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Preschool Educators' Perspectives on the Racial Disproportionality in Exclusionary School Discipline

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MS, Walden University, 2016

BS, Southeastern University, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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February 2020

Abstract

Black preschool students are disproportionately suspended and expelled from school compared to their same age White peers. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of preschool educators in a single county located in a southeastern state to gain insight about the racial disproportionality in school discipline. Critical race theory was used as a framework to further understand educators' perspectives concerning the influence of race and culture on student discipline and examine educators' perspectives concerning the contextual factors that contribute to exclusionary school discipline. This was a basic qualitative study with semistructured interviews of 11 preschool educators. Participants included current or former preschool educators who have been directly involved in the exclusionary discipline referral or decision-making process. Interview transcripts were examined using open-coding techniques with thematic analysis. Participants reported that socioeconomic level, students' unaddressed mental health needs, and a lack of family support were significant contributing factors to exclusionary school discipline. None of the participants identified race as a contributing factor to their own disciplinary decisions or behavior management. Mental and behavioral health training and support, as well as cultural awareness training, is recommended to help educators better respond to student's needs and to manage needs that are interpreted as behavior problems. Further recommendations include that schools adopt culturally relevant behavior systems. This study contributes to positive social change by helping to inform both researchers and practitioners about the necessity of addressing student needs that impact the racial disproportionality in school discipline and the need to increase both supports and educator training for responding to those needs.

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Dedication

This process was grueling, and the sacrifices were great, but with support from my family and friends (who are like family) and my faith in God, I did it.

Husband…Danell, you are my source of support and strength. I not only admire, but also appreciate you for choosing to join me on this journey. Doing this together has proven a complicated, beautiful mess, but I am 100% sure that I never would have made it without you by my side. I love you and I appreciate you.

Akailah, you are a dream come true as a daughter. I raised the greatest girl into a wonderful woman, and I thank you for cheering me on. I hope I've made you proud. Daughter, we did it.

Carson…CARSON. You are one of a kind. With all of the ups and downs, God saw me through. Thank you, Son, for being my comic relief when I needed it and for giving me reasons to take breaks from writing. You're the best, Little Guy.

My daughters, Nicole S., Samantha, and Nicole G., you are always in my prayers and in my heart. If your momma became a doctor you can certainly do anything you put your minds to! Always reach for the stars, Girls. You make me proud!

And to my parents. Momma and Daddy, I could never repay what you did for me…for us… during this near three year journey. From babysitting for days on end to checking on my progress every single day, you have truly been the absolute best support and my biggest cheerleaders. I am immeasurably blessed to have you as parents and literally couldn't have done this without you.

And lastly, to Gia, who stayed up late and woke up early with me for months while I was writing, but didn't make it to the end. RIP, Girl. You were truly the best!

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Dr. Yarosz and Dr. Longo, I am truly appreciative of your guidance and support. I had no idea what to expect when I began this journey and must admit that I was extremely nervous about the thought of "dissertating." You two put me at ease early in the process. I appreciate your professional guidance, your prompt and specific feedback, and the way you gave me confidence that I could get through this. Everyone should be so lucky as to have a committee like the two of you. Dr. Yarosz, you probably don't remember this, but there was a particular time (when you were my professor, not my Chair) when I was so close to throwing in the towel. Home life and work had gotten the best of me, and I told you that I was ready to quit. You told me, "You can do this. Ultimately the decision is yours, but I am here for you if you need anything. I know you can do it." That conversation forced me to reassess my current situation, regroup and persevere. I kept going because of you. Thank you for that. Dr. Marerro, thank you for serving as my URR, for understanding the benefit of my study, and for providing feedback to help me grow as a researcher. I sincerely appreciate all of you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Since 1954 when the United States Supreme Court first federally mandated school integration, U.S. lawmakers have been calling attention to educational inequities and promoting equity and equality for students of all races and ethnicities (U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, & U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). In the years since the Supreme Court's ruling, additional legislation has been passed to address issues of educational inequity, yet the problem persists. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, Title IV of the Act was written specifically to prohibit discrimination based on factors such as color, national origin, religion, race, or gender in public educational facilities (U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, & U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Ten years prior to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Supreme Court's ruling had laid the foundation for passing anti-discrimination laws that would affect public schools (U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, & U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). States, especially in the South, had been slow to comply with the law as it pertained to desegregation and integration.

More recently, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Acts (ESSA) were passed to address issues of educational inequity (NCLB, 2001 & ESSA, 2015). Upon the passing of the NCLB Act, every state was required for the first time to report specific educational accountability data to the United States government (NCLB, 2001). These data are collected annually by the U.S. government and are disaggregated by race. Data analysis has revealed that 65 years after the U.S. Supreme

Court first mandated the equal treatment of all students regardless of race or ethnicity, racial disparities continue to exist in a number of areas within educational settings, including exclusionary disciplinary practices (NCLB, 2001). The data showed that year after year, Black students continue to be disproportionately impacted by these disparate practices (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR, 2016), even though the percentage of students who were either expelled from school or suspended from school for at least 1 day decreased significantly between the years 2006 and 2011, the discipline disparities between Black and White students has continued to increase throughout the years. The disparity rate for exclusionary discipline between Black and White students doubled between 1989 and 2010 (OCR, 2012).

Former President Obama signed The ESSA into law in 2015 (ESSA, 2015). The ESSA represented an updated version of the NCLB Act, and as it pertains to discipline disparities, this new version of the law provided additional mandates and requirements for states and school districts for reducing the discipline gap (ESSA, 2015). Among other requirements, The ESSA (2015) mandated that every state develop a plan that details how it will support school districts with reducing the "overuse of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom; and the use of aversive behavioral interventions that compromise student health and safety" (p. 221). The intention of the updates to this law as it pertains to school discipline was to provide schools with supports for addressing and closing the disparities between the rate at which minority students are disciplined and

assigned exclusionary discipline as compared to White students of the same age, grade, and for the same disciplinary offenses (ESSA, 2015).

In this study, I explored the phenomenon of exclusionary discipline in preschool programs and the racial disparities that exist as it pertains to disciplining Black students compared to their same age White peers. More than 14 years ago, seminal research produced by the Yale Child Study Center first revealed that preschool students were being suspended and expelled from school more frequently than kindergarten through 12th grade students and that the exclusionary discipline practices appeared to be racialized, with Black preschoolers being suspended and expelled nearly four times more frequently than children of other races (Gilliam, 2005). This is problematic, as (a) there has been no research to show that preschool students' behaviors change or improve as a result of exclusionary discipline (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles, & Espelage, 2016); (b) Black preschoolers have not been shown to engage in more frequent misbehavior or worse behaviors than preschoolers of other races (Huang, 2016); and (c) studies have shown that a repeated loss of instructional time or a loss of time in the learning environment due to suspensions and expulsions can lead to serious long term consequences (Mallett, 2016; Nance, 2016).

My exploration of educator perspectives and experiences concerning the contextual factors that contribute to the disproportionality in preschool exclusionary discipline practices may potentially help to reduce the discipline gap and improve practices. Understanding the factors that result in Black students being more frequently suspended and expelled from school for the same behaviors as their same age White

peers may result in the development of school, district, or statewide policies that provide systematic and procedural policies and guidance for managing behaviors, interacting with children of diverse backgrounds, and for assigning disciplinary consequences. This study may also result in educational practitioners becoming more aware of their own implicit biases, the role that implicit biases play in discipline, as well as possibly influencing mandates for professional development on racial and cultural pedagogy and how to better relate to and understand children of all races and ethnicities.

In Chapter 1, I included background information on the topic of study, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study. I detailed the research questions, the conceptual framework that informs the study, explained the nature of the study, and offered definitions for terms that are included in the study. Finally, I provided assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, the significance of the study, and a summary of the information contained within the chapter.

Background

Seminal research conducted by Gilliam (2005) first revealed that preschool students were being suspended and expelled from school at a rate of more than three times that of students in grades K-12. In 2018, the Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative conducted a survey that confirmed Gilliam's findings (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2018), and a report issued by the OCR (2016) also revealed that preschool suspensions and expulsions affect certain groups of children more than others. In almost every state, Black children are more likely to be suspended or expelled from public preschool programs than their peers (Gilliam, 2005; OCR, 2016),

and statistics show that Black children are 3.6 times as likely to be suspended from public preschools than their same age White peers (Balfanz, Byrnes & Fox, 2015; Losen et al., 2015; OCR, 2016). While Black children represent just 19% of preschool enrollment, these students account for 47% of the preschoolers who have been assigned more than one out-of-school suspension (OCR, 2016). On the other hand, White students represent 41% of preschool enrollment but only 28% of preschoolers who have been assigned more than one out-of-school suspension (OCR, 2016). To date, research has not adequately addressed preschool educators' perspectives on the disparate impact of exclusionary discipline, resulting in a gap in practice found in the professional literature. In my study, I explored educators' perspectives concerning contextual factors that contribute to disparate disciplinary outcomes for Black children.

Regardless of race, evidence suggests that the practice of exclusionary discipline during a child's early years sets the path for future academic, social, and behavior problems throughout a child's school career (Losen et al., 2015; Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015; Vanderhaar, Munoz, & Petrosko, 2015; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016). Researchers have linked exclusionary discipline to negative impacts such as future incarceration, criminal victimization, joblessness, and a failure to complete high school (Losen et al., 2015; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Vanderhaar et al., 2015; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016). Due to the racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices (also known as the *discipline gap*) during the preschool years (Gilliam, 2005; OCR, 2016), Black children are being placed at academic and social disadvantages as early as age three or four (Losen et al., 2015; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016). This study was needed to

explore contextual factors that contribute to discipline disparities. The results can help to inform experts, practitioners and school districts on ways to address the discipline disparity that has persisted for decades between Black students and their non-Black peers.

Problem Statement

The problem in this study is that Black preschool students are disproportionately suspended and expelled from school as compared to their same age White peers (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2018; Gilliam, 2005; OCR, 2016), despite there being no evidence that Black preschoolers engage in worse or more challenging behaviors (Wolf & Kupchik, 2016), thus creating what is known as the discipline gap. Past research and data show that Black students, notably Black boys, are routinely assigned exclusionary discipline more frequently than same age peers of other races (OCR, 2016). While a significant amount of research has been conducted on the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices in grades K-12, much of that work has been quantitative, omitting stakeholders' perspectives, experiences, and perceptions that could provide insight about the contextual factors that contribute to the statistical findings and results of quantitative studies. With the contributions that have been made to the professional literature thusfar, few studies have contributed to an improved understanding of the preschool discipline gap (Findlay, 2015). As a result, there remains a gap in practice in the professional literature about factors that contribute to the disproportionality in exclusionary preschool discipline practices (Findlay, 2015; Vanderhaar et al., 2015; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of educators who had been directly involved in the disciplinary referral, intervention, and decision making processes of preschool students who had been suspended or expelled from preschool and to gain insight about why Black preschool students are disproportionately impacted by this phenomenon. For the purpose of this study, educators were defined as teachers, administrators, and directors. Preschoolers were defined as children who were enrolled in three-year-old and four-year-old programs. I sought to provide an understanding about factors that contribute to the preschool discipline gap based on the perspectives of preschool educators. These educators offered perspectives from those who made disciplinary referrals that resulted in exclusionary discipline; those who provided intervention services for preschool students who were referred for behaviors that might result in exclusionary discipline action, those who served as a part of multidisciplinary teams, and those who made disciplinary decisions. Furthermore, I explored how educators made meaning of their role in the disciplinary process and experience.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What are preschool educators' perspectives about preschool suspensions and expulsions?

RQ2. What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the influence of race and culture in managing student behavior and making exclusionary discipline decisions?

RQ3. What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the factors that contribute to the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices in preschool programs?

RQ4. What are preschool educators' perspectives about the role that their relationships with preschool students and their families play in exclusionary discipline decision making?

Conceptual Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) was used to inform this study. CRT was first introduced in 1994 as a framework to address inequities in the field of education (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Dixson, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT uses critical theory to examine how race, power, and law relate to culture and society. In the educational field, CRT is used to help examine how race operates within school settings and how it influences interactions among students and educators (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Dixson, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A major construct of CRT is that White privilege and supremacy persist despite the constitutional guarantee of equal and fair opportunities and protection for all, and that the law plays a part in these injustices (DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, & Moussavi Saeedi, 2017). A second major construct is that racism is a societal norm and that due to the ongoing exposure to everyday racism, many minorities have learned to either ignore or adapt to the racism they encounter (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). In this study, CRT was used as the framework to explore educators' perspectives about disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices. The goal was to gain a better understanding about what factors contribute to the assignment of

harsher punishments to Black preschool students who commit the same disciplinary infractions as their same age White peers, and offer insight about how race and discipline connect in school settings. A more thorough overview of CRT is presented in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

This was a basic qualitative study with interviews. Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because this type of research is designed to help gain a better understanding of beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, or meanings of or about a particular problem or phenomenon (see Almeida, Faria, & Queirós, 2017). Semistructured interviews were used to gain an understanding about the personal perspectives of educators who had participated in the intervention, disciplinary referral making process, and administration of exclusionary discipline as a consequence for preschool students' behaviors.

In qualitative research, interviews can be used as a method for obtaining detailed, first hand information from participants to better understand their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, perspectives, and opinions about a particular phenomenon. Interviews allowed each participant to provide insightful responses to questions regarding his or her personal experiences with exclusionary discipline while allowing focus to remain on both the problem statement and the purpose of the study.

Definitions

The following terms will be used throughout the study and will contribute to its overall understanding:

Discipline gap: The disparate use and assignment of exclusionary school discipline to one group of students as compared to their same age, same grade peers (Losen et. al, 2015).

Exclusionary discipline: A disciplinary consequence used as a consequence for misbehavior and removes or excludes a student from his regular instructional placement (e.g. out-of-school suspension, in-school-suspension, expulsion (Exclusionary Discipline, 2019).

Expulsion: Exclusionary discipline that results in the removal of a student from their regular instructional setting for the remainder of the instructional year and possibly longer. Depending on the student's eligibility, educational services may or may not continue (e.g. placement at an alternative school setting) during duration (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

In school suspension (ISS): Exclusionary discipline that results in the removal of a student from his or her regular instructional setting for a minimum of half of a school day. The student remains under school supervision. (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b)

Out of school suspension (OSS): The process of temporarily removing a student for disciplinary reasons from his or her regular educational setting to an alternative placement (e.g. home or alternative school) for more than a half day and no more than 10 days. For students with disabilities, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) services may or may not be provided (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

Preschool (Pre-K): Preschool programs and services for children between the ages of three and five and who have not yet enrolled in kindergarten programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b)

Assumptions

I assumed that the educators who were selected for participation in this study understood the study's importance and truthfully and properly self-identified as meeting participation criteria. Criteria for participation included (a) being a current or former preschool educator in the identified county, (b) having been involved in the exclusionary discipline referral, intervention, or disciplinary decision-making process of at least one preschool student, and (c) willingness to participate in a face-to-face, Zoom (internet based), or telephone interview regarding their personal experiences or perspectives. I further assumed that the participants' responses were accurate and truthful; that participants understood the questions that were asked; and that the selected participants honestly expressed and described their personal perspectives, experiences, feelings, and opinions. Lastly, I assumed that no unusual circumstances (e.g. a personal relationship between an educator and student) interfered with or had any influence on participants' responses.

Scope and Delimitations

This study was limited to the experiences and perspectives of current and former preschool educators who were employed in one county in a southeastern state. The perspectives and experiences of the educators who took part in the study are not representative of preschool educators that are located in other parts of the state or

country. The results from this study only serve as a representation of the perspectives of the educators who are currently employed or have previously been employed in preschool settings in the county in which the study was conducted, and may not be generalizable to other settings. However, the findings may be helpful for providing insights to early childhood practitioners regardless of the location of the program.

Limitations

This study was limited to a small sample size of 11 preschool educators (teachers, administrators, and directors) who were currently or were previously employed at preschools in one county in a southeastern state. Therefore, the perspectives from this educator sample may not be reflective of a larger sample of educator participants or of preschool educators in other parts of this or other states. Additionally, this study was limited to educator perspectives and did not consider student or family input, as the purpose of this study does not extend to the perspectives of students and their parents or guardians. Therefore, the understanding of the contextual factors that contribute to the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices in preschool programs is limited to the perspectives and experiences of the preschool educators involved in this study. Each of these limitations presents the possibility for future study expansion and generalizability.

