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Middle and High School Administrators' Perceptions on the use of Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices related to Student Discipline

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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BS, Ohio University, 2001

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Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Educators in the United States have become increasingly concerned about students who are suspended out of school because they miss classroom instruction and are then less likely to graduate. The problem addressed in this study was that school administrators continued to use exclusionary practices for discipline negating more culturally responsive practices. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore middle and high school administrators' perceptions on their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to out of school suspension. Culturally responsive school leadership served as the conceptual frameworks for this study. Four high school and six middle school administrators, who comprised two embedded units, participated in semistructured interviews. Thematic data analysis was used to identify the categories and themes for each unit. Themes that emerged from the analysis of the data included building relationships, communication, consistent expectations, effective discipline methods, school support staff, interventions, and alternatives to exclusionary discipline consequences. Findings can be used for school district leaders to collaboratively create a comprehensive framework using restorative practices to reduce the use of exclusionary practices for discipline. Middle and high school administrators can benefit from the results of this study through an effort to use culturally responsive leadership practices to create a positive and inclusive school climate and decrease the number of students who are excluded from the educational setting.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral research to my beautiful, intelligent, strong, and remarkable daughters, Delaney, Riley, and Kenzie. You inspire me every day, bring me pure happiness and exude true love. You are my heroes. To my incredible husband, Sean, I am so grateful for your continuous reassurance, support, comfort, and sincere love. I adore you and I'm the lucky one. You are my "why." My very encouraging sister, Shannon, who has always sat in my "front row" and works as an educator helping students every day, is my inspiration. To my heavenly and loyal sister, Missy, and my amazing parents, Joanne and Dan, your words, energy, and love are always with me. I would not be where I am today without my tribe, and I hope that I made all of you proud.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Out of school suspensions (OSS) can have a long-lasting negative impact on students who are suspended or expelled because they are likely to suffer academically, repeat a grade, or drop out of school (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Students who receive out of school suspensions are also less likely to graduate from high school and college and are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Data and research on school discipline found that punitive and exclusionary methods can have adverse effects on all students and are disproportionately administered to students of color and low-income students (Gomez et al., 2021). While studies revealed there is no one-size-fits-all solution to improving student behavior, school officials are adopting alternatives to disciplinary actions that remove students from the classroom, such as initiatives that promote positive behavioral expectations for students (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018).

Exclusionary discipline, which includes the use of suspensions from school, has been found to be ineffective at improving school safety and in deterring future infractions because exclusionary practices do not address the underlying reasons that may lead to behavioral incidents, nor do they create opportunities for students to learn new approaches to communicating or resolving conflicts (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Research has shown that the use of restorative practices in response to student misbehaviors, rather than traditional punitive discipline, reduce recidivism and promote higher academic achievement (Payne & Welch, 2018).

School-based restorative practices have gained attention as an alternative disciplinary approach. Restorative practices emphasize the reparation of harm, repairing of relationships, and promoting reconciliation among students and adults involved in conflict (Gomez et al., 2021). Although the use of restorative practices has been found to decrease student delinquency, result in better academic outcomes, and improve school climate, many schools continue to use punitive disciplinary practices to regulate student behavior (Payne & Welch, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2022), there were over 2.5 million incidents of out of school suspension in the most recent available data from the 2017-2018 school year in addition, during the 2017–2018 school year, almost 9% or 1 out of 11 students with disabilities were suspended, compared to 4% for students without disabilities, and Black students with disabilities consistently had the highest risk of suspension, with almost 19% or 1 in 5 receiving a suspension in 2017–2018 (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022).

To create inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments, educators and administrators must foster trusting relationships with students (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). It has been recommended that states and districts provide resources to enable educators to create positive learning environments that include professional development focused on mitigating implicit biases, developing empathy for students, creating multi-tiered systems of support, advancing restorative practices, providing support for students with disabilities, and embracing diverse backgrounds (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022).

In this study, I explored culturally responsive school environments by exploring middle and high school administrators' perceptions on their use of culturally responsive

leadership practices (CRSL) to address student discipline, specifically exclusionary discipline practices. Chapter 1 contains the background of the study followed by the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the conceptual framework, the nature of the study, and definitions. The chapter concludes with the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, significance, and a summary of the chapter.

Background

According to Hall et al. (2021), the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) from 2015–2016, documented 2.6 million suspensions and 120,800 expulsions in the United States. Hall et al. found this to be significant because a single out of school suspension incident increases a student's chance of repeating a grade, not graduating, and entering the juvenile justice system. Exclusionary discipline, which involves removing students from the classroom through punishments such as suspensions and expulsions, deprives students of the opportunity to learn (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Exclusionary consequences dramatically increased in the United States over several decades because of zero-tolerance policies; these exclusionary punishments have significant consequences and disproportionately impact students of color and students with disabilities (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). The allocation of zero-tolerance policies extended beyond severe discipline infractions and contributed to the suspensions of over 3.1 million students, mostly for non-violent behavior, and to the expulsions of over 87,000 students nationwide in 1998 (Yaluma et al., 2021).

The implementation of both federal and state zero-tolerance policies was highest during the 1990s and early 2000s, which increased the use of suspensions in schools as a disciplinary consequence and contributed to racial disparities in suspension (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). The allocation of zero-tolerance policies extended beyond severe discipline infractions and contributed to the suspensions of over 3.1 million students, mostly for non-violent behavior, and to the expulsions of over 87,000 students nationwide in 1998 (Yaluma et al., 2021). As a result, zero-tolerance policies resulted in significant increases in suspensions, expulsions, and law enforcement involvement, often for minor offenses (Henry et al., 2021).

Overall, these policies had alarming implications for the education system in the United States including the advancement of the school to prison pipeline (Hall et al., 2021). Definitions of zero-tolerance policies and consequences applied by school systems varied, which led to discrepancies in the consistent application of disciplinary consequences that were often subjectively interpreted and implemented (Henry et al., 2021). Recent changes in discipline policy and practice have begun to shift educators away from exclusionary discipline to focus more on alternatives consequences involving repairing harm, building relationships, and taking responsibility for misbehavior (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). According to the U.S. Education Department, Office for Civil Rights (2022), expulsions under zero-tolerance policies declined by 13% from the 2015-2016 school year to the 2017-2018 school year.

While suspensions are intended to create safer schools and deter future misbehaviors, research has shown that exclusionary discipline is ineffective at improving

school safety and deterring behavior infractions (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Researchers found that students who experience discipline that removes them from the classroom are more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, and become involved in the juvenile justice system (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). In addition, exclusionary discipline negatively affects students' mental health and increases the chance of exposure to the justice system (Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021). School climates that are centered on exclusionary consequences can negatively affect students who are not suspended, and studies have shown that non-suspended students in schools with strict exclusionary discipline policies have lower test scores compared to students in lower-suspending schools (Leung-Gagne et al., 2021). Although exclusionary consequences have been used to deter future misbehavior, exclusionary practices may, in fact, increase rates of future misbehavior (Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021)

Educators often have discretion about whether or how to discipline a student and these decisions can result in certain groups of students being more harshly disciplined than others (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). As stated previously, exclusionary discipline disproportionately affects students of color and students with disabilities (Gregory et al., 2020). Black, Hispanic, and Native students often receive harsher punishments in school for the same behavior when compared to their White peers and are more likely to receive office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions from school (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). Black students are three times more likely than White students to be suspended or expelled (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). In addition, the students who enter the school to

prison pipeline are disproportionately Black and Latino students as those students are more likely to be disciplined with exclusionary consequences and experience involvement with the juvenile justice system (Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021)

Discipline inconsistencies are not only disproportionate by race but also by disability (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). Students of color with disabilities received severe punishments at very high rates, with low-income Black males who received special education services suspended at the highest rates of any subgroup (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

Given the ineffectiveness of exclusionary practices to mitigate future behavioral issues, many schools are making efforts to move schools away from exclusionary approaches through school-wide positive behavioral intervention supports, social emotional-learning, and restorative practices (Gregory et al., 2020). Researchers have strongly suggested the need for culturally responsive approaches to promote positive student development in addition to trauma sensitive approaches and strengths-based mental health and social services (Gregory et al., 2020).

Problem Statement

The problem that I addressed in this study was that school administrators continue to use exclusionary practices for discipline negating more culturally responsive practices. Educational stakeholders in the United States have become increasingly concerned about the use of exclusionary discipline practices because students who are suspended out of school miss pertinent instruction they need to advance academically and are then less likely to graduate (Augustine et al., 2018).

During the 2021-22 school year, there were 1,134 incidents resulting in OSS at the middle and high school level in the target school district. Of this total number, there were 227 middle school students and 438 high school students suspended out of school (see Table 1). During the 2019-2020 school year, 11% of the total high school population and 9% of the total middle school was suspended out of school. During the 2020-2021 school year, 2% of total high school students and 4% of total middle school students were suspended out of school when the district was on virtual learning for the entire first semester due to COVID-19. In January of 2021, the district began hybrid learning, with the student population attending 2 days per week brick and mortar and 3 days per week at home. The full student population did not return full-time until March 2021. During the 2021-2022 school year, 11% of the total high school population and 12% of the total middle school population were suspended out of school.

Table 1111

Study District Out of School Suspension Trend Data

	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
District MS Enrollment	2,160	1,984	1,953
Middle School Students OSS	201	89	227
Total % MS Students OSS	9%	4%	12%
District HS Enrollment	4,296	4,183	4,101
High School Students OSS	475	103	438
Total % HS Students OSS	11%	2%	11%

Note. During the 2019-2020 school year, the school district was closed by the order of the governor of Ohio on March 16, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2020-2021 school year, discipline data were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual learning. Restorative practices were to be implemented by school leaders beginning in the 2019-2020 school year and declined during virtual learning.

Recent data collected by the U.S. Center on Disease Control show that the need for intervention is high due to a decline in students' mental health, and the primary and secondary trauma students experienced resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Gross & Prather, 2021). Some of the effects of trauma likely manifest themselves in the classroom

through disruptive behavior, disrespect for others, and withdrawal from group activities (Gross & Prather, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic inflicted trauma directly and indirectly on students of all ages in several ways: home confinement and social distancing reduced students' social interactions with each other, and many students had limited opportunities to interact and receive services from educators and school mental-health workers (Stein, 2021). Many families experienced job loss, food scarcity, and home insecurity (Feeding America, 2021). There was a constant threat of illness and death (Gross & Prather, 2021). The confinement and trauma also limited opportunities for play and social interaction (Cushing, 2020). The pandemic exacerbated the already high rates of anxiety, depression, and stress and increased the rate of suicide attempts among U.S. high school students (Rodriguez, 2021). Student mental health continues to decline and there is a need for serious intervention (Sparks, 2021). As a result, Gross and Prather (2021) recommended that, as students returned to face-to-face instruction, they should not be suspended or punished for acting out as they may not know how to process the trauma inflicted by the pandemic.

The data by race display the district percentages of OSS broken down by White middle school and high school students and middle and high school students of color for 3 school years (see Table 2). The suspension data during the 2020-2021 school year were affected by the pandemic during which virtual and hybrid-learning replaced face-to-face instruction. Upon the return to face-to-face instruction, the number of OSS grew higher post-pandemic. In addition to more OSS during the 2021-2022 school year, the number

of students of color who were suspended was disproportionate to their White counterparts.

Table 2222

Study District Percentages of Out of School Suspension Data by Race

	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
Middle School White Students	4%	2%	9%
Middle School Students of Color	7%	3%	16%
High School White Students	7%	3%	10%
High School Students of Color	8%	3%	11%

Note. The trend data of the percentages of students suspended out of school are broken down by race.

Understanding the use of OSS is important for educators to ensure equal treatment for all students, particularly when taking the pandemic into consideration (Gross & Prather, 2021). While previous researchers have specifically documented the unequal treatment of minority students regarding discipline, I used a holistic approach to study the problem and include all students at the middle and high school levels in the target school district regardless of race, gender, or disability (see National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). My goal in this study was to provide information on the use of culturally responsive leadership to implement restorative practices as an alternative to the

use of OSS. I conducted interviews of middle and secondary administrators who are charged with student discipline in the target school district to develop a deeper understanding on the use of restorative practices as possible alternatives to OSS.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore school administrators' perceptions on their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to OSS with middle and high school students. Leung-Gagne et al. (2022) identified several systemic factors associated with the disproportionate suspension of certain populations of students, including implicit bias, insufficient educator preparation, poor working conditions, ineffective school leadership, harsh discipline policies, and inequitable resource allocation. School exclusion also damages students' overall sense of well-being and belonging in school and contributes to students' perceptions that they are unworthy members of their school communities (Bruhn, 2020).

A study by Leung-Gagne et al. (2022) presented evidence-based alternative strategies to exclusionary consequences such as implementing schoolwide restorative practices and teaching social and emotional skills to combat inequity in educational outcomes. Restorative practices are a proactive, relationship-centered approach to building a positive school climate and addressing student behavior (Bruhn, 2020). Fronius et al. (2019) found that restorative practices may have positive effects on attendance, graduation rates, school climate, and culture. When implementing restorative justice and restorative practices, doing something wrong is not seen as grounds for

exclusion but rather an opportunity to build relationships and repair harm (Bruhn, 2020). Such practices can be integrated with social and emotional learning, as students are encouraged to acknowledge and manage their emotions, develop empathy for others, and establish positive relationships (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Research has found that restorative practices are effective in reducing suspensions and improving school climate (Fronius et al., 2019).

Research Questions

I used the following research questions to guide this qualitative case study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of out of school suspension as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do school administrators perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of out of school suspensions as a discipline consequence for middle and high school students?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to guide this study was culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) by Khalifa et al. (2016). CRSL, derived from the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, incorporates leadership philosophies to create inclusive school environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Khalifa et al., 2016). Khalifa et al. contend that CRSL is based on four criteria: (a) critical self-awareness, (b) culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, (c) culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and (d)

engaging students and parents in community contexts. Restorative practice is connected to CRSL because restorative practice is an approach that demonstrates how one builds relationships and strengthens social connections within communities (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). Implementing restorative practices as an alternative to punitive discipline has been found to help reduce crime, violence, and bullying; improve human behavior; restore relationships; and repair harm (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). By building relationships with students, showing compassion, creating a positive learning climate, and giving students a voice, educators may reduce incidents of misbehavior and help students remain in their classrooms (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019).

CRSL spotlights how students' sense of belonging requires educational leaders to establish relationships and be sensitive to the needs of diverse communities. According to Khalifa (2018), leaders must implement and promote culturally responsive pedagogy and establish culturally responsive relationships with parents and community members. Trusting relationships with students and families are essential for a positive school climate that is conducive to learning. Culturally responsive leaders develop and support the school staff and promote a climate that makes the whole school welcoming and inclusive by being responsive to the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of their students, staff, and families (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culturally responsive leaders build relationships with their students, and they strive to create a positive learning space that encourages trust, connection, compassion, and communication. Culturally responsive leaders pay close attention to the organizational manifestations of others' behaviors and that could hinder cultural

responsiveness (Scribner et al., 2021). School principals who use the CRSL framework work to remove policies that undermine cultural responsiveness and, instead, promote policies and practices that encourage student voice and opportunities to learn and develop (Khalifa, 2018). School principals who practice CRSL see beyond school culture and move toward a deeper understanding of students' cultures. Culturally responsive leaders understand that each student brings unique characteristics shaped by family and life experiences that are separate and apart from the general culture (Khalifa et al., 2016). Khalifa et al. examined the significance of school leadership on restorative practices and found the principals' supervision was the only significant indicator of teachers' engagement in restorative practice interventions; therefore, a principal's guidance through the application of culturally responsive leadership practices is needed for the successful implementation of restorative practices.

CRSL has been used to explore educational leadership and how to build trusting relationships and increase students' sense of belonging and inclusion. I used CRSL to explore school administrators' perceptions on their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to OSS with middle and high school students. I used CRSL to develop interview questions and analysis of the data to determine if the perceptions of the participants aligned with CRSL practices.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative case study design in this study. According to Burkholder et al. (2020), "Qualitative research is an exploratory investigation of a complex social

phenomenon conducted in a natural setting through observation, description, and thematic analysis of participants' behaviors and perspectives for the purpose of explaining and/or understanding the phenomenon" (p. 83). The target district's school administrators have received training over the course of three academic years beginning with the 2019-2020 school year on restorative practices and have been expected to implement these practices. Creswell (2013) noted that qualitative research methods are employed when the researcher seeks to understand a complex issue that involves sharing individual experiences and multiple sources of data. I used a case study design with embedded units to solicit the perceptions of middle and high school administrators for Grades 5 through 12 in the target school system related to restorative practices through semistructured interviews.

Case study research is used when a researcher analyzes a phenomenon within a real-world context (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). A case study design was used to explore the participants' perceptions of restorative practices in a bounded context, one urban public school district. The case study included two embedded units, consisting of middle and high school principals, to explore their perceptions, experiences, and reflections related to OSS and restorative practices. The case study included a self-designed, semistructured interview protocol, discipline data from the target district, and district documents related to professional development and training in restorative practices and culturally responsive leadership that were compared to the participants' interview responses during the data analysis process.

The participants for this study included six middle school administrators responsible for the discipline of students, who comprised one embedded unit, and four high school administrators responsible for the discipline of students, who comprised the second embedded unit in this case study. The interview protocol included questions that were aligned to the research questions and the conceptual framework of the study. I coded and analyzed the data following the process of thematic analysis as described by Clarke and Braun (2013) and Nowell et al. (2017), beginning with within case analysis followed by a cross-case analysis and synthesis of the findings (see Yin, 2014).

Definitions

Culturally responsive leadership (CRSL): Culturally responsive leadership practices and policies influence school climate, school structure, teacher efficacy and student outcomes. Within the school context, CRSL addresses the cultural needs of the students, parents, and teachers. Culturally responsive school leaders are responsible for promoting an inclusive school climate and they have a moral obligation to counter the oppression of minoritized students (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Exclusionary consequences: A punitive method that removes students from the educational setting (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). Exclusionary discipline involves removing students from the classroom through punishments such as suspensions and expulsions, deprives students of the opportunity to learn (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022).

First ring suburbs (inner ring suburbs): These communities are older more populous areas of a metropolitan area that experienced mass suburbanization efforts of the post-World War II era which subsidized the development and residential settlement of

new communities further from the urban center (Lebovits, 2022). Suburban living was once seen as a privilege for the wealthy, then mass suburbanization created new housing for the working class. (Lebovits, 2022).

Restorative justice: Restorative justice is a theory of justice based in Indigenous peacemaking practices that reduces recidivism and emphasizes reparation of harm (Pavlacic et al., 2021).

Restorative practices: According to Archibold (2014), restorative practice is an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals, focuses on repairing harm as well as encouraging social connections within communities. When applied in schools, restorative practices proactively improve climate and culture.

Zero-tolerance policies: A punitive method that schools use to deal with bad behaviors that students display. These policies include actions of exclusion (e.g., suspensions and expulsions) that lead to the removal and isolation of students that commit infractions from both the school context and the community and that are put in place to enforce order within the schools themselves (Lodi et al., 2021).

Assumptions

Two assumptions regarding this research include (a) administrators participating in the study are familiar with and may have used culturally responsive leadership or restorative practices, and (b) participants will be honest and speak openly about their experiences and perceptions of the use of culturally responsive leadership practices related to student discipline. It is important for the selected participants to be familiar with restorative practices and culturally responsive leadership regarding exclusionary

discipline practices. It is also necessary for the participants to reflect on whether their attitude and actions towards school discipline reflect their practice. In addition, there is an assumption that the participants will speak openly and honestly given the voluntary nature of their participation. The intended results are to provide greater insight into the perceptions of administrators when considering student discipline, exclusionary consequences, and possible alternatives to OSS.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study included middle and high school administrators from one first ring suburban district, with a total of 10 participants providing their perceptions on school discipline through an interview process. The goal was to discuss their perceptions of exclusionary school discipline practices such as OSS through the lens of restorative practices and culturally responsive leadership. Gaining these perspectives led to insights into why administrators choose various responses to misbehavior. This study was delimited to middle and high school administrators in a first ring suburban district that has adopted restorative practices. The inclusion criteria were limited to (a) middle and high school administrators in the target district who received training on restorative practices and are expected to implement these practices at their school sites and (b) those administrators whose responsibility is to work directly with student discipline and determine the disciplinary consequences for students. Transferability of the study's findings were limited to schools with similar demographics and to the middle and high school levels.

Limitations

Among the limitations and barriers that affected this study were challenges for collecting primary data through semistructured virtual interviews, which included access to participants due to scheduling conflicts. To address this potential barrier, virtual interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. To protect the identity of participants, alpha numeric identifiers were used in place of all participants' names and specific schools. Using the qualitative data collection method of interviewing posed issues with interpretation of questions and objectivity. Poorly designed questions can be a threat to objectivity because the participant may not understand or articulate that they require clarification or more information (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). To address this, I asked both closed and open-ended questions that were not too broad to answer (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In addition, I maintained a sense of neutrality in addition to self-reflecting throughout the process because I could not completely remove myself given my professional experiences (see Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

As a high school administrator in the school district where the data was collected, the professional relationship with participants was a potential unintended bias. To mitigate any conflict of interest, the high school in which I serve as an administrator was excluded from the study as were administrators at my school site. While the participants and I professionally collaborate as administrators, I did not serve in a supervisory or evaluative capacity over the participants. The process of reflexivity was used to acknowledge and monitor any biases, experiences, and beliefs I brought to the study (see Creswell, 2013). To control for unintended biases, I engaged in reflexive journaling,

particularly during the data collection and analysis process in this study (see Burkholder et al., 2020). I wrote about my experiences and impressions of the research gained from the interviews and kept the journal as a tool for self-reflection throughout the research process.

Significance

Middle and high school administrators' perceptions on restorative practices are needed to inform school administrators concerning the use of restorative practices for discipline rather than using OSS as a disciplinary consequence (Fronius et al., 2019). Identifying and understanding administrators' perceptions of restorative practices and school discipline may lead to a more socially just school environment (Gomez et al., 2021). This study contributes to practice by exploring middle and high school administrators through the lens of CRSL. With the continued high number of middle and high school students being suspended out of school in the target district, it is important to reflect on restorative practices as an alternative to OSS and to address student achievement in the target district. Identifying practices that help keep students in school to continue learning can contribute to student achievement as well as to add information on the use of restorative practices from the school administrators' perspective.

