

ACCEPTING AND UNDERSTANDING OUR OWN DISCIPLINE DATA: PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING WITH TEACHERS TO REIMAGINE KNOWLEDGE SKILLS AND
DISPOSITIONS TO ENHANCE CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE PRACTICES AND FOSTER
STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry involved seven professional learning sessions with four middle school teachers focused on exploring and understanding their biases and the impact these biases have on classroom management practices. Participants examined and acknowledged the disproportionality in discipline data and explored how Implicit Biases, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Restorative Practices contribute to equitable discipline strategies. Two key findings emerged from coding participants' written responses and conversations during the sessions: the significance of data ownership and the mindset shifts necessary to become effective change agents. By taking ownership of their discipline data, participants experienced mindset shifts, leading to adopting restorative practices. They reported improved student relationships and overall engagement due to these changes in mindset and practice.

Effective leadership requires a dynamic skill set. A leader must understand the environment (structure, goals, mission, etc.), the people involved, and themselves. Trusting the process proved challenging, as it required letting go of control. Completing this study shifted my perspective on what constitutes meaningful and engaging professional learning.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WITH TEACHERS TO REIMAGINE KNOWLEDGE SKILLS
AND DISPOSITIONS TO ENHANCE CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE PRACTICES AND
FOSTER STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my Nana. Known as “Queenie,” she was a force to reckon with growing up. She spoke her mind whether solicited or not and beamed with pride regarding risks and accomplishments. Being one of two grandchildren, I saw her weekly and am lucky to have a life filled with memories. Queenie has influenced my life in ways she will never know. Living during the Great Depression, she valued a work ethic, level-headedness, and a sense of pride. She never had the opportunity to attend college, so she instilled that education was an equalizer and an investment in yourself. Queenie- I finally did it. The dream of having my robe and beanie is closer than ever before. I will also be graduating with the credentials for my Superintendent’s licensure. I remember sitting in your living room in the leather chair, laughing that someday, I could cancel school. Now, I am fully aware of what a decision like that entails, and a different level of respect for such a decision.

I wish you were here to sit in the audience and witness the celebration, but I also know you will be with me when I wear the attire to attend graduation. Thank you for watching over me to ensure I finish what I start and always challenging me to think differently.

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Embarking on the doctoral journey took work and, at times, challenging enough that I wanted to quit. While the journey lasted 36 months, the day-to-day reading and writing at odd hours wore me out. I would not have made it if it were not for my excellent support system. Thank you to my parents, Florrie and Bob Mulvey, my husband Tim, and my children Greg and Alexis. Several times, I was reminded that I was working towards joining a club where few belonged. While the initiation was challenging, the benefits were endless. In many instances, I was reminded that All but the Dissertation (ABD) was not an option. My husband and mother have encouraged me to embark on this journey. It took 18 years, but I have almost completed the goal. Furthermore, I appreciate the daily phone calls and discussions about homework, tasks that needed to be accomplished, and what was on the agenda for the next day and week. While they routinely reminded me that I signed up for this adventure, they always ensured that I stayed engaged, did not get discouraged, and realized that this journey would be worth it. To my sister Michelle, thank you for the impromptu Disney getaways- nothing like popcorn and a Mickey bar walking down Main Street, USA, to forget the outstanding chapters, revisions, or piles of reading. Thank you to my friend Austin. She reminded me that 36 months was nothing and would go by fast. There were days I was clinging to that mindset and counting the months. To Margaret and Jamal, two Thought Partners who went above and beyond with engaging discussions and for reminding me that the work is essential. To Dr. Chavis- bumping into you in

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE.....	i
COPYRIGHT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	xi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Focus of Practice.....	2
Context of Study.....	3
Statement of Focus of Practice.....	11
Focus of Practice Research Questions.....	15
Overview of Inquiry.....	15
Inquiry Partners.....	16
Theoretical or Conceptual Framework.....	17
Definition of Key Terms.....	18
Assumptions.....	20
Limitations.....	20
Significance of Inquiry.....	21
Advancing Equity and Social Justice.....	21
Advances in Practice.....	22
Summary.....	23
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	25

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework.....	26
Disproportionality.....	27
Implicit Bias.....	30
Culturally Responsive Teaching.....	34
Restorative Practices	40
Summary.....	45
CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY.....	47
Focus of Practice Research Questions.....	47
Inquiry Design and Rationale.....	49
Context of the Study.....	51
Inquiry Partners.....	53
Elective Teacher.....	53
Exceptional Children (EC) Teacher.....	53
Intervention Teacher.....	55
School-Based Administrator.....	55
Central Services Director	56
Ethical Considerations.....	56
Inquiry Procedures.....	56
Phase I.....	58
Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies.....	60
Instrumentation.....	61
Pilot Study/Baseline Data Collection.....	63
Data Analysis.....	65

Summary of Phase I.....	66
Phase II.....	66
Inquiry Approach/Intervention.....	68
Summary of Phase II.....	69
Phase III.....	69
Analysis of Approach.....	70
Summary of Phase III.....	70
Inquiry Design Rigor.....	71
Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions.....	72
Role of the Scholarly Practitioner.....	73
Study Validity.....	73
Summary.....	74
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	75
Power of the Data.....	76
School-wide Data.....	78
Disproportionality.....	89
Implicit Bias.....	95
Importance of Relationships.....	96
Mindset Shift to Become a Change Agent.....	102
Classroom Management Practices.....	107
Restorative Practices.....	112
Changes in Practice.....	115
Individual Interviews.....	116
Summary.....	119

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS.....	122
Interpretation of the Findings.....	122
Power of the Data.....	123
Disproportionality.....	123
Implicit Bias.....	124
Importance of Relationships.....	125
Mindshift Shift to Become a Change Agent.....	129
Restorative Practices.....	132
Changes in Leadership.....	134
Limitations of the Inquiry.....	135
Implications of the Findings for Practice.....	135
Implications of the Findings for Equity.....	136
Recommendations for Practice.....	138
Recommendations for Future Study.....	138
Conclusions.....	139
Scholarly Reflections on Leadership.....	143
REFERENCES.....	145
APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL.....	163
APPENDIX B: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE.....	164
APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL.....	167
APPENDIX D: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE.....	168
APPENDIX E: 2022-2023 TEACHER MANAGED BEHAVIORAL REFERRAL BY RACE AND GRADE.....	171
APPENDIX F: 2022-2023 TEACHER MANAGED BEHAVIORAL REFERRAL BY RACE AND OFFENSE.....	172

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS REGARDING TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT DISCIPLINE.....	173
APPENDIX H: EXIT TICKET QUESTIONS.....	174
APPENDIX I: CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT DATA LOG.....	175
APPENDIX J: CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION LOG	176
APPENDIX K: INTERVIEW RESPONSES.....	177

LIST OF TABLES

1. Short-Term Suspension Incidents by Race.....	5
2. Historical Subgroup Enrollment.....	7
3. Risk Ratio Data for 2021-2022 Major Referrals.....	9
4. Subgroup Suspension: 2022-2023 School Year.....	10
5. Historical End of Grade (EOG) 2021-2022 Assessment Data by Subgroup.....	12
6. Historical End of Grade (EOG) 2022-2023 Assessment Data by Subgroup.....	13
7. Historical End of Grade (EOG) 2023-2024 Assessment Data by Subgroup.....	14
8. Subgroup Suspension: 2021-2022 School Year.....	52
9. Inquiry Partners and Their Roles.....	54
10. Data Collection Tool Alignment.....	59
11. Participant's Demographics.....	62
12. Schedule for Asynchronous Professional Learning Sessions.....	64
13. Data Analysis.....	67
14. School-Wide Data and Disproportionality Jamboard Responses.....	80
15. Buddy Teacher Referrals (July 2024).....	82
16. School-Wide Data and Disproportionality.....	86
17. Changes in Mindset and the Impact on Classroom management Practices: Entrance Ticket-Organized Responses.....	91
18. Buddy Teacher Referrals: Weekly Data for the First Six Weeks.....	101
19. Changes in Mindset and the Impact on Classroom Management Practices: Entrance Ticket Responses Organized.....	109
20. CRT and RP Awareness and Emerging Growth Mindset: Organized Responses....	111
21. Themes of RP.....	114
22. Themes of Participant Interview Responses.....	118

23. Buddy Teacher Student Referral Data by Race.....	120
24. Classroom Management Strategy Implementation.....	126

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Phases of improvement science.....	50
2. Findings.....	77
3. School-wide data and disproportionality Jamboard responses.....	81
4. School-wide data and disproportionality.....	85
5. Disproportionality and participant mindset: Entrance ticket responses.....	90
6. Disproportionality and participant mindset: Exit ticket responses.....	94
7. Identifying and understanding the impact of implicit bias: Entrance ticket responses.....	97
8. Identifying and understanding the impact of implicit bias: Entrance ticket responses organized.....	98
9. Identifying and understanding the impact of implicit bias: Discussion responses....	103
10. Identifying and understanding the impact of implicit bias: Responses and ICM.....	104
11. Changes in mindset and the impact on classroom management practices: Entrance ticket responses.....	106
12. CRT and RP awareness and emerging growth mindset.....	110
13. Implementation of RP at RWMS.....	113

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 mandated that all schools have clearly defined discipline policies, thus focusing less on tolerance and harsher consequences. Districts believed that harsher exclusionary practices (student removal from class) curtailed problematic behaviors and that a one-punishment-fits-all approach was best (Gibson et al., 2014). Student exclusion, specifically out-of-school suspensions, resulted in three million students missing school in 2010 (Morris & Perry, 2016). A study completed by Losen and Gillespie (2012) reported that one out of six Black students have been suspended, equating to three times as likely than their white peers. This one-size-fits-all approach has led to inequitable discipline practices. In June 2021, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) released public school suspension data from 2017-2018, revealing that 31.4% of enrolled Black students received one or more in-school suspensions and 38.2% received one or more out-of-school suspensions (United States Department of Education, 2021, p. 7). During that same period, Black students accounted for 15.1% of nationwide enrollment but were subjected to disciplinary actions disproportionately. Adopting harsher discipline practices has not reduced learning interruptions or led to safer schools (Luster, n.d.) but instead has resulted in millions of days of lost learning (<https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/school-suspensions-do-more-harm-good>). The 2021 OCR report indicates that in 2017-2018, over 11 million school days were missed due to out-of-school suspensions (United States Department of Education, 2021).

With the 2021 OCR report, various agencies, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, have expressed concerns with schools' disciplinary practices. There is an acknowledgment that while exclusionary practices are a response to behaviors, these practices do not curtail the behaviors or resolve any conflict (*Pushed Out: Trends and Disparities in Out-of-*

School Suspension, 2022). The study completed by the American Institute of Research stated that in-school and out-of-school suspensions are ineffective ways to address student misbehavior in middle and high school (Álvarez, n.d.), thus creating inequities and impacting student achievement (Álvarez, n.d.).

The 2021 OCR report called on policymakers and educational leaders to examine school discipline practices. With federal attention focusing on discipline practices, schools began revisiting exclusionary practices. Acknowledging the impacts of discipline practices, school systems are examining more inclusive practices (Regional Educational Laboratory Program [REL], n.d.), including Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Safer-Saner Schools, and Restorative Practices, as responses to addressing discipline and overall disproportionality.

Background of the Focus of Practice

Codes of conduct are standard features in school districts worldwide. These codes typically outline expected behaviors, disciplinary procedures, and consequences for violating the rules. To maintain a safe and respectful learning environment and promote positive student behaviors, consequences for infractions can range from warnings and detention to suspension or expulsion. Chronic disruptive behaviors result in students receiving Office Discipline Referrals (ODR) and being removed from the learning environment. Removing students as an “intervention has failed” (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 32), resulting in the loss of approximately 11.2 million days of instruction during the 2017-20218 school year (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014). During that same academic year, accounting for 51.4% of total student enrollment nationwide, male students received 69.5% of in-school suspensions and 70.5% of out-of-school suspensions (United States Department of Education, 2021).

Previous OCR reports suggest that the data collected in 2017-2018 continues to reveal the same pattern (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014), resulting in Black students being excluded 1.8 times higher than their white peers (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014). The 2014 "Dear Colleague" letter from the Department of Education (DOE) acknowledged racial disparities in discipline practices, further noting that disparities exist because race was a factor in student discipline (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014).

Discipline disproportionality is a critical concern, reflecting systemic biases and inequities within the education system and disparities in academic achievement and opportunities. Addressing discipline disproportionality requires a multifaceted approach beyond punitive measures and focuses on early intervention, prevention, and support for students with behavioral challenges. Creating a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students and providing ongoing professional development for educators can help mitigate discipline disparities and promote equity in disciplinary practices.

Context of Study

Rain Water Middle School (RWMS) is a public middle school (grades 6-8) within the Mulvallee School District located in the northeast central region of North Carolina. To maintain confidentiality, the school, the district, and employees referred to by pseudonyms. Being a year-round middle school with approximately 1,000 students and more than 70 staff members, the student-teacher ratio is 16:7, while the Free and Reduced lunch percentage is 21%. As a year-round middle school, students and teachers are assigned to one of the four tracks with the 10-month instructional calendar spread over 12 months. Both students and teachers adhere to a 45 instructional day calendar with a 15-day track-out period. It is important to note that students are

always in the building throughout all calendar months, and both Physical Education and elective teachers are assigned to 11- and 12-month employment calendars.

RainWater Middle School (RWMS) opened its doors in 2012-2013 as a Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) school. Students were acknowledged for their positive behavior, and quarterly celebrations took place school-wide. Each year, the systems, practices, and data were reviewed with the county PBIS coaching staff, which led to identifying goals for the School Improvement Plan (SIP) and professional learning. In 2016-2017, a change in leadership occurred at RWMS. The new principal dedicated much of late fall and winter 2016-2017 to meeting with staff to understand the school and its culture. Policies and procedures remained unchanged for much of the year, and although PBIS continued, enthusiasm and commitment diminished. Many changes occurred over the next two years, including phasing out the daily and quarterly PBIS celebrations. The SIP focused exclusively on academic achievement, and the approach to discipline changed.

There was a cultural shift regarding discipline. Initially, staff indicated it was too student-focused and expressed frustration with evolving consequences. Additionally, teachers voiced dissatisfaction with students being removed from class and returning to the same learning environment during the same period. Initial professional learning aimed at developing a school-wide tiered response to discipline, highlighting the distinction between major and minor offenses. District offenses were reviewed, with staff identifying minor (teacher-managed) and significant (administrator-managed) categories. Office referrals were emphasized as a last resort, highlighting the transfer of authority from teacher to administrator.

Table 1 shows short-term suspension data at RWMS over five years. The table intentionally excludes data from 2020-2021 because students were dispersed across cohorts and

Table 1

Short-Term Suspension Incidents by Race

School Year	White	Black	Hispanic	Multi-Racial	Total
2017-2018	27	53	7	13	100
2018-2019	14	27	11	3	75
2019-2020	9	17	6	3	45
2021-2022	23	68	23	7	121
2022-2023	53	110	54	20	237

virtual learning models. It is also important to note that the 2019-2020 data extends through March 13, 2020, when schools closed due to COVID-19 and did not resume in-person learning for the remainder of the school year. The data indicates a decrease in short-term suspensions from 2018 to 2020. This reduction may be attributed to improved classroom management and tiered discipline; however, it is crucial to mention that only major referrals were reported to the administration, and no formal data regarding classroom-managed behaviors was recorded. Upon closer examination, the previously shared data in Table 1, paired with the enrollment data (see Table 2), revealed the disproportionate disciplinary practices faced by Black students compared to their White peers. Furthermore, Black students experienced disciplinary actions at a rate more than 1.5 times that of White students each year.

During the 2017-2018 school year, the county began engaging leaders in discussing inequitable discipline practices. While this initially served as a platform for RWMS staff professional learning, discussions came to a grinding halt when some staff members expressed their concerns with the topic and their level of discomfort. Deeming that the staff was not ready, all race and discipline discussions ended. From that point, professional learning pivoted and focused solely on academic achievement. While subgroup data was routinely reviewed and discussed, discipline practices were never addressed as a possible variable in the achievement gap.

The North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NC TWC) survey is conducted biannually to gather staff input on various topics, including professional learning, school facilities, student conduct, student discipline, and equity. The response rate during the 2020 TWC data collection was 79.1%. Collected responses indicate that 45% of RWMS staff reported a lack of shared vision between faculty and staff (NC TWC Survey, n.d.). Additionally, 70%

Table 2

Historical Subgroup Enrollment

School Year	American Indian	Asian	Black	Hispanic or Latino	Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	Two or More Races	White
2012-2013	1	14	142	84	1	24	255
2013-2014	2	21	260	179	2	45	462
2014-2015	2	24	355	244	2	68	583
2015-2016	3	32	369	251	1	64	562
2016-2017	4	47	381	292	3	55	568
2017-2018	3	32	330	144	2	52	539
2018-2019	2	26	353	158	2	52	545
2019-2020	2	25	352	178	1	49	501
2020-2021	2	34	324	196	3	49	481
2021-2022	3	39	314	215	1	87	449

reported insufficient participation in establishing school discipline practices (NC TWC Survey, n.d.), 68% agreed that the school administration must enforce student conduct rules consistently. With a vote of no confidence in consistent enforcement, 42% of staff reported that not all students are treated equitably.

Using the 2021-2022 discipline data, Table 3 presents risk ratio data. A risk ratio identifies the likelihood of risk for various groups. Table 3 shows the racial composition of RWMS for the 2021-2022 school year. Representing about 28% of enrolled students, Table 3 indicates that Black students are nearly two times more at risk of being involved in a disciplinary situation than White students. Additionally, this same group is 1.88 times more likely to receive a major discipline referral compared to their White peers. Moreover, using the same year (2021-2022), the disproportionality observed during the 2021-2022 school year persisted into the 2022-2023 school year. Table 4 displays suspension data for that year, mirroring the data theme presented in earlier tables. In the 2022-2023 school year, roughly 315 Black students out of 1,066 enrolled. While Black students continue to make up approximately 42% of all suspensions, they represent about 30% of total student enrollment. Historical suspension data from 2017-2020 showed that this subgroup constituted 53%, 48%, and 53% of all suspensions. During those years, this specific subgroup accounted for 30% and 31% of the total student enrollment.

In the spring of 2022, RWMS welcomed a new leader. The 2022-2023 school year saw many changes at RWMS. While most focused on best practices and procedures, it was in the spring of 2023 that discussions returned to examining disciplinary practices. As in previous years, staff were encouraged to manage classroom incidents, referring only major incidents to school administrators. Data became a routine topic at monthly grade meetings, helping staff see and understand the conveyed messages. However, this is where the learning has stalled. While

Table 3

Risk Ratio Data for 2021-2022 Major Referrals

Group	# of Enrolled Students	# of Students with Referrals	%of Students within Ethnicity with Referrals	Risk Ratio
Asian	40	1	2.50%	0.143
Black	333	66	19.80%	1.88
Hispanic	227	42	18.65	1.77
Multiracial	51	9	17.60%	1.67
White	446	47	10.50%	***
Other	3	3	100%	***

Table 4

Subgroup Suspension: 2022-2023 School Year

Short-Term Suspensions	Black	American Indian	Asian	Hispanic	Multi- Racial	White	Total
# of Students in School	315	2	40	223	63	423	1,066
% of Overall Students	30	.19	3.75	20	5.91	40	100
# of Suspensions	110		7	54	13	54	238
# of Students Involved	64		3	34	11	36	100

the data is part of the SIP, there needs to be a plan for communicating the information. In July 2023, the Office of Equity Affairs engaged staff in a discussion about equitable classroom practices. These sessions included conversations surrounding the power of relationships, acknowledging students where they are, understanding cultural differences, and restorative practices. Data discussions did not extend beyond grade-level meetings or lead to changes in practice. The staff have not been exposed to any professional reading. Instead, a select few have been invited to a book study with the intention that those individuals teach their colleagues.

As a subgroup, Black students subjected to disciplinary measures experience further academic impacts. The data presented in Table 5 reflects the 2021-2022 End of Grade (EOG) assessment results, disaggregated by subject area, subgroup, and proficiency. In the 2021-2022 academic year, Black students represented 30% of all suspensions, and over 50% were not proficient in either Reading or Math. This data illustrates the achievement gap between Black and White student subgroups, highlighting the effect of disciplinary decisions that remove students from their learning environments. Additionally, questions and concerns are raised about the potential influence of disciplinary practices on academic achievement.

Historical End of Grade Assessment data disaggregated by subgroup for the years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years (see Tables 6 and 7) continues to reinforce the narrative that Black students remain less proficient than their White peers. Furthermore, the data in both tables provide evidence that “school punishment may hinder academic growth and contribute to racial inequalities in achievement” (Morris & Perry, 2016, p. 68).

Statement of Focus of Practice

Using improvement science (IS), this inquiry aimed to investigate the impact of professional learning on classroom management practices and discipline disproportionality.

Table 5

Historical End of Grade (EOG) 2021-2022 Assessment Data by Subgroup

Subgroup	Subject	Grade Level	Percent Level 3 and Above	Not Proficient
White	Reading (3-8)	6-8	62.8	37.2
Black	Reading (3-8)	6-8	48.9	51.1
White	Math (3-8)	6-8	59.7	40.3
Black	Math (3-8)	6-8	33	67

Table 6

Historical End of Grade (EOG) 2022-2023 Assessment Data by Subgroup

Subgroup	Subject	Grade Level	Percent Level 3 and Above	Not Proficient
White	Reading (3-8)	6-8	64.8	35.2
	Math (3-8)	6-8		
Black	Math (3-8)	6-8	42.4	57.6
	Reading (3-8)	6-8		

Table 7

Historical End of Grade (EOG) 2023-2024 Assessment Data by Subgroup

Subgroup	Subject	Grade Level	Percent Level 3 and Above	Not Proficient
White	Reading (3-8)	6-8	64.2	35.8
Black	Reading (3-8)	6-8	49	51.0
White	Math (3-8)	6-8	70.5	29.5
Black	Math (3-8)	6-8	49	51

Based on Senge's five disciplines of professional learning (systems, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning), school educators who use data can understand and respond to concerns and challenges, thus benefiting students' learning environments (Thompson et al., 2004). Additionally, Gregory and Evans (2020) note that successful implementation relies heavily on staff buy-in (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021).

Focus of Practice Research Questions

Discipline disproportionality occurs when one subgroup of students is overrepresented in data, and historically, that subgroup has been Black students. Although Black students represent approximately 24.8% of the total student population, they consistently account for about 41-42% of all exclusionary practices in the RWPS as a subgroup. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers' perceptions and understanding of discipline disproportionality impact classroom-based discipline practices?
2. How does delivering professional learning focusing on Implicit Bias, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Restorative Practices impact teacher mindset and discipline practices?
3. As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership style change due to this study?

Overview of Inquiry

Both mixed methods and explanatory sequential design were utilized to address the research questions. This research enabled me to merge qualitative and quantitative approaches through mixed methods. It allowed for exploration not only of "what" is happening but also of "why" and "how" it has occurred, including how explanatory sequential design helped in identifying and understanding the factors contributing to disciplinary disproportionality.

Grounded in Improvement Science and specifically the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) framework (Spaulding & Hinnant-Crawford, 2019), this inquiry was carried out in phases.

Using the PDSA framework, three phases enabled participants to answer the research questions, while the investigator tested changes and identified improvements (Langley et al., 2009). The first cycle concentrated on gathering and analyzing data regarding discipline disproportionality at Rain Water Middle School. An initial questionnaire, which was piloted and validated, and distributed to clarify participants' levels of understanding and knowledge. Development of the professional learning sessions during the second inquiry cycle and shared with participants. Initially, the research, contributing factors, and responses to interventions were shared. Each professional learning session included discussion questions, capturing the participants' ongoing perceptions and experiences concerning the effectiveness of the professional learning modules, their role in managing student behavior, and addressing disciplinary disparities. The third phase of the inquiry centered on structured and semi-structured interviews, along with continued quantitative data collection and analysis. Recorded interviews conducted virtually or in person. Responses are organized to identify themes, generalizations, and conclusions.

All data collection instruments were validated through a pilot study. Furthermore, a journal maintained by the investigator throughout the inquiry assisted in identifying how I have changed as a leader.

Inquiry Partners

Incorporating the insights and support of Inquiry Partners enhanced the rigor and effectiveness of this inquiry. The partners were eager to examine and address inequitable discipline practices. All partners have worked at the site for over two years, earning the trust of

the staff. Additionally, each partner brings unique perspectives and understanding to ensure the study's rigor. Collaboratively, the partners served as thought partners throughout the initial quantitative data review and contributed to the development of the inquiry questions. The purpose of these questions is to guide the study's processes and analysis. Semi-monthly meetings with the partners will be held to review inquiry progress, quantitative data collection, and analyses, and to discuss the research questions. The research questions will be referenced frequently as they ground the study. Meetings will be conducted virtually (on Google Meet) and in person, with all members adhering to confidentiality.

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The theory of Vulnerable Decision Points (VDP) suggests that teachers and school administrators “differentially discipline students from different racial backgrounds” (Girvan et al., 2021, p. 289). Therefore, it is crucial to address VDP and implement interventions that focus on repair, restoration, and prevention (Gregory et al., 2021). Discipline data from across the nation reflects racial disproportionality. Teachers and administrators can affect this disproportionality through their biases and disciplinary practices (Girvan et al., 2021). Such practices reinforce the message to students that “they are incompatible with the school community” (Gomez et al., 2021, p. 460) and may lead to further “victimization of their peers” (Gomez et al., 2021, p. 464). Various studies conducted by scholars have aimed to understand and explain the factors behind disproportionality.

Grounded in the theory relating to social and restorative justice and focuses on repair, restoration, and prevention, Restorative Practices (RP) (Brown, 2017; Gregory et al., 2021), is an intervention “for addressing racial disparity through the development of reflexivity and critical

conversations” (Lodi et al., 2022, p. 13). It is a positive response to conflict that prevents exclusions (Lodi et al., 2022).

Definition of Key Terms

Key terms that were utilized throughout this inquiry included:

Classroom-based referrals: Data collection tool used by teachers to document student behavioral issues (Colbert, 2010).

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT): Cultural content knowledge (Weinstein et al., 2003) as well as an understanding of their cultural background and the way their biases impact student interactions (Colbert, 2010).

Disproportionality: A particular group or subgroup of individuals who are overrepresented/underrepresented concerning a data point for the entire group (Bryan et al., 2012).

Exclusionary practices involve removing students from a regular setting with their peers and placing them in a more restrictive setting. Examples include time out, in-school suspension (ISS), or out-of-school suspension (OSS) (Gage et al., 2020).

Implicit Bias (IB): Attitude, prejudices, and previous experiences that led to unconscious generalizations impacting one’s ability to understand and make decisions (Staats, 2015-2016).

Inclusive Environment: an environment where all students feel emotionally, intellectually, and academically supported. All students feel a sense of belonging (Yale University Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

In-School Suspension (ISS): Students are excluded from their regular classroom setting but not excluded from school. Placement can last from minutes to multiple days but not more than ten consecutive days (“In School Suspension,” 2023).

