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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Jacqueline Binion

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

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Social Workers, Positive Behavior Interventions Supports, and Exclusionary Discipline of Black Males

by

Jacqueline Binion

MS, University of Southern Mississippi, 2007

BS, University of Southern Mississippi, 2002

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

February 2024

Abstract

School social workers play an instrumental role in providing school faculty members with skills and interventions to facilitate positive outcomes in both schools and the community at large. It is not known what role social workers play in the suspension and exclusion of Black male high school students. The research questions for this generic qualitative study explored the perspective of high school teachers and social workers from various South Mississippi counties perceptions of the roles social workers play in the implementation of positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) and social workers' impact on the exclusion of Black male students from the high school setting as well as the influence PBIS has had on Black suspension rates in the high school setting. This study was directed using the open systems theory (OST). Virtual interviews were conducted with five participants including four high school teachers and one social worker. Thematic analysis was used to unveil patterns and themes in the data. Overall, findings suggested that social workers did not have substantial involvement with the exclusionary discipline of Black male students in the high school setting and no involvement in the implementation of PBIS. Moreover, PBIS has not had a substantial influence on the Black male exclusionary discipline rate. This qualitative study has the potential to enhance positive social change through social work competencies by providing research-based strategies to advance school social work practice, thus providing social workers in educational settings with evidence-based strategies that could improve the outcomes of Black students in the school setting and increase their ability to become productive members in society.

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Dedication

I dedicate this research to my husband James and each of my children: Ephraim, Caitlin, Jamice, Jamaya, and Careese. You guys are my rock and the inspiration necessary for completing my goals. I hope you are also able to achieve your dreams. This generic qualitative study is also dedicated to my grandmother Betty Lou Graham who could only achieve an eighth-grade education, but always stressed the importance of education.

Acknowledgments

Foremost, I give praise to my Lord Jesus Christ for enabling me to achieve this milestone currently in my life.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my research chair, Dr. Mary E. Larscheid, for her patience, guidance, and continued support throughout this generic qualitative study. Additionally, I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Monica Levine-Sauberman and Dr. Debora Rice for their invaluable feedback. Furthermore, I would like to express my appreciation to the Institutional Review Board whose guidance influenced how I conducted my research project. Finally, this research would not have been possible without the participants who volunteered their time to facilitate this generic qualitative study.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

The practice of *exclusionary discipline*, a system of utilizing out-of-school suspension and expulsion, expanded from the use of zero-tolerance policies, racial and cultural biases, and social-emotional deficiencies (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Anzalone, 2015; Bell, 2015; Teasley et al., 2017). Black males experience exclusionary discipline at a disproportionate rate (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Anzalone, 2015; Bell, 2015; Teasley et al., 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR, 2021), during the 2017–2018 school year, Black males comprised 7.7% of students attending school in the United States but received 24.9% of one or more out-of-school suspensions. This percentage is profound as it is three times the amount of Black male enrollment for the 2017–2018 school year, whereas White males received 24.9% of one or more out-of-school suspensions correlated to their total enrollment of 24.4% for the 2017–2018 school year (OCR, 2021). Nationally, 1 in 14 high school students were suspended in the 2017–2018 school year (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). National data also indicate a decrease in the Black–White suspension gap for secondary schools in most states apart from Mississippi, Kansas, Nevada, North Dakota, and South Dakota where the racial gap increased (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022).

For Black males, the experiences they encounter due to exclusionary discipline includes being funneled through the school to prison pipeline, academic failure, and low socioeconomic status. Most profound is the school to prison pipeline, which is viewed as a consequence of the criminalization of students' behaviors to juvenile justice agencies

and adult criminal court (McCarter, 2020). Therefore, students identified as at risk are already at a disadvantage; however, when adding exclusionary discipline practices, their possibility of successfully completing high school diminishes. When students are removed from the classroom, disengagement rates increase, and they fall further behind academically (Marchbanks et al., 2015; McCarter, 2020). Similarly, when students are incarcerated, they receive criminal records, coupled with a failure to obtain a high school diploma (Marchbanks et al., 2015). Students who struggle in school sometimes become adults who struggle in society, thus highlighting a need for school interventions to curtail such occurrences as these same individuals get older.

Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) is a framework for highlighting positive behaviors of students while integrating interventions for improved behaviors. PBIS is recognized as "a schoolwide framework for preventing, reducing, and replacing problem behaviors" (Fluke & Peterson, 2013, p. 1). The goal of this framework is to create a positive school culture by teaching students positive replacement behaviors. PBIS provides a consistent process to monitor and analyze in a collaborative manner (Fluke & Peterson, 2013).

As members of the team, school social workers play an instrumental role in Black male students' education and their outcomes. This is done in a plethora of ways, primarily by familiarizing staff with the impact of exclusionary discipline. Also, school social workers play a role in addressing the social and economic outcomes of Black males' exclusion from the high school setting. Moreover, school social workers possess a wide range of knowledge that can serve beneficial to faculty, students, and families

(Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). Foremost, school social workers are trained to assist school staff in developing interventions that create a positive school climate that is conducive to students' social and emotional growth (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). Social workers are educated in providing wrap-around services such as counseling and coordinating community resources to produce positive outcomes for students, the school environment, and the community (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). These positive outcomes include increasing the high school graduation rates, decreasing student disengagement, and a decline in dropout rates (Avarez et al., 2013). Given these points, school social workers are influential in providing evidence-based programs and interventions that facilitate positive school climates and student outcomes. Enhancing the quality of education for all students is a critical need in the United States, especially for minorities. The equity versus equality debate is still a significant topic of concern.

This section begins with an overview of the context that provides the basis of this generic qualitative study. Included are the problem statement, purpose, research questions, nature of the doctoral project, significance of the study, identification of the background, and the rationale for the study. Additionally, this section provides the theoretical framework, values and ethics, and a review of the professional and academic literature. Finally, Section 1 concludes with a summary of the section.

Problem Statement

The disproportionality of Black males being excluded from educational settings is alarming. Black male students encounter higher rates of exclusionary discipline than White male students (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Anzalone, 2015; Bell, 2015; Teasley et

al., 2017). Most profound, datum from the 2017-2018 school year indicated that Mississippi, along with several other states including Kansas, Nevada, North Dakota, and South Dakota, had an increase in the Black–White disproportionality suspension gap in secondary or the high school setting. (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022).

This disproportionality rate of exclusionary discipline can be attributed to the utilization of zero-tolerance policies, cultural and racial biases, as well as social-emotional deficiencies (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Anzalone, 2015; Bell, 2015; Teasley et al., 2017). Social workers are needed in every educational setting, especially where students are receiving biased consequences. More importantly, schools need a systematic structure in place to ensure consistency and equity.

Zero-tolerance policies provide mandatory suspensions for all disciplinary infractions (Anzalone, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2015; Teasley et al., 2017). Racial and cultural biases that appear in school climate, classroom management, teaching practices, and school funding contribute to excluding Black students from the high school environment (Teasley et al., 2017). The exclusion of Black students is correlated to the students' social-emotional deficiencies, students' enrollment in special education programs, and students with behavior problems (Teasley et al., 2017). Unfortunately, Black males who encounter exclusionary discipline have a path to the school to prison pipeline, academic failure, low socioeconomic status, and social-emotional deficiencies (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Anzalone, 2015; Bell, 2015; Teasley et al., 2017). The educational system was created to advance individuals, not prohibit them. According to Rosa et al., (2015), PBIS is an effective alternative to zero-tolerance policies.

The PBIS framework has been adopted nationally by districts across the country. Research indicates that PBIS is an effective intervention for decreasing school suspensions and increasing student academic performance (Houchens et al., 2017; Baule, 2020). PBIS, when implemented appropriately and with fidelity, has helped students modify negative behaviors (Fluke & Peterson, 2013; Houchens et al., 2017). Implications or impact is influenced by implementation. Baule's (2020) research found PBIS was an effective intervention for decreasing the out-of-school suspension rate for Black students. This can serve as an additional approach to improve the learning environment of Black males.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to understand teachers' and social workers' perspectives on the roles social workers have in the implementation of PBIS and their impact on the exclusion of Black male students from the high school setting. Due to harsh disciplinary policies, racial and cultural bias, and lack of social and emotional interventions, Black students are pushed out and excluded from the high school environment (Anzalone, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2015; Teasley et al., 2017). Unfortunately, many school districts do not employ social workers, and those districts that have school social workers underutilize them, thus minimizing the positive impact social workers could have on the exclusionary discipline of Black males in the high school setting.

Presently, there is a gap in data with high school campuses using school social workers to increase the implementation of PBIS with Black male students at risk for

exclusionary discipline. There is a lack of research providing data to demonstrate the need for social workers in the school setting as well as social workers' involvement with maintaining fidelity implementation of PBIS. This qualitative study used social workers and high school teachers to obtain their perspectives of the outcomes of high school Black males with the implementation of PBIS. Additionally, I explored the teachers' perspectives on the impact social workers could have on the implementation of PBIS.

The following concepts were included in this study:

- *Exclusionary discipline*. A system of utilizing out-of-school suspension and expulsion to remove students from an educational setting (Losen et al., 2015).
- *Positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS)*. "A schoolwide framework for preventing, reducing, and replacing problem behaviors" (Fluke & Peterson, 2013, p. 1).
- *Social worker*. School district employees responsible for working with all educational stakeholders (i.e., students, teachers, leaders, parents, community partners, etc.) to mitigate barriers experienced by students that have the potential to negatively impact their academic success (Richardson, Williams, & Lewis, 2019).

The research questions for this study were as follows:

- RQ1: How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe social workers' work to reduce the exclusionary discipline of Black male students?

- RQ2: How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe the PBIS framework's influence on student behavior?
- RQ3: How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe social workers' roles in the implementation of PBIS with male Black students?

Nature of the Doctoral Project

This study was descriptive in nature. Qualitative research allows the researcher to fully understand trends or phenomena using descriptive data. Due to the descriptive nature of qualitative research, scientific methods are not involved. Moreover, the goal of qualitative research is "to discover how people see the world" (Cropley, 2019, p. 38). This approach was used to better understand teachers' and social workers' perspectives on the impact of PBIS implementation in their current practice and school campus. It was not known what role social workers play in PBIS, the suspension and exclusion of Black male high school students, nor how teachers perceive social workers.

Data for this qualitative project included virtual interviews from high school teachers and a social worker who works with high school students. There were five participants. Individuals were asked to participate through criterion sampling, which is achieved by selecting research participants to meet criterion of having any involvement with the issue being evaluated (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). My intentions were to gather perspectives from critical stakeholders currently in the field of education to shine a light on their attitudes, understanding, and beliefs regarding the social worker's role and PBIS

implementation on the exclusionary discipline practices of Black male students. Moreover, including participation of key stakeholders can assist with the triangulation of multiple data sources (Jentoft & Olsen, 2009; Then et al., 2014). I administered a nominal scaled questionnaire to obtain background information from participants.

