there for a minimum of five years. After five years, they will be deleted and destroyed. I followed the steps that were in Chapter 3 to conduct the research and did not encounter any unexpected occurrences during the data collection process.

### **Data Analysis**

In this basic qualitative study, I explored administrators' perceptions of the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students by conducting one-on-one interviews. I asked 10 open-ended questions in the same order. Follow-up questions were also asked to gain more clarity on participants' responses. During the interviews, Google Meet was used to audio record and I transcribed the interviews into written text. I also used voice memo to audio record the two interviews that were conducted in person. Each transcript was thoroughly reviewed and edited as needed to ensure the participants' words were transcribed accurately. The transcriptions were then shared with the participants for their review and feedback, requested back within a week. After sending the transcripts to the participants and confirming that all were correct, I

began to analyze the data word by word again. I listened to the audio recordings while reading the transcription multiple times. This process ensured my familiarization with the data.

I used the conceptual framework lens to analyze the data and supported the data findings with extant literature. To assist in organizing the data, open coding was applied to identify repetitive words, phrases, and concepts. This helped me to code accurately and consistently by using the same code for similar words for each interview question from each participant. After codes were created and listed in an Excel spreadsheet, I began to categorize the codes. Similar codes were placed into a category. The categories were used to complete a second phase of coding referred to as axial coding. Each category was identified with a specific color to aid me with identifying categories and going through them quickly and efficiently. After the category phase, I was able to count the various categories and identify themes that were emerging from the study. There were no discrepant cases per se because all perspectives were factored into the analysis. No unusual situations occurred during the data analysis process.

### **Step 1: Familiarizing Myself with the Data**

To validate the accuracy of the transcript, I compared each audio recording with my notes and the written transcripts and edited transcripts as needed. I also had each participant review and confirm the accuracy of the transcript. Each interview was analyzed in the order that the interviews were completed. Each participant was given an alphanumeric code, such as P1 and P2, to ensure confidentiality. I read the transcript and listen to the audio recording multiple times to gain a deeper understanding of the data.

While reading and listening to the transcript, I created 10 tabs in an Excel spreadsheet and listed each question on a tab. Each tab was broken into columns, which contained the alphanumeric code for the participants in the first column, a narrative summary of the participant's response to the question in the second column, and open codes in the third column, and each code was broken down into various categories in the fourth column. I created a Word document that contained all the codes in one column, the category which the codes were placed in, and the theme that emerged.

### **Step 2: Generating Codes**

Open and axial coding were used to analyze the interview data. After organizing my data in an Excel spreadsheet, I began the coding process. I reviewed each response word by word and assigned a word or short phrase to summarize the meaning of participants' responses. I then grouped the common words and phrases into codes based on the similarities of the words and its meanings. Assigning codes allowed me to capture the essence of the participants' responses using a word or short phrase. The codes were inputted in a column labeled "open code" in Excel. Each tab, for each interview question, for every participant, had a column labeled codes. When I was challenged with identifying a code, the existing codes helped me to identify a code that would be appropriate to summarize the data. Additional codes were added as needed. The codes were grouped by participants' responses. Based on the data, over 100 codes were identified. Based on the data, approximately 50 open codes were identified. Table 3 shows an example of four of the open codes organized by participants' ID and narrative for research question one (RQ1).

**Table 3***Examples of Open Codes*

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>How do you see your role in resolving student discipline situations that may threaten or harm others?</b>	<b>Open Code</b>
P1	Use restorative practice. Give students skills to resolve conflict before it occurs. Administration ensures staff and teachers have support as needed to intervene and assist. Social and Emotional Learning. Ensuring we are taking care of all learnings and a sense of belonging.	restorative practice, coping, skills, Intervene, assist, belonging, support, social, emotional
P2	I see my role, specifically in behaviors that may threaten or harm others, as the primary responder to those behaviors. And when those behaviors are in any way, intentionally predatory and not based on a mutual conflict in finding an appropriate balance of consequence and support for the student that's engaging in those behaviors as a primary point of emphasis. Keep people safe from behaviors that might threaten and harm others. Assign appropriate consequences, such that students understand what our standard for behavior is, but we also work to resolve the conflict to the extent that we can. If an ongoing conflict reengages over and over again. We have to take steps to escalate those.... intensify the consequences. So it's really, I guess two different approaches depending on whether it's this (Gestures two fist together) or one person really like engaging in antisocial behavior, that's purely intended to harm or harass, somebody else.	threaten, harm, primary, response, behaviors, intentionally, predatory, conflict, balance, consequences, support, engaging safe, standard, ongoing, escalate, harass scared
P3	Look at it and take myself out and look at it subjectively as far as what's the best outcome for both parties or whoever is involved in it. I have to look at it as far as trying to get all the information first and follow through with due process with whoever's involved. Regardless if it's a student or a teacher.... focus on students, saying whoever aggressor is in a situation	Subjectively, Due Process
P4	Immediate stop harm and make sure everyone is safe. Understand what happened. Identify appropriate resolution/consequences. Communicate to parents. Monitor disciplinary action to see if it solved the problem. Share discipline data with teams and ensure decisions are logical. District code of conduct does not cover everything. Subjectivity in decision making reflects the role race plays in decision.	Immediate, harm, safe, resolution, consequences, communicate, patents, monitor, disciplinary, actions, solve, problem, logical, teams, code of conduct, subjectivity, decision making, role, race

After completing open coding, I utilized axial coding to further review the initial codes to identify categories. On an Excel spreadsheet, I grouped the codes together based on their similarities of meaning. Codes that referenced meanings similar to others were grouped together into categories. Each category was named based on the summary of overall meaning of the codes. After the axial coding process, there were nine categories. I then listed all the codes that were generated from the open coding process. Table 4 shows a sample of the participants' identifier, interview question, open codes, and category.



