

6-27-2024

## Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Implementation of School Discipline Practices for African American Girls

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Jasmine Marie Gladney

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2024

Abstract

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Implementation of School Discipline Practices  
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by

Jasmine Marie Gladney

MA, Pacific Oaks College, 2014

BA, California State University, Stanislaus, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

August 2024

## Abstract

Middle school African American girls have yet to be studied comprehensively concerning school discipline practices related to their behavior. It has been assumed that teachers are not doing their jobs and are mistreating African American girls by singling them out; however, teachers' voices and perceptions of school discipline practices in the classroom have not been examined extensively to understand this issue. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls in their classrooms, schools, and districts. The conceptual framework was based on Gregory et al.'s 10 principles of increasing equity in school discipline and McCold and Wachtel's restorative justice theory. This qualitative study addressed teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls. Interviews were conducted with eight middle-school teachers across the United States and analyzed reporting the common patterns or themes. The themes were (a) middle school teachers' understanding and implementation of discipline practices, (b) factors influencing disciplinary practices and responses, and (c) middle school teachers' perceptions of disciplinary practices and African American girls' responses. The implications for positive social change are that the findings reinforce the importance of using more positive school discipline practices that could yield better results for behavior correction versus zero-tolerance policies through teacher and student interaction within the classroom.

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## Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family, godparents, and circle of friends who have been by my side, cheering me on since I decided to pursue this degree. A special feeling of gratitude to my amazing mother, Rosa Dacus, whose words of encouragement, prayers, and financial support made this dream possible. My sisters Tanisha, who passed away before I finished, Marquita and Crystal, have believed in me, made me laugh when I wanted to cry, and gave me pep talks that I will always be grateful for. I also dedicate this dissertation to the people I've met at work, pageants, and church family who have supported me throughout the process. I will always appreciate the love they have shown me. I dedicate this work and give special thanks to my former teachers who believed in me as a Black girl, saw past my behavior, and helped me succeed academically. Most importantly, I dedicate this dissertation to all the African American girls who inspired me, who I have inspired, and who I will inspire in the future.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my committee members, who were more than generous with their time, expertise, advice, guidance, and encouragement throughout this long process. A special thanks to Dr. Kimberley Alkins, my committee chair; without her, there is no way I would have made it this far. I appreciate her for the countless hours she spent reading and editing my dissertation and encouraging me not to give up, especially when I became ill, had family issues, lost my sister, and had to apply for two extensions. Most of all, not giving up on me. Thank you, Dr. Karine Clay, for agreeing to serve on my committee and helping with the push for my topic and completion of my dissertation.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

African American girls are often seen as disruptive students and have been subjected to harsher school discipline practices such as suspension, often for minor infractions like a wardrobe violation, in comparison to their peers of different racial and ethnic groups who may receive a warning or detention for the same offense (Green, 2022). Additionally, students experience education and punishments based on the systemic and structural inequalities passed down through history (Apugo et al., 2023). The U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR) reports on the school climate and safety of U.S. schools, including school suspensions and expulsions. The data are collected every 2 years, with the most recent data available during this study from the 2020-2021 school year (see Table 1). African American girls across the United States accounted for 14% of all students suspended during the 2015 to 2016 school year out of the 2.7 million students suspended and only accounted for 8% of the total student population (OCR, 2018). In the 2017-2018 school year, African American girls comprised 7.4% of total public school enrollment and, 13.3% of out-of-school suspensions, and 11.2% of in-school suspensions (OCR, 2021). African American girls received suspensions and expulsions across all races at a disproportionate rate. For the 2020-2021 school year, African American girls made up 7% of the total enrollment yet received 8% of the in-school suspensions, 9% of the out-of-school suspensions, and 8% of the expulsions, which is twice as many as European American girls (OCR, 2023).

**Table 1***Suspensions and Expulsions for African American Girls for All U.S. Public School Districts*

Year	Total student enrollment	African American girls			
		% of total enrollment	% in-school suspensions	% out-of-school suspensions	Expelled
2015-2016	50.6 million	8%	Not reported	14%	10%
2017-2018	50.9 million	7.4%	11.2%	13.3%	11.8%
2020-2021	49.2 million	7%	8%	9%	8%

*Note.* Source of information OCR (2018, 2021, 2023). CRDC collects these data every

other school year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data were not collected from 2019 to 2020.

Although not disaggregated by gender, African American students had 18% of referrals to law enforcement and 22% of school-related arrests out of 15% of total K-12 student enrollment (OCR, 2023). Additionally, of the 49% total K-12 female enrollment, 32% were referred to law enforcement, and 32% were referred to school-related arrests (OCR, 2023). The disparities among African American, European American, and Hispanic American students concerning suspensions are still on the rise, with African American students being suspended more than twice as European American and Hispanic American students, beginning as early as preschool (National Prevention Science Coalition, 2020; Sevon, 2022). According to the National Prevention Science Coalition (2020), among preschoolers, 47% of the 19% of African American preschoolers are suspended, and rates are 39% for transition into primary school. African American girls

struggle to navigate the school system because of preexisting biases about their behavior, which is not seen as the typical standard of femininity (Apugo et al., 2023). Based on the ideas of Black femininity, African American girls' classroom behavior can be misguided when one's view of them does not meet the expectations (Green, 2022; Sevon, 2022).

Green (2022) identified how African American girls have difficulty escaping punitive exclusionary discipline practices because of school scrutiny and implicit bias. African American girls have a greater risk for school pushout, which is associated with situations involving race and gender-based persecutions and assumptions stemming from slavery and segregation that have plagued society with ideologies of what Black femininity should be and look like that do not depict White middle-class standards of femininity (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Green, 2022). Green (2022) described four stereotypes of Black women: (a) the Mammy, (b) the Welfare Queen, (c) Jezebel, and (d) Sapphire. Moreover, exclusionary discipline practices (a) make it difficult to teach any student, (b) are linked to poor scholarly achievement and decreased participation in the classroom, (c) put students at a greater risk for criminal justice system entanglement, (d) increase chances of school dropout, and (e) encourage school violence and antisocial behavior (National Women's Law Center, 2022). Racism developed within an institution, such as stereotyping and intersectionality, subjects African American girls to inequitable and exclusionary discipline practices (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020).

Studying teachers' implementation of school discipline practices for African American girls could allow for a deeper exploration of how current discipline practices

are implemented and middle school teachers' perceptions of how they affect African American girls. In addition, this study could provide the opportunity to explore whether teachers believe there is a connection between their school discipline practices and African American girls' behavior. Although there is a link between exposure to violence and adolescent behavior, there is only research concerning the disparity in harsh school discipline practices for African American boys. Owens and McLanahan (2020) stated that there is a lack of research to support this disparity between African American and European American girls. Other factors surrounding this disparity need further study.

African American girls are subjected to harsh discipline, often linked to the juvenile system (Hassan & Carter, 2021). The discipline can include suspensions and expulsions for behaviors such as writing on locker room walls or falling asleep in class (Hassan & Carter, 2021). Exposure to the juvenile system for minor infractions of school rules makes it difficult for African American girls to succeed, leading to poor academic outcomes and causing distrust between them and the teachers (Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020; Hassan & Carter, 2021). To combat this issue, racial disparities must be acknowledged and addressed, and there needs to be a decrease in zero-tolerance school discipline policies, the use of alternative discipline methods, and a case-by-case assessment of the infraction by the student to find discipline methods that change the inappropriate behavior without destroying the students' educational opportunities (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Sevon et al., 2021). Furthermore, the use of increased restorative practices and the promotion of positive partnerships between teachers and students, teachers and family, and schools and communities, with a heavy focus on equity and



fairness, can aid in the decrease of harsh discipline for African American girls (Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020).

Chapter 1 presents the issue of current school discipline practices, the negative effect they can have on African American girls' behavior, and what is being done to end harsh discipline practices against this group of girls. I identify the contributing factors that influence African American girls' behavior and the role of Black femininity based on gender assumptions of standard femininity. In association with the juvenile justice system and the school prison-to-pipeline issue, I highlight aspects of the zero-tolerance policy that contribute to the harsh discipline of African American girls. This chapter includes the problem statement, the research questions, and the conceptual framework for the theory that will guide the research. The nature of the study and methodology, definitions of key concepts, assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, and the study's significance for potential contributions are also discussed.

### **Background**

In the mid-1900s, the documentation of racial disparities in school discipline began. Moreover, with zero-tolerance policies in the 1990s, punishment for African American students increased with law enforcement, suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and referrals to the juvenile justice system (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). In 2014, a "Dear Colleague Letter" (DCL) was issued by the Obama administration concerning public school outcries of discipline disparities based on race and special education (Department of Justice, 2014; Eden, 2019). The DCL was a package of reforms issued to encourage administrators to make changes that would discipline all students equally (Eden, 2019).

The DCL mainly focused on ensuring equity and fairness amongst students who misbehave, focusing on classrooms that are conducive to learning and do not single out students of color (Department of Justice, 2014). Another goal was to reduce the number of suspensions for African American students if they appeared to be at a higher rate than European American students (Eden, 2019).

Additionally, the DCL was based on the idea that exclusionary discipline practices directly affect students' relationship with the school-to-prison pipeline and an effort to encourage the replacement of exclusionary discipline with restorative (Eden, 2019). Many opposers of the reforms outlined in the DCL fought against implementing the proposed changes because of false allegations and unrealistic expectations (Eden, 2019). The suggested guidelines outlined in the DCL were rescinded in 2018 by the Trump administration.

Ksinana et al. (2019) revealed how discipline policies are administered and how they predominantly affect minority students. The study focused on the overrepresentation of minority youth at risk for receiving exclusionary school discipline compared to European American students (Ksinana et al., 2019). Ksinana et al. found that previous research concerning the ethnic and racial disparities in school discipline policies is accurate, and most minority students are more likely to be punished regardless of what the infraction may be. Bell (2020) explained how African American students are at risk for school failure based on current exclusionary discipline practices. In particular, African American girls are penalized for violations that pertain to personal choices such as hair, dress style, and music and are not allowed to plead their case (Bell, 2020).

Moreover, African American girls continue to be disciplined for minor infractions at a higher rate than European American girls, based on a study conducted by Hassan and Carter (2021). This disproportionate treatment of African American girls often leads to negative relationships with law enforcement (Addington, 2023; Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020). When African American girls encounter negative relationships with law enforcement, regardless of the situation, it often leads to arrests (Girls Inc., 2021). On a national level, African American girls make up 16% of the student female population, but 39% of those girls arrested during school (Girls Inc, 2021).

Nelson et al. (2022) compared different school districts across the United States related to the harsh discipline practices against African American girls, including race, gender, surveillance, criminalization, and punishment. The findings included harsh discipline practices labeled push out, shut out, and snatch out, with the latter representing referrals of African American girls to law enforcement. Nelson et al. stated that the collected data further demonstrate the continued mistreatment of African American girls related to exclusionary discipline practices. Many factors contribute to the yearly occurrence of exclusionary discipline practices, with no real change even after many conversations (William et al., 2023). The factors that contribute to the negative effect of exclusionary discipline practices are concerning with the presence of school resource officers on campus, where exclusionary discipline is heavily used towards punishing African American girls more than European American students and often African American boys (William et al., 2023). Based on the findings, the presence of school resource officers could contribute to the behavior issues.

Administrative staff frequently perceive African American girls as aggressive, angry, and disrespectful and are subjected to adultification, which includes being hypersexualized (Coker & Gonzalez, 2021). The challenges African American girls face in schools where European American femininity is the norm for behavior and character in school and society and that because African American girls are considered the exact opposite, they are not afforded the same opportunities (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Green, 2022). Gibson et al. (2019) focused on out-of-school suspensions for African American girls and the adverse outcomes of using this form of school discipline. Gibson et al. asserted how African American girls are sexualized and are often seen as “hypersexual, angry, and hostile” (p. 170). Additionally, Gibson et al. described how African American girls are punished harshly when defending themselves against bullying and sexual harassment.

A direct relationship exists between teacher implementation of school discipline and its effectiveness on the outcomes of African American girls in the school system (Morris & Perry, 2017; Sevon, 2022). Equal discipline practices are necessary to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students (Department of Justice, 2014), yet research has revealed that even African American girls as young as 3 and 4 experience harsh discipline practices that threaten their learning opportunities (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017; Sevon, 2022). African American students have been researched extensively on many issues affecting education; however, the research regarding a direct relation to teachers’ current school discipline practices for African American girls is either outdated, coupled with another group, or limited (Epstein et al., 2017). In this study, I seek to

explain current and relevant discipline practices specific to African American girls while comparing those practices to Gregory et al.'s (2017) 10 principles for increasing equity in school discipline and McCold and Wachtel's (2003) restorative justice theory.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed in this study was middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing inequitable disciplinary practices toward African American girls. Implementation of disciplinary practices towards African American girls is inequitable, and African American girls are disciplined more severely than girls from any other racial group, losing valuable instruction time (Annamma et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2022). Perceived as tough, argumentative, disruptive, mean, angry, and troublemakers, African American girls are often stereotyped before entering the school system (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Attentiveness from teachers is not always bestowed upon African American girls even though research has confirmed their misbehavior is related to issues from their community, home, and school, which indicates support is essential and could be attributed to the idea that African American students need more tough love to prepare them for the outside world (Owens & McLanahan, 2020). Research has indicated that high suspension rates, the severity of other school discipline consequences, and teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions regarding African American girls often influence the outcome of the girls' behavior and performance in school (Addington, 2023; Annamma et al., 2019). In addition, there is a lack of equity when it comes to the practice of school discipline and the punishment African American girls receive compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Green, 2022).

Past research has revealed the lack of equity in school discipline for minority students. The research has shown that African American and Hispanic American students receive most of the discipline compared to European American students (Owens & McLanahan, 2020). National data for the 2017 to 2018 school year, analyzed by race and gender, focused on school discipline disparities in the following categories: “rates of suspension, expulsion, arrest, restraints, referral to law enforcement, and transfers to alternative schools for disciplinary reasons” (Georgetown Law Center, 2020, p. 1). Based on the analysis, African American students are being suspended and expelled at higher rates than any other racial/ethnic group (Georgetown Law Center, 2020). Moreover, African American girls had the highest rate of school discipline out of all races and genders. Compared to European American girls, African American girls had 4.19 times towards the risk of receiving out-of-school suspensions, 3.99 times towards the risk of expulsion, 3.66 times towards the risk of arrest at school, 2.17 times towards the risk of restraint, and 5.34 times towards the risk of transfer for disciplinary reasons (Georgetown Law Center, 2020).

Understanding how the practice of equity on school grounds related to school discipline affects African American girls could show whether current practices are successful or need adjustment. However, the gap in the research is that while African American students are researched as a group, African American girls have yet to be extensively researched concerning school discipline and equitable discipline practices (Annamma et al., 2019).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls in their classrooms, schools, and districts. Current school discipline practices such as zero-tolerance policies that rely heavily on suspensions have caused an increase in the use of juvenile court systems instead of school discipline-only punishments (Ford, 2021; Novak, 2022). While zero-tolerance policies were designed to keep students safe and discourage misbehavior, students of color and those with special needs often fall subject to the harsh consequences of these policies (Ford, 2021; Sorensen et al., 2021). Students who engage in disruptive behavior and break school rules outlined in the zero-tolerance policies receive severe consequences, regardless of the infraction. The presence of student resource officers on school campuses does not make students feel safe but does the opposite (Shannon, 2021). African American girls who experience this type of criminalization within the school system are among those who have been dealt harsher punishments for minor infractions without due process based on zero-tolerance policies compared to girls of a different ethnicity (Annamma et al., 2019; Sevon, 2022).

In a report on toxic stress and children's outcomes, Morsy and Rothstein (2019) stated that children exposed to early traumatizing events, exposure to poverty, and violent experiences often suffer academically, behaviorally, and physically. Many African American girls, although not all, have been defenseless against harsh upbringings and suffer mental, physical, emotional, and behavioral issues and often act out in school (Alvarez & Price, 2022). Many African American girls who experience abuse and neglect

and have been exposed to juvenile detention have a more challenging time acclimating to society and ending the vicious cycle without the proper education (Alvarez & Price, 2022; Annamma et al., 2019). These girls have had teachers who see color and their pubertal development before they know the person, and rather than receiving leniency and forgiveness for a slight infraction, they receive condemnation and prejudice (Blake et al., 2022). According to Sevon (2022), one reason for this treatment is based on implicit bias, and African American girls are more affected by this conduct from teachers than students from other ethnic groups because of adultification.

### **Research Question**

I addressed the following research question in this study: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of disciplinary practices implemented toward African American girls, and how do the girls respond?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Research is grounded in theory to affirm and validate the evidence of what is being presented. Maxwell (2012) stated that the framework's purpose is to guide the study based on a model that focuses on the what and the why of the problem. Exclusionary discipline practices have been the driving force in U.S. school systems, with zero-tolerance policies that provide a safe environment for students (Luster, 2018), which is the dominant practice of school discipline for teachers. Therefore, this qualitative study was informed by Gregory et al.'s (2017) framework for increasing equity in school discipline to provide a foundation for school discipline practices that teachers can use fairly for all students. Additionally, McCold and Wachtel's (2003)



framework on restorative justice, which focuses on positive school discipline, informed this study.

Gregory et al. (2017) suggested 10 principles related to prevention and intervention to increase equity in school discipline. The prevention principles are “supportive relationships, bias-aware classrooms, respectful school environments, academic rigor, culturally relevant and responsive teaching, and opportunities for learning and correcting behavior” (Gregory et al., 2017, p. 255). The intervention principles consist of “data-based inquiry for equity, problem-solving approaches to discipline, the inclusion of student and family voice on conflicts’ causes and solutions, and reintegration of students after conflict” (Gregory et al., 2017, p. 255). The final principle, a multitiered systems of supports incorporates prevention and intervention. These 10 principles promote positive, consistent, fair, and manageable guidelines for educators to practice in their classrooms daily (Gregory et al., 2017). By using these 10 principles, students who need reprimanding can be disciplined appropriately, and the guidelines of the principles make it difficult to target a specific group of students.

