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# **Perspectives of Administrators on Practices Leading to Discipline Disproportionality Among African American Students with Disabilities**

Delicia Goodman-Lee  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Delicia Goodman-Lee

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

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Walden University

2024

Abstract

Perspectives of Administrators on Practices Leading to Discipline Disproportionality

Among African American Students with Disabilities

by

Delicia Goodman-Lee

MSW, Clark Atlanta University, 1996

BS, Clark Atlanta University, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2024

## Abstract

Discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities is well documented in empirical research; however, there are limited studies about school administrators' perspectives on practices leading to disproportionality for this population. The purpose of this study was to examine school administrators' perspectives on practices and issues leading to discipline disproportionality in a large southeastern U.S. state. Social justice leadership, coupled with disability studies and critical race theory, served as the conceptual framework. A basic qualitative design with open coding and thematic analysis was used to answer the three research questions. Data were collected via virtual semistructured interviews with six administrators who work in a school district with or without discipline disproportionality. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The following themes emerged: (a) absence of mechanisms for building relationships with students and parents; (b) lack of cultural understanding and knowledge of different ethnicities and backgrounds; (c) the need for training for administrators, teachers, and school staff; (d) inconsistent implementation of individualized education programs and behavior plans; (e) limited proactive student support to address students' social and emotional needs; (f) exclusionary practices; (g) restorative practices as an alternative to suspension; (h) the need for disciplinary consequences that are equitable and individualized; and (i) the ineffectiveness of zero-tolerance policies for some students with disabilities. This study may promote positive social change by offering school district leaders strategies for increasing equity in discipline practices through alternatives to suspension and the development of policies and procedures to lessen the discipline gap among African American students with disabilities.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to my sons, Theodore Lee, III, Tariq Lee, Tai Lee, Toure' Lee, and T'ien Lee. I also dedicate this work to my mother Carolyn Goodman, my father Floyd Goodman, my brother Kennan Goodman, my cousin MaKeisha Adams, and my husband Theodore Lee, Jr. Your endless support, ongoing encouragement, sincere understanding, empathic listening, and extra push in support of my doctoral studies and research are invaluable. I love you all dearly.

Thank you to all of my relatives and extended family for your boundless enthusiasm and thoughtful affirmations. I could not have made it through this journey without you!

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Thank you to my parents, Floyd and Carolyn Goodman. Your support has been a blessing in my life, giving me the strength and courage to pursue my dreams and be the best version of myself that I can be. Thank you for being such amazing parents and loving me unconditionally. To my brother, Kennan Goodman, thank you for always having my back and supporting me through all the many moments of my life. I also want to thank my husband, Theodore Lee, Jr., for pushing me to learn and grow.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Disparities in the administration of discipline for racial/ethnic minority students and students with disabilities have generated concern among U.S. school district leaders, state departments of education, and government officials, who have designated the reduction of such disparities a top priority in education (Green et al., 2018; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Several studies have suggested that African American students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined compared to their peers (Gullo & Beachum, 2020a). Although administrators have used exclusionary practices such as suspension to discipline public school students for over 40 years, a significant body of research indicates that school administrators disproportionately use suspensions to discipline special education students who are African American (Cruz et al., 2021; Scott & McIntosh, 2022). According to Marcucci (2020), African American students are more likely to receive disciplinary consequences than students of other races.

School administrators continue to hold the responsibility and power of dealing with conflict and leading practices, procedures, and policies when making decisions about exclusionary discipline practices (Feirsen & Weitzman, 2021; Katz-Amey, 2019). A substantial body of research indicates disproportionality in the disciplining of African American students with disabilities (Cruz et al., 2021; Laco, & Manley, 2019; Welsh & Little, 2018; Zakszeski et al., 2021). However, there remains a gap in the research regarding school administrators' perspectives on the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality (Brown et al., 2019; Camacho & Krezmien, 2019; Katz-Amey, 2019).

Several empirical studies have indicated that discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities is prevalent in a large southeastern U.S. state (Steed & Weingarten, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020a; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Bleakley and Bleakley (2018) suggested that school disciplinary procedures of harsh consequences for minor behavior infractions, administrative disciplinary practices such as suspension, and zero-tolerance policies with automatic penalties of criminalization perpetuate discipline disproportionality.

Other research studies have suggested that implicit biases (intended or unintended), discrimination, and unequal practices contribute to discipline disproportionality (McIntosh et al., 2018; National Association of School Psychologists, 2018). Green et al. (2018) suggested that equity and social justice must become a top priority in U.S. schools to help mitigate discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities.

In this study, I examined school administrators' perspectives to help identify practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities in a state located in the Southeastern region of the United States. The findings from this study may inform education leaders of systemic issues that impact discipline disproportionality and areas needed for improvement. This study has the potential to foster positive social change by offering school district leaders strategies for increasing equity in disciplinary practices, alternatives to exclusionary discipline, positive approaches toward behavior concerns, and the development of policies and procedures.

The implementation of these strategies may help to lessen the discipline gap among African American students with disabilities.

In this chapter, I describe the topic of the study and identify the gap in research and the need for further investigation. The sections of this chapter include an overview of the background literature, the research problem and the purpose of the study, and the research questions (RQs). Chapter 1 also contains an introduction to the conceptual framework of the study and a discussion of how the framework relates to the study's approach. In the latter portion of Chapter 1, I discuss the nature of the study; define key terms; and discuss the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. I conclude the chapter with a summary of the main points.

### **Background**

The phenomena of discipline disproportionality have affected African American students and students with disabilities for several years. In a study conducted by the Government Accountability Office, researchers found disparities in the disciplining of minority students with disabilities compared to their White and Asian peers (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Similarly, McIntosh et al. (2018) reported that data disaggregated by race and disability status indicated that African American students with disabilities receive more exclusionary discipline consequences than White students with disabilities. Moreover, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2018) findings indicated that African American students with disabilities received exclusionary discipline consequences at significantly higher rates than their disabled and non-disabled peers.



A study conducted by Lacoë and Manley (2019) revealed that suspension rates for Black students and students with disabilities were twice those for other students when accounting for similar disciplinary infractions. Comparably, according to the Civil Rights Data Collection survey, African American students with disabilities represented 2.3% of the U.S. student population in 2017-2018, but received 6.2% of in-school suspensions and 8.8% of out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Furthermore, African American students with disabilities receive exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, and referrals to law enforcement) at more than twice the rate of their nondisabled and disabled peers nationwide and for the state in this study (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020c, 2020d, 2021). Although discipline disparities among African American students with disabilities are well documented, few qualitative researchers have examined the perspectives of school administrators regarding the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality.

Camacho and Krezmien (2019) conducted a multilevel investigation of disproportionate suspension rates using discipline data from middle and high schools. The results showed that several school-level factors were associated with an increased risk of suspensions for minority students with a disability. On the other hand, in a study conducted by Whitford and Emerson (2019), findings indicated that a statistically significant effect of implicit bias toward Black individuals explains the ongoing issues of disproportionality in disciplining students with disabilities of color. According to Feirsen and Weitzman (2021), school administrators must be prepared to confront issues related

to implicit bias, critical race theory, social justice, and inequality when making decisions about disciplinary practices. According to Girvan et al. (2019), discipline disproportionality is a persistent problem that requires the work of administrators, teachers, and policymakers to evaluate the root causes and eliminate disproportionality. Further, Gullo and Beachum (2020b) suggested that school administrators' disciplinary practices may be influenced by implicit biases; however, they also noted limited research on administrators' discipline practices.

Throughout the past 4 decades, discipline disproportionality has been addressed through policies created to protect the rights of students with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education. In the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), addressing racial and ethnic disparities in discipline was designated a top priority by Congress (Wrightslaw, 2018). The reauthorization of IDEA mandated states to examine school data to help identify significant disproportionality in the disciplining of students with disabilities based on race and ethnicity (Lacoe, & Manley, 2019; Wrightslaw, 2018). In 2015, the National Council on Disability and the My Brother's Keeper Task Force collaboratively issued a Dear Colleague Letter to address discipline disparities. Furthermore, they developed a guidance package of resources for schools and districts regarding their responsibility to ensure equal discipline practices for all students under civil rights laws (National Council on Disability, 2015).

On January 18, 2017, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services released final regulations regarding IDEA and

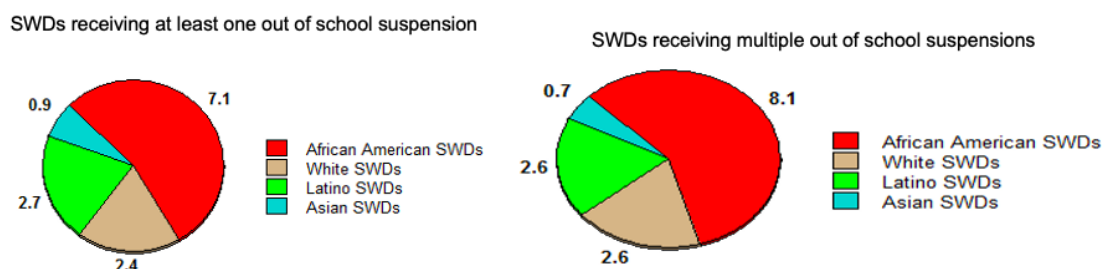
disproportionality (i.e., measurement; reporting; and comprehensive, coordinated early intervening services) as guidance for addressing this problem (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020; see also U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2016). The United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019) found that African American students with disabilities were disciplined at disproportionate rates compared to their peers. Moreover, it recommended additional funding from Congress and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. Despite allocations for government resources, funding from Congress, and statutes to address discipline disparities in the nation, discipline disproportionality continues for African American students with disabilities (Martinez, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

Discipline disproportionality is a moral and ethical concern that has been highlighted and designated a top priority several times by the U.S. Department of Education (Green et al., 2018). Although discipline disproportionality has been a well-known problem for over a decade, research literature indicates a need for more clarity and understanding of the issues and practices that contribute to this phenomenon (Bryant & Wilson, 2020). Understanding the practices that school administrators use and the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities is at the forefront of discussion among many school districts across the United States (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020). Several research studies have suggested that there is an existing gap in the literature regarding school administrators' perspectives on the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality among African American students with

disabilities (Brown et al., 2019; Camacho & Krezmien, 2019). Moreover, recent studies have reported that African American students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined in a large southeastern state (Steed & Weingarten, 2019; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Therefore, in this study, I examined school administrators' perspectives on the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities in a large southeastern state where administrators' perspectives are underresearched.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2021), African American students with disabilities are suspended nationally at more than twice the rate of their peers. Statistics from the most recent Civil Rights Data Collection report released in October 2020 indicated that African American students with disabilities in a southeastern state are assigned out-of-school suspensions at a higher percentage rate than students with disabilities of other races or ethnicities (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020c, 2020d). Furthermore, discipline data for the southeastern state in this study indicated that behavior infractions, discipline consequences, and discipline disproportionality occur at all school levels (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2020). Figure 1 shows the disparity in discipline data for out-of-school suspensions for the state in this study.

**Figure 1***Discipline Rates for Students With Disabilities in the Target State*

*Note.* SWDs = students with disabilities. The data in the figure are from the U.S.

Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2020c, 2020d).

Research conducted by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019), shows that school-level factors, such as a principal's perspective on discipline, can significantly affect disparities in out-of-school suspension rates for students of color with disabilities. Likewise, Camacho and Krezmien (2019) noted that several school-level issues may be associated with an increased risk of suspension for minority students with a disability. Similarly, Bottiani et al. (2018) suggested that discipline disproportionality may stem from issues such as administrator or teacher bias, zero-tolerance policies, cultural insensitivity, or the need for staff training. For the state in this study, there is a gap in the research regarding school administrators' perspectives about the issues that perpetuate exclusionary discipline practices among African American students with disabilities.

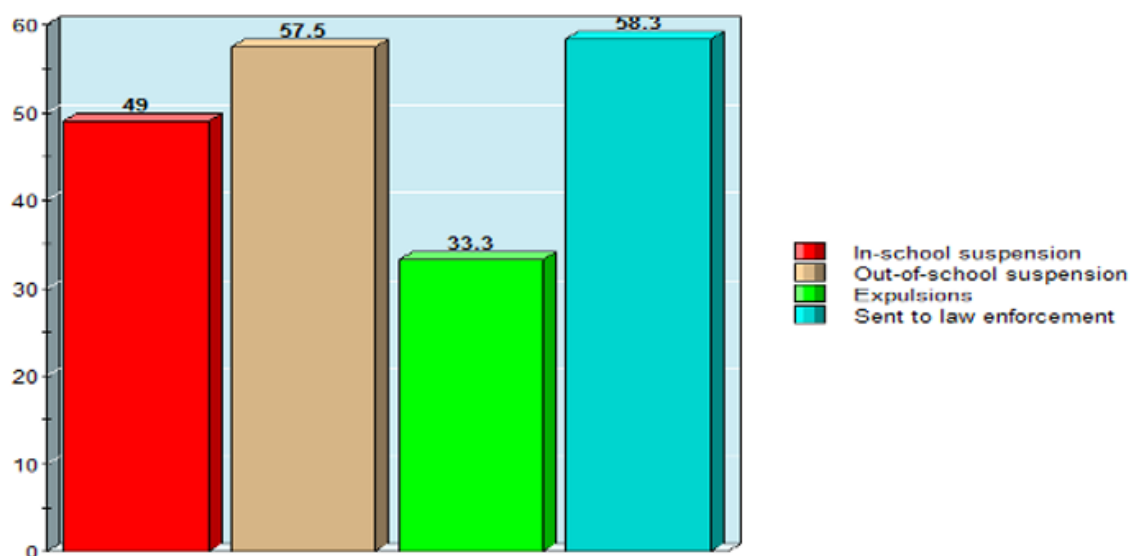
For this study, I explored the perspectives of school administrators in two school districts (referred to as “District 1” and “District 2”) that demonstrated a significant discrepancy in discipline data based on the 2018–2019 annual summary report for the state in this study, which had over 100 school districts at the time of this study. The two school districts selected for this study demonstrated a significant discrepancy in the rate of suspensions greater than 10 days in a given school year for special education students or students with individualized education plans (IEPs) based on the 2018–2019 annual summary report. These two school districts also demonstrated a significant discrepancy by race or ethnicity in its rate of suspensions greater than 10 days for special education students with IEPs. The 2018–2019 annual summary report also noted noncompliant policies, procedures, or practices. Additionally, to promote transferability and compare similarities and differences, I also explored the perspectives of school administrators working in school districts in a large southeastern U.S. state that did not demonstrate discipline disproportionality based on the 2018–2019 annual summary report.

According to the discipline report released in October of 2020 from the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2020a), students with disabilities in District 1 made up roughly 13% of students in the district and accounted for 20% of in-school suspensions, 26% of out-of-school suspensions, and 33% of expulsions. Of the students with disabilities in District 1, African American students with disabilities accounted for approximately 49% of in-school suspensions, 57% of out-of-school suspensions, and 33% of expulsions (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020a). Additionally, of the students referred to law enforcement, 58% were

African American students with a disability (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020a). Figure 2 shows discipline data for students with disabilities in District 1.

### Figure 2

*Discipline Data for African American Students With Disabilities in District 1*



*Note.* SWDs constituted approximately 13% of the student population in the district.

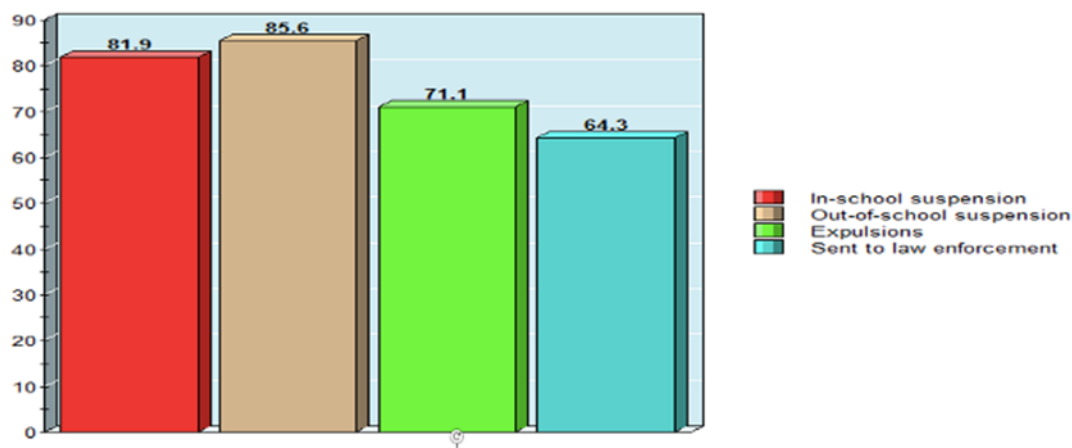
SWD = students with disabilities. The data in the figure are from the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2020a, 2020b).

Furthermore, in District 2, the discipline report released in October 2020 from the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2020b), Students with disabilities made up roughly 12% of the student population of all students in the district and accounted for 14% of in-school suspensions, 16% of out-of-school suspensions, and 25%

of expulsions (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020b.). Of the students with disabilities in District 2, African American students with disabilities accounted for roughly 81% of the in-school suspensions, 85% of out-of-school suspensions, and 77% of expulsions (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020b.). Of the students referred to law enforcement, 64% were African American students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020b). Figure 3 shows discipline data for students with disabilities in District 2.

### Figure 3

*Discipline Data for African American Students With Disabilities in District 2*



*Note.* SWDs constituted approximately 12% of the student population in the district.

SWD SWDs = students with disabilities. The data in the figure are from the U.S.

Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2020a, 2020b).

The disparity in disciplinary practices among African American students with disabilities appears to have created discipline discrepancies that warrant a closer look at



school administrators' perceptions on the issues that perpetuate exclusionary discipline practices for this marginalized student group (Bottiani et al., 2018). A qualitative study with in-depth interviews may clarify school administrators' perspectives on the issues that perpetuate exclusionary discipline practices. Such research may lead to a better understanding of gaps in research and professional knowledge about discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine school administrators' perspectives on the discipline practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities in a large southeastern U.S. state. For this study, I sought to gain insight into the issues that influence administrators' disciplinary practices and why discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities persists. Principals and assistant principals are the school administrators responsible for making decisions about disciplinary practices, and these are the individuals who assign exclusionary discipline consequences (Gullo & Beachum, 2020a). Therefore, I explored the perspectives held by principals and assistant principals about disciplinary practices to acquire a better understanding of the issues that might propagate instances of exclusionary discipline practices for African American students with disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

For this qualitative study, I examined school administrators' perspectives on the issues that perpetuate exclusionary discipline practices among African American students

with disabilities in a large southeastern U.S. state. I conducted interviews to gather data.