**Table 4** (continued)*Examples of Open Codes and Categories*

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>What are your perceptions about the documented racial disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?</b>	<b>Open Code</b>	<b>Category - Culture</b>	<b>Category - Blacks commit more infractions</b>
P2	Culturally, certain groups of black students are more likely to engage in fights at school than all groups of white students. In terms of substance use stuff, it's proportional... and we're just as likely to catch a non-black student as a black student, with vape, drugs, or alcohol, or whatever. And then I think that for non-fighting non-substance stuff.... A lot of high intensity, skipping behaviors by a very small group of students lead to wandering that leads to a conflict that if both parties had been in class would never have happened.	culturally, Black, engage in more fights, vapes, drugs, alcohol, skipping, non-black student	Culturally black students more likely to fight	Certain groups of Black students more likely to fight
P3	Numbers can tell you one thing and details tell what happened. When looking at things like fights Black kids fight Black kids. You don't have many white kids getting in fights. I remember the same three to four kids fighting each other over and they were all new to the district. so, you have to look at everything, the kids involved.... what happened. the culture that they come in with also that they bring from home, because that plays a part in it.	Numbers, Details, Fights, New Students, Black on Black fights, Culture, Home, New to the district, Whole story	The culture that they bring from home	White kids don't fight

**Table 4** (continued)

P4	National issue. Contributors – Building administrators want to support teachers by removing disruptive kids instead of supporting students. If I put a white kid out, parents will get involved. Most black parents are not as engaged. Not having strong relationships with students. Only interacting with kids when things are going bad for Black kids. White teachers have a better relationship with White kids.	National issues, contributors- Administrators, support, teachers, removing, disruptive, supporting, White kid, Parents, Involved, Black parents- not engaged, strong relationships, relationships	Black parents are not engaged; White teachers have better relationships with White kids; Administrators support teachers and not students
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**Step 3: Emerging Themes**

After completing the axial coding, categories were reviewed for emerging themes.

The categories were combined based on words with similar meanings. Data was entered from the Excel spreadsheet coding analysis sheet into a table in Microsoft Word that identified the codes, categories, and themes. Categories were then analyzed to identify patterns and emerging themes. Initially, 14 themes emerged for the two research questions; however, emerging themes answered both research questions. All codes and categories were thoroughly analyzed multiple times. After further consolidation of similar categories and a final analysis, four themes emerged: (a) biases in classroom management contributes to the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions for Black students, (b) code of conduct serves as a discipline guide for administrators to collaborate with others to discuss appropriate equitable disciplinary decisions, (c) Black students commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions than White students,

(d) home and school culture contributes to the bias and disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the four themes and research questions.

The codes and categories were reviewed multiple times to ensure the data supported was aligned with the theme. During my review, additional data that was missed during the initial phase of data analysis was coded as needed. Four themes were analyzed by reviewing the connection between each theme, category, and codes. Each theme was determined to be clear and distinct. The SJT and CRT conceptual framework guided the study and research questions. The data was grouped based on similarities that led to categories and themes that addressed the research questions.

#### **Step 4: Themes**

This step was the final confirmation of themes. The themes were selected to answer the research questions of this study based on the data analysis results. Four themes emerged from the data analysis in response to the research questions.

The participants perceived those biases in classroom management contributes to the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions for Black students. All of the participants agreed that the identification and interpretation of student infractions traditionally and commonly starts in the classroom. Multiple classroom disciplinary referrals can escalate to more severe disciplinary actions including out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. All participants, at some point during the interview, referenced the code of conduct as a discipline guide for administrators to collaborate with others to discuss appropriate equitable disciplinary decisions. A student's previous

disciplinary infractions, such as classroom referrals, was cited as one of the factors that administrators consider when rendering out of school disciplinary actions.

Five out of 10 participants agreed that Black students commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions than White students. Administrators frequently commented that Black students are more likely to fight than White students and more likely to fight other Black students. All participants listed fighting as one of the most severe disciplinary infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions. Home and school culture were consistently referenced throughout the interview as a major contributor to the bias and disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Participants expressed that some White teachers do not understand Black students or their behaviors. Table 5 shows a sample of the categories and themes that emerged during thematic analysis in relation to the research questions.

**Table 5***Categories to Themes*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bias</li> <li>● Classroom management</li> <li>● Teacher bias</li> <li>● Monitor behavior</li> </ul>	Biases in classroom management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● code of conduct</li> <li>● Bias</li> <li>● Safety</li> <li>● Severe disciplinary infractions</li> <li>● Monitor behavior</li> <li>● Restorative discipline</li> </ul>	Code of conduct
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Black students fight Black students infractions</li> <li>● Bias</li> <li>● code of conduct</li> <li>● Classroom Management</li> <li>● Safety</li> <li>● Severe disciplinary infractions</li> <li>● Restorative discipline</li> </ul>	Black students commit more
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culture</li> <li>● Bias</li> <li>● Classroom Management</li> </ul>	Home and School culture

**Evidence of Trustworthiness****Credibility**

Flemings et al. (2021) listed the ability to generate credible evidence as the primary role of research. I utilized multiple strategies to establish and maintain credibility throughout this dissertation process. Bracketing was used to identify personal biases. I

used bracketing to write memos and notes in a journal to document my personal biases and reflections for each interview. I consistently recorded my emotions and experiences throughout the process to separate my personal opinions from my findings. Other strategies used for research accountability included triangulation and member checking. I shared my summary of the data with participants to confirm the accuracy of my summary and cross-checked recorded interviews with my written notes from the interviews and my journal. Participants had the option to review their responses and provide additional feedback or corrections.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is the process of using knowledge gained from one study in a new study to expand on the depth of knowledge (Stahl & King, 2020). To allow for transferability, thick descriptions of data were provided. The thick descriptions included details about the process for participants' selection, data collection, the setting, the sample size, and the criteria. Additionally, the interview questions were included.

### **Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative research studies reinforces consistency in research findings (Tracy, 2019). Dependability was demonstrated by following the guidelines of the IRB approved interview protocol guide. I asked the same interview questions in the same order for all participants. Open-ended, semistructured interview questions were asked that focused on the topic of the study. To ensure accuracy, interviews were recorded and transcribed. The final transcription was sent to participants for confirmation

of accuracy. I incorporated the audit trail consisting of the coding process and identified what codes clustered together to form themes.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to researchers being neutral by identifying their personal biases and prejudices and reporting findings that are based on data (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I used bracketing by regularly and consistently identifying and reflecting on my personal biases. I also manually transcribed and coded each participant's interview as well as using Microsoft Excel for coding to ensure trustworthiness. The interviews were recorded to increase fidelity and integrity of the data that was provided during the interviews. Other strategies I implemented as evidence that findings and analysis were based on participants' responses included giving each participant an opportunity to review and confirm their responses.

### **Results**

The results of this basic qualitative study came from interviewing nine current or previous school administrators with three or more years of experience as a disciplinary administrator. Each participant was asked the same 10 open-ended interview questions in the same order. The questions on the participant interview protocol were research designed (see Appendix A) to answer the research questions.

The research questions focused on the lived experiences of school administrators' perceptions of the documented disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. The two research questions that guided this study were:

RQ 1: What are school administrators' perceptions about the documented

disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?

RQ 2: What are school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in expulsions between Black and White students?