Out-of-School Suspension (OSS): Students are prohibited from attending school and all school-sponsored events due to violating a student code of conduct. Exclusions can range from one day to five days (Morrison & Skiba, 2001).

Professional Learning: interactive opportunities customized to meet individual educators' needs. It encourages educators to take responsibility for their learning (Scherff, 2018).

Risk Ratio: the statistical measure used to identify the likelihood of an event or outcome occurring in one group compared to another (Girvan et al., 2021).

Research-Based Interventions: These are classroom practices grounded in theory and research. When implemented with fidelity, they significantly impact student learning and behavior (Evidence-Based vs. Research-Based: Understanding the Differences, 2023).

Restorative Practices (RP): A non-punitive approach to handling conflict (Fronius et al., 2019) rooted in respect (Gregory et al., 2016), inclusivity, and connectedness (Kline, 2016).

School Improvement Plan (SIP): A document that identifies measurable goals (academic and behavioral) in response to students not meeting a specific expectation (academic or behavioral). The document is reviewed quarterly (over two years), with data being reviewed and progress monitoring completed for each goal area ("What is a School Improvement Plan," 2023).

Student Referral: A document (digital or paper) describing a student's behavioral infraction (Wright & Dusek, 1998).

Corrective Action: Measures that educators can utilize daily (if needed) to assist students with adhering to behavioral expectations. Measures are not set with the premonition of causing any harm (physical or emotional) (Kajs, 2006).

Assumptions

This study assumed that some classroom educators may require support or clarity regarding disproportionality and its effects on student achievement. Many educators need to recognize the consequences of exclusionary practices and acknowledge their role in contributing to student inequity. Furthermore, there is limited understanding of how discipline disproportionality takes place, and educators frequently view punitive actions as the most appropriate response to student behaviors (Skiba et al., 1997). Student behavior is perceived as the student's responsibility, with little influence from adults.

RWMS has been guilty of introducing initiatives, purchasing the necessary materials, engaging in professional learning, and changing courses at the end of a year or two. Given that, some viewed the idea of RP as “just another thing” and an initiative or practice that would not last long. Additionally, some individuals do not believe their behaviors and responses may have contributed to the disproportionality. With the recent addition of the county equity policy, staff would view RP as a mandate and not an opportunity to focus on developing equitable relationships and culture (Andrews & Gutwein, 2020; Gregory et al., 2016) for all students of all races.

Limitations

Participants were challenged to look beyond their race and understand the impact of subjective classroom-based referrals on student achievement. There are validity concerns regarding educators' preconceived gender and racial biases, as well as the establishment of student relationships. Participants exhibited a lack of racial diversity (75% are white) and gender diversity (75% are female). There was a biased mindset that every student deserved “a second chance.” Staff needed an opportunity to discuss philosophies and beliefs in a safe (non-

judgmental) space. It was crucial for all participants to grasp the impacts of implicit bias, culturally responsive teaching (CRT), and restorative practices (RP) on building the school culture. While it would take time to fully rebuild the school culture, individuals can begin the work. During the 2022-2023 academic year, classroom-based referral data started to be entered into the Every Child Accountability Tracking System (ECATS). Prior to the 2022–2023-year, classroom-based discipline data was maintained by teachers, who lacked formal documentation processes and accountability.

Significance of Inquiry

With the release of data from the OCR in 2017-2018, discipline disproportionality has become a nationwide concern. Studies (Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2011) suggest that subjective offenses, such as noncompliance and disrespect, often lead to student exclusion. Classroom teachers play a significant role in creating, maintaining, and sustaining disproportional discipline data. While the data may imply that Black students commit more infractions, the reality is that they do not. Instead, the data reflects the overrepresentation of Black students.

Previous exclusionary discipline practices are no longer viewed as interventions but rather as contributing factors to student inequity (Skiba et al., 1997). Middle school is a challenging period in a student’s educational journey. A study by Mendez and Knoff (2003) found that during this tumultuous phase, particularly in grades 7 and 8, the highest rates of exclusion occur.

Advancing Equity and Social Justice

Forty-six years after the initial Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) study, data continues to show that Black students face alarming suspension rates. The June 2021 Office of Civil Rights

report revealed that Black students comprise 15.1% of student enrollment nationwide while accounting for 31.4% of one or more school suspensions (United States Department of Education, 2021). A study conducted by the Ohio Children’s Defense Fund indicated that, although Black students' classroom behavior does not significantly differ from that of their white peers, the consequences they face are dramatically different. The current socio-political environment continues to exhibit racism, as Black students are perceived as more troublesome than their white counterparts. They must combat stereotypes to demonstrate that they are not “dangerous” (Gullo & Beachum, 2020, p. 5) and deserve the same protected learning environments as their white peers. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize racial differences, the prevailing color blindness, and that behavioral tendencies are not dictated by race. By collaborating closely with Inquiry Partners, school personnel need to understand the influence of professional learning on student discipline as a vital step toward reducing disciplinary disproportionality.

Advances in Practice

This inquiry aims to inform and educate school staff about discipline disproportionality, with the long-term goal of reducing existing disparities. Discipline practices must shift away from a one-size-fits-all approach and focus more on conflict management and resolution (Gibson et al., 2014; Lodi et al., 2022). This inquiry investigated current discipline practices and reviewed classroom-based referrals. Through professional development and data reviews, adjustments in practice will be explored to reduce existing disproportionality. The inquiry's success depends on participants' acknowledgment and commitment to diminish disproportionality and promote student equality and equity.

Summary

A study by the American Institute of Research indicates that both in-school and out-of-school suspensions are ineffective methods for addressing student misbehavior in middle and high school (Álvarez, n.d.). Schools are beginning to recognize the impact on student achievement and the inequities created by discipline policies (Álvarez, n.d.). Research by authors such as Carter, Gage, and Gregory show that exclusionary practices do not effectively reduce problematic behaviors (Tobin et al., 1996) and often lead to more chronic infractions (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). By acknowledging the effects of these disciplinary practices, school systems are exploring more inclusive approaches (REL, n.d.), including Implicit Bias, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), Inclusive Classroom Management (ICM), and Restorative Practices to address discipline and disproportionality. Rain Water Middle School (RWMS), a public middle school serving grades 6-8, is located within the Mulvallee School District in the northeast central region of North Carolina. Exclusionary practices at RWMS include time-out, buddy-teacher referrals, lunch detention, and referrals to the grade-level administrator. According to the 2022 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (TWC) survey, 85% of the 85 staff members who completed the survey indicated that professional learning equates to five hours or fewer. Additionally, while 58% reported that students understand the expectations for their conduct, 39% said that students follow the rules. In the 2024 TWC, 35% of the 62 responding staff identified a need for additional professional learning in classroom management. Although 92% agree that all staff respect students' cultural beliefs and practices, formal discipline data contradicts this belief, revealing a historical disproportionality pattern impacting student achievement.

Excluding students begins in the learning environments. Offenses that could have been resolved in the classroom are not addressed, leading to excessive consequences for minor infractions. Student referrals and exclusions are subjective (noncompliance and respect) and rely on staff judgment (Gibson et al., 2014). Data suggesting that Black students commit more infractions results from biases (Gibson et al., 2014). Black students are overrepresented in subjective offenses (Martinez et al., 2016), with a chance of receiving an office referral at a rate of four times their White peers in middle school (Staats, 2014). While the data may portray that our Black students are committing more infractions, the reality is that they are not. Acknowledging the disproportionality between continuing discipline and student achievement requires action. Implementing targeted professional learning can help school staff understand the role of Implicit Bias, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), and Restorative Practices in reducing discipline disproportionality.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Office for Civil Rights estimated that during the 2017-2018 school year, about 11 million school days were missed due to out-of-school suspensions (United States Department of Education, 2021). In that year, Black students made up an estimated 15% of total school enrollment, yet 31% received one or more in-school suspensions, while 38% received one or more out-of-school suspensions (Girvan et al., 2017). Black students are 3.8 times more likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than their white peers (Dhaliwal et al., 2020).

During the 2011-2012 school year, 16.4% of Black students in the United States were suspended compared to 4.6% of White students (Heilbrun et al., 2018, p. 325). Historically, Black students have faced disproportionate disciplinary practices (United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014) more frequently than students of any other race (Dhaliwal et al., 2020) due to enduring stereotypes. Researchers Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2017) suggest that disciplinary stereotypes stem from centuries of oppression and discrimination, leading to lowered behavioral and academic expectations for Black students. Traditional disciplinary practices continue to perpetuate the inequity in our public schools (Lund et al., 2021).

In 2014, the United States Department of Education called for action, requiring public schools to review their disciplinary processes. While this subgroup represents 15.5% of public-school students, they account for 39% of out-of-school suspensions (Girvan et al., 2017). Furthermore, a study conducted by the Office for Civil Rights in 2014 reported that Black students are disproportionately disciplined (United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014), at a rate higher than any other race (Dhaliwal et al., 2020). When examining

school discipline, the most common causes for student exclusions include implicit bias, a lack of restorative practices (RP), and a lack of culturally responsive teaching (CRT).

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

Ambiguous behaviors are often associated with Black students, leading to a tendency to exclude these students from school. The works of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggest that the exclusion of Black students persists today as it did during the Civil Rights Movement. Current actions continue to perpetuate racism against Black students. Kinsler (2011) noted that ambiguous behaviors are frequently linked to Black students, resulting in their exclusion from educational environments. The Vulnerable Decision Points (VDP) model proposes that uncertainty or discretion may be tied to the internal, unconscious biases of decision-makers (Austin et al., 2024). The model indicates that racial bias can shape decisions and contribute to disproportionality.

Research by Smolkowski (2016) and Austin et al. (2024) confirms that VDP directly impacts school discipline, leading to disproportionate disciplinary practices. Moreover, VDP posits that consequences related to subjective incidents depend on ingrained habits, resulting in inequitable practices (Gregory et al., 2021). Researchers Austin et al. (2024), Smolkowski et al. (2016), Gregory et al. (2021), and Lodi et al. (2022) propose that involving teachers in reflective opportunities to review student behaviors and teacher responses may help mitigate racial biases in disciplinary decisions. VDP can be examined in small or more significant group settings. Schools have effectively diminished inequitable disciplinary practices when paired with discipline data and integrated into a regularly reviewed action plan.

Disproportionality

Since the 1970s, the Children’s Defense Fund has reported that Black students remain overrepresented in school discipline data (Fenning & Rose, 2007). A study conducted by Skiba et al. (2011) analyzed school discipline data from the 2005-2006 academic year. The study's results support the findings shared by the Children’s Defense Fund and extend the data, indicating that Black students receive office referrals at a rate twice that of their white peers in elementary school and four times that in middle school (Staats, 2014). Data released by the Office for Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for 2017-2018 indicates that “students of color are disproportionately subjected to disciplinary actions in contrast to their white peers” (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014, p. 9). Approximately 60 years after the Civil Rights movement, systemic racism persists in school buildings across the nation (Lund et al., 2021). The behavior of Black students is no more unruly than that of their peers; however, school faculty often label behaviors as inappropriate, even when that is not the student’s intent (Monroe, 2005; Rudd, 2014). Furthermore, Black students’ behaviors are frequently scrutinized due to staff fear and anxiety (Fenning & Rose, 2007), leading to assigned disciplinary actions. The passage of the Safe Schools Act in 1994 (Lund et al., 2021) resulted in adopting zero-tolerance policies. Initially intended to deter students from bringing weapons to school, implementation led to a one-size-fits-all discipline policy. Traditional disciplinary practices, including in-school and out-of-school suspensions in response to student behavior (Skiba et al., 1997), involve pre-determined consequences, with zero-tolerance resulting in a “one punishment fits all” approach (Gibson et al., 2014, p. 274), regardless of the context of the behavior (Hines et al., 2022). In other words, zero-tolerance represents a prescriptive disciplinary approach. Policies have gradually reflected school staff interpretations (Lund et al., 2021),

contributing to threatening behaviors and a redefinition of zero-tolerance policies. This redefinition has resulted in Black students being suspended from school four times more often than White students (Lund et al., 2021). While there is a common belief that harsh consequences for chronic behaviors will extinguish those behaviors, most out-of-school suspensions “are for minor infractions of school rules rather than for dangerous or violent acts” (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 32). A 1997 study by Skiba (Skiba et al., 1997) further supports the findings of Mendez and Knoff (Mendez & Knoff, 2003) by categorizing minor behaviors as “disrespect, non-compliance, defiance, and general disruption” (Skiba et al., 1997, p. 296). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 mandated that all schools establish clearly defined discipline policies (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). School systems lacking such policies faced consequences if students were left behind, leading to discipline policies emphasizing less tolerance and harsher penalties (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2017; Gibson et al., 2014).

Data released in 2017-2018 by the Office for Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) indicates that “students of color are disproportionately subjected to disciplinary actions in contrast to their white peers” (United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014, p. 9). Furthermore, these same students are “suspended at rates two to three times higher than other students and are similarly overrepresented in Office Discipline Referrals (ODR)” (Skiba et al., 2011, p. 86). Skiba et al. (2011) observe that Black student referrals in middle school are nearly double those in elementary school (Welsh, 2022), while Losen and Gillespie (2012) note that the most significant disproportionality occurs at the secondary level (Welsh, 2022). Concerns have been “consistently raised about the efficacy and fairness of traditional disciplinary procedures” (Skiba et al., 1997, p. 296). While *Brown v. Board of Education* ended segregation in schools, it did not guarantee racial equity. Nationwide, school discipline data

reflects racial disproportionality, stemming from “economic, social, and political inequalities that have plagued the United States for centuries” (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2017, p. 5).

Perceptions of “who is valued and who is not, who is capable and who is not, and who is safe and dangerous” (Carter et al., 2016, p. 208) have affected our schools. Black students' behavior is no more unruly than that of their peers; yet, school faculty often label behaviors as inappropriate when that is not the student’s intent (Monroe, 2005; Rudd, 2014). The American Academy of Pediatrics stated that exclusionary practices—also known as a “one punishment fits all” approach (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013, p. 1,006)—are no longer practical (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021) and that learning occurs only when students are present in school (Kline, 2016). In 2017-2018, approximately 11.2 million days of instruction were lost due to students being excluded from learning opportunities. Critics provide no evidence that exclusionary practices reduce student misbehavior (Fabelo et al., 2011; United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014), and instead of serving as interventions (Gomez et al., 2021; Skiba et al., 1997), they are “exacerbating the problems” (Fenning & Rose, 2007, p. 539). Additionally, students subjected to frequent exclusionary discipline are often “more likely to continue to receive future discipline” (Girvan et al., 2017, p. 392), become less engaged (Girvan et al., 2017), view the school as a punishment (Hines et al., 2022), and suffer academically. A study conducted by Gregory et al. (2010) suggests that school discipline contributes to the student achievement gap.

Whether it’s an Office Discipline Referral (ODR), In-School Suspension, or Out-of-School Suspension, traditional discipline practices negatively affect students (Gomez et al., 2021; Skiba et al., 1997). A 2006 study conducted by Emily Arcia (Morris & Perry, 2016) highlights the achievement gap, revealing that after two years, “suspended students were five

grade levels behind those who were not suspended” (Morris & Perry, 2016, p. 71). Discipline practices disproportionately affect students (Pimentel-Mannan et al., 2023), with classroom discipline being a major contributor to these disparities (Gion et al., 2022). Monroe (2005) suggests that teachers' perceptions of behavior influence the severity of assigned consequences, resulting in harsher punishments when Black students are involved. Furthermore, Monroe (2005) states that the absence of “nonpunitive techniques” (p. 46) when initial behavioral concerns arise with Black students exacerbates discipline disproportionality. A study by Skiba et al. (1997) of nineteen middle schools in the midwestern United States found that behaviors such as “disobedience, conduct, disrespect, and fighting” (Monroe, 2005, p. 47) led teachers to label Black students as inappropriate, regardless of their intentions.

Implicit Bias

Stereotypes have afflicted the nation for centuries (Carter et al., 2016), with research by Greenwald et al. (1998) indicating that Black faces are associated with negative words and behavior. In his 2015 study, Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) noted that repeated negative behavior from Black students is perceived as chronic, resulting in these students being labeled as troublemakers. It was during the blind portion of the same study that it was revealed teachers are “more likely to label a student as a troublemaker if they think the student is Black” (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015, p. 620). The 2010 study conducted by Gregory et al. suggests that educators' interpretations of student behavior and their biases contribute to “racial disparities in school discipline outcomes” (Chin et al., 2020, p. 567), implying that Black students are disciplined for “more subjective behaviors than their White counterparts” (Chin et al., 2020, p. 567).

Referred to as existing outside of conscious awareness (Handelsman & Sakraney, 2015), implicit bias occurs automatically (Merolla & Jackson, 2019), and most intentional individuals

can hold biases (Skiba et al., 1997). While no one is exempt (Staats, 2014), implicit biases affect an individual's decision-making capabilities (Gregory et al., 2010). Quick decisions are made at the unconscious level, triggered by past experiences, relationships with various groups, and media influence (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Gion et al., 2022). A study conducted by Gullo (2017) found that individuals with strong implicit biases “favor White people over Black people” (Girvan et al., 2021, p. 290) and impose harsher consequences on Black students compared to White students. Nosek et al. (2002) reported that 83% of White Americans possess an implicit pro-White/anti-Black bias.

Understanding that implicit bias supports the idea that even individuals with positive intentions can possess biases (Annamma & Morrison, 2018, p. 118), these biases influence how students and school staff engage within schools daily. Furthermore, they affect how school staff respond to student behavior (Gullo & Beachum, 2020) and contribute to the overrepresentation of Black students subjected to exclusionary discipline practices (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). A study by Skiba et al. (2002) indicates that Black students face harsher discipline for subjective behaviors compared to their White peers (Chin et al., 2020), due to teacher interpretations that view “Black students’ behaviors as threatening” (Chin et al., 2020, p. 567) and problematic (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). With 80% of the teaching workforce identifying as White (Starck et al., 2020), educators’ racial biases play a significant role in perpetuating both classroom inequity and disciplinary disproportionality (Starck et al., 2020). Black students frequently find themselves marginalized, labeled, and punished in schools (Annamma & Morrison, 2018) based on how their behavior is perceived (Staats, 2014). Student behaviors are often viewed through a lens of ambiguity, relying on the “school interpretation” (Staats, 2014, p. 2). While one individual may see a behavior as a significant infraction, another may consider it

minor. Losen and Gillespie (2012) report that, after reviewing suspensions across 26,000 middle and high schools, “the vast majority are for minor infractions of school rules such as disrupting class, tardiness, and dress code” (Staats, 2014, p. 5). In the 1990s, school discipline was largely shaped by zero-tolerance policies, predominantly focusing on weapons being brought onto school campuses. Over time, these policies have evolved to classify “threatening behaviors” (Lund et al., 2021, p. 15) to include inappropriate language and non-compliance. The Office of Civil Rights has noted that its investigations reveal Black students are disciplined more harshly and more frequently than their White counterparts (United States Dept of Education for Civil Rights, 2018), thereby reinforcing the notion that Black students' behaviors are perceived differently than those of their White peers. Additionally, subsequent infractions are often viewed as indicative of a pattern (Marcucci, 2019), leading to Black students being labeled as repeat offenders and thus requiring more severe treatment (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). These referrals and consequences result in a loss of instructional time, directly affecting student achievement.

Subjective behavior is when implicit bias is most evident (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2017). These behaviors often require individuals to make inferences (Girvan et al., 2021) about ambiguous actions. Disruptions identified as minor (Gibson et al., 2014) in one setting may be perceived as egregious elsewhere. Research suggests that stereotypes may influence teachers when addressing Black students (Monroe, 2005). Data indicated that some teachers and administrators operate under the assumption that Black boys do not respond to nonpunitive measures (Monroe, 2005). A study by Gullo (2017) further revealed that school administrators with stronger implicit biases favoring White students assigned harsher consequences for subjective offenses to Black student offenders (Girvan et al., 2021). Vavrus (2008) stated that a

teacher's race plays a significant role when addressing student behaviors (Staats, 2014). Black students reported that consequences often seem to single them out, as their non-Black peers engage in the same behavior without facing repercussions (Carter & Gutwein, 2019). Discipline suggests that Black students commit more infractions, but the reality is that they do not (Gibson et al., 2014). While behaviors may not align with mainstream expectations (Staats, 2014), offenses lead to student referrals and exclusions and are subject to staff judgment (Gibson et al., 2014). Reasons for exclusions include dress code violations, disrespect (such as talking back), and non-compliance (Staats, 2015-2016). Staff attempted to manage behavioral disruptions, and when these escalated, it resulted in an Office Discipline Referral (ODR). Offenses that could have been resolved within the classroom are not addressed appropriately.

While behavior continuums have been developed to help delineate between minor and significant behavior offenses, consequences remain at the discretion of the staff member (Skiba et al., 1997). Staff rely on their experiences, knowledge, and understanding to determine appropriate consequences (Skiba et al., 1997). As Hines et al. (2022) noted, biases significantly influence how behaviors are perceived, and race can factor into the decision-making process for many (Morris & Perry, 2016). Behaviors are often seen as challenging and threatening, prompting teachers to respond based on these perceptions (Annamma & Morrison, 2018) and implement disciplinary consequences to maintain control (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Staff biases “are one driver of racial inequity” (Starck et al., 2020, p. 273) in schools. Without explicit professional learning, staff members struggle to confront their biases. It's crucial for staff to recognize the effects of the “nonverbal signals” (Starck et al., 2020, p. 274) they convey, emphasizing the need for self-awareness. Although well-intentioned teachers may be less conscious of their biases, subconscious behaviors can affect how students are treated (Annamma

& Morrison, 2018), contributing to poor student achievement, disciplinary disproportionality, and the marginalization of Black students (Peterson et al., 2016). In a recent study, Girvan et al. (2021) found that educators tend to monitor Black students more closely for behavior violations compared to their White peers. This hyper-focus, coupled with implicit bias, leads to disproportionate discipline and Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs). The 2020 study by Chin (Chin et al., 2020) indicates that a higher proportion of White students to Black students correlates with greater implicit bias (Chin et al., 2020), while Riddle and Sinclair (2019) confirmed the positive correlation between implicit bias and disciplinary disproportionality (Girvan et al., 2021).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

In 2014, students of color comprised most of the student population nationwide, yet 83% of educators were white (Bonner et al., 2018). Although educators acknowledge that "educating non-White students is a key challenge in today's schools" (Bonner et al., 2018, p. 699), it was the Supportive Schools Discipline Initiative that mandated disciplinary reforms to meet the cultural needs of all students. Culture is "a collaboration of shared meanings or common beliefs" (Colbert, 2010, p. 17) and is critical to understanding how individuals learn (Colbert, 2010) and behave (Cramer & Bennett, 2015). Schools should be "inclusive and supportive of all" (Cramer & Bennett, 2015, p. 20). Researchers such as Lustick (2017), Pas et al. (2011), and Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2017) argue that educators who foster inclusive, respectful, and culturally responsive environments build strong relationships, thereby reducing cultural inequities (Bottiani et al., 2018) resulting in a caring learning environment (Vavrus, 2008). Acknowledging the cultural disconnect between school and home may contribute to disparities

(Larson et al., 2018); educators must understand their cultural backgrounds and recognize how their biases influence student interactions (Colbert, 2010; Weinstein et al., 2003).

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) helps educators move away from automatic, culturally driven responses and adopt more intentional approaches (Bottiani et al., 2018; Dray & Wisneski, 2011). Referred to as being student-centered, CRT requires educators to develop "knowledge, skills, and predispositions to teach children from diverse racial, ethnic, language, and social class backgrounds" (Weinstein et al., 2003, p. 270). In addition to maintaining a "commitment to a caring classroom community" (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2022, p. 171). Lustick (2017), CRT requires educators to "model critical consciousness" (p. 687). Classroom management extends beyond compliance and ensures "equitable learning opportunities for all students" (Weinstein et al., 2004, p. 27). Furthermore, Lustick (2017) suggests that disciplinary situations should be utilized as teachable moments rather than punitive ones. Lustick (2017), Cramer and Bennett (2015) echo two elements of Gloria Ladson-Billings' work in that to be genuinely culturally relevant; students must: "develop and or maintain cultural competence and develop a level of critical consciousness" (Lustick, 2017, p. 687). While Banks (2000) suggests that CRT focuses primarily on academics (Weinstein et al., 2004), Weinstein et al. (2004) stress that when strategies are stretched to include the classroom environment, specifically classroom management, a cultural competence emerges, resulting in equitable learning for all students (Weinstein et al., 2004). Furthermore, cultural competence results in a greater understanding, thus impacting classroom discipline.

Recognizing cultural biases reduces the likelihood of misinterpreting behaviors and ensures they are addressed equitably (Weinstein et al., 2003). The objective of classroom management extends beyond enforcing compliance (Sugai et al., 2012); it seeks to understand

the underlying causes of behavior (Dray & Wisneski, 2011). With students at the center of the learning process, invaluable opportunities for academic success are created (Bonner et al., 2018). Educators must recognize that every student, regardless of diversity, can learn. This commitment is essential in reducing student marginalization (Gay, 2002). There are five fundamental components involved in implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT): recognizing one's biases, acknowledging students' cultural backgrounds, understanding the complexities of the educational system, being willing to use culturally appropriate classroom management strategies, and committing to building caring classroom communities (Weinstein et al., 2004). Establishing a tone of understanding, acceptance, self-awareness, and mindfulness (Dray & Wisneski, 2011; Lustick, 2017) while recognizing that culture is the center of a student's behavioral and academic profile (Bonner et al., 2018). Preventative and alternative approaches to behavior management have proven more effective in reducing student exclusion (Lustick, 2017). Educators who set clear standards, involve students in establishing norms, and challenge them to meet expectations contribute to creating respectful, caring, and safe learning environments (Bondy et al., 2007).

Research indicates positive school discipline models can transform student behavior and decrease exclusions (Lustick, 2017). Learning environments that focus on support, nurture, and respect encourage student cooperation and academic growth (Bondy et al., 2007). Strategies to foster these relationships include integrating artifacts that reflect students' interests, using real-world examples, and incorporating problem-solving during instruction (Larson et al., 2018). Larson's study focused on proactive behavior management and culturally responsive teaching, finding that proactive behavior management had a statistically significant positive impact on student behavior (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Similarly, a study by Gion et al. (2022) found that

racial disparities lessened when teachers received coaching and professional development focused on disparities, equity, and engagement (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2022). Educators with a greater sense of self-efficacy in behavior management, particularly with Black students, observed fewer problematic behaviors (Gion et al., 2022). Coaching and support related to culture and its connection to classroom management are relatively new (Pas et al., 2011). In a study by Pas et al. (2011) that focused on building relationships and establishing trust, teachers engaged directly in professional learning and received coach feedback. While direct engagement with coaches averaged three hours, 90% of teachers “believed that coaching (Pas et al., 2011, p. 553) benefited their students.” Furthermore, 80% of participating teachers reported that the feedback and focus on professional learning was immediately applicable and overall increased their understanding (Pas et al., 2011). Additionally, Gregory and Ripisky (2008) noted that students who reported solid relationships and trust with school staff were “less likely to defy authority in the classroom” (Lustick, 2017, p. 685).