The RQs that underpinned this study were

RQ1: What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives regarding the issues that influence discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities?

RQ2: What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives about using exclusionary practices to discipline students?

RQ3: What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives about using equal practices for all students when making decisions about disciplinary consequences?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theory of social justice leadership contributed to the framework for this study. Social justice leadership practices involve identifying and remedying oppressive and unjust practices and replacing them with practices that are more equitable and culturally appropriate (Theoharis, 2007). According to Furman (2012), the concept of social justice encompasses a variety of meanings. Theoharis (2007, p. 223) asserted that social justice is supportive of processes that are focused on “respect, care, recognition, and empathy”. Goldfarb and Grinberg (2007) described the concept of social justice as an opportunity to influence organizational change that promotes and sustains fairness, equality, and equity in education. Similarly, DeMatthews et al. (2017) posited that social justice leadership theory focuses on equal practices and justice for marginalized groups such as students of color and students with disabilities. Accordingly, DeMatthews et al. (2017) suggested that while the disposition of school principals on race and discipline is not fully known,

the underpinnings of social justice leadership may strengthen the understanding of how principals deal with the issue of discipline gaps for marginalized students. With these thoughts in mind, the framework of social justice leadership was used to inform this study. Moreover, the framework of social justice leadership was relevant to the qualitative nature of this study and the key RQs regarding administrators' perspectives on the practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for the student group in this study.

Exploring discipline disparities from disability studies and critical race theory (DisCrit) framework was also relevant to examining the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities who are African American (see Annamma et al., 2013). I used DisCrit as a secondary framework for examining the perspectives of principals about the issues leading to discipline disproportionality and the decisions they make about disciplinary practices. Rausch et al. (2019) posited that a DisCrit framework “can be used to understand how differences in power between administrators, teachers, schools and families can lead to exclusionary practices” (p. 42) for marginalized groups such as African American students with disabilities. By engaging with critical race theory viewed through the lens of DisCrit, I was able to bring to light some of the dilemmas administrators may face when making decisions about exclusionary discipline practices for marginalized student groups such as students with disabilities who are African American. This framework further informed the qualitative nature of this study and the key RQs regarding administrators' perspectives about the practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality.

### **Nature of the Study**

This was a basic qualitative study with in-depth, semistructured interviews. Qualitative methodology involves gathering information about the experiences, perceptions, or realities of study participants to better understand a given problem or phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, I explored school administrators' perspectives about the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities. Equally important, qualitative studies allow researchers to explore phenomena for which limited information is known (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For the southeastern U.S. state in this study, no prior investigation on disproportionality and administrators' perspectives about disciplinary practices has been performed, according to my review of the literature, which further presented an opportunity to utilize a qualitative methods approach.

For this qualitative study, I explored the perspectives of school administrators who currently work as a principal or an assistant principal in school districts located in a large southeastern U.S. state. I did so by conducting one-on-one, semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews allowed me to obtain detailed knowledge about administrators' perspectives on the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality based on the participants' lived experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this research study as this method of sampling allowed me to select participants with firsthand knowledge and experience with disciplinary practices.

## Definitions

This section includes an overview of relevant terms and phrases found throughout this study. The key terms are operationally defined to offer clarity and understanding of how they are used in this study (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

*Discipline disproportionality*: A phenomenon that occurs when students of one race/ethnicity group are subjected to high rates of office discipline referrals (ODRs) and exclusionary discipline practices compared to other student groups (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.).

*Disability studies and critical race theory (DisCrit)*: A theory that emerged through a collaborative paper that addressed inequities in education related to race, class, and ability (Annamma et al., 2018). DisCrit looks at how ideas and attitudes in society shape individual perspectives about race, class, disability, racism, and ableism (Annamma et al., 2018).

*Exclusionary discipline*: Discipline practices that involve removing a student from the school environment by way of suspension (Novak, 2021).

*Office discipline referrals (ODRs)*: Data forms used by schools to track and document disciplinary infractions or behavior issues (Sugai et al., 2000; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2020).

*Restorative practices*: An approach to managing student behavior in the school setting (Kehoe et al., 2018). According to Costello et al. (2019), activities of restorative practices in school may include conferences, circles, and mediation.

*School administrators:* A term that refers, within the public school setting, to principals and assistant principals (see Costello et al., 2019). The term *administrator* may also apply to district-level personnel and individuals in senior-level positions (Costello et al., 2019). For this study, the term *school administrator* refers to principals and assistant principals who work in an elementary, middle, or high school setting.

*Significant disproportionality:* A phenomenon that occurs in school districts when students from one particular racial group receive exclusionary discipline consequences that remove them from the school environment (suspension, expulsion) at very high rates compared to students of other racial/ethnic groups (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

*Social justice leadership:* Positive leadership practices aimed at affording equitable opportunities, just practices, and cultural inclusivity (Gullo & Beachum, 2020b).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that participants would voluntarily participate in this study with no expectation of compensation. I also assumed that the participants would understand the term “disproportionality” and the disciplinary consequences associated with removal from the school environment; such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and juvenile justice referral. Another assumption was that the participants would honestly answer questions regarding their experiences with disciplinary practices and their perspectives about assigning disciplinary consequences to African American students with disabilities.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The focus of this study was limited to the perspectives of two groups of school administrators who were employed as a principal or an assistant principal in a large southeastern state. Group 1 consisted of school administrators who worked in school districts that demonstrated discipline disproportionality. Group 2 consisted of school administrators who worked in school districts that did not show discipline disproportionality. This study included perspectives held by elementary, middle, and high school administrators because discipline data for the southeastern state in this study indicated that behavior infractions, discipline consequences, and discipline disproportionality occur at all school levels (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2020). However, for this study, I did not include perspectives of school administrators who work in a school district outside of the target state. The results of this study may not reflect the perspectives of school administrators who work in a school or district in other states or even within the entire state. However, the findings of this study may be transferable to any school district by offering insight into the issues and practices that may potentially affect instances of disproportionality among African American students with disabilities as well as other student groups.

### **Limitations**

This qualitative study is limited to the perspectives and ideas of principals and assistant principals who were employed in the target state at the time of the study. One limitation is that this study did not focus on the perceptions of school administrators in other school districts around the United States. Second, this study included a small

purposive sample of administrators from two school districts in a southeastern state and may not represent the perceptions of administrators throughout the two school districts or the entire state in this study. Finally, the results of this study are intended to provide insight into the perspectives of school administrators on the issues and practices that lead to discipline disproportionality in a southeastern state and cannot be used to generalize the perspectives of administrators in school districts across the nation. For this study, the following measures were implemented to address the identified limitations: (a) individuals were informed prior to consenting to participate that their name would not be listed in the final study, (b) participants were referred to using an alphanumeric identifier (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6), (c) participants were informed that their school district would not be named in the study and would be referred to as D1 and D2, and (d) member checking was conducted after each interview to answer any questions from the participants and to review participants' responses for accuracy.

### **Significance**

IDEA mandates that state officials collect and examine school data to identify discipline disparities based on race or ethnicity (Wrightslaw, 2018). Discipline data for the state in this study indicated disparities in exclusionary discipline practices for African American students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020c, 2020d). According to a study conducted by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019), African American students with disabilities received exclusionary discipline consequences disproportionately compared to other student groups. This data suggested that schools and districts may be applying disciplinary practices in unequal



ways that violate federal civil rights protections for this marginalized student group. For this study, I sought to provide a deeper understanding of the perceptions held by school administrators on the issues that may perpetuate instances of exclusionary discipline practices for African American students with disabilities in this southeastern U.S. state. Presently, principals' and assistant principals' perspectives about the factors that perpetuate exclusionary discipline practices among African American students with disabilities in this state are not yet known (Steed & Weingarten, 2019).

The findings of this study contribute to existing literature and help to further explain gaps in research regarding administrators' perceptions about utilizing exclusionary discipline practices to discipline African American students with disabilities. This exploration of school administrators' perspectives may inform school districts of the need for social justice leadership actions such as establishing an equity team, reevaluating practices, evidence-based decision making, and disaggregating discipline data (Green et al., 2018). These actions align with the tenets of social justice leadership and are a critical step toward ensuring equity for all students.

### **Summary**

I began Chapter 1 with an introduction to the study. Next, I presented an overview of the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, and significance of this study. Within the field of education, discipline disproportionality is a well-documented issue that continues to be a topic of discussion across the United States. Empirical research studies have indicated profound disparities in

how African American students with disabilities receive exclusionary discipline consequences compared to other student groups (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Recent studies suggest a need for more qualitative studies to further examine the issues that influence discipline disproportionality. Many studies also suggest the need for more research on school administrators' perspectives on the issues and practices that lead to discipline disparities for African American students with disabilities (Brown et al., 2019; Camacho & Krezmien, 2019; Katz-Amey, 2019).

In Chapter 2, I review relevant literature, including seminal research studies published primarily in the last 5 years and additional sources older than 5 years. Chapter 3 consists of participant information, the methods for selecting study participants, instrumentation, data collection processes, and the ethical ramifications of research. The information in Chapter 4 encompasses an analysis of the data collected, identification of themes, and research findings. Chapter 5 offers a conclusion to the study. I discuss the overall findings and the implications of this study as well as provide recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem in this study is discipline disproportionality in suspension and expulsion data among African American students with disabilities in two school districts in a large southeastern state. Countless research studies have indicated that discipline disparities are prevalent among African American students with disabilities across the nation (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). Compared to students of other races or ethnicities, African American students with disabilities receive ODRs, suspensions, and alternative placements in disproportionate numbers (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Although African American students with disabilities receive exclusionary discipline consequences at an alarming rate, research indicates that this group of students is no more likely to misbehave in school than any other student population (Blake et al., 2020).

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine school administrators' perspectives on the discipline practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities in a large southeastern state. School administrators (principals and assistant principals) are the disciplinarians who make decisions about school disciplinary practices (Costello et al., 2019). However, limited research has focused on school administrators' perspectives about the issues that lead to discipline inconsistencies or practices that may be unfair to African American students with disabilities (Brown et al., 2019; Camacho & Krezmien, 2019).

Principals and assistant principals are the school leaders responsible for regulating disciplinary policies and practices (Costello et al., 2019). Principals deal with discipline issues throughout the school day by reviewing ODRs and assigning discipline

consequences. The consequences of misbehavior in schools are often suspension or other forms of exclusionary discipline. Lund et al. (2021) posited that administrators often use exclusionary practices to deal with zero-tolerance policies defined by the school district, such as threatening actions, using profanity towards teachers, disrespect, or defiance. Moreover, Lund et al. (2021) proclaimed that these offenses are subjectively interpreted as minor behavior infractions by one administrator and zero-tolerance infractions by a different administrator. Exclusionary discipline practices are common in schools. The disparity in the rate at which principals assign exclusionary discipline practices to African American students with disabilities is concerning. Examining school administrators' perceptions and trends in disciplinary practices may offer school districts guidance towards practices and procedures for reducing instances of discipline disparities and disproportionality among African American students with disabilities.

In Chapter 2, I review current literature from within the past 5 years and additional literature older than 5 years. I also discuss the constructs of social justice leadership and disability/critical race theories and how these frameworks supported this study. More specifically, I reviewed government reports, empirical studies, and peer-reviewed journals that discuss the following: (a) educational impact of disproportionality, (b) exclusionary discipline practices, (c) discipline disproportionality in middle and high school, (d) zero-tolerance policies, (e) implicit bias, (f) equity in practice/equitable practices, (g) school administrators as social justice leaders, (h) positive behavior interventions and support, (i) culturally responsive practices, (j) restorative practices, and

(k) perceptions and attitudes of school administrators. Chapter 2 concludes with recommendations and a summary based on the literature reviewed.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I retrieved publications from the American Psychological Association, education websites, Google Scholar, government agencies, legal websites, and the Walden University Library and to conduct the literature review for this study. The literature search strategies that I used comprised a comprehensive review of electronic research articles primarily within the last 5 years, seminal research articles, reports, books, government websites, and education websites. Scholarly sources were obtained through electronic databases from the Walden University library, which included the following: Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, Education Source, ERIC, FindLaw, Google Scholar, NCES Publications, Open Library, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, Scholar Works, and Taylor & Francis Online. The websites used for this study included the following: Governor's Office of Student Achievement, U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection, U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Government Accountability Office, and Wrightslaw. The keywords and terms I used to locate literature for this study consisted of the following: *disability studies and critical race theory, discipline in special education, disciplinary practices, disproportionality, disproportionality in school discipline, disproportionality in special education, exclusionary discipline, implicit bias, implicit social cognition, principals AND discipline AND students with disabilities, school administrators AND discipline*

*practices, school discipline, school to prison pipeline, social justice, social justice leadership, students with disabilities, suspensions, and expulsions.*

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study focused on the underpinnings of Furman's (2012) framework of social justice leadership, which looks at the inequities facing marginalized groups in education and the capacities administrators need to exemplify social justice leadership in schools. Additionally, Annamma et al. concept of DisCrit served as a secondary framework that focuses on educational practices that impact students of color with disabilities (Wagner, 2018). In this study, the concept of social justice leadership, complemented by the tenets of DisCrit, was used to help understand administrators' perspectives on practices and issues that may lead to discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities.

Theoharis (2007) postulated that social justice leadership serves as a guide for principals to "transform culture, curriculum, pedagogical practices, atmosphere, and schoolwide priorities to benefit marginalized students" (p.221). According to Gullo and Beachum (2020b), social justice leadership encompasses positive leadership practices aimed at affording equitable opportunities, just practices, and cultural inclusivity. For this study, the framework of social justice leadership is relevant for examining administrators' perspectives on the issues leading to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities. Equally important, DeMatthews (2016a) suggested that critical race theory offers a lens from which principals can examine the root causes of discipline disparities. Anyon et al. (2021) discussed that a critical race theory framework helps to

explain how racialized ideas and biases about behavioral expectations in the absence of considering cultural differences influence discriminatory practices and behavior expectations in the education setting. The concepts of DisCrit were used to provide insight into how ideas and attitudes in society shape individual perspectives about race, class, disability, racism, and ableism (Connor et al., 2016). Therefore, the primary conceptual framework for this study is grounded in social justice leadership, and the secondary framework of critical race theory was explored through the lens of DisCrit to examine the perspectives of high school administrators on practices and issues that lead to discipline disparities for students with disabilities who are African American.

### **Social Justice Leadership**

The theory of social justice leadership contributed to the framework for this study. Social justice leadership theory focuses on equal practices and justice for marginalized groups such as students of color and students with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Goldfarb and Grinberg's concept of social justice leadership (as cited in Theoharis, 2007) describes social justice as an opportunity to influence organizational change that promotes and sustains fairness, equality, and equity in education. For this study, the theory of social justice leadership explains how school administrators can analyze policies and culture in the education setting to identify biased and unequal practices (DeMatthews et al., 2017). A study conducted by Wang (2018) suggested that social justice leadership provides principals with a deeper understanding of their position of power to influence equal practices for marginalized groups and positively impact social change in the school environment. Accordingly, DeMatthews et al. (2017) postulated that

while school principals' disposition on race and discipline is not fully known, the underpinnings of social justice leadership may strengthen an understanding of how principals deal with discipline gaps related to race. For this study, the framework of social justice leadership is relevant for examining administrators' perspectives about the issues that impact discipline disproportionality among African Americans.

For this study, I focused on the conceptual framework of social justice leadership theorized by Furman (2012), which centers on marginalized groups in the educational environment. According to Furman (2012), principals seeking to enact social justice leadership must demonstrate specific capacities. First, principals must be action-oriented and transformative as change agents in their ability to recognize how practices may impact marginalized groups and favor other groups (Sun, 2019). Second, principals must acquire the capacity to be committed and persistent in their efforts to continuously support an agenda of social justice and change (Sun, 2019). Third, principals should be diligent in enacting inclusive and democratic practices for all student groups through a culture of collaboration among all stakeholders. Lastly, principals working for social justice must be rational and caring in their ability to be transparent in communicating with all stakeholders (Sun, 2019). Additionally, a principal who emulates social justice leadership must also be reflective in identifying their own biases and proactive in orienting socially just practices (Sun, 2019).

### **Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory**

DisCrit also contributed to the conceptual framework of this study. Research literature indicates that a critical race theory framework is relevant in examining



discipline disproportionality (Annamma et al., 2018). According to DeMatthews (2016a), DisCrit influences school administrators to recognize their perceptions of leadership practices, discipline policies, classroom management, and deficits in perspectives about students and their families. DisCrit emerged through a collaborative paper that addresses inequities in education related to race, class, and ability (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit framework informs how ideas and attitudes in society shape individual perspectives about race, class, disability, racism, and ableism (Annamma et al., 2018). The underpinnings of DisCrit explain how race, disability, and ableism influence actions, practices, and procedures in an educational milieu (Connor et al., 2016).

Approaching this study through the lens of DisCrit offers insight into how constructs such as disability, race, gender, and culture influence inequities in education related to disproportionality, achievement gaps, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma et al., 2018; Connor et al., 2016). A study conducted by Haight et al. (2016) examined the perspectives of four Black youths, their caregivers, and their educators regarding out-of-school suspensions; this brought to light the challenges of race and disability and communication challenges between educators and caregivers. Furthermore, DeMatthews (2016a) suggested that critical race theory offers a lens from which principals can examine the root causes of discipline gaps. Therefore, the premise of DisCrit is relevant for examining administrators' perspectives on how race, disability, culture, gender, and ableism may influence decisions about disciplinary practices that lead to disproportionality for African American students with disabilities.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables**

Discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities of color has been a problem for decades (Scott & McIntosh, 2022). IDEA mandates schools to address issues of racial discipline disparities; however, many schools and districts across the nation continue to experience challenges with managing this problem. Bottiani et al. (2018) pointed out that despite the well-known concern regarding discipline disproportionality in today's educational system, a gap remains in perspectives about the issues of discipline disparities. According to Bottiani et al. (2018), these disparities have escalated concern about the increasing rate that administrators assign exclusionary discipline consequences to students (Bottiani et al., 2018). There is considerable debate regarding whether inequitable discipline practices are linked to inaccurate referrals and administrator bias in school discipline (Green et al., 2018). There is a need for a deeper understanding of the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality from the perspective of school administrators (principals and assistant principals).

