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Discipline Policy and Preschool Special Education Students' Social Skills

Amanda Lee Tamagni
Walden University

Walden University

College of Education

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Amanda Tamagni

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Review Committee
Dr. Michael Brophy, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty
Dr. Andrea Wilson, Committee Member, Education Faculty
Dr. Nicolae Nistor, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University
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Abstract

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Amanda Tamagni

MS, University of Louisville, 1995

BA, University of Louisville, 1992

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Preschool special education students' lack of personal-social skills is affecting their kindergarten readiness and placing them at risk for exposure to school discipline in a large school district in the Southeastern United States. The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship between the quality of school discipline policies and personal-social skills of preschool special education students within the focus district. Ecological systems theory provided the framework for the study. Data collection included archived personal-social skills scores, as measured by the Battelle Developmental Inventory 2 (BDI 2), of 354 preschool special education students. Four trained educators rated the effectiveness of the schools' discipline policies using the Teaching and Guidance Policies Essentials Checklist (TAGPEC). Findings from simple linear regression analysis indicated no significant relationship between the TAGPEC ratings and students' BDI 2 scores. An ANCOVA was used to compare BDI 2 scores of students in Title I and non-Title I schools (n = 96 students per group) while conrolling for TAGPEC ratings, but results showed no statistically significant differences. The average quality of the discipline policies was rated as inadequate overall. Findings may be used by district administrators to improve the quality of current discipline policies. A policy recommendation was developed to encourage effective discipline policies and create a supportive school environment to promote positive social behaviors of all students, including the youngest and most vulnerable.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my family. I am so thankful for the endless hours of supportive listening, encouragement, and understanding, I appreciate the camaraderie and support of my son as we wrote papers together in the early hours of the morning and celebrated each small victory on our parallel journeys. To my partner, Lisa, there are no words to express my gratitude in encouraging me to pursue a dream 20 years delayed. None of this work could have happened without you.

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The Local Problem

Young children with social skill deficits are often at a disadvantage when entering kindergarten and are ill-prepared for school (Brennan, Shaw, Dishion, & Wilson, 2012; Hauser-Cram & Woodman, 2016; Whitted, 2011). According to the Florida Department of Education (2017), preschool special education students in the local district are not demonstrating growth in positive social behavior. Social skill deficits and challenging behavior in young children continue to be a national concern due to short- and long-term outcomes such as peer isolation, poor educational performance, and increased use of school discipline (Denham et al., 2013; Gilliam, 2005; Snell et al., 2012). Establishing high-quality discipline policies to support prosocial behavior in young children plays an essential role in ensuring children's preparedness for school (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018).

Developmentally appropriate, fair, and equitable discipline policies contribute to positive school climates that promote prosocial behavior (Garrity, Longstreth, Salcedo-Potter, & Staub, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Wang & Degol, 2016). The Division of Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) issued a joint policy statement to address the issue of social skill deficits and challenging behavior at a national level. The joint statement recommended early childcare providers adopt developmentally appropriate discipline policies that should address intensive individualized supports for children with challenging behavior and highlighted the importance of teaching positive social behavior to young children

(DEC/NAEYC, 2009). The United States Department of Health and Human Services (2014) also issued a joint policy statement calling for the elimination of suspension and expulsion in early learning settings and emphasizing the importance of teaching positive social behavior skills. Despite these national efforts calling for high-quality, developmentally appropriate discipline policies, researchers found that early childcare systems lack high-quality discipline policies to reduce and prevent challenging behavior (Garrity, Longstreth, & Linder, 2017; Longstreth, Brady, & Kay, 2013).

There are additional national and local concerns regarding social skill deficits, exceptional young children in poverty, and inequitable school discipline policies. Students who live in poverty are more likely to be affected by harsh, punitive school discipline (Anyon et al., 2014; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Mallett, 2014). Additionally, exceptional education students of color represent a larger population of students who experience harsh school discipline (Fabelo et al., 2011; Mallett, 2011; Mears, Aaron, Bernstein, & National Council on Disability, 2003). According to a state-level analysis of school discipline in Florida, corporal punishment and restraint were both more likely to be used in pre-K through sixth grade than at other grade levels (Gagnon, Gurel, & Barber, 2017). Researchers have suggested that school-level factors such as discipline policy contribute to the ongoing issue of overrepresentation of at-risk students (poor, minority, students with disabilities) in harsh school discipline outcomes (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Mallett, 2014). As school districts continue to grapple with issues of school safety, discipline, and disproportionality, it is necessary to examine discipline policy and young children's personal-social skills and how these two variables are related for students who

live in poverty and students who do not (Brown & Beckett, 2006; Doolittle, Horner, Bradley, Sugai, & Vincent, 2007; Mallett, 2014). In Section 1, evidence of the local problem is presented, and a rationale is given. A review of the professional literature addresses the quality of discipline policies in early childcare systems and the vital role of positive social skills in learning.

Rationale

Despite the implementation of classroom strategies, school-wide programs, and district-wide multitiered systems of support that promote positive social behavior, there is a gap in preschool special education students' growth in positive personal-social skills. The personal-social skills gap affects young children's kindergarten readiness and places them at a greater risk for exposure to school discipline. Preschool special education students in the local school district are not meeting the state target for increasing growth in personal-social skills (Florida Department of Education, 2017). In a very large school district in the Southeastern United States, 47% of preschool special education students who enter preschool special education services below grade level expectations are not meeting the state target for growth in positive social skills as measured on the Battelle Developmental Inventory 2 (BDI 2; Florida Department of Education, 2017). Additionally, 47.5% of preschool special education students who enter preschool below grade expectations are not increasing their growth rate in using appropriate behaviors as measured on the BDI 2 (Florida Department of Education, 2017). The BDI 2 is a standardized, individually administered assessment used to evaluate early childhood developmental milestones (Newborg, 2005). The gap in preschool special education

students' growth in positive personal social skills is affecting kindergarten readiness. District data showed that 31% of students entering kindergarten demonstrated personal and social development skills at the emerging (instead of proficient) level as measured by the Work Sampling Systems (WSS; Florida Department of Education, 2015). The WSS (Meisels, Liaw, Dorfman, & Nelson, 1995) is an assessment tool designed to evaluate overall readiness for students entering kindergarten. Student performance is rated by teachers in five domains (Personal and Social Development; Language and Literacy; Mathematical Thinking; Scientific Thinking; and Physical Development, Health, and Safety).

In the local setting, preschool special education teachers have participated in specialized training in universal, secondary, and tertiary interventions to support positive behavior and reduce challenging behavior of preschool special education students (Pre-K Exceptional Student Education Supervisor, personal communication, November 4, 2016). Universal interventions include creating high-quality environments and establishing responsive caregiver relationships (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003). Secondary interventions include the explicit teaching of social skills (Fox et al., 2003). Tertiary interventions include intensive individualized interventions to address challenging behavior (Fox et al., 2003). Additionally, in response to federal and state mandates, each school has implemented multitiered systems of support and programs to support positive social behavior. According to a district report found on the state's Department of Education website, the local district is scaling up the multitiered systems of support/response to intervention framework (MTSS/RTI) administrators and staff have

not received training in the teaching pyramid (Fox et al., 2003). The teaching pyramid (Fox et al., 2003) is a tiered framework of supports that is specific to the developmental needs of young children. The district's participation in the state's scale-up efforts of MTSS/RTI means that problem-solving leadership teams at each school have received specialized training in the multitiered systems of support/response to intervention model for kindergarten through 12th grade.

A review of the public data revealed that preschool students with disabilities are not meeting the state target for growth in increasing positive social behavior as measured by the BDI 2 (Florida Department of Education, 2017). Additionally, in the local district, 31% of entering (kindergarten) students demonstrated personal and social development skills at an emergent (not proficient) level as measured by WSS (Florida Department of Education, 2015). The local district, in response to concerns regarding kindergarten readiness, initiated a free preschool program adding 400 voluntary preschool seats to elementary school campuses. The district is now including early childhood in the overall strategic plan to improve graduation rates (Sokol, 2018a). Despite the implementation of evidence-based practices, preschool special education students and children entering kindergarten in the local district continue to struggle with demonstrating positive social behavior (Florida Department of Education, 2017). Given the serious short- and long-term effects of social skill deficits, especially for young exceptional students, it is imperative to provide developmentally appropriate, systems-level policies to improve student outcomes (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018).

Positive social behavior is one aspect of a more complex set of skills identified as social-emotional competence that plays an important role in school readiness (Denham, 2010; Denham et al., 2013). Positive social behavior includes sharing, cooperation, and effective problem solving (Denham et al., 2013). The importance of positive social behavior in early learning cannot be overstated because of short- and long-term consequences for young children. Some of the consequences of strong positive social behavior include improved school readiness, academic success, improved school adjustment, and reduction of challenging behavior. According to Denham's (2006) summary of the literature, children who lack positive social behavior are likely to struggle in school and experience less acceptance by peers and teachers.

Similarly, Bulotsky-Shearer and Fantuzzo (2011) found a relationship between poor adult and peer interactions in preschool and later literacy outcomes. Bulotsky-Shearer and Fantuzzo used a mixed-methods approach to examine preschool behavior across several classroom situations, including peer and adult interactions. They followed a group of 1852 HeadStart students through the transition from preschool, into kindergarten, and through the first-grade year (Bulotsky-Shearer & Fantuzzo, 2011). Bulotsky-Shearer and Fantuzzo examined student outcomes on early literacy skills, fluency, early reading, and language achievement through the end of first grade and found that students with poor peer and adult interactions were more likely to have poor literacy and language outcomes in kindergarten and first grade. These findings are consistent with other research on social-emotional information processing and school success (Denham et al., 2013).

Positive social behavior also affects children's adjustment in school. Herndon, Bailey, Shewark, Denham, and Bassett (2013) used regression analysis to examine the impact of preschool children's regulation and expression of negative emotions. Herndon et al. collected data on a large sample of children from Head Start and private childcare centers in Northern Virginia. Teachers rated children on social competence, learning behaviors, school adjustment, and their relationships with the children (Herndon et al., 2013). Herndon et al. combined the assessments through statistical analysis to create an overall measurement of school adjustment. Overall, children's ability to regulate and express negative emotions was significantly related to school adjustment (Herndon et al., 2013). In other words, the more successful children were in regulating their emotions, the better their school adjustment (Herndon et al., 2013). Based on these findings, promoting and supporting positive personal social skills in young children, especially children experiencing social skill delays, is a significant educational concern. Similarly, Welchons and McIntyre (2017) investigated long-term sociobehavioral outcomes in kindergarten for children with and without disabilities. Welchons and McIntyre found that improved adaptive behavior (including positive social behavior) and lower problem behavior in preschool predicted improved outcomes for kindergarten students with and without disabilities.

Positive social behavior is especially important for young children because of the risk of suspension and expulsion from preschool due to challenging behavior. According to Gilliam (2005), the national expulsion rate for pre-K students was 3.2 times higher than that of children in grades K-12. The United States Department of Education Office

for Civil Rights (2014b) found that 6% of school districts that collected preschool discipline data reported out-of-school suspensions of at least one preschool-age child. Additionally, racial disparities in school discipline exist for preschool children. Although Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, they also represent 48% of preschool children who were suspended more than once, with boys receiving three out of four out-of-school suspensions (United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014a). Children who lack positive social skills and who are experiencing challenging behavior are significantly more likely to be suspended or expelled from school (Gilliam, 2005). Other researchers examined challenging behavior and early childhood expulsions. Hoover, Kubicek, Rosenberg, Zundel, and Rosenberg (2012) surveyed early childcare providers in Colorado regarding their knowledge of child development, response to challenging behavior, and policies to address social-emotional competence of young children. Respondents reported that 11% of children demonstrated challenging behavior, resulting in the expulsion of 453 children (Hoover, Kubicek, Rosenberg, Zundel, & Rosenberg, 2012). The expulsion rate was 3 times higher than the K-12 expulsion rate for Colorado (Hoover et al., 2012). Even providers with many years of experience expressed a need for mental health consultation and support (Hoover et al., 2012). Supporting and promoting positive social behavior is essential at the local, state, and national level.

It is imperative that early childcare programs ensure there are systems in place to address the short- and long-term effects of social skills deficits in the early years (Garrity et al., 2017). Developmentally appropriate, high-quality discipline policies that support

positive social behavior and reduce challenging behavior in young children are a necessary and an effective component of service delivery systems (Garrity, et al., 2017; United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014c). Longstreth et al. (2013) examined the quality of discipline policies in state-licensed early childhood programs in in Arizona. The results showed that that the discipline policies obtained from 65 childcare sites addressed only 10 out 28 possible items, indicating that high-quality discipline policies in early childcare programs were not a priority (Longstreth et al., 2013). The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between discipline policy and positive personal-social skills of special education students in a large school district in the Southeastern United States.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used throughout the research project:

Positive behavior support (PBS)/School wide positive behavior support (SWPBS): A tiered system approach for addressing challenging behavior in children; school-wide positive behavior support refers to the school-wide system approach for creating a school culture and climate that includes behavioral supports to create effective learning environments for all students (Duda, Dunlap, Fox, Lentini, & Clarke, 2004; Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Positive social behavior: One aspect of a more complex set of skills identified as social-emotional competence that includes sharing, cooperation, and effective problem solving (Denham, 2006).

Preschool special education: Educational support and services for children ages 3 to 6 years with a suspected or known disability (Sandall & Schwartz, 2002).

Teaching and guidance policy essential checklist (TAGPEC): A 30-item, reliable, and valid questionnaire designed to evaluate the nine essential elements of high quality early childhood discipline policies (Garrity et al., 2017).

Teaching pyramid/Program-wide positive behavior support (PWPBS): A tiered system approach that provides support at the universal (high-quality environments and nurturing relationships), secondary (explicit teaching of targeted social-emotional skills), and tertiary (intensive, individualized interventions) level (Fox et al., 2003).

Voluntary prekindergarten (VPK): A free, voluntary prekindergarten program for 4 and 5-year-old children (Bassok, Miller, & Galdo, 2016).

Significance of the Study

A gap exists in preschool special education students' growth in positive personal-social skills, thereby affecting kindergarten readiness and increasing risk for exposure to school discipline. Personal-social skill deficits have long- and short-term negative consequences for children (Brennan et al., 2012; Hauser-Cram & Woodman, 2016; Whitted, 2011). Children with poor personal-social skills are more likely to experience challenging behavior and are at risk for poor peer and adult relationships, social isolation by peers, and poor long-term behavioral adjustment (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2010; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). In a longitudinal, mixed-methods investigation of the short- and long-term effects of social competence, Bornstein et al. (2010) reported that children who struggle with social competence at 4 years of age

continue to experience behavioral and social challenges into adolescence, such as depression, anxiety, aggression, and disruptive behavior.

Social and behavioral challenges also place children at-risk for school failure. Ren, Knoche, and Edwards (2016) found a relationship between social competence and pre-academic skills. Ren et al. investigated the relationship between social skills and pre-academic achievement in a group of preschool children in China. Parents and teachers of 166 preschool children rated children's social competence and pre-academic skills (Ren et al., 2016). When children experienced more difficulty self-regulating emotion, interacting with peers, and attending to tasks, pre-academic skills were lower (Ren et al., 2016). Conversely, when children demonstrated more positive social behaviors, such as sharing, effective social problem solving, and cooperation, pre-academic skills were higher (Ren et al., 2016). These findings are consistent with previous research on social-emotional information processing and school success (Denham et al., 2013). Strong social competence, including personal-social skills, may prevent later social and behavioral problems that impact school success (Bornstein et al., 2010; Denham et al., 2013; Ren et al., 2016).

According to Brown and Beckett (2006), systemic school discipline policies that are consistently implemented by teachers, staff, and administrators reduce the incidence of challenging behavior that can lead to severe discipline consequence, such as suspension and expulsion. Early childcare programs, including those in public school districts that serve preschool students with disabilities, must ensure there are policies in place to address the short- and long-term effects of social skill deficits in the early years

(Garrity et al., 2017). The current study focused on the relationship between school discipline policy and positive personal-social skills of preschool special education students. The current study was significant because I compared the BDI 2 scores on personal social skills of students in Title I and non-Title I schools. Students in poverty are at higher risk of exposure to school discipline (Anyon et al., 2014; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Mallett, 2014). In the local district, preschool special education students are served in 100 schools; 61 of these sites are considered high-poverty and are designated as Title I schools. The average percentage of kindergarteners who demonstrated proficiency in personal-social development was 56.5% in Title I schools compared to 75% in non-Title I schools, as measured by the WSS. As the local district increases the number of young children on its campuses (Sokol, 2018a), it is essential to examine personal-social skill deficits at an early age, especially for students at-risk, to determine whether there are disparities between students in Title I versus non-Title I schools.

I examined the current district discipline policies that address students in the K-12 environment but do not address developmentally appropriate, evidence-based approaches for young children. Findings may lead to policy recommendations that improve the guiding principles for discipline and promote positive social behavior in young children. Findings may also provide a better understanding for administrators and teachers to create developmentally appropriate policies and align them with practices. As more preschool-age children access public school campuses, district policy that guides daily practices must be adapted to meet the needs of a changing population. This study

addressed a gap in practice through examination of the role of policy in student outcomes for a vulnerable population: preschool students with disabilities.

In the local district's strategic 5-year plan published on the district website, graduation rates and kindergarten reading readiness are high priorities. The local district also recently committed to adding 400 free VPK seats in district schools for 4-year-olds (Sokol, 2018a). The district identified three essential components for student success, including behavior, for K-12 students. According to the local district's strategic plan, decreasing student suspension and exposure to school discipline is a priority due to the impact on graduation rates. Additionally, the local district has recently redesigned its Tier 3 intervention process for students with challenging behavior (Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, 2014). The Tier 3 redesign aligns with the district's strategic plan in that it targets the reduction of challenging behavior, suspensions, and expulsions with the goal of improving student outcomes.