I used the qualitative processes coupled with diverse ways to answer the research questions and produce findings to allow an exploration of ideas and perspectives linked to the exclusionary discipline of Black male students. Semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method for this project. Interviews allow a researcher to ask participants questions to obtain their beliefs and perspectives on their experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Due to the COVID19 pandemic, I used the videoconferencing platform Zoom to conduct interviews. Research suggests that Zoom is an adequate method of collecting data as the videoconferencing platform is secure, cost-efficient, and easy to use (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020); more specifically, Zoom can record and store data without using third-party software (Archibald et al., 2019).

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study has the potential to enhance social work competencies by providing research-based research strategies to guide and advance school social work practice. School social workers play an influential role in student supports, administration, and policymaking. Competency 4, provided by the Council on Social Work Education (2015), encourages social workers to conduct practice-informed research and have knowledge of research to inform practice and to utilize theories to guide scientific research. Thus, to become cognizant of their roles in “advancing a science of

social work and evaluating their practice" (p. 2). This information is critical to improve the learning environment of at-risk students. Social workers should apply logic with scientific evaluations and ethics to increase their knowledge. Most importantly, social workers should have the capacity to relate and translate research to "improve practice, policy and service delivery" (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 2).

The knowledge obtained from this qualitative study may facilitate positive change on the micro (clinical practice), mezzo (community practice), and macro (policy practice) levels by employing research strategies with Black students at risk for exclusion (Ebue et al., 2017). The disproportionality rates of Black youth, specifically males, in public school settings, is a grand challenge for the social work profession (Teasley et al., 2017). School discipline is one of the barriers that social workers are in place to mitigate. Richardson et al. (2019) concluded that not only is there a negative relationship with school suspension for students of color, but there is a greater need in urban school settings.

Social workers employ direct knowledge for engaging in case management activities, developing mental health as assessments, and creating behavior intervention plans (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). These direct interventions are necessary to ensure the individual and collective needs of stakeholders are being met. Most importantly, school social workers play a vital role in facilitating a positive school climate and assisting with emotional growth of students (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018) two goals of the PBIS framework. The outcome of this qualitative study could impact school social workers' increased role in facilitating PBIS as an intervention to impact exclusionary

discipline, while assisting students in mitigating their undesirable behaviors. School social work involves engaging and educating school faculty and staff on strategies that can be used with Black students at risk for academic exclusion. Therefore, the goal is to provide social workers with methods to train educators with research-based concepts to provide a more effective approach for implementation of PBIS and improving school culture and climate. Finally, work practice can engage in administration, policy, and advocacy for social change (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 20180.

Nationally, there is a lack of school social workers being employed in schools (Whitaker et al., 2019). Those who are employed have large caseloads. Moreover, Finigan-Carr and Shaia (2018) indicated that school social workers are underutilized in school settings. The significance of this research study on the macro level would provide knowledge on the effectiveness of social workers in the school settings demonstrating the need for educational systems to employ social workers at all levels with manageable caseloads. This study can also provide research to inform school districts of the positive impact social workers also have on improving school culture and climate.

Furthermore, the significance of this generic qualitative study may influence policy change in the use of ineffective disciplinary practices with Black students at risk for exclusion. School districts, across the nation, adopted zero-tolerance models to address school discipline (Teasley et al., 2017). Zero-tolerance policies are viewed as policies that use harsh punishment for unmitigated infractions (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Kennedy, et al., 2015). The application of the zero-tolerance approach, without considering the nature of the infraction and the student's social-emotional needs,

facilitates students' exclusion from the academic setting and increases academic failure. Change is necessary. Utilization of PBIS, as an alternative to exclusionary discipline, racial and cultural bias, and lack of a social-emotional support system, can improve conditions for at-risk students.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Open systems theory (OST) is the theoretical framework that was used for this generic qualitative study. OST is derived from the aspect of the social systems theory, which focused on the interaction between an individual (micro-level) and the environment (Kretchmar, 2019). Additionally, OST employs the application of both the individual (micro) and organization (macro) to conceptualize the behaviors of the organization to promote change. Houchens et al. (2017) asserted that the fidelity level of PBIS implementation determines the effectiveness of improving school discipline, academic performance, and school attendance. The theoretical aspects of OST aid this generic qualitative study in providing an understanding of the associated challenges of PBIS implementation.

General systems theory (GST) is the foundational basis from which OST derived. It emerged as an interdisciplinary theory in general science, which conceptualizes social and behavioral theories relevant to educational organizations. Bertalanffy's (1968, as cited in Sunday, 2017) viewpoint on a system was that "nothing could be understood by isolating merely one part of what plays a significant role in a system" (p. 171). Analyzing systems must be done openly, coupled with resolving the problems revealed.

According to Lunenburg (2010), all schools are open systems. Consistent with open systems, schools receive information and feedback from the environment. School systems consist of five primary components (Lunenburg, 2010). This is inclusive of inputs, human resources (faculty and staff), financial resources, physical resources, and information resources (Lunenburg, 2010). The second component, the transformation process, involves management conceptualizing the resources to facilitate the structure and achieving its goals. Thirdly, the component of outputs recognizes the outcome and results of achieved goals. The next component of feedback is gathered to address the inadequacies of the transformation process. Finally, the environment consists of social, political, and economic entities that affect the organization or school.

OST is consistent with the problem statement and the research question by assessing the problems of PBIS fidelity implementation and the barriers of inclusion of social workers in Black males' outcomes on a high school campus. Furthermore, OST is appropriate for assessing the implementation of PBIS. Most specifically, the characteristics of the transformation component of OST directs administrators to evaluate and resolve issues (Lunenburg 2010) correlates to PBIS schoolwide implementation, such as school administrators collecting data to identify areas of program weakness, growth needs, and accountability (Scaletta et al., 2020). Furthermore Scaletta et al., (2020) suggest that school administrators are tasked with purposefully evaluating programs that impact the learning environment.

In addition, OST can be used to analyze school systems' inability to employ social workers as well as their appropriate use, which contributes to the ineffective

implementation of PBIS. The concepts of OST are appropriate for understanding school systems as all public-school systems are open systems. Therefore, the foundational theories of OST were used to analyze social workers' perspectives of PBIS fidelity implementation on the outcomes of Black male students on the high school campus.

Values and Ethics

School social workers provide a range of services within educational settings. These roles include providing professional development, participating in multidisciplinary team meetings, engaging in administrative functions, advising policy, and connecting with families and communities (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). As school social workers participate in various roles in their work, the social worker must also adhere to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (NASW, 2021) Code of Ethics, which outlines core values and principles for social workers including service, social justice, dignity and worth, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

The values of the NASW Code of Ethics are vital to school social work practice with the social problem of Black male exclusion. Social workers have a standard to advocate and promote social justice for students and their families. The uttermost principle is providing a service to individuals and families in need (NASW, 2021). Primarily, engaging and assisting "students, families, schools, and the community in providing a service involves providing students' mental, social-emotional services to facilitate their adjustment at home, school, and the community resources to reduce barriers to academic success" (School of Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)

[SSWAA], n.d.). Secondly, the value of social justice encourages school social workers to use professional skills to promote social change for students, families, and communities (SSWAA, n.d.). Thus, social workers are directed to advocate for social justice and equality and are actively seeking change for individuals that are marginalized. Thirdly, the value of dignity of worth stresses the importance of respecting the client and the client's right to make their own decisions. The value of the importance of relationships iterates the significance of working through differences as social change occurs when people work together to enhance the quality of life for others. Subsequently, social workers have a professional principle to practice in a trustworthy manner and demonstrate the responsibility to adhere to the agency and clients they work for (NASW, 2021). In addition, social workers have the responsibility to practice with competence, acquire knowledge, and apply knowledge to their day-to-day tasks (NASW, 2021).

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Research has indicated that disproportionality continues to occur at a higher rate for Black male students (Harper et al., 2019; OCR, 2021). Black male students "received out-of-school suspensions (24.9%) at rates more than three times their share of the total student enrollment (7.7%) the largest disparity across all races, ethnicity, and sex grouping" (OCR, 2021, p. 3).

To illustrate, the state of Mississippi continues to utilize suspensions at a higher rate (Harper et al., 2019; Leung-Gagné et al., 2022; Mississippi Data Project, 2017). According to the OCR, (2021, during the 2017–2018 school year, in grades K-12, Black makes represented 48.6% of students enrolled in public schools in Mississippi.

Profoundly, 68.7% of Black males in K-12 schools in Mississippi without disabilities received at least one out-of-school suspension for the 2017–2018 school year. In addition, 64.2% of Black males in grades K-12 without disabilities, were referred to law enforcement for the 2017-2018 school year (OCR, 2021). In comparison, 44.3% of Mississippi K-12 student enrollment for the 2027-2018 school year were White males. Additionally, 27.3% of White males without disabilities received one out of school suspension and 31.7% of White males without disabilities were referred to law enforcement. Furthermore, Mississippi is amongst five other states including Kansas, Nevada, North Dakota, and South Carolina where racial disparities increased in secondary education (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). Several factors contribute to the use of disproportional suspension in Black males. Primarily, the use of zero-tolerance policies, which apply harsh discipline for minute behavior infractions (Anzalone, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2015; Teasley et al., 2017). A second factor includes the school campus' use of bias (Teasley et al., 2017). Finally, there is the lack of school-related support-service resources for students who present with behavioral and emotional disorders (Teasley et al., 2017).

In contrast, PBIS has been noted as an evidenced-based intervention (Fluke & Peterson, 2013; Houchens et al., 2017). Although PBIS has proven effective in decreasing suspension rates, disproportionality with Black male students continues to occur (Houchens et al., 2017). The factors of PBIS fidelity implementation and cultural bias have been identified as rationales for the ineffectiveness of PBIS. School social workers can play an influential role in implementing PBIS to impact exclusionary

discipline with Black male students; however, school social workers are underutilized (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018).

In this section, I reviewed the literature on the factors contributing to exclusionary discipline amongst Black male students. Considering the magnitude of the outcomes for the identified participants, the benefit and underutilization of school social workers in alleviating exclusionary discipline is of grave importance. The literature related to exclusionary discipline and PBIS were reviewed in this section. To initiate this research, I used keywords such as *exclusionary discipline*, *socioeconomic issues*, *zero-tolerance policies*, *PBIS*, and *school/teacher bias* to conduct searches in the Walden University Library, Google search, and Google Scholar. Finally, the data located consisted of research studies, governmental reports, and dissertations.

There is a myriad of related concepts to understanding the exclusionary discipline of Black high school males, in relation to the role of the social worker and teachers' perceptions. However, the organization of the professional and academic literature is inclusive of the following components: exclusionary discipline, cultural bias, and social-emotional needs. These components highlight the equality versus equity debate of educating minority children. The historical context of the development of zero-tolerance policies will not be explored, but rather the impact of their development. Bias, along with social-emotional needs of Black males' experience, will be addressed.

Racial Disparities in Student Discipline

The way students are assigned consequences impacts their achievement. In some cases, when students are cognizant of varied treatment, this causes issues for all

stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers, social workers, local/district leadership, etc.). When variance is denoted as a bifactor of race, it intensifies exclusionary discipline. Gordon (2018) asserted the documentation of racial disparities, regarding discipline, dates back decades. In North Carolina, Lindsay and Hart (2017) reported that Black students were less likely to experience exclusionary discipline if they had Black teachers.