A number of research articles and reports have documented the racial discipline gap across the nation (McIntosh et al., 2018; Zakszeski et al., 2021). As a result, the federal government's concern about this issue has prompted school districts to pay more close attention to discipline data, with consequences for school districts that demonstrate significant discipline disproportionality (Wrightslaw, 2018). Despite the concern among various educational departments, agencies, and organizations, there remains a need for more research about school administrators' perspectives on the issues that contribute to discipline gaps (Gullo & Beachum, 2020a). Principals are the gatekeepers for discipline

practices, and they hold the responsibility of regulating how students are disciplined.

Although teachers primarily are the ones who submit ODRs, principals play a significant role in the discipline gap because they are responsible for making decisions about assigning exclusionary consequences such as out-of-school suspension (Feirsen & Weitzman, 2021). According to DeMatthews et al. (2017), limited empirical studies have sought to identify whether issues of race or other factors may influence how principals sanction discipline in their schools.

### **Exclusionary Discipline Practices**

Bottiani et al. (2018) stated that differences in exclusionary discipline practices such as office referrals and out-of-school suspensions have been a concern in society since the 1970s. Over the years, these discipline practices have escalated to concern regarding racial and ethnic disparities in the rate at which students receive exclusionary discipline consequences. Presently, students with disabilities of color account for many students receiving exclusionary disciplinary action in schools (Ball, 2020).

Disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices are a multifaceted issue with moral and ethical concerns in education. According to Camacho and Krezmien (2020), researchers in the special education field have found that exclusionary practices such as suspensions do not improve student behavior but rather reinforce undesirable behaviors. Anyon et al. (2021) pointed out that instances of in-school suspension are exclusionary discipline practices that typically result in the same outcomes as out-of-school suspensions, such as loss of instructional time, referral to the juvenile system, and negative impact on academic achievement.

Research conducted by Cotter Stalker (2018) suggested that discipline disproportionality in its complicated nature may be improved with disciplinary practices such as teen-court programs that allow students to remain in the school setting that offers alternatives to suspension. Counts et al. (2018) pointed out that the use of school resource officers in school may be linked to disproportionate school discipline referrals and school arrests among minority students and students with disabilities. Counts et al. (2018) also asserted that school resource officers generally intervene in discipline situations that typically require attention from the principal or school administrator. The lack of training among school resource officers may contribute to increased school arrests, referrals to the juvenile justice system, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Counts et al., 2018). A study conducted by Lewis 2018, informed that even when determining whether a student's behavior is related to the student's disability, such as in a manifestation determination, team members are often subjective in their decision-making.

While discipline disproportionality exists from myriad issues, research suggests specific actions for addressing discipline disparities. A study by Bal et al. (2019) suggested that education leaders must evaluate individuals and the whole school environment to determine the root causes of disparities in exclusionary discipline practices. Camacho and Krezmien (2020) also contend that evidence-based practices, prevention, and intervention-focused policies effectively reduce exclusionary discipline practices. According to Katz-Amey (2019), school leaders should consider strategies such as ongoing teacher professional development and training on cultural competence to help

remedy disproportionality. Further, developing policies and interventions curtail adverse student outcomes from exclusionary discipline practices.

### **Educational Impact of Exclusionary Discipline Practices**

Exclusionary discipline practices can have an adverse educational impact on African American students with disabilities. A study conducted by Carter et al. (2017) asserted that ongoing severe and consistent racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsion lead to a variety of adverse outcomes for African American students. Research conducted by Carter et al. (2017) also informed that the frequent removal of students from school through suspensions and expulsions impacted graduation rates for African American students with disabilities and presented a growing population of youth entering the pipeline to prison.

According to Fallon et al. (2022), “exclusionary discipline practices are associated with increased risk of poor academic achievement, criminalization, and incarceration during adult years” (p. 124; see also Tefera et al., 2022). Bal et al. (2019) noted that exclusionary discipline practices adversely impact academics, delinquency, and behavior outcomes. Similarly, Marcucci (2020) contends that disproportionality and exclusionary discipline negatively impact student achievement, increase dropout rates, and increase chances of referral to the juvenile justice system. Tefera et al. (2022) suggested that students who are disciplined harshly in school may be forced to leave school, resulting in high drop-out rates.

According to a study conducted by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019) practices such as suspension and expulsions impact overall student achievement and

success. Repeated instances of exclusionary discipline impact students with disabilities by decreasing access to specialized instruction and increases the likely hood of retention (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). According to the research conducted by United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019) African American students with disabilities lost more instruction days than White students with disabilities when factoring excessive exclusionary discipline. These consequences of discipline disproportionality present a significant concern and a high priority for school districts to focus on corrective actions.

### **Discipline Disproportionality in Elementary School**

Discipline data for students with disabilities in elementary school differs from those at other school levels. Data from a study conducted by Welch (2022) found that elementary school students are disciplined more for subjective offenses and staff and student assault offenses. According to the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (2023), disciplinary infractions were most prevalent for elementary school students in the second and fifth grades for the state in this study. A study conducted by Welch (2022) informed that although elementary school students received fewer school suspensions than students at other school levels, there is evidence of discipline disproportionality among students who are Black and students with disabilities. Welch (2002) conducted a study on discipline disparities in a southeastern state and discovered that Black male students in elementary school experience more significant instances of exclusionary discipline when compared to other students.

### **Discipline Disproportionality in Middle and High School**

Camacho and Krezmien (2019) revealed that middle and high school students receive more suspensions than elementary school students. For the state in this study, disparities in suspension data for African American students with disabilities are prevalent during grade levels where students are enrolled in middle and high school (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2019). According to the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2019), empirical research suggests that the suspension rates for middle and high school students increase for each grade level. Further, for the school districts in this study, 9th-grade students have the highest percentage of disciplinary occurrences (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2020).

According to Camacho and Krezmien (2019), numerous factors increase the risk of suspensions for minority students with disabilities in middle and high school. Namely, zero-tolerance policies have been identified as a factor impacting disproportionate suspensions for students with disabilities during middle and high school (Alnaim, 2018; Heilbrun et al., 2018). Studies have also suggested that students with disabilities in middle and high school are frequently reprimanded for subjective behaviors. Moreover, “African American students and students with disabilities are often monitored and disciplined more harshly than other students despite evidence that they misbehave more than other student groups” (DeMatthews, 2016b, p. 91). A Texas study of at least 1,000,000 middle school students revealed that Black students were more likely to be disciplined for “discretionary” behavior infractions (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). According to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019), Black

students were likelier to be disciplined for being late to class, leaving class early, and for dress code violations (United States Commission on Civil Rights (2019). Similarly, research findings from a study conducted by Camacho and Krezmien (2020) indicated that most of the behavior infractions in the study allowed administrators to use personal discretion when assigning behavior consequences.

Heilbrun et al. (2018) suggested that there is a need for schools and school districts to understand the factors that influence disproportionate suspensions to identify solutions and support for dealing with issues of over-suspension for students at the middle and high school levels. A study by Ksinan et al. (2019) pointed out that many studies on disproportionality for middle and high schoolers have focused on comparing empirical data among African American and White students, indicating discipline disparities exist. Ksinan et al. (2019) also informed that African American students and students of more than one race accounted for the highest number of students suspended in middle and high school.

### **Zero-Tolerance Policies**

The U.S. federal government created zero-tolerance policies. Zero-tolerance policies were first implemented in schools during the 1980s to promote a safe and secure learning environment for students and teachers (Kyere et al., 2018). Zero-tolerance policies have since been identified as a factor that impacts disproportionate suspensions for students with disabilities. According to Bleakley and Bleakley (2018), although behavior management is critical to a thriving school environment, zero-tolerance policies criminalize misbehavior in schools and impact thousands of students yearly. Bleakley and



Bleakley (2018) asserted that much of the research on the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon points to rigid government policy issues such as zero-tolerance policies, which provide the basis for automatic suspension for behavior infractions such as possession of a weapon or drugs.

Although zero-tolerance policies were designed to deal with behavior infractions involving weapons, drugs, and violence, more recently, zero-tolerance policies in schools are used to deal with subjective behavior infractions, such as insubordination or disrespect (Kyere et al., 2018). With this thought in mind, students of color, especially African American students with disabilities, face excessive exclusionary discipline, which impacts overall school performance, graduation rates, and referral to the juvenile justice system (Alnaim, 2018; Kyere et al., 2018). According to Alnaim (2018), students with a disability in the categories of learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, and emotional and behavioral disorders are significantly impacted by zero-tolerance policies that are not designed to consider the manifestations of a student's disability on their behavior. Alnaim (2018) suggested that zero-tolerance policies do not consider issues of poverty, hunger, and disability but rather subject students with disabilities to unfair discipline practices.

Bleakley and Bleakley (2018) suggested that factors such as administrative support, understanding of rules and regulations, consideration of unique differences among students, and support for teacher actions are lacking in schools and negatively influence harsh disciplinary consequences for minor behaviors. Similarly, Lustick (2020) insists that administrators must shift the culture of zero-tolerance policies and seek

alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices. Alnaim (2018) posited that administrators should individually assign discipline consequences for students with disabilities, considering the student's underlying issues and the nature of the disability. This thought aligns with IDEA regulations that require school districts to hold manifestation determination meetings for students with disabilities prior to suspension beyond 10 days to determine if the student's behavior is a manifestation of the student's disability (IDEA, 2019).

### **Implicit Bias**

In the field of education, there is considerable debate regarding the concept of implicit bias and the influence that biased decisions may have on the decisions administrators make about disciplinary practices when assigning behavior consequences to African American students with disabilities. In their recent work, Gullo and Beachum (2020a) insisted that administrators' bias explains the disparities in the severity of discipline practices for students of color. Additionally, Gullo and Beachum (2020b) argued that implicit bias on the part of school administrators contributed to racial school discipline gaps when examining the severity of discipline infractions. A research study conducted by Riddle and Sinclair (2019) suggested that implicit bias may contribute to discriminatory behavior practices when administrators do not acknowledge the issues of biases. According to the study conducted by Riddle and Sinclair (2019), data from approximately 1,600,000 people visiting the Project Implicit website indicated disparities in discipline practices when comparing White and Black students. Riddle and Sinclair (2019) posited that acknowledging the role that racial bias plays in discipline disparities

is essential to dealing with the issue of disproportionality in the disciplining of African American students and other minority student groups. According to Gullo and Beachum (2020b), although implicit bias is not considered intentional, the negative impact of bias on students of color warrants much attention.

However, on the other hand, Riddle and Sinclair (2019) informed that research on implicit bias is limited. Further, FitzGerald et al. (2019) contend that there is a lack of sufficient research to validate that reducing implicit biases reduces discipline disparities. Similarly, Carter et al. (2017) argued that implicit biases do not fully explain biased school decisions or behaviors.

Although disproportionality stems from a multitude of issues, Green et al. (2018) suggested that reducing exclusionary discipline practices can be addressed by strategies designed to decrease discriminatory discipline practices. A study conducted by FitzGerald et al. (2019) informed that strategies for reducing implicit biases might help address exclusionary discipline practices where there is a concern for a particular group of students. Additionally, Carter et al. (2017) posited that recognizing and addressing self-perceptions of implicit biases can influence more positive interactions between students and school personnel. Moreover, according to FitzGerald et al. (2019), research-based interventions focusing on multiculturalism, approach-avoidance training, cueing social connectedness, and multicultural counseling classes showed promise in reducing implicit bias.

### **Equity in Practice or Equitable Practices**

Discipline disproportionality in public middle and high schools is a multifaceted issue with moral and ethical concerns in education (Martinez, 2020). Recent revisions to the nation's special education law under IDEA have enacted policies to protect students with disabilities when disciplined in schools (Wrightslaw, 2018). However, discipline disparities persist for African American students with disabilities. The research findings from the study conducted by Little and Welsh (2019) concluded that discipline disparities are most prevalent when teachers and administrators subjectively make decisions about behaviors based on their perceptions or individual bias. Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al. (2021) stated that race, culture, and inequitable practices heavily influence discipline disparities, especially for students of color with disabilities. According to Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., there is a need for a more concise examination and implementation of IDEA policies in special education to combat discipline inequities in schools. Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al. also suggested that education stakeholders need to acknowledge how racial ideologies can shape individual beliefs and influence inequities in discipline practices within the educational organization.

Unequal practices in the assignment of disciplinary consequences have negative educational impacts on students. According to Brown et al. (2019), inequities along the lines of segregation by race and disability persist as evidenced by disproportionality in discipline practices such as detention and suspension and influence negative consequences such as the school-to-prison pipeline. Green et al. (2018) asserted that leaders in the field of education, special education, and school psychology must work

together to investigate the inequalities that perpetuate racial disparities in exclusionary discipline practices. According to Green et al., the ethical problem of discipline disproportionality may be addressed when school administrators develop equity teams, re-evaluate discipline policies, and utilize evidence-based decision making.

### **Critical Race Theory and DisCrit**

The conceptual framework of critical race theory has existed for over a decade (Schwartz, 2021). According to George (2021), critical race theory experts such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Tara Yosso, and others postulated that the concept of critical race theory acknowledges that implicit or explicit inequalities and prejudices negatively impact marginalized groups. According to Annamma et al. (2018), DisCrit, a branch of critical race theory, emerged as a premise for understanding how inequality and oppression impact multi-marginalized groups, such as African American students with disabilities. George (2021) suggested that the persistent phenomena of discipline disproportionality might be explained by critical race theory, which acknowledges that the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and disability exist in society. Further, as Annamma et al. (2018, para. 8) noted, scholars such as Bell and Ladson-Billings and Tate have noted that “applying DisCrit to the field of education exposes long-standing inequities despite the passing of legislature such as *Brown v. Board of Education*”.

On the contrary, beginning in January 2021, the term “critical race theory” has been viewed by some as promoting division in society and tainting the history of the United States with discussions about racism and oppression (Schwartz, 2021). Recently, opposition from conservative lawmakers has supported legislation against the idea of

critical race theory. Based on the interpretation of critical race theory as a practice of blaming an entire group for individual acts of racism, imposing that one group is better than another, and a belief in divisive concepts, conservative lawmakers from 47 states have supported legislation banning critical race theory in schools and banning mandatory diversity training for school staff and government employees (Schwartz, 2021).

It is not yet unknown what impact banning critical race theory might have on school discipline and kindergarten through Grade 12 instruction (Pendharkar, 2022). However, with persistent issues of discipline disparities among African American students with disabilities across the nation, the impact that misconceptions and anti-critical race theory might have on discipline disproportionality is concerning. A recent study by UCLA informed that many participants reported experiencing restrictions on teaching lessons on race and limitations on efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within their school districts (Pollock et. al., 2022). According to George (2021), limited legal support and interventions related to critical race theory may perpetuate ongoing issues of discipline disproportionality among marginalized student groups. George (2021) also suggested that embracing the tenets of a critical race theory may help support social justice and interventions for ethical practice in education.

### **School Administrators as Social Justice Leaders**

Discipline disproportionality is a problem of social justice that continues to impact racial disparities, academic achievement, and long-term outcomes for minority students in schools across the nation (Bal et al., 2019). According to Ball (2020) students with disabilities of color account for a large number of students receiving disciplinary

action in schools. With this thought in mind, Bornstein (2017) explained that school leaders in their efforts to enact social justice must consider the multifaceted issues that lead to disproportionality in schools.

Principals are the school leaders who can enact social justice leadership practices in their school. Wang (2018) asserts that the principal as the school leader has the ability to endorse and influence social justice practices. According to Wang (2018), a principals' positioning determines how teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders interact in the school environment. Comparably, DeMatthews (2016a) suggested that social justice leadership offers guidance to principals on utilizing their position of authority to advocate for equal practices in schools and eradicate discipline disproportionality for marginalized groups. According to Gullo and Beachum (2020a), although ODRs are initiated by teachers, school administrators hold the final responsibility for making disciplinary decisions that are equitable. Chunoo et al. (2019) recommended that educators seeking to focus on social justice must be vigilant in their efforts to promote cultural relevance in the school climate, in classrooms, and during school activities.

Social justice leadership practices in education have been limited in practice and scope among principals (Gullo & Beachum, 2020b; Wang, 2018). Research conducted by Wang (2018) emphasized that increased expectations and policy constraints present barriers and challenges for social justice leaders in their efforts to impose accountability measures for equal practices in the school setting and the educational community. A study conducted by DeMatthews (2016a) examined principals' efforts to enact social justice and posited that principals may not be aware of their actions, behaviors, and

attitudes about students in marginalized groups when making disciplinary decisions. According to Ezzani (2021), principals striving to promote social justice should evaluate data regularly. Ezzani (2021) also posited that principals engaged in social justice leadership have a responsibility to provide professional development for teachers on core beliefs, cultural differences, and support for managing behavior among diverse populations. Further, Chunoo et al. (2019) pointed out social justice leaders must be willing to tackle injustices in the school environment and dismantle systems of oppression that may exist in the school setting.

### **Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports**

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) have become a primary means of providing behavioral support and creating an effective school discipline system in schools across the United States. According to Lee et al. (2021) implementation of a school wide PBIS (SWPBIS) with fidelity serves as a proactive measure for handling discipline in schools and reduce incidence of exclusionary discipline. According to Lee et al. (2021, p. 412) current research suggests that implementing PBIS activities such as placing positive statements throughout the building, consistent rewards system for all students, and connecting rewards to behavior expectations are most effective in reducing discipline referrals and exclusionary discipline practices. A study conducted by Grasley-Boy et al. (2019) informed that the implementation of universal SWPBIS when done consistently, was effective in reducing the number of students with disabilities removed from their home school and placed in an alternative setting for behavior infractions.