This study contributed to positive social change in the middle and high schools in the target school system given the detrimental effects of OSS on the education system as a whole and the education and achievement of students (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021). The results from this study provided information to the target school district administration and the state Department of Education about school

administrators' perceptions of the strategies and approaches related to restorative practices that can be used to develop professional development programs.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the study while the background section provided the definition of exclusionary discipline as well as concerns about the effectiveness exclusionary consequences. There was a gap in practice related to middle and administrators' perceptions of school discipline regarding culturally responsive leadership practices. Research questions for the study included (a) What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of OSS as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students; and (b) How do school administrators perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of OSS as a discipline consequence for middle and high school students? The conceptual framework that guided this study was CRSL by Khalifa et al. (2016). The nature of the study included a description of the qualitative case study design, in addition to data collection methods. Interviews were conducted with 10 participants, six school administrators from three first ring suburban middle schools in the same district and 4 school administrators from two first ring suburban high schools in the same district. Lastly, this chapter included definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study. Each section of the chapter collectively supported the importance of exploring the perceptions of middle and high school administrators who worked with students and school discipline.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that I addressed in this study was that school administrators continued to use exclusionary practices for discipline negating more culturally responsive practices. Research has shown that students who experience exclusionary discipline are more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, and become involved in the juvenile court system (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore school administrators' perceptions on their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to out of school suspension (OSS) with middle and high school students.

Restorative practices have been found to be effective in reducing suspensions and improving school climates (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). These practices create a proactive, relationship-centered approach to building a positive school climate and addressing student behavior (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). The community building that comes because of restorative justice, allows school leaders to use restorative practices as an initiative of social justice (Joseph et al., 2021). Restorative practices are integrated with social and emotional learning, as students are encouraged to acknowledge and manage their emotions, develop empathy, and compassion for others, and build positive relationships (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Recent studies indicate that respectful and credible relationships between teachers/administrators and students can make a school climate more positive (Liang et al., 2020). School administrators who want to reduce

discipline disparities among students must provide transformative and CRSL (Joseph et al., 2021).

Culturally responsive school leadership pertains to the academic, cultural, and socio-emotional school environment; therefore, school leaders must celebrate practices that promote diversity and embracing all cultures (Khalifa et al., 2016). In a study by Payne and Welch (2013) examining the importance of school leadership regarding restorative practices intervention, results suggested that a principal's supervision was the only significant predictor of a teacher's engagement with the intervention. Therefore, both principal supervision and CRSL are essential for the successful implementation of a social justice pursuit of restorative practices (Joseph et al., 2021).

Proponents of exclusionary school discipline believe that punitive punishment will correct problem behaviors and deter future criminal incidents; however, there is little evidence that removing misbehaving students improves school safety (Gerlinger, 2022). Removing students from the educational setting with suspension and expulsion increases the likelihood that a student will enter the juvenile justice system or prison, which is often referred to as the school to prison pipeline (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). The concept of the school-to-prison pipeline reflects the changes that have occurred in both school discipline and the juvenile justice system over the past three decades (Mittleman, 2018).

Racial disparities have persisted across the years with Black students being suspended from school at the highest rate, as compared with other student subpopulations, with more than 12% receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions in 2017–2018 (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Despite some progress over time, students with

disabilities also continue to be disproportionately suspended more than twice the rate as their non-disabled peers (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). Because of the negative impacts on a student's life from research over the past three decades, exclusionary school discipline practices, such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion, have increasingly gained public attention (Anyon et al., 2018). Recent studies recommend establishing healthy and trusting relationships between school staff, students and families and alternative practices to reduce suspension (Anyon et al., 2018).

I answered the following research questions in this study:

RQ1: What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of out of school suspension as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students?

RQ2: How do school administrators perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of out of school suspensions as a discipline consequence for middle and high school students? The intent of this study is to gain insight into middle and high school administrators' perceptions of student discipline.

Chapter 2 contains an exhaustive review of the seminal and current literature related to CRSL, the conceptual framework of the study, and current research on culturally responsive leadership in education, restorative practices, school climate, the history and progression of discipline policy in the United States and student discipline, in general, with a focus on OSS.

Literature Search Strategy

A review of the literature began with a search of the Walden Center for Research Quality Dissertations as an initial source for research. I then conducted an extensive search researching databases to locate both seminal and current literature specific to the purpose of the study. Searches were conducted using Walden University Library and the following educational databases, EBSCO, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, and ERIC. The Google Scholar search engine was also used to find additional journal articles and peer-reviewed resources. Searches were filtered for peer-reviewed publications and limited to the last 5 years for current research to minimize outdated research.

I used the following key terms to narrow the search: *school administrators' perceptions of school discipline, culturally responsive leadership, restorative practices in schools, restorative discipline, zero tolerance, No Child Left Behind, school climate, restorative justice,* and *educator perceptions of discipline.* Additional searches of *exclusionary school discipline, restorative practices interventions,* and *cultural responsiveness* provided an extension of resources for an exhaustive literature review.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study emanated from culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL), developed by Khalifa et al. (2016). CRSL was derived from the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, which incorporates leadership philosophies to create inclusive school environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Khalifa et al., 2016). Khalifa et al. (2016) asserted that CRSL is based on four criteria: (a) critical self-awareness, (b) culturally

responsive curricula and teacher preparation, (c) culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and (d) engaging students and parents in community contexts.

According to Johnson and Fuller (2015), CRSL involves leadership that promotes school environments that are inclusive for both students and families from diverse backgrounds. School leaders who practice CRSL support families, build trusting relationships, and foster cultural responsiveness (Davy, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016). Davy (2016) and Johnson and Fuller (2015) asserted that culturally responsive principals are willing to challenge the assumptions about communities that are different than their own and seek to put strategies in place to engage and include all students on their school.

According to Khalifa (2018), leaders with diverse school populations are needed to ensure that culturally responsive pedagogy is practiced by teachers and to establish culturally responsive relationships with parents and community members. Principals must ensure that their diverse school context is inclusive and culturally responsive to the needs of all stakeholders by displaying transparency and upholding values aligned with practices that afford access to every aspect of the curriculum and extra-curricular activities for all students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Lindsey & Lindsey, 2014).

Culturally responsive leaders demonstrate a culturally proficient and responsive leadership disposition by continually accepting and embracing the differing cultures that exist in their schools and the community by using practices that engage and include all students and families (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive leaders understand that each student is unique and that educators must embrace all cultures with tolerance and

compassion and are responsive to the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of their students, staff, and families (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culturally responsive leaders pay close attention to the dynamics of their organization and how different relationships and mindsets could impede the success of creating and maintaining a culturally responsive school climate (Scribner et al., 2021). Khalifa (2018) recommended that school leaders should be compassionate and caring while holding high expectations for their students. School principals must develop strategies to determine the future direction of their schools to account for changes in the environment and student population and for advancements in technology that are likely to occur (Dunn, 2000; Gay, 2000; Glickman, et al., 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

As societal demographic shifts occur, it is essential to account for the simultaneous cultural shifts occurring that are counter to the existent mainstream culture (Smith, 2016). According to Khalifa (2018), culturally responsive school leaders look beyond the current school culture and plan for these changes. According to Khalifa et al. (2014), it is a moral imperative for school leaders to acknowledge and adjust leadership styles to account for the changing contexts of schools (Khalifa et al., 2016).

In a study by Khalifa et al. (2016), findings suggested that the principals' supervision was the only significant indicator of teachers' engagement in restorative practice interventions. The CRSL framework connects to restorative practice because both promote inclusivity and community building rather than exclusion and on building relationships and strengthening social connections within communities (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). A principal's adoption of culturally responsive leadership can provide

the guidance and support needed for the successful implementation of restorative practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). The heart of both CRSL and restorative practice is to promote a school environment of belonging and inclusion (Huguley et al., 2022). Culturally responsive leadership is particularly relevant considering the inequities that persist in education despite the use of instructional and transformational school leadership (Davy, 2016; Johnson, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Educational Policies related to Student Discipline

This section includes a discussion of the background of the legal roots of educational policies associated with student discipline in the United States. Out of school suspension rates have steadily increased since 1973, reaching a high in the early 2010s (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). In the 2013–2014 academic year, researchers estimated 2.6 million public school students received one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2021). According to Leung-Gagne et al., 2022, OSS rates began to slightly decrease in 2015 with the efforts of the Obama administration to reduce exclusionary discipline including issuing a guidance package to support schools in their efforts to move away from punitive discipline policies and move toward research-based, restorative practices.

The civil rights of students first became prominent with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, who believed that every child should have an equal opportunity for education (ED, 2022). Upon the establishment ESEA was a civil rights law and offered

funding for districts serving low-income students (ED, 2022). Additionally, ESEA offered federal grants to state educational agencies to improve the quality of K-12 education for all students (ED, 2022).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, ratified in 2002, focused on students' academic progress and students needing additional support to make adequate progress regardless of race, income, disability, or background (ED, 2022). Under NCLB (2001) schools were held accountable and forced to do right by minority students and students with disabilities (Sawchuk, 2022). At the core, there was an equity promise, but the reliance on testing distracted educators from the main objective of helping all students achieve (Sawchuk, 2022). NCLB (2001) forced conversations about disparate achievement patterns and tasked educators and administrators with analyzing data to find solutions to close the gaps and provide equal opportunities for all students (Sawchuk, 2022). Although the intentions were good, NCLB (2001) set equity goals without defining equity or providing a language on how educators were supposed to reach those goals (Sawchuk, 2022).

NCLB contained requirements that became increasingly difficult for educators to meet; therefore, in 2010, the Obama administration created a law that focused on the goal of fully preparing all students for post-secondary success (ED, 2022). In 2012, the Obama administration began granting flexibility to states regarding specific requirements of NCLB in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive plans designed by the states to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students (ED, 2022).

Since 1968, the ED (2022) has used the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) to collect educational and civil rights data in U.S. public schools, formerly collected through the Elementary and Secondary School Survey (E & S Survey). The purpose of the CRDC is to acquire data authorized under the regulations implementing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color, and national origin, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination based on sex; and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, prohibits discrimination based on disability (ED, 2022). The CRDC also collects a variety of information including student enrollment and data on educational programs and services, most of which is separated by race, sex, limited English proficiency, and disability. Information collected by the CRDC is used by other education agencies as well as by policymakers and researchers outside of education (ED, 2022).

The CRDC and Section 618 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) data have consistently demonstrated that student discipline disproportionately is focused on students of color, particularly Black students, and on students with disabilities (ED, 2022). On their own, disparities in student discipline do not violate federal laws such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin; or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits discrimination based on disability (ED, 2022). Nevertheless, these disparities

should prompt school districts to evaluate their discipline policies and practices (ED, 2022).

Historical Roots of School Discipline

The historical context of school discipline in the United States has roots with the early British concept, in loco parentis, meaning "in place of parent" (Skiba et al., 2009). This concept established a precedence of giving nonparental caregivers some parental privileges that became the basis for school authorities to discipline students (Kyere et al., 2018). The purpose of student discipline was used to ensure a safe learning environment that is conducive to learning (Kyere et al., 2018). School personnel made efforts to respond to or manage students' undesirable behaviors with suspensions, expulsions, and corporal punishment (Cameron, 2006).

In the 1960s, corporal punishment was a common intervention used by school authorities to discipline students (Skiba et al., 2009). Due to the physical nature and the purposeful infliction of pain associated with corporal punishment, corporal punishment was found to violate human rights and, therefore, was found to be a flawed consequence (Skiba et al., 2009). As corporal punishment became less common since the 1970s, suspensions and expulsions became more common as disciplinary practices to manage student behavior (Noguera, 2003; Skiba et al., 2011). Over the past 30 years, school discipline has transformed, reflecting the tough on crime movement that originated in the criminal justice system (Gerlinger, 2022)

Federal, state, district, and school policies have played a historic role in the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions as a response to school misbehavior (Camacho

& Krezmien, 2019). Zero-tolerance policies originated from efforts that began in U.S. federal drug enforcement agencies in the 1980s motivated by the idea of eliminating drug activities using severe penalties (Kyere et al., 2018). This evolved into the concept of zero tolerance in the 1990s that was adopted by many school administrators and policymakers to prevent the possession of drugs and weapons (Kyere et al., 2018). Zero-tolerance policies impose punishment for inappropriate or criminal behavior often in the form of exclusionary discipline such as suspension or expulsion (White & Young, 2019). According to Yaluma et al. (2022), exclusionary discipline in schools coincided with the increase adoption of zero-tolerance policies beginning in the early 1990s.

Educators are confronted with several challenges relating to student misconduct ranging from insubordination and disruption to serious violence (Irwin et al., 2022). The high rate of school shootings and violence in the 1990s led to the 1994 federal Gun-Free Schools Act to ensure a safe and conducive learning environment and affirm an intolerance to school violence (Klein, 2016). The Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 mandated that all states receiving federal funding expel students from public schools for no less than a year for bringing weapons to school, which resulted in an array of state-level "zero tolerance" policies that operated on the assumption that strict punishments would result in an end to drugs and weapons in schools (Camacho & Krezmien, 2019). Initially, “Zero Tolerance” was defined as regularly enforced suspension and expulsion policies in response to weapons, drugs, and violent acts in school (Joseph, 2022).

Exclusionary punishments became more widespread and routine in its use after the implementation of the Guns Free School Act of 1994, which addressed disciplinary

infractions with a zero-tolerance approach (Camacho & Krezmien, 2019; Yaluma et al., 2022). Recently, zero tolerance has come to refer to school or district-wide policies that mandate harsh punishments such as suspension and expulsion for a wide range of discipline infractions (Joseph, 2022). Most commonly, zero tolerance policies address drug, weapons, violence, smoking, and disruption in efforts to ensure student safety and support a school environment that is conducive to learning (Joseph, 2022).

Some educators choose zero tolerance policies because these policies are viewed as sending a clear message that certain behaviors are not permitted at school, and the enforcement of these policies allows the removal of problematic students from school (Joseph, 2022). Although the original objective of zero-tolerance policies was to ensure safe and conducive learning environments, in practice, these policies also led to the exclusion of students for numerous offenses through suspension and or expulsion practices (Morgan et al., 2014; Skiba & Noam, 2001). Research has reported that zero tolerance policies are ineffective in the long run and are related to increased school dropout rates and discriminatory school discipline practices (Joseph, 2022).

According to Yaluma et al. (2022), zero tolerance approaches to discipline did not create the discipline gap but rather intensified existing disparities. Public schools were mandated to implement zero-tolerance policies for gun, drug, and violent-offenses or risk losing federal funding (Skiba et al., 2014). Administrators were obligated to permanently remove or remove for a year, students who committed gun and drug-related infractions (Levesque, 2011). Despite good intentions, the result of the implementation led to the

suspension and expulsion of millions of students (Koon, 2013) depriving them of the right to education (Klein, 2016).

There is no evidence of the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies regarding school safety (Kyere et al., 2018). According to Chu and Ready (2018), OSS may exacerbate negative behaviors. Novak (2019) and Jacobsen (2020) claimed that suspended students became more delinquent following removal from school, in part, through increased involvement with deviant peers. Zero-tolerance policies have become predictors of negative outcomes such as high dropout rates, criminal justice involvement, substance use, and trauma (Skiba & Noam, 2001; Teasley & Miller, 2011). Although stipulations in the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act aimed to decrease the number of students suspended, the suspension rate increased 9% from 2002 to 2011 (Daly et al., 2010) in contrast to rate of violence committed by the percentage of students ages 12 to 18, which only dropped approximately 1% from 2002 to 2011 (ED, 2013). Kyere et al. (2018) concluded that suspension rates increased due to zero-tolerance policies. In addition, racial disparities in school discipline were found to be persistent and correlate to zero-tolerance policies (Del Toro & Wang, 2022). These zero-tolerance policies mandate predetermined punishments regardless of the context of or rationale for the behaviors (Del Toro & Wang, 2022).

Disciplinary policies in schools throughout the United States disproportionately affect students of color through exclusionary practices that can have detrimental effects on students with high rates of trauma (Dutil, 2020) In March 2018, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2018) released a report finding that that Black students,

male students, and students with disabilities were disproportionately disciplined with suspensions and expulsions in K-12 public schools. "Black students were particularly overrepresented among students who were suspended from school, received corporal punishment, or had a school-related arrest" (GAO, 2018, p. 12). Students of color, particularly African American students, experience the negative and unintended consequences of zero-tolerance policies at a disproportionate rate (Morgan et al., 2014; Quintana, 2012). The Office of Civil Rights reported that 5% of White students were suspended, while 16% of Black students were suspended during the 2011–2012 academic year (ED, 2014). In this same time frame, Black students made up 16% of U.S. public school enrollment and were suspended and expelled at 3 times the rate of their White peers, who comprised 51% of enrollment (ED, 2014). By the 2013–2014 academic year, Black K–12 students were 3.8 times more likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions compared to their White peers (ED, 2021). In 2015-2016, Black students made up 16% of the U.S. school age population and 39% of those who received one or more out of school suspensions (Bell, 2020).

Background of Restorative Practices

Restorative practice originated within the cultural activities of various Native American traditions and in recent decades has been used in the United States, first in criminal justice settings and then in K-12 education settings (Fronius et al., 2019). Restorative practice has gained popularity in the field of education by focusing on proactive community building by equalizing the voices of students, educators, administrators, and staff in the school community and by focusing conflict resolution

rather than relying on the false hope that exclusion will resolve conflicts (Huguley et al., 2022; Winn, 2018; Zehr, 2015). The philosophy of restorative practices is based on the premise that the wrongdoer can repair and learn from the harm that was done without being excluded and punished (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Kehoe, 2018; Lustick, 2022). Restorative practices allow individuals to self-reflect and reinforce interpersonal responsibility (Lustick, 2022), and most importantly, allow offending students to share if they themselves have been harmed because healing harms on all sides is part of the restorative process (Lustick, 2022).

Restorative practice typically focuses on building a community by establishing relational norms and on conflict resolution rather than exclusionary practices (Huguley et al., 2022). According to Huguley et al. (2022), exclusionary discipline has a negative impact on students with adverse school-wide effects. Implementing alternatives to punitive consequences can reduce criminal activity, bullying, and violence (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). Educators using restorative practice can create a positive climate by providing students with the opportunity to build relationships, learn to make amends, and reduce behavior issues so that students can remain in their classes (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019).

The CRSL framework connects to restorative practice because both promote inclusivity and community building rather than exclusion and on building relationships and strengthening social connections within communities (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). According to Khalifa (2018), it is important for school leaders to understand the collective history, memories, and experiences of the community they serve. It is

important for there to be collaborations between school and community stakeholders to benefit school, community, and student performance (Khalifa, 2018). School administrators have the responsibility to advocate for their students and the students' community (Khalifa, 2018). When school leaders lead with community perspective, they build relationships not only with students, but with their families and community members (Khalifa, 2018).

Restorative Practice and Disparities in School Discipline

Restorative practice may be the resolution to address disparities in K-12 discipline (Bruhn, 2020) rather than more traditional punitive discipline approaches that have increased the adversity faced by the most disadvantaged adolescent populations (Amemiya et al., 2019). Because restorative practice challenges the traditional approach to discipline while allowing for conversations about equity (Lustick, 2022), disadvantaged, vulnerable and traumatized students benefit from practices that focus on repairing harm and establishing trust (Herrenkohl et al., 2019).

Restorative practice typically begins with a focus on building relationships through establishing relational norms and engaging in community-building activities (Huguley et al., 2022). Within the context of school discipline, a restorative approach aims to first build school community across and between students and teachers through structured activities like restorative circles, which are regularly held group discussions and personal sharing sessions in classrooms to build relationships and help process community events (Huguley et al., 2022). When dilemmas occur, tools like restorative

circles are used to collaboratively find solutions that are more reparative than punitive (Huguley et al., 2022).

Effective implementation of restorative practice typically involves in-depth school staff training and student conferences (Augustine et al., 2018; Huguley et al., 2020). Professional development for these practices should include ongoing supports (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019; Huguley et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2014). It is common for the implementation of restorative approaches to be combined with a schoolwide or district commitment to reduce suspension rates or to ban the use of suspensions all together in lower grade levels and/or for lower-level offenses (Hashim et al., 2018; Lindstrom, 2017). Studies of restorative practice implementation have been generally shown to curb the overall use of suspensions and expulsions in schools (Fronius et al., 2019). In recent studies, suspension rates were reduced by 20-30% after 1-2 years of restorative practice programming (Huguley et al., 2022).

Despite the promise of restorative practices, existing research on restorative practices in schools finds that while restorative practice may reduce disciplinary inequity in some areas (McCombs et al., 2019) it may unintentionally intensify it in others (Hashim et al., 2018). Because restorative practice programs often overlap with standard disciplinary practices and do not completely replace them (Ispa-Landa, 2018), disparity in the social contexts that surround the implementation of such programs may lead to outcomes that may reduce or exacerbate racial disparities (Davison et al., 2021). Recent research work has shown the importance of allocating time to implement restorative

programs, which is likely to take a minimum of 3-5 years to make a significant difference after implementation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; González et al., 2018).

On average, restorative practice implementation involves comprehensive training of teachers and school staff around leading restorative circles, holding one-on-one conferences with students, and mediating conflicts (Augustine et al., 2018; Huguley et al., 2020). The extent of professional development for these practices ranges from intensive trainings at the start of the year, to in-house professional development and providing ongoing supports for educators and support staff (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019; Huguley et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2014). Often, the implementation of restorative approaches is paired with commitments to reduce OSS rates, or an actual ban on suspension altogether in lower grade levels and/or for lower-level offenses (Hashim et al., 2018; Lindstrom, 2017).

Restorative Practices and Disproportionate Disciplinary Practice

Research has documented that minority students and students with disabilities are disciplined disproportionately in comparison to their counterparts, which has led to negative consequences including an increase in the school-to-prison pipeline (Puckett et al., 2019). Black and Latino students are adversely affected by educational discrimination, including school discipline, that have been found to cause harmful consequences for mental health and academic success (Anderson et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2000; Huguley et al., 2021; Sehgal et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2003).

Historically, Black, and Latino students have also faced structural and systemic oppression that has disproportionately exposed them to detrimental environmental factors

outside of the educational setting such as concentrated poverty, over policing, and family disruption (Alexander, 2012; Coates, 2014; Davis, 2015; Katznelson, 2006). Evidence suggests that the racial biases that some educators have toward African American students are rooted in gendered racial stereotypes (Leath et al., 2019). These structural factors have negative consequences for students' mental health and academic success. As a result, Huguley et al. (2022) recommended that school personnel should attempt to use restorative approaches to repair harm rather than worsen the effects of oppression with punitive approaches to discipline. Additionally, educators should receive training in bias and childhood trauma to help alleviate severe disciplinary action for vulnerable students (Crosby et al., 2018).

Similarly, Winn (2018) recommended that to have restorative justice these practices need to be opportunities to heal societal harms like racism and other forms of systemic oppression and not just be limited to interpersonal harms. Research on the implementation of restorative practice has yielded mixed results and is limited at the school level (Gilzene, 2019) with scholars and practitioners are cautioning educators on the dangers of unreflective restorative justice practice implementation, particularly in terms of perpetuating harm because of racism. (Valandra, 2020).