School districts have policies in place to mitigate barriers that have led to racial inequalities in education (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2019). This includes how discipline consequences are assigned to students. Steinberg and Lacoe (2017) explored discipline reform in Pennsylvania. Revealed was the following:

- a majority of schools did not comply with the policy with fidelity,
- 60% of schools reduced the number of suspensions for conduct (expectation was to eliminate, not reduce), and
- noncompliant schools use conduct as a rationale for out of school suspensions.

This led to an exploration of student outcomes. Data showed there was no adverse impact on students who were not suspended. Policy compliance varied across schools. Therefore, policy change is implemented more effectively at the school level than the district level.

Debates linking policy to practice regarding the school to prison to pipeline result from disproportionality. The Department of Education is now exploring research completed over the last decade (Petrilli, 2017). Goals of such policies include highlighting the impact, present and future, of racial disparities in school discipline. The issue is prevalent. Students, regardless of race or offense, should be treated equally and

the policies in place should be utilized equally. Individual and collective rights of all students should be protected (Barnes & Motz, 2018).

There should be no separation in how students are treated in educational settings. This is inclusive of how they are taught, treated, and assigned consequences for undesirable behaviors. There is a correlation between discrimination and the student discipline gap (Gordon, 2018). Implicit bias shows up in the treatment of minority students, regarding how they are treated, as a result of their behavior (Gershenson & Dee, 2017). Studies have also been done on students' participation in the federal lunch program. Barrett et al. (2017) researched suspensions in relation to race and family income status in Louisiana schools. The researchers found a relationship between students' suspension and their free or reduced-priced lunch status, with Black students being suspended twice the rate of White students. Additionally, Barrett et al. (2017) research found that "*Black students are about twice as likely as White students to be suspended, and low-income students are about* 1.75 *times as likely as non-low income students to be suspended (p.1).*

Disparities also exist due to the length of the suspension students receive. Research was conducted to explore the variance amongst races. Anderson et al., (2017) found that "Black students receive about 0.07 extra days of punishment per incident relative to White students in the same school" (p. 17). Even when students receive the same consequence, Black students' length of suspension is longer. Though the numbers are low, they do have statistical significance.

The racial gap in schools results from an array of variables. Gopalan and Nelson (2019) conducted a study to explore the discipline gap between Black and White, and Hispanic and White students. Their exploration included students in the state of Indiana in prekindergarten through 12th grades, from the 2008–2009 to the 2013–2014 school years. Characteristics included gender, poverty, attendance, race, and suspension rates. Multiple regressions were conducted across three grade spans, such as Prekindergarten and kindergarten, grades one through eight, and high school (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019). Black students are suspended at an alarmingly higher rate than their White, Hispanic, and other counterparts. In every school year analyzed, Black students were suspended at higher percentages than Hispanic, White, and other students.

Gopalan and Nelson (2019) also separated the data into three bands based on grade level to highlight the impact grade level and ethnicity has on suspensions. Among prekindergarten and kindergarten students in Indiana, Black students were almost always suspended at twice the rate for White, Hispanic, and other races. Rates are doubled in every category for Black students' suspension. The final data depiction, in their study, highlights the same components for high school students, showing that White students are suspended less than half the rate of Black students, and Hispanic students are more likely to be suspended than White students and students of other races, but still less than Black students. Racial biases in the community impact racial disparities in schools. This negatively impacts the rate at which students experience academic success. Similarly, Riddle and Sinclair (2019) explained that:

> Black students in the United States are subject to disciplinary action at rates much higher than their White counterparts. These disciplinary actions put students at higher risk for negative life outcomes, including involvement in the criminal justice system. Using federal data covering over 32 million students at nearly 96,000 schools, our research demonstrates that the disciplinary gap between Black and White students across five types of disciplinary actions is associated with county-level rates of racial bias. (p. 8255)

Researchers conducted a study to understand the relationship between racial disparities, in schools, and in communities. Riddle and Sinclair's (2019) research not only highlighted that Black student are suspended at higher rates, but also that Black students receive harsher punishments, with negative long-term outcomes (i.e., employment and criminal justice system involvement). The authors highlighted the disproportionate variance between Black and White disciplinary actions (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Teachers are one of the most significant factors to influence student achievement (Hattie & Anderson, 2020). Their impact also influences what results from disciplinary infractions. The treatment of students regarding discipline is a civil rights issue (Lindsay & Hart, 2021). Researchers Lindsay and Hart (2021) posed the following question in their study: Does having a same race teacher impact students' accessibility to exclusionary discipline? Their frame of reference was students in North Carolina. Findings assert that students are less likely to be suspended from school, consequently, when they share the same race as their teacher (Lindsay & Hart, 2021). This highlights the need for not only more research, but also greater adversity in the education field.

The school to prison pipeline creates another issue for students and schools. As noted by Lindsay and Hart (2021), “Blacks and Latino students experience harsher discipline in schools than their White peers and that these school-based experiences increase the likelihood of their eventual engagement with the criminal justice system” (p. 8). The most vulnerable population of students are susceptible to experiencing exclusionary discipline. This is inclusive of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students, along with students with exceptionalities. The American Psychological Association (2019) share the following:

- the school to prison pipeline starts early,
- Black students and students with disabilities are more likely to receive harsh school discipline than their counterparts,
- disproportionate suspensions of girls of color are alarming,
- students of color with disabilities have harsher consequences than their non-disabled counterparts,
- the link between school discipline and the school to prison pipeline is well recognized, and
- implicit bias influences disciplinary decisions (p.1).

Exclusionary Discipline

Exclusionary discipline has harmful effects on students and their academic achievement. Williams (2020) shared the impacts of exclusionary discipline to include an interruption of learning, supportive services, students to feel unsafe, an increase to more disruptive behavior, truancy, and/or dropping out, coupled with contributing to the school

to prison pipeline. This includes in- and out-of-school suspensions, along with detention and expulsions (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). Students need advocates in schools where exclusionary practices are used. Black males' suspensions are statistically significant and higher (Girvan et al., 2017).

Though research has suggested that minorities receive harsher punishment than their White counterparts, this negative phenomenon impacts them socially, cognitively, and behaviorally. Darensbourg et al. (2010) conducted a study to examine the overrepresentation of Black males in education. The purpose of their study was to provide school-based mental health professionals with recommendations for mitigating negative educational experiences for minorities. In their review, they addressed the zero-tolerance policies, disproportionality, and other punitive discipline practices. Darensbourg et al. (2010) revealed that mental health professionals possess critical skill sets that can reduce Black males' exposure to exclusionary discipline, to minimize adverse outcomes.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

Zero-tolerance policies emerged in the early 1990s as an intervention for school violence (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). These policies evolved from the federal government's model of crime and drug enforcement programs. Zero-tolerance is characterized as "swift, certain, and severe punishments for any behavioral misconduct at school, no matter how minor the infraction" (p.1); therefore, exclusionary discipline such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions is applied to any type of school behavioral infraction (Peterson et al., 2014). For example, school administrators can suspend

students for minor violations. The underlying philosophy of zero-tolerance policies was to create safe school climates (Fluke & Peterson, 2013; Peterson et al., 2014). However, the application of zero-tolerance policies has had an adverse effect on Black male students.

Research has reflected zero-tolerance policies as ineffective strategies for improving student behaviors (Peterson et al., 2014). Such policies facilitate increased school absences, thus denying students access to instructional time (Losen & Whitaker, 2019; Marchbanks et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2014). National data indicate Black males missed 66 days of instructional time due to out-of-school suspensions (Losen & Whitaker, 2018), which is over a third of a traditional school year. Thus, exclusionary discipline contributes to increased student dropouts, low graduation rates, incarceration, and low socioeconomic status (Losen & Whitaker, 2018; Marchbanks et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2014).

Bias

Quereshi and Okonofua (2017) concur with Harper, Ryberg, & Temkin (2019) that Black students receive more severe discipline such as expulsion, arrest, and incarceration. Moreover, once a student is labeled, the student may continue to receive biased disciplinary actions. The authors suggest that these disparities in discipline encountered by Black students are caused by implicit bias. Foremost, implicit bias is categorized as “the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017, p.10). An individual can demonstrate bias unintentionally. Unfortunately, unintentional bias affects an

individual's behavior, causing individuals to treat two racially different individuals differently just because of race or ethnicity. In addition to implicit bias, racial anxiety is also a factor in discriminatory practices. Racial anxiety was described as the intense level of stress an individual experiences when he or she interacts with others from a different (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). Consequently, the literature suggests that these aspects of implicit bias are observed in school discipline. For example, if a teacher interacts with a racially different student, he or she may have biased perceptions of the student and the students' behavior (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017).

Cultural bias facilitates teachers' perceptions of Black students (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). Studies indicate biased perceptions of Black students as having negative attitudes, demonstrating poor behavior, and performing academically lower than their White students (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Moreover, teachers' stereotypical attitudes of Black students' behaviors facilitate their disciplinary decisions. The authors' research indicated that teachers' responses to Black students' additional minor infractions were harsher than their reactions to White students who demonstrated the same behavior (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).

Social-Emotional Needs

Teasely et al. (2017) support the research that Black male students receive exclusionary discipline at higher rates than White students. Furthermore, Black youth are diagnosed with mental health disorders at an increased disproportionate rate. In ratio to White students, Black students are diagnosed with emotional disturbance disorder at 2.7% higher rate; Black students are diagnosed with cognitive impairments at a higher

rate than their White counterparts. Moreover, there is a correlation between the disproportionality of Black students diagnosed with mental health disorders and special education. It is important to note that while the mental health issue of Black males is a researchable phenomenon, it brings a stigma to Black males (Teasely et al., 2017).

Whitaker et al. (2019) illustrate the prevalence of mental health problems on school campuses. Mental health challenges include an array of disorders and suicide ideation. Specifically, "the suicide rate for children ages 10 to 17 increased by 70% between 2006 and 2016" (Whitaker et al., 2019, p. 6). The mental implication of the lack of social-emotional support negatively impacts not only cognitive development but also hinders mental clarity and/or progression. Approximately 72% of children will have witnessed a traumatic event, such as being victims of abuse, observing violent incidents, and experiencing the death of a loved one (Whitaker et al., 2019). Adverse childhood experiences influence students' productivity in all aspects of life.

One in 5 children will have suffered a psychological issue (Whitaker et al., 2019). Thus, 70% to 80% of these students will need additional mental health services from school staff due to the inaccessibility of mental health resources. Conversely, school districts lack support staff such as social workers, counselors, and psychologists. Data from the 2015–2016 Civil Rights Data Collection Report (OCR, 2018), approximately 3,000 schools met the professional recommendation of 250 students to one social worker. Most profoundly, 67,000 schools did not employ a social worker. In contrast, school districts have increased the utilization of school resource officers, which heightens the exposure at-risk students have with law enforcement officers, while not adequately

addressing their mental health needs, thus facilitating the criminalization of students with possible mental health needs (Whitaker et al., 2019).