The 10 principles are described in Gregory et al. (2017). Principle 1 relates to supportive relationships among teachers and students where students are encouraged to succeed and feel supported by their teachers. Using supportive relationships helps the students apply themselves academically and behave well at school to promote a positive learning experience (Gregory et al., 2017). Principle 2 relates to having bias-aware classrooms and respectful school environments with educators disregarding their implicit biases and stereotypes about African American students regardless of their age, gender,

name, demeanor, or communication and holding them to the same standards. Principle 3 relates to the academic rigor of classrooms that engage students in the learning process by having teachers create rich instruction and lesson plans where students are excited to learn (Gregory et al., 2017). Principle 4 relates to having a culturally relevant and responsive teaching approach to engaging and providing instruction to students through learning about their culture and history and building a trusting, relatable relationship with each student. Principle 5 relates to providing students with the opportunity to learn and correct their misbehavior without using harsh discipline methods first, which often increases and intensifies the misbehavior of the disruptive student (Gregory et al., 2017). Principle 6 relates to using data-based inquiry to promote equity in the classrooms. Principle 7 relates to using problem-solving approaches to discipline to understand student behavior, which may uncover underlying mental or academic deficiencies that need to be addressed (Gregory et al., 2017). Principle 8 involves including the student and family in discussions about causes and solutions of conflicts. Principle 9, the reintegration of students after conflict or absence, and Principle 10, a multitiered system of supports, both relate to rehabilitating students for their misbehavior and providing the support and tools necessary to make a positive change by correcting their behavior (Gregory et al., 2017).

McCold and Wachtel's (2003) restorative justice theory aims to provide equitable discipline with high discipline and high support, where changing unwanted behavior is equally as important as educating the student. Restorative justice theory has three key components that shape its structure: (a) social discipline window, (b) stakeholder roles,

and (c) restorative practices typology (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). The primary purpose of restorative justice theory is to take the misbehavior and, through collaborative communication with all involved, determine the most productive way of repairing the harm caused by the misbehavior (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). In addition, McCold and Wachtel stated that restorative justice theory seeks to confront the psychological needs and the connections necessary to establish and maintain a thriving environment. An example of restorative justice theory might involve a situation where a student defaces school property, and all stakeholders affected by the student's action participate in a restorative conference and determine reconciliation with the student (Buckmaster, 2016).

Using restorative justice, instead of zero-tolerance policies regarding African American girls, protects the victim's rights without the offender going to juvenile hall (Daneshzadeh & Sirrakos, 2018). Restorative practices use three tiers for reconciliation and addressing the rehabilitation of students' behavior without harsh discipline methods (Daneshzadeh & Sirrakos, 2018). According to Daneshzadeh and Sirrakos (2018), the primary focus of restorative justice is to unite students, families, stakeholders in the community, and schools to help all students feel safe and receive the highest education to be successful. Restorative justice encourages positive relationships with teachers and students, which then allows for successful growth in educational experiences (Fronius et al., 2019). Moreover, students and teachers feel more comfortable communicating and addressing the misbehavior, which allows for a positive alternative to resolving the issue, versus suspension and expulsion, which sends the student away and sometimes isolates them from learning (Fronius et al., 2019).

The interview questions were used to understand whether a positive approach to school discipline, like McCold and Wachtel's (2003) restorative justice framework and Gregory et al.'s (2017) framework for increasing equity in school discipline, is more effective, especially for African American girls. According to Morris (2016), the current approach to discipline for African American girls is mostly zero-tolerance policies. This method of school discipline is widely used across the United States to prevent misbehavior and protect students from being harmed or having a loss of instruction time by those misbehaving students (Green et al., 2018). Zero-tolerance policies are ineffective and create misconceptions about the positive change they could bring in correcting misbehavior (Gregory et al., 2017). Additionally, the students who suffer the most from zero-tolerance policies are African American students (Wun, 2018). Green et al. (2018) pointed out that suspensions are heavily used for zero-tolerance policies but do not enhance teaching and learning in the classroom, discourage students from misbehaving, or help to change the student's behavior with parental involvement.

Examining these frameworks as alternative discipline practices provided a different perspective to discipline methods used in traditional discipline practices. Alternative discipline practices do not give the student a pass for their behavior; the student is still held responsible. By exploring the discipline methods teachers must use towards misbehavior with the positive discipline methods within the frameworks outlined by Gregory et al. (2017) and McCold and Wachtel (2003), a comparison could be made on which method produces more positive results. The teacher interviews gave insight into the daily practices and behavior management, seen through the eyes and actions of the

teachers. The focus of the interviews addressed how current practices are similar and different to the methods described in Gregory et al.'s principles on equity in school discipline.

Furthermore, how teachers perceive the reactions African American girls have towards the discipline practices currently was carefully examined and identified by the teachers' responses. A deeper understanding and thorough research on the effects of using alternative discipline practices, such as restorative justice, versus traditional discipline practices, like zero-tolerance policies, will be explained in Chapter 2. Additionally, the process by which teachers would need to implement alternative discipline practices alongside the current methods used for traditional discipline practices was further investigated.

### **Nature of the Study**

In this study, I used a basic qualitative design to gather data and analyze what was collected to help add understanding to the current research on African American girls concerning school discipline practices based on teachers' implementation. This design was selected based on understanding the definition of the purpose of basic qualitative research. Basic qualitative research is where the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting data. Data were collected through interviews and document analysis. The data collected show a common pattern or theme, and data and description are where interpretation is drawn from (Agazu et al., 2022), which aligned with the focus of this study. Seeking to understand teachers' implementation of school discipline practices using equity for African American girls and how these practices contribute to their

behavior in school aligns with basic qualitative research design. The design is consistent with the frameworks provided by Gregory et al. (2017) and McCold and Wachtel (2003).

To shed light on this problem, I conducted semistructured interviews with a convenience sample of eight middle school teachers who taught in Grades 7 and 8 from schools across the United States during the 2022 to 2023 school year. These interviews took place at a mutually agreed upon platform and a convenient time for each teacher during the middle term of the 2022 to 2023 school year. Interviews are used in qualitative research because they can gather primary data, fill knowledge gaps, provide new understandings, and clarify organizational practices (Puyvelde, 2018). Documentation is necessary for knowing what school discipline practices are required in the classrooms and on campuses to compare to what teachers practice, Gregory et al.'s (2017) 10 principles on equity school discipline practices, and McCold and Wachtel's restorative justice theory.

### **Definitions**

*Climate of belonging:* A safe classroom environment conducive to learning where teachers and students trust one another (Slate et al., 2016).

*Exclusionary discipline practices:* Removing students from the classroom and school through suspension or expulsion for breaking school rules (National Women's Law Center, 2022).

*Zero-tolerance policy:* Police presence and heavy use of suspensions and arrests for school improvement (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018).

### **Assumptions**

For this study, which only draws from current research and teacher interviews, I assumed teachers would be honest about how school discipline practices are used in their classroom or on campus based on requirements outlined by their school district and policy handbook. I also assumed that teachers would be unable to speak on school discipline practices used in their classroom or on campus regarding African American girls who may not follow the district or handbook policies because of ethical issues. Nevertheless, I assumed that teachers would be honest and more open to discussing past school discipline practices where discipline was unfairly used in their classroom or on campus as it no longer carries any weight. Furthermore, I assumed teachers would be willing to be honest and discuss whether current school discipline practices were effective for use with African American girls. The knowledge gathered from teacher interviews could clarify how school discipline regarding African American girls is viewed and perceived.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

For this study, the scope included in-depth semistructured in-person interviews, which were recorded, with eight teachers individually who taught middle school in schools across the United States during the 2022 to 2023 school year. During each interview, I executed an informal conversation with each teacher about their background in teaching and hobbies before leading into questions about classroom management techniques the teacher has used in the past, and I took observation notes. Then I focused on interview questions associated with the research questions about the disciplinary

actions that teachers implement towards African American girls, whether they practice Gregory et al.'s (2017) 10 principles of increasing equity in school discipline, whether they incorporate McCold and Wachtel's (2003) restorative justice theory, and what are their perceptions on the response to current discipline practices by African American girls to elicit their perspectives.

This study contained delimitations selected by me based on the research problem I was interested in, which I felt a personal connection to, and on my preference of methodologies, such as the type of interview I planned to conduct and the number of participants I desired to interview along with the time and location. The interview was constructed using the interview protocol refinement framework, which used a 4-phase process so that the researcher and interview participant collect enough data that are substantial, relevant, and aim toward an understanding of the research questions being asked (see Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Additionally, the study was conducted using a semistructured interview approach to ask open-ended questions with a few predetermined questions while allowing the flow of the interview to go in a direction to collect the most data while staying in a semicontrolled direction (see Pathak & Intrat, 2012). The interview questions focused on the framework and research questions guiding the study.

### **Limitations**

Conducting any research study, regardless of the design, has limitations, challenges, and barriers (Rahman, 2016). I used a qualitative research design focusing solely on research, current literature, and in-depth semistructured interviews from eight teachers across the United States, which provided comprehensive data. However, the



nature of qualitative research is often confined to a low standard of acceptance and reliability by policymakers, and the small sample size increases the controversy concerning generalizability (Rahman, 2016). For that reason, the first limitation of this study was that the data were limited due to the size of the participant pool, and because of no statistical generalizability within qualitative research, sufficient data are needed to present my research findings (see Anderson, 2017). Another limitation was that the research sites were middle schools rather than elementary or high schools. These sites could yield different data.

Based on my strong opinion about the contents of this study, a second limitation was bias made by me. While Anderson (2010) described the research as having the ability to be influenced by the researchers' personal biases and that maintaining, assessing, and demonstrating accuracy and thoroughness is complicated, Birt et al. (2016) described how member checking can be used to assist for the improvement of accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability of the study. For this study, I used member checking to show accuracy in my research and check for bias. Further explanation for how peer review was used to eliminate bias will be described in Chapter 3. Lastly, using interviews for qualitative research requires specific techniques used for the conduction of interviews, transcription, and the analysis of the interviews (Smith, 2019), which means that the third limitation of this study would be time. Time was a limitation because the process from start to finish is time-consuming. If delays occur or dates should change, previous sources and information used may have to be updated, adjusted, or changed for the study's accuracy.

### **Significance**

By further examining teachers' implementation of school discipline practices related to the treatment of African American girls, this study could contribute to the identified research gap by providing evidence that encourages school administrators to reexamine and evaluate discipline policies for any bias to ensure fairness to all students. This study could provide insight into teachers' use of equity in the school and school district discipline policies across the United States to protect all students while promoting equal discipline practices. This study focused specifically on African American girls because there are currently limited studies on how school discipline practices relate to the discipline of African American girls. In recent years, African American girls have become an important group in the spotlight, dealing with stereotypes and harsh discipline because of their race and gender (Blake et al., 2022). The positive social change of this study could be to encourage teachers, schools, and district administrators to refocus and create a variety of school discipline practices tailored to meet the needs of African American girls to provide an opportunity for academic success. The potential significance of this study could provide opportunities for discussions regarding how teachers can actively promote improved school discipline practices.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, this chapter focused on several key aspects of this study that lay the groundwork for the gap in the research relevant to implementing school discipline practices from teachers' perspectives regarding African American girls. The problem focused on current practices and percentage rates of discipline for African American

girls, with background information on current research. Along with the research questions that were addressed using the teacher interviews for insight into classroom practice, the purpose of this study, and the significance it could potentially contribute to school discipline practices, I presented Gregory et al.'s (2017) framework for increasing equity in school discipline as well as McCold and Wachtel's (2003) framework for restorative justice theory. I provided definitions for key elements included in the research. Chapter 1 concluded with an assessment of the study's assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations. The study continues with an analysis of the literature on implementing school discipline practices for African American girls, and the factors that contribute to or affect their behavior are outlined in Chapter 2.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

African American girls are disciplined more severely because of implicit biases and unfair treatment not explicitly addressed in school policy handbooks (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020; Gibson & Decker, 2019). Implementing these school discipline practices toward African American girls is often culturally insensitive and leads to unequal education (American Association of University Women, 2018; Annamma et al., 2019). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls in their classrooms, schools, and districts.

The literature review includes an in-depth examination of current school discipline practices implemented by teachers and administrators, such as zero-tolerance, where suspension and referrals to the juvenile court system are heavily practiced and often negatively affect some African American girls. In the literature review, I also examine how restorative justice theory and the increasing equity in school discipline framework can benefit student behavior and school discipline practices by altering or eliminating zero-tolerance policies. The following three factors are presented regarding restorative justice theory: (a) providing support to the offender, victim, and any other party involved; (b) providing the rehabilitation necessary for the offender to make changes; and (c) acknowledging the community's involvement in establishing the process of effective change concerning discipline responses is a key component (McCold & Wachtel, 2003).

Furthermore, I present the 10 principles for increasing equity in school discipline. Nine of the principles are separated into categories of prevention and intervention:

- supportive relationships,
- bias-aware classrooms and respectful school environments,
- academic rigor,
- culturally relevant and responsive teaching,
- opportunities for learning and correcting behavior,
- data-based inquiry for equity,
- problem-solving approaches to discipline,
- inclusion of student and family voice on conflicts' causes and solutions, and
- reintegration of students after conflict. (Gregory et al., 2017, p. 255)

A multitiered system of supports is the 10th principle that combines prevention and intervention.

Traditionally, school districts and administrators have created generalized policies that are passed down to individual schools to implement for the safety and well-being of the students. Teachers, in turn, create behavior management systems implemented in their classrooms to keep order and make the learning environment conducive for all students (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). Although these behavior management systems are closely tied to the overall system mandated, not all classroom systems are created equally. Some teachers are selective with how and when to enforce classroom rules and with which students to punish (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). Teachers often use their judgments and implicit biases to determine whether a student misbehaves and

ultimately violates the classroom management system (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020; Gibson & Decker, 2019). Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2020) stated that some classroom systems are ineffective because they isolate the student and cause vulnerability when the teacher confronts the student in front of the class. Additionally, that confrontation often includes degrading, name calling, yelling, and being picked on for the same infraction another student violated or for no reason. Action must be taken to resolve the issue of incorporating implicit biases when disciplining African American girls (Gibson & Decker, 2019). Parsons et al. (2023) encouraged administrators and stakeholders to consider using the discipline integrity approach to address the unequal discipline practices that affect African American girls as another positive approach.

School administrators set discipline policies for teachers to implement, but teachers manage the classroom and student behavior. Students are subjected to discipline policies on school grounds and within the classroom, which are created to teach them the correct way to conduct themselves in society. The community and society are affected by the students' conformity to school discipline practices, which shape who they will become. Due to these reasons, this research on equitable and positive discipline is essential. More effective ways of managing student behavior using equitable school practices that promote positive discipline and create a positive learning experience for all students are necessary to cultivate future leaders. In Chapter 2, I summarize the tools and techniques I used during the literature review search to provide a wide variety of reputable peer-reviewed resources, discuss the conceptual framework that lays the groundwork for this study, and present the three factors of restorative justice theory, the

10 principles of increasing equity in school discipline, the effects of school discipline practices on African American Girls and other stakeholders, and effective strategies for positive discipline and positive learning experiences.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used Google, Google Scholar, and the Walden University library while researching this topic and developing the literature review to search for peer-reviewed articles. I mainly used Google and Google Scholar to assist with my topic in finding enough resources to determine a gap in the research. From there, I used the Walden Library database without using limitations other than the key phrase. In total, I used 15 key phrases, such as *African American girls and school discipline*, *Black girls school discipline*, *school discipline*, *teachers' perceptions of school discipline*, *restorative justice theory*, *exclusionary discipline practices*, *teachers' perceptions of Black girls*, *equity in school discipline*, *positive discipline*, *middle school discipline*, *zero-tolerance policies*, *implicit biases*, *preschool pipeline*, *culture and school discipline*, and *the school-to-prison pipeline*. With all three search engines, I identified over 300,000 available articles.

Initially, I refined my search to peer-reviewed journal articles from 2018 to 2022 using only the Walden Library. About 24,334 articles were discovered, which I had to narrow down to a smaller number by title and year of publication. After determining which articles to use, I took previous resources from Chapter 1 and carefully selected sources from the reference sections about my topic. As I began writing Chapter 2, I discovered I needed more articles for the new information. I chose the key terms *restorative justice* and *positive discipline*. Using the same limitations from the previous

search, I found an additional 5,138 articles, which I carefully selected to represent best the research topic needed for the literature review. I used 67 articles to synthesize this section. Due to the extended time frame for completing my study, I redefined my search to include peer-reviewed journal articles with current school discipline practices for African American girls from 2020-2024 by searching article titles and authors I previously used and articles suggested by my chair. I removed some older articles from the previous literature review and added 25 articles to this section.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Gregory et al.'s (2017) 10 principles of increasing equity in school discipline guided this qualitative research study. McCold and Wachtel's (2003) restorative justice framework was used to add further to the conceptual framework for this study. This study aimed to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of school discipline practices related to African American girls in their classrooms, schools, and the district. Getting middle school teachers' perceptions of which discipline practices they currently use and how effective or ineffective they believe those methods are with African American girls can shed light on how to improve discipline methods that both punish and empower them. The goal of positive school discipline or any discipline practices should always be to hold students responsible for their actions of inappropriate behavior and infractions against the school policies that encourage students to change their behavior (Anyon et al., 2016; Wegmann & Smith, 2019). Using restorative discipline practices can positively resolve and restore the relationship between the perpetrator and victim and create a positive learning environment (Anyon et al., 2016;



Gonzalez et al., 2019). At the same time, students should not miss school and learning opportunities unless their actions are criminal and dangerous to themselves and others. Gregory, Hafen, et al. (2016) pointed out how ineffective and risky it is for students to be suspended based on the correlation between suspension rates and high school dropout and criminal activity rates. It is possible for a student's misbehavior to drastically change with intervention from restorative practices (Anyon et al., 2016). Using restorative justice practices is instrumental in creating positive school and learning environments (Gonzalez et al., 2019).