Replicating the results of the Gion et al. (2022) study has been challenging. A three-year study involving 155 elementary and 46 middle schools implementing positive discipline (Lustick, 2017) by Vincent and Tobin (2012) found that although student exclusions decreased, there was little to no impact on Black students (Lustick, 2017). Additionally, while CRT may help students build resilience and form connections (Gay, 2002), limited evidence links it to positive student behavior (Larson et al., 2018). While additional research is needed to assess the impact of CRT on student behavior (Vincent & Tobin, 2012), data suggests that combining CRT with school-wide Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) can reduce student exclusion and racial disproportionality (Gage et al., 2020).

Although more research is needed to fully understand the impact of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) on positive student behavior (Vincent & Tobin, 2012), existing data suggests that when combined with school-wide Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS), there is a decrease in student exclusions and racial disproportionality (Gage et al., 2020). PBIS, a tiered approach, is implemented school-wide and emphasizes proactive and preventive practices (Gage et al., 2020). With the PBIS tiers resembling a triangle shape, tier one focuses on proactive strategies for all students. In tier one, student and staff relationships are cultivated, and behavioral expectations are established (Lutsick, 2017). Tier two is often identified as a moderate intervention that focuses on a dialogue between students and staff and how the conflict can be resolved (Lustick, 2017). Tier three focuses on significant disputes, often called “intensive intervention” (Lustick, 2017, p. 684). Within tier three, intensive encompasses frequency and the duration of the interventions. This tier often facilitates significant discussions and dialogues engaging high-risk students.

Utilizing PBIS cultivates a positive school culture where all students are held to consistent behavioral standards (Vincent & Tobin, 2012). Clear and objective discipline procedures are well-defined (McIntosh et al., 2018) and ensure classroom expectations are explicitly taught (Gage et al., 2019) using relevant examples (Sugai et al., 2012). Data is collected in real-time to support progress monitoring and identify areas of need (Gage et al., 2019) while reducing the ambiguity of behaviors (Sugai et al., 2012). Behaviors are analyzed in terms of their impact on other students (Vincent & Tobin, 2012), and procedures are established to recognize students who meet expectations and to "promote positive, productive interactions between students, their peers, and staff" (Lloyd et al., 2022, p. 1). Instead of punishment, positive reinforcement is employed (Gage et al., 2020).

A study conducted by McIntosh et al. (2018) demonstrated reduced discipline referrals and student exclusions for all racial groups, bringing these numbers below the national average. By 2018, over 23,000 schools across the United States had implemented PBIS (Gage et al., 2018), all reporting positive effects on behavior and academic achievement (Gage et al., 2018). Implementing PBIS positively correlated with reducing disciplinary disproportionality among students of color, as the study of McIntosh et al. (2018) noted. The effectiveness of PBIS is further supported by a comprehensive study conducted in Florida by Gage et al. (2019). The state of Florida has the highest number of student exclusions and disproportionate discipline rates for Black students (Gage et al., 2019). Gage et al. (2019) saw significant results across 593 schools, noting that when PBIS was implemented with fidelity, Black students were less likely to experience school exclusion (Gage et al., 2019). Moreover, the most substantial reductions in exclusionary practices were observed after three to five years of consistent implementation (Gage et al., 2019).

Despite some positive outcomes, student exclusions and their frequency continue to be a nationwide concern for schools (Weinstein et al., 2004). Interventions such as Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are vital for maintaining student engagement (Sugai et al., 2012). However, their effectiveness depends on consistent implementation (Gage et al., 2019). Reviewing and analyzing data is essential (Gage et al., 2019) to fully grasp its explicit and implicit messages (Bottiani et al., 2018). The needs of today's students are different from those of previous generations (Bonner et al., 2018), necessitating that educators and learning environments continuously evolve (Gage et al., 2018). Today's schools reflect a student body with varied learning and disciplinary needs. Historical

disciplinary practices, such as student exclusion, are outdated and contribute to student inequity. Discipline should emphasize understanding rather than punishment.

Effective interventions require uncovering the root causes of behavior, listening to and valuing student voices, and ensuring appropriate and fair responses. Equitable treatment across race, gender, and ethnicity is crucial. Schools must work to deeply understand students' behaviors and needs, using data to accurately represent these needs. While analyzing the data may be challenging, addressing it meaningfully benefits everyone. Student diversity should be seen as a rich resource, not a disciplinary variable.

Restorative Practices

Grounded in Restorative Justice (RJ) principles, Restorative Practices (RP) offers an alternative to traditional disciplinary methods. Emphasizing engagement, collaboration, and accountability (Evans & Lester, 2013), it is built on a foundation of respect (Gregory et al., 2016), inclusivity, and connectedness (Kline, 2016). Designed to be both proactive and reactive, these strategies aim to address conflicts and repair relationships (McClusky et al., 2008). Often associated with the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), RP comprises seven principles, which include meeting needs, providing accountability and support, making things right, understanding conflict, building healthy communities, restoring relationships, and addressing power imbalances (Evans & Lester, 2013). Furthermore, while it is frequently seen as a classroom management tool, it is one that “focuses on what students need and not what they deserve” (Evans & Lester, 2010, p. 58), indicating opportunities for accountability and learning (Evans & Lester, 2010).

Restorative Practices (RP) are viewed as an alternative to student exclusion (Cruz et al., 2021), engaging students and staff in purposeful activities that foster equitable relationships and

a positive culture (Gregory et al., 2016) for all students, irrespective of race (Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). In RP, students participate in setting social and behavioral goals (Gomez et al., 2021) and assume responsibility for their actions (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021), which shifts the emphasis from punishment to support and accountability (McCluskey et al., 2008). Rather than perceiving infractions merely as policy breaches, RP interprets them as harm to the community and relationships (Kline, 2016). Making amends is crucial, so repairing harm is encouraged to prevent student exclusion (Gregory et al., 2021), fostering a commitment to corrective actions, restoring relationships, and rebuilding trust (Lodi et al., 2022). This approach enables victims to regain a "sense of personal power" (McCold & Wachtel, 2003, p. 2), while wrongdoers are urged to take responsibility for their actions. Engaging in thoughtful discussions to identify the damage and its effects on individuals re-establishes integrity (Kline, 2016), repairs harm, and averts future incidents (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). Through intentional conversations, students begin to grasp the impact of their actions and the significance of empathy, thereby fostering a sense of remorse and self-awareness (Kline, 2016; Monroe, 2005). Discussions become safe, helping students to "recognize emotions, manage anger, and avoid biases. They learn triggers and ways to prevent future conflicts" (Gregory et al., 2022, p. 59). The labels of victim and perpetrator are discarded, and the focus shifts to justice for all (Lodi et al., 2022). This methodology also integrates into a school's identity, driven by relationships, ownership, trust, and self-worth (Lodi et al., 2022). Comprised of "11 Essential Elements" (Gregory et al., 2016, p. 329), implementation can include "circles, conferences, mediation, peer mediation, restorative conversations, and community-building circles" (Lodi et al., 2022, p. 5). Whether emphasizing prevention or intervention, restorative and relational skills are necessary to ensure all participants are heard (Lodi et al., 2022). Restorative circles are suitable for minor conflicts as

part of a continuum, while mediation and restorative conferences are intended for more serious conflicts (Lodi et al., 2022). Implementing RP demands a substantial commitment from the entire school and may take three to five years. It is not a “train and hope approach” (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021, p. 382), but necessitates a school’s dedication to “non-punitive, relationship-centered approaches” (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021, p. 372) and collaborative problem-solving. The objective is to hold students accountable through conversations and encourage reflection (Gregory et al., 2021), fidelity, and professional learning (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Successful implementation requires all staff members to be fully engaged in this effort.

Between 1999 and 2002, Palisades Middle School and High School in Pennsylvania began implementing Restorative Practices (RP). The implementation started with gaining buy-in from both students and staff (Mirsky, 2007). Over the three-year period, students and staff collaborated to develop processes and refine the school culture. Within those three years, both schools reported a “metamorphosis” (Mirsky, 2007, p. 9) among students and staff. Mirsky’s study indicated that students became engaged learners who held each other accountable for their behaviors. It was further noted that discussing issues in circles was more accessible for their social-emotional well-being than calling out to peers individually (Mirsky, 2007). Engaging in conversations within circles boosted students’ self-confidence and helped them understand their peers’ perspectives, feelings, and motivations (Mirsky, 2007). Mirsky’s 2007 study showed a 56% reduction in Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs), while classroom incidents fell by 60%. Similar results were reported in a study by González (2015) conducted at Denver Public Schools (DPS). Over seven years of RP implementation, DPS experienced a drop in the suspension rate from an average of 10.58% to 5.63% (González, 2015). In line with previous studies, the Augustine et al. (2018) research within the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) revealed a 16%

reduction in the number of instructional days lost to exclusionary practices. This study pointed to a more significant impact on Black students regarding the reduction of lost instructional time (Augustine et al., 2018). On a smaller scale, the 2013 study by Gregory et al. examined classroom management issues, particularly disrespect and non-compliance. Minor infractions fell by 70% following the implementation of RP strategies (Gregory et al., 2016). Literature indicates that while the implementation of RP is prevalent, there is a lack of data on its effectiveness (Gregory et al., 2022; Song & Swearer, 2016; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). A study conducted by Acosta et al. (2019) in 14 middle schools in Maine found that RP had no positive effects on school culture or peer interactions. Furthermore, establishing a “true restorative-oriented climate” (Fronius et al., 2019, p. 16) is time-consuming and demands commitment (Mirsky, 2007). While there is no consensus on the optimal way to implement RP, a lack of commitment and fidelity has hampered results (Acosta et al., 2019; Fronius et al., 2019; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Gregory and Evans (2020) emphasize that successful implementation relies heavily on staff buy-in and ongoing professional development (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Staff involvement in processes and protocols enhances understanding of “the potential for effectiveness” (Fronius et al., 2019, p. 18) and can similarly engage students (Martinez et al., 2016). However, although several studies suggest that implementing RP positively affects school culture and relationships and reduces discipline issues (Gibson et al., 2014), “it is not supported by rigorous scientific evidence to determine whether particular steps are effective” (Fronius et al., 2019, p. 17). In contrast to Fronius (2019), 22 studies completed by Latimer and colleagues demonstrated high “levels of compliance and low levels of recidivism” (Latimer et al., 2005, p. 60). Although RP implementation decreases exclusionary practices, McMorris et al. (2013) reported only a slight rise in students’ grade point averages (Fronius et

al., 2019). Interestingly, while GPA was only slightly affected, a study by Jain and colleagues (2014) highlighted a significant gain (60%) in graduation rates for schools implementing RP compared to those not using it (Fronius et al., 2019, p. 28). Elizabeth Dozier, principal at Fenger High School in Chicago, Illinois, implemented RP, resulting in a learning community tailored to students' needs, leaving adult and student egos at the door. Embracing an “all in” mindset and following a “human-centered” (Teasley, 2014) approach, Fenger School's dropout rate decreased from 20% to less than 2%, and student arrests fell from 300 to under 10. While Ms. Dozier credits the entire community for Fenger’s success, she humbly states that achievement is the result of doing what is morally right. The situation at Fenger was dismal, but it was through listening, understanding values, and addressing everyone’s needs that led to these transformative changes and ultimately made the turnaround successful.

The Supportive School Discipline Initiative (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2014), developed by the United States Department of Education, holds schools accountable for reducing disproportionality and for developing and implementing favorable school discipline policies (Lustick, 2017). While managing disruptive behaviors continues to challenge educators (Skiba et al., 1997), schools’ approach to discipline needs to evolve (Lustick, 2017). The aim of discipline alternatives (besides exclusion) is to ensure equity for all students (Bottiani et al., 2018) and to minimize racial disparities in school discipline (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2022). There is an urgent need to focus on intentionality, ensuring that school responses are purposeful (Dray & Wisneski, 2011) and that they reflect a level of cultural understanding (Gay, 2002). Restorative practices (RP) are an intervention designed to reduce exclusionary practices (Martinez et al., 2016) and to promote equitable discipline practices (Skiba et al., 2002). While some studies by Gregory, Zakszeski, Augustine, and Gonzalez

illustrate RP's effectiveness in addressing and reducing school discipline issues, others, such as Fronius, raise questions about its implementation and impact. Students who have been excluded are three times more likely to drop out of school compared to students who have never faced exclusion (Rudd, 2014). A 2006 study by Emily Arcia revealed that students subjected to exclusionary discipline over two years experienced a learning loss equivalent to five grade levels (Morris & Perry, 2016). Furthermore, a quantitative two-year longitudinal study conducted by Morris and Perry (2016) showed that excluded students score 15 points lower on standardized assessments than their peers who have not been excluded. Over a student's academic career, multiple exclusions result in a loss of learning that cannot be regained (Morris & Perry, 2016). Significant learning loss can escalate students' behavior problems, diverting attention from their academic challenges (Morris & Perry, 2016). While Balfanz et al. (2013) indicate that each exclusionary practice reduces a student's chances of graduating from high school by 20%, further studies are necessary to assess the impact on student achievement (Gomez et al., 2021). Implementing RP requires time, dedication, funding, and commitment (Marsh, 2017). The needs of students today differ from those of previous years; thus, our responses must also change (Marsh, 2017). As schools adapt to meet the diverse needs of students, policies must evolve accordingly (Girvan et al., 2017).

Summary

School discipline has involved students being excluded from instructional opportunities lasting minutes, hours, or even days. Intended to address undesired behavior, student exclusion has proven ineffective as an intervention (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 32), resulting in students being less willing to engage and generally more compliant (Girvan et al., 2017). Data on exclusions reflect the loss of instructional time, as exclusions “are for minor infractions of school

rules rather than for dangerous or violent acts” (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 32). The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) indicates that 11,205,797 school days were missed in the 2017-2018 school year due to student exclusions. Concerns are “consistently raised about the efficacy and fairness of traditional disciplinary procedures” (Skiba et al., 1997, p. 296). While *Brown v. Board of Education* ended segregation in schools, it did not guarantee racial equity.

Following the *Brown* decision, a level of intolerance and bias emerged. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 mandated that all schools establish clearly defined discipline policies (Mendez et al., 2003). Consequently, these policies focused less on tolerance and more on harsher consequences (Gibson et al., 2014). Districts believed that stricter practices reduced problematic behaviors and that a "one-size-fits-all approach with pre-determined consequences" most effective (Gibson et al., 2014). Research from scholars including Skiba, Carter, and Fenning reveals that Black students face school exclusions at a higher rate than their White peers. Additionally, referrals for Black students often stem from subjective offenses that are minor and non-violent (Skiba et al., 1997).

As schools evolve to meet students’ diverse needs, disciplinary practices must also change (Girvan et al., 2017). Overusing exclusionary practices harms student achievement and undermines school culture (Manassah et al., 2018). Additionally, the Manassah et al., (2018) study suggests that conventional disciplinary practices do not help students develop the skills and strategies necessary to improve behavior and avoid future issues (Lund et al., 2021, p. 16). Staff beliefs regarding student discipline require professional development in Implicit Bias, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), Inclusive Classroom Management (ICM), and Restorative Practices (RP). Moreover, behaviors should be evaluated objectively, free from racial bias.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

This inquiry sought to understand and address discipline disproportionality by using a mixed methods approach with an explanatory sequential design. This method enabled me to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, provide insights into its causes, and develop targeted strategies to promote equity and fairness in school discipline practices. Rooted in Improvement Science and specifically the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) framework (Spaulding & Hinnant-Crawford, 2019), this inquiry was conducted in phases, allowing for the opportunity to answer the research questions, test changes, and identify improvements (Langley et al., 2009).

Although Black students often face harsher consequences (Monroe, 2005) compared to their White peers, their behavior is no more unruly than that of others (Rudd, 2014). School faculty frequently label these behaviors as inappropriate despite not being the student's intention (Monroe, 2005). To tackle this issue, this inquiry proposed using Improvement Science (IS) to assess the effects of professional learning on classroom management practices and the impact in reducing discipline disproportionality.

Focus of Practice Research Questions

The following questions will help guide this inquiry:

1. How do teachers' perceptions and understanding of discipline disproportionality impact classroom-based discipline practices?
2. How does delivering professional learning focusing on Implicit Bias, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Restorative Practices impact teacher mindset and discipline practices?
3. As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership style change due to this study?

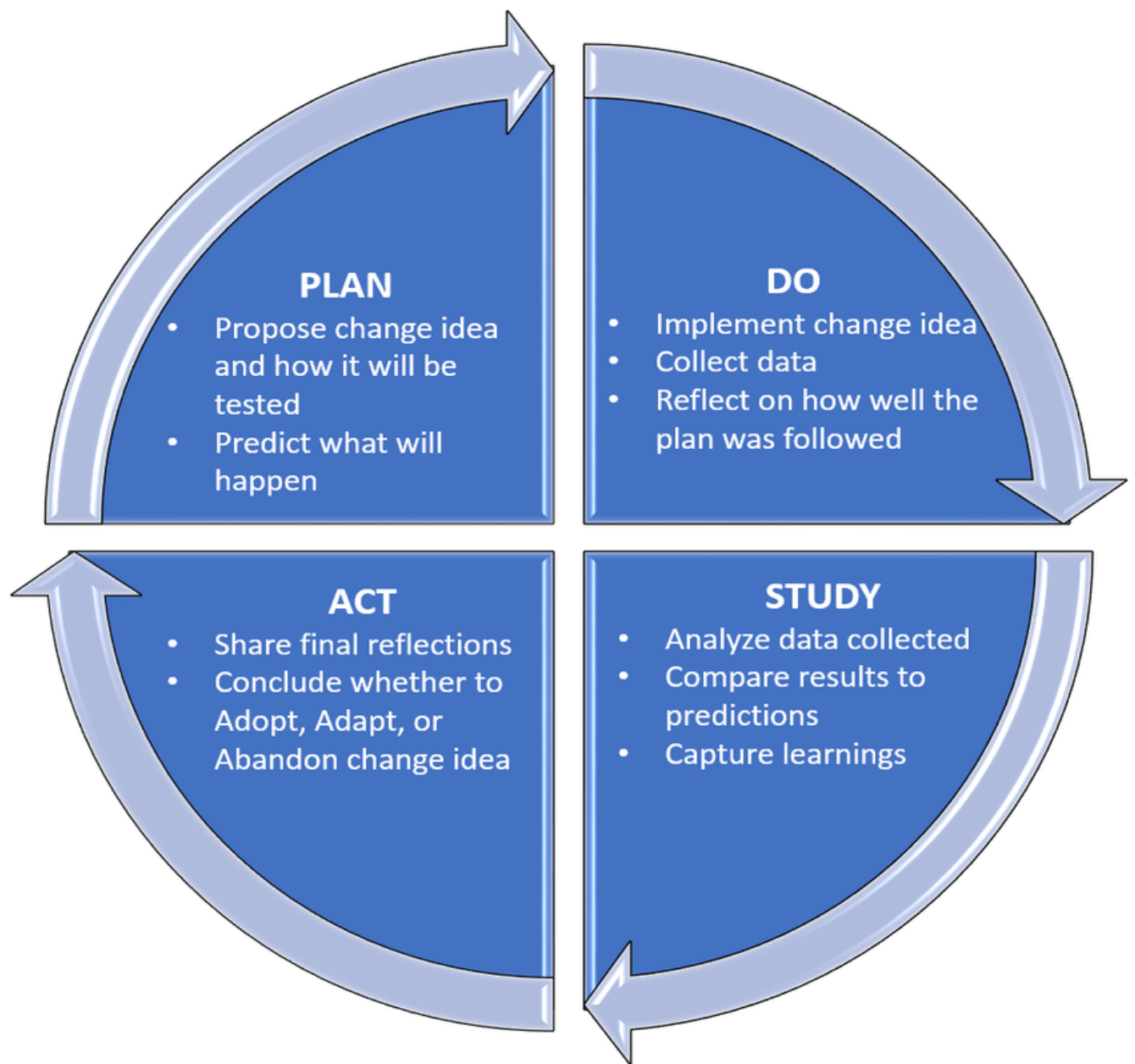
The first question aimed to explore participants' understanding and perceptions of the impact of classroom discipline practices on discipline disproportionality. By combining questionnaires and interviews, the goal was to identify participants' views on classroom discipline practices and the effects of exclusionary practices on discipline disproportionality and student achievement. Participants should be familiar with current and past classroom-managed discipline data across teams, grades, and schools. Additional knowledge of In-School Suspension (ISS) and Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) was advantageous.

The second question aimed to understand and evaluate participants' knowledge regarding the impact of their classroom management practices on discipline disproportionality. The participants' mindsets were assessed during the inquiry because of biases' significant influence on discipline. This insight is crucial for developing effective strategies to address disciplinary issues and promote a positive and inclusive school environment. This question employed quantitative and qualitative data, including surveys and interview questions. Participants collected and shared initial and final data points to evaluate the impact of the professional learning sessions.

The final research question aimed to identify how the implementation of this study has influenced the leadership skills of scholarly practitioners. Engaging with participants enabled me to raise awareness and empower teachers to address the challenges tied to current disciplinary practices. Discussing and formulating responses to interventions was essential for student success and helped participants grasp the complexities surrounding the achievement gap. Journal entries after each session acted as a data collection tool for this inquiry. Ultimately, integrating reflective practices ensured my ongoing growth and positively impacted my efforts to address critical issues in education.

Inquiry Design and Rationale

This inquiry aimed to understand the impact of professional learning and specifically Classroom Management practices in reducing disproportionate discipline in a systematic and data-driven way. A mixed-method approach was used to gather qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the professional learning sessions and their effects on decreasing discipline disproportionality. Following the Improvement Science framework of Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA), the study was carried out in phases (see Figure 1), enabling adjustments or actions based on the findings. The PDSA framework is cyclical, promoting continuous improvement and modifications based on data and experience. This structured approach was selected for its ability to foster reflection (Langley et al., 2009) and enhance practices (Mertler, 2022). Qualitative research serves as a valuable method for exploring behavior and its underlying causes, as noted by Roberts and Hyatt (2019). This aligns with the objective of understanding the impact of professional learning and Classroom Management practices on discipline disproportionality. Qualitative data was collected from various sources, including notes, individual interview transcripts, and observations from both virtual and in-person meetings. Data analysis employed coding, a common technique in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), to identify recurring themes and patterns, draw conclusions, and highlight outcomes. This process was vital for interpreting the data and deriving meaningful insights—quantitative research aimed to collect objective facts and numerical data to aid in understanding student and staff behavior. Data was gathered and analyzed numerically, allowing for statistical analysis. The questionnaire is the most widely used data collection tool (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019) as it provides “a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population.”



Note. (Barron et al., 2017).

Figure 1. Phases of improvement science.

In addition to surveys, further quantitative data was obtained through the Every Child Accountability & Tracking System (ECATS). The combination of surveys and existing data from ECATS provided a comprehensive quantitative approach. Surveys enabled the collection of specific data related to the study's objectives, while data from ECATS offers broader insights into student behavior and discipline.

Context of the Study

Rain Water Middle School (RWMS) is a public middle school serving grades 6-8, located within the Mulvallee School District in the northeastern central region of North Carolina. Since its inception, the school has maintained the same mission and vision statements. It aims to prepare all students to become independent, goal-oriented learners, ready to contribute to a constantly evolving community. The inquiry site began to re-evaluate its vision statement, emphasizing equity and inclusiveness more strongly in response to the district-wide adoption of Equity Policy 1150 (November 2022). Specific goals were created within the School Improvement Plan (SIP) in response to the recognized discipline disproportionality, aligning the school's mission and vision of equity and inclusivity.

With the development of specific goals addressing discipline disproportionality, previously shared risk data indicates that the disciplinary risks faced by one subgroup are more significant than those of their peers. Additionally, the risk data for these subgroups aligns with school suspension data by race. Table 8 shows that Black students accounted for 56% of all suspensions, which is double the suspension rate of White students. During the same period, 12% of Black students received routine suspensions, compared to just 4% of White students. This raises questions about whether the suspensions reflect the severity of the offenses or are

Table 8

Subgroup Suspension: 2021-2022 School Year

Short-Term Suspensions	Black	American Indian	Asian	Hispanic	Multi- Racial	White	Totals
# of Students in School	333	2	40	227	52	445	1,099
% of Overall Students	30	<.5	4	21	6	40	100
# of Suspensions	68	1	1	23	5	23	121
# of Students Involved	40	1	1	18	4	20	100
% of Total Suspensions	56	.83	.83	19	.04	19	13.88

influenced by racial bias, as the data suggests that the behaviors of Black students are not more severe than those of their White peers.

Inquiry Partners

Incorporating the insights and support of Inquiry Partners enhanced the rigor and effectiveness of this inquiry. Table 9 identifies the specific partners and their roles in the inquiry. Each partner was invited to participate because of their distinct roles within the school building.

Elective Teacher

This individual was invited to serve as an Inquiry Partner due to their diverse educational background and active engagement with students. This teacher has worked at numerous schools and strongly advocates for students. As a School Improvement Team (SIT) member, this individual has frequently “rocked the boat” during staff meetings and seeks to understand the reasons behind practices and their alignment with best practices. When data is shared, this individual posed clarifying questions, looking for innovative ways to support students. Relationships are valued and built from day one, and understanding the reasons is more important than the consequences of behaviors. Student equity is always at the forefront when planning lessons. As seasoned staff member, they feel comfortable engaging in challenging conversations and continuously strive for positive change.

Exceptional Children (EC) Teacher

Before becoming an EC teacher, this individual taught middle school math. Data intrigues this partner, and they consistently seek to understand why and how. This staff member loves quantitative data and assisted in analyzing it. As an EC teacher, this partner moves in and out of various staff members' learning environments throughout the day and can speak

Table 9

Inquiry Partners and Their Role

Inquiry Partner	Role in Study
Elective Teacher	- Assist with validating the instruments - Assist with conveying the message of both the quantitative and qualitative data - Assist with interviewing participants - Assist with managing the professional learning modules - Analyze qualitative data
Exceptional Children Teacher	- Assist with validating the instruments - Assist with conveying the message of both the quantitative and qualitative data - Assist with interviewing participants - Analyze quantitative data.
Intervention Teacher	- Oversees In School Suspension (ISS) - Keeper of the ISS data - Passionate about Restorative Practices - Well-read and will assist with identifying the journal article that participants will read. - Will lead the discussion with participants surrounding the article and assist with providing clarification and school-based examples. - Assist with calculating risk ratio
School-Based Administrator	- Manages administrative referrals - Has a voice when suggesting/planning professional learning opportunities
Central Service Director	- Assisted with global perspective - Applicability of learning modules - Access data - Discuss data

discuss the inconsistencies among teams, tracks, and grade levels. Furthermore, this staff member has previously acknowledged that policies and procedures do not meet students' needs. This partner has been a part of the staff for several years, is trusted and respected, and will conduct the semi-structured interviews.