Alternatives to Ineffective Interventions

Positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) is an evidence-based multitiered framework for improving student behaviors (Fluke & Peterson, 2013; Freeman et al., 2019). Primarily, PBIS consists of three tiers. Tier 1 is viewed as a universal tier that applies to all students. Moreover, Tier 1 implements teaching campus expectations of behaviors to all students. Eighty percent of the student body should respond to Tier 1 interventions. Tier 2 provides interventions to approximately 15% of the school's student population. At this tier, students received more focused interventions such as social skills groups (Fluke & Peterson, 2013; Freeman et al., 2019). The final tier, Tier 3 is most intensive.

Tier 3 provides services for the remaining 5%of the student population (Fluke & Peterson, 2013; Freeman et al., 2019). These students are considered at risk because they did not respond to the previous levels of interventions. Moreover, at Tier 3, the interventions are individualized, focusing directly on the students' needs. Furthermore, Tier 3 consists of providing students with intensive interventions such as mental health counseling, functional behavior assessments, and wrap-around services (Freeman et al., 2019).

The fundamental goal of PBIS is to "teach students more positive, appropriate behaviors while creating an environment in which these behaviors are more acceptable than negative, inappropriate behaviors" (Fluke & Peterson, 2013, p. 1). PBIS focuses on

the concept of modeling and learning new behaviors. Once a new skill or behavior is learned, the behavior is reinforced by applying positive reinforcements. Behaviors that are reinforced are demonstrated repeatedly, which makes PBIS a practical framework for improving student behaviors. In contrast, the use of zero-tolerance policies has been observed as an ineffective intervention for improving student behaviors (Fluke & Peterson, 2013; Peterson et al., 2014).

Houchens et al. (2018) emphasize the effectiveness of PBIS in improving student behavior, reducing office referrals, and decreasing school suspensions. However, the overall outcome of PBIS is contingent on the fidelity of the implementation. In addition, research also indicates a link between high PBIS implementation levels, decreases in out-of-school suspensions, and improved academic performance. The goal of increased PBIS levels is to enhance the quality of education students receive in an environment conducive to learning. Houchens et al. conducted a research study to evaluate "working conditions in SWPBIS schools with varying levels of implementation fidelity" (p. 170). Fidelity of implementation requires stakeholders to move from compliance to commitment. The researcher's study found that teachers' implementation fidelity level was influenced by their perception of students and faculty's knowledge of behavioral expectations, acceptable student behavior, and school safety. Additionally, schools with high and medium levels of implementation fidelity demonstrated generally higher achievement scores on statewide exams than schools that presented with lower levels of implementation fidelity (Houchens et al., 2018).

Baule (2020) iterates a positive method of school discipline than using a system of punishment. Moreover, the author's research evaluates the implementation of PBIS and questions the impact of PBIS on middle and high school suspensions in an urban school district in Muncie, Indiana. The study established that the implementation of PBIS positively decreased the type and quantity of disciplinary infractions. Additionally, the administrators' attitude toward implementing PBIS also influenced the level of implementation fidelity. Although PBIS influenced decreasing disciplinary problems and racial disproportionality of Black, multiracial, and White students, racial disproportionality was observed (Baule, 2020).

In addition to PBIS, the researchers suggest the inclusion of restorative practices. These practices include students becoming a member of supportive community with increased accountability (Okonofua et al., 2016). The Schott Foundation (n.d.) highlighted nine primary restorative practices to mitigate exclusionary discipline:

1. Restorative justice: dialogue between victim and accuser with the opportunity to mitigate exclusionary discipline.
2. Community conferencing: dialogue with a mediator and all involved parties about the offense, its impact, and possible resolutions.
3. Community service: self-improvement through serving others.
4. Peer juries: using trained peers to meet with the offender to discuss offense, its impact to others, and possible resolutions.
5. Peer mediation: students are trained to facilitate conflict resolution with their peers.

6. Circle process: regular scheduled meeting with students and educators to foster a sense of community.
7. Preventative and Post Conflict Resolution Programs: programs geared towards students' self-regulation, resolve problems, and manage conflict.
8. Informal Restorative: informal strategies that facilitate sharing of feelings and reflective communication.
9. Social Emotional Learning: framework to help students make connections, build empathy, and collaborate to manage conflict.

Addressing these issues from a political standpoint may also serve beneficial. Education reform includes leveling the playing field regarding the quality of education students receive, this should be inclusive of the consequences assigned because of their behavior. The development of disciplinary policies should include feedback from stakeholders directly impacted by the changes being recommended. Legislators should examine data on increased and declining suspension rates in their discovery phase (Eden, 2017; D'Orio, 2018). Compliance, at the local school level, is a concern; however, a decline in suspensions resulted in Philadelphia, when schools used positive rather than punitive measures to address undesirable behaviors; other positive impacts included increased cohesion amongst faculty, teacher morale, and a better approach to serving students with varied socioeconomic statuses (Gray et al., 2017).

The APA (2020) supports the need to address exclusionary discipline, via policy, as the outcomes of youth have short and long-term implications. How youth's undesirable behaviors are addressed impacts our criminal justice system. There is a grave

need to address racial inequalities, and it is no different with race and school-based punishment. The following are recommendations provided by the APA (2020):

- Enact legislation to increase access to behavioral health counseling and other support services.
- Implement alternative solutions that do not include removing students from the classroom.
- Adopt policies that address discrimination and biases.
- Require stakeholders to attend anti-bias intervention training.
- Enhance data collection and reporting (pp. 2-3).

Social Workers' Role

There are a myriad of duties and responsibilities expected of social workers. Vulnerable student populations require more support than teachers and administrators alone can provide. Social workers' primary role is to alleviate barriers to students' successful high school completion. The Atlanta Public Schools System (2020) identifies the goal of social workers as keeping students in school, ensuring they graduate, experience success while in school, and develop socially and emotionally. Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (n.d.) highlighted the following as top issues and responsibilities of social workers: (a) mental health/illness, (b) attendance, truancy, and dropouts, (c) behavior management, (d) basic human needs, (e) special education, (f) trauma, (g) crises, (h) homelessness, (i) family relationships, (j) school culture/climate, (k) resiliency, and (l) child abuse and neglect. Social workers are responsible for providing an added layer of support for students who have increased risks.

Social workers provide comprehensive support to students when evaluating their role in discipline. Three roles are prevalent: individual and small group services, classroom instruction, and system changes. Individual and small group services address the need for anger management, social skills, and how to resolve conflict (Rhim & Kothari, 2018). Not all students have individuals who advocate for them or teach them how to handle crises. Social workers can also work with stakeholders to develop students' behavior intervention plans. From the social worker's lens, classroom instruction is not English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. But more so protective behaviors, suicide prevention, health promotion, and bullying prevention (Ramey, 2016). Lastly, changing systems within a school, though sometimes challenging, is another duty of the social worker. It can be the implementation of PBIS or the building of relationships between the school and the community.

Students struggle with receiving adverse treatment, especially when they are cognizant that it is a byproduct of race or cultural differences, and their peers are receiving a different consequence (Kirwan Institute, 2019). Fair treatment of students of all ethnicities has remained a concern in educational reform. Luster (2018) highlights the challenge of educators everywhere, trying to bridge the gaps between discipline and school safety, classroom efficacy, and positive student outcomes. Students want to be successful but struggle with disengagement because of unfair treatment and feelings of isolation, being misunderstood, undervalued, and unwelcome. Educators found that when students feel they have a voice, they are more likely to positively contribute to the learning environment (Luster, 2018). Social workers can also support structures as such.

The role of all educators is expanding; school social workers are no different. Social workers have an innate ability to intertwine culturally and developmentally appropriate strategies to minimize suspensions (Mowen & Brent, 2016). The social work discipline is necessary to reverse exclusionary discipline practices in schools across America. Duran (2020) reviewed social workers' role in reducing school suspension; the study aimed to explore how social workers in California used alternatives to minimize the use of exclusionary discipline and their efficacy in preventing future suspensions. Durane's findings suggest the following as alternatives to suspensions: navigate systems for students with repeat offenses, mediate and serve as students' voice, build staff capacity, improve teachers' buy-in, facilitate school mobilization to support vulnerable students, foster a nurturing community, and development for alternatives to suspension. Incorporating these strategies can positively influence a school's culture and climate.

Summary

This generic qualitative study was conducted to understand the impact of PBIS on the outcome of Black male students on a high school campus. In addition, the researcher wanted to understand the teachers' perceptions of issues related to implementation with fidelity. The data from this study provided specific skills to assist school social workers in the field. Additionally, the evidence from this study minimizes the gap in data with high school campuses, using school social workers to increase fidelity implementation of PBIS with Black male students at risk for exclusionary discipline. Shared was research-based data to demonstrate the need for social workers in the school setting as well as social workers' involvement with maintaining and successfully implementing PBIS.

Social workers and high school teachers can use this qualitative study to share their perspectives on the outcomes of Black males on the high school campus with implementing PBIS. Finally, this project utilized insight from the teacher's and social workers' perspectives on the impact social workers have on PBIS implementation.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Introduction

In Section 1, I highlighted how qualitative research practices would be used to explore the experiences, challenges, and barriers of high school teachers and social workers concerning implementing PBIS interventions for Black male high school students in South Mississippi counties. Black male students are being excluded from high school campuses at an alarming rate (Teasley et al., 2017). This exclusion amounts to Black male students missing instructional time and decreasing the graduation rate of Black male students. Furthermore, suspensions and expulsions place Black male students at risk of encountering the school-to-prison pipeline (McCarter, 2020). Social workers in educational settings can be integral in implementing research-based interventions such as PBIS and other support services. Therefore, the purpose of this generic qualitative study is to understand high school teachers' and social workers' perspectives of the roles social workers play in the implementation of PBIS and their impact on the exclusion of Black male students from the high school setting as well as the influence PBIS has had on Black suspension rate from the high school setting. The research questions were:

The research questions were:

1. How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe social workers’ work to reduce the exclusionary discipline of Black male students?

2. How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe the PBIS framework's influence on student behavior?
3. How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe social workers' roles in the implementation of PBIS with Black male students?

The components of Section 2include the research design and methodology, inclusive of participants, instrumentation, data analyses, and ethical procedures. Primarily, the research design was descriptive in nature utilizing semi-structured interviews and five participants. Secondly, the research methods consisted of a 10-question interview protocol. Data analysis was conducted by applying thematic analysis. The findings of the research suggested that social workers have little to no involvement with the exclusionary discipline of Black male students in the high school setting. Additionally, social workers' duties were as behavior specialists and mental health counselors. However, the social workers' involvement with students is obstructed by who is supposed to refer the student to the social worker.

Research Design

Siedlecki (2020) termed *descriptive research* as describing the phenomenon by examining it in the natural setting. This generic qualitative research aimed to explore, thematize, and unveil high school teachers' and social workers' perspectives on implementing PBIS and its outcome on the exclusionary discipline Black males

experience. Qualitative research practices were used to explore the phenomenon. I collected data from social workers and teachers from various South Mississippi Counties.

I used the latest data from the US Department of Education's OCR (2021) as a frame of reference from the social workers' and teachers' perspectives. All participants were asked to complete a demographic survey (see Appendix A) to provide background data. The interview protocols were designed for each discipline, using one for social workers and one for high school teachers (see Appendices B and C, respectively). Open-ended questions were used to clarify participants' beliefs and understanding while providing more in-depth insight (Singer & Couper, 2017).