The findings from a case study conducted by Bornstein (2017), indicated that while PBIS programs help provide behavioral support and identify expectations for behavior, the program has not shown effectiveness in reducing the problem of disproportionality. According to McIntosh et al. (2018), implicit biases that influence disproportionality may be addressed through a four-step approach from the PBIS Disproportionality Data Guide that uses school discipline data to identify specific interactions that are more susceptible to the effects of implicit bias on decision-making. Although PBIS is a recommended practice in states across the nation, research informs that this program has not been successful in remedying the issues of racial disparities in office referrals and suspensions for minority students (Vincent et al., 2015; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). In a study conducted by Bornstein (2017), where a case study was conducted on discipline disproportionality involving students of color with disabilities, the findings indicated that while the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports program helped provide behavioral supports and identify expectations for behavior, the program was not effective in reducing the problem of disproportionality in the district. On the other hand, a more recent study conducted by Brown et al. (2019) suggested that schools using Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports may be effective in managing student behaviors.

### **Culturally Responsive Practices**

The intersection of culture, disability, race, and gender presents challenges for administrators in their efforts to address behavior and disciplinary concerns for African American students with disabilities (Annamma et al., 2018; Bornstein, 2017). Oftentimes,

there are a multitude of cultural issues that play a role in how students behave or misbehave in the school environment. Brown et al. (2019) posited that there is a need for school leaders to focus more on culturally responsive practices in schools to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse populations in special education. Research data from a case study conducted by McIntosh et al. (2018) indicated that interventions grounded in explicit instruction and cultural responsiveness showed more promise in decreasing discipline disproportionality. Similarly, a study conducted by Brown et al. (2019) suggested that schools using Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports are effective at addressing cultural differences and can be effective in managing student behaviors.

Bal (2016) suggested that schools should utilize a multidisciplinary team to develop discipline procedures that are culturally responsive in addressing the behavior needs of all students. Further, Ball, (2020) suggested that unequal practices and inequalities in the school setting, especially discipline disparities among students of color with disabilities can be addressed when personnel such as social workers and school administrators work together using restorative practices to build connections between the school, home, and community. School administrators must be able to evaluate these diverse cultural situations when making decisions about discipline consequences, especially when considering removing a student from the academic environment (Haight et al., 2016). According to Bornstein (2017), school leaders should consider strategies such as training teachers on de-escalation strategies and professional development on cultural competence to help remedy disproportionality.

## **Restorative Practices**

Unlike restorative justice used in the criminal system to punish undesirable behavior, restorative practices in schools are intended to promote support, relationship building, communication, and accountability (Costello et al., 2019). According to Costello et al. (2019), restorative practices in schools offer administrators an opportunity to work with students and their families and teachers through a collective effort to improve behavior outcomes and student achievement. Restorative practices in schools involve using approaches to dealing with behavior before an incident occurs and managing behavior when an incident has occurred (Kehoe et al., 2018).

Recently, restorative practices have emerged as a possible preventative measure for decreasing exclusionary discipline practices in schools (Lustick et al., 2020). Research studies have suggested that the effectiveness of restorative practices in reducing discipline disproportionality is dependent on administrator and teacher willingness to support alternative practices (Costello et al., 2019; Joseph et al., 2021). According to Costello et al. (2019), restorative practices are more successful in decreasing suspensions and the need for exclusionary discipline when implemented proactively. In contrast, Lustick et al. (2020) suggested that restorative practices may have little impact on disproportionality rates in suspension. Further, Ball, (2020) suggested that unequal practices and inequalities in the school setting, especially discipline disparities among students of color with disabilities can be addressed when personal such as social workers and school administrators work together using restorative practices to build connections

between the school, home, and community to build resources that influence equity and promote social change.

### **Perceptions and Attitudes of School Administrators**

This qualitative study presents an opportunity to connect with school administrators in a southeastern state and provide them with a platform to express their perspectives on the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality. Discipline disproportionality is a well-known concern in today's educational system (Fallon et al., 2022). However, there is a gap in research regarding administrators' perspectives on discipline disproportionality (Bottiani et al., 2018). Little and Welsh (2019) posited that a principal's discipline philosophy and perceptions regarding behavior expectations significantly impact discipline practices in the school environment. Additionally, Little and Welsh (2019) informed that previous research findings from studies conducted by the Civil Rights Project (2000), Mukuria (2002), Skiba et al. (2007), and Skiba et al. (2014) suggested that suspension rates are closely associated with a principal's attitude.

Gaining insight into principals' perceptions provided answers to the questions in this study about discipline disproportionality, exclusionary discipline practices, and equity in disciplinary consequences when disciplining African American students with disabilities. Little and Welsh (2019) suggested that the perceptions held by teachers and administrators regarding behavior norms, discipline practices, and cultural differences may play a critical role in the assignment of exclusionary discipline that manifests into discipline disparities. The results of this study can help fill the gap in research regarding

administrators' perspectives and serve as a guide to school districts in the state included in this study and districts across the nation.

### **Recommendations**

Although the phenomena of discipline disproportionality are well-researched in today's educational system, more research is needed to address the gap that remains in administrator's perspectives on discipline disproportionality (Bottiani et al., 2018). While discipline disproportionality exists from a myriad of issues, research suggests specific actions for addressing discipline disparities. Green et al. (2018), pointed out that while disproportionality stems from a multitude of issues, exclusionary discipline practices involving special education students can be addressed by strategies designed to decrease biased discipline practices. Moreover, according to Green et al. (2018), the problem of discipline disproportionality may be addressed when school administrators develop equity teams, re-evaluate discipline policies, and utilize evidence-based decision making. A study conducted by DeMatthews et al. (2017) suggested that school leaders use their position of power to enact social justice leadership practices that focus on equity and inclusivity. Comparably Williams et al. (2017) recommend that schools and school districts dealing with discipline disproportionality evaluate disciplinary practices to curtail biased and unfair practices. Further, Green et al. (2018), asserted that leaders in the fields of education, special education, and school psychology must work together to investigate the inequalities that perpetuate racial disparities in exclusionary discipline practices.

## Summary and Conclusions

The literature reviewed in this study substantiates the need for a deeper understanding of the practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities. The vast majority of research studies reviewed for this study revealed a plethora of quantitative data and empirical research studies documenting a national problem of discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities. Limited studies were found on administrators' perspectives about the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities. The absence of research on this topic evidence a gap in research on administrators' perspectives about the issues and practices that lead to discipline disproportionality for this marginalized student group.

Discipline disparities are prevalent in a southeastern state for African American students with disabilities in two school districts based on the 2018–2019 annual summary report for the state in this study. Recent studies suggested that administrators make decisions about discipline practices based on their lived experiences. Some studies suggested that individual biases and cultural insensitivity play a critical role in the prevalence of discipline disparities for African American students and students with disabilities. While research suggests that implicit biases and lack of cultural awareness are to blame for over-suspensions for African American students and students with disabilities, identifying and remedying these issues can be difficult.

Several major themes emerged from the review of the literature. Discipline data for the state in this study indicated that discipline disproportionality is prevalent among

students with disabilities in elementary, middle, and high schools. Empirical data indicated that most issues of disproportionality occur in middle or high school. However, research also revealed that discipline disparities in a southeastern state discovered that Black male students in elementary school experience more significant instances of exclusionary discipline when compared to other students.

Research has also indicated that exclusionary discipline practices can negatively impact student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates for African American students with disabilities. Students who experience OSS and ISS have an increased risk of not graduating from high school and being referred to the juvenile justice system. Several studies conducted over the past 10 years suggest that a principal's attitude, personal beliefs, and individual biases directly influence exclusionary discipline practices in school. Some studies suggested that culturally responsive interventions may have the most impact in remedying issues of disproportionality. The use of restorative practices recently emerged to address discipline and behavior problems in schools. The concept of social justice also emerged as a pathway for administrators to work with teachers and staff to reconcile individual biases and create more equitable practices to address students and staff cultural differences.

Substantial information is not yet known in the education field about school administrators' perspectives on discipline disparities, the issues that contribute to disproportionality, and the best methods for eradicating discipline disparities for African American students with disabilities. There is a consensus that discipline disproportionality is a nationwide problem that requires correction in education. Despite

the numerous studies identifying that over-suspension of African American students with disabilities exists, there is a gap in the literature about school administrators' perspectives on the issues that lead to discipline disparities. School administrators are the individuals who assign disciplinary consequences, and there is a need for more understanding about how administrators decide to remove a student from the learning environment. There is an understanding of the responsibility of school administrators to act on zero-tolerance policies; however, understanding where administrators draw the line on removing students from the school environment for minor or subjective behavior infractions continues to be unclear.

This study may inform constituents in the education field, school district leaders, school administrators, and other education stakeholders of the perspectives of school administrators in a southeastern state about the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality. Although this study focuses on the perspectives of principals and assistant principals in a southeastern state, the information discovered can guide other districts across the nation. This study's results offer other school administrators' insight into their own lived experiences to reflect on how they make decisions about disciplinary practices, identify what is working well, and target areas that may need improvement. In Chapter 3 of this study, I discuss the research design, rationale, and the role of the researcher. The information in this chapter also provides an overview of the study's methodology. A review of the strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and a summary of the ethical procedures are also presented in this chapter.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine school administrators' perspectives on the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities. Distinctly, for this study, I explored the perspectives of principals and assistant principals regarding their experiences of using disciplinary practices and assigning disciplinary consequences. Gaining a better understanding of administrators' perspectives on assigning exclusionary discipline consequences may offer school districts insight into the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities. Moreover, for this study, I used a basic qualitative design to identify if any similarities or differences in school administrators' perspectives are evident. To address the problem of discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities, I analyzed the perspectives of principals and assistant principals to answer the RQs regarding exclusionary discipline practices, equal practices for disciplining students, and the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality.

In Chapter 3 of this study, I discuss the procedures and guidelines for conducting research as outlined by Walden University. The components of this chapter consist of the following: research design, the role of the researcher, participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, data analysis, trustworthiness, threats to validity, and ethical procedures. This chapter concludes with a summary of key points.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

For this study, I used a qualitative approach to examine school administrators' perspectives on the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American

students with disabilities in two school districts in a large southeastern state. I used purposeful sampling to intentionally select participants, examine a specific phenomenon, and identify similarities and differences in perspectives to inform the RQs for this study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015; Rumrill et al., 2011). The RQs that underpinned this study were

RQ1: What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives regarding the issues that influence discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities?

RQ2: What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives about using exclusionary practices to discipline students?

RQ3: What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives about using equal practices for all students when making decisions about disciplinary consequences?

Using a basic qualitative approach, I examined the perspectives of principals and assistant principals regarding their use of disciplinary practices and their insight on the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities. Qualitative research involves investigating a phenomenon through the viewpoints and perspectives of an individual's lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The overarching goals of the qualitative method involved researching for understanding and discovery (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While the main focus of qualitative research is to gain knowledge about phenomena, qualitative researchers seek to understand the experiences of individuals as a means to obtain information to improve

understanding. This study focused on the perceptions of school administrators about the issues that lead to disproportionality for African American students with disabilities.

Existing studies about discipline disproportionality in schools have focused heavily on quantitative methods. A significant number of empirical research studies suggest that African American students with disabilities are disproportionately suspended compared to their peers across the nation (Cruz et al., 2021; Scott & McIntosh, 2022). Previous literature on discipline disparities has focused on the percentage of students receiving exclusionary discipline consequences among student groups in the categories of race, age, gender, and disability status (U. S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). Few studies have explored the perspectives of school administrators regarding the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality, especially for African American students with a disability. With this thought in mind, using a quantitative approach toward this study may have provided robust knowledge on the significant number of students impacted by discipline disproportionality. However, using the qualitative approach to this study helped me capture broader but more specific information about the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities through the perspectives of school administrators. Accordingly, researchers in the fields of education, social justice leadership, disability studies, and psychology have suggested that there is a need for more qualitative research to capture the experiences and perspectives of administrators about the issues leading to discipline disparities for this student group (Girvan et al., 2019; Green et al., 2018),).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that qualitative research as a whole is interpretive and focuses heavily on individuals' experiences, worldviews, and the meaning of experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that the most common research method among applied fields such as education and administration consists of a basic interpretive study. Moreover, within education, qualitative research is the most common method of inquiry (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research depicts a “constructivist worldview” and seeks to discover research participants' viewpoints on their understanding of a phenomenon.

The data collection methods for a basic qualitative study may consist of interviews, observations, focus groups, or document analysis (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In contrast, quantitative studies are focused more on numbers and empirical data (Howson, 2021). Howson (2021) contends that quantitative studies typically include large participant samples, up to thousands of individuals. However, sample sizes for qualitative studies generally include smaller, purposive samples that allow the researcher to investigate the experiences and viewpoints of participants more thoroughly (Dworkin, 2012; Merriam, 2002; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). With these thoughts in mind, a basic qualitative approach was the most appropriate method for researching the phenomena of discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities. Therefore, I chose to approach this study using a qualitative methodology that involved examining the perspectives of principals and assistant principals through semistructured in-depth interviews.

There are several approaches to qualitative research beyond an interpretive or basic qualitative method that I could have utilized for this study. Other approaches to qualitative research may include the following: phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, or case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, after carefully reviewing the different approaches to qualitative research, I determined that using a basic, interpretive design with semistructured interviews was most appropriate for examining the participants' perspectives in this study.

The phenomenology approach involves exploring the lived experiences of individuals to help understand phenomena. Uniquely, a phenomenological design examines the researcher's experiences and beliefs, and the participants (Creswell, 2013). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) the phenomenology approach involves examining intense emotional situations to explain the essence of a concept or phenomenon. Moreover, phenomenological studies may be well suited for examining thoughts, ideas, and beliefs beyond an individual's perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, for this study, I focused primarily on participants' perspectives. Therefore, a phenomenology approach was not appropriate for my study.

Ethnographic research involves exploring the cultural and social aspects of a group of individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A signature characteristic of ethnography research is that the research process requires extensive time spent studying the social group researched (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the research process of an ethnographic study, the researcher examines the culture, processes, ideas, and attitudes of

the group studied through several observations and interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher may also participate in daily activities within the social setting studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An ethnographic approach also requires the researcher to interact with participants in social situations for extended periods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In contrast, I interviewed participants in a single setting via videoconference. Thus, an ethnographic approach was not appropriate for this study.

Another qualitative approach that I considered was grounded theory research. The goal of a grounded theory approach is to develop a theory that explains the phenomena studied (Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory studies typically include 20-30 participants and last for extended periods over time (Creswell, 2013). However, the sample size for this study was six to 10 participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), grounded theory research involves developing a theoretical explanation of actions or processes based on participants' responses. The overarching goal of grounded theory is to examine and dissect the experiences of the participants studied to discover a unique theoretical framework for improving practice and future research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, I selected an established framework from which to base this study; therefore, a grounded theory approach was not well suited for this study.

Last, I also considered using a case study approach and a narrative approach for my study. The purpose of narrative inquiry is to tell a story about the lived experiences of an individual or a group of individuals who share the same environment (Creswell, 2013). On the other hand, the purpose of a case study is to explore a real-life case of an individual or group through extensive observation, interview, or document analysis to

illustrate a case or provide an understanding of an issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study approach involves the researcher spending significant time researching an individual or group in a specific environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Similarly, a narrative approach involves the researcher spending considerable time with participants to uncover their lived experiences. Based on the purpose of my study, the case study and narrative inquiry approaches were not the most appropriate designs for my study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), the researcher of a qualitative study must engage in the process of reflexivity to assess how their positionality may impact the results of a study. With this thought in mind, I have worked in the special education field for 30+ years and some of my responsibilities have included teaching students with emotional and behavior disorders, developing behavior intervention plans (BIPs), dealing with behavior issues, monitoring suspension data, managing compliance issues, and working with school administrators on disciplinary practices and behavior resolutions for students with disabilities. I worked in the juvenile justice, mental health, and social work fields for 10 years, which provided me with the opportunity to directly experience the issues and challenges faced by students with disabilities who are African American in psychiatric and correctional facilities. My career in education began as a middle school special education teacher in a self-contained classroom for students with emotional and behavioral disorders for 3 years. For 23 years, I worked in elementary school settings as a special education administrator and collaborated with principals, assistant principals, and teachers daily regarding a plethora of issues involving students with disabilities. I

currently work at the district level and collaborate with therapists (occupational, speech, physical), assistive technology specialists, special education school administrators, multi-tiered system of supports specialists, district coordinators, and district directors, regarding the coordination of speech and related services for students with disabilities. As I reflect on my work experiences, I realize that I have an array of perspectives about the issues that may lead to discipline disproportionality.

My experiences as a special education teacher and special education building administrator may have presented me as biased or impartial toward participants' responses to interview questions. Additionally, my role as an administrator of special education may have influenced responses provided during interviews in various ways. Some participants might have assumed that I may be biased or impartial to certain disciplinary practices or consequences. Some participants might have assumed that I had preconceived notions about disproportionality issues based on my experiences and race. Other participants might have assumed that I already understood the issues that impact disproportionality and could identify with their duties and responsibilities as an administrator in charge of discipline. These issues can potentially impact participants' responses positively or adversely and influence how they answer the interview questions. As I conducted research for this study, it was essential that I remained reflective of my role and experiences throughout this study. It was also critical that I was attentive to details and accurately reported the findings of this study. To ensure that I was accurately recording the perspectives of the participants in this study, I informed each participant prior to interviewing that all interviews would be audio recorded via Zoom. I utilized



member checking to gain insight and validate participants' responses by speaking with participants after the interview to allow them to hear my interpretations and share feedback (Connelly, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kornbluh, 2015; Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

### **Methodology**

The overall purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of principals and assistant principals about issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities. Qualitative research can be used to investigate the perspectives of others as a means to provide an understanding about a phenomenon that is not known (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research is prevalent in the education field and is interpretive in nature. Qualitative researchers acquire understanding about a phenomenon by examining the world views and lived experiences of study participants through observations, interviews, focus groups, and documents (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), qualitative research is flexible in its design, which can allow the researcher to utilize unstructured interviews that offer the opportunity for information to emerge in an evolving manner. Therefore, the use of a qualitative design with semistructured interviews was appropriate for examining the perspectives of the participants in this study.