Intervention Teacher

Equity and disproportionality are passions of this individual. This staff member engages with all students throughout the school building in the role of intervention teacher. Similar to the EC teacher, this staff member works with students across all grades and tracks. In the intervention role, quantitative data is regularly reviewed and analyzed, and they demonstrate a comfort level with understanding and explaining data. Relationships matter, and significant time has been dedicated to supporting students in self-advocacy. While they are relatively new to the school (having been there for two years) and still learning the hidden culture, they are well-read and can provide insights that other partners may lack. This individual would handle data collection and analysis but would not be involved in facilitating the semi-structured interviews.

School-Based Administrator

This individual is new to year-round work but has experience in school administration. They quickly navigated the learning curve after joining the school mid-year. In addition to valuing transparency, this staff member confidently engages in critical conversations. Questions are regularly asked, and objectives are clearly defined. This individual has a growth mindset but can become frustrated when responses focus on outdated practices rather than pedagogy. They were chosen specifically in hopes of encouraging colleagues to recognize the data and the narrative it conveys, as well as to rethink the current discipline data narrative.

Central-Service Director

A global perspective is crucial when engaging in data-rich discussions. Seeking someone outside the school is important, as they can offer insights from a district-wide viewpoint. This individual values data-driven conversations while also recognizing daily challenges, resulting in a level of credibility that many lack. They collaborate with various district and school leaders and regularly provide district-wide professional development. An outside perspective can help raise questions and challenges that others might overlook or misunderstand.

Ethical Considerations

Before starting this inquiry, the scholarly practitioner sought approval from East Carolina University and the local district Institutional Review Board (IRB). In the IRB application, the practitioner mentioned completing the CITI modules. The IRB approval is included in Appendix A. The researcher explained the inquiry and participant engagement, with informed consent documented in Appendix B. All data collection tools mentioned in Appendices C-E were stored on a secure, external, password-protected hard drive. Data will be kept for approximately two years, after which the drive will be erased. Recognizing that the inquiry occurred at the practitioner's previous employment site, the researcher expressed concern regarding participants' honesty. The researcher has established relationships with many staff members and relied on identified inquiry partners to conduct the interviews, ensuring honesty and confidentiality.

Inquiry Procedures

This inquiry corresponded with the phases outlined in PSDA. The initial cycle, Phase I, concentrated on identifying potential participants, outlining the structure of the professional learning sessions (content, duration, and frequency), and determining the tools for quantitative data collection. This phase established the foundation for data collection and analysis. In June

2023, the pilot study reviewed, revised, and validated all data collection tools. By utilizing the Every Child Accountability Tracking System (ECATS) for initial quantitative data, classroom-based and Office Referrals baseline data were provided. Following the leadership change, teachers began entering classroom-based referral data. This initial information served as a starting point for measuring the impact of the interventions. An initial survey was developed to identify and assess participants' knowledge about school-based discipline practices and discipline disproportionality. An outline for the study was created, resulting in six professional learning sessions that varied between in-person (off-campus at a nearby library) and online (via Google Meet). Each session was aligned with a specific theme supported by professional reading and averaged one hour in duration. Jamboard, a Google tool, collected participants' thoughts and ideas anonymously. All Post-it notes used within the application were the same color to maintain each participant's anonymity. Classroom referral data and ODR data were gathered during this phase, serving as a baseline for the study.

Phase II focused on implementing six professional learning sessions over 12 weeks, complemented by ongoing assessments of their impact on classroom discipline practices. The sessions addressed Discipline Disproportionality, Implicit Bias, Inclusive Classroom Management (ICM), Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), and Restorative Practices. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the sessions, including ECATS, Buddy Teacher referral data, entrance and exit ticket responses, and dialogue from each session. The initial questionnaire evaluated participants' knowledge and understanding of discipline disproportionality. Participant feedback was continuously analyzed and shared with Inquiry Partners throughout the study.

Phase III included semi-structured interviews, data analysis, and the researcher's journal entries. Utilizing the validated interview questions from the pilot study, both structured and semi-structured formats enabled the interviewer to ask follow-up questions or seek clarification as needed. The interview data provided insights into participants' understanding and implementation of specific interventions. All collected data expressed themes or generalizations through coding, which helped identify insights and draw meaningful conclusions. The PDSA cycles were employed within the Improvement Science framework. Specifically, the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) approach (Spaulding & Hinnant-Crawford, 2019) facilitated addressing the inquiry questions, testing changes, and identifying improvements (Langley et al., 2009). The scholarly practitioner maintained a journal that documented experiences, thoughts, and ideas throughout the study.

Phase I

During this initial phase, historical discipline data (short-term suspension) was examined by grade level, race, code of conduct offense, and subgroup enrollment from 2012 to June 2023. Since professionals define disproportionality in various ways, clarity was sought from professional readings, including the works of Gage, Gregory, and Ladson-Billings. The research questions were developed using the literature, with Table 10 illustrating each research question and its inquiry alignment. The previously referenced risk ratio data indicated that previous interventions had not effectively reduced the disparities between White and Black students.

Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, this approach incorporated the steps of Plan, Do, Study, and Act for continuous improvement (Langley et al., 2009) and provided the opportunity to answer the inquiry questions, test changes, and identify improvements (Langley

Table 10

Data Collection Tool Alignment

Instrumentation	Inquiry Research Question		
	#1	#2	#3
Phase I	X		
Pilot Study			
Initial Participant Questionnaire	X		
RWMS Professional Learning	X	X	
Phase II	X	X	
RWMS Professional Learning	X	X	
RWMS Teacher Interviews	X	X	
Phase III			
Researcher Journaling			X

et al., 2009). Additionally, the Inquiry Partners helped determine whether the findings could be generalized and applied to other educational settings.

The phase began by inviting participants to the study. Following the recruitment process and procurement, initial quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. The Initial Questionnaire assessed the participants' knowledge of current discipline practices and their familiarity with disproportionality. Initial quantitative data from ECATS included teacher-managed behavior and formed the basis for comparing future teacher-managed behavior data.

Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies

Understanding that the study was conducted in person and in virtual settings, Jam Board was chosen as the primary response collector. The study was opened to all staff members and ideally included both core and elective teachers. Core teachers work with the same 125-130 students daily throughout the school year, while elective teachers interact with all students during that time. Furthermore, ideal participants volunteered and possessed a growth mindset. Ideally, the group of participants was small, allowing for the establishment of trust. Potential participants were identified through convenience sampling. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could opt out at any time. All staff received a recruitment email announcing the study and detailing upcoming information meeting times and locations. All potential participants were assured that participation had no impact on their current employment. Virtual meetings were recorded for coding purposes, but all participants were notified before the session began. An initial questionnaire was distributed for completion prior to the first session. Any questions were answered beforehand.

Attendance at the first session involved obtaining Informed Consent (included in Appendix B). Participants were informed that the researcher would keep a journal throughout the

study. Study participants included core and elective teachers, although not all were from the same track. Additionally, race, gender, ethnicity, teaching experience, and years at the school varied among participants. This diversity was crucial for identifying potential biases and understanding how interventions affect different groups. Table 11 illustrates participant's demographics and years at RWMS.

Instrumentation

Data collection instruments consisted of tools that facilitated both quantitative and qualitative data gathering. These instruments included an initial questionnaire, entrance and exit tickets during study sessions, a teacher-managed behavior log, Buddy Teacher referral data, and discipline data obtained from ECATS. The initial questionnaire assessed each participant's knowledge level about discipline practices, discipline data, and disproportionality. The Buddy Teacher referral data indicated how often a student was removed from the learning environment and redirected to a nearby teacher's classroom. Each staff member is assigned a Buddy Teacher, and students are required to complete a questionnaire as part of that process. Teachers brought the list of students referred to their Buddy Teacher to each professional learning session. The information collected included students' race, gender, duration of absence from the learning environment, and frequency of exclusion. Entrance and exit tickets, along with session discussion questions, revealed participants' mindsets and the sessions' impact. The interview questions aligned with those used in the sessions but followed a semi-structured format, allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification when necessary. Additionally, the questions aimed to draw out individuals' thoughts and ideas about discipline practices and their experiences as agents of change. All validated instruments are included in the appendices.

Table 11

Participant's Demographics

Gender	Race	Content Area	Years at the School
Male	White	Social Studies	8
Female	White	English	10
Female	Hispanic	Spanish (elective)	1
Female	White	CTE (elective)	12

Pilot Study/Baseline Data Collection

The pilot study provided an opportunity to evaluate how data was collected prior to the actual data collection process (Mertler, 2022). A pilot focus group was created to assess the readiness of the entire staff for discussions about discipline disproportionality. Norms emphasized openness, confidentiality, and reflective discourse. Participation was voluntary, and privacy was ensured. All participants were certified staff members representing a diverse cross-section of the faculty. Meetings were conducted both in person and virtually. The in-person meeting focused on the inquiry's overview and research questions, while subsequent sessions concentrated on data sources and collection instruments.

Feedback was crucial in assessing the data collection tools, ensuring they were clear and that the desired information was obtained. During the evaluation of the initial questionnaire, feedback centered on clarifying the difference between a classroom-level referral and an Office Discipline Referral (ODR), thus removing any assumptions. Additional considerations included race and participant roles. Questions arose about whether the number of years on staff impacted perceptions of disproportionality. All questions were reviewed repeatedly to reduce assumptions and lessen the threat level for respondents. The initial questionnaire protocol was revised to incorporate this feedback and is outlined in Appendix D.

While the phases of the inquiry were noted earlier in Table 10, Table 12 further describes the duration of the investigation and the professional articles shared during each phase. Those invited to the pilot proposed using the Gallery Walk protocol, but this shifted when the participants' anonymity was compromised. Consensus emerged that the study's impact depends significantly on qualitative data and that anonymity is crucial; therefore, the digital tool Google Jamboard was selected for data collection. Although the tool tracks participants' access, no

Table 12

Schedule for Asynchronous Professional Learning Sessions

Month	Module Name	Professional Journal Article
March 2024	Session 1: What is the story being told by the data?	
	Session 2: What is Discipline Disproportionality and how is it impacting our students?	You Can't Fix What You Don't Look At: Acknowledging Race in Addressing Racial Discipline Disparities
March 2024	Session 3: Implicit Bias	Implicit bias, disproportionate discipline, and teacher responsibility for instruction as prevention
April 2024	Session 4: What is Inclusive Classroom Management	Classroom Management Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms \
April 2024	Session 5: Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)	Culturally Responsive Classroom Management: awareness into action or Mindful Reflection as a process for developing Culturally Responsive practices
May 2024	Session 6: Restorative Practices	Restorative Justice in Education: What We Know So Far
May 2024	Session 7: Interviews	

identifying information is linked to comments, thus ensuring anonymity. Quantitative data will be sourced from the district (ECATS) and participants (see Appendix I and Appendix J). All entrance and exit tickets questions and session topics were reviewed and agreed upon. All questions aligned to the identified themes. They aimed to evaluate the participants' prior knowledge and identify any changes resulting from their professional learning. The semi-structured interview format allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions if necessary.

Participant recruitment included both an email and an in-person meeting. The meeting was open to all staff, providing an overview of the study and the required commitment. The Consent to Participate (see Appendix B) was shared, highlighting contact information. Initially, it was thought to include only sixth-grade teachers; however, concerns arose about the narrow audience of 11 and the potential for no participants. The meeting was opened to all staff, covering the study's purpose, commitment, format of each session, and the duration of the study. Participation was emphasized as voluntary with no implications on current employment.

Before submitting the study to the district's and East Carolina University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), an outline detailing the sessions and listing the professional articles for reading and discussion was created. The time between scheduled sessions provided opportunities for reviewing and organizing data, recording engagement observations, sharing information with Inquiry Partners, and adjusting materials or articles as needed.

Data Analysis

Data was presented clearly and understandably to emphasize disproportionality. Initial quantitative data was collected from ECATS and categorized by subgroup. A composite index was used to calculate a ratio that illustrates the enrollment number of a specific population

relative to the total population (Girvan et al., 2019), comparing the number of Black students to the overall school enrollment. The risk ratio formula is applied as follows:

$$\frac{\text{Total number of students referred} - \text{Number of Black students referred}}{\text{Total students enrolled} - \text{Total \# of Black students enrolled}}$$

A percentage was calculated to determine the likelihood of Black students being excluded compared to their peers (Kaur, 2019). This inquiry defined peers as White students. Qualitative data included professional learning sessions, entrance and exit tickets, and interview responses. All qualitative data was coded and identified themes and their impact on discipline practices.

Table 13 illustrates how the research questions were applied throughout the study. Aligning the questions, tools, and methods ensured that the collected data corresponded to the inquiries. Each meeting with the inquiry partners began with a review of the questions and the collected data, ensuring that the study remained focused and allowed for the identification of necessary adjustments.

Summary of Phase I

Phase I provided an opportunity to collect and review initial discipline data through ECATS. The research questions were discussed, and the professional learning plan was outlined, including session themes, specific professional articles, activities, frequency, and duration of sessions. All Inquiry Partners agreed on the plan. Participant sampling was reviewed. Initial discipline data and information from the initial questionnaire (regarding participants' knowledge and understanding of current discipline practices) served as the baseline for evaluating the study's impact on discipline disproportionality.

Phase II

Phase II focused explicitly on the professional learning plan. This plan outlined six sessions, each lasting about one hour. The initial session began by establishing norms, reviewed

Table 13

Data Analysis

Research Questions	Instrument Collection	Data Analysis
How do teachers' perceptions and understanding of discipline disproportionality impact classroom-based discipline practices?	● Classroom Referral data (ECATS) ● Initial Questionnaire ● Session Entrance Tickets ● Session Exit Tickets ● Buddy Teacher referral data ● Classroom Management Data Log	● Quantitative - ECATS (classroom referral data) - Responses from Initial Questionnaire ● Qualitative - Responses from the professional learning sessions
How does delivering professional learning focusing on Implicit Bias, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Restorative Practices impact teacher mindset and discipline practices?	● Initial Questionnaire ● Structured/semi-structured interviews ● Classroom Referral data (ECATS) ● Session Entrance Tickets ● Session Exit Tickets ● Buddy Teacher referral data ● Classroom Management Data Log	● Quantitative - ECATS - Buddy Teacher data - ODR data ● Qualitative - Responses from Professional Learning.
As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership style change because of this study?	● Journal	● Qualitative

at the start of every meeting. Each session aimed to access prior knowledge and engage participants in discussions around application and reflection. The sessions alternated between in-person and virtual formats (via Google Meet) generating both quantitative and qualitative data. The selected scholarly articles introduced participants to specific concepts and offered resources for classroom management strategies. Direct questions were posed using the digital tool Jamboard, which allowed anonymous responses. Entrance questions and exit tickets encouraged participants to share their "aha" moments and reflections.

During this phase, strategies that could be quickly integrated into classroom management practices were discussed, and feedback was requested on their implementation. After each session, qualitative data was reviewed and coded according to identified themes. Quantitative data, such as Buddy Teacher Referrals and teacher-generated referrals, were accessed and analyzed regularly. Data triangulation aimed to assess the impact of professional learning on disciplinary practices.

Inquiry Approach/Intervention

The professional learning sessions acted as the intervention in this inquiry. They were guided by established norms and trust, promoting genuine discussions on discipline policies and classroom management. Understanding the data was crucial for addressing discipline disproportionality. Analyzing data, reviewing selected professional journal articles, and engaging in guided discussions improved participants' awareness and understanding of the Focus of Practice. Qualitative data collection methods included an initial questionnaire, individual session questions, and entrance and exit tickets, while quantitative data comprised teacher-managed referral data.

Phase II focused on five professional learning sessions, each guided by essential questions and centered on distinct themes. Each session encouraged participants to engage in authentic discussions and reflect on their practices. Furthermore, it provided an opportunity to explore strategies applicable to classroom learning environments. Together with the Inquiry Partners, both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to assess the impact of professional learning on discipline practices. The results indicated a decrease in recorded teacher-managed behaviors, as measured by Buddy Teacher referral data and insights gathered from ECATS.

Summary of Phase II

The study's intervention took place during Phase II. The professional learning sessions produced valuable qualitative and quantitative data. Throughout this phase, data was regularly analyzed, themes were identified, and the impact of the professional learning sessions was assessed. Establishing norms fostered a sense of trust among participants. Discussions on content and application were engaging and clear. The sessions provided opportunities for reflection and growth concerning disciplinary practices and potential next steps at the inquiry site.

Phase III

This phase focused on specific Inquiry Partners facilitating structured and semi-structured interviews. There was no time limit for the interviews; however, the partner conducting them attended the last 20 minutes of the professional learning session to complete introductions. Participants engaged in sessions conducted via Google Meet or in person, with these sessions recorded for analysis after prior notice. Interview responses remained confidential, and personal email addresses used for sending session invitations. Participants informed that the questions followed a semi-structured approach and allowed for additional follow-up questions as needed. The interview questions (see Appendix G) and the structure provided a framework to assess

participants' understanding of the data and their level of readiness for change. Alongside the interviews, this phase emphasized final data collection. The final ECATS data was acquired before the end of the first semester of 2024-2025. All quantitative data, including risk ratios, was reviewed to assess the impact of the learning sessions. Qualitative data, such as Jamboard responses and entrance and exit tickets, was also analyzed to aid in the evaluation of the study.

Analysis of Approach.

Phase III involved a thorough analysis of quantitative and qualitative data and evaluated the effectiveness and impact of the learning sessions on discipline practices. Coding the learning session responses and exit tickets identified themes and generated follow-up questions. Furthermore, data provided insights into the participants' engagement levels and willingness to use the discussed strategies. Combining the qualitative data from the interview responses with quantitative analysis, identified the level of influence the sessions had on the participants' mindset and the applicability of the interventions to address discipline disproportionality.

Summary of Phase III

Phase III was the period during which the semi-structured interviews were conducted, qualitative data was analyzed and coded when applicable, and the final collection of discipline data occurred. This phase was rich in data analysis that extended beyond coding. Data was reported as it was, and personal opinions not considered. In addition to the quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher's journal assessed the impact of the learning sessions on discipline practices. All data, including the county's equity policy 1150, was reviewed when determining the next steps at RWMS.

Inquiry Design Rigor

Trustworthiness was a critical element of this inquiry and was built through credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Mertler, 2022). Consistent techniques (such as triangulation), prolonged engagement, thick description, and peer debriefing with Inquiry Partners transpired throughout this inquiry. Purposeful sampling (Mertler, 2022) was used, and assumptions and limitations associated with these techniques were acknowledged and addressed.

Established relationships fostered familiarity with staff behaviors and mindsets. Engagement, transparency, and understanding of the school's culture ensured consistency, credibility, and enhanced trust. Participant trust provided numerous opportunities to learn about classroom culture and identify positive and negative patterns. Frequent debriefing sessions with the Inquiry Partners created many chances to reflect and ensure that data included detailed descriptions and opportunities for reflexivity. Data triangulation would be monitored, and inquiry questions would be routinely referenced. Discussions regarding the PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) phases and questions helped determine whether additional phases were necessary. These sessions established credible and valid data by identifying biases, themes, and next steps. Interviews and surveys provided candid insights and allowed themes to emerge identified. Utilizing a mixed methods approach was the most appropriate for this inquiry as there was a need to go beyond one source of data (Mertler, 2022). Data was analyzed from multiple perspectives and collected in an explanatory manner. Seeking themes and patterns permitted a deeper understanding of how behaviors and interventions, such as Restorative Practices, impact disproportional discipline.

Throughout the inquiry, I maintained a journal capturing my hypotheses regarding specific interventions, participant mindsets, concerns, and any additional questions. Journaling

served as a document to record my initial understandings and takeaways from meetings and interviews with my inquiry partners. My journal entries were honest, included as many details about the setting and interactions as possible, and allowed me to express my thoughts and wonders. Additionally, they served as a data source describing the impact on my leadership style.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

The limitations of this inquiry emphasized challenging participants to look beyond their race and understand how personal classroom referrals impact student achievement. Validity concerns arise from educators' preconceived gender and racial biases and the nature of student relationships. Participants exhibited a lack of racial and gender diversity, with 75% being white and 75% female, reflecting a bias toward the belief that every student deserves "a second chance." There was a possibility that participants might express one viewpoint during the sessions and act differently in their environments. Participants discussed philosophies and beliefs in a safe, judgment-free environment.

Before the inquiry, it was presumed that the participants genuinely required assistance in comprehending the underlying messages conveyed by the data. Historically, there has been a lack of emphasis on systematically analyzing disciplinary data. When disciplinary measures are predominantly punitive, students who face behavioral challenges tend to disengage from learning. Although the data indicates racial disproportionality, it is plausible that participants may not recognize their contribution to this disproportionality. Relationships play a crucial role in student behavior, and a few participants were expected to report having strong connections with their students. Assisting participants in understanding the relationship between student culture and behavior was anticipated to pose considerable challenges. Finally, it was essential to be prepared for some participants to engage under the pretense of enhancing their image and

without a genuine willingness to implement the needed changes to address the existing disproportionality.

Role of the Scholarly Practitioner

When reviewing discipline, it was essential to acknowledge and address existing disproportionality. In recent years, there had been an inconsistent approach to school discipline, with some student behaviors being addressed while others were overlooked. Additionally, assigned consequences were not consistent and sometimes varied drastically. Furthermore, assigned consequences have not been consistent, sometimes varying drastically. As a former administrator at the school, I did not participate in the interviewing process due to concerns about participants' need to feel safe and honest. As the lead researcher, data was analyzed methodically and without bias with all reported responses valued and shared. Throughout the process, I maintained a journal to help me process and reflect on each phase and the overall inquiry. The journal allowed me to express my honest thoughts and ideas. Engaging in this process required me to let go and trust my partners and the overall workflow. While there were moments of frustration, how those were handled mattered most. This inquiry adhered to deadlines, procedures, and protocols and was not micromanaged by any individual.

Study Validity

To ensure validity, data triangulation was used to incorporate multiple sources of data and information (Mertler, 2022). Quantitative data was gathered using ECATS, including examining current and historical data dating from 2017-2018, current data included the examination of teacher-managed discipline practices. Subjective offenses, grade level, and subgroup data were analyzed. The initial questionnaire contributed to quantitative data, thus conveying the participant's prior knowledge. Qualitative data was collected through five focus

group sessions, session entrance and exit tickets, and individual participant interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, permitting the interviewer to ask follow-up questions.

Following each focus group facilitated in Phases I and II of the inquiry, data was organized and interpreted with themes identified. The inquiry questions guiding the study were often reviewed to ensure data collection aligned with the study objective.

Summary

This inquiry addressed the discipline disproportionality between middle school Black students and their peers. Subjected to harsher consequences (Monroe, 2005), Black students receive exclusionary practices at 1.8 times that of their White peers (Gibson et al., 2014). Utilizing Improvement Science and PDSA phases to work collaboratively with Inquiry Partners, this inquiry evaluated the impact professional learning has on classroom management practices and discipline disproportionality. Participation was confidential and voluntary, and their mindsets were acknowledged as integral to the inquiry. Adhering to ethical practices and utilization of data (quantitative and qualitative), all analyses is free of bias and reported with transparency.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This inquiry examined the impact of professional learning (focusing on Implicit Bias, CRT, and RP) and classroom management practices on reducing discipline disproportionality. This inquiry incorporated continuous and cumulative professional development that exposed the participants to professional reading, practical approaches, and engaging with all classroom students. Furthermore, this inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers' perceptions and understanding of discipline disproportionality impact classroom-based discipline practices?
2. How does delivering professional learning focusing on Implicit Bias, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Restorative Practices impact teacher mindset and discipline practices?
3. As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership style change due to this study?

Utilizing an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, this study included multiple phases of inquiry aligning with the PDSA Model and incorporated the steps of Plan, Do, Study, and Act for continuous improvement (Langley et al., 2009). During the first phase of this inquiry, pre-existing discipline data was reviewed by grade level, race, and code of conduct offense. Historical data, short-term suspension data, and subgroup enrollment data from 2017-June 2023 were reviewed, and subgroup enrollment data from 2012-June 2022 was reviewed.

The study was completed in three phases, lasting approximately one year. There were five professional learning sessions lasting one hour over eight weeks. Each session was structured and allotted time for a discussion surrounding the topic and connection to RWMS. The culmination of the study was the individual semi-structured interview sessions.

Using session dialogues, entrance and exit tickets, Jamboard responses, and individual interviews, two key findings emerged around:

- **Power of Data - Acknowledging data as a vital tool for decision-making and trend analysis,** feedback from dialogues and Jamboard responses highlighted the significance of data in making informed choices. Close examination of school-wide data focusing on disproportionality and an understanding of implicit bias created an opportunity to understand the power of data more thoroughly.
- **Mindset Shift to Become a Change Agent – Armed with a new understanding of data,** participants experienced a mindset shift to move to more collaborative ways of thinking and change their practices.

A recurring theme of relationships emerged consistently during the study, linking the two findings and establishing the necessary conditions for participants to grasp the power of data and act upon it. Trust, open communication, and mutual support were essential for achieving mindset shifts. Participants acknowledged the significance of relationships among colleagues, recognizing the necessity for students to take a more proactive role in driving change and supporting others throughout the process. Figure 2 is a visual representation of the findings, the key elements within each, and the progression from understanding to mindset shift, to making changes to practice. The remainder of this chapter details the evidence that was collected during the professional development sessions to support each finding.