All nine participants provided thick, rich details about their lived experiences as school administrators and their perceptions of the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions. The findings from the study showed no differences between how administrators perceived the racial disparity in suspensions compared to expulsions. Four themes emerged during the data analysis phase that identically addressed both suspensions and expulsions.

### **Theme 1: Biases in Classroom Management Contributes to the Racial Disparity in Suspensions and Expulsions for Black students**

All of the participants consistently and constantly referenced biases as one of the primary contributing factors to the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions for Black students. Bias was referenced 69 times during the interview process amongst the 10 participants. Majority of the participants agreed that teachers are traditionally the first person to identify discipline issues. P7 stated, "if there is a fight on the playground, his first question is where were the teachers?" P5 stated:

As a principal, oftentimes you're the second point of contact concerning student behaviors. The first point of contact is typically the teachers. Kids go to the teachers and let them know and then if it's something that the teacher feels he or she can't adequately respond to, then they elevate to the principal.



When P5 was asked about perceptions of the documented racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students, the response was.

Teachers view Black students as more threatening than White students. People ignore and turn their heads when White students commit offenses. White students are viewed as, not as harmful, and words like horse playing are used to describe their actions when they are involved in physical altercations. Black students are reported in a different way and words like aggressive and fights are used to describe their actions when they are involved in physical altercations.

P8 discussed how multiple teacher referrals of a student can lead to students being considered a habitual violator. Teacher's bias was referenced by majority of participants as one of the primary contributing factors to the racial disparity.

P8 referenced teacher bias as a reason for teachers to submit a disciplinary referral for a Black student and may not submit a disciplinary referral for a White student that committed the same infraction. P8 stated:

We had a tardy threshold, or skipping, and what we noticed was that White kids go to Miss Smith's, who is White, class late and she's not going to write that up. Whereas, the Black kid comes in late, because he may give her a little hard time in class, she's going to write that one up every time. That is our inconsistency.

P3 and P8 both agreed that some White teachers are scared of Black kids. P8 went on to say, "Some of our White teachers are scared of Black kids, and so that definitely shows in the way that they write up a referral." P4 specified that administrators want to support teachers by removing disruptive kids instead of supporting students, and that White

teachers have a better relationship with White kids. P4 said, “As a White male, I had better rapport with White students than Black students.” P1 agreed that Black students are being suspended at a higher rate than White students. Nine of the 10 participants identified a relationship between teachers’ perception of Black students and classroom management.

P6 identified classroom management as a factor that contributes to the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. P6 gave the example,

If a kid has 15 to 20 office referrals, then eventually that may lead to an expulsion. That's where the disproportionality comes in because they get those office referrals that happen in the classroom and sometimes what we may see as a disrespectful student of color, may not be viewed the same way for a White student. When you start looking at disparity, you start really looking at those low level incidents that become high level incidents and that starts in the classroom. So I do see some cases where some of my staff members have a different perspective, if you will, on low level instances, based on the students’ race.

P5 described the bias in classroom management as a joint decision of the teacher and the administrator. P5 stated:

I don't think it's solely the teachers, but it's also administrators because ultimately, they're the ones who hand down the decision. Teachers can want a kid to be suspended and all of that, but they are usually not the decision maker, it is the administrator. So also, thinking about what teachers are elevating kids to that

level and then how often are principals and assistant principals assigning out-of-school suspension to those students of color for the same things that white students do that may not even make it to their desk.

P3 indicated that White female teachers are afraid of Black people, especially Black males. P3 used as an example a situation where a White student can be defiant and it is perceived differently than a Black kid being defiant. P3 acknowledged that there is bias and stated, "If you are afraid to work with the community that you are in, you should not be in the community." Participants agreed that classroom referrals can lead to progressive disciplining resulting in suspension and expulsion.

P7 stated, "Most students are suspended or expelled based on the code of conduct. However, students that are expelled for other reasons are commonly due to progressive disciplinary infractions that typically start with classroom referrals." P5 acknowledged that racism is embedded in our society and discussed the importance of teachers and administrators being conscious of their biases when enforcing disciplinary consequences for their Black students. P9 also commented, "there is implicit bias in education." P5 indicated that teachers should not make decisions based on their personal biases, but should do their best to take an honest assessment of the situation to determine if the student's actions caused danger or harm before escalating incidents. P1 contributed the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students to bias. She stated, "Unconscious bias creates more opportunities for White students and gives them more leeway." A resource frequently used to eliminate bias, is the code of conduct. One participant referred to following the code of conduct as the only way to be fair when

making discipline decisions. The code of conduct outlines what disciplinary actions should be taken based on the infractions.

**Theme 2: Code of conduct serves as a Discipline Guide for Administrators to Collaborate with others to Discuss Appropriate Equitable Disciplinary Decisions**

Nine of the ten participants expressed that they follow the code of conduct when deciding how students should be disciplined. P1 stated that disciplinary actions are based on following protocols and policies set forth by the district. P3 specified that the code of conduct ensures disciplinary decisions are applied the same to all students by following the specified guidelines. P3 stated:

That's the only way it can be fair is if I follow the code of conduct, so everybody gets the same punishment for the same infraction; however, there are some areas within the code of conduct that are not clear and certain areas isolate a certain race.

P9 referenced the code of conduct 20 times throughout the interview. P9 responded that using the code of conduct is how he keeps the school safe. He also stated:

My number one priority and biggest responsibility is that the school is safe for all students and staff members. So my role, when it comes to discipline, is to follow the district-wide code of conduct and then it's my role to make sure that my staff knows that code of conduct and is aware of the code of conduct and understands all the different levels, different codes, different infractions and stuff, and all the different levels of consequences and make sure we kind of cover a lot of that stuff in pre-planning and then we kind of monitor it as we go through.

P9 was very confident that the code of conduct ensures equitable treatment of students by detailing specifically the consequences and steps to follow based on the discipline infraction. As the interview continued, P9 admitted that there was subjectivity to interpreting the code of conduct. As the interviews continued, participants referenced subjectivity and not being equitable multiple times when describing the code of conduct.

Participants expressed concerns about the code of conduct being equitable for all students and the subjectivity in the interpretation and implementation. P7 stated, "I do not believe in one size fits all or a blanket policy. I think every case is unique and you have to view them with that mindset." P4 stated, "the code of conduct does not cover everything and subjectivity in decision-making reflects the role race plays in decision." P6 stated:

So, there are times when we have to make a decision, and the way the code of conduct is written doesn't necessarily spell out the steps for you. It's kind of very open, and it allows for alternative methods when it comes to suspension and that's where we have to do our calibration in our building to make sure that the Assistant Principals are doing the same thing because there is a lot of flexibility within our code of conduct, which is good and bad.