### **Participant Selection**

This study's participants are school administrators who work in a large southeastern state because these individuals handle discipline incidents, assign

disciplinary consequences, and make disciplinary practice decisions (Gullo & Beachum, 2020a). For this study, I used purposeful sampling to recruit school administrators who were a principal or an assistant principal who had experience with handling discipline issues and assigning disciplinary consequences. The participants selected for this study were school administrators who work in two school districts that demonstrated discipline disproportionality in a large southeastern state and school administrators who work in school districts in a large southeastern state that did not demonstrate discipline disproportionality. I used the public websites of school districts located in a southeastern state to obtain email addresses for potential participants (principals and assistant principals).

There were some variations in the participant sample size for this study. Initially, I intended to collect data from 10 to 12 high school administrators working in two southeastern school districts (D1 and D2) that demonstrated discipline disproportionality. However, due to recruitment challenges, I met with Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to further discuss the issue. Sample sizes for qualitative studies generally include smaller, purposive samples that allow the researcher to investigate the experiences and viewpoints of participants more thoroughly (Dworkin, 2012; Merriam, 2002; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Therefore, I sought permission from IRB to change the sample size for this study to six to 10 participants. I also sought permission to remove the criteria of high school administrators for a more purposive sample that would allow me to more thoroughly investigate the experiences and viewpoints of school administrators to answer the RQs in this study.

A total of nine school administrators responded to the invitation to volunteer for this study. Two of the potential participants did not follow through with scheduling an interview. Seven of the potential participants followed through with scheduling an interview. One participant was a no-show and did not respond to the invitation to reschedule. Finally, six participants completed an interview via the Zoom virtual platform. I used Zoom to audio record each interview and I downloaded each recording to my password-protected computer.

### **Instrumentation**

The data collection instrument for this study was an interview guide that consisted of 16 open-ended questions regarding school administrators' perspectives on their experiences, worldviews, and the meaning they place on their experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The interview questions included in the interview guide aligned with the three RQs in this study and were adapted from the Disciplinary Practices Survey (DPS) and themes from the literature review. Skiba and Edl (2004) developed the DPS to assess principals' attitudes toward school discipline. According to Skiba and Edl, the DPS is a good measure for research with strong reliability ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ). Its performance supported the use of this survey to frame the interview questions for this study. Skiba and Edl, the authors, granted permission for me to use the DPS in this dissertation (see Appendix A).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) informed that qualitative research often encompasses interview questions that are open-ended and non-structured in nature. For this qualitative study, semistructured interviews were conducted with principals and

assistant principals regarding their perspectives on the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality. Potential participants were informed that they would participate in one 30-min interview via Zoom (camera off) or phone that would be audio-recorded. Prior to agreeing to participate in this study, potential participants received a sample of the interview questions and were informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded via Zoom. Additionally, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) alongside Moser and Korstjens (2018) asserted that qualitative researchers may utilize an interview guide to list the questions that the researcher will ask each participant. For this study, each interview question from the interview guide was posted in the chat section of the video platform to provide participants with an opportunity to view each question before answering. Table 1 shows the alignment between the RQs and the interview questions.

**Table 1***Alignment of the Research Questions to the Interview Questions*

Research question	Interview question
RQ1. What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives regarding the issues that influence discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities?	1. Tell me about your experiences with disciplinary regulations for students with disabilities.
	2. Please describe any challenges you experienced when disciplining students with disabilities who are African American.
	3. What is your perspective on teachers at this school being adequately trained to handle problems of misbehavior and discipline for students with disabilities?
	4. What is your perspective on students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds having different emotional and behavioral needs?
	5. What is your perspective about zero tolerance policies and the impact that they have on disciplinary consequences for students with disabilities?
	6. Based on your experiences, what are some of the issues that appear to lead to discipline disproportionality?
RQ2. What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives about using exclusionary practices to discipline students?	7. What are your experiences with exclusionary (suspension, expulsion) discipline practices impacting academic achievement for students with disabilities?
	8. What are some of the behavior infractions that most frequently result in exclusionary discipline consequences for African American students with disabilities?
	9. What is your perspective on suspension as the only option for disciplining disruptive students?
	10. What is your perspective on in-school suspension as a viable alternative to out-of-school suspension?
	11. What is your perspective regarding suspension and expulsion as being unfair to students with disabilities from certain racial/ethnic backgrounds?
	12. What is your perception of utilizing restorative practices to deal with discipline issues as an alternative to exclusionary discipline?
RQ3. What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives about using equal practices for all students when making decisions about	13. Describe your experiences as an administrator with getting to know students on an individual basis.
	14. What is your perspective on disciplinary consequences being scaled in proportion to the severity of the problem behavior?
	15. What is your perspective on using culturally responsive practices when disciplining students?
	16. What additional resources are needed to increase this school's capacity to reduce and prevent troublesome behaviors that are dealt with using exclusionary discipline practices?

*Note.* RQ = research question.

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

There were some variations in the recruitment and participation procedures in this study. Initially, I intended to partner with school districts and collect data from 10-12 high school administrators. However, due to recruitment challenges, I met with Walden University's IRB to engage in further discussion. Qualitative studies generally include smaller, purposive samples that allow the researcher to investigate the experiences and viewpoints of participants more thoroughly (Dworkin, 2012; Merriam, 2002; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Therefore, I sought permission from the IRB to change the sample size to six to 10 participants and to remove the criteria of high school administrators for a more purposive sample that would allow me to more thoroughly investigate the experiences and viewpoints of school administrators to answer the RQs in this study. I also sought permission to seek out potential participants through public school websites and by posting an informational flyer on social media as a secondary method. Last, I requested permission to offer participants a \$40 Visa gift card as a token of appreciation.

On July 11, 2023, I received approval from Walden University's IRB (no. 01-06-23-0089823) to conduct the study with the requested procedure changes. I recruited school administrators who were principals or assistant principals with experience handling discipline issues and assigning disciplinary consequences. I used the public websites of school districts in a southeastern state to obtain email addresses for potential participants (principals and assistant principals). I emailed potential participants a letter explaining the purpose of the study, criteria for participation, study procedures, sample of the RQs, and informed consent. Potential participants replied with the statement "I

consent” within 14 days if they were interested in participating in the study. Potential participants could also consent to participation and schedule an interview via a Google Drive link provided on the invitation and the informed consent. Once participants selected the interview date and time that worked best for their schedule, they received an individual link via email to join the interview via Zoom for the designated date and time.

Nine school administrators responded to the invitation to volunteer for this study (see Appendix C). Two of the potential participants expressed interest, but they did not follow through with scheduling an interview. Seven potential participants followed through with scheduling an interview. However, one of the participants was a no-show and did not respond to the invitation to reschedule. Finally, six school administrators volunteered to participate, scheduled an interview, and completed an interview via the Zoom virtual platform.

For this study, I conducted in-depth, semistructured virtual interviews via Zoom with school administrators who work in two school districts that demonstrated discipline disproportionality in a large southeastern state and school administrators who work in school districts in a large southeastern state that did not demonstrate discipline disproportionality (Dworkin, 2012; Guest et al., 2006; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Before participating in this study, I informed potential participants that they would participate in one 30-minute audio-recorded interview via Zoom with their camera off. Accordingly, Merriam and Tisdell (2016), alongside Moser and Korstjens (2018), asserted that qualitative researchers may utilize an interview guide to list the questions that the researcher will ask each participant. In this study, each of the 16 interview questions from

the interview guide was posted in the chat section of the Zoom platform to provide participants with an opportunity to view each question before answering. At the end of the interviews, I completed member checks that lasted at most 10 min. After each interview, I thanked each volunteer for their participation and offered a \$40 gift card as a token of appreciation. Then, I downloaded each recording to a password-protected computer.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I maintained the security of the data I collected for this study, which I stored on my personal password-protected computer. Interview data were first transcribed in the Zoom virtual platform. Next, the raw data transcripts were uploaded into NVivo transcription for further review and to clean the transcripts. Cleaned transcripts were then unloaded into ATLAS.ti, which was used to store, organize, and analyze the interview data collected from the participants in this study. Data analysis consisted of the following: a. reading and review of interview transcripts, b. listening to audio recordings of interviews, and c. reviewing information in the researcher's reflective notes. Open coding with thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Amankwaa, 2016) described trustworthiness as a means of establishing a study's significance and worth. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Connelly, 2016) noted four dimensions of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Further, Kornbluh (2015) discussed that the goal of the qualitative researcher is to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena by



exploring participants' worldviews and perceptions of lived experiences. The identified gap in research for this study is the perspectives of school administrators on the issues leading to disproportionality. In this study, I examined the perspectives of school principals and assistant principals about the issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities to address the gap in research and establish trustworthiness. To establish trustworthiness for this study I implemented five techniques—(a) peer debriefing, (b) reflective journaling, (c) member-checking, (d) triangulation, and (e) audit trail—to ensure alignment with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four dimensions of trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

Connelly (2016) asserted that establishing credibility in qualitative research may involve meeting with participants, observing the environment, peer debriefing, member-checking, and reflective journaling. For this study, I conducted individual interviews with school administrators who had experience handling discipline issues and assigning discipline consequences. The interviews involved asking open-ended questions to acquire in-depth responses about the participants' experiences, perceptions, ideas, and knowledge (Patton, 2015). I also implemented member-checking and reflective notes to establish credibility (Connelly, 2016). Before agreeing to participate in this study, I informed participants that the interviews would be audio-recorded to accurately document their responses to the RQs. At the start of each interview, I reminded participants of the audio recording and to turn off their cameras before I pressed the record button in the Zoom platform. I implemented reflective journaling by taking notes during each interview to

reflect on my experience (Kornbluh, 2015). After each interview, I utilized peer debriefing to thank participants for participating and inform them of the next steps in the research process. I completed a brief member check, which lasted at most 10 min, to share interpretations and obtain participant feedback. The member checks also provided an opportunity to answer questions from the participants and validate responses.

### **Transferability**

Transferability in qualitative research means study results can be applied to similar situations over time (Merriam, 2015). Additionally, in qualitative research information collected from participants must be very detailed and reflective of participants responses (Connelly, 2016). Exploring the perspectives of school administrators who make decisions about discipline practice was critical to obtaining information relevant to the topic in this study (Connelly, 2016; Merriam, 2015). Therefore, to increase transferability in this study, purposeful sampling was used to recruit administrators who were a principal or an assistant principal with experience handling discipline issues in a southeastern state. I interviewed school administrators from two school districts in the state for this study. Participants consisted of administrators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, which helped to strengthen the transferability of the findings and offered insight into the issues and practices that may potentially impact instances of disproportionality among African American students with disabilities.

## **Dependability**

The researcher of a qualitative study must ensure that the findings and information presented reflect the participants' perspectives. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), dependability describes a study's ability to produce results that are dependable, trackable, and able to provide answers to the RQs in the study. To establish dependability, I audio-recorded one-on-one interviews with participants in Zoom and generated transcripts of the interviews. I uploaded the transcripts to Nvivo for further transcription and review. I reviewed the transcripts several times and finally generated a clean transcript of each participant's responses. Each cleaned data transcript was then uploaded to ATLAS.ti for data analysis.

Creswell and Poth (2018) posited that dependability in a study can be managed through triangulation, which involves utilizing multiple sources to substantiate information and findings. Triangulation was established in this study through interviews with participants, review of discipline data at the state and federal levels, and reading scholarly journals. When establishing dependability, it is also critical that the processes and procedures used for collecting data are clearly defined and detailed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This study's processes and procedures were submitted to the Walden University IRB prior to conducting research. After a series of IRB reviews and researcher requests for changes in procedures, the final processes and procedures for this research study were approved by the university's IRB on July 11, 2023. After receiving approval to conduct research, I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants and I emailed them

a formal invitation and informed consent outlining the processes and procedures of this research study.

### **Confirmability**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), confirmability describes the accuracy in reporting findings that are consistent with the information researched and the responses of the participants in the study. Reporting the findings of a study to only the information discovered ensures that the study results are not based on the perspectives or biases of the researcher. Connelly (2016) purported that the researcher may utilize peer-debriefing and member checks to minimize researcher bias and help establish confirmability.

Furthermore, Connelly (2016) recommended the researcher document any personal biases recognized throughout the research process. As the researcher of this study, I implemented the following actions to strengthen confirmability: (a) collected data from multiple sources, (b) reflected on my personal perspectives through journaling, (c) peer-debriefed with participants at the conclusion of interviews (d) conducted multiple reviews of interview transcripts, and (e) used ATLAS.ti to code participants data to identify relevant and recurring themes. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Prior to conducting interviews for this study, I submitted a request to the IRB of Walden University, as human subjects are the participants in this study. My initial request to conduct research included seeking the perspectives of high school administrators only. Upon receiving approval to conduct research from the Walden University IRB (no. 01-06-23-0089823) on March 24, 2023, I began data collection for this study. During the

data collection process, I experienced recruitment challenges with securing volunteers to participate in this study. I consulted with my dissertation committee Chair, met with IRB staff, and submitted a request to the Walden University IRB for a change in procedures. This change in procedures included the removal of the term high school from the participants, recruitment via public websites and social media, the development of a research flyer, and a token of appreciation for participating in the study. My request for a change in procedures was approved by the Walden University IRB on July 11, 2023, and I resumed collecting data for this study.

Participants were informed that participation is voluntary and that no compensation would be provided for participation in this study. Participants were emailed an invitation letter (see Appendix C) and the informed consent form prior to deciding to participate in the study. Participants were given a choice to participate via a virtual interview on Zoom with the camera off or a telephone interview. Participants were also informed prior to participation that the interviews would be audio-recorded. Upon completion of the interview, participants received a letter of thanks for participation in the study and were offered a VISA Gift card as a token of appreciation. The participants in this study will receive a link to a cloud drive to access the final dissertation study. Per Walden University guidelines, 5 years from the date of this study, all data on the my password-protected computer and the cloud drive will be permanently deleted.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I provided an overview of the research procedures used in the methodology of this study. In this chapter, I introduced the reader to the research setting,

reviewed the demographics of the research site, and discussed the procedures for obtaining permission to conduct research. Chapter 3 of this study also included information about participant selection, instrumentation, and recruitment of participants. Additionally, I provided an overview of the procedures for gathering data and analyzing the data collected. Finally, in this chapter, I discussed approaches to ensure trustworthiness, minimize threats to validity, and steps to implement ethical procedures throughout this study. In Chapter 4, I provide a brief introduction of the purpose and RQs for this study. Next, I include a summary of the setting, data collection, data analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine school administrators' perspectives on the practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities in a large southeastern state. I conducted this study to gain more insight into the issues that influence administrators' disciplinary practices and why discipline disproportionality persists. The results of this study may promote positive social change by informing education leaders of systemic issues that impact discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities and other student groups impacted by discipline disparities.

RQ1: What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives regarding the issues that influence discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities?

RQ2: What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives about using exclusionary practices to discipline students?

RQ3: What are principals' and assistant principals' perspectives about using equal practices for all students when making decisions about disciplinary consequences?

This chapter includes information about the study's setting, the data collection process, an analysis of the data collected, the study's results, evidence of trustworthiness, and an overall summary.

### **Setting**

Several empirical studies have indicated that discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities is prevalent in a large southeastern state

(Steed & Weingarten, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020a; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). The setting for this study was a large southern state and 2 school districts within this state. Participants were informed prior to participation that their name and school district would not be included in the results or final study to maintain confidentiality.

### **Demographics**

This study included two groups of school administrators. The participants in Group 1 consisted of school administrators who work in the two school districts included in this study that demonstrated discipline disproportionality in a large southeastern state based on data from the state's 2018 annual summary report. The participants in Group 2 consisted of school administrators who worked in school districts that did not demonstrate discipline disproportionality in a southeastern state based on the 2018 state annual summary report. This facet allowed me to obtain a broader perspective of school administrators' experiences, similarities, and differences in perceptions about discipline disproportionality, which may have impacted the findings of this research study. Due to the confidential nature of this study, the names of the participants and school districts were not included in this study or its results. Table 2 shows the demographics of the participants in this study.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics*

Participant and district	Discipline disproportionality in participant's school district	Role	School level
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P1, D1	Yes	Assistant principal	High
P2, D2	Yes	Assistant principal	Middle
P5, D1	Yes	Principal	Elementary
P3	No	Assistant principal	Elementary
P4	No	Principal	Elementary
P6	No	Assistant principal	Middle

### **Data Collection**

I received my final Walden University IRB approval on July 11, 2023, to seek out potential participants for this study. After receiving approval to conduct research, I identified school administrators by perusing public school websites in a southeastern state. I collected the email addresses of principals and assistant principals and emailed potential participants the IRB's approved invitation or research flyer. Potential participants received a letter explaining the purpose of the study, criteria for participation, study procedures, a sample of the interview questions, and informed consent. Potential participants were asked to reply with the statement "I consent" within 14 days if they were interested in participating in the study. Potential participants also had the option to consent to participation and schedule an interview via a Google Drive link provided on the invitation and the informed consent form.

Once the participant selected the interview date and time that worked best for their schedule, participants received an individual link to join the interview via a virtual platform (Zoom) for the designated date and time. Nine administrators responded to the invitation. Seven of the potential participants followed through with scheduling an interview. Two of the potential participants did not follow through with scheduling an interview. One participant was a no-show and did not respond to the invitation to reschedule. Finally, six participants completed an interview via the Zoom virtual

platform. I used Zoom to record each interview and I downloaded each recording to my password-protected computer.

The data gathered in this study was collected from a total of six school administrators with experience handling discipline and assigning disciplinary consequences for students with disabilities. The participants in this study were divided into two groups. Group 1 consisted of school administrators from two school districts in a southeastern state that demonstrated discipline disproportionality. Group 2 consisted of school administrators from school districts in a southeastern state that did not demonstrate discipline disproportionality. Due to the confidential nature of this study, participant names and the school district they worked in were not included in this study or its results.

The interviews for this study were conducted via videoconferencing platform (Zoom) between April 20, 2023, and August 8, 2023. Before beginning the interviews, I thanked the participants for volunteering to participate in the study. Participants were reminded to keep their cameras off and that the interview would be audio-recorded. Participants were informed that each interview question would be read out loud and placed in the chat for them to review before answering. At the end of the interviews, I completed member checks with participants to share interpretations and feedback, which lasted no more than 10 min. The member checks also provided an opportunity to answer any questions from the participants and validate responses to the items on the interview guide. Before exiting the Zoom platform, I thanked the participants again for participating in the study.