According to Wegmann and Smith (2019), while some African American girls misbehave criminally, many are being punished for misbehavior that is seen as juvenile, such as talking back, not turning in homework assignments, talking in class out of turn, and many other minor infractions against school discipline policies. While students should follow the rules regardless, discipline practices must be fair and relate to the infraction committed, allowing the student to learn their lesson. Furthermore, many teachers are unaware of their actions toward these students, and their discipline practices are not intentional and could be avoided with proper training and an understanding of African American culture (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020).

The exclusionary and punitive discipline practices currently used in the school systems include suspension and expulsion, which takes the student out of school (Annamma et al., 2019; Morris, 2016). Furthermore, using suspension decreases a student's chance of graduating from high school by 20% and increases the student dropout rate because of the loss of instructional time (Balfanz et al., 2015; Gregory, Hafen, et

al., 2016). Gregory, Clawson, et al. (2016) stated that African American students (26.2%) are more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension in response to their first offense in comparison to Hispanic American (18%) and European American (9.9%) students. Gregory, Clawson, et al. suggested that high school educators rethink their approach to school discipline, such as “preventing conflict, handling rule infractions, and re-engaging students after an infraction has occurred” (p. 326). Policymakers who seek alternatives like restorative justice to reduce dependency on school exclusion and the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in the school discipline system could have better student outcomes over time (Gregory, Clawson, et al., 2016).

Gregory et al.’s (2017) framework on the 10 equity principles and McCold and Wachtel’s (2003) framework on restorative justice promote positive school discipline practices that keep the students in school but hold them accountable for their misbehavior. The significant difference between discipline practices is the implementation process and the outcome. To examine and understand how school discipline is connected to African American girls and how teachers’ implementation of school discipline is perceived, a foundation must be laid using the frameworks increasing equity in school discipline and restorative justice theory as alternative positive school discipline practices as opposed to the exclusionary and punitive discipline practices that are predominately used.

Using exclusionary and punitive discipline practices, using zero-tolerance policies, having police on campus, and heavily relying on suspensions and expulsions to maintain order are harming African girls at an alarming rate (Luster, 2018; Onyeka-

Crawford et al., 2017; Slate et al., 2016). Annamma et al. (2019) stated that using exclusionary discipline practices with African American girls has an increased link to criminalization and a greater likelihood of incarceration. The alternative to using exclusionary and punitive discipline practices is restorative practices that claim to improve discipline by decreasing suspensions and strengthening student performance (Buckmaster, 2016; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2018; McCold & Wachtel, 2003).

The issue is that while policymakers work towards the implementation of restorative discipline practices and move away from traditional school discipline practices, teachers have challenges in maintaining order and monitoring behavior with few “empirically based, developmentally appropriate school discipline interventions available” (Gregory, Clawson, et al., 2016, p. 326). However, Gregory, Clawson, et al. (2016), in a study using student surveys, found that teachers who used a high implementation of restorative justice practices had fewer exclusionary discipline referrals about Hispanic American and African American students and positive relationships in comparison with teachers who used a low implementation of restorative justice practices. Gregory, Clawson, et al. also stated that restorative justice practice is being implemented more to help reduce suspension rates in the United States. Properly implementing restorative justice practices has narrowed the racial discipline gap (Gregory, Clawson, et al., 2016). Gonzalez et al. (2019) pointed out how restorative discipline practices, which engage the student in repairing relationships for their wrongdoing, and positive relationship building, including the intention of integrating the student back into the classroom, are all essential for effective discipline practices.

One of the main concerns with traditional school discipline practices is the adverse effects they have on African American girls, which creates a disproportion in the equity of discipline and raises concern as to whether African American girls are being targeted and mistreated (Annamma et al., 2019; Morris, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017). Traditional school discipline practices in the United States education system in the past were harsher on African Americans fueled by racism, and much has not changed since then (Gregory et al., 2017; Morris, 2016). Alternatively, while discipline reforms have changed over the years, restorative practices are still relatively new and have helped reduce suspensions. They are also seen as a way to end the racial discipline gap. More research is needed to determine if restorative practices are the solution to the issue of school discipline equity. (Gregory, Clawson, et al., 2016).

The purpose of Gregory et al.'s (2017) principles for increasing equity in school discipline is to provide developmentally appropriate practices that focus on student behavior concerning race and gender disparities. Implementing Gregory et al.'s framework on the 10 principles for increasing equity in school discipline creates opportunities for students to correct misbehavior while taking ownership of their misbehavior. Additionally, research has shown restorative justice's positive effect on student behavior tied to learning and keeping students in school (Fronius et al., 2019). The restorative justice framework gives students a different perspective on their misbehavior when they play a role in the consequences of their actions versus traditional practices, which punish immediately regardless of the level of infraction committed (Gregory, Clawson, et al., 2016). Moreover, educators must be willing to accept that

there are some biases about school discipline and that for change to take place, gender, power, race, culture, and privilege must be addressed (Gregory et al., 2017). Every principal aims to break the racial discipline gap and create a positive experience for teachers and students (Gregory et al., 2017).

Gregory, Clawson, et al. (2016) stated that problem-solving between the wrongdoer and those affected by the wrongdoing is a significant component of restorative justice in repairing the harm caused by the misbehavior. For example, a student having trouble at home could take it out on another student in a first-time offense. In this situation, having an open circle provides the wrongdoer, victim, administrator, teacher, and other students with more knowledge and understanding of why they mistreated another student. The victim and other stakeholders could express to the wrongdoer how they were affected and express how to make amends and get the wrongdoer help for their home issues. However, if the same situation occurred under exclusionary discipline practices, the student would most likely be sent to detention or suspended. The issue's root would be missed, and the misbehavior would not change. The difference between the two outcomes is the role of the students, teacher, and administrator in correcting misbehavior, which is a critical factor in the learning experience outcome (Gregory, Clawson, et al., 2016).

The principles for increasing equity in school discipline target areas related to the values and perspectives held by teachers, the degree to which relationships between individuals and groups are upheld, and the learning experience and available resources to assist and support behavior based on prevention and intervention protocols (Gregory et

al., 2017). The principles consist of five prevention, four intervention, and one combination protocol that addresses ways to promote equity in school discipline (Gregory et al., 2017). Open circles are used as a method in restorative justice to allow the wrongdoers to explain why they misbehaved and to hear from those affected as a means of intervention (Gregory, Clawson, et al., 2016; Luster, 2018). Additionally, restorative justice includes the same type of open circle as a preventative measure before an individual commits an infraction by discussing academic, emotional, and classroom-specific topics early in the school year with the entire classroom and students take turns sitting in the middle of the circle (Gregory, Clawson, et al., 2016).

Documented research has shown that teachers need professional development and experience with classroom management to have a positive relationship with their students (Stough & Montague, 2014). Few professional development training programs focus on school discipline reform (Reed et al., 2020). Because most inappropriate behavior and school discipline interactions occur between the teacher and student, training on resolving these matters without them ending in suspension is necessary (Gregory et al., 2019). Positive relationships and interactions between teachers and students promote student learning, create a peaceful environment, promote academic growth, and encourage positive behavior (Agyekum, 2019).

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

Discriminatory policies and practices against African Americans have been prevalent throughout the history of the United States, and they are the most overrepresented students regarding exclusionary discipline practices (Martin & Smith,

2017; OCR, 2023; Smith et al., 2023; Wegmann & Smith, 2019). Nevertheless, African Americans learned and gained knowledge but needed a more challenging education. The *Brown v. Board of Education* court case is a perfect example of how some African American families fought the education system for integration so that their children and future African American children could receive the same education as European Americans (Martin & Smith, 2017; Middleton et al., 2023). African American teachers were displaced following this decision, and African American students were filtered into schools with European teachers and students (Middleton et al., 2023). This integration was a disadvantage to African American students as European Americans already had preconceived biases towards African Americans in general and were culturally unaware of best practices for teaching African American students (Middleton et al., 2023).

Although the U.S. educational system has undergone many improvements, more must be done. School reforms can continue to change for equality (Johnson, 2020). Still, the reforms will only make a real difference once the inequitable issue is acknowledged, accepted, discussed, and destroyed at the root.

Today, the quality of a student's education, just like in the past, relies on the teachers who provide the instruction. Because most educators are European American, African American students are underrepresented in the field of education, making it difficult for teachers who are not familiar with their cultural norms to see past their skin color and look at their abilities (Johnson, 2020). Additionally, the current U.S. educational system has created a cycle of assigning African American students to lower-level classes, making advancing difficult and sometimes impossible (Johnson, 2020).

African American students are more likely to be subjected to less qualified teachers and have a higher rate of referrals to special education, but they are more likely to have lower referral rates to gifted programs and higher school dropout rates (Wegmann & Smith, 2019). Students who lack equal education often disrupt the learning of others, just as constantly disciplined students lack the opportunity to learn, which puts them at an increased risk for unequal educational opportunities (Austin et al., 2024; Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Austin et al. (2024) stated that exclusionary discipline practices have adverse outcomes for African American students. With education not being created equal and discipline practices being used unjustly on students of color, African American girls have found it challenging and frustrating to navigate the educational system (Gibson & Decker, 2019; Wegmann & Smith, 2019), which, according to Katz and Acquah (2024), includes gendered racism referring to “sexual violence, negative relationships with teachers, and biased policies” (p. 817). African American girls are psychologically and emotionally affected by disproportionate school discipline practices (Parsons et al., 2023).

In the current U. S. school system, some students may experience unequal consequences when school discipline practices follow a zero-tolerance policy, thus increasing the discipline gap between African American and European American students (Curran, 2016; Girvan et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2023). Smith et al. (2023) stated how a greater risk of involvement with the juvenile justice system for African American students is a contributing factor for unequal school discipline practices. School discipline reform may be the only solution to limit suspension and expulsions among the racial



divide and bring equity to school discipline (Reed et al., 2020). Blake et al. (2022) pointed out that the discipline gap between African American and European students is wider for girls than boys. Carefully analyzing the issues related to the inequity of school discipline practices used with African American girls can assist in understanding how some current practices are ineffective (Henry et al., 2022; Petrosino et al., 2017). Additionally, reevaluating current practices and studying the outcomes using alternative discipline methods can lead to actions toward the reformation of school discipline practices (Augustine et al., 2018; Henry et al., 2022; Parsons et al., 2023). These actions could promote positive behavior from African American girls, producing better-prepared and educated students (Sherrod, 2019).

### **Inequitable Implementation of Disciplinary Practices**

The U.S. educational system regarding discipline has changed over the years, using more zero-tolerance and less restorative approaches (Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Moreover, the results for African American students are disproportionate discipline practices (Smith et al., 2023). When more African American students are present, exclusionary discipline practices are more prevalent (Blake et al., 2022). Additionally, African American girls are subject to discipline that uses force and unfair punishments that often lead to pushing students out of school and losing valuable learning time (Blake et al., 2022; Martin & Smith, 2017). The suspension rate increases for African American girls and is higher for them than for girls from any other ethnicity and race (Blake et al., 2022; Kemp-Graham, 2018; Paul & Araneo, 2018). During their teenage years, students grow and develop and often test boundaries of authority. The combination of their

development and respect, or lack thereof for authority, can sometimes be explosive and end negatively, with the student suffering academically (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). For example, Kemp-Graham (2018) shared a story of an African American honor student who was suspended for a dress code violation after refusing the command from her teacher to remove a headwrap that the student claimed was necessary for a social studies project. Moreover, Gadson and Lewis (2022) pointed out documented stories of violent consequences experienced by African American girls, such as being body slammed to the ground by police, placed in a chokehold, and being handcuffed for talking back to a teacher.

The inequitable form of discipline relates to the teacher's lack of knowledge and sensitivity to a student's race, class, and gender based on preconceived notions about the type of person the student is (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). In the Butler-Barnes et al. (2023) study, not only did African American girls experience unfair discipline because of negative teacher relationships, but they were also less likely to be recommended for advanced courses. Another implication suggested by Wegmann and Smith (2019) is that students who are given warnings have opportunities to correct their behavior before a harsher punishment is delivered. Yet, in their study with European American and African American students, Wegmann and Smith found that most African American students did not receive warnings like their European American peers before punishment was delivered. Heilbrun et al. (2018) found lower suspension rates in positive learning environments, such as schools where teachers and students agreed on the equality of the rules and teachers cared about the students. However, a lack of equitable discipline leads

to higher rates of discipline and instruction loss for African American girls, which affects academic achievement (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). Moreover, African American girls are reprimanded and suspended for violations such as insubordination against authority and dress code violations related to hairstyles and colors like dreadlocks, mohawks, and box braids (Butler-Barnes et al., 2023; Griffin et al., 2024; Kemp-Graham, 2018). Given that the goal of social justice and the equal rights movement is equality for all, school discipline policies must be reexamined to eliminate any racial inequalities currently affecting African American girls (Gibson & Decker, 2019).

Researchers have revealed that many African American girls are at a greater risk for suspension and expulsion when disciplined at school than other students (Blake et al., 2022; Griffin et al., 2024; Wegmann & Smith, 2019). The treatment of African American girls sometimes goes unnoticed when teachers are not aware of their personal biases or preconceived notions (Gibson & Decker, 2019). These students have been suspended, expelled, or told they could not participate in school activities based on their appearance because their appearance supposedly did not fit the school's dress code policy; such school rules and policies are often biased (Martin & Smith, 2017; Townsend-Walker, 2020). Some school policies do not include clear descriptions or definitions of what constitutes a violation, which leads to various interpretations by the authority figure. African American girls are often discriminated against due to their interpretations (Gibson & Decker, 2019). Even skin tone is a factor African American girls must contend with regarding discipline and achievement (Townsend-Walker, 2020). Colorism is prevalent among African American girls in schools, and darker-toned students are twice

as likely to be suspended than lighter-toned students, amongst other privileges (Blake et al., 2017; Rosario et al., 2021). In addition, when working with African American girls is new and unfamiliar, proper training and racial sensitivity are needed to guide the relationship, including interaction, communication, support, and mutual respect (Gibson & Decker, 2019). When African American girls notice the deferential treatment they are receiving, they will react to the situation. They may even speak up for themselves regardless of the backlash they might receive (Butler-Barnes et al., 2023; Gibson & Decker, 2019).

African American students are perceived to be mature and developed by a certain age even though they are still young; they are no longer considered innocent but instead a threat to authority and are expected to behave more maturely than their peers (Townsend-Walker, 2020; Wegmann & Smith, 2019). African American students are held to standards reserved for adults, referred to as adultification, instead of looking at their behaviors as that of a child (Butler-Barnes et al., 2023; Wegmann & Smith, 2019). These assumptions determine the discipline level used and the type of punishment they will be given (Townsend-Walker, 2020). Additionally, the behaviors of African American students are perceived differently than students from other ethnic groups, whose behaviors are seen as harmless. In contrast, African American students' behaviors are seen as threatening based on negative stereotypes (Butler-Barnes et al., 2023; Wegmann & Smith, 2019). On the other hand, according to Gibson and Decker (2019), some African American girls feel that the attention they do get is racially motivated by biased compliments such as, "You speak well," or "Wow, I cannot believe how smart you are,"

implying that African American girls are not capable of being intelligent and articulate. Often, the issue is due to unintentional biases or implicit biases, which leads to unfair treatment and punishment, and without addressing the problem, educational barriers will develop for African American girls (Bell & Puckett, 2023; Gibson & Decker, 2019).

### **The Effects of Inequitable Implementation of Disciplinary Practices**

Exclusionary discipline practices affect many African American students (Evans-Winters, 2017; Smith et al., 2023; Young et al., 2018). Punitive discipline practices are ineffective and detrimental to African American and Hispanic American students, who are most vulnerable and affected by harsh punishments (Blake et al., 2020; Gadsden, 2017; Jean-Pierre & Parris-Drummond, 2018). Pesta (2018) described strong risk factors that encourage relationships between the criminal justice system, such as dropout and school failure. Exclusionary discipline practices only heighten those factors, especially for African American students. The discipline of African American girls is often associated with criminalization and discrimination at a disproportionate rate (Parsons et al., 2023).

Based on past research data, a disproportionate number of African American students received school suspensions because many African American students attend schools that rely heavily on exclusionary discipline practices (Anderson & Ritter, 2020). Severe disciplinary practices negatively affect students, such as dropping out of high school and involvement with the criminal justice system (Reed et al., 2020; Rocque & Snellings, 2018). In Cohen et al.'s (2023) study on suspensions with African American students in middle school, it was noted that there is a negative association between

suspensions and academic performance and behavior, even though not intended by this use of discipline. Nguyen et al. (2019) pointed out how African American students' fundamental civil rights are violated based on several studies explaining the relationship between academics and punitive discipline practices and that something must be done to correct this wrong. Johnson (2020) related the inequitable use of school discipline practices to the enslavement of African Americans over 200 years ago, which the author described as "(a) a dehumanization and dismantling of Black culture, (b) merciless discipline, (c) an assumption of dumbness and denial of a competitive education, and (d) preparation for servitude and/or shackles" (p. 7). According to Johnson, African American students feel defeated in school discipline based on fears and past experiences with teacher and administrator encounters. No real change has taken place using traditional forms of school discipline. There has been an increase in school violence and misbehavior, which students continue to get suspended and expelled for, keeping them from further learning opportunities (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019). Although disruptive students are dismissed from class to ensure learning takes place for the nondisruptive students, those misbehaved students lose valuable instruction time.

Additionally, the knowledge of school discipline practices directly linked to the justice system increases the likelihood of zero-tolerance policies being inequitably used on African American students and leading to more misbehavior (Henry et al., 2022; Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Moreover, with constant disciplinary actions taken against African American students, current zero-tolerance policies may have an adverse effect on the severity of their punishment and association with the law (Henry et al., 2022;

Marchbanks & Blake, 2018). Patrick et al. (2020) stated that although it is believed and supported that schools would not be safe for students and teachers without exclusionary discipline practices, there is ample documentation from teachers and students attending schools with high rates of ostracism for insignificant infractions expressing the opposite.