Significance

The results of this study contribute to the professional literature by providing an understanding about factors that contribute to the use of exclusionary discipline with preschool students and insight as to why Black preschool students are impacted by this

phenomenon more than their same age White peers. Additionally, the results can be used to help preschool programs identify contextual factors and systemic issues that may be contributing to disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices. Identifying these issues may result in the development of written discipline policies and consequences, the adoption of policies and procedures to reduce preschool suspensions and expulsions, and/or the implementation and mandate of training and professional development on how implicit bias negatively impacts discipline and disciplinary consequences.

The findings from this study can effect positive social change by prompting teachers, administrators, and school districts to become more aware of current practices. Stakeholders should make use of the insight gained regarding the contextual and contributing factors of exclusionary discipline and consciously work towards reducing the discipline gap in preschools, paying specific attention to the contributing contextual factors. The reduction or eradication of preschool suspensions and expulsions may help lessen the potential occurrences of future negative impacts such as involvement in the prison system, crime victimization, joblessness, and failing to graduate from high school (Losen et al., 2015; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Vanderhaar et al., 2015; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016), especially for Black students, who are impacted more by exclusionary discipline than any other group of students.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 1 was to introduce the study and to provide background information on the topic; present the problem and purpose statements; describe the nature of the study; give an overview of the research questions; describe the conceptual

framework; provide definitions for meaningful words and terms; and to explain the assumptions, limitations, scope, and delimitations and significance of the study. In Chapter 2, I introduced existing research on exclusionary discipline and the discipline gap, which identified a gap in practice in the literature. This gap was addressed within this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research shows that Black students, notably Black boys, are routinely suspended and expelled from school more often than their same age White peers (OCR, 2016). The problem in this study is that Black preschool students are disproportionately suspended and expelled from school as compared to their same age White peers (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2018; Gilliam, 2005; OCR, 2016), despite there being no evidence that Black preschoolers engage in worse or more challenging behaviors (Wolf & Kupchik, 2016), thus creating what is known as the *discipline gap*. While a significant amount of research has been conducted on the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices in grades K-12, much of that work has been quantitative, omitting stakeholders' perspectives, experiences, and perceptions that may provide insight about the contextual factors that contribute to the findings and results of quantitative studies. With the contributions that have been made to the professional literature, thusfar, few have contributed to better understanding about the preschool discipline gap (Findlay, 2015). As a result, there remains a gap in practice in the professional literature about factors that contribute to the disproportionality in preschool exclusionary discipline practices (Findlay, 2015; Vanderhaar et al., 2015; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016).

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of educators who have been directly involved in the disciplinary referral, intervention, and decision making processes of preschool students who have been suspended or expelled from school, and to gain insight about why certain demographics are disproportionately

impacted by this phenomenon. I sought to provide an understanding about factors that contribute to the preschool discipline gap based on the perspectives of preschool educators who make disciplinary referrals that have the potential to result in exclusionary discipline, those who provide intervention for those students, and those who make disciplinary decisions. Furthermore, I explored how educators make meaning of their role in the disciplinary process and experience.

Chapter 2 is a review of existing literature that establishes the relevance of the problem that serves as the foundation for this study. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research and professional literature that currently exists pertaining to the disparity in exclusionary discipline practices, and the contextual factors that may contribute to the phenomenon. This literature review includes relevant research findings on the contextual factors of interest and how those factors are connected through the CRT framework to exclusionary discipline.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth overview of a current gap in practice found in the professional literature by reviewing research pertaining to the CRT and how the framework supports the study, as well as by reviewing the research about the contextual factors that may contribute to disproportionate assignment of exclusionary discipline to Black preschool students. This literature review provides a comprehensive review of research and professional literature that pertains to (a) the impacts of exclusionary discipline, (b) parent, student, and educator perspectives regarding exclusionary discipline, (c) race, culture and socioeconomic status as a contributing factor to discipline decisions, (d) mental health, (e) how student-teacher relationships influence student

behavior, (f) zero tolerance, and (g) culturally relevant pedagogy. Finally, I provide a summary of how the research findings link the problem in this study to the framework upon which the study is based.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search strategies for this study consisted of an in-depth search and thorough review of Walden University's library research databases. The electronic search included the following databases: Criminal Justice Database, EBSCOhost, Education Source, ERIC, Global NCES Publications, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, SAGE Journals, SAGE Research Methods Online, ScholarWorks, Thoreau Multi-Database Search, U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The search terms for this study included: *alternatives to exclusionary discipline*, *critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, discipline disparities*, *discipline gap*, *exclusionary discipline, exclusionary preschool discipline, preschool behavior, maladaptive preschool behaviors, maladaptive school behaviors, preschool discipline*, *preschool suspensions and expulsions*, *restorative justice*, *school behavior problems, school discipline*, *school to prison pipeline*, and *school exclusion*. After exhausting the preceding search terms, subsequent searches were conducted using combinations of the following terms: *civil rights and school discipline*, *culture and student behavior*, *disproportionate school discipline*, *effects of exclusionary discipline, implicit bias*, *race and school discipline, school wide positive behavioral interventions and supports, social emotional learning, socio-economic impact on school behavior and learning, student behavior, teacher-student relationships* and *Zero*

Tolerance. Most of the articles included in this study were published within the last five years. A few seminal research articles also guided my research.

Conceptual Framework

On the issue of race, Roediger (1991) posited that history has shown that "Whites reach(ed) the conclusion that their Whiteness is meaningful" (p. 6). Due to the implied and perceived value and superiority that has been placed on Whiteness, Ladson-Billings (1998) asserted that it is necessary to frame "discussions about social justice and democracy and the role of education in reproducing or interrupting current practices" (p. 9). Considering the identified problem, purpose, and research questions for this study, I used CRT as the framework of reference. CRT gained its origin from the field of law (Gordon, 1990), and first emerged in the mid-1970s, based on the work of Bell and Freeman (Bell, 1976; Freeman, 1978). Bell and Freeman were unhappy with the slow progression of racial reform in the United States (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). As a result of Bell's and Freeman's work, CRT is now used by education researchers to help explore and analyze the role of race and racism in supporting and promoting racial disparities between dominant and marginalized races of people (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2005; & Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Ladson-Billings (1998) stated that "CRT becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power" (p. 9). The purpose of this framework is to uncover factors that are overlooked or minimized in race and privilege analyses

(Parker & Villalpando, 2007). CRT first emerged in the field of education in 1994 as a framework to address educational inequities (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Since the theory's emergence in education, scholars have heavily relied upon CRT as a framework for critiquing and analyzing educational research and practice (Ladson-Billings, 2005). CRT uses critical theory to examine how race, power, and law relate to culture and society. In the field of education, scholars use CRT to help explore how race operates within school settings and how it influences interactions among students and educators (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

One major construct of CRT is that White privilege and supremacy persists despite the constitutional guarantee of equal and fair opportunities and protection for all, and that the law plays a part in these injustices (DeMatthews et al., 2017). A second major construct is that racism is a societal norm and, due to the ongoing exposure to everyday racism, many minorities have learned to either ignore or adapt to the racism they encounter by not responding to racism or adjusting to White, middle class expectations or societal norms (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010).

Major Research Using Critical Race Theory

Several major studies have been conducted in the field of education using CRT. DeMatthews et al. (2017) conducted a study where the findings showed that due to several factors, school principals are one of the most influential factors when it comes to the discipline gap. The contributing factors include having the discretion to make determinations about what punishments students should receive when an infraction is committed, and students being victims of the principals' known or unknown biases

(DeMatthews et al., 2017). The findings suggested that school administration preparation programs must work to support administrators with identifying systematic racism both in the schools and in their school districts.

Gregory and Mosely (2004) conducted another major study using CRT. Their research focused on the disciplinary consequences that are administered to Black students by teachers, and findings showed that most teachers believed that internal forces are the primary drivers of student behavior, with the student being the source of the problem. Few teachers identified race or culture as contributing factors to students' perceived misbehavior (Gregory & Moseley, 2004), despite other research findings that suggest the opposite may be true.

How Critical Race Theory Aligns with and Informs the Study

CRT can play a significant role as educational entities work to eradicate the discipline gap and become more inclusive. The framework can be used to unearth the deeply imbedded social disparities that promote and support privilege and oppression. I used CRT to examine educators' perspectives about the causes of disparate disciplinary consequences, specifically as it pertains to race and culture. CRT was used as a tool to analyze the data from this study. The goal of my study was to gain a better understanding about what factors contribute to educators administering harsher punishments to Black preschool students who commit the same disciplinary infractions as their same age White peers. Using CRT as a framework, my goal was to provide insight about how race, culture, and discipline connect and intersect in school settings.

Extent of the Problem

Years after Gilliam's (2005) seminal research first revealed Black preschoolers were being suspended and expelled from public schools more frequently than students in grades K-12, the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health (an initiative of The Child and Adolescent Health Measurement, 2016), the U.S. Department of Education (2014) and the OCR (2016) corroborated Gilliam's research by (a) issuing a study that showed preschool students are being suspended from school nearly four times as often as students in grades K-12, and by (b) providing data that showed Black students are 3.6 times as likely to be suspended from public preschools for the same behavioral infractions as their same age White peers. The National Survey of Children's Health (2016) also, for the first time, included exclusionary discipline data from private preschools and revealed that approximately 50,000 preschool students were suspended at least once during the 2016 school year. An estimated 17,000 additional preschool students were expelled that same school year, totaling nearly 250 preschool suspensions or expulsions that occurred each day in the year 2016.

Data from the OCR (2014) placed the extent and magnitude of the disproportionality of exclusionary discipline in preschool programs into perspective. The data collected from schools across the United States indicated that although Black children account for just 19% of preschool enrollment, these students represent 47% of preschool students who are assigned one or more days of out of school suspension (OCR, 2014). White preschoolers, however, represent 41% of the enrollment and account for 28% of preschool students who are assigned one or more days of out of school

suspension (OCR, 2014). According to the OCR, when controlled for gender, Black boys account for 19% of the preschool population, but represent 45% of the preschool boys being suspended from school for one or more days, and although Black girls represent just 20% of the preschool enrollment, they account for 54% of the preschool girls being suspended from school for one or more days during a given school year.

Impacts of Exclusionary Discipline

Multiple researchers have provided findings that suggest that suspensions and expulsions can negatively impact students' social-emotional and academic progress (see Morris & Perry, 2016) throughout their school career. Researchers have also provided evidence of various long term, lasting social problems and negative impacts that exclusionary discipline may have on children's lives (see Losen et al., 2015; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Vanderhaar et al., 2015; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016). Additionally, Losen, Sun, and Keith (2017) offered evidence that exclusionary discipline often results in reduced instructional time, while Mallett (2016) and Nance (2016) made a connection between exclusionary discipline and the *school-to-prison pipeline*. Marchbanks et al. (2015) also showed that students who are assigned exclusionary discipline as a punishment are more likely to be retained in a grade.

Academic Achievement

Despite the decades long studies on the educational disparities that exist between Black students and their peers, the contextual factors that contribute to this disparity remain unclear (Morris & Perry, 2016). Morris and Perry (2016) posited that school discipline, which remains under examined, is a critical contributing factor in achievement

disparities that exist between Black students and peers of other races. To examine how the suspension rates of different race students impacted reading and math performance, Morris and Perry used a sizable hierarchical and longitudinal data set that consisted of both student and school records. This study was the first of its kind and found that exclusionary discipline accounts for as much as one-fifth of the achievement differences between Black students and their same grade White peers (Morris & Perry, 2016). These findings related to my study because they offered a reason to close the discipline gap between Black students and their same age White peers since exclusionary discipline retards academic growth and is a contributor to racial disparities in school achievement.

Zero Tolerance and the School to Prison Pipeline

Sixty-one percent of the U.S. prison population is comprised of Black or Hispanic inmates (Kaeble, Glaze, Tsoutis, & Minton, 2015), and in the juvenile justice system, the fastest growing demographic for arrests and incarcerations is Black girls (Hill, 2019). According to the Juvenile Crime Facts published by the U.S. Department of Juvenile Justice (2018), Black and Latino students together make up 70% of all school arrests and incarcerations. The arrests of most of these students are due to the zero tolerance policies in schools. Zero tolerance policies result in school administrators assigning predetermined consequences for disciplinary infractions. When implementing zero tolerance policies administrators do not differentiate between minor and major offenses. All students receive the same consequence for committing a given offense. Therefore, students receive suspensions or expulsions for infractions such as tardiness, throwing

uncontrollable tantrums, violating dress codes, or fighting just as they would receive for bringing a gun to school or assaulting an authority figure.

Zero tolerance policies criminalize minor school disciplinary infractions and some argue that the increasing presence of police (resource) officers in school settings contributes to the criminalization of behaviors that should be managed by school personnel (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.). These policies and approaches to school discipline have resulted in both the mismanagement and mistreatment of students' situations and harsh, punitive disciplinary consequences which have a significant effect on students' futures, resulting in sentencing to juvenile detention centers or prison. The American Civil Liberties Union (n.d.) offered that zero tolerance policies that result in exclusionary discipline correlate with students' school dropout rates and the likelihood of becoming involved with the criminal justice system. Students who are assigned exclusionary discipline as a consequence for discretionary violations prove almost three times more likely to have involvement with the juvenile justice system the year following the assignment of the exclusionary discipline (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.).

Minority students are disproportionately vulnerable to, and impacted by, exclusionary practices and the racially disparate assignment of such (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.). Experts refer to the disproportionate tendency for youth from marginalized, disadvantaged populations to be incarcerated as the school-to-prison pipeline (SPP; n.d.). Many researchers have attributed the development of SPP to school discipline factors such as laws addressing school disturbances, zero tolerance, and the increasing assignment of school resource police officers; however, not all scholars agree.

The findings from one 2014 study suggested that the discipline disparity between Black students and their peers of other races was explained by the problem behaviors exhibited by Black students (Wright, Morgan, Coyne, Beaver, & Barnes, 2014). This study concluded that the racial disparity in exclusionary discipline practices might not be as heavily biased as many experts have argued (Wright et al., 2014). However, a 2016 study that analyzed a national high school dataset found that while misbehavior and deviant attitudes were contributing factors to the assignment of exclusionary discipline to Black students, Black students did not engage in misbehavior or display deviant attitudes more often than their White peers (Huang, 2016). The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality (2019) confirmed however, that behaviorally, people are more likely to view Black students as presenting with more behavior concerns. Black girls in particular are viewed as more adult like and less innocent, and more disrespectful, aggressive, and unruly (Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019). This finding directly correlates with the increasing arrests and incarceration of Black females (Hill, 2019). Annamma et al. (2019) suggested that additional studies should be conducted on the rapidly increasing rate of the assignment of exclusionary discipline to Black female students and how this trend intersects with their interaction with the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems.

Parent, Student and Educator Perspectives Regarding Exclusionary Discipline

The acquisition of appropriate social skills is an important part of every child's growth and development. While some children naturally learn the appropriate skills

through exposure and through their environments, other skills and other children must explicitly be taught the appropriate social skills.

Haight, Gibson, Kayama, Marshall, and Wilson (2014) examined the common and unique perspectives of students, their parents/guardians and educators concerning the causes and consequences of exclusionary discipline and to find more appropriate solutions to conflicts relating to recent school suspensions. Haight et al. (2014) also explored what educators perceived as barriers to implementing more appropriate alternatives to out of school suspensions. This research was conducted through a mixed-methods study, and examined the perspectives of Black youth, their parents/guardians and educators on specific behavioral incidents that resulted in out of school suspensions.

In conjunction with other theories, the authors used CRT in this study as framework for examining White privilege, racial oppression, marginalized cultural values, and *narrative inequality*, which refers to the privilege that some voices (e.g. educators) have over others (e.g. students and parents). The researchers interviewed 28 Black youth who had recently received out-of-school suspensions, 25 of the students' parents/guardians and 16 educators who were involved in the disciplinary decisions. Findings revealed that participants in every group: (1) viewed out-of-school suspensions as an issue that is impacted by race, (2) believed that both student and parent/guardian behaviors contribute to exclusionary discipline, (3) believed that suspensions are detrimental to both student achievement and student-teacher relationships, and underscored that caring teacher-student relationships can change behaviors that are considered problematic (Haight et al., 2014).