The redesign is also part of a larger, statewide effort to address the disturbing pattern of the use of school discipline with students with disabilities (Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, 2014). This study was significant for the local district because it addressed a gap in the growth of positive personal-social skills for young children, which affects kindergarten readiness and increases the risk of exposure to school discipline. An investigation of the policies that support district priorities and promote developmentally appropriate, evidence-based practices may enable the local district to ensure the alignment of policies and practices for the youngest learners in an area that directly affects district strategic priorities.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

An examination of discipline policies is necessary for the local district due to the gap in preschool special education students' growth in positive personal-social skills and the impact on kindergarten readiness. There is local and national concern regarding social skill deficits, kindergarten readiness, and the increased risk of the use of school discipline with young children. There are additional concerns regarding the disparity in personal-social kindergarten readiness skills for students in Title I versus non-Title I schools. The research questions (RQs) and hypotheses for this investigation were the following:

RQ1: How do school discipline policies as measured by the TAGPEC relate to positive personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2 of exiting preschool special education students in a large school district in the Southeastern United States?

$H_0$1: There is no relationship between the quality of school discipline policies as measured by the TAGPEC and personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2.

H_a1: There is a positive linear relationship between the quality of school discipline policies as measured by the TAGPEC and personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2.

RQ2: After controlling for the quality of discipline policy as measured by the TAGPEC, are there differences in personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2 for students in Title I schools versus students in non-Title I schools?

$H_0$2: After controlling for the quality of discipline policy as measured by the TAGPEC, there are no differences in personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2 for students in Title I schools versus students in non-Title I schools.

H_a2: After controlling for the quality of discipline policy as measured by the TAGPEC, there are differences in personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2 by students in Title I schools versus students in non-Title I schools.

Review of the Literature

Theoretical Foundation

The focus of this investigation was the relationship between positive personal social skills and discipline policies. The theoretical framework for the investigation was Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner's theory of development emphasizes the experiences of the individual in and with the environment. Bronfenbrenner posited that the individual and the environment and influence each other. There are five levels in Bronfenbrenner's theory that are often depicted as concentric circles. At the center is the child, who develops inside an interactive set of systems. These systems include ontogenic development, microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. Ontogenic development refers to the growth of the child, who is at the center of the systems. Microsystems are the perceptions, activities, events, roles, and relationships the child experiences in a setting, such as a school, home, or a childcare center. The mesosystems are the interrelation between two or more microsystems. For example, the home-to-school relationship is an example of a mesosystem. Exosystems are the settings that do not directly or actively involve the developing child but include distal events that influence and are influenced by what happens in the setting of the child. For example, the parent's work environment, community events, and an older sibling's group of friends are all exosystems. Macrosystems are the patterns that are found in the

micro, meso, and exosystems. Macrosystems include norms, culture, politics, economics, and systems of beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) related to the present study in two ways. The first was how the theory considers the developmental processes of children. The current discipline policy in the local setting is written for the K-12 environment and does not address developmental approaches that may contribute to an indirect effect on the personal social outcome data. The ecological systems theory also allows for the consideration of factors that influence the child and the interaction of the child with the settings. According to ecological systems theory, policy, school settings, and poverty influence and are influenced by the developing child (Thapa, Cohen, Higgins-D'Alessandro, & Guffey, 2012). Ecological systems theory provides the framework that links policy to student outcomes through the macrosystem of school climate. The rules and norms of a school (the operationalization of the discipline policy) are considered a safety-related dimension of school climate and are part of the macrosystem that influences and is influenced by the developing child (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005). The macrosystem includes physical and social-emotional safety as essential elements of school climate and influences the personal-social skills of the child because of the profound effect on the individual experiences of the child. The exosystem includes distal settings, events, and structures that also influence the microsystems of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017; Thapa et al., 2012).

Review of the Broader Problem

A thorough investigation of current, peer-reviewed, scholarly literature was conducted using various electronic databases including Thoreau multi-data base, Sage, ERIC, Education Source, and Academic Search Complete. I also used the Google Scholar search engine. Search terms and key words included *social competence and preschool*, *challenging behavior*, *school climate*, *discipline policy* and *social emotional learning*, *policy*, *student outcomes*, *bullying* and *school climate*, *ecological systems theory*, *poverty*, and *school discipline*. References in current literature were reviewed for key words and additional resources.

The literature review includes a discussion of the macrosystem of the school, including the influence of policy on school climate. The literature review also includes a discussion of how school climate influences and is influenced by teaching and learning, specifically student social and academic outcomes. Finally, I review studies on exosystem and microsystem elements such as socioeconomic status, which was relevant to this doctoral study due to a comparison of Title I and non-Title I schools. The literature review also provides the background and rationale for methods by addressing the connection between policy and personal-social skills of students.

The Macrosystem: Policy and School Climate

Educational policies have consequences and are part of the macrosystem of school climate (Brady, Duffy, Hazelkorn, & Bucholz, 2014; Thapa et al., 2012). Educational policies also reflect values and are used by school districts to streamline decision-making (Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016). For example, the reauthorization of the No

Child Left Behind Act led to a focus on high-stakes testing that teachers and researchers suggested has contributed to negative school climates. This section of the literature review highlights the influence of policy on school climate to show how the macrosystem of policy influences the microsystem of the school.

Zero tolerance policies are an example of how policy influences school climate. Zero tolerance policies increased in school districts after incidents of school violence influenced rules and norms in schools (Jones, 2013). The policies mandate specific consequences, such as out of school suspension, for certain infractions regardless of other circumstances related to the incident. Curran (2016) examined zero-tolerance policies and their effect on discipline, racial discipline disparities, and student outcomes. Curran used logistic regression to examine survey data from the National Center of Education Statistics and the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights to investigate the effect of zero-tolerance policies on suspension rates of school districts. Curran found that zero-tolerance policies predicted an increase in the use of exclusionary discipline and that students of color were suspended at higher rates than White students. Curran concluded that the change in suspension rates was most likely determined by the policy that resulted in more severe penalties for infractions that may not have previously called for a suspension.

Caton (2012) reported similar results in a qualitative investigation of the effects of zero-tolerance policies on the educational experiences of Black males. Caton interviewed 10 Black males over a period of 9 months. The participants reported that, in their experience, zero-tolerance policies resulted in a suspension for disciplinary infractions

that teachers could have addressed in the classroom (Caton, 2012). Additionally, the participants reported that the presence of metal detectors, the practice of body searches, and the use of cameras in the school created a hostile climate that affected their relationships with teachers and influenced how teachers perceived them (Caton, 2012). The policy influenced the environment and the relationships in the environment, and according to the participants resulted in exclusionary discipline practices that led to school dropout. Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil (2016) reported similar results for Latino students in California. Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil examined the effect of zero-tolerance policies and a lack of resources in the qualitative investigation of five public high schools. Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil conducted interviews with teachers, students, and administrators. Two themes were lack of resources at the schools and the application of zero-tolerance policies to nonviolent issues that resulted in exclusionary practices (Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016). In both studies, zero tolerance policies were applied indiscriminately, resulted in school exclusion, and contributed to a hostile school climate. Policy influences outcomes for students because of the impact on day-to-day decision-making that translates into adult responses to student behavior. Adult-student relationships and responses to policies contribute to school culture and climate. Zero-tolerance policies show how policy affects school climate.

Policy influences norms, rules, and decision-making, thereby affecting the structure and supports in schools. According to Gregory, Cornell, and Fan (2011), how rules are enforced and how adults respond to student needs contributes to school

structures and support. Strong school structures and supports are associated with lower suspension rates and increased student willingness to seek adult help when bullied (Gregory et al., 2011). Gregory et al. examined school climate surveys from 1,449 ninth-grade students in Virginia public high schools. Gregory et al. used multiple regression analysis to examine school environment and suspension rates. Findings indicated that when schools had characteristics of structure and support, such as high academic expectations and caring, responsive adult-student relationships, suspension rates were lower (Gregory et al., 2011). Results also showed disproportionate suspension of Black students in almost all schools, and schools with high Black student enrollment tended to suspend more students overall (Gregory et al., 2011). Gregory et al. suggested additional research is needed to examine students' experiences of high behavioral expectations, clear communication of school rules, and consistent follow-through of school rules. These specific recommendations are related to how discipline policy shapes school climate and affects student outcomes. Policy influences student outcomes.

School climate links policy and student outcomes because it includes the rules, norms, and expectations of a school that contributes to the physical and emotional safety of teachers, students, and families (Thapa et al., 2012). According to the National School Climate Council (2007), school climate comprises the goals, norms, values, interactions, relationships, and organizational structures that support the physical, social, and emotional safety of the students, parents, and educators who make up a school community. In their review of school climate measures and the effects on student outcomes, Wang and Degol (2016) suggested there are four domains of school climate:

academic, community, safety, and institutional environment. The academic domain includes teaching and learning, leadership, and professional development; the community domain includes the quality of relationship, connectedness, diversity, and respect; the safety domain includes social, emotional, physical safety, discipline, and order; and the domain of institutional environment includes resources, structural organization, and the physical environment (Wang & Degol, 2016). Although somewhat complex in the various elements that compose it, school climate links policy to outcomes because it affects daily practice across multiple domains.

In summary, policy shapes school climate through the norms, rules, and expectations established in the school. The norms, rules, and expectations driven by policy are the elements of school structure and support for students. These structures and supports influence adult behavior, as well as teaching and learning. In the next section, I address the connection between policy and student personal-social skills through the vehicle of school climate.

Macrosystems: Student Climate and Academic Outcomes

School climate is a multilevel concept that comprises interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, and organizational structures (National School Climate Council, 2007). Discipline policy influences personal-social skills through school climate because of the interactions between the child and the macrosystem. According to Wang and Degol (2016), various dimensions of school climate relate to different of types of student outcomes. This section focuses on school climate and student outcomes. Student social and behavioral outcomes are included because they relate to the present study's

examination of personal-social skills. Policy can bring about change because of how it influences daily practices. Growing concerns about bullying, school violence, and student discipline problems resulted in the adoption of policies and approaches that were intended to improve school climates (Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016). One such approach is School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012). SWPBIS is an evidenced-based, tiered approach to creating a positive school climate with social and behavioral supports for all students. Although often touted as a program, SWPBIS is an evidence-based system approach that includes a variety of strategies and supports intended to influence daily teaching practices and student outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2012). Mitchell and Bradshaw (2013) examined students' perceptions of school climate of 1,902 fifth graders following the implementation of SWPBIS. Mitchell and Bradshaw also collected teacher survey data to examine teacher's self-reported use of effective behavior support strategies. Mitchell and Bradshaw used structured equation models to investigate the various subscales of the school climate survey and classroom behavior support strategies. Findings indicated that the use of exclusionary discipline practices was associated with lower student ratings of school climate and that when teachers use positive behavior support strategies, students' perceptions of school climate were more positive (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). Policies to improve school climates can lead to improved daily practices that result in decreased problem behaviors and improved perceptions of the school environment.

Policy plays a role in how school climate develops, and student perception of school climate is the individual's experience at the center of the macrosystem. These

experiences of school climate influence student outcomes. Gage, Larson, Sugai, and Chafouleas (2016) examined student perceptions of school climate and the relationship to office discipline referrals. Gage et al. used latent class regression modeling to investigate how specific items from the school climate survey predicted student office discipline referrals in a large New England school district in the United States. Findings indicated that school-involved parents and a school environment with clear and consistent behavioral expectations and positive teacher-student relationships contributed to fewer office discipline referrals for students with intense social and behavioral needs (Gage et al., 2016). Clear school rules and norms created an environment in which students felt safe and supported and resulted in more positive behavioral outcomes for the students (Gage et al., 2016). Similarly, Hopson, Schiller, and Lawson (2014) explored connections between school climate and various social and academic outcomes for students in an analysis of school success profile data from seven states. Hopson et al. used self-report measures for grades and student questionnaires to measure behavior. The findings demonstrated a relationship between students who had positive perceptions of school climate (more social support and connections to the school) and an increase in grades. Overall, students who perceived more significant social supports, prosocial behavior at school, home and in the neighborhood, demonstrated better grades, and better behavior. The findings were significant because they showed the interaction of school climate in the school, but also within the broader macrosystem of the neighborhood. The findings aligned with previous research that examined the relationship between school climate and neighborhood crime (McCoy, Roy, & Sirkman, 2013). McCoy et al. investigated

neighborhood crime and academic achievement in 500 Chicago schools. McCoy et al. reported that school climate predicted academic achievement and found that higher levels of school safety and academic expectations also predicted a reduction in the amount of violent crime in the neighborhood. The findings indicated that the effects of school climate interact with and reach beyond the immediate environment of the child, highlighting another way that school climate influences student outcomes (McCoy et al., 2013). While the absence of or decrease in problem behaviors (in and out of school) is an important metric when examining the effects of school climate on students' outcomes, it is also important to consider other measures to show the relationship between school climate and student outcomes. In the next section I examine the research about school climate and measures of aggression, bullying, and personal social skills.

Bullying is a frequent topic in the literature on school climate and personal social skills. The current investigation focused on the personal social skills of young children, and not on bullying or overt acts of aggression. But, the research about bullying is relevant because it highlights how school climate indirectly influences personal social skills. Positive school climates in that students feel cared about and connected to the adults are thought to mitigate bullying and aggression (Waasdorp, Pas, O'Brennan, & Bradshaw, 2011).

Although bullying is often viewed as a problem related to the individual, many researchers report that school climate and its perception by the students play an essential role in the rates of bullying behavior (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014; Bradshaw & Johnson, 2011; Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011). For example, Bosworth and Judkins (2014)

conducted a case study on the implementation of school-wide positive behavior support in a middle school. The purpose of the investigation was to examine how the implementation of school-wide positive behavior support affected students' perception of school climate as measured by a school climate survey. Focus groups were used to gather data about student perceptions of school climate. School-wide positive behavior support is a three-tiered approach to preventing challenging behavior and improving school climate (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012). Tier one strategies are universal approaches for all students and include the explicit teaching of behavioral expectations around the school campus, tier two interventions are for students who need more targeted behavioral supports than universal interventions provide, and tier three interventions are intensive individualized interventions for students with persistent, challenging behavior, such as aggression or bullying (Waasdorp et al., 2012). Bosworth and Judkins (2014) found student perceptions of school climate improved and office discipline referrals for bullying decreased.

Similarly, Kelm, McIntosh, and Cooley (2014) investigated how full implementation of school-wide PBIS affected student perception of school climate, behavioral outcomes, and academic achievement in a small, Canadian elementary school. Office discipline referrals were used to measure problem behavior and were reduced by half after full implementation of PBIS. Academic achievement, as measured by the standardized district assessment, improved for fourth and seventh-grade students (Kelm et al., 2014). Student perception of school climate also improved, and students reported

they felt there were fewer bullying incidents (Kelm et al., 2014). Students perceived a positive school climate as a safer learning environment (Kelm et al., 2014).

Just as a positive school climate affects academic achievement, other researchers (Klein, Cornell, & Konold, 2012) reported a positive school climate plays a protective role in risky youth behavior. Klein et al. (2012) surveyed 3, 087 high school students regarding youth risk behavior and three dimensions of school climate that focused on bullying (aggressive acts, the prevalence of teasing and bullying, and willingness to seek help). Klein et al. used structured equation modeling to investigate the relationship between school climate and risky behaviors (substance abuse, aggression, depressive feelings, suicide attempts/thoughts). The findings showed that all three paths (aggressive acts, the prevalence of teasing and bullying, and willingness to seek help) were significantly correlated with risky behaviors (.22-.37; Klein et al., 2012). Students who perceived a more positive school climate were less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Therefore, a positive school climate can reduce incidences of bullying, teasing, and aggression, but also plays a role in reducing other risky behavior that affects social and academic outcomes for students (Klein et al., 2012). A positive school climate can also make a difference for students with different types of home stressors and family structures. For example, O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw, and Eklund (2015) investigated student perceptions of school climate and self-reported grade point averages from 902 schools in California. O'Malley et al. used a cross-sectional approach to examine the moderating effects of school climate on students living in different family situations. O'Malley et al. compared student perceptions of school climate and self-reported grade

point averages using regression models and found a positive association between self-reported grade point averages and school climate perceptions. Students with a positive perception of school climate reported better grade point averages, regardless of the family structures in that they lived (O'Malley et al., 2015). It is important to note, however, that students living in foster care had the least positive effect.

Gol-Guven (2017) measured students' perceptions of school climate and student behavior in a Turkish school for students in grades one through four as part of a social-emotional learning program evaluation. The investigation is unique because it examined the absence of office discipline referrals as an indicator of improved behavior and directly assessed student social skills before and after the implementation of a social-emotional learning curriculum (Gol-Guven, 2017). The social-emotional curriculum was entitled the Lions Quest Program. According to Gol-Guven (2017), the program emphasizes the creation of a positive school climate and, respectful learning environments, and social skills such as cooperation and conflict resolution. The purpose of the investigation was to examine the effects of the program on school climate and student behavior (Gol-Guven, 2017). Gol-Guven used a quasi-experimental design to compare a control group to schools implementing the program. Schools that implemented the program reported better school climates than schools that did not implement the program (Gol-Guven, 2017). Gol-Guven also used ANOVA to compare student post-test behavior scores and reported the experimental group's mean score for positive was higher than the control group. Additionally, effect sizes for Cohen's d for an increase in positive behaviors were moderate to large. The positive behavior of the experimental group was

better than the positive behavior of the control group after the implementation of the program, and school climate was connected to improved student behavior (Gol-Guven, 2017).

Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, and Benbenishty (2017) reported in their research synthesis of school climate and academic achievement that school climate influences academic achievement. Berkowitz et al. conducted a comprehensive examination of the school climate literature between 2000-2015, focusing on primary, empirical studies. Berkowitz et al. examined the relationship between school climate, socio-economic status (SES), and academic achievement. Although much of the school climate literature Berkowitz et al. examined used a correlational design, there was a consistent relationship between positive school climate and positive academic outcomes (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Additionally, Berkowitz et al. found in the analysis of the school climate literature that positive school climate plays an important role in potentially narrowing the achievement gap for students of low SES backgrounds. Berkowitz et al. recommended that future research include multiple perspectives of school climate, rather than focus only on student perceptions.