For female students, the relationship between school discipline has been linked to negative outcomes (Paul & Araneo, 2018). Although there is not enough evidence to identify why African American girls are disciplined more severely and frequently than students of other races, Marchbanks and Blake (2018) suggested four possible reasons for harsher punishments. African American girls' punishment could be harsher because

- African American girls' frequent engagement in aggressive behavior,
- shared characteristics that increase individual risks, such as low socioeconomic status or single-parent home,
- intentional or unintentional bias from a teacher about minority students, or
- the misinterpretation of European American teachers concerning the behavior of African American students as having more aggressive behavior than European American students. (Marchbanks & Blake, 2018, p. 7)

Clark-Louque and Sullivan (2020) suggested that some of the reasons African American girls' punishment could be harsher are based on institutionalized racism, stereotyping of Black girls, and implicit biases that some school officials hold. However, Marchbanks and Blake explained that knowing more about the individual could result in better evidence and information concerning the connection between school discipline and the juvenile justice system for African American students. When disciplined harshly, African

American girls struggle more than their peers, negatively influencing their emotional state and academics (Ispa-Landa, 2017; Parsons et al., 2023). When African American female students experience harsh discipline, there is an increased opportunity for them to encounter the law and become teen moms (Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020). While these experiences are not valid for all African American girls, they happen too often to enough of them that contentious relationships with the juvenile justice system and teen pregnancy must be addressed. Some African American girls are exposed to violence within their families and neighborhoods and often lack support, which schools should be a haven with consistency and stability (Massen, 2021). Furthermore, the violence these African American girls are exposed to early in life, including rape, other forms of sexual abuse, physical abuse, trafficking, and being pimped out, affect their mental and physical health (Massen, 2021; Morris, 2016). There are records of physical and sexual abuse by more than 90% of girls of African descent and high-risk behavior involved with the juvenile system (Morris, 2016). African American girls are one of the highest groups in the nation who are sexually victimized at a rate of nearly 19% (Massen, 2021).

One of the issues related to the harsh discipline of African American girls is that there are stereotypes about their behavior, demeanor, tone of voice, character, the way they dress, and how they respond to authority, which leads some teachers to believe they should be treated roughly to correct the misbehavior (Edwards, 2016; Gadson & Lewis, 2022). Lamboy et al. (2020) stated that in these cases, teachers and students are the victims of systematic racial injustice, and teachers must be taught proper interaction and discipline for the cycle to end. African American girls rely on the knowledge and



experience of teachers to nurture and guide them by teaching them proper behavior for society while modeling the same behavior they expect from the students (Lamboy et al., 2020). While a teacher's role is always to manage the classroom and keep students safe, sometimes school discipline practices are used ineffectively and justified as safety protocol to keep students from being harmed; however, discipline practices sometimes prevent African American students from learning (Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020; Welsh, 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018). As stated in Katz-Amey (2019), lower academic success is related to suspensions, which cause students to be absent from a greater proportion of academic learning time, resulting in a disconnect between classroom engagement.

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline Connection With Inequitable Disciplinary Practices**

One of the most important factors schools and administrators should be concerned with is keeping teachers and students safe on school grounds. To provide a safe learning environment, there must be rules and regulations to keep order. However, those rules and regulations should be based on legal factors and not influenced by racial or gender factors. According to Sobti and Welsh (2023), there is well-documented evidence that African American students are punished more severely than European American students for offenses that are similar. Due to the disparities between African American girls and their peers concerning exclusionary discipline practices, African American girls often receive too many referrals, expulsions, and suspensions (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Townsend-Walker, 2020). Exclusionary discipline practices are heavily relied upon and often permit the enforcement of school policies by law officials and push students out

of school (Adamu & Hogan, 2015; Keyes, 2022; Nance, 2017). Based on the OCR (2018) data, for the 2013-2014 school year, 27% of African American students were recipients of law enforcement referrals and arrests while attending K-12 schools but only made up 16% of the total student population. In the 2015-2016 school year, 31% of African American students received referrals and arrests but only made up 15% of the student population (OCR, 2018). Additionally, African American students made up 15.1% of the total student population, but 28.7% were referred to law enforcement, and 31.6% were arrested (OCR, 2021). In the recent OCR (2023) data, African American students made up 15% of the total student population and had 18% referred to law enforcement and 22% arrested.

Moreover, across the United States, African American females comprised 9% of suspensions but only 7% of the total school enrollment (OCR, 2023). Students of color, such as African American and Hispanic American students, are more likely to be removed from the classroom across schools in the United States than any other group of students and are the most vulnerable concerning the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon (Sissoko et al., 2023). There is a relationship between the combination of academic deficiencies and the disproportionate school discipline practices that affect African American students' involvement at an alarming rate that is higher than European American students (Keyes, 2022; Quinn, 2017).

There is a link between the school and juvenile justice system called the *school-to-prison pipeline*, where students are pushed out of school into the criminal justice system because of behavior issues (Gibson & Decker, 2019; Rocque & Snellings, 2018;

Sissoko et al., 2023). Students who experience too many suspensions and expulsions about exclusionary discipline practices are often criminalized (Sissoko et al., 2023). African American students make up a more significant percentage of the students who are pushed out of school (Gibson & Decker, 2019; Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Those students with multiple infractions attending schools that use suspensions heavily will presumably develop a relationship with the juvenile justice system, leading to incarceration (Patrick et al., 2020; Sobti & Welsh, 2023). With the loss of instructional days from suspensions and expulsions, African American students are preexposed to low academic achievement due to learning gaps (Sobti & Welsh, 2023). Patterns concerning suspension in middle schools showed that when European American students were suspended, it was usually once, but for African American students, it was multiple times (Townsend-Walker, 2020). Additionally, unlike their peers, African American girls' behavior and infractions against school policies are perceived to be "willfully bad with adult motivations," so they receive harsher punishments (Sobti & Welsh, 2023, p. 502). Office discipline referrals are given twice or three times more to African American students than to European American students (Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Sobti & Welsh, 2023; Wun, 2016).

African American girls have been deprived nationwide based on how school discipline is carried out (Neal-Jackson, 2020). Many African American girls attend schools where zero-tolerance policies drive school discipline because of past safety issues like what happened at Columbine High School in 1999 (Martin & Smith, 2017; Massen, 2021; Rocque & Snellings, 2018). The Columbine incident involved a massacre shooting

and attempted bombing by two students, resulting in the death of 12 students and one teacher. The correlation between school discipline practices and the juvenile justice system makes it easier to connect students displaying inappropriate behavior to the authorities to stop a potential incident and protect students and staff members (Massen, 2021; Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Amongst zero-tolerance policies are out-of-school suspensions, which keep students from learning in a school setting. Too many out-of-school suspensions encourage interaction with the justice system (Blake, Gregory, et al., 2016; Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). Students who receive out-of-school suspension are more likely to commit a crime than those who are not (McCarter et al., 2020). Massen (2021) argued that the ever-increasing suspensions and expulsions for African American girls have skyrocketed as a result of zero-tolerance policies; thus, losing valuable classroom instruction time and having more opportunities to break the law, African American girls are at risk for hostile environments and a lack of education. School police officers are often empowered by the zero-tolerance policies enforced in schools involving court referrals, making decisions for youth to go to juvenile court to handle the misbehavior better suited for school administrators (Brown et al., 2020). When African American girls are sent to the juvenile justice system through the school-to-prison pipeline, they receive severe sentences and make up a large portion of the juvenile justice system population (Bell & Puckett, 2023; Evans-Winters, 2017; Morris, 2016).

Another factor concerning the school-to-prison pipeline for African American girls is the low expectations concerning their academic performance (Anderson, 2018; Griffith, 2023; Owens, 2022). African American students are subjected to school push-

out and low academic achievement based on school discipline practices (Gadsden, 2017; Keyes, 2022; Owens, 2022). African American girls must have positive educational experiences and high expectations from their teachers (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). When teachers have lower expectations for African American girls and are discriminatory towards them, it makes learning difficult, uninteresting, and unimportant, which causes misbehavior and attitudes (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020; Townsend-Walker, 2020). The misbehavior and attitudes then lead to severe discipline problems and punishments, causing suspensions and expulsions, which are associated with low academic performance and failure, ultimately leading some African American girls to prison (Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Wegmann & Smith, 2019).

African American girls who find academics difficult and achieve low performance often find no reason to continue school and justify dropping out due to a lack of support and constant punishments (Rocque & Snellings, 2018). School dropout results from unfair treatment of school discipline practices, including school-based arrests, and African American students are twice as likely to drop out than their European American peers (Morris, 2016; National Women's Law Center, 2022). Additionally, some African American girls are not offered opportunities to participate in advanced courses and honors programs due to racial discrimination in the schools related to exclusionary discipline practices (Apugo et al., 2023). Exclusionary discipline practices have the reverse effect on their intended purpose, and African American girls are among those students who are paying the price (Apugo et al., 2023).

School dropouts, suspensions, and expulsions related to exclusionary discipline practices are also associated with truancy and can lead to relationships with the juvenile justice system (Anderson, 2018; Weathers et al., 2021). Truancy can mean many things, and students miss school for different reasons; however, Weathers et al. (2021) described truancy as being related to disengagement from school and detachment from peers, which can have short-term and long-term adverse effects. Weathers et al. stated that truancy in current practice is considered a crime and habitually truant students are punished severely. Truancy is associated with the school-to-prison pipeline and ripple effect on students, causing less instruction time, lower academic performance, and relationships with the juvenile justice system (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020; Weathers et al., 2021). Truancy in the early years could indicate future problems with education, and those students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged are more likely to be truant for various reasons, but regardless of the cause, they suffer immensely (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020).

The school-to-prison pipeline crisis is detrimental to the education of students, and it starts as early as preschool (Cyphert, 2015; Keyes, 2022; Reed et al., 2020). Exclusionary discipline practices towards African American preschoolers are susceptible to harsher school discipline that is developmentally inappropriate, including expulsion, which is twice as high as their European American classmates (Wymer et al., 2022). Preschoolers are being suspended or expelled for typical behaviors that are developmentally appropriate due to unconscious and conscious biases from their teachers, which are seen as disruptive behaviors (Wymer et al., 2022). Multiple factors

are related to preschool suspension and expulsions, such as individual child development, the learning environment, and teachers' perceptions and biases about a student's gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and physical size (Stegelin, 2018; Wymer et al., 2022). Alarming, African American preschoolers comprised 17% of enrollment for the OCR data collection during the 2020-2021 school year but represented 31% of preschoolers who received suspensions and expulsions (OCR, 2023). Preschool suspension and expulsion have long-term effects on students' social and emotional development and affect how they view school in subsequent years (National Prevention Science Coalition, 2020; Stegelin, 2018).

School disengagement plays a significant role in the relationship between a student and the school-to-prison pipeline epidemic (McCarter et al., 2020). Based on the number of out-of-school suspensions and absences, which causes students to lose valuable classroom time, African American students are more likely to become disengaged from school based on these factors (McCarter et al., 2020; Wymer et al., 2022). Disengagement from school can take different forms but includes lacking the ability to communicate with the students, misunderstanding the behavior, and assigning the wrong consequence (Haight et al., 2016; Wymer et al., 2022). As time increases, students become disengaged from school and academics.

### **Inequitable Implementation of Disciplinary Practices Related to Culture**

While many contributing factors affect the inequality of school discipline for African American students, Wegmann and Smith (2019) pointed out different cultural factors that contribute to unequal school discipline, such as the difference in

communication styles, preconceived stereotypes, misunderstanding of behaviors, and expected maturity. Most U.S. classrooms have predominantly European American teachers whose cultural experiences differ from those of African American students (Johnson, 2020; Wegmann & Smith, 2019). According to Wymer et al. (2022), European teachers comprise over 80% of the public school teacher population. Not having teachers who resemble them can threaten African American girls, who are often punished for failing to uphold the female expectations of femininity of the European American middle class (Kemp-Graham, 2018; Morris, 2016; Sobti & Welsh, 2023). African American girls are often regulated by schools in such a way that it violates their right to identify with their culture because they are punished for not practicing specific standards of beauty and femininity that are the dominant culture (Evans-Winters, 2017; Sobti & Welsh, 2023). Cultural factors that influence behavior seen differently based on normative behaviors make it difficult for African American students to be treated fairly when disciplined (Reno et al., 2017; Wegmann & Smith, 2019). Patrick et al. (2020) pointed out how African American girls are subjected to close surveillance concerning school policies that aim to persecute how they identify and connect with their culture, such as rules that address hair codes explicitly targeting African American girls' hairstyles.

African American girls have been distinctly and unfairly judged and punished on multiple occasions for behaviors that have been misconstrued or culturally misunderstood, all under the microscope of gendered bias (Griffith, 2023). Past and present educational institutions have taught students based on a cultural norm representative of European American males and do not reflect the vast majority of



student and teacher cultures that represent the classrooms (Johnson, 2020). This educational practice creates a paradigm that often leads to European American people's culture and classroom etiquette as the dominant group in schools and society. In contrast, everyone else's culture is seen as nondominant, mirroring a form of slavery (Johnson, 2020). African American students, like other students, come from different backgrounds and have different life experiences; however, when joined in the classroom, all students' cultures should be appreciated and respected, yet for African Americans, this is sometimes not the case (Johnson, 2020). The dominant culture of European American middle-class teachers who often lack "culturally responsive discipline practices" utilizes the discipline practice models for school culture in U.S. public schools, and students who display behaviors contrary to those norms are punished severely (Sanders et al., 2023, p. 30).

As stated, many U.S. teachers are European American females who have experienced life differently from many of their students (Johnson, 2020; Wegmann & Smith, 2019). Students need culturally responsive teachers who are aware and try to include all ethnic and racial groups in the classroom so everyone feels included and connected (Keyes, 2022). Finding a way to bridge the gap between school norms and the cultural norms of students can create a harmonious classroom. There are many styles of teaching and learning. With diverse classrooms nationwide, having a culturally responsive classroom will help teachers navigate discipline and classroom management that helps nurture development and benefits African American students (Keyes, 2022). Additionally, culturally responsive classroom management helps to eliminate the use of

exclusionary discipline practices that are racially and ethnically driven (Keyes, 2022; Pas et al., 2016). Gaias et al. (2019) stated how important it is for classroom management when building a culturally responsive classroom and that there are usually three levels. Higher-level managed classrooms typically have students with good behavior, and lower levels usually have students with misbehavior (Gaias et al., 2019). A well-managed classroom takes time and effort and must be done intentionally to make it culturally responsive.

Griffith (2023) suggested how important it is to promote a culturally responsive classroom, encourage cultural pride for African American girls, and foster positive student-teacher relationships. Teachers who understand how culture and classroom behavior relate are better equipped to decipher appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Keyes, 2022; Siwatu et al., 2017). A culturally responsive classroom does not necessarily mean specific rules or guidelines. Still, a culturally responsive classroom is more closely related to a state of mind and how teachers and students engage based on knowledge of cultural norms through communication and appreciation and acceptance of differences in values and beliefs (Abacioglu et al., 2020; Siwatu et al., 2017).

Teachers need to understand the culture of their students when building a culturally responsive classroom to eliminate biases and the use of stereotypes. African American girls deal with various stereotypes based on how they carry themselves, their appearance, and even their hair choices (Massen, 2021). Henning et al. (2022) described experiences where African American students have been humiliated, made to cut their hair to compete, and sent home because of their hair choices. Additionally, African

American girls are often described as loud, disruptive, aggressive, and disrespectful (Gadson & Lewis, 2022; Shange, 2019; Slate et al., 2016). These stereotypes and implicit biases follow these young ladies, and the moment they display any emotion, behavior, or action resembling these adjectives, they are punished severely (Austin et al., 2024; Slate et al., 2016).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The education of all students is necessary for their growth and development. With African American girls being the focus of disrupters to the educational system rather than contributors, the school discipline system must be reformed. This chapter focused on areas in the school discipline system that lacked empathy and concern for African American girls, such as biases, cultural insensitivity, misinterpretation of behaviors, the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices, and lack of knowledge. Additionally, I provided detailed factors related to school discipline practices related to culture, the school-to-prison pipeline, the effects of discipline practices when used unfairly, and what inequitable discipline practices look like for African American girls. While many factors affect and contribute to African American girls being pushed out, punished more severely, and not accepted because of their differences, the research is limited on why it happens so often and what is currently being done to address and change the use of inequitable discipline practices for African American girls.

Further, the research has only addressed the school discipline gap for specific areas and age groups. It does not reflect how African American girls are treated across K-12<sup>th</sup> in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The research has mainly focused on highly

populated areas with African American students who attend schools with a higher rate of exclusionary discipline practices. However, the research showed that change is possible. With a different approach closely representative of restorative practices, African American girls have an opportunity for a similar educational experience.

This study pointed out factors that can be addressed over time with teacher training, administrative support, a review of the current school discipline practices to eliminate any biased rules for all students, and using restorative practices that are equal for all students. Without changing the current discipline practices, the cycle of inequitable school discipline practices will continue and increase over time. The specific research design, rationale, and methodology will be described in Chapter 3. Additionally, my role in the research, the instrumentation, and procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection will be discussed, as well as the ethical guidelines and trustworthiness that will be adhered to.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls in their classrooms, schools, and districts. Through synthesis, teacher interview results were combined with research on restorative practices, positive discipline practices, and zero-tolerance policies. The research has the potential to contribute to the identified research gap to encourage school administrators to reexamine and evaluate discipline policies for any bias to ensure fairness to all students and promote equal discipline practices. I used the basic qualitative research method to address the study research question. Rahman (2016) explained the significance of using a qualitative research method for studies with interviews as the primary source for data collection by acknowledging the interview's focus on the participants' "feelings, opinions, experiences, deeper insights into the issues, and understanding of the human experience in specific settings" (p. 104). To understand middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing current school discipline practices toward African American girls, it was important to use a method to draw from those experiences and explain the data collected from the interviews. A review of the research design and rationale, along with my role as the researcher, the methodology that was chosen for this study, the study's trustworthiness, and the ethical considerations, are presented in this chapter.