Haight et al. (2014) showed that students emphasized the role that their peers' behaviors played in their own assignment of exclusionary discipline, and how the disciplinary actions that were taken against them affected their relationships with peers. Haight et al., also indicated that parents and guardians underscored the negative impact of their children's suspensions on their family and on school relationships, and the need for interventions that will improve educators' sensitivity to student behaviors. Educators expressed the need for maintaining a positive and inclusive learning environment for students and parents as well as more flexible approaches to student behaviors and alternatives to suspensions (Haight et al., 2014). These findings can be used to better structure school environments to be more inclusive of, responsive to and tolerant of Black students and their families.

The research method used in the Haight et al. (2014) study was sufficient to address the research questions. A suburban public school was chosen as the research site, and the student participants were all Black students who had been suspended from school. The students' guardians represented a variety of races, and the educators (teachers and administrators) who were involved in the students' suspensions represented a variety of races as well. Taking into account the participants that were involved and the research questions that were examined, this study could be easily replicated at any school where Black students are enrolled. The results are generalizable and transferrable to other contexts.

The research conducted by Haight et al. (2014) applies to the proposed study because it addressed a gap where little research exists in the current body of knowledge.

While much information and research can be found involving school discipline data and the fact that the discipline gap exists, few studies explore the discipline gap and exclusionary disciplinary practices from the perspective of the affected students and their parents or caregivers. These findings can be used to better train educators on cultural diversity, help schools to develop better relationships with Black students and their parents, and to help better understand how culture and racial bias plays a part in the disproportionality of discipline.

Over the past 40 years, the use of suspensions and expulsions has increased, and the discipline gap between Black and White students has also widened (Kennedy-Lewis, Whitaker, & Soutullo, 2016; OCR, 2016). Through a mixed methods study, Kennedy-Lewis et al. (2016) used two theoretical frameworks: utilitarianism and Rawls' theory of distributive justice-to explore the increasing use of exclusionary discipline and the assignment of students to alternative schools for both minor and major discipline infractions. The researchers examined one southeastern school district's perception of its alternative school's role and purpose; educators' justifications for making student referrals; and whether student outcomes upon completion of assignment at an alternative school supported placement in an alternative setting. The school district that participated in the study enrolled over 25,000 students, with the student population being 45% White, 35% Black, and less than 10% Latino, Asian American, and mixed race and ethnicity (Kennedy-Lewis et al. 2016).

Findings suggested that the educators at traditional schools had contradictory reasons for making student referrals to the school district's alternative school (Kennedy-

Lewis et al., 2016). Some educators claimed that an alternative school placement should be a punishment or deterrent for student misbehavior while others claimed that the alternative setting would offer better student support and be able to better meet the needs of students who exhibit challenging behaviors (Kennedy-Lewis, et al., 2016). Findings revealed mixed outcomes of alternative school placements, and the data did not indicate that the alternative school placement improved student outcomes.

The researchers sought to address a gap in the current body of knowledge by exploring the relationship between alternative school outcome data, educators' claims about student outcomes, and whether these claims contribute to the discipline gap. The researchers also sought to explore: 1) "how educators in one school district describe the purpose of its disciplinary alternative school and justify assigning students there," and 2) **"**how the school district's data regarding the academic and behavioral outcomes of its alternative school students support, challenge, or both support and challenge, educators' justifications for sending students to this school" (Kennedy-Lewis, et al., 2016, para. 14). Kennedy-Lewis, one of the researchers, referred to the two fundamentally conflicting theoretical frameworks on which the study was based as the *discourse of safety* (which emphasizes the group's well-being as a whole rather than the individual well-being, promotes compliance, and underscores punishment due to noncompliance, all with the goal of perpetuating the current social and economic order and focuses on changing the student) and the *discourse of equity.* In contrast to *discourse of safety*, *discourse of equity* stresses attentiveness to contextual factors to promote social justice, and instead, promotes equitable education for all students in an inclusive community that exercises

democracy, with the goal of promoting school wide and educational system changes and approaches to alternative education (Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016). Although conflicting, both of the frameworks were appropriate for the study because both views are often included in school discipline policies and used by the same educators.

The findings and research methods used in the Kennedy-Lewis et al. (2016) study helped to guide my own research, as it addressed questions that can provide insight to some of the factors that contribute to the discipline gap in public schools. According to the study, there are disproportionate numbers of Black students enrolled in alternative schools (Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016). It is worth exploring whether educators and school districts are using referrals to alternative schools as a behavioral "intervention" for Black students. Based on Kennedy-Lewis et al. (2016) results and recommendations, future research and data analysis is necessary to help to explore the intent and use of alternative school referrals for Black students. Depending on the results of future research, policies, procedures, and interventions can be put in place to help reduce the number of alternative school referrals for Black students.

Race, Culture and Socioeconomic Status

Morris and Perry (2016) posited that although unacknowledged by educators, race and culture might be contributing factors that lead to behaviors that often result in disproportionate exclusionary school discipline. The Morris and Perry (2016) study related to my research study because I closely examined cultural and racial factors for the purpose of obtaining better insight about why Black children are more likely than any other race to be assigned exclusionary discipline as consequences.

In an attempt to find trends and factors that contribute to the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices among minority and White students, Anderson and Ritter (2017) conducted a quantitative study to analyze seven years of discipline data (school years 2008-2009 through 2014-2015) from K-12 public schools across the state of Arizona. The discipline data analysis included student descriptors such as race, grade, special needs, English Language Learner status, and socio-economic status based on eligibility for free-and-reduced-lunch (FRL). The original discipline data included 19 different behavior infractions, 13 types of consequences, the date the offense occurred, and the duration of the consequence, however for the purpose of the study, the 13 different consequences were consolidated into seven (in school suspension (ISS), OSS, alternative school referral, expulsion, corporal punishment, no action, and other). Findings showed that across the state of Arizona, Black students are roughly 2.4 times more likely to receive exclusionary discipline than their White peers, but that this same discipline disparity is not present within each school (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). Similar to the study conducted by Wright et al., (2014), Anderson and Ritter's (2017) research found that within schools, factors other than race accounted for the disproportionalities in exclusionary discipline (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). The study showed that factors such as socio-economic status and special needs eligibility were the primary drivers of the discipline gap in schools across Arizona, and that schools with higher minority populations tended to give out consequences of longer durations, regardless of student income levels (Anderson & Ritter, 2017).

To demonstrate an extension of the existing body of knowledge, Anderson and Ritter (2017) referred to previous research that investigated the contributing factors to racial disparities in school discipline. The research questions were clearly stated, with researchers seeking to determine: 1) whether disproportionalities exist in the assignment of exclusionary discipline for minority, low-income, special needs, or English Language Learner students across the state of Arizona, 2) whether disproportionalities exist in the assignment of exclusionary discipline for minority students, and 3) what school characteristics are associated with longer, harsher disciplinary consequences **(**Anderson & Ritter, 2017). Findings indicated that there are multiple contributors to the discipline gap, and that although race appears to contribute to the majority of the disproportionalities across the state, socio-economic or special needs status may be more of a factor within individual schools (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). These findings resulted in some confusion because more Black than White students receive free and reduced lunch and receive special education services across the state of Arizona and in most individual schools. Although the findings in Arizona are specific to that particular state, the similarities in the patterns of discipline disparities and disproportionalities indicate that this study's findings may be relevant to and applied to most other states as well. The findings showed that the disparities between Black and White students are more significant than any other disparities.

Implicit Bias

While it is true that educators must respond to children's misbehaviors, implicit biases in reference to gender and race may have an impact on how adults perceive and

address those behaviors, possibly exaggerating the severity of behaviors and causing inequalities over a period of time (Okonofua, Walton, & Eberhardt, 2016; Payne & Welch, 2015). Todd, Thiem, and Neel (2016), found that teachers may automatically associate Black students with a perceived threat of aggression even in children as young as five years old. Evidence suggests that Black boys are viewed as older and less child-like than their same-age White peers, (Payne & Welch, 2015) and Black girls are viewed as more adult-like in nature, less child-like, and more disrespectful, aggressive and unruly than their same-age White peers (Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019). Payne and Welch (2016) also found that the association of Black students with apes impacted police violence toward children, which relates back to zero-tolerance policies, the assignment of school resource officers to manage school behaviors that should be handled by school officials, and the school to prison pipeline. Payne's and Welch's (2015) findings suggest that dehumanizing Black children is a dangerous behavior, and that intergroup perceptions of Black children deserve more exploration.

In another study conducted with 701 preschool students in 11 early childhood centers to explore teacher-student ethnic and racial matches and teacher ratings of student behaviors, results showed that in the beginning of a school year there were no differences in how Black and white teachers rated students' behaviors. However, Black boys with White teachers experienced an increase in problem behavior ratings between the fall and spring, suggesting that over time, White teachers are more likely than Black teachers to increase the severity of their responses to what they perceive as misbehavior or to change

their assessments of challenging behaviors over time (Downer, Goble, Myers, & Pianta, 2016).

DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, and Moussavi Saeedi (2017) explored the role that principals and school context play in the harsher disciplinary consequences, specifically suspensions and expulsions that have been historically administered to Black students for the same infractions that are committed by their White peers. The study found that although there has been no research based evidence showing that Black students are more likely to misbehave than White students, principals are more likely to suspend Black students who commit the same disciplinary infractions as their White peers (DeMatthews et al., 2017). School principals contribute to the discipline gap because they uphold disciplinary systems and practices that are biased against minority students and force those students to adhere and assimilate to cultural norms (DeMatthews et al., 2017).

The results of this study can be used to change the way principals approach discipline for Black children. Findings showed that some of the principal participants administer harsher punishments to Black students due to what they consider consistency, neutrality, and/or due to racial bias. Six of the 10 principals reported that they preferred adhering to their school's codes of conduct (in the name of neutrality) as a way to demonstrate their neutral approach to discipline. The principals suggested that their interpretations of policies were strict even in instances when teachers instigated the situation or were negligent. When asked how they would respond to discipline if a teacher held a bias or preconceived notion against a particular student's background and it negatively impacted the teacher-student interaction, every study participant agreed that

the teacher should be reprimanded but that the student should still be held accountable for his actions. These findings help us to understand that school systems must offer appropriate training and professional development for principals on identifying their own biases as well as changing the discipline culture in their schools. School districts must not only provide the proper and appropriate training for principals, but the districts must also charge school leaders with serving as "antiracist school leaders that undo institutionally racist school practices, address teacher misunderstandings about race, or combat biased behaviors from all school community members that stifle the school engagement and success of Black children" (DeMatthews et al., 2017, p. 521).

This study places a fair amount of responsibility on school principals for the discipline disparity. While in many cases principals are ultimately the person to determine what consequence a student will receive for his or her misbehavior, one must remember that there are times when the principal is held to a school district's policies. A zero tolerance policy, strict code of conduct or discipline plan, and school district policies sometimes allow administrators no room for discretion when a student commits a disciplinary infraction.

The researchers used CRT as a framework for this study. In situations when principals are permitted to use discretion for the consequences that should be administered for misbehavior, CRT provides a framework to examine and analyze exchanges in reference to behavior between students and educators. CRT can also be used to isolate ways that race factors into the school's discipline culture. CRT can prove beneficial for schools as a whole, but principals would first need to address their own

personal biases and attitudes towards race and inequities before the use of CRT is likely to be made a priority or implemented school wide.

Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, and Horner (2016) explored the identification and implementation of effective interventions to reduce incidents of implicit bias and exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools. Using the Vulnerable Decision Points (VDP) model as a conceptual framework along with discipline data and office discipline referrals from 1,666 elementary schools, researchers examined factors and specific scenarios or situations where disproportionality in disciplinary consequences was more likely. VDPs are specific incidents or scenarios when disproportionality is more likely to occur, including situations that increase the likelihood of implicit bias playing a factor in the execution of disciplinary consequences. Findings suggested that when school personnel subjectively define behaviors, racial and gender disproportionality increases, and that the time of day when behaviors occurred substantially impacted disproportionality (Smolkowski et al., 2016).

The Smolkowski et al. (2016) study sought to identify patterns in school discipline data that would support or disprove the VDP model; and the study's purpose and research question were well developed to extend the existing body of knowledge. The discipline gap between minority students and their White peers has been well documented in literature throughout the years, but no concrete findings have explained why the gap in discipline practices continues to occur, why Black students are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline as consequences, or what interventions or measures can be taken to eradicate the problem (Smolkowski et al., 2016; Anderson &

Ritter, 2017). For the aforementioned reasons, the conceptual framework on which this study was based was most appropriate. The researchers also used methods and a design that aligned with the purpose and could answer the questions they set out to answer in reference to the VDP model.

The methods and design of this study were appropriate in that the researchers only examined office discipline referrals (ODRs) for Black and White students who were enrolled at elementary schools in 45 different states where the student information system was used to code ethnicity for at least 80% of the office referrals so that only schools with racial diversity were included in the study. The researchers conducted the study at elementary schools for the purpose of consistency, as middle and high school students are assigned different teachers for different subjects. The results lend to the transferability and generalizability in other contexts, as the sample was appropriate for what the study sought to answer, including elementary school students across a variety of states and settings. These findings, regardless of the setting, can help to affect social change as educators work to determine in their own settings what factors are contributing to the disproportionate number of office referrals for Black students as compared to their White peers.

The findings from the Smolkowski et al. (2016) study were used as a reference for the current study. First, the results helped to identify situations and scenarios across settings (and in multiple contexts) when teachers and administrators are more likely to use subjectivity for administering consequences for misbehavior, and when implicit bias may play a factor. This can help with suggestions for specific interventions during

teacher-student interactions that may lead to office referrals that result in exclusionary discipline for Black students. Examining the results of this study was essential to assisting schools with determining how they can best eradicate implicit bias and minimize situations where Black students are more likely to be suspended than peers of other races.

Mental Health

Emmons and Belangee (2018) argued that childhood mental health disorders that are unaddressed or not properly managed or treated can serve as a contributing factor to higher rates of exclusionary discipline. Studies show that when educators use therapeutic strategies or approaches to address students' mental health concerns, students become more interested in and committed to their own success and achievement (Emmons & Belangee, 2018). One of the most prevalent mental health concerns for students is attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder diagnoses have been on the rise in the United States (Coker, Elliott, Toomey, Schwebel, Cuccaro, Emery, Davies, Visser, & Schuster, 2016). In 2011, parent-reported rates of ADHD diagnoses for children between the ages of four and 17 increased to 11% compared to a rate of 7.8% in 2003, and rates of parent-reported medication usage for those same children increased from 4.8% in 2007 to a rate of 6.1% in 2011 (Visser, Danielson, Bitsko, Holbrook, Kogan, Ghandour, Perou; & Blumberg, 2014). While examining the rise in ADHD diagnoses, scholars have found the existence of racial and ethnic disparities in ADHD diagnoses and treatment (Collins & Cleary, 2016). Research has shown that Black and Hispanic children appear to be diagnosed with ADHD and

treated with medication for the diagnoses at lower rates than White children (Collins & Cleary, 2016).

To examine the racial and ethnic disparities in ADHD diagnoses, medication usage, and to determine whether documented medication disparities were more likely due to the under diagnosis or under treatment of Black and Hispanic children or the over diagnosis or overtreatment of White children, Coker, Elliott, Toomey, Schwebel, Cuccaro, Emery, Davies, Visser, and Schuster (2016) conducted a longitudinal, multisite study of students in grades fifth through tenth and their caregivers. Findings suggested that Black children, who are historically disadvantaged, are under-diagnosed with ADHD (Coker et al., 2016). This finding has implications for educators and school systems when examining the discipline disparities between White and Black students. The finding informs the currently proposed study as the study addresses unmet mental health needs that could be an underlying contributing factor in preschool students' behaviors that result in suspensions or expulsions.