Other researchers reported similar findings when investigating bullying, victimization, and school academic achievement among high school students (Lacey & Cornell, 2013). Teachers and students from 286 Virginia schools completed school climate surveys, as well as other measures regarding student perception of the prevalence of bullying. Lacey and Cornell conducted standard regression analysis of Virginia Standard of Learning scores and survey measures. Schools with low rates of perceived

teasing and bullying had consistently higher school-wide passing rates in Algebra, History, Geometry, Biology and Earth Science than schools with medium to high rates of perceived teasing and bullying (Lacey & Cornell, 2013). School academic achievement is negatively affected when teasing, and bullying is prevalent in the school climate (Lacey & Cornell, 2013).

There are many studies, as previously noted, about the positive relationship between school climate and student academic outcomes. However, other researchers (Wang et al., 2014) reported conflicting findings of school climate, peer victimization, and grade point averages as a measure of academic achievement. Wang et al. surveyed students in 50 elementary schools in Canada. The investigation was unique because it examined school-level data of school climate measures instead of individual-level data. Wang et al. used multi-level modeling to examine data on self-reported peer victimization, school-level climate data, and teacher-reported grade point averages for students. Although the researchers expected positive school climate to moderate the effects of peer victimization on teacher-reported grade point averages, this was not the case (Wang et al., 2014). Positive perceptions of school-level climate were associated with higher grade point averages but did not mediate or change the effects of peer victimization on grade point averages, as predicted. However, other findings were consistent with the literature, such as students who perceived a poorer school climate also reported higher rates of victimization and lower grade point averages (Wang et al., 2014).

School climate literature has focused on schools in the United States. There are, however, perspectives from other countries that show support for the claim of the

influence of school climate on student outcomes. For example, Ali and Siddiqui (2016) investigated the relationship between the school learning environment and student academic achievement of all 10th-grade students in the Punjab province in Pakistan. Ali and Siddiqui measured school climate with a survey and the scores from the district's annual test of achievement. The findings demonstrated a significant relationship between student achievement scores and school climate rating using, adding a Pakistani perspective to the literature on school climate and student achievement (Ali & Siddiqui, 2016). Other researchers have also examined the relationship between school climate and academic achievement. O'Malley et al., (2015) investigated student perceptions of school climate and self-reported grade point averages from 902 schools in California. O'Malley et al. used a cross-sectional approach to examine the moderating effects of school climate on students living in different family situations. O'Malley compared student perceptions of school climate and self-reported grade point averages using regression models and found a positive association between self-reported grade point averages and school climate perceptions. Students with a positive perception of school climate reported better grade point averages, regardless of the family structures in that they lived (O'Malley et al., 2015). It is important to note, however, that students living in foster care had the least positive effect.

Climate also matters at the micro-level. For example, Cheema and Kitsantas (2014) investigated the relationship between classroom climate and math achievement scores of 5,475 high school student from 274 schools in the United States. Cheema and Kistsantas used PISA data, an assessment of math, literacy, and science skills of students

around the world. Students completed surveys to measure classroom climate, as well as self-efficacy. Cheema and Kitsantas found that when students perceived the class climate as positive, math achievement scores were higher. Black and Hispanic students who perceived a positive classroom climate showed an increase in math achievement at rates faster than White students (Cheema & Kitsantas, 2014). Improved climate indirectly affects academic achievement at the classroom and school level, thereby reducing the achievement gap for Black and Hispanic students (Cheema & Kitsantas, 2014). Other researchers have examined similar micro-level factors, such as the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and school climate. For example, Berkowitz et al. (2015) examined the role of school climate in the relationship between academic achievement and (SES). Berkowitz et al. used a multilevel approach to investigate school climate data of 59, 946 Israeli fifth and eighth-grade students. Achievement gaps for low SES students decreased in positive school climates, both at the school and student level.

Similarly, Morin, Marsh, Nagengast, and Scalas (2014) found that classroom climate predicted student reports of math self-efficacy and achievement. Morin et al. used multilevel analysis to examine data from 2, 541 elementary school students and found a positive relationship between classroom climate and classroom achievement levels (Morin et al., 2014). Thus, school climate matters at the school, class, and individual level.

Microsystems and Exosystems: Poverty, Race, and Student Outcomes

There are additional concerns reported in the literature regarding exosystems factors, such as poverty, race, and school discipline (Mallett, 2014; Skiba, Arredondo, &

Williams, 2014). According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), exosystems are larger social systems that indirectly affect the child's macro and microsystems. Factors included in this layer include income resources and community resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In this section, I will address the role of poverty and race in school discipline. Exosystem factors are important to examine because exposure to harsh school discipline increases the risk for negative long-term social outcomes for an already vulnerable population (Mallett, 2014).

Anyon et al. (2014) conducted a cross-sectional analysis of demographic and student discipline data for Denver public schools for the 2011-12 academic year. Anyon et al. examined disparities in race in student discipline and investigated the effects of alternatives to out of school suspensions. Anyon et al. used multilevel logistic regression analyses for this large dataset. Their findings, consistent with the existing literature, were that Black, Latino, Native American, and Multiracial students were significantly more at risk for office discipline referrals than White students. Additionally, students living in poverty and homeless students were also at an increased risk for exposure to school discipline (Anyon et al., 2014).

Similarly, Shabazian (2015) reported in an analysis of archival data from the second largest school district in the United States, that poverty, race, and school year were predictors of exclusionary discipline practices (suspension, expulsion and opportunity transfers). Shabazian used correlation, multiple regression analysis, and an information system mapping tools to examine district data from 2001 in a large, urban school district. The findings of the exploratory study, consistent with current literature,

confirmed that schools with the highest suspension rates also had the highest rates of disproportionality (Shabazian, 2015). African American and Latino students were more likely to receive harsher disciplinary responses. Overall, Shabazian found that schools designated as low SES and located in urban, inner-city areas used more exclusionary discipline than suburban, high-SES schools (Shabazian, 2015). Shabzian's study is relevant to the current investigation because it highlights the degree of variation in exclusionary discipline practices related to poverty and because of the author's recommendation for future research. While the current study will not examine discipline outcomes for preschool special education students (no discipline data exists on this population), it will focus on positive personal-social skills and compare Title I (low-SES) and non-Title I schools. As previously noted, positive personal-social skills can prevent challenging behavior that can lead to exposure to school discipline (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam, 2016). Shabazian recommended further research examine the discipline policies at lower suspending schools. The author's recommendation connects policy and practice.

Racial disparities in discipline between black and white students begin in preschool (United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014a). For example, although only 19% of preschool children are Black, they represent 47% of the students who receive out school suspensions (United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014a). Mallett (2014) reported that students exposed to school discipline share common risk factors with adolescents involved with juvenile courts. These risk factors included living in poverty and experiencing abuse and neglect (Mallett, 2014). Poverty and living in chaotic communities, often with higher crime rates, also

place children and adolescent at increased risk for involvement in the juvenile court system (Mallett, 2011). Martinez, McMahon, and Treger (2016) examined office discipline referrals among specific student groups to investigate predictors for referrals. Martinez et al. used archival data to investigate school and individual-level characteristics for students who received office discipline referrals in a homogenous, low-income community. African American had higher office discipline referral rates than other Latino or White students, and boys had higher rates than girls (Martinez et al., 2016). The findings indicated that more segregated schools have higher referral rates for physically aggressive behavior (Martinez et al., 2016). Martinez et al. noted that the social contexts of the larger challenges in the community (poverty, violence) place these students at a disproportionate risk. Individual responses (office discipline referrals) ignore the contextual issues that play in role in the lives of the students. The findings are consistent with prior research (Skiba, 2013).

Although a positive school climate can reduce achievement gaps, other researchers (Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanye, 2015) reported that aggregate data of school climate does not accurately portray the experiences of all the school's students. Voight et al. investigated over 400 California middle schools using a cross-sectional design and analyzed school-climate data by sub-group. Black students reported significantly lower levels of safety and connectedness, and Hispanic students reported fewer opportunities for participation (Voight et al., 2015). The findings indicated that although a positive school climate can reduce achievement gaps for some students, there

is evidence to suggest that student experiences of school climate may differ by race (Voight et al., 2015).

Educational policies affect school climate by establishing norms, rules, and guidelines for decision-making (Brady et al., 2014; Thapa et al., 2012). School climate links policy and student outcomes because it includes the expectations, values, and structures of a school that contribute to the physical and emotional safety of students, teachers, and families (National School Climate Council, 2007; Thapa et al., 2012; Wang & Degol, 2016). Positive school climates hold promise for their effect on the relationship between positive personal-social and academic outcomes (Berkowitz et al., 2015). Discipline policy, therefore, plays a role in the personal-social skills of special education preschool students through the vehicle of school climate. The child, at the center of complex, interacting systems, influences, and is influenced by, the macrosystem of discipline policy (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Implications

At the local level, elementary school campuses are serving more preschool-age students. Therefore, the implementation of equitable, developmentally appropriate discipline policies to promote positive school climates, and prosocial behavior is essential for student success (Garrity et al., 2017). This review provided a strong rationale for the significance of an investigation into the relationship between current school discipline policies and student personal-social skills. This doctoral study examined the relationship between discipline policies and the personal-social skills of a vulnerable population and included a comparison of students living in poverty with those who do not. The findings

of this investigation led to policy recommendations that may result in more equitable, developmentally appropriate discipline, and promote positive social behavior in young children. The positive social change implications of an investigation into the relationship between policy and student outcome data included a better understanding for administrators and teachers of developmentally appropriate policies and their alignment with practices. The positive social change implications also included an improved understanding of how to create developmentally appropriate discipline policies that support positive social behavior in young children.

Summary

In summary, there is a gap in preschool special education students' personal-social skills that is affecting kindergarten readiness and increasing the risk for exposure to school discipline for a vulnerable population in the local district (Florida Department of Education, 2017). Additionally, in the local district, there is a disparity in personal-social skills in kindergarten between students living in poverty compared to those who do not (Florida Department of Education, 2015). Positive personal-social skills are essential in early learning because strong social competence reduces challenging behavior, and increases effective social problem-solving, cooperation and pre-academic skills necessary for kindergarten and later school success (Brennan et al., 2012; Denham et al., 2013; Hauser-Cram & Woodman, 2016;Ren et al., 2016; Whitted, 2011). Systemic, consistently enforced school discipline policies contribute to a positive school climate (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Positive school discipline policies establish guidelines for daily interactions between adults and students, establish explicit behavioral norms, social

expectations, and offer necessary supports to promote positive personal-social skills (Brown & Beckett, 2006; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). As more preschool-age children access public K-5 elementary schools, it is imperative to ensure that developmentally appropriate, equitable discipline policies are in place (Garrity et al., 2017). The use of developmentally appropriate discipline policies will help to ensure school climates that promote positive personal-social behavior, reduce the risk of challenging behavior and exposure to school discipline (Garrity et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Section 2 includes a description of the quantitative methodology used in this study. A description of the correlational design is presented, including a justification for using this design and approach. Additionally, there is a discussion of the population, the sampling strategy, recruitment, and informed consent. The section includes the instrumentation and information on data collection and analysis. I also discuss the assumptions, limitations, scope, and delimitations of the current study.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The goal of this doctoral project study was to provide quantitative evidence about the gap in the growth of preschool special education students' personal-social skills and to examine the differences in personal-social skills between students in Title I and non-Title I schools. By examining the relationship between school discipline policy and pre-K special education student outcomes, I developed recommendations to improve and align policy and practice. The information addressed in Section 2 includes the research design and approach, rationale for the design, the population, sampling strategy, and information about the protection and recruitment of participants. Information about the instrumentation, materials, data collection, and data analysis is included, as well as the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

The research approach for this doctoral project study was correlational and quasi-experimental (see Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The quantitative design for RQ1 was correlational because I examined the relationship between school discipline policies, as measured by the TAGPEC, and exiting pre-K students' BDI 2 scores (see Creswell, 2014). I did not manipulate or control variables as in an experimental design. In the local district, there is one district-wide discipline policy. However, each school creates and implements school-wide discipline policies. Individual school policies are available in the school improvement plans. School improvement plans can be accessed through the Florida Department of Education public portal. The template used for individual school improvement plans includes three indicators of school environment that relate to

discipline. The first indicator requires the school to describe how the school learns about student's cultures and builds relationships between adults and children. The second indicator requires the school to describe how the school creates a safe, secure school environment. The third indicator requires the school to describe the established protocols for discipline and the school-wide behavior system. These three indicators from the school improvement plans were chosen for TAGPEC scoring because they provide more individualized detail about the school policy than the general district policy. According to Lodico et al. (2010), in correlational research data are collected at one point in time, and there is a measurement of at least two variables thought to be related. Additionally, data are collected from one sample of participants, and correlations are computed between the scores for each pair of variables. The variables measured were continuous (BDI 2 scores and TAGPEC scores). The BDI 2 data were archival. I used a panel of three educators to score the school discipline policies using the TAGPEC, and I also scored them. I used the average of the scores for the TAGPEC data. Data were collected at one point in time, and the BDI 2 scores collected were from one group of participants. A correlational design for RQ1 was appropriate because I examined the relationship between two variables.

The research design for RQ2 was quasi-experimental. I compared two preformed groups (exiting pre-K special education students attending Title I schools and exiting pre-K special education students attending non-Title I schools) on a dependent variable (BDI 2 scores) after controlling the quality of the discipline policy as measured by the TAGPEC (see Creswell, 2014). An experimental design was not chosen for this research

question because no variables were being manipulated and data were archival (see Creswell, 2014).

There is a gap in the personal-social skills of preschool special education students that is affecting kindergarten readiness and placing students at-risk for exposure to school discipline (Florida Department of Education, 2017). Current discipline policies are for K-5 levels and do not address the developmental needs of young children, which could be contributing to the problem. Improving overall discipline practices and improving kindergarten readiness are two priorities for the local district. A correlational design and quasi-experimental design were used to examined the relationship between personal-social skills and discipline policy, and to examine the differences in personal-social skills between two preexisting groups while controlling for the quality of the discipline policy.

Setting and Sample

The local setting was a large school district in Southwest Florida. The school district serves 206,841 students across a large geographical area (United States Department of Education, 2016). According to the United States Department of Education (2016), the local district's enrollment by ethnicity is 40% White, 29% Hispanic, 21% Black, and 3% Asian. Fifty-seven percent of students are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program, and 12% of students are English language learners. I established the following criteria for inclusion in this study: The elementary schools must have preschool special education classrooms on the campus, and students must be preschool special education students exiting the pre-K special education services. The reason I chose exiting students is because the state mandates that these students have a

BDI 2 upon leaving pre-K special education, thereby providing the archival data. There are 111 elementary schools with preschool special education classes on the campus; of those schools, 61 have Title I status and 45 do not. BDI 2 scores are for students exiting pre-K special education services. The sample for RQ1 included 354 preschool special education students who exited preschool special education services in the 2016-17 school year, were kindergarten eligible for the next school year, but were not yet 6 years old. For RQ2, I created two balanced groups from the population of exiting preschool special education students in the district.

For RQ1, I used the G* Power 3 analysis to determine sample size. According to Fink (2013), the level of significance, or alpha value, should be small to avoid rejecting the null hypothesis when it is true. The alpha value was .05. The power of the analysis was .80, a common requirement for determining whether a hypothesis test is effective (see Triola, 2012). A high power will indicate a difference if it exists in a sample (Fink, 2013). For RQ1, I conducted a power analysis in G* Power 3 to determine a sufficient sample size with an alpha of 0.05, a power of .80, and an effect size of .30 (see Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2013). Based on the assumptions for RQ1, the required minimum sample size was 111 students. However, given that all data were archived and TAGPEC scores were calculated using a panel of four educators, census sampling was used to include all exiting pre-K special education students in 111 elementary schools (N = 354), which exceeded the number required by the power analysis.

For RQ2, I conducted a power analysis in G* Power 3 to determine a sufficient sample size. According to Cohen (1992), the required sample size for an ANCOVA with

two groups, an alpha of .05, a power of .80, and a large effect size is 26 participants per group. Even though it is more common in educational research to use a medium effect size, I did not have a sufficient population size to satisfy this minimum expectation. Due to the nature of the study and the use of all available preschool special education student participants in the data set, the large effect size was deemed permissible to run the analysis. For RQ2, two of the 111 schools did not have a school improvement plan and could not be included in the analysis, bringing the total to 109 schools. I created the groups by listing the BDI 2 scores of the students from all 45 Title I schools (96 students). I then randomly selected 96 students from 45 non-Title I schools using a random number generator. Because balanced groups were created from the total population used in RQ1 ($N = 354$), the sample for RQ2 included the same students. I used 100% of the students available in the Title I group and created a balanced sample for the non-Title I group. For RQ2, there were two groups of 96 students for a total of 192 students.

I contacted the district via e-mail to obtain permission to access student BDI 2 data. Once permission was granted, I contacted the supervisor of the preschool special education program via e-mail to obtain the BDI 2 scores. Although the district discipline policy is stated in the school handbook (public data), each school has a customized version of the policy. Discipline policies are public record available in each school's school improvement plan. No permission was needed to access the discipline policies. School status (Title I or non-Title I) is also public data, and no permission was needed to obtain that information. I scored the TAGPEC and recruited three early childhood special

educators who are certified in the content area required to teach preschool special education. The educators had a minimum of 5 years experience and were trained on TAGPEC scoring on the same day at the same time. The individuals were paid and were not participants. A volunteer de-identified all discipline policies by assigning a number to the policy and removing the school name from the documents. The volunteer was a district colleague with no connection to the project. Consent was not needed because they were not participants, and all data were de-identified, so there was no need for confidentiality agreements.

Instrumentation and Materials

I examined the relationship between the school-level personal-social BDI 2 scores for preschool special education students and school discipline policies as measured by the TAGPEC (Garrity et al., 2017). In this section, I describe the instruments used to obtain the numerical data. The reliability and validity of each instrument are also discussed.