Criticism of zero-tolerance approaches to school discipline, which have increased the use of school suspensions for even minor student misconduct, has led school districts to revise their discipline policies in support of more tempered responses to student misbehavior to keep students in the classroom (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2018). According to Davison et al. (2022), to address the increased number of exclusionary consequences, a

growing number of school districts across the United States have adopted restorative justice (RJ) programs. Educational reform initiatives have consistently recommended the adoption of alternate methods to exclusionary discipline and have referenced the adverse effects of exclusionary discipline (ED, 2016; Morgan et al., 2014). Amemiya et al., (2019) recommended that educators consider replacing punitive disciplinary measures with developmentally appropriate behavior supports and interventions that support building trusting relationships with students. Building trust is at the core of restorative practices to promote fair learning environments that promote relationships through policies and practices that support students experiencing conflicts in lieu of exclusionary disciplinary practices (Winn, 2018; Zehr, 2015).

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter included a review of the literature related to the evolution of K-12 school discipline in the United States. There was also a discussion on the role of restorative practices as a response to discipline. This research was framed by the CRSL framework. The following topics addressed in this chapter included: (a) the literature search strategy, (b) current research related to the conceptual framework based on Khalifa's framework (2016) for CRSL, (c) the origins of restorative justice and restorative practices, (d) the disproportionality of various student subgroups regarding k-12 school discipline (e) the evolution of school policies regarding exclusionary consequences, (f) zero-tolerance policies, and (g) school climate.

Several themes emerged from the literature. The first was that Black and Latino students and students with disabilities are disproportionality affected by exclusionary

discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions in comparison to their counterparts (Puckett et al., 2019). Second, restorative practices have been found to be beneficial because restorative practices challenge the traditional approach to discipline while encouraging educators to have conversations about equity (Lustick, 2022). Third, over the past 30 years, school discipline transformed to reflect the tough on crime movement in the criminal justice system (Gerlinger, 2022), and exclusionary discipline became norm due to zero-tolerance policies (Camacho et al., 2020). However, there is no evidence of the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies regarding school safety (Kyere et al., 2018). Last, a principal's adoption of CRSL can provide the guidance and support needed for the successful implementation of restorative practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). The main goal of both CRSL and restorative practice is to promote a positive school environment of belonging and inclusion (Huguley et al., 2022).

There were several research gaps identified related to this literature review. The first was that there was no literature found to validate that exclusionary discipline practices improved the school environment or increased school safety. A second gap was few studies addressed how educators determined disciplinary responses for behavioral issues. Finally, there was little literature on the perspectives on restorative practices of middle and high school administrators.

To conclude, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' perceptions on their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to OSS with middle and high school students. Chapter 3 addresses the role of the researcher and the

research design and methodology. Included in the methodology are the participant selection process, instrumentation, and data analysis plan. The chapter concludes with the strategies to establish trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and a summary.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' perceptions on their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to OSS with middle and high school students. By examining the perspectives of middle and high school administrators using culturally responsive practices, I developed further insight on student discipline for suggested best practices in building relationships with students and creating a positive school climate for other middle and high schools.

The chapter is organized into four sections that outline the methodology used in the study. The first section includes the research questions, the central concept of the research, and the rationale for the chosen research approach. The methodology section includes information on the population and sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and the process that I used for analyzing data. Next, strategies I used to achieve credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are explained, followed by the ethical procedures that I used to protect participants and gather data.

Research Design and Rationale

According to Burkholder et al. (2020), qualitative research is an exploratory process in which the researcher develops an understanding of a phenomenon in its natural setting. Qualitative research is based on how meaning is constructed, and the purpose is to discover and decode these meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers use a qualitative research design to uncover participant perception within a real-world context (Yin, 2014). One of the central uses of a qualitative research design is to explore the

shared experience of a group of people (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, middle and high school administrators who are charged with discipline have a shared experience and shared their perceptions of the phenomenon. I used the following research questions to guide this study:

RQ1: What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of out of school suspension as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students?

RQ2: How do school administrators perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of out of school suspensions as a discipline consequence for middle and high school students?

I used a single case study design with embedded units. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the unit of analysis, or the case, can be defined as an experience occurring in a defined framework. Embedded units are smaller units within a larger case that can be examined (Baxter & Jack, 2008). I examined one school district with two embedded units: one for middle schools serving as study sites and one for high schools serving as study sites. The target district was composed of approximately 9,800 students across 15 schools, one preschool, eight elementary schools, three middle school and three high schools.

This case study was exploratory in nature, because the phenomenon that I assessed had no clear set of outcomes (see Yin, 2014). The target district had three middle schools and three high schools that comprised the embedded units in this study, the first sub-unit consisted of middle school administrators and the second sub-unit

consisted of the high school administrators. By doing this I addressed the purpose and research questions by exploring the perceptions of both middle and high school administrators on their approaches to student discipline and culturally responsive leadership. Embedded units are situated within the case study and can be analyzed within or between the case analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The main objective of a case study design is to portray a comprehensive representation of a bounded unit framing a phenomenon (Burkholder et al., 2020). A case can be bound by time, place, definition and/or context (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Binding a case guarantees that the study stays acceptable in scope (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This study was bounded by context and place because the participants who were experiencing the phenomenon were middle and high school administrators who were responsible for student discipline.

Researchers use case studies to explore a phenomenon using a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This approach ensures that the issue is seen through a variety of lenses, which results in various aspects of the phenomenon being discovered and understood. According to Yin (2014), a case study design should be considered when the researcher wants to evaluate related conditions because they believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study, or the boundaries are not evident between the phenomenon and framework. Stake (1995) and Yin (2014) based their approach to case study on the constructivist paradigm and ensured that the subject of relevance is well explored and that the core of the phenomenon is uncovered. In the constructivist design, the researcher takes an active role, being flexible, and searching to understand the

participants' perspectives (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher examines the individuals' views, values, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions and often finds that more valuable than gathering facts (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

My intent in this study was to address the gap in practice by focusing on middle and administrators' perceptions of school discipline regarding culturally responsive leadership practices. Additional research and data on middle and high school administrators' student discipline practices will improve school climate. The data sources consisted of an interview protocol, district discipline data. and district documents related to professional development and training on restorative practices and student discipline.

Role of the Researcher

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative researchers seek to understand the experiences and the meaning that people have created using an inductive process. Patton (1985) explained that qualitative research is an attempt to understand the nature of a setting and what it means for participants to be in that setting and faithfully communicate to others who are concerned with that setting without prediction. Qualitative researchers are interested in how people make sense of their surroundings with the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

My role as the researcher was to collect data related to the problem and purpose and to interview the participants. Personal experiences, values, and biases can affect a qualitative researcher's findings (Creswell, 2013). For the past 19 years, I worked in K-12 education, first as a Spanish teacher, then as a dean of students, and most recently, as

an assistant principal. The target district had three high schools and three middle schools. I served as an assistant principal in charge of Grades 8 through 12 in one of the high schools in the target district. Because of my administrative and supervisory responsibilities, the high school in which I work was excluded from the study.

To conduct this qualitative case study, I interviewed middle and high school administrators using a semistructured interview format. I also analyzed district documents and discipline data. The participants for this study were middle and high school administrators who are responsible for student discipline. Participants were recruited from the remaining two high schools and three middle schools in the target district. I did not work directly with any of the staff in those schools, nor did I have any supervisory responsibilities over any of the participants from those middle schools and high schools.

For the integrity and purpose of the study, interactions with the participants were solely for research purposes. Because I worked as a high school administrator in the study district and was the sole researcher in this study, I maintained neutrality and monitored my personal beliefs and experiences so that they did not impact the research. To monitor my role as researcher and mitigate the potential for bias, I practiced reflexivity.

Reflexivity is a trustworthiness strategy used to achieve confirmability (Anney, 2014) that involves researchers documenting their experiences related to the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). Qualitative researchers practice reflexivity by keeping self-reflective journals while conducting research to examine personal beliefs, perspectives,

and assumptions (Ortlipp, 2008). To practice reflexivity in this study, I maintained a reflexive journal to document my experiences and impressions in relation to the research process prior to and throughout the data collection and analysis and to monitor myself, as the researcher, to mitigate any biases that may emerge (see Anney, 2014; Ortlipp, 2008). I recorded these experiences and impressions throughout the study for self-reflection to maintain the trustworthiness of the study and achieve confirmability (see Anney, 2014).

Methodology

The research design for this investigation was a qualitative case study with two embedded units, one formed by middle school administrators and the other by high school administrators. In the following section, I discussed the participant selection process, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment and participation, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Participant Selection

I used purposive sampling participant selection. Purposive sampling is the use of a small sample that is considered a strength in qualitative research to delve more deeply into the problem of study (Shakman et al., 2017). Purposive sampling is based on the premise that a qualitative researcher needs to select study participants who have experience with the phenomenon and from whom the most can be learned to understand the phenomenon of study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To begin the process of purposive sampling, a researcher determines the criteria that are needed in choosing sites and participants who might provide the most useful information to achieve the purpose of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The best resources for finding participants who fit the sampling criteria for this study were middle and high school administrators. The inclusion criteria for study participants were: (a) middle or high school principals or assistant principals responsible for discipline, (b) middle or high school principals or assistant principals previously trained by the target district on restorative practices for student discipline. Exclusion criteria included (a) middle or high school principals or assistant principals not responsible for students, (b) middle or high school principals or assistant principals who were not trained by the target district on restorative practices for discipline, and (c) principals or assistant principals at the elementary level.

The sample size in qualitative research varies with the nature of the study (Creswell, 2013). The size of a sample depends on the design and questions being asked in the research study, the data being gathered and analyzed, and the available resources to support the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample size for this study were six middle school and four high school administrators from a total of 16 middle and high school participants identified through the study district's public records. The initial recruitment for potential participants who met the inclusion criteria took place through email. A second email was sent to those who did not respond to the initial recruitment email.

Instrumentation

According to Burkholder et al. (2020), an interview protocol ensures consistency and creates a structure for all study participants. Interviews are considered the most effective method of data collection for case study research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Most interviews in qualitative research are semistructured and include specific, open-ended questions and probes to gain more information as needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of multiple data sources in case study research improves the credibility of the information obtained (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2014). According to Baxter and Jack (2008), prospective sources of data may include, but are not limited to: documentation, archival records, interviews, physical artifacts, direct observations, and participant-observation. Each data source is considered one piece of the puzzle, contributing to the researcher's greater understanding of the overall phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The main source of data in this study was semistructured interviews using a self-designed interview protocol. Researchers use the semistructured format for the flexibility to ask probing questions if more information is needed (Burkholder et al., 2020). To ensure the consistency of interviews with all participants, the interview protocol included a framework for data collection with an introduction, interview questions, potential probes, and a closure (see Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Yin, 2014). The interview questions were formulated using Khalifa's (2018) CRSL framework and aligned to their corresponding research question (see Appendix A). To establish content validity and determine if the interview protocol was valid as a data collection instrument to study the phenomenon, the interview protocol was field tested. An administrator who was not a study participant reviewed the questions to determine if they were representative of the phenomenon and sufficient to answer the research questions. Additional data sources included discipline data from the target district and district documents that were analyzed using a document analysis form (see Appendix B) related to professional development

and training in restorative practices. I analyzed and compared culturally responsive leadership to the participants' interview responses.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Before collecting data for the study, permission was obtained from the target school district superintendent using the required Partner Organization Agreement for Advanced Educational Leadership (AEL) students to conduct the study (see Appendix C). I then submitted the required documentation to the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for preapproval. After IRB approval was obtained, I began to recruit participants. The Walden University IRB approval number for this study was 07-24-23-0089574.

Participant information was obtained from the target school district's public records to confirm the criteria for participation. Potential participants were recruited and invited to participate through email using the Leader Interview Consent Form for AEL students. Informed consent is an exchange of communication between the participant and the researcher to confirm the participant's right to voluntarily participate or withdraw from the study, as described by Burkholder et al. (2020). The consent form included the following information: an introductory paragraph describing the purpose of the study, a brief description of participation, the data collection method and projected time commitment, any risks or inconveniences as well as the benefits of the study, a privacy statement explaining how the data will be protected and confidentiality will be maintained, and a statement of voluntary participation including the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

Administrators invited to participate in the study were given time to review the consent form and to ask any questions. They were asked to respond to the email within five days of receipt with the words, “I consent.” If no response was received, a second email was sent to follow-up with potential participants as well as a phone call, as needed. After consent was obtained from the participants, interviews were scheduled at a time and in a location that was both private and convenient for the participants. The preference was to conduct face-to-face interviews; however, virtual interviews were used as an alternative, if needed, using a virtual conferencing tool. All interviews were audio recorded with a voice recorder application. The allocated time for interviews was 40-60 minutes. Prior to recording the interviews, participants were asked for their consent to be recorded. At the time of the interview, the participants were given a copy of the informed consent and an opportunity to ask any questions they had about the study.

Each interview was conducted following the interview protocol. Interviews began with an introduction and demographic questions to gain insight into the background and role of the participants. Notes were taken in conjunction with the audio recording. At the conclusion of the interview, a debriefing was held as described in the interview protocol. During the debriefing, I provided my personal contact information to ensure that participants could reach me if they had questions related to the study. Participants were also asked to review their interview transcript for validation, which took approximately 15-20 minutes. Transcript validation is a type of member check that allows participants to review their interview responses for accuracy and allow for comments or correction

(Creswell, 2014). The interview transcriptions were kept on a password protected personal computer to keep the data secure from the semistructured interviews.

Additional sources for this study that were a part of the data collection included discipline data and district documents detailing the professional development, trainings and resources provided to study participants associated with CRSL, restorative practices, and student discipline. The participants attended the professional development sessions and trainings and received the related resources from the district. These data and documents were accessed from the school district's shared drive, which I had access to in the target study district.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis consists of disassembling information and reassembling it to summarize and draw conclusions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A qualitative study involves simultaneously analyzing and collecting data as an ongoing process that can range over an indefinite amount of time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, data analysis was guided by the conceptual framework of CRSL, the related literature, and the research questions (see Burkholder et al., 2020).

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and involved identifying themes that are generated from the process of data analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Findings were then inductively developed in the form of themes that emerged from the analysis of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Clarke and Braun's framework (2006) for thematic analysis includes six stages: "(a) familiarization with data, (b) coding, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming

themes, and (f) writing the research report" (p. 121). This process is not a linear, but rather, a recursive process with the researcher moving back and forth between the data analysis phases (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

I began the analysis process and familiarized myself with the data by listening to the interview recordings multiple times and transcribing each interview. According to Hagens et al. (2009), transcripts being shared with the interviewee is known as interview transcript review to obtain transcript verification. A copy of the interview transcript was emailed to each participant for validation of their transcript with a request to return the transcript within five days with any amendments noted. After each transcript was validated, I began to manually code the data in search of common keywords and phrases to generate codes. Coding was inductive, or bottom-up, with the codes originating from the data as recommended in thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). Memos will also be added in the margins to note collective perspectives and similar views, patterns, and comparable descriptions (Clark & Braun, 2006).

The search for themes, the next step of thematic analysis, involved reviewing the recurring codes and searching for meaningful patterns in the data related to the research questions (Clark & Braun, 2006). This required that the coded data from the participants in each of the two embedded units are reviewed and categorized, with the first sub-unit consisting of the middle school administrators and the second sub-unit consisting of the high school administrators. To facilitate this process, a data chart was constructed to list the codes from each sub-unit, then to sort the codes into categories that led to defining the themes of the case study (Clarke & Braun, 2006). As this process progresses, it may be

necessary to discard codes and combine or split the categories to define the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2006).

Triangulation was used to confirm and strengthen the integrity of the study's findings. Anney (2014) described three types of triangulation that can be used in the investigation of a phenomenon: (a) investigator triangulation, which involves the use of multiple researchers; (b), methodological triangulation, which employs various methods, and (c) data triangulation, which is the use of multiple sources of data. Data triangulation was used to compare the semistructured interview responses among the participants within each sub-unit followed by a comparison of the participants' responses across the two sub-units to determine if the data sources intersected to support the findings of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). The triangulation of the data, after comparing the data across both units from the middle and high school administrators, was then compared with the district documents and discipline data. The document analysis consisted of reviewing the district professional development, trainings, and resource documents related to CRSL and restorative practices provided to study participants and student discipline data using a self-designed document analysis form.

The final step of the thematic analytic process was composing the findings of the study in a narrative form to provide a detailed description of the themes supported by the data (Clarke & Braun, 2006). According to Creswell (2014), researchers should also present negative or discrepant data that may contradict the themes that emerge from the data to increase the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2014). To ensure that all findings

were represented, I presented contradictory evidence as part of the discussion of the findings to provide an accurate and thorough representation of the data (Creswell, 2014).

Trustworthiness

Burkholder et al. (2020) maintained that for trustworthiness to occur in a qualitative study, researchers must seek to ensure the rigor, confidence, and strength of their conclusions. The foundation for trustworthiness in a qualitative study is achieved by addressing the following criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The trustworthiness of the data is directly correlated to the person who collects and analyzes the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is the researcher's task to ensure trustworthiness by incorporating strategies to address the trustworthiness criteria throughout the research process. The strategies that follow were used to achieve credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the research process.

Credibility

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), researchers must determine credibility, also referred to as internal validity, by determining if the findings are sound given the data presented by the participants. Credibility is used to ensure that the research findings match the reality of the context of a phenomenon and affirm that the researcher appropriately collected data, analyzed the findings, and confirmed that the findings portray an accurate picture of the participants' perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

In this study, credibility was achieved through data triangulation and reflexivity. One of the best approaches to support internal validity is triangulation, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016). In this study, data triangulation, as explained previously, was achieved using multiple sources of data to validate the research outcomes (see Yin, 2018) within and across the two sub-units of the case as well as through the document analysis process. The data sources for this study included semistructured interviews, discipline data, and school district documents related to student discipline, culturally responsive leadership, and restorative practices. The findings were generated based on a thematic analysis of the data from these sources.

According to Probst and Berenson (2014), credibility can be achieved using reflexivity, known as the researcher's position, to show how the researcher is affected by the research process. Researcher reflexivity in qualitative research enables the researcher to consider the participants' viewpoints while examining and documenting their own assumptions, experiences, and biases to mitigate any threats to the data analysis process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflexivity was practiced through reflexive journaling to reflect on my role in the study, my personal background, culture, and experiences and how they shape my interpretations of the findings (Creswell, 2014; Ortlipp, 2008). Throughout the process, reflective notes were also taken to record personal thoughts as well as ideas and themes that emerged from the data collection process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Transferability

Transferability, also known as external validity, refers to the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe transferability as being made by the reader who determines if the findings are applicable to their context rather than the researcher making that broad generalization. It is important for researchers to consider the transferability of the results of the study to similar contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To achieve transferability, qualitative researchers must adequately portray the context of the study and provide enough data so that readers can make their own judgement of the transferability of the study to their context (Burkholder et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

One of the most common methods of increasing transferability is using thick description (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which is a detailed description of the setting, participants, and findings of the study so that the reader may assess the similarity between their context and that of the study (Lincoln & Guba,1985). Thick descriptions support other researchers who may seek to replicate the study or for practitioners who seek to apply the findings in their practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thick descriptions of the research design, the study site, the participant interview data, the document analysis, and the district discipline data were provided in the study's results, while ensuring that confidentiality was maintained using ethical procedures.

Dependability

According to Gibbs (2007), dependability, or qualitative reliability, refers to a consistent approach across different researchers and projects. Dependability relates to stability in a research study (Creswell, 2014). To ensure dependability in a qualitative study, researchers must clearly document their data collection and analysis in a logical manner (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The use of an audit trail will be created to ensure the research plan is followed and will be used to support the data (see Anney, 2014).

To ensure dependability in this study, I engaged a peer reviewer, who held a terminal degree in education and who was not a study participant, in dialogue throughout the investigative process (Anney, 2014). The peer reviewer can be familiar with the research or new to the topic being investigated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I discussed the process of study, the emerging findings, raw data, and analysis with the peer reviewer.

Confirmability

Confirmability, or objectivity, is critical to qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Researchers pursue believability based on insight and trustworthiness through verification rather than traditional reliability measures used in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability is the process of confirming that research findings are influenced by provable procedures in the data analysis process that are not the result of researcher bias (Burkholder et al., 2020). To avoid researcher bias, qualitative researchers are urged to take an active role as the primary instrument for collecting data and to practice reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis process (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell, 2014).

To mitigate any subjectivity given my positionality in this study, I used a reflexive journal to maintain objectivity throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Meyer & Willis, 2019; Ortlipp, 2008). Reflexive journals allow a researcher to engage in self-critical analysis and reflect on the research process to explain their assumptions and dispositions (Meyer & Willis, 2019; Probst & Berenson, 2014). As the researcher for this study, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Based on my education and personal and professional experience in education, I used journaling to acknowledge my personal assumptions and perceptions concerning student discipline, culturally responsive leadership, and restorative practices.

Ethical Procedures

Researchers should always be ethical and respectful of the participants and research sites (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). According to Burkholder et al. (2020), it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure ethical safeguards are introduced and rigorously maintained to protect the study participants and those at the study site. It is important to obtain permission from site administrators and participants and to clearly communicate the purpose of the study to those involved before collecting data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The ethical guidelines that supported this study were set forth by Walden University's Advanced Education Administrative Leadership (AEAL) Program and IRB. To uphold the ethical procedures of the IRB during the research process, an informed consent required by the AEAL program and approved by the IRB, was used to provide protections to participants and ensure participant confidentiality. The name of the target district, study sites, and district personal were concealed in all documents and

materials. Alphanumeric identifiers were used in place of the names of study participants and their schools. These identifiers were assigned at the beginning of the study and consistently used in the reporting of the findings.

After consent was granted from the target district superintendent, and eligible participant information was received, invitations to participate, inclusive of the informed consent, were emailed to the middle school and high school administrators in the target district meeting the inclusion criteria. Ethical considerations were upheld regarding my relationship to the potential participants (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); therefore, none of the participants who were recruited or included in the study worked in my school, nor did I have a supervisory role over any of the potential participants in schools serving as study sites. The middle and high school administrators eligible for participation received an email introducing myself, stating the purpose or the study, the informed consent, and a request for their participation in the study. Participants were notified that they could withdraw from the study at any time throughout the process without consequence if they did not wish to proceed. At the time of the interview, each participant had their rights explained again and were asked if they have any questions before beginning.