Like Coker et al. (2016), Parker, Paget, Ford and Gwerman-Jones (2016) also explored how mental health concerns contribute to exclusionary school discipline practices. The Parker et al. (2016) study was conducted to understand experiences and perspectives of the parents of children with psychiatric and psychological disorders as it pertains to exclusionary discipline, to examine better supports for children with mental health disorders who are at risk for school exclusion, and to explore the factors that parents and guardians believed were contributing factors to their children's exclusion from school (Parker et al., 2016). Participants included the parents of students ages five

to 12 who had been assigned exclusionary discipline and the students themselves. The study was aligned with recent research that suggested that students are being suspended and expelled from school at alarming rates, and that specific groups of students appear to receive exclusionary disciplinary consequences more than others (Coker et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2016). The authors highlighted the perspectives of the parents of students who are mentally ill and require additional supports but instead, have been suspended or expelled from school, further contributing to the problems these students and their families currently face. Researchers indicated that while not much research had been done from the perspective of parents whose young children had been suspended or expelled from school, perhaps these findings could be instrumental in providing insight into some of the contributing factors surrounding the phenomenon of early childhood suspensions (Parker et al., 2016). The findings from this study could be applied in preschool programs of various types, both public and private, when considering alternatives to suspensions or expulsions and providing additional supports (such as mental health services or teacher training) prior to considering exclusionary discipline.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Collins, O'Conner, and Supplee (2016) indicated that teacher-child relationships impact student behavior and can have an effect on students' externalizing behaviors that result in exclusionary discipline. Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, and Pianta (2014) posited that improving teacher-student relationships with middle school students may reduce educators' use of exclusionary discipline, which may have implications for preschool teacher-student relationships as well. One way to decrease disproportionality in

exclusionary preschool discipline is to increase teacher empathy (Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016). These scholars suggested that developing positive, meaningful student-teacher relationships will help to reduce the incidents of bias and disproportionately assigned exclusionary discipline consequences.

Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline

Due to discipline disparities, educators and scholars continue to search for ways to eradicate the discipline gap (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Decreasing or eliminating the disparate impact of exclusionary discipline on Black students will require changes in policies, practices and procedures. Over the past 20 years, many states and school districts have begun introducing and implementing interventions and changes to address discipline disparities. The most prevalent school interventions that have emerged as alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices include Restorative Justice, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS). Evidence suggests that when these practices and interventions are implemented with fidelity, Restorative Justice, SEL and SWPBIS help decrease the overall number of school disciplinary issues, which directly impacts the number of suspensions and expulsions.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice first emerged in the criminal justice system, but was introduced into educational settings as an alternative to exclusionary discipline and punitive practices (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles, & Espelage, 2016). The foundation of restorative justice is repairing the harm that has been caused by inappropriate behaviors

or actions. The practice seeks to determine the causal or contributing factors to an offense, and perpetrators or offending parties meet with victims to determine how to rectify the wrong. The offending party and victim may agree to restorative practices such as restorative student conferences, community service or peer mediation. Restorative practices seek to mend the relational harm caused by offenders to victims or offenders to the community. Restorative justice serves as an alternative to suspensions and expulsions that allows students to maintain their place in the educational environment with continued access to instruction.

Although the use of restorative practices has been increasing in U.S. schools, there is little empirical research on its effectiveness (Ortega et al., 2016; Payne & Welch, 2015). Much of the limited research that does exist has explored the outcomes of restorative justice practices in schools as it relates to student behavioral outcomes as opposed to the impact the practice has had on reducing discipline disparities and closing the discipline gap. In a study of one high school the researchers sought to examine student and educator outcomes after participating in restorative circles, a restorative practice. The authors used semi-structured interviews with school staff, administrators, and students to investigate outcomes of using restorative circles as a restorative justice practice. The interview data yielded both positive and negative outcomes. Findings suggested that disappointment and frustration were key themes for negative outcomes from the use of restorative circles, and positive outcomes included taking responsibility for the restoration process, disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline, improvement of relationships, preventing the cycle of conflicts, teaching appropriate dialogue and conflict

resolution, and positive academic and social outcomes (Ortega et al., 2016). The Ortega et al. (2016) findings contributed to my study as the findings suggested that allowing Black students in particular to participate in restorative practices could possibly help decrease or eliminate the long-standing disparities in exclusionary discipline practices.

Previous research has tested the racial threat theory and found that the racial make-up of a school correlates with the school's use of more punitive discipline methods (Payne & Welch, 2015). Racial composition in schools also correlates with negative or harsh interactions with the criminal justice system (Payne & Welch, 2015). To date, there has been little research relating to whether a school's racial composition affects or correlates with the likelihood that restorative justice practices will be used as an alternative to exclusionary discipline. Payne and Welch (2015) did seek to determine a relationship between a school's racial composition and its use of restorative practices such as peer mediation, restorative student conferences, community service or restitution. These scholars found, by using a national random sample in logistic regression analyses, that when schools are comprised of a higher number of Black students they are less likely to use restorative practices to respond to student behaviors (Payne & Welch, 2015). This finding has serious implications for Black students and for school districts as a whole, and it directly relates to the higher rate of exclusionary discipline for Black students.

Social-Emotional Learning

Many school districts are more closely examining their discipline policies, practices and how they identify and respond to student misbehavior. To address issues that have arisen due to policies such as zero tolerance, some districts have begun

incorporating SEL in to their discipline practices. When implemented with fidelity, SEL can teach and help students to: better understand and manage emotions; navigate and improve peer and adult relationships; and engage in more responsible decision-making. These improved social skills lead to improved student behaviors without the excessive use of punitive practices such as zero-tolerance approaches, suspensions and expulsions.

Metro Nashville Public Schools integrated SEL into its curriculum by adopting eight evidenced based SEL programs and aligning the practice with all district initiatives (Neimi & Weissberg, 2017). The implementation of SEL resulted in third-graders in the majority of Metro Nashville's Public Schools demonstrating marked increases in every area of social emotional competency (including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making). One high school had a 33% reduction in discipline referrals 2 years after implementing SEL; a middle school reduced the number of suspensions by 60% one year after implementing SEL; and an elementary school decreased the academic achievement gap by 23% in reading and language arts for its English Language Learners 2 years after implementing SEL (Neimi & Weissberg, 2017). These findings suggest that when implemented with fidelity, SEL can have a significant effect on reducing the rate of exclusionary discipline. The findings do not, however, address the discipline disparities between Black and White students.

Gregory and Fergus (2017) posited that SEL alone cannot adequately address discipline disparities because (1) the practice focuses on student rather than adult behaviors, and (2) SEL ignores contextual and contributing factors such as privilege, power, and cultural differences (p. 11). Failing to address the aforementioned factors

supports implicit biases from educators by ignoring harsh disciplinary measures that are assigned to students due to educators' personal beliefs, attitudes and reactions to behaviors that fall outside of the White cultural norm (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Research has proven that educator behaviors, attitudes and social-emotional IQ directly affect school climate and student motivation and behavior. Gregory and Fergus (2017) argue that SEL employs a "color-blind" approach, removing race as a factor, and will therefore have a limited effect on closing the discipline gap. Bonilla-Silva (2006) suggested that color-blind racism contributes to why SEL will not be successful in eradicating discipline disparities (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). When well-meaning educators subscribe to practices and beliefs such as: (1) the removal of descriptors such as race and gender is the best way to eradicate racism; (2) people should be treated as individuals and social identities should be ignored; and (3) the focus should be on commonalities among people, school systems are more likely to dismiss race as a contributing factor to the school discipline disparity and focus on other possible causes to the phenomenon (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This can prove problematic as schools and school districts may never address adult and system wide behaviors that need to be changed to address the discipline gap.

School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is a multi-tiered system of supports that is designed to teach students pro-social skills that will help improve their academic and social environments and support positive student behaviors (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2018; Horner &

Sugai, 2015). The system has great flexibility in its execution and is designed to meet the needs of individual students and staff. The idea is to place more emphasis on positive behaviors and outcomes rather than focusing on inappropriate behaviors. To be effective, SWPBIS requires school-wide collaboration and effort for using evidence-based practices to meet students' needs. SWPBIS is an extension of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) strategies and techniques to educational settings (Sailor, Stowe, Turnbull, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2007; Tincani, 2007). Like ABA, the goal of SWPBIS is to reduce problem behaviors while encouraging appropriate, desired behaviors, however, there has been minimal empirical research on the practice of SWPBIS as it relates to diverse student populations. For SWPBIS to be considered by school systems as an alternative to exclusionary discipline and to be explored as a practice for reducing the discipline gap, the intervention should be examined for effectiveness with racially, ethnically and culturally diverse populations of students. Determining the effectiveness of SWPBIS with diverse populations could lead school systems across the country to advocate for nationwide adoption of the practice if evidence suggests that the intervention is indeed effective across races, ethnicities and cultures.

Several studies have shown that SWPBIS is effective in reducing incidents of student misbehavior and for reducing the practice of exclusionary discipline (Bradshaw, Mitchell & Leaf, 2010; Bradshaw, Waasdorp & Leaf, 2012). Because of its success and effectiveness, experts have wondered whether the intervention could be also effective for reducing the discipline gap (Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017). Other scholars, however, have expressed concerns that SWPBIS will increase rather than decrease

discipline disparities (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017). Results have been inconclusive in the few studies have been conducted to examine the impact of SWPBIS on discipline disparities.

Using a national data set, McIntosh, Gion, and Bastable (2018) found that in schools where SWPBIS was implemented with fidelity, the exclusionary discipline rate was 20% lower than the national average, and lower for Black students as well. However, despite the lower suspension and expulsion rates at these schools, the racial disparity was still significant. In a small study of 40 schools, Barclay (2015) also found that there was no significant reduction in discipline disparities in schools that used SWPBIS.

Summary and Conclusions

In chapter 2 I addressed the framework on which the study was based, provided background on the extent of the problem of exclusionary discipline, and discussed the impacts of the phenomenon. I then provided research on the impact of zero tolerance discipline policies and how it impacts exclusionary discipline practices; explored parent, student and educator perspectives (from middle and high schools) concerning exclusionary discipline; discussed how race, culture and socioeconomic status impact the discipline gap; explained parent perspectives on discipline for their children with mental health needs; provided research on student-teacher relationships; and explored alternatives to exclusionary discipline.

The statistical evidence that researchers have presented concerning the racial disparities of the assignment of exclusionary discipline indicate that additional investigation or further study is warranted. Findlay (2015) noted that there have been few

empirical studies that have explored whether race is a critical contributing factor in how school administrators administer disciplinary consequences, and Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, and Shic (2016) explained that there is a lack of current research to explain why Black preschool students are more frequently expelled from school than their same age White peers. This gap in practice in the research contributes to the difficulty addressing disparities in exclusionary discipline informing practice. These research findings relate to my study as they showed that there is a gap in practice in the professional literature about possible causes or contributing factors to exclusionary discipline in preschool. In my research study I gathered input directly from preschool teachers, which there is minimal literature in the professional knowledge base, as it pertains to causal factors of exclusionary discipline in preschool settings. The literature review indicated that regardless of the early childhood setting, Black preschoolers receive more frequent or more severe disciplinary consequences than same age White peers.

Research has clearly shown that discipline disparities exist between Black and White students at every grade level in the U.S. public school system. Through the years, researchers have examined this issue and explored factors that contribute to the discipline gap and the high number of exclusionary discipline consequences that are given to Black students. No concrete answers have been determined, however implicit, cultural factors, and student-teacher relationships have been identified as potential factors. Some research indicates that race is actually not the predominant contributing factor to the discipline gap, but that socioeconomic status plays a more important part in which students are subjected to exclusionary discipline.

A clear gap in practice exists in the research as it pertains to preschool educators' perspectives about the disproportionality in disciplinary actions. Most research pertains to middle school and high school aged students. Educators, students and parents from these grade levels have been given the dominant voice in research. More research should be conducted to explore educators' perspectives about the factors that contribute to the discipline gap that exists specifically between Black preschool students and same age White peers, as well as to examine the impacts of exclusionary discipline on Black preschool students and their families. In my research I addressed the gap that pertains to preschool educator perspectives on the discipline gap.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of educators who had been directly involved in the disciplinary referral, intervention, and decision-making processes of preschool students who had been suspended or expelled from school, and to gain insight about why Black preschool students are disproportionately impacted by this phenomenon. For the purpose of this study, educators were defined as teachers, administrators, directors, or coordinators. I sought to provide an understanding about factors that contribute to the preschool discipline gap based on the perspectives of preschool educators. These educators offered perspectives from those who made disciplinary referrals that resulted in exclusionary discipline, those who provided intervention services for preschool students who were referred for behaviors that might result in exclusionary discipline action, those who served as a part of multidisciplinary teams, and those who made disciplinary decisions. Furthermore, I explored how educators made meaning of their role in the disciplinary process and experience.

In this chapter, I discussed the research design and the rationale for the study, followed by a description of my role as a researcher. Next, I provided a detailed discussion of the methodology for this study, including procedures for participant selection; instrumentation; and procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. I detailed my plan for data analysis and explained how I established trustworthiness and addressed threats to validity. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion of ethical procedures and a summary of the chapter's contents.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions were used to conduct this study:

RQ1. What are preschool educators' perspectives on preschool suspensions and expulsions?

RQ2. What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the influence of race and culture in managing student behavior and making exclusionary discipline decisions?

RQ3. What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the factors that contribute to the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices in preschool programs?

RQ4. What are preschool educators' perspectives about the role that their relationships with preschool students and their families play in exclusionary discipline decision making?

This was a basic qualitative study and semistructured interviews were used to collect data. Lichtman (2010) explained that qualitative studies are used when a researcher wants to describe a person or persons' perceptions or perspectives of an issue based on their personal beliefs, values or opinions. Furthermore, according to Creswell (2013), a basic qualitative approach consisting of interviews is most appropriate when a researcher's goal is to learn more about a phenomenon by obtaining information from the individuals who are directly involved in the research problem, those who are influenced by it or have an influence on it, or those who have experienced it. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of educators who have been directly involved in the disciplinary referral, intervention, and disciplinary decision-making processes of

preschool students who have been suspended or expelled from school, and to gain insight about why Black preschool students are disproportionately impacted by this phenomenon. I sought to provide an understanding about factors that contribute to the preschool discipline gap based on the perspectives of preschool educators who make disciplinary referrals that have the potential to result in exclusionary discipline, those who provide intervention for those students, and those who make disciplinary decisions.

Creswell (2013) provided in depth information regarding other qualitative approaches: phenomenology, case study, grounded theory, and ethnography that may have been considered for this study. However, after considering these research design options, I found that a basic qualitative study consisting of semistructured interviews was the most appropriate design for this study. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design in which a researcher seeks to understand a phenomenon by seeking meaning from individuals who share a lived experience (Yin, 2009). Phenomenological studies describe *what* or *how* a phenomenon was experienced. My focus was on educators' perspectives of the contextual factors that contribute to the discipline gap rather than the actual experience (for example, the lived experiences of the students themselves or of the parents of the students who are disproportionately impacted by the discipline gap) itself.

A case study is another qualitative design that was considered for this study. Case studies are used to conduct in-depth, multifaceted examinations of people, groups, or communities (Yin, 2013). A main tenet of a case study is that the research is conducted in the natural setting in which the phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2009). Case studies often involve observing participants or reconstructing a research participant or participants'

case history to answer *how* and *why* questions about research questions, and often include more than one method for collecting data. My research design only consisted of interviews, and it was not conducted in the natural environment with groups or communities. Therefore, a case study was not the most appropriate choice.

Grounded theory is another qualitative design that I considered for this study. The purpose of grounded theory is to gather information from research participants and use it in an attempt to develop a theory about a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). My study was designed to explore educator perspectives and gain insight about the factors that contribute to the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline on Black preschool students. Grounded theory is not appropriate as there was no attempt at theory development based on the study's findings.

Another design that was considered for this study was ethnography. An ethnographic study is one that is conducted in the participants' natural environment to understand the participants' beliefs, values, and culture (Creswell & Proth, 2017). Observations are the main source of data for ethnographic studies. Based on the purpose and goal of my study, an ethnographic study would not be an ideal research design. Ethnographic studies are best for exploring, understanding, and describing cultural norms or patterns (Leedy & Ormond, 2014).