The BDI 2 is a criterion-referenced, standardized assessment used to measure developmental skills of children aged birth to 7 years, 11 months (Newborg, 2005). The BDI 2 screener is a shortened version of the full assessment and is used in several states, including Florida, as a program outcome measure for preschool special education programs (Elbaum, Gattamorta, & Penfield, 2010). There are five developmental domains assessed by the BDI 2 including Adaptive, Personal-Social, Communication, Cognitive, and Motor. The full version of the BDI 2 provides standard scores (developmental quotient scores) and scaled scores for each subdomain. The screener test contains the same domains and subdomains as the full assessment but has fewer times.

Both tests are administered in the same way. Items are scored with a rating of 0-2 and are totaled to provide the domain scores. Three levels of cut scores can be used by examiners to determine whether a child has passed the domain or needs additional assessment. For most test items in the screener and the full assessment, the examiner has three options for evaluating the child's skills: observation, interview, or structured assessment. Most of the items in the Personal-Social domain are observation and interview items because they contain tasks that are not easily observed. Scripts are used for interviewing, and scoring is standardized. In the local setting, the preschool special education teachers administer the BDI 2 screener test to students in the spring of their exiting year and submit the data to the state for program evaluation purposes. The BDI 2 is considered a reliable and valid developmental assessment (Elbaum et al., 2010). The BDI 2 data are submitted to the state in a data management system, and districts have access to the raw data at the individual, school, area, and district level. I obtained permission from the local district to access raw student scores.

The TAGPEC (Garrity et al., 2017) is a checklist that was developed to evaluate the quality of early childhood discipline policies and guide revising, rewriting, or developing discipline policies in early childhood programs. According to Garrity et al. the TAGPEC is a 30-item checklist that can be used by a variety of early childcare program providers (state funded, faith based, for-profit, nonprofit, etc.). Garrity et al. used the instrument to evaluate the discipline policies of childcare centers. An earlier version of the instrument, the EC-DPEC (Longstreth et al., 2013) was developed through an extensive literature review. The instrument was piloted in the state of Arizona. From

that in-depth review of literature in the fields of early childhood, early childhood education, early childhood special education, administration, and school psychology, Garrity et al. (2017) identified nine essential features of high-quality, systems-level early childhood discipline policies. The name of the instrument was revised for implementation in a larger study, and the essential features changed from nine to seven (Garrity et al., 2017). There are 30 items on the checklist that assist users in rating the seven essential features of discipline policy. There is a rating system for each item on the TAGPEC. Items can be marked "no" if the feature was not addressed in the policy, "emerging" if there was minimal evidence of the feature in the policy, or "yes" if there was clear evidence of the feature in the policy. Points were assigned as follows: 0 points for items marked "no," 1 point for items marked as "emerging," and 2 points for items marked "yes." The highest score on the TAGPEC is 60. This score indicates sufficient evidence of each of the essential features in the discipline policy.

The TAGPEC instrument is considered reliable and valid (Longstreth et al., 2013). Interrater reliability for the instrument was established using Pearson's correlation coefficient and was moderately strong. Through the process of scoring the TAGPEC, I realized that the TAGPEC scores were not interval variables, as initially thought because the difference between each score category is known and meaningful. The scoring information in the book was much more detailed than previously understood (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018). There were seven essential features in the TAGPEC, and each subscale (Essential Feature) yielded an average score. The TAGPEC scores were considered ordinal due to the scoring method. For example, a score of 0.00-0.059 was

giving an "inadequate" rating, indicating that the discipline policy did not contain sufficient evidence of developmentally appropriate, evidence-based guidance practices (Longstreth & Garrity, 2018). The next scoring category was minimal (.60-.69), and so on through the numeric rating of 2.0, which was a rating of "Excellent" (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018).

I recruited three educators with a minimum of 5 years experience in early childhood education to complete the TAGPEC, and I also scored the policies. The educators had the appropriate certification to teach in the content area. The educators had extensive knowledge of best practices in early childhood special education based on their years of experience and certification. All three educators were trained at the same time in the use of the instrument to calculate a score for each school's discipline policy. The panel of raters completed the ratings of the discipline policies within the same time frame. There was a total of 109 policies to rate, and all three raters completed it for all schools. Raters assigned assign a point value of 0 to items marked no, one to items marked sometimes, and a value of two to items marked yes. The discipline policies were de-identified. Each policy had a number, and the school name was removed to ensure the raters were not able to identify the school associated with each policy they rated. The data from TAGPEC ratings was stored by each rater in an encrypted electronic file on a flash drive. The flash drives were hand-delivered to me. I used Fleiss's Kappa reliability estimate to measure agreement between the raters who completed the TAGPEC. I chose Fleiss's Kappa because it can be used with multiple raters and applies to nominal scale (categorical) data (Falotico & Quatto, 2015).

Fleiss's Kappa values range from 0 (no agreement) to 1 (perfect agreement), with a coefficient of .75. I ran Fleiss' Kappa in SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 24) to determine if there was agreement between four independent scores on whether school discipline policies demonstrated the use of inadequate, minimal, adequate, good, or excellent developmentally appropriate, evidence-based guidance practices. Fleiss' Kappa measures the proportion of agreement above chance and ranges from -1 (no agreement) to +1 (perfect agreement), and zero indicates agreement is no better than chance (Laerd Statistics, 2018). There was fair agreement between the rater's scores, k= .206, 95% CI [.159-.252], p <.001. Individual kappa for the inadequate, minimal, adequate, good, and excellent categories was .378, .016, .014, .011, and .233, respectively. There was fair agreement overall between the rater's scores of the TAGPEC. However, there were some differences for the different rating categories. For the "inadequate" rating, there was fair agreement between raters; for the "minimal" rating there was poor agreement between raters; for the "adequate" rating there was poor agreement between raters; for the "good" rating there was poor agreement between raters; for the "excellent" rating there was fair agreement between raters.

Data Collection and Analysis

I obtained IRB approval from Walden University (IRB approval 5-16-18-0521504) and obtained a data use agreement from the school district. I contacted the supervisor of preschool special education services to get the raw BDI 2 scores to address RQ1: How do school discipline policies as measured by the TAGPEC relate to positive personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2 of preschool special education students in

a large school district in the Southeastern part of the United States? The data set contained the Personal Social BDI 2 screener scores of exiting preschool special education students from the 2016-17 school year. After eliminating duplicate scores and removing scores that did not meet inclusion criteria (students were six years or older), I conducted the analysis for RQ1.

Prior to any analysis, I assessed the dataset for outliers. Outliers were defined as any scores within the 1% furthest from the mean; this is the definition Field (2009) suggested and corresponded with a distance from the sample mean of 3.29 standard deviations or more. I calculated z scores to determine the distance from the mean regarding standard deviations. These represent each participant's distance from the mean in units of standard deviation and are represented visually in Figure 1 below. Based on this plot, three participants met the criteria to be considered outliers, and only one appeared as an extreme outlier. Inspection of this participant's scores did not give any reason to believe that this participant was not correctly entered, and their response was retained to capture the full range of possible responses represented in the dataset.

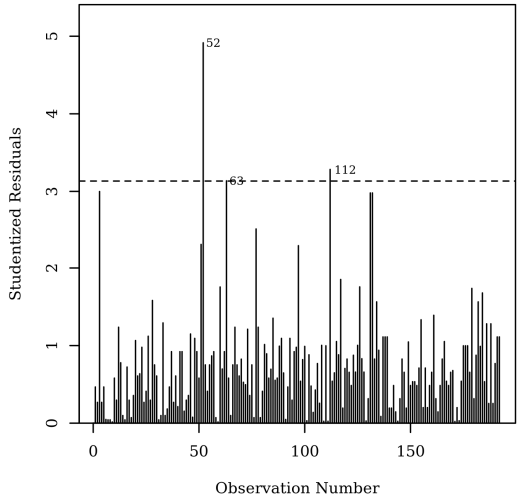

Figure 1. Plot of standardized *z* scores.

I accessed school improvement plans (SIP) via the internet and scored them with the TAGPEC, in addition to using the panel of three raters. All raters were certified teachers in the content area of early childhood and had at least 5 years teaching experience. All raters were trained on the use of instrument at the same time, using the same training materials created by the authors and available on their website for no cost. I purchased copies of the book (Longstreth & Garrity, 2018) for each rater, which contained detailed scoring directions and examples. After completing the online training module from the TAGPEC authors, I decided to use the entire instrument to obtain numeric (interval scale) scores for discipline policies. I chose to do this for two reasons: all the items on the TAGPEC were relevant to the current investigation, and due to the scoring of the TAGPEC. The scoring method averaged each subsection in the total score and leaving out any subsections would have changed the overall score (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018). All four raters completed the checklist independently on all 109 school

discipline policies over 25 days. To prevent any potential bias, a volunteer de-identified the school improvement plans so the raters would not know any school's name. Because there was no student interaction, I needed no student, parent, or district permission for the school improvement plans. I stored all raw data from the BDI 2 and TAGPEC in encrypted files on a personal computer.

I used simple linear regression for RQ 1 instead of Pearson's Correlation for two reasons. First, the regression provided more information about the potential predictive nature of the relationship between the TAGPEG and BDI scores (See Triola, 2012). Second, I teated this TAGPEC score as continuous, due to the presence of more than five ordered categories. Johnson and Creech (1983) and Zumbo and Zimmerman (1993) both specified that there was little to no effect on error rates when treating ordinal variables with five or more categories as continuous. For RQ 2, I conducted an ANCOVA to determine whether there were significant differences in Personal Social BDI 2 scores by Title I status while controlling for the TAGPEC scores.

There were no additional data needed to address RQ2: After controlling for the quality of discipline policy as measured by the TAGPEC, are there differences on personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2 for students in Title I schools versus students in non-Title I schools? I used a one-way ANCOVA was used to test the main effects of a categorical independent variable on a continuous dependent variable while controlling for the effect of other continuous variables that co-vary with the dependent (Creswell, 2014). Numeric data were obtained using the TAGPEC (Garrity et al., 2017)

and BDI 2 scores. The categorical data was the school's Title I, and non-Title I school status.

The independent variable was the quality of the school discipline policies as measured by the TAGPEC (Garrity et al., 2017). The scale of the variable was at the interval level because differences in the measurement are meaningful, but there is no natural zero starting point (Triola, 2012). The dependent variable was the BDI 2 school-level scores on the Personal-Social domains. The scale of the variable was also at the interval level because there is no zero-starting point (Triola, 2012). The control variable in RQ 2 was the TAGPEC scores. The control variable was at the interval level (Triola, 2012). The quality of the discipline policy was chosen as the co-variate because of the role high-quality policies play in school climate and the day-to-day interactions between teachers and students (Berkowitz et al., 2015; National School Climate Council, 2007; Thapa et al., 2012; Wang & Degol, 2016). The quality of the discipline policy was also chosen as a co-variate because it provided information about the developmental appropriateness of school discipline policies for a vulnerable population. It was important to include it because the quality of the policy may impact the personal-social skills of the students through the vehicle of school climate (Longstreth et al., 2013; Thapa et al., 2012).

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

I made several assumptions during this doctoral study. I assumed that all exiting pre-K special education students were 4 to 5 years old and that pre-K special education teachers attended district-required content training that included developmentally

appropriate strategies to support positive personal-social behaviors and skills. I also assumed that the preschool special education students in the study received a full-time level of service because they were served on the public-school campus. However, once the data set was obtained, it was not possible to determine the level of special education services the students received. Therefore, the sample contained students who came to the school campus for therapy services only, as well as students who received full-time special education services all day. The data set also contained students who were older than five and had to be removed as they did not fit the inclusion criteria for the study.

There were several limitations to this doctoral study. It was a purely a quantitative evaluation. Adding a qualitative component, according to Beaumont, Durkin, Hollins Martin, and Carson (2016) would have triangulated the data and enhanced the validity of the investigation.

The scope of the current study is the local school district that serves approximately 3,000 pre-K special education students in 111 elementary school sites. The target population of exiting preschool special education students is unique because previous examinations of this topic have never included preschool-age special education students in public school settings.

The delimitations of this doctoral study included that it was the first examination of school discipline policies as they relate to preschool special education students on public school campuses. I chose to limit the investigation to this population because there was no previous examination of their unique needs in a formal public elementary school environment. I did not include general education preschool programs on public

elementary school campuses (e.g., Head Start) because the teachers are not required to attend the same training to support positive personal social skills. I did not choose a qualitative approach because of time and resource constraints for this initial investigation of this unique population. I did not focus on cognitive or communication domains because, in the local district, students are meeting the state target for those skills (Florida Department of Education, 2017).

In this doctoral study, I examined the relationship between current school discipline policies and exiting preschool special education student's personal-social skills. The research project was a quantitative design that compared students in Title I schools and non-Title I schools, controlling for the quality of school discipline policies. Once the proposal was approved and I obtained IRB approval through Walden University, I collected the BDI 2 data and used the TAGPEC to evaluate school discipline policies. I analyzed the data and developed the project based on the research findings.

Protection of Participant Rights

I took measures to protect any participants from harm in compliance with the National Institute of Health (NIH) guidelines and in accordance with Walden University policies and procedures. I obtained a data use agreement from the local district to access the BDI 2 personal-social student data. All data was de-identified by the district for this secondary data analysis. The data use agreement addressed anonymity for the district and the students. The school discipline policies are public data that can be accessed via the

internet. A confidentiality agreement was not needed for the three educators who will score the discipline policies because they were scoring public data.

Data Analysis Results

Research Question 1

I calculated results for Research Question One through a linear regression analysis in SPSS (IBM Statistics for Windows, Version 24). Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics relative to the sample. Validity of the simple regression analysis hinges on three assumptions, including linearity, normality of residuals, and homoscedasticity. I compared means of the IV (TAGPEC scores) and the DV (BDI 2 scores) to evaluate the assumption of linearity. As seen in Figure 2, the Personal Social BDI 2 scores clustered at the high end of the BDI 2 range. Thus a visual inspection was not sufficient to determine linearity.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Personal Social and TAGPEC Scores

	M	*SD*	*N*
Personal Social raw score on BDI	33.95	5.75	354
TAGPEC score	.88	.29	354

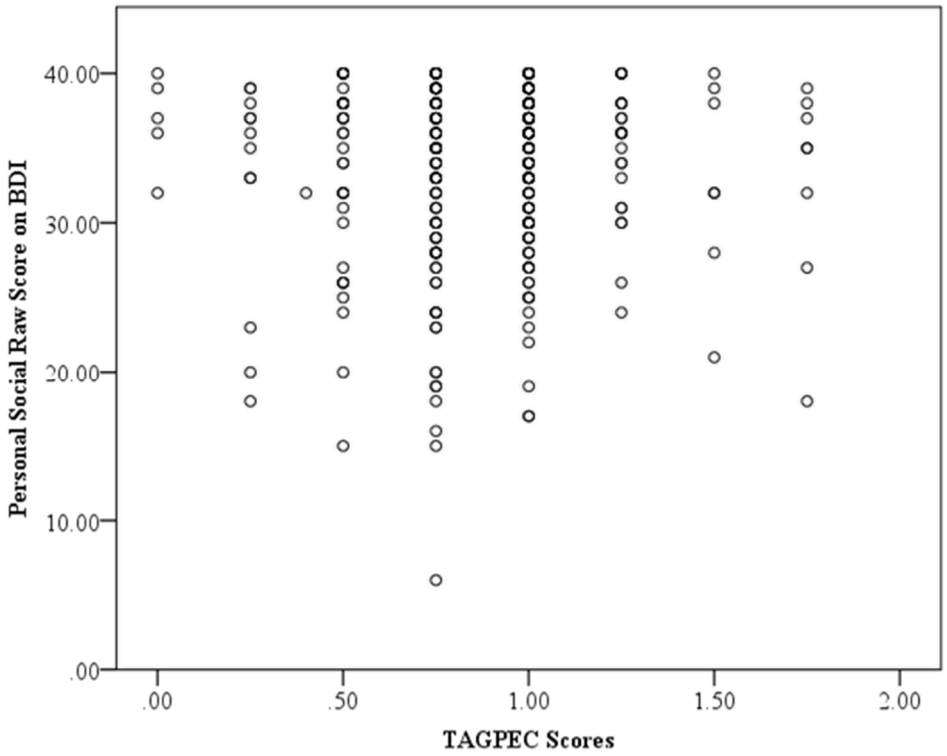

Figure 2. Scatterplot of TAGPEC and Personal Social BDI 2 scores.

Because a visual inspection of the scatterplot showed vertical alignment of the scores and linearity could not be determined. The test for linearity significance value for deviation from linearity was greater than 0.05 ($p = 0.27$). The test for linearity significance value ($p = .38$) did not indicate a significant degree of linearity, either. However, the lack of deviation from linearity value can be used to assume that linearity would not be problematic to testing the relationship between the TAGPEC score and the BDI 2 scores. Figure 2 confirms this, showing no true patterning, but no reason to assume a relationship, either.

I then evaluated normality using a Q-Q scatterplot and homoscedasticity through a residual scatterplot (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2014; DeCarlo, 1997; Field, 2009). I used Intellectus Statistics (2017) for the Q-Q and residual scatterplots, which I

visually assessed for normality and homoscedasticity, respectively. As seen in Figure 3, the visual assessment depicted a relatively straight line.