There were some variations to the data collection plan for this study. Originally, I intended to collect data from high school administrators working in two southeastern school districts (D1 and D2) that demonstrated discipline disproportionality. However, with IRB approval I had to make an adjustment to the participant pool due to recruitment challenges. One participant from D1 scheduled an interview, but was a no-show, and did not respond to the invitation to reschedule. Two potential participants, one from D1 and one from D2 who expressed interest in participating in the study, did not follow through with scheduling an interview. These participants were replaced with school administrators from a southeastern state who work in school districts that did not demonstrate discipline disproportionality. These administrators met the criteria for participation, responded to the research invitation, and agreed to participate in the study.

In this study, I collected data from a total of six school administrators with experience handling discipline and assigning disciplinary consequences for students with disabilities. The participants in this study were divided into two groups. Group 1 consisted of school administrators from two school districts in a southeastern state that demonstrated discipline disproportionality. Group 2 consisted of school administrators from school districts in a southeastern state that did not demonstrate discipline disproportionality. Due to the confidential nature of this study, participant names and the school district they worked in were not included in this study or its results. I downloaded each recording to my password-protected computer and uploaded data to my password-protected accounts in Nvivo and ATLAS.ti for further transcription and data analysis. For

this study, I intended to collect data from six to 10 participants, however, I was able to reach data saturation after six interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study consisted of a. reading and review of raw data interview transcripts, b. listening to audio recordings of interviews, c. re-reading transcripts, d. cleaning transcripts, and reviewing reflective notes. After each interview, the audio recording and transcript from the Zoom platform were uploaded to the researcher's password-protected computer and organized according to the completion date.

1. I read the raw data transcript from Zoom line by line and reflected on the information provided by the participant.
2. Next, I listened to the Zoom audio recording to better understand the participant's perspective.
3. Then, I uploaded the raw data transcript into NVivo Transcription to clean up the data. Once the interviews were transcribed in NVivo, I reviewed the transcripts again, reviewed reflective notes, and corrected words that were misspelled or misrepresented by the AI transcription in NVivo.
4. Finally, I uploaded the cleaned transcripts to ATLAS.ti to begin coding.

For this study, I used open coding with thematic analysis to analyze the data collected from interview transcripts to answer the RQs. I analyzed interview data for participants to identify emergent themes. I also analyzed data for Group 1 and Group 2 to identify emergent themes. I used ATLAS.ti to store, organize, and analyze the data collected from participants. All data for this study are stored on my password-protected

computer and in password-protected ATLAS.ti. The results of this study are stored in a password-protected cloud drive. After 5 years from the date of the study, all data on my computer and the cloud drive will be placed in the trash bin and permanently deleted.

During the open coding process, I uploaded the transcribed interview data into ATLAS.ti, which generated 402 codes. I reviewed the codes several times and then grouped them into subcode categories, breaking the 402 codes down to 106. I generated a word frequency cloud in ATLAS.ti to identify patterns of words and phrases that were the most prevalent and frequently occurring keywords. Next, I used axial coding to compare the code categories and place codes into groups. Then, I highlighted the codes with various colors to identify patterns and emerging themes. I generated memos in ATLAS.ti to organize participants' quotes and perspectives to answer the RQs. Based on the data analyzed, the following themes emerged:

## **Results**

The Results section includes discussion of the themes that emerged from the data analysis process. School administrators were asked 16 interview questions related to the three RQs in this study. The responses are organized by the participant group, RQ, and the themes that emerged from the data collected.

### **Group 1**

#### ***Research Question 1***

**Theme 1: Lack of Mechanisms for Building Relationships with Students and Parents to Meet Student's Needs.** Participating administrators in Group1 emphasized the importance of building relationships with students and understanding students' needs

before resorting to suspension. They suggested that school leaders need to work towards building relationships with students and parents to keep the lines of communication open between home and school. School administrators in Group 1 also suggested that administrators who are aware of students' issues in the home environment and school setting have a better understanding of the issues that may influence a student's behavior. This group expressed that ongoing communication with parents and daily interactions with students in the school environment positively impact student behavior and overall academic performance. For example, P5 stated, "One thing that I do that I love to do, I stand in the hallway each morning. That's my morning duty, is to greet students. I'm in the main hallway, so I get to see students coming in from buses as well as our car riders. I get to see them every morning. I try to call them by name, but give them high fives, hugs, whatever they need."

The participants in Group 1 expressed that collaboration and teamwork among school staff are essential in preventing behavior infractions, especially when coupled with culturally responsive practices behavior management, and understanding the function of behavior. Participants in this group shared the perspective that positive daily interactions with students help create a positive school climate and culture. P2 highlighted that building relationships and understanding students' disabilities, triggers, and preferences are crucial components of being an effective administrator. P1 explained,

It is important get to know the student, get to know their home life and things, because a lot of their behaviors are a result of what they're experiencing outside of the classroom. And we can't take things personally. When we take things

personal. We look at things Well, just because he did this, we're going to automatically suspend him or automatically do this.

P2 exclaimed that sometimes disciplinary practices may be unfair and that male and female students are treated differently when they misbehave. P5 voiced the perspective that discipline disproportionality may occur when administrators are not familiar with students. Therefore, building relationships with students is an essential component to understanding student's needs in the school environment.

**Theme 2: Lack of Cultural Understanding and Knowledge of Different Ethnicities and Backgrounds.** The participants in Group 1 shared similar viewpoints regarding the importance of cultural understanding when handling discipline and assigning disciplinary consequences. Participants emphasized that cultural norms, values, and expectations in the home can impact how a student behaves in school. They shared that school administrators must address the diverse needs of students from different ethnicities and backgrounds before moving straight to suspension for students with disabilities. Participants voiced that understanding different cultural backgrounds can have a positive impact on communication and interactions between staff and students. P2 added, "I try to you know, get out there, and learn all of them, as many of them as much as possible. P5 stated, "I really think a lot of times it happens with administrators who are not familiar with students of various ethnicities, various backgrounds. It's just different for them. And their perceptions of those students with ethnicities or their disabilities may impact the way that they issue consequences." P1 shared, "I think it's important to build an environment of understanding and making sure that there is social tolerance, not only

social tolerance, but, you know, sometimes different ethnicities or races have different religions backgrounds.” P5 added, “the needs of the Hispanic community are certainly different than those of the African American community and those of Caucasian communities.”

P5 also shared that it is important for administrators to reach out to other schools within the district to collaborate on various methods for handling discipline issues. P5 also stated, “I think culturally responsive training, restorative practices, giving people some other options, helping people understand that there are some other options for consequences.” P2 suggested that school administrators as well as all employees in the school building should receive social justice and disability awareness training to learn how to best handle behavior issues for students with disabilities. Similarly, P2 also emphasized that proper training is needed throughout the school year because some staff do not know how to approach students with disabilities. Further, P1 emphasized the importance of building an environment of understanding of cultural backgrounds and making it a priority that the school environment is welcoming for all students. Overall, each school administrator interviewed pointed out their concerns and desire for more training at their schools and throughout their school district several times during the school year.

### **Theme 3: Training for Administrators, Teachers, and Other School Staff.**

Participating administrators in Group 1 suggested that training administrators, teachers, and other school staff is essential to managing behavior and disciplinary practices in schools. However, administrators in Group 1 shared differing perspectives on training needs for their schools. P1 expressed that teachers in their school are trained well and that



they do not have a lot of problems with discipline among students with disabilities or African American students with disabilities. P5 stated, “I think our district does a really good job of trying to prepare teachers.” P5 also shared that administrators and teachers receive training at the beginning of the school year. P5 also informed that crisis prevention intervention training for teachers and administrators is provided with yearly refreshers. Likewise, P2 suggested that all staff in a school should receive training on how to work with students with disabilities. P2 further expressed that administrators and teachers need training on the nature of a disability and how the disability (e.g., emotional behavior disorder and tic syndrome) impacts the student’s behavior.

Although administrators in this group acknowledged that their school districts provide training on behavior and discipline, they also identified areas of concern. P5 explained that administrators need district support to allocate resources, provide training, and collaborate with other school administrators. P2 emphasized experiencing biased or unfair disciplining practices for students with disabilities, such as when male students face more harsh consequences than their female peers for the same behavior infraction, which aligns with the trajectory of the DisCrit framework. P2 further suggested that exclusionary discipline and discipline disproportionality can occur when administrators have limited knowledge about the nature of a student’s disability.

Participants were asked what additional resources are needed to increase this school’s capacity to reduce and prevent troublesome behaviors that are dealt with using exclusionary discipline practices. P5 exclaimed,

I think just training, for just providing people with knowledge. I think culturally responsive training, restorative practices, giving people some other options, helping people understand that there are some other options for consequences and getting students when they exhibit types of behaviors.

P2 stated, “We need more of the district level support.” P5 stated,

I don’t know if it will directly impact the exclusionary consequences, but I think having a school-based therapist or somebody who can possibly come in, you know, a couple of days out of the week and build a caseload of students who may be at risk socially or emotionally, and then giving them a safe space to talk about things that may be going on.

P5’s response suggests a need for social-emotional support for students provided by trained professionals.

#### **Theme 4: Inconsistent Implementation of Individualized Education**

**Programs and Behavior Intervention Plans.** Participants in Group 1 expressed the importance of being familiar with a student’s IEP and making sure students receive all services included in the IEP. Based on the perspectives of these administrators, not implementing an IEP with fidelity may have an undesirable impact on students’ behavior as well as overuse of suspension when disciplining students with disabilities. P1 highlighted that administrators must ensure IEPs are implemented for students with disabilities and that accommodations are delivered as listed in the IEP. P2 voiced that administrators must be mindful of the type of disability a student has when assigning a disciplinary consequence and look to the IEP and accommodations before sending

students home. Similarly, P2 emphasized that administrators must ensure they are familiar with a student's IEP and the disciplinary regulations that must be followed, such as not suspending students with disabilities for more than 10 days, which impacts discipline disproportionality. P1 emphasized that functional behavior assessments and BIPs provide students with disabilities the IEP support required to manage chronic behavior. Moreover, P1 and P5 recommended that administrators should seek guidance from other administrators, schools, and districts when considering disciplinary actions.

**Theme 5: Limited Delivery of Proactive Student Support to Address Students' Social and Emotional Needs.** The participants in Group 1 suggested that schools need more student support delivery to address the social and emotional needs of students with disabilities. Participants highlighted that providing support to students before resorting to suspension or expulsion impacts student behavior and the disciplinary practices used to deal with discipline issues. Participants also reported a need for training, particularly in areas such as culturally responsive practices and understanding the function of student behavior. Participating administrators in this group recommended schools do more to provide students with school-based therapy and behavior plans to help manage behaviors that administrators may have otherwise dealt with via exclusionary discipline practices.

There was a common perspective among the participants that social and emotional barriers impact student behavior discipline and that schools must work to deliver student supports to address students' social and emotional needs. P1 suggested,

I think having a school-based therapist or somebody who can possibly come in, you know, a couple of days out of the week and build a caseload of students who may be at risk socially or emotionally, and then giving them a safe space to talk about things that may be going on.

P5 highlighted the importance of getting the behavior specialist involved to make sure as many supports as necessary are provided to make sure a student is successful and using suspension as a last resort.

### ***Research Question 2***

**Theme 6: Exclusionary Practices That Negatively Impact Students with Disabilities.** All participants in Group 1 expressed that exclusionary discipline consequences for students with disabilities is not a preferred disciplinary practice. The consensus among participants was that student with disabilities need to be in school and that exclusionary practices negatively impact school attendance and academics for this student group. P1 stated, “Our goal is to make sure our students get instruction and they can only get instruction if they remain in the classroom.” P1 also added I’m all for giving alternative options to discipline if it fits.” P2 shared that sometimes students with disabilities receive in-school suspension, which helps to keep students in the school building instead of sitting at home with no academic support. P5 stated, “We have local special education administrators assigned to our schools and so they are very active and very helpful in providing guidance as it relates to providing discipline with students with disabilities.” P2 pointed out that when a child misbehaves or acts up, administrators need

to take time to figure out why is the student is acting out instead of automatically jumping to suspension.

**Theme 7: Restorative Practices Are an Alternative to Suspension.** All participants in Group 1 highlighted that implementing restorative practices was a preferred alternative to suspension when disciplining students with disabilities. Participants expressed the importance of fairness in disciplinary practices and suggested restorative practices as an opportunity to remediate undesired behavior and encourage expected behavior. Participants expressed that restorative practices are most effective when staff are adequately trained in restorative practices and when staff implement these practices consistently. P2 shared, “I wish that we would have a PL throughout the district for all of the teachers and administration team to teach, them restorative practices.” P2 added that restorative practice provides an opportunity to restore behaviors.

### ***Research Question 3***

**Theme 8: Disciplinary Consequences Should Be Equitable and Individualized.** Although there was a shared perspective among administrators in Group 1 that all disciplinary consequences should be equal among students, administrators expressed that disciplinary consequences may look different for some students with disabilities. Participants shared a common perspective that schools should have discipline procedures and policies that everyone follows. Participants also shared a common perspective that students with disabilities may require individualized disciplinary consequences based on the nature of their disabilities and the content of their IEP or BIP. P2 emphasized the need to be mindful of the type of disability students have when

applying disciplinary regulations. P1 expressed that administrators have to look at whatever the situation is and determine if that student with a disability was receiving the support and accommodations as outlined in the IEP, which could impact the assignment of individualized discipline consequences for the student.

P5 stated, “We have to be cognizant of the different needs that students have, and a lot of times, especially if you have a nonverbal autistic student, you can’t penalize them as you would a student who, let’s say, may have an emotional behavior disorder.” P5 explained that discipline practices for students with disabilities should be determined on a case-by-case basis and that the student’s needs should aid administrators in making decisions about discipline consequences. P5 also stressed, “We really have to look at the student and the situation and issue a consequence accordingly.”

**Theme 9: Zero-Tolerance Policies Are Not Effective for Some Students With Disabilities.** Participants in Group 1 had similar perspectives on the use of zero-tolerance policies for students with disabilities. Participants emphasized that zero-tolerance policies should apply to issues that threaten student safety. Yet, there was also a consensus that zero-tolerance policies are not effective for some students with disabilities. Participants expressed that zero-tolerance policies should not be used for minor offenses. P1 expressed that a zero-tolerance policy should not be used to discipline infractions such as skipping class or other attendance issues. P1 also stated: “I think zero tolerance policy should adhere or relate to violations that deal with anything that is a hindrance to student safety, i.e., drugs, alcohol, weapons, things of that nature.” When asked the question about zero tolerance policies, P2 stated, “I think zero tolerance policies are not very

effective.” Similarly, P2 and P5 emphasized that zero-tolerance policies are not effective practices when disciplining students with disabilities and should be based on the student’s area of disability, particularly when the student has eligibility in the category of emotional and behavioral disorder in comparison to eligibility for autism spectrum disorder. P5 shared, “Yeah, I just really think there are a lot of things that need to be taken into consideration before issuing a consequence.

## **Group 2**

### ***Research Question 1***

**Theme 1: Lack of Mechanisms for Building Relationships With Students and Parents to Meet Student’s Needs.** The participants in Group 2 stressed that the absence of mechanisms for building relationships with students and parents can have an impact on how student’s might be disciplined in the school environment. Participants highlighted their experiences with parents not being familiar with discipline policies in the school and administrators needing to better understand a student’s disability as an issue that impacts exclusionary discipline. Participants suggested that building relationships with parents may help address misconceptions about disciplinary practices and behavior expectations in the school setting. Participants also shared their experiences related to meeting the needs of students with disabilities and how relationship building impacts discipline disproportionality.

P4 shared that they have experienced issues of overrepresentation of suspensions for students with disabilities, particularly African American students. P3 emphasized that being an effective administrator involves building relationships with students and helps

administrators with understanding students' disabilities, triggers, and preferences. P4 mentioned experiencing challenges they face with parents thinking their special needs child is exempt from disciplinary actions, but also shared that they work with parents at their school to educate them on the importance of adhering to the code of conduct. Similarly, P6 shared having experienced parents advocating for disciplinary exceptions based on their child's exceptionality when administrators may not be familiar with a student's disability. P3 emphasized that the absence of mechanisms for building relationships with students

can make or break you as an administrator, so you have to spend time getting to know all of your SWD [student with disability] students and knowing what their disabilities are, what their triggers are, what they like, what they dislike, and kind of using that as a bridge to kind of keep everybody calm. Just really, you know, building a relationship.

**Theme 2: Lack of Cultural Responsiveness and Knowledge of Different Ethnicities and Backgrounds.** Participants in Group 2 conveyed that administrators and teachers must be culturally responsive to the needs of their students. P6 acknowledged experiencing situations where factors such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status have had an impact on suspension rates. P3 expressed that it is important to take a look at culturally responsive practices and find ways to connect with students and establish rapport with them. P3 also explained, "In many instances, we found that students who act out the most are those students who feel a sense of disconnection from their teachers versus those students who find that even though they may act out at times, they feel that



their teachers truly do care about them and consequently their teachers find ways to try to reach them at different levels.” P3 further explained “We found that those students have a greater opportunity for success and or they are more likely not to repeat the same behaviors that we have seen initially.” P4 highlighted that there is a need for more training and support for teachers to be culturally responsive towards students.

P6, who shared her experiences working in a large district, commented that African American students needed more equitable support. P6 also expressed, “My job as an administrator is to be a school climate and culture change agent, so I'm very big on trying to build a positive culture for students where they love to come to school, not like, but I want them to fall in love with coming to school and knowing that the support is there for them, no matter what area they may fall in.” P4 stated, I think in just the culturally responsive lands and even within a school that's predominantly African American, that may have a staff that mirrors the same ethnicity as the students, just teachers not being fully equipped at times with understanding the full gamut and scope of what it means to be a culturally responsive educator. And so with that, that comes the responsibility of the school leaders, just making sure that we are providing the necessary training and support to those students so that they do get the opportunity to have a teacher that is responsive, culturally responsive, rather to their needs, and that they really are actively trying to implement strategies and solutions that are not necessarily focused on the punitive actions of out-of-school suspension.