P7 also spoke about zero tolerance offenses that are specifically identified in the code of conduct as infractions that automatically result in suspensions or expulsions. P4 stated, "I did not always ensure decisions were equitable and applied the same for all students." P4 indicated that he follows the codes of conduct on issues specifically identified in the code of conduct, however, has flexibility on other incidents. P4 stated, "the subjectivity in decision-making reflects the role race plays in decisions." P5 acknowledged that the code

of conduct cannot address every single scenario possible and that there are some gray areas in the code of conduct. P5 stated:

When principals have a behavior situation that they are unsure of how to best handle it, they look at the code of conduct, and when there are some gray areas that they need to speak about, they should collaborate with their leadership team and come to a decision. I think it's best to use a team approach and be consistent with the team and then also in that team approach record how you handle this exception and add that to your guidelines. So, if it comes up again, let's say maybe not this year, but two years down the line, you have a base for how you have handled that, so, you don't have an issue with this happening to someone else and they receive different treatment. The teachers and administrators are aware of how they interpret the code of conduct based upon who's standing in front of them.

Little kids are learning to be sociable; so when they get frustrated with one another, their first instinct might be to slap another kid. When you read the code of conduct, you can write that up as assault and stuff and imagine being that parent of a kindergartener and you get this note home that your child has a level three code of conduct that says he was just assaulted. I have a really hard time with that; so, I really like to think things through and have a restorative process. I think we are not here to punish behavior. We are here to teach kids how to behave, right?

P9 also indicated that the code of conduct cannot be broken up into age levels, however, principals have common sense and a little leeway. P9 went on to say that he thinks the code of conduct document is extremely important and knows it from A to Z. In addition to the code of conduct, he identified some situations that require his leadership team to take into consideration the code of conduct, the student's history, and the student's race before rendering a disciplinary decision. As the interview continued, P9 admitted that there was explicit and implicit bias in staff, and that the code of conduct is not culturally sensitive, and it is written for Black kids to fail. P9 concluded the interview by stating:

I think the code of conduct can be umm well... I don't know. I think we've come a long way. If you look at the numbers, there's still a discrepancy and there is still disproportionality, but our total numbers of suspensions and expulsions and in-school suspensions have dropped dramatically, and I'm really proud of that.

Blessett and Gaynor (2021) believe that racial inequities are embedded in policies and administrative decisions. Based on the participants' responses, although the code of conduct was established to serve as a document to ensure equitable decisions for all students, the subjectivity in the interpretation results in racial inequities for Black students.

### **Theme 3: Black Students Commit More Infractions that Result in Suspensions and Expulsions than White Students**

When asked about school administrators' perceptions about the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students and why the disparity exists, five out of nine participants responded that Black students commit more

infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions than White students. P2 expressed that “certain groups of Black students are more likely to engage in fights at school than all groups of White students” and contributed this to the “psychosocial reasons.” P2 stated that from his experience “most often fights are Black students fighting Black students. P2 went on to say that his school is working on implementing anger management counseling for Black students because “they are less likely to engage in mental health; whereas White students are more likely to get therapeutic support.” P3 and P6 suggested that researchers need to look beyond the numbers and look at the details when it comes to racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions to understand why the disparity exists. He used as an example, if you only have 20 Black kids and five are acting up, you are already at 25%. P3 went on to say, “when you look at things like fights, you don’t have many white kids getting into fights and it is usually the same Black students fighting other Black students.” P3 also stated:

Although Black kids are the minority at the school, they commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions. I’ve only had one White kid caught with drugs this year, but I have had two or three Black kids caught with drugs. I haven’t had any White kids threaten teachers, but, I’ve had Black kids do that.

P6 felt strongly that Black students commit more infractions than White students and explained, “The disparity really isn’t because of any disproportionality. It’s truly because the students who are committing the incidents that would result in a suspension or expulsion are mostly my Black students.” P5 viewed the disparity from a different perspective and indicated that the disparity is due to the reporting. She stated, “A higher



level of Black students are reported for level five offenses which result in a high level of Black students being expelled.” P5 strongly felt that the reporting of Black students for higher level offenses were due to biases against Black students. P9 mentioned that fighting was one of the most common infractions that results in suspensions or expulsions. He stated that, “Black students fight in the building where some of our White students may wait until they are outside of the building to participate in that kind of activity.” P9 described White students' fights traditionally consist of a strike, one student hits another and the other student does not hit back, so that means only one student is suspended. He described Black students' fights as mutual combat with multiple strikes. Several contributing factors were listed as the reasons that Black students are perceived as committing more disciplinary infractions than White students. The factor that was referenced most frequently as a contributing factor was school and home culture. The culture was perceived as shaping the environment for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for students, teachers, and administrators.

**Theme 4: Home and School Culture contributes to the Bias and Disparity in Suspensions and Expulsions between Black and White students.**

Throughout the interview process, participants consistently referenced the home and school culture as being a contributing factor for disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Culture was referenced in different contexts including access to resources, perception of students, and the home and school background. P2 indicated that the home culture has a direct impact on the school culture and the lack of correlation between the two results in a disconnection. P8 specified,

“there are some cultural differences in us having a lot of White teachers and not as many Black teachers proportionally.” P2 and P8 explained that students often engage in behavior that is unacceptable at school because it is acceptable at home. P8 used drug use as an example and explained that, “Drug use may be accepted in a home and may be promoted.” P6 stated, “Oftentimes, our students who are coming to our school are believed to have the same background, academic knowledge, and social-emotional background and they simply do not.” If the school and home culture differ significantly, students and teachers may have a challenge understanding each other and creating a healthy relationship.

Multiple participants mentioned parent engagement and access to resources as a dividing line between Black and White students when it comes to discipline. When P6 was asked about the disparity in suspensions and expulsions, he said,

Where we have identified a White kid who’s committing multiple low level incidents, that White kid will typically get IDEA protection where parents will get a psych evaluation and get tested and now that particular kid is receiving IEP services and protections. So, it’s a lot different when you start looking at the same acts occurring with a student of color. That particular process is usually started by the school.

P3, P6, and P8 shared the same viewpoint that White parents have access to more resources. P3 stated:

White parents have the means to pull their kids out of the school and take them somewhere else to prevent going through a tribunal hearing. So, basically there is no documentation of a disciplinary hearing.

As P8 was responding to the interview questions regarding administrator's perception of the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions, he noted as a huge observation that Black students often do not have access to attorneys and the legal system or certain resources that White students have access to. P8 stated, "During a hearing process, the school system has their attorney at the table and White students will also bring an attorney to the table to represent them." Parents 'access to resources is often contingent upon their income and social connections. The school district's statistics listed the median income in the district's community as \$123,617 with a White population of approximately 61% and a Black population of approximately 22%.