Methodology

Participants

This generic qualitative study incorporated five interviews, including teachers and social workers working with high school students across South Mississippi counties. The goal was to validate the information provided by the participants through the development of themes (Singer & Couper, 2017). Participants for this generic qualitative study were obtained through criterion sampling and convenience sampling. In criterion sampling, a researcher selects participants based on their knowledge and work with an occurrence being evaluated (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Convenience sampling is selecting participants based on their availability to the researcher (Jager et al., 2017). Per Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, all participants must complete an Informed Consent Form. The research study's participate criteria stipulated that all participants must have worked in a Mississippi County school system as a high

school social worker or teacher and have worked in their current role for a minimum of three years.

Additionally, the participation criteria specified that the participants would have knowledge of PBIS. Participants were able to withdraw at any time during the data collection period. High school social workers and teachers were interviewed and asked questions focusing on their practice in their current high school and the PBIS implementation impact on Black males. I sought to obtain participants who were vested in an occurrence but had different personal perspectives (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Instrumentation

Three instruments were used within this project. A demographic survey (see Appendix A) was given to all participants to complete. I developed this tool to ensure alignment with the criteria for the study. Providing accurate professional descriptors of the participants would illuminate their perspectives. Additionally, two instruments were developed, tailored to social workers' (Appendix B) and the teachers' (Appendix C) respected practices. The instruments guided the social workers and teachers to focus on their practice and work with Black males and the social workers' role in PBIS implementation. Furthermore, the interview questions allowed me to examine participants' roles in the disciplinary process, direct practice skills, and their involvement with the PBIS implementation.

Young et al. (2018) described how interviews could be used to gain knowledge and an understanding of stakeholders' values, beliefs, and decisions while strengthening research. I developed the interview questions for the social workers (see Appendix B) by

engaging in dialogue with educators. Two high school administrators, a social worker, and teachers were included. Questions were developed during the Summer and Fall semesters of 2020. All questions were open-ended to allow participants to open up and share information from their lens as current practitioners and to allow the researcher to probe for clarity based on responses.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis design involves the researcher reading the data rigorously to understand participants' meanings of human experiences with a phenomenon. Qualitative data analysis facilitates interpreting data generated from sources such as structured or semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations (Lester et al., 2020). Data analysis for this generic qualitative study was generated by using thematic analysis. Lester et al. (2020) referred to thematic analysis as "an analytic method commonly used to identify patterns across data sets" (p. 95). More specifically, the researcher analyzes the data for codes that identify labels across the data set (Viasmoradi et al., 2016).

Additionally, the codes are generated into themes characterized as similar essential defining elements (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). These themes assist the researcher in answering the research questions (Viasmoradi et al., 2016). Themes can be semantic or latent (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Semantic themes are focused directly on what the participants expressed, whereas latent themes focus on participants' assumptions and underlying perspectives expressed within the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

In thematic analysis, the coding method is guided by the researcher's perspectives, research questions and can consist of both methods (Dawadi, 2020; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Inductive analysis involves generating themes based solely on the data set. In contrast, in deductive analysis, a researcher develops themes using the concepts of the theory, research questions, as well as the literature (Dawadi, 2020; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Utilizing both methods can increase the validity of the qualitative data analysis process (Dawadi, 2020). Additionally, validity can be achieved by (a) assuring the research question will address the topic, (b) the research methods are appropriate for answering the research question, (c) the alignment is appropriate for the research design and methodology, (d) the sampling and data analysis, (e) the results and conclusions are appropriate for the sample and context (Leung, 2015). Researchers identify the Braun and Clarke thematic six phases of data analysis as an effective method for facilitating the validity of qualitative data analysis (Dawadi, 2020; Lester et al., 2020). This thematic analysis is a systematic process where the phases overlap and guide the researcher in reading and rereading data sets (Dawadi, 2020).

For this generic qualitative study, I used the *Zoom* online meeting platform to audio record participant's' interviews. *Zoom* provides a secure method of videoconferencing that does not require third-party software (Archibald et al., 2019). Additionally, *Zoom* has a secure feature of user-specific authentication and real-time encryption of meetings (Archibald et al., 2019). I used *Microsoft 365* to transcribe the recorded interview videos. *Microsoft 365*, the online version, has a component that allows premium subscribers to transcribe videos into the web version of Word (Gunnell,

2020). *Microsoft Excel* is a software spreadsheet program used for data analysis and documentation (University of Washington, 2023). The cells in the spreadsheet hold one piece of data, which makes information more accessible to view and find meaning in the data (University of Washington, 2023). Primarily, the research questions and answers were placed into an *Excel* worksheet, with each comment placed into a column (Bree & Gallagher, 2016).

I coded the data using Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis. Next, the data were reviewed to locate themes (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Additionally, themes and cells were color-coded as Microsoft Excel uses a color-coding tool that sorts cells and data into a thematic color scheme (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Thus, aligning the crucial themes for additional reviews (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). There is a myriad of limitations and barriers that may accompany the research. The expected participants were sampled from various South Mississippi counties. There were no guarantees that social workers and teachers would want to participate, coupled with the potential for their implicit biases.

Ethical Procedures

Walden University's IRB stresses that all research studies receive IRB approval before conducting research (Research Ethics, n.d.). Thus, iterating the significance of conducting ethical research to promote social change. Data collection was done ethically. The IRB maintains ethical standards in Walden Research studies (Research Ethics, n.d.). Therefore, the research for this study began after the URR and Walden IRB approval (03-23-22-0238364) was received.

I used *Google* to research the school districts in South Mississippi that utilized the PBIS framework. social media sites such as *LinkedIn*, *Instagram*, and *Facebook* to sample participants actively. All information was disseminated through electronic communication. However, the research process started with all participants receiving the Informed Consent Form detailing the nature of the research study, their rights, risks of potential harm, and the researcher's contact information. The interviews were scheduled via email and confirmed electronically with the meeting code and password embedded.

All participants' identities were maintained confidential. Each social worker and teacher received a code based on role and submission number (e.g., SW1- (Social Worker submitted first) Identifying information was not shared or viewed by anyone but myself and will be kept private and secure on a password-protected device. Any supplemental documents related to the study are locked in a file cabinet at my home and office. All information will be discarded after 5 years.

Summary

Interviews were used as a data collection method to conceptualize themes of social workers and teachers working with Black males to reduce exclusionary discipline in South Mississippi counties. I used the interviews to provide insight into the impact social workers' implementation of PBIS has on male Black students in various Mississippi counties. The goal was to have social workers and teachers from Mississippi counties during the 2020–2021 school year. Three tools were used to collect data: Background Survey (Appendix A), the social worker interview protocol (Appendix B),

and the teacher interview protocol (Appendix C). In Section 3, I presented the findings of the study.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

This generic qualitative study aimed to explore social workers' role in implementing PBIS and the exclusionary discipline of Black male high school students. The research questions were the following:

1. How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe their work to reduce the exclusionary discipline of Black male students?
2. How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe the PBIS framework's influence on student behavior?
3. How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe social workers' roles in the implementation of PBIS with male Black students?

Data were collected by conducting *Zoom* interviews with five participants. Furthermore, I transcribed the interviews and utilized coding to analyze and thematize data.

This generic qualitative study incorporated the concepts of the OST and the GST, the theoretical aspects of which aided this generic qualitative study in providing an understanding of the problems of the fidelity of PBIS implementation and the influence on the outcomes of Black males, coupled with the associated social work practices. In addition, school districts can use OST to analyze school systems' inability to employ social workers and the misuse of social workers in the field, which can contribute to the

ineffective implementation of PBIS. The theoretical aspects of OST and GST aided this generic qualitative study in the following: (a) analysis of social workers' and teachers' perspectives of PBIS implementation with fidelity and (b) the impact of exclusionary discipline.

Data Analysis Techniques

This generic qualitative study aimed to understand social workers' and teachers' perspectives on the implementation of PBIS and its impact on the exclusion of Black male students from the high school setting. In addition, I sought to understand the influence PBIS has had on the Black male suspension rate. There was a gap in the literature regarding the identified concepts. All research questions were answered using a qualitative research design. I gathered data from participants with extensive knowledge of PBIS and provided services to Black male high school students. Two different interview instruments were designed for social workers and teachers. Each instrument had ten interview questions in which six themes emerged.

Following IRB approval for this generic qualitative study, I conducted a *Google* search for South Mississippi counties with school districts that utilized PBIS. Twenty-three possible respondents (16 social workers and seven teachers) were invited to participate in this study via social media sites: *LinkedIn, Facebook Messenger,* and *Instagram*. One social worker and four teachers consented to participate. Seven social workers did not respond, and five did not meet the criteria. Additionally, two teachers did not respond, one failed to consent, and two did not meet the requirements. The one social worker included in the study had an undergraduate degree in social work and a master's

degree with up to 12 years in education. Of the four teachers, three had undergraduate education degrees, and one had an undergraduate degree from another field. Three of the four teachers held graduate degrees. Finally, all of the participants had 12-plus years in education.

The consenting participants' interviews were scheduled based on their availability. Moreover, the interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, allowing the respondents to provide their perspectives on social workers' involvement with PBIS, exclusionary discipline, and the roles of social workers. Each interview was audio-recorded via *Zoom* and transcribed using the online version of *Microsoft 365*, which has a component that allows premium subscribers to transcribe videos into the web version of Word (Gunnell, 2020). Additionally, to analyze and make sense of the perspectives provided by the participants, I utilized Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for conducting thematic analysis, which includes becoming familiar with the data, generating the initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up the results (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Furthermore, this framework assists the researcher in fully understanding the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

For the first phase of the thematic analysis process, I became familiar with the data by consistently reading and re-reading transcripts. Thus, the responses were read repeatedly and cross-referenced with the audio recordings to ascertain the transcription's correctness and to fully conceptualize the participants' perspectives. Primarily, the research questions and answers were placed into a *Microsoft Excel* worksheet, with each comment placed into a column (see Bree & Gallagher, 2016). *Microsoft Excel* is a

software spreadsheet program used for data analysis and documentation (University of Washington, 2023). The cells in the spreadsheet hold one piece of data, which makes information more accessible to view and find meaning in the data (University of Washington, 2023).

Phase 2 involved developing the initial codes. Coding facilitates breaking the data into meaningful parts (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Furthermore, the coding process is conceptualized by the researcher's perspectives and the research questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Therefore, I utilized inductive and deductive analysis to conceptualize my perspectives on the data. Inductive analysis is a process where meaning in raw data is used to develop codes and themes (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022; Dawadi, 2020;) whereas deductive analysis is a process of generating codes and themes based on literature, theory, and research questions (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Additionally, the data were reviewed to locate codes (see Bree & Gallagher, 2016). The cells and codes were color-coded as Microsoft Excel uses a color-coding tool that sorts cells and data into a color scheme (Bree & Gallagher, 2016).

Phase 3 of the Braun and Clarke model focuses on generating themes (Dawadi, 2020; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This step in the analysis process is crucial as it indicates the relationship between patterns in the data set or participant responses. Moreover, it is beneficial to the development of themes in this phase to be cognizant of the research questions (Dawadi, 2020), thus utilizing deductive analysis. Furthermore, in this phase, it is imperative to revisit the transcripts before aligning codes to themes (Dawadi, 2020).