### **Theme 3: Training for Administrators, Teachers, and Other School Staff.**

Participating administrators in Group 2 shared similar perspectives about the importance

of training administrators, teachers, and other school staff in how to manage behavior in classrooms and in the school environment. P6 exclaimed that educators in their district are well-trained in disciplinary procedures for students and further went on to explain their experiences with providing training to teachers in the district. P6 explained their experiences as an assistant principal with training teachers on PBIS strategies and implementing the practices in the classroom. Interestingly, P3 suggested that more training is needed for inclusion teachers in the general education classroom to better support students with disabilities and reduce disruptive behaviors. P3 went on to say,

Teachers need to be trained in the proper strategies to use for de-escalation and planning properly for students with disabilities so that they can mitigate some of the behaviors that are happening in their class, because if they can engage the students, then you know, we'll have fewer behaviors.

P4 suggested making sure that your staff is fully trained around understanding the laws and expectations around how we handle discipline practices for students with disabilities. P4 further emphasized that administrators have the responsibility to ensure teachers are trained on restorative practices, cultural responsiveness, PBIS, and using suspension as a last resort. Administrators in this group emphasized the importance of ongoing training in their schools as well as training offered by their school district.

#### **Theme 4: Inconsistent Implementation of Individualized Education**

**Programs and Behavior Intervention Plans.** School administrators shared that not implementing IEPs and BIPs is an issue that can lead to discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities. All of the participants agreed that staff should be

knowledgeable of the services and accommodations in a student's IEP and that not implementing the IEP can impede the behavior of students with disabilities who have behavior challenges in school. P6 shared the perspective that

discipline disproportionality occurs when you have administrators that are just not equipped with the knowledge to navigate restorative practices and progressive discipline actions, therefore their first reaction as an administrator would be just to suspend the student.

P3 expressed that lack of IEP planning and engagement often leads to students acting out or being off task, which may be frustrating to the general education teacher, which may lead to discipline referrals and suspensions. P4 emphasized that "if a student has an eligibility which falls under any domain related to discipline, I do want to see some type of a behavior goal and or support plan for that particular student." P4 went further to say,

I want to make sure that teachers are informed, well informed and well versed in developing those behavior intervention plans so that if infractions occur, we have to make sure that the intervention is being applied to the student, the data is being collected, and all of those things are things are taken into consideration when a situation arises that might warrant a consequence of an out-of-school suspension.

Participants shared similar views regarding expectations for IEP and behavior plan implementation in schools. P4 emphasized the expectation that all teachers and staff in their building must be knowledgeable about IEPs and BIPs for students with disabilities. P6 stressed the importance of collaboration between school staff such as

ESOL and special education departments, to ensure effective communication about IEP services and the delivery of appropriate accommodations. P6 acknowledged experiencing issues with trying to get teachers to implement IEPs, especially for students with behavior challenges. P6 stated,

I think that if we did a better job of addressing IEPs and thoroughly reading them early you would not have this high, vast number of disproportionate students and my rationale for this is because many students commit offences or behavior infractions and they're truly either a. just not aware of school policy or b. it could be that the teachers are not really implementing or putting in those preventative measures within the classrooms to reduce those infractions.

**Theme 5: Limited Delivery of Proactive Student Support to Address**

**Students' Social and Emotional Needs.** Participants in Groups 2 highlighted that social and emotional issues can impact students' behavior and that students need access to student support as a proactive measure to deal with behaviors before there is a need for exclusionary discipline practices. P3 identified issues of poverty rates and homelessness playing a role in students' behavior and requiring social-emotional support. P4 suggested that schools make programmatic changes and provide more opportunities for students to engage in school activities. P6 suggested implementing a positive morning routine for students that is focused on building a positive school culture and providing support for all students. P6 also stressed the need for a comprehensive behavior management plan and collaboration among staff to prevent behavioral issues and keep students engaged in school. P6 stated,

I think that with special education students, especially with African American males, restorative practices and alternative measures to suspensions are not implemented enough on the front end and I really do think if schools were more towards being preventative and just working together as a team, they could reduce numbers of disproportionality.

P4 stated,

I really can't speak from different racial or ethnic backgrounds because I predominantly worked in minority schools that serve African American or Hispanic students and with a small population of students who are non-Black or White or multiracial, but the perspective I have in terms of the emotional and behavioral needs is I approach it from the perspective that we have to approach all students from a lens of social-emotional learning. So, we definitely implement practices at my school, such as PBIS and check-in systems, so that we can encourage the correct behavior.

### ***Research Question 2***

**Theme 6: Exclusionary Practices Negatively Impact Students With Disabilities.** Participants expressed that exclusionary discipline practices impact students with disabilities in unfavorable ways. Participants shared similar views that suggested suspension from school negatively impacts academic performance and achievement for students with disabilities. P6 shared, “I have seen many kids that have missed school, but each year they fall further and further behind, and the issue is not addressed.” P3 shared, “Any time a child is suspended, there is an impact to academics whether the child is

SWD [student with disability] or general ed.” P6 noted that when special education students are absent from school they are not receiving services and that over suspension can result into a situation where compensatory services have to be rendered because that child did not receive services or instruction.

P6 also stated, “I really do think in-school suspension needs to be designed for special education kids as a support system to acknowledge behavior, but also to hold accountability with instruction so that the student is still being served at all capacity.” P4 held the perspective that exclusionary discipline should not be the only consequence for handling disciplinary infractions. P4 stated, “I don't think that is the only option and research already shows that suspension is not necessary, it doesn't promote or help to change the behaviors.” P4 further stated,

My perspective is that we have to approach things from a restorative approach. I do believe that children deserve consequences, but I also believe that it is the responsibility of teachers to teach and reteach the expected behaviors that are most appropriate and that would best meet the needs of that particular student.

**Theme 7: Restorative Practices Are an Alternative to Suspension.** Participants highlighted that administrators and teachers need to use more restorative practices as an alternative to suspension. P3 informed that as an administrator they use alternative strategies like de-escalation, restorative practices, and social-emotional learning strategies to address disruptive behavior in their school. P4 explained their expectation for staff at their school to implement restorative approaches to behavior when disciplining students. P4 gave examples of how they as an administrator address behavior challenges

for students with disabilities, such as implementing positive interventions. P6 acknowledged that disproportionality in suspensions for students with disabilities is an issue in schools and recommended that restorative practices and other alternative measures to suspensions should be implemented more often to address behavior issues.

P6 expressed that suspensions should be implemented in a restorative manner that provides support and accountability for students while also ensuring that students with disabilities still receive instruction. P6 also shared the perspective that factors like race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are connected to suspension rates and stressed that restorative practices can help mitigate disproportionality. P4 expressed that restorative practices, as an alternative to suspension, are a very useful tool, stating “I think that it is definitely needed.” P4 added, “I think that when you provide training to your staff around restorative practices, it also helps to highlight some of the biases that teachers may have against students with disabilities that subsequently lends itself to teachers, particularly trying to identify students who need to be suspended when in fact they haven't really tried a different approach to addressing the behavior.”

### ***Research Question 3***

**Theme 8: Disciplinary Consequences Should Be Equitable and Individualized.** While school administrators agreed that disciplinary consequences should be equitable, they also believed that disciplinary practices for students with disabilities should be individualized and case-by-case. P4 suggested that discipline consequences should mirror the behavior infraction and that the disciplinary action

should consist of responsive practices for students with disabilities. P3 added the perspective that

discipline consequences depend on the circumstances surrounding the situation, and then you just have to handle it on a case-by-case basis, because sometimes children are triggered by adult behaviors, and you have to have a conversation with the adult, but you also have to have a conversation with the child about how they react to situations.

P6 exclaimed that exclusionary practices should not be used as a weapon to deny students access to special education services. P6 shared that school administrators must investigate incidents and address any triggers or issues that may contribute to student behavior before deciding on disciplinary consequences. However, P6 also emphasized the importance of administrators being culturally responsive and providing equity and fairness to general and special education students.

### **Theme 9: Zero-Tolerance Policies are Not Appropriate Disciplinary**

**Practices for Some Students With Disabilities.** Participating administrators in Group 2 expressed similarities and differences in their perspectives about zero-tolerance policies for students with disabilities. P4 stated, “I think that zero-tolerance policies are needed.” P4 went further to say,

We are living in an age where, you know, kids at all levels within the school system, K–12 [kindergarten through Grade 12], there can be some things that a student will do that would be considered egregious, and whether a student is



classified as being disabled or non-disabled, I think that zero tolerance policies are in place for the protection of the larger school community.

P3 expressed, “I don’t really agree with zero-tolerance policies, I think that you have to handle each case based on the circumstances surrounding it.” P3 further shared that a zero-tolerance policy for automatic suspension for behaviors such as fighting on the bus or on campus may not be appropriate for students with a disability in certain categories, even though they may have contributed to the behavior, which may seem unfair to a student who is not a student with a disability.

P6 held the perspective that zero-tolerance policies can be appropriate for some students with disabilities and not appropriate for other students with disabilities. P6 shared the perspective that zero-tolerance policies can be punitive for students with disabilities who may not fully understand or be aware of their actions. P6 also pointed out “that in some cases with zero-tolerance policies, it could be punitive towards students, especially if they are not cognitively aware of what they are doing, and you do have some kids that may be identified as special ed under a certain exceptionality, but they still are breaking school policy that has zero tolerance.” P6 stated, “Another thing is like with weapons, that one can become tricky because in this the district that I serve, you have the big three, so it’s like weapons, drugs, and there’s fighting, and we do know that with some special ed students that they can be triggered and that they can become volatile unfortunately in certain situations, but with weapons and drugs that would not have anything to do with their exceptionality to a certain extent, so I think, you know, again, it’s depending upon the student, the situation, and the exceptionality.”

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Connelly, 2016) outlined four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this study, I implemented a variety of techniques and strategies to establish trustworthiness.

#### **Credibility**

I conducted individual interviews with school administrators who had experience handling discipline issues and assigning disciplinary consequences to establish credibility (Connelly, 2016). Reflective journaling was done to take notes during each interview to reflect on experiences and address researcher biases (Kornbluh, 2015). Peer debriefing was used to thank participants for participating and inform them of the next steps in the research process. I used member checking after the interviews to share obtain participant feedback and check participant's responses for accuracy (Connelly, 2016). I journaled notes when needed based on feedback from the participants.

#### **Transferability**

Transferability in qualitative research means study results can be applied to similar situations over time (Merriam, 2015). Therefore, to increase transferability in this study, purposeful sampling was used to recruit school administrators who were a principal or an assistant principal with experience handling discipline issues in a southeastern state. Participants consisted of administrators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, which helped to strengthen the transferability of the findings of this study to any school level by offering insight into the issues and practices that may

potentially impact instances of disproportionality among African American students with disabilities. Additionally, this study consisted of administrators from two groups of administrators; school districts with discipline disproportionality and school districts that were not identified with discipline disproportionality. This facet allowed me to compare the differences and similarities in administrators' perspectives, which helped strengthen the relevance of the research findings to a broader range of school administrators.

### **Dependability**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), dependability describes a study's ability to produce results that are dependable, trackable, and able to provide answers to the RQs in the study. To establish dependability, I audio-recorded one-on-one interviews with participants and generated transcripts of the interviews. Creswell and Poth (2018) posited that dependability in a study can be managed through triangulation, which involves utilizing multiple sources to substantiate information and findings. Triangulation was established in this study through interviews with participants, review of discipline data at the state and federal levels, and reading scholarly journals.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability describes the accuracy in reporting findings that are consistent with the information researched and the responses of the participants in the study (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019). As the researcher of this study, I implemented the following actions to strengthen confirmability: (a) researched multiple sources, (b) reflective journaling, (c) peer-debriefing at the conclusion of interviews (d) multiple reviews of interview transcripts, and (e) used ATLAS.ti to code participants' data to

identify relevant and recurring themes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Reporting the findings of a study to only the information discovered ensures that the study results are not based on the perspectives or biases of the researcher.

### **Summary**

The principals and assistant principals in this study participated in audio-recorded one-on-one virtual interviews with the researcher that were conducted in Zoom with their cameras off. Member-checking was conducted at the conclusion of each interview to answer any questions from the participants and to review participants' responses for accuracy. Nine major themes emerged from the data in this research study. Chapter 5 of this study will consist of a brief overview of the study, interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine school administrators' perspectives on the discipline practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities in a large southeastern state. I conducted this study to gain more insight into the issues that influence discipline disproportionality and to compare the differences and similarities in administrators' perspectives. The participants selected for this study were school administrators who work in two school districts that demonstrated discipline disproportionality in a large southeastern state and school administrators who work in school districts in a large southeastern state that did not demonstrate discipline disproportionality. The criteria for participation was employment as a principal or assistant principal with experience handling discipline and assigning disciplinary consequences. School administrators participated in virtual, semistructured interviews with the researcher via Zoom. I used member checking to validate the participant's responses. Nine themes emerged from the data collected.

The findings from this study offer school districts strategies for increasing equity in discipline practices, alternatives to suspension, and the development of policies and procedures to better address lessening the discipline gap among African American students with disabilities. This chapter is organized by the RQs and the themes that emerged from the data. For RQ1, administrators conveyed that the absence of mechanisms for building relationships, lack of cultural understanding, limited training, inconsistent implementation of IEPs, and limited delivery of student support to address

social and emotional needs are issues that lead to discipline disproportionality among students with disabilities. The results from RQ2 indicated that school administrators perceive exclusionary discipline practices negatively impact students with disabilities and that restorative practices are a viable alternative to suspension. The results for RQ3 revealed that school administrators feel that disciplinary consequences should be equitable but individualized for students with disabilities and that zero-tolerance policies are not effective or appropriate for some students with disabilities. Chapter 5 of this study encompasses a brief overview, interpretation of the findings, study limitations, recommendations, implications, and conclusion.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

I developed the three RQs for this study to capture the perspectives of school administrators regarding the issues and practices that lead to discipline disproportionality among students with disabilities. Although this study focused on discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities in two school districts, the data collected from participants revealed concerns about discipline disproportionality among students with disabilities who are African American as well as students with disabilities in general. Nine major themes emerged from the data analysis process in this study. The themes that emerged from the data analysis were

- absence of mechanisms for building relationships with students and parents (Theme 1);
- lack of cultural understanding and knowledge of different ethnicities and backgrounds (Theme 2);

- the need for training for administrators, teachers, and school staff (Theme 3);
- inconsistent implementation of IEPs and behavior plans (Theme 4);
- limited proactive student support to address students' social and emotional needs (Theme 5);
- exclusionary practices negatively impact students with disabilities (Theme 6);
- restorative practices are an alternative to suspension (Theme 7);
- the need for disciplinary consequences that are equitable and individualized (Theme 8);
- zero-tolerance policies are not appropriate disciplinary practices for some students with disabilities (Theme 9).

The RQs in this study along with the emergent themes provided me with more insight into the issues that influence discipline disproportionality and helped me identify the differences and similarities in administrators' perspectives.

I analyzed the findings from this study based on the RQs, literature review, emergent themes, and the conceptual frameworks presented in this study. This study focused on the underpinnings of Furman's (2012) framework of social justice leadership, which looks at the inequities facing marginalized groups in education and the capacities administrators need to exemplify social justice leadership in schools. In this study, social justice leadership served as a guide for understanding how principals and assistant principals can "transform culture, curriculum, pedagogical practices, atmosphere, and schoolwide priorities such as disciplinary practices for students with disabilities" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 221). In this study, DisCrit was used as a secondary framework for

examining the perspectives of principals and assistant principals regarding issues that lead to discipline disproportionality and the decisions administrators make about disciplinary practices. I used DisCrit to understand how school administrators' experiences, ideas, and attitudes in society may shape individual perspectives about race, class, disability, racism, and ableism when disciplining African American students with disabilities (Annamma et al., 2018).

Finally, the findings in this chapter are organized by the RQs and the themes that emerged from the data collected. The findings of this study were shared with participants via individual Google Drive links specific to the participant only to maintain anonymity and protection of privacy.

### **Research Question 1**

#### ***Theme 1: Absence of Mechanisms for Building Relationships With Students and Parents to Meet Students' Needs***

Participants conveyed that the absence of mechanisms for building relationships, lack of cultural understanding, limited training, inconsistent implementation of IEPs, and limited delivery of student support to address social and emotional needs are issues that lead to discipline disproportionality among students with disabilities. With this thought in mind, Bornstein (2017) explained that school leaders in their efforts to enact social justice must consider the multifaceted issues that lead to disproportionality in schools. School administrators in Group 1 emphasized that they must build relationships and work with students to understand their needs before resorting to exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension. Similarly, administrators in Group 2 shared their experiences related



to meeting the needs of students with disabilities and highlighted that relationship building has a positive impact on reducing discipline disproportionality. Participants in Group 1 suggested that school leaders must work towards building relationships with students and parents to keep the lines of communication open between home and school. Participants in Group 1 also revealed that administrators who are aware of students' issues in the home environment and school setting have a better understanding of the issues that may influence a student's behavior. This group expressed that ongoing communication with parents and daily interactions with students in the school environment positively impact student behavior and overall academic performance.

Similarly, the participants in Group 2 stressed that the absence of mechanisms for building relationships with students and parents can impact how students might be disciplined in the school environment. Participating administrators in Group 2 highlighted their experiences with parents not being familiar with discipline policies in the school and administrators not understanding a student's disability as an issue that impacts exclusionary discipline. These participants also suggested that building relationships with parents may help address misconceptions about disciplinary practices and behavior expectations in the school setting.

***Theme 2: Lack of Cultural Understanding and Knowledge of Different Ethnicities and Backgrounds***

School administrators in this study identified that when school staff are culturally unaware and have limited knowledge of different ethnicities and backgrounds, misunderstanding students' behavior may trigger exclusionary discipline practices that

eventually lead to discipline disproportionality. 100% of participants cited that a lack of cultural awareness and knowledge of different ethnicities and backgrounds are issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities. According to Katz-Amey (2019), school leaders should consider strategies such as ongoing teacher professional development and training on cultural competence to help remedy disproportionality. Participating administrators in Group 1 shared similar viewpoints regarding the importance of cultural understanding when handling discipline and assigning disciplinary consequences. These participants emphasized that cultural norms, values, and expectations in the home impact how a student behaves in school; therefore, school administrators must address the diverse needs of students from different ethnicities and backgrounds before moving straight to suspension for students with disabilities. Participating administrators in Group 2 held similar perspectives about how awareness of different cultural backgrounds can positively impact communication and interactions between staff and students. Their perspectives reflected that school administrators should collaborate with colleagues on disciplinary issues and options for disciplinary consequences for students with disabilities.