Power of the Data

Data is a powerful tool that, when disaggregated, can share various valuable viewpoints and levels of understanding. The participants' lack of exposure to socialized disaggregated data resulted in them creating their narratives. Initially, they thought that one subgroup of students'

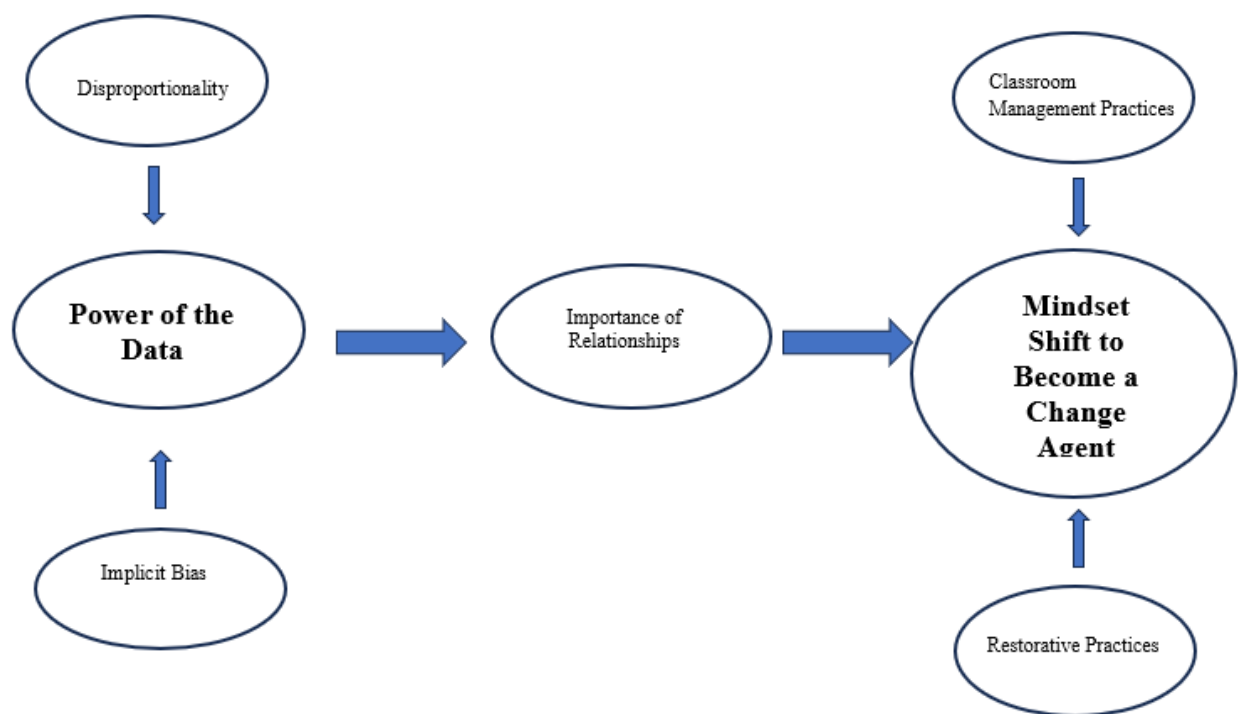


Figure 2. Findings.

behavior was more pronounced than others, which resulted in a new level of understanding. As data became more socialized, so did awareness about their role in student discipline practices.

Reflecting on this session underscored the significance of shared data and the understanding of the conveyed narrative. While two participants were somewhat familiar with the data through meetings like the School Improvement Team (SIT), the other two had no prior exposure. By sharing school-wide data, the more confident participants identified the narrative. Both were eager to point out that RWMS had a suspension issue. However, perceptions shifted when examining disaggregated data by race, offense, and grade level.

During the data review, participants recognized a different narrative as they expressed concerns about inconsistencies across grade levels and the subjectivity of offenses and questioned whether the behavior of Black students justified the consequences assigned. One male participant attempted to connect the discipline data with the school's academic performance data. Initially, it was assumed that student exclusions resulted from decisions made by the school administration, affecting performance scores. While silently reviewing the grade-level data, he concluded that it was not the school administration's choices impacting the students but the teachers' actions.

Professional development sessions focused on school-wide data, disproportionality, and implicit bias. Participants completed entrance tickets based on assigned readings and previous experiences, engaged in discussion, and submitted exit ticket responses for each session.

School-Wide Data

The first session was held virtually via Google Meet. Before the meeting, all participants received the meeting code and link to the Google Jamboard. Established norms included honesty, a safe space to share perceptions, and complete agreement that all discussions and comments

would remain within the group. Establishing trust was crucial because not all participants regularly engaged with one another. Additionally, it was determined that no sessions would be recorded due to participants' concerns regarding their identities.

Using Jamboard, participants utilized same-colored Post-it notes to identify disciplinary practices and areas of need at RWMS. Table 14 illustrates how the responses were analyzed. Initially, participants hesitated to add comments, but once one note was posted, the Jamboard became populated. After reviewing and identifying keywords, themes of inconsistency and transparency emerged. Of the 15 generated responses (see Figure 3), 53 % of the reactions expressed concerns about student accountability, while 40% highlighted inconsistent practices among adults.

The school's discipline culture expects teachers to manage minor behaviors such as disrespect, non-compliance, and integrity issues. All behaviors are outlined in the district's Student Code of Conduct, but participants acknowledged that these definitions are subjective. A school-wide practice assigns each teacher a "Buddy Teacher," allowing them to remove disruptive students to maintain a conducive learning environment temporarily. Students referred to a Buddy Teacher are expected to reflect on their behavior while completing classwork in an alternate location. While one participant mentioned actively using this system, two others noted that, although they do not assign students, they do receive students in their classrooms. Table 15 estimates weekly Buddy Teacher referrals for the start of the 2024-2025 school year. Although three participants do not assign students to their Buddy Teacher, two reported receiving them. Those who received students often noticed the same individuals being sent repeatedly, raising concerns about the effectiveness of this intervention.

Table 14

School-Wide Data and Disproportionality Jamboard Responses

What does discipline look like? Are there areas of need? Organized participant responses.

Inconsistencies	Transparency
Administration never looks at Buddy Teacher referrals	Data is never shared with staff
Not all administrators are supportive	The EOY led to clear boundaries and better behavior
Reported discipline means more of what we could have done better- never posed to the student	Rams Reflection is a mess- kids want to go there
Depends on school administrator	Inconsistent kids need more
Actions may lead to accountability, but consequences may be enjoyable	
Not all administrators have the same responsiveness	
Two different approaches- what we say and what we do are different	
Different consequences for different kids	
Not all students are held accountable-depends on who their parents are	
There is no discipline for BST kids- protected by Sped	

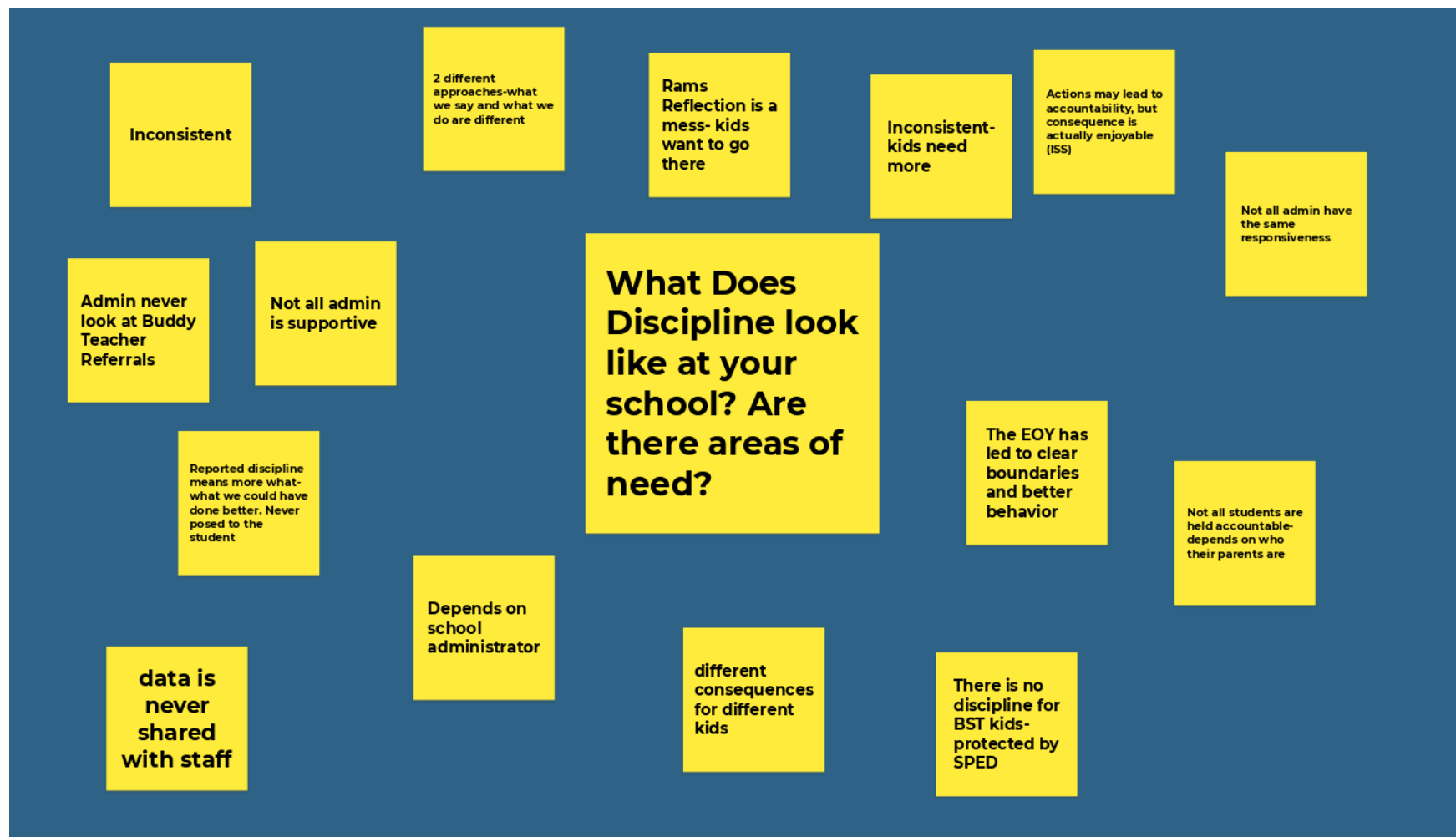


Figure 3. School-wide Data and Disproportionality Jamboard Responses: What does discipline look like? Are there areas of need?

Table 15

Buddy Teacher Referrals (July 2024)

Participant	Estimate of students assigned	Estimate of students received
Veteran Elective	0	5
English	0	3
Social Studies	3	0
Newest Elective	0	0

One participant clarified that an effective intervention should reduce the behavior, which this system fails to achieve given the recurring referrals. Individual teachers maintained their Buddy Teacher referral data, but this information was not routinely shared, reviewed, or discussed with school administration. A participant who utilized the strategy noted that reassignments occur only after multiple unsuccessful redirections, impacting instruction. This participant expressed frustration with the process, stating that the same students are consistently referred. All participants agreed that the Buddy Teacher referral only changes a small percentage of students' behavior, often becoming an intentional tool for students to exit the learning environment.

Participants expressed concerns regarding the need for more transparency and sharing of RWMS discipline data. It was reported that data is shared with specific staff, and school-wide data is seldom viewed collectively. Acknowledging that not all participants have had the opportunity to view the data, the 2022-2023 teacher-managed referrals (see Appendix E and Appendix F) were shared with participants. While reviewing the data, elective teachers highlighted that the building was divided by grade levels and subject areas, with elective teachers working separately from core teachers. This isolation has resulted in elective teachers operating in silos, disconnected from the larger team. One participant noted the challenges of addressing behaviors when initial interventions fail. The three remaining participants mentioned instances where consequences had to be modified, emphasizing that effective behavior management relies on student engagement and buy-in. Although all participants agreed on involving families in disciplinary decisions, they rarely seek support from administrators, as feedback can raise concerns about teacher performance and behavior management. This feedback indicated a significant disconnect between staff and administration. Questions arose about why Black

students have been assigned more referrals than other races, and the differences in behavior versus the other students were questioned. Participants needed to be able to view the teacher-managed discipline data and the school-wide discipline data.

Two participants, who had seen some data, were engaged in a discussion surrounding the data and its story. Noting that Black and Hispanic student subgroups were being suspended at higher rates than their White peers, participants raised concerns regarding the academic impact on these subgroups. Historically, these subgroups have endured higher suspension rates. With three participants having been at the school for five or more years, questions arose about why discipline practices had stayed the same. During this discussion, the veteran elective teacher suggested that the data conveys disproportionality.

Figure 4 displays the participants' thoughts on the causes and ways of addressing disproportionality. In contrast, Table 16 displays organized participants' responses when identifying how disproportionality happens and how it can be addressed. Participants noted that the lack of accountability and data review are leading causes, while ownership, engagement, and data analysis need to be interrupted. The core participant (English) indicated that disproportionality occurs when one subgroup receives more intentionality or responses than others. Utilizing Post-it notes, participant responses were organized, thus enabling grouping and the identification of additional variables contributing to disproportionality. Misinterpretation of data, staff and student relationships, and the lack of problem-solving commitment are all factors the participants identified as contributing to disproportionality. Additionally, three Post-it notes highlighted that "seeing" the data goes beyond the numbers on the paper and extends to understanding the "why." The 2022-2023 teacher-managed referral data (see Appendix E) and

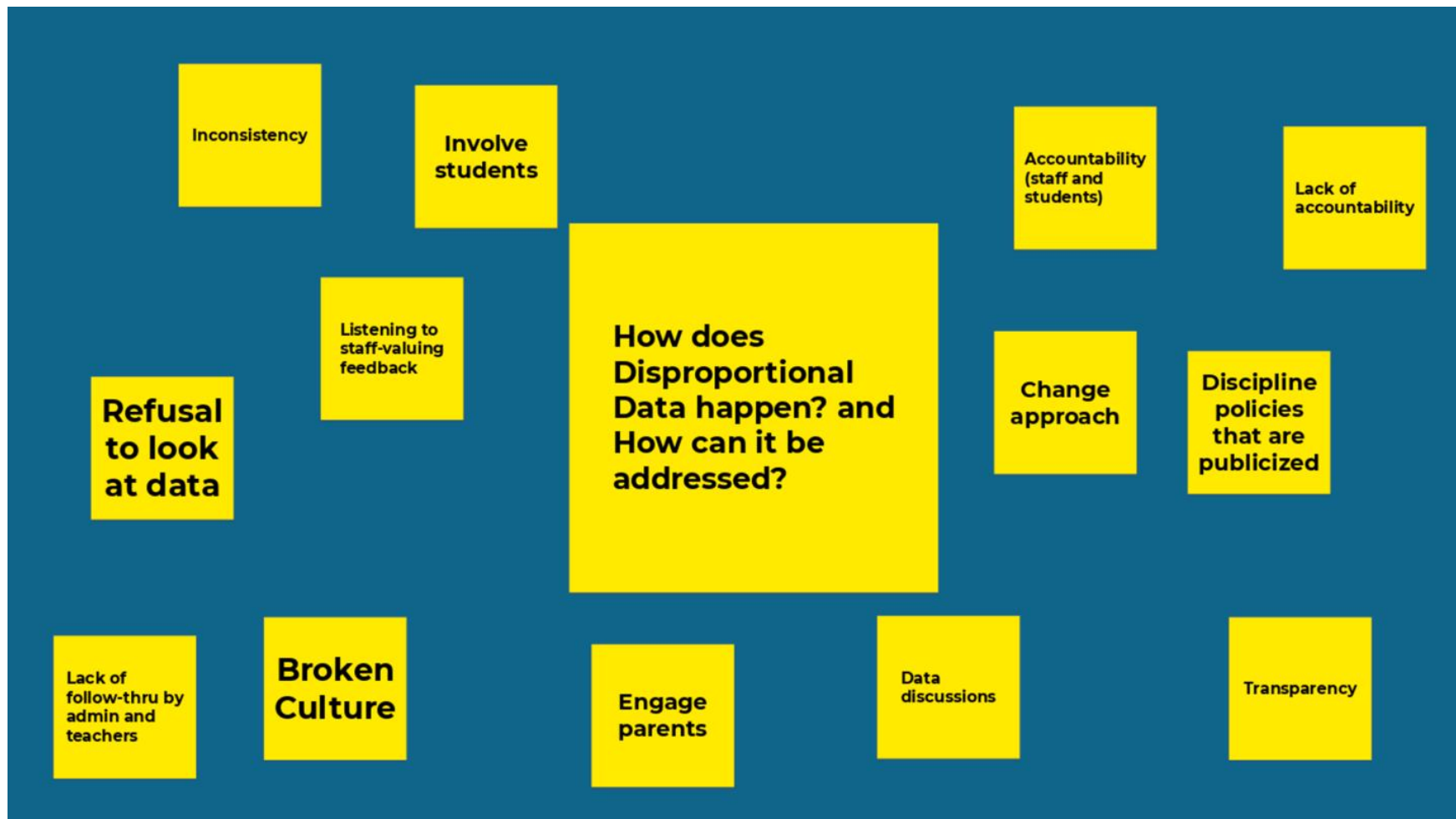


Figure 4. School-wide Data and Disproportionality: How does disproportionality happen? How can it be addressed?

Table 16

School-Wide Data and Disproportionality

How does disproportionality happen? How can it be addressed? Organized Participant responses.

<u>How does disproportional data happen?</u>	<u>How can disproportional data be address?</u>
Inconsistency	Accountability by all staff and students
Broken culture	Engage parents
Refusal to look at the data	Listening to staff-valuing feedback
Lack of follow thru by administrators and teachers	Change approach
Lack of accountability	Data discussions Involve students Publicize discipline policies Transparency

the data disaggregated by the offense (see Appendix F) grounded the concept of disproportionality at RWMS.

Provided with time to review, process, and comment, emerging themes included consistency, equity, and mindset. One participant eagerly noted that the referrals by race decreased through the grade levels, with the two elective participants noting the decrease may not be attributable to effective interventions but because of inconsistency, grade alignment, and tolerance. With three participants having worked at RWMS for over five years, note the importance of discussing students' race when reviewing behavioral and academic data. Three participants indicated that previous conversations about race were abandoned because staff felt uncomfortable. A standalone comment noted that stakeholders desire changes but are unwilling to engage due to their feelings of pain. The connection between behavior and academic performance remains overlooked despite an overt focus on academics. All participants noted current interventions as being ineffective when responding to student behavior. There is a well-socialized goal of academically advancing specific subgroups but a failed acknowledgment that instruction differs for excluded students. They discovered that repeatedly assigning consequences to the same student did not alter the behavior and directly contributed to the school-wide disproportionality. The male participant shared that formal academic assessment data is unsurprising as it aligns with discipline data. Additionally, he vocalized the realization that the same students continue to be subjected to disciplinary consequences.

All participants unanimously agreed that assigning discipline consequences is easy, but understanding the behavior is challenging. Transparency and awareness among all stakeholders appeared often, with the veteran participant pointing out that implementing new programs would

not address inconsistencies and that consequences should match the behavior—furthermore, relationships and alignment matter.

Using the information previously shared in Table 16, participants noted the need for school-wide alignment with compliance to directives and mutual respect. The male participant elaborated by stating that the lack of alignment leads to inconsistent discipline practices. The two female elective participants also reiterated that the consequences of elective teachers do not align with those of core teachers. The female core (English) participant further expressed that her views on disrespect and non-compliance differ from those of her colleagues. She quickly dismissed alignment with tolerance, while the veteran participant emphasized that expectations and consequences should be consistent throughout the school. The newest staff member at RWMS remarked that a student's appearance, language, and behavior influence disciplinary actions, suggesting that students are often labeled as “good” or “bad.”

Participants vocalized that teacher-managed offenses of compliance with directives, integrity, and respect are subjective. Referencing 2022-2023 data disaggregated by offense and race (see Appendix F), participants quickly noted that in addition to the subjective code of conduct, the data reflects Black students being identified as non-compliant four times that of their White peers. Furthermore, mutual respect was a concern, given that Black students are being assigned consequences for this student code of conduct 1.18 times that of their White peers. With inconsistent interpretations of behavior contributing to disproportionality, the biggest obstacle is that the socialized and actual school cultures do not align. The female core (English) participant noted abundant data sources available at each grade level but rarely analyzed using a structured problem-solving approach like the ICEL (Instruction, Curriculum,

Environment, Learner) framework. The belief that data can be threatening, addressing the root causes of behaviors and aligning disciplinary practices is essential to reducing disproportionality.

Disproportionality

Before the second session, all participants read the article “You Can’t Fix What You Don’t Look At: Acknowledging Race in Addressing Racial Discipline Disparities” (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2017). The session occurred in person, and participants received entrance tickets, as Figure 5 illustrates their responses—thoroughly analyzing these responses was necessary and led to three distinct conclusions. Using Fig Jam, we sought keywords aligned with the questions, noting that not all reactions corresponded directly with the queries and were thus excluded from the analysis. Table 17 shows the questions on the Jamboard and the responses to each question.

While only one response pertained to discipline for repetitive behavior, all participants agreed during the discussion that they had disciplined a student due to disruptive actions. Although teachers managed the consequences and included parental communication, three participants expressed that not only did they repeat consequences, but the outcomes seldom changed the behavior. The newest staff member, an elective teacher, questioned the necessity of imposing a consequence. This same individual pointed out that while consequences may relieve adults, conveying the message that behavior matters, she stressed the importance of student buy-in. Her comment silenced the group. Expressing this sentiment led to a significant shift in the session. The veteran elective teacher suddenly remarked that RWMS discipline directly reflects the school’s culture, and the RWMS data indicates a lack of inclusivity and respect. This comment initially received criticism from core teachers, who argued that they promote inclusive practices and equitable learning environments where all students are respected. The newest staff

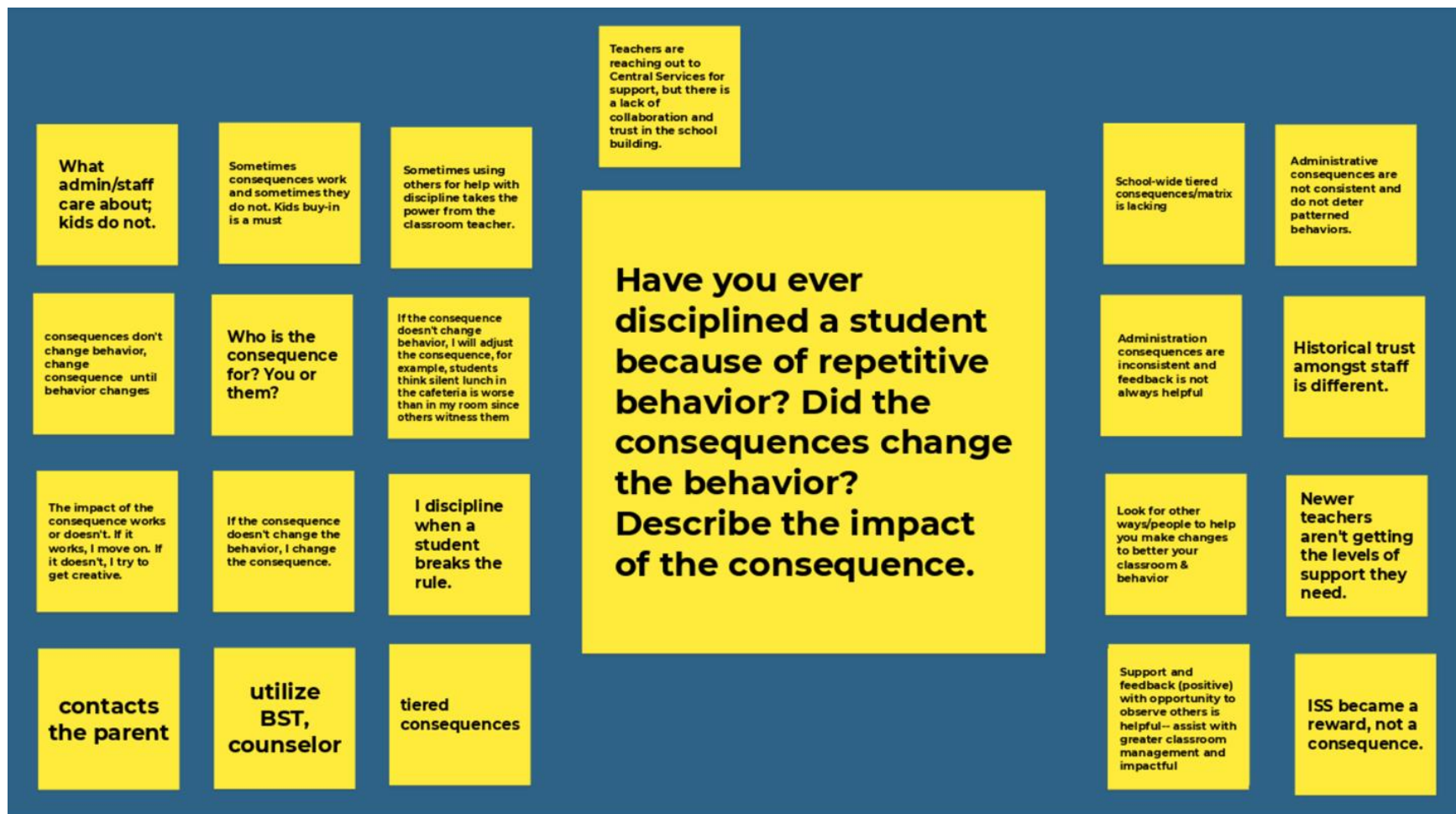


Figure 5. Disproportionality and participant mindset: Entrance ticket responses.

Table 17

Disproportionality and Participant Mindset: Entrance Ticket-Organized Responses

Have you ever disciplined a student because of repetitive behavior?	Did the consequences change the behavior?	Why are the consequences not changing the behavior?
I discipline when a student breaks a rule.	- Sometimes consequences work and sometimes they do not. Kids buy in is a must. - The impact of the consequences works or doesn't. If it works, I move on. If it doesn't, I try to get creative. - Consequences don't change behaviors, change consequences until behavior changes. - If the consequences don't change the behavior, I change the consequences. - Contact the parents - If the consequences don't change the behavior, I will adjust the consequences- for example- students think silent lunch in the cafeteria is worse than in my room since others can see them	- Who is the consequence for- you or them? - A school-wide tiered consequences/matrix is lacking. - Historical trust among staff is different. - Administration consequences are inconsistent, and feedback is not always helpful. - Sometimes uses other to help with discipline takes the power away from the classroom teacher. - Lacking tiered consequences.

member, an elective teacher, stated that inclusive learning environments should not consistently display data indicating disproportionality.

While the core teachers stressed the school-wide implementation of social contracts, the two elective teachers asserted that social contracts only address expected behavior and neglect to consider consequences. The elective teachers reminded the other two participants that they interact with all students in the building. Furthermore, both agreed that consequences do not effectively change student behavior due to inconsistencies and a lack of respect within the school. Additionally, each core team has its own rules and expectations, leading to differing consequences. A behavior on one team might result in a warning and a phone call, while similar behaviors on another team could lead to lunch detention or a Buddy Teacher referral. The lack of consistent expectations across the building has contributed to disproportionality. While the core teachers emphasized the school-wide implementation of social contracts, the two elective teachers pointed out that these contracts only address expected behavior and do not discuss consequences. They also reminded the other participants that they engage with all students in the building. Both elective teachers unanimously agreed that consequences fail to alter student behavior due to inconsistencies in expectations and respect throughout the building. Moreover, each core team has its own rules and expectations, resulting in various consequences.

Recognizing that behavior involves several variables, participants engaged in a discussion about the previously identified article. The Social Studies teacher emphasized the importance of trust, equating it to the foundation of all interactions, and acknowledged that conversations about race and gender can be uncomfortable yet necessary. Moreover, he pointed out that trust and alignment of expectations and consequences affect data outcomes. Citing historical data, the experienced elective teacher expressed that current practices at RWMS must

change to reduce disproportionality. Additionally, essential conversations are required and should include all stakeholders. The female Hispanic elective teacher stated that reading the article increased her awareness of the need for community and collaboration. She also noticed an underlying tone of judgment and questioned how many students at RWMS feel this way. The core English teacher remarked that these conversations are familiar to RWMS staff, but concrete actions have yet to be implemented.