P2 agreed that White parents have more money and more Black kids qualify for free and reduced lunch." P8 and P2 also expressed the need for mental support for Black students. P8 specified, "Therapy is frowned on in the Black community and may not be acceptable. However, in the White community, students are typically in therapy and use it as an avenue to reduce consequences." In addition to White students having access to more resources, parent engagement was also perceived as a resource and support that Black students often do not have. P4 expressed, "If I put a White kid out, parents will get involved. Most Black parents are not engaged." P8 noted,

White kids' parents force relationships on you; whereas, a student of color parents may be working two jobs and assumes the school is doing the right thing, and

therefore, doesn't reach out to build that relationship with the school and get a better understanding.

Understanding the school culture and having a history with the culture was perceived as improving the relationship between students and teachers. Three out of 9 participants perceived the culture that new Black students bring to the district as problematic to the school culture. P3 and P7 expressed that new Black students bring a different culture to the district and it takes them time to adjust. P7 stated that the data shows that new Black students commit "90% if not more of the discipline infractions." P7 went on to say:

In looking at that with the proper lens you have to say, we need some better orientation for our new students of color, we need some onboarding. We need to get them acclimated and not just throw them into our system and let them fend for themselves. We need to let them know, hey, in this system, this is what we do.

P3 stated, "Kids that are new to the district do not have the same culture as people who have been here." P3 contributed fights and other issues to new kids to the district.

Various aspects of home and school culture were referenced throughout the interviews as separating Black and White students based on economic resources and social needs. The Black students perceived as having limited economic and social resources were more likely to have a home culture that was different from the school culture.

P5 and P7 comparison of the racial disparities in discipline between Black and White students aligned with Hutchins and Nelson (2021) research that other areas of historical and current racial discriminatory practices Black Americans have experienced

are embedded in the educational, criminal, and judicial systems. P5 compared the racial disparity in discipline between Black and White students to the racial disparity in the world between Black and White people. P5 went on to say:

America is a racist country and breeds people that have those mindsets. I don't think Black students commit more level 5 offenses, I think it is reported on Black students more than any other races. People ignore and turn their heads when White students commit offenses. White students are perceived as "not as harmful" and their fights are referred to as "horse playing." White students are reported in a different way from Black students, especially Black boys.

P5 also stated that she has witnessed teachers using words such as "animal-like characteristics" to describe a Black child's behavior and other negative, exaggerated adjectives, such as "assaulted and attacked". P7 elaborated on the difference in how Black and White students are perceived and treated. P7 explained:

We are quick to send a student of color to tribunal. Whereas, we are typically more lenient towards our White students, and we're not viewing things with the equity lens, with the lens that you see color. A lot of people will say, I don't see color. Well, you should see color. So, we're not seeing this and we're not documenting enough to see that these are the students I've sent to tribunal in the past and 80% of them are kids of color. But, when a white student did the similar thing, they were not sent to tribunal.

P7 went on to discuss the biases Black people face in society and the inability for White people to understand or relate to the racial challenges that Blacks face daily. P7 further

stated, “If you have never been pulled over by a cop for no reason, you don't understand that.” P4 commented, “As a White male, I had a better rapport with Whites students than Black students.” This statement supports society norms that there is an opportunity for relationship building between White and Black students and teachers. P3 stated that the racism does not change until “we address the bias and start calling people out about it.” P2 briefly referenced that societal treatment of Black students has an impact on their mental health. P5 stated, “Black boys are automatically considered destructive, and are often described as aggressive and threatening; whereas words like frustrated, disability, and anxiety are used to describe White boys.” Culture was perceived as having a direct impact on how teachers perceive their students and how students perceive their teachers. Understanding students’ background and cultures may help teachers to develop healthier relationships with their students.

Participants for this study were aware that there was a racial disparity in discipline between Black and White students and there were several factors perceived as contributing to the disparity. Culture and bias were the words referenced most frequently as contributing to the disparity. Each theme touched on culture and bias in some capacity. Classroom management was based on the teacher’s biases and culture and their ability to relate to the student’s culture. The code of conduct was perceived as subjective and did not prevent bias interpretation. Black students fighting more than White students was based on the interpretation of what was considered a fight and words teachers and administrators used to describe the fight. Misalignment of the home and school culture was perceived as creating friction between students and teachers and administrators.

## Summary

In summary, in this chapter, I reviewed the process of data analysis and shared the results of the study. I sought to answer the research questions that explored administrators' perception of the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Using semistructured interviews, nine current or previous administrators shared their perspectives for this basic qualitative study. Through thematic analysis, four themes emerged: (a) biases in classroom management contributes to the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions for Black students, (b) code of conduct serves as a discipline guide for administrators to collaborate with others to discuss appropriate and equitable disciplinary decisions, (c) Black students commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions than White students, and (d) home and school culture contributes to the bias and disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. The themes indicated administrators' perspectives on the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Trustworthiness, creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were established during the collection and analysis of the data. A complete data analysis allowed me to answer both research questions which address school administrators' perceptions about the documented disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students.

The participants were aware of the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students and discussed various factors that contributed to the disparity. During the interview process, all of the participants referenced bias at least

once as one of the primary contributors to the disparity. Administrators overwhelmingly agreed that teachers are often the first point of contact when it comes to identifying discipline infractions and that multiple classroom referrals often lead to out-of-school disciplinary sanctions. Bias in classroom management was one of the emerging themes in response to both research questions. Administrators perceived teachers as giving White students preferential treatment by not referring them for disciplinary sanctions for committing the same infractions that resulted in Black students' disciplinary referrals. White teachers were also perceived to not have healthy relationships with Black students due to feeling threatened by or frightened by Black students.

Participants also responded that the code of conduct was a resource that contributed to the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. The code of conduct contains policies and procedures that outline steps to be taken based on the student's infraction. Administrators commented that the code of conduct was subjective, and that racism was embedded in the policies that unfavorably targeted Black students. Additionally, the code of conduct does not cover every possible scenario which leaves room for bias in decision-making and differential disciplinary sanctions for similar infractions.

During the interview, participants responded that Black students commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions than their White counterparts and this has led to the racial disparity in discipline. Participants' overall responses were the overrepresentation of Black students in out-of-school disciplinary sanctions is a result of Black students fighting and committing infractions with one another. The final theme,



home and school culture, contributes to the bias and disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Home and school culture was one of the factors that was identified as contributing to Black students committing more infractions. The home and school culture were discussed as having an impact on acceptable and unacceptable behavior and how administrators perceive students based on their race.

Most of the participants' responses to administrators' perception of the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students were aligned with the Critical Race Theory framework. The developing framework was that systemic racism is embedded in American society and it contributes significantly to the disciplinary and achievement gaps between Black and White students (Vastine, 2020). Participants demonstrated a comprehensive understanding that this is a dangerous social issue that has a negative impact on Black students, and they are exploring alternative disciplinary practices to suspensions and expulsions. Additionally, all administrators discussed using restorative disciplinary practices that have resources and tools that include capturing data which can be analyzed to show disciplinary trends. The ultimate goal that emerged was to offer support, mental health, and counseling to teachers, staff, and students to change behavior and address biases.

In Chapter 5, I will review the purpose and nature of the study and discuss why the study was conducted. I will interpret the findings and compare them to previous research as discussed in Chapter 2. Next, I will identify the limitations to the study and describe recommendations for further research, followed by implications for the study

and opportunities for social change. The study will be completed with a conclusion and final thoughts.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore administrators' perceptions of the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Data was collected using one-on-one semi structured interviews. The 9 participants were administrators who previously or currently served as administrators over discipline. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) biases in classroom management contributes to the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions for Black students, (b) code of conduct serves as a discipline guide for administrators to collaborate with others to discuss appropriate equitable disciplinary decisions, (c) Black students commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions than White students, and (d) home and school culture contributes to the bias and disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Chapter 5 includes findings that align with the current literature and conceptual framework. The implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are also provided.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

After receiving final approval from Walden University IRB, I utilized categories and theme analysis to begin the process of data collection and analysis. CRT and the SJT were the conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study. Christian, Seamster, and Ray (2019) reported that CRT is grounded in racial realism with a focus on removing illusions about racial inequality for those who struggle against racism in academia, the streets, or the legal system. School administrators and teachers have an ethical obligation to ensure social justice in education for all students. In this Chapter, I describe how my

findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge in this discipline by comparing them with the peer-reviewed literature in Chapter 2. I also utilized the CRT and SJT conceptual framework to interpret the findings. Research Questions 1 and 2 resulted in the same themes, therefore, the findings apply to both research questions. This section is arranged by research questions and corresponding themes. I examined the four themes in relation to the literature review and the conceptual frameworks.

### **Findings Related to Research Questions 1 and 2**

#### ***Finding 1***

The first finding was that biases in classroom management contributes to the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions for Black students. The participants agreed that the classroom is where the majority of discipline referrals are initiated. At some point in the interviews, all participants commented that teachers may have implicit or explicit biases that result in inequitable discipline referrals among students. Finding 1 confirms research by Wirtz (2021) which listed implicit bias toward Black students as one of the primary factors contributing to the discipline gap between Black and White students. The majority of administrators reported that Black and White students commit the same disciplinary infractions. However, Black students receive harsher disciplinary sanctions than their White counterparts. Several studies on the discipline gap between Black and White students, including Gullo and Beachum's (2020b) study, aligned the growth in the discipline gap to the inequitable distribution of discipline severity despite similar behavior infractions among Black and White students.

Administrators referred to challenges associated with not having a teaching staff that reflects the diversity of the students. Participants commented that teachers have better relationships with students who look like them. The findings confirmed Goldhaber et al., (2019) research that student outcomes are more positive with students who have teachers who look like them. Additionally, the findings of this research study supports Perez and Okonofua (2022) experimental research that a student's race has an influence on a teacher's perceptions of a series of misbehaviors and their disciplinary response. Although disciplinary actions are ultimately determined by the administrator, the findings of this research study show that students who frequently receive classroom disciplinary referrals are considered to be habitual violators and this is a factor that administrators take into consideration when deciding if students should be suspended or expelled. One participant commented that most students are suspended or expelled based on the code of conduct. However, students that are expelled for other reasons are commonly due to progressive disciplinary infractions that typically start with classroom referrals. Finding 1 supports Gerlinger et al., (2021) study that exclusionary sanctions for minor infractions are disproportionately applied to Black students.

### ***Finding 2***

The second finding was that the code of conduct serves as a discipline guide for administrators to collaborate with others to discuss appropriate and equitable disciplinary decisions. Nine out of ten participants referenced the code of conduct as a guide they follow when deciding what punishment to render for infractions. Participants stressed concerns about the code of conduct being equitable for all students and the subjectivity in

the interpretation and implementation. Participants identified the subjectivity in the code of conduct as a factor that contributes to the racial disparity in discipline between Black and White students. One participant noted that the code of conduct is not culturally sensitive and it is written for Black kids to fail. This finding confirms research that exclusionary discipline policies and practices have strategically been used to sanction, remove, and criminalize Black students who are perceived as not conforming to classroom norms, behaviors, and expectations (Hines-Datiri & Cater Andrews, 2020). Finding 2 also confirms CRT's core pillar analysis of the impact educational policies and practices have on the construction of racial inequities (Dixson & Rousseau, 2018).

Participants responded that the Code of conduct incorporates zero tolerance policies for disciplinary infractions such as fighting. Multiple participants indicated that fighting is an infraction that commonly occurs among Black students. However, fighting is perceived differently based on who is fighting. For example, one participant responded that if elementary kids fight, the administrator would not give them the same punishment that he would give a high school student; although the code of conduct specifically lists fighting as a zero tolerance offense that results in suspensions or expulsions. The administrator indicated that the code of conduct gives principals some commonsense leeway. Additionally, a participant responded that the adjectives used to describe Black students fighting is significantly different from adjectives used to describe White students fighting. Words like "aggressive" and "fighting" are used to describe Black students fighting; whereas, words like "horse playing" and "strikes" are used to describe White students fighting. The selective use of adjectives used to describe disciplinary infractions

impacts the interpretation of the infraction and the disciplinary sanction. Findings 2 confirms Writz's (2021) and other researchers' study that although the policies should apply to all students, Black students are monitored at a higher level of scrutiny than their White counterparts. Therefore, exclusionary discipline impacts Black students at a much higher rate.

### ***Finding 3***

The third finding was that Black students commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions than White students. Nationally, Black students' out-of-school suspension percentage is more than twice their enrollment percentage (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Although research confirms that Black students disproportionately receive out-of-school disciplinary sanctions, there is limited research that confirms Black students commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions. Research supports the prevalence of race-based inequities in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Chu & Ready, 2018). This finding disconfirms peer literature research and studies in Chapter 2. Five out of the nine participants responded that the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between White and Black students is due to Black students committing more infractions that qualify for suspensions and expulsions. Participants responded that Black students fight other Black students at a much higher rate than White students fighting White students. Additionally, two participants attributed the racial disparity in discipline to the small percentage of Black students that are repeatedly suspended or expelled for fighting one another.