Phase 4 of the Braun and Clarke model guides the researcher to align all the themes and subthemes. This phase, as in the abovementioned phases, the transcripts are reread to ascertain validity (Dawadi, 2020). This step also allows a researcher to understand whether themes are relevant and related to the research question (Dawadi, 2020). During this phase, themes can be either merged or deleted altogether. Additionally, the researcher can review and rename themes. Therefore, at this step, utilizing deductive analysis, I revisited the table and the spreadsheet to provide clarity of the phrases. In addition, I merged themes and created subthemes.

Phase 5 of Braun and Clarke's framework focuses on providing meaning to the themes (Dawadi, 2020; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The meaning of the themes should be clear. Moreover, the definition and meaning of the themes should be developed with the research question and the literature in mind (Dawadi, 2020). As the themes were assigned meaning, they were also assigned a narrative from the participants' perspectives (see Dawadi, 2020).

The final stage of the model involves the writing of the report. Braun and Clarke (2006, as cited in Dawadi, 2020) expressed that the writing report stage "of a thematic analysis must convince the readers of the merit and validity of the analysis" (p. 70). Moreover, the researcher must capture the participants' perspectives of the phenomenon and exemplify those perspectives with the excerpts from the participants. Considering this concept, I extracted the participants' responses to each question into a table. Table 1 displays the themes that evolved from the participants' perspectives. Also highlighted

were the questions impacting each theme. Ten questions were documented per participant (i.e., social worker and teachers).

Table 1

Interview Questions and Related Initial Themes

Theme	Social worker interview questions	Teacher interview questions
Exclusionary discipline	10	10
Roles	1, 2, 8, 10	1, 2, 9, 10
Social workers' impact on exclusionary discipline	3, 4, 5, 9	9, 10
Perspective of PBIS		3, 4, 6, 8

After the initial codes were generated, I reviewed the data again to align the data to redefine the themes. The overall findings suggested that social workers' roles were consistent with support services. In addition, the social workers had little to no involvement on the exclusion of Black males from the high school setting and on the utilization of PBIS. Six themes emerged in the examination of the research questions, interview questions, and participants' responses: (a) suspension of Black males, the social problem of putting Black males out of school based on their behavior; (b) support services, which defines the specific title and participants' perspective of the work social workers provide with high school students; (c) social workers have had some involvement with Black male students, which details the effect social workers have had on Black males being suspended or expelled from the high school setting, a subtheme of social work referral process; (d) concepts of PBIS, which details the participants' views of the concept of PBIS; (e) barriers to PBIS, which details the problems of implementing

PBIS; and (f) social workers' involvement with PBIS, which describes what responsibilities social workers have regarding PBIS. These themes helped me understand educators' perspectives. The absence of substantial support for Black male high school students was evident.

Table 2 provides an illustration of the participants' perspectives. The table contains the themes, the number of participants who provided similar responses, the number of excerpts, and a sample of the responses. Furthermore, the table characterized the participants' thoughts of the roles social workers perform in impacting PBIS and the exclusion of Black males from the high school setting. Each participant shared, from their viewpoint, the manner in which social workers are utilized on their respective campuses and practices. These support services include behavior specialists, mental health counselors, and social workers. Additionally, their perspectives demonstrated the lack of involvement social workers have in the implementation of PBIS. Moreover, participants' responses indicated that clarity around expectations regarding the referral process and what all falls under the social worker's umbrella is still needed. Finally, the responses suggested that social workers have little to no impact with the exclusionary discipline of Black male students in the high school setting.

Table 2

Emergent Themes

Themes	No. of participants	No. of excerpts	Sample excerpts
Suspension of Black males	5	5	I don't have the facts, but it's always very high numbers amongst our Black males that contribute to our suspension rates or alternative school placements.
Support services	5	5	In the position that I'm in, I work under the Office of Exceptional Education. So, I do behavior intervention plans. I may do classroom observations within the classroom setting of students, as well as behavior intervention plans, and functional behavior assessments.
Social workers have had some involvement with Black male high school students	5	21	I think that if we weren't involved, I think they would be suspended a whole lot more. You know, so I think that the social workers have actually helped in trying to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions for Black males.
Concept of PBIS	5	8	Teachers and students must receive feedback on "what do you think you did, right" as well as "what do you think you need to improve on."
Barriers to PBIS	5	24	Although he follows through with it, he himself does not buy into the whole PBIS, but he does comply with the rules and procedures around PBIS." Teachers 1 and reflect on student buy-in.
Social worker involvement with PBIS	3	3	When PBIS first started in our district, our role was to serve as coaches or specialists. These titles were used to describe the duties and responsibilities linked to developing a PBIS action plan.

Findings

The research participants for this generic research study consisted of four teachers and one social worker. Four of the participants had master's degrees. All the participants had 12-plus years in the field of education. Additionally, four of the participants viewed

exclusion as any disciplinary practice that isolates students from their classroom environment and includes in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion. One teacher viewed expulsion as taking students out of the classroom and denying them access to instruction and school-based support services.

The findings in this generic qualitative study are documented and discussed in the following subsections as themes that will be linked to direct quotes from the participants. Additionally, the excerpts of the quotes have been adjusted for readability and clarity, while keeping the integrity of the respondents' position. This information highlights the participants' understanding of the identified variables included in this study, thus allowing readers to understand through the research participants lens, how social work involvement impacts both PBIS and Black males on high school campuses.

The first research question focuses on high school social workers' and high school teachers' description of social workers' work to reduce the exclusionary discipline of Black male students. Themes developed from the participants' responses were suspension of Black males, support services, social workers have had some involvement with Black male students, and a subtheme of referral process.

Theme 1: Suspension of Black Males

The participants viewed that suspension and alternative school placement is high amongst Black male high school students. Teacher 2 expressed "it's always very high numbers amongst our Black males that contribute to our suspension rates or alternative school placements." Teacher 1 acknowledged that schools must take a stance on violent infractions such as weapons, gang activity, and fighting. However, also verbalized, "more

of our young Black men are being suspended, at an alarming rate" for behaviors such as "skipping." Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 alluded that those Black suspensions contribute to Black male students "lack of effective communication." Teacher 1 viewed talking loudly as a part of Black culture. Therefore, placing Black students in situations where they must be quiet and "not able to express ourselves becomes a handicap." Teacher 3 voiced similar perspective stating,

> Communication is an extreme barrier that our Black males deal with on a daily basis. A lot of them don't feel like they can communicate. They don't know how to communicate. Because they don't know how to communicate, it might cause an aggressive situation. Or some type of negative situation you know that could have been prevented if they learned how to communicate better, how to express their feelings, how to specifically tell someone what they need, or how they are feeling.

Theme 2: Support Services

Support services, the second theme, was emphasized to illuminate participants' perspectives on social workers' tasks on high school campuses. In addition, support services also describe how administrators were using social workers with Black males, PBIS, and discipline. The perspectives convey that their social workers performed tasks consistent with advocacy and a support system for students when they have emotional needs or problems at home. Teacher 1 alludes to social workers in that they have the flexibility and time to provide one-on-one interventions with students and parents. Teacher 1 stated, "They can go places that teachers can go but don't have the time to go or are not able to go. They can contact parents and students." Additionally, Teacher 2

stated, "The social worker is there to provide social and emotional support to students that need it. When students are having adverse childhood experiences or difficult moments, social workers are there for them."

Teachers 1, 2, 3, and 4 share the perspective of social workers' roles, including being more clinical, performing as mental health counselors and social workers. Teacher 3 stated, "Our social worker is able to meet with high school students, and you know, she's only responsible for the high school students. And I also know she does more of the clinical counseling our students receive." Social Worker 1 communicated that her duties fall under the office of exceptional services as a behavior specialist, thus only working with children receiving special education services. The social worker stated, "I may do classroom observations within the classroom setting for students, as well as behavior intervention plans and functional behavior assessments (FBAs)." However, this participant expressed those tasks such as home visits, support services, and referrals are not totally outside of their job description and can be made if necessary.

Theme 3: Social Workers Have had Some Involvement with Black High School Students

This theme developed from the framework of this generic qualitative study, which focused on social workers' impact on the exclusion of Black males from the high school setting. Moreover, this theme encompassed the teachers' interview protocol that asked for the participants' perspectives on the correlation between exclusionary discipline and the social worker's role. Additionally, this theme included the social worker interview protocol, which asked several questions focusing on social workers' involvement with

discipline, discipline policies, and the social worker's impact on Black males' exclusion from the high school setting.

The participants expressed varied opinions on social workers' impact on the exclusion of Black males on the high school campus. Additionally, the participants view social workers as an intervention to decrease student suspension. Teacher 1 conveyed that " in lieu of suspension," the student would have to participate in sessions with the social worker. "Social worker 1, Teacher 1, 2, and 4 share the opinion that social workers have had an impact on the suspension of Black males from the high school campus. Teacher 1 implied, "I would imagine it has some impact on the number of out-of-school suspensions Black male students receive." Social worker 1 indicated that their involvement has decreased the number of suspensions. Social worker 1 responded,

> I think that if we weren't involved, they would be suspended a lot more. I think that the social workers have helped in trying to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions African American male students receive.

Teacher 3 conveyed a different opinion, referencing, "Speaking of African male students, that I have had that have gone through the expulsion process and whatnot. I don't necessarily think that they have been in contact with the social worker."

This theme also focused on the social worker's perspective of their use in the disciplinary process. Social worker 1 acknowledges not being invited by administrators (principals) for direct input in the discipline of students. Additionally Social Worker expressed, "I've never been asked, 'What are some things you think we should do or how should we go about doing this or handling this?" Social Worker 1 added, "We do not

currently function as a partnership. Our opinion is not asked, nor valued.” However, in response to involvement from the school district level, Social Worker 1 acknowledged being asked by the school district to complete a survey on the code of conduct.

Although the participants agree that social workers are providing support to Black males from the high school setting, they believe the involvement should start before students have significant behavior problems and should be available to general education and students receiving special education. Teacher 1 stated, "I think the social worker could serve as an interventionist to support children." Teacher 4 communicated, "Maybe we could help them sooner to minimize expulsion." Social worker 1 acknowledges services are tiered only to students receiving services under the Office of Exceptional Services. Therefore, providing interventions to students receiving special education. However, Teacher 4 conveyed social workers should be accessible to students "whether they have a special education ruling or not." Teacher 3 communicated, "A lot of kids are overlooked because they do not have a Tier 3 behavior plan, though they exemplify those behaviors."

Subtheme: Referral Process

The participants perceive the social worker's role as a necessary intervention to impact the suspension rate. Participants expressed similar perspectives, articulating that social workers could provide Black male students with behavior strategies. Teachers 1, 2, and 4 concur that social worker involvement would help to facilitate Black males' ability to respond appropriately in the high school setting. However, there is a convoluted process of how students are referred to or receive social work services. Teacher 2 pointed

out, "Our leadership team needs to make sure they are involved in those conversations. When students are getting into trouble, and they see it's a social or emotional response, they should involve the social workers." As mentioned, students receiving special education services can receive assistance through the behavior specialist. Social worker 1 reported that if a child needed assistance the "administrator would make a referral to the department of exceptional services. However, Teachers 1, 2,3, and 4 expressed mixed processes of how students receive support from the social worker. Teachers 1 and 2 specify that administrators make referrals to the social worker. Teacher 4 conveys that the counselor refers students to the social worker because they are "the front line." However, students may have several problems "before an issue is highlighted."

The second research question for this generic qualitative study focused on "How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe the PBIS framework's influence on student behavior?" The themes generated from this research question include concepts of PBIS, which details the participants' views of PBIS, and barriers to PBIS which included the sub-themes of: (a) buy-in, stakeholders' acceptance of PBIS, (b) time, how much time the model takes to implement, (c) social and emotional needs of students, emotional and home environment problems students come to (d) testing and academics, providing quality instruction.

Theme 4: Concept of PBIS

I generated the fourth theme to ascertain the participants' understanding of the PBIS framework. The PBIS framework is centered on providing students rewards for demonstrating positive behavior. These outcomes are student-focused on giving rewards

and incentives, motivation, and feedback to all. Teacher 1 stated, "The use of PBIS is two-fold. The PBIS framework gives students something to work towards while highlighting how we, as a school, focus on the positive behaviors of students." Teacher 2 communicated, "PBIS is a way of life." In addition, "the focus is on positive outcomes for students."

Moreover, Teacher 1 viewed a reward as "motivation." Teachers 3 and 2 communicate that the reward must be something the student views as valuable. "Teacher 1 stated students would be willing to work for a reward "if you can find the reward that the students really desire." Furthermore, PBIS requires feedback. Teacher 1 notes teachers and students must receive feedback on "what do you think you did, right" as well as "what do you think you need to improve on."

Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions are part of the context for PBIS. Tier 1 refers to what is needed for all students, whereas Tiers 2 and 3 refer to the students whose needs are slightly more significant in reading, mathematics, and behavior. Noteworthy is that three out of five participants agree that teachers were not doing tier 1 and tier 2 interventions at all or that the teachers were using the interventions with inconsistencies. Teacher 1 reflects on the low ratio of students in the alternative school setting being consistent for tier 1 and tier 2 interventions and counselors coming to the campus to provide tier 3 or one-on-one interventions. However, Teacher 1 acknowledges that "we are not doing (PBIS interventions) how it is described in the literature." Teacher 3 stated,

> I don’t see the impact. This may be because interventions are inconsistently implemented at my school throughout the school. The school may need to incorporate or hire an interventionist to facilitate this process.

Theme 5: Barriers to PBIS

As mentioned above, the participants acknowledged that with the consistent implementation of PBIS, the framework could effectively decrease the exclusionary discipline of Black males in the high school setting. This theme emerged to understand the participants' perspective on the difficulties in implementing the PBIS framework in the high school setting. The participants' perspectives included testing and academics, social-emotional needs, buy-in, culture, and time.

Subtheme 1: Buy-In

Both teachers and students must buy-in (compliance) with the PBIS framework. Teacher 1 stated, "If the complete buy-in is lacking, what happens in my classroom will not benefit the entire school." Teacher 3 reflected on a teacher who teaches upper-level courses and does not buy into certain rewards such as "missed class time." Additionally, Teacher 3 stated, "Although he follows through with it, he does not buy into the whole PBIS, but he does comply with the rules and procedures around PBIS." Teachers 1 and 3 reflect on student buy-in. Teacher 1 indicates that the teachers must promptly provide the students with rewards after the student has demonstrated the appropriate behavior. Consistent with Teacher 1, Teacher 3 referenced a lack of student buy-in, saying, "It takes too long for them to receive a benefit. Social worker 1 indicated,

> I think the first thing needed is to get all stakeholders to buy-in and actively participate. Resources must be set aside upfront to ensure everyone's follow through. If students know what to expect upfront, that may increase their buy-in.

Subtheme 2: Time

The participants express time as a barrier to the effectiveness of PBIS. According to Teacher 1, "The biggest part is you must set aside time to implement PBIS with fidelity." Consistent with Teacher 1, Teacher 3 refers to teachers not having time to implement PBIS due to class size. Teacher 3 said, "So, I find that teachers who are overloaded don't engage, and this rubs off on students." Social worker 1 also reflects on time as a barrier but recognizes that PBIS is an effective intervention. Therefore, teachers should allocate time to implement PBIS with fidelity. Social worker 1 stated,

> Time is a thing. You do have to set aside the time to have your meetings to do what needs to be done to set up PBIS implementation. Time does play a role in things, as it is a limited resource. Though there is a lot going on, I think PBIS is just as important as everything else because, if done correctly, it can positively impact the school and the community. Everyone can flourish by focusing on the positive behaviors of students.

Subtheme 3: Social and Emotional

The participants convey that the emotional and home environment problems students come to school with are a barrier to PBIS implementation. Moreover, they need social workers to intervene and provide interventions. Teacher 1 stated "that until students' problems are dealt with, PBIS will not be effective." Teacher 3 added that some

students "have habitual attendance issues" related to "culture." Meanwhile, Social Worker 1 and Teacher 4 communicate profound perspectives on students' social and emotional needs. Social Worker 1 articulated, “There is a myriad of barriers associated with PBIS. There are some educators who lack understanding of what the whole child encompasses and how that impacts their cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral development.”

Teacher 4 said,

> I think that we are faced with so many more challenges now than ever before. It is getting more difficult to help students navigate and grow. And as teachers, we try to teach them the correct way to navigate through life. I think the social worker is important because many of our children come to school angry about something. Sometimes, they (children) become delusional about some things. Additionally, some of our children are raising themselves. They don't understand their role when it comes to school life; they're confused when they come from a home life where they have to defend themselves, and then come to school and try to behave like a child and not as an adult.

Subtheme 4: Testing and Academics

Testing and academics emerged as a theme because high school teachers focus on graduation requirements. Therefore, don't have the time to implement the rewards and activities component of PBIS. Teacher 4 iterated, "We have such a strict curriculum that we have to follow." Consistent with Teacher 4, Teacher 3 stated, "Some teachers feel that PBIS pulls students away from learning. Learning is more important than celebrating the

positive behaviors of students.” Teacher 2 stated, "Students need certain grades to be eligible to graduate." "So, focusing on the aspects of PBIS is not a primary focus of theirs.".

The third research question from this generic qualitative study inquired, “How do social workers and high school teachers in various counties in Southern Mississippi describe social workers’ roles in the implementation of PBIS with male Black students?” I generated one theme for the question: social workers’ involvement in PBIS - describes what responsibilities social workers have with PBIS.

Theme 6: Social Worker Involvement with PBIS

This theme was developed to understand social workers' impact on implementing PBIS. I interpreted their perspective of social workers' impact on PBIS by describing how they observe social workers' involvement with PBIS. From the participants' perspective, social workers have not significantly influenced the PBIS framework. Teacher 4 conveyed, "We don't have as many social workers on the PBIS committee." Teacher 1 communicated that social workers have had “some impact” and would like to have social workers as consultants or coaches to assist in PBIS training.” However, Teacher 3 and Social Worker 1 do not perceive the social worker as impacting PBIS. Teacher 3 stated, "I hate to say this, but I don't know that the social worker knows a lot about PBIS. Additionally, I don't think she plays a large part in our implementation of PBIS." Social Worker 1 reflected on when the PBIS framework was introduced, stating,

> When PBIS first started in our district, our role was to serve as coaches or specialists. These titles were used to describe the duties and responsibilities linked

to developing a PBIS action plan. This plan was done to guide the implementation of the program, not the people. That was our role initially. I really have no role at this point regarding the implementation of PBIS. Unfortunately, it is almost nonexistent and inconsistent throughout our district.

Summary

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the social worker's role in the implementation of PBIS and exclusionary discipline of Black high school male students, as well as the PBIS influence on Black male exclusion rate. Overall, findings suggested that social workers have little to no involvement with the exclusionary discipline of Black male students in the high school setting. Social workers' direct roles are as behavior specialists and mental health counselors. However, the social workers' involvement with students is impeded by who is supposed to refer the student to social work services. Clarity around expectations regarding the referral process and what all fall under the social worker's umbrella are still needed.

In reference to PBIS, social workers are not involved in implementing the framework. Moreover, PBIS has not had a substantial influence on the Black male exclusionary discipline rate. However, if the administrators and faculty implemented the PBIS model with fidelity, it could have an impact on improving student behavior and the climate of the campus. Finally, interventions to improve Black male students' social and emotional needs are needed to improve student behavior. This final section bridges the findings from section 3 to social work practice in the educational setting. Section 4 consists of the introduction, application for professional ethics in social work practice,

recommendation for social work practice, implications for social change, and the summary.

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

Introduction

This generic qualitative study aimed to understand teachers' and social workers' perspectives of the roles social workers have in implementing PBIS and their impact on the exclusion of Black male students from the high school setting. In addition, this study aimed to understand the influence PBIS has on excluding Black males from the high school setting. Due to zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, racial and cultural bias, and lack of social and emotional interventions, Black male students are pushed out and excluded from the high school environment. This generic qualitative study aimed to understand teachers' and social workers' perspectives of the roles social workers have in implementing PBIS and their impact on the exclusion of Black male students from the high school setting. In addition, this study aimed to understand the influence PBIS has on excluding Black males from the high school setting. Due to zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, racial and cultural bias, and lack of social and emotional interventions, Black male students are pushed out and excluded from the high school environment (Anzalone, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2015; Teasley et al., 2017). This study used a descriptive qualitative design, thus allowing me to understand teachers’ and social workers’ perspectives on the impact of PBIS implementation in their current practice and school campus. In Section 4, I discuss the application of the findings in relation to the NASW Code of Ethics, social work practice, recommendation for additional research, and implication for social change. The OST, as described in Section 1, was utilized as the base theoretical framework to illustrate the application of both the individual (micro) and

organization (macro) to conceptualize the behaviors of the organization to promote change (Kretchmar, 2019).

Additionally, this qualitative generic study is significant as it has the potential to influence the roles social workers can play in student support, administration, and policymaking, thereby impacting the exclusionary discipline of Black males in high school settings. Overall, findings suggested that social workers do not have substantial involvement with the exclusionary discipline of Black male students in the high school setting. Social workers' direct roles are as behavior specialists and mental health counselors. However, the social workers' involvement with students is impeded by who is supposed to refer the student to obtain social work services. Clarity around expectations regarding the referral process and what all fall under the social worker's umbrella are still needed.

Regarding PBIS, social workers are not involved in implementing the framework. Moreover, PBIS has had minimal influence on the Black male exclusionary discipline rate. However, if the high school faculty implemented the PBIS model with fidelity, it could significantly improve student behavior. Finally, interventions to improve Black male students' social and emotional needs are needed to facilitate positive academic outcomes and provide skills to empower Black males to become productive members of society.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

The NASW Code of Ethics provides social workers with seven principles to guide their social work practice. Social workers are responsible for increasing their knowledge

and skills to expand their efficiency in providing services. This increase in knowledge is achieved by continuous education, professional development, and research. Social workers work in host settings, agencies in which social workers are guests and are employed to provide support services (Teasley, 2018). Moreover, social workers are challenged with adhering to the NASW S Code of Ethics and the host agency's policies.