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

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls

in their classrooms, schools, and districts. In this basic qualitative study using teacher interviews, I addressed the following research question: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of disciplinary practices implemented toward African American girls, and how do the girls respond? A qualitative approach for this study is based on the phenomena and appropriateness of answering why something is or is not for progress improvement in a natural setting (Busetto et al., 2020; Teherani et al., 2015). A qualitative design aims to collect the necessary data and determine the best method for organizing the data (Suter, 2012). According to Busetto et al. (2020), having the ability to answer questions for progress improvement is better served with a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative approach, which only offers numerical value.

In contrast, a qualitative approach offers in-depth explanations of the existing problem. Most importantly, a qualitative approach to this study was a way to help ensure that research questions are answered using minimal parallel explanations (Suter, 2012). Focusing on the perspectives of the participants involved in the experience, how the experience unfolds, and how participants are affected by the experience is a benefit of using qualitative research (McGrath et al., 2019; Sutton & Austin, 2015; Teherani et al., 2015). Qualitative design can be "simple, complex; creative, flexible, informal, and dynamic" (Suter, 2012, p. 373). Additionally, using a qualitative approach allows the researcher to become more involved and connected with the research (Dodgson, 2017). The design choices for conducting qualitative research are plentiful as each method yields similar and different results; they include the phenomenological approach, the

ethnographic approach, grounded theory, case study, and narrative designs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Shufutinsky, 2020).

Various qualitative methods can be used to gather data, such as observations, focus groups, a document study, and semistructured interviews (Busetto et al., 2020). I chose to conduct a basic qualitative design using the semistructured interview technique. Consequently, the researcher must remain objective and “reflexive, conscious, and aware about how his or her role might impact the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee” (McGrath et al., 2019, p. 1004). The interview results can inform the research on progress with school discipline policies and how they affect African American girls through direct insight from teachers in the field to continue bridging the discipline gap and providing positive discipline methods for better outcomes related to African American girls.

The research tradition that is closely aligned with this study is a basic qualitative design. Kahlke (2014) stated that a basic qualitative design is a research method that does not follow an established set of guidelines commonly found in phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography. Instead, the researcher chooses the methodology best for the study’s intended purposes and implements the necessary practices from the selected method (Kahlke, 2014). The basic qualitative design is used to gain knowledge and understanding of how the world and things around us are perceived and interpreted by others. Kahlke explained that a researcher who uses a basic qualitative design could choose which sampling technique they would like to use for their study. Additionally,

semistructured interviews and focus groups are usually used to collect data for basic qualitative studies.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher has many roles in a research study. In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is to “attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants” (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 226). I chose the social media platform from which the study participants were selected due to the ease of selection. However, I did not know any teachers or staff from the selection pool.

My role as the researcher was to develop an appropriate interview protocol to gather as much information as possible from each teacher interview, focusing on the middle school teachers’ perceptions concerning the current school discipline practices concerning African American girls. My role as the researcher included keeping my biases aside and recording what was said in the interviews. Those personal biases included believing African American girls are often mistreated in school, just like in society. Based on my experiences and what I have witnessed growing up, some teachers are harsher on students of color than European American students. I had to be mindful of my biases to go into the interviews without negative feelings, emotions, or beliefs. My role was not to interpret the data based on my perceptions of what I thought was said or judge teachers for what they may or may not have done. My role as the researcher was to collect, record, and examine the perceptions from the teacher interviews without bias for helpful information.



## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The participants were chosen from the teachers who volunteered to participate in the interviews through the flyer posted on social media and Walden University's participant pool. I contacted the director of Walden University's participant pool and applied to have my flyer posted on the website. I had to update every few months whether my post needed to remain so that it could be taken down once I had enough participants. I offered a Starbucks gift card for \$10 as an incentive for participating in the study. I did not have prior contact with any potential teachers for the study. The participation selection criteria for this study were as follows: (a) Teachers had to be middle school teachers, (b) teachers had to have worked in any U.S. school district for a minimum of 3 years, and (c) teachers had to have experience teaching or witnessing how school discipline was administered to African American girls.

After my study was approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I contacted the administrators of the three social media platforms for permission to post my recruit flyer. The flyer included my contact information, the purpose of the study, and the selection criteria. Interested participants who thought they met the criteria were asked to contact me by email to schedule their interviews. I emailed the consent form to the interested participants along with the date and time for their interview. They were given the option of interviewing through video chat or by phone. There was an overwhelming response to the initial posting of my flyer in March 2023. Although I contacted 10 participants, only six were chosen from that pool because the

other four did not meet the study criteria. Those six teachers became part of the sample, and I moved forward with the interviews. I needed more participants to reach saturation, so I only reposted my flyer on Facebook the first week of July. Three participants were chosen and interviewed based on that effort.

I conducted semistructured interviews with nine participants to gather information-rich data. However, the first participant's recorded interview was inaudible, and I could not transcribe the interview tape. Thus, the final sample size for this study was eight participants. Small sample sizes are used when conducting interviews for qualitative research "to support the depth of case-oriented analysis that is fundamental to this mode of inquiry" (Vasileiou et al., 2018, p. 2). Additionally, the small sample size reduces the need to conduct too many interviews. There must be a balance in the number of participants used for the study; too many participants will affect the intimate analysis qualitative data brings, and too few will not yield enough new evidence (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Sampling can be achieved in different ways, and each method has specific purposes. I used purposive sampling, a common form used in qualitative research. Purposive sampling focuses on responding to the research questions from situations related to the study (Schreier, 2018). The specific methods that most fit my study are purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive and convenience sampling are both techniques that can be used in qualitative research. Purposive sampling is where the researcher already has a goal and the chosen participants to help fulfill the study (Suen et al., 2014). With purposive sampling, the participant is chosen deliberately based on their qualities (Suen et al., 2014). According to Suen et al. (2014), convenience sampling uses

a specific set of nonrandom participants to meet the required criteria to help fulfill the study. In convenience sampling, readily available participants are used (Suen et al., 2014). However, one of the disadvantages of using convenience sampling is that the population is homogenous and likely to be biased (Suen et al., 2014). Suen et al. stated that emphasis on saturation is the focus of purposive sampling, while convenience sampling focuses on generalizability. I used a combination of both sampling methods.

### **Instrumentation**

I created the interview protocol used as the data collection tool (see Appendix A). An interview protocol is used as a procedural guide to help the research proceed with the interview process (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Additionally, an interview protocol is a script used before and after the interview, not just a list of questions that will be asked during the interview (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Jacob and Furgerson (2012) stated that the interview protocol must also include a consent form for the participants to complete before the interview, and the interview questions should be open-ended.

The participants in my study had the option of being interviewed over the telephone or using video conferencing. Regardless of choice, I audio-recorded all interviews. Audio recording allows for the verbatim transcription of the interviews. For telephone and video interviews, the embedded audio recording served as the primary tool for recording. Using the interview protocol, I collected information from the participants on what discipline practices are used in their classrooms, schools, and the district (see Appendix A).

The interview protocol consisted of nine questions. I asked the participants to describe their discipline practices and their effective discipline methods. I asked them how they viewed the school and district rules and whether they incorporated those rules into their classroom discipline practices if they were different. In addition, I asked the participants how they perceived the rules are equal amongst students of all races and ethnicities and if they believed some students experienced a difference when disciplined. I asked the participants to elaborate further if they considered the rules biased and, if so, what could be done to improve the rules.

Furthermore, I asked the participants if they had ever seen or experienced the rules being abused in any way that directly affected African American girls. If so, how did the students react to those rules and consequences? Based on their response, I also asked the participants how often African American girls were disciplined unfairly versus other ethnicities.

For those who needed it, I provided the participants with two lists: (a) the 10 principles of increasing equity in school discipline (see Appendix B) developed by Gregory et al. (2017), and (b) McCold and Wachtel's (2003) restorative justice theory principles and practices (see Appendix C). I asked them to elaborate on their familiarity with these practices and the ways these practices had been incorporated into their classroom rules, school rules, and district policies. These interview questions addressed the following research question: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of disciplinary practices implemented toward African American girls, and how do the girls respond?

The teacher interviews were used to collect data based on the research question from middle school teachers in the field. Using semistructured interviews is best for qualitative study because the researcher is allowed to gather data through open-ended questions and presents the opportunity to explore deep personal feelings and issues that are sometimes sensitive (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Additionally, using semistructured interviews creates a special relationship between the interviewer and interviewee using relationally focused skills, including the ability to facilitate (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), researchers should be mindful of the basic skills of interviewing used in qualitative research, which are as follows:

- determining the purpose and scope of the study,
- identifying participants,
- considering ethical issues,
- planning logistical aspects,
- developing the interview guide,
- establishing trust and rapport,
- conducting the interview,
- memoing and reflection,
- analyzing the data,
- demonstrating the trustworthiness of the research and
- presenting findings in a paper or report. (p. 1)

Because this study aimed to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices on African American girls, using semistructured interviews provided that opportunity.

The semistructured interview technique uses the participants' subjective experiences, including their perspectives through first-hand knowledge and open-ended questions and predefined topics (Busetto et al., 2020; McGrath et al., 2019). I used the semistructured interview technique by interviewing a controlled group for a specific topic. Semistructured interviews are great data collection tools and require the researcher to build rapport with the participants, listen to what the participants are saying, be prepared for unanticipated emotions and feelings, and be familiar with the interview guide to keep the flow of the interview (McGrath et al., 2019). I was the primary instrument used to collect data.

Content validity must be established in qualitative research regarding the data (Aung et al., 2021). I carefully constructed the interview questions to ensure the quality and coverage of the research question. The first step I took toward designing questions in my interview protocol was reviewing my research question. I created questions that would help answer the research question based on the prior research gathered from Annamma et al. (2019), Bowman et al. (2018), and Crenshaw et al. (2015). These studies described the challenges African American girls have experienced in schools when they are disciplined. They explained that there is a lack of data available that could be used to assist with the elimination of biased discipline and that future research studies could contribute to the growing data. I carefully considered my research question and

developed a few questions to ask the participants, which could be used to gather data to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of school discipline. Based on feedback from my committee members and meeting with my chair, I eliminated, revised, and selected nine solid questions, outlined in Appendix A.

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

I collected the data for this study from individual teacher interviews with nine teachers from two recruitment rounds. I was the one who collected the data and transcribed each interview. I eliminated the first participant's interview because the audio file did not record a clear version of the interview, making transcribing impossible. The teacher interviews were conducted over 5 months, with two conducted in March, three in April, and four in July. Interviews took place during the Spring 2023 and Summer 2023 semesters. The transcription of each interview took place within 1-2 days of the interview. I asked the remaining eight participants to review their interview transcripts to ensure the interview captured their intended responses. This review made it possible for them to provide any additional clarification or information. I also used transcript reviews to establish credibility and validity in qualitative research. It took me a few days to a few weeks to review each interview transcript for coding, except one which was not coded until a few months after the interview. Once I completed my data analysis write-up, each teacher received a copy of the summary of my research.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Organizing and analyzing research is an important aspect when conducting a study. Data analysis is generally described as an iterative process, bringing meaning to

the data (Lester et al., 2020). A data analysis plan helps keep the researcher organized and on target with the research questions. My data analysis plan was used to answer the research question.

After collecting the interview data, I followed specific procedures to organize and code the data. Coding, category formation, and theme extractions are all techniques that can be used for data analysis (Lester et al., 2020). While several practices can be used to analyze the data, I used sorting and sifting to find common themes using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is used in qualitative data to identify patterns across the data collected from in-depth interviews or focus groups (Lester et al., 2020). Lester et al. (2020) provided three reasons how thematic analysis is used in qualitative research:

1. It offers tremendous theoretical flexibility, allowing the researcher the opportunity to engage disciplinary theories and perspectives, expanding the outcomes for meaningful and relevant analysis;
2. It engages with analytic practices that are common with other approaches to qualitative analysis, such as sorting and sifting through the data set to identify similar phrases and relationships; and
3. It can be used when analyzing various kinds of data and a range of data set sizes. (p. 98)

Once the data from the interviews have been collected, the next step in the process of thematic analysis is to transcribe the data (Lester et al., 2020). Ample time is necessary to transcribe the data collected from the semistructured interviews (Lester et al., 2020).

Based on Lester et al. (2020), verbatim transcripts are the most common form of



transcription used in qualitative research, which uses a thematic analysis approach. When transcribing data, it is important that a researcher not rely on outsourcing a transcriptionist. Transcribing one's own data set lets the researcher become acquainted with the data (Lester et al., 2020).

Additionally, Lester et al. (2020) stated that a researcher's understanding of the participants' perspectives could deepen by transcribing their data. However, if a transcription service were used, the researcher's next step would be to familiarize themselves with the transcribed data collected (Lester et al., 2020). Although the basic qualitative design does not require software use, several choices can aid in the "coding, organization, and rapid retrieval of information" (Suter, 2012, p. 382). I used the Microsoft 365 Word tool on Walden University's website to upload my audio file and transcribe my interviews. I then listened to each recording while reviewing the transcript to correct any mistakes and add the missing information.

I coded and analyzed the data. The analysis led to themes about middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices for African American girls. In qualitative research, the researcher is responsible for providing discrepant data that may have occurred during the data analysis process and show validity (Coleman, 2021). When a researcher carefully examines all data that seem to challenge their conclusions, known as discrepant data, the discrepant data must be included within the study to represent all perspectives (Coleman, 2021). I used eight teacher interviews to answer the research question. All data collected from the eight interviews are included to ensure trustworthiness, validity, credibility, and any discrepant data uncovered.

### **Trustworthiness**

The researcher has a vital role and responsibility when collecting and interpreting the data to report any findings from the study (Shufutinsky, 2020). To substantiate the trustworthiness of this research study, the following four elements must be addressed: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Establishing credibility is vital to the research study. It includes the researcher being able to set aside personal biases, ideologies, beliefs, perceptions, preconceived notions, and any connections to the topic of study (Shufutinsky, 2020). To achieve credibility in this qualitative study, I had to stay focused on the teachers' responses to the interview questions related to their experiences and remove my voice and opinion from the data. I also used a sample of the nine individual teachers. I asked them to review their transcripts to help establish credibility.

Furthermore, transferability is essential and central to qualitative research methods. The main purpose of transferability is to provide generalization, which is often not considered important in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2021). Transferability describes the context of the behavior and experiences of the participants to obtain meaning that an outsider could understand and appreciate (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability is necessary to encourage the transferability of the data. Dependability refers to the steadiness and consistency of data gradually involving the participants' analysis related to the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I achieved transferability and dependability by providing detailed descriptions of the study and data to allow the reader

to determine the transferability of the findings to their setting and to enable future researchers to duplicate the study.

Improving confirmability requires the researcher to remain objective when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data to certify there are no biases and allow the study to be grounded in the data and focused on the participants' words (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure the establishment of dependability and confirmability are included in this study, I selected a strategy known as an audit trail. An audit trail documents the qualitative study's progress through record keeping of the implementation and interpretation by the researcher of the data collected (Carcary, 2020). In Chapter 4, I will include more information about the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The nature of this study is a sensitive topic, and I always had to be professional, keep personal thoughts and opinions out of the interviews, and respect the participants' ideas, opinions, feelings, and beliefs. Before any data could be collected for the study or participants recruited, I had to adhere to the guidelines based on Walden University's IRB approval (IRB Approval No. 05-13-22-0155918). Once my study was approved, I followed the steps toward recruitment in Walden's participant pool and the social media platform where my participants were selected. After participants were recruited, I briefed all participants before their acceptance to do the interview, again before the interview took place, and throughout the interview as a reminder, and once the interview was complete. The participants emailed "I consent" after the consent form was sent, stating

they were briefed and understood that they should not share any information about the interview. Participants received their gift cards before or upon completion of the interview.

Participant names were not used; audio recordings were only used to ensure word-for-word transcription during the synthesis process. Although there was no physical risk, there were minimal risks emotionally and mentally based on the topic of this study and the questions I asked during the interviews. To ensure confidentiality, I gave each participant an alphanumeric code to identify them. I was the only one privy to any personal information. Keeping the participants' names private helped when I presented the narrative for the findings in Chapter 4. All recorded data and written interview responses were locked in a file cabinet in my closet, where they remained until the study was completed. I used Microsoft Office 365 Word to transcribe the interviews, and each participant could receive a confidential copy of the transcribed interview written verbatim. I will destroy all data after 5 years.

### **Summary**

The purpose of Chapter 3 was to explain the research design and rationale for the study. I included a detailed description of the role of the researcher and how I monitored and eliminated biases from the study. In the methodology section, I discussed how participants were selected, the data collection instrument, the procedures for recruitment, the data analysis plan, and the follow-up plans. Also included were the issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures to protect the participants. The results from the data collected are presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls in their classrooms, schools, and districts. I transcribed, coded, and analyzed the teacher interview data; this chapter outlines the results. In this study, the teacher interviews addressed the following research question: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of disciplinary practices implemented toward African American girls, and how do the girls respond?

To begin with, in Chapter 4, I describe the demographics of the teacher participants and how many years they taught middle school. The experience and knowledge that each teacher participant contributed to this study provide insight into the current school discipline practices that represent past and improved school discipline practices. Careful review and analysis of the teacher interviews, extracting only relevant information that focused solely on the research question, helped to address the purpose and conceptual framework. Additionally, I include the process I used for collecting and analyzing the data to ensure that accurate and pertinent data were extracted from the teacher interviews. I have included the codes, categories, and themes created from the analysis using a table. The conclusion of this chapter provides evidence of trustworthiness, the results of the study, and a summary of Chapter 4, which includes a discussion of the three major themes that arose from the data analysis to answer the research question: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of disciplinary practices implemented toward African American girls, and how do the girls respond?