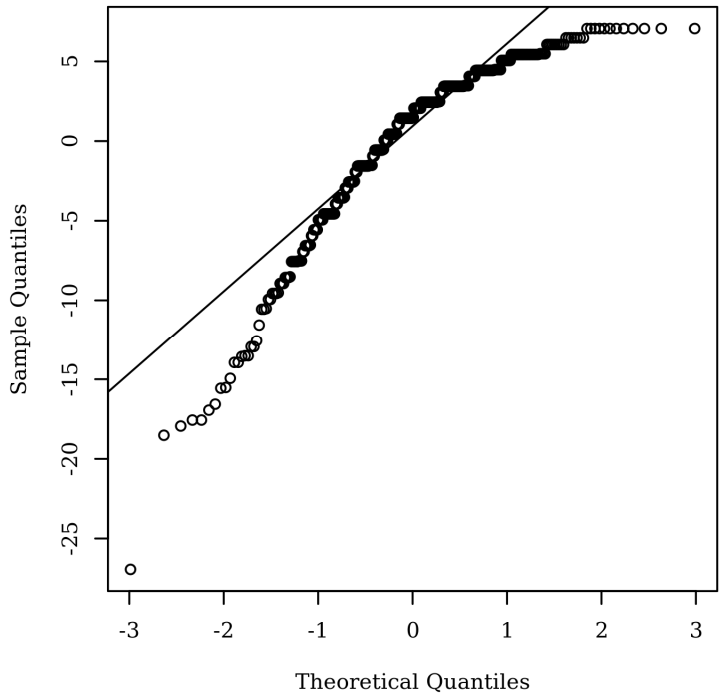

Figure 3. Q-Q Scatterplot testing normality.

I evaluated homoscedasticity by plotting the residuals against the predicted values in the residual scatterplot seen in Figure 4 (Bates et al., 2014; Field, 2009; Osborne & Waters, 2002). Based on the lack of a distinct difference in variance among the bands of data the assumption of homoscedasticity was met. Since there was only one predictor variable, multicollinearity does not apply, and Variance Inflation Factors were not calculated

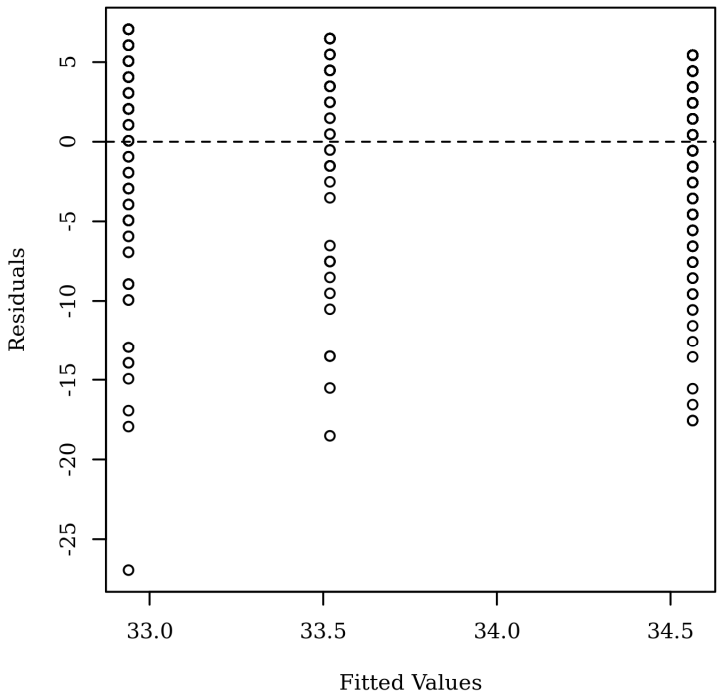

Figure 4. Residuals scatterplot testing homoscedasticity.

Based on the favorable results of assumption testing, I conducted a simple linear regression in SPSS (IBM Statistics for Windows, Version 24) to assess whether TAGPEC scores significantly predicted Personal Social BDI 2 scores. As presented in Table 2, the predictor variable was not found to be statistically significant [$B = 0.93$, 95% C.I (-1.15, 3.01), $p = .38$]. The TAGPEC scores did not explain a significant proportion of the variation in the Personal Social BDI 2 scores. Therefore, I failed to reject the null hypothesis for research question one, how do school discipline policies as measured by the TAGPEC relate to positive personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2 of exiting preschool special education students in a large school district in the Southeastern part of the United States?

Table 2

Regression Results for TAGPEC as a Predictor of BDI-2

Source	β	p	R^2	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Constant				31.20	35.01
TAGPEC score	.05	.379	.00	-1.15	3.01

For RQ1, there was no relationship between the Personal Social scores on the BDI 2 and the TAGPEC scores for the schools. In other words, the quality of the discipline policy had little to no effect on the outcomes of personal social skills for those students as measured by the BDI 2.

Research Question 2

I calculated results for Research Question Two through an ANCOVA in Intellectus Statistics (2017) used to determine whether there were significant differences in Personal Social BDI 2 scores by Title I status while controlling for the TAGPEC scores. To better understand the data used for RQ 2, summary statistics were first calculated for each interval and ratio variable using Intellectus Statistics (2017). As seen in Table 3, frequencies and percentages were calculated for each nominal variable When observed as an aggregate and not individually for either group, the mean TAGPEC scores was 0.85 (SD = 0.29, SE_M = 0.02, Min = 0.00, Max = 1.75). The sample aggregate calculation for Personal Social BDI 2 scores had an average of 33.67 (SD = 5.89, SE_M = 0.43, Min = 6.00, Max = 40.00). Skewness and kurtosis were also calculated as shown in Table 4.

Table 3

Frequency Table for Nominal Variables

Variable	*n*	*%*
T1status		
Students in non-Title I schools	96	50.00
Students in Title I schools	96	50.00

Table 4

Summary Statistics Table for Interval and Ratio Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*n*	SE_M	Skewness	Kurtosis
TAGPEC scores	0.85	0.29	192	0.02	-0.31	1.66
PS BDI 2 scores	33.67	5.89	192	0.43	-1.55	2.93

Field (2009) indicated that larger sample sizes result in analyses that are less sensitive to slight deviations from normality. This is especially applicable for sample sizes above 50, and for RQ2, the sample size of $n = 192$ leads to the assumption that this tendency toward normality applied to the Q-Q scatterplot for normality. Prior to conducting the ANCOVA, the assumptions of univariate normality of residuals and homogeneity of variance were assessed. As with the regression, normality was evaluated using a Q-Q scatterplot (Bates et al., 2014; DeCarlo, 1997; Field, 2009). The Q-Q scatterplot for normality is presented in Figure 5, and though it shows a similar tendency to the regression's Q-Q plot for normality, it was also not considered to be overly

problematic to the results, as an effect of the relatively large sample size. Homoscedasticity was evaluated by plotting the residuals against the predicted values (Bates et al., 2014; Field, 2009; Osborne & Waters, 2002). The assumption of homogeneity of variance is met if there is no apparent inequality in variance from the two bands in Figure 6. These two bands represent the two groups of the ANCOVA and did not exhibit any visible difference in the degree of spread, indicating that the two groups had similar degrees of variance.

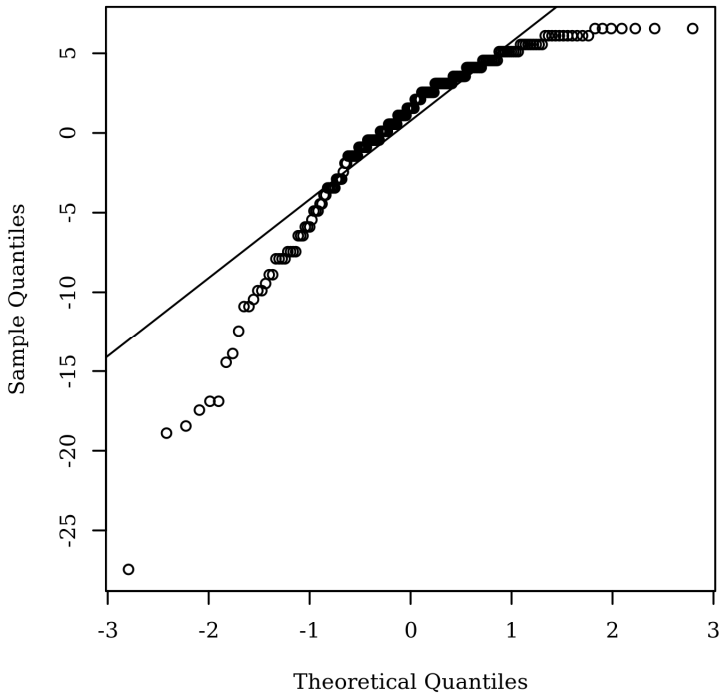

Figure 5. Q-Q Scatterplot testing normality.

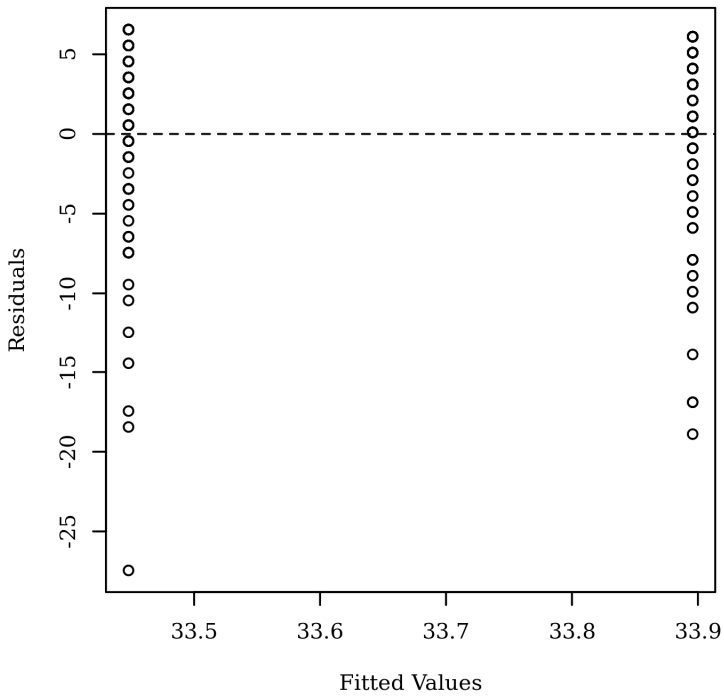

Figure 6. Residuals scatterplot testing homoscedasticity.

After assessing the assumptions of ANCOVA, I conducted the analysis as planned. The results of the ANCOVA were not significant, F (2, 188) = 0.29, p = .75, indicating any differences in values of BDI-2 between Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools were not likely to be due to anything beyond chance. The main effect, Title 1 status was not significant at the 95% confidence level, F (1, 188) = 0.10, p = .76, indicating there were no significant differences of Personal Social BDI 2 scores by Title 1 status levels. These outcomes can be seen in Table 5. The mean for Personal Social BDI 2 scores for students in non-Title I schools was 33.90 (SD = 5.81). The mean for Personal Social BDI 2 scores for students in Title I schools was 33.45 (SD = 6.0). The means and standard deviations for both Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools are presented in Table 6. Thus, I failed

to reject the null hypothesis for Research Question Two, which asked, *after controlling for the quality of discipline policy as measured by the TAGPEC, are there differences on personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2 for students in Title I schools versus students in non-Title I schools*?

Table 5

Analysis of Variance Table for Personal Social BDI 2 Scores by Title 1 While Controlling for TAGPEC Scores

Term	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
T1 status	1	0.10	.76	0.00
TAGPEC scores	1	0.55	.46	0.00

Table 6

Standard Error, and Sample Size for Personal Social BDI 2 Scores by Title 1 Controlling for TAGPEC

Combination	*SE*	*n*
Non-Title I schools	0.57	96
Title I schools	0.58	95

Discussion of Results

There was a ceiling effect observed in the BDI 2 scores when examining the scatterplot (Figure 2). According to French, Sycamore, McGlashan, Blanchard, and Holmes (2018), when a large proportion of the sample scores fall in the upper range of the measurement scale, it is due to a ceiling effect. The ceiling effect limits the variation in the dependent variable, and the distribution becomes skewed (French et al., 2018). It is

possible that the non-significant findings for RQ1 are related to the ceiling effect in the scores. It may also be that the overall quality of the discipline policies was so poor, that it made little difference in scores. The average TAGPEC score was .85, which fell in the "Inadequate" range.

Given that the schools use a template for the school improvement plans, the policies were so similar, that there was little to distinguish them from one another and this could be reflected in the scores. Although there is research (Martinez et al., 2016) that suggests poverty places students at increased risk of poorer social outcomes, there was no such difference in this investigation. For this investigation, I used Title I status to define poverty status.

Additionally, the BDI 2 scores clustered at the high end of the range for the scores. The clustering of the scores may be related to the characteristics of the sample. It was not possible to determine the level of special education services the students received from the data set. Therefore, many students who received only speech-language services were included in the sample. These students do not attend school but walk in for group therapy at the school site. The inclusion of these students in the sample may have contributed to the overall cluster of the BDI 2 scores at the high end of the range.

Summary

Section 2 described the methods used for this correlational and quasi-experimental investigation into the problem detailed in Section 1: the gap in preschool special education students' personal social skills as measured by the BDI 2. The findings of the examination of the relationship between school discipline policies and preschool

special education students' BDI 2 scores revealed that there was no conclusive linear relationship between the quality of the school discipline policies and the Personal-Social BDI 2 scores. The quality of the discipline policies was so poor, there were no clear effects on the personal-social skills of preschool special education students. Additionally, there were no differences between students in Title I and non-Title I schools. However, one surprising finding was the overall poor quality of the discipline policies as evaluated by the TAGPEC. The average score of the discipline policies was considered an "inadequate" rating. The findings from the investigation indicated that the BDI 2 screener scores might have been a poor choice for examining the impact of the school discipline policies. The TAGPEC results, however, were consistent with previous investigations of discipline policies in private childcare settings (Garrity et al., 2017). These results point to a need to improve the overall quality of school discipline policies. Considering the local district's renewed commitment to early childhood education (Sokol, 2018a), such a project meets the local need and derives logically from the findings.

Section 3: The Project

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the relationship between discipline policy and positive personal-social skills of special education students in a large school district in the Southeastern United States. Preschool special education students in the local district are not meeting the state benchmark for growth in personal social skills. The gap in special education students' positive personal-social skills is affecting kindergarten readiness and placing this vulnerable population at risk for increased exposure to school discipline (Brennan et al., 2012; Denham et al., 2013; Gilliam, 2005; Hauser-Cram & Woodman, 2016; Snell et al., 2012; Whitted, 2011). Local program evaluation data, local kindergarten entry data, and national data from the literature supported the need for this project study.

A data use agreement was obtained, and the local district provided de-identified, archival Personal Social BDI 2 screener scores. The school improvement plans used in the study were publicly available and were de-identified by a volunteer. Four raters evaluated the quality of the discipline policies found in the school improvement plans using the TAGPEC, a valid and reliable instrument (see Garrity et al., 2017). The average TAGPEC score for each school discipline policy was used in both research questions. The findings for each research question were nonsignificant. There was no relationship found between Personal Social BDI 2 screener scores and the quality of school discipline policies. There were also no differences between students in Title I schools' and non-Title I schools' Personal Social screener scores. Although there was no clear linear relationship, nonlinearity could not be established either. In other words, the findings

were inconclusive. An additional finding was that the overall quality of discipline policies fell in the "inadequate" range as measured by the TAGPEC (see Garrity et al., 2017). The inconclusive findings and the overall "inadequate" quality of the discipline policies from the data pointed to the lack of impact of current discipline policies and a need for improved discipline policies for the local district.

In Section 3 I describe the project study, goals, and rationale for choosing this project to address the problem of the gap in preschool special education students' personal-social skills. The policy recommendation (see Appendix A) includes a review of the literature related to the specific genre of a position paper with policy recommendations. This section also contains a description of the project, including necessary resources, existing supports, potential barriers, and solutions to those barriers. Finally, I present a project evaluation plan to explain the overall goals of the project, describe the key stakeholders, and detail the possible social change implications.

Rationale

A gap exists in preschool special education students' personal-social skills that affects kindergarten readiness and increases the risk of exposure to school discipline (Brennan et al., 2012; Denham et al., 2013; Gilliam, 2005; Hauser-Cram & Woodman, 2016; Snell et al., 2012; Whitted, 2011). As explained in Section I, school climate is the vehicle that links policy to student outcomes. A careful review of the literature revealed a paucity of research regarding the quality of discipline policies in public school early childhood settings and the potential connection to positive student outcomes. To address this issue, I investigated the relationship between school discipline policies and preschool

special education student personal-social outcomes. The nonsignificant findings pointed to the ineffectiveness of the existing discipline policies. The goal of the position paper was to provide clear policy guidance and recommendations to help students, teachers, schools, administrators, and families support the personal-social skills of a vulnerable population.

The investigation of discipline policies in school improvement plans indicated the need for a policy recommendation position paper as opposed to a professional development curriculum plan or evaluation report. Neither of those options would have included clear steps to support positive social behavior in schools (see Confrey, Maloney, & Corley, 2014; Lodico et al., 2010). A policy recommendation position paper was intended to provide educators and administrators with clear definitions of exclusionary discipline, appropriate discipline, and the resources to support positive behavior in young children (see Bardach, 2012; Longstreth & Garrity, 2018; McKinney, Fitzgerald, Winn, & Babcock, 2017). The goal of the project was to create an early childhood teaching and guidance policy to provide educators and administrators with resources to support positive behavior in young children and clear steps to respond to young children in a vulnerable population.

Review of the Literature

According to Wong, Green, Bazemore, and Miller (2016), policy recommendations are analytical documents that provide evidence to direct a focused course of action to achieve a practical solution to a problem. I searched the literature using Walden University's library databases, including Thoreau, Academic Search

Complete, and ERIC. I also used the Google Scholar search engine. The key words I used for the literature search included *early childhood discipline*, *policy development*, *policy frameworks*, *out-of-school suspension*, *implicit bias in early childhood policies*, and *early childhood suspensions*. In this section I review the current literature related to the genre of policy recommendations.

The goal of the investigation was to raise awareness about the quality of the current discipline policies and the potential effects on a vulnerable population. The findings from the investigation into the relationship between discipline policies and personal-social skills of preschool special education students did not demonstrate linearity, and there was insufficient evidence to suggest nonlinearity. There were no significant differences in the personal-social skills of preschool special education students in Title I versus non-Title I schools. Current discipline policies found in school improvement plans in the local district obtained an average rating of "inadequate" when scored by four independent raters using the TAGPEC (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018).