During my research of the literature on factors that may have an impact on the racial disparity, my research did not lead me to studies on Black students committing more infractions than White students. My research led to various studies on factors that impact discriminatory discipline practices including biases, culture, policies, and practices. Liu, Hayes, and Gershenson (2021) found significant differences between Black and White students' referral rates and the rate at which administrators distribute punishment for the same incident. Based on Liu, Hayes, and Gershenson (2021), there is disparity in the disciplinary sanctions between Black and White students. For example, if Black and White students are fighting other Black and White students and the Black students are suspended or expelled whereas the White students receive detention, the records would show a higher percentage of suspensions or expulsions based on Black students fighting Black students. White students fighting White students would not be reflected in the out-of-school disciplinary data because of the disciplinary sanction they received.

Two participants commented that the disparity is in how disciplinary referrals are written and reported. Although some participants commented that Black students commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions, other participants commented that Black students do not commit more offenses, however, are reported more than other races. Participants commented that White students are not considered as threatening as their Black counterparts and White students' infractions are frequently ignored. Participants also commented that stronger and harsher words are used to describe Black students' actions. The reporting of the incidents determines the severity of the infraction



which determines the severity of the disciplinary actions. Historically, school discipline policies and practices have resulted in race-based inequities and in school suspensions and expulsions (McIntosh et al., 2021). Findings 3 creates an opportunity for further research on factors that may contribute to the disciplinary disparity in suspensions and expulsions between White and Black students.

***Finding 4***

The fourth finding was that the home and school culture contributes to the bias and disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. This finding confirms Dunning-Lozano's (2022) study on American public schools' failure to create an equitable culture of upward mobility for all children and the excessive discipline of Black students. Participants acknowledged the role culture played in expanding the disciplinary gap between Black and White students. One administrator stated, "code of conduct is not culturally sensitive and is written for Black kids to fail."

Participants also referenced the subjectivity and leeway in the interpretation of the Code of conduct. Common sense, leeway, and the subjectivity of the code of conduct leaves room for cultural interpretations. Previous research that addresses the discipline gap between Black and White students focused on various elements that may have contributed to the disparities including socioeconomic factors, culture, disability, and ethnicity (Bryant & Wilson, 2020).

Participants had a wide range of comments on their perspective of the role that culture plays in the discipline disparity between Black and White students. Black parents were perceived to be less engaged in school activities and functions and their access to

resources such as attorneys and mental help was viewed as limited. These perceptions confirm Blessett and Gaynor's (2021) study that racial inequities have manifested throughout history and are embedded in institutions, laws, policies, resource allocations, and administrative decisions. Black Americans experience racism in all areas of their lives, adversely impacting their physical, mental, social, and socioeconomic health (Hutchins & Nelson, 2021). Additionally, Black students were perceived to be more threatening. According to research by Gullo & Beachum (2020b), these are implicit bias, beliefs, and stereotypes that directly impact school discipline and racial disparity. Comments were made that White teachers have a better relationship with White students and are more likely to issue a disciplinary referral for a Black student than a White student for the same infraction. Regardless of how minor the disciplinary infraction is, the code of conduct lists multiple disciplinary referrals as habitual, this qualifies as a zero-tolerance infraction that can result in suspensions or expulsions. This finding also confirms Babb (2019) study which concluded that zero-tolerance policies create a culture with stringent discipline policies that justify school suspensions and expulsions of students for minor incidents and accidental infractions.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I identified several limitations within this basic qualitative study in Chapter 1. The actual limitations I encountered were not including teachers and researcher's bias. This study was limited to administrators who were currently or had previously served in roles as disciplinary administrators for a school district where there was a documented disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. Since

teachers are traditionally where discipline referrals are initiated, teachers' perspectives could have provided additional insights into exclusionary discipline behaviors.

In Chapter 1, I addressed researcher bias. As a Black parent and grandparent with a career in the field of education, I had my personal perspectives regarding the discipline of Black students. To address my personal biases, it was imperative for me to utilize reflexivity bracketing. I maintained a reflective journal during the collection and analysis phase of the process. This allowed me to complete the study with integrity and without inserting my assumptions and biases. My goals were to simply collect the data from the participants, then, exclusively analyze participants' data. In addition to utilizing a reflective journal, I also recorded the interviews, obtained a transcript of the interviews, took notes, and sent the summary of the transcript to the participants to review. This allowed me to maintain the integrity of the data and establish trustworthy and credible data. To ensure the dependability of the themes that emerged, I implemented thematic analysis. This, along with the audio recording and transcript, allowed my interpretations to remain unbiased. Confidentiality was maintained for all who participated by using pseudonyms.

### **Recommendations**

The perceptions shared in this research study and the findings of this research study support and extend existing research on the racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions for Black students. I explored administrators' perceptions of the racial disparity in suspensions and expulsions for Black students. Participants included in this study identified that (a) biases in classroom management contributes to the racial

disparity in suspensions and expulsions for Black students, (b) code of conduct serves as a discipline guide for administrators to collaborate with others to discuss appropriate equitable disciplinary decisions, (c) Black students commit more infractions that result in suspensions and expulsions than White students, and (d) home and school culture contributes to the bias and disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students.

Although administrators have a critical role in determining the appropriate disciplinary actions for students (Gullo & Beachum, 2020a), administrators in my study stated that disciplinary decisions are made through a collective process of resources and people, and decisions are not made in isolation. Further research could be conducted to understand teachers' and administrators' joint role in disciplinary decisions. Participants from this study frequently referred to habitual behaviors based on classroom discipline referrals. Additionally, biases and subjectivity in the code of conduct is an area that should be further reviewed. Based on participants' responses, the code of conduct leaves opportunities for personal interpretations. Furthermore, research on Black students' disciplinary history and a deeper understanding of the actual offenses would provide clarity on the infractions that have resulted in out-of-school disciplinary sanctions for Black students. Finally, research on the impact that the home and school culture have on disciplinary decisions could contribute to the literature and positive social changes.

A first recommendation is for future research to expand the participants in the study to include teachers that could provide a broader insight into the disciplinary practices that affect the disparity in school discipline. Teachers were frequently

referenced throughout the interview process. Teachers' bias and classroom management was a theme that emerged as a factor that contributed to the disciplinary disparities. Understanding teachers' perspective from the classroom may reveal opportunities that can result in alternative strategies to discipline, including a partnership approach between Black and White teachers. A partnership between the two races could help teachers to mentor one another and discuss disciplinary issues prior to submitting classroom referrals. A partnership would also help each race to gain a better understanding of different cultures and practices.

The second recommendation for future research is to conduct a similar study with all White participants or all Black participants to determine if there are different perceptions based on the race of the administrators. Interviewing same race administrators could reveal findings that would improve the understanding of administrators and teachers' perspective of referring Black students for disciplinary actions. This study was conducted with both Black and White administrators. I did note that administrators of the same race responded similarly to some of the interview questions. Understanding administrators' perceptions based on their race could provide valuable data through a racial lens, help to develop strategies to change school cultures, and address bias.

Another recommendation would be to explore how exclusionary discipline affects academic performance. Most of the participants responded that classroom management and bias was one of the primary contributors to the disparity in discipline between Black and White students. Research has documented a correlation between school discipline,

lower academic achievement, lower college enrollment rates, increased high school drop-out, and involvement in juvenile and adult criminal justice systems (Camacho & Krezmien, 2019). According to Bell and Puckett (2020), out-of-school discipline practices result in a loss of instructional time and negatively impact students' academic performance. Although research supports the negative impacts exclusionary discipline practices have on students, this type of punishment is still prevalent in school districts nationwide (Henry et al., 2021). A study that focuses on exclusionary discipline practices and students' academic performance would be valuable to teachers and administrators.

A final recommendation is for all stakeholders to have input into the code of conduct. Stakeholders should include district leaders, teachers, administrators, mental health professionals, and parents. board members, and community leaders. The code of conduct should be analyzed from various perspectives to ensure it is culturally sensitive and is not written subjectively. All students and parents should have access to resources that impact a student's education. All disciplinary actions should be recorded in a central database so that trends can be quickly identified and addressed. These recommendations are focused on eliminating the discipline and achievement gap between Black and White students and promoting equality and equity throughout the district.

### **Implications**

The goal of this basic qualitative study was to understand administrators' perception of the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions. The findings from this study may contribute to promoting positive social change by providing administrators with information on factors that can contribute to racial disparities. Additionally, school

administrators, leaders, and teachers may also use the findings from this study to improve the relationship between Black students and White teachers and implement strategies to build diversity within the districts' teaching staff. The information learned from the data analysis may be used to develop equitable policies and practices to eradicate discipline disparities and to provide additional support and training to classroom teachers on equitable disciplinary processes, utilizing alternative disciplinary actions, and identifying and overcoming their own biases. These strategic and specific approaches would provide administrators and teachers with resources and the knowledge needed to support all students. Furthermore, these approaches would eliminate the discipline and achievement gap between Black and White students.

### **Conclusion**

Participants in this study shared their personal views on the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students. The results of my study filled a gap in practice by contributing to the literature on factors that contribute to the discipline gap between Black and White students. The findings of this study are aligned with the critical race conceptual framework that systemic racism is embedded in American society and it contributes significantly to the disciplinary and achievement gaps between Black and White students (Vastine, 2020). Administrators expressed concerns that Black students received inequitable punishments because of biases, culture, classroom management, and subjectivity in the code of conduct. Some administrators also indicated that Black students committed more infractions that resulted in suspensions and expulsions.

The results of this study provide data that supports that teachers and administrators need additional training and resources to serve Black students. The findings of this study fill the gap in practice by expanding the knowledge in multiple disciplinary areas including disparities in teacher-issued discipline referrals and district-created policies. My hope is that the results of this study will lead to a deeper understanding of the challenges associated with equitable discipline decisions. We all have biases as educators; therefore, cultural awareness and understanding is imperative. Teachers and administrators must be cognizant of their own biases while responding to the diverse needs of their students. Establishing healthy relationships with parents and students and learning about students' backgrounds is paramount to closing the discipline and achievement gap between Black and White students.



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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

In this section, the questions developed below reflect the interview protocol that will help me address the research questions. The questions are written in objective format to gain an understanding of administrators' perceptions about the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students.

### Basic/Background Demographic Information

- Gender \_\_\_\_\_
- Race/Nationality \_\_\_\_\_
- Total years in Education \_\_\_\_\_
- Total years as an administrator \_\_\_\_\_
- Number of years at current school \_\_\_\_\_

RQ1: What are school administrators' perceptions about the disparity in suspension between Black and White students?

1. What are your perceptions about the documented racial disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?
2. What factors impact your decision making when it comes to suspending a student?
3. Why do you think there is a disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?

RQ2: What are school administrators' perceptions about the disparity in expulsions between Black and White students?

4. What are your perceptions about the documented racial disparity in expulsions between Black and White students?
5. What factors impact your decision making when it comes to expelling a student?
6. Why do you think there is a disparity in expulsions between Black and White students?

#### General Questions

7. How do you see your role in resolving student discipline situations that may threaten or harm others?
8. How do you ensure that your disciplinary decisions/recommendations are applied the same for all students?
9. What were the behavioral incidents/scenarios that resulted in out-of-school disciplinary actions for the students that you disciplined?
10. Does your school have any restorative disciplinary practices that do not involve suspension or expulsion?

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study about the racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks ten volunteers who are or have served as:

- Administrators over school discipline
- Administrators in schools which have documented history of racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Lonita Broome, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

### **Study Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to understand administrators’ perceptions about the disparity in suspensions and expulsions between Black and White students.

### **Procedures:**

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

- Respond to a questionnaire to determine if you qualify as a participant (email – 5 minutes)
- Take part in a confidential audio recorded interview (virtual – 1 hour)
- Review a typed transcript of your interview to make correction if needed (email options available – 10 minutes).
- Speak with the researcher once more time after the interview to hear the researcher’s interpretations and share your feedback (20-30 minutes by phone)

Here are some sample questions:

1. What are your perceptions about the documented racial disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?
2. What factors impact your decision making when it comes to suspending a student?

3. Why do you think there is a disparity in suspensions between Black and White students?
4. How do you see your role in resolving student discipline situations that may threaten or harm others?

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not.

I will follow up with all volunteers to let them know whether or not they were selected for the study.

If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by contribute to the literature on racial disparities and may be instrumental in decreasing the achievement and disciplinary gap between Black and White students. Once the analysis is complete, I will share the overall results with participants by email.

**Payment:**

I will email a virtual \$5 Starbucks gift card to all volunteers once they complete the interview.

**Privacy:**

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential, within the limits of the law. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by saving data to a password protected device and using codes in place of names. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You can ask me questions by phone at 404-456-6917 or email at lonita.broome@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 07-06-23-1009113. It expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.**

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask me or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

**Obtaining Your Consent**

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please fill out the information below, sign and return to me by email with the words "I consent" in the subject line or you can verbally consent prior to the interview.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

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