Identifying factors such as relationships, differing social norms, and the perception of “good kids” versus “bad kids,” the next steps to address the existing disproportionality include having conversations about race that go beyond academic testing results, aligning behavioral expectations and consequences, and recognizing and confronting existing biases. All participants concurred that RWMS’s approach to discipline needs to change.

Session two required self-reflection and identifying and analyzing RWMS's current discipline practices. Participants were candid, trusting the process and acknowledging discipline disproportionality only when the school had consistent disciplinary practices and routinely reviewed data. Figure 6 displays participant exit responses, with participants able to populate as many Post-it notes as warranted. All the notes reflect a heightened awareness of bias and its impact on discipline. While the notes are anonymous, they raise questions about whether this is the first time discipline practices and data have been examined without considering academic achievement data. Although it may be expected that some of the items listed on the notes come from less experienced educators, three of the participants have been teaching for over five years. The notes convey the importance of transparency and engaging discussions surrounding discipline. Additionally, discipline and behavior are subjective, meaning that what is tolerated by one may result in consequences by another.



Figure 6. Disproportionality and participant mindset: Exit ticket responses.

With a consensus that discipline was rarely discussed, the conversation needed to focus on the participants' classroom management practices. Initially, frustrations were expressed about chronic behaviors that remained unchanged. During the session, the participants inadvertently revealed their mindset. Three participants conveyed dissatisfaction that repeated disciplinary explore potential root causes and solutions, one showed no interest. This participant wanted to review data but not much else. With a closed mindset, the other participants quickly engaged this individual in a dialogue, seeking to understand the limited ownership. Using the participants' Buddy Teacher Referral data, the others sought to understand the data narrative. Gradually, the disinterested participant began to see the data from a different perspective and recognized that while trust matters, relationships are essential. During the session, the third participant's mindset changed as the responsibility shifted from solely the student to the student and teacher.

Safe dialogue is a crucial aspect of data discussions. With established norms, participants felt comfortable seeking clarity and understanding. Dialogue should be encouraged to promote clarity and comprehension. Data is more than just numbers; it conveys a narrative that needs to be understood.

Implicit Bias

The Harvard Implicit Bias Test was shared with all participants. There was no expectation as part of the study for participants to take the test or share the results if they had taken it. Similar to session two, this session was also in person. Interestingly, three participants completed the test, with one participant sharing that the awareness of biases is vital, as “when you know, you can do better.”

With the expectation of reading “Implicit Bias, Disproportionate Discipline, and Teacher Responsibility for Instruction as Prevention” (Scott, 2021) before the session, participants

eagerly engaged in how Implicit Bias can impact learning and discipline. Figure 7 depicts the participant's responses, while Figure 8 reflects the organized reactions. During the session, participants' understanding of the impact of the biases. Before the reading, participants equated discipline practices solely to student behavior. Students were assigned consequences because of their behavior. Following the reading and discussion, there was an emerging understanding that discipline was exclusively the outcome of student behavior. Participants began understanding that their behaviors and attitudes impacted student behavior and discipline practices. The Jamboard responses reflect a shift in understanding that some student behavior is subjective, thus relying on the teacher's judgment. Ultimately, teacher biases directly impact student discipline. The latter was best highlighted when one participant shared those certain behaviors in her learning setting, acknowledged as acceptable, may appear as disrespectful and non-compliant in another space.

Importance of Relationships

The dialogue among the participants was authentic and safe. Later, participants shared that, while it was sometimes uncomfortable to hear, listening to their colleagues sparked reflection and accountability. One participant even shared that they only implemented some basic strategies out of frustration, and they began viewing their role in the learning environment. As relational trust grew, participants became more open to new practices in their classrooms. Initially, the discussion centered on current classroom management practices. Strategies for managing classrooms shifted from a teacher-centered approach to one emphasizing student involvement. Participants recognized the importance of relationships and sought to understand the underlying causes of behaviors. Instead of dismissing students and imposing consequences based on implicit bias, they started to view each student holistically. Participants reported

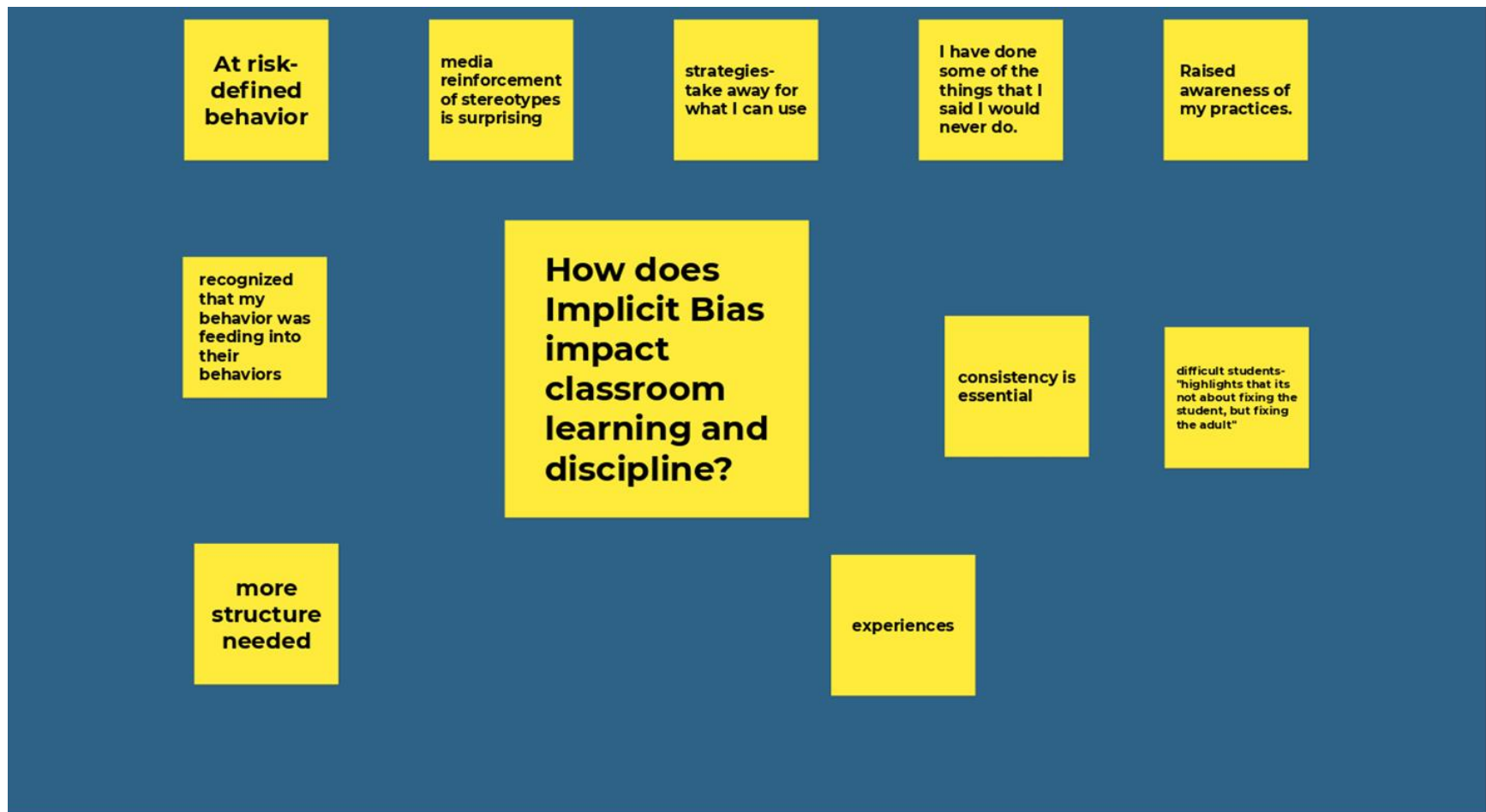


Figure 7. Identifying and understanding the impact of implicit bias: Entrance ticket responses.

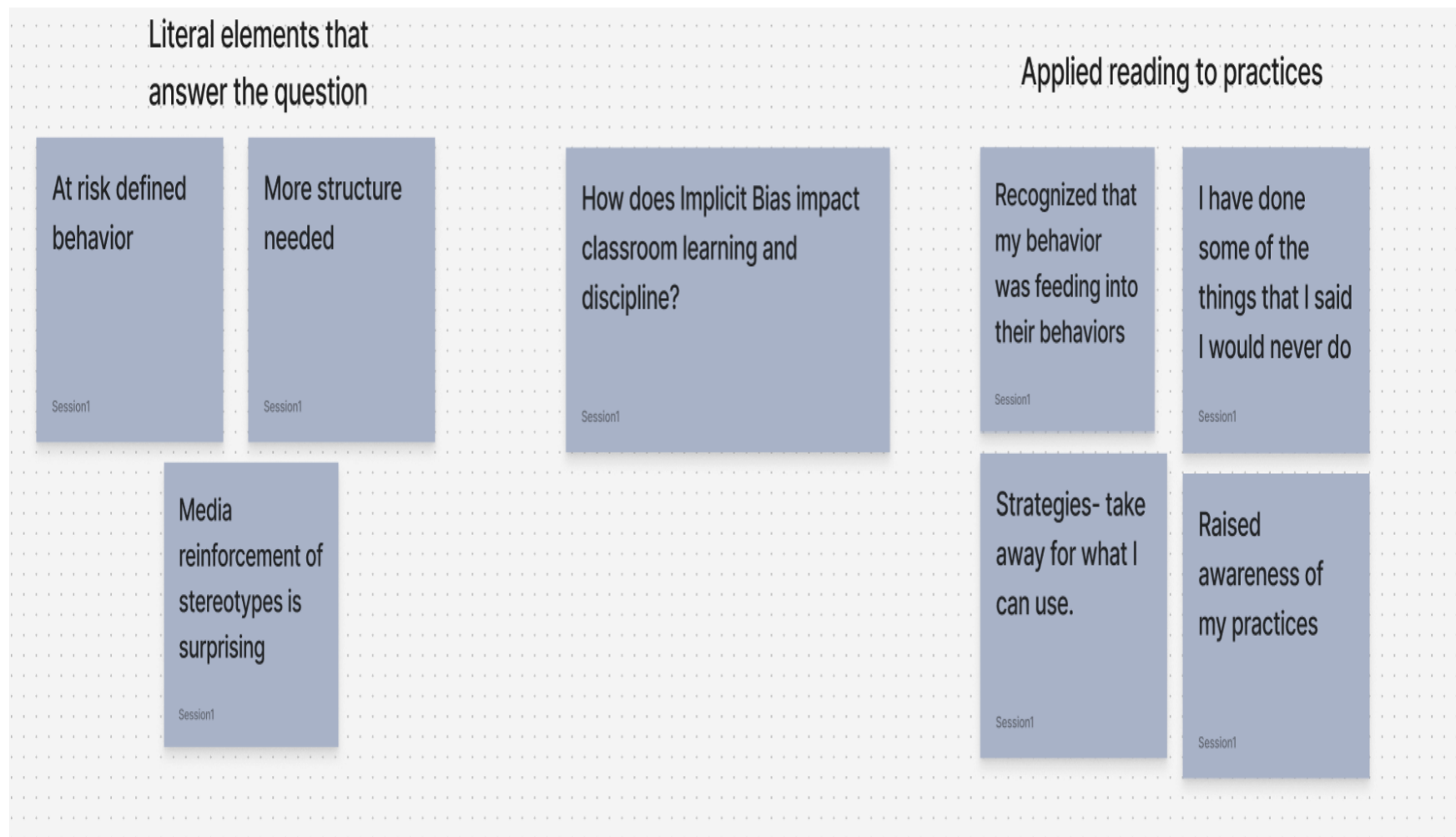


Figure 8. Identifying and understanding the impact of implicit bias: Entrance ticket responses organized.

improved engagement between students and staff, indicating deeper connections rather than merely superficial relationships. When behaviors arose, instead of reacting quickly and assigning consequences, one participant noted that they met with students to understand the reasons behind the behavior. In this participant's learning environment, they shared that there has been a decrease in Buddy Teacher Referrals. Additionally, they mentioned that the meetings with the student have been beneficial, as both the student and the participant can share their perspectives. The level of honesty has led to improved student behavior and heightened participant mindfulness regarding how they "show up" to the learning session.

Session five took place in person, and the participants arrived enthusiastically, eager to discuss the topics with their colleagues. The veteran elective teacher shared her excitement for the session, noting that the previous one had been engaging. She also emphasized the value of hearing her colleagues' diverse thoughts, opinions, and strategies in a supportive environment and the real-world applications that can be implemented the very next day.

Participants openly discussed their Classroom Management Log (see Appendix I). The themes from the conversation included monitoring tone, judgment-free language, intentional listening, and building and maintaining relationships with all students. The male participant highlighted that none of the strategies required financial investment, emphasizing the importance of an open mind and opportunities for reflection. He shared his recent self-awareness regarding how he attends class, noting that each day is a new beginning for him and his students. When addressing problematic behaviors, he actively listens to understand the student's perspective and considers how he responds. The male participant's response led to the newest staff member (elective teacher), highlighting that all the listed strategies can be interpreted as an objective, thus requiring them to be modeled across various settings. Acknowledging all previously shared, the

core English teacher shared that change happens when concerns are defined, seen, and understood by all. She continued to say that real change requires consistent building commitment with all staff members accountable. With 75% of participants excited and ready to implement changes at RWMS, the remaining 25% remained apprehensive, dismissing her uncertainty about her unfamiliarity with the culture.

Aligning with the progress of the implementation of the strategy, the discussion shifted toward focusing on Buddy Teacher referral data and teacher-managed behaviors. Table 18 differs from the previously shared data in Table 15, reflecting actual data from the first six weeks of school. Participants estimated that the male participant consistently used his Buddy Teacher to protect the learning environment before the study began. Given the natural progression of the school year, the number of referred students is anticipated to equal or exceed the figures noted earlier in Table 15. During the discussion, the male participant candidly revealed that he referred 38 students to his Buddy Teacher during the 2022-2023 school year. He elaborated that these referrals often occurred when he felt overwhelmed. Now, he intentionally engages with the students to identify the root causes of their behaviors before considering exclusion. Although initially required a shift in mindset, he noted he is noticing changes in his students, including increased engagement and a slight decrease in challenging behaviors. Additionally, he mentioned that the exclusions listed in followed multiple redirections and individual student conferences.

The veteran elective teacher noted that she had welcomed more students and collaborated with her colleagues. She further explained that she is beginning to interact with students in new ways as she seeks to understand their behaviors, reporting that they are starting to see her as an advocate. In one instance, a student asked, "How come you get me, and he doesn't?" This highlights research findings that students are sometimes misunderstood and may not be

Table 18

Buddy Teacher Referrals: Weekly Data for the First Six Weeks

Participant	Number of students assigned	Number of students received
Newest Elective	3	5
English Teacher	1	4
Social Studies	6	0
Veteran Elective	2	12

intentionally misbehaving. Reacting to the veteran elective teacher's insights, another core teacher (English) expressed that she had previously resented receiving students, feeling her classroom was viewed as a “dumping ground” for her colleagues. Attending the sessions has shifted her perspective, leading her to engage more positively with the students. She shared that one student was frequently sent to her, prompting the need for intervention. Seeking assistance from the counselor, the teacher arranged a conference with the counselor, the subject-matter teacher, and the student. Ultimately, the behavior stemmed from feelings of disrespect on both the student’s and teacher's part. Although the conference was uncomfortable for everyone involved, it transformed their perspectives, fostering a better understanding of one another and decreasing the number of missed classes.

Mindset Shift to Become a Change Agent

When reviewing responses, a theme emerged suggesting that while Implicit Bias has impacted participants, there is a sense of awareness. Using open coding of the ten responses, 40% correlated the question to the participant’s existing practices, while 30% answered the specific question by citing elements from the reading. The responses reflect participants’ mindsets when reading, thus possibly suggesting different levels of participant awareness and readiness.

When asked to identify strategies that could be implemented, such as reducing Implicit Bias, the responses in Figures 9 and 10 identified words such as consistency, transparency, and heightened awareness. The latter aligns with the words used to address disproportionality. During this conversation, Inclusive Classroom Management (ICM) was also discussed, and rather than adhere to the proposed professional learning schedule, learning Sessions three and four were combined, as reflected in Table 12 (Chapter 3). The session time was extended at the

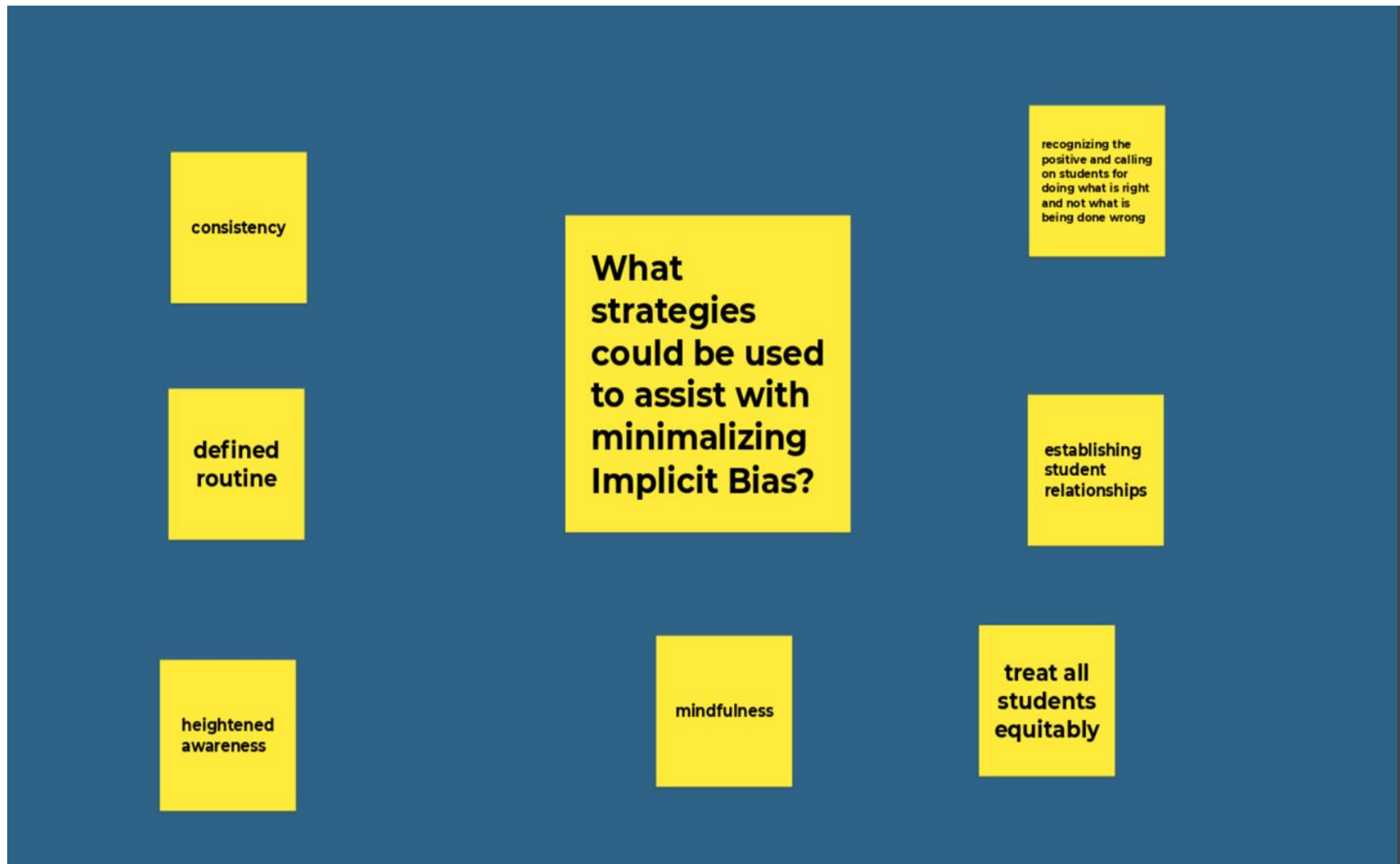


Figure 9. Identifying and understanding the impact of implicit bias: Discussion responses.



Figure 10. Identifying and understanding the impact of implicit bias: Responses and ICM.

request of the participants, with time allotted to read the article aligning with proposed session four.

Figure 11 reflects responses highlighting mindfulness and intentionality, echoing the understanding that not every student is in the learning environment. The veteran elective teacher suggested that ICM is absent at RWMS; thus, others wondered how to address the inconsistency and disproportionality. The female core teacher (English) silenced the group when she suggested that every facet of a school depends on culture implies that RWMS's culture is fractured.

During the session reflection activity, each participant partnered with a peer to discuss their classroom management style and identify any changes and the reasons. In the group discussion, a male participant shared that his teaching style had evolved due to the readings and discussions from the session. He noted that he is now more intentional and actively monitors his responses to students. Furthermore, he is conscious of immersing himself in the learning environment, recognizing its impact on instruction and student reactions. The elective teacher noted that she needed to be made aware of how she held one group of students to a different standard than others. While shocked by this bias, she was grateful for the newfound awareness and, like her peer, has become more intentional in her engagement with students. This participant left the session eager to implement changes and evaluate both the modifications made and their impact on the overall learning environment. The responses and engagement during the session discussions indicate emerging shifts in participants' mindsets, as evidenced by their aligned reactions.

Participants gradually recognized the connection between their behavior and its impact on student discipline practices. After reviewing their specific discipline data in earlier sessions, this session focused on biases. Participants disclosed that before taking the Harvard Implicit Bias

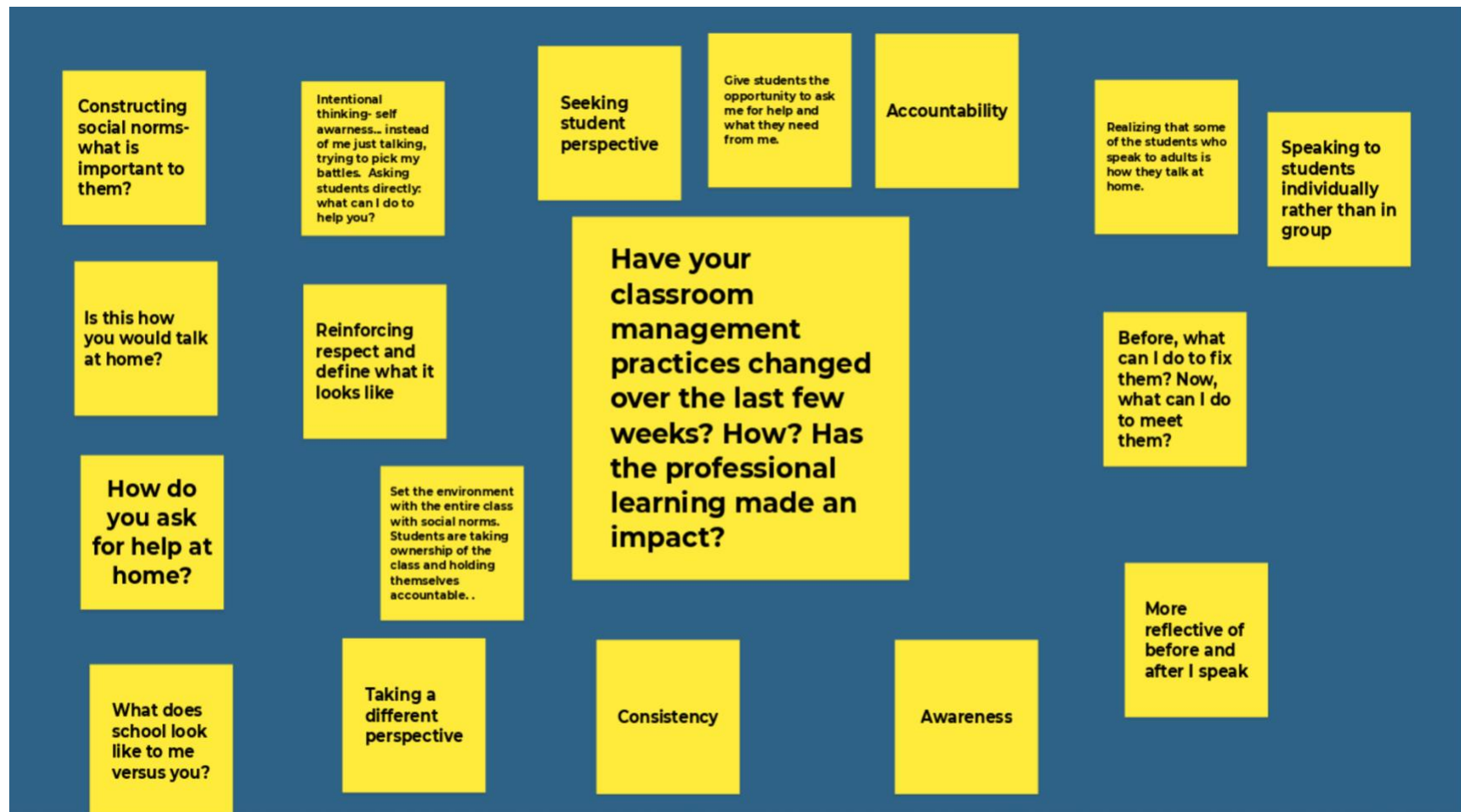


Figure 11. Changes in mindset and the impact on classroom management practices: Entrance ticket responses.

Test, they did not consciously believe they had any biases. Engaging in the assessment was significant, as the information came from an objective source rather than a colleague, community member, or school administrator. Throughout the session dialogue, one participant acknowledged the effect of their biases on student achievement and discipline. Soon, the other participants began reflecting on their biases and their consequences. With increased awareness, participants expressed feelings of guilt and regret. In addition to recognizing biases related to students' race and reputation, participants understood that their presence also affects student behavior and discipline. It was very powerful to observe the participants throughout this dialogue.

At various points during the session, we noticed changes in body language, such as shaking heads and gasps. Participating in the Harvard Implicit Bias Test was difficult but necessary, as it evaluated the participants objectively. While those who completed the assessment expressed disbelief and, in some instances, shock, what they did with that information was most important. Reminding the group that the data was complex, the veteran elective teacher shared that changes could be made based on this information.

Previously, there were discussions about how school data is affected by inconsistencies among school administrators. Based on the data and conversations from this and past sessions, participants recognized their shared responsibility for the inequitable discipline data. Furthermore, it became clear that discipline encompasses many variables that extend well beyond student behavior.

Classroom Management Practices

Due to changes in the schedule, session four was held virtually. As RWMS is a year-round school, there was a break between the sessions because of the start of the 2024-2025

school year. The session began with an entrance ticket question linked to the Strategy Implementation Log (see Appendix J) and the Classroom Management Log (see Appendix I). Pairing the information in the previously shared figures with the discussion, Table 19 highlighted an emerging change and awareness of roles within the learning environment. The responses showed significant differences from those in session two. Previous remarks, such as “if the consequence does not change the behavior, change the consequence,” have transformed into a sense of awareness and ownership concerning the necessary actions by adults. Student actions are also becoming more apparent, indicating a partnership. The perspective of actions and ownership of those actions reinforces the significance of student-teacher relationships, illustrating the learning environment as a collaborative space between students and teachers. This directly relates to ICM, which is founded on the principle that all voices matter, encouraging mutual respect and collaborative ownership.