After the study was completed, I met with the target district superintendent and provided a written summary of the research findings without disclosure of the identities of the study participants or the school sites. All data were kept on a personal computer that was password protected and interview transcripts and documents were secured in a locked file cabinet in my home office. All documents, materials and resources obtained for this case study were kept confidential and will be permanently deleted from my

personal computer and hard copies of documents will be shredded 5 years after the conclusion of the study.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' perceptions of their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to OSS with middle and high school students. Chapter 3 addressed the research design of case study and qualitative methodology and rationale for the selection of the design and methodology to achieve the purpose of the study. The role of the researcher was described as was my positionality in the study. Purposive sampling and the inclusion criteria were explained as was the recruitment process to describe the selection of middle and high school administrators who meet the inclusion criteria and who served as participants in the two embedded units within case study. The interview protocol and document analysis were described in the instrumentation, followed by the data collection process and data analysis following the thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The specific trustworthiness strategies were addressed to achieve credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. The chapter culminated with the ethical procedures that were maintained throughout the study to ensure that participants' rights are protected, and confidentiality was upheld. Chapter 4 follows and provides a report of the study's results and findings.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' perceptions on their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to OSS with middle and high school students. Prior to this research study, little was known how middle and high school administrators in the target school district perceived student discipline through the lens of CRSL. To accomplish the purpose of the study, a case study with two embedded units was used. The first embedded unit in this case study consisted of high school administrators and the second unit consisted of middle school administrators. Through purposive sampling, I collected data from four high school administrators and six middle school administrators. Guiding the research for this study were the following questions:

RQ1: What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of out of school suspension as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students?

RQ2: How do school administrators perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of out of school suspensions as a discipline consequence for middle and high school students?

Data were collected using one-on-one, semistructured interviews, as well as district training documents and district discipline data. Culturally responsive school leadership was the framework used to guide the analysis of the data. In this chapter, the qualitative case study's setting is described, followed by the process for data collection, the data analysis procedures to determine the findings of the study, the results, the

evidence of trustworthiness and a chapter summary. The codes and categories that led to the themes of the study are presented in the results that address the research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary and preview of Chapter 5.

Setting

The setting for this study was a large urban public school district in the Midwest region of the United States. At the time of the study, the target district was composed of one preschool, eight elementary schools, three middle schools and three high schools serving approximately 9,700 students. The school consolidated to two high schools and six elementary schools for the 2023-2024 school year.

A total of 10 participants responded to the recruitment email and gave their consent to participate. The study's 10 participants were middle or high school administrators in the target district with 3 or more years of experience who oversaw student discipline. All participants received training and professional development in restorative practices. The target district's senior leadership began training with all their administrative teams during the 2019-2020 school year. The senior leadership team consisting of the assistant superintendent and director of special education met monthly with the administrative teams from all the middle and high schools. They would discuss disciplinary actions, analyze discipline data, and discuss alternative consequences and restorative practices to decrease the use of OSS.

The target district passed board policy to allow all students who are suspended out of school to make up assignments and work missed during the suspension from school. In addition to monthly meetings and data analysis, the target district held a restorative

practice training at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year that was conducted by Brad Weinstein, the author of *Hacking School Discipline: 9 Ways to Create a Culture of Empathy and Responsibility Using Restorative Justice*. The administrators created training sessions for their staffs and held book studies to disseminate the information throughout the district. In addition, the administrators were asked to attend Kevin Oliver's restorative practice training that included resources and books. The administrators then created and facilitated a series of professional development sessions with their staff members in their schools.

The target district also provided a toolkit that included resources on restorative practices, trauma-informed education, and CRSL. Furthermore, they provided state standards for social-emotional learning (SEL), district positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) policies, key points on trauma and the brain, information on self-awareness, restorative practices, building relationships, restorative circles, key vocabulary, and instructional strategies and approaches.

The district recently underwent a consolidation that involved closing one of the three high schools and two elementary schools for the 2023-2024 school year. The target district serves three unique communities; because of the consolidation, one of those communities was struggling with the closure of their high school. Students in that community were split between the two remaining high schools for the 2023-2024 school year. The district leadership has plans for future consolidation to one high school, but that plan is dependent on the passing of a bond issue. At the time of the data collection, there were changes to administration due to the consolidation; however, there were no major

changes in school administrator assignments for the participants involved in this study. There were also no major changes to the budget or financial cuts at the time of the study. The administrators from the closed high school and the two closed elementary schools were added to the administrative teams in other district buildings.

There was a total of 10 participants in the study, with six participants working in middle school administration and four participants working in high school administration. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes. Table D1 reflects the demographic data of the middle school administrators who met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study. The data include their job titles, years in their school at the time of the study, and verification of working with student discipline.

I assigned each administrator a participant code to ensure confidentiality. Job titles included head middle school principal (MP), assistant middle school principal (MAP), and dean of students (MD). There were six participants who worked as middle school administrators. The middle school administrators were assigned MP (middle school principal), MD (middle school dean of students) and MAP (middle school assistant principal). There were four participants who worked as high school administrators. They were assigned HP (high school head principal) and HAP (high school assistant principal). There were no high school participants who worked as a dean of students. The participants from the middle schools possessed 4-11 years of experience in their current administrative positions in the target district. All the participants had worked throughout most of their educational careers in a large public school system.

Table D2 reflects the demographic data of the high school administrators who met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study. The data also include their job title, years in their school at the time of the study, and verification of working with student discipline. Job titles included head high school principal (HP) and assistant high school principal (HAP). The participants from the high school unit possessed 4-8 years of experience in their current administrative positions in the target district. All the participants had worked throughout most of their educational careers in a large public school system.

Data Collection

I used three sources of data in this qualitative case study with two embedded units. The primary source of data was one-on-one, semistructured interviews with the middle and high school administrators. The secondary data sources were the middle and high school discipline data (see Appendix D) and district documents detailing the professional development, training, and resources provided to study participants associated with CRSL, restorative practices, and student discipline (see Appendix B).

Semistructured Interviews

After IRB approval was obtained through Walden University, in addition to the approval of the school district's superintendent, emails containing the information required by the Education Administration and Leadership for Experienced Administrators (AEAL) program were sent to administrators to invite them to participate in the study. The emails were sent exclusively to middle and high school administrators who worked in the target district for a minimum of 3 years and were responsible for student discipline.

The initial email invitation resulted in 10 interested candidates who met the inclusion criteria. Participants were provided with the informed consent to obtain their agreement to participate. After the eligible participants responded with an email stating “I consent” to participate and be audio recorded, personal telephone calls and texts were exchanged with each of the participants to schedule their interview and their preferred format for the interview. Of the 10 interviews, one took place in person and nine took place virtually using Google Meet based on the participants’ preference and availability. The interviews ranged from 30 to approximately 45 minutes.

The interview protocol was used for consistency in gathering information from the participants related to student discipline, OSS, alternatives to exclusionary consequences, culturally responsive leadership, and restorative practices. All the participants were engaged and transparent when sharing their perspectives. Interviews, whether in person or virtual, were recorded with Google Meet or Otter audio. The interviews were transcribed through the Google Meet or Otter platforms and stored on a password protected Google Drive.. I reviewed each transcription for accuracy and then sent each participant their transcript to verify the accuracy of their transcribed interview data. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), returning post-interview transcriptions to study participants is a member checking approach to verify accuracy of the information. Three participants followed up through email correspondence to share their reactions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The other seven participants reviewed their transcripts and communicated that their transcript was accurate and no changes were needed. There were

no deviations from the data collection plan or sample size, nor were there significant or unusual events or circumstances encountered during the data collection process.

District Discipline Data

In Chapter 1, the discipline trend data were included as local evidence for the target district. Table D3 contains the OSS trend data for the target district since the 2019-2020 school year that was available for the middle schools (MS) and high schools (HS) at the time of the study. The target district began training and professional development in restorative practices, trauma-informed education, and CRSL during the 2019-2020 school year. The school year abruptly ended on March 16, 2020, when the governor closed all schools and non-essential businesses due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Upon returning for the 2020-2021 school year, the district's students were in the virtual learning environment for the entire first semester. Students began attending hybrid learning in January 2021 with 3 days of virtual learning and 2 days of in-person learning until March 22, 2021. All students in the target district returned to in-person learning at that point. The 2021-2022 school year was not affected by any significant time in virtual or hybrid learning, and students returned to school for in-person learning.

The last column reflects the target district's most recent OSS data for the 2022-2023 school year. The district has continued with professional development and training in restorative practices, trauma-informed instruction and CRSL since the schools reopened after the pandemic closure through the 2022-2023 school year. Despite the continued training for the district's administrators and certified and classified staff, the OSS numbers continued to rise.

The OSS trend data since the 2019-2020 school year through 2022-2023 were analyzed. The overall district student enrollment decreased since the 2019-2020 school year, yet the number of students suspended out of school continued to increase. The OSS numbers for district's middle school students went from 12% of the entire middle school population during the 2021-2022 school year receiving an OSS to 16% in the 2022-2023 school year. The OSS numbers for the district's high school students went from 11% of the entire high school population during the 2021-2022 school year to in the 2022-2023 school year.

District Documents

The target district began first training administrators in restorative practices, trauma-informed instruction, and CRSL during the 2019-2020 school year. Upon returning to a full in-person school year from the school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the training and professional development continued for all certified and classified staff beginning in the 2021-2022 school year. The 2020-2021 school year was spent navigating virtual and hybrid learning where students were learning at home 3 to 5 days per week until March of 2021.

The target district provided a variety of professional development, support resources, and training opportunities for the K-12 administrators. There was consistency, monitoring, follow-through, and feedback provided. The senior leadership team, consisting of the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and the director of exceptional students, met monthly with building administrators to discuss discipline data, attendance data, student withdrawals, interventions, incentive and reward programs,

restorative practices, and staff meeting agendas and presentations. There was never a definitive request by the target district's senior leadership to only use restorative practices. All the administrators used both restorative practices and traditional disciplinary consequences. There were two leadership training sessions that the study participants attended. One presenter stated that they believed restorative practices were the only appropriate consequences if a school wanted to pursue a restorative program with fidelity. The second training addressed both restorative practices and traditional disciplinary consequences with the presenter telling the audience that students still need to be suspended from school at times.

The senior leadership team also provided all the district schools with home liaisons and outside counselors who offered school-based counseling so that students could receive services during the school day. The district administration also provided their certified staff and administrators with many opportunities to collaborate and exchange ideas, strategies, and resources. Appendix B contains the chart documenting the target district documents related to student discipline, restorative practices, and CRSL that were accessed and analyzed in this study.

Data Analysis

The conceptual framework of CRSL, literature review, and research questions guided the process of data analysis. I applied inductive coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017) when completing the thematic analysis of the data informed by the work of Clarke and Braun (2013) and Nowell et al. (2017). As codes emerged from the

data, I reviewed recurring codes and searched for patterns related to the research questions to arrive at the themes of the study (Clarke & Braun, 2006).

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis for this qualitative case study with two embedded units was informed by Clarke & Braun's (2013) data analysis process beginning with (a) familiarizing myself with the data including the interview transcripts, the discipline data, and the documents, (b) coding the data, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing the results. The inductive method of analysis is a data-driven process by which the researcher codes the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame (Clarke & Braun, 2006).

Phase 1: Familiarization with Data

I began the analysis by familiarizing myself with the data by reading through all the interview transcripts. I reviewed and reread the interview transcripts multiple times and listened to the audio recordings twice. In addition, I watched the Google Meet recordings for the nine interviews that were conducted on that platform.

Phase 2: Data Transcription

After concluding each interview, I listened to the audio recording while viewing the transcripts to ensure accuracy. I made notes and highlighted relevant and meaningful observations to reflect on as the data were transcribed and reviewed. Reviewing the transcriptions allowed me to become more familiar with the data so that I could prepare for their analysis.

Phase 3: Coding the Data

I used inductive coding to begin the analysis of the interview data collected from the participants (see Clarke & Braun, 2013). Codes were determined from the data that reflected recurring trends, which helped formulate themes. Codes emerged from the data related to RQ1, RQ2, and the concepts from CRSL and restorative practices. Paraphrasing, highlighting, and coding were added to the transcripts, addressing the two research questions and 18 interview questions that helped to interpret the participants' responses. Color-labeled codes were used so data could be reviewed several times to quickly find related coded data to refine the codes and categorize the data to identify emergent themes that led to the next phase of the analysis process (see Clarke & Braun, 2013). The color codes were organized by RQ1, RQ2, CRSL, and RP in a Google Sheet. Each of the four sections were assigned a different color. The semistructured interview data were further analyzed to identify the color-labeled codes that correlated to one of the four sections. Some of the codes overlapped and appeared in more than one section. The codes later became categories and eventually formed the themes. For example, the terms, build relationships and communication, were codes that emerged from the interview data regarding RQ1. The category of consistent expectations then resulted, which eventually led to a theme.

Phase 4: Search for Themes

I collated each relevant data item related to the codes in a Google Sheet and then categorized and analyzed the coded data further to discover themes. Google Docs and Sheets were used to document the codes, and the subsequent categories organized. A

table and bar graph were created to display code frequency and emergent themes. Findings were inductively developed after coding and categorizing the data to form the themes that emerged from the analysis (see Clarke & Braun, 2013). The tables in Appendix D reflect the results of the inductive coding that revealed the themes related to the middle school and high school administrators' perceptions of the contributing factors affecting student discipline, OSS, CRSL, and restorative practices related to RQ1.

The next step involved checking that the themes 'worked' in relation to both the coded extracts and the full set of data. I contemplated if the themes worked by considering all the data sources. I reflected on whether the themes presented an accurate and comprehensive story regarding the interview data. I listened and read the interview transcripts repeatedly until I felt that I uncovered a theme that told a compelling story about the data. I then began to define the nature of each individual theme and the relationship among the themes within both embedded units in the case study (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Phase 5: Document Analysis

Using the District Document Analysis Form (see Appendix B), I reflected on the target district training in relation to the interview responses that had been analyzed as well as the district discipline data. All K-12 district administrators received the same training and professional development. The participants for this study were all middle or high school administrators in the target district and were given the same resources and support. As a researcher, I then reflected on the story the themes told concerning the context of the study and how the themes fit in the story about the data.

Phase 6: Define and Review Themes

During phase 6, I reviewed the initial themes to verify that they were relevant and applicable based on the research questions and research problem. The data were condensed, but the original impression was kept, preserving the participants' responses to be used as excerpts to capture the themes of the study and to provide thick descriptions of the results. Extra time was taken to review the data and ensure that my interpretations were accurate and clear. The last step involved writing the analytic narrative to provide the reader with a coherent story about the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The results of this study materialized from the perceptions, insights, and discipline approaches of the target district's middle and high school administrators to address the increase in the number of students who were suspended out of school in the past few years. This qualitative case study consisted of two embedded units, the first being the target district's middle school administrators and the second being the target district's high school administrators. I examined both units separately and then compared the similarities and differences. I focused on the data from the semistructured interviews, target district discipline data, district document analysis, and the resulting themes organized by each research question. Reviewing and reflecting on these data allowed me to review both embedded units and answer the research questions guiding this study. After analysis of the interview data, there was discrepant data concerning the effectiveness of OSS that are presented in the results of the study.

Results

Middle and high school administrators implemented various strategies when considering approaches to student discipline. All the middle and high school administrators that participated in this study believed that student discipline was not a "one size fits all" package. There was a collective sentiment from all the study participants that each student was unique, and each case required different support, interventions, and consequences.

Despite the on-going training, professional development, and resources and supports, there was an increase in OSS rates over the past several years. Most of the administrators attributed the increase in behavior incidents to a fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health concerns, social media, and a lack of maturity from the 2 years when traditional school schedules were interrupted. There were varying opinions on the effectiveness of OSS in both the middle and high school units, yet all the participants used OSS for severe behavior infractions and progressive discipline when the alternatives were not effective and behavior infractions continued. The six participants from the middle school unit were split down the middle regarding their beliefs on the effectiveness of OSS. Three the middle school administrators believed that OSS was an effective form of discipline, and the other three did not. There was only one high school administrator of the four participants in the high school unit who did not believe OSS to be an effective disciplinary consequence.

Embedded Unit 1: Middle School Administrators

A total of six middle school administrators participated in this qualitative case study forming the first embedded unit. All the middle school administrators were trained by the district's professional development in restorative practices and worked in middle and/or high school administration in the target district for a minimum of 3 years.

Research Question 1

What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of out of school suspension as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students? After an in-depth analysis of the participants' transcripts from the six middle school administrators, a reexamination of the target district discipline data, and a review of district training documents, the theme that emerged was around building relationships, promoting effective communication, engaging parents, and striving to decrease the numbers of out of school suspensions. All the middle school administrators worked with student discipline and were trained and directed by the target district's senior leadership to implement culturally responsive leadership and restorative practices in their buildings. The superintendent, assistant superintendent, and director of exceptional students met with the middle and high school teams to build a collaborative plan to focus on approaches, interventions and supports that keep students in school. However, they did not prohibit the use of exclusionary consequences. The plan was to meet monthly to review discipline data, attendance data, student academic watch list data, and current practices to assess their challenges, strengths, and needs.

All six middle school administrators had more than 4 years of experience working in administration for the target district and completed recurrent training on culturally responsive leadership practices that contributed to their leadership styles and their discipline approaches. At the root of their practice, all the middle school administrators agreed that building relationships with students was essential.

Theme 1. Middle school administrators strive to build relationships, promote effective communication, establish consistent expectations, and engage parents. In addition, the middle school administrators strove to decrease the numbers of OSS by using alternative consequences to keep students in school.

MAP2 explained their thoughts,

> The idea behind building that relationship, regardless of what the situation is, it isn't new. But I do like the fact that some of the restorative practices and a lot of the documentation out there gave specific examples of things that you could do. But in the end, I still think it all funnels down into establishing that relationship with that kid, no matter how hard that may be.

MP1 worked in education for over 25 years and agreed that relationships are key. "You can never go wrong with building those relationships. I just wish we could do it with more of our kids." Limited time and resources and an overwhelming volume of work prevented middle school administrators from being able to reach higher numbers of students. MAP6 has worked in the middle school for 11 years and was very frustrated with the increase in student incidents over the past 2 years and was on the verge of

leaving the profession. MAP6 indicated that relationships were critical and continued to be critical to improving student discipline, especially with the highest need students.

> I think I have really worked on developing relationships with our toughest kids. It started out, like I said, in my first few years. I was always just the discipline person, and the kids always hate you because you're the disciplinarian, but I think through the years, I've really worked on just developing that relationship. I think I personally have worked on just developing those relationships, getting to know, especially my heavy hitters, and figuring out what we can do and working with them.

Building relationships was also essential when establishing a trusting relationship with the students' parents and families. MP1 emphasized that relationships were very important when getting parents on board with your expectations. Transparency and communication were key when having a successful working relationship with a student's family.

When asked about what additional resources and supports were needed to continue to improve and help students, MP1 mentioned support with difficult parents. "For me, that parental piece, but it's so difficult because, again, we're working with 1%. There are so many mental health issues that come with that. I don't know how to fix it." MAP2 added that partnering with parents was crucial so that they understood that in the school building, discipline methods are individualized. MAP2 commented, "Every child and every approach to every child is different, and you just have to see what works."

Communication was named by five of six middle school administrators as a key factor to a successful approach to student discipline. The administrators perceived that they communicated effectively with all stakeholders so that the expectations were well-defined and explained. The administrators believed that when they, school staff, students, and families communicated efficiently, there was more collaboration and understanding. MP4 commented, "It's definitely collaborative. Talk with the parents and offer resources." When the middle and high school administrators in this study communicated with the parents about resources and support, they gained support and it helped create a collaborative environment.

The middle school administrators shared the collective belief that knowing their students and encouraging trusting relationships leads to a productive environment that is conducive to learning. Relationships and knowing their students are connected to using differentiated and diverse strategies with students so that the consequences and reflections are individualized. For example, MP2 described that it was necessary to understand the needs of the students and the reasons for their behavior. MP4 added that it was critical to recognize the function of the behavior so a customized approach could be used with individual students. In general, according to all the study's participants, student discipline does not align to the "one size fits all" philosophy.

Communication was a fundamental practice that extended throughout the interview data with both the middle and high school administrators. To best meet the needs of students, and support a positive school climate, the administrators felt they must effectively communicate with all stakeholders, particularly the students, parents, and the

school staff. MAP2 and MAP6 both added that administrator to staff communication was very important in their buildings because, in the past, some of their staff felt that restorative practices meant no consequences and the teachers initially struggled with the concept. MAP2 and MAP6 both made attempts to frequently update staff, hold training, and provide resources so staff felt supported, and so staff understood that culturally responsive practices and restorative practices did not necessarily mean that the students would not receive punitive consequences.

The middle school administrators agreed that effectively communicating with parents and gaining their support was a significant factor in determining if OSS would be an effective consequence for students. MAP6 commented that sending students home was a reward for many students who already did not want to be in school. MAP6 worried about the message that it sent to students and families and shared that OSS could be an effective consequence for students if parents were present, and they didn't reward the student who was home due to an exclusionary consequence. MAP2 agreed with MAP6, stating that overall OSS was not effective; however, it might be with some students who have parental and/or familial support at home to explain that OSS has negative effects, and the behavior will not be tolerated at home, just as it is not tolerated at school. MP4 was the third middle school participant that concurred with MAP2 and MAP6 and did not believe that OSS was effective. MP4 added that while it might work for some students, it required parent support at home and an understanding between the school and the family clearly explaining that the rules were broken, the expectations were not met, and that was why the student was given an OSS and removed from the school setting.

MAP6 acknowledged that administrators must know their audience so students are not sent to empty homes or homes where they will not be held accountable for their actions. MAP6 stated, “Suspension, I think it does more for the school than it does for the student.” However, MAP6 acknowledged that they did not think that OSS worked, overall, yet it might work for some students such as students who want to be in school, for whatever reason, who do not want to be removed from their social circles, classes, friends, or teachers might be affected more by OSS. The students who didn’t want to be at school, and already had poor attendance, could misbehave simply to be suspended to avoid school.

On the other hand, MP1, MD3, and MP5 stated that OSS can be an effective discipline method, and it encouraged positive changes in behavior. MP1 believed that OSS was effective and that most students who got an OSS learned from the incident and moved forward with improved behavior. However, MP1, MD3, and MP5 also agreed that parental support was helpful and could influence the effectiveness of the OSS. MD3 noted that OSS would be more beneficial for students if the parents did not allow them to treat it as a vacation day from school. MP5 remarked that most students who get suspended did not get suspended again and learned from the consequence. MP5 believed that OSS was an effective form of discipline, and many administrators use it as a time out from school when the behavior escalates, and other consequences were attempted before removal from school.

After analyzing the target district documents (see Appendix B), Theme 1 correlated to the target district’s resilient learner framework that was introduced during

the 2019-2020 school year and used every year since for a daily point of reference, resource, and support for promoting resilient learners. The framework focuses on embracing students by building relationships and communication with students about mindset, responsibility, self-regulation, and self-awareness. The professional development days and slides provided resources that included books, articles, strategies, lesson plans, videos, and stipend opportunities for both certified and classified staff to attend trainings.