I developed a policy recommendation paper to provide a focused course of action for the local district. Bardach (2012) outlined clear steps to developing policy, including defining the problem, presenting evidence, offering alternatives, determining policy evaluation criteria, examining possible outcomes, deciding on a course of action, and identifying the target audience. Similarly, other researchers suggested that policy recommendations should offer a path for what to do, provide resources to support the course of action, and be understandable to the audience (Dovlo, Nabyonga-Orem, Estrelli, & Mwisongo, 2016; García, 2016; Kilbourne & Atkins, 2015; McKinney et al.,

2017; Politis, Mowat, & Keen, 2017). Policy recommendations should define a problem, present evidence, explore alternatives, provide a clear course of action, and identify resources and supports for policy implementation (see Bardach, 2012).

Definition of the Problem

Policy recommendations should be evidenced-based and include available local data to quantify the current problem in a meaningful way (Bardach, 2012; Doyle, 2013; Kilbourne & Atkins, 2015; McKinney et al., 2017; Politis et al., 2017). The objective for providing a policy recommendation on the issue of early childhood teaching and guidance policies was based on the fact that, in the local district, despite the implementation of multitiered systems of support and a new focus on early childhood education, exiting preschool special education students were not meeting the state target for growth in personal-social skills as measured by the Battelle Developmental Inventory 2 (see Florida Department of Education, 2017). In the local district, 47.5% of preschool special education students who entered preschool below grade expectations were not increasing their growth rate in using appropriate behaviors as measured on the BDI 2 (see Florida Department of Education, 2017). Additionally, 31% of entering (kindergarten) students demonstrated Personal and Social Development skills at an emergent (not proficient) level as measured by WSS (Florida Department of Education, 2015). This gap in exiting preschool special education students' personal-social skills places a vulnerable population at risk for exposure to school discipline and has serious long- and short-term effects for school and life success (Bulotsky-Shearer & Fantuzzo, 2011; Denham et al.,

2013; Herndon et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2017). This evidence indicated the problem in the local district and provided the foundation for the policy recommendation.

According to the 2018 strategic plan, the district redefined itself as serving student's from preschool to age 22, instead of a K-12. Individual school improvement plans located on the Department of Education's website contain detailed questions about the policies and practices, including those that address student discipline. However, existing discipline policies do not address the differentiated needs of young children, especially preschool special education students. It is essential to ensure that district policies support and promote developmentally appropriate, evidence-based practices in an area that directly affects district strategic priorities. This can be done by establishing high-quality discipline policies to support prosocial behavior in young children plays to ensure their preparedness for school (Garrity et al., 2017; Longstreth & Garrity, 2018; Neitzel, 2018). In response to this problem, I offered research-based recommendations for policy implementation to address the needs of an at-risk population.

Studies in the area of early childhood discipline, including policies, are relatively recent. Albritton, Mathews, and Anhalt (2018) conducted a systematic meta-analysis of the extant literature regarding the role of early childhood mental health consultation in preschool suspension and expulsion. Only three articles addressed preschool suspension and expulsion, and only one of those (Gilliam, 2016) was current. In this review I summarize the current literature on early childhood discipline policies and explain its relevance to the current policy recommendation.

Several deficits emerged from the literature regarding early childhood and discipline policies that were addressed in the current study. These deficits included unclear definitions of *suspension* in early childhood (Garrity et al., 2017; Neitzel, 2018); a lack of developmentally appropriate, equitable responses to challenging behavior (Gilliam, Maupin, & Reyes, 2016; Michigan State Legislature, 2016), including lack of guidance and training for educators and administrators about resources; and clear steps to take before turning to exclusionary discipline practices (Garrity et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Neitzel, 2018; Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016; Vinh, Strain, Davidon, & Smith, 2016). There are also significant concerns, locally and nationally, about implicit bias and exclusionary discipline practices (Gilliam et al., 2016).

Need to Define Exclusionary Discipline

Early childcare systems across the United States do not have clear definitions of suspension and expulsion. For example, the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (2015) provided a summary of early childcare regulations and policies, including behavior guidance and discipline policies. The most recent brief indicated that 42 states reported what types of discipline are allowed, and 52 states reported what types of discipline are prohibited (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2015). Although this report does not include preschool programs operated on public school campuses, neither public preschool programs nor private early childcare programs have clear definitions of preschool suspensions, including *soft* suspensions (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2015). So-called soft suspensions are informal practices such as repeatedly calling parents to pick up a child in response to

challenging behavior (Neitzel, 2018; Todd, Horner, & Tobin, 2006). Similarly, Meek and Gilliam (2016) reported that suspension and expulsion are not terms typically used in early childhood systems when children are sent home early and dismissed in response to behavior. Additionally, several researchers pointed out that because attendance in early childhood programs is voluntary, early childcare systems often lack defined policies regarding suspension and expulsion (Garrity et al., 2017; Meek & Gilliam, 2016).

Early childcare systems need clear definitions of exclusionary discipline to enable them to monitor, reduce, and/or change these inappropriate practices (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). When out-of-school suspension is not defined or is poorly defined in a policy, data collection cannot occur (Gilliam, 2016; Meek & Gilliam, 2016). Data collection of exclusionary discipline practices is essential for schools and districts seeking to improve their practices (Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015). Losen et al. (2015) examined out-of-school suspension data for K-12 environments for every school district in the United States. Findings indicated that data collection and analysis of exclusionary discipline practices enables schools and districts to identify trends and needed supports to address challenging behavior (Losen et al., 2015). As a result of persistently high rates of suspension and expulsion reported in early childhood settings, and continued evidence of disproportionality, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2014a) issued a joint policy statement calling for the reduction of preschool suspension and expulsion and emphasizing the need for early childcare systems to develop clear definitions of suspension and expulsion in their policies.

Need for Clear Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline Practices

A second deficiency in the current policy that is reflected in the literature is a lack of guidance and training for educators and administrators regarding developmentally appropriate responses to challenging behavior before turning to exclusionary discipline for young children. Policies must include resources and clear steps for educators and administrators to take to respond to challenging behavior (Garrity et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Miller, Smith-Bonahue, & Kemple, 2017; Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016; United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014c; Vinh et al., 2016). Additionally, other researchers (Neitzel, 2018) suggested discipline policies should also include information about resources for educators and administrators to prevent and respond to challenging behavior.

When alternatives to exclusionary discipline are not available, teachers and administrators are more likely to suspend or expel young children with challenging behavior (Conners Edge et al., 2018; Gilliam, 2016). Conners Edge et al. (2018) reported that 42.9% of childcare directors surveyed in Arkansas suspended or expelled a child in the last year. Administrators reported they were concerned about teachers' abilities to respond to challenging behavior. Conners Edge et al. recommended a multifaceted approach to reducing suspensions and expulsions, including policy changes, improved community partnerships and communication about the policy, and increased access to mental health consultation services (Conners Edge et al., 2018). Similarly, Miller et al., (2017) found in the absence of resources and guidance, preschool teachers were more likely to choose expulsion from preschool in response to children's persistent,

challenging behavior. These findings are consistent with prior research, showing that when teachers have resources and training to respond appropriately to challenging behavior, exclusionary discipline rates declined (Vinh et al., 2016).

Similar findings regarding the importance of resources and supports for educators and administrators led other states, such as Colorado, to change their discipline policies. Colorado updated early childhood discipline policies to include processes to access mental health consultants for early childcare providers, and additional training for teachers and administrators regarding developmentally appropriate responses to challenging behavior (Hoover, Kubicek, Rosenberg, Zundel, & Rosenberg, 2012). Early childhood teaching and guidance policies must offer clear alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices for educators and administrators and resources to prevent and address challenging behavior (Conners Edge et al., 2018; Hoover et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2017; Vinh et al., 2016).

Need to Address the Role of Implicit Bias

The third area of concern in the current policy also reflected in the literature is the role of implicit bias in school discipline. The unconscious beliefs and stereotypes that influence daily decision-making are known as *implicit bias* (Carter, Skiba, Arrendondo, & Pollock, 2017). According to the United States Government Accountability Office [GAO] (2018), public schools with mostly African American and Hispanic populations have higher rates of suspension and expulsion than schools with mostly White students. The same trend is in the preschool environment. According to the 2014 report from the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights on preschool discipline,

Black children were four times more likely to experience exclusionary discipline practices than White children (United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014a).

Although the research on implicit bias in the early childhood field is relatively recent, extensive research in the K-12 environments documented the ongoing concerns regarding racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015). Findings from research in K-12 settings indicated there are several contributing factors to disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices. These factors include poor school climate, a lack of teacher and administrator training regarding bias and perception, a lack of funding for programs, and biased implementation of discipline policies (Staats et al., 2015). According to Albritton et al. (2018), there are similar findings in the early childhood discipline disproportionality literature.

Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic (2016) examined the role of implicit bias in preschool teachers' perception of challenging behavior. The results confirmed the findings of the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014a) investigation of preschool discipline. Gilliam et al. used eye-tracking technology to investigate preschool teachers' implicit bias. The findings demonstrated that Black boys were identified as needing the most attention and that there was a difference in discipline approaches between White and Black teachers (Gilliam et al., 2016). Several researchers recommended additional training in evidence-based interventions to prevent and respond to challenging behavior as well as targeted professional development to increase teacher empathy to reduce bias (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; Gilliam et al., 2016).

Gilliam (2016) and others (Devine et al., 2012; Neitzel, 2018; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014) also identified a need for the development of integrated teaching and behavior guidance policies that intentionally reduce early childhood suspensions and expulsions. These policies must define those terms and include guidance for educators and administrators for alternatives to exclusionary discipline (Gilliam, 2016). Finally, policies should also address implicit bias, through highlighting culturally responsive, evidence-based teaching practices to prevent and respond to challenging behavior (Allen & Steed, 2016; Gilliam, 2016; Hemmeter, Snyder, Fox, & Algina, 2016).

Project Description

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

The local district has existing teams and processes to support the development of a high-quality, early childhood discipline policy. The early childhood team consists of the supervisors of the preschool programs in the district (HeadStart, school readiness, and the preschool special education program), an assistant superintendent, and the director of the district early childhood programs. The early childhood team meets weekly to examine program data, program-wide concerns, and plan for community events and partnerships. I can present the findings of this study to the team and recommend the formation of a small workgroup to include program supervisors, early childhood teachers, school administrators, and district compliance/policy personnel. The workgroup can create a high-quality discipline policy using the seven essential features outlined by Longstreth and Garrity (2018). There are also existing district teams that provide behavioral support

and consultation to school teams. I can contact the facilitator of the team to recommend the inclusion of early childhood personnel to the team.

Potential Barriers

There are two potential barriers to the project. The barriers include competing district priorities, and the cost for the materials to create a policy. I will address the potential barriers and propose potential solutions for each.

The local district has many competing priorities. A potential barrier for this project is the many competing priorities due to the number of high-needs schools. In the last three years, the district has experienced two re-organizations, downsizing, and a financial crisis (Sokol, 2018b). There are 50 schools in the local district that are considered chronic, poor-performing schools. In the last three years, three different initiatives were implemented in these schools to improve their overall school grade (Sokol, 2018b). Currently, these struggling schools are a top priority in the local district. The local district may not want to devote attention to the current discipline policy due to initiatives surrounding the 50 high-needs schools. Creating an early childhood discipline policy may not be seen as a top priority, given other on-going re-organization efforts.

A potential solution to this barrier is to use the re-organization of the early childhood department as an opportunity to create coordinated, unified policies that support and align with the revised district strategic plan. These do not need to be layered on to existing policies but can seamlessly fit into current policies. Another potential solution is to recruit the support of the general director of the exceptional student education department. Reducing biased, exclusionary discipline practices is also a current

goal of the special education department, and this policy recommendation supports that initiative by expanding it to include to preschool-age students.

A second potential barrier is a small cost associated with purchasing Longstreth and Garrity's (2018) work to support the process of creating the policy. The book is available for purchase for $19.95, and the workgroup would need approximately 8-10 copies. The total cost is approximately $199.50. However, as a solution to the barrier, the supervisor for the preschool special education program offered to purchase the books for the workgroup using part of the grant allotted for professional development.

Proposal for Implementation and Time Table

I will present the new policy recommendation to the early childhood team upon its approval. My recommendation will be to form a small workgroup of the early childhood supervisors, early childhood educators, principals, and parents that can meet and create the policy in four sessions using the project's evidence and resources. The workgroup can meet twice a month for two months using the following format, based on Bardach's (2012) framework, as a guide. In-person meetings can be in a central location with the option of phoning in or video conferencing to join the meeting for those who cannot drive.

The meetings can be broken down into for sessions to create the teaching and guidance policy. In the first session, the agenda will include establishing group norms, defining the problem using data from the current study; presenting that evidence to the team, identifying the target audience, and brainstorming alternatives. Longstreth and Garrity's (2018) work, *Effective Discipline Policies: How to create a system that*

supports young children's social-emotional competence can be used to provide alternatives. I will use a facilitated approach to engage all participants, as recommended by Bardach (2012). All group members will read chapters 1-4 of *Effective Discipline Policies: How to create a system that supports young children's social-emotional competence* before the second session. The supervisor of the early childhood special education department offered to purchase eight books for the workgroup to use.

For the second session, the agenda will continue with Bardach's (2012) framework. The agenda items will be: determine evaluation criteria and decide on a course of action. Longstreth and Garrity (2018) recommended teams draft a commitment statement that describes their core beliefs. The commitment statement can be part of the evaluation criteria recommended by Bardach (2012). Next, the group will brainstorm a list of sample statements for each essential feature and choose the statements that best align with the core beliefs of the commitment statement. These statements will serve as the course of action.

For the third session, the group will revise the draft of the seven essential features chosen in session two and discuss how to embed resources and processes into the document. For example, the document can include hyperlinks to websites such as the Pyramid Model Innovation Project (challengingbehavior.org) that provide resources and solutions for preventing and responding to challenging behavior.

For the fourth session, the team can review and approve the final document and plan for district-wide roll-out to educators and administrators. The early childhood supervisors will present the policy and implementation plan, with the support of the

general director of special education, to the assistant superintendent who is responsible for the early childhood and exceptional student education programs. For educators, the policy can be embedded into existing content training. For administrators, the policy can be presented in existing small group principal's meetings. These meetings occur routinely to update and train district administrators.

Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others

As the researcher, I accepted responsibility for implementing the research adhering to ethical standards. I conducted a research study and presented the findings to the supervisor of the preschool special program. I will collaborate with her to present to the early childhood team and will help create the workgroup for the project. I will reach out to fellow early childhood educators in the district. The supervisor of preschool special education will reach out to the general director of special education and school administrators to recruit workgroup members. I will collaborate with the workgroup to implement the project according to the timeline.

Project Evaluation Plan

Two methods can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of this policy recommendation. The first method is a goal-based evaluation. Longstreth and Garrity (2018) recommended that programs set short- and long-term goals for the development and implementation of high-quality teaching and guidance policies. The short-term goal (three months) for the local district is to create an early childhood teaching and guidance policy based Longstreth & Garrity's (2018) seven essential features. The policy should include the elimination of suspension and expulsion of children in preschool through

second grade. The long-term goal (one year) for the local district is to revise the policy to embed the policy into existing professional development modules for educators and administrators.

The second method of evaluation is to evaluate the impact of the teaching and guidance policy every quarter during the existing early childhood team meetings. Currently, the early childhood team meets weekly so that there is no additional burden on the team. The team can examine student outcomes by using the district's behavior tracker data and Teaching Strategies Gold data in the social-emotional domain. Behavior tracker, as previously mentioned, is the current online system used by the district to monitor student behavior. It is a tool used in the district-wide MTSS/RTI process for K-12 and was recently revised to include preschool students. Teaching Strategies Gold is an online portfolio assessment tool currently used all early childhood programs in the local district. A final source of summative data is the BDI 2 scores used by the preschool special education program. These two evaluation methods will provide the local district with goals for a plan of action as well as student outcome information.

A goal-based, data-driven evaluation plan is an appropriate method to evaluate the policy recommendation. According to Longstreth and Garrity (2018), this type of evaluation plan is realistic and attainable. Short- and long-term goals can be formative data as benchmarks for the project. Summative data can be used as previously mentioned (BDI 2, Teaching Strategies Gold). Formative and summative data will provide meaningful, timely data for the local district about the policy implementation (see Lodico et al., 2010). Continuous progress monitoring using student data every quarter is also

essential to implementation change (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018). The key stakeholders are the early childhood team members, and includes the program supervisors for HeadStart and preschool special education, and the assistant superintendent of federal finance and programs.

Project Implications

I investigated the relationship between current discipline policies in school improvement plans and the personal-social skills of preschool special education students. The project is important to the local district because of its potential effect on students, the early childhood team, and the local community. As a result of the findings, I made a policy recommendation to support the prosocial skills of preschool special education students to improve overall school readiness and reduce the risk of exposure to school discipline for a vulnerable population. Clear policy and guidance to support prosocial skills in young preschool special education students can provide a fundamental, systems-level approach to support evidence-based practice in early childhood classrooms (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018). The policy aligns with the district strategic plan to reduce suspensions and expulsions in the K-12 population.

The project is important to the early childhood district team as they reorganize. A clear teaching and guidance policy can the first step in unifying the different early childhood programs in the district and can serve as an example to early childcare providers in the local community. The policy recommendation is important to early childhood educators and administrators because it will provide clear guidance and access to exiting district supports to prevent and respond to challenging behavior in young

children. Finally, the policy recommendation is important to the local community because it provides guidance, tools, and resources for students, educators, and administrators to keep a vulnerable population in school by making sure they have the skills and resources to improve personal-social skills.