In addition to checking in with participants about updates, the team discussed Culturally Responsive Classroom Management. In alignment with ICM, participants read either “Culturally Responsive Classroom Management: Awareness into Action” (Weinstein et al., 2003) or “Mindful Reflection as a Process for Developing Culturally Responsive Practices” (Dray & Wisneski, 2011). Each article was reviewed during the session, and those who read them shared insights and resonant thoughts gathered using Jamboard. What began as a sharing of highlights (see Figure 12) evolved into meaningful discussions, emphasizing student accessibility and comfort levels, and acknowledging that everyone approaches the learning session differently. Highlighting the comments from “Culturally Responsive Classroom Management: Awareness into Action” (Weinstein et al., 2003), Table 20 highlights themes aligning with the session

Table 19

*Changes in Mindset and the Impact on Classroom Management Practices: Entrance Ticket**Responses Organized*

Comments	Teacher's Action	Student Actions	Student and Teacher Action together
Constructing social norm- what is important to both students and teacher			X
How do you ask for help at home?	X		
What does school like to each student and teacher			X
Intentional thinking-self-awareness- instead of me just talking, asking students what I can do to help them?	X		
Reinforcing respect and defining what it looks like			X
Set the environment with the entire class with social norms- student taking ownership of the class and holding themselves accountable			X
Seeking student perspective	X		
Provide students the opportunity to ask me for help and what they need from me	X		
Speaking to students Individually rather than in a group	X		



Figure 12. CRT and RP awareness and emerging growth mindset.

Table 20

CRT and RP Awareness and Emerging Growth Mindset: Organized Responses

Responses	Theme
Student Partnership	Student-Teacher Relationships
Student Ownership/agency	Student-Teacher Relationships
Acknowledging that students show up with different rules	Student-Teacher Relationships
Behavior is culturally influenced. All students need a say in how they are treated in the classroom environment to feel valued.	Student-Teacher Relationships
Classroom should not be designed to privilege	Student-Teacher Relationships
Important to learn about student's culture- its all about relationships	Student-Teacher Relationships
Ensure that students can access the curriculum (language)	Student-Teacher Relationships
Before thinking negative, think about through a different lens	Teacher mindset
Important to value all cultures and contributions	Teacher mindset
Everyone (teachers and students) show up differently each day- we need to be mindful of this each day	Teacher mindset

entrance ticket, emerged a shared sense of ownership between students and teachers. Classroom management practices emphasized intentional student engagement, input, and perspective.

Additionally, two notes underscored the importance of culture, recognizing that everyone is different and deserves equal treatment. Unlike earlier notes, it explicitly addresses culturally responsive practices, suggesting that being culturally responsive requires a level of teacher awareness that acknowledges both culture and learner agency. After discussing both articles, participants began identifying new strategies for quick implementation. Both core teachers (English and Social Studies) shared how they incorporated formal student conferences to review grades and work. Engaging students in reviewing and analyzing their work can help identify areas of additional need. They also agreed that while it might be easier to have a student leave, they would be more deliberate when behaviors arise and speak with the student outside, hoping to uncover the root of the behavior.

The two elective teachers also shared immediate implementations, including being mindful of how they (the adults) present themselves in class, pausing before addressing a student about behavior, and ensuring consistency across all class periods. Furthermore, both discussed sharing information with their Professional Learning Community (PLC) and working toward alignment among the elective teachers. Participants left eager to share at the next session.

Restorative Practices

Transitioning to the discussion of the article “Restorative Justice in Education: What We Know So Far” (Anfara et al., 2013), participants examined and defined restorative justice within the context of schools. While Figure 13 illustrates the participants’ responses, Table 21 underscores the importance of a strong culture, relationships, and consistency. Referencing the article, participants stressed the necessity for a strong culture and accountability through



Figure 13. Implementation of RP at RWMS.

Table 21

Themes of RP

Culture	Consistency	Relationships
Respect	Accountability	Focus on repair
Viewing everything in totality	Disciple approaches	Forced focus on the relationship itself
Must needed	Training	Between staff is essential- all have to be on the same page
Honesty		
Level of comfort and trust		

behavioral ownership while also expressing concerns about implementation issues related to teacher vacancies. Additionally, securing staff buy-in is essential with a commitment to sustain long enough to see results, suggesting a pilot program before full-school implementation. Citing the shift in mindset, the core English teacher challenged the group to consider Restorative Justice (RJ) and, more specifically, Restorative Practices (RP) through a cost-benefit lens. One male core participant shared that RP would be most effective after reviewing peer responses and engaging in meaningful conversations, pending an examination of the building culture, emphasizing that culture affects everything within a school. Culture is a significant factor contributing to disproportionality. This remark left all participants silent. After silence, the other core English teachers supported the male teacher's response, stating that culture also influences academic achievement. Given the low staff retention, the newest staff member questioned the actual impact of the culture at RWMS. This led other participants to reflect on their experiences with previous administrators and the school's overall functioning. Referring to historical discipline data, the newest elective teacher suggested a fractured culture, implying that RWMS is no better off now than when it first opened. The discussion of RP and its implementation at RWMS stirred emotional responses from all participants. While the dialogue was structured to allow each participant to speak freely, it concluded with the understanding that professional disagreements are acceptable.

Changes in Practice

In evaluating the school's level of readiness, participants concluded that before discussing discipline practices, the school's culture and trust must be addressed. Everyone agreed that change cannot be impactful without trust and commitment. Furthermore, there needs to be an acknowledgment that the school can achieve more than just a state report grade of C.

Connecting culture, confidence, and discipline to student achievement, discussions around data must be meaningful. With complete agreement, participants suggested that colleagues discuss Implicit Bias and CRT. Participants prefer the Harvard Implicit Bias Test because it is a well-respected and objective source, meaning that feedback comes from someone unknown to them rather than a peer or administrator. Additionally, it was determined that while all participants appreciate the idea of RP, the school is not yet ready for that level of commitment or implementation. Instead, RP would be identified as a goal.

Data disproportionality would not be presented initially but combined with topic-based scholarly articles. Grade-level and team data would be used for analysis, with participants noting that staff are not yet ready to understand the narrative their data conveys. While the latter is the goal, it may be initially more straightforward when unsure of the staff member's identity.

Participants started to identify the specific process for implementing this plan. With two participants on the School Improvement Team (SIT), the goal was for these individuals to start asking questions and making suggestions as the SIT began to formulate next year's goals and objectives. Additionally, both SIT members shared that they would go as far as volunteering to serve as the key process managers.

Individual Interviews

After session five, the individual semi-structured interviews were set up. After sharing with the Inquiry Partners the participants' reluctance to have sessions recorded, it was determined that two individuals would attend the interviews, one serving as the interviewer and the other as the note-taker. The Inquiry Partners believed this structure would free the interviewer from worrying about recording responses, thus enabling concentration on the reactions and formulation of additional questions. The individual serving as the recorder had no

further role. Utilizing the interview questions (see Appendix G), each session lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Three sessions were conducted in person, while the fourth was held virtually. Each session adhered to the five agreed-upon questions, allowing the interviewer to seek clarity or additional details. The interview questions were shared with all participants before the meeting, along with a reminder that the sessions would not be recorded. Before formally beginning the interview, the goal was to hear each participant's thoughts and ideas without the influence of others. Additionally, participants were not required to answer questions if they felt overwhelmed or uncomfortable. The participant interview questions and identified response themes are presented in Table 22, while each question and its detailed responses can be found in Appendix K. The responses were organized by question and enabled a comprehensive analysis. Throughout the individual interviews, the theme of inconsistency emerged. All participants noted inconsistencies in how situations and consequences are managed, varying from teachers to administrators. When discussing disproportionality, all participants acknowledged the influence of students' race and reputation on the consequences and duration of the determined consequences. When provided the opportunity to discuss growth opportunities, all participants agreed that data needs to be frequently socialized. Understanding that behavior is subjective, participants expressed the need for additional professional learning opportunities focusing on the Student Code of Conduct, fostering a positive culture, and building and maintaining strong relationships with staff and students. The Veteran Elective teacher emphasized the latter when she described a recent conflict with a colleague regarding the excusal of a particular student from this colleague's classroom. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of ongoing professional development in understanding behavior and root causes, CRT, and de-escalation techniques. An effective discipline policy integrates student and staff

Table 22

Themes of Participant Interview Responses

Interview Questions	General Theme of Responses
As a school, describe how discipline is managed?	● Discipline is inconsistent varying between administrators and teams of teachers
What story is the disproportionate data conveying? Do you think that the data is accurate? Do staff biases impact you? Why?	● The data is indicating that Black students are involved behavioral incidents more than other subgroups
What actions can be taken to address the school-wide discipline policy? Describe areas for growth. Is there a clear understanding between classroom-based referrals and Office Discipline referrals?	● Data needs to be socialized with staff ● School needs more professional learning and education understanding Student Code of Conduct and appropriate consequences
Describe the ideal discipline policy. How does it provide inclusivity for all students?	● Input from both students and staff ● Policy needs to be clearly defined and assigned consequences objectively reviewed
What about the current policy needs to change?	● Relationships ● Re-build school culture ● Trust

input and includes well-defined expectations and consequences. With the suggestion of student “buy-in,” the participants perceive RWMS as a closed system and believe that “everyone” should have a voice. Lastly, there was agreement on the need for consistent and equitable discipline practices, which should be objectively reviewed each semester.

After session six, the Inquiry Partners gathered to reflect on the study and to identify the next steps. Session six and the participant responses were reviewed during this time. A heavy emphasis was placed on the interview questions because in a one-on-one setting, partners believed responses to be more honest than in more extensive settings—many of the responses aligned with the content from the various sessions. Furthermore, the partners were comfortable with the interview responses and considered them valid. In addition to reviewing the responses, the partners identified the following steps: looking at classroom-managed referral data before, during, and after the study. Tables 23 reflects teacher-managed referrals from 2023-2024 and July through November 2024 indicating that Black students continue to receive teacher-managed referrals at a rate 2.28% higher than their White peers. The 2024-2025 data in reflects reduced teacher-managed referrals and decreased racial disproportionality.

Summary

Through the improvement science methodology with an explanatory-sequential, mixed methods design, the inquiry team developed appropriate responses to the three research questions of Inquiry to create more culturally aware teachers and examine the impact professional learning has on student discipline practices. With initial professional learning sessions developed and supporting data, future professional learning sessions must continue building upon teachers’ cultural awareness and equitable discipline practices. Focused sessions are continually needed to reduce the existing discipline disproportionality between Black and White students. This chapter

Table 23

Buddy Teacher Student Referral Data by Race

Race	2023-2024	2024-2025
Black	31	6
White	16	3
Hispanic	8	1

described the inquiry, instruments developed and used, data collection, and data analysis to answer the three inquiry research questions. Chapter 5 summarizes the inquiry including the research questions and specific recommendations for the continued work surrounding discipline disproportionality.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This inquiry aimed to determine the impact professional learning has on classroom management practices and discipline disproportionality in middle schools. With the understanding that removing students from learning environments as an “intervention has failed” (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 32), there is a need for more aligned and equitable discipline practices. Seeking to raise the participants' awareness of school discipline data and the impact of their responses, professional learning sessions were designed to engage school staff in effective classroom management practices and developing responses to student behaviors. A focus on equitable classroom management practices would address the discipline disproportionality between Black and White students.

Interpretations of the Findings

Participants discussed disproportionality, implicit bias, culturally responsive teaching, and restorative practices using focused sessions. Through these dialogues, along with Jamboard responses and entrance and exit tickets, participants better understood the significance of data, disproportionality, mindset, and growth. Additionally, student behavior was no longer seen as one-dimensional; instead, it was recognized as the result of various factors, including relationships and culture. Throughout the inquiry, accountability for student behavior shifted from solely the student's responsibility to being shared by both the student and the teacher. Participants also began to appreciate the importance of disaggregated data, the effects of biases, and the need for cultural responsiveness in addressing overall disproportionality. Moreover, there was a change in participants' mindsets as they acknowledged ineffective practices and sought improvements in classroom management strategies.

Power of the Data

The initial research question assessed participants' perceptions concerning the disproportionality of discipline and its implications for classroom discipline practices. While it was agreed by all participants that discipline is not uniformly enforced across various grade levels and within the building, three attributed this inconsistency to implicit bias, whereas one participant expressed uncertainty. These findings suggested that the participants know inequitable disciplinary practices but remain unsure about the underlying causes. The data presented previously in Table 17 and the responses in Figures 8 and 9 illustrate the developing understanding that disciplinary measures may be subjective and susceptible to biases.

While they had their predispositions about the discipline story, viewing and discussing the data led to a heightened awareness. After reviewing data from previous years, participants began vocalizing that inconsistent discipline practices contribute to the disproportionality in school buildings. Previous classroom-based referral data was shared, making participants feel surprised and guilty.

Disproportionality

Regarding the relationship between race and discipline, all participants either agreed or strongly agreed that Black students face disciplinary consequences more frequently than their White counterparts. However, three participants disagreed with the idea that the school's Black student subgroup violated the Student Code of Conduct to a greater degree. This discrepancy indicated that while three participants acknowledged the existence of inequitable disciplinary practices, two suggested that these inequities arise from misunderstandings about the student subgroup. The quantitative data collected from sessions one through three present conflicting information when compared to the insights obtained during the initial questionnaire, as two

participants anonymously expressed that the data indicated both Hispanic and Black student subgroups received more disciplinary actions than their White peers. The male participant noted that classroom referrals contribute to these inequities, suggesting that the disproportionality begins at the classroom level. Furthermore, it was mentioned that repetitive discipline is also a contributing factor to disproportionality. However, this latter point was not widely accepted by the other participants, who exchanged uncertain glances, unsure of what to say next.

Implicit Bias

Completing two professional learning sessions led participants to conclude that behavior is subjective, discipline is subjective, and relationships genuinely matter. Recognizing that their behavior may influence student behavior, participants discussed their management style, noting any changes based on the professional readings and discussions. Nine of the eleven Post-it notes in the previously presented Figure 10 focused on the teacher's actions. The male participant became acutely aware that his actions and responses impacted student behavior. Throughout the various session discussions, he realized that perspective shapes how behaviors are perceived. While behaviors in one setting may be tolerated, the same behavior in another may lead to a disciplinary referral. With the emerging understanding that interpreting behavior is subjective, participants recognized that tone, clearly defined expectations, policies, procedures, and consistent implementation are crucial. When addressing behaviors, it's essential to be mindful of everyone's needs and to understand that each individual presents differently every day. Each day represents a fresh start, and participants acknowledged that there are days when they seek grace; students deserve the same consideration.

Importance of Relationships

Participants maintained a Classroom Management Strategy Log (see Appendix J) throughout the inquiry, identifying specific utilized interventions. Table 24 identifies some examples of the strategies implemented during that time. There is a shift from teacher-managed behavior to student-teacher-managed behavior. The three participants who collected and shared the data noted changes in the classroom culture. One participant pointed out that student re-direction included utilizing index cards for all students. Every student received five index cards for the duration of the cards. A card was removed for every disruption, with the loss of all five resulting in lunch detention. Student empowerment and control was highlighted as the cards served as a visual aid for students to self-monitor. The first few class periods were challenging but eventually resulted in less removal of cards and increased student excitement about the engaging activities. Students' feedback was sought at the end of the week, with the majority sharing that they liked it because the visuals helped them see how close lunch detention could be. Furthermore, the reduced disruptions allowed the class to engage in more hands-on applications and fewer discussions about behaviors. Students who struggled with behavior arrived at class with a new attitude as they shared that they felt they were getting second chances and not one-and-done.

Another participant utilized student conferences and noted that the students were initially uneasy and uncertain about what to say. At first, the student believed that the teacher did not care and was only pleased when the student was sent to another teacher or received a disciplinary referral. Following up with the participants after the inquiry, they shared that the student-teacher relationship thrives. The student now regards this teacher as an advocate and often approaches them for help with challenges in other classes. The feedback regarding class remediation was

Table 24

Classroom Management Strategy Implementation

Identify the strategy	How often implemented?	Describe how the specific strategy was implemented	Observations about implementation	Describe differences between multiple implementations
Student re-direction	Multiple times during class	Each student received five index cards- yielding focused and meaningful engagement	- Students more engaged and aware - Student intentional about engagement- more focused	Involving the student was beneficial- they had ownership and a voice.
Student Conference	Weekly	- Met with the student to discuss disruptive behavior - Student encouraged to share the why for the behavior - Made sure that the student understood that it was safe to talk- want to identify the reason and ways to support - Set small goals (5 reminders per class) and recognized student for their efforts	- Student struggled at first with goal, but by second day was more aware of behavior - Student invested and followed up at the end of the class period to get feedback (How did I do?) - Student displayed new attitude and shared with their preferred adult that they felt like I really cared about them and was not just trying to send them out of class.	- More focused in class - Improved student-teacher relationship - Trust - Increased engagement - Reduction in disruptive behaviors - Grade improvement

Table 24 (continued)

Identify the strategy	How often implemented?	Describe how the specific strategy was implemented	Observations about implementation	Describe differences between multiple implementations
Class Mediation	Whenever needed	• When an disruption happened, class was stopped. • Posed the question to the students as to why the instruction stopped- all encouraged to share • Sought solutions from the students as to how to reduce the disruptions	• All students involved- ownership for learning • Students began to hold each (respectful) other accountable for behavior • Students accepted redirection better from peers • More acknowledgment of individual behaviors- more intentional self-monitoring	• Initially was challenging- student mindset that this was their classroom and learning • Students became leaders • Teaching and learning happened every day • Peer relationships improved

that instruction came to a halt when disruptions occurred. Instead of addressing one student or stopping all instruction, the participant encouraged student engagement. The students became part of the solution by asking the students why the instruction stopped. This approach required the involvement of all students and ultimately shifted the ownership of learning from the teacher to both the teacher and the student.

At one point during the inquiry, the male participant acknowledged that he routinely assigned Buddy Teacher referrals to students who chronically interrupted instruction and the learning of others. He shared that he had never considered the root causes of such behavior or the impact of his approach to each class period, student behavior, and discipline.

Previously students exhibiting chronic behaviors were never provided with a fresh start or due process. Instead, students were judged based on previous behaviors. The latter aligns with that of Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2017), thus suggesting that perceptions plague our schools and contribute to disproportionality. Historically, classroom management has not been a strength, and this participant frequently requested administrative support. Additionally, when suggestions were made, the participant was closed-minded and dismissive. Changes to practice are significant given the previous poor classroom management. He later reported that he has begun engaging students in determining the reasons behind their actions and possible solutions. This change has improved student-teacher relationships and significantly decreased Buddy Teacher Referrals.

Similarly, the newest elective teacher, aligned with the male core Social Studies teacher, shared her increased awareness of how she presents herself in each class. In addition to seeking mental breaks from colleagues, when necessary, she also expressed a desire for more student feedback. She mentioned surveying students about the class content, instruction, and overall

culture. While noting that some of the feedback was difficult to read, it was eye-opening and helped her realize the need for change. Adopting a different perspective revealed her biases against Hispanic students, acknowledging that she had previously used past behavioral challenges against them, thus denying them a fresh start. With this new outlook, she approached her classes differently, now utilizing a modified version of the social-emotional curriculum, Zones of Regulation. Each class begins with a quick Google form for students assessing how they are showing up to the learning environment. Additionally, she has made the commitment to deliberately focusing on structure, expectations, and accountability.

All participants recognized the importance of understanding their biases and developing awareness. Throughout the inquiry, they expressed the need for changes at RWMS. Furthermore, the previous methods could no longer be deemed acceptable and required action. With the participants beginning to recognize how their biases influence student interactions (Colbert, 2010; Weinstein et al., 2003), discipline is shifting to intentional approaches (Bottiani et al., 2018; Dray & Wisneski, 2011), and with increased consciousness, classroom management is progressing toward more equitable learning for all students (Weinstein et al., 2004).

Mindset Shift to Become a Change Agent

Before this inquiry, other than passing in the hall or seeing each other at faculty meetings, the participants did not know each other. Throughout the inquiry participants vocalized the value of dialogue with their peers and students. The participants' honesty level mattered, with each holding the others accountable. After the initial meeting, participants raised questions seeking to understand. Listening to colleagues sparked reflection and accountability. The latter went as far as a participant acknowledging their behavior as a contributor to the discipline disproportionality. One participant even shared that they only implemented some basic strategies

out of frustration, and they began viewing their role in the learning environment differently. Over the duration of the inquiry, participants reported that they started viewing their colleagues as a resource. One participant noted that smiles are discreetly shared in the hallways and notes left in mailboxes. The inquiry brought the participants together and reinforced the message that they matter. Days may be challenging and at times each may want to give up, but there are supports in the building.

During the inquiry, accountability and behavior shift, which became a shared responsibility of both the students and teachers. By reflecting on and changing their mindsets, participants approached discipline differently. With more inclusive strategies, participants reported changes in student-teacher relationships and behaviors. Initially perceived as the disciplinarian, power shifted from the teacher to all students. In two classrooms, social contracts were developed and referenced throughout instruction. Behaviors were addressed as a class rather than individually, empowering all students to hold each other accountable. Research by Zakszeski and Rutherford (2021) indicates that peer intervention is more widely accepted than adult-directed intervention, resulting in fewer discipline infractions. This shift helped establish a more responsive and inclusive environment. Additionally, participants reported that students felt “heard” and “seen.” One male participant shared that meeting with students individually to explore both root causes and support methods resulted in positive changes in behavior and grades. Emphasizing the importance of engagement, he noted that understanding the reasons behind students’ actions helped him become a better teacher, allowing him to tailor his responses to their needs. This aligns with the research of Lustick (2017), Pas et al. (2011), and Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2017), who argue that educators who cultivate inclusive, respectful, and culturally responsive environments build strong relationships and reduce cultural inequities

(Bottiani et al., 2018). Aligning with the research from Zakszeski and Rutherford (2021), two participants reported seeing a shift in responsibility from the adults to the students. Furthermore, they shared that peer intervention is more widely accepted than adult-directed intervention. These two participants continued to share that they are slowly changing their mindset from punishment to support and accountability (McCluskey et al., 2008).

The culture at RWMS continues to concern participants, highlighting issues related to staff mindset and commitment. Participants identified an immediate need to rebuild the school's culture and relationships prior to implementation, thus ensuring transparency and a renewed level of commitment. The veteran elective and core English teacher shared that she has begun intentionally following up with colleagues when receiving students as part of the Buddy Teacher referral process. She expressed surprise at some of her peers' feedback, which revealed decreased professional respect. Citing several articles and additional research, she found it surprising to witness others' dismissive reactions regarding discipline and disproportionality. Until this point, the other core English teacher had remained quiet. While she rarely disciplines students, she does receive those sent to her room by her peers. While she rarely disciplines students, she does receive those sent to her room by her peers. During this session, she shared that she is gaining confidence in speaking with her colleagues, meaning she now follows up with them regarding the students she has received. Utilizing the CRT article, she mentioned having recently met with her colleague about the Buddy Teacher referrals. She indicated that the initial conversation was difficult, and her colleague perceived it as accusatory and unsupportive. After reflecting on various perspectives, the colleague confided their frustrations. Acknowledging that what worked in the past was no longer effective, the study participant shared thoughts regarding CRT and the role of biases. She was pleased to report that student exclusions have decreased.

Restorative Practices

With limited knowledge of Restorative Practices, all participants were eager to engage in the discussion. Paired with the reading, three participants noted the importance of RP being utilized as a school-wide intervention. Three of the participants voiced concerns about RP, expressing that implementation needs to be school-wide and follow the implementation of CRT to be genuinely effective. All participants identified RP as the goal for RWMS but recognized the time commitment and the need for a strong culture. Adopting parts of RP, three participants shared that they engage students in developing social contracts for their respective learning environments. The veteran elective teacher elaborated that the social contract for each class period is posted in front of the learning environment. When behaviors become distracting, she referenced the contract, reminding the class of the agreed-upon norms. The male Social Studies teacher echoed something similar: when problematic behaviors occur, he pauses the instruction and engages the entire class—posing the question *Why am I pausing?* The pause and question cue the students collectively to refer to the contract, identifying the undesired behavior.

As the discussion progressed, the Veteran Elective teacher voiced that she views RP as being at the top of a pyramid. She continued emphasizing the importance and commitment to Implicit Bias and CRT before implementing RP. Echoing this same sentiment, the core English teacher further elaborated that while some elements could be immediately implemented, such as social contracts and discussions identifying damage and its impact on individuals, defining behavioral goals requires a school-wide commitment. Before the approach can become part of a school's identity, intentional work around relationships and trust is needed to ensure all participants have a voice (Lodi et al., 2022).

Participants identified the most significant challenges and obstacles facing RWMS. They unanimously agreed that culture is the foundation and brainstormed the next steps toward acknowledgment and repair. Two participants identified as School Improvement Team (SIT) members and intended to socialize the scholarly articles. One SIT member even vocalized that addressing disproportionality requires a school-community commitment, and RWMS needs an action plan. The plan is to start small with the SIT team, and similar to the leadership concept of the dancing nut, begin with small actions visible to all, resulting in a movement in examining the school's discipline practices.

After completing the study, the participants asked for an additional virtual meeting. Although there was no agenda or questions to guide the session, it was a reflective opportunity for each participant. The participants led the session, sharing what the study meant to them. Together, they discussed a new sense of awareness regarding data, behavior, and disproportionality. Data has not been effectively communicated, and with everyone agreeing that it should be, one participant planned to ask about its inclusion at monthly staff meetings. The male participant noted that he is walking away with knowledge he did not previously understand. Transparent that classroom management is a struggle, he elaborated on his difficulties in understanding his impact on the learning environment. He showed his vulnerability and noted that the implicit bias assessment scores led to acknowledgment, reflection, and change. While he expressed that change is difficult, implementing some of the elements discussed during the sessions has been very beneficial, and he is eager to continue his growth. The newest elective teacher conveyed a renewed sense of energy and commitment. She also mentioned the limited interaction between core and elective teachers during her time as an elective teacher. Aware of biases and their impact on the learning environment, she emphasized the importance of

connecting with other staff members. The smiles and nods while transitioning in the hallways mean everything. Other participants echoed this sentiment, noting that the sessions were valuable because it felt like everyone was learning together, with sessions focused on providing practical insights, unlike other professional development opportunities that demanded no additional work. The information was helpful and easily implemented, thereby not relying on money or created resources. Participants also noted that hearing from their colleagues about their challenges and viewpoints broadened their perspectives. Listened to and acknowledged for their contributions, each felt valued and respected.