Role of the Researcher

My role for this project was that of a researcher. I did not have any professional influence, relationships, or decision-making powers over any of the participants. All

participants were informed about the confidentiality of their interview responses and were reassured that no identifying information would be disclosed.

Because of my current and previous work with children who present with behavior and emotional challenges, I brought some biases to this study. I remained objective by following the interview protocol and accurately transcribing participants' interview responses as well as by member checking. Participants were asked to review their individual interview transcripts and to notify me about any inaccuracies. Creswell (2009) suggested member checking as a method for research participants to verify that all information was accurately stated during the transcription process.

Methodology

Participant Selection

I focused on preschool educator participants (teachers, administrators and directors) to explore their perspectives relating to exclusionary discipline. Educator perspectives are instrumental in understanding this phenomenon. Other stakeholders such as parents, students, district personnel, or community members would not likely provide the same breadth and depth or relevant information that educators are likely to provide.

The population for this study was inclusive of preschool educators from a county in a southeastern state that has a historically higher disproportionate rate of exclusionary discipline assigned to Black students as compared to White. Educators were defined as teachers, administrators, and directors, and the sample included 11 current or former preschool educators who had been involved in the exclusionary discipline process. All research data came from the carefully recruited and purposefully selected participants.

The rationale for the sample size was based on professional literature concerning data saturation. Francis et al. (2010) posited that 10 participants is considered by most scholars to be the minimum required number to reach data saturation, while Fusch and Ness (2015) argued that a failure to reach data saturation will affect the quality of the research.

Sampling Strategy

The sample for this study included current or former preschool educators in the identified county in the identified southeastern state. The selected participants were involved either in the discipline referral, intervention, or disciplinary decision-making process for preschool students who had been assigned exclusionary discipline as a consequence for their behavior.

Purposive sampling assures that participants are selected based on their ability to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In this study, I used criterion sampling; a type of purposeful sampling that ensures all participants have had experience with the phenomenon. In my study, the phenomenon was having experienced and having been a participant in exclusionary discipline in preschool settings. Criteria for participation included (a) being a current or former preschool educator in the identified county, (b) having been involved in the exclusionary discipline referral, intervention, or disciplinary decision-making process of at least one preschool student, and (c) being willing to participate in a face-to-face or telephone interview. Meeting the participation criteria enhances the quality of the study.

Instrumentation

Individual, semistructured interviews were used to determine educators' perspectives. I explored educators' perspectives concerning preschool suspensions and expulsions, the influence of race and culture on exclusionary discipline decisions, factors that contribute to the disproportionality in preschool discipline, and the role that educators' relationships with preschool students and their families plays in preschool discipline. Educators who volunteered to participate in the study were contacted by email or telephone to schedule an interview and interviews took place either in a mutually agreed upon location or by telephone.

A qualitative interview is a naturalistic research method that is conducted with an individual participant. The intention is to obtain an understanding or insight into the attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, or perspectives of individual participants who have experience with or knowledge about the research topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In a responsive interview the researcher asks questions, listens to responses, and asks more questions based on the participants' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview includes main questions, probes, and follow up questions. The interviews for this study consisted of 14 to 15 questions (Appendix A and B). Each interview began by reading an introduction to the study, followed by offering participants the opportunity to ask questions. Once all questions were thoroughly answered, I began the interview. I used an audio recording application to record all interviews, and wrote field notes to document each interviewee's responses. The conceptual framework informed the interview questions and the interview questions were aligned with the research questions.

Interviews help to provide in-depth responses to research questions and are often considered the best method for topics that are considered sensitive or controversial (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval (approval number 10-04-19-0552185), I began recruitment for this study by posting the IRB approved recruitment flyer in Facebook groups, which included the State Association of Early Care & Education (SCAECE), the State Association for the Education of Young Children (SCAEYC), and the State Early Childhood Association (SCECA). As educators began to express interest, I responded via email, telephone, or Facebook to ensure that the interested parties met participation criteria. If an individual met the criteria, I provided the informed consent form via email. Within two days, I followed up via email, Facebook, or by telephone to schedule an interview at a mutually agreed upon location or by telephone if meeting in person proved inconvenient.

Data Collection

Interviews served as the primary source of data collection. Participants were recruited through Facebook. During the recruitment process, I provided potential participants with a written description of the study that contained both my email address and phone number to express interest. When expressing interest in participation, the interested parties were asked a series of questions to screen for meeting participation criteria. Once requirement criteria were met, I scheduled an interview with each of the 11 purposefully selected educators. One-time interviews were conducted at a mutually

agreed upon location or by telephone. Interviews were audio recorded using Otter, an iPhone audio recording app. During each interview, I also took handwritten notes to record participants' responses. Upon completion and transcription of the interviews, all participants were asked to verify the transcriptions for content and for accuracy. Once transcriptions were verified, participants were thanked for their participation and considered to have exited the study.

Data Analysis Plan

I answered the research questions by thoroughly reading and reviewing the interview transcripts multiple times and using open coding with thematic analysis. All data and research related material were secured by using NVivo for data storage. The data collected is password protected. I followed Creswell's (2009) and Esterberg's (2002) procedures for data analysis and coding. Esterberg (2002) posited that qualitative data should be analyzed line by line as to identify themes and categories of interest. Creswell (2009) added that researchers should look for codes to emerge during the data analysis process. After thoroughly reviewing the data through the open coding process, I reviewed the codes for emerging themes.

Creswell (2009) described a nonsequential, interactive process to data analysis for qualitative research, and explained that analyzing data for this type of research is an ongoing process. I followed Creswell's (2009) six recommended steps to analyze the data in this study. I organized and prepared data for analysis by reviewing the audio from the recorded interviews and transcribed the audio into written transcripts. I read through the transcribed data and reflected on the information provided by the participants, then began

a detailed analysis using the coding process by organizing the data into sentence segments and then into categories, and labeling the categories with terms that were used by participants. I used the coding process to develop a description of the participants, and developed categories for the participants for analysis. I also represented the themes' descriptions in the qualitative narrative, to include themes that emerged during data analysis into narratives to represent findings from the participants' responses. And lastly, I interpreted the meaning of the data. During this step I focused on and made meaning of the participants' perspectives of their experiences, paying specific attention to exact language, and to the conclusions drawn by each participant. I acknowledged discrepant cases by including participant experiences that did not emerge as themes. While discrepant cases are representative of only a few participants, these cases can be useful for providing a more complete description of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility (or trustworthiness) is the equivalent of internal validity, and is considered the most important criteria of a research study (Connelly, 2016). In research, trustworthiness "refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study" (Connelly, 2016, p. 435). Readers must be able to trust that a study's findings are based on data and not on the researchers own predispositions (Shenton, 2004). At a minimum, qualitative research should include criteria for guaranteeing quality and trustworthiness by setting standards for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Connelly, 2016;

Shenton, 2004). I demonstrated credibility for this study by taking steps to show that a true picture of the phenomenon was thoroughly examined (Shenton, 2004). I conducted both member checks and a peer review. Member checks help to ensure credibility by allowing participants to affirm that the research summary reflects their perspectives (Carlson, 2010). After themes were developed, I conducted member checks by emailing a summary of the data analysis to each participant. Then, prior to finalizing themes, I reviewed and analyzed the participants' feedback from the member checks. I also conducted a peer review by having a peer (colleague) review the data in order to confirm both accuracy and quality.

Transferability

External validity, or how well the findings apply beyond the context of the study, is referred to as transferability (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). In this study, I offered sufficient details about the fieldwork so that readers can decide if their own potential research environment is a similar enough situation for the study's findings to be applied (Shenton, 2004). I used rich, thick description of the study's context (Merriam, 2002) so that future researchers can make decisions about the possible transferability of the findings. Using rich description provides readers and future researchers enough description and detailed information to contextualize and determine to what extent their own situation compares with or matches that of the study (Merriam, 2002).

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research is equivalent to reliability in quantitative research (Shenton, 2004). Dependability describes the study's reliability to the extent that future researchers would arrive at the same results after conducting the same procedures. To establish the dependability in this study, I utilized an audit trail to explain in detail the data collection methods, data analysis, procedures and decision points (Merriam, 2002), and I recorded the interviews to ensure the accuracy of transcriptions.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to a study's objectivity (Shenton, 2004). Researchers should ensure that findings have come from actual data that has been collected and analyzed and not from their own assumptions (Shenton, 2004). In qualitative studies, researchers are expected to not only collect data, but to also analyze and interpret participants' responses, perspectives and experiences. For this reason, qualitative researchers must think broadly, avoid narrow views and thinking, and abstain from their own assumptions (Stake, 2000). It is important to take precautions to establish credibility; therefore, I ensured the objectivity of this study by implementing the process of reflexivity. When a researcher demonstrates reflexivity, the researcher is transparent about personal biases, positions, and values (Walker et al., 2013). I ensured transparency so that the study was conducted and presented honestly.

Ethical Procedures

There are several aspects to consider when contemplating research ethics. In terms of a relational approach between the researcher and participants, the researcher

should allow himself to become engaged with the interactions of the study participants; consider that personal biases may emerge in the researcher's words or actions during the study; respect, understand and acknowledge the humanity of participants; and appreciate that there are differences that exist among people (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Obtaining approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB); ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and transparency; and obtaining informed consent are all paramount components of ethical considerations in data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Institutional Review Boards provide critical safeguards against harm to study participants and can point out any potential ethical problems prior to the conduction of the study. Researchers are under an ethical obligation to keep any information that is disclosed during the course of the study confidential, and likewise, participants' identities should never be disclosed. A study should never be conducted without participants having been fully informed of the purpose, benefits, potential risks, the opportunity to ask questions, and without having given informed consent.

To conduct an ethical study, I obtained all required permissions and approvals from both Walden University and the participants. I submitted the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to obtain permission to proceed with data collection, and upon identification of the participants, I obtained participant consent via the Informed Consent form prior to conducting the research interview. When reviewing the consent form with participants, I emphasized the assurance of confidentiality, voluntary participation, the process for early withdrawal, and the proper elimination of data once the study is complete.

During the recruitment process, I stressed that participation is voluntary, and no educator was coerced to participate in the study. Participants were advised that there was no significant risk involved in this study, and that I would honor any request for early withdrawal regardless of the reason. There was no penalty to participants for early withdrawal from the study. Potential participants were further advised prior to participation that there is no monetary compensation for their participation in the study. To motivate educators' interest in participation, I stressed the potential educational benefits and impacts on social change.

Securing research data is another way to demonstrate ethics in data collection. Data security can be considered of high moral quality, however, according to Stahl, Doherty, Shaw, and Janicke (2014) there has been some cause for both debate and concern. Securing data has presented unique challenges such as abuse of power through technology, applications, and programs (Stahl et al., 2014). The information collected from research participants will be kept confidential, and will not be used for any purpose other than that of the research study. Randomly selected codes or pseudonyms were assigned to disguise any potential identifying information such as participants, counties, schools, or school districts. All data and research information will be kept secure, with research data being maintained on NVivo and protected by password on USB drive. Data will be stored for a period of no less than 5 years after the university has officially accepted the dissertation. After a period of more than 5 years, all electronic data will be destroyed by means of deletion.

Summary

In chapter 3, I detailed the research method for this study, the design and the rational for such. Additionally, I explained the role of the researcher, the methodology, and instrumentation. Further, I detailed the requirements for participant selection, and procedures for recruitment, participation and data collection. This chapter also outlined how data from the study will be analyzed; how the researcher will ensure trustworthiness, minimize threats to validity, and what ethical procedures were taken throughout the course of the study.

In chapter 4, I described the setting where the research was conducted and presented participant characteristics that were relevant to the study. I also gave an overview of data collection and data analysis methods, provided the results of the study, and provided evidence of the study's trustworthiness by discussing the steps taken to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In chapter 5, I summarized and interpreted the study's findings, and described: the study's limitations to trustworthiness, recommendations for further research, potential impact for positive social change, empirical implications. Lastly, I made recommendations for practice and provided a conclusion to the study.

Chapter 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of educators who have been directly involved in the disciplinary referral, intervention, and decision-making processes of preschool students who have been suspended or expelled from school, to explore the contextual factors that result in exclusionary discipline in preschool settings, and to gain insight about why certain demographics are disproportionately impacted by this phenomenon. I used a basic qualitative approach to answer the research questions:

RQ1. What are preschool educators' perspectives about preschool suspensions and expulsions?

RQ2. What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the influence of race and culture in managing student behavior and making exclusionary discipline decisions?

RQ3. What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the factors that contribute to the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices in preschool programs?

RQ4. What are preschool educators' perspectives about the role that their relationships with preschool students and their families play in exclusionary discipline decision making?

Next, I described the setting in which data collection took place, the demographics, and participant characteristics that are related to the study, explained data collection techniques, gave an overview of data analysis, presented the results of the study, and offered evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

This study took place in a single county located in a Southeastern state. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), 6% of the county's total population of approximately 406,000 residents is preschool age (age five or below and not yet enrolled in kindergarten). The county where the study was conducted is the second largest in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), and it is comprised of one school district. School discipline data have revealed a trend in disproportionate suspensions and expulsions when comparing disciplinary consequences for Black students to that of their White peers. The suspension rate for Black students in this county is eight to nine times higher than White students at the elementary level, approximately five times greater in the middle grades, and roughly six times higher at the high school level. Additionally, school district data have shown that Black students who attend school in this county have the highest expulsion rates of any race of students at both the elementary and high school levels.

Demographics

This study included 11 educator participants, which included six teachers and five members of leadership (directors and administrators). The study included four White and seven Black participants. Years of professional experience in preschool settings ranged from 1 to 31 years. See Table 1.

Table 1
Research Participant Demographics

Participant	Title	Total Yrs PreK Experience	Race
P1	Director	23	B
P2	Teacher	1	W
P3	Teacher	5	W
P4	Teacher	4	W
P5	Admin	2	B
P6	Director	20	B
P7	Principal	7	B
P8	Teacher	9	B
P9	Director	12	B
P10	Teacher	26	W
P11	Teacher	31	B

Data Collection

I received approval from Walden University's IRB (approval #10-04-19-0552185) prior to beginning participant recruitment and data collection. Recruitment occurred via social media on Facebook. I posted research participant recruitment flyers on Facebook pages that would likely have preschool educator as members. The flyers invited those who might be interested in participating in participating in the study to contact me directly by telephone or email. Facebook recruitment pages included the SCAECE, SCAEYC, and the SCECA. When potential participants expressed an interest in the study, I first verified that each individual met participation criteria. If the criteria were met and the participant agreed to move forward in the process, I emailed a copy of the consent form for review. The consent form provided additional information about the study, and after review, I answered questions and provided any necessary clarification. Participants were asked to respond to the email containing the consent form with "I

consent" if they agreed to participate in the study, or, if they preferred, they were given the option to sign the consent form in person.

A total of 11 educator participants took part in interviews for this study over a 28-day period, between November 2, 2019 and November 30, 2019. The participants included five preschool administrators or directors and six teachers. Participants' years of experience ranged from 1 to 31 years, and all participants had been involved in the exclusionary discipline process or preschoolers either through documenting and intervening with behaviors or through the decision-making process. The data collection process consisted of one time, one-on-one, semistructured interviews with each participant. All interviews were voluntary and confidential. Data were collected either in person at a mutually agreed upon location or by telephone, and all settings were quiet and free from distractions. I personally conducted each interview, and the interview sessions lasted between 17 to 26 minutes, depending on participant responses. Interviews were semistructured to yield the best possible data for describing the phenomenon as experienced by the educators who participated in the study. I used prepared, prewritten, self-designed interview questions during the interviews and also asked additional questions for clarity, for elaboration or to probe for additional information. I took handwritten notes and also audio-recorded interviews to ensure accuracy. Lastly, after I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews, I emailed each participant a copy of the interview transcript. I asked participants to read and verify the interview transcriptions for content accuracy and to respond with any discrepancies or clarifications within 72 hours. Participants exited the study after member checks were completed.

Data Analysis

I answered the research questions by thoroughly reading and reviewing the interview transcripts multiple times and using open coding with thematic analysis. All data and research related material is being kept confidential and secure by using NVivo for data storage. The data is password protected. I followed Creswell's (2009) and Esterberg's (2002) procedures for data analysis and coding. Esterberg posited that qualitative data should be analyzed line by line as to identify themes and categories of interest. Creswell added that researchers should look for codes to emerge during the data analysis process. After thoroughly reviewing the data through the open coding process, I reviewed the codes for emerging themes.

I used Creswell's (2009) recommended steps to analyze the data in this study. I organized and prepared the data for analysis by reviewing the audio from the recorded interviews and transcribing the audio into written transcripts. I read through the transcribed data and reflected on the information provided by the participants, then began a detailed analysis using the coding process by organizing the data into sentence segments and then into categories, and labeling the categories with terms that were used by participants. Further, I used the coding process to develop a description of the participants, and represented the themes' descriptions in the qualitative narrative. I included the themes that emerged during data analysis in the narratives to represent findings from the participants' responses. Lastly, I interpreted the meaning of the data. During this step, I focused on and made meaning of the participants' perspectives of their experiences, paying specific attention to exact language, and to the conclusions drawn by

each participant. I acknowledged discrepant cases by including participant responses and experiences that did not emerge as themes. While discrepant responses were a representative of only two participants in two separate interview questions, these cases can be useful for providing a more complete description of the phenomenon.

During the data analysis of participants' interview transcripts, several common themes and patterns emerged. The following major themes were developed from participants' responses to the interview questions:

- A lack of school based supports
- No benefit of exclusionary discipline for the student
- Socioeconomics and family support
- Implicit bias

Theme 1: A Lack of School Based Supports

The absence of adequate school based supports was a recurring theme throughout this inquiry. Participants expressed frustration with what they perceived to be the increasing behavioral and mental health needs of preschool students and the lack of response from district level officials and lawmakers who have the ability to fund what they believe are essential resources such as school based mental health providers and behavior consultants. Participants shared the following perceptions: P8 expressed that

> Preschool children are in crisis and, you know…I mean, our government and school officials are not responding accordingly with what these children really need to help them, or even with what I need as a teacher to be able to meet their needs.

In reference to providing mental health and behavioral support at her preschool for the students she serves, P1 shared,

> I have a lot of kids that are really just not focused and have behavioral issues and need therapy and all of these other resources-this (mental and behavioral health agency) service do(es) everything. So now I have them coming in, but if that parent never came in, then….you know the preschools now….it's up to us to reach out and get resources for the children. We're on our own. But when we're required to get 26 hours of training and take all types of classes, dealing with this stuff should be a part of that training.

P10 went on to explain that although school based supports such as mental health therapists were available at one of the high poverty schools where she had taught, preschool students were often overlooked as needing those supports and services, which she assumed was due to the children's ages. P10 stated,

> I don't always think some of the professionals understand that the behavior isn't age appropriate and that the kids don't always just grow out of it. They um, I mean…they write it off…I guess, like, as age appropriate or as 'kids will be kids, and that's not it. Some of these children really need help with being aggressive and all, and they aren't getting it.

Theme 2: No Benefit of Exclusionary Discipline for Students

None of the 11 educators who participated in this research study believed that exclusionary discipline during the preschool years benefited the students. Collectively, the participants agreed that the students needed socialization in preschool to help develop

the very skills for which they were being suspended or expelled. Both administrators and teachers reported that although they were not in support of exclusionary discipline in preschool, sometimes the student was suspended because the student and teacher needed time apart due to the student's behavior and the teacher's frustration with ongoing behavior concerns. P5 stated that,

> I know that there are administrators who will suspend kids just to give the teacher a break. But I wasn't that type of administrator. I tried to be fair. I wasn't going to suspend a child, especially a three-year-old just to give a teacher a break.

And in reference to a four-year-old who was suspended for hitting her, P2 stated,

> And I think on that day it, not necessarily a suspension was the answer but I do think that after him hitting me, it wouldn't have been a good situation to put him back in my classroom for the rest of the day. We needed to have a break.

P7 reported,

> It wasn't an ideal situation to suspend this student, because in reality we knew it wouldn't resolve the problems he was having in school, but at that point, I think both the teacher and student needed a break from each other.

Participants also reported that preschool students don't understand why they are being suspended or expelled and that exclusionary discipline was sometimes used as a consequence for parents. P4 reported,

> I think it's more of an eye opener to the parents because three- and four-year-olds…don't understand…but it is more of an eye opener to the parents. 'Hey you know we've tried and tried and tried. You know, this is the last step, this is you

> know, an eye opener for you. Hey, this is all we can do for you and your child. I'm sorry'.

None of the participants who were interviewed for this study believed that exclusionary discipline benefits preschool students. The participants were unanimous in the belief that when suspended or expelled from school, preschoolers lose access to both valuable instructional time and some of the very supports they need (e.g. social-emotional instruction) that help them learn to better self-regulate and manage their behaviors. In the long run, participants believe that exclusionary discipline is detrimental to preschool age students.

Theme 3: Socioeconomics and Family Support/Involvement

Research participants reported that most of the students who were assigned exclusionary discipline resided in low-income homes and that the parents of those students were rarely actively involved in their children's preschool education. P9 explained that,

> We never really see those parents show up at the school. Most of the communication is by telephone, and that's if they answer…or when they come in for pick up. Sometimes we have to…we have to call a grandparent or auntie or somebody else. I mean, it's hard when I just can't get the parent to support us. I mean, just communicate with us so we can work together.

P6 stated, "his mother was the only working parent working a minimum wage job, so there wasn't a lot of income." P5 offered, "I can't really say (their income) for sure, but I know that they were moving into like the reduced income housing that was right next to

the school." Other participants responded that families were "low income," "on free and reduced lunch," or that the family's income was at or below the poverty line. P4 did state that of the six students that had been suspended or expelled from the preschool where she worked during her tenure, "a few of them were pretty decent income. You know, professors and that type of thing." This response is considered discrepant, as only two to three of the 28 students discussed were reported to be from middle to high-income homes.

Either the research participants themselves or the preschools adjusted their family involvement expectations based on the families' socioeconomic levels; however, even with the adjustments (such as time commitment or the number of times parents were expected to volunteer per year) to traditional expectations, most of the students' families were still not adequately involved in their children's education as measured by the participants' standards. Due to work schedules or other factors that were believed to be associated with their socioeconomic status, most families either could not or did not participate in traditional methods of school involvement such as serving as classroom volunteers or chaperoning on field trips. The lack of parent involvement reported by participants supports the finding that schools and educators use fewer strategies to involve and engage families with lower socioeconomic levels (Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison, 2015).

According to Ule, Živoder, and du Bois-Reymond (2015), most schools have expectations for family involvement, however, these expectations are based on middle-class values and do not take into consideration factors such as the family's

socioeconomics, culture, or language. Although one participant in this study noted that a student's parent initially appeared to be involved by making daily visits to the school to have lunch with the student, the participant later discovered that the parent was actually giving the student medication for ADHD when the parent came for lunch and had not disclosed this information to the director or teacher. All but one research participant indicated that the parents of the students who received exclusionary discipline were not very involved with the child's preschool education as compared to the school's expectations, regardless of the parent's income level. P1 stated,

> If we can't get the parents to come in and join and help us, then that's a big factor right there. So we see that we don't have help that we're not getting the partnership, the parent and teacher communication, the director-parent communication so that's just one big factor. When they just don't help us with the child's behavior.

P2 responded that, "there were times when the parent was very involved, and easy to get ahold of and there were other times where I wouldn't be able to get in touch with the mom at all." And P4 went on to report that

> I got a lot of eye rolls. It was 'I'm at work y'all will have to handle that. I can't leave work, my job is important.' We had parents who, you know, we'd ask them to come and sit in the classrooms and they would tell us they didn't have time. You know, 'that's not my job to do that- it's your job to do it.' So it was a lot of pull, you know, we would try to reach out and there was no support.

It should be noted that P3 provided a response to the interview question pertaining to family support and involvement that was discrepant from the other participants' responses. In reference to one student's parent, P3 indicated that

> She was on top of her game…we got Headstart involved, and they brought all of these family counselors in to do work with mom and daughter together, to show them how to even just do some things as simple as a puzzle together and how to best respond to her in certain situations and things like that. So she took every little opportunity that we gave her to benefit from this experience and she just wanted to learn how she could make life easier for her little baby.

Even with modified expectations for classroom involvement, the parents of most students who received exclusionary discipline were not involved with or responsive to the school as the school or teacher expected. Research has shown that educator expectations for family support and involvement may be influenced by the educators' beliefs about students from certain backgrounds (Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2015). Due to the behaviors of the children described during their interviews, most participants did not have high expectations for family support and involvement.

Theme 4: Implicit Biases

Participants reported observing differences in the way educators interacted with, managed the behaviors of and disciplined Black preschool students as compared to White preschoolers or preschoolers of other races. P7 reported, "There have been countless occasions where I have had to call to a teacher's attention that they had submitted a discipline referral for behaviors that a Black student had displayed when a White student

who displayed the same behaviors had been given a time out or lost time from recess." P5 went on to explain, "if you're at a school in a suburban neighborhood, and a Caucasian girl is having a tantrum… crying, screaming, having a full out tantrum. And then you go to an urban school in a poverty neighborhood, and a little Black girl is having a tantrum. It's going to be viewed differently. It's going to be viewed differently. It's going to be written up differently. If it's even written up (for the Caucasian student)…if it's written up, the Caucasian girl will be, you know, a tantrum. If it's written up… and it's doubtful that it would be written up. The referral for the African American girl will be…will have words like 'aggressive' especially if it's a boy. I see that a lot…'aggressive.' And it's just viewed differently than their peers. African Americans are just viewed differently than their White peers. They're just not allowed to have a tantrum." P4 offered, "…because of where we live, some Caucasian teachers are just set in their ways of how things should be and how kids should act." P11 went on to add, "I love all the kids the same, but I think…I'm probably tougher on the Black kids, especially these Black boys, because I know what the future holds for them with where they come from. I want better for them, you know? So I'm harder on them and expect more...they don't have the same privileges as my White students."

Participants collectively agreed that implicit bias may play a role in the racial disproportionality in exclusionary school discipline, and while almost all participants stated that they had witnessed incidents with other educators that believed were possibly related to bias, none of the educators seemed to be aware of their own biases or that there

was even a possibility for racial, gender or socioeonomic related bias. Every participant believed that they treat all of their students the same.

Results

Research participants were interviewed to gain insight about their perspectives and experiences in regards to the racial disproportionality of exclusionary discipline in preschools. Participants were identified using alphanumeric codes in both the interview transcripts and the research study. This section will present results based on the participants' responses to the interview questions that relate to each research question. Discrepancies included participant perspectives on family support and involvement and on the impact of socioeconomic status on students' behaviors. While these responses were considered during data analysis because they may add to the overall understanding of the phenomenon, the responses are considered discrepant, as only two to three of the 28 students discussed were reported by participants to be from middle to high-income homes, and only one parent of the 28 students discussed was actively involved in her child's preschool education.

RQ1: Perspectives Regarding Exclusionary Discipline

RQ1: What are preschool educators' perspectives about preschool suspensions and expulsions?

The participants in this study unanimously agreed that the assignment of exclusionary discipline in preschool is not beneficial for children, and that three and four year old students should only be suspended or expelled if their behavior constantly poses a threat to other students or staff, and the interventions that have been implemented do

not result in improved behaviors. P7 reflected on her experiences with exclusionary discipline and shared that,

> It is unfortunate that suspensions and expulsions are an option for preschool children, and I regret having to say that I have had to suspend children as young as four years old. Unfortunately, my hands are tied when children hurt other children or their teachers.

P9 shared, "I hate that they are starting out their schooling like this. They need to be in school. Sitting at home isn't teaching them what they need to know for kindergarten and they just fall behind…" All of the participants expressed concerns about the long-term social and academic impacts of exclusionary discipline during the preschool years, and agreed that preschool educators need more support and options for keeping preschoolers in school and dealing with undesired behaviors. P10 explained, "It's really not fair to the child. Yes, they did those things…I mean, yes they were aggressive, but they're probably learning the behavior at home. They need to be in school to learn other ways to cope."

RQ2: Race, Culture and Exclusionary Discipline

RQ2: What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the influence of race and culture in managing student behavior and making exclusionary discipline decisions?

Despite 17 of the 28 children whose exclusionary discipline process the educators had been involved being Black and 25 of them being boys, none of the participants believed that race or gender was a factor in the way they personally managed students' behaviors or made disciplinary decisions. Research participants stressed that although

they had observed some disciplinary decisions that appeared to be race related, they believe that racial disparities in the way preschool students are disciplined are more of an individual educator issue as opposed to a systematic one. P4 shared,

> I worked at a preschool before where the Caucasian teachers would pick and choose who they thought, you know, who they didn't want in their class. And a lot of times you do see that type of behavior from the Caucasian teachers. You know, 'I don't want that in my classroom' or you know, 'your parents must be dead because you're African American and that's why you're acting out'…you do see that a lot in preschools… 'Oh, you must not have money that's why you act that way.' It's a lot with some Caucasian teachers, you know towards African American children.

Other participants reported that the influence of race and culture on discipline is a systematic issue and has a significant impact on how preschool students are disciplined. These participants believe that both explicit and implicit biases influence disciplinary decisions, resulting in the racial disproportionality that exists between Black preschool students and their White peers. P8 stated, "There is no doubt…no doubt in my mind that race plays a factor in how these children are disciplined. You can't always see it, but it's there. I don't even think they realize it…how they treat these kids differently." P11 offered,

> In my experience, either the White teachers are too soft on Black kids because of where they think they (the kids) came from, or they're too hard on them because

> of the color of their skin. There is a big difference in how the kids are, you know…treated…that I've seen in my 31 years.

RQ3: Contextual Factors that Contribute to Exclusionary Discipline

RQ3: What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the factors that contribute to the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices in preschool programs?

Collectively, preschool educators reported that socioeconomics, family involvement, family dynamics, and unaddressed mental health needs are the most significant contributing factors to the ongoing issue of racial disproportionality in exclusionary school discipline. P9 offered,

> There's a lot of young parents, parents who aren't really educated…I mean, just all sorts of things. They really don't have the skills to deal with their kids, or you know…the kids have been sitting at home for three, four years with no structure or anything, or no discipline, and then all of a sudden they're in school and they don't have the skills…they haven't been taught.

P6 reported that "his mother was the only working parent…minimum income job…", and then went on to say,

> I just felt like maybe he didn't have a male figure in his life. I felt like mom was more of like…she catered to him in a lot of ways, and I felt like even though he was four, he knew how to manipulate her and intimidate her. And if he couldn't do that with other people it made him angry and upset and he kind of took it out on them. I think mom did that because she was the only parent and caregiver at

> the time. I think a lot of those things resulted in his behavior based on the environment in which he lived.

P3 expressed,

> Not having parent support makes it harder when they're not necessarily seeing it, seeing eye to eye with the teacher. You know, for example, we use a system in preschool where they would get a color for every day for their behavior. And if parents are checking that every night and responding to them based on what they got, you know, giving them a reward or consequence based on their color that can make it kind of hard because then they're just going to, they're going to know that they can get away with these behaviors at school. Because when they take this color home from mom or dad or Auntie or granny or whoever it is, you know there's not going to be any kind of consequence.

P1 shared about the previously discussed parent who was discovered to have been coming to the preschool every day at lunch and giving medication to her son,

> After two weeks of logging everything about his behavior…everything that he's done from the morning when he came in at 7:30 until 5:00 when he left, she finally just came in one day when he wet his clothes, and he had, you know, just kept urinating on himself like the whole day. She just cursed us out and told us you know either you're going to keep them here, or I'm going to call my lawyer back because you can't just let him go for this and that. Then I had the to pull out my policy, and let her know all of the things that he had done, and I had the behavior log to back it up. Even though we worked with them the first month, and

> asked if anything had ever happened to him, she kept telling us no. But later on after he was expelled we found out that he was diagnosed with not severe autism, but he was diagnosed with some type of autism. And she had to bring us those letters (concerning his autism diagnosis) once she really broke down, and now she wants to work with us, and it's pretty much too late. Because now at this point we see that he needs a little more help than we can give him.

RQ4: Educator Relationships with Students and Families

RQ4. What are preschool educators' perspectives about the role that their relationships with preschool students and their families play in exclusionary discipline decision-making?

Educators agree that developing a good, positive relationship with students and parents alike is paramount to preschool students' success; however, neither the teachers nor administrators who were interviewed in this study believe that those relationships have any influence on managing behaviors or on disciplinary decisions. P7 shared,

> At the end of the day, positive relationships with the children and their families helps our school to function more smoothly, but teacher-student and teacher-family relationships cannot influence my decision-making when students are becoming aggressive or causing harm to others. I have to take the appropriate action to keep everyone safe.

P4 added,

My expectations are the same for every student. I treat them all the same regardless of my relationship with their parents, and when admin(istration) has to make a decision about

suspending or expelling a student, I don't really think they take my relationship with the student or family into consideration. See Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of Major Themes Related Interview Questions

Theme 1:	Theme 2:	Theme 3:	Theme 4:
A lack of school based supports	No benefit of exclusionary discipline for students	Socio-economics and family involvement	Implicit bias
Minimal mental health and be-havioral supports	Exclusionary discipline does not address behaviors long-term	Most students reside in low-income households	Teachers respond differently to students based on race or culture
No alternative options to exclusionary discipline	Suspensions do not deter behavior	Most parents not actively involved	

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility (or trustworthiness) is the equivalent of internal validity, and is considered the most important criteria of a research study (Connelly, 2016). In research, trustworthiness "refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study" (Connelly, 2016, p. 435). Readers must be able to trust that a study's findings are based on data and not on the researchers own predispositions (Shenton, 2004). At a minimum, qualitative research should include criteria for guaranteeing quality and trustworthiness by setting standards

for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Connelly, 2016; Shenton, 2004). I demonstrated credibility for this study by taking steps to show that a true picture of the phenomenon was thoroughly examined (Shenton, 2004). I conducted both member checks and a peer review to ensure accuracy of the data collected during the interviews. Member checks help to ensure credibility by allowing participants to affirm that the research summary reflects their perspectives (Carlson, 2010). After themes were developed, I conducted member checks by emailing a summary of the data analysis to each participant. Then, prior to finalizing themes, I checked and analyzed the participants' feedback from the transcript reviews. Based on participant feedback, there were two minor changes made in the transcripts prior to finalizing them. Finally, I conducted a peer review by having a peer (colleague) review the data in order to confirm both accuracy and quality.

Transferability

External validity, or how well the findings apply beyond the context of the study, is referred to as transferability (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). This study offers enough details about the fieldwork so that readers can decide if their own potential research environment is a similar enough situation for the study's findings to be applied (Shenton, 2004). I used rich, thick description of the study's context (Merriam, 2002) so that future researchers can make decisions about the possible transferability of the findings. Using rich description provides readers and future researchers enough description and detailed information to contextualize and determine to what extent their own situation compares with or matches that of the study (Merriam, 2002).

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research is equivalent to reliability in quantitative research (Shenton, 2004). Dependability describes the study's reliability to the extent that future researchers would arrive at the same results after conducting the same procedures. To establish the dependability in this study, I described in detail the steps that I took during the research process. I described the process for collecting raw data, the data analysis process, and the process for interviewing and communicating with research participants.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to a study's objectivity (Shenton, 2004). Researchers should ensure that findings have come from actual data that has been collected and analyzed and not from their own assumptions (Shenton, 2004). In qualitative studies, researchers are expected to not only collect data, but to also analyze and interpret participants' responses, perspectives and experiences. For this reason, qualitative researchers must think broadly, avoid narrow views and thinking, and abstain from their own assumptions (Stake, 2000). It is important to take precautions to establish credibility; therefore, I ensured the objectivity of this study by implementing the process of reflexivity. When a researcher demonstrates reflexivity, the researcher is transparent about personal biases, positions, and values (Walker et al., 2013). I ensured transparency so that the study was conducted and presented honestly.

Ethical Procedures

There are several aspects to consider when contemplating research ethics. In terms of a relational approach between the researcher and participants, the researcher should allow himself to become engaged with the interactions of the study participants; consider that personal biases may emerge in the researcher's words or actions during the study; respect, understand and acknowledge the humanity of participants; and appreciate that there are differences that exist among people (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Obtaining approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB); ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and transparency; and obtaining informed consent are all paramount components of ethical considerations in data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Institutional Review Boards provide critical safeguards against harm to study participants and can point out any potential ethical problems prior to the conduction of the study. Researchers are under an ethical obligation to keep any information that is disclosed during the course of the study confidential, and likewise, participants' identities should never be disclosed. A study should never be conducted without participants having been fully informed of the purpose, benefits, potential risks, the opportunity to ask questions, and without having given informed consent.

To conduct an ethical study, I obtained all required permissions and approvals from both Walden University and the participants. I submitted the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to obtain permission to proceed with data collection, and upon identification of the participants, I obtained participant consent via the Informed Consent form prior to conducting the research interview. When reviewing

the consent form with participants, I emphasized the assurance of confidentiality, voluntary participation, the process for early withdrawal, and the proper elimination of data once the study is complete.

During the recruitment process, I stressed that participation is voluntary. Participants were advised that there was no significant risk involved in this study, and that I would honor any request for early withdrawal regardless of the reason. I explained that there was no penalty to participants for early withdrawal from the study. Potential participants were further advised prior to participation that there is no monetary compensation for their participation in the study. To motivate educators' interest in participation, I stressed the potential educational benefits and impacts on social change.

Securing research data is another way to demonstrate ethics in data collection. Data security can be considered of high moral quality, however, according to Stahl, Doherty, Shaw, and Janicke (2014) there has been some cause for both debate and concern. Securing data has presented unique challenges such as abuse of power through technology, applications, and programs (Stahl et al., 2014). The information collected from research participants will be kept confidential, and will not be used for any purpose other than that of the research study. Randomly selected codes or pseudonyms were assigned to disguise any potential identifying information such as participants, counties, schools, or school districts. All data and research information is being kept secure, with research data being maintained on NVivo and protected by password on USB drive. Data will be stored for a period of no less than 5 years after the university has officially

accepted the dissertation. After a period of more than 5 years, all electronic data will be destroyed by means of deletion.

Summary

In chapter 4, I described the setting where the research was conducted and presented participant characteristics that were relevant to the study. I also gave an overview of data collection and data analysis methods, provided the results of the study, and provided evidence of the study's trustworthiness by discussing the steps that were taken to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

This qualitative study was conducted to explore educators' perspectives concerning the racial disproportionality of exclusionary discipline in preschools. The purpose of this study was explore the perspectives of educators who had been directly involved in the disciplinary referral, intervention and decision making processes of preschool students who had been suspended or expelled from preschool and to gain insight about why Black preschool students are disproportionately impacted by this phenomenon. Eleven educators, including six teachers and five administrators or directors were interviewed. Data were analyzed using open coding and thematic analysis, and four themes emerged. Themes include: a lack of school based supports, no benefit of exclusionary discipline, socioeconomics and family support, and implicit bias. Discrepancies included perspectives on family support and socioeconomics.

All research participants agreed that exclusionary discipline in preschool is an extremely difficult phenomenon to address and that there are little if any benefits for the student who is suspended or expelled (RQ1). The educators who participated in this study

agreed that there is a racial disproportionality in preschool discipline, but not all agreed that this disproportionality is due to race (RQ2). All participants believed that factors such as socioeconomics, mental health and family dynamics greatly influence preschool students' behaviors and the likelihood to be suspended or expelled from school (RQ3), and that while having a good relationship with the student and family help support positive classroom behaviors, those relationships do not play a factor in administrators' decisions when preschool students display dangerous or unsafe behaviors toward other students or staff (RQ4).

In chapter 5, I summarized and interpreted the study's findings and described the study's limitations to trustworthiness, recommendations for further research, the potential impact for positive social change, and empirical implications. Lastly, I provided a conclusion to the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of educators who have been directly involved in the disciplinary referral, intervention, and decision making processes of preschool students who had been suspended or expelled from preschool, and to gain insight about why Black preschool students are disproportionately impacted by this phenomenon. In this study, educators were defined as preschool teachers, administrators, or directors. Preschoolers were defined as children who were enrolled in three-year-old and four-year-old programs. I sought to provide an understanding about factors that contribute to the preschool discipline gap based on the perspectives of preschool educators. These educators offered perspectives from those who made disciplinary referrals that resulted in exclusionary discipline, those who provided intervention services for preschool students who were referred for behaviors that might result in exclusionary discipline action, those who served as a part of multidisciplinary teams, and those who made disciplinary decisions. Furthermore, I explored how educators made meaning of their role in the disciplinary process and experience.

This was a basic qualitative study with interviews. A qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because this type of research is designed to help gain a better understanding of beliefs, attitudes, perspectives or meanings of or about a particular problem or phenomenon (see Almeida et al., 2017). Semistructured interviews were used to gain an understanding about the personal perspectives of educators who had

participated in the intervention, disciplinary referral making process, and administration of exclusionary discipline as a consequence for preschool students' behaviors.

In qualitative research, interviews can be used as a method for obtaining detailed, first hand information from participants to better understand their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, perspectives, and opinions about a particular phenomenon. The interviews conducted for this study allowed each participant to provide insightful responses to questions regarding his or her personal experiences with exclusionary discipline while allowing focus to remain on both the problem statement and the purpose of the study. Participant responses to interview questions related to the research questions provided a range of perspectives and experiences from educators who have been involved in the exclusionary discipline process of preschool students. The four major themes that emerged from data analysis were (a) a lack of school based supports, (b) no benefit of exclusionary discipline, (c) socioeconomics and family support and involvement, and (d) implicit biases.

Interpretation of the Findings

The research questions that were developed for this study were designed to help me gain insight into educator perspectives regarding the disproportionality in preschool discipline. The research questions were:

RQ1. What are preschool educators' perspectives about preschool suspensions and expulsions?

RQ2. What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the influence of race and culture in managing student behavior and making exclusionary discipline decisions?

RQ3. What are preschool educators' perspectives concerning the factors that contribute to the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices in preschool programs?

RQ4. What are preschool educators' perspectives about the role that their relationships with preschool students and their families play in exclusionary discipline decision making?

After I collected and analyzed data, four themes were identified in relation to the research questions. These themes included (a) a lack of school based supports; (b) no benefit of exclusionary discipline for preschool students; (c) socioeconomics and family support; and (d) implicit bias. The findings from this study confirm and extend several findings from the professional literature as discussed in Chapter 2.

Interpretation of RQ1

The theme uncovered after analyzing the data for the interview questions that correspond with RQ1 was that there is no benefit of exclusionary discipline for preschool students. Participants believed that removing students from school due to their behavior caused greater deficits in the academic and social skills that the student who received the disciplinary action need to develop, resulting in an achievement gap between those students and their peers. Data analysis indicated that participants were unanimous in the perspective that exclusionary discipline does not benefit preschool students. This finding is consistent with current research. Morris and Perry (2016) found that exclusionary discipline accounts for up to one fifth of the achievement differences between Black students and their same grade White peers, and research also shows that exclusionary

discipline can have negative, long term, lasting impacts on students social emotional and academic development (Losen et al., 2015; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Vanderhaar et al., 2015; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016). Exclusionary discipline has been linked to the SPP (Mallett, 2016; Nance, 2016), and has also been connected to grade retention (Marchbanks et al., 2015). See Table 3

Table 3

Theme(s)Related to RQ1

Participant	Theme: No Benefit of Exclusionary Discipline for Preschoolers
P2	"I think on that day, not necessarily a suspension was the answer but I do think that after him hitting me, it wouldn't have been a good situation to put him back in my classroom for the rest of the day. We needed a break."
P4	"I think it's (suspension) more of an eye opener to the parents because three and four year olds…don't understand…but it is more of an eye opener to the parents."
P5	"I know that there are administrators who will suspend kids just to give the teacher a break. But I wasn't that type of administrator. I tried to be fair. I wasn't going to suspend a child, especially a three year old just to give a teacher a break."
P7	"It wasn't an ideal situation to suspend this student, because in reality we knew it wouldn't resolve the problems he was having in school, but at that point, I think both the teacher and student needed a break from each other."
P8	"It is unfortunate that suspensions and expulsions are an option for preschool children…"
P9	"Sitting at home isn't teaching them what they need to know for kindergarten and they just fall behind…"
P10	"It's really not fair to the child...they need to be in school to learn other ways to cope."

Interpretation of RQ2

Implicit bias emerged as the theme concerning how race and culture impact preschool suspensions and expulsions; however, despite the fact that 25 of the 28 students discussed in this study were Black, the participants did not believed that race was a factor in the way they personally managed students' behaviors or made disciplinary decisions. It should be noted however, that every participant shared that they had personally observed racial and cultural disparities in how fellow educators managed students' behaviors and made disciplinary decisions. Some of the participants considered these disparities to be a reflection of individual educators as opposed to it being a being a systems issue. This finding aligns with Morris and Perry (2016), who posited that educators do not acknowledged that race and culture might be contributing factors that lead to student behaviors that often result in disproportionate exclusionary school discipline. The finding extends the professional literature base, as it suggests that educators may recognize some incidents of implicit bias in fellow educators, but may not be aware of how their own implicit biases impact disparities in their personal behavior management or disciplinary decisions.

The finding in regards to implicit bias confirms current knowledge in the discipline concerning how educators may perceive and address behaviors. Research indicates that implicit biases in reference to gender and race may correlate with how educators perceive and address those behaviors, with the severity of behaviors being exaggerated and causing disparities over time (Okonofua et al., 2016; Payne & Welch, 2015). All of the educators in this study responded that their preschool students were

suspended or expelled due to acts of aggression. Todd et al. (2016) shared that teachers may automatically associate Black students with a perceived threat of aggression even in children as young as five years old, and evidence suggests that Black boys are viewed as older and less child-like than their same-age White peers (Payne & Welch, 2015). See Table 4.

Table 4
Theme(s)Related to RQ2

Participant	Implicit Bias
P4	"…the Caucasian teachers would pick and choose who they…didn't want in their class…you know, 'I don't want that in my classroom' or you know, 'your parents must be dead because you're African American and that's why you're acting out'…you do see that a lot in preschools… 'Oh, you must not have money that's why you act that way. Because of where we live, some Caucasian teachers are just set in their ways of how things should be and how kids should act."
P5	"If you're at a school in a suburban neighborhood, and a Caucasian girl is having a tantrum… crying, screaming, having a full out tantrum. And then you go to an urban school in a poverty neighborhood, and a little Black girl is having a tantrum. It's going to be viewed differently. It's going to be written up differently. If it's even written up (for the Caucasian student)…if it's written up, the Caucasian girl will be, you know, a tantrum. If it's written up… and it's doubtful that it would be written up. The referral for the African American girl will be…will have words like 'aggressive', especially if it's a boy. I see that a lot…'aggressive'. And it's just viewed differently than their peers. African Americans are just viewed differently than their White peers. They're just not allowed to have a tantrum."
	"There have been countless occasions where I have had to call to a teacher's attention that they had submitted a discipline referral for behaviors that a Black student had displayed when a White student who

P7	displayed the same behaviors had been given a time out or lost time from recess."
	"There is no doubt…in my mind that race plays a factor in how these children are disciplined. You can't always see it, but it's there. I don't even think they realize it…how they treat these kids differently."
P8	"…in my experience, either the White teachers are too soft on Black kids because of where they think they (the kids) came from, or they're too hard on them because of the color of their skin. There is a big difference in how the kids are, you know…treated…that I've seen in my 31 years."
P11	"I love all the kids the same, but I think…I'm probably tougher on the Black kids, especially these Black boys, because I know what the future holds for them with where they come from. I want better for them, you know? So I'm harder on them and expect more...they don't have the same privileges as my White students".

Interpretation of RQ3

In reference to RQ3, the identified themes were: a lack of school-based supports, socioeconomics, and family support. Every educator who participated in this study identified a lack of school-based resources, poverty, and lack of family support as the major contributing factors to preschool students' exclusionary school discipline. Participants shared that all but two or three of the 28 students discussed resided in low-income households, and issues related to poverty contributed to the students' behaviors. Furthermore, both teachers and administrators reported feeling ill equipped to properly and effectively deal with the trauma, mental health issues, and significant behaviors that the students who were suspended or expelled presented. This aligns with research that indicates that unaddressed or improperly managed mental health disorders can serve as a contributing factor to higher rates of exclusionary discipline (Emmons & Belangee, 2018). Studies have shown that when educators use therapeutic strategies or approaches to address students' mental health concerns, students become more interested in and committed to their own success and achievement (Emmons & Belangee, 2018). Only one parent of the 28 students was supportive or consistently responded to the school in a timely manner when she was called concerning her son's behavior. Educators reported that most of the students' parents were either unable or unwilling to be actively involved in their children's preschool program due to issues (such as transportation or time constraints due to working multiple jobs) that were assumed to be related to the families' socioeconomic level.