Social Change Implications

The project deliverable aligns with district strategic goals to reduce suspensions but also addresses the growing national concerns regarding implicit bias and racial disparities in exclusionary discipline practices (Gilliam, 2016; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Recent research emphasized the critical role of policy for improving overall school climates, reducing implicit bias, and providing clear guidelines to support positive social behavior in students (Chin, Dowdy, Jimerson, & Rime, 2011; García, 2016; Gilliam, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; McKinney et al., 2017; Neitzel, 2018; Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014). The project deliverable aligns with the recommendations by the United States Departments of Health and Human Services (2014) for the elimination of suspension and expulsion in early childcare. The development of a high-quality early childhood teaching and guidance policy could also be shared with community childcare providers through existing community partnerships and through the Childfind evaluation teams who screen and evaluate young children on a monthly basis. The local district recently identified early childhood as a priority (Sokol, 2018a). The local district participates in monthly meetings with the local early childhood council who represents community childcare centers. The policy could be shared with the early childhood council as part of this initiative. Finally,

high-quality teaching and guidance policies that explicitly prohibit exclusionary discipline, address the role of implicit bias in suspensions and expulsions, and offer resources for supporting positive social behavior are the first step districts, schools, and child care providers can make to change the trajectory of children at-risk for the preschool to prison pipeline (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). Such a policy reflects the value of equal access and opportunity to a free and appropriate public education for *all* children (Gilliam, 2016).

Conclusion

Section 3 described the project deliverable, a policy recommendation, with a position paper. I began the section with a description of the policy recommendation position paper. I recommended the local district create an early childhood teaching and guidance policy to support young children's positive behaviors. I reviewed the current literature to provide support for the current project deliverable. The rationale for creating and implementing the teaching and guidance policy was to provide educators and administrators with clear definitions of exclusionary discipline, and resources to prevent challenging behavior and support positive behavior in young children. I provided details in the project description and a timeline to create and implement the policy. Finally, I presented a list of key stakeholders, and discussed the roles and responsibilities in the local community. Section 4 includes reflections on the project's strengths and limitations, alternatives, leadership, the importance of the work, and implications for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

In this section, I discuss the project strengths and limitations. I also discuss recommendations for alternative approaches to creating an early childhood high-quality teaching and guidance policy. I reflect on what I learned about the research process, policy development, leadership, and social change, and include an analysis of how I have grown as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. This section also includes a discussion of the impact of positive social change in the local district. Finally, I address the methodological implications and offer recommendations for future research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

This project addressed a long-standing concern in the preschool special education program in which I work. Although the state began using the BDI 2 as a program evaluation tool in 2008, the district has not met the state benchmark for growth in positive personal-social skills despite the implementation of high-quality professional development and multitiered systems of support. The strength of the project deliverable is that it offers a clear statement of core values of the early childhood programs, clear processes to support positive behavior, and resources for educators and administrators to prevent and respond to challenging behavior in young children. An additional strength of the project is that it aligns with the revision of the district strategic plan that addresses early childhood. The project also supports the district plan to reorganize early childhood because it provides a policy that all early childhood (HeadStart and preschool special education) programs can use as a unified statement. Finally, the project deliverable is grounded in research, as recommended by Bardach (2012).

The current discipline policies found in school improvement plans do not address early childhood, which is consistent with deficits found in the current literature regarding early childhood discipline policies. These included unclear definitions of suspension in early childhood (Garrity et al., 2017; Neitzel, 2018), inappropriate and inequitable responses to challenging behavior (Gilliam et al., 2016; Michigan State Legislature, 2016), and little guidance and training for educators and administrators about resources and clear steps to take before turning to exclusionary discipline practices (Garrity et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Neitzel, 2018; Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016; Vinh et al., 2016). The new policy recommendation is stronger than the current policies found in school improvement plans because it addresses a local district concern regarding kindergarten readiness and contains the seven essential features of a high-quality, early childhood discipline policy (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018).

There are limitations of the new policy recommendation in addressing the problem of the gap in preschool special education students' personal-social skills. Although the policy provides clear steps and resources to educators and administrators to support positive behavior, implementation is not guaranteed. According to Bardach (2012), some limitations to policy implementation include delays in adoption, excessive costs, and lack of administrative or political support. Possible remedies for this limitation are to engage teachers and administrators in the creation of the new policy and to ensure the policy is effectively communicated by recruiting the support of the general director of special education. The general director of special education meets regularly with special education supervisors and principals and is a valuable resource in the process. Other

remedies include using goal-based and data-driven evaluation criteria and embedding the policy in existing professional development modules for educators and administrators.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The position paper and policy recommendation were designed to address the problem of the lack of impact the current discipline policy has in supporting preschool special education students' personal-social skills. There were other approaches to addressing the problem rather than the policy recommendation position paper. For example, I could have written an evaluation report or a professional development plan for educators and administrators. An evaluation report would have provided a summary of the research findings and recommendations based on the results (see Lodico et al., 2010). However, the purpose of an evaluation report is to assess the implementation of a program. There are already benchmarks and tools in place from the state that serve those purposes. The state provides local districts with the Local Education Agency (LEA) profile that has information about the district's performance based on the state's targets, which is required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

A professional development plan for administrators regarding developmentally appropriate methods to support positive behavior was another possible approach to the problem. However, I did not select this approach because it would not have addressed the need for an overall teaching and guidance policy that provides educators and administrators with clear guidelines, steps, and resources to prevent and respond to challenging behavior in a vulnerable population. I selected the best method for addressing the local problem in the school district by recommending the creation of a teaching and

guidance policy to address the overall poor quality of the exiting discipline policies in school improvement plans.

Scholarship

My doctoral journey at Walden University changed me from an educator and district leader to a scholar-practitioner. The research process and the subsequent development of the policy recommendation position paper taught me valuable critical thinking skills, improved my writing skills, and showed me how to be an agent of social change using the tools and resources that were available in my local community.

I learned through the literature review process and the data analysis process how to read, analyze, and interpret information critically. Conducting a thorough literature review and evaluating each source impacted my daily work as a district resource teacher. I routinely summarized the current literature and shared it with my supervisor and the preschool special education teachers whom I support. The literature review process improved the quality of the professional development that I create because I connect research to practice in real time and actively help teachers apply it in the classroom. I changed from a teacher of teachers to scholar-practitioner and coach.

My scholarly writing skills improved as a result of the research process and project development. Walden University offers vast resources in multiple formats, and I used all of them. I learned to be patient with myself in the iterative process of designing and implementing a research project and creating a detailed policy recommendation. Writing and summarizing research regularly made my writing more concise, and I learned how to support my claims with evidence from current literature. Summarizing

current research helped me improve how I write in my day-to-day work. I coach teachers in writing individual education plans for students and use the tools I learned at Walden to help teachers incorporate evidence to create learning plans for students and drive their instruction.

Finally, writing a detailed policy recommendation showed me how to use the skills I learned at Walden to be an agent of social change in my local district. I never realized how powerful program evaluation data could be until I completed the policy recommendation. My supervisor and I routinely examine program data but connecting the data to a larger local and national problem through scholarly literature changed how I view the impact I can have. I learned how to define a problem, develop a method of investigation, and use the results to implement change to address equity and access in early childhood education. I can change the outcome for a vulnerable population in my local district by sharing the knowledge I learned though this process with other district leaders, administrators, and educators.

Project Development and Evaluation

I learned using Bardach's (2012) framework how to develop a meaningful policy recommendation using available local data. Before this experience, I did not know the steps required for writing a policy recommendation. Although Longstreth and Garrity's (2018) work provided the seven essential elements for a high-quality teaching and guidance policy, I learned the steps I needed to take to create one. I used local data to define the problem and presented the evidence to my supervisor and the early childhood team. Though this process, I identified a target audience, offered alternatives, determined

policy evaluation criteria, examined possible outcomes, and decided on a course of action that promotes social change. The development of a policy recommendation flowed logically from the research project.

Leadership and Change

Leaders work to influence or persuade individuals or groups toward a shared objective or goal (Gardner, 1990). I learned through the development of the policy recommendation that leadership for change is much more than influencing others. I learned through the process of trying and failing the kind of leader I want to be. The iterative process of creating a scholarly work through collaboration with my committee's support offered me a model of leadership I hope to follow through the rest of my career as a scholar-practitioner. My committee guided me back to the literature and the scholarly process throughout this project. Not only was I applying what I was learning, but my committee's example of leading and serving showed me how I could do this for others. I learned that I could have an impact in my local district by being a scholar-practitioner who uses local data to identify a problem, examines current literature for solutions, and creates meaningful change.

Facilitated leadership involves coaching and serving, as well as acting as an agent of change (Marx, 2006). I used leadership skills modeled by my committee to engage with other district leaders such as my program supervisor and the general director of special education to present the data and recommendations. I will continue to use the skills I learned to serve the community of preschool special education teachers whom I serve.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

I learned through the project study that my research had real-world application in my local district. I also learned that I had more potential to impact social change through my work than I previously understood. I was able to effect social change by using local data and connecting them to current literature about national concerns (early childhood exclusionary discipline). The project offered an evidence-based definition of a local problem to shed light on deficits in existing discipline policies found in school improvement plans. I learned how to connect theory to practice through the development of the policy recommendation. The policy recommendation presents a real-world solution to a problem that connects to district strategic priories. My project study could be used as a model for other districts or for early childcare providers in our community to develop a similar policy.

My review of the literature helped me see the significant potential and urgency for social change on the issue of exclusionary discipline practices in early childhood. The school-to-prison pipeline has now become the preschool-to-prison pipeline due to the high rates of preschool suspension and expulsion (Gilliam, 2016). I can have an impact on the larger problem by using the policy recommendation to raise awareness of the problem and promote social change.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The project study addressed the relationship between discipline policies and preschool special education students' personal-social skills. The policy recommendation was intended to raise awareness of the poor quality of discipline policies found in school

improvement plans. In this project study and project deliverable, I recommended the creation of a high-quality teaching and guidance policy to offer clear steps and resources to educators and administrators to support positive personal-social skills in a vulnerable population. The position paper and policy recommendation will be presented to the early childhood team to address the deficits in the current discipline policies.

Future research on this topic could include a mixed-methods study to provide a complete picture of student outcomes and teacher practices. Although school climate is the vehicle that connects policy to practice (Thapa et al., 2012), classroom practices should also be included. Qualitative data from open-ended survey questions could provide more information from teachers about their daily classroom practices. BDI 2 scores could still be used, but the scores from the comprehensive assessment may provide a less biased outcome measure. Other student outcome data, such as data from the online portfolio assessment Teaching Strategies Gold, could also be used. These approaches may provide more information about current practices and student outcomes.

Future research could also address individual school behavior plans to provide more detailed information about internal school supports and practices to promote positive social behavior. Many schools in the district participate in the Florida Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) project and are required to complete documents that detail universal, secondary, and tertiary supports for behavior. Although the Florida PBIS project does not address grade levels below kindergarten, the plans would provide better information about how the school supports positive personal-social skills. Future research could also include a larger sample size. I used the full population

in this setting for the study, but the full population did not provide a big enough sample for a medium effect size. A larger sample size in future studies with the same design and analysis may yield different results. Finally, researchers should continue to examine early childhood discipline policies in public school settings. The TAGPEC is a reliable, valid, and useful tool for districts to revise or create early childhood teaching and guidance policies. As more preschool students access public school campuses through voluntary pre-K, HeadStart, and early childhood special education programs, it is imperative that school districts implement high-quality teaching and guidance policies to support positive personal-social skills.

Conclusion

The project deliverable I created as a result of the project study was a position paper that included a policy recommendation. In Section 4, I discussed the project's strengths and limitations, as well as recommendations for alternative approaches. This section also included a discussion of what I learned about scholarship, policy development, leadership, and change. I also reflected on the importance of this study, including application of the findings and suggestions for future research. This project deliverable could result in social change by providing guidance and resources to educators and administrators to support positive behavior and improve school readiness for a vulnerable population.

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Appendix A: Position Paper and Policy Recommendation

A position paper policy recommendation to the local district pre-K exceptional student education supervisor concerning developing an early childhood discipline policy.

Introduction

There is a gap in preschool special education student's personal-social skills that affects Kindergarten readiness and places a vulnerable population at risk for exposure to school discipline. Despite the implementation of multitiered systems of supports and a new focus on early childhood in the local district, exiting preschool special education students in the local district are not meeting the state target for growth in personal-social skills as measured by the Battelle Developmental Inventory 2 (Florida Department of Education, 2017). Strong personal-social skills play an essential role in the short and long-term success of young children (Bulotsky-Shearer, and Fantuzzo, 2011; Denham, 2010; Denham, et al., 2013; Jones, Barnes, Bailey & Doolittle, 2017). Additionally, there are national concerns regarding preschool suspension and expulsion (Gilliam, 2016; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). The local district recently added 400 voluntary preschool seats (vpk) to due to a growing concern regarding kindergarten readiness (Sokol, 2018a). Although the district has now redefined itself as a preschool to age 22 district instead of a K-12 district, existing policies, including discipline policies, do not address the differentiated needs of young children, especially those identified with disabilities. Individual school improvement plans, located on the Department of Education's website, contain detailed questions about the policies and practices, including those that address student discipline. Ensuring that the policies that

support district priorities and promote developmentally appropriate, evidence-based practices is essential in supporting the youngest learners in an area that directly affects district strategic priorities. I describe the problem and offers research-based recommendations for policy implementation that addresses the needs of an at-risk population.

The Problem

According to the Florida Department of Education (2017) preschool, special education students in the local district are not demonstrating growth in positive social behavior. For example, 47% of preschool special education students who enter preschool special education services below grade level expectations are not meeting the state target for growth in positive social skills as measured on the Battelle Developmental Inventory 2 (BDI 2) (Florida Department of Education, 2017). Additionally, 47.5% of preschool special education students who entered preschool below grade expectations are not increasing their growth rate in using appropriate behaviors as measured on the BDI 2 (Florida Department of Education, 2017). In the local district, 31% of entering (Kindergarten) students demonstrated Personal and Social Development skills at an emergent (not proficient) level as measured by Work Sampling System (WSS) (Florida Department of Education, 2015). Social skill deficits and challenging behavior in young children continue to be a national concern due to the short and long-term outcomes, such as peer isolation, poor educational performance, and increased use of school discipline (Denham et al., 2013; Gilliam, 2005; Snell, Voorhees, Berlin, Stanton-Chapman, Hadden, & McCarty, 2012). Establishing high-quality discipline policies to support prosocial

behavior in young children plays an essential role in ensuring children's preparedness for school (Garrity et al., 2017; Neitzel, 2018).

The Current Policy

According to the local district strategic plan, the district recently identified early childhood initiatives and the reduction of suspensions as strategic priorities. However, the language in the district strategic plan addresses only K-12 environments, failing to include all preschool students, including preschool special education students. Recently, the addition of 400 free vpk seats to the existing public preschool programs on K-5 elementary school campuses has highlighted the need to ensure that current district policies align with the revised strategic plan. The current policies do not address, nor support the positive personal-social growth of a vulnerable population.

School improvement plans were examined because the information is public data, and the template requires the school to provide detailed, individualized information about school environments, culture, and discipline policies. For example, in the first section of the plan that addresses current school status, the school is required to describe the school environment, culture, relationships, behavior systems, discipline and training on behavior systems. The section also requires the school explain how the social-emotional learning needs of the students are being met. It requires a description of the problem-solving processes through multitiered systems of support. It is noteworthy that each school's response to this section was an identical description of the problem-solving model for data analysis and most lacked specificity regarding how social-emotional learning needs were addressed. Despite the inclusion of such detailed elements, the overall average

rating of the 111 school discipline policies as measured by the TAGPEC, fell in the "inadequate" range. According to Garrity et al. (2017), high-quality guidance policies should reflect seven essential research-based features to create a systems-level approach to promoting positive personal-social skills in young children. These features include: the intentional teaching of social-emotional skills, a focus on creating developmentally and culturally appropriate learning environments, clear behavioral expectations, multitiered systems of intervention to prevent and address challenging behavior, systems for including families in supporting children's positive behavior, commitment to on-going professional development to support policy implementation, and systematic data collection systems to evaluate the policies' effectiveness (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018). The current policies included in the school improvement plans are targeted for a K-12 environment and contain deficits that will be outlined in the research section regarding developmentally appropriate approaches to guidance policy and practices.

Research

Several deficits emerged from the literature surrounding early childhood and public-school discipline policies. These deficiencies included unclear definitions of *suspension* in early childhood (Garrity et al., 2017; Neitzel, 2018), a lack of developmentally appropriate, equitable responses to challenging behavior (Gilliam et al., 2016; Michigan State Legislature, 2016), and a lack of guidance and training for educators and administrators about resources and clear steps to take before turning to exclusionary discipline practices (Garrity et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Neitzel, 2018; Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016; Vinh et al., 2016). There are also significant concerns,

locally and nationally, about implicit bias and exclusionary discipline practices (Gilliam, Maupin, & Reyes, 2016).

Despite the call to action by the United States Departments of Health and Human Services (2014) to reduce preschool suspension and expulsion and implement policies and practices to support positive behavior in young children, there are still no clear definitions of exclusionary discipline in early childhood settings (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2015). When preschool suspensions and expulsions are not defined, they cannot be accurately tracked (Meek & Gilliam, 2016; Neitzel, 2018). Some researchers have suggested that this haphazard approach in early childcare policies, tracking, and discipline decision-making may be because attendance is voluntary (Garrity et. al., 2017). Therefore, there are no consistent monitoring requirements (Garrity et al., 2017; Meek & Gilliam, 2016).

Without adequate, systematic monitoring of exclusionary discipline policies and practices, schools and districts cannot engage in problem-solving approaches to support positive behavior. Several researchers have identified the important role of data collection and analysis in preventing and addressing challenging behavior (Gilliam, 2016; Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015; Meek & Gilliam, 2016; Quesenberry, Hemmeter, & Ostrosky, 2011). According to Losen et al. (2015), data collection and analysis of exclusionary discipline practices enables schools and districts to identify trends and needed supports and address the root of challenging behavior. It is evident that early childhood guidance policies must contain clear definitions of exclusionary discipline practices.