The district goals for 2019-2020 were also analyzed and senior leadership members, who included the assistant superintendent and the director of exceptional students, met monthly with the middle and high administrators to discuss OSS data, attendance data, action plans, watchlists, and interventions used with the most challenging students. In 2019-2020, the senior leadership team provided a timeline for the school year with models and samples of professional development presentations for administrators to use with their staffs. This document included links for videos, articles, visuals, websites, quotes, and other resources.

The professional development on “the brain” in 2021 contained information on trauma, dysregulation, and strategies to work with students who were frustrated, anxious, or upset and unable to focus for learning. This training encouraged staff members to build relationships and to get to know their students so that they could understand and anticipate students’ triggers, strengths, and challenges. This training also included the importance of consistent expectations and clear communication.

The professional development from 2021 also included the district positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) goals and vision. During the 2021-2022 school year, the senior leadership team, consisting of the assistant superintendent, director of exceptional students, and coordinator for PBIS, created a resilient learner toolkit for all district employees. This toolkit included a glossary of terms, articles, strategies, videos, visuals, lesson plans, ice breakers, restorative circle planning, and program development for social-emotional learning, PBIS, trauma-informed practices and restorative practices. The main objective for all the district resources was to promote relationships, communication, consistent expectations, accountability, and compassion to decrease the numbers of OSS.

The trainings in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 continued. In 2021, the first training involved the book by Maynard and Weinstein (2019), *Hacking Discipline: 9 Ways to Create a Culture of Empathy and Responsibility Using Restorative Justice*. All K-12 administrators, guidance counselors, home liaisons, and school psychologists attended this training. After the initial training, the building administrators trained their staffs throughout 2021-2022 with book studies, presentations, and collaborative planning time.

During the 2022-2023 school year, the superintendent and senior leadership team chose not to introduce any new resources. The senior leadership team wanted to remain consistent with the resources that they previously used and provided since 2019-2020. They knew that the resilient learner framework, including the toolkit of resources, the established PBIS program, and culturally responsive leadership practices were established, and they did not want to add any new initiatives into the agenda for the year.

Despite the use and emphasis on all these resources, trainings, efforts, programs, and supports, the OSS numbers increased.

Theme 2. Middle school administrators did not collectively believe that out of school suspension was an effective discipline method for students, but they all continued to use it as a disciplinary consequence. The participants also believed that OSS was the last step after other options were exhausted. MP5 tried to find a good balance of consequences leaning more towards restorative practices and culturally responsive practices. However, MP5 stated that punitive consequences were still necessary in some circumstances, and OSS could not be fully excluded as an option. MP5 shared one example where they had a very challenging group of students who were sent to the office daily for behavior. The team tried several alternatives to OSS such as detention, in-school intervention, restorative circles, and community service projects around the building. MP5 commented that an alternative would work for a few days and then the students would end up back in the office. None of the alternative consequences or approaches worked with this group so they started progressive discipline with OSS.

The question of whether OSS was an effective disciplinary method was a highly debated topic. Of the six middle school administrators in this study, four of six worked to decrease their OSS numbers. MP5 mentioned that their objective was to decrease the number of out of school suspensions. “The goal should be to reduce them [OSS]. I don’t want kids out of school, and we have got to keep getting creative on how to get our kids in school.” MP4 stated, “We really try to not suspend out of school, unless we have exhausted every other option.” MP4 stated that the use of OSS is not effective, yet MP5

believed that OSS was effective with 95% of their student body, “I think that most kids who get suspended don't ever get suspended again or just don't get suspended in the first place.”

MP4, who did not believe that OSS was overall an effective consequence, explained that when students were out of school, they just sat home on their phones or watched television. Although MP4 did not consider OSS an effective consequence, they added that if parents supported the school’s decision to suspend, and hold their children accountable at home, then OSS might become an effective discipline consequence. Nevertheless, MP4 did not think that most students who are suspended are held accountable at home. MAP2 agreed with MP4, that OSS was not an effective disciplinary consequence, but if it was to become an effective discipline consequence, the administration must have full parental support. Therefore, their conclusions were somewhat unclear as to the effectiveness of OSS, but OSS was determined to be ineffective due to a lack of parental support. On the other hand, MP1 stated that they considered OSS to be an effective consequence for many students; however, MP1 also agreed that parental support and the students being held accountable at home made OSS a more effective consequence.

MAP2 agreed with MP5 in that OSS and removal from school should be the most severe consequence after other alternatives were ineffective. All the middle school participants mentioned that the most severe safety infractions required immediate OSS. MAP2 added that anything with drugs or weapons required immediate removal. MAP6 commented, “If it's dangerous, if it's harmful to self or others, we have to send a clear

message. You just can't come to school and behave that way." MP4 added that if the behavior negatively affects the safety and well-being of the school environment, the student must be suspended out of school.

There was not any information concerning discipline and alternatives to OSS for infractions involving weapons, drugs, alcohol, threats of violence, fighting, and assault after reviewing district documents. Throughout the interviews and analysis of district documents, there was no evidence that the target district encouraged or discouraged the use of OSS regarding severe behavior incidents. In addition, there were no documents provided regarding the effectiveness of OSS, except for the training using the Maynard and Weinstein (2019) book. There was information in the professional development recommending that administrators make attempts to keep students in the classroom; however, there were no recommendations, resources, or alternatives concerning the use of OSS and the most severe disciplinary infractions.

Theme 3. Middle school administrators used out of school suspension as a last resort and when alternative non-exclusionary consequences were not effective. In addition to OSS being required for the most severe behavior infractions, it was the general belief that OSS was used after non-exclusionary consequences were attempted first and found to be ineffective. MD3 and MP1 both believed that OSS could be an effective discipline method. They both also tried to first use mentor programs, counseling sessions, restorative circles, peer mediation, lunch detentions and in-school intervention before going directly to OSS and removal from the school environment. MD 3 commented about a bias toward mediation sessions as a restorative practice. "It [a

mediation session] illustrates to the student how their behavior affected a relationship either with the classmate or with the teacher." Those middle school administrators who believed that OSS was an effective discipline approach also tried to first use alternative consequences and practices to keep students in class.

MP4 echoed the same sentiments as their middle school colleagues. In general, MP4 tried alternative approaches such as reflective lessons, mentor programs, ISI, and counseling sessions as possible alternatives to OSS, but stated that students were given OSS if they were a safety concern. Although MP4 did not believe that OSS was an effective discipline approach, MP4 felt that weapons, drugs, and alcohol should result in immediate OSS.

In reviewing the district documents, the monthly meetings for the 2019 Restorative Practices encouraged alternatives to OSS in an attempt to keep students in the educational setting. The senior leadership team worked with the middle and high school administrative teams to analyze discipline data and discuss interventions and alternatives for the most challenging students. In addition, the senior leadership team worked with building teams to provide action steps and proactive plans to address the use of suspensions with students with disabilities. The district had been placed in corrective action by the state during the 2019-2020 school year due to the high number of students with disabilities who were suspended out of school. Each school created and used behavior matrixes and discipline flowcharts that varied from school to school and level to level. The district did not provide set expectations, training, documents or professional development on when or when not to suspend a student from school.

Research Question 2

How do school administrators perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of out of school suspensions as a discipline consequence for middle and high school students? In describing their perceptions of using culturally responsive practices as an alternative to OSS, all six middle school administrators reported that communication was a key factor. MP4 stated that it was their job as the building leader to communicate effectively with teachers and encourage a collaborative environment. MP4 stated,

> I think trying to make sure that teachers are all on the same page and that we're all having good conversations about how to deal with discipline is our ultimate goal when trying to determine the function of the behavior. Because again, the consequences aren't doing any good if we're not going back to why they're behaving the way they are.

MP1 agreed that communication was essential because some teachers struggled with understanding the alternatives to traditional consequences. MP1 made sure that the staff knew exactly what they were doing as administrators to support them and take care of behavior incidents before frustration set in. All the middle school administrators agreed that teachers often became dissatisfied because they thought culturally responsive practices and restorative practices meant no consequences for behavior issues. MP1 added,

> Sometimes it’s very difficult for educators in the classroom to understand what we're trying to do. So, it's all about communication and getting them on board,

which I think in our building that's an easy thing for me because we just have a veteran staff who wants to do what's best for kids.

MAP2 shared that although they worked with a wonderful staff, communication was a significant component of their building climate. MAP2 remarked that there was a misinterpretation among the staff that restorative practice meant no consequence, and MAP2 made sure to present professional development material about the alternative consequences so that the staff could understand that there were still consequences for behavior and students would be held accountable with the hope that behavior improves.

MAP6 and MP5 also found that their staff struggled with restorative practices, and they communicated daily to maintain a collaborative and transparent environment. They did not want their staff to feel as if they were not being supported. MAP6 and MP5 sometimes held teacher-student intervention meetings so that the student could work to repair harm with a teacher if disrespectful behaviors occurred toward the teacher. Their goal was to keep the student in the classroom, so they worked through the function of the behavior in the hope that the problems were not repeated in the future.

The majority of the middle school administrators clarified that there was no perfect consequence or perfect alternative to OSS. However, they all agreed that there were various effective alternatives to exclusionary discipline that they used in their buildings. One notable component of the middle school administrators' perspectives was that no consequence, punitive or restorative, worked for every student. Every student was different, coming from diverse backgrounds, families, and cultures. There was no "one size fits all" approach that worked for every student.

Theme 4. Middle school administrators perceived various restorative practice strategies as effective alternatives to out of school suspension. Four of the six middle school administrators commented that relationships were essential to create an educational setting where effective alternatives to OSS could be effectively implemented.

MP4 mentioned several effective alternatives to OSS that were used in their building such as in-school intervention (ISI); school counseling sessions; mentor assignments; check-ins/check-outs with mentors, counselors or administrators; and restorative circles. MP1 also mentioned ISI, mentor assignments, and check-ins/check-outs with school staff as possible effective alternatives to OSS. However, MP1 also added that other punitive consequences, such as lunch detentions or after-school detentions, could be effective alternatives to OSS that allowed administrators to assign discipline while keeping students in class. MP1 added that they were limited with what they provided as an effective alternative due to the sheer volume of incidents that occurred. Volume and time were mentioned as their biggest challenges with implementing more effective alternatives to OSS that were not punitive in nature.

MP5 had a unique perspective because they felt that they did not assign enough OSS when they first began working as a middle school head principal. MP5 added that the administrative team moved more to the middle in terms of discipline and implemented alternatives to OSS such as detentions and ISI. MP5 also used alternatives such as community service, where students cleaned and assisted teachers and administrators in various aspects of organizing and improving areas of the building. However, MP5 added that the administrators always made sure to communicate

effectively with both staff and parents about those alternative consequences before assigning them.

MAP6 also mentioned the community service alternative to OSS in their building. MAP6 provided one example where a student vandalized a bathroom door, and in lieu of OSS, they helped the custodial staff clean the area. This alternative was only provided after communication and agreement by the parent and staff member.

MD3 stated that although restorative practices were time-consuming, they were valuable. Peer mediation, counseling sessions, and restorative circles were three alternatives to OSS that MD3 believed to be effective. MD3 added that the administrators in their building relied on the school counselors to assist with restorative circles and peer mediation. MAP2 also felt strongly about trying alternatives before removing a student from school and mentioned using punitive consequences such as detentions and ISI so the student still had direct access to education. In addition, MAP2's team used restorative circles, peer mediation, counseling, and mentor programs first to be proactive and throughout the year as possible alternatives to OSS. MAP2 believed that removing a student from the educational setting should be a last resort.

Although all the middle school administrators reported that they believed there were effective alternatives to OSS, they also agreed that there were certain infractions that required immediate removal from school. The major infractions mentioned that necessitated an OSS were possession/use/distribution of drugs or alcohol, possession/use of a weapon (knives and firearms specifically), and physical altercations such as fighting

and assault. All the middle school administrators perceived drugs, alcohol, weapons, and physical violence as a violation of school safety that required OSS.

The middle school administrators perceived various restorative practice strategies as effective alternatives to OSS. Many alternatives to OSS including peer mediation, ISI, detention, counseling sessions, check-in/check-out, mentor programs, and community service to repair harm existed before the trainings, professional development and initiatives of 2019-2020. One of the restorative practices that the middle school administrators believed to be helpful was restorative circles. The restorative circle training and resources were first provided during the 2021-2022 professional learning days, as found in the document analysis. The district document analysis was conducted to explore the resources, trainings, professional development sessions, and strategies that were given to the building administrators in the target district. It was evident that the target district's senior leadership wanted to provide alternatives to exclusionary consequences. However, even though all these resources were presented, nothing was required or formally organized. The restorative circles training was not reinforced or established. Information was provided in the Restorative Circles PowerPoint, Resilient Learner Toolkit, and Hacking Discipline Training.

Each building was responsible for training their staff to implement some type of restorative circle. Some of the information provided encouraged academic circles, and others promoted social-emotional circles to repair harm and encourage accountability for behavior infractions. Each building used different staff members and different rooms, support staff, students, and times of day. There was a lack of fidelity in the training and

implementation process. In some buildings, the administrators were running the circles, while in other buildings, it was school counselors or home liaisons running the circles. There was little consistency, follow-through, or monitoring of the process. Restorative circles appeared to be an alternative that the middle school administrators believed to be an effective alternative to OSS, but there is no district or level uniformity.

Theme 5. Middle school administrators believe that parental support is critical to preventing recurrences of OSS and building a collaborative relationship between school and families. MAP6 stated that with the right parent support, OSS could be an effective method for school administrators. MAP6 added that if they knew the families and that the student would not be rewarded at home for the OSS, then it could be an effective consequence. MAP6 did not want to send students home and exclude them from school: however, MAP6 believed that sending students home to a family who supported the school's decision was the best scenario for a student who was assigned an OSS.

MD3 concurred that parent support was essential to making OSS an effective disciplinary consequence. MD3 commented, "If we had more cooperation from parents and we knew that the suspension wasn't a vacation laying on the couch, doing video games and that kind of thing, then I think that would make suspensions more valuable." MD3 liked to see students do community service around the school to repair the harm or damage caused by the behavior infraction. For example, if a student drew on a table, then MD2 believed the student should clean the table; however, MD3 often struggled with parents because they did not want their child to clean or fix the damage. Many parents

preferred their child be suspended out of school or placed in ISI rather than perform community service around the school.

MAP2 consistently asked for parental support to prevent removing students from the classroom and commented, “Then, with the student, we bring the parent into the fold. Here's what could really help, if you would help us and work with us and be a part of this team. If you get that parent on board, you sometimes see really dramatic changes very quickly.” MP4 agreed with both MAP6 and MAP2 regarding the effectiveness of OSS and what administrators needed from parents. MP4 stated that for cases where the student made a mistake, was not frequently misbehaving, and there was parental support, then OSS could be an effective tool. MP4 added that the administrative team must have a supportive working relationship with the family, or they risk sending a student home to a vacation of watching television and playing games on their phones.

Lack of parental support was an issue for MP1 and their administrative team. MP1 commented that it got to a point with certain students, where the school attempted to intervene with multiple resources, yet the parents did not respond or believe that their child needed support. Regarding parental cooperation, MP1 stated,” We’re battling the parent.” MP1 was confident in the deans and assistant principals and their interactions with students and families; however, MP1 had the mindset that there was a lack of parental support for the highest need students who had the highest number of behavior infractions.

The middle school administrators believed that parental support was critical to preventing recurrences of OSS. There was no evidence found of resources, training,

professional development, or supports to specifically work with parents and student discipline in the district documents. The emphasis has always been on relationships and general collaboration, yet there are not documents, professional development agendas, training sessions, books, articles, videos, or resources particular to parental support and student discipline.

Theme 6. Middle school administrators rely on the support and assistance of their school counselors as an intervention and resource for the most challenging students. The target district made a strategic decision during the 2018-2019 school year to hire home liaisons to support the administrative team with students concerning chronic absenteeism, residency concerns, transportation issues, food deliveries, counseling referrals and truancy. In addition to home liaisons, the target district added school counselors at the middle and high school level and partnered with two outside agencies to bring school-based counseling to all the K-12 buildings. The home liaisons, school counselors, and outside counselors have been an integral part of the focus on culturally responsive and restorative practices in the target district. The district training focused not only on types of restorative approaches and strategies, but also provided a background in trauma-informed practices, mental health awareness, and social-emotional needs. Even though the target district provided these resources and the OSS numbers continued to increase.

MP1 shared that they always start with the school counselor when there is a high needs student who is frequently in the office due to misbehavior. MP1 first reviews the student's file to see if there is anything documented on a medical 504 or individualized education plan (IEP). MP1 then speaks to the student's teachers to review progress,

strengths, challenges, and observations. Afterwards, MP1 meets with the school counselor, home liaison and parent to review the situation, and create a plan for the student. MP1 stated that the school counselors often see students first to write incident reports or begin conflict resolution with mediation and restorative conversations before discipline is issued. The student is often a part of the process because administration always considered their input.

MD3 credited their school counselors for being a constant support and resource for the highest needs students. MD3 added that one of the outside school-based counseling agencies contracted with the target district has greatly benefited students with mental health struggles, social-emotional issues, and behavioral concerns.

MAP2 credited their "strong counseling team," home liaison and SRO for assisting the administrative team and intervening with a strong approach that holds students accountable by focusing on repairing harm and changing behavior. MAP2 believed strongly in the power of community and the necessity of multiple resources for students. The school resource team, consisting of a school counselor, school administration, the SRO, and home liaison together are "an anchor for understanding and helping that parent move forward, which then usually translates into positives for the student." MAP2 added that having this full team of supportive professionals divided the work and allowed the administration to reach more students and families.

The middle school administrators relied on the support and assistance of their school counselors and support staff for the most challenging students. School counselors are certified staff members. All the training and professional development was required

and presented to the school counselors and the teachers. The home liaisons are classified staff members but were also provided the professional development opportunities, resources, supports, and training on restorative practices, trauma-informed practices, CRSL, and social-emotional learning. There was no specific information found in the document analysis that was provided to administrators about alternative consequences and who should be using the strategies or conducting the circles with the students. There were documents containing information on academic circles for teachers, but there was no specific information provided on who should run the restorative circles for behavior.

Theme 7. Middle school administrators need more time and support staff such as home liaisons, student resource officers, and therapeutic counselors to best serve their students and decrease the OSS numbers. In an ideal scenario, educators would have an endless amount of support, resources, interventions, staff, and time. Several of the middle school administrators in the target district worked with a student resource officer (SRO) who assisted the administrative team with supporting students and families. The SRO also intervened in many situations where the student or parent were irate, combative, or belligerent. The SRO built relationships with staff, students, and families so that there was one more safety resource in the building.

MD3 gave credit to the SRO in their building for daily support with issues such as vaping, fighting, vandalism and disrespect. MP1 would like to see a full-time SRO in their building in the future because the SRO knows many of the families in the community. MP1 believed that a full-time police presence would be extremely useful with relationship building with the parents and the community.

MP4 did not have any SRO presence in their building and would welcome the idea of having a full-time police presence in their school. MP4 agreed that an SRO not only brings a safety and security presence, but also relationship building because the SRO knows the families and works with them in the community. MP4 and MP5 commented that the presence of extra adults who are available to support students with the highest needs are the key to decreasing exclusionary consequences. MP4 stated that the mental health issues were overwhelming and stated, “There are just not enough adults to support the kids.”

Despite a comprehensive professional development schedule with time and funds dedicated for training, resources, supports, outlines, data analysis, added support staff, and out of district collaborations, the OSS numbers remained higher than they were before the target district began training their administration and staff during the 2019-2020 school year. All the middle school buildings have school counselors, outside agencies doing school-based counseling with a selection of students who have parent and school counselor referrals, and home liaisons to assist with chronic absenteeism, food delivery, truancy, housing issues, and transportation, and some of the middle schools also have a student resource officer.

While the literature suggested that exclusionary discipline, such as OSS, does not benefit students nor does it improve behavior, both the middle and high school administrators still use OSS as a discipline approach. As a result, the question remains as to what other resources and supports are needed to help students improve behavior and decrease the number of infractions resulting in OSS.

The middle school administrators needed more time and support staff to better serve their students and decrease the OSS numbers. It became apparent that restorative practices take time and dedication. In the Hacking Discipline training, it was stated that full implementation of restorative practices for schools should take approximately 3-5 years with a full commitment. There was also information in that training about timing for restorative circles. In addition, there was information on the timing of conducting circles in the Restorative Circles PowerPoint. There was no clear plan, document, agenda, or presentation that contained information on creating or designating extra time for administrators. None of the training stated that a trained counseling professional was required to be involved once the staff received the resources and training through professional development. The 2019 District Goals contained action plans with staff members responsible for various actions. However, the buildings determine who is implementing the plans, therefore, there was no directive or training from senior leadership on who should implement restorative practices. In the District Resilient Learner Building Team Meeting document from 2021-2022, the schools chose the members of the team that varied from building to building.

Embedded Unit 2: High School Administrators

A total of four high school administrators participated in this qualitative case study forming the second embedded unit. All the high school administrators were trained by the district's professional development in restorative practices and worked in middle and/or high school administration in the target district for a minimum of 3 years.

Research Question 1

What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of out of school suspension as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students? After an in-depth analysis of the participants' transcripts from the four high school administrators, a reexamination of the target district discipline data, a review of district training documents and various rounds of coding, the theme that emerged consisted of building relationships, promoting effective communication, engaging parents, and striving to decrease the numbers of OSS. All the high school administrators worked with student discipline and were trained and directed by the target district's senior leadership to implement culturally responsive leadership and restorative practices in their buildings. The superintendent, assistant superintendent, and director of exceptional students met with the middle and high school teams to build a collaborative plan to focus on approaches, interventions and supports that keep students in school; however, the district policy did not prohibit the use of exclusionary consequences. The plan was to meet monthly to review discipline data, attendance data, student academic watch list data, and current practices to assess challenges, strengths, and needs.

All the high school administrators have more than 4 years of experience working in administration for the target district and completed recurrent training on culturally responsive leadership practices that contributed to their leadership styles and their discipline approaches. All the high school administrators agreed with the middle school administrators that building relationships with students was essential to student academic achievement and social emotional growth.

Theme 1. High school administrators strive to build relationships, promote effective communication, establish consistent expectations, and engage parents. In addition, high school principals strove to decrease the numbers of out of school suspension by using non-exclusionary alternatives such as in-school-intervention and detention. All four high school administrators in this study mentioned that building relationships was critical for student success. HAP2 commented that trusting relationships were fundamental to creating a positive school climate. Students worked best when they worked with supportive adults. HAP1 added, “Building relationships in classrooms is key.” Students do not always want to learn from teachers when they feel disrespected or negative about the classroom environment. HAP1 believed that students who found a trusted adult were more likely to stay on track and resolve conflict before a behavior problem escalated.

HAP4 commented that adult mentors in their building had a positive impact on at-risk students. HAP4 stated, “I always try to partner kids with a teacher or an adult mentor, whether that's a teacher, whether that's a monitor, whether that's a counselor, whoever, even if it happens to be an administrator.” HAP4 worked with students who were credit deficient and many of whom were major attendance concerns. HAP4 believed that building relationships helped students want to come to school.

Communication between stakeholders was a fundamental aspect of a successful school environment. The high school administrators encouraged frequent communication between teachers and students, particularly when there was a conflict. HAP2 used five-minute meetings between teachers and students with a conflict to explain their feelings

and hopefully prevent disruption during class and conflict recurrence in the classroom environment. HAP1 tried to frequently communicate clear and consistent expectations to both students and parents. HAP1 mentioned that communication between the school and the parent was critical but so was communication between the administration and the teachers. Families and teachers became frustrated when there was a lack of communication and transparency from administrators.

Engaging parents can be more difficult at the high school level. As students get older, there is less parental involvement at school. According to Lambert et al., (2022), the involvement of a parent or guardian in a child's education is an important predictor of student outcomes at the high school level. HP3 started to focus on parent communication to clarify various behavior concerns and school policies during the last school year. HP3 stated,

> We started to hone-in on information with parents and start communicating with them about what has been going on and what we're doing to intervene. I definitely talked to them [parents] about the cell phones and what we did, and I shared with them that we went 39 days without any social media issues once we implemented that policy.

It can be challenging to engage parents at the high school level, and the high school participants struggled with parental support regarding school consequences and out of school suspension.

The analysis of the target district documents was the same for the high school unit as the middle school unit. After analyzing the documents, Theme 1 of the high school

subunit correlated to the target district's resilient learner framework that was introduced during the 2019-2020 school year. This framework was used daily throughout the target district as a point of reference for educators and administrators as a resource and support for promoting resilient learners. The framework focuses on embracing and engaging students by building relationships, establishing trust, and communicating with students, staff members, and families about mindset, responsibility, self-regulation, and self-awareness. The target district provided slides for professional development days and a wealth of resources including books, articles, strategies, lesson plans, videos, and stipend opportunities for both certified and classified staff to attend trainings.

As part of the action plan for the 2019-2020 school year, the district goals were analyzed and the senior leadership team representatives for resilient learners, consisting of the assistant superintendent and the director of exceptional students, met monthly with the middle and high administrators to discuss OSS data, attendance data, action plans, watchlists, and interventions used with the most challenging students. During the 2019-2020 school year, the senior leadership team provided a comprehensive plan and timeline for the school year with models/samples of professional development presentations. These resources were given to the K-12 building administrators to use with their individual staffs. The plan was an essential resource to promote consistency with the expectations for staff training and included links for videos, articles, visuals, websites, quotes, and other resources.

The professional development presentation titled "The Brain" in 2021 provided background information on how trauma affects children, dysregulation, and strategies to

work with students who become escalated and are unable to learn. This training was important to provide staff members with a different perspective on students and encourage them to build relationships so that they could be more compassionate and understanding and to anticipate their triggers, likes, dislikes, strengths, and challenges. Trauma often explained behaviors, but it did not excuse them; accountability was important, and this training encouraged clear and consistent expectations with frequent communication.

The Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) initiative was also included in the target district's professional development from 2021. This plan included the target district's PBIS goals, vision, and action plan. During the 2021-2022 school year, the assistant superintendent, director of exceptional students, and PBIS coordinator created a toolkit on building a resilient learner for all district employees. This toolkit included terms, articles, strategies, videos, visuals, lesson plans, ice breakers, restorative circle planning, and program development for social-emotional learning, PBIS, trauma-informed practices and restorative practices. The target district was transparent and communicated that the district resources were provided to promote relationship-building, communication, consistent expectations, accountability, and compassion with the goal being to decrease the number of OSS.

Throughout 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, the district continued to provide training opportunities. In 2021, the first training began over the summer using the Maynard and Weinstein (2019) book. All K-12 administrators, guidance counselors, home liaisons, and school psychologists were directed to attend this three-day training. After the initial

training, building administrators were to train their staff members throughout the 2021-2022 school year with book studies, presentations, strategies, and collaborative planning. During the 2022-2023, the district senior leadership team wanted to remain consistent by using the resources provided in 2019-2020, so additional resources and initiatives involving student discipline were not introduced. The resilient learner framework, including the toolkit of resources and restorative practices, the established district wide PBIS program, and the culturally responsive leadership practices were viewed as comprehensive in the plan. Nevertheless, even with a vast collection of resources, trainings, programs, strategies, and supports, the number of students suspended from school continued to increase.

Theme 2. High school administrators view out of school suspension as an effective discipline method of progressive discipline for continued violation of school rules. In addition, high school administrators believe that OSS was a required consequence for the most severe behavior infractions that jeopardize student safety such as fighting, assault, threats of harm, drugs, alcohol, and weapons. All the high school administrators were consistent in reporting that they attempted to avoid OSS by first using alternatives to exclusion from school. The alternatives to OSS mentioned were in school intervention, detention, mediation, counseling, restorative circles, mentor programs, restitution projects, intervention meetings and reflection exercises. However, all the administrators felt the need to hold students accountable for their actions. After repeated violations of school rules, progressive discipline led to OSS. The only

occurrences where the administrators immediately assigned an OSS were the most severe behavior infractions that threatened the safety of students and staff.

High school principals strove to decrease the numbers of OSS by using non-exclusionary alternatives such as in-school-intervention and detention. HAP2 worked to decrease the number of OSS and only used exclusion from school if a student committed a major infraction or there was a continuum of behavioral issues after alternatives to OSS were attempted. HAP2 added that they used 5-minute meetings with teachers and students who were having issues. HAP2 also used reflection sheets, restorative conversation circles, and mediations with students having behavior issues. The goal was to try and keep students in the classroom and educational setting. HAP2 did assign in-school-intervention with reflection sheets and restorative circles so that there was a mix of traditional consequences and restorative practices. HAP2 believed that students needed to be held accountable through consequences in addition to the use of restorative practices to repair harm or resolve conflict.

HAP1 also attempted to use alternatives to OSS before excluding students from school. HAP1 believed in a progressive discipline model but first tried restorative practices such as mediation and restorative circles. HAP1 saw a rise in repeated classroom disruption after the students returned from online and hybrid learning during the 2021-2022 school year and found that students were not adhering to basic classroom expectations, which HAP1 believed resulted from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. “When they [students] were virtual, they were able to go to the bathroom

when they wanted, they were able to have a snack while they were doing school. And then, we get into a classroom, you can't just leave the classroom."

After the district returned to the traditional school schedule, HAP1 saw a rise in the lack of respect for school staff, security, and police and a lack of respect for school property. HAP1 wanted to "press the restart button with several students" and found that culturally responsive leadership practices, knowing the population, understanding the community, and rebuilding relationships was essential. HAP1 encouraged more of a focus on counselors involved with students, mediation, circles, conflict resolution and one on one conversations. HAP1 knew that there were infractions that necessitated exclusionary consequences like OSS but preferred to try alternatives before progressing to removing students from the educational environment.

HP3 used peer mentor programs, tardy sweeps, ISI, detentions, peer mediation and restorative circles as alternatives to OSS in their building. HP3 had multiple issues of severe vandalism and disrespect for the school facility. After incidents of vandalism, damage, or defacement, HP3 stated, "We were making them [students] clean that up and mop the floors and wipe down the wall. Obviously, if they break something and they need to fix it, they must pay for it, we'll do restitution." HP3 wanted the student to meet face-to-face with the custodian if they vandalized, or with a cleaner if they intentionally created a mess. HP3 mentioned these restitution projects due to concerns with destruction and damage to property in the school. They added that there were multiple cases of students who might have been suspended if they did not offer the alternatives to exclusion from school. There was a point where the alternatives to OSS were exhausted,

and the high school administrators began the progressive discipline process involving suspension days, followed by discipline hearings, and eventually recommendations for expulsion in several cases. HAP2 stated that OSS was used for repeated violations of school rules, but HAP2 also met with students when returning from the consequence as an intervention to prevent recurrences.

HAP4 also tried to avoid OSS with students and only assigned OSS for major infractions and believed that students needed consequences and accountability. HAP4 commented, “I am always looking for alternatives, but we have to hold kids accountable for their actions.” In HAP4’s school, they often used restorative circles facilitated by the home liaison or ISI monitor. Mediation was also frequently used for conflict resolution. As a result of the interviews, all the high school administrators perceived that they attempted to avoid OSS and tried to pursue alternative consequences before excluding students from school.

All the high school administrators worked to be visible and proactive with established and consistent expectations. In addition, they all used alternative consequences and restorative practices before moving to OSS. They did not want to exclude students from the classroom setting; nevertheless, they agreed that OSS was used in cases of progressive discipline after alternatives to exclusion were attempted and the behavior did not change or worsened.

All the high school and middle school administrators agreed that there were definite behavior infractions that required OSS. Any infraction involving weapons, fighting, assault, drugs, or alcohol required OSS and immediate removal from the school

environment. Every administrator agreed that the most severe infractions are safety concerns for both students and staff and therefore must result in exclusion from school.

HP3 commented that there were non-negotiable infractions that require OSS, but they always held a discipline hearing during the suspension to determine if the student could return early to the school setting. They wanted to give students the opportunity to explain what occurred during the incident and what could be done upon their return to prevent recurrences. HAP4 also stated that the non-negotiable infractions included anything that was a major safety issue such as drugs, weapons, violence, alcohol, or threats. Their building also offered discipline hearings for students during the OSS so that the student and family could come speak to the administration about the incident in hopes to prevent further infractions or recurrences.

HAP1 and HAP2 also concurred that there were certain behavior infractions that required immediate exclusion from school. HAP2 believed that restorative practices were helpful, but that they should not replace punitive consequences. They thought that they should be used concurrently. For example, the student would receive an OSS and upon the return would have an intervention meeting, mediation, or reflection activity. HAP2 also advocated for students who were assigned to in school intervention to participate in restorative circles. HAP1 and HAP2 believed that restorative approaches were most successful in conjunction with traditional discipline practices like OSS, detention, and ISI.

The second theme that emerged from the second embedded unit, was that high school administrators viewed OSS as an effective discipline method for severe infractions

and a continued violation of school rules. An analysis of district documents revealed no information involving discipline and alternatives to OSS with infractions involving weapons, drugs, alcohol, threats of violence, fighting, and assault. Throughout the interviews and analysis of district documents, there was no evidence found that the target district leadership encouraged or discouraged the use of OSS for severe behavior incidents. In addition, there were no documents found on the effectiveness of OSS, except for the training using the Maynard and Weinstein (2019) book. There was information in the professional development recommending that attempts should be made to keep students in the classroom; however, there were no recommendations, resources, alternatives, or information about the use of OSS to address students' severe disciplinary infractions or continued violations of school rules.

Research Question 2

How do school administrators perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of out of school suspensions as a discipline consequence for middle and high school students? In describing their perceptions of using culturally responsive practices as an alternative to OSS, all four high school administrators reported that communication and relationships were fundamental to the success of effective alternatives to OSS. HAP1 said, "Communication with parents and staff is critical." There were staff members in the building who thought that restorative practices suggested no consequences. HAP1 added that staff members were more understanding when there was frequent communication regarding the connection and combination of culturally responsive practices and disciplinary consequences.

Theme 3. High school administrators perceive various restorative practice strategies as effective alternatives to out of school suspension. All four high school administrators attempted to avoid OSS and tried alternatives prior to exclusion from school unless the infraction was severe. HAP4 stated, ‘We are always looking for alternative ways to help a child, but they still need to be held accountable, so how do we make that work?” HAP4 added that they preferred to use mediation for student conflict resolution and restorative circles. However, they commented that it was essential for the circles to be conducted by a professional who had built relationships with the students. In the target district, that may be a school counselor or home liaison.

HP3 mentioned community service projects and restitution for damage or vandalism as a possible effective alternative to OSS. They added that having a student face the adult in the building such as the custodian or cleaner who had to fix or clean the damage they caused, was powerful. HP3 commented, “Once they [students] can put a human face to it and see the person standing there, like why are you making my job more difficult? There is a sense of remorse and them, recognizing that what they're doing is not appropriate.” HP3 also believed that mediation and/or restorative circles were effective alternatives to OSS if there was a verbal altercation that did not escalate to physical violence.

HAP1 focused on peer mediation, restorative circles, and one on one meetings as effective alternatives to OSS. They also considered ISI a preferred option to OSS because students were not excluded from school, they still had access to their teachers, classwork, and materials. In addition, the students worked on reflection activities and restorative

circles in the ISI room. HAP1 knew there were behavior infractions that required OSS, but he tried to avoid exclusionary consequences. HAP2 used reflection sheets for behaviors that resulted in one full day of ISI. In addition, their administrative team used restorative conversations, restorative circles and peer mediations for behaviors that resulted in more than one day of ISI. HAP2 also implemented a system of mediation and restorative circles for students after they returned to the building from their OSS. HAP2 did not believe that restorative practices were effective on their own. They thought they were most effective when used with a punitive consequence such as ISI or detention.

Like the middle school unit, the high school administrators perceived various restorative practice strategies as effective alternatives to OSS. Many alternatives to OSS including peer mediation, ISI, detention, counseling sessions, check-in/check-out, mentor programs, and community service/restitution options existed before the trainings, professional development, and initiatives of 2019-2020. The high school administrators believed restorative circles were an effective alternative to OSS. The restorative circle training and resources were first provided during the 2021-2022 professional learning days. The restorative circles training was not formal or established. Information was provided in the Restorative Circles PowerPoint, Resilient Learner Toolkit, and Hacking Discipline Training.

Each building was responsible for training their staff to implement some type of restorative circle. Some of the information provided encouraged academic circles, and others promoted social-emotional circles to repair harm and encourage accountability for behavior infractions. Each building used different staff members and different rooms,

support staff, students, and times of day. There was a lack of fidelity with the process across schools. In some buildings, administrators were running the restorative circles, while in other buildings, it was school counselors or home liaisons running the circles. There was a lack of evidence to check for consistency, follow-through, or monitoring of the process. While restorative circles appeared to be an alternative that the middle and high school administrators believed to be an effective alternative to OSS, there was no district or uniformity across schools when implementing the process.

Theme 4. High school administrators believe that parental support was critical to preventing recurrences of OSS. All the high school administrators believed that the success of OSS came from the level of parental and familial support when the student was at home. If the parent supported the school's decision and communicated to the student how serious the situation was to be excused from school, there was less chance of reoccurrence or further issues. The high school administrators collectively felt that if a student wanted to be home because they could sleep, play with technology, and not be bothered, then many students preferred OSS.

HP3 knew that OSS drove a wedge between the student and the school. They also knew that it set the student back academically. However, when they felt that it was necessary, HP3 felt that OSS was effective if the parent was supportive of the school's decision to exclude the student from the school environment. HP3 commented,

> I do think if you're able to partner with someone in the family that can support you and not just say they're going to be sleeping in doing whatever. I've had many times parents say, don't even think that you're going to be sleeping in. You're

getting up, you're coming to work with me. I think when you do it, when you're able to partner with someone in the family, that helps.

HAP4 agreed that if the school did not have parental support during the OSS, then it was not effective. They added that OSS was very effective with certain populations, but they did not feel that the demographic in the target district generally supported the school's decision to suspend their child from school, even in cases of severe infractions.

The high school administrators believed that parental support is critical to preventing recurrences of OSS. In the document analysis for both the middle and high school units, there was no evidence found of resources, training, professional development, or supports to work with parents about student discipline. While the emphasis was faced on student relationship building and general collaboration, there were no documents, professional development agendas, training sessions, books, articles, videos, or resources found particular to parental support and student discipline.

Theme 5. High school administrators rely on the support and assistance of their school counselors as an intervention and resource for the most challenging students. The school counselors and home liaisons in the target district supported the administrators by assisting them with peer mediations, restorative circles, outside counseling referrals, check-in conversations, parent contact, attendance interventions, transportation concerns, housing concerns, educational neglect, community resources, and teacher intervention meetings. School counselors also conducted groups for mental health, matters of LGBTQ, the boy group, the girl group, anxiety, and grief.

The school counselor's role in the target district was recently changed at the high school level. The role of the school counselor became more concentrated on post-secondary planning, testing, graduation requirements, grade audits, class registration, schedule changes, graduation seals, college and/or career readiness and College Credit Plus. They did not have the time for substantial counseling sessions to support mental health. They met with students and did "check-ins," but were not able to offer the support that many suffering students needed. However, all the administrators in this study recognized the incredible support that the school counselors have provided with the volume of students they serve each day. They credited both the home liaisons and school counselors for helping administration with the most challenging students. Many restorative practices were time-consuming, such as facilitating a restorative circle. In addition to trained staff members, to use restorative practices with fidelity, you need sufficient time.

The high school administrators relied on the support and assistance of their school counselors for the most challenging students. School counselors are certified staff members in the target district. All professional development and training is required and presented to the school counselors and the teachers. The home liaisons are classified staff members in the target district and are also provided the professional development opportunities, resources, supports, and training on restorative practices, trauma-informed practices, CRSL, and social-emotional learning. There was no specific information found in the document analysis that was provided to administrators about who should be conducting the strategies, alternative consequences, or restorative circles with the

students. There were documents found containing information on restorative circles on academic issues for teachers, but there was no specific information found on who should run the restorative circles for behavior. There was no information found in the document analysis regarding who should conduct community service/restitution projects, peer mediation, check-in/check-outs, or other alternatives. Typically, school counselors assisted school administrators in the target district.

Theme 6. High school administrators need more time and support staff such as home liaisons, student resource officers (SROs), community support and therapeutic counselors to best serve their students in hopes to decrease the OSS numbers. When the participants were asked, what additional resources were needed to support students, HP1 commented that they would like to have more home liaisons in the building working with students, staff, and families. HP1 added that time was an issue due to the overwhelming volume of work and support staff was an indispensable part of a positive school climate. The home liaisons cared greatly for their students and were a tremendous support because they helped make sure that students' basic needs were met. Regarding home liaisons, HP1 commented, "Our gap between getting students transportation to school, getting a bike, finding some additional food, clothing, making sure the student has basic needs met, they are great resources." By assisting students with basic needs, the home liaisons helped school staff fight some of our discipline issues because kids had more access to transportation, food, clothing, and mental health support. HP1 added, "When we look at some of our greatest challenges at a school, it's the students that are attendance concerns or who's behavior is impacted by the baggage they bring in from outside of school."

HP3 would like to see more mental health specialists in the building. HP3 added that the schools needed more licensed mental health professionals to support students with trauma, depression, anxiety, and relationship issues. HP3 commented about ways to decrease behavior issues,

> I think, just if we had more mental health resources in the building, we would see some of this subside. We need a licensed mental health counselor that can meet with children because we're going to lessen their anger. We're going to lessen their, outbursts, where they're going to have more of an outlet.

Parents frequently requested mental health assessments for their children in HP3's building and assumed the school psychologists were there for mental health support. When a parent requested services in the target district, the school referred the student to one of the outside agencies based on the type of insurance the parent carried. From there, the agency reached out for an initial meeting. There was a very high number of requests for therapeutic counselors and many agencies had wait lists as long as 6-12 months. Lack of mental health support was one main concern for the high school administrators in the target district. Students struggled with coping and emotion regulation. Many of the students in the target district suffered from past trauma, anxiety, PTSD, transiency, economic hardship, family struggles, depression, and substance abuse.

HAP4 thought that community outreach could help the schools implement initiatives to support and incentivize students. HP4 recommended a program that they called *Stay in the Game*. The *Stay in the Game* mission was to prioritize attendance by connecting schools to resources that tackle chronic absenteeism. The target district

reported that the rate of chronic absenteeism for the 2022-2023 school year was 24.2% of the student population. This program offered a collaboration between the community and the schools.

HAP2 wanted more trained personnel to facilitate restorative circles and mediations. HAP2 suggested that a trained counselor, who was not a disciplinarian, could make a significant difference with behavior. HAP2 commented that "having an open-minded person that students could trust to help them work through problems, I think, would be really, really meaningful." Students were often angry and frustrated during the restorative circle sessions. The high school administrators felt that the circles were more productive when the students felt comfortable talking freely without fear of retribution from the administrators.

The student resource officers (SROs)were a new support added to the middle and high school buildings in the target district over the past 2 years. The district partnered with the local police departments to post one full-time officer daily to each high school and one full-time officer to split between two of the three middle schools. The three middle schools were in three separate municipalities; therefore, the officer reporting to the buildings must be an officer from that specific municipality. One of three cities did not have the manpower to spare one full-time police officer to be stationed in the middle school, so that middle school did not have an SRO, however district security was available.

The high school administrators thought that the SROs were a significant support for building relationships with both students and families. Many of the officers knew the

students or their families since they served in the community for many years. The SROs assisted the high school administrators with investigations, parent communication, vape issues, drug issues, safety drills, physical violence concerns, possible threats, and facilitating a safer school environment with their presence and visibility. The SROs were trained in conflict resolution, culturally responsive practices, and trauma-informed education.

The high school administrators reported that they needed more time and support staff to decrease the OSS numbers. The analysis of the documents for both the middle and high school units revealed that restorative practices required time and dedication. In the training using the book by Maynard and Weinstein (2019), it was stated that full implementation of restorative practices should take approximately 3-5 years with a full commitment of the school; however, there was not a full commitment to only using restorative practices. The target district was committed to the use of restorative practices and culturally responsive leadership, but without the stipulation that punitive consequences could not be used. Information was provided about timing for restorative circles. In addition, there was information on the timing of conducting different types of restorative circles evident in a restorative circles PowerPoint, but there was no clear plan, document, agenda, or presentation found that contained information on creating or designating extra time for administrators. The training did not indicate that a trained counseling professional was required to be involved after the staff received the resources and training.

The 2019 district goals contained action plans with staff members responsible for various actions; however, the individual schools determined who was to implement the action plans. There was no direction from the senior leadership as to who should implement restorative practices in the action plans. In the District Resilient Learner Building Team Meeting document from 2021-2022, the schools chose the members of the team, and they varied from building to building.

The district resources provided a thorough and comprehensive set of resources, trainings opportunities, and professional development for middle and high school administrators. There was an emphasis on building relationships, understanding trauma, and how it affected students. In addition, the administrators were provided with articles, visuals, videos, quotes, strategies, lesson plans, and activities to train their staffs and use with students. However, there was no consistency with training, staff, timing, schedule, and frequency of restorative circles across the schools. All the middle and high school administrators commented that restorative circling was an effective alternative to OSS, but the district did not implement the strategy consistently throughout the district.

All the participants conveyed the importance of parental support to prevent recurrence of OSS, yet there was no district document, training, resource, or support that specifically trained administrators on gaining parental support regarding student discipline. The administrators acknowledged that school counselors, student resource officers, and home liaisons were essential supports with the most challenging students. Nevertheless, there was no documentation found in the professional development resources for scheduling restorative circles, who might best facilitate circles, or how to

best use the support staff to assist with disciplinary infractions to decrease the number of students suspended from school.

Conclusions

The middle and high school administrators were generally of the same mind regarding their discipline approaches and perceptions of culturally responsive leadership practices and restorative practices. All the middle and high school participants in this study agreed that there was no "one size fits all" approach to discipline. They concurred that students should be treated as individuals using various disciplinary approaches, consequences, and strategies; there was not one consequence that was effective for all students. They also acknowledged that there were situations where no consequences were effective with some students. All the middle and high school participants agreed that school staff should prioritize building relationships with the students and their families and believed that trust, clarity, and communication can lead to support and collaboration.

There was resistance from some staff members regarding restorative practices. Despite training and support resources, some teachers felt that restorative practices meant no consequences. This led to a level of mistrust and a negative tone in the school climate. All the administrators agreed that parental support was critical to the effectiveness of disciplinary consequences, particularly with OSS. However, they did not feel that the parents fully supported their decisions. All the administrators felt that OSS was only effective if the parents supported the school's decision and held the students accountable at home.

All administrators at both levels agreed that support staff such as home liaisons, school counselors, outside counselors, and student resource officers supported the administrators and helped students get their basic needs met. In addition to basic needs, these support staff members improved the school climate by helping with mental health services, counseling, restorative circles, mediation, school safety, parent communication, and coping and trauma-informed strategies. All the administrators felt that the students' mental health concerns were overwhelming, and many behavior issues stemmed from mental health issues unrelated to the school environment.

All the middle and high school administrators attempted to use alternatives to OSS before excluding a student from the school environment. However, every participant in this study agreed that there were non-negotiable behavioral infractions that required OSS. These infractions were severe and directly threatened school safety.

Although the administrators agreed on many aspects of school discipline approaches, they differed in their view of whether OSS was an effective disciplinary consequence. Only one high school administrator believed that OSS was not an effective discipline approach. The middle school administrators in this study were split regarding whether they believed that OSS was an effective discipline approach. The consensus was for OSS to be effective, they needed parental support during the OSS to prevent future behavior issues and recurrences of OSS. The administrators concurred that many parents did not agree with the suspension a student and, as a result, the students did not believe that they deserved removal from school. This made it difficult to have a relationship with the student and the family. It also increased the likelihood for future behavioral issues

when the students perceived that they had not done anything wrong and were mistreated because of the disciplinary consequence.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

The triangulation of data sources and different perspectives from the middle and high school participants increased the credibility in this study. Data was collected through semistructured interviews, target district discipline data and target district documents related to training, professional development and resources associated with restorative practices, CRSL and student discipline. The middle and high school administrators' experiences and leadership perspectives contributed to answering the two research questions. All the study's participants worked more than 4 years in leadership for the target district and received training in restorative practices and CRSL.

Data triangulation was accomplished by conducting semistructured interviews, analyzing district discipline data and documents concerning resources, training and professional development associated with student discipline, restorative practices, and CRSL. The multiple data sources helped corroborate the findings and increase the probability that the embedded units were accurately represented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016).

After I reviewed each interview transcription to check for accuracy, the transcription was sent to the participant to verify the accuracy of the data. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), returning post-interview transcriptions to study participants is a member checking approach to verify correctness of the information. I asked each

participant to review their transcript. Three participants followed up through email correspondence to share their reactions (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The other seven participants reviewed their transcripts and found that their transcripts were accurate and no changes were suggested. The analysis of the district discipline data and district documents related to professional development were used to support the data collected from the semistructured interviews. This information revealed the perceptions of the middle and high school administrators regarding student discipline and alternatives to OSS. In general, all the study participants believed that student discipline approaches do not fit into a "one size fits all" philosophy. There were several resources, approaches, consequences, and strategies that administrators used with each individual student.

Transferability

According to Nowell et al., (2017), transferability refers to the degree to which the research findings can be applied in other contexts and studies. In this study, I achieved transferability through the semistructured interviews with six middle school and four high school administrators by providing a detailed narrative of the study's setting and the participants' backgrounds. A descriptive account of the administrators' perceptions was formed by using direct quotes from the participants. I did not expect the findings of this qualitative case study with two embedded units to be transferable to all school settings because the gap in practice was specific to middle and high school administrators in the target district. The detailed narrative will allow readers to determine if the results are applicable.

Dependability

Dependability in a research study is attained by maintaining consistency throughout the entire process for the duration of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I consulted a peer reviewer throughout the research process at various points who was not affiliated with the research study. I communicated updates on the recruitment of the participants, the data collection, and data analysis. After reviewing the target district discipline data and documents, the peer reviewer provided feedback and observations. The peer reviewer also offered advice about the tables and themes that came from the data. An audit trail was created to examine how the data was collected and analyzed using codes and categories to determine emerging themes. An audit trail was developed and showed the data collection and analysis processes. This audit trail served as a running log for the research process (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The dependability of the study was increased using the audit trail and the peer reviewer.

Confirmability

According to Burkholder et al. (2020), confirmability is the extent to which research findings are influenced by procedures rather than research bias. I was the primary research instrument in this study, so it was important to recognize my perspectives and observations in a reflexive journal. The journaling began in the participant recruitment phase of the study. I used two embedded units in the case study to uncover any similarities or differences and reflected on all aspects of the research process including similarities and differences in the participants' interview question responses. I

focused on the data collected to answer the research questions without allowing my perspectives or opinions to influence the data collection or analysis.

Summary

In this case study, with two embedded units, the perceptions of middle and high school administrators' approaches to discipline and the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of OSS were explored. Two research questions were used to analyze the perceptions of middle and high school administrators' beliefs, methods, and approaches to student discipline. The two research questions were shaped to understand how middle and high school administrators (a) perceive their approach to discipline when considering the use of OSS as a disciplinary consequence, and (b) perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of OSS as a discipline consequence. The research process was guided by the research questions and the conceptual framework of CRSL.

The middle and high school administrators reflected on their perceptions of school discipline through the lens of their experience, background, and beliefs. All the participants acknowledged that there was not a "one size fits all" disciplinary consequence that was appropriate for all situations. They also agreed that there were severe behavior infractions that required the use of OSS. Communication and building relationships were fundamental to creating or maintaining a collaborative school climate. All the middle and high school administrators tried to keep students in the classroom. They concurred that removal from school was used only for severe infractions or after progressive discipline where alternative consequences were previously attempted.

The administrators did not agree on the guaranteed effectiveness of any one discipline consequence. There was not one singular consequence that was effective for all students. Out of school suspension worked for some, but usually not the students with repeated behavior issues. There was a sentiment that, in some cases, nothing worked, not punitive consequences nor restorative practice. The administrators differed slightly in their beliefs on the effectiveness of OSS. Only one high school administrator did not believe that OSS was an effective discipline consequence. However, the other three high school administrators felt that it was effective, but that it worked best with parental support. The middle school administrators were split in their opinion of the effectiveness of OSS. Three of the six middle school administrators felt that OSS was effective, while the other three did not believe OSS was an effective consequence. The middle school administrators also agreed that OSS was more effective if the parents supported the decision to remove the student from school. The collective opinion was that the administrators felt that parents did not fully support them, and they believed that OSS only truly worked if the parents also held the child accountable at home.

All the participants relied on the support of counselors, student resource officers and home liaisons to assist with behavior issues. They also believed that there were effective alternatives to OSS, but that each student was unique and what might work for one student did not necessarily work for another. Collectively, the participants applied culturally responsive leadership practices and believed that restorative practices helped decrease the number of OSS. They all continued to use OSS for severe infractions and used it progressively after a process of applying disciplinary consequences that kept

students in school. Nevertheless, the discipline data for the target district showed an increase in OSS.

Every administrator was trained in restorative practices and implemented them daily in their buildings. Some of the restorative practices were conducted by the home liaison, school counselor, or student resource officer. Every administrator looked for alternatives rather than excluding students from the school environment. The participants shared that they believed the increase in behaviors resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, an increase in social media use, a lack of supervision at home, trauma, and mental health issues.

The students and educators were still dealing from the unintended consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students experienced a delay in the traditional education schedule. Many schools were closed or exclusively online for over a year, which caused students to lose valuable instructional time. This setback was still affecting students and some of the disrespect, substance abuse issues, attendance issues, mental health issues, social media and cell phone infractions were perceived as resulting from the pandemic.

In Chapter 5, I continue interpreting and analyzing the findings from the study. The limitations of the study are explained in Chapter 5 along with implications for practice and recommendations for future research. Chapter 5 concludes with the impact this study can have on social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study with embedded units was to explore school administrators' perceptions of their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices and restorative practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to OSS with middle and high school students. I conducted this study to gain insight into middle and high school administrators' perspectives on student discipline, particularly OSS, and to analyze the efficacy of alternatives to OSS. This study was relevant because there was limited research on middle and high school administrators' insights and perspectives on using OSS as a disciplinary consequence and possible effective alternatives to excluding students from the school environment.

I investigated the perceptions of the leadership practices of six middle and four high school administrators working with student discipline. I used a qualitative case study with two embedded units, the first for middle school administrators and the second for high school administrators, to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions through semistructured interviews. Despite an increase in support staff and a district initiative to implement restorative practices and culturally responsive leadership, there was an increase in OSS rates in the target district. I developed two research questions that guided this study:

RQ1: What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of out of school suspension as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students?

RQ2: How do school administrators perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of out of school suspensions as a discipline consequence for middle and high school students?

Semistructured interview data, target district document data, and target district student discipline data were collected and analyzed to explore middle and high school administrators' perceptions of student discipline through the lens of CRSL. The following sections include the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and conclusions.

Interpretation of the Findings

The study participants shared their experiences in school administration working with student discipline and their perspectives on OSS, restorative practices, and CRSL. I focused on student disciplinary consequences, particularly OSS, as well as restorative practices and possible alternatives to OSS. I asked six middle and four high school administrators about their perceptions of, and professional experiences related to CRSL and their disciplinary practices.

The target district began and continued with initiatives to implement restorative practices and CRSL that reflected the findings at the district level. The administrators in this study preferred not to use OSS, knowing the negative impact exclusionary consequences had by removing students from the educational setting. Yet, all the study participants used OSS as a disciplinary consequence, despite the research of Leung-Gagne et al. (2022), in which researchers found students who were suspended from

school can be impacted negatively because they are likely to suffer academically, or possibly repeat a grade, or drop out of school.

The study participants concurred that a one size fits all approach in student discipline is ineffective. This concept, which the participants stated they believed in, of treating each student as an individual, evidenced that they realized that not all consequences and interventions worked the same for everyone. This connected to recent research on restorative practices and alternatives to punitive discipline (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). According to the United States Government Accountability Office (2018), school officials throughout the United States have adopted alternative restorative practices over disciplinary actions that remove children from the classroom.

According to Payne and Welch (2018), using restorative practices in response to student misbehaviors, rather than OSS reduces recidivism and promotes higher academic achievement. Despite the previous research, training, professional development, resources, and added support, OSS numbers in the target district continue to increase at the middle and high school levels. Restorative practices were found to decrease student delinquency, improve academic outcomes, and create a positive school climate, and yet in this study and in other studies, it was found that school administrators continue to use punitive disciplinary practices to control student behavior (Payne & Welch, 2018). This may be the result of the target district's use of restorative practices while also maintaining the use of traditional disciplinary consequences, including OSS.

Based on recommendations from the state, the target district provided resources to enable educators to create positive learning environments that include professional

development focused on mitigating implicit biases, developing empathy for students, creating multi-tiered systems of support, advancing restorative practices, providing support for students with disabilities, and embracing diverse backgrounds (see Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). To create inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments, educators and administrators must foster trusting relationships with students (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). The administrators in this study understood that building relationships, embracing diversity, and embracing the individual needs of the students was important. The district provided resources and professional development about compassion, empathy, implicit bias, diversity, and students with special needs. However, despite all the trainings and resources, the middle and high school administrators continued to use traditional disciplinary consequences. There was no ban or specifications regarding the use of OSS from the district administration. The training and resources provided by the target district require a comprehensive review as to their effectiveness to reduce the use of OSS as a disciplinary consequence.

The administrators in this study reported that they often delegated restorative practices to others given their overwhelming workloads. Delegating practices that can promote trusting relationships may negatively affect the administrators' relationship-building efforts with students in this study (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). The administrators in this study always assigned punitive consequences, yet they were not always directly involved in the alternatives and restorative practices. The administrators often used the school counselors and home liaisons for peer mediations and restorative circles. Each building assigned different staff members to assist with these alternatives.

There was no consistency or criteria throughout the district with the implementation of restorative practices.

The middle and high school administrators in this study also stated that they understood that all students were unique individuals with diverse strengths, challenges, upbringings, and experiences, reflecting Khalifa's et al. (2016) premise that educators embrace all cultural backgrounds considering the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of their students. Culturally responsive leaders understand that each student has different strengths, talents, and challenges. Khalifa (2018) recommended that school leaders hold high expectations for all students while considering their experiences with care and compassion. It was evident from the responses of the middle and high school administrators in this study they held high expectations for their students; nonetheless, the OSS numbers continued to rise despite the implementation of culturally responsive and restorative practices in their schools.

Research Question 1: Key Finding 1

What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of OSS as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students? Unanimously, the middle and high school administrators in this study emphasized the need for trusting relationships and effective communication to build a positive school climate. They also felt strongly about building relationships with their students. Based on the strategies and efforts described by the participants in their interviews, there should be some positive change. The hope was that these practices would decrease the number of behavior issues resulting in OSS. Despite the training,

professional development and resources provided by the target district, the data did not show a decrease, but rather an increase in the number of OSS. The interview data from the participants did not reveal a definitive conclusion as to why their claims of using culturally responsive and restorative practices did not decrease OSS numbers.

While the participants shared the need to build relationships with students, building relationships with parents and families was not found to be a priority for the administrators in this study. This was in contradiction to Khalifa's (2018) recommendation that collaboration among stakeholders grows through relationships and benefits school, community, and student performance. The participants in this study shared that they did not receive consistent support from their parents and that there was a lack of family engagement with the school community reflective of a lack of building culturally responsive relationships with parents and community members as a priority. Trusting relationships with students and families are essential for a positive school climate conducive to learning (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022).

The middle and high school administrators in this study shared that they used OSS for the most severe behavior infractions as part of progressive discipline. This contrasted with the findings of Leung-Gagne et al. (2022) who found OSS and expulsion to be ineffective at improving school safety and deterring future infractions because exclusionary practices does not address the underlying reasons that may lead to behavioral incidents, nor do they create opportunities for students to reflect or resolve conflicts. The target district did not conduct a comprehensive examination of student

disciplinary infractions at each level to seek out the underlying reasons for these behavior to address the issues resulting in excluding students from the educational setting.

The administrators also shared that they suspended students from the educational setting to ensure that the majority remained in a positive learning space. This, in part, reflected Khalifa's et al. (2016) recommendation that culturally responsive leaders support the school staff and promote a climate that makes the whole school welcoming and inclusive; however, this only occurs by meeting the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of all their students, staff, and families, which was not fully evident in the participants' responses and given the OSS data. As reflected in the research of Johnson and Fuller (2014), it is important to create a positive learning climate for everyone and to find the balance among the needs of all. The middle and high school participants reported that staff members were concerned that restorative practices meant no consequences for behavior infraction. The target district did not regularly communicate, collaborate, and follow-up with the district staff to encourage the need to habitually try to build relationships with both students and families and cultivate a compassionate and empathetic environment.

Research Question 1: Key Finding 2

All the middle and high school administrators in this study considered various restorative practice strategies as effective alternatives to OSS. These practices create a positive school climate to address student behavior (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). The district data analysis documented that the administration provided ongoing resources, training, and professional development for restorative practices, but did not provide a

specific blueprint for the implementation of these practices. Effective implementation of restorative practices typically involves a thorough and comprehensive staff training and student conferences (Augustine et al., 2018; Huguley et al., 2020). The professional development for these practices should include ongoing supports and follow-up (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019; Huguley et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2014).

It is common for the implementation of restorative approaches to be combined with a schoolwide or district commitment to reduce suspension rates or to ban the use of suspensions all together in lower grade levels and/or for lower-level offenses (Hashim et al., 2018; Lindstrom, 2017). As a result of the data analysis in this study, a lack of uniformity was found with the implementation process of restorative and culturally responsive practices within district schools. In addition, a consistent and universal district-wide action plan was missing. The implementation action plans were created separately by each school's administrative team. The target district lacked consistency in holding student conferences or in banning the use of out of school suspension (see Augustine et al., 2018; Huguley et al., 2020).

The district administration encouraged the school administrators to analyze the discipline data at the building level but did not prohibit the use of exclusionary discipline practices, such as out of school suspension. While the middle and high school administrators reported using the resources and implementing restorative and culturally responsive practices, the results of these efforts did not lead to a decrease in the use of out of school suspensions. In fact, the number of out of school suspensions increased each year since the pandemic. According to the National Forum on Education Statistics

(2023), discipline data can provide information about what incidents are occurring and how schools respond to incidents. Educators can use discipline data to help them decide how to address student needs, preventing incidents when possible, and developing effective interventions (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2023). Depending on the accuracy and timing of the data collected, the schools may be able to determine why incidents occurred so they can make proactive and informed decisions in the future (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2023). The target district did not fully evaluate and analyze their discipline data and strategies to meet the needs of students to implement interventions aimed at improving school climate and learning conditions for students.

Several alternatives to OSS were used to resolve conflict so as not to remove students from the educational setting. All the middle and high school administrators reported that they used their counseling and support staff to assist the administrators with behavior infractions. Several alternatives to OSS were facilitated by support staff such as school counselors, home liaisons, and student resource officers to keep students in the school environment and to connect with parents. All the study participants believed that parental support was critical to preventing recurrences of OSS. According to Khalifa (2018), it is important for school leaders to connect to students and their families, then they can lead with community perspective. This was a gap in the practice of the administrators in this study. The middle and high school participants felt that there was a lack of parent support and engagement, yet there was no mention of programs or initiatives to focus on building relationships with parents and families. The study participants felt that there was a struggle to gain the parents' cooperation and that

parental support made OSS more effective and prevented recurrence. Consequently, they stated that OSS was not effective when students were not held accountable for their actions in school by their parents.

The administrators in this study had varying opinions on the effectiveness of OSS, but they collectively believed that parental support was essential to hold students accountable for their actions and for building a trusting and collaborative relationship between home and school. Research found that educational leaders who practice CRSL support families and build trusting relationships with families (Davy, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016). This was another gap in the practice of the administrators. The district administration did not provide structures to listen to families about discipline practices (State Support Network, 2018). In addition to professional development and self-reflection, teachers, administrators, and district staff could benefit from purposeful structures that allow them to listen and understand the perspectives of families (State Support Network, 2018). In many schools, communication may be primarily initiated by the teachers; however, schools that establish recurrent listening meetings with families can help teachers and administrators improve their listening and build relationships with families and the community (State Support Network, 2018).

The study participants added that if there were structure and accountability at home during an OSS, there would be less chance of recurrence because students would receive a consistent message both at school and home. Khalifa et al. (2016) contended that CRSL is partly based on culturally responsive and inclusive school environments and engaging students and parents in community contexts. This connects to the study findings

based on the data from this study; the parents were not engaged with the administration. The target district administration did not effectively engage the parents and families to support diversity, an inclusive environment, promote culturally responsive leadership and build trusting relationships. The administrators expressed that due to time constraints and the overwhelming volume of work, more support staff was needed to assist with their most challenging students. Additional support staff, such as school counselors, could help assist administrators by communicating with parents and families and offering the students a safe space to talk. Support staff could be the bridge to assist school administrators to create a more trusting and understanding relationship with families.

The target district communicated a dedication to analyzing OSS rates since the 2019-2020 school year and began on-going training in restorative practices and CRSL. Studies of restorative practice implementation have been generally shown to decrease suspensions and expulsions in schools (Fronius et al., 2019), yet they have increased in the target district. Effective implementation of restorative practice typically involves comprehensive and collaborative staff training and student conferences (Augustine et al., 2018; Huguley et al., 2020). Professional development should be ongoing while providing evidence-based support and resources (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019; Huguley et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2014). It is common for the implementation of restorative approaches to be combined with a district or school wide commitment to reduce suspension rates (Hashim et al., 2018; Lindstrom, 2017). Despite the target district's goal to provide professional development and implement restorative practices to

decrease the numbers of out of school suspension, the effective implementation of this process was not evident in the target district data or in the interviews.

Research Question 2 Key Findings

The middle and high school administrators in this study commented that they needed more time and support staff to better serve their students and to decrease the OSS numbers. Creating a positive school climate that fosters a positive and safe environment, may be accomplished by increasing the number and diversity of school counselors, mental health professionals, social workers, psychologists, nurses, and other support staff throughout the school (ED, 2023). The target district increased the number of school counselors at the high school level, but not the middle school level. In addition to school counselors, the target district added behavior specialists and home liaisons at all levels K-12. There were two outside agencies that provided therapeutic counseling to students based on referral and insurance coverage.

When asked what additional resources and support were needed for student discipline in their role as school administrators, most answered that they needed more support staff. According to the study participants, students' mental health issues, social media use, an increase in technology use, pandemic setbacks, anxiety, and an inability to handle adversity contributed to increased discipline infractions at the middle and high levels in the target district. The ED (2021b) reported that without sufficient support to handle stress and adversity, students may experience exclusionary discipline practices that further exacerbate mental health concerns, interrupt access to and participation in learning,

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 13–22% of school-aged youth experienced a mental health episode at a level associated with a formal medical diagnosis (NCSMHI, 2016). It is estimated that 80% of those children have unmet treatment needs for mental health (McCance-Katz, & Lynch, 2019). Children with unmet needs may experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges (ED, 2021b). Many students had to relearn how to function during a traditional school day when they returned to a full-day school schedule after the pandemic's hybrid schedule. For K–12 students and families, the pandemic was a traumatic catalyst for further trauma including social isolation, financial worries, and death of family members and friends (ED, 2021b). The increased number of behavior infractions post-pandemic left the middle and high school administrators searching for assistance. The support staff in the target district was reported by the study participants as providing encouragement and assistance during this time.

Limitations of the Study

The accuracy of the study's findings was dependent on multiple data sources and from multiple participants within a single study site (see Stake, 1995). Within 24-48 hours after completing each semistructured interview, I engaged the study participants in member checking for interview transcript verification and analyzed each embedded unit separately within and between the cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Given this, the participants' self-reported data was a limitation.