Student culture is a defining characteristic ultimately impacting the ways in which students arrive to the learning setting each day. Cultural behavior needs to be acknowledged, understood and not subjected to school discipline practices. Behaviors viewed as offensive, are mis-understood resulting in students being excluded from their learning settings. A change is needed providing students the opportunity to explain and educate. Unilateral judgements cannot continue being applied to all students.

Limitations of the Inquiry

At the beginning of the inquiry, I had concerns about the limited number of participants, the effectiveness of the professional learning sessions, and their impact on classroom discipline practices. Additionally, with the recent leadership change at RWMS, I was unsure about the participants' level of engagement. However, with the establishment of norms and the lack of any recordings, the leadership change had no noticeable impact on engagement.

The inquiry required coordination and collaboration among multiple partners. Scheduling check-ins was time-consuming and often led to virtual meetings. Sometimes, the sessions felt disjointed, with some members absent. I tried to capture and regularly share information with the

other members. Organizing the professional learning sessions was also difficult due to the year-round school calendar, which needed to align with track-out periods and teacher workdays. Considering the busy schedules, we balanced sessions between in-person and virtual formats, keeping them to no longer than one hour. Aware of the time constraints, we curtailed a few discussions due to the elapsed time and our understanding of participants' commitments. Before each session, we shared the upcoming session details, agenda, and a scholarly article with all participants.

Although the inquiry provided rich qualitative data supporting the effectiveness of the professional learning sessions, the study's duration affected the quantitative data. While the Buddy Teacher Referral data indicates a decrease in student referrals, questions emerged about whether extending the study would have an impact like that of the qualitative data.

Implications

The implications of this inquiry led to participants' understanding and ownership of their specific classroom management data. This understanding and ownership prompted a mindset shift, which in turn resulted in changes in practice and equity.

Practice

Discussing discipline disproportionality requires acknowledging that previous policies and practices have negatively impacted students for decades. Furthermore, those practices and policies have crafted the message of “who is valued and who is not, who is capable and who is not, and who is safe and dangerous (Carter et al., 2016, p. 208).”

Examining the topic through the lens of classroom management, participants engaged in sessions that revealed their mindsets and biases. The Initial Questionnaire assessed participants' prior knowledge, ensuring that professional learning sessions were meaningful and applicable.

Recognizing that participants were unfamiliar with discipline data, it was essential to ground professional learning in equitable access for all participants. Sharing data is one step toward meaningful professional learning. Disaggregated teacher-managed behavior referrals by student race, reflecting disproportionality across grade levels and races.

Scholarly articles were utilized before and during the sessions, allowing participants to digest, process, and reflect. Entrance and exit tickets evaluated participants' understanding and application. Well-balanced sessions concentrating on strategies and applications enabled participants to hear a variety of viewpoints and practices. In a supportive environment, participants could acknowledge their biases and start understanding their impact on students and their achievements. The CRT and Implicit Bias sessions were highly engaging. Acknowledging the discomfort associated with each topic, feedback from a male participant underscored the need to allow time for digestion, processing, and reflection. Participants became more aware of their influence on student discipline practices by starting with learning and support centered on implicit bias, CRT, disproportionality, and later, restorative practices. Furthermore, with heightened awareness of interpersonal relationships, student engagement became more deliberate, meeting students where they are and providing them with what they need. All participants continued to focus on the identified areas for individual and school growth through ongoing learning and support.

Equity

Disciplinary policies and practices reflect systemic racism, leading to Black students facing suspensions at an alarming rate. Although the study conducted by the Ohio Children's Defense Fund shows that Black students' classroom behavior does not significantly differ from that of their white peers, the consequences they encounter are drastically different. Today's

socio-political landscape continues to perpetuate racism, with Black students being perceived as more troublesome than their white counterparts.

Using real participant data allowed each participant to recognize their biases and their effects on student discipline. By organizing professional learning sessions focused on inequitable discipline policies and practices and their impacts on students (Álvarez, n.d.), participants enhanced their ability to implement more inclusive discipline strategies. Moreover, when examining school-wide data, participants could discern the disproportionality across grade levels and tracks and their contributions to that disproportionality.

Through engaging discussions and comprehensive professional readings, participants began to understand the impact of Implicit Bias, CRT, and RP on student discipline practices. Furthermore, there was a growing awareness and sense of responsibility regarding subjective student behavior, along with the acknowledgment that student referrals and exclusions are influenced by subjective measures (noncompliance and respect) and rely on staff judgment (Gibson et al., 2014). Although data shows that Black students face more infractions, they are disproportionately represented in subjective offenses (Martinez et al., 2016). The data misleadingly suggests that Black students are responsible for a higher number of infractions, which does not reflect the true situation. Raising participants' awareness was critical in addressing the disproportionality in discipline. Beyond merely identifying inequitable data, it was essential to involve all participants in discussions about current practices and their misalignment with professional literature. Using guiding questions helped participants deepen their understanding and practical applications. The discussions were genuine, fostering individual accountability and commitment to changing practices. Enhanced awareness and active participation led to more equitable discipline policies and practices.

Recommendations

Participating in this study has been invaluable. Reflecting on it, I have identified recommendations and suggestions for future replications. A growth mindset is essential for change; while equitable discipline practices are not new, they require this mindset. Utilizing a questionnaire clarified this mindset and facilitated meaningful research. Before any readings, the study must be grounded in school-wide and individual participant data. While school-wide data helps illustrate the “larger picture,” personal data emphasizes the need for and significance of the work.

When selecting scholarly readings, they should align with the school level and be easily understood. The less educational jargon included, the better. Often, professional readings are set aside due to jargon and lack of relevance. Selections must be brief, relatable, and offer practical suggestions. Participants shared that while they appreciated the concise readings, each provided suggestions that could be applied. Additionally, the sessions gave participants designated time to share and discuss their perspectives and experiences. Participants noted that the engagement centered around the application and school and individual data was the most beneficial aspect.

It is crucial to access and share both school-wide and individual data regularly. Additionally, creating another questionnaire to evaluate participants’ mindsets and the application of strategies would be beneficial. This questionnaire could serve as a valuable tool for measuring the impact of professional learning. Furthermore, the ongoing review and sharing of quantitative data can help identify additional areas for support.

Future Study

The small sample size of this inquiry at Rain Water Middle School does not allow

It can be used to predict similar results in other settings without replication and with repeated outcomes. I recommend replicating this inquiry in various contexts to determine if it produces identical results in reducing discipline disproportionality between Black and White students. Before engaging staff, it will be essential to ensure consistent discipline alignment among all school administrators. Understanding whether professional learning sessions focusing on disproportionality, implicit bias, culturally responsive teaching, and restorative practices, as part of a professional development series, could lessen discipline disproportionality would be beneficial.

Aligning with the Dancing Nut theory, the sample participants should be a small group that understands the inclusion of others. Classroom teachers do not always willingly welcome suggestions or mandates from school administration, but colleagues' ideas and successes lead to change. Additionally, participants should keep a reflection log throughout the study, focusing on their reflections, thus documenting changes in mindset and practice.

Engaging in equity work can be challenging; spacing the sessions may enhance application and significantly reduce inequitable disciplinary practices. Additionally, non-agenda-driven sessions could be implemented to align with drop-in hours, allowing colleagues to connect, collaborate, and decompress.

Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership

This dissertation journey at East Carolina University has profoundly impacted me both personally and professionally. Through this process, I have gained a deeper understanding of what it means to be a scholarly practitioner and the role of an educational leader. Before embarking on this journey, I viewed data merely as a set of numbers without fully appreciating the story or message behind it. Now, I approach data with a more focused analytical lens,

seeking the "why" and "how" beyond the surface. This often leads to follow-up questions that aren't always comfortable, but they are necessary. While time is always a precious resource, it can no longer serve as an excuse for avoiding tough conversations. These discussions have been challenging and personal, but I have learned not to shy away from them for fear of discomfort. Honesty, accountability, and, when necessary, difficult conversations are crucial to ensuring equitable opportunities for all students, regardless of their race, gender, or ethnicity.

My experience with professional learning has evolved. Initially, I questioned the relevance of the many sessions I attended and the additional time and resources they required. However, this study's inquiry-based professional learning sessions were thoughtfully designed to be both relevant and impactful. These sessions balanced research, applicability, and meaningful dialogue. Afterward, participants provided feedback highlighting the value of discussions with colleagues and the relevance of our chosen articles. They even expressed interest in more meetings and opportunities for engagement and problem-solving. This experience reinforced the idea that professional learning doesn't need to involve "shows" or costly resources but should emphasize teachers as valuable resources for learning from one another.

I will always be grateful for the lessons I learned while working with a talented, patient, and dedicated group of teachers during the professional learning sessions. Through this process, I came to better understand the importance of listening to truly hear—not merely to respond. I also realized that, like students, teachers need support as well. It was immensely gratifying to witness the shifts in the participants' awareness and their willingness to try new things. The excitement they expressed when they returned to share their progress was fulfilling. The sessions clearly mattered, and meaningful change was taking place.

Leadership requires an evolving skill set; effective leaders must comprehend the environment—its structure, goals, and mission—while also understanding the people involved and themselves. This study has prompted me to reflect on my own developing leadership style. At the beginning of the study, I anticipated minimal challenges due to my existing relationships with the participants. However, after the first session, I felt unsettled. Despite this, I recognized that the study would be transformative. I initially concentrated on being goal-oriented, adhering to deadlines, and achieving desired outcomes. However, I soon realized that these goals shouldn't come at the expense of the participants. Their feedback and perspectives were invaluable. Despite having planned all the sessions in advance, I quickly learned the importance of flexibility and trusting the process. There were moments when I could have moved on from discussions, but I chose to allow participants to continue sharing, enriching the study in the process. I began to see that the agenda was simply a guide, not a rigid structure. It became clear that it was just as essential for participants to be heard as it was to progress through the agenda. Some sessions led to off-topic discussions, but upon reflection, the insights gained from these conversations were beneficial and would have been missed had I adhered strictly to the agenda. After the first session, I set aside all previously created agendas and relied solely on entrance and exit tickets. I let go of my role as a strict timekeeper and became more attuned to the participants' contributions. As the study progressed, my leadership style evolved toward a High Supportive, Low Directive approach, as described by Northouse. High Supportive, Low Directive “does not exclusively focus on goals but employs supportive behaviors that enhance followers' skills” (Northouse, 2022), in this case, their viewpoints.

I also made a conscious effort to observe the engagement levels of participants. When one participant dominated the discussion, I posed follow-up questions to encourage clarification

and actively sought the opinions of others. Over time, participants grew more comfortable with one another, which led to more consistent participation. Individual responses became increasingly significant, and all participants began to take ownership of the sessions. By the middle of the study, participants were eager to engage in discussions and share their viewpoints and ideas. This dynamic shift further reinforced my High Supportive, Low Directive approach, which Northouse describes as focusing on supportive behaviors that build followers' capacity for change (Northouse, 2022, p. 110). This flexibility provided participants with the space to process their thoughts, identify needs, and explore potential changes. The honest responses and sometimes unexpected reactions would not have emerged had I adhered strictly to the agenda.

Looking back on the study, I now recognize how naïve I was to think everything would unfold according to plan. Trusting the process was challenging, as it required me to relinquish control. When reviewing my journal entries throughout the study, I noticed they reflected my vulnerability and lack of self-confidence. Initially, I believed everything had to be perfect and structured. However, I learned the importance of flexibility and how much richer the experience became when things didn't go according to plan. Being present and not distracted by simply crossing items off a list allowed me to make more intentional observations and engage meaningfully. This approach led to participant-driven sessions and valuable data. Completing this study has shifted my perspective on what constitutes meaningful and engaging professional learning. It underscored the importance of referring to shared norms, much like the approach I observed by a male Social Studies teacher. When problematic behaviors arise in his classroom, he pauses the instruction and asks, "Why am I pausing?" This question prompts students to reflect on the agreed-upon contract, helping them stay aligned with the expectations. This

reflective approach fosters a more thoughtful and engaged learning environment, reminding us of the importance of shared accountability and mutual respect.

Conclusions

Recognizing discipline disproportionality is the first step in addressing it. While this issue is widespread within the educational system, reducing it requires a committed, direct, and systematic approach. Discussing discipline and classroom management practices with the study participants was a privilege. Engaging in professional conversations that directly impact discipline practices was invaluable. Although discussions about equity can be uncomfortable, I greatly appreciated the participants' openness and honesty in each session. Witnessing their genuine accountability and commitment to change was both inspiring and powerful. Over time, their awareness and dedication to addressing these issues deepened, preparing them for meaningful change. Hearing the participants express confidence when discussing troubling practices with their colleagues and sharing insights at School Leadership Team meetings was incredibly validating.

This inquiry supports using implicit bias training, culturally responsive teaching, and restorative practices as effective strategies to reduce discipline disproportionality. The professional learning sessions, data collection tools, and meaningful discussions provided teachers with essential information to enhance classroom management practices. School leaders must prioritize and allocate time for this professional development. While discipline disparities may not be a priority for every school leader, a continued lack of focus undermines school culture and relationships. It reinforces the harmful practice of treating the behavior of Black students as more serious than that of their White peers. I hope that the participants in this study will continue to reflect on these issues, hold each other accountable, and push for the much-

needed change at RWMS. This ongoing commitment will help foster more equitable discipline practices and reduce undesired behavior.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



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

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Susan Lavallee](#)
CC: [Lawrence Hodgkins](#)
Date: 4/8/2024
Re: [UMCIRB 23-002650](#)
The Impact of Restorative Practices in Middle School on Discipline Disproportionality

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 4/7/2024. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1,2 AB.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Appendix B-Participant Consent (Revised per IRB).docx(0.01)	Consent Forms
Appendix C-Participant Recruitment-Revised.pdf(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
APPENDIX D- Questionnaire.docx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
APPENDIX D.docx(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
APPENDIX F- Exit Questions.docx(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Classroom Management Strategy Implementation log.docx(0.01)	Additional Items
Dissertation -March 22.docx(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Teacher Classroom Management log.docx(0.01)	Additional Items

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: INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

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

Title of Research Study: Impact of Restorative Practices in Middle School on Discipline Disproportionality

Principal Investigator: Susan C. Lavalley (EdD Student Name / Person in Charge of this Study)

Institution, Department or Division: Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education, East Carolina University

Address:, 917 Plummer Court, Wake Forest, NC 27587

Telephone #: 919-793-8526

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

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

This research aims to review current discipline practices and ensure that all students, especially Black students, receive equitable discipline as their White peers. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a district teacher who utilizes classroom management strategies, often resulting in student discipline. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how the school can implement equitable discipline practices for all students.

If you volunteer to participate in this research, you will be one of six to do so.

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

I understand I should not volunteer for this study if I am not able to attend the five sessions and participate in the interview. I understand I should not volunteer if I am not willing to be honest about my culture, perceptions of education, or educational goals.

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

You can choose not to participate. There will be no repercussions for doing so.

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

The research will be conducted virtually via Google Meet as well as in the media center at Rolesville Middle School. The total time you will be asked to volunteer for this study will not exceed 330 minutes over the next three months.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following:

- Answer questions about your beliefs and understanding of discipline practices.
- Discuss your knowledge of classroom management strategies.
- Discuss your thoughts and feelings about current discipline practices at Rolesville Middle School and the impact they have on discipline disproportionality.
- Discuss and implement specific classroom management strategies.
- Participate in an individual interview session about beliefs and practices surrounding school discipline practices. Conversations will not be recorded, but handwritten notes will be taken. All notes will be stored digitally via the East Carolina University (ECU) OneDrive. All documents will remain private and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the dissertation process.

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 participating in this study. There may not be any personal benefit, but the information gained by doing this research may influence future discipline practices.

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?

There is no financial cost to be part of the research.

Who will know I participated in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you participated in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- The investigator(s) conducting this study.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff are responsible for overseeing your welfare during this research. They may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

Processes and procedures were developed to ensure the confidentiality of the data collected. All interview and focus group transcripts will be stored digitally via OneDrive only I have access to.

Others assisting with the research will not have access to the original names. All information and notes will be destroyed after the dissertation process.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has started. There will be no consequences if you choose to stop participating.

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 **919-793-8526** between 7:45 and 5:00 Monday through Friday.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 (8:00 a.m.- 5:00 p.m.). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may contact the Director for Human Research Protections at 252-744-2914.

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 regarding information that I did not understand in this research and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know I can stop participating 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, which 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

Dat

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Frustrated with student behavior? Looking for a way to add to your classroom management strategies? Join us on April 20, 2024, at 4:30 via Google Meet to discuss an upcoming opportunity at Rolesville Middle School. As part of my EdD program at East Carolina University, I am conducting an active research study examining the impact of professional learning on teachers' dispositions and classroom management practices on discipline disproportionality. Participation is voluntary, and participants can opt out at any time.

Join the link to learn more about the study, ask questions, and, if interested, become a participant. The study will consist of five professional learning sessions (in-person and virtual) and one interview over a 12-week period. Sessions will last approximately 60 minutes and focus on classroom management practices and their impact on discipline practice

APPENDIX D: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

No personally identifiable information will ever be shared. The information from this data collection will remain confidential during and after this inquiry research project.

If you feel uncomfortable participating at any time, you may skip a question or remove yourself from this study. Please contact Susan Lavalley (lavalley22@students.ecu.edu) if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you for your partnership in this project.

I am a core teacher (associated with a grade and track).

1. Yes
2. No

I am an elective teacher.

1. Yes
2. No

I have been a member of this staff for:

1. 0-5years
2. 5-10 years
3. 10+ years

The existing discipline policy is well-defined and tiered supporting students and teachers.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

Discipline is managed in a consistent manner across all grades and tracks.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

The classroom-based referral is used as a strategy when addressing student behavior.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

The classroom-based referral is used as a last resort when addressing student behavior.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

The classroom-based referral is an effective tool when managing chronic (repeated) behaviors.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

Office Discipline Referrals (ODR) is an effective tool when managing chronic (repeated) behaviors.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

School discipline data suggests inequities at the classroom-based level.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

School discipline data suggests inequities at the ODR level.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

Implicit Bias is a contributing factor to discipline disproportionality.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

School-wide data reflects that our Black students are being assigned disciplinary consequences at a rate higher than their White peers.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

Our Black students are engaging in more behaviors that violate the Student Code of Conduct.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

Our Black students are subjected to consequences for their behaviors because, as a subgroup, they are misunderstood.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. No opinion
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

APPENDIX E: 2022-2023 TEACHERS MANAGED BEHAVIOR REFERRAL
BY RACE AND GRADE

	6	7	8
Black	162	157	95
American Indian	0	4	1
Multi-Racial	21	34	8
Asian	5	0	4
Hispanic	38	140	51
White	89	69	4

**APPENDIX F: 2022-2023 TEACHERS MANAGED BEHAVIOR REFERRAL
BY RACE AND OFFENSE**

	Compliance	Integrity	Mutual Respect	Appropriate Language
Black	191	1	67	16
American Indian	2	0	0	0
Multi-Racial	23	0	5	5
Asian	3	0	2	0
Hispanic	91	2	28	20
White	86	3	42	10

**APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS REGARDING TEACHER
PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT DISCIPLINE**

1. As a school, describe how discipline is managed.
2. What story is the disproportionate discipline data conveying? Do you think that the data is accurate? Do staff biases impact you? Why?
3. What actions can be taken to address the school-wide discipline policy? Describe areas for growth. Is there a clear understanding between Classroom-based referrals and Office Discipline Referrals?
4. Describe the ideal discipline policy. How does it provide inclusivity for all students?
5. What about the current policy needs to change

APPENDIX H: EXIT TICKET QUESTIONS

Session 1

1. Over the last month, how many students have you sent to your Buddy Teacher (estimate)? How many students have been more than once?

Session 2

1. Share something specific from today that surprised you. How will this information impact your teaching practices?

Session 3

1. For the next session, identify, implement and note one strategy you can incorporate into classroom management practices.

Session 4

1. Using the data collection tool, identify, implement and note one strategy you incorporated into classroom management practices.

Session 5

1. Have your views on discipline changed since the first session? Describe in a few sentences.

APPENDIX I: CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT DATA LOG

Days of the Week	Number of Buddy Teacher Referral	Number of ODR	Strategies Used
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			

APPENDIX J: CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION LOG

Identify the strategy	How often implemented?	Describe how the specific strategy was implemented	Observations about implementation	Describe differences between multiple implementations.

APPENDIX K: INTERVIEW RESPONSES

Participant responses	Question 1: As a school, describe how discipline is managed?
Core teacher (Social Studies)	● Discipline is handled under a matrix based on severity and frequency. ● Consequences include Buddy Teacher referral, silent lunch, calls home and office referrals. ● Most incidents are handled by classroom teachers ● Consequences vary by team, grade and track ● Administration is seldom involved, but do handle the extreme situations and safety concerns
Core teacher (English)	● Teachers report behaviors to administration after recording incidents in ECATS ● Administrator assigns consequences ● Consequences are inconsistent ● Teachers seldomly included or acknowledged ● Consequences do not change behavior
Veteran Elective teacher	● We have a behavior continuum, but not sure if it followed ● Significant discrepancies between elective and core teachers regarding expectations and consequences ● Administration is seldom contacted meaning that teachers handle the behaviors. Consequences appear to be determined by student family, level of advocacy and their connections ● Each administrator handles situations differently when referred to them ● Certain students' behavior is ignored ● Athletes treated differently
Newest Elective teacher	● Depends on the teacher and the administrator ● Students get a write-up, message home ● Consequence depends on who they are and previous behaviors ● ISS does not change student behaviors- ISS is viewed as a fun place to go because you get to listening to your music, use your phone and do whatever you want. There is no accountability.

Participant responses	Question 2: What story is the disproportionate data conveying? Do you think that the data is accurate? Do staff biases impact you? Why?
Core teacher (Social Studies)	• Data suggests that certain sub-groups misbehave more than others • Definitions of misbehavior or disruption is subjective causing disproportionality • I think I am not bias, but I have always been part of the middle-class my whole life. However, I try to be cognizant of needs and interests • I am not satisfied with status quo because not even benefits • Sadly, data is correct- shows biasness. Certain kids are treated differently. It seems that no fresh start and behavior is held over kids faces.
Core teacher (English)	• Data shows that some subgroups of students are being written up and discipline more than others • Data is accurate- no reason to think it is not • Staff biases impact me as a teacher because depending on situation and outcome, it can impact my relationship with the colleague and student- they may show up to my classroom does not like themselves requiring me to interfere, council and support. While I am happy to do it, it takes away from instructional time.
Veteran Elective teacher	• The data indicates that the minority students have more behavioral issues than the White students. • The data is accurate- but to deal with disproportionality, would like to see the specific teachers who are engaging in this behavior- they need support. • Staff comes from various cultural backgrounds, and many are not open minded. They generalize feelings about specific students onto the entire race. • Students seldom get to share “their side of the story” and previous incidents are held against them. • Staff biases have impact relationships with colleagues. Have been doing this a long time and have no reservations confronting a colleague if I think a student is not being treated fairly.
Newest Elective teacher	• Discipline is disproportionate and depends on student, teacher or administration • Student reputations impact discipline • Race plays a huge impact on discipline and the consequences assigned

Participant responses	Question 3: What actions can be taken to address the school-wide discipline policy? Describe areas for growth. Is there a clear understanding between classroom-based referrals and Office Discipline referrals?
Core teacher (Social Studies)	• Behavior matrix needs to be revised for clarity/understanding-cited discrepancies with habitual and a level one- need to re-vamp with clarity and processes • Viewing the discipline policy first hand, has witnessed students being “targeted” by teams of teachers and administration- some students watched more closely than others • Teacher manages level one offenses of Code of Conduct, but many of the behaviors are too subjective. • Students are humans too- relevant mitigating factors make the “one size fits all” approach silly
Core teacher (English)	• Data needs to be shared and socialized with students’ staff with defined with easily understood goals and objectives- what are we trying to achieve? • Leadership engaging in the development and description of behaviors-tiered with clear definitions and consequences. • We need to engage in similar practices we did in the study to assist people with understanding the story being conveyed, why it appears this way and strategies that we can easily use to assist us when engaging with students
Veteran Elective teacher	• Teachers need training understanding student conduct and when it is/is not appropriate to discipline. Too many are assigning severe consequences for subjective behavior. Need to define behaviors. • Professional training regarding behavior management and de-escalation strategies- some staff behaviors instigate student behaviors • Understanding staff reactions to situations can escalate/de-escalate a situation • Adult behavior needs to change- more accepting and positive • Increase communication and partnerships- colleagues, student-teacher and families.
Newest Elective teacher	• We need to educate adults-expand knowledge and understanding about other cultures. • Understand the importance of relationships between student-teacher and teacher-teacher • Better communication between administration and teachers- consequences do not always align and teacher input not valued

Participant responses	Question 4: Describe the ideal discipline policy. How does it provide inclusivity for all students?
Core teacher (Social Studies)	● Policy centered on positives-reward positive behaviors with no punitive unless impacts safety of students and/or staff. ● Expectations reflect all individuals (students and staff) cultures with clearly defined consequences that are consistently adhered to ● Student and teacher buy-in- cannot come from someone “from above” ● Student and staff involvement would move towards more inclusive and equitable policies
Core teacher (English)	● Policy created by students, staff and families ● Teaching the expectations and policies in a meaningful way- no big assemblies where kids “tune out,” but hands on meaningful, engaging with application ● Involving everyone (students, staff and families) leads to global “buy in”
Veteran Elective teacher	● Having counselors who can consistently meet with students providing support, guidance and individualized strategies ● Instilling time to the development of school-wide relationships between all students and staff. People who know the students’ names. ● Acknowledging emotions and the impact on behavior and sometimes consequences ● Investing in Restorative Practices- teaching the students that mistakes happen and that rather than being judged, it’s important to learn from them and not make them again ● Involving students with discipline- like Teen Court
Newest Elective teacher	● Engaging and involving students in expectations and consequences (except when behavior jeopardizes safety) ● Developing and adhering to social contracts ● Consistency- regardless of race, gender or ethnicity- consequences for specific offenses are non-negotiable. ● A discipline review committee for subjective offenses- ensures consistency and equity

Participant responses	Question 5: What about the current policy needs to change?
Core teacher (Social Studies)	• In School Suspension (ISS)- structure. Viewed by students as a preferable setting rather than classroom • ISS is not seen as discipline, but a place of fun and to hang out- you can wear ear buds, watch television and use your phone • Consistency- some students get silent lunch and parent contact while others will be assigned ISS for same offense
Core teacher (English)	• Relationship between staff and administration needs to strengthen • Trust needs to be re-established leading to the re-building of the culture • Culture is the foundation for everything-without it, without it, disproportionality will continue
Veteran Elective teacher	• The adults in the building need training, support and resources to create inclusive learning settings • Adjust class sizes so that teachers can get to know the students • Improved communication between staff and administration- teachers need to be treated as professionals who understand what their students need
Newest Elective teacher	• More accountability for staff and students • Overhaul ISS- cannot be viewed as a reward