### **Setting**

This study occurred when social media was used to showcase hidden matters in the world, displaying harsh discipline practices, both isolated events and practices that had been kept private. However, with more students using cell phones and filming situations in school, the world is becoming more aware of what occurs in some classrooms. These events did not negatively influence the teacher participants' ability to participate in this study. Although there were African American teachers in this study, they did not use their personal experiences growing up in the school system when answering the interview questions. The teacher participants in this study taught in middle schools located on the East Coast of the United States. The teacher participants worked in urban school districts that serve predominantly African American students but still have a diverse population of minority students. The teacher participants were truthful about their past and current teaching experiences concerning the school discipline of African American girls, which provided insight into the current school discipline practices that contributed to this study.

### **Demographics**

Using a posted flyer with a brief study description, I recruited the teacher participants for this study via social media and Walden University's participant pool. Teacher participants emailed me stating they were interested in participating in the study. I replied with a detailed description of the study, their necessary commitment to the study, and a consent form. Although there was an enormous amount of interest in the study, I chose nine participants to interview; however, Teacher A's recorded interview

was inaudible, and thus, I could not transcribe it. Teacher A was removed from the study. The eight teachers who participated in this research study identified as male or female. There were five male and three female participants. All teacher participants were African American teachers who have taught in the United States. Each participant had taught middle school for at least 3 years and was currently teaching middle school or another grade level, as outlined in Table 2. For this study, I assigned alphanumeric codes to protect the identity of the teacher participants by using Teacher followed by a letter of the alphabet based on the order of their interview. For example, the first teacher participant whom I interviewed I labeled Teacher A, and the second was named Teacher B.

**Table 2**

*Participant Interview and Demographic Information*

Participant	Interview date	Interview start time	Interview platform	Gender/ ethnicity	Number of years taught middle school
Teacher A	Inaudible recording. Data were not included in the study.				
Teacher B	03/30/23	5:00 pm	Zoom	Female/AA	8 years
Teacher C	04/05/23	6:00 pm	Zoom	Male/AA	7.5 years
Teacher D	04/13/23	5:00 pm	Zoom	Male/AA	4 years
Teacher E	04/10/23	5:00 pm	Zoom/Email	Male/AA	3 years
Teacher F	07/06/23	1:00 pm	Zoom	Female/AA	13 years
Teacher G	07/10/23	3:00 pm	Zoom	Female/AA	3 years
Teacher H	07/11/23	3:00 pm	Zoom	Male/AA	6 years
Teacher I	07/18/23	1:00 pm	Zoom	Male/AA	4 years

*Note.* AA = African American.

### **Data Collection**

I collected the data using Zoom's audio recording feature for interviews. I stored audio files on my password and fingerprint-protected laptop. I used Microsoft 365 Word to transcribe all audio files as it was less expensive than my original plan of using

rev.com. Then, I listened to each audio recording and made any changes, such as missed words, punctuation marks, and correct words or phrases to the transcriptions lost in translation. I kept to the original verbiage of each participant during my transcription process; however, I edited the transcripts to reflect proper grammar. After reviewing each transcription, I made follow-up questions if necessary and emailed those teachers for a response. Once they responded, I updated their interview transcript. I sent each participant a copy of the final transcripts for member checking and clarification on their communication during the interview.

I conducted most interviews for this research study using Zoom except for one interview, which I conducted halfway on Zoom and halfway through email, which was semistructured. I conducted weekly interviews between March and July of 2023 in the afternoons and evenings. Most interviews took place the same week consent was received, but a few were scheduled almost 2 weeks after consent. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code using Teacher followed by a letter of the alphabet based on the order of their interview. The code was not assigned based on gender, age, ethnicity, or name. It took a total of 5 months to complete the eight interviews. Interview durations ranged between 18-35 minutes. Teacher E's interview took place on April 10, 2023, at 5:00 pm; however, there was a bad internet connection on their end, so I could only complete the introduction and ask about their teaching journey before the internet disrupted our interview. We finished the interview via email after I asked Teacher E if they still wanted to participate once we saw there would be no connection. The interrupted interview was our second scheduled interview, so I chose not to create a third



and gave the email option. Teacher E sent me their responses via email on April 16, 2023.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative research process from start to finish is challenging and time-consuming for novice researchers because they are learning the technique while trying to implement the steps in the process. Walden University provided a learning workshop detailing the coding process at the June 2023 Orlando residency. It included step-by-step instructions on manual coding and a practice session coding a poem with instructor and peer feedback. The workshop provided a list of websites and software I could have used to transcribe and code my interviews. My Chapter 3 data analysis plan guided my steps during the data collection process. After I collected the interview data, I coded, categorized, and extracted themes. I used the verbatim transcripts after uploading the audio file to the Microsoft 365 Word tool, but I manually coded. I listened to each transcript's audio file from Microsoft Word to ensure the transcription's accuracy. From there, I read the transcript one sentence at a time and coded any statements concerning the research topic that stood out to me. Using the sort and sift method, I allowed the data to guide me regardless of what I knew and researched before the interviews. First, I coded each interview. Once I completed coding the statements gathered from the eight interviews, I grouped the codes into related categories and themes. After review from my committee, I went through each of the codes and condensed them into fewer categories. Those categories were then grouped into three final themes.

I uncovered two discrepancies that fell outside the study themes during the data analysis process. Teacher E stated that European American male bullies were the group they believed to be singled out the most, contrary to the literature and the other seven teacher interviews. The only other difference was that the teacher participants stated that they work at schools predominantly filled with African American students, so they see less differentiation in school discipline. The teacher participants did point out that during their careers, they have witnessed unfair discipline practices against African American girls. Based on the eight interviews' overall analysis, the themes I developed, and detailed accounts, the discrepant case based on Teacher E's interview stood out because it focused on the opposite gender and ethnicity that current research does not point out as receiving unfair discipline practices. Due to this difference, and only one teacher participant mentioning it, it needed to hold more weight to make it a theme in this study.

### **First Cycle Coding**

I began the initial coding process by examining each transcript line-by-line and coding participant statements relevant to the research questions and topic of study. Extracting participant statements pertinent to the study ensured alignment between the research question, data collection, and data analysis. There were 61 codes in all. This first cycle of coding combined all eight interviews into workable data. Table 3 includes a sample of the initial codes, participant identifiers, and data excerpts corresponding to each code.

**Table 3***Examples of Initial Codes*

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Classroom management	Teacher B	I found that being personable with the students just helped to ensure a well-run classroom.
Consequences	Teacher I	Sometimes we give them some light consequences, like to clean. When you are not in good behavior, you just do some cleaning.
Sense of community	Teacher C	Yes, of course they're involved. We sit down and have a class meeting and talk about what do they want to do and what they do not want. And we come to a collective agreement and write down the rules.
Gain understanding	Teacher F	We respond. Based on our culture. And when I'm speaking with teachers and my teachers in my environment, they understand me when I say if you came from Michigan, I need you to hang out in the hood a little. Because you need to understand that the way we converse with one another is normal in our environment.
Supportive relationships	Teacher H	Also, communication is key in case people and relationship for them like they should relate with each other and with me or other teachers are in a positive way and communicate wherever they feel like they are oppressed or something.
Opportunities for learning & correcting behavior	Teacher D	Well, what I prefer to do when students are not doing the right thing is to come to an understanding. I believe that no one is wrong, including most likely children. So that's why I cannot give consequences immediately at least when somebody has done something wrong, I have patience to give them the opportunity to explain themselves. I don't really have premade rules or judgements or how to follow things. I believe that things should work according to real time, if they make a mistake, there is probably a reason why they did it and I'd rather listen to that.
Misinterpreted punishment	Teacher G	They feel that they're not giving that same discipline, that's to giving to others sometimes, which is not so
Witnessed changes	Teacher E	Advisory practice is the most effective discipline practice in my classroom. Bullies have stopped bullying their mate and now submissive to school authority

## **Second Cycle Coding**

For the second cycle of coding, I then grouped the coded data by similarities and placed them in a category. An average of three to eight codes were grouped into 11 categories. Those categories were behavior management plan, Maslow's hierarchy of needs: love and belonging, safety precautions, classroom management, restorative justice theory, 10 principles of increasing equity, positive discipline approach, firsthand knowledge, critical observations, girls' behavior, and girls' attitudes. Then, I condensed those 11 categories into eight final categories. Those categories were behavior management plan, restorative justice theory, racial inequity in school discipline, community culture, positive relationships, African American girls' responses and behavior, equity in consequences, and misinterpreted discipline. I placed the consolidation of my initial codes into a new table chart and chose key excerpts from the teacher-participant interviews. Table 4 includes a sample of six categories, some relevant codes, participant identifiers, and excerpts from the data that correspond with each code and category.

**Table 4***Examples of Codes and Initial Categories*

Category	Code	Participant	Excerpt
Behavior management	Rules	Teacher C	So, when you're in my English class there's not unnecessary walking around in class or unnecessary borrowing of stuff in the classroom.
	Consequences	Teacher B	If students were horse playing during labs, students had to sit down and receive a written assignment that would satisfy their lab grade.
Community culture	Maslow's hierarchy of needs: love and belonging	Teacher C	So, in a class based on your cultural ethnicity or any differential background differences, we expect everyone to treat each one equally without any racial discrimination or any discrimination based on great performance or level of income. So yeah, we tried to get this good and open space where everyone can interact.
		Teacher I	We also must care for that person sitting next to you. So, like I will say that my class stays together in my class that this student has so much care about. Even if one of the students is absent like these others. The other one will show a lot of concern because they do care for each other like I am bringing up a family out of them like different parents. But they're growing up to be a good family.
	Prevention	Teacher F	So, embracing culture and understanding culture would give us a better understanding of just the ways that we are communicating.
Equity in consequences	Safety precautions	Teacher H	Rules of the school, for me, I think for the schools is more of discipline and hard work oriented. Which for me it still applies, but for them is more like transparency, like sometimes someone might commit a failure, you must report to the deputy, and sometimes there's some mistakes that are usually worth getting a suspension or not. So, for us in terms of as a class, we usually agree. But before that, before we escalate matters to the higher authority in the institution, we tend to try and solve them within us before they may escalate.
Positive relationships	Supportive relationships	Teacher F	But the most effective is the relationship with the student. And be in at the door when they come in, having fun with them, praising them as they are doing things, watching them as they grow, and just out of the blue, just letting them know that I see you and I see that you're doing great. You're not like you were on day one and I see you're standing up. You know you're participating.

Category	Code	Participant	Excerpt
Conflict resolution	Restorative justice theory	Teacher F	Also, redirection and conflict for the resolution is one of the things that I put forward always because I understand sometimes these girls, these boys, they may get into arguments, and it won't be productive in terms of their academics.
Racial inequity in school discipline	Perception	Teacher D	I have seen some white teachers behave so indifferent to black kids.
	Single out	Teacher B	So, my professional opinion I've seen over the years is that some of the girls have been singled out because sometimes they fuss differently.

### **Themes Generation**

I carefully selected the initial 11 categories and grouped them into three preliminary themes: seasoned teacher who knows, understands, and implements what students need; discipline practices that promote positive discipline administered to all students equally regardless of race or gender; and behavior displayed by girls in general over the years and subject to teacher and administrative interpretation. After reviewing the recommendations from my second member, I condensed my 11 categories into eight categories and three revised themes. The revised themes are (a) middle school teachers' understanding and implementation of discipline practices, (b) factors influencing disciplinary practices and responses related to relationships, and (c) middle school teachers' perceptions of the unfairness of disciplinary practices and African American girls' responses. Table 5 contains the final eight categories and related themes.

**Table 5***Final Categories and Themes*

Category	Theme
Behavior management plan Community culture Equity in consequences	Theme 1: Middle school teachers' understanding and implementation of discipline practices
Restorative justice theory Positive relationships	Theme 2: Factors influencing disciplinary practices and responses related to relationships
Racial inequity in school discipline African American girls' responses and behavior Misinterpreted discipline	Theme 3: Middle school teachers' perceptions of the unfairness of disciplinary practices and African American girls' responses

**Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is necessary for qualitative research. Adler (2022) mentioned how Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the evaluation of trustworthiness, focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Additionally, Adler stated that transparency in qualitative research is the most important aspect because the principal research instrument is the researcher. In this study, I established trustworthiness by spelling out the research techniques I used, refraining from using my personal biases in every aspect of the study, following the qualitative research methods, and presenting findings driven by data from the literature and the teacher interviews.

**Credibility**

The establishment of credibility in qualitative research allows the data and interpretation of the data to be reliable. Researchers must practice the ability to stay focused on the research study's topic by excluding one's personal views related to the topic (Shufutinsky, 2020). During my teacher interviews, I went into the interview with



only my questions. I focused on the teacher participants' responses, followed up with questions and clarification, and added their responses when they responded. My sample size was eight individual teachers from different states who worked in different school districts across the United States. The teacher participants had similar experiences and perspectives working with and observing African American girls.

I created a research journal to take notes during and after the interviews and during the data analysis. The journal allowed me to record what I did, what took place during the interviews, and any thoughts I had about what was said during the interviews. During the data analysis, using the journal kept me on track and held me accountable for interpreting exactly what was said as I transcribed and coded the interviews.

### **Transferability**

This study included using purposive sampling by choosing participants based on the study's criteria to help establish transferability. I had many potential participants who viewed my recruitment flyer on social media. However, at least 30 potential participants did not meet the requirement and had only responded to scam me for the \$10 Starbucks gift card. I achieved transferability by sticking to the criteria and screening all potential participants with screener questions. Three participants made it past the screener questions, but once I started asking the interview questions, they could not respond. Two of the participants hung up, and the other one I explained to them that they did not meet the requirements for the study. I provided the steps for collecting and analyzing the data I used during the research process, which included tables, known as thick descriptions, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) described to achieve external validation. I took the

details from my research journal and coded interviews to create a table graph of the data collected from the eight interviews to develop codes, categories, and themes. I used this thick description to describe the interpretations as a combined data collection table with direct quotes from the teacher participants that were meaningful understandings aligned with the literature. The most relevant contextual details gathered from the data included how discipline was carried out towards African American girls, how African American girls responded to the discipline, details of unfair discipline practices, and observations and knowledge of unfair discipline practices towards African American girls from the teacher participants perspectives.

### **Dependability**

To achieve dependability in this research study, I followed the same procedures for recruitment, interviewing teacher participants, and transcribing and coding the semistructured interviews. Before I began writing my analysis, my committee chair reviewed my interviews and research journal, providing feedback and guidance. Additionally, my second committee member, who specializes in qualitative research methods, viewed my data analysis and transcribed and coded data. Having someone other than myself, a doctoral student, view my work helps to ensure and establish dependability.

### **Confirmability**

I had to remain objective before, during, and after the semistructured interviews, especially during the interviews and data analysis. The study was grounded in the data, and the teacher participants' responses were the focus of the interpretation. I used an audit

trail to document my qualitative study's progress using a research journal. I included notes of similarities among the responses with descriptions related to the literature review.

## **Results**

The research question for this study, what are middle school teachers' perceptions of disciplinary practices implemented toward African American girls, and how do the girls respond, was used to create nine interview questions. As a result, three themes were produced from the data analysis that correlate to the research question. In this section, I report the results by the themes and the categories within each theme, using quotes to support the categories and themes. Those themes are (a) middle school teachers' understanding and implementation of discipline practices, (b) factors influencing disciplinary practices and responses related to relationships, and (c) middle school teachers' perceptions of the unfairness of disciplinary practices and African American girls' responses as outlined in Table 4.

### **Theme 1: Middle School Teachers' Understanding and Implementation of Discipline Practices**

I organized three categories under the first theme, middle school teachers' understanding, and implementation of discipline practices. The categories are behavior management plan, community culture, and equity in consequences. I chose these three categories as they relate to how teachers manage their classrooms throughout the school year. Additionally, the categories relate to how teachers set the stage at the beginning of the school year for what they expect of the students and how they adapt over time.

### ***Behavior Management Plan***

Teacher participants began the interview by describing the reason they became teachers and how long they have worked with middle school students. While each teacher participant's reasoning varied, all teachers went into teaching to make a difference in their students' lives. To be successful teachers, they each understood that a well-planned and executed behavior management plan was necessary to establish at the beginning of the school year. Teacher B said, "My classroom management style for middle school was consistent with setting the rules from Day 1 and being personable with the students helped to ensure a well-run classroom". Teacher F made a similar statement by stating,

I start with the expectations across the board, and we talk about that behavior component. At the third week I began easing up because at this point, they understand the routine, they understand our processes and how we do things.

Many of the teacher participants included their students' input to establish the classroom policies and consequences if they were broken. However, a couple of teacher participants created the rules without student input. Teacher D said,

I don't really have premade rules or judgements or how to follow things. I believe that things should work according to real time, if they make a mistake, there is probably a reason why they did it and I'd rather listen to that.

Overall, teachers explained the importance of preparation and including the students when deciding on consequences. Additionally, they shared that the number one goal was to deescalate the situation and handle the behavior in the classroom without involving anyone else unless the situation got out of control.

### *Community Culture*

There was also a consensus of establishing a culture of community through communication, respecting everyone's background, ethnicity, and characteristics through mutual respect, and expectations of caring for peers when absent. Moreover, some of the teacher participants felt it was important for teachers to know and understand the culture of their students. Some of the teachers shared that one way of learning and understanding culture could be accomplished through training and exposure in their students' neighborhoods. Teacher F described the importance of understanding culture. Teacher F stated that African American girls respond differently than Hispanic American, European American, and Southwest Indian girls because African American girls respond with emotion based on their culture, which is typical in African American environments. Teacher F went on to say that embracing and understanding culture gives teachers a better understanding of the ways African American people communicate. Teacher participants felt their duty was to expose themselves to their students' culture to better understand and serve them.