The transferability of the study was limited given the context of the middle and high schools and the participants' unique perspectives serving as middle and high school administrators within a single school district in the Midwest region of the United States.

To address transferability, thick descriptions of the context and the perspectives of the participants using excerpts from their interviews were provided.

As the sole researcher for this qualitative case study, there was a potential for researcher bias because I worked as an assistant principal in the target district. I excluded the school to which I was assigned to address this limitation, and I was not in a supervisory role for any of the study's participants. To minimize researcher bias, I used reflexive journaling to self-reflect on my subjectivity and experiences as I analyzed the data from multiple sources. Throughout the research process, I frequently recorded my perceptions as journal entries in a reflexive journal.

Recommendations

The results of this qualitative case study and the research that comprised the literature review supported the need for research on middle and high school administrators' perceptions of student discipline, focusing on OSS. Given the research on the detrimental effects of OSS on the education system as a whole and on the education and achievement of students, this study is important for social change (U.S. Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021). To reduce exclusionary consequences, such as OSS, there is a need to identify and understand administrators' perceptions of restorative and culturally responsive practices as related to school discipline to create a positive and socially unprejudiced school environment (Gomez et al., 2021). The following recommendations for future studies may contribute to the body of research on student discipline through the lens of CRSL and restorative practices.

Based on the results of this study, I recommend further research using OSS data to investigate practices in school districts with similar demographics to determine if there are trends related to the types of behavior infractions that result in OSS. I would also recommend quantitative studies that breakdown the discipline data in districts that have high OSS rates and compare this data with data from districts with similar demographics that implemented restorative and culturally responsive practices to see if disciplinary infractions were reduced, particularly OSS. An additional recommendation is to develop and disseminate a survey to expand the research to a broader population in multiple school districts that have implemented restorative practices to address exclusionary discipline. A quantitative study may offer descriptive statistical data on a wider scale.

There is a need for additional research on restorative practices and CRSL related to student discipline. Future researchers may want to consider a mixed methods approach. A mixed methods study design, collecting qualitative and quantitative data, could be used to create a comprehensive breakdown of specific discipline data and alternatives to OSS that could provide more insight into student discipline when various approaches are implemented to address students' behavioral issues.

A basic qualitative design, interviewing administrators and teachers at a school or district that reduced the OSS rates, would be valuable to determine the practices that resulted in a reduction and to provide insights that could not be provided by this study due to its purpose and delimitations. This research study focused only on middle and high school administrators, expanding this study in future research by interviewing district and school administrators, counselors, and teachers at various levels may offer additional

perspectives on the understanding of student discipline and the practices that may effectively improve student behavior and reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. A longitudinal study to observe, over time, the restorative and culturally responsive practices implemented at the middle and high school levels could also provide insights on the fidelity of the implementation process to address student discipline.

Implications

To promote positive social change, the implications of this study's findings are significant to middle and high school administrators who work with student discipline and are responsible for developing policies, procedures, and practices that encourage building relationships, resolving conflict, supporting academic achievement, and cultivating social-emotional growth. As a result of the study's findings, it is recommended that the target district search for the missing pieces to the puzzle as to why OSS rates have not decreased by reviewing the resources and training provided and the uniformity and fidelity of the implementation process across the district. There were no district requirements or guidance related to uniformity or fidelity in the implementation and use of these practices across the schools in the target district based on a review of district documents and the interviews with the participants. The implementation of restorative programs is likely to take a minimum of 3-5 years to make a significant difference after implementation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; González et al., 2018). Based on the results, I recommend a review of the district's implementation process for restorative practices, to determine how to provide more clarity, progress-monitoring, consistency, and follow-up in the use of restorative practices. Monitoring the fidelity of

the implementation of restorative practices while analyzing discipline data and providing additional professional development will be important to address the increasing rates of OSS.

While the target district implemented restorative practices, they did not eliminate the use of traditional disciplinary approaches, which may have communicated an unclear message to those responsible for the implementation of these programs. It is recommended that the target district assess the clarity of the messaging conveyed in their policies and training as well as assess the effectiveness of the professional development they provided and continue to provide. The findings of this study could also be used as an impetus to review current school discipline policies and to mitigate the use of OSS at the middle and high school levels, emphasizing the need to retain students in the learning environment through the alternative disciplinary approaches that have been implemented.

Based on the study's findings, there could be further development of culturally responsive leadership practices for middle and high school administrators through professional development and mentoring. Facilitating professional development, adequately training administrators and teachers, providing evidence-based resources, and creating a district-level action plan may help ensure that restorative practices will be implemented and practiced with fidelity.

According to the ED (2023), co-creating policies with educators and parents through both formal (e.g., high-quality school climate surveys) and informal (e.g., forums, feedback boxes) methods builds collaborative and trusting relationship. Research has found that information-sharing to improve parent and family knowledge and make

families feel welcome and a part of school communities helps improve parent engagement and develop an inclusive school climate (ED, 2023). I recommend that the target district create an action plan to engage K-12 parents using surveys, forums, and other means to achieve more transparent communication.

There is a need for district leaders to collaborate with building principals, teachers, and support staff to create a comprehensive framework that supports accountability and provides guidance documents and resources to retain students in the learning environment. Decreasing the number of students who are excluded from the educational setting will promote positive social change and ensure that school leaders are using culturally responsive leadership practices that contribute to a positive and inclusive school climate for teachers, students, and families.

Conclusion

This study's purpose was to explore school administrators' perceptions on their approaches to discipline and culturally responsive practices when considering disciplinary consequences as an alternative to OSS with middle and high school students. The intent of the study was to add to the existing research and fill the gap in practice by identifying middle and high school administrators' perceptions of student discipline through the lens of CRSL. The existing research on school discipline focuses on policy and the perspectives of students and teachers with a gap in the current research on the perceptions, practices, and beliefs of school administrators concerning their use of OSS and the use of effective alternatives to suspension restorative practices.

This study's findings broadened existing research to better understand the perceptions, practices, and beliefs of middle and high school administrators at the study site who work directly with student discipline. The results of this study uncovered middle and high school administrators' perceptions and beliefs about the effectiveness of OSS and possible alternatives to exclusionary discipline consequences.

The findings of this study revealed the participants' collective belief that communication and building relationships were key to engaging stakeholders and building a positive school climate. It can be concluded from this data that the middle and high school administrators did not believe that there was a one size fits all approach to student discipline and viewed each student as a unique individual with diverse needs. It can also be concluded that the participants did not agree on the effectiveness of OSS yet continued to use it as a disciplinary consequence. In addition, the participants identified the lack of parental support, insufficient time and staff, and the results of the COVID-19 pandemic as primary challenges confronting them regarding the increased number use of OSS as a disciplinary consequence. The participants believed that the pandemic as well as social media caused unintended consequences for students, families, and educators, and they became more reliant on school counselors, home liaisons, and student resource officers for support and assistance.

Through a comprehensive review of multiple sources of data, it appeared that despite professional development, added resources, recurrent trainings, and additional support staff, the OSS numbers in the study school sites in the district continued to increase. Even with the increase in the OSS discipline data, the middle and high school

administrators remained optimistic that the implementation of restorative practices and culturally responsive leadership created a more positive school climate for both students and staff. However, there are apparent gaps in these practices at the school sites that are evident in the OSS rates that need to be uncovered.

Middle and high school administrators might begin to address these gaps in practice if they truly believe in the implementation of restorative practices and if they engage in CRSL practices that includes the intentional engagement of families in the school community. It was clear that the administrators' participation in this qualitative case study provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their professional experiences, leadership practices, and beliefs to consider their approach to discipline in the future. The hope is that middle and high school administrators seeking to successfully implement restorative practices use this research as a call to action to design a comprehensive plan that includes parent engagement opportunities, on-going data analysis, collaboration among stakeholders, and consistency and follow-through with the strategies being implemented to reduce the use of OSS for middle and high school students.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

RQ1: What are school administrators' perceptions of their approach to discipline when considering the use of out of school suspension as a disciplinary consequence for middle and high school students?

RQ2: How do school administrators perceive the use of culturally responsive practices as an alternative to the use of out of school suspensions as a discipline consequence for middle and high school students?

Conceptual Framework: Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL)

Restorative practice (RP)

Introduction to Interview: I am Mandy McCullough, a doctoral candidate at Walden University. Thank you for your participation in this study. You are being asked to participate in a research study to study middle and high school administrators' perceptions of student discipline through the lens of culturally responsive school leadership. Conducting this qualitative methods study will gain insight into improving school climate and student discipline practices.

Your participation is voluntary. The interview will be audio recorded. If you have questions, ask me to stop as we go through the interview, and I will explain. If you have questions later, feel free to contact me at any time.

You can choose to decline to answer a question or end your participation in the research study at any time. There will be no repercussions for leaving the study. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions	RQ1	RQ2	CRSL	RP
How long have you been a school administrator?				
Is your opinion on student discipline different since you became an administrator?	X			
Do you believe that there have been significant factors that have affected student behavior since the 2019-2020 school year? If so, what are these factors?	X			
Since the district's emphasis on restorative practices in the 2019-2020 school year, have you seen a change in student discipline? If so, was it a positive or negative change? Probe: Can you describe why you believe this?		X		X

With the district placing a focus on restorative practices since the 2019-2020 school year, have you seen an increase or decrease in out of school suspensions? Probes: How has it changed in your school? How has your use of out of school suspensions changed?		X		X
Has the district's emphasis on restorative practices improved overall school climate in your building? If so, how?		X	X	X
Can you provide examples of the culturally responsive and/or restorative practices that you use with your students?		X	X	X
Do you believe culturally responsive and/or restorative practices are effective with your students? Why or why not?		X	X	X
Are there specific culturally responsive or restorative practices that are alternatives to out of school suspension in your school? If so, are they useful? Probe: Can you provide some examples?	X		X	X
Do you believe there are definitive infractions that require out of school suspension? If so, can you provide some examples or reasons to use out of school suspension?	X			
Do you believe that out of school suspension can be an effective method for discipline for your students? Probe if yes: If you believe out of school suspensions are effective, can you provide some examples of their effectiveness? Probe if no: If you do not believe they are effective, why do you believe this? Probe if sometimes: What do you believe they are sometimes effective and, at times, not effective?	X		X	X
Do you believe out of school suspension help improve or worsen student behavior? Can you provide some examples based on your response?	X		X	
As a school administrator, do you try to decrease the number of out of school suspensions in your building? If so, how? If not, why not?	X			X
Have you found effective alternatives to out of school suspension? If so, can you describe the alternatives, and how were they effective?		X		X
How and when do you review and analyze your student discipline data? Probe: Do you share your analysis with staff, with students, with families?			X	X

As a school leader, what can you do to improve student behavior? Probes: How can you work with staff to improve student behavior? with support staff? with students? with families?			X	
What additional resources and supports do you need for student discipline in your role as school administrator?				X
Is there anything else you would like to add or any final thoughts before we conclude?				
Closure to Interview: Thank you for making time to meet with me today. I am grateful for your participation in this study. A written transcript of the interview will be emailed to you within 72 hours for viewing to check for accuracy. Please review this transcript and make any corrections or revisions to the transcript. Please return this to me through email within 5 days. If no changes are required, please respond that the transcript accurately represents your responses.				

Appendix B: Document Analysis Form

Document Title	Evidence	Analysis
PCSD 2021-2022 Professional Learning Days	• PD Schedules with exact times for the full school year • Resources • Toolbox • Stipend Information	• The target district provided administrators with time dedicated to professional development for both teachers and classified support staff. • In addition to time, the target district provided resources such as books, articles, strategies, lesson plans, videos, and stipends to pay both certified and classified staff to attend district and building meetings and to present to their peers.
2019 Restorative Practices	• PD Slides • 2019-2020 District Goals for Resilient Learner	• The district established goals for the resilient learner which were shared with both certified and classified staff and followed-up on in every district leadership team meeting. The team met quarterly and shared ideas, strategies, analyzed discipline and attendance data and created action steps for the 15 individual buildings.
Focus: Building Resilient Learners (2019-2020)	• PCSD Resilient Learner District Playbook/Framework	• The superintendent in addition to the senior leadership team created the “resilient learner” framework for the entire district staff to use as

		reference and implement daily.
11/1-11/2/21 Certificate of Completion Restorative Practices Workshop	• District Approved Professional Development on Restorative Practices for District Administration	• The district sent 12 K-12 administrators to attend an out of district training on restorative practices. • The administrators returned to their buildings and trained their colleagues, presented the information from the training to the staff and presented at the district leadership team meetings.
10/22/21 8:40-10:25am NHS PD "The Brain"	• Professional Development on the resilient learner	• The administration received specific training about brain development, dysregulated students, the function of behavior and trauma-informed education.
8/19/19 NHS Opening Day PD PBIS/Resilient Learner Professional Development	• Administration reviewed Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and the Resilient Learner Initiative	• The resilient learner playbook is connected to the PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports) Program that is a district initiative.
Restorative Circles PowerPoint Presentation for Administration (2021-2022)	• PowerPoint with information on the definition of restorative circles and examples/information on how to implement them at each level (elementary, middle, and high)	• District leaders presented on restorative and academic circles, providing examples at each level.
Professional Development	• Full detailed monthly sample of professional	• Senior leadership provided K-12

Planning Resource Page (2019-2020)	development and building leadership team meeting ideas with resources	administration with sample professional development presentations, meeting idea topics, timelines, and resources such as videos, articles, images, websites, quotes, etc.
District Resilient Learner Building Team Leader Meetings (2021-2022)	• Every building in the district had to schedule a meeting with the district coordinator to discuss supports needed for resilient learner, PBIS/discipline	• This was an individualized training specific to each building's needs, strengths, climates, goals, and vision. The administrative team met monthly with the resilient learner/PBIS district coordinator for support, progress monitoring and collaboration.
Resilient Learner Toolkit (2021-2022)	• A compilation of resources for district administrators and staff to use to build resilient leaners (SEL, PBIS, Trauma-Informed Practices, Restorative Practices, Professional Development Ideas, Terms, Definitions	• This is a comprehensive collection of resources for staff to use including terms, articles, strategies, videos, images, lesson plans, ice breakers, restorative circle planning, data, and program development ideas for social emotional learning, PBIS, trauma-informed education, and restorative practices.
Restorative Approach Training (3 Days) August 2021	• This training was designated for administrators, guidance counselors and behavior specialists to assist with de-escalation	• Brad Weinstein, author of "Hacking Discipline: 9 Ways to Create a Culture of Empathy and Responsibility Using Restorative Justice presented to every K-12

	and restorative practices	administrator and school counselor in the target district.
10/20/21 Email memo on the Administrator's Guide to Restorative Practices Training 10/20/21	• All district leadership received an email about a professional development opportunity (2 Day Training) Administrator's Guide to Restorative Practices Training	• Brad Weinstein, author of "Hacking Discipline: 9 Ways to Create a Culture of Empathy and Responsibility Using Restorative Justice presented to every K-12 administrator and school counselor in the target district.
August 9-10-11, 2021 Memo on a 3 Day Restorative Practice Training based on the book Hacking Discipline by Brad Weinstein	• Restorative Practice Training Schedule for Administrators, Guidance Counselors and Behavior Specialists	• Brad Weinstein, author of "Hacking Discipline: 9 Ways to Create a Culture of Empathy and Responsibility Using Restorative Justice presented to every K-12 administrator and school counselor in the target district.
Strategy Share District Professional Development Information and Schedule for 11/2/21 and 5/3/22	• Detailed professional development share-out opportunity for all certified staff and administration	• All certified staff was encouraged to share strategies on classroom management to their peers and colleagues to collaborate and help each other.
2022-23 Professional Learning Days Schedule	• Yearly professional development schedule with details, times, outlines, and resources	• Senior leadership provided K-12 administration with sample professional development presentations, meeting idea topics and resources such as videos, articles,

		images, websites, quotes, etc. • Consistency with the Resilient Learner District Playbook • Continued discipline data follow-up and monitoring

Appendix C: Partner Organization Agreement for AEAL

WALDEN UNIVERSITY

A higher degree. A higher purpose.

Partner Organization Agreement
for AEAL Dissertation

Organization Name
Organization Email Address
Organization Phone Number
Date

The doctoral student, Amanda McCullough, will be conducting a doctoral study as part of the AEAL (Education Administration and Leadership for experienced administrators) EdD program. The student will be completing Walden IRB requirements *and our organization's research approval processes*.

I understand that Walden's IRB has given the student tentative approval to interview leaders (supervisors, board members, PTA leaders, community partners, state department personnel, and similar decision-makers) with whom the student has no power relationship. Details will be created for the final proposal, and the informed consent letter attached will be used. Depending upon the details of the student's study, deidentified organization data* may be requested.

> **At the discretion of the organization's leadership, the student may analyze deidentified records including: aggregate personnel or student records that have been deidentified before being provided to the doctoral student, other deidentified operational records, teaching materials, deidentified lesson plans, meeting minutes, digital/audio/video recordings created by the organization for its own purposes, training materials, manuals, reports, partnership agreements, questionnaires that were collected under auspices of the partner organization as part of continuous improvement efforts (SIPs, for example), and other internal documents.*

I understand that, as per doctoral program requirements, the student will publish the doctoral capstone in ProQuest (withholding the names of the organization and participating individuals), as per the following ethical standards:

a. The student is required to maintain confidentiality by removing names and key pieces of evidence/data that might disclose an organization's or individual's identity.
b. The student will be responsible for complying with policies and requirements regarding data collection (***including the need for the organization's internal ethics/regulatory approval as applicable***).

c. Via the Interview Consent Form, the student will describe to interviewees how the data will be used in the doctoral study and how all interviewees' privacy will be protected.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research activities in this setting.

Signed,

Authorization Official Name
Title

This template has been designed by Walden University for the purpose of creating a partnership agreement between an education agency or district/division and a Walden doctoral student in support of that student's capstone study. Walden University will take responsibility for overseeing the data collection and analysis activities described above for the purpose of the student's doctoral study.

Appendix D: Tables

Table D1

Middle School Administrator Participant Demographics

Participant	Job Title	Years at current school in target district	Works with student discipline
MP1	Middle School Head Principal	7	yes
MAP2	Middle School Assistant Principal	4	yes
MD3	Middle School Dean of Students	4	yes
MP4	Middle School Head Principal	8	yes
MP5	Middle School Head Principal	6	yes
MAP6	Middle School Assistant Principal	11	yes

Table D2

High School Administrator Participant Demographics

Participant	Job Title	Years at current school in target district	Works with student discipline
HAP1	High School Assistant Principal	4	yes
HAP2	High School Assistant Principal	10	yes
HP3	High School Head Principal	6	yes
HAP4	High School Assistant Principal	8	yes

Table D3

Study District Out of School Suspension Trend Data

	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
District MS Enrollment	2,160	1,984	1,953	1,890
Middle School Students OSS	201	89	227	303
Total % MS Students OSS	9%	4%	12%	16%
District HS Enrollment	4,296	4,183	4,101	4,014
High School Students OSS	475	103	438	594
Total % HS Students OSS	11%	2%	11%	15%

Note. During the 2019-2020 school year, the school district was closed by the order of the governor on March 16, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2020-2021 school year, discipline data were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual learning and declined during virtual learning. Restorative practices were to be implemented by school leaders beginning in the 2019-2020 school year.

Table D4

Codes, Categories, and Themes for RQ 1--Middle School Administrators

RQ Focus	Code	Category	Participants	Themes
Administrators' perceptions of discipline approaches	Build relationships Communication Parental Support Strive to decrease OSS OSS is not an effective discipline method	Consistent expectations Clarity Transparency The effectiveness of OSS The effectiveness of OSS	MP1 MAP2 MD3 MP4 MP5 MAP6 MP1 MAP2 MD3 MP4 MAP6 MP1 MAP2 MD3 MP4 MP5 MAP6 MAP2 MP4 MP5 MAP6 MAP2 MP4 MAP6	1.The middle school administrators strive to build relationships, promote communication, establish consistent expectations, and decrease the numbers of out of school suspensions. 2. The middle school administrators do not collectively believe that out of school suspension was as an effective discipline method, but use OSS for the most severe behavior infractions. 3. Middle school administrators use out of school suspension as a last resort after alternatives were not effective.

Table D5

Codes, Categories, and Themes for RQ 2--Middle School Administrators

RQ Focus	Code	Category	Participants	Themes
Administrators' perceptions of alternatives to out of school suspension	Communication Relationships Parents	School Climate	MP1 MAP2 MD3 MP4 MP5 MAP6	4. The middle school administrators perceive various restorative practice strategies as effective alternatives to out of school suspension.
	Restorative Circles Counselors In-School Intervention	Interventions and alternatives consequences to OSS	MP1 MAP2 MP4 MAP6 MP1 MAP2 MD3MP4 MP5 MAP6	5. The middle school administrators believe that parental support was critical to preventing recurrences of OSS.
			MP1 MAP2 MD3 MP4	6. The middle school administrators rely on the support and assistance of their school counselors for the most challenging students.
			MP1 MAP2 MD3MP4 MP5 MAP6 MP1 MAP2 MD3MP4 MAP6	7. The middle school administrators need more time and support staff to better serve their students and decrease the OSS numbers.

Table D6

Codes, Categories, and Themes for RQ 1-- High School Administrators

RQ Focus	Code	Category	Participants	Themes
Administrators' perceptions of discipline approaches	Build relationships	Consistent expectations	HAP1 HAP2 HP3	1. The high school administrators strive to build relationships, promote communication, establish consistent expectations, and decrease the numbers of out of school suspensions.
	Communication		HAP4	
	Parental Support		HAP1 HAP2 HP3	
	Strove to decrease OSS		HAP2 HP3	
	OSS was an effective discipline method	The effectiveness of OSS	HAP4	2. High school administrators view out of school suspension as an effective discipline method for severe infractions and a continued violation of school rules.
			HAP1 HP3 HAP4	
			HAP2 HP3 HAP4	

Table D7

Codes, Categories, and Themes for RQ 2--High School Administrators

RQ Focus	Code	Category	Participants	Themes
Administrators' perceptions of alternatives to out of school suspension	Communication Relationships In-School Intervention	School Climate	HAP1 HAP2 HP3 HAP4	3. The high school administrators perceive various restorative practice strategies as effective alternatives to out of school suspension.
	Restorative Circles Parents		HAP1 HAP2 HP3 HAP4	4. The high school administrators believe that parental support is critical to preventing recurrences of OSS.
	Counselors	Interventions and alternatives consequences to OSS	HAP2 HP3 HAP4	5. The high school administrators rely on the support and assistance of their school counselors for the most challenging students.
			HAP1 HAP2 HP3 HAP4	6. The high school administrators communicate that they need more time and support staff to decrease the OSS numbers.