Little and Welsh (2019) suggested that the perceptions held by teachers and administrators regarding behavior norms, discipline practices, and cultural differences may play a critical role in the assignment of exclusionary discipline that manifests into discipline disparities. Participants in Group 1 and Group 2 held a common perspective that collaboration and teamwork among school staff are essential in preventing behavior infractions, especially when combined with culturally responsive practices, behavior

management strategies, and understanding the function of behavior. According to Wang (2018), a principal's positioning determines how teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders interact in the school environment. Participants in both groups shared the perspective that positive daily interactions with students help create the positive school climate and culture needed to remedy discipline disproportionality among students with disabilities.

Moreover, the participants in Group 2 suggested that schools need more access to training about cultural competency to ensure that teachers and staff are culturally and socially aware of cultural differences and backgrounds and how these issues impact student behavior. According to DeMatthews (2016a), DisCrit, the secondary framework for this study, influences school administrators to recognize their perceptions of leadership practices, discipline policies, classroom management, and deficits in perspectives about students and their families. Ultimately, the participants in both groups conveyed that administrators and teachers must be culturally responsive to the needs of their students when dealing with behavior challenges and assigning disciplinary consequences.

### ***Theme 3: Training for Administrators, Teachers, and Other School Staff***

School administrators in this study reported that more training is needed for administrators, teachers, and other school staff to facilitate strategies for managing behavior and options for disciplinary practices in schools. Participants explained that a lack of training in de-escalation techniques, restorative practices, classroom management, IEP implementation, behavior management, and instructional practices impacts the

frequency of ODRs and unnecessary out-of-school suspensions for students with disabilities. Although administrators acknowledged that their school districts provided training on behavior and discipline, they identified training needs and areas of concern for their individual schools and school districts. Ezzani (2021) posited that principals engaged in social justice leadership are responsible for providing professional development for teachers on core beliefs, cultural differences, and support for managing behavior among diverse populations. One participant from Group 2 emphasized that administrators are responsible for ensuring teachers are trained on restorative practices, cultural responsiveness, PBIS, and using suspension as a last resort.

However an administrator from Group 1 expressed that their school needed more support and training at the district level. Participants in Group 2 suggested that all staff in a school should receive training on how to work with students with disabilities. Similarly, participants in Group 1 expressed that administrators and teachers need training on the nature of disability categories such as emotional behavior disorder, tic syndrome, and autism and how a disability can impact a student's behavior. All participants agreed that it is essential for administrators, teachers, and other school staff to receive adequate training to manage behavior in classrooms and the school environment.

***Theme 4: Inconsistent Implementation of Individualized Education Programs and Behavior Intervention Plans***

The findings in this study suggest that inconsistent implementation of IEPs and BIPs is an issue that can lead to over-suspension and discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities. School administrators shared the perception that inconsistently

implementing IEPs and BIPs for students with disabilities is a problematic issue that can lead to discipline disproportionality. All administrators voiced similar views regarding expectations for IEPs and BIP implementation in their schools. Participating administrators in Group 1 shared their experiences with being familiar with what is included in a student's IEP and making sure students receive all services included in the IEP. Based on the perspectives of these administrators, not implementing an IEP with fidelity may have an undesirable impact on students' behavior as well as overuse of suspension when disciplining students with disabilities. One administrator in Group 1 emphasized that students with disabilities should have a functional behavior assessment and a BIP that outlines the IEP support required to manage chronic behavior.

Participants in both groups recommended that school administrators should seek guidance from other administrators, schools, and districts when considering disciplinary practices. All of the participants agreed that teachers and school staff should be knowledgeable of the services and accommodations in a student's IEP and that not implementing the IEP can impede the behavior of students with disabilities who have behavior challenges in school. A common perspective among participants in Group 2 was that principals and assistant principals have a responsibility to ensure teachers and other school staff are providing required IEP services and support to students with disabilities prior to assigning disciplinary consequences.

***Theme 5: Limited Delivery of Proactive Student Support to Address Students'******Social and Emotional Needs***

School administrators suggested that limited delivery of student support to address the social and emotional needs of students with disabilities can lead to discipline disproportionality. According to Lee et al. (2021), the implementation of SWPBIS with fidelity serves as a proactive measure for handling discipline in schools and reduces the incidence of exclusionary discipline. The participants in Group 1 suggested that schools need more student support delivery to address the social and emotional needs of students with disabilities. Participants highlighted that providing support to students before resorting to suspension or expulsion impacts student behavior and the disciplinary practices used to deal with discipline issues.

Participants also reported a need for training, particularly in areas such as culturally responsive practices and understanding the function of student behavior. Participants in this group recommended schools do more to provide students with school-based therapy and behavior plans to help manage behaviors that administrators may have otherwise dealt with via exclusionary discipline practices. There was a common perspective among all participants that social and emotional barriers impact student behavior discipline and that schools must work to deliver student supports to address students' social and emotional needs. Participants in Groups 2 highlighted that social and emotional issues can impact student's behavior and that students need access to student supports as a proactive measure to deal with behaviors before there is a need for exclusionary discipline practices.

**Research Question 2*****Theme 6: Exclusionary Practices Negatively Impact Students with Disabilities***

School administrators reported that exclusionary discipline practices impact students with disabilities in unfavorable ways. All participants expressed that exclusionary discipline consequences for students with disabilities is not a preferred disciplinary practice. The consensus among all participants was that students with disabilities need to be in school and that exclusionary practices negatively impact school attendance and academics for this student group. Participants shared similar views that suggested suspension from school negatively impacts academic performance and achievement for students with disabilities.

***Theme 7: Restorative Practices Are an Alternative to Suspension***

According to Costello et al. (2019), restorative practices in schools offer administrators an opportunity to work with students and their families and teachers through a collective effort to improve behavior outcomes and student achievement. The results from RQ2 indicated that school administrators perceive exclusionary discipline practices negatively impact students with disabilities and that restorative practices are a viable alternative to suspension. All participants in Group 1 highlighted that implementing restorative practices was a preferred alternative to suspension when disciplining students with disabilities. Participants expressed the importance of fairness in disciplinary practices and suggested restorative practices as an opportunity to remediate undesired behavior and encourage expected behavior. Participants expressed that restorative practices are most effective when staff are adequately trained in restorative

practices and when staff implement these practices consistently. Participants highlighted that administrators and teachers need to use more restorative practices as an alternative to suspension. Research studies have suggested that the effectiveness of restorative practices in reducing discipline disproportionality is dependent on administrator and teacher willingness to support alternative practices (Costello et al., 2019; Joseph et al., 2021).

### **Research Question 3**

#### **Theme 8: Disciplinary Consequences Should Be Equitable and Individualized**

School administrators held the perspective that disciplinary consequences should be equitable but individualized for students with disabilities and that zero-tolerance policies are not effective for some students with disabilities. According to Gullo and Beachum (2020a), although ODRs are initiated by teachers, school administrators are responsible for making sure disciplinary decisions are fair and equitable. Although there was a shared perspective among administrators in Group 1 that all disciplinary consequences should be equal among students, administrators in this group expressed that disciplinary consequences may look different for some students with disabilities. Participants in Group 1 conveyed that disciplinary consequences for students with exceptionality in the areas of intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, emotional behavior disorders, or Tourette's syndrome may not fully understand the ramifications of their behavior, in which the utilization of an exclusionary discipline consequence may be inappropriate.



Comparatively, administrators in Group 2 shared a common perspective that schools should have discipline procedures and policies that everyone follows. However, administrators in Group 2 also emphasized that students with disabilities may require individualized disciplinary consequences based on the nature of their disabilities and the content of their IEPs or BIPs. Participating administrators in Group 2 shared a common perspective that schools should have discipline procedures and policies that everyone follows. Participants also shared a common perspective that students with disabilities may require individualized disciplinary consequences based on the nature of their disabilities and the content of their IEP or BIP.

Although school administrators agreed that disciplinary consequences should be equitable, they also believed that disciplinary practices for students with disabilities should be individualized and dealt with on a case-by-case basis. This perspective aligns with IDEA regulations that require school districts to hold manifestation determination meetings for students with disabilities prior to suspension beyond 10 days to determine if the student's behavior is a manifestation of the student's disability (IDEA, 2019). Ball (2020) suggested that unequal practices and inequalities in the school setting, especially discipline disparities among students of color with disabilities, can be addressed when personnel such as social workers and school administrators work together using restorative practices to build connections between the school, home, and community to build resources that influence equity and promote social change.

***Theme 9: Zero-Tolerance Policies Are Not Effective for Some Students With Disabilities***

The results for RQ3 also revealed that school administrators agreed that zero-tolerance policies are not effective for some students with disabilities. School administrators expressed similarities and differences in their perspectives about zero-tolerance policies for students with disabilities. Legislation on zero-tolerance policies was created to deal with behavior infractions involving weapons, drugs, and violence; yet more recently, zero-tolerance policies in schools have been used to deal with subjective behavior infractions, such as insubordination, disrespect, or skipping class (Kyere et al., 2018). School administrators in this study agreed that zero-tolerance policies should apply to issues that threaten student safety.

All participants agreed that zero-tolerance policies should not be used for minor offenses. Some administrators in this study held the perspective that zero-tolerance policies are needed for behavior infractions that cause harm to others. However, there was also a consensus that zero-tolerance policies are not effective or appropriate for students with a disability in specific categories, such as autism spectrum disorder or emotional and behavior disorders. Alnaim (2018) posited that administrators should individually assign discipline consequences for students with disabilities, considering the student's underlying issues and the nature of the disability, which aligns with the participants' perspectives in this study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was met with some limitations. First, this qualitative study was limited to the perspectives and ideas of a small sample of school administrators employed in the two school districts demonstrating discipline disproportionality in a large southeastern U. S. state and a small sample of administrators employed in school districts that did not demonstrate discipline disproportionality in the same southeastern U.S. state. Second, this study included a small purposive sample of administrators from school districts in a southeastern U.S. state and may not represent the perceptions of administrators throughout the entire U.S. state in this study. Equally important, potential participants may have been reluctant to participate in this study due to the nature of the topic, which may have contributed to a reduced participation rate and interview no shows or cancellations.

Finally, the results of this study provided insight into the perspectives of school administrators on the issues and practices that lead to discipline disproportionality in a southeastern state and cannot be used to generalize the perspectives of administrators in school districts across the nation. For this study, the following measures were implemented to address limitations: (a) participants were informed prior to consenting to participate that their name would not be listed in the results or final study, (b) participants were referred to as P1, P2, P3, etc. to protect their identify, (c) participants were informed that their school district would not be named in the study and that the two districts with discipline disproportionality would be referred to as D1 and D2, (d) member checking

was conducted at the conclusion of each interview to answer any questions from the participants and to review the Zoom transcript for accuracy.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the limitations of this study, it is recommended that continued research efforts are needed to fill the gap in administrator's perspectives about discipline disproportionality. This qualitative study was limited to the perspectives and ideas of a small sample of school administrators, which could have impacted this study's results. Future research efforts on this topic should focus on a larger sample size and a more diverse population of participants such as lead special education teachers, special education school administrators, special education coordinators, and special education directors. It is recommended that future research on this topic be explored at the district level within school districts that experience discipline disproportionality. Due to the nature of this research, more participation may occur if this topic is explored within a given school district instead of from individuals outside of the educational organization.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine school administrators' perspectives on the discipline practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities in a large southeastern state. The three RQs in this study helped me to gain more insight into the issues that influence administrators' disciplinary practices and why discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities persists. The results for RQ1 indicated that administrators recognize that the absence of mechanisms for building relationships,

lack of cultural understanding, limited training, inconsistent implementation of IEPs, and limited delivery of student support to address social and emotional needs are issues that lead to discipline disproportionality among students with disabilities. The results from RQ2 informed that school administrators perceive exclusionary discipline practices to negatively impact students with disabilities and that restorative practices are a viable alternative to suspension. The results for RQ3 conveyed that school administrators feel that disciplinary consequences should be equitable but individualized for students with disabilities and that zero-tolerance policies are not effective or appropriate for some students with disabilities.

Social justice leadership was the primary conceptual framework for this study. The implications of this study suggest that school administrators recognize that they have the power to act as social justice leaders in their efforts to emulate positive leadership practices that influence equitable learning opportunities, just disciplinary practices, and cultural inclusivity in the school environment, which aligns with the underpinnings of Furman's (2012) framework of social justice leadership. Further, administrators' perspectives in this study suggested that principals and assistant principals must embrace their leadership capabilities, identify deficits in practice and procedure, and recognize the need for a culturally and linguistically diverse school climate that embraces the need for change in disciplinary practices.

DisCrit was the secondary framework. According to DeMatthews (2016a), DisCrit influences school administrators to recognize their perceptions of leadership practices, discipline policies, classroom management, and deficits in perspectives about

students and their families. The responses from administrators in this study highlighted the importance and challenges of ensuring that teachers and school staff are culturally respectful to students and their families and identified challenges with discipline practices that look different for students based on gender, social and economic issues, disability category, and cultural misunderstanding, which all align with the tenets of Annamma et al.'s (2018) DisCrit framework. This study's positive social change implications are rich in social justice leadership initiatives that offer school districts strategies for increasing equity in discipline practices, alternatives to suspension, professional development for cultural awareness, de-escalation training, relationship-building activities, and development of policies and procedures to address lessening the discipline gap among African American students with disabilities and all students in marginalized groups.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine school administrators' perspectives on the discipline practices and issues that lead to discipline disproportionality for African American students with disabilities in a large southeastern U.S. state. The results of this study are informative, and they also underscore the significant role of school administrators in shaping disciplinary practices. This study provided principals and assistant principals a platform to share their lived experiences and an opportunity to reflect on their ideas about disciplinary practices for students with disabilities. Most importantly, administrators identified what works well and the areas needing improvement, which provided invaluable insights into the issues and practices that can lead to discipline disproportionality.

Although discipline disproportionality is quantitatively well-researched in today's educational system, more research is needed to address the gap in administrators' perspectives on discipline disproportionality (Bottiani et al., 2018). This study addressed the gap in research regarding school administrators' perspectives by providing a platform for principals and assistant principals to explain how they make decisions about discipline consequences and the challenges that they experience when disciplining students with disabilities as a whole. The responses from the participants in this study substantiate claims from other researchers that discipline disproportionality exists from a myriad of issues. Participating administrators in this study pointed out that issues such as limited training in de-escalation, special education professional development needs, lack of relationship-building, limited alternative approaches to discipline, exclusionary discipline practices, school climate, and lack of cultural awareness lead to discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities, particularly African American students with disabilities.

While the results from this study indicated that disproportionality stems from many issues, the responses from administrators and the literature reviewed recommended an array of solution-focused actions that may help lessen the problem of discipline disproportionality in schools, such as the consistent implementation of restorative practices, PBIS, social-emotional learning, and on-going staff training. These actions, if implemented, hold the potential to reduce discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities. Moreover, according to Green et al. (2018) and the administrators in this study, the problem of discipline disproportionality may be

addressed when school administrators and school district leaders develop equity-based initiatives, re-evaluate discipline policies for students with disabilities, consult with other education professionals on evidence-based decision-making, promote professional development activities, and create school-based initiatives designed to improve cultural awareness, equity, and social justice. Furthermore, the results of this study encourage positive social change through social justice leadership efforts such as the development of equity teams, discipline data teams, revision of school discipline policies and handbooks, and initiatives for increasing cultural knowledge among school staff and all stakeholders.



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## Appendix A: Permission From Author to Use the Disciplinary Practices Survey

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May 11, 2020

Dear Ms. Goodman-Lee:

Thank you for your interest in the Disciplinary Practices Survey. You have our permission to use the measure in your dissertation. I wish you the best on your work, and would be happy to hear about your findings when you are finished.

Sincerely,



Russell Skiba, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
Indiana University

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Delicia Goodman-Lee

Mon 4/20/2020 8:42 AM

To: skiba@indiana.edu; ormiston@indiana.edu



Greetings Dr. Skiba and Dr. Ormiston,

I hope this email finds you safe and well. I am a doctoral student at Walden University in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I am writing for permission to use the Disciplinary Practices Survey Instrument from your work titled "The Disciplinary Practices Survey: How Do Indiana's Principals Feel About Discipline" in my dissertation. Once completed, the dissertation will be made available to the school districts in the study and made public in the ProQuest Information Database. If you agree, please provide me with a permission letter or sign below and return to me by email (a scanned version is fine). I appreciate your consideration of my permission request.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Respectfully yours,

Delicia Goodman-Lee  
delicia.goodman-lee@waldenu.edu

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## Appendix B: Invitation Letter

Greetings,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Delicia Goodman-Lee, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University pursuing an EdD in Special Education. I am conducting research for my dissertation entitled “Perspectives of Administrators on Practices Leading to Discipline Disproportionality in a Large Southeastern State.” I am inviting principals and assistant principals to describe their perspectives about the issues and practices that lead to discipline disproportionality among African American students with disabilities.

### **About the study:**

- One 30 minute interview via Zoom (camera off) or phone that will be audio-recorded
- Speak with the researcher one more time after the interview to hear the researcher’s interpretations and share your feedback (this is called member checking and will take 10 minutes)
- You would receive a thank you note and a \$40 Visa gift card as a token of appreciation
- To protect your privacy, participants and school districts will be masked with a pseudo name (Participant #1, District #2)

### **Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

- Principal with experience handling discipline issues and assigning consequences.

OR

- Assistant Principal with experience handling discipline issues and assigning consequences.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please review the consent form below. If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with the words “**I consent**” within 14 days. You may also indicate your consent and schedule an interview by clicking the following link: [REDACTED]. Interviews will take place in July 2023.

If you are not interested in participating in this study, I thank you very much for your time and consideration. Have an awesome day!

Sincerely,

Delicia Goodman-Lee  
Doctoral Candidate Walden University  
[delicia.goodman-lee@waldenu.edu](mailto:delicia.goodman-lee@waldenu.edu)