A second deficiency in the current policy reflected in the literature is a lack of guidance and training for educators and administrators about developmentally appropriate responses to challenging behavior before turning to exclusionary discipline for young children. Policies must include resources and clear steps for educators and administrators in response to challenging behavior (Garrity et al., 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Miller, Smith-Bonahue & Kemple, 2017; Neitzel, 2018; Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016; Vinh, et al., 2016). Many states, such as California, Oregon, Illinois, Connecticut, and Michigan, have passed legislation to eliminate or prohibit the suspension of students in preschool through second grade, citing a need for developmentally appropriate discipline strategies for children at different developmental stages (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Policies must provide clear alternatives for educators and administrators to eliminate exclusionary discipline practices (Garrity et al., 2017).

When alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices are not clear, educators and administrators are more likely to choose exclusionary practices in response to challenging behavior (Gilliam, 2016; Miller, Smith-Bonahue & Kemple, 2017). According to Miller et al. (2017), teachers' perception of behavior support resources was a significant predictor of expulsion for children with challenging behavior. When teachers have knowledge and training regarding effective responses to challenging behavior, they are less likely to choose suspension or expulsion (Gilliam, 2016; Miller et al., 2017). Similar findings have led other states to include in their discipline policies processes for accessing mental health consultants and additional training regarding developmentally

appropriate responses to challenging behavior (Hoover, Kubicek, Rosenberg, Zundel, & Rosenberg, 2012).

However, access to and knowledge of social-emotional behavior supports may only address part of what is needed to prevent preschool suspension and expulsion. For example, in a recent investigation of early childhood suspension and expulsion in Arkansas, Conners Edge et al. (2018) recommended a multifaceted approach to reducing suspensions and expulsions, including policy changes, and improved community partnerships. The multifaceted approach resulted in increased access to mental health consultation services and behavioral supports for early childhood providers.

The third area of concern in the current policy reflected in the literature is the role of implicit bias in school discipline. The unconscious beliefs and stereotypes that influence daily decision-making are known as implicit bias (Carter, Skiba, Arrendondo, & Pollock, 2017). Gilliam et al. (2016) examined the role of implicit bias in preschool teacher's perceptions of challenging behavior. The use of eye-tracking technology to investigate preschool teachers' implicit bias revealed that Black boys were identified as needing the most attention and that discipline approaches varied according to the teacher's race (Gilliam et al., 2016). Additionally, disproportionality in suspension and expulsion is a trend that exists in K-12 public school environments and is mirrored in early childhood settings (United States Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2018; United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Research in K-12 environments suggests that there are several contributing factors to disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices. These factors include poor school climate, a lack of

teacher and administrator training regarding bias and perception, a lack of funding for programs, and biased implementation of discipline policies (Staats et al., 2015).

Several researchers (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; Gilliam et al., 2016; Neitzel, 2018; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014) identified a need for the development of integrated teaching and behavior guidance policies that reduce early childhood suspensions and expulsions. Teaching and guidance policies must define suspension and expulsion, as well as provide guidance and resources for educators and administrators for alternatives to exclusionary discipline (Gilliam et al., 2016; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Finally, policies should also address implicit bias, through highlighting culturally responsive, evidence-based teaching practices to prevent and respond to challenging behavior (Allen & Steed, 2016; Hemmeter, Snyder, Fox, Algina, 2016). It is essential to address the role of implicit bias when developing early childhood guidance policies (Gilliam et al., 2016).

Synopsis of the Study

I examined local data that demonstrated a gap in the personal-social skills of exiting preschool special education students as measured by the Battelle Developmental Inventory 2 (BDI 2). Additionally, there was a growing local concern that students who were entering kindergarten were not ready for kindergarten. I examined the discipline policies of the local district after reviewing the literature. I selected a quantitative methodology to examine the relationship between the quality of the discipline policies as measured by the Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist (TAGPEC) and the personal-social skills of exiting preschool special education students as measured by the

BDI 2. Due to the increased risk of exposure to school discipline for students living poverty found in the literature, I also compared preschool special education students in Title I schools to preschool special education students in non-Title I school on the BDI 2 while controlling for the quality of the discipline policy. Although there was no evidence of a linear relationship between the school discipline policies and BDI 2 scores, the results also did not demonstrate non-linearity. There were no differences in personal-social skills as measured by the BDI 2 between students in Title I versus non-Title I schools. The non-significant findings pointed to the ineffectiveness and poor quality of the current discipline policy. The results were consistent with prior research in the private childcare sector on the quality of discipline policies and led me to a policy recommendation.

Policy Recommendations

I will present alternatives to the early childhood team in the local district to address the deficiencies in the current school discipline policies. In the publicly available district strategic plan, the local district identified early childhood as a strategic priority, yet district policies continue to focus on the K-12 environment. This policy recommendation is based on evidence from the literature which indicates there are seven essential features of high quality, early childhood teaching and guidance policies that focus on the prevention of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension, reduce discipline disparities across race and gender, and emphasize helping students improve positive behavior (Longstreth & Garrity, 2018). Current school improvement plans contain policies with related features, such as emphasizing positive school climate,

addressing the social-emotional needs of students, and data-based problem-solving processes. However, they do not include clear definitions of *suspension* in early childhood, developmentally appropriate, equitable responses to challenging behavior, or guidance regarding the role implicit bias in exclusionary discipline practices.

Clear Definitions of Suspension and Expulsion in Early Childhood

Out-of-school suspension is defined as time students spend out of school as a consequence for behavioral or conduct infractions (Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker & Hughes, 2014). However, according to some researchers (Neitzel, 2018), this definition may not capture the range of exclusionary discipline practices used in early childhood in which students are removed from instruction as an adult response to challenging behavior. Students are often sent home for the day (parent pick up), sent to another classroom, or otherwise excluded from instruction (Neitzel, 2018). As previously noted, the data on early childhood suspension and expulsions are not captured or reported in the local district. In the current study, school improvement plans did not include early childhood teaching and guidance policies or practices to prevent exclusionary discipline. Although the local district has established codes of conduct, and data tracking systems for exclusionary discipline, the policy is written for K-12 environments. The current behavior tracker data system was recently updated to include preschool environments but is not consistently used. The data must be collected and reported to have an impact on reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices. The recommendation, based on the current study, is that the local district early childhood department develop a teaching and

guidance policy, using the seven essential elements outlined by Longstreth and Garrity (2018).

Additionally, the teaching and guidance policy must include clear definitions of exclusionary discipline, including *soft suspensions*. Exclusionary discipline practices must be defined and eliminated for preschool through second grade due to the serious short and long-term consequences (Gilliam et al., 2016; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). The policy must also address consistent data collection and reporting of early childhood discipline data (Essential Feature 7; see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018).

Responses to Challenging Behavior

Across the United States, school districts have updated discipline policies in K-12 environments to address developmentally appropriate responses to challenging behavior (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). The updates included the revision of zero-tolerance policies (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). The recommendation, based on the current study, is that the early childhood teaching and guidance policy include evidence-based resources for educators and administrators to support positive personal-social behavior and respond to challenging behavior (see Longtreth & Garrity, 2018; Essential Features 1-4). The teaching and guidance policy should contain information about district professional development on evidence-based practices, such as the Pyramid Model (Hemmeter et al., 2016). It should also include hyperlinks in the document to internal district resources, as well as state and national resources designed to prevent and respond to challenging behavior, such as the Technical Assistance and Training System (https://tats.ucf.edu/) and

the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu). Finally, as an additional district resource, the local district should create an early childhood multidisciplinary district team to provide behavioral consultation and assistance to schools, educators, and administrators. This team would serve as an additional layer of support for schools, administrators, educators, and students. According to several researchers (Garrity et al., 2017; Gilliam, 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2016), access to mental consultation and behavioral supports is an essential step in implementing evidence-based practices with fidelity to reduce challenging behaviors that may result in exclusionary discipline. Although schools in the local district have student services teams to support K-12 students, the current study showed that these teams do not have policies that provide guidance and support to school teams to address the needs of young children.

Addressing the Role of Implicit Bias

Racial disparities in exclusionary discipline in the preschool-12 environment are well-documented in the literature (Gilliam, 2016; Gilliam et al. 2016; Skiba et al., 2014). The short and long-term effects of such practices are so concerning that United States Departments of Health and Human Services (2014) issued a joint policy statement calling for the severe limitation of exclusionary discipline practices in early childhood settings. The joint statement also included recommendations for creating clear policies and expectations for supporting positive social behavior as well as ensuring equity and fairness. The recommended alternative to the current policy is found in Longstreth and Garrity's (2018) Essential Features for high-quality early childhood discipline policies.

The policy must ensure the data collection and analysis process includes a program-wide analysis of disaggregated discipline data to be reviewed regularly. Additionally, the policy should include professional development recommendations and resources for teachers and administrators on topics related to preventing and responding to challenging behavior, including implicit bias (Gilliam et al., 2016: see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018).

Recommended Course of Action

The current policy recommendation takes the position, aligned with recommendations from the current literature and present study, that high-quality, early childhood discipline policies should provide clear definitions of, and evidenced-based, equitable, alternatives to, exclusionary discipline practices (Gilliam, 2016; see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). The alternative recommended to the current policy is to develop an early childhood teaching and guidance policy using the seven Essential Features (see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018) of effective discipline policies. The policy can be developed by a team of early childhood personnel including supervisors and coordinators from the current early childhood team, a small group of school principals, preschool special educators and HeadStart personnel. The team should also include representation from the district special education department to ensure that any policy developed aligns with the district strategic plan. The potential implication of creating and implementing this policy with fidelity is that preschool special education students will improve their personal-social skills. A second implication is that *all* preschool students on district campuses will benefit from high-quality, effective teaching and guidance policies to support positive behavior. The vehicle

for this change is through improved school climates that result from providing educators and administrators clear guidance and resources to support children's positive personal-social skills.

The policy recommendation does not require any additional funding to be implemented. The policy recommendation will complement and fit well with the current template found in school improvement plans. The recommendation of the formation of a district preschool behavior support team also does not require additional funding. There are current teams and processes for district behavioral supports for schools. However, those teams do not include support for preschool special education students or any preschool students on public school campuses. District personnel currently provide support and guidance to schools for preschool students on an as-needed basis. The recommendation is that these personnel join existing behavior support teams in a coordinated manner to ensure that the guidance to schools, educators, and administrators aligns with the early childhood teaching and guidance policy. No additional funding is needed to educate administrators and teachers about the teaching and guidance policy. There are current processes in place through which administrators receive district information and professional development. Small groups of principals meet regularly and receive weekly newsletters with information updates. The early childhood department currently provides professional development to teachers on an on-going basis. The teaching and guidance policy can be embedded into existing content training. This policy recommendation will be presented to the district early childhood team at a weekly team meeting.

Project Evaluation

Two methods can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of this policy change proposal. The first method is a goal-based evaluation of the revised teaching and guidance policy. Longstreth and Garrity (2018) recommend that programs set short- and long-term goals for the development and implementation of high-quality teaching and guidance policies. The short-term goal (three months) for the local district is to create an early childhood teaching and guidance policy based Longstreth and Garrity's seven essential features. The policy should include the elimination of suspension and expulsion of children in preschool through second grade. The long-term goal (one year) for the local district is to revise the policy to embed the policy into existing professional development modules for educators and administrators.

The second method of evaluation is to examine the influence of the teaching and guidance policy on a quarterly basis during the existing early childhood team meetings. Currently, the early childhood team meets weekly so that no additional burden will be placed on the team. The team can examine student outcomes by using the district's behavior tracker data and Teaching Strategies Gold data in the social-emotional domain. Behavior tracker, as previously mentioned, is the current online system used by the district to monitor student behavior. It is a tool used in the district-wide MTSS/RTI process for K-12 and was recently revised to include preschool students. Teaching Strategies Gold is an online portfolio assessment tool currently used all early childhood programs in the local district. Using these two methods to evaluate the policy change will

provide the local district with goals for a plan of action as well as student outcome information.

Conclusion

High-quality teaching and guidance policies are a necessary first step for improving student outcomes and reducing racial discipline disparities (Gilliam, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Teaching and guidance policies that define exclusionary discipline include developmentally responses to challenging behavior and address implicit bias through on-going progress monitoring will improve outcomes for a vulnerable population. The current policy does not include or address the needs of the 3,000 preschool special education students found on local district K-5 elementary school campuses. If implemented, the teaching and guidance policy will provide clear guidance and resources for educators and administrators to support preschools special educations students and all early childhood students in the local district (Gilliam, 2016; see Longstreth & Garrity, 2018).

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Appendix B: The Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist (TAGPEC)

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Program's name: _____ ***Date filled out:*** _____

Completed by: _____ ***Role in program:*** _____

Instructions: This Checklist is designed to identity different aspects of quality in early care and education guidance policies. This Checklist can be completed by a trained program staff member or a specialist in early care and education. For each question below, please check the response that best describes your program's guidance policy: check "no" if the policy does not show evidence of addressing the item, check "emerging" if your policy shows some evidence of addressing the item, and check "yes" if the policy shows clear evidence of addressing the item.

EF1: Intentional Focus on Teaching Social Emotional Skills

Early childhood behavior guidance policies should reflect an instructional, proactive approach to behavior guidance that supports the learning and practice of appropriate pro-social behavior of all children, regardless of individual differences and/or cultural and linguistic background.

Item 1: The policy clearly states that the goal of behavior guidance is to teach social emotional skills to all children.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 2: The policy clearly describes the role of the teacher in proactively teaching all children social-emotional skills.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 3: The policy clearly describes the role of positive and consistent interactions among teachers and children in promoting positive behavior.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 4: Multiple, evidence-based, developmentally and culturally appropriate strategies are described.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

EF 2: Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Learning Environment

Early childhood behavior guidance policies should describe the importance of a developmentally appropriate learning environment that is predictable, engaging, and relationship-based.

Item 5: The policy clearly describes the importance of nurturing and responsive teacher-child relationships as essential to preventing challenging behaviors.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 6: The policy emphasizes the importance of the sufficient and active adult supervision of all children.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 7: The policy describes the need for staff to continuously (at all times) monitor and respond to children's behavior.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 8: The policy clearly describes the use of ecological arrangements (classroom environment and materials) as a means for promoting positive, pro-social behavior.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 9: The policy clearly describes the need for a predictable, intentional, and developmentally appropriate daily schedule (e.g. small and large group times, carefully planned transitions, child and adult initiated activities).

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 10: The policy clearly describes the value of an engaging curriculum that takes a strengths based view of culture and language as a deterrent to challenging behavior.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

EF 3: Setting Behavioral Expectations

Early childhood behavior guidance policies should describe clear and consistent expectations for behavior.

Item 11: The policy has clearly stated program-wide behavioral expectations that are developmentally appropriate and reflect the natural learning abilities typically associated with the age groups of children served. ***If this item is answered no, items 12-15 must be answered no***

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 12: Behavioral expectations are stated positively and emphasize what children can and should do rather than what they cannot do.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 13: Behavioral expectations are designed to promote children's self-regulation, promoting external to internal foci from staff to self.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 14: The policy describes the need for clearly defined rules that are observable and measurable at the classroom level.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 15: The policy describes the need for a connection between program-level behavioral expectations and classroom rules.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 16: The policy clearly describes practices that are unacceptable for use by staff (e.g. humiliation, depriving meals, snacks, rest, etc.).

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

EF 4: Preventing and Addressing Challenging Behaviors Using a Tiered- Model of Intervention

Early childhood behavior guidance policies should identify primary, secondary, and tertiary preventative and intervention practices for promoting pro-social behavior and reducing challenging behavior in young children.

Item 17: Procedures are in place to screen children for behavioral concerns.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 18: The policy clearly describes the need to understand challenging behavior as children's effort to communicate.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 19: The policy clearly describes primary strategies to teach and reinforce pro-social behaviors in all children (*see Items 1-10*).

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 20: The policy describes targeted secondary strategies for children who are at risk for problem behaviors (e.g., the use of social skills curricula, intentional small group instruction).

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 21: The policy clearly describes the use of tertiary strategies for helping children who exhibit chronic and intense problem behaviors (e.g., developing a behavior support plan, early childhood mental health consultation, trauma-informed care).

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

EF 5: Working with Families

Early childhood behavior guidance policies should reflect the family-centered nature of early childhood education.

Item 22: The policy promotes pro-active (rather than reactive) collaborative relationships as a means of promoting social competence in children.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 23: The policy promotes authentic staff-family collaboration in effectively dealing with challenging behavior and families are given an opportunity to participate in developing and implementing interventions.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 24: The policy describes the need for obtaining contextually and culturally relevant information (e.g. at-home sleeping and eating habits, family events, favorite toys and activities) from families in order to understand children's inappropriate behavior.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 25: The policy promotes embedding individual behavior support plan goals and objectives into family/home routines and activities.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

EF 6: Staff Training and Professional Development

Early childhood behavior guidance policies should ensure that staff that staff has access to training and technical assistance in implementing policy guidelines and promoting the social competence of young children.

Item 26: The policy describes practices that are in place to ensure that staff understand and can articulate the behavior guidance policy.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 27: The policy describes a process for ongoing professional development opportunities to support staff in the use of evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 28: The policy describes the intent of the program to ensure that staff have a strong understanding of culture and diversity and are provided opportunities to engage in self-reflection and ongoing professional development that encourage awareness of implicit and explicit biases that may affect their work with children and families.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

EF 7: Use of Data for Continuous Improvement

Early childhood behavior guidance policies should reference the use of a data collection system by which the relative success or failure of the behavior guidance policy will be evaluated.

Item 29: Policy evaluation procedures are in place and clearly describe how the success or failure of the policy will be measured.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Item 30: The policy describes how data will be used to engage in continuous improvement in order to ensure that practices are in line with the intent of the behavior guidance policy and to ensure fairness and equity for all children.

_____ Yes _____ Emerging _____ No

Do you have any concerns about your program's guidance policy? ❒ No ❒ Some ❒ Yes

Please describe below.

SCORING

Step 1: Calculate score total

"No" = 0 "Emerging" = 1 "Yes" = 2

Step 2: Sum all of the item scores to get a total score.

Step 3: Transfer total score to Summary Section (below).

Step 4: Higher item scores are strengths.

Summary Section

Total Score: _____/60

TAGPEC

Strengths:

Areas to Improve: