ABSTRACT

Demond Wayne McKenzie, ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: CHANGING ADULT BEHAVIORS TO REDUCE DISPARITIES IN DISCIPLINE REFERRALS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL (Under the direction of Dr. Karen Jones). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2022.

Despite various efforts to reduce disparities in discipline referrals among African American males in schools, the gap continues to persist. African American males are disciplined at a higher rate than any other demographic in the United States. What might be the root cause? Could the perceptions of adults in the classroom be a major contributing factor? Studies indicate implicit bias exists among all beings and can lead to assumptions that result in preconceived/discriminatory actions toward students of color (Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2002). Schools have attempted to combat these injustices by providing trainings and implementing systems to minimize exclusionary discipline practices to some success. In this mixed method study, we facilitated research-based professional learning and provided coaching to support teachers with the implementation of strategies with the intent of changing behaviors and practices in a specific school setting to create a more equitable culture. This study evaluated professional development and its impact on the perceptions of educators toward African American male students as to determine whether they reduced the number of discipline referrals administered at CPS Middle School, a rural school in North Carolina. Ultimately, we determined while some perceptions and attitudes were changed, there was no change in the disparities among the discipline referrals among African American males potentially due to some unforeseen extenuating factors.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: CHANGING ADULT BEHAVIORS TO REDUCE DISPARITIES IN DISCIPLINE REFERRALS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

A Dissertation

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by

Demond Wayne McKenzie

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ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: CHANGING ADULT BEHAVIORS TO REDUCE DISPARITIES IN DISCIPLINE REFERRALS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this study to my wife, Alneshia J'Vett, for her love and unwavering support throughout this journey. First and foremost, I appreciate your prayers and encouragement. Thank you for listening to my ideas, vetting my thoughts and providing feedback. There is no way I could have done this without you by my side. I love you and look forward to being by your side as you embark upon your next level in counseling.

Also, I would like to dedicate this study and continuous work to my three sons, Jahmai, Darius and Jadon. As an African American male, I pray often that their experience in school and life will not be the experience of mine and my forefathers. I hope that their struggle will be less because of mine.

Finally, I would like to honor my parents, Dewayne and Delois McKenzie, for all they instilled in me. Despite what statistics reveal, you rose to the challenge and ensured I had all the necessities to become the man I am today and beyond. I am so grateful for having you in my life.

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I would like to thank the following individuals for their support in bringing my study to fruition:

- The ECU Leadership Education Department staff, especially Dr. Travis Lewis (Advisor) Dr. Karen Jones (Chair) and members of my committee, Dr. Marvin Bradley (Asst. Superintendent of Carolina Pines Schools), Dr. Heidi Puckett, and Dr. Marjorie Ringler.

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- My extended family. They are too numerous to name but I want you to know that I love you and appreciate the various parts you contributed in making the man I am today and to come.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the United States, school districts have shared similar data revealing significantly higher exclusionary discipline rates of African American and Latin American students compared to those of White students (Gage et al., 2019; Rafa, 2018). Moreover, these exclusionary discipline rate disparities exist more notably when comparing African American males to White males (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Even in situations in which the population of students of color is considerably smaller than White students, students of color receive more suspensions than their counterparts (Nowicki, 2018). At the national level, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), for the 2015-16 school year, despite representing only 8% of students enrolled in K-12 public education, African American male students accounted for 25% of students assigned out of school suspension (see Figure 1). More recent data revealed that African American males had a higher suspension rate three times that of White males (Nowicki, 2018). A previous sample of discipline data exposed that African American middle school students were four times more likely to be referred to the office than White students and two times more likely in an elementary setting (Skiba et al., 2011). Such disparate data suggest the possibility that systemic structures and entrenched inequities pervade public schools in the United States.

An enduringly high number of suspensions among African American males could signal the existence of a de facto tracking system that leads to disillusioned African American males dropping out of school and ultimately becoming casualties of the law enforcement process. For example, in 2017, African American males between the ages of 16 and 24 years old experienced a drop-out rate of 8% compared to 3.9% for White males (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reported in the same year that the

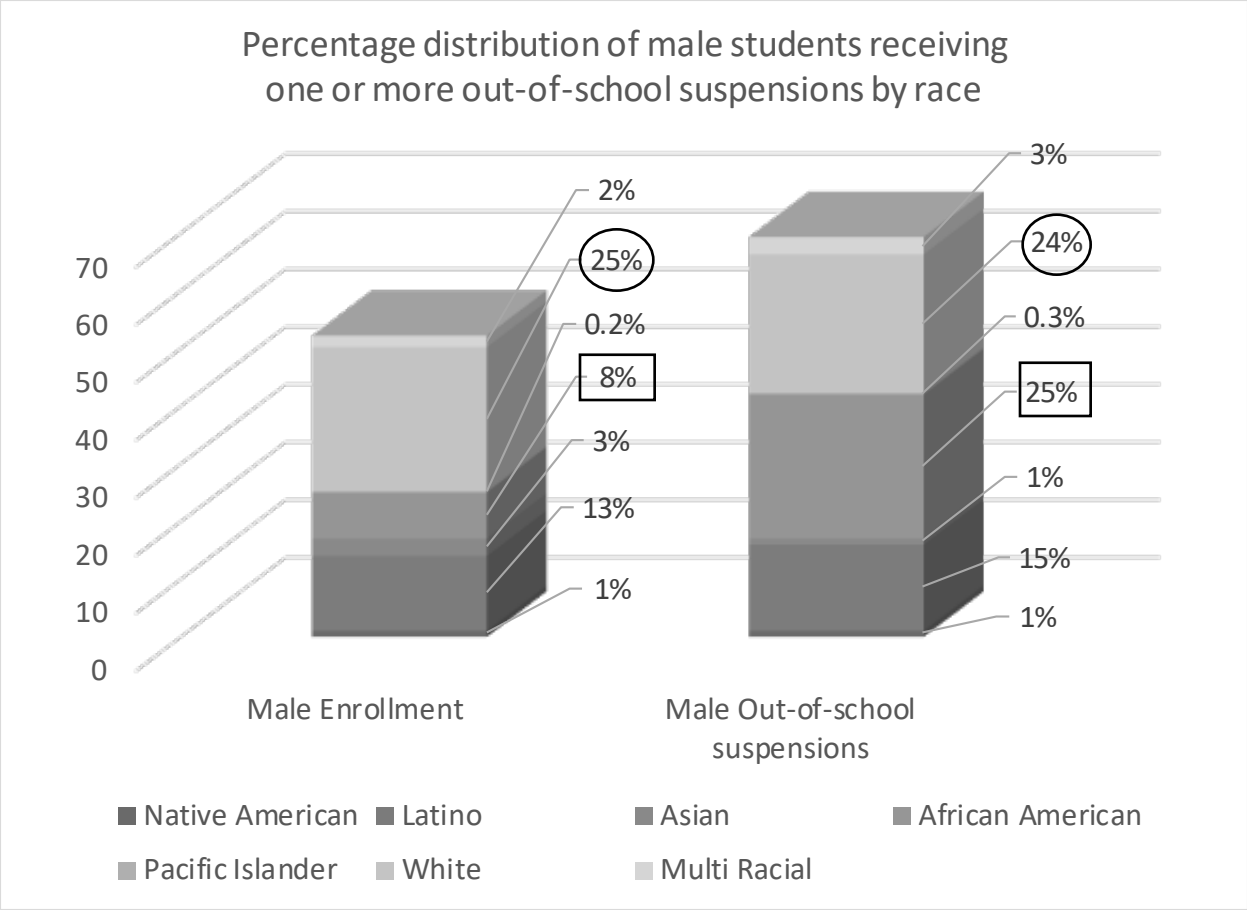


Figure 1. U.S. student male population vs. student male suspension rate.

percentage of detained African American male residents ages 12-20 was over 46% nationwide. These statistics support what has been typically identified as the school-to-prison pipeline for African American males in the United States (Ginwright, 2004; Skiba et al., 2014a).

Intentionally revealing and then combating the root cause of African American males being disproportionately suspended in public schools is an initial step on the way to addressing the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is a construct used to describe policies and practices in schools and the juvenile justice system that impede the probability of school success for youth, and increase the potential for negative life outcomes (Skiba et al., 2014a). Although research shows that disparities in short-term suspension rates for rural and urban schools are not notably different, the data reveal that African American students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) schools and smaller schools are at greater risk for disciplinary measures (Ksinan et al., 2019). This study initially surveyed the literature to examine the root causes of adult behaviors toward African American males and potential biases that influence these behaviors. Subsequently, this study explored the literature regarding structures in education that may influence the disproportionate suspension data. In response to the findings, I facilitated research-based professional learning and provided coaching to support teachers with the implementation of strategies with the intent of changing behaviors and practices in a specific school setting to create a more equitable culture in one rural school district in North Carolina.

Background of Focus of Practice

Carolina Public Schools (CPS) is a rural district in eastern North Carolina. The district has a student population of approximately 7,200 students. CPS Middle School is the largest middle school in the county located just outside the city limits of the county seat. The demographic breakdown of the approximately 782 students attending CPS Middle is 41% White,

38% Black, 18% Hispanic, and 3% Multiracial. In contrast with the student demographics, the teaching staff of approximately 60 members is predominantly White and female. Beginning teachers with at most three years of experience make up 40% of the staff. On the other hand, 40% of the teaching staff have more than ten years of experience. With this bimodal distribution of teaching experience at CPS Middle, the school caters to the needs of beginning teachers through mentorships yet struggles to prioritize the needs of all teachers through professional development and professional learning communities.

Biennially, the state of North Carolina conducts a voluntary statewide survey, the Teacher Working Conditions Survey (TWCS), which is designed to gather responses from licensed staff (teachers, administrators, media coordinators, counselors, etc.), both full-time and part-time, regarding the adequacy of school facilities and resources, school leadership, community support, student conduct, professional development, and student learning (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2020a). In the 2018 Teacher Working Conditions survey conducted at CPS Middle, only two thirds of the teaching staff agreed that professional development was differentiated to meet the individual needs of teachers. More than 50% of participants expressed the need for additional support in the areas of differentiated instruction, students with disabilities, and closing the achievement gap. Teachers responded overwhelmingly "no" to having at least 10 hours of professional development in the past two years in the following areas accordingly: student assessment, 70%; differentiating instruction, 67%; students with disabilities, 71%; English Language Learners, 86%; closing the achievement gap, 86%; literacy strategies, 68%; and classroom management techniques, 86%. Research supports the effectiveness of teachers participating in high-quality professional development having sufficient duration and continuance (Desimone et al., 2006; Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018).

Approximately 61% of CPS Middle teachers agreed that students followed the rules and almost 70% of teachers believe parents support them as teachers, which contributes to their success with students. When comparing available data, the lack of effective professional development may have some impact on student behavior and engagement in the classroom.

In the fall of 2018, the teachers at CPS Middle School set a goal to support the school's vision to prepare students to become lifelong learners and global citizens. In doing so, the staff committed to focusing on promoting responsibility, academic excellence, and the personal success of students. As one strategy, teachers, counselors, and administration implemented the Positive Behavior Instructional Support (PBIS) program (Childs et al., 2015). PBIS is a three-tiered framework designed to improve and integrate data, systems, and practices that impact daily student outcomes. Tiers range from universal support for all students to more intensive, individualized support with the aim of improving behavioral and academic outcomes (Childs et al., 2015). Teachers attended a training for PBIS at the beginning of the year and conducted monthly check-ins during staff meetings. Through PBIS, teachers are expected to handle the misbehavior of students with a positive approach. For example, if a student acts inappropriately, a teacher should follow the school protocol: (1) provide a warning, (2) "bounce" to another teacher, (3) contact a parent/guardian, and (4) submit an office referral. Another strategy encourages teachers to monitor students' emotions and assist students exhibiting unacceptable behaviors. For example, a student who is sleeping in class could be encouraged by the teacher to go get a drink of water or given the option to stand up in the back of the classroom. Evidence of the effectiveness of the teacher's implementation of the PBIS actions should reflect in a 40% reduction of student disciplinary office referrals (Nocera et al., 2014). Contrary to the school's efforts to implement PBIS, student disciplinary office referrals remain largely unchanged.

Despite the PBIS efforts mentioned above, discipline data reveals significant disparities in the number of short-term suspensions administered to African American students, specifically African American males at CPS Middle School (see Figure 2). Student discipline office referrals often lead to suspensions, both out-of-school and in-school, which have a negative impact on student academic success (Anderson et al., 2019). Moreover, long-term effects could adversely impact the adulthood of students (Wolf & Kupchik, 2016).

Context of Study

Carolina Public Schools is in a county in eastern North Carolina bordering the Pamlico Sound of the Atlantic Ocean. The county has a population of approximately 47,000 residents. Several small towns in the county are havens for retirees and tourism. Alternatively, many rural communities in the district reflect characteristics of economic struggle. In 2019, the county was ranked as one of the 40 most distressed counties in the state (NC Department of Commerce, 2019). This ranking is based on four factors, (1) average unemployment rate, (2) median household income, (3) percentage growth in population, and (4) adjusted property tax base per capita (NC Department of Commerce, 2019). Nineteen percent of the population in Carolina County live below the poverty line, which is higher than the national average of 13.1%, and children from poor families are evenly distributed across the schools in the district.

CPS Middle School is located outside of the town limits of Carolina Pines, NC. It is one of 14 schools in the Carolina Public Schools and the only school with a Grade 6-8 composition and is located adjacent to the elementary school. It has an enrollment of 782 students with a demographic breakdown of 41% White, 38% African American, 18% Latino and 3% Multi-racial. Ninety-nine percent of students are eligible for free/reduced lunch. With that said, the makeup of the faculty membership at CPS Middle is slightly different.

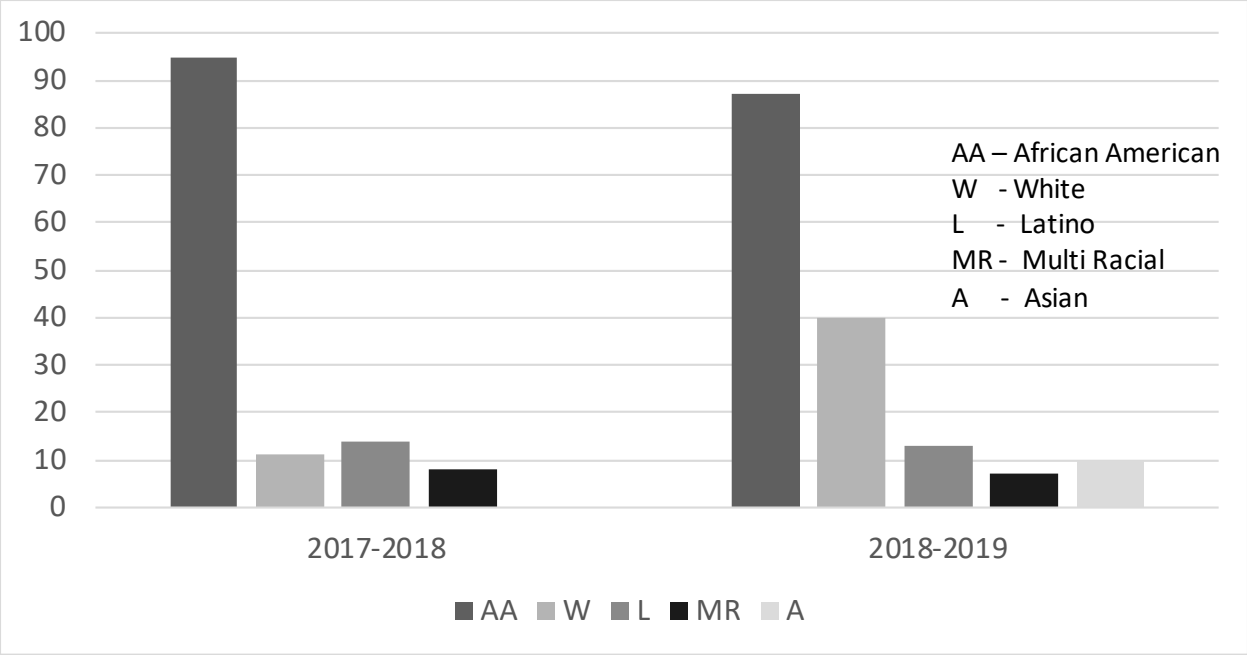


Figure 2. CPS Middle School suspensions for male students by race/ethnicity (A).

In 2018, the teacher experience varied with 40% of the teachers having acquired zero to three years, 16% with four to 10 years, and 44% having 10 or more years of teaching experience. The principal is in her first year at the school with two assistant principals, one completing her first year at the school and the other his second year. The teacher turnover rate is considerably high at 21% compared to a state rate of 14.5%.

Although teachers overwhelmingly find CPS Middle School a "good place to work and learn" (based on their responses to the 2018 TWCS), some responses to the TWCS raise concern. In 2018, the TWCS revealed that 60% of teachers felt that students followed the rules of conduct—a percentage that is lower than one might expect, given the earlier "good place to work and learn" response. Also of concern is that only 57% of teachers thought that class sizes were reasonable, such that teachers have the time available to meet the needs of all students. Finally, only two-thirds of teachers believe that professional development is differentiated to meet the needs of individual teachers.

I anticipate that changing adult behaviors played a role in reducing discipline referrals and diminishing disparities in suspension rates for African American males. My study will engage the staff at CPS Middle in conversations about implicit bias and how these biases potentially play a role in the actions they take regarding students. I anticipate that my provision of professional learning will equip participants with the skills to recognize and compensate for such biases as well as provide them with strategies designed to foster environments of engagement for all students. If my intervention is effective, the staff will see a positive change in student behavior as measured by a decrease in student discipline office referrals.

Statement of Focus of Practice

During this study, I intended to reduce the discipline referral rate of African American males by changing the adult behaviors and attitudes of teachers. For purposes of this study, a short-term suspension meant the removal of a student from school and all school-related activities for up to 10 days. Removal from school beyond 10 days is deemed a long-term suspension (NC General Assembly, 2020). Data presented under the term "suspension" are identified as short-term suspension numbers. A detailed federal report released in April 2018 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018) provided data for the 2015-16 school year that supported claims that, nationally, African American male students receive harsher discipline than their White counterparts. During that school year, African American male students represented 8% of the student population, yet 25% of out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Similarly, in the following 2016-17 school year, even though the student population of African American students was half that of White students in North Carolina, African American students received double the number of short-term suspensions (Nicholson, 2018). During the 2018-19 school year, data from school report cards issued by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) revealed that, statewide, despite similar enrollment numbers across five school years, African American students received more than double the number of short-term suspensions than those of White students as noted in Figure 3 and Table 1.

In close agreement with the North Carolina state figures, during 2016-17 school year in Carolina Public Schools, the Southern Coalition for Social Justice (Nicholson, 2018) reported that African American students were suspended 3.8 times more than their White peers. Districtwide data show that there are specific disparities among the suspension rates of African American males and White male students (Nicholson, 2018). Over the past three years since

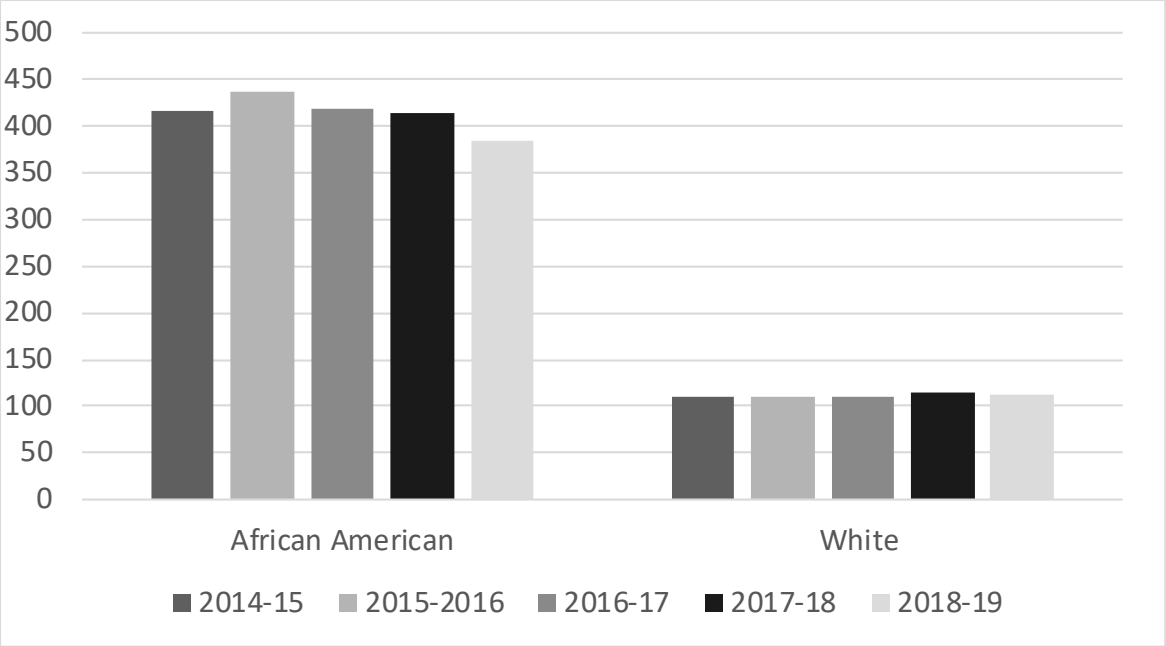


Figure 3. North Carolina male short-term suspension rates by race/ethnicity.

Table 1

Short-Term Suspension by Race/Ethnicity in NC, 2018-19

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage of all Short-Term Suspensions	Percentage of Total Student Population
American Indian	1.9%	1%
Asian American	.01%	3%
African American	54.1%	25%
Latino	10.9%	17%
Multi-Racial	5.5%	4%
White	26.7%	48%

Note. Information retrieved from NC Department of Public Instruction.

2016, the number of suspensions among African American male students increased from 615 to 715. While the number of students suspended at CPS Middle School decreased during the same time period, the gap in the rate of suspensions between White and African American males remained wide (see Figure 4).

Data from school report cards issued by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) revealed that, statewide, despite similar enrollment numbers across five school years, African American students during the 2018-19 school year received more than than double the number of short-term suspensions than those of White students. Considering the tendency of these disparities, existing contributors include discontinuity in cultural matches between African American students and White teachers, lack of appropriate academic and behavior skills of African American students, implicit bias, and biased policies (Gilliam et al., 2016; Whitford et al., 2016). For example, a U.S. Government Accountability Office (Nicholson, 2018) report suggested that implicit bias contributed to disparities in discipline: "Implicit bias – stereotypes or unconscious association about people – on the part of teachers and staff may cause them to judge students' behaviors differently based on the students' race and sex" (p. 4). According to research, implicit biases are concerning as individuals engage in differential treatment towards race and gender in disciplinary actions based on stereotypes or unconscious associations (Morris & Perry, 2017; Smolkowski et al., 2016). If this is the case, the specific problem may be that African American male students are assumed to be a "behavioral threat" by adult educators even before disruptive behavior occurs. The actions of educators who are cognizant of implicit biases and adept at implementing strategies to overcome them should have an observable impact in reducing the disparity in the frequency of disciplinary referrals across the demographics.

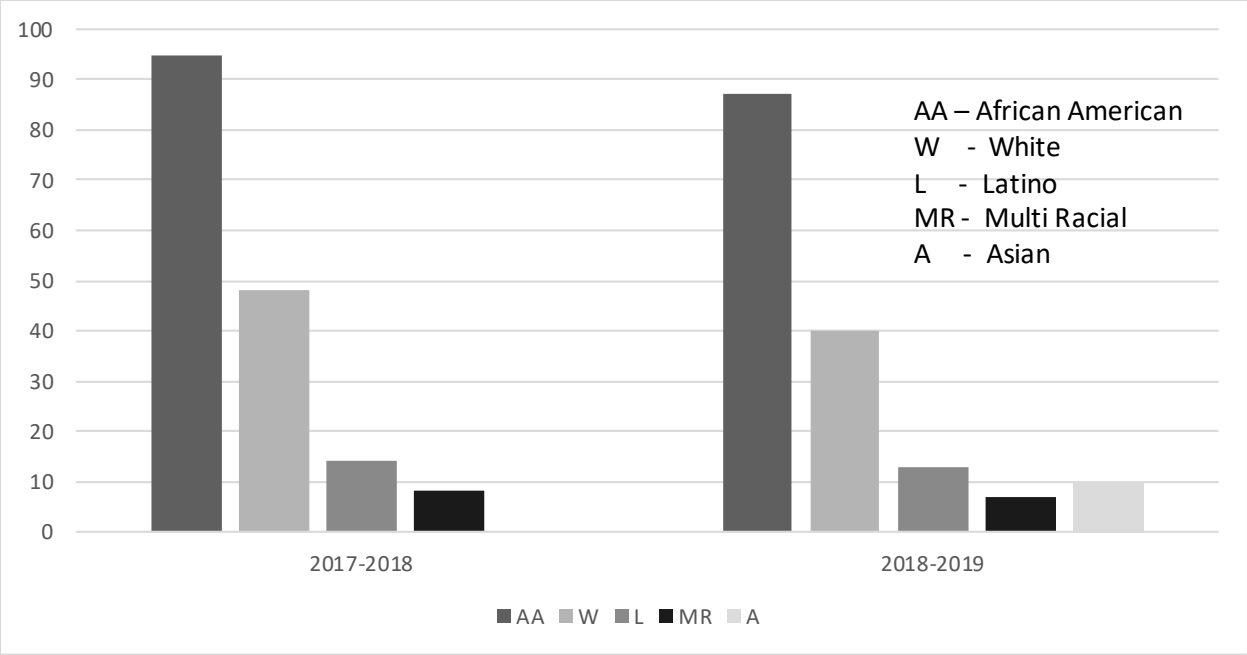


Figure 4. CPS Middle School suspensions for male students by race/ethnicity (B).

Focus of Practice Guiding Questions

This study will be guided by the following questions:

1. How does a professional development program for teachers affect their perception of African American male behavior in the school setting?
2. How does a professional development program for teachers affect their responsiveness/reaction to African American male behavior in the school setting?

Overview of Inquiry

The intent of my study is to determine whether a professional development approach I will implement with the teachers at CPS is effective in decreasing discipline actions for African American males. This will be measured by studying disciplinary data and teacher attitudes or perceptions. Change in adult behaviors impacts the climate of the school potentially influencing both the academic and social behaviors of students. Research reveals that aspects of school climate have extensive significance on students' experiences and outcomes, including reduced absenteeism and suspension rates (Durlak et al., 2011), and increased engagement and academic outcomes (Yoder, 2014). The study will explore the effects of adult beliefs and experiences as it relates to interaction and relationships with students. Specifically, the study will confirm that implementing a Social Emotional Learning framework, designed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at CPS Middle School changes the approach teachers use when deciding to write disciplinary referrals. This may result in a decrease of discipline referrals submitted by staff, thus reducing the suspension rate of African American male students.

The fishbone diagram provides a way to propose causal factors of a problem as well as to foster a conversation about the issues surrounding those factors (Crow et al., 2019). In Figure 5, I

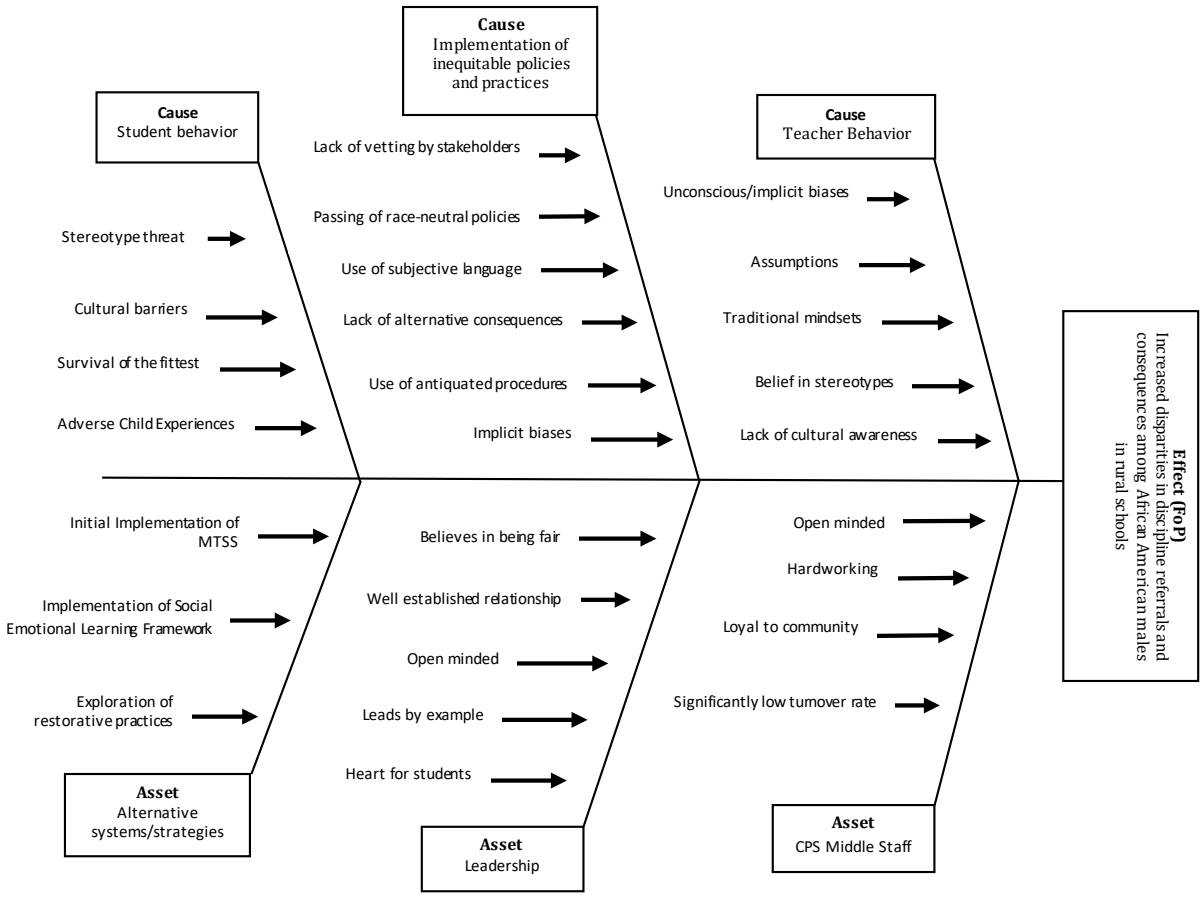


Figure 5. Fishbone diagram.

provide a representation of causes and assets that I propose increase disparities in discipline referrals and consequences among African American males at CPS Middle School.

Implementing an explanatory mixed methods research study ensures a more complete understanding for the cause of increasing disparities in discipline referrals among African American males. The design begins with a collection and analysis of quantitative and is then followed by a collection of qualitative data (Mertler, 2019). The use of critical race theory in this study centers race and racism throughout the research process. Collecting diverse types of quantitative and qualitative data should provide a more complete understanding of the focus of practice. The study will begin with a collection of quantitative data from discipline, attendance and academic reports of the student population anticipating various disparities among African American males. I will review disciplinary referrals and study the language teachers wrote for any biases. Through surveys with the teaching staff, I will capture the adult behaviors in the school setting and beliefs in general. In a second phase, I will collect qualitative data through teacher focus groups and interviews to help explain the initial survey (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, identified staff will receive customized professional development focused on developing social and emotional learning skills and using culturally responsive pedagogies. During the final phase, both quantitative and qualitative data will be reviewed to assess the implications of adult learning on student behavior and academic performance.

Purpose of the Study

Male students of color, specifically Biracial and African American, are often suspended at a higher rate than any other subgroup in Carolina Public Schools, a rural school district in the mid-eastern coastal plains of North Carolina (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2020b). The purpose of this mixed methods study is to evaluate the effect of professional learning on the

discipline rates from the previous school year to the discipline rates at the conclusion of the next school year at the middle school level after providing professional development to teachers. Near the conclusion of the previous school year, data will be collected from various stakeholders to glean the needs of the school and background knowledge regarding the existing culture at the school. At the start of the upcoming school year participants will engage in ongoing professional development focused on building relationships, deconstructing biases, and facilitating courageous conversation centered around race. These sessions will be designed collaboratively with and vetted by colleagues. Throughout the year, staff will engage in surveys, focus groups and individual interviews to gain insight on the effectiveness of implementing strategies in the classroom and throughout the building as well as collecting pertinent data. At the conclusion of the school year, the staff will complete a survey designed to capture reflective thoughts regarding the experience and desired outcomes or aspirations because of the experience. With the influences of adult behaviors through professional development and conversations, the outcomes of this study should include a change in participant perception and a reduction in the discipline referrals of African American males during the academic year.

Inquiry Partners

Throughout the course of this study, I will be assisted by multiple collaborative partners in order to gain history, resources, and pertinent data. The superintendent and district personnel have been instrumental in collecting quantitative data. At the school level, the administration assisted in initiating relationships with the staff, ensuring the fidelity of practices, and providing support to teachers. The School Improvement Team (SIT) assisted in identifying gaps in understanding around the study topic for staff and validate the need for professional learning to close those gaps. School counselors provided support to staff via coaching and modeling.

Moreover, the teachers and staff at the school are crucial to the success of this study. The role of these collaborative partners is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Foundation

The underlying disparities that exist in America have historically and currently revolve around race. In education, racial inequity prevails when students are limited to access, hindered from opportunity, and blocked outcomes (Price, 2020). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework that is used as an analytical tool in education focusing on the perspectives of race, causes of racism and inequity, and the advantages of power and privilege. There are five tenets: (1) the inter-centricity of race and racism, (2) the challenge of dominant ideology, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experience knowledge, and (5) the transdisciplinary perspective (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Solorzano et al., 2000). Throughout this study, CRT will be used to examine potential inequities in rules and policy at both the district and school level. Additionally, CRT will support and guide the facilitation of conversations regarding race during focus groups and interviews.

The reviews of multiple research reports indicate that social emotional learning (SEL) programs are effective throughout a myriad of educational contexts (Blair & Raver, 2015; Borman et al., 2016; Mahoney et al., 2018). Many schools throughout the United States and other countries have implemented SEL programs (CASEL, 2020). SEL is described as the process for which children and adults acquire and effectively apply knowledge, attitudes, and skill necessary to manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). This process or framework consists of five core clusters of social and emotional competencies identified as self-awareness, self-management, social

awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (see Figure 6). It is believed that these competencies impact student performance academically and behaviorally (Durlak et al., 2011). Considering this framework and evidence provided by research, CPS Middle School, with the appropriate follow-up through professional development and coaching, should see a positive impact as it relates to student behavior. The staff and faculty may develop a new mindset when building relationships with students and a different perspective addressing discipline. Within this established culture, I anticipate resulting data may reveal an increase in student academic performance and a reduction in student discipline referrals. As a result of the implementation of the intervention and professional learning with teachers, data should indicate that instances of suspensions have reduced overall, but more specifically among African American males. Research suggests that SEL support could foster greater equity for traditionally underserved groups, such as African American, Latino, and low-income students (Blair & Raver, 2015; Borman et al., 2016).

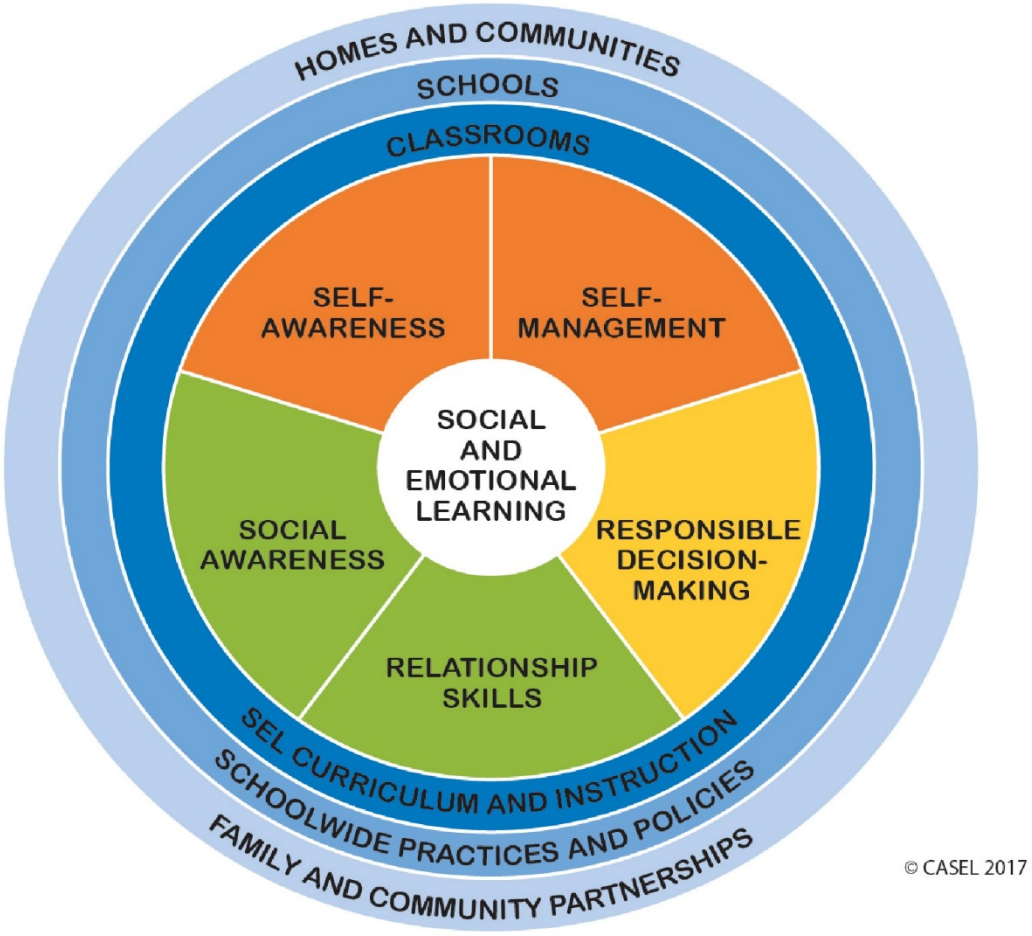
Definition of Key Terms

Cultural Competence – Defined as a combination of knowledge about certain cultural groups as well as attitudes towards and skills for dealing with cultural diversity (Betancourt, 2003).

Cultural Responsiveness – Ones actions due to the ability to understand and consider the different cultural backgrounds of the students taught (Tanase, 2020).

Discipline Gap – Disproportionate rates and disparities of school discipline based on race, gender and socioeconomic status (Nguyen et al., 2019).

Discipline Referrals – "[A]n event in which (a) a student engaged in a behavior that violated a rule/social norm in the school, (b) a problem behavior was observed by a member of



Note. (CASEL, 2020).

Figure 6. Core SEL competencies.

the school staff, and (c) the event resulted in a consequence delivered by administrative staff who produced a permanent (written) product defining the whole event" (Sugai et al., 2000, p. 96).

Exclusionary Discipline – School discipline practices, such as removal from the classroom, referral to the office, in-school suspension, or out-of-school suspension, removing students from the environment of classroom instruction (Stanford, 2017).

Long-term Suspension – An exclusionary practice resulting in student removal from school beyond 10 days (NC General Assembly, 2020).

Short-term Suspension – An exclusionary practice involving the removal of a student from school and all school-related activities for up to 10 days (NC General Assembly, 2020).

School-to-Prison Pipeline – An anomaly that criminalizes students who misbehave subsequently using punitive consequences that resort to youth entering the prison system (Rodríguez, 2017).

Zero-Tolerance Policy – A policy that mandates certain consequences for specified offenses regardless of circumstances (Curran, 2016).

Assumptions

In the development of this study, there is the assumption that the staff at CPS Middle is biased due to cultural indifferences. While teachers have best intentions without malicious intent, prior experiences might impact disparities in discipline. Biases lead to students of color being suspended more than White students. Although this could be valid, there is no means in which to prove the assumption to be true.

Another assumption is that at the conclusion of professional development focused on social and emotional learning and cultural responsiveness, teachers will implement strategies with fidelity. Notably, fewer than 20% of teachers implement new learning at the completion of

a professional learning session without additional follow-up versus 95% of teachers who implement new learning following a professional learning session with sustained coaching (Bush, 1984). Follow up from professional learning is important because it impacts attitude, practice, efficacy and student achievement (Cornett & Knight, 2009). Teachers are likely to implement strategies and practices gleaned from professional development if there is some form of accountability that follows. Research shows that coaching and modeling are highly effective in equipping teachers with the tools needed to implement strategies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Teachers note a sense of confidence in performing specific tasks or engaging in the situation.

Scope and Delimitations

My study will only involve middle school teachers at one school in Carolina Public Schools with their informed consent prior to the beginning of the second semester of the 2020-2021 school year. While this may impact my sample with school starting in August for the fall semester, my inquiry should not be affected considering all teachers will have access to the pre- and post-survey, focus groups, professional learning and coaching. Staff, including cafeteria workers, custodians, and clerical, will not be expected to participate.

Limitations

One should note that there may exist multiple limitations throughout the course of this study. The study is seeking to determine whether the disparities in discipline for African American males is linked to the beliefs of adults in the school. Participants will engage in focus groups for which there is no means to determine whether responses are truthful and not influenced by external factors. Adult behaviors sometimes leave out the complete truth when discussing a disciplinary issue with a student, especially if the student is African American and

the adult is not. Due to my ethnicity and gender being the same as the student group of focus in this study, I considered taking specific precautions to ensure the authenticity of responses to focus group questions by allowing an outside entity to conduct the session. With that said, I also considered using a survey methodology to lessen such potential influencers.

What individuals are willing to share in the course of the study can impede the collection of data, one's historical knowledge can be equally as significant. Beginning teachers serving in their first or second year have not been exposed to as much training as veteran teachers. According to the district, CPS Middle has not received extensive professional learning as it pertains to social and emotional learning. However, the staff does receive some support through the district with Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) training. Similarly, information could be contingent upon the emotions of the staff. New leadership at the school may negatively impact the responsiveness of veteran teachers to the professional development implemented. Another limitation could be that leadership in the district has recently changed. The superintendent has been in the district for two years. Areas of focus are subject to change based on visions of leadership in the district. In addition, CPS Middle is the only middle school in the district with a 6-8 grades model. Other schools in the district have a K-8 model due to small populations in the community.

In March of 2020, a world-wide viral pandemic, Coronavirus (COVID-19) closed multiple systems, including governmental organizations and educational institutions. Proving deadly to more than 900,000 people, schools adjusted by providing remote virtual learning. Many reports speculate some form of trauma impacting the social and emotional well-being of both students and adults due to various losses (Nicola et al., 2020; Torales et al., 2020).

Therefore, the misrepresentation of data is highly possible when attempting to analyze data collected during the pandemic.

Significance of Inquiry

The actions of educators within the school setting have a lasting impression on students. Educators create assignments, assign grades, make recommendations, and enforce policy. Such actions can influence students positively or negatively. When it comes to disciplining students, the actions of adults can be detrimental, resulting in academic failure, dropout, and judiciary contact (Balfanz et al., 2003; Fabelo et al., 2011).

Advancing Equity and Social Justice

According to most recent data collected nationally, although suspension rates have declined, suspensions among minority students continue to be disproportionate. Between 2012 and 2016, the proportion of students suspended at least once fell from 5.6% to 4.7% (Kamenetz, 2018). Additionally, suspension rates fell most drastically among African American students who were most often suspended. With that said, African American students in 2016 were twice as likely to be suspended compared to White and Hispanic students. In North Carolina during the 2018-19 school year, there were 203,298 short-term suspensions, a decrease of 3.8% from the previous year. Conversely, middle grades saw an increase compared to the 2017-18 school year. Although the rate of suspensions decreased slightly statewide, African American male students had the highest rate of short-term suspensions (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2020c).

Evidence shows that schools that implement effective alternatives to disciplining students foster conducive environments for learning (Childs et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2015). This study of adult behavior toward minority students can reveal potential barriers that obstruct the issuance of fair consequences. Identifying these barriers will allow teachers to combat intentional and

unintentional biases that encourage afflicting behaviors. This study will show that providing educators with skills to create cultures of equitable opportunities will result in positive changes in student behavior and school climate. This work will ensure the community that the school is taking the appropriate steps to addressing disparities in suspensions. The actions taken at CPS Middle will also show that the district is working to address issues of equity and social justice. More importantly, the actions of the teachers will guide students along the path to a better educational experience in Carolina Public Schools and beyond.

Advances in Practice

Disparities also exist in other subgroups often marginalized as a result of race and/or gender. National data reveals that Latino males, African American females and students with disabilities experience disparities comparable to African American male suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In 2018, the U.S. Department of Education reported that African American female students represented 8% of the student enrollment nationally and accounted for 14% of out-of-school suspensions. Latino males represented 13% and accounted for 15% of out-of-school suspensions. Similarly, while students with disabilities represented 12% of student enrollment, they accounted for 26% of out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The implications and results of this study could prove transferable to other people of color and disabilities experiencing similar inequities.

Summary

Throughout the turn of the century, reports continue to show the disparities of African American males in discipline nationally contributing to the eventual fate of these individuals as participants in the school to prison pipeline. This trend is mirrored both across the US and locally. The phenomenon of suspension disparities is not only pervasive in urban areas but also

prevalent in rural districts. A 2018-2019 North Carolina report revealed that 32.73% of suspensions were issued to African American males (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2020c). African American make up only 25% of the state's student population. Carolina Public Schools' data reflects similar trends. Such inequities exist due to systemic and institutionalized racism as well as individual biases and lack of knowledge.

Using a mixed methods approach collecting both quantitative and qualitative data through surveys, focus groups and interviews, this study will (1) examine the root cause of adult behavior toward students of color and potential biases that influence these behaviors, (2) explore structures in education that influence this disproportionate data, (3) implement a program designed to create a more equitable school culture for students and (4) review the impact of adult behaviors on disciplinary data. More specifically, this study will be conducted within the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) acknowledging the existence of race and racism and its constraints.

Identified staff at CPS Middle School will engage in a series of work sessions over the course of one year equipping them with the skills to integrate social emotional learning in academics and beyond. While limited in time, it is the predicted outcome that these research-based practices will make for sustainable cultures that provide a sense of equity and social justice for all students. Chapter 2 will take a deep dive in a historical context for the existence of racial disparities and review research to support my quest to prove that changing adult behaviors of educators inevitably reduces disparities in discipline referrals among African American males in a rural middle school.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature begins with setting the foundational theory from which I will explain the cause of educational racial disparities in the United States. Secondly, I will highlight the impact of racism and discrimination ultimately attributing to disparities in various sectors of society, specifically education. Thirdly, the review will focus on the causes of implicit bias and how it fuels racist behaviors. These thoughts and behaviors filter into the realm of education through adult behaviors. Then, the review will examine how such behaviors transform into creative structures and policies that indirectly impact marginalized students disproportionately. Later, I will explore research that explains how the implementation of alternative discipline strategies and practices in schools create cultures that positively impact student behavior. Specifically, I will survey research-based strategies to support the success of African American males in schools. Finally, I will discuss the means for how I will support teachers at CPS Middle through professional development.

Theoretical Foundation

A product of the legal world, Critical Race Theory (CRT) comes from an established practice of resistance toward the inequitable and unfair distribution of power and resources embedded institutionally along political, economic, racial and gendered lines in America (Taylor et al., 2016). Kisha Bird provides a thorough definition in her testimony to the House Education and Labor Committee:

> Many structural and systemic factors contribute to individuals' barriers to work. These include mass incarceration and the implicit biases in the criminal justice system; racism and discrimination; segregation and isolation; policy and investment failures in the K-12 and postsecondary systems; and major gaps in access and in investment in crucial

> supports for work, including childcare, health, and behavioral health. These factors have their roots in systems of power. Systems of power are the beliefs, practices, and cultural norms on which individual lives and institutions are built. They are rooted in social constructions of race and gender and are embedded in history (colonization, slavery, migration, immigration, and genocide) as well as present-day policies and practice (*Eliminating Barriers*, 2019, p. 5; West-Bey et al., 2018).

Akin to institutional racism (Scott, 2007), this unequal distribution of power provides opportunities that benefit a dominant race – Whites, Caucasians, Anglo Saxons – at the expense and eventual exclusion of others – African Americans, Blacks, Hispanics, Latinx, Native Americans, etc. The ideology of White superiority is embedded systemically in educational, legal and political structures (Delgado, 1995). CRT provides conceptual tools for examining how race and racism have been institutionalized and sustained (Sleeter, 2017). Various researchers argue in favor of this theory.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) discuss social inequity and school inequity on the grounds of (1) race as a significant factor for determining inequity, (2) society based on property rights, and (3) the intersection of race and property to better understand social inequity, as well as school inequity. The researchers used the foundational works of Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois who also argued that society should consider race as a central construct for understanding inequality. In *The Mis-education of the Negro*, Woodson (1933) identifies the school's role in establishing inequality and demeaning African American students. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois (1989) noted that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (p. 1). Cooperatively, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) hold that race continues to be a significant factor. To define race, Omi and Winant (1994) suggests that "race is a matter of

both social and cultural representation" (p. 56). In spite of debates in defining race and lack of the term being theorized, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that class and gender alone are not powerful enough to explain disparities in school experience and performance in educational research.

To support the claim that the American society is built on capitalism, CRT researchers argue that historically individuals with more wealth have better things, better property. Those with better property have better schools. The inability of African Americans to qualify for educational advancements, jobs and mortgages creates a cycle of low educational achievement, underemployment and unemployment, and standard housing. Due to living in segregated communities, African Americans are unable to provide equivalent funding for their schools, unlike those in wealthier neighborhoods (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In addition, they indicate that curriculum is a form of "intellectual property" and observe that the quality and quantity of curriculum reflects the "property value" of the school. This is an example of how African Americans suffer the consequences of systemic and structural racism.

CRT also challenges the traditional claims of the educational institution viewed as an environment of objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). In other words, the voice of the African American is silenced and erased when denouncing ideology of the dominant culture. "Naming one's own reality" or "voice" is rooted in the work of CRT theorists. Delgado suggests that there are three reasons for naming one's reality. First, reality is socially constructed; therefore, political and moral analysis is situational. He states, "truths only exist for this person in this predicament at this time in history" (Delgado, 1991, p. 111). Secondly, controlling the mind leads to psychic self-preservation. Self-condemnation is a contributing factor to the demoralization of marginalized

groups (Delgado, 1989). An example of this act is minority groups internalizing the stereotypic images society has created around those minorities in order to maintain their own power (Crenshaw, 1988). Reclaiming the story that was told by the dominant culture and telling it as your own can heal wounds caused by racial oppression (Delgado, 1989). These stories can affect the oppressor. Lastly, the dominant group will create a story to justify its power which constructs a reality to maintain privilege (Delgado et al., 1989). Rationalized in the act of oppression, the oppressor has no regard for self-examination.

> Another CRT theorist, Harris (1993) talks about Whiteness as the ultimate property: Possession—the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property—was defined to include only the cultural practices of Whites. This definition laid the foundation for the idea that whiteness—that which Whites alone possess—is valuable and is property. (p. 1,721)

She deems the property functions of whiteness as (1) rights of disposition, (2) rights to use and enjoyment, (3) reputation and status property, and (4) absolute right to exclude. First, Whiteness is accepted as the standard and thus transferred to others. For example, society rewards individuals for conformity to "white norms" or cultural practices in school, including but not limited to dress, speech patterns, unauthorized conceptions of knowledge. When they choose not to conform, they are penalized or met with opposition. Secondly, being White allows one to enjoy and use that privilege. Whiteness allows for specific social, cultural and economic privileges (i.e. better neighborhoods get better schools and curriculum) (McIntosh, 1990). Thirdly, Harris draws the analogy that to damage someone's reputation is to damage some aspect of his or her personal property as to calling a White person Black is to defame him or her. Similarly, to identify a school as non-white diminishes its status. To term a school "urban" is

understood to mean black. Urban schools are typically lacking in status and reputation compared to suburban schools (Bissinger, 1994). Finally, Whiteness is constructed in this society as the absence of Blackness. The right to exclude in education started with denying blacks the right to attend schools. Later there was the creation of separate schools. Now it has become white flight and vouchers and school of choice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Exclusion also exists through tracking within schools. African American students are rarely accounted for in gifted programs, honors programs, and advanced placement (Oakes, 1985).

Critical race theory has a connection to education that is well established. Viewed as an equalizing institution for opportunity, the education system in the United States has historically and continues to be tainted with pervasive racism. The assumptions of White superiority are deeply embedded in educational structures as to be practically unrecognizable (Delgado, 1995).

Historical Disparities in Education

Considerable scholarly work has documented the persistence of White privilege for generations in the United States, which has enabled the disproportionate transfer of wealth, health, education and other social benefits to Whites (Katznelson, 2005; Lipsitz, 2006). As a result, the African American individual has endured injustice and suffered a myriad of inequities created by a White supremacist society. This unequal treatment throughout history has created disparities in multiple sectors of society for the African American community and have continued to impact the lives of African Americans today (Rothstein, 2017). The timeline paints a picture of slaves living in dilapidated shacks set up on plantations, indentured tenants working farms while continuing to live in less than favorable housing, and relocated African Americans pushed to overcrowded slum ghettos. These experiences fueled by layers of racially explicit laws, regulations, and government practices created deep patterns of residential segregation. Not

only has residential segregation in the United States limited access to wealth accumulation and posed health related burdens for African Americans, moreover, it has created negative experiences in educational opportunities (Rothstein, 2017).

Before the establishment of public schools, policies were created in the United States that would shape the sorting, the opportunities and the resources African American families would have to invest in education (Ladson-Billings, 2006). During the slavery era, anti-literacy laws existed in many southern states, which prevented slaves from learning to read and write. Slave owners thought that the education of slaves would threaten the economy of the South. Although illegal, some African American slaves saw learning to read as a symbol of freedom. Opposing the anti-literacy laws, African Americans had built, funded and maintained approximately 500 small schools in the South. As a result, 10% of slaves learned to read and 5% learned to write (Schweiger, 2013).

The Reconstruction Period following the Civil War presented various challenges for African Americans who sought to create additional schools. There was a shortage of qualified teachers and funding to pay a teacher's salary. As a result, African American communities requested support from the Freedmen's Bureau. Established by Congress in March 1865, the bureau assisted northern aid societies, like the American Missionary Association, financially in meeting the African American demand for education mainly in the South (Butchart, 2017). Public institutions were erected for youth and adults. With that said, African Americans made huge strides in education during the Reconstruction Era in southern states. Unfortunately, these advancements would be short lived.

Post Reconstruction in 1877, after the federal government pulled troops out of the South, legislators were effective in stripping the constitutional rights of African Americans by passing

laws that mandated segregation and suppressed voting. African American employees attending school were released from their White employers. The African American community was intimidated by White supremacists' groups, like the Ku Klux Klan, by burning schools, beating and murdering teachers and students, and threatening those who attended. Despite these attempts, African American literacy in 1880 increased from 5% to 30%, and by 1900 to 70% (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) constitutionally upheld the existence of racial segregation under the "separate but equal" doctrine, ultimately allowing a dual education system based on race. Conversely, the schools in this system were not equal. In some states, White schools received two to three times more capital per student than African American schools. At times, African American taxpayers not only bore the cost of their schools, but also a percentage of the White schools. African American schools often received resources (i.e. textbooks, instruments, furniture, etc.) passed down from White schools. In 1954, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka overturned Plessy vs. Ferguson declaring the system of legal segregation unconstitutional. States were encouraged to end segregation with "all deliberate speed." Throughout several years to follow starting in 1957, African American students could attend desegregated schools in the South starting with Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, the New Orleans Public Schools in Louisiana, the University of Mississippi, the University of Alabama and the University of Georgia (Smithsonian Institute, 2004). These actions for integrating schools were often met with opposition in the form of violence, neglect and ostracism toward African American students. Many predominantly African American public schools were closed and African American educators were either demoted or lost their jobs. School desegregation operated in a fashion that benefited Whites counterintuitively contributing to

social inequity (Bell, 1990). In hindsight, CRT would argue that Brown v. Board of Education, while pivotal in the Civil Rights Movement, was an ephemeral Civil Rights Law victory (Crenshaw, 1988).

Policies continue to impact the African American community in a generational cycle of inequalities that impact the attainment of education. As alluded earlier, residential segregation has adversely shaped the contemporary patterns of school segregation within and between districts (General Accounting Office, 2016). Racial segregation in neighborhoods has profound consequences related to access to educational opportunities, because children often attend schools in close proximity to their homes (Frankenburg, 2009). Attending segregated schools impacts the paths students pursue in his/her adulthood. Goldsmith (2009) found that disadvantaged students who attended predominately Black and Latino schools were less likely to receive a high school diploma than their peers who attended predominately White schools. In the same respect, students attending predominantly Black and Latino schools were substantially less likely to have a bachelor's degree by age 26 than their peers who attended predominately White schools. Despite the desegregation and segregation of schools, disparities across African American and Latino students are disproportionate in academics and discipline (Davis, 1986; Reardon et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2011).

The context of the lives of African American youth on their perception of academic performance is attributed to multiple factors, including home and community environment, stereotypes, teacher authority, and internalized messages (St. Mary et al., 2018). Aligned to the causes of this perception, earlier studies identify the lack of parental involvement connected to disparities in academic achievement (Christner et al., 1991; McDaniel & Mack, 1992). Research

also revealed that health discrepancies negatively impacted the cognitive achievement of African American children at an early age (Crosnoe, 2006).

In the United States, student performance is measured though academic assessments. Notably, African American students often underperform on standardized tests (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Literature suggests disparities in academic performance between African American and White students is associated with attendance and school turnover (Fomby et al., 2010). If attendance is a factor, then a suspension's design of excluding students from the traditional instructional setting should affect student academics. A recent study associates multiple suspensions to lower achievement for students (NaYoung, 2018). Unfortunately, these exclusionary disciplinary consequences are administered to African American males at a disproportionately higher rate.

Several theories have been studied to provide a reason for these disparities detailed above. Findings show that discontinuity in cultural matches between African American students and predominately White teachers may lead to deficiency in appropriate academic and behavioral skills, implicit bias, and biased policy implementation alleging neutrality (Whitford et al., 2016). These contributing factors are categorized as adult behaviors and policies.

Contributing Factors: Adult Behaviors

Throughout history, the defiance and resistance toward the African American community that developed from the fears and prejudices of White supremacy drove racial disparities in America. Jointly, the dehumanization of the African American male as a threat to society, an aggressor, and a "sexual predator" is a continuous portrayal in society (Zounlome et al., 2019). At the start of the 17th century, slave owners made it illegal for slaves to marry, travel without permission, or assemble in groups (Finkelman, 1999). Fearing slave revolts of the early 19th

century, slaveholders spread rumors that runaway slaves were seeking to rape White women (Asante & Mattson, 1998). At the conclusion of the Civil War and the passage of the 13th Amendment, which constitutionally freed the slaves, the incarceration of African Americans, specifically males, surged (Adamson, 1983; Muhammad, 2011). Several laws targeting newly freed African Americans were passed to pacify the public's fear and bolster the depressed economy. These Black codes included offenses like "walking without a purpose" or "walking at night", hunting on Sundays, or settling on public or private land. At the turn of the century, images from *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), and the endorsements of politicians and academics further ingrained the depiction of the African American male as a rapist and threat. These acts perpetuated the mass incarceration and lynching of thousands of African American males. Such portrayals of the African American male over centuries builds stereotypes and fear that are not easily dismantled.

In 2020, *Color of Change*, an organization charged to challenge injustice by holding corporate and political leaders accountable, called on multiple networks to cancel law enforcement shows that depict distorted images of crime and policing as it pertains to African American males. These stereotypes over the course of multiple centuries can easily contribute to lowered expectations for marginalized students academically and socially (Ferguson, 1998; Tyson, 2011). Stereotypes could play a role and impact the beliefs that people hold despite the truth. Unfortunately, many educators are prone to enter schools with these stereotypes fed by implicit biases.

Implicit Bias

Many education scholars and criminologists have shared their thoughts regarding how and why disproportionate disciplining of African American students occurs. Psychologists

suggest that implicit bias may impact the disciplining of Black students by teachers (Okonofua et al., 2016). Implicit biases are described as "deep-seated attitudes that operate outside conscious awareness – that may even be in direct conflict with a person's stated beliefs and values" (Carter et al., 2017, p. 217). According to theoretical models, implicit bias may be controlling teacher disciplinary decisions in some cases, even though implicit attitudes compete for control over an individual's behavior (Fazio, 1990; Gilliam et al., 2016).

Two psychological mechanisms process constructs like race: an unconscious, implicit one and a conscious, explicit one (Chaiken & Trope, 1999). A spontaneous mental association between one's race and a stereotypic thought is considered an implicit racial bias (Devine & Montieth, 1999). While many Americans do not consciously believe that African Americans should be treated differently, they could unconsciously associate African Americans with negative thoughts as a result of endemic antiblackness that exists in American society. Unconscious associations like this often perpetuate injustices throughout society. Warikoo et al. (2016) argue that, "people are generally unaware of their implicit associations or unwilling to endorse them as indicative of their beliefs about those groups" (p. 508).

A universal psychological process, implicit bias is also socially-constructed. In other words, it is shaped by its cultural environment even though implicit bias is an innate predisposition. Furthermore, implicit or unconscious bias is developed during the early stages of life via media and interpersonal interactions with family, friends, and other surroundings (Baron & Banaji, 2006).

In spite of the lack of supporting evidence, researchers suggest that implicit racial bias among teachers may play a causal role in discipline disproportionality (Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002). Considering other contextual factors and

competing explicit attitudes influencing an individual's actions, implicit bias never operates exclusively as a driver in an individual's behavior (Fishbein & Azjen, 2010). That being said, teachers are chronically overworked and overstressed, particularly in low-resourced schools, and therefore lack time and energy to evaluate their implicit biases and how they impact their behavior. Warikoo et al. (2016) even argue that the teaching profession systemically denies the opportunity for teachers to override their implicit bias due to the prevalence of chronic emotional stress within the school context.

Various studies support the idea that personal implicit bias of educators and juvenile justice personnel contribute to the overrepresentation of Black students in school discipline (Anyon et al., 2014). Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) conducted a series of experiments that supported the 'Black escalation effect.' Several kindergarten through 12th grade teachers were asked to read a discipline record with a stereotypically White or Black name. After the initial read, evaluators found there was no racial disparity on how concerned the teacher felt regarding the student or how severely they would punish the student after the first infraction. Upon the second infraction, data revealed a racial disproportionality between students. More specifically, teachers were more concerned by and more likely punished Black students harsher. In addition, a Black student's infraction was perceived as a pattern classifying the student as a 'troublemaker.'

On the other hand, some studies debunk the above theory. A study using a similar method investigated early childhood educators' implicit biases in perceptions of behavior and discipline using both eye tracking techniques and racial priming in a standardized scenario. In this investigation, the researchers were pointed in distinguishing Black boys, Black girls, White boys, and White girls as distinct groups. The study revealed that early childhood educators were more likely to track Black boys when asked to look for student misbehavior. Contrary to anticipated

belief, White teachers were more likely to render harsher consequences for White students following a racial priming through a scenario (Gilliam et al., 2016). This is counterintuitive to what most researchers indicate about anti-Black implicit bias and racial disparities in discipline.

With that said, Marcucci's (2019) research supported the Gilliam et al. (2016) study that White teachers provide harsher punitive decisions for White students. With these findings and acknowledging the quest to override anti-Black bias in certain context, Marcucci cautions the potential lowering of expectations for Black students by White teachers.

On a separate note, while most teachers believe in racial equality (Quinn, 2017), the demands of the classroom and stress due to poor working conditions may reduce opportunities to override implicit bias. As a result, their implicit bias is more likely to impact how they interact with and discipline African American students.

Cultural Mismatch

One institutional construct that exists in education is the homogeneous landscape of teachers throughout the country. In spite of the trending rapid growth of diverse populations in schools today, the majority of teachers in America remain White, female, and middle class. Over 80% of these teachers work in schools that are predominately culturally and linguistically diverse (Englehart, 2014).

Contextually, cultural mismatch in the classroom involves an "unawareness of the tactics, rules, nuances and idiosyncrasies that exist between teachers and their students" (Davis, 2009, p. 24). Many aspiring teachers in education programs have little previous contact with racial groups other than their own. This can lead to a cultural mismatch between school personnel and the school's student body.

Exclusionary disciplinary actions for African American students could stem from cultural misunderstandings between these students and school personnel (Bireda, 2002). It is important to note that some African American males may operate in a nonconformist manner that does not meet the expectations of educators as it pertains to communication style within an educational setting. To be clear, the manner in which some African American students communicate with their peers can be misperceived as loud and confrontational by teachers (Cartledge & Fellows-Milburn, 1996). School personnel lacking this understanding could misconstrue the "abrasive" language and vocal inflections as gestures engaging one to a physical altercation. It is important to note the difference in communication styles of these two cultures and how they can result in misunderstandings. Often, such misunderstandings result in student referrals to the office for subjective behaviors considered threatening and dangerous.

Microaggressions

Comments like "You speak excellent English" to a Latina American female, "You are a credit to your race" to an African American professor, or "You are very articulate" to a young African American male can be offensive. While the intent is complementary, the communication is that they were perceived inferior. Such statements are known as microaggressions. Microaggressions are daily exchanges that are often subtle and demeaning in nature (Sue et al., 2007). Usually brief in delivery, these actions are reminders about social identities, including race, ethnicity, religion, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, disability status, and socio-economic class (Sue, 2004). Microaggressions are often enacted automatically and unconsciously communicated by subtle insults, indifferent looks, gestures, and tones. Similar to implicit bias, all individuals have the potential to participate in micro-aggressive behavior. These actions are often difficult to detect, whether verbal, nonverbal, visual, or behavioral (Solorzano

et al., 2000). Some examples include validating men and ignoring women during a conversation, making assumptions about a person's background, or continuing to mispronounce someone's name after they have corrected the person multiple times. Proactiveness in curbing micro-aggressive behavior before it happens is important and entails limiting assumptions, creating safe environments, speaking your own experience, and being cognizant of social identities in your space (McClintock, 1990).

Colorblindness

"I don't see color" is a phrase used to disprove prejudice or a racial act. Colorblindness is a tactic practiced by many Whites as a belief mechanism in interracial settings (Plaut, 2002). In the classroom it could be used to manage diversity (Pollock, 2004; Sue, 2004). Socially accepted in some personal and institutional beliefs, it is a strategy used to appear unbiased.

Colorblindness, as described by Eduard Bonilla-Silva (2003) emerged after the civil rights era. It was believed that this ideology would help end discrimination based on the barrier of race or ethnicity between individuals. Bonilla-Silva (2003) determines individuals believe they are (1) minimizing the presence of racism by omitting race, gender, and other identifiers as valid social descriptors, (2) benefitting individuals by disregarding their social identities or group affiliations, and (3) reducing discrimination by focusing on commonalities.

Another short coming of colorblindness is that it allows its practitioners to rationalize racial inequality. Excluding race, supporters might suggest that certain situations exist due to natural conditions or cultural behaviors of certain groups (Fergus, 2017). Apfelbaum et al. (2008) explored the interactions of White and African American participants and how interracial (White and African American) observers perceived acts of colorblindness, including the appearance of prejudice. Conducting four studies of various interactions, it was revealed that Whites' avoidance

of talking about race differed depending on who the interaction partner was, how the partner talked about race, and the context in which the interaction took place. More specifically, African American observers perceived Whites' intention of using colorblind behavior to prevent the appearance of prejudice as unfavorable.

Colorblindness can sustain a White cultural frame for how one perceives society (Fergus, 2016). This belief can prevent the understanding of how discrimination, politics, policy, and economics over centuries has marginalized racial and ethnic minorities. Such barriers subsequently limited access and opportunity for these groups. Closer to the classroom, it prevents educators from empathizing with African American students when their misbehaviors result from the experiences of despair, anger, frustration, and fear of continuous marginalization (Fergus, 2017).

Contributing Factors: Policies

Research also reveals that policies may produce racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions which could hinder the academic success rates of African American students (Curran, 2016). Beyond Plessy v. Fergusson (1896) and Brown v. Board of Education (1954), the government has played a pivotal role in enacting federal policy that has impacted education and more specifically, discipline. The United States experienced an increase in school violence due to the desegregation of schools and the Civil Rights movement over the course of two decades (Mallett, 2016). In an effort to repair relationships and create safer neighborhoods and schools, the federal government established the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act (1968) which provided police presence in local schools and communities (Mallett, 2016). During the 80s, the government instituted a "get tough on crime" campaign encompassing the "three strikes" policy to discourage inappropriate behavior in schools. Students who failed to comply

were removed from the school setting (Hoffman, 2014). In a similar fashion, propelled by the Clinton administration during the 1990s, zero tolerance policies gained high acceptance as hearsay regarding gang violence and rumors of "super predators" and occurrences of school shootings caught the attention of American constituents (Triplett et al., 2014).

To improve data collection, broaden technical assistance, and support state and local officials with reformation, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education jointly released a two-part federal guidance document with recommended practices for fostering supportive and equitable school discipline. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act signed into law in 1965 and includes a number of provisions intended to reduce disciplinary exclusion and disparities in exclusion. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) identifies school climate as an indicator of student success, requires local education agencies to create a strategic plan to reduce the overuse of exclusionary discipline, and allows districts to use federal funding for intervention services to increase parent engagement, to implement school-based mental health services, and establish multitiered systems of support (Capatosto, 2015).

Under the federal ESSA, states were granted flexibility to develop their own path to educational success provided they submit a proposal of action to the U.S. Department of Education outlining how they will reach intended goals. The North Carolina ESSA State Plan was approved in June 2018. The plan calls for individualized instruction and learning for both students and educators and continues to explore and promote emerging initiatives for personalized learning. More specific to this work, the plan focuses on reducing exclusionary discipline practices that remove students from the classroom. North Carolina has legislation to support safe environments in schools by addressing student academic, behavioral and social

emotional needs. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), the state agency, supports Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in professional development, resources, and technical assistance to implement practices aligned to legislation (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2020d).

Administrative policies, practices, and individual administrator personalities have a profound effect as they relate to disciplinary discrimination in the educational setting. Variation in the attitudes of principals and teachers has an influence on disciplinary practices (Brown & Di Tillio, 2013; Skiba et al., 2014b). Disproportionality of exclusionary practices among African American students was higher in schools where principals favored this practice (Skiba et al., 2014b). Not surprisingly, African American students were more inclined to receive exclusionary actions for minor infractions (Skiba et al., 2011).

Similarly, zero tolerance policies have contributed to suspension and expulsion becoming common methods of addressing problem behaviors in schools. Over the past 20 years, these policies have resulted in a staggering increase of exclusionary discipline rates, and ultimately the discipline gap (Flannery et al., 2013; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Once a nationwide phenomenon, these policies criminalize student misbehaviors ultimately resulting in punitive consequences that push students into the prison system, a construct known as the school-to-prison pipeline (Rodríguez, 2017). If suspension and expulsion are being used as forms of punishment, they should theoretically result in a reduction of problem behavior after their administration. Counterintuitively, exclusionary disciplinary practices have not been associated with reductions in problem behaviors among students. Suspension predicts high rates of misconduct in the future (Raffaele Mendez, 2003) and precede delinquent behavior (Teske, 2011).

On the other hand, some studies reveal that the existence of structure in schools helps to reduce racial disparities in school discipline. Schools where students and teachers perceived school rules as strict yet fair and thought teachers were supportive reported a lower overall suspension rate and a smaller gap between African American and White suspension rates. Such findings may be used to support the implementation of school climate initiatives established to reduce racial disparities in school discipline (Heilbrun et al., 2018).

Strategies and Supports

Non-punitive forms of discipline are gaining traction in American schools because of their more rehabilitative philosophies. Research shows how various models of trauma informed teaching and social justice, as well as practical strategies, support student success socially and academically (Desimone et al., 2006; Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018). Additionally, evidence points to possible reduction in disproportionate disciplining of African American students when restorative practices are implemented (Augustine et al., 2018). A potential solution for schools is to implement a multi-tiered system that supports student academic performance, behavior, and social emotional needs.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Initially framed as Response to Intervention (RTI), the implementation of MTSS stemmed from federal education initiatives following the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), which called for more alignment between this policy and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Sugai & Horner, 2009). MTSS programs in schools are designed to provide a more systematic, data-driven, and equitable approach to solving academic and behavioral issues with students. The program structure involves sorting students into three tiered categories based on the level of risk and need: (a) Tier

1 identifies students who are in the general education population and who are thriving, (b) Tier 2 identifies students who need slightly more intensive intervention that can be delivered both individually or in a small group setting, and (c) Tier 3 identifies students who need intensive individualized interventions (Ockerman et al., 2012). The process includes school-wide screening or testing, intervention implementation, and progress monitoring. To further support students and address problem behaviors, MTSS is typically linked with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Once students have been identified for a particular tier group, a team consisting of school personnel, including a counselor, meet to determine strategies to meet the student's needs through a cyclical process as outlined in Figure 7. This team should be involved in planning, enacting, and evaluating the services and interventions utilized. In the planning phase, the team should examine preliminary discipline data to gauge universal supports needed and determine the appropriate instrument to be used for universal screening. It is imperative for the faculty to work collaboratively with administrative support when conducting the screening. Once complete, the MTSS team should review the data in order to identify at-risk students. Finally, students will be placed in one of three MTSS tiers (Ockerman et al., 2012).

Tier 1

Tier 1 instruction or intervention is part of the general curriculum schoolwide and is offered to all students (Harn et al., 2015). PBIS and Social Emotional Learning are commonly used in conjunction with MTSS at this level (Cook et al., 2015). School counselors can partner with administrators and teachers to develop classroom lessons and schoolwide programs. Tier 1 interventions are designed to effectively serve approximately 80-85% of the student population (Martens & Andreen, 2013).

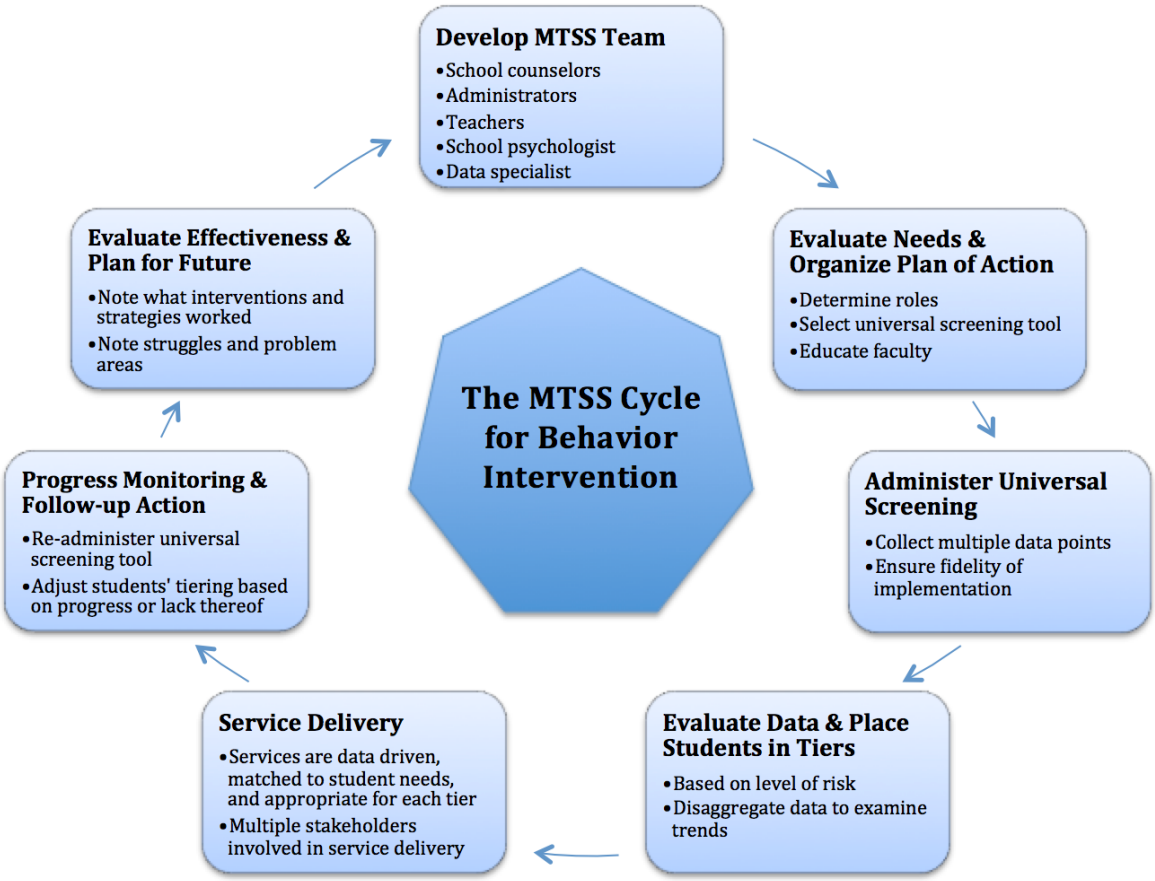


Figure 7. MTSS Cycle for behavior intervention.

Tier 2

Tier 2 interventions are available for students whose needs are not being met by Tier 1 services and may include various interventions such as the following: (a) targeted interventions, (b) group interventions, and (c) individualized interventions for less problematic behaviors (Newcomer et al., 2013). While school counselors may participate in facilitating interventions, they are more likely to conduct direct small group interventions and individualized interventions for minor problem behaviors.

Small Group Counseling. Considering the disproportionate use of exclusionary disciplinary actions toward students of color, school counselors and the decision-making team should utilize Tier 2 interventions that promote alternatives to suspension and help students develop or enhance prosocial behaviors. Group counseling interventions support students in growing personally, connecting with their feelings, developing social skills, and solving problems (Gladding, 2016). Counselors should facilitate sessions that foster an environment of safety and trust. Students should feel comfortable in expressing their feelings and emotions.

Individualized Interventions. Two commonly used strategies are Check-in/Check-out and behavior contracts. Conducted frequently, Check-in /Check-out is a structured method for providing students with feedback regarding their behavior (Crone et al., 2010). In a similar manner, behavior contracts include a modified behavior intervention plan (BIP). With both approaches, a behavior tracking document should be personalized based on the developmental and behavioral needs of the student.

Tier 3

If students have not responded positively to Tier 2 interventions and identified as highly at risk, then they receive Tier 3 interventions. As with Tier 2 interventions, school counselors'

roles with Tier 3 interventions may vary, ranging from a supporting or consultative role to directly delivering interventions. Counseling interventions at this level include individual counseling, one-on-one mentoring, or referrals to community agencies for more intensive services (Ockerman et al., 2012). To mitigate more severe problem behaviors, behavior intervention plans are administered (Bohanon et al., 2015).

Finally, the team should monitor student outcomes. Carter et al. (2012) recommended administering the universal screening instrument at least twice during the school year as a means of evaluating progress. Students who respond favorably to Tier 2 or 3 interventions may advance to Tier 1, whereas those not responding favorably to Tier 1 or 2 may be recommended to Tier 3. Students not responding to Tier 3 interventions may warrant additional behavioral or psychological assessment to determine if further services are more appropriate (Ockerman et al., 2012).

Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), PBIS

Like MTSS, SWPBIS is a tiered framework. It is a school-wide systematic approach to establishing a positive school climate through supporting the social emotional needs of all children (Childs et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2015). Orchestrated by a team of administrators, teachers, counselors, and behavior specialists, the core elements of SWPBIS are integrated within an organized system of supports for initial implementation, active application, and sustained use of these elements (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Primary features include (1) preventing problem behavior, (2) teaching appropriate social behavior skills, (3) acknowledging appropriate behavior, (4) using a tiered system for differentiated instruction/intervention according to student need, (5) making data driven decisions to problem solve, and (6) implementing evidence-based

practices systemically (George et al., 2009). Table 2 provides an outline of this system of supports.

Tier 1

Student needs are addressed at this level. Explicitly, students learn prosocial behaviors and skills. In addition, students assemble in general settings to engage in situations that allow them to practice learned skills. Finally, students are recognized and provided incentives for demonstrating prosocial behaviors.

Tier 2

If students fail to respond to universal level interventions and supports, they advance to Tier 2. Students are categorized as "at-risk" for failure to model appropriate behavior. As a result, education practitioners administer a functional behavior assessment (FBA).

Tier 3

The most intensive support is an individualized approach. Like Tier 2, formal assessments are used to determine the student's need as well as develop a support plan with both academic and behavior goals.

Although multiple sources indicate a reduction in the number of exclusionary discipline practices in school, it appears that the decrease exists only with White students (Bal et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2010a). Disparities among African American students regarding exclusionary practices continue to exist within SWPBIS cultures (McIntosh et al., 2015; Vincent et al., 2011; Vincent et al., 2016). Researchers attribute this to engrained Eurocentric values in determining appropriate behaviors (Bal et al., 2012). As a result, Johnson et al. (2017) suggests that a culturally responsive adaptation of SWPBIS is needed.

Table 2

PBIS Prevention Model

Prevention Tier	Core Elements
Tier 1	• Behavioral Expectations Defined • Behavioral Expectations Taught • Reward system for appropriate behavior • Clearly defined consequences for problem behavior • Differentiated instruction for behavior • Continuous collection and use of data for decision-making • Universal screening for behavior support
Tier 2	• Progress monitoring for at risk students • System for increasing structure and predictability • System for increasing contingent adult feedback • System for linking academic and behavioral performance • System for increasing home/school communication • Collection and use of data for decision-making • Basic-level function-based support
Tier 3	• Functional Behavioral Assessment (full, complex) • Team-based comprehensive assessment • Linking of academic and behavior supports • Individualized intervention based on assessment information focusing on (a) prevention of problem contexts, (b) instruction on functionally equivalent skills, and instruction on desired performance skills, (c) strategies for placing problem behavior on extinction, (d) strategies for enhancing contingence reward of desired behavior, and (e) use of negative or safety consequences if needed. • Collection and use of data for decision-making

Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS)

The CRPBIS framework provides a research-based, inclusive problem-solving process through which educators co-design culturally responsive school discipline systems with local stakeholders who have been historically excluded from the decision-making process (Bal, 2016). It consists of five interrelated processes: forming CRPBIS Learning Labs, determining outcomes of CRPBIS, understanding cultural mediation and implementing culturally responsive practices, using data for continuous improvement and innovation, and ongoing systematic transformation (Bal et al., 2012). These five elements of the CRPBIS Framework are described in Table 3.

CRPBIS may be considered a radical approach to addressing a culture of disproportional student discipline. This approach encourages students, family, and community stakeholders to work collaboratively with schools in identifying and developing practices that foster student engagement and learning (Johnson et al., 2017). A collaboration of these stakeholders helps to reduce the likelihood of embedded Eurocentric influences.

Johnson et al. (2017) suggest that CRPBIS data collection methods should focus on data collection and analysis as they relate to interactions between individuals and infrastructure. Attending to such data enables researchers and practitioners to combine geographic data that has been collected in and out of the context of the schools. Examining the influence of multiple variables and their interaction with one another may help school officials identify how complex variables like power and privilege operate in the context of education (Bal et al., 2012). Additional data to monitor may include whether CRPBIS is associated with school attendance through the reduction of severe behavior consequences as well as school attendance in general. Learning Labs (Bal, 2011) are the first step to creating a platform for structured activities that establish common dialogue. It is recommended that Learning Labs include students, families,

Table 3

Descriptions of Five Processes for CRPBIS Practices

Essential Elements	Description
Learning Labs	Establish a common dialogue between families, community stakeholders, educators, and practitioners. This is achieved by all stakeholders reflecting critically on daily tensions and working together to develop an action plan to address them (Bal, 2011; Bal et al., 2014)
Determining Desired Outcomes	When students' culture, language, and experiences are drawn upon to develop behavioral expectations, consequence and support, these expectations become socially and ecologically relevant for all students (Bal et al., 2012). Thus, reviewing and analyzing the cultural motives that underlie expected school behaviors increases their relevancy for all stakeholders. This ensures that the outcomes are operationalized in a manner that is culturally and socially relevant to all students. Learning Labs provide a structured methodology and context for these outcomes to be developed and evaluated (Bal et al., 2016).
Cultural Mediation/Implementing Culturally Responsive Practices	The CRPBIS framework utilizes general principles of culturally responsive teaching strategies which include democratic and inclusive school climates that promote reciprocal relationships between school staff and students. As a result, teachers and practitioners are encouraged to focus on students and communities' strengths when instructing and implementing behavioral interventions (Bal et al., 2016).
Data for Continuous improvement and Innovation	Data enables educators to monitor students' performance and identify those that may be in need of more intensive intervention. CRPBIS data collection is focused on interactions between people an infrastructure to gain a more contextualized understanding of the sociological and cultural patterns that exist in common educational practices and policies (Bal et al., 2012). Analyzing this data enables Learning Lab members to systematically transform power/privilege paradigms that contribute to the disproportionate discipline of African American students.
Ongoing Systemic Transformation	Engaging a diverse array of stakeholders in the planning and implementation of CRPBIS increases the likelihood of ongoing systemic change. This is accomplished through building sustained systems level support at school, community, and policy levels (Bal et al., 2012).

administrators, teachers, intervention specialists, and other school personnel. An ultimate outcome during sessions is to develop community-based solutions and culturally responsive strategies to mitigate systemic issues. CRPBIS requires that behavioral expectations, consequences, and support are clearly defined culturally and socially. For instance, schools often disregard the fact that "respect" is largely contingent upon culturally derived attitudes, values, and beliefs; therefore, the term "be respectful" can be conceptualized in many different ways. Although, some teachers may find it disrespectful when students do not make direct eye contact with them while engaging in conversation, some students have been taught that making eye contact with an elder is disrespectful. For this reason, the motives and understanding behind desired school behaviors should be examined by all stakeholders. An overarching goal of CRPBIS is to replace noncompliant and aggressive behaviors with socially appropriate ones. These behaviors should encourage both teachers' and students' ownership to change their school and classroom communities. This input from multiple stakeholders will eventually become a universal set of positive behavioral expectations. This process will also enable this diverse group of stakeholders to identify what constitutes unacceptable behavior (Bal et al., 2016).

Johnson et al. (2017) offer that schools interested in adapting their SWPBIS system to a more culturally responsive model toward African American students should first examine office discipline referral data to determine if African American students are over-represented in exclusionary practices. If disparities exist, additional information should be collected noting the teachers' instructional and discipline practices. If this data reveals the over-representation of African American students, then culturally relevant interventions should be implemented ensuring that techniques used to teach appropriate behavior are also culturally relevant, which may require professional development related to cultural competency.

Bal (2016) concludes that CRPBIS Learning Labs and future multisite formative intervention studies enable researchers and practitioners to make comparisons between formative interventions in different education systems possible. In this environment, diverse communities work collaboratively as problem solvers and innovators creating inclusive and supportive schools for all.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Considering the above programs and the culturally conscious implementation of those programs, this study focused on the use of SEL from an equity lens. Social Emotional Learning is a conceptual framework used to facilitate inclusiveness and build culturally responsive schools. SEL activities enhance the implementation of many schools' SWPBIS framework. SEL "is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2020, para. 1). SEL is based on theory focused on the development of self-discipline through social and emotional competencies (Bear et al., 2015). These five competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Consistent with the pursuit of educational equity, researchers recently offered the concept of transformative SEL to expose the constructs of power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination in the field of SEL (Jagers, 2016). In transformative SEL students and teachers follow a process toward building strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, critically examining root causes of inequity, and developing collaborative solutions to address problems in the community

and society as a whole (Jagers et al., 2018). Using this equity lens, the SEL competencies are defined accordingly.

First, *self-awareness* is the base for equity. It is defined as the ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and how it influences their behavior. This is evident through one's ability to assess their strengths and limitations. Often, the individual possesses a high level of self-esteem and confidence. It also allows individuals to appreciate a sense of self including cultural values, orientations, and other collective identities (e.g., ethnic-racial group, socioeconomic status, and gender) (Jagers et al., 2018). Secondly, *self-management* entails one's ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors appropriately in diverse situations. Because most educational institutions prioritize middle-class American culture, success for African American students requires acculturation or a familiarity with American cultural meanings, norms, and practices (Jagers et al., 2018). This can cause stress. In addition, discrimination which is the perception of unfair treatment of an identifiable social group can cause stress. Students' of color reactions and responses to cultural and racialized stress could result in disciplinary actions (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Managing stress, tempering impulses, motivating self, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals are examples of this competency. In recognizing stress and acts of discrimination, students and adults could become more focused on identifying situational or societal challenges and pursue solutions that impact self and society (Neblett & Carter, 2012).

In addition, *social awareness* is the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports. A critical social awareness helps individuals notice cultural and race-related messages and expectations;

therefore, recognizing the importance of diversity in society (Jagers et al., 2018). Social awareness is the ability to discern issues of race and class in the context of school and community as well as the cultural demands (Brannon et al., 2015).

Relationship skills are critical as one aspires to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes clear communication, active-listening, cooperation, the resistance of inappropriate social pressure, the constructive negotiation of conflict, and the provision of support when needed (Jagers et al., 2018). From an equity perspective, cultural competence and cultural fluency support relationship development. The National Education Association (NEA) (2020) defines cultural competence as "understanding your own culture, other's culture, and the role of culture in education (para 1). Adults can bolster cultural fluency by learning about and discussing cultural differences. When cultivating this fluency, a sense of cultural humility is imperative where the individual accepts the limitations of one's own culture and acknowledges the likely benefits of diversity (Danso, 2016).

Lastly, the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior is deemed *responsible decision making.* One engages in social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms and the well-being of self and others. When making decisions, an individual should attend to systematic or structural explanations for differential treatment and outcomes because racial inequities exist (Jagers et al., 2018). If not, these actions can result in decisions that reflect and are reflected in school policies and practices that perpetuate educational inequities (Danso, 2016). Advancing equity through SEL recommends adults engage in initiatives, co-create structures and processes that are inclusive, equitable, and

mutual as alluded in the overarching goal of CRPBIS when engaging stakeholders (Jagers et al., 2018).

Studies revealed positive effects on problem behavior, engagement, and social skills, including the knowledge and attitudes regarding SEL competencies when students are intentionally taught the aforementioned skills (Durlak et al., 2011; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). The implementation of SEL requires teachers to make intentional adjustments of instruction to support the development and effective use of the five competencies. Meta-analyses on SEL suggest that varied approaches like direct instruction, peer mediation, and embedded concepts in instruction result in positive outcomes for students (Garrard & Lipsey, 2007). Where schools focus on the development of SEL competencies for students, research recognizes that educators need support to deepen their own social emotional competencies (Jennings & Frank, 2015). Jennings and Frank (2015) argue that teachers with high social and emotional competence create stronger relationships with students. Teachers with these competencies are also able to develop mutual understanding with their students, acknowledge various perspectives of conflict, and acquire resolutions during disputes. For this reason, professional learning for educators that is effective is essential.

Effective Professional Development (Professional Learning)

Professional development in education is an opportunity for personnel at the state, district, and school levels to gain new information which requires the implementation of a new skill. At times, presenters will provide examples (evidence) of how the practice is used and model the strategy. While new information is gained, it is often the case that a one-time session is ineffective because the participants do not have support during the implementation phase (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In addition, such workshops have little sustainability to impact

change in classroom culture and teacher behavior (Fullan, 2007). As mentioned earlier, research revealed that fewer than 20% of teachers implement new learning after a workshop without additional follow-up (Bush, 1984). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) defines effective professional development as "structured professional learning that results in changes to teacher knowledge and practices, and improvements in student learning outcomes (p. 2)." Factors of the professional learning that contribute to sustainability include focused content, active learning, modeling of strategies, support for collaboration through coaching, feedback and reflection, and facilitation over a long period of time.

Webster-Wright (2009) argues the need for a paradigm shift in professional development from using best practices to deliver information toward building on authentic experiences throughout learning. She begins with a change in nomenclature suggesting the renaming of professional "development" to "learning" implicating the idea of supporting and shaping continuous learning for professionals. Secondly, her study revealed that professionals considered continuous learning that was embedded and constructed in the experience of their practice more valuable than a professional development program (Webster-Wright, 2010).

Aligned with the above research, Learning Forward (2020), a professional learning organization based in Oxford, Ohio, has developed seven standards to build the capacity of leaders to create and sustain effective professional learning. The standards, described in Table 4, are indicators for a process that establishes learning communities, requires sufficient resources, integrates theory, research and modeling, aligns outcomes, promotes leadership, utilizes various data, and sustains implementation. Researched and evidence-based, these practices guide the learning, facilitation, implementation, and evaluation for professional learning that increases the effectiveness of educators and student results.

Table 4

Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning

Indicator	Description
Learning Communities	Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.
Leadership	Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.
Resources	Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring and coordinating resources for educator learning.
Data	Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning.
Learning Designs	Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.
Implementation	Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long-term change.
Outcomes	Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards.

While noting the importance of guidelines and standards aligned to those experiences in the profession to support continuous learning, one should also be cognizant of the realities that exist in the workspace in addition to work duties (Webster-Wright, 2009). For these reasons, it is my goal to design a framework that not only supports professionals as they learn, but also encourages ownership of that learning.

Summary and Conclusions

As discussed in this literature review, historical disparities existing in the African American community are connected to institutionalized bondage and systemic racism. These disparities exist in various sectors of society, including housing, income, health and education. Typically viewed as a means to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to become "productive" citizens in society, the education system in the United States by design may serve as a hindrance for the advancement of African American students and other students of color. Critical race theorists uplift race as a central construct for better understanding the inequities that exist in education. They identify many examples of systemic structures that marginalize African American students, such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, policies, and school resources. They also suggest that being in a position of power allows White people to control the story and maintain possession of property whether wrongfully obtained or not. Therefore, the practices and experiences of the White culture are established and engrained in American structure.

Cultural norms in education, influenced by Whiteness, perpetuate mindsets and beliefs harmful to students of color. Due to experiences and biases, these beliefs and attitudes manifest as actions and regulations established in school settings. Along with practices and individual educator personalities, administrative policies that display neutrality and zero tolerance result in disciplinary discrimination and disparities among African American students. In response to this

trend, alternative forms of discipline interventions and supports have gained traction in schools across the United States. Research based frameworks like MTSS, SWPBIS (PBIS), and SEL encourage the collaboration of schools, parents and community to facilitate these interventions. Although effective in reducing inappropriate behavior in schools when implemented to fidelity (Bradshaw et al., 2010b), these frameworks show little evidence to support reduction in disparities among marginalized students (Skiba et al., 2011; Vincent et al., 2016). When administered with a culturally conscious approach, like CRPBIS, as evidenced in multiple studies, schools have reported a reduction in discipline disparities.

In my study, I will support the faculty at CPS Middle School in exploring their attitudes and beliefs, reflecting upon practices used in the classroom, and implementing culturally conscious responses toward student behavior. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of this process including the questions guiding my study, methods of use, actions throughout implementation, and analysis of data.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

As noted in Chapter 1, male students of color, specifically African American students, are suspended at a higher rate than any other subgroup in Carolina Public Schools as noted, a rural school district in the mid-eastern coastal plains of North Carolina. The disparity of discipline referrals at CPS Middle School were twice that of white male students in spite of similarity in population distribution. The purpose of this mixed methods action research study was to implement a professional learning intervention with teachers in an effort to decrease discipline referrals for the identified population and determine the success of the intervention by re-examining the state of disciplinary infractions at the school. In this chapter, I will (1) review the guiding questions of the study, (2) identify the inquiry method and its connection to the guiding questions, and (3) outline the internal consistency of the research design.

Focus of Practice Guiding Questions

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study was guided by the following questions:

1. How does a professional development program for teachers affect their perception of African American male behavior in the school setting?
2. How does a professional development program for teachers affect their responsiveness/reaction to African American male behavior in the school setting?

Inquiry Design and Rationale

The intent of this study was to determine whether a change in adult behaviors impacted the climate of the school thereby influencing both the academic and social behaviors of students. Research reveals that aspects of school climate have extensive significance on students' experiences and outcomes, including reduced absenteeism and suspension rates (Durlak et al., 2011) and increased engagement and academic outcomes (Yoder, 2014). This study explored the

impact of changes in adult beliefs as they relate to interaction and relationships with students. Specifically, the study explored the effect of implementing a professional learning series using a Social and Emotional Learning framework at CPS Middle School on the perspective of teacher behavior toward students. I anticipated a correlation in the change of teacher perspective with a decrease in the number of discipline referrals of African American male students by staff at the school.

My action research study implemented an explanatory mixed-methods design collecting both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Action research is defined as an investigation conducted by "the people empowered to take action concerning their own actions" with the intent of improving actions in the future (Sagor & Williams, 2017, p. 6). The design of this study should have influenced the beliefs and behaviors of adult practitioners thus improving school culture. A focus on professional action in the future, the empowerment of inquiry partners to adjust future action based on results, and the feasibility of improvement were reasons to justify the identification of this study as action research (Sagor & Williams, 2017). Collecting diverse types of data provided a more complete understanding of the impact of the intervention on the focus of practice. My research began with a collection of data from school conducted surveys to identify themes of adult perspectives and discipline reports of the student population to determine disparities among specific subgroups. In a pre-survey administered by administration, I captured the adult beliefs and behaviors of the staff based on a 13 question Likert scale. The data collected was anonymous and the results were reported in aggregate. Afterwards, I collected more detailed views through a focus group of teachers and interviews of teachers, counselors and administrators to help provide perspective on my initial survey (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With the support of the principal and leadership team during the second phase, the teaching staff

and identified faculty participated in a professional learning series designed to explore the influences of adult behavior and examine strategies and practices to establish a more equitable school culture. Throughout the series, teachers were invited to receive one-on-one coaching and participated in targeted focus groups (professional learning communities). During the final phase, quantitative and qualitative data was reviewed to assess student behavior and academic performance. Finally, a follow up survey identical to the initial survey was conducted to assess whether adult behavior and beliefs changed at the start of the next school year. Pointed questions were posed during a post focus group to determine whether the professional learning experience influenced the change in adult behavior and discipline data.

Aspiring to better understand the perspectives of teacher behaviors and its impact on the disparities in discipline among African American males, this action research study investigated the behaviors of adults at a rural middle school. I examined how professional learning for the staff impacted their responses to student behavior. Using a social and emotional learning (SEL) framework with an equity-focused lens, this professional development series was designed to strengthen the transformative SEL competence of educators towards students. As participants learned strategies and strengthened practices for the classroom to support students, it was the intent of the facilitator to guide and support participants in assessing one's own social and emotional competence. The development of social emotional competence was ongoing for the faculty. The faculty built an understanding of the role cognitive bias, relationships, and adult responsiveness contribute in promoting environments of equity. Ultimately, this study encouraged an intentional investigation and understanding of mindsets, practices, and data.

The research involved the comparison of teacher beliefs at the beginning of the school year to teacher beliefs at the start of the following school year. The administration of CPS

Middle School administered a survey mid-year of the 2020-2021 school calendar to assess the attitudes and behaviors of teachers. In the initial stages of the study, I administered a survey and considered conducting focus groups to explore the perspectives of participants. Afterwards participants were invited to participate in a professional learning work series designed to support educators in removing barriers to equitable access to student learning. At the conclusion of the series, participants were asked to participate in a post survey. Data collected from the pre- and post-surveys were used to inform a follow-up quantitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Context of Study

Located in the eastern region of North Carolina, Carolina County has a population of approximately 47,000 residents. As noted previously, the area experiences economic challenges, especially in rural communities. As one of the 40 most distressed counties in the state, several families either incur unemployment or low-income wages. Nineteen percent of the population in Carolina County live below the poverty line, a statistic evident in the demography of most schools in the district.

CPS Middle School is located outside of the town limits of Carolina Pines, NC. It is one of 14 schools in the Carolina County School District and the only school with a 6-8 grade model. The school is located juxtapose the elementary school on the same campus. At the time of the study, the school had an enrollment of 782 students with a demographic breakdown of 41% Caucasian, 38% African American, 18% Latino, and 3% Multi-Racial. Ninety-nine percent of students were eligible for free/reduced lunch. With that said, the makeup of the faculty membership at CPS Middle was slightly different.

The faculty and staff of CPS Middle School consisted of 82 members. The makeup of positions were administrators (3), teachers and assistants (56), instructional coach (1), school

nurse (1), bus drivers (5), child nutrition (5), clerical (3), custodians (5), and counselors (2). The demographic breakdown was 68% Caucasian and 32% African American. More specifically, the teaching staff was overwhelmingly tilted with 82% being Caucasian, and of those teachers, 80% were female. Accordingly, 10 teachers were African American and the two male teachers served in the role as an Exceptional Child (EC) teacher and the in-school suspension (ISS) teacher assistant. Overwhelmingly, the custodial staff was 100% African American male and the bus drivers were all African American.

In 2018, the teacher experience varied with 40% having zero to three years, 16% four to 10 years, and 44% with 10 or more years. Similarly, the principal had been at the school for more than 10 years, while the assistant principal was completing his first year. Although teachers overwhelmingly found CPS Middle School a "good place to work and learn," some conditions raised concern. The teacher turnover rate was considerably high at 21%. In 2018, Teacher Working Conditions revealed that 60% of teachers feel that students follow the rules of conduct. Remarkably, only 57% of teachers thought that class sizes were reasonable, such that teachers had the time available to meet the needs of all students. Two thirds of teachers believed that professional development was differentiated to meet the needs of individual teachers.

The study presumed that changing adult behaviors would reduce discipline referrals and diminish disparities in suspension rates for African American males. This study engaged the staff at CPS in conversations about implicit bias and how these biases potentially play a role in the actions taken toward students. Professional learning set out to equip participants with the skills to recognize and combat such biases as well as strategies to foster environments of engagement for all students. As a result, the staff might have not only seen a positive change in student behavior but also an increase in academic performance and attendance.

Inquiry Partners

As mentioned in Chapter 1, throughout the course of this study there were multiple collaborative partners who contributed to my understanding of history, resources, and pertinent data. Partners consisted of district office personnel, including the superintendent, and school level personnel. More specifically, the administration at the school level provided support by establishing an initial introduction to the staff. They also supported teacher implementation of strategies in the classroom to fidelity as well as acquiring data for discipline referrals.

The School Improvement Team (SIT) assisted in identifying gaps for staff and validated the need for professional learning to close those gaps. The SIT, in collaboration with the principal, were responsible for submitting requests to the district office for professional development. In turn the district office determined the appropriate resources, content and curriculum delivered to the school. The director of Professional Learning shared the work the district had done to that point to implement MTSS in the school district. School counselors assisted in providing support to staff via coaching and modeling.

Moreover, the teachers and staff at the school were crucial to the success of this study. Teachers participated in professional learning and were encouraged to use SEL frameworks in their classrooms. Teachers were expected to implement strategies and practices when interacting with students, more specifically African American male students. Additionally, the staff and teachers of CPS Middle School participated in surveys, focus groups and individual interviews. Per request, I offered coaching, individually or in small groups. Table 5 provides a list of collaborative partners and their responsibilities.

Table 5

Collaborative Partners and Responsibilities

Collaborative Partner	Responsibilities
School Administration: Principal and Assistant Principals	• Oversight of implementation of systems and processes • Management of discipline data • Support with fidelity of practices and strategies • Participate in interviews • Participate in professional learning
School Improvement Team	• Assessment of staff needs • Oversight of request for Professional Learning
Director of Curriculum and Instruction	• MTSS consultant • Approval and reviewer of professional learning
School Counselors	• Monitor student referrals for support • Coaching and support for staff • Participate in professional learning
Teachers	• Complete surveys • Engage in professional learning • Participate in focus groups • Participate in coaching • Participate in small group sessions
Research Analysts	• Support with development of professional learning • Review survey protocol • Review and vet professional learning

Ethical Considerations

Execution of this action research study in Carolina Public Schools was submitted to the local Board of Education and the Institution Review Board (IRB) in the Fall of 2020 (see Appendices A and B). Both entities acknowledge the study as a benefit to the educational community and the community at large. I completed the mandatory elements of CITI training, a course focused on social/behavioral research to gain ethical insight and a better understanding of various protocols to follow and federal regulations to consider. Throughout the course of this research, participants were not harmed physically, emotionally, or psychologically. Consent forms were posted at the beginning of all surveys as well as distributed and signed by participants in focus groups and interviews. Data collected was stored on an encrypted flash drive that was kept in a fire protected safe when not in use.

Inquiry Procedures

Action research uses four sequential stages prompting the researcher to (1) clarify a vision and target, (2) articulate a theory, (3) implement action and collect data, and (4) reflect on data and plan informed action (Sagor & Williams, 2017). In conducting my research at CPS Middle School, I operated in three phases, combining stages 1 and 2 in Phase I, then moving forward accordingly with stages 3 and 4 in Phase II and Phase III, respectively as illustrated in Figure 8.

Phase I

In the initial phase of the study, I established relationships with the administration and staff of the school to build a strong level of trust to establish an "insider" positionality. A meeting was scheduled with administration to discuss the parameters of the study including logistics and timeline. Working collaboratively, we discussed how I would integrate and align

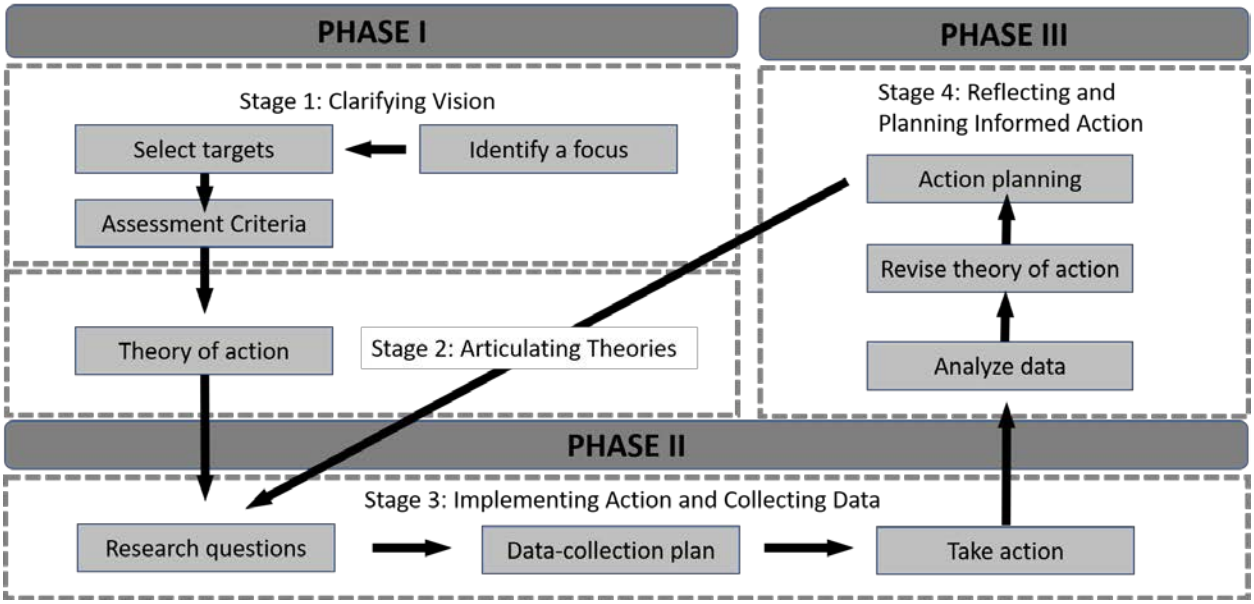


Figure 8. Alignment of phases with action research.

my supports of professional learning and coaching as least intrusively as possible. Buy-in from the staff proved to be critical. I requested multiple sources of archival data in addition to information previously obtained to conclude a focus of practice. During the planning of implementation, I continued to review literature to support my work with the staff during the study. A comprehensive report was used to validate my work moving forward. Upon thorough vetting of my plan of implementation by administration, an email was sent to staff to inform them of my presence on site to support the staff.

To begin, various forms of data from the school and district were accessed from the previous three school years noting any discipline, attendance, and academic disparities according to race and gender. District and school level personnel were instrumental in gathering this data. A pre-survey was conducted during the first month returning from the winter break to assess staff beliefs (see Appendix D). The survey was designed to provide current stance of staff perception regarding student behavior. Participants were asked to answer demographic questions, including gender and race. The survey took no more than 15 minutes to complete. It consisted of a thirteen (13) question Likert scale survey ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. All staff was asked to participate in the survey excluding cafeteria, custodial and bus drivers. Upon at least 75% of the staff completing the survey, I compiled the data to determine the beliefs of the participants.

Staff was also invited to participate in focus groups and individual interviews which would be used to collect further information as to why one may have responded to the survey questions accordingly. In spite of my position as an African American male potentially being a contributing factor in obtaining authentic responses, I opted to move forward in conducting the focus group and interview sessions. Prior to starting, participants were asked to complete a

consent form upon participating in the interview or focus group. As the facilitator, I expressed appreciation for the individual or group's willingness to participate, provided an overview of the study, reminded everyone of the right to opt out at any time they felt uncomfortable and established a space of confidentiality while informing participants that the session would be recorded to ensure accuracy of data (see Appendices E and F). The focus group protocol lasted a duration of 45 to 60 minutes with at most four participants. The format of the focus group was semi-structured. The number of focus groups and interviews were contingent upon the willingness of staff members to participate. Following these sessions, data collected was transcribed and themes were identified through coding via Nvivo, a software program used for mixed-methods research (QSR International, 2020). I reviewed the collected data to determine whether race and gender played a factor in teacher interaction with students. The analysis of this qualitative and quantitative data determined the specific design of professional learning for the staff at CPS Middle.

Phase II

Data collection from archival data, the pre-survey and transcriptions from focus groups were used to facilitate a custom designed professional development series of sessions for the staff. The School Improvement Team (SIT) was charged with assessing the appropriate needs for the staff and requesting support from the district office or an external resource for professional development. Therefore, I worked collaboratively with the SIT to develop a series of sessions aligned with staff needs to build a culture of equity and address gaps revealed from the survey. Upon approval by the SIT, principal and district office, all staff were encouraged to attend the professional learning.

A professional development work series of four sessions using the social and emotional learning framework supplemented with additional practices to establish a culture of equity were held over the course of six months crossing over one school year to the next. Topics included, but were not limited to, cognitive debiasing, relationships, equity, and trauma sensitivity. Sessions integrated theories, research, and examples of relevant experiences. At the conclusion of each session, participants were asked to reflect on their learning by completing an anonymous reflection form. With that said, I anticipated the imperativeness to engage in self-reflection and decompression following sessions to gauge my biases as an African American male. Information from staff reflections influenced the design of proceeding sessions. In addition, sessions were recorded and analyzed in confidentiality.

In between professional learning sessions, individual and small group coaching sessions were offered to the staff. These voluntary sessions created a smaller, more intimate learning community to discuss and reflect on practices among trusted colleagues. Throughout the semester, administration was asked to monitor fidelity of practices and strategies implemented in the school by observing classroom instruction and discussion in PLCs using a self-developed tool. I discussed with administration how current instruments can be used to monitor a teacher's level of student engagement in the classroom. Throughout this phase, discipline data for students was monitored as well. All data collected was compiled over the course of two school years.

Phase III

In the final phase, a follow-up survey was conducted at the conclusion of the series of sessions to note any change in adult attitudes or perceptions toward students. The same procedures followed as in the implementation of the pre-survey. Follow-up focus groups were also conducted. Using the above data, I was able to compare and contrast my own observations

of reflective writing with the responses of participants. I examined the various data points related to discipline to note whether there was a reduction of the discipline referrals among African American males. The triangulation of post survey, post focus group, reflections from professional development and discipline referral data revealed whether adult learning impacted the adult behavior which resulted in lower discipline referral rates of African American males. I also noted whether there was a close in the disciplinary gap between African American males and White males.

A report was written and presented to the district detailing the three phases of my study and capturing what I learned. Resources from the professional learning series were accessible to the district for future sessions if they desired to continue the facilitation with other schools throughout the county.

Inquiry Design Rigor

At the completion of each focus group, participants were briefed and provided the opportunity to make any adjustments to their responses. Interviewees were provided a transcript of responses via email to questions posed and asked to make any adjustments or provide confirmation. Responses to focus groups performed during the pilot study were compared to those of the actual study. In addition, data from scholarly articles of research conducted in rural areas were compared.

Delimitations, Limitations and Assumptions

There were multiple limitations and assumptions to consider during the phases. Self-reported data through surveys were at risk of being conflated and no efforts were made to validate whether the responses were consistent to actual beliefs or practice. Responses during focus groups were at the subjection of being influenced by another participant(s). With that said,

questioning could be subjective. Due to the racial and gender sensitivity of this case study, I considered allowing an external party to facilitate focus groups. Another limitation contemplated was the study was a single setting over the course of one year.

More importantly, during the previous and current year of this study, there was a world-wide pandemic. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) was a viral disease that caused upper-respiratory tract illness. It proved deadly to over 750,000 people nationally. The severity of the pandemic closed multiple systems including the government and education. Schools were forced to provide alternative platforms for instruction virtually. With that said, there was reason to speculate some form of trauma impacted the social and emotional well-being of both students and adults due to various losses (Nicola et al., 2020; Torales et al., 2020). Due to students receiving instruction in a virtual setting, I chose to focus more on the perceptions and beliefs of teachers versus the number of discipline referrals. The results of this study might have differed when conducted under more normal conditions. Therefore, the misrepresentation of data was highly possible.

Role of Scholarly Practitioner

As a scholarly practitioner, I operated in the capacity of orchestrating meetings with administrators, counselors, faculty and district personnel. In addition, a focus group was conducted by me contrary to split opinions. It was my responsibility to collect, transcribe and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data as appropriate. Throughout the study, I co-developed and facilitated professional learning for teachers. Ultimately, it was my responsibility to ensure the validity of information and data to the best of my ability.

Summary

To conclude, this action research study used a mixed-methods design approach. The results of the study were explained within the context of Critical Race Theory. As noted, the

study began with the collection and analysis of data from discipline, attendance, and academic information with the intent of exposing disparities among minority subgroups. Surveys with identified staff captured adult behaviors and practices used. Phase Two allowed me to delve deeper by conducting focus groups and interviews to support data collected in Phase One. Through the triangulation of this data, I was able to design an intervention for the faculty to support the social and emotional learning of the staff and students. At the conclusion of the inquiry process, quantitative data and qualitative data collected through surveys, observations, and interviews was triangulated to assess the implications of adult learning on student behavior and academic performance. Lastly, responses to a follow-up survey were used to compare beliefs, post professional learning, and its alignment to data potentially reflecting the results disclosed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of my research was to determine how providing professional development for teachers would impact adult behavior toward African American male students. This study would specifically gauge whether the implementation of strategies taught during the professional learning session would reduce disparities in discipline referrals among African American males in the school. The sessions extended over the course of five months from the March 2021 until October 2021 with a break for the summer. Participants were invited between sessions to engage in opportunities for coaching and professional learning communities. Additionally, the district's goals aligned to support the implementation of MTSS and PBIS in schools. The professional learning series' focus on SEL and mental health, which addressed the needs of developing the whole child, further supported the districts efforts. Not only would the series equip teachers with the skills and resources to support students, but it would also build the capacity of teachers to be resilient and self-aware of their own emotional needs. If my analysis revealed a reduction in discipline disparities among African American students as well as a change in adult behavior at the conclusion of the professional learning series, then my hypothesis that highly effective professional learning focused on equipping staff with the skills to address self and student social emotional needs would be confirmed and could ultimately impact the culture at CPS.

Research Questions

The research questions were as follows:

1. How does a professional development program for teachers affect their perception of African American male behavior in the school setting?
2. How does a professional development program for teachers affect their responsiveness/reaction to African American male behavior in the school setting?

Demographics

Most members of the staff at CPS Middle volunteered to participate in this study, which focused on changing adult behavior to reduce disparities in discipline among African American male students. Where most of the staff attended the professional learning series, some teachers, administrators, and student support personnel participated in impromptu conversations and interviews. Seven teachers with at least three years of experience in a variety of licensure areas, three administrators with at least 10 years of experience and two counselors with a total of 15 years of experience were scheduled to participate in focus groups. All staff members who participated in the interview were female, one of African American descent and another identified as multi-racial. The demographics of the teacher participants were not representative of the staff makeup at the middle school.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study began during the spring semester of the 2020-2021 school year. In January, I met with the leadership team of CPS Middle School to share information regarding my study and how I would like to proceed with the implementation of this work using a blended learning approach which would include face to face support as well as virtual sessions with teachers throughout the course of my time at the school. It was my intent to be sensitive to the current circumstances that existed at the school due to the pandemic. I shared that the intent of my study was to support teachers with meeting the social emotional needs of students in order to increase positive student behavior in the school setting. I noted that allowing teachers to build self-awareness and emotional resilience while equipping them with the skills and tools needed to support student social emotional needs would impact positively school culture.

Participant Recruitment

Prior to conducting the study, I asked the principal if I could provide customized professional development for the staff at CPS Middle School. All teachers were expected by the principal to participate in the series of professional development. An email was sent to the staff explaining the study and asking for volunteers to participate in surveys, focus groups, and interviews. A copy of the informed consent document was attached for their review. The pre-survey was sent to the staff from the principal prior to the first professional learning session. I specifically asked for teachers who wanted to participate in the focus group to return a signed document to myself or the principal.

At the conclusion of the first professional learning session held in March with a group of 36 participants, I took a moment to request additional participation from individuals in the focus groups. I explained that the sessions would be small, and conversations would be confidential. When a teacher agreed to participate, I asked them to sign the consent form and provided them with a copy of the signed document. Unfortunately, I only had two teachers to volunteer. Despite several request via email, I can only assume that teachers were overwhelmed due to various demands due to the pandemic. With such a small number, I decided to conduct individual interviews with these participants. Efforts to gather teachers together during the spring and fall semesters for a focus group also resulted unsuccessfully. With that said, I was able to conduct additional interviews following the first professional learning session during the 2021-22 school year. All participants were female. Participants included one administrator and two teachers.

Because participation from the administration was expected, all four professional learning sessions were attended by the teaching staff. As a result, I was able to collect reflections

regarding the participants' experience as well as engage in impromptu conversation with staff afterwards.

Professional Development Series

In January of 2021, the principal of the school recommended that I deliver my professional learning session as part of the curriculum offered by the district. The process entailed providing a description of the session to be posted on the registry system. At the beginning of each session participants were asked to commit to the following agreements: (1) be present, (2) stay engaged, (3) speak your truth, (4) support productive collaboration, (5) share airtime equitably, and (6) show grace for growth. Participants noted their commitment with a visual thumbs up or thumbs down. If there were any concerns with the agreements, I allotted time for discussion to allow for adjustments that could be agreed upon by the entire group. Additionally, participants were requested to hold each other accountable for these agreements.

The series consisted of three ninety-minute sessions focused on identifying adult behaviors, monitoring those adult behaviors and acknowledging its impact on student behaviors. As noted earlier the series would equip teachers with the skills and resources need to support students through the integration of SEL and academics, build teacher resilience, self-awareness, and social awareness, and indirectly improve school culture. The series was strategically designed in collaboration with fellow research analysts to explore each competency of the SEL framework as well as allow opportunities for participants to practice and engage in strategies they could use both professionally and personally (CASEL, 2020). As it relates to African American male students, the SEL framework assist school personnel in creating an infrastructure for building strong relationships, examining causes of inequity, and developing solutions collaboratively in the community (Jagers et al., 2018). Per conversation with school leadership

and counselors along with data collected from the pre-survey, the first two sessions were developed. Latter sessions were customized based on participant feedback from previous sessions.

Session One: March 17, 2021

Session one, titled "You Better Check "Yoself", focused on adult self-awareness and self-care. During the session, participants explored various strategies and exercises to take care of self, gained a deeper knowledge of who they were as individuals, identified individual behaviors in an effort to build more cohesiveness among the staff, and defined implications of their work moving forward during the school year. I began with a brief introduction and overview of the SEL framework to set the stage for further conversations and activities centered around the SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Upon defining self-awareness as the ability to understand one's emotions and thoughts and how they influence one's behavior, we transitioned to a facilitated conversation about mindset and how one's experience creates beliefs that not only impact their behaviors toward others but also their beliefs about themselves. I noted that our behaviors are influenced by one of two cognitive pathways used when processing information. One is fast thinking (automatic assumptions) which is prone to biases and the other is slow thinking (analytical) (Kahneman, 2011). The next segment topic, self-management, provided an opportunity for participants to identify cues of stress and engage in activities like deep breathing to regulate stress. Self-management is defined as the ability to regulate one's emotions and behaviors in different situations and to set and work toward goals (CASEL, 2020). Participants took an abbreviated DISC behavioral assessment during the second half of the session. Normally consisting of approximately 125 questions, the DISC model analyzes a person's behavior; how

they respond to certain experiences (Bonnstetter & Suiter, 2016). The assessment I administered consisted of twelve sets of four characteristics (see Appendix G). Each participant was asked to rank each set according to their personal preference from greatest to least. The individual assessment provided a score that linked to a particular DISC behavioral profile which participants would either note as accurate or not. Based on the rendered behavioral profile, participants moved into groups to engage in conversations guided by the following questions: (1) What should others know about you?, (2) What do you contribute to a team?, (3) How might you be misunderstood?, and (4) What do you need from others? Participants were then asked to share their collaborative responses from each group to the larger group. I debriefed the activity to gain insight on how they might use the information and how it might inform their interaction with others. The session concluded with participants completing an exit ticket requesting them to make commitments for change (ie. What will they stop doing, what will they do less of and what are they going to start doing?)

Session Two: April 21, 2021

Session two, titled "Let's Connect," highlighted the SEL competencies of social awareness and relationship skills. The objectives of the session encouraged participants to discuss various paths and processes to engage in social awareness, explore strategies to establish, maintain and restore relationships, and define implications for their work moving forward. After providing a recap of session one, I defined social awareness listing actions like "perspective-taking, empathy, respecting diversity, understanding social and ethical norms of behavior, and recognizing family, school and community supports." The group was then asked how one might develop empathy. I shared two potential actions that could support empathy: noticing the importance placed on various types of diversity and gauging whether and in what ways you are

involved in dynamics that disadvantage others. This will be discussed later in Chapter 5. After viewing a short video clip discussing toxic elements within a school, participants were asked to reflect on whether schools are cultural institutions that advance, consciously or unconsciously, dominant racialized cultural norms, values, and practices (Jagers et al., 2018). Afterwards, I guided participants through the empathy mapping process, which was developed by Dave Gray, co-founder of strategy consultants XPlane (see Appendix H). During this activity, participants identify the stakeholder and determine what they might see, say, hear, do, think and feel. Multiple questions are considered as it relates to each category above. For example, a participant is asked to consider what the stakeholder sees in their environment, social media, websites, etc., what they might hear from friends, family and peers, what might be their worries or aspirations, what is the appearance of the school or attitude of the public, and then note the potential impact including successes and obstacles created as a result of decisions made by the school.

The latter portion of the session focused on relationship skills. To begin this segment, participants were intentionally asked to write an example of a good relationship and a difficult relationship with a student or colleague on a notecard. We identified these as the "relationships of focus." Developing relationships is the ability to make positive connections with others, as well as one's ability to take their emotions into account in different situations and social interactions (CASEL, 2020). Participants were reminded of cognitive biases and the need to slow down thinking to counteract the tendency to make automatic assumptions and act on them. Doing so helps to make mindset shifts that counteract our biases. With that said, I defined implicit and explicit biases. Reflecting upon the "relationships of focus" identified earlier, participants were asked to note how implicit biases may have influenced these relationships. Participants then engaged in an analysis of various pictures to share what they noticed and

assumed. The pictures portrayed moments from various rallies including Black Lives Matter, Gun Rights, LGBTQ Rights, Pro Life, Trump 2020 campaign, etc. In small groups, participants were asked to share what they noticed and their assumptions. A debrief question was posed to gain perspectives on how biases might influence the story participants tell themselves about others and the way they build relationships. Research by Bourgone & Tromp was then shown to reveal that building relationships is ranked as the top quality of an effective teacher by stakeholder groups (see figure 9). Participants then engaged in an activity to explore the Establish, Maintain, Restore (EMR) model of relationship-building and discuss thoughts about what it looks like as well as personal experiences connecting to the example. The EMR model phases include establishing authentic relationships, maintaining relationships, and restoring relationships as noted in Figure 10. Circling back to the "relationships of focus", participants reflected on what they would do differently to "maintain" the good relationship and "restore" the difficult relationship. In conclusion and as in the first session, a "Commitments for Change" exit ticket was used to close out the session.

Session Three: May 5, 2021

After having a conversation with the principal regarding the state of students due to COVID, I decided to make some adjustments to the third session by shifting the focus from the fifth SEL competency, responsible decision-making, to trauma sensitivity. The principal shared that students were having a tough time readjusting to the return of school. Students were struggling to adhere to the norms of school expectations both academically and socially. As a facilitator, it was my hope to support participants in defining and identifying the various types of traumas, illustrating how the brain and body respond to stress and trauma, and applying the knowledge of trauma to build skills and develop practices to create a more equitable culture in

Researchers	%	Policymakers	%	Parents	%	Administrators	%	Students	%	Teachers	%
Relationships	11.9	Relationships	13.1	Relationships	15.2	Relationships	14.9	Relationships	18.3	Relationships	13.9
Teaching Skills	8.5	Teaching Skills	8.3	Patient, Caring	13.5	Patient, Caring	7.4	Patient, Caring	13.4	Patient, Caring	9.4
Patient, Caring	8.5	Subject Knowledge	7.5	Professionalism	9.1	Know Learners	7.2	Professionalism	7.9	Subject Knowledge	7.8
Subject Knowledge	7.6	Professionalism	7.2	Subject Knowledge	7.4	Professionalism	7.0	Make Ideas Clear	7.3	Professionalism	7.5
Professionalism	7.2	Patient, Caring	7.1	Make Ideas Clear	6.9	Dedication	6.8	Engaging	6.5	Dedication	6.7
Dedication	6.5	Dedication	6.0	Dedication	6.5	Subject Knowledge	6.3	Know Learners	6.3	Know Learners	6.5
Know Learners	6.5	Know Learners	5.9	Know Learners	6.1	Teaching Skills	6.3	Teaching Skills	6.2	Engaging	6.3
Engaging	5.4	Engaging	5.7	Engaging	5.3	Engaging	4.7	Subject Knowledge	5.8	Teaching Skills	5.9
Make Ideas Clear	4.8	Make Ideas Clear	4.6	Teaching Skills	4.4	Class Mgt	4.6	Dedication	5.3	Make Ideas Clear	5.4
Class Mgt	4.6	Non-Cognitive Skills	4.4	Class Mgt	3.8	Make Ideas Clear	4.5	Class Mgt	3.4	Class Mgt	4.3

Figure 9. Top 10 qualities of an effective teacher by stakeholder group.

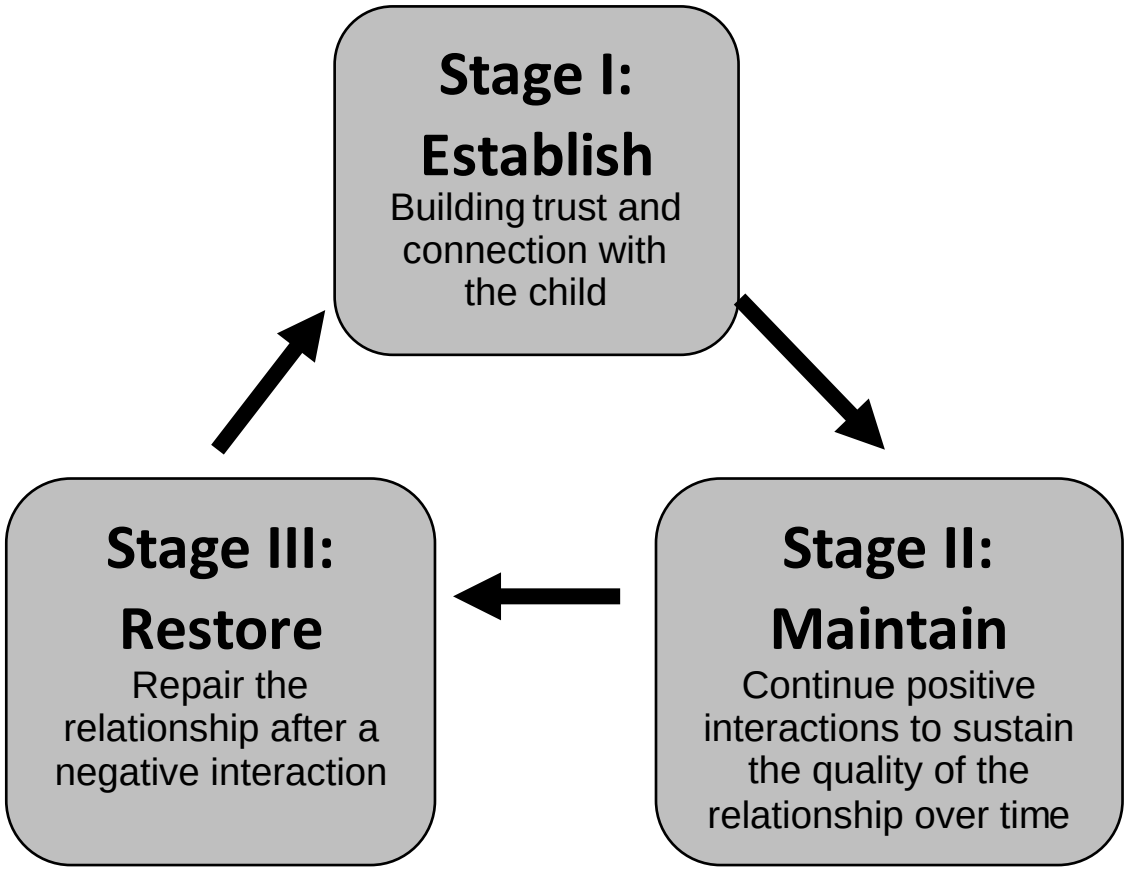


Figure 10. Phases of relationship-building (EMR Model).

their school. This session was titled "Peeling Back the Layers: Trauma Sensitivity in Schools." Resources for this session were collected from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) website (SAMHSA, 2019). To begin, participants were introduced to common myths surrounding trauma sensitivity including the ideas of educators having to know the previous experiences of students to successfully intervene, fix children, and forego consequences for inappropriate behavior. Trauma refers to an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (SAMHSA, 2019, p. 33). Participants were asked to brainstorm examples of trauma that students or faculty experience or may have experienced at their school or in the district. Upon discussing the types of traumas, acute, chronic, complex and historical/racial, participants sorted the brainstormed examples under the trauma categories and then examined whether their school consisted of elements or portrayed characteristics that could be considered toxic.

Upon watching a video explaining anxiety for student, we discussed the stress responses of "fight, flight or freeze." The following questions were posed: (1) What situations during the school day have the potential to activate your stress response system? (2) What situations are more likely set off the stress response in your students? Colleagues? (3) What does the "fight, flight, or freeze" response look like for you in the moment? (4) How might this information about the stress response inform your daily work? Following, I noted that the changes in brain structure and chemical activity caused by child maltreatment can have a wide variety of effects on children's behavioral, social, and emotional functioning. Immediately afterward, I facilitated a discussion regarding why it is important to recognize signs of trauma and/or toxic stress. Then we considered the implications of their work with students and teachers. Using two scenarios,

participants responded to how they would support students and view internal barriers that they would need to overcome in order to support the student. In the same fashion, the session concluded with commitments. This was the last session for the 2020-2021 school year and there were no sessions during the summer due to state mandated summer school.

Session Four: September 22, 2021

At the start of the fall semester for the 2021-2022 school year, the staff engaged in a session focused on adult SEL and teacher resiliency titled "Social-Emotional Learning & Resilience for Educators: Let's Be There in the Moment." This session intentionally circled back to (1) explore strategies and exercises pertaining to self-care, (2) gain a deeper knowledge of self and (3) define implications of their work moving forward in the new school year. Participants were introduced to the following quotes and asked to select the one that resonated with them most:

> "The development of a child's potential depends on the ability of the teacher to perceive the child's possibilities." (Rudolf Dreikurs)
>
> "Teachers cannot create and sustain the conditions for the productive development of children if those conditions do not exist for teachers." (Seymour Sarason)
>
> "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." (Anonymous)
>
> "I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather." (Haim Ginott)

Upon quote selection, participants congregated in small homogeneous groups accordingly to share their individual perspective regarding the significance of the quote. Afterwards, they shared with the larger group emergent themes. I then transitioned the focus of the session to

identifying the connections between mental health and social emotional learning. Mental health is the "state of well-being" in which an individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stress of life, and can work productively to contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2021). SEL is an active learning process of developing and using the knowledge, attitudes and skills that assist individuals to develop relationships, make responsible decisions, show empathy toward others, develop personal identities, and achieve their goals. With that said, SEL skills should be used to acquire a "state of well-being." After brief discussion about mental health and SEL, participants were asked to identify which of the SEL competencies would be considered a strength as well as an area for growth. Their choices were revealed to the larger group with the intent of building community and support. Participants later engaged in small group discussions designed to investigate the role of the educator in supporting social-emotional learning and mental health. In addition, I inquired about the impact that the social and emotional wellbeing of educators have on teaching and learning.

During the latter portion of the session, participants read an article titled "How Teachers Can Build Emotional Resilience." A Four "A's" Text protocol was used to guide their conversation around assumptions, agreements, arguments, and aspirations relating to the text (National School Reform Faculty, 2021). Afterwards, I pushed teachers to think about what their responses meant for their work with students. The session concluded with participants committing to using an idea or strategy to support them in their efforts to be resilient throughout the school year.

Impact of COVID

In late February of 2020, a pandemic infiltrated throughout the United States impacting the infrastructure of the country and totally disrupting the daily lives within society. The

Coronavirus (COVID-19) was a viral disease that caused upper-respiratory tract illness which proved deadly to nearly a million people nationally. The trauma of the pandemic created lasting effects in education. Schools were forced to provide alternative platforms for instruction virtually during the initial stages of the pandemic. Families had to alter their daily lives in order to accommodate the new setting for students acquiring an education. This significantly impacted educators who had to provide instruction and support their children who were in school. As the pandemic progressed, there was a push to return society back to normalcy. This act caused a huge eruption in education. There was a lot of controversy with having students as well as teachers return to a physical setting for instruction. Parents were concerned with the rate of vaccinations as well as the right to "not" wear a mask. There was a lot of uncertainty. District and school leadership along with teachers were under tremendous pressure to provide a solution that would accommodate all. This resulted in several students being promoted regardless of their ability to meet academic standards. A significant percentage of teachers left the profession at the conclusion of the 2019-2020 school year due to the demands and expectations of having to teach virtually.

With the start of 2020-21 school year, there was a huge concern regarding academic loss of students as well as how the education system would be conducted. Most school districts in North Carolina returned virtually and later provided options for teachers to return to the building. With that said, there was reason to speculate some form of trauma impacted the social and emotional well-being of both students and adults due to various losses (Nicola et al., 2020; Torales et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, the issues of the pandemic affected the implementation of my case study. Due to students receiving instruction in a virtual setting during the majority of the 2020-21

school year, discipline referrals for students were minimal. In contrast, during the fall of the 2021-22 school year with the return of students to the physical building, administration and teachers reported a significant increase in discipline issues and behavior incidents. Assuming that discipline data would be skewed due to various factors connecting to the pandemic, I chose to focus more on the perceptions and beliefs of teachers.

The results of this study might have differed when conducted under more normal conditions. Therefore, the misrepresentation of data was highly possible. The above limitations as well as others will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

Survey

Prior to the start of the professional learning series, teachers were asked to complete a survey to assess the beliefs of individuals who would participate. Participants were then asked to complete the same survey at the conclusion of the workshop series. In hopes of gaining teacher perceptions of their students, questions focused on student race and social economics as well as student well-being (see Appendix D). These questions were pulled from a belief survey featured as part of a project by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2021). The survey was divided into two sections. The first section asked participants to respond on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree about their beliefs towards students based on race and social-economics and its impact toward student expectations and performance. The latter section focused on the social emotional well-being of students. Twenty-seven participants consisting of teaching staff (20), support staff (5) and administration (2) responded to the first survey. In the follow-up/post survey, twenty-nine (29) members of the teaching staff and one support staff member participated. For research purposes, this study focused on the responses of teaching staff.

Pre-Survey

The first survey was conducted during the Spring semester prior to the first professional learning session of a four-part series. This survey reflected the beliefs of 20 teachers (see Table 6). In the first section, a significant number of teachers neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements. When asked if teachers thought of their students in terms of their race and ethnicity, 55% of teachers stated that they were color blind when it comes to their students. Interestingly enough, the following two questions revealed the same data as it relates to teachers believing that the gap in the achievement among students of different races is about poverty and that teachers should adapt teaching to the distinctive cultures of African American, Latino, Asian and Native American students. To this point, 65% of teachers affirmed that "students of different races and ethnicities often have different learning styles and good teachers will match their instruction to these learning styles." Only one teacher disagreed.

Teachers were ambivalent in their response to questions about a student's native tongue. Question 4 stated that "in some cultures, students are embarrassed to speak in front of others, so I take this into account and don't call on these students in class." Thirty percent of teachers agreed, 20% disagreed, and 50% remained neutral. Like this statement, 30% of teachers agreed that it is not fair to ask students who are struggling with English to take on challenging academic assignments while 40% disagreed in Question 6. Thirty percent remained neutral. Sixty-five percent agreed with question 5 which spoke to family educational values and involvement not being a priority thus impacting student performance.

Questions 3 and 7-12 focused on instructional and grading strategies used in the classroom to support student achievement. Teachers overwhelmingly agreed (80%) that students who try hard should be rewarded, even if they are not doing well in school, building their self-

Table 6

Pre-Survey Results

Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD
Question 1.	7	4	2	6	1
Question 2.	7	4	5	4	0
Question 3.	0	11	7	3	1
Question 4.	0	6	10	4	0
Question 5.	6	7	4	2	1
Question 6.	1	5	6	8	0
Question 7.	6	10	4	0	0
Question 8.	2	6	7	5	0
Question 9.	3	10	6	1	0
Question 10.	3	9	3	5	0
Question 11.	5	8	5	2	0
Question 12.	1	5	6	6	2
Question 13.	1	0	10	5	4
Question 14.	4	6	8	2	0
Question 15.	12	7	1	0	0
Question 16.	0	3	11	6	0
Question 17.	9	9	2	0	0
Question 18.	10	7	2	1	0
Question 19.	3	5	8	3	1
Question 20.	3	7	7	2	1

Note. Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD).

esteem is important. Forty percent (8 of 20) of teachers intentionally provided students with assignments to boost student moral. Thirty-five percent responded neutrally, while 25% disagreed with this tactic. Over half of the teaching staff grouped students of different levels of achievement for instruction and believed that students needed to have a grasp of basic skills before engaging in complex learning task. There was an even distribution in responses to whether finding and using examples for culturally relevant connections to everyday experiences took away from teaching and learning about what mattered most. Thirty percent of teachers agreed, 30% were neutral and 40% disagreed. When asked if talking about race with colleagues was not beneficial, 45% disagreed and 50% were neutral.

In the latter section of the pre-survey consisting of questions 13 through 20, participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) regarding their knowledge and the school's approach to developing the social and emotional needs of students. Questions were specific to the teacher's understanding of SEL, its benefits to school culture and safety, the awareness of the community, as well as implementation of SEL in the school. Fifty percent of the teaching staff understood the essential elements of social emotional learning. Overwhelmingly, 95% of teachers acknowledged the benefits of meeting the social and emotional needs of students by developing relationship. A similar trend existed with ninety percent of the teaching staff noting that a focus on student social and emotional skills impacts both school culture and school safety. Counterintuitively, only fifty percent of the staff believed that this was a focus of the school. Sixty percent were unsure if there was a schoolwide SEL vision and mission. This evidenced aligned with the belief that families are unaware of an SEL focus at the school.

Post-Survey

The post-survey was conducted at the conclusion of school year following the third professional learning session of a four-part series (see Appendix D). This survey reflected the beliefs of 29 teachers (see Table 7). In the first section, similar to the first survey, a significant number of teachers neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements. When asked if teachers thought of their students in terms of their race and ethnicity, only 28% of teachers stated that they were color blind when it comes to their students. Revealing an increase, 72% teachers affirmed that "students of different races and ethnicities often have different learning styles and good teachers will match their instruction to these learning styles." Unlike the pre-survey, a higher percentage disagreed.

In the latter section of the post-survey (questions 13-20), data revealed a gain in SEL understanding, progress in SEL implementation in the school and belief in SEL benefits for school culture and safety. Fifty-five percent of the teaching staff understood the essential elements of social emotional learning which is consistent with the staff's belief that SEL is a focus of the school. Like the pre-survey results, 97% of teachers acknowledged the benefits of meeting the social and emotional needs of students by developing relationship. Likewise, 93% of the teaching staff noted that a focus on student social and emotional skills impacts school safety. Remarkably, all participants agreed that school safety increases due to a focus on developing the social and emotional skills of students. Showing a slight decrease, 55% were unsure if there was a schoolwide SEL vision and mission. An awareness of an SEL focus on the school by families continued to be a struggle with only 21% of staff in agreement.

Table 7

Post-Survey Results

Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD
Question 1.	2	6	5	15	2
Question 2.	4	9	8	7	1
Question 3.	2	13	11	2	1
Question 4.	1	12	13	1	2
Question 5.	2	17	5	4	1
Question 6.	4	7	6	6	2
Question 7.	11	15	2	1	0
Question 8.	1	13	7	6	2
Question 9.	5	16	7	5	0
Question 10.	1	15	7	4	2
Question 11.	7	12	7	2	1
Question 12.	0	9	5	9	6
Question 13.	2	3	6	12	6
Question 14.	4	11	13	1	0
Question 15.	18	10	1	0	0
Question 16.	1	5	11	10	2
Question 17.	12	15	2	0	0
Question 18.	11	18	0	0	0
Question 19.	3	10	11	4	1
Question 20.	4	12	10	2	0

Note. Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD).

Data Analysis of Professional Development

In managing the data collected during this study, I created a survey in Google forms for each session to capture immediate feedback and reflection regarding the experience of the participants. Feedback from the first session was limited due to the lack of participants who engaged in the evaluation process. Despite several attempts via email requesting participant feedback only one staff member provided their thoughts. Using this outcome as a lesson learned, I designed the following sessions allotting time at the conclusion of the session for participants to complete their feedback forms before leaving the physical space. Feedback from the following three sessions reflected the thoughts of most participants. Three of the four sessions were held during a teacher workday. The final session was held at the end of the school day. As a result, the session was shortened to approximately 70 minutes. The information from the evaluations would be used to gauge participant knowledge and gather feedback regarding participant needs. It was the expectation that teachers would attend all sessions. Four questions were provided at the conclusion of each session to be answered anonymously using a Google form. The questions posed included:

- What key points from the workshop do you think will have the most impact on your own work?
- What worked well for you as a participant today?
- What did not work well for you as a participant today?
- What additional information should I be aware of as my support for the staff moves forward?

Key Points

Participants consistently were able to identify key points that would impact their work with students. As stated earlier, the one overarching theme that resonated with participants during the second session was maintaining relationships and having empathy. Participants appreciated tools shared throughout this session. Thirty percent of participants identified the EMR model as a process that could potentially influence their work. One participant noted, "Empathy mapping is a great tool to help us understand situations with others and improve relationships." Another participant shared, "Making sure that my behavior is positive to all around me. Positive behavior [equals] = positive relationships." Most resoundingly a participant remarked:

> Sometimes as teachers we get so bogged down with the everyday-instruct-grade papers-contact parents-complete this form-so on and so forth that we forget what our true mission is. I needed this refresher today of my purpose as an educator. Relationships!! Building life lasting positive impressions!!

During session three, several participants identified the importance of de-escalation and the awareness of traumatic experiences. "Being aware that students experience trauma and that each student deserves to be treated as an individual with their own interests, flaws, and experiences that make up who they are" was highlighted as a key take away. Another participant acknowledged that looking through the right "lens" when dealing with students who may be demonstrating concerning behaviors helps to de-escalate situations. In addition, participants reflected on the appropriate steps to take when responding to students "in the moment."

For the final session of the series, participants identified self-management, self-awareness and relationships as a means to build resilience. Ninety-three percent of participants who responded referenced some connection to maintaining emotional wellness as a key point that would most impact their work. With that said it is important to recall that this session was facilitated at the start of the 2021-22 school year. Like most, the following participants saw themselves as contributors to the type of environment they wanted to create:

> Mindset is [an] important factor and collaboration among co-workers helps to make a positive environment that motivates students and co-workers.
>
> Reminding myself to set the mood and contribute to getting the kids in a good state of mind. . .

During this session, participants were asked to provide one key takeaway from the session on a notecard. Most participants responses were focused on the self-preservation of their mental well-being.

What Worked Well

Participants often appreciated the opportunity to have both large group and small group discussions. One participant stated, "During the workshop today we were given multiple opportunities to discuss/share our viewpoints with our colleagues, this worked well since I love hearing other's outlook on different situations." A common theme was that participants appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with peers and work in small groups. Most sessions were designed to keep participants engaged through kinesthetic learning. For example, participants would move from one workstation or location in the room to another to engage in discussion or complete a task. Finally, participants noted time allotted for personal reflection.

Not Working Well

Often, time was a factor for some participants. This particular concern arose during two sessions. One session occurred after a teacher appreciation luncheon and the second following a full day of instruction with students in the building. During the session after school several teachers expressed their exhaustion, yet they endured until the end. One teacher expressed, "I wish the session would have been shorter. An hour and a half after a whole day of work was tiring."

Another concern was the desire to have more in-depth and logistical training. Specifically, some teachers found the session focused on trauma difficult to take in. They wanted the opportunity to logistically practice strategies that could be used when working with students. Unfortunately, time did not permit for this type of work. Several expressed their thoughts accordingly:

> The different ways to help a student that is dealing with those events of trauma. It was a very centered view of the teacher and the teacher interaction. I think this is very important in that same breath, but what do we do from there is my question.
>
> [I] don't feel like we're getting practical advice - logistics of how to make things happen given constraints of daily schedules!
>
> I think people need the information, time to process it, and ways to apply what they have learned. We know about trauma. Now what do I do with this information? The 'what does this have to do with me?' factor.

Additional Information

As I moved forward with the work sessions, I hoped to gain additional information regarding my approach to supporting teachers in their work. For this reason, I prompted

participants to share any additional information they thought would be helpful. Participants inquired about the opportunity to have conversations with members of the staff they did not feel comfortable to foster stronger relationships. They shared the willingness to work together as a team, to build relationships with students and staff, and to encourage one another. One stated, "Staff continue to need to make the choice to communicate, be empathetic, build relationships and forgive students and colleagues." Another participant requested "good ideas to continue to build relationships with the students and being able to grow in everything that we do so that we can make a difference in every life that we touch."

As noted in the previous section, participants sensed individuals who were content in having a fixed mindset. These teachers were vocal, and several noted their frustration as stated in this comment, "There were times when teachers stated of their unwillingness to change. Teachers need to make adjustments. If you can't adjust, then they need to go." Others offered encouraging thoughts like the following:

> I do not feel that there is anything that I could tell you that you are not already aware of when dealing with schools. (Not everyone will share your passion for education like you have.) But the ones that do share your passion will be like sponges-soaking up all this information-then passing it on to others when we leave the workshop.

Statements like this kept me encouraged while providing professional learning during a pandemic.

Data Analysis for Focus Group

Several circumstances presented the inability for focus groups to be implemented. Despite several attempts to set up focus groups, it was difficult to solicit the number of participants desired to conduct a focus group as well as arrange a time when everyone could be

available to convene together. Most teachers were unresponsive to mass mailings sent via email. Fortunately, requests at the conclusion of work sessions resulted in some potential possibilities. In all, eight teachers responded and provided consent forms, three during the spring semester of 2021 and five during the fall semester of 2021. After various attempts to align schedules to meet faltered, I resorted to contacting participants individually via email to schedule interviews.

Data Analysis for Interviews

Unfortunately, the three interview sessions during the spring semester did not come to fruition. On the other hand, I was able to confirm three of the five interviews I scheduled during the fall semester. In an effort to be sensitive to the constraints of multiple circumstances caused by the pandemic, I requested no more than 45 minutes of the participant's time. I met with two teachers from the seventh-grade team and the assistant principal. All participants have at least 10 years in the profession. With that said, only one had been at the school more than two years. Participants were asked questions specific to the impact of the professional learning sessions on how they respond to students. Participants were asked the recorded questions noted in Appendix E. The following segments are a recap of my conversations with the staff members from CPS Middle School. To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, each has been provided an alias/pseudonym.

Darlene

Darlene is a seventeen-year veteran in education. She is a White female who worked mostly at the elementary level in CPS school district and served as a literacy coach. This is her second year at the middle school teaching seventh grade inclusion classes. Darlene attended all four sessions. She did not waste any time sharing her background and telling her story. Sharing proudly and unforgivingly:

> I live with people with emotional issues. I have a lot of background knowledge. I don't feel like teachers are equipped to handle students with learning disabilities if they have not dealt with it personally. My personal experience has impacted the way I work with students.

During my interview with Darlene, I learned how her behavior impacted work in the classroom. She stated that her personal experiences cause her to remember what children bring into the classroom as well as think about what could be happening at home. There was a moment when she reflected and shared the story of a child, an African American female, who lost her dad at the start of school and how she felt that the student's loss was negatively impacting the student's behavior. She said, "The student had a bad attitude, didn't like any of the teachers and wasn't coming to class." Darlene had lost a sister prior to school the previous year and thought that she would be able to make a connection with the student by sharing her story. She told me that while she was sharing with the student, she felt the need to give her (the student) her sister's obituary to read. She re-enacted, "You are still grieving, I am still grieving." Once she shared, the student started returning to class. She continued, "The student would get in fights with students, she was placed in foster care. It is enough to make you angry, but the student is nice to me." Darlene feels that she has made a connection with the student. She makes the comparison, "The student doesn't care for the co-teacher. She feels that other teachers don't understand her." Darlene has constantly reminded teachers that she is grieving and angry. This is an example of why she doesn't feel educators are prepared. She feels that the other teacher will think about it more. She noted that we should not label students as bad based on their actions. "There could be an underlying issue."

She shared a second brief story of a student, an African American male, who wanted to be a doctor and was misbehaving in class. She addressed him stating, "If you want to be a doctor, you have to learn how to have compassion for others." The student started crying and she was quite surprised by his response. She later learned from his parents that he does not cry unless somebody points it out to him when he is wrong. Darlene noted that he thinks she is his best friend now and does not want to disappoint her.

As the conversation shifted, the teacher acknowledged that there are disparities at CPS Middle but noted that she did not think it was intentional. She feels that "it" is where the behaviors are. Based on our interaction, I will define "it" as African American males. She went on to explain:

> I believe that the role models in the homes are moms. You have to stand up to them (African American males). I have to remind them. I don't mean to sound ugly. I am not prejudice but that is where I am having issues.

She has written up more students this year. She highlighted two African American males who were causing disruptions. During this reflection, she talked about another African American male student who had "issues too." She stated, "Mom got rid of the child to focus on another child." In the same breath she quickly noted that she believes that the child is smart, but she has yet to tell him. Darlene feels that he is hurting from abandonment. She wrapped up decidedly, "He is next on my list. I am working on him."

As we conversed about student behaviors, Darlene shared, "I used to teach honors children. They are just as bad and sneaky. They just get away with it." She noted her request for inclusion. She expressed that the "discipline and structure was not where it needed to be last year pointing out that she had a lot of repeaters." She also expressed her disappointment in students:

> They have been at home doing nothing, there is no motivation. I believe that students should be retained. We shouldn't push them through school. Students are more disrespectful, and it has a lot to do with the pandemic, lack of parental supervision but it's not the parents fault they had to work.

While shaking her head she talked about how tiring it was for teachers. "The students are a handful. It takes consistency and sternness." She went on to elaborate:

> Younger teachers want to be friends. We can't be their friends. Your students will respect you if you hold that line. Being friends makes it harder for other teachers. There is a big learning curve for a new teacher.

As we concluded our conversation, she felt like there was a need for more professional development when it comes to social and emotional issues. "It has to be taught," she reiterated:

> It can't just be your guidance counselor. Having the relationship and knowing circumstances with the child helps you to be a better teacher and how to respond. Because of the pandemic there may be more issues. I don't want to have to send my children to the office if I know I can handle it.

It seemed as if we had come full circle as she finished, "The emotional things with my family have taught me to be more empathetic. I don't know if you learn that, really learn that, until you experience it. The more education you have the better you can handle it."

Lori

Lori, a Multi-race female, is a sixteen-year veteran with a background at the middle school level teaching both English and social studies. She has been at CPS Middle three years and currently teaches seventh grade English Language Arts. She attended all four sessions. My

conversation with Lori began with her sharing excitedly what she learned as a result of the professional learning sessions.

She acknowledged that trauma is real. After students returning back into the school building from a year and a half of virtual learning, she talked about the importance of gaining an awareness of the students' background. She shared, "I work with students. I show them how I can work with them versus writing them up." She noted, "It has been eye opening to focus on a student and how you would support that student."

She acknowledged that the sessions have had a huge impact on her approach to teaching students. "I check myself constantly." She shared a story of how she mistakenly told the student that her nose was too big. Days went by before the student let her know that she, the teacher, offended her, the student. Learning this information, Lori apologized to the student. The lesson she learned was "choosing not to be in defensive mode and owning when you mess up." Such lessons have influenced her work with beginning teachers. She shares with them the importance of seeing things from the student's perspective. She complemented, "Your sessions have influenced the way that I support them."

Our conversation then shifted to see how her responses as the adult impacts her students. She openly began by sharing, "When I get frustrated, my hair gets bigger, my patience has gotten better as I get older. I am working on my reactions." She noted that students may not know how to react, hence the reason she checks her reactions and is open to student reactions. One strategy she uses is pacing. It helps to relieve the frustration she experiences. Lori acknowledges that her reactions are caused by stress and as the day progresses it gets worse. She shared, "Everyone experiences this (stress). I can't tell you that every reaction is handled with grace, but at least we are trying." She also identified humor as a strategy that helps her to get through the day.

As it related to disparities in discipline, Lori wasn't sure if she noticed a difference since the pandemic, but she noticed a difference in general. Regarding teaching inclusion, she shared that the majority of her students written up are African American and Hispanic. She expressed that she believes that this is due to antiquated expectations like "staying in your seat." Adamantly stating:

> I have a tough time teaching about all white men and not acknowledging other cultures. I am mixed race. Not recognizing all cultures and only acknowledging students who are in upper classes is wrong . . . There is a difference in acknowledgement which impacts discipline. We don't give students the time to cool off which can become a racial issue.

Prefacing her statement with "I can only tell you what I see," Lori shared that she saw teachers making an effort to interact with students. She also admitted that patience with some students has shortened. These actions occurred with the same kids and the same teacher which she was guilty as well. On the other hand, she noted that teachers were doing a better job of acknowledging students in the hallway, particularly in the seventh-grade hall, and that she didn't observe this as much on other hallways. "Deep relationships exist among few teachers. Some students who are talked to more [and] there are some students who might be avoided." Intrigued by her account of teachers with deep relationships, I inquired about the percentage of teachers with a positive mindset toward students. She responded, "I would say 30% due to pandemic." She based her calculation on conversations she heard throughout the building. She mimicked stories of "watch out for so and so." She thought that some teachers "go in with an open mind." Providing an example, "We will call each other out when we approach students inappropriately. 'Are you sure you want to do this.' We don't do it in front of other students."

Right before we ended our session, Lori halted me abruptly, "I got it now, there is one more thing that I need to share that has been so powerful." Backing up to the start of my conversation with her, there was something that she couldn't quite remember, and it was on the tip of her tongue. After several unsuccessful attempts to assist her in recalling her thought, I told her that we could come back to it before we concluded our time together. After a few minutes had passed with elation on her face, she recalled, "You talked about the difference between sympathy and empathy. This has been earth shattering for me." In this moment, she told me that she assisted her mom teaching aspiring teachers at a public university in North Carolina and how they do not understand empathy. "I now teach the students about empathy thanks to you."

Regina

Regina, an African American female, is the AP at the school, with 10 years of experience in education. She worked at both the elementary and high school level as a health/physical education instructor before joining the CPS Middle staff as an administrator in January 2020. Interestingly, she started her career outside of education and entered as a substitute teacher. She attended three of the four sessions. She shared that it was empowering to hear someone say something she already knew, and more importantly, it was based on research.

From the start of our conversation, Regina passionately shared her love for her job. "This was my calling. I fell in love with education. I have work to do." Noting that she drives an hour to work every day, she said, "I look forward to coming to work. If I can touch one person and that person touches one person, I have done my job on this earth." She shared multiple stories and experiences regarding students, parents and teachers. She talked about understanding why all are "acting out." Regina recognized that you have to address the social needs of students in order to keep students in class. "We must be empathetic. You can't be so quick to judge."

Our conversation focused on the importance of building relationships. She feels that her relationships with students are not impacted negatively when she has to administer consequences. She shared that students know her expectations of them and understand the consequences when they fail to meet expectations. She keeps a matrix chart for consequences and conducts conversations of what to do next time to avoid the consequences. She takes the time to talk to all students for at least one minute. She expects students to apologize for messing up. With that said she also tells her students that she has hope in them, she believes in them. She shared that she was the only one to go to college in her household and that her personal experiences have shaped her approach to working with students. Regina shares her story with her students. She tells students that she worked for what she got. It wasn't given to her. She shared her practice of allowing students, particularly African American males, to sit behind her desk and envision themselves being in a position sitting behind a desk. Sharing with a smile, "You have to plant the vision. Some students can't write a vision if it has never been shown."

She reminded me that during our final session with the staff, I asked what they could get from our time together and some people stated that they were too old to change. She responded, "You have to be flexible and go to where students are in order to get them to where you want them to build." She shared that one teacher continuously dropped students off at her office without a referral because she couldn't deal with them. "We need to give students options for inappropriate behavior . . . addressing discipline as a teachable moment."

As it pertains to adult interaction with students, Regina believes that there would be a small number of individuals on the staff who are complete "nay sayers." One is about to retire who consistently makes negative comments toward students. To make it worse, this teacher would say things in front of the students. For the majority of the staff, she shared others are

"ready to change the world, but it has been a demanding year." She acknowledged that teachers need a mental break.

She and the principal have discussed implementing a program called CPS pals in order to boost student morale. Teachers would be asked to support identified students academically as well as mentor them through regular check-ins. Due to the pandemic, administration is sensitive to the mental capacity of teachers to take on one more thing. She acknowledged that a significant number of teachers are experiencing high stress levels and low mental morale. Efforts to build morale have been tough. They want to do what they can to support teachers. She compared teachers who were happy at the start of school and within two months teachers who were deflated. She sees herself as a cheerleader.

She specifically shared about a teacher whose mother was recently diagnosed with cancer and the teacher is the main caregiver. "I truly believe she is dealing with trauma and is at a breaking point. Unfortunately, it is impacting the way she is interacting with students." Providing her solution:

> You have to get teachers to a state of well-being where they can cope. You have to Maslow before you can Bloom. That includes the teachers. How can you be successful in your work? I shared my story with the teacher when I was dealing with my grandmother's bout with dementia. I had to learn coping skills in order to survive and work. I chose not to snap on anyone. And this was because I am doing things to keep me in my right mind like running and meditation. I have to support teachers with encouraging words as well.

As we discussed disparities in discipline, she noted there has been a difference in discipline since the pandemic and their response to behaviors has been different. With the

increase in behaviors, like insubordination, fighting, and aggressive behavior, she shared that counselors assume that student behaviors are connected to post traumatic stress disorders. She anticipates that students are experiencing similar behaviors in their homes. With an increase in behaviors and discipline, consistently similar disparities still exist among African American students. She stated, "Just in this year, there was a record among African American males being disciplined and the number for others don't even come close."

Just as we started, our conversation ended on a positive note. She shared:

> There are no problems only solutions. Jeremiah 29:11 hangs above my head when I sit at my desk. It keeps me at peace. I don't take this home with me. I don't take this personally. The parents and kids are not mad at me. They are frustrated because they can't figure out what to do with their situation . . . We are going to keep encouraging and being optimistic. I just want to teach others how to do it.

The qualitative data collected via the interviews proved to support findings to answer both research questions as explained later in this chapter.

Data Analysis for Discipline Data

Discipline data was collected from the Spring 2021 and Fall 2021 semesters parallel to the facilitation of the professional development series. It is appropriate to note that these semesters exist in separate calendar school years. In addition, the school had experienced staff turnover due to several teachers retiring. During the Fall 2021 semester, 753 students were enrolled in CPS Middle School. Demographically, 52% of the student population is male. Of these males represented in the student body, 43% are African American, 30% are White, 22% are Latino, and 4% are Multi-racial as shown in Figure 11. During the Spring 2021 semester, 731 students were enrolled. Fifty-two percent represented the male student population. This

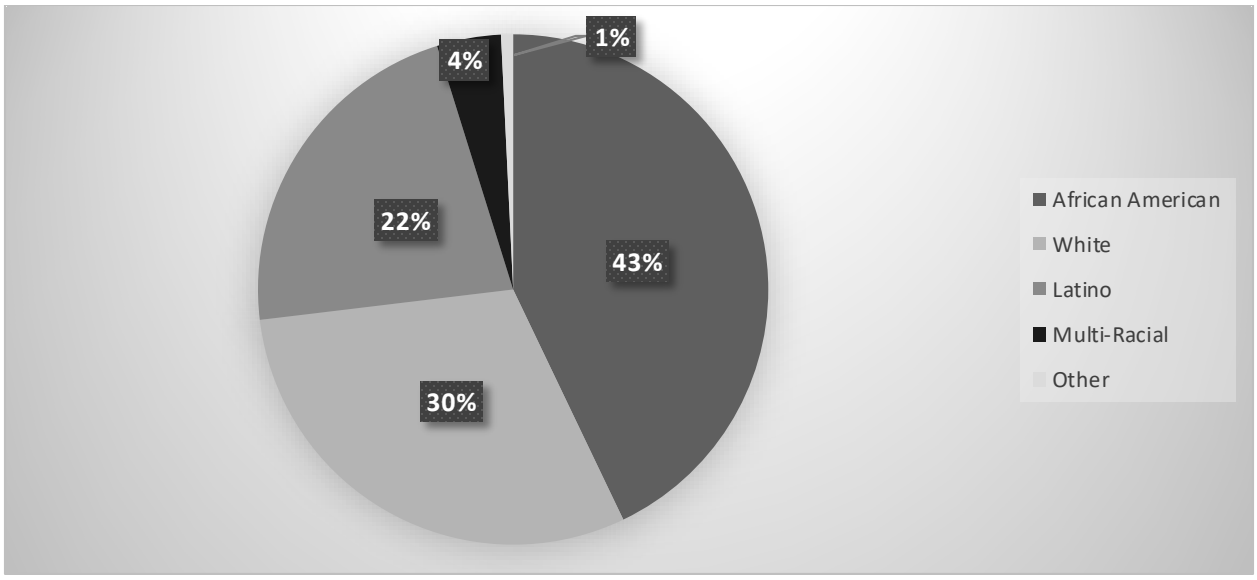


Figure 11. CPS male student demographics 2021-2022.

demographic was comprised of the following accordingly: 39% African American, 34% White, 21% Latino, 5% Multi-racial.

Discipline is collected according to the action type and offense type. An action type is defined as the consequence that is assigned because of one's inability to comply to the stated or written expectation. The offense type is the behavior that occurs to warrant a specified consequence. For the purpose of this study, we will focus on two of seven action types administered: Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) and In-School-Suspension (ISS). Of the various offense types, we will analyze data categorized as fighting, aggressive behavior, inappropriate language, insubordination, disruptive behavior, inappropriate behavior and disrespect of faculty/staff.

Prior to this study during the 2018-2019 school year, two hundred male students were assigned ISS and 151 were assigned OSS. The data was not available to show whether multiple offenses existed with the same student. As it relates to ISS, 110 (55%) were African American and 46 (23%) were White. OSS assignments revealed 58% African American compared to 26% White. During the study in the Spring of 2021 when students were given the option to return to in-person learning, 35 students were assigned ISS and 26 OSS (see Figure 12 and 13). Seventy-one percent of students assigned ISS were African American and 14% were White. OSS data shows 73% African American and 19% White. During the Fall of 2021, all students in the Carolina Pines School district returned to in-person learning. Of these students, 295 students were assigned ISS and 142 OSS. As it relates to ISS, 70% were African American and 15% were White. OSS data revealed 62% African American and 17% White.

Data also revealed that African American male students were most likely to be reprimanded for insubordination, disruptive behavior, inappropriate language, fighting,

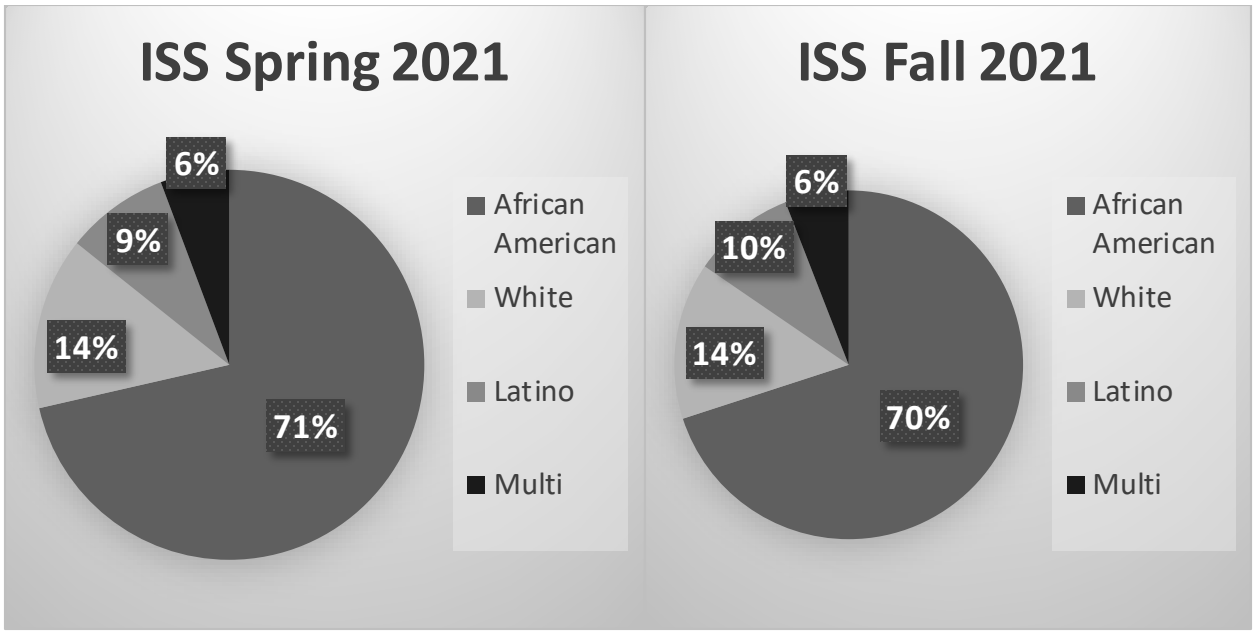


Figure 12. CPS Middle ISS discipline: Male students.

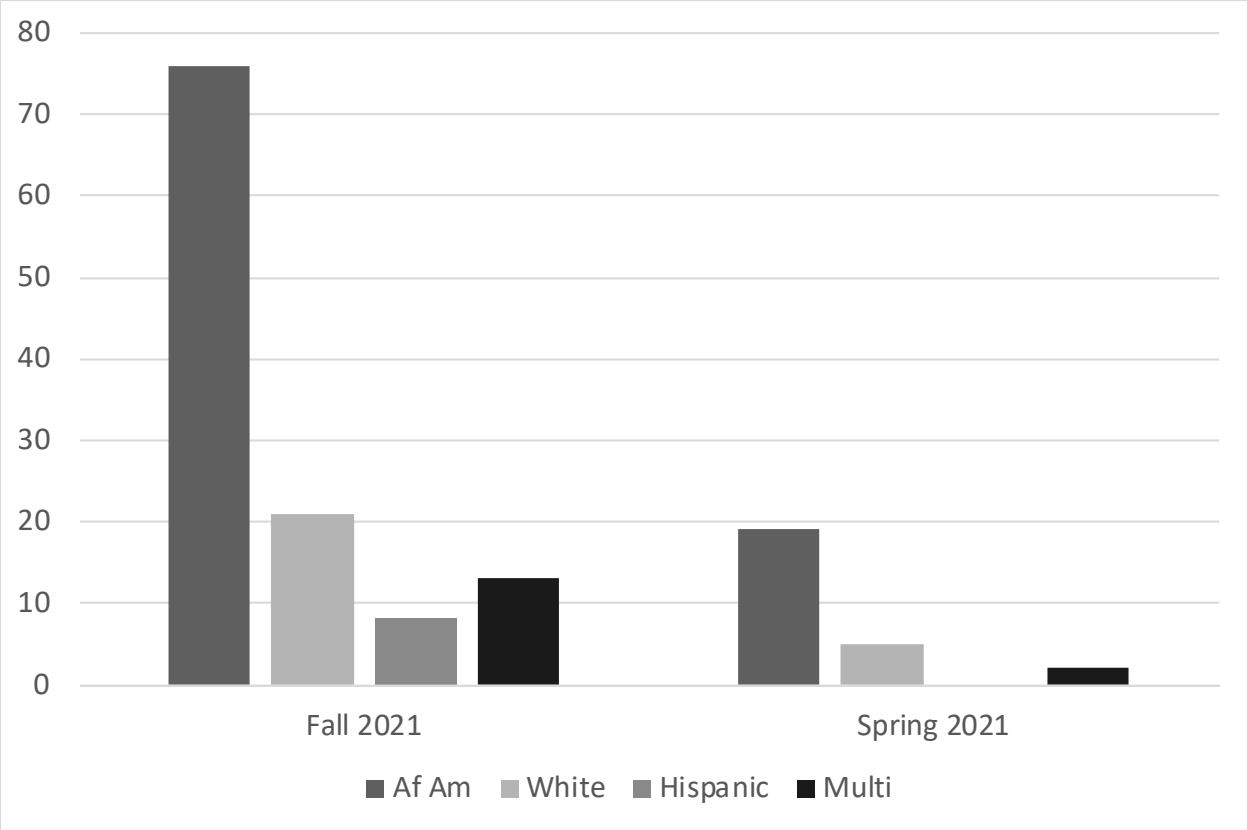


Figure 13. CPS Middle OSS discipline: Male students.

inappropriate behavior, disrespect of faculty/staff and aggressive behavior during Fall of 2021 (see Table 8). Male students committed the most offenses school wide. Of those offenses committed by males, African American males were reprimanded at the following rates accordingly: fighting (48%), aggressive behavior (84%), inappropriate language (74%), insubordination (77.5%), disruptive behavior (76%), disrespect of faculty/staff (94%), and inappropriate behavior (63%). When compared to White male students, African American males were 10 times more likely to receive consequences for aggressive behavior and insubordination, four times for inappropriate behavior, six times for disruptive behavior, 15 times for disrespect of faculty/staff and twice for inappropriate behavior. Implications for this will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Findings

In this section, I incorporate my data analysis to develop answers to best support each of my research questions. In doing so, I explain the logic that serves as a foundation for my conclusion and how the various data sources thoroughly contribute (or not) to my answer for each question.

Overview of Findings Regarding Research Question 1

Question 1 in my study inquired "how does a professional development program for teachers affect their perception of African American male behavior in the school setting?" To collect data for this research question, I asked participants to complete a pre and post survey as shared previously. The questions on the survey can be referenced in Appendix D. In addition, I also asked participants to complete evaluation forms at the conclusion of each professional development session.

Table 8

Fall 2021 CPS Middle Male Offenses by Race

Offense Type	TO	TM	BM	WM	HM	MM
Aggressive Behavior	40	25	21	2	1	1
Disrespect of Faculty/Staff	46	33	31	2	0	0
Disruptive Behavior	65	42	32	5	4	1
Fighting	45	27	13	8	1	5
Inappropriate Behavior	42	35	22	10	2	1
Inappropriate Language	39	23	17	4	1	1
Insubordination	64	40	31	3	3	3

Note. TO=Total offenses school wide; TM=Total offenses male; BM=Black male offenses; WM=White male offenses; HM=Hispanic male offenses; MM=Multiracial male offenses. Information retrieved from CPS Middle School.

From the analysis of comparing the comments of participants from the pre-survey to the post-survey, results appeared to be more favorable. For example, participants were more cognizant of dispelling the belief that "colorblindness" is a good thing. Those in agreement to being colorblind decreased by 27%. These surveys also revealed an increase in the percentage of teachers who were willing to make adjustments to their teaching to support students in their learning styles. Instruction strategies impact student behaviors. A question where the response rate did not change much, yet really dealt with a teacher's perception toward the student and their household, was question 5 regarding educational values and involvement as a priority. Over half of the staff continued to perceive that the family did not care about the education of their child. The phrasing of the statement may have impacted the responses of participants. This will be discussed more in Chapter 5.

Recounting several conversations with teachers and reflections following professional learning sessions, individuals were open to being more empathetic toward students. They also noted a focus in being intentional to view students using the right "lens." When doing so teachers are more empathetic and less likely to be biased based on their experiences. Looking at this data, one might assume that more teachers were able to empathize with African American students when misbehaviors resulted from traumatic experiences at home (Fergus, 2017). As a result, the adult's perception of the student existed in a more positive light.

Collectively, teacher accounts from interviews revealed that professional development sessions pushed teachers to be more empathetic in their interaction with students. Per conversation with interviewees, all alluded to there being a significant population of teachers who had a forgiving response to their perception of students. Unfortunately, we are unable to determine if these students are African American males. With that said, these individuals

recounted their interactions with African American male students where they exhibited de-escalation strategies and EMR practices that were modeled and discussed during professional development sessions. One teacher gave an account of pacing back and forth before reacting to students. Based on the synthesis of teacher feedback from professional development sessions, pre and post survey data, conversations with staff and accounts from observations, one can conclude that the participation of staff in the professional development series affected the teachers' perception of African American male students in a rural school setting.

Overview of Findings Regarding Research Question 2

Research Question 2 in this study asked, "how does a professional development program for teachers affect their responsiveness/reaction to African American male behavior in the school setting?" Findings for this question were collected from interviews conducted with volunteer staff, reflections from sessions, "commitments" from participants as outlined in the final session and discipline data before and after the professional development series. In spite of responses from various staff members regarding their appreciation for the content shared during professional development as well as their commitments to develop relationships with students, discipline reports continued to mirror previous trends.

Feedback from sessions suggested that teachers would be more cognizant of their behavior when responding to students and the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with students. Participants acknowledged the various strategies that they might use to de-escalate situations concerning student behaviors. Staff accounts as shared in interviews show that adults were intentional about their approach to addressing inappropriate behavior in the classroom. With that said and contrary to my hypothesis, African American male students incurred more disciplinary consequences than in previous years as evidenced by Fall 2021

discipline data. As noted in Diane's experience with African American male students, she felt the need to "stand up" to them because there are no role models at home. This same teacher admitted to "writing up" more students this year. Likewise, other staff members continued to assign disproportionate consequences for student actions by African American males. As presented earlier in the data analysis of discipline data, African American male students received significantly higher exclusionary discipline consequences than their white male counterparts despite representing a similar demographic percentage at CPS Middle School.

The impact of COVID may have impacted the increase in negative behaviors exhibited at school. Administration and staff noted a difference in student behavior upon return to school after the abrupt closing of schools in March 2020 due to the pandemic. In tandem with student behaviors, teachers were subject to various stressors both personally and professionally. As noted in Chapter 2, the demands of the classroom and stress due to poor working conditions may have increased implicit biases that impact how teachers respond to and discipline African American students. In light of the various contributing factors to affect the discipline data, I find it inconclusive to determine whether a professional development program would affect the responsiveness/reaction of teachers toward African American male behavior in a rural school setting.

Summary

This research study was directed by two research questions focused on the impact of professional development on adult perception and behavior. My analysis produced notable revelations regarding my efforts as it pertains to adult behavior. In reviewing Research Question 1, my analysis suggested a correlation between providing the staff professional development with research based content and engaging activities, and their implementation of strategies

gleaned from the sessions which influenced their perception of African American students. On the other hand, in reviewing Research Question 2, my analysis did not affirm my proposed hypothesis that the influences of adult behaviors through professional development would reduce the disparities in discipline referrals among African American males during the academic year.

In the following chapter, I will share my reflections as it relates to the critical disclosures from conducting this study based on the literature and data collected. I will provide additional details to the challenges faced in implementing my study and facilitating an effective professional development series in midst of a pandemic. Furthermore, I will share various considerations that could influence the adult behaviors to reduce disparities in discipline referrals among African American males in a rural middle school.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

I arrived at the school early in the morning after a two-hour drive from my home, leaving before the sun came up. As I park the car, I am rushing to grab my computer, bag of materials and chart paper. As I am rushing to enter the school, I stop in my tracks realizing that I am not wearing my mask, which is mandatory due to CDC guidelines. Once I ensure that my mask is on, I enter the building which is absent of children because it is a teacher workday. I introduce myself to the receptionist at the front desk and she immediately calls the principal on the walkie talkie. She is somewhere in the building making sure that the technology for one of the teachers who is teaching her class remotely is all good and checking in with the media specialist to ensure that the distribution list for hotspots is ready for the afternoon. As she enters the office, she has two laptops under her arm that are either non-functioning or need to be assigned to students who have opted out of returning to school in spite of the Plan A model that has been activated by the state. We exchange greetings and she escorts me hurriedly to the cafeteria where I will be facilitating a hybrid professional learning session (a mixture of both virtual and face-to-face) which is the first of four sessions. I was already nervous because this was the first time I had ever done anything like this. As I was setting up and testing the technology, the microphone is not connecting to the audio for participants who will be joining virtually. Just my luck. Now, I am getting anxious. Plus, I am already sweating from running around the space trying to set things up to ensure that each person has their own materials which are socially distanced from one space to the next. I am hot and I am struggling to breathe behind my mask. Thinking about the title of my session, "You Better Check Yo'self," I stop. I take a deep breath and remind myself of why I am there. Hopefully, I will say something today that will influence a teacher to change

their perception of an African American male student which will purposely affect that child's educational experience at CPS Middle School for the better.

The Work

Over the course of the next six months, it was my intent to facilitate research-based professional learning sessions and provide coaching to support teachers with the implementation of SEL strategies. I set out with the ultimate goal of changing adult behaviors to create a more equitable culture at the school. Like most in the United States, CPS Middle had a significantly higher rate of African American male students who were disproportionately suspended (see Figure 2). These disparities in the assignment of exclusionary discipline are often due to the potential biases of adults that influence such behaviors (Fazio, 1990; Gilliam et al., 2016).

The study was conducted in Carolina County, a rural district in eastern North Carolina. Being ranked as one of the 40 most economically distressed counties in the state, CPS Middle School's student body consist of a low-socioeconomic background with ninety-nine percent of students being eligible for free/reduce lunch (NC Department of Commerce, 2019). Throughout the duration of my study at the school, the student population averaged approximately 770 students with an African American and White demographic of about 40% each. In contrast, the teaching staff was predominately White females. As a result of the pandemic, the staff increased in number of beginning teachers from the 2020-21 school year to the 2021-22 school year. The administration team remained, all with less than three years being assigned to the school.

Using a mixed method approach, I collected quantitative data from discipline reports and surveys then collected qualitative data from interviews. During the first phase of the study, in reviewing various discipline reports over the course of several years, I was able to identify disparity trends among African American male students in exclusionary discipline practices. In

addition, I conducted a pre-survey to capture the behaviors and beliefs of study participants. Later in the second phase, these participants engaged in a customized professional development series of four work sessions focused on identifying one's own social emotional needs and supporting students in developing social and emotional learning skills. Participants also learned and practiced culturally responsive pedagogies to potentially be used in the school setting. In the final phase, I used both quantitative and qualitative data to assess the implications of adult learning during the professional development sessions on student behavior as measured through student discipline data.

The Findings

As noted in the previous chapter, I was able to determine that staff participation in the professional learning series did influence their perception of African American male students as noted in the reflection data collected at the conclusion of each professional learning session, conversations with staff and conducted interviews. In contrast, there was little evidence to support my theory that the professional learning series would have a positive impact on staff responses/reactions toward African American male students to reduce disparities in discipline referrals.

During this chapter, I will connect my findings to research shared in Chapter 2 that shows how implicit biases and behaviors indirectly impact marginalized students disproportionately. I will also explore research-based reasons to potentially support why data did not show a reduction in discipline referrals among the African American male population. Following this discussion, I will share multiple implications of this work moving forward in rural school districts. In conclusion, I will explain how my experience as a researcher has impacted me personally and professionally.

Discussion

Within the framework of CRT, students are rewarded for conformity to "white norms" or cultural practices in school. These norms include but are not limited to dress, speech patterns, and unauthorized conceptions of knowledge. In addition, these norms are typically subjective and when not followed, students are penalized. For example, the communication of some African American students with their peers might be misperceived as loud and confrontational (Cartledge & Fellows-Milburn, 1996). Another CRT theorist provided the example that students are rewarded for conforming to "white norms" or cultural practices in school (Harris, 1993). The following paragraphs respectively support these constructs.

In a similar respect, one of the teachers I interviewed expressed that she believed that the disparities in exclusionary discipline are due to antiquated expectations like "staying in your seat." She expressed adamantly, "There is a difference in acknowledgement [of behavior] which impacts discipline. We don't give students the time to cool off which can become a racial issue." To support her claim as noted in Chapter 4, African American males at CPS Middle were 10 times more likely to receive consequences for aggressive behavior and insubordination, four times for inappropriate behavior, six times for disruptive behavior, 15 times for disrespect of faculty/staff and twice for inappropriate behavior according to my analysis. All of the above offenses are subjective in which they are based on the personal perspective or preferences of a person.

As it relates to cultural competence and responsiveness, it could be concluded that staff demographics at CPS Middle impacted the disparities reflected in exclusionary discipline. Bireda (2002) notes that exclusionary disciplinary actions for African American students could result from cultural misunderstandings between these students and school personnel. By definition,

CPS Middle is an example of a school that is culturally mismatched. Like national and state statistics, the majority of teachers at CPS Middle are White and female.

Bias and Perception

One's personal perspective could be shaped by stereotypes. Research reveals that stereotypes over the course of multiple centuries can contribute to lowered expectations for marginalized students academically and socially (Ferguson, 1998; Tyson, 2011). Such stereotypes impact the beliefs of educators which lead to implicit biases in the school setting. This thought led me to reflect upon my interaction with Darlene. In recollection, she began her interview touting about her experiences and how they "prepared" her for an understanding of her students. By the conclusion of the interview, I wondered about the perception of some teachers regarding African American males. Darlene thought it was her role to support "these" students. This was only the first of many red flags that caused me to have pause during our time together. As the conversation continued, she made a point to note that she did not think that the disparities in discipline were intentional. She felt that "it" is where the behaviors are. Reflecting here, another pause, I wondered if she were referencing "African American males" as an object. Could she be suggesting that being an African American male is synonymous to being a behavior problem or could she, like some Americans, unconsciously associate African American males with negative thoughts as a result of endemic antiblackness that exists in American society (Devine & Montieth, 1999)? Again, referencing the research of Warikoo et al. (2016), "People are generally unaware of their implicit association or unwilling to endorse them as indicative of their beliefs about those groups" (p. 508). Aligned to their theory, she made several stereotypical generalizations throughout her interview and recanted at one moment, "I don't mean to sound ugly. I am not prejudice but that [African American males] is where I am having issues." I left

this conversation wondering if her perception of African American males was prevalent among other teachers regardless of race.

Stress and Discipline

In spite of professional learning sessions focused on self-awareness, one might assume that participants did not frequently take the time to evaluate their implicit biases and how they impacted their behavior toward African American male students. During the pandemic, teachers were chronically overworked and overstressed. Research points out that implicit bias never operates independently as a driver in our behavior (Fishbein & Azjen, 2010). Warikoo et al. (2016) expounds even further that the teaching profession systemically denies the opportunity for teachers to override their implicit bias due to the prevalence of chronic emotional stress within the school context. Similarly, Quinn (2017) acknowledges the demands of the classroom and stress due to poor working conditions may reduce opportunities to override implicit bias and impact how teachers engage and discipline African American students. Data and evidence collected during my study align with this research. Disparities in exclusionary discipline between African American males and White males increased from twice in 2018-19 to four times in the Fall of 2021.

Effective Professional Development

Overall, I would assess that the professional learning work series was mostly effective in educator results. The focus on SEL did support the needs of the staff and was appropriate considering the circumstances. Although the implementation of the professional development series was not executed to fullest potential, there was evidence to show that participation from staff influenced adult behavior. Research states that one-time sessions are ineffective because participants do not receive support during the implementation phase (Darling-Hammond et al.,

2017). Hence, my reason for designing a multiple session series. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) recommends that sessions include focused content, active learning, modeling of strategies, support for collaboration through coaching, feedback and reflection, and facilitation over a long period of time. I was intentional in designing my sessions to include these factors embedded with authentic experiences that participants found meaningful and purposeful toward their work. Webster-Wright (2010) revealed that professionals considered continuous learning that was embedded and constructed in the experience of their practice more beneficial than a professional development program. When implemented, participant feedback confirmed what research has shown.

Participants shared in evaluations that they appreciated the opportunities to have large and small group discussions, collaborate with peers in small group activities, modeling and practicing, and individual reflection time. While several participants shared their intent to use strategies and methods explored during sessions, I was unable to carry out a successful structure/system to ensure implementation of these strategies to fidelity. As noted in Chapter 2, Learning Forward (2020) speaks to seven standards to creating and sustaining effective professional learning. The pandemic limited my ability to execute several of these indicators to create learning communities for support systems, monitor resources, and support implementation. Coaching sessions intermittently between sessions were not provided to staff due to district restrictions. In an effort not to cause additional stress among staff, I was sensitive to the frequency and timing of sessions throughout the duration of the study. Unfortunately, this did not always work in my favor. Similarly, I was hesitant to impose additional demands on administration to monitor and enforce practices in the classroom. For this reason, I was unable to

confirm the use of strategies regularly and only account for implementation through second-hand observation and conversation with staff.

Implications

The findings of this project point out the importance of self-awareness of adults and understanding how their experiences impact their beliefs which drive consequential actions, whether intentional or non-intentional, toward a specific group of students. Professional development with a focus on SEL skills in addition to cultural responsiveness and trauma sensitivity broadens the awareness of teachers about the experiences of their students and pushes them to be empathetic in looking at things from a different perspective. Knowing what to do and how to respond assist in building supportive cultures for students who experience trauma at home.

With that said, the design of the professional development must be systemic in allowing time for participants to reflect, practice, and make connections to their own work. Additionally, staff should convene in PLCs that specifically focus on strategies being used in the classroom and data review. Coaching for teachers should be provided by a member of the instructional leadership team. The members of this team may vary from one school to the next. Finally, there should exist some form of accountability to measure the level of fidelity with implementation. Although, I was able to meet the needs of participants through reflection, practice and connection, regrettably I was unable to set coaching sessions and a consistent system for accountability.

Policy

Policies are written to ensure safe and equitable schools. With that said, these policies should be structured to assist schools in treating all students fairly versus inflating disparate

numbers across racial and gender lines. Regardless of intent, some policies, as noted in this study, disproportionately affect African American males. These policies were often subjective. For this reason, I would encourage adults to review policy at both the school and district level. Reviews like this should help to curtail the effects of explicit bias, lessen the use of discriminatory practices and enable the implementation of equity interventions. Upon reviews, districts may develop clear, objective school discipline procedures, replace exclusionary practices with instructional ones and create professional learning to support policies and policy revision.

Human capital policies might support adults in the building by lowering stressors for teachers in the classroom. Research continues to support the idea of smaller classroom sizes and its impact on classroom instruction. Accountability without the support or resources only exacerbates the issue of disproportionate discipline toward students. Capacity building and increased human capital in the school building might assist in eliminating these concerns.

Research Process

In hindsight, I would take a different approach in collecting data from participants. During the collection and analysis of data, I determined that statements posed in the survey and interview provided little evidence to answer my research questions. I recognized that in my attempt to ensure that participants felt comfortable in their responses, I inadvertently missed the opportunity to gain authentic and specific responses regarding African American males. Not only would I have considered developing more pointed questions during the interview that might expose hidden biases or perceptions regarding specifically students of color, but also developed short scenarios regarding African American males that warranted participant reaction or response.

Upon review, survey statements were complex in design and contained multiple thoughts. For example, Question 5 stated, "When students come from homes where educational achievement is not a high priority, they often don't do their homework and their parents don't come to school events. This lack of parental support undermines my efforts to teach these students." There are three thoughts mentioned. Thought one: "Low priority equals students not doing homework." Thought 2: "Low priority equals parents not coming to school events." Thought 3: "Lack of parental support undermines teaching." Each thought could have a different response ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. If participants were confused by these statements, they may have chosen neutral. The semantics of these statements if simpler may have yielded different responses. At the beginning of each professional learning session, I would consider collecting information to assess previous knowledge of the participant by asking participants to complete a questionnaire. I would ask participants to complete the same questionnaire at the conclusion in order to assess growth of knowledge based on the information shared during the session.

Curious to know how many participants might be accepting of statistics about students of color at face value, I also wondered about generalizations that existed among the staff at CPS Middle. Academically, I would be curious to know the effects of adult behavior on African American male student performance. How might the impact of adult behavior on this set of students vary from one grade level to the next?

Research Recommendations

Some additional research questions that could be employed to advance our knowledge are to consider how the race of the adult impact the perception and behavior of adults toward African American males. During this study, I was unable to account for these characteristics when

conducting surveys and collecting feedback from participants. In addition, I would advocate not only for support of teachers through coaching but also monitoring of implementation of instructional and behavioral strategies by leadership. Another consideration for expansion of this research would be to investigate how the environment, surroundings, and access to resources impact adult behavior toward African American males. The findings and practices of my research can be expanded to students of other ethnicities. Research also supports an increased number of disparities in discipline among African American females and Latinx students.

Limitations

My experience at CPS Middle School was quite interesting and at times challenging, not only due to the pandemic but also my lack of previous relationship with the district. As an external entity, I struggled to initiate and gain a relationship with the teachers on the staff. Visibility and presence on the campus was minimal which negatively impacted my ability to forge authentic relationships with the staff. On the other hand, the administrative teams at the school and district level were very supportive and crucial to the limited success I had in conducting my study. I was able to establish a strong relationship with these individuals in the initial stages of my work.

Making connections virtually with the staff was very slow. Even though I was introduced by the principal via email and given permission to send blanket emails to the staff, I found this method to be ineffective in getting responses from teachers. In spite of meeting the staff face to face during professional learning sessions, responses to my correspondence in between were little to none. Using email proved to be inconducive in getting traction with teachers to participate in focus groups and interviews.

All that considered, timing could have been a factor. Still in the midst of a pandemic and prior to the start of conducting my study, the school board decided to transition to a Plan A protocol model therefore allowing all students to transition back into the physical building. This model provided full in-person instruction, masking, and minimal physical distancing for educators and students. It was an apparent stressor for some teachers. In spite of this decision, a significant percentage of students remained virtually enrolled. This required teachers to instruct lessons in a hybrid setting which had mixed reviews in implementation. Increased stressors like these could have presented and, in my opinion, did present various barriers in the reframing of practices in the classroom; particularly the practices I was about to teach and model in my professional learning series. With this in mind, I worked hard to decrease levels of anxiety.

During the workshop sessions, we began by establishing agreements that invited individuals to speak their truth, show grace for growth, and support productive collaboration. Conditions of anonymity and sensitivity were created to appeal to participants. The sessions were designed to allow participants to often breakout into smaller groups to create comfortable environments for discussions. In addition, surveys were anonymous. With that said, while teachers verbally committed to implement strategies in the classroom, there was little evidence to show different responses in adult behavior. Essentially, the will for teachers was there, but the mental capacity was not. Most, if not all teachers, were overwhelmed with meeting the demands of state driven mandates. Getting commitments from teachers to fully engage to fidelity with my action research proved to be difficult. The integration and alignment of the work in the classroom would be critical for implementation.

These demands also impacted the work of the administration team, according to my inquiry procedures, who would serve in the role of accountability to ensure that SEL strategies

were being integrated in classroom instruction. Unfortunately, and more often than not, administration was engrossed with addressing residuals from the pandemic including but not limited to teacher and bus driver shortages, discipline escalation, and COVID tracing. Like teachers, the responsibilities of their role were complex, urgent, and onerous.

Leadership Development

My experience as a scholarly practitioner has pushed me to be reflective, research-based, and strategic in my work. As a reflective practitioner, I have set aside time to reflect on my actions during the process and often take a critical stance. Reflections often led me to make adjustments to my work based on feedback and learnings as a result of the experience. Adjustments included revising PD and refining my research questions. Being in a position of frequent change and inconsistency throughout my research allowed me to see my strengths in adaptation and flexibility. With that said, an area of growth would be proactive planning. Reviewing the methods, I used during this study hopefully will challenge me to improve the quality of my practice.

From a strategic aspect, I have appreciated the opportunity to work with district and school leadership to gain insight and collaboratively brainstorm ideas to develop a district-wide approach in supporting teachers with the implementation of SEL in their classrooms. CPS Middle was used a pilot sight. The experience has sharpened my change management skills in how one might approach a strategic plan. bb Creating measures and specific outcomes allow you to gauge whether you are being successful or not. Throughout this process, I have become more comfortable with using project management tools (i.e., RACI and Gantt charts) to monitor the progression of my work.

Moreover, I have gained a greater appreciation for the process of identifying a problem, determining its root cause(s), posing questions, collecting data, testing the work and eventually developing a resolution to the problem. I have become open to the idea of doing something over and over again and producing multiple iterations before landing on a final product. This experience has taught me perseverance and resilience. Being a scholarly practitioner conducting a study focused on social justice has propelled me forward to becoming a transformative leader in education.

Conclusion

Since entering the education field as an African American male from the rural southeastern part of North Carolina, I have been compelled to advocate for students and moreover, African American male students. I am a father of three African American males. Upon leaving my hometown for college, my grandmother admonished me to "never forget where you came from." Her words spoken softly yet firmly, were forever embedded in my heart. It is my mantra and I take it with me everywhere I go. As an education consultant, my job places me in various school districts throughout the country and often I find my feet walking through the halls of a small, rural school with minimum resources to support a quality education for students. I am intentional in making eye contact and speaking to students, particularly African American males because I want them to know that I see them. To see someone is to let them know that they exist. Sawabona is a South African greeting which means "I respect you, I value you, you are important to me." Too often, he is overlooked, forgotten, marginalized, pushed to the side.

It is my hope, with various adjustments, to continue this work at CPS Middle School or schools similar to it. This study brings validation to my purpose as an educator, and I can only hope that it will be one of many studies that explores the behavior of adults and its impact on the

trajectory of African American males in society. Too many studies remind us of a de facto tracking system that places African American males along a path to dropping out of school or being incarcerated; not seen. This study and others like it should begin to change the statistics of African American males being disproportionately assigned exclusionary discipline actions by impacting the beliefs and behaviors of adults one effective professional learning session at a time.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Demond McKenzie
CC: Karen Jones

Date: 3/8/2021
Re: UMCIRB 21-000181
Enough is Enough: Changing Adult Behaviors

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 3/8/2021. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

As the Principal Investigator you are explicitly responsible for the conduct of all aspects of this study and must adhere to all reporting requirements for the study. Your responsibilities include but are not limited to: . . .

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Demond McKenzie 12-16 2020 Proposal_Final.docx	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Email to Staff v. 2	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Focus Group Protocol.docx	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Informed-Consent-Document-Enough is Enough v. 2.doc	Consent Forms
Journaling questions	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Pre and Post Survey.docx	Surveys and Questionnaires
Questions for survey and focus groups.docx	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: DISTRICT CONSENT

Beaufort County Schools

Matthew F. Cheeseman, Superintendent
321 Smaw Road
Washington, North Carolina 27889
252-946-6593
www.beaufort.k12.nc.us

December 1, 2020

Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I give Mr. Demond McKenzie permission to conduct the research titled ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: CHANGING ADULT BEHAVIORS TO REDUCE DISPARITIES IN DISCIPLINE REFERRALS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL at PS Jones Middle School, Beaufort County Schools. This letter also serves as assurance that PS Jones Middle School complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The research will be conducted with oversight from Dr. Karen Jones, East Carolina University and Ms. Kelly Makepeace, Principal. The research shall be conducted with all confidentiality requirements outlined in Beaufort County Board of Education policy 4700 Student Records and policy 4705/7825 Confidentiality of Personal Identifying Information as attached for reference. Please feel free to contact me directly should you have questions.

Sincerely,

Matthew F. Cheeseman
Superintendent

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Principal Investigator: **Demond McKenzie**
Institution, Department or Division: **East Carolina University, College of Educational Leadership**
Address: **8425 Henderson Rd, Apex, NC 27539**
Telephone #: **919-749-8986**

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to determine if adult behaviors and belief impact student behaviors and performance. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a viable volunteer. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn whether adult perceptions impact adult behaviors.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of no more than 60 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

There are no known reasons why you should not take part in this research.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at PS Jones Middle School. You will need to come to the media center and designated room no more than eight (8) times during the study. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is six (6) days over the next four (4) months.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following:

- *Participate in a pre- and post-survey*
- *Participate in focus group of no more than 4 individuals*
- *Participate in a 3-day workshop (2 hrs in length)*
- *Participate in an one-on-one interview (optional)*
- *Journal (optional)*

What might I experience if I take part in the research?
We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?
We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?
It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?
Only the researcher may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?
Data will be stored securely at all times at 8425 Henderson Rd, Apex NC, only accessible to the researcher on an encrypted flash drive. The researcher will maintain the confidentiality of all participants. This information will be kept for one year.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?
You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?
The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at (919)749-8986 weekdays, between 8am to 6pm, Saturday, between 1pm to 6pm.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

Is there anything else I should know?

The following research results will be provided to you**...**

- *The impact of adult perceptions post-professional learning and coaching*
- *The outcome of discipline data*

These results will be shared with you by July 1, 2021 presented as a report to the school and district pending successful compilation of data with no irregularities.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?
The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT) **Signature** **Date**

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT) **Signature** **Date**

Principal Investigator (PRINT) **Signature** **Date**

APPENDIX D: PRE AND POST SURVEY

Changing Adult Behaviors to Reduce Disparities in Discipline Referrals Among African American Males in Rural Middle Schools

Survey Statements

Common Beliefs Survey (Questions 1-13)
https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/Common%20Beliefs%20Survey%20New_0.pdf

1. I don't think of my students in terms of their race or ethnicity. I am color blind when it comes to my teaching.
2. The gap in the achievement among students of different races is about poverty, not race.
3. Teachers should adapt their teaching to the distinctive cultures of African American, Latino, Asian and Native American students.
4. In some cultures, students are embarrassed to speak in front of others so I take this into account and don't call on these students in class.
5. When students come from homes where educational achievement is not a high priority, they often don't do their homework and their parents don't come to school events. This lack of parental support undermines my efforts to teach these students.
6. It is not fair to ask students who are struggling with English to take on challenging academic assignments.
7. I believe that I should reward students who try hard, even if they are not doing well in school; building their self-esteem is important.
8. I try to keep in mind the limits of my students' ability and give them assignments that I know they can do so that they do not become discouraged.
9. Students of different races and ethnicities often have different learning styles and good teachers will match their instruction to these learning styles.
10. Grouping students of different levels of achievement for instruction may benefit some students, but it can undermine the progress that could otherwise be made by higher achieving students.
11. Before students are asked to engage in complex learning tasks, they need to have a solid grasp of basic skills.
12. With all the pressures to raise student achievement, finding and using examples for the cultural, historic and everyday lived experiences of my students takes away (or could take away) valuable time form teaching and learning what matters most.
13. Talking about race with my colleagues could open up a can of worms/ little good is likely to come from it.
14. I understand the essential elements of social emotional learning (e.g. definition, characteristics, benefits, impact).
15. Student teacher relationships have an impact on building students' social and emotional skills.
16. Families are aware of a focus on social and emotional learning at my school culture.
17. A focus on students' social and emotional skills contributes to school safety.

18. A focus on students' social and emotional skills contributes to school culture.
19. There is a school-wide vision and mission for SEL at my school.
20. Social and emotional learning is a necessary area of focus at my school. Essential elements of social and emotional learning (e.g. definition, characteristics, benefits, impact) are understood by most staff (certified and non-certified) in the building.

Participants are asked to answer on a range of 1) Agree Strongly 2) Agree 3) Neutral 4) Disagree 5) Disagree Strongly.

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Changing Adult Behaviors to Reduce Disparities in Discipline Referrals Among African American Males in Rural Middle Schools

Focus Group Protocol

Introduction & Overview: Notes to Facilitator

- Express appreciation for student's being there and their willingness to participate.
- Overview of the study, review of assent forms again. Provide students with copies of their signed forms.
- Express confidentiality again. Though real names may be used throughout the discussion, all real names will be replaced with pseudonyms.
- Review of audio tapping for later transcription.
- Take questions.

Warming Up Questions

Ask participants to introduce themselves and number years of experience using an icebreaker.

Focus Questions

1. What would you consider most important when working with students in a school setting?

2. What was the most recent infraction that you wrote for a student and how did you address it?

3. (Show chart reflecting African American males being suspended at a rate twice that of White males.) When you see these statistics, what factors do you think contribute?

4. If there is anything that can be done differently in our schools to address these disparities, what steps or actions should be taken?

Conclusion

1. Is there anything else you would like to add?
2. Do you have any questions?
3. Offer an opportunity to continue the conversation and volunteer for an individual interview?

APPENDIX F: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Changing Adult Behaviors to Reduce Disparities in Discipline Referrals Among African American Males in Rural Middle Schools

Individual Interview Protocol

Introduction & Overview: Notes to Facilitator

- Express appreciation for student's being there and their willingness to participate.
- Overview of the study, review of assent forms again. Provide students with copies of their signed forms.
- Express confidentiality again. Though real names may be used throughout the discussion, all real names will be replaced with pseudonyms.
- Review of audio tapping for later transcription.
- Take questions.

Warming Up Questions

1. Recall information from focus group obtained about the participant.
2. Ask them to tell me more about themselves.
3. How many of the SEL sessions did you attend?
4. Was there anything that you considered new learning?

Research Question 1: *How does a professional development program for teachers affect their perception of African American male behavior in the school setting?*

1. What type of impact have sessions had on your work/teaching in the classroom with students?
2. What would you consider most important when working with students in a school setting?
3. Provide examples of student behavior expectations that you have set in your classroom.
4. What was the most recent infraction that you wrote for a student?
5. Share an experience when you had to control disruptive behavior in your classroom. What did it look like?

Research Question 2: *How does a professional development for teachers affect their reaction/responsiveness to African American male behavior in the school setting?*

1. Have you noticed how your responses have impacted students? How have students responded?
2. Have you noticed disparities in discipline as it pertains to African-American male students and white males?
3. (Show chart reflecting African American males being suspended at a rate twice that of White males.) When you see these statistics, what is your immediate reaction? What are your thoughts?
4. What can be done differently in our schools to address these disparities? What steps or actions should be taken?
5. What differences in student behavior have occurred since the pandemic?

6. What is your observation of teacher-student interaction at CPS Middle? What do you notice?
7. What would you consider to be contributors of the disparities alluded to earlier?

Conclusion

1. In looking at the SEL competencies, which would you consider your strength and why?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add?
3. Do you have any questions?

APPENDIX G: DISC ASSESSMENT (ABBREVIATED VERSION)

Participants can use the following link as a forced copy:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ExyANZzIr1iT_oL22q8YI12jvm5ISZqR/copy

DISC WORKSHEET

Rank each horizontal row of words on a scale 4, 3, 2, 1 with 4 being the word that best describes you and 1 being the least like you. Use all rankings in each line only once. There are no right or wrong answers. Respond according to your personal preferences rather than what you think is best.

Example:

Column 1 ____		**Column 2 ____**		**Column 3 ____**		**Column 4____**	
2	Straightforward	*1*	Upbeat	*4*	Steady	*3*	Detailed

DISC

Column 1		**Column 2**		**Column 3**		**Column 4**	
3	Forceful	4	Lively	2	Modest	1	Tactful
2	Aggressive	3	Emotional	4	Accommodating	1	Consistent
2	Direct	4	Animated	3	Agreeable	1	Accurate
1	Tough	4	People-oriented	2	Gentle	3	Perfectionist
2	Daring	3	Impulsive	4	Kind	1	Cautious
4	Competitive	3	Expressive	2	Supportive	1	Precise
2	Risk taker	4	Talkative	3	Gentle	1	Factual
1	Argumentative	4	Fun-loving	3	Patient	2	Logical
3	Bold	4	Spontaneous	1	Stable	2	Organized
3	Take charge	4	Optimistic	2	Peaceful	1	Conscientious
4	Candid	3	Cheerful	2	Loyal	1	Serious
3	Independent	4	Enthusiastic	2	Good listener	1	High standards
	Total 30		**Total 44**		**Total 30**		**Total 16**

Note: Your **totals** should add up **horizontally** to **120.** If not, recheck your calculations.

DISC SCORING GUIDE

1. Enter the letter **"D"** in the blank line **above** column 1, **"I"** in the blank line above column 2, **"S"** in the blank line above column 3, and **"C"** in the blank line above column 4.
2. Plot the totals from each column on the graph below.
3. Connect the four dots with lines, and circle any points above midline, or 30. These are the strongest components of your personality.
4. Look for this sequence of letters for the corresponding pattern.

Example: *Sharon's DISC scores are D=20, I=42, S=34, C=24. He would circle the "I" and "S" scores because they are over 30. His "I" is highest at 42, then his "S" at 34; thus, his pattern is* ***"IS".***

	D	**I**	**S**	**C**
High	-48- -46- -44- -42-	-48- -46- -44- -42-	-48- -46- -44- -42-	-48- -46- -44- -42-
Moderately High	-40- -38- -36- -32-	-40- -38- -36- -32-	-40- -38- -36- -32-	-40- -38- -36- -32-
Moderate (Midline)	-30- -28- -26- -24- -22-	-30- -28- -26- -24- -22-	-30- -28- -26- -24- -22-	-30- -28- -26- -24- -22-
Moderately Low	-20- -18- -16- -14-	-20- -18- -16- -14-	-20- -18- -16- -14-	-20- -18- -16- -14-
Low	-12-	-12-	-12-	-12-
Description	**Dominant**	**Influencing**	**Steadiness**	**Compliant**

APPENDIX H: STAKEHOLDER EMPATHY MAP

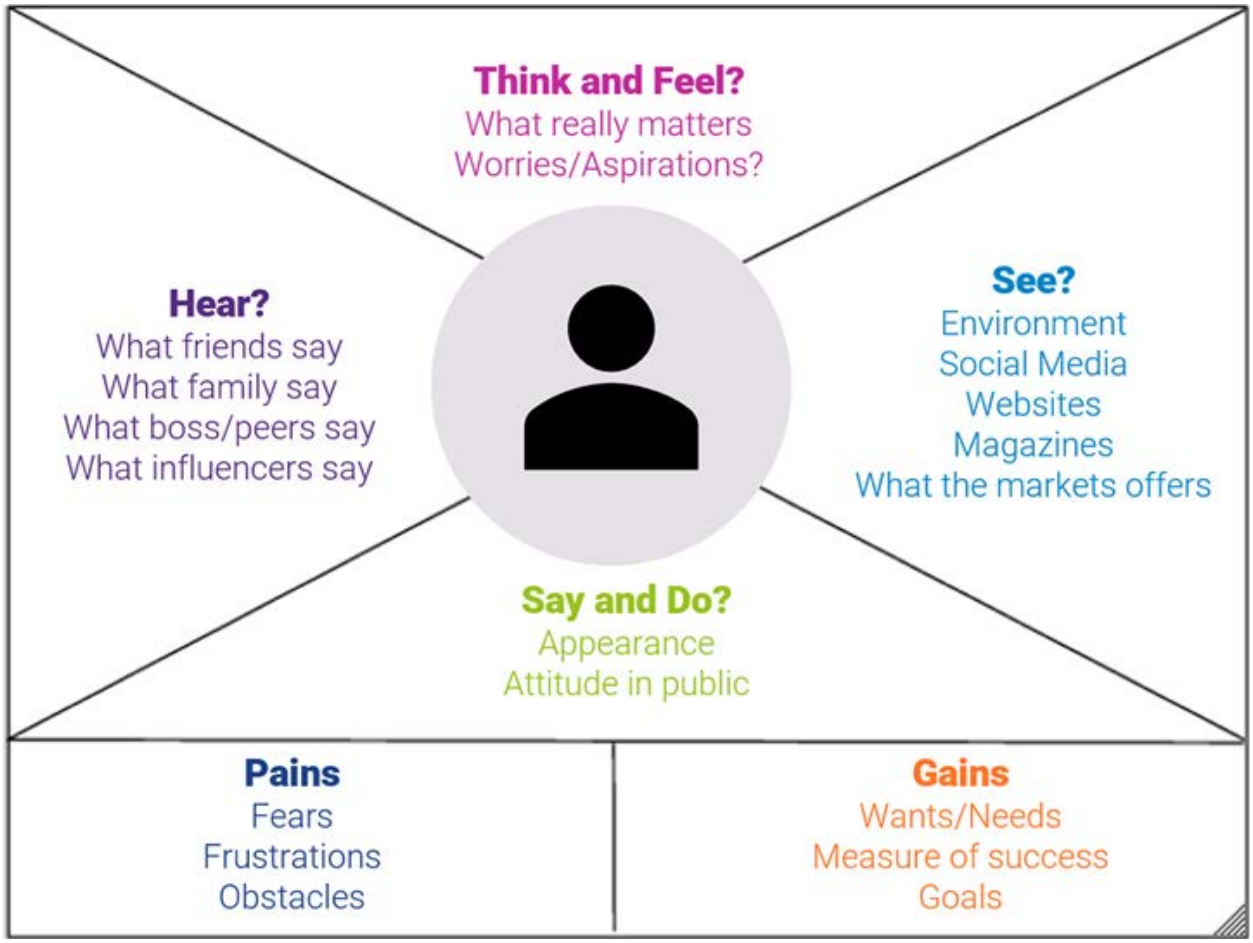
Protocol

Complete a stakeholder empathy map for each group

- Teachers
- Students
- Parents/Caregivers
- Community Partners

How does the map inform the design of school culture?

What are the implications of your work for these stakeholders?



APPENDIX I: PICTURE ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

Guiding Questions:

- What do you notice?
- What assumptions do you make?
- What do you wonder?