These findings align with the professional literature base that indicates that factors such as socioeconomics might play more of a factor to exclusionary school discipline than race. Studies conducted by Wright et al. (2014) and Anderson and Ritter (2017) both found that factors other than race accounted for the disproportionalities in exclusionary discipline. Through research conducted in one large school district in Arizona, Anderson and Ritter found that factors such as socioeconomic status and special needs eligibility were the primary drivers of the discipline gap in schools across the state. This contradicts other research that cite race as the primary contributing factor to the disproportionality in school discipline (Morris & Perry, 2016; Todd et al., 2016; Payne & Welch, 2015). See Table 5.

Table 5
Theme(s)Related to RQ3

Participant	A Lack of School-Based Resources	Socioeconomics	Family Support
P1	"…but later on after he was expelled we found out that he was diagnosed with not severe autism, but he was diagnosed with some type of autism…at this point we see that he needs a little more help than we can give him." "…I have a lot of kids that are really just not focused and have behavioral issues and need therapy and all of these other resources…"		"…if we can't get the parents to come in and join and help us, then that's a big factor right there. So we see that we don't have help that we're not getting the partnership, the parent and teacher communication, the director-parent communication so that's just one big factor. When they just don't help us with the child's behavior."
P2			"Not having parent support makes it harder when they're not necessarily seeing… eye to eye with the teacher." "There were times when the parent was very involved, and easy to get ahold of and there were other times where I wouldn't be able to get in touch with the mom at all."
P4			"I got a lot of eye rolls. It was 'I'm at work y'all will

			have to handle that. I can't
P5		"I can't really say (their income) for sure, but I know that they were moving into like the reduced income housing that was right next to the school."	leave work, my job is important.' We had parents who, you know, we'd ask them to come and sit in the classrooms and they would tell us they didn't have time. You know, 'that's not my job to do that- it's your job to do it'. So it was a lot of pull, you know, we would try to reach out and there was no support."
P6		"His mother was the only working parent…minimum income job…"	
P7	"Preschool children are in crisis and, you know…I mean, our government and school officials are not responding accordingly with what these children really need to help them, or even with what I need as a teacher to be able to meet their needs."		
P8			"There's a lot of young parents, parents who aren't really educated…they really don't have the skills to deal with their kids, or…the kids have been sitting at home for 3, 4 years with no structure or
P9		"We never really see those parents show up at the school. Most of the communication is	anything, or no discipline, and then all of a sudden they're in school and they don't have the skills…"

		by telephone, and that's if they answer…or when they come in for pick up."	"I mean, it's hard when I just can't get the parent to support us. I mean, just communicate with us so we can work together."
P10	"I don't always think some of the professionals understand that the behavior isn't age appropriate and that the kids don't always just grow out of it. They…write it off…I guess, like, as age appropriate or as 'kids will be kids', and that's not it. Some of these children really need help with being aggressive…and they aren't getting it."		

Interpretation of RQ4

None of the participants believed that their relationships with students or families impacted exclusionary discipline decisions. Although all of the educators agreed that student-teacher and family-teacher relationships were important in supporting positive classroom behaviors, when disciplinary decisions were required, none of the participants believed that either of these relationships impacted administrators' or teachers' decisions about whether the student would be referred for or assigned exclusionary discipline as a consequence.

To some extent, this finding contradicts what is currently found in professional literature. Research shows that that student-teacher relationships impact student behavior and can influence students' likelihood to externalize behaviors that result in exclusionary discipline (Collins, O'Conner, and Supplee, 2016). Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen & Pianta (2014) posited that improving teacher-student relationships with middle school students might reduce educators' use of exclusionary discipline. This may have implications for preschool educators as well, as Okonofua, Paunesku, and Walton (2016) suggested that a way to decrease the preschool discipline gap is to increase teacher empathy. Research suggests that developing positive, meaningful student-teacher relationships will help to reduce the incidents of bias and disproportionality in school discipline (Okonofua et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2014).

The findings in this study correspond with the conceptual framework that guided this study. CRT uses critical theory to examine how race, power, and law relate to culture and society. In the field of education, CRT is often used to explore how race operates

within school settings and how it influences interactions among students and educators (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A major construct of CRT is that racism is a societal norm, and that due to the ongoing exposure to everyday racism, many minorities have learned to either ignore or adapt to the racism they encounter by not responding to racism or adjusting to White, middle class expectations or societal norms (Ford, & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). This study suggests that as it pertains to behavior management and disciplinary decisions, Black educators have adapted to the racism that is present in schools and school systems by holding Black students and families from lower socioeconomic households to the same behavioral expectations and parent involvement requirements as White, middle class families, resulting in disproportionate school discipline. Findings also suggest that White educators perhaps do not recognize that holding poor, Black students to White, middle class norms and expectations results in discipline disparities between Black preschool students and their White peers.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to a small sample size of 11 preschool educators (teachers, administrators, and directors) who are currently or were previously employed at preschools in one county in a southeastern state. Therefore, the perspectives from participants in this study may not be reflective of a larger sample of educator participants or of preschool educators in other parts of this or other states. Additionally, this study was limited to educator perspectives and did not consider student or parent/guardian input, as the purpose and scope of this study does not extend to the perspectives or experiences of students and their families. Therefore, the understanding of the contextual

factors that contribute to the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices in preschool programs is limited to the perspectives and experiences of the preschool educators involved in this study. Each of these limitations presents the possibility for future study, expansion, and generalizability.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the results and limitations of this study, I have concluded that there are several topics that warrant further research. The role that family members of preschoolers who reside in lower socioeconomic households desire to play in their children's preschool education is worth exploration, as there is uncertainty as to whether families with lower incomes desire to be more involved with their children's education. Additionally, this study was limited to educator participants, and families were not interviewed. Further research should be conducted to gain insight into family perceptions about the contextual factors that influence racial disproportionality in preschool discipline. Phenomenological research that is conducted to gain a more in depth understanding of these issues may provide more insight to this topic. Additionally, investigation into the role that poverty and mental health play in discipline disparities as compared to the role that race plays in preschool discipline may help scholars and early childhood practitioners obtain a deeper understanding about the contextual factors that influence the disparate disciplinary decisions that affect Black children.

Implications

The results of this study may help to inform experts, practitioners and school district officials on ways to address the discipline gap that has persisted between Black

students and their non-Black peers for decades (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2012). Results from the exploration of preschool teacher, director and administrator perspectives and experiences concerning the contextual factors that contribute to the disproportionality in preschool exclusionary discipline practices may potentially help to reduce the discipline gap and improve practices. Understanding the factors that result in Black students being more frequently suspended and expelled from school for the same behaviors as their same age White peers may result in the development of school, district, or state-wide policies that provide systematic and procedural policies and guidance for managing behaviors, addressing mental health concerns, interacting with children of diverse backgrounds, and for assigning disciplinary consequences. The results and findings from this research study provide insight about how race and culture; socioeconomic status; and family support and involvement impact disciplinary decisions, and therefore have the potential to influence mandates for analyzing and reporting data, the provision of school based interventions, requirements for training and professional development, and to emphasize the importance of better relating to and understanding children of all races.

Recommendations for Practice

This study emphasizes the need for preschools and the school districts to which those preschools belong to adopt policies or practices that include the annual examination and disaggregation of preschool discipline data to identify discipline referral patterns that may contribute to the racial disproportionality between Black and White students. Due to the significant discipline gap that exists between Black students and their White peers, it

is recommended that the policy of examining and disaggregating data is adopted at the state level, requiring school districts to report this information just as they are required by the state and federal governments to report discipline data on an annual basis. Although the school district that is located in the county where this study took place reports school discipline data to the state and federal government as required by law, there is no reported practice or system in place for preschool administrators, teachers, or school district level officials to examine and determine the possible contextual factors that lead to the disparate disciplinary outcomes for Black students. At the school or district level, decision makers should take begin taking steps to disaggregate and analyze data before state or federal policies are implemented, with the goal of better and more effectively collecting, analyzing data and reporting findings and outcomes. District level employees, administrators, teachers, parents and other appropriate stakeholders should be involved in the shared decision making process of developing a procedure and process for collecting, disaggregating and analyzing data (Nishioka, Shigeoka, & Lolich, 2017).

Given the young age and varying developmental stages of preschool students, preschool programs should have in place system an objective tool such as rubric or checklist to define and measure behaviors that could lead to disciplinary referrals that have the potential to result in the assignment of exclusionary discipline. The implementation of such a tool could help to decrease issues of implicit bias and potentially decrease the racial disparities in disciplinary decisions (Smolkowski et al., 2016). Research has shown that objective decision making tools have decreased both the subjectivity and racial disparities in school disciplinary decisions (Girvin, Gion,

McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2016; Yusuf, Irvin, & Bell, 2016). This tool or protocol should contain not only defined and measureable behaviors, but also interventions and resources that are appropriate for the behaviors that the student is displaying. Perhaps adopting the practice of providing appropriate interventions or resources rather than assigning suspensions or expulsions will result in closing the discipline gap that currently exists. Using a tool or protocol to monitor and analyze behaviors that could result in discipline referrals that are typically assigned suspension or expulsion will allow preschool practitioners and school district level employees to better gauge what factors are leading to the disproportionate representation of Black students in exclusionary discipline practices and perhaps lead to better access to interventions and resources to help support positive and appropriate classroom behaviors.

It is further recommended that preschools adopt behavior support systems that are culturally relevant and use culturally relevant discipline practices (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain- Bradley, 2011; Banks & Obiakor, 2015). While some of the preschools in the county where this study was conducted currently use a SWPBIS system, the systems are not necessarily diverse or inclusive of all cultures (Bal, 2015; Banks & Obiakor, 2015; Johnson, Anhalt & Cowan, 2017). With a rapid growth in school diversity, educational practitioners and researchers who are interested in school discipline disparities and outcomes have emphasized the need for more culturally responsive SWPBIS models (Bal, 2015; Banks & Obiakor, 2015; King et al., 2006). In the current professional literature, few studies or theoretical discussions exist concerning cultural responsiveness in SWPBIS programs (e.g., Bal, 2015; Banks & Obiakor, 2015; Eber,

Upreti, & Rose, 2010; Johnson, Anhalt & Cowan, 2017; Vincent et al., 2011), and researchers and practitioners alike often perceive culture as the differences in how students and educators express themselves verbally and nonverbally, their core values, or the difference between their thoughts or perceptions.

Current recommendations in the professional literature for considering and incorporating cultural and contextual factors into SWPBIS highlight three specific areas of practice: a) family and community collaboration to teach and reinforce school-wide behavioral expectations; b) monitoring the discipline gap between majority and minority groups of students by analyzing data trends and disaggregating data by demographic characteristics such as race; and c) professional development that increases educators' awareness of cultural differences and that will support better interpretation of students' problematic behaviors (Banks & Obiakor, 2015). The adoption of a culturally responsive SWPBIS system will not likely eradicate the racial disparity in exclusionary school discipline on its own, however, the implementation of such a system may help preschool educators to administer more equitable consequences for disciplinary infractions and reduce the potential for bias in disciplinary decision making (Mann & Ferguson, 2015).

Conclusion

Data from interviews conducted with 11 preschool educators in a single county located in one southeastern state were analyzed to explore educator perspectives about the contextual factors that contribute to the disparity in exclusionary school discipline at the preschool level. The data showed that socioeconomic level, students' unaddressed mental health needs and family support were significant contributing factors to

exclusionary school discipline. Of the 28 students discussed in this study, 25 were Black, 25 resided in low income households, 27 lacked sufficient parent support as measured by the school's standards, and all had ongoing mental health, developmental, or behavioral health needs that the educators did not consider themselves equipped to manage. Unanimously, the participants agreed that additional training and support is needed to help respond to and manage the needs of the students that manifest as inappropriate or aggressive behaviors.

Although 25 of the 28 students discussed in this research study were Black, none of the participants identified race as a contributing factor to their own personal disciplinary decisions or the way they manage behaviors. Conversely, all participants reported having witnessed situations with other educators where either explicit or implicit bias was likely a contributing factor to how the student's behavior was managed or the disciplinary decision that was given. This finding leaves scholar-practitioners to wonder if preschool educators, regardless of race, are unaware of their own implicit biases during their day-to-day interactions with students.

Previous research has well documented the long term, negative impacts and outcomes of exclusionary school discipline. By removing students from instruction, students are more likely to experience grade retention, have lower academic achievement, are less likely to graduate from high school, and are more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system. With this knowledge, it is critical to examine factors that lead to racial disproportionalities in school discipline and implement trainings, procedures, protocols and evidenced based practices to ensure that students' needs are appropriately

met in the school setting and help reduce the disproportionate disciplinary decisions. Change must occur at the federal, state and school levels to close the discipline gap that has persisted for decades between Black students and their same age White peers.

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Appendix A: Exclusionary Discipline Teacher Interview Questions

1. What is (or was) your position with the preschool?

2. How long have you held/did you hold this position?

3. In what way or ways have you been involved in the exclusionary (i.e. suspension or expulsion) discipline referral or decision-making process for preschool students?

4. What are the characteristics (gender, family dynamics, socio-economic level, race/ethnicity, behavior, etc.) of the child/children that were suspended or expelled?

5. What were the behavioral incidents/scenarios that resulted in the suspensions or expulsions for the students that you were involved with?

6. When (for what reasons) do you believe preschool students should be suspended or expelled from school?

7. What family or school factors do you believe contribute to the behaviors that lead to exclusionary discipline in preschool settings?

8. What school or classroom based interventions are/were used prior to the decision to suspend or expel the preschool student?

9. What (if any) purpose or benefit do you believe suspensions and expulsions have for preschool students?

10. What role do you believe your relationship with your preschool students and their families play in the exclusionary discipline decision-making process?

11. How involved with and responsive to the school were the parents of the preschool students who were suspended or expelled?

12. What, if anything, do you believe you as a teacher or the school could have done differently to better support the needs of the student or students who were suspended or expelled?

13. Do you believe race plays a role in preschool discipline, and if so, why or why not?

14. Do you believe Black preschool students are disproportionately assigned exclusionary discipline for their behaviors as compared to their same age White peers and if so, why?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with exclusionary discipline?

Appendix B: Exclusionary Discipline Preschool Adminstrator/Director Interview Questions

1. What is (or was) your position with the preschool?

2. How long have you held/did you hold this position?

3. In what way or ways have you been involved in the exclusionary discipline referral or decision-making process for preschool students?

4. Is the exclusionary discipline decision-making process different for preschool students than it is for students in grades K-5/6?

5. What were the behavioral incidents/scenarios that resulted in the suspensions or expulsions for the students that you were involved with?

6. What are the characteristics (gender, family dynamics, socio-economic level, race/ethnicity, behavior, etc.) of the child/children that were suspended or expelled?

7. Is suspension and expulsion protocol left to a school district-wide discipline plan or is it left to your discretion?

8. When (for what reasons) do you believe preschool students should be suspended or expelled from school?

9. What family or school factors do you believe contribute to the behaviors that lead to exclusionary discipline in preschool settings?

10. What interventions are typically implemented prior to the assignment of exclusionary discipline?

11. What, if anything, do you believe the teacher or school could have done to better support the student(s) that were suspended or expelled from school?

12. What (if any) purpose or benefit do you believe suspensions and expulsions have for preschool students?

13. What role do you believe teacher-student and teacher-family relationships play in preschool discipline referrals that may result in exclusionary discipline?

14. What role do you believe race and culture play in preschool discipline, managing behaviors and exclusionary discipline?

15. Do you believe Black preschool students are disproportionately assigned exclusionary discipline for their behaviors as compared to their same age White peers and if so, why?

16. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with exclusionary discipline?