Another critical aspect of establishing community culture that some teachers pointed out is including student input. Teacher C stated, "We sit down and have a class meeting and talk about what do they want to do and what they do not want. We come to a collective agreement and write down the rules." Teacher H made a similar statement, pointing out that "the students are involved because sometimes when an initiator suggests a rule that maybe does not favor either of them or one of these, the class usually agrees." The teacher participants suggested that the best way to establish a community of culture

is to include all student input, understand and accept their backgrounds and home environments, and make an effort to get to know how the students communicate, whether in their words, body language, or attire.

### *Equity in Consequences*

Most teacher participants agreed that a positive approach to school discipline is more effective and that having conversations when both parties are calm, without passing judgment, will aid in giving fair consequences. Allowing each student to share their side of the story creates a community of fairness. Teacher I said, “When fairness is created, we create an atmosphere of learning and a good learning environment for these kids.” Also, some teacher participants pointed out how important it is to get a complete picture of the situation, especially when it involves more than one student.

Another essential aspect pointed out by the teacher participants was the importance of managing and preventing misbehavior. Overall, the teacher participants described that giving oral warnings, providing opportunities to change, and separating students to prevent misbehavior allowed the classroom to operate more smoothly. Teacher G stated, “We do prevention and intervention and try to stop bad behaviors from happening. When we see the red flags by giving oral warnings without any punishment.” Similarly, Teacher C stated, “I don't usually go ahead and punish or discipline the students. I go talk to the student and sit down with the student and ask questions or get to know what made her make the mistake.” Regarding equity in consequences and using fairness as the approach to discipline, Teacher H pointed out that “they [students] respond positively. They [students] have adapted to them [rules] positively because they

[students] find that it is worth it; it's working.” The teacher participants claimed the students responded well to the consequences because they were being heard, and explanations of their misbehavior were given.

Teacher participants discussed how important it was for consequences to match misbehavior and be given equally to all students involved in the infraction. Teacher B shared their experience by stating,

I've seen over the years that some of the girls have been singled out because sometimes they fuss and talk differently. They get louder. And with their frustration, I've seen administrators, are harsher with the females ... spending more time talking to the girls and reprimanded their behaviors.

The teacher participants interviewed ensured equity in consequences in their classrooms and observed that most teachers practice the same; however, some teachers witnessed inequity in school discipline.

Unlike Teacher B, who has witnessed African American girls being treated unfairly and receiving harsher discipline than their peers, including African American boys, Teacher C stated that “African American boys receive harsher discipline and are misunderstood because of implicit bias from other teachers, staff, and administrators.” Although Teacher C mentioned how African American girls behave, they felt that the consequences fit the misbehavior and that African American girls receive their consequences with a positive attitude. Teacher H witnessed African American girls being given a harsher consequence for a dress code violation while their European American peers received a less severe consequence. A few of the teachers mentioned dress code as

one of the most significant school discipline issues that is unfair and singles out African American girls. At the same time, African American girls often break the dress code and dress inappropriately and try to play the race card when they are caught and confronted. The teachers agreed that while these outcomes are accurate in some cases when European American girls violate the same dress code rules, they are given a pass, allowed to explain themselves, or given a light consequence. When African American girls try to explain, they are seen as being disrespectful and argumentative. They are not given a pass and sometimes receive suspension. Teacher H was concerned with a situation they witnessed and did not understand why all the girls did not receive the same punishment. Teacher D shared their experience, saying,

I've seen some of the teachers who have been so cruel to Black kids for the same mistakes that some Caucasian kids do. They seem to single out in terms of the workload they give. For example, if you've done a mistake and you must be punished... but when you see some other teachers when it's a Black African girl, they tend to give her too much work.

A few of the teacher participants pointed out how African American girls are expected to behave in a certain way that is often more mature than their peers. When African American girls do not meet the expectations that are expected of them, they end up receiving additional consequences. Teacher I shared their experience, stating,

African American girls, they're too loud. They're very expressive. They are too bossy. So sometimes you'll find that you impose some disciplinary measures like dressing up. You must dress quite well when you come to school; you find out



that these kids sometimes will do the opposite of that. She'll just do contrary to that. Some will say that some clothes are too exposing, [and] ... when you try to correct the kid and even when the parent comes, the parent will start acting like you are judging them because you are discriminating against them because they're Black. Sometimes when this issue has been taken by maybe a White teacher it becomes another thing.

The other teacher participants did not have similar experiences as most of them work at schools with predominantly African American students and have their own way of dealing with misbehavior.

## **Theme 2: Factors Influencing Disciplinary Practices and Responses Related to Relationships**

I organized two categories under the second theme, factors influencing disciplinary practices and responses. The categories are restorative justice theory and positive relationships. I chose these two categories as they relate to how teachers and administrators react to student misbehavior and administer consequences, and how students respond to receiving consequences for their misbehavior. Moreover, I have provided teacher responses that show changes in student behavior when a positive approach is used.

### ***Restorative Justice Theory***

Student behavior must be managed using a variety of techniques. When students misbehave, teachers must approach the misbehavior carefully. Some teacher participants discussed the importance of allowing students to explain their infractions or misbehavior

and accept responsibility for their actions, which are elements of restorative justice theory. Teacher C stated, “So my role and the purpose are for restorative justice. It’s like promoting healing amongst all the students through a process that places collaborative problem solving.” Teacher I described how they use restorative justice, the next step, once students respond:

I create that environment, and once I create the environment for them to talk to me, they'll be able to share a lot. So, the next step. When they are wrong, I will just tell them in a nicer way, in a quiet way, that instead of doing this, you are supposed to do this, and at the end of the day, the student will apologize.

Teacher participants who use positive discipline explained that part of using restorative justice or a positive approach is knowing how to de-escalate a situation before it becomes a bigger issue. Teacher C stated, “I try to get to the solution from the problem, not the problem trying to create another bigger problem”. Likewise, Teacher H stated, “Redirection and conflict for the resolution is one of the things I put forward because I understand sometimes these girls and boys may get into arguments, and it won’t be productive in terms of their academics.” Teacher B explained how knowing their students and how they react to certain situations plays a factor when administering discipline and helps to keep the student calm and compliant.

Another important aspect of restorative justice is making sure consequences are imposed based on the level of the consequence. Teacher C stated, “Consequence matches infraction regarding the classroom discipline practices, usually depended on what kind of mistake that a student has made and on which nature the student made the mistake.”

Teacher F pointed out that sometimes students do not respond, and restorative justice might not be the best approach to correct the behavior. Teacher F described a behavior model previously used at their school which involved using a behavior modification tech and a counselor who might be able to deescalate the situation before more severe consequences are administered. Teacher G described part of the restorative justice approach as acclimating the student back into the classroom from a period of absence because of misbehavior. Using a counselor to talk with the student and providing time for them to make up work so they are not behind their classmates helps with transition and prevention of future misbehavior.

### ***Positive Relationships***

Establishing positive relationships with students is part of using restorative justice or positive discipline approach and teacher participants pointed out how students will respond to teachers who are positive versus teachers who are negative. Teacher participants shared the effects of open communication and mutual respect when building relationships with the students. When the students respect you and trust that you care, they are more responsive when being reprimanded for violating classroom and school rules. Moreover, motivating the students and encouraging them to succeed is equally important. Teacher F stated,

But the most effective is the relationship with the student. And be in at the door when they come in, having fun with them, praising them as they are doing things, watching them as they grow, and just out of the blue, just letting them know I see

you, and I see that you're doing great. You're not like you were on Day 1 and I see you're standing up. You know you're participating.

Teacher participants reflected on receiving positive compliance to the rules when they chose to build relationships with their student first. Teacher C stated,

We go and talk to the student and get to know the student and get the student to talk and to share with us what made him or her do that. So, like we're kind of trying to bond and get the student to be our friend rather than to fear teachers and to not talk to teachers if they have problems.

Another factor that influences whether a student will change their behavior after being reprimanded and promotes a positive relationship between teacher and student is the way they are welcomed back to the learning environment. Teacher G provided an example of how African American girls are reintegrated back into school after a conflict. Teacher G stated,

You notice that they carry this sorry appearance, sorry face and try to behave nicely. Talk to them calmly if possible. We always have a counselor in our school. We take them to the counseling room, and we talk to them. Advise them, choose to make them not feel that they were rejected from the school, bring their mind back because you might have missed the environment and the rest, you're trying to make them reform. You're trying to make them feel that everything is as normal, but they just must change their behavior to fit in. You do love talking to them and helping them to cope.

While the teacher participants pointed out that there is more than one factor that can influence how discipline is carried out the responses received by African American girls, the key is to respond positively.

### **Theme 3: Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of the Unfairness of Disciplinary Practices and African American Girls' Responses**

I organized three categories under the third theme, middle school teachers' perceptions of disciplinary practices and African American girls' responses. The categories are racial inequity in school discipline, African American girls' responses and behavior, and misinterpreted discipline. I chose these three categories because they show what teachers have witnessed and experienced as it relates to the school discipline practices of African American girls. Additionally, the categories show how teachers feel about what they have witnessed. Based on the teacher participant experiences, being African American themselves, and witnessing a negative and positive approach to discipline, these three categories provide insight.

#### ***Racial Inequity in School Discipline***

Throughout the teacher participants' teaching career in middle school, some have witnessed African American girls being treated differently and unjustly subjected to harsher discipline. Teacher F described how suspension may affect an African American girl versus an in-school suspension the student's peer may receive:

[The peer is] still in the learning environment. She's still getting her work sent up by her teachers, or the in-school suspension teacher might call the teacher and say I need you to send the workup for this student. But [the African American girl]

might be home chilling on the couch, eating Cheerios and watching cartoons, so [she's] out of the learning environment and [she's] getting behind, so [her] parents might not be home because they got to work. There's no one to say get your work done, or if they said it before they went out the door. There's no accountability for [the African American girl] getting [her] work done, so being out of school for suspension, that's an unexcused absence.

Teacher F explained further,

I feel like the person that's initiating the discipline, initiates it in a subjective way, such as, if it was me getting in trouble, I might get two days suspended. But if it was Susie over here beside me, and we're doing the exact same thing, she might get one day in school suspension.

Teacher D stated, "I've seen some of the teachers who have been so cruel to Black kids for the same mistakes that some Caucasian kids do." Teacher D provided an example of what happens to some African American girls when disciplined differently. Teacher D stated that African American girls are often given additional work than their peers for the same infraction.

Some of the teacher participants who witnessed unfair treatment towards African American girls expressed the negative feelings and emotions the teacher felt about what they witnessed. However, the teacher understood that wisdom must be used if they chose to approach the person (e.g., teacher or administrator) who administered the consequence to the student. Teacher H reflected on an experience about a group of girls receiving different consequences for the same infraction based on their race. Teacher H scrutinized

the actions of the administrator and expressed, “You find that they [student from the racial group] were in a group together, I felt like all of them deserved equal punishment. But how come they [student from the racial group] got a heavier punishment than the others.” In the same token, Teacher G expressed concerns of African American girls when this type of unequal discipline is administered. Teacher G shared, “Sometimes you see them [African American girls] saying my teacher punished me more than the way he should punish Jason because Jason, is a White person, I’m a person of color and my teacher punished me worst.” Teacher participants pointed out that sometimes racial inequity in school discipline practices are isolated events and something that does not take place at all schools for all African American girls. Teacher B pointed out, “Now and then you would have some that didn’t want to follow the rules and didn’t care and then you would have to escalate to an administrator.” Teacher participants explained knowing when to call for help and when to try and resolve the issue in the classroom. Teacher C and Teacher H similarly shared that if teaching can still take place and the misbehavior can be resolved quickly then there is no need for escalation to an administrator or removal of student from class.

### ***African American Girls’ Responses and Behavior***

Teacher participants described seeing both positive and negative responses from African American girls to the rules and the consequences of breaking those rules. Most responses the teachers witnessed were positive based on their experience as a middle school teacher in schools predominantly serving African American students. Teacher G stated, “I think the responses are good, and even my friends from other schools have been

telling me that African American girls are doing a lot of good keeping to the best of their behaviors outside.” Teacher E stated, “Students respond positive.” In response to school rules, Teacher H stated, “They respond positively. They have adapted to them positively because they find that it is worth it, it’s working.” According to Teacher C, African American girls responded well and had a positive effect on their academics. Most of the teacher participants perceived that African American girls responded positively and with respect because they were shown respect by the teacher administering the consequence.

Although some teachers described how African American girls respond well to consequences for their behavior, not all teachers would agree. Teacher B stated,

But the girls, especially middle school, no matter how consistent you are with the rule from person to person, they get mouthy and disrespectful, the girls, I'm not saying all the girls, but a large amount of the girls, especially at the middle school level, they didn't care for being corrected, and then they would take it a step further and just be disrespectful, so then I would have to check that.

Moreover, Teacher I stated that sometimes African American girls will do the opposite of what you desire them to do. Teacher D had a similar response. Teacher D stated,

According to what I've seen, the students don't respond well. I think they're more hideous of their inner emotions because I think what they do is well, for example, maybe Jane would do it today because Melissa did yesterday and it's kind of normal. It's hard to read the emotions the feelings from what they do because sometimes it's fun to them, you know.



Some of the teachers described African American girls' behavior as mimicking other girls, and sometimes not taking the misbehavior or consequences seriously.

### *Misinterpreted Discipline*

There are times in which the teacher participants agreed that African American girls were being singled out and disciplined harsher than their peers. However, this is not always the case and often African American girls will try to use their race as an excuse to break the rules and evade the consequences of their actions. Teacher G said, "They feel that they're not given the same discipline that's given to others sometimes, which is not so." The rules are set at the beginning of the school year, and all students are aware of the consequences. Most teacher participants would agree with Teacher G: "Let's say out of 100% you see that 80% might want to follow the rule, while 20% will always be stubborn." While the teacher participants acknowledge that some of the dress code rules need to be updated to reflect today's culture, African American girls cannot continue to break the rules just because they do not agree with them. Teacher I recounted,

One day they [student] came to school, they did not dress appropriately so being that we are from this nation, the first thing that the kid will say is that you are judging. Because I'm from this race because I'm a minority

in explaining why students feel judged breaking dress code because of race. Other teacher participants stated that African American girls were treated fairly even when it came to dress code violation especially because the dress code is clear. Teacher C stated, "The dress code policy states one should not wear anything with vulgar, explicit, or derogatory pictures, symbols, and languages," and students who violate this policy are given

consequences. Another teacher described knowing their students' culture of dress while explaining to them the current school dress code and giving them time to comply without the need to punish.

### **Discrepant Cases**

I found only one case that opposed the findings of this research study during the data analysis stage of my research. This case deviated from the predominant themes of this research because it highlighted another gender and race, which is considered a dominant race. Teacher E stated that European American male bullies were disciplined the most, contrary to what the other seven teachers stated. The case contradicts the research by suggesting that European male bullies receive harsher discipline than African American girls. However, the teacher participants worked at schools predominantly filled with African American students, so they do not see as much differentiation in school discipline. The data from all teacher interviews are included in this research study, which allows access for other researchers to view every perception.

### **Summary**

The data analysis process and my research study's findings were conveyed here in Chapter 4. I interviewed eight African American teachers located in different states across the United States using ZOOM. The examination of middle school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of school discipline practices related to African American girls was constructed from one research question. For this qualitative study, I used semistructured interviews with eight teacher participants; I captured their experiences and observations. I examined the data using a thematic analysis approach

explained by Lester et al. (2020) to identify codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the interviews. The data collected from the teacher participants produced three themes outlined in Table 4, all related to the research question: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of disciplinary practices implemented toward African American girls, and how do the girls respond?

After having interviewed all eight teachers, the common school rules that African American girls are breaking are dress code violations with wardrobe and hair such as tight-fitting clothes, short skirts, and bonnets on their heads. Additionally, the mouthing off and passion for standing up for themselves or asking why they are getting in trouble creates situations where African American girls are considered aggressive, disrespectful, and too loud. Based on the eight interviews I conducted, some teachers had positive experiences witnessing and administering discipline that combined the 10 principles of increasing equity in school discipline and restorative justice theory. The remaining teachers had experienced witnessing some harsh discipline towards African American girls but not administering it. A couple of the teachers stated that some of the harsh discipline towards African American girls was because of a lack of cultural understanding regarding the African American girls' reaction to the discipline. There is miscommunication by both the teachers and students, and because African American girls respond in a way that seems defiant at times, they are usually just expressing themselves, trying to get an understanding of why they are being called out, and defending themselves just as any other student would. However, the girls' responses are

often verbally aggressive, and teachers feel threatened. None of the teachers mentioned the rules being racially targeted, as the literature has stated.

Included in Chapter 5 are an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications. I describe the limitations of the study in detail. Chapter 5 also includes recommendations for future studies, the potential for social change, and a final reflection of the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls in their classrooms, schools, and districts. Examining the perceptions of teachers regarding implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls was a notable cause that required insight because based on research from Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2020), Blake et al. (2022), Sevon (2022), Smith et al. (2023), and Katz and Acquah (2024); many African American girls are subjected to harsher discipline practices than their peers for the same infractions. Teachers' perceptions of the African American girls' attitudes and bodies contribute to the type of discipline they receive as they are seen as less feminine (Blake et al., 2022). The teacher participants in this study provided perceptions that addressed their experiences, observations, and knowledge of school discipline practices toward African American girls.

The data obtained from eight teachers purposively selected and interviewed using a semistructured interview protocol were subjected to a thorough qualitative content analysis using member checking and an audit trail. Three major themes occurred as a result: middle school teachers' understanding and implementation of discipline practices, factors influencing disciplinary practices and responses related to relationship, and teachers' perceptions of the unfairness of disciplinary practices and African American girls' responses. The key findings of this study suggest that while some African American girls do experience harsh discipline practices, there are other factors suggesting race is not always involved. Moreover, culturally aware teachers recognize attitudes,

behaviors, and appearances as normal behavior and use positive approaches towards conformity. Additionally, findings show a need for change in specific areas of policy, such as dress code, which is one of the most significant discipline issues in relation to cultural awareness faced by African American girls, which could lead to social change.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In this section, I interpret the study findings through current literature and the conceptual frameworks, Gregory et al.'s (2017) 10 principles for increasing equity in school discipline, and McCold and Wachtel's (2003) restorative justice theory, which I discussed in Chapter 2. I used these frameworks to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of school discipline practices related to African American girls; for that reason, the use of the findings can be expanded by adding additional suggestions to examine the effects of implicit bias and cultural unawareness of school discipline implementation on African American girls' academics (see Annamma et al., 2019). Additionally, I use the peer-reviewed literature from Chapter 2 as a comparison to the findings from this study. I summarize my findings as confirmation, disconfirmation, or extension of knowledge in this discipline.