As social workers strive to advocate for social justice and social change within host settings, a conflict of interest can arise between the NASW Code of Ethics and the agency's policies. NASW Code of Ethics Standard 3.09 directs social workers to follow the host agency's policies until situations conflict with the NASW Code of Ethics (Murray, 2021). As school social workers advocate for social change regarding the exclusion of Black males in high school settings, they must educate administrators and stakeholders on the social work code of ethics to mitigate ethical conflicts (Murray, 2021). The cohesion of the school social workers and stakeholders is imperative for impacting the experience of Black males in high school settings and promoting social change.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

The impact exclusionary discipline has on Black males also has a direct effect on society. Social workers are involved in intervening on the micro, mezzo, and macro level. These interventions include direct practice with students, educating school facilities, and engaging the community. This generic qualitative study aimed to explore teachers' and social workers' perspectives of social workers' role in PBIS and the exclusion of Black males. Moreover, the findings of this research provided me, as an advanced practitioner,

with evidence-based research to promote social change. This social change would include lobbying mezzo and macro systems for additional employment and involvement of social workers in the high school setting.

Furthermore, the findings of this generic qualitative study are applicable and transferable to the broader field of social work practice and social change. Social workers in any field, including clinical social work practice, should adhere to and follow the NASW Code of Ethics and Competencies. Most importantly, any field of social work practice should incorporate evidence-based research to implement best practices and interventions. The research findings will be disseminated by providing this research study to stakeholders via a report. Additionally, this study will be published in the ProQuest database for access to the academic community. This study indicated recommendations for practice in several areas.

Implications for Further Research

The replication of this generic qualitative study could be beneficial in several aspects. Primarily, this study could provide additional knowledge for social work practice by studying students from elementary education and secondary (middle school and high school) education. Statistics from the OCR (2021) illustrate a trend where Black male students are receiving exclusionary discipline as early as kindergarten. Furthermore, extending the research to the elementary level would also increase the participant pool, as demographics from several potential participants indicated that they only worked with elementary students. Therefore, including participants from all educational grade bands (i.e., K-5, 6-8, 9-12) would allow for an increased number of social work participants,

thus increasing data on social workers' impact on excluding Black male students in the high school setting. Continued research with participants in regular education can potentially increase social work competencies with PBIS fidelity and Black males.

Implications for Social Change

The avenues for individuals to have the capacity to be productive members of society purport the goals of social change. Social justice is a core principle of the NASW Code of Ethics. The NASW Code of Ethics also encourages social workers to be catalysts for social change. Social workers must apply all the standards in practice, particularly competence and providing service to facilitate social change. They must also have an essential role in educational settings. Social workers' roles in educational settings and social change align with the OST. Within OST, schools are viewed as systems because they use inputs such as teachers, social workers, and feedback from outputs or the community as change agents to achieve shared goals (Lunenburg, 2010). Moreover, the concept of schools as a system is consistent with the role of school social work as both entities engage with the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of society's socioeconomic and political entities (Lunenburg, 2010).

At the micro level, social workers in educational settings utilize knowledge and data to engage with students and families to improve student outcomes. The data on how to meet the needs of students on a micro level are generated by providing needs assessments (Illinois State Board of Education & Illinois Association of School Social Workers, 2020). Social workers must be visible and able to provide social work services to students receiving special and regular education services. Social workers provide direct

services to assist students and families in identifying needs and achieving positive outcomes. The research participants noted that students bring several barriers related to socio-emotional development, communication problems, and physiological needs to school.

Students may demonstrate disruptive behaviors if their physiological needs, such as food, housing, and clothing, are not being met (Burleson & Thoron, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary for social workers to be directly involved in developing student intervention plans. Moreover, social workers should utilize their practice skills to provide support and counseling services to meet the psychological needs of students. School social workers also refer students and families to appropriate community resources to assist with nutrients, shelter, and other community resources (Illinois State Board of Education & Illinois Association of School Social Workers, 2020).

Mezzo level practice at the school district and school site address the need to change disciplinary policies and implement research-based strategies to impact disproportional racial suspension and improve the school climate. Educational mezzo level social work interventions apply knowledge and data from research as feedback to promote change at the school site, district, and community levels. The call for social change can be evidenced by the research participants' perspectives and the literature on the impact of exclusionary discipline. Secondly, the lack of available social workers for this research study at the high school level illustrated the need for additional social workers in the high school setting coupled with expanding the study. Moreover, social workers can advocate to the school district to increase the number of social work staff

members and develop a social work referral process. Social workers also need to educate the community stakeholders on the impact of the exclusion of Black males and how interventions are needed to facilitate Black male students' ability to function productively in society.

Educational macro social work practice interventions indirectly facilitate social change by advocating the strengthening of both micro and macro social work practice (McBeath, 2016). Additionally, macro level practice aids in the continued awareness of social problems to entities that can facilitate change on a larger level. According to McBeath (2016), macro-level social work practice collaborates with various organizations, engages larger institutions to advocate for policies, solicits funding for organizational change and research, and works within influencing organizations. Therefore, social workers in educational settings should advocate for national awareness of the implications of the exclusionary discipline of Black male high school students. Furthermore, educational social workers, at the macro level, should engage state and federal education organizations for policies to require school districts to employ social workers and design how they should be utilized per student ratio. Finally, macro-level social work interventions should advocate for funding from the state and federal government to assist school districts in positively impacting the lives of Black males.

Summary

The exclusionary discipline of Black males has been researched extensively (Harper et al., 2019). The impact of PBIS on improving the school climate has also been documented; however, the phenomenon of exclusionary discipline of Black males

persists in those school systems that utilize PBIS (Baule, 2020). Additionally, there needs to be more literature on the roles social workers have in the implementation of PBIS and their impact on the exclusion of Black males. Four teachers and one social worker expressed their perspectives on the slight impact social workers have on the exclusion of Black male high school students and PBIS. Primarily, social workers' direct roles are inclusive of behavior specialists and mental health counselors. The social worker participant for the generic qualitative study noted that the title of school social worker changed to a behavior specialist in the office of exceptional services. Therefore, having no involvement with regular education students and having no involvement with disciplinary infractions at the school site is not beneficial. Furthermore, social workers are not involved with the direct implementation of PBIS. Moreover, if PBIS was used with fidelity within the high school setting, it could mitigate the rates at which Black males are excluded from high school.

This generic qualitative study utilized a semi structured interview protocol to explore teachers' and social workers' perceptions of social workers' impact on PBIS and the exclusion of Black males from the high school setting. The participants gave meaningful perspectives that I categorized into six themes: (a) suspension of Black males, (b) support services, (c) social workers have had some involvement with Black male high school students, (d) concepts of PBIS, (e) barriers to PBIS, (f) social worker involvement with PBIS. The findings of this study can heighten social work practice by providing evidence-based research strategies to guide and advance school social work practice. More profoundly, the findings of this study can provide research to inform

policymakers and school districts of the positive impact social workers can have on the exclusion of Black male high school students, thus facilitating Black male students' ability to function.

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Appendix A: Background Survey

1. What was your major during your undergraduate studies?
    a. Education
    b. Social Work
    c. Other

2. How long have you been in the field of education?
    a. 0-3 years
    b. 4-7 years
    c. 8-11 years
    d. 12+ years

3. What is your current title?
    a. Teacher
    b. Social Worker

4. How long have you been at your current school?
    a. 0-3 years
    b. 4-7 years
    c. 8-11 years
    d. 12+ years

5. Which definition mostly aligns with your understanding of exclusionary discipline?
    a. Any **disciplinary** practice that isolates students. from their classroom environment, includes in-school suspension, out- of-school suspension, and expulsion.
    b. removal from any usual learning environment. In many cases, exclusionary discipline is the result of developmentally typical behavior, such as restlessness, that is deemed inappropriate by subjective judgement.
    c. taking students out of the classroom and denying them access to instruction and school-based supports and services.

6. What is your highest level of education completed?
    a. Baccalaureate
    b. Masters
    c. Specialist
    d. Doctorate

Appendix B: Social Worker Interview Protocol

Social Worker Interview Questionnaire

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Research indicates that Black males receive out-of-school suspensions and expulsions at a higher rate than Black males. However, PBIS has been researched as an effective strategy for impacting exclusion. I am interviewing you to understand overall, your perspective of the impact of PBIS with Black males in the high school setting.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Therefore, your participation or decision not to participate will not have any effect on your role as a social worker in the school system. I know that you initially completed a consent form. However, I want to take this time to inform you of your rights. This interview will be recorded via zoom. But the recording and any information related to your identity included in the report will be kept confidential and your identity will not be shared with anyone. You have the right not to answer any questions and stop the interview for any reason. Do you have any questions? This interview should take about 30 minutes. Is it ok for me to start the zoom meeting?

1. What does your practice look like daily?
2. What is your perspective of how the school uses your skills?
3. What roles have school administrators allowed you to have in discipline policies and procedures at the district level?
4. What role if any, did you have with discipline and Black males at the school site level?

5. What barriers if any have you encountered working with school administrators in discipline with Black male students?
6. What involvement, if any, have you had with working with PBIS?
7. What barriers, if any, have you had while working with PBIS interventions?
8. How are students referred to the school social worker for social work services?
9. From your perspective, what impact has the social work role had on Black males being suspended or expelled from high school?
10. Overall, what is your perspective of the impact of PBIS with Black males in the high school setting?

Thank you for participating in the interview. I appreciate you volunteering your time and sharing your experiences, beliefs, and perspectives.

Appendix C: Teacher Interview Protocol

Teacher Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Research indicates that Black males receive out-of-school suspensions and expulsions at a higher rate than White males. However, PBIS has been researched as an effective strategy for impacting exclusion. I am interviewing you to understand overall, your understanding of social workers' role regarding their impact of PBIS with Black males in the high school setting. Participation in this research study is voluntary. Therefore, your participation or decision not to participate will not have any effect on your role as a teacher in the school system. I know that you initially completed a consent form. However, I want to take this time to inform you of your rights. This interview will be recorded via zoom. But the recording and any information related to your identity included in the report will be kept confidential and your identity will not be shared with anyone. You have the right not to answer any questions and stop the interview for any reason. Do you have any questions? This interview should take about 30 minutes. Is it ok for me to start the zoom meeting?

Questions

1. How do you view the role of social workers on a high school campus?
2. What type of work do you observe social workers perform on the high school campus?
3. What is your perspective of the implementation of PBIS on your school's campus?

4. What do you view as a barrier to implementation of PBIS, with fidelity, on the high school campus you work?
5. What impact do you believe PBIS has had on Black males being suspended or expelled from high school?
6. Are Tier 2 and 3 PBIS interventions being implemented with fidelity with Black male students on the high school campus? How do you know?
7. How do you feel the social work role has impacted PBIS implementation with Black males?
8. What is your perspective of the impact of PBIS with Black males in the high school setting?
9. What if any, is the correlation, between exclusionary discipline and the social worker's role?
10. Is there any additional information you would like to share regarding exclusionary discipline and Black males?

Thank you for your time and the information that you provided.