### **Theme 1: Middle School Teachers' Understanding and Implementation of Discipline Practices**

Teacher participants gave insight into the early preparation needed to set the school year's tone. The teacher participants gave examples of how to interact with the students and shared that respect must be given to be earned. Additionally, the teacher participants understood that positive discipline methods are always best, and providing

warnings, talking with the students about their behavior, and understanding why the students misbehave works best, which is an example of two of Gregory et al.'s (2017) 10 principles of increasing equity in school discipline, Principle 1 (supportive relationships) and Principle 2 (bias-aware classrooms and respectful school environments). Finally, understanding the culture and environment in which African American girls are raised helped the teacher participants create a positive classroom environment, which allowed them to implement positive discipline practices. This finding relates to Gregory et al.'s Principle 4 (culturally relevant and responsive teaching). The findings related to Theme 1 supported the research that I discussed in Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework.

While middle school teachers' perceptions confirmed some of the misinterpreted behavior displayed by African American girls and the harsh discipline practices they receive, for the most part, African American girls behave and respond in specific ways that could be misinterpreted, and escalation of the situation gets harsh consequences. From the responses from the interviews, some teachers have witnessed African American Girls receiving harsher discipline than their peers. School discipline practices have been biased in the United States for a long time (Smith et al., 2023). A change must happen regarding school discipline development and implementation to close the discipline gap and promote equity in the school system (Reed et al., 2020). Inequitable discipline rates often occur due to a lack of teacher knowledge and sensitivity to their students' cultural norms, including race, class, and gender (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020).

Teachers must be aware of their personal biases and preconceived notions about the attitudes, behaviors, and anatomy of African American girls (Green, 2022; Sevon,

2022). Teachers must understand that when their personal biases affect how African American girls are disciplined, these biases negatively affect students' behavior and academics (Sevon, 2022; Townsend-Walker, 2020). Teachers are at a disadvantage when it comes to school discipline practices; without the proper training and cultural sensitivity education, the systematic racial injustice cycle will continue (Lambooy et al., 2020). Promoting positive equal school discipline could result in positive responses and behavior from African American girls (Parsons et al., 2023).

Using positive equal school discipline was pointed out by the teachers in my study through their experience and implementation with middle school students. Specifically, one teacher talked about using a method of restorative justice during disagreements where they reminded the students how important it was to work together and talk the issue out until it was resolved, and an agreement reached. Another teacher discussed the use of restorative justice, focusing on the promotion of healing through collaborative problem solving, and the use of a disciplinary committee. Additionally, a different teacher described the importance of not having premade rules or judgments when it comes to behavior and discipline. All of these examples allow the offender to be confronted, the victims to express their feelings, and communities of care to ensure proper discipline is used, which is the purpose of McCold and Wachtel's (2003) restorative justice theory and practices.



## **Theme 2: Factors Influencing Disciplinary Practices and Responses Related to Relationships**

Teacher participants described how important it was to build a positive relationship with their students and expect the same level of academic participation from all students. The teacher participants shared how easy it was for African American girls to change their misbehavior because of mutual trust and respect, whereas other teachers had a more challenging time. The findings related to Theme 2 support the research found in Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework. Understanding the cultural norms of one's students is necessary concerning school discipline practices; without this knowledge teachers are less understanding towards African American students (Johnson, 2020). Teachers unfamiliar with African American culture who teach African American students may perceive their behavior and responses differently, as stated by some of the teacher participants (see Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020).

One of the teacher participants described an experience of racial divide among African American girls and European American girls when it came to being disciplined for the same infraction, noting that the African American girls' consequence was more severe. When unequal consequences of school discipline practices are experienced, the discipline gap between African Americans and their European American peers is widened (Smith et al., 2023). Acknowledging the development of middle school girls and the culture in which African American girls are raised is key when witnessing their reactions to consequences and sometimes disregarding the rules (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). The level of punishment African American girls receive is due to how

they are viewed by adults based on gender assumptions (Townsend-Walker, 2020). While none of the teacher participants described the harsher consequences African American girls received based on their gender or body development, they did describe characteristics based on culture and environment.

The teacher participants discussed additional reasons middle school African American girls are often punished more severely. These girls are often penalized for aggression, loudness, defensiveness, and disrespect. Due to the teachers' and administrator's cultural unawareness and implicit biases towards African American girls, the use of zero-tolerance policies can negatively affect African American girls, and they receive harsher punishments for minor infractions, which sometimes involve the law when escalated (Sevon, 2022). One of the teacher participants described avoiding sending students to administrators, which could lead to higher authority. By understanding their African American female students' culture and reasons for violating the school rules, rather than punishing them, the students were allowed time to correct the infraction, given an explanation, and offered a compromise. This same teacher participant described the mutual respect and ability to get their students to learn and participate in class.

African American girls will respond positively and perform well when respected by their teachers (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). Some teacher participants explained how important it is to set high standards for their students and settle discipline matters among themselves unless it is necessary to involve higher authority, which is the key to escalation or de-escalation. When discussing supportive relationships and the effects on school discipline, the first principle of Gregory et al.'s (2017) theory, a teacher

shared how they handled disputes by having a discussion with all students involved through respect, listening to all sides, and guiding the students to an agreement where everyone feels respected and heard.

Teacher participants explained the ease and importance of first using classroom behavior management techniques to resolve conflicts before office referrals, which is an example of using McCold and Wachtel's (2003) restorative justice theory and practices. While some of the teacher participants used similar techniques related to Gregory et al.'s 10 principles of increasing equity and restorative justice theory, the techniques used were in correspondence to the management style of the teacher and the culture of the classroom.

### **Theme 3: Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of the Unfairness of Disciplinary Practices and African American Girls' Responses**

Although some of the teacher participants mentioned witnessing middle school African American girls being mistreated in the past, recently, the teachers have seen equal treatment. Teacher participants also described that middle school African American girls are naturally loud, and when confronted, the girls are usually defensive but do not mean to be disrespectful. The teacher participants stated that it is not fair or proper to punish these girls for behaviors, body language, and expressions used daily in their culture and home environments. At times, African American middle school girls can be explosive when expressing their feelings of unfairness, which in turn can be interpreted as disrespectful (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). African American girls are empowered to defend themselves and fellow peers of the same race for infractions they

are disciplined for unfairly, regardless of the outcome (Butler-Barnes et al., 2023). Additionally, middle school African American girls rely on their teachers to guide them and protect them against harm; when this trust is broken, African American girls have difficulty complying (Lambooy et al., 2020). When African American girls are not given the opportunity for change, they are more likely to become disengaged from school (McCarter et al., 2020). The teacher participants expressed that the more teachers learn, understand, and embrace African American culture, the less African American girls will be viewed as aggressive and disrespectful, and the more learning and excelling will take place. The teacher participants acknowledged the importance of integrating as many of Gregory et al.'s (2017) 10 principles of increasing equity in school discipline and highlighted Principles 2 and 4 as they relate to having culturally bias-free classrooms and positive attitudes towards African American girls.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were many limitations to this study. This qualitative study was limited by the information provided by the eight participants used for this study, which was a small sample size, which was an intentional design choice to reach data saturation. All participants worked at schools consisting of predominantly African American students, and all were middle school teachers, which eliminated elementary and high school teachers' perceptions. Participant recruitment became a limitation because I started with getting IRB approval to study one school district in the Northern region of the United States. However, I was unable to obtain approval from the school district. Between waiting on approval to change from the school district to social media recruitment, I lost

time, which became another limitation. The time lost required me to change my recruitment criteria, go through IRB approval a second time, change specific information in Chapters 1-3, and update sources that fell out of the 5-year range. Additionally, after the Walden University IRB approved social media recruitment, I had to take a quarter off from school and could not recruit or collect data. Only one of the original teacher participants could be interviewed from the first batch of participants. Trying to distinguish between scammers and real teachers was also a limitation because if scammers were interviewed, I would collect false data.

Another limitation of this study was my own experience and observations as an African American female and teacher. Although my experience as a student differed from the African American girls in the literature review, I had to keep my biases from the data analysis and conclusion based on what I witnessed. I used an audit trail to avoid any biases I may have had by recording my thoughts in an organized manner. I put forth great effort to ensure a bias-free analysis.

### **Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls in their classrooms, schools, and districts. My recommendations for further research are outlined as follows: I recommend further research be conducted to examine teachers' perceptions of school discipline practices related to African American girls at the elementary and high school levels. Additionally, the pool of teacher participants should include schoolteachers from rural, suburban, and urban locations using a mixed pool of

ethnicities and genders. Another recommendation would be to gain permission to interview African American girls at each grade level in each geographic location, including students with African American teachers and teachers of other racial groups. It is essential to have a more comprehensive view of perceptions and experiences to aid in reforming school policies and procedures related to school discipline across the United States. The focus of the studies should be on ways to improve current discipline practices that do not single out African American girls, discipline them for their cultural practices, or give different consequences for the same infraction. Finally, I recommend educators have access to professional development on culturally responsive classroom management practices as well as school-wide restorative approaches.

### **Implications**

Based on this study's results, there are implications for teachers, school administrators, and school districts who make decisions concerning school discipline policies and procedures. This study's findings contribute to the gap in the research by providing middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices regarding African American girls and offer positive ways to communicate effectively, build relationships, understand culture, and gain mutual respect. There are several positive social change contributions this study may have for teachers, schools, and districts. Some of the social change contributions include the following:

- Teachers exposing themselves to the culture of African American girls through training, community visits, and other activities,

- School administrators adopting a motto that reflects a culture-first approach to teaching and disciplining, providing training to expose teachers and other school staff to African American girls' culture along with bias awareness training,
- School districts revamping the current school discipline policies to reflect current cultural practices amongst the students in the school, such as hairstyles, and eliminate any rules that are racially driven, biased, and reflect traditional western femininity standards.

The implications for African American girls because of these changes could be that they feel comfortable and safe coming to school, knowing they will be treated fairly, be disciplined less because of cultural awareness, receive equal consequences for the same infractions, and be suspended less and spend more time in class, which could increase their academic knowledge.

Creating a positive school environment where teachers understand, recognize, and appreciate the cultures of their students, the teachers create respectful relationships where students feel heard and not singled out when they are reprimanded for misbehavior.

Creating this safe space of mutual respect and honesty may prompt the administrators of schools that do not consist of predominantly African American students to adopt school discipline models reflected in schools that are predominantly African American students currently practicing culturally sensitive positive school discipline practices. Being knowledgeable of the students' culture helps to correct behavior appropriately because often African American girls are reprimanded for an infraction that is only

miscommunication between the adult and student. Additionally, this study may influence student learning and behavior as teachers adopt culturally positive school discipline practices to understand facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and even dress code violations to prevent racial bias.

Overall, as this study focused on improving equal discipline practices to increase academic learning for one group of students, the findings may influence the future of African American girls' positive contribution to their communities and society. Instead of African American girls having a negative relationship with the law because of behavior issues due to unfair discipline practices, the implications could lead to less arrests and emptier juvenile detention centers. Moreover, instead of African American girls having low academic performance leading to low socioeconomic status, the implication could lead to higher achievement, college readiness, and career development.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls in their classrooms, schools, and districts. African American students have been researched extensively, mostly focusing on boys' academics and behavior. There is some research on African American girls regarding school discipline practices; however, the research is not extensive concerning school discipline and equitable discipline practices (Annamma et al., 2019). The harsh discipline practices towards African American girls have become an important issue that must be resolved (Blake et al., 2022). The results of this study can help fill this gap in the literature. Eight middle school teachers were



interviewed, and their perceptions of implementing school discipline practices related to African American girls were examined.

The positive discipline methods used towards misbehavior outlined by Gregory et al. (2017) and McCold and Wachtel (2003) were included in the participants' daily practices and behavior management. The key practice included in the participants' discipline practices with African American girls was cultural sensitivity, which is missing in some classrooms across the United States (see Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). Additionally, perceptions from the participants showed the positive results of using restorative justice when disciplining African American girls. Restorative discipline practices can positively affect teacher-student relationships and make learning more conducive (Gonzalez et al., 2019).

The three themes developed from this research study were as follows: (a) middle school teachers' understanding and implementation of discipline practices, (b) factors influencing disciplinary practices and responses related to relationships, and (c) middle school teachers' perceptions of the unfairness of disciplinary practices and African American girls' responses. The results of this study provide insight into how school discipline is administered, why African American girls experience harsher discipline and ways to prevent and improve current school discipline practices for middle school African American girls from teachers who are African American. This study's data and results may provide teachers, school administrators, and school districts who make decisions concerning school discipline policies and procedures insight into adopting more culturally aware rules and consequences that do not make African American girls singled

out based on the recommendations and perceptions of the teacher participants. Finally, this study on African American girls' experience in the educational school system regarding unfair discipline practices on their overall development can be given immediate attention. It is with great urgency that a call to action from school leaders and policymakers work expeditiously to make the necessary changes for the present and future of African American girls.

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### Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine your perceptions of the implementation of school discipline practices related to middle school African American girls. Therefore, each question that is asked during this interview should relate to the discipline of African American girls.

1. Please describe your classroom discipline practices.
  - a. In what ways are your students involved in the classroom practices?
  - b. How do your students respond to the discipline practices?
2. Describe the current discipline rules/practices implemented in your school?
  - a. What do you think about these rules/practices?
  - b. How do students respond to the school discipline rules/practices?
3. Describe discipline rules/practices implemented in your school district.
  - a. What do you think about these rules/practices?
  - b. How do students respond to the district discipline rules/practices?
4. Returning to your classroom discipline practices, which of the school and/or district discipline rules/practices have you incorporated into your classroom discipline practices?
  - a. Why did you choose these practices?
5. Which of the discipline practices used in your classroom have you found most effective?
  - a. In what ways were they effective. Please provide an example.
6. In what ways do current discipline practices single out certain groups of students?

- a. Which group or groups of students do you believe are singled out the most?
  - b. How might African American girls be singled out in relation to school discipline practices that differs from their peers?
7. Here is a list of the 10 principles of increasing equity in school discipline. Are you familiar with these principles? Please explain.
  - a. Describe your classroom rules that include one or more of the 10 principles.
  - b. Describe school discipline practices that include one or more of the 10 principles.
  - c. Describe district policies on discipline that include one or more of the 10 principles.
8. Here is a summary of restorative justice theory's principles and practices. Are you familiar with principles and practices that restorative justice theory offers? Please explain.
  - a. Which of your classroom rules include all or some the principles and practices restorative justice theory offers?
  - b. Which of the school discipline practices include all or some the principles and practices restorative justice theory offers?
  - c. Which of the district policies on discipline include all or some the principles and practices restorative justice theory offers?



9. Earlier I asked, how African American girls might be singled out in relation to school discipline practices that differs from their peers.
  - a. How do African American girls respond to your current classroom rules?
  - b. Based on your knowledge and experience, how do African American girls respond to the current school discipline practices?

## Appendix B: 10 Principles of Increasing Equity in School Discipline

**Prevention:**

1. *Supportive Relationships* - Authentic connections are forged between and among teachers and students.
2. *Bias-Aware Classrooms and Respectful School Environments* - Inclusive, positive classroom and school environments are established in which students feel fairly treated.
3. *Academic Rigor* - The potential of all students is promoted through high expectations and high-level learning opportunities.
4. *Culturally Relevant and Responsive Teaching* - Instruction reflects and is respectful of the diversity of today's classrooms and schools.
5. *Opportunities for Learning and Correcting Behavior* - Behavior is approached from a nonpunitive mind-set, and instruction proactively strengthens student social skills, while providing structured opportunities for behavioral correction within the classroom as necessary.

**Intervention:**

6. *Data-Based Inquiry for Equity* - Data are used regularly to identify "hot spots" of disciplinary conflict or differential treatment of particular groups.
7. *Problem-Solving Approaches to Discipline* - Solutions aim to uncover sources of behavior or teacher–student conflict and address the identified needs.

8. *Inclusion of Student and Family Voice on Conflicts*' - Causes and Solutions Student and family voice are integrated into policies, procedures, and practices concerning school discipline.
9. *Reintegration of Students after Conflict or Absence* - Students are supported in reentering the community of learners after conflict or long-term absence has occurred.

**Prevention and Intervention:**

10. *Multitiered System of Supports* - Schools use a tiered framework to match increasing levels of intensity of support to students' differentiated needs.

(Gregory et al, 2017, p. 255)

## Appendix C: Restorative Justice Theory and Practices

- The purpose of restorative justice is to promote healing amongst all stakeholders through a process that utilizes collaborative problem-solving.
- **Victims, offenders, and their communities of care** are considered the three primary stakeholders.
  - **The offender** is positively confronted of their wrongdoing, given the opportunity to own their mistakes and make amends with the victims. “Offenders also damage their relationships with their communities of care by betraying trust. To regain trust, they need to be empowered to take responsibility for their wrongdoing” (McCold & Wachtel, 2003, p. 3).
  - **Victims** come together to “share their feelings, describe how they were affected and develop a plan to repair the harm done or prevent a reoccurrence” (McCold & Wachtel, 2003, p. 2).
  - **Communities of care** meet the needs of offenders and victims “by ensuring that something is done about the incident, that its wrongfulness is acknowledged, that constructive steps are taken to prevent further offending and that victims and offenders are reintegrated into their respective communities” (McCold & Wachtel, 2003, p. 3).
- The understanding is that the damage can best be repaired if all stakeholders involved can express their feelings and offer suggestions on what the offender must do to correct their wrong.