

A BEHAVIORAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM TO ADDRESS DISCIPLINE DISPROPORTIONALITY IN A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Discipline disproportionality, the excessive disciplinary consequences imposed on students of color in comparison to the overall student population within a school (MAEC, 2020) is an area worth researching. White students are four times less likely to be suspended than their Black counterparts for the same offense (Davis, 2019). These harsher consequences for the same infraction reflect racial biases that Black students' behaviors are more problematic when compared to their White peers (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). The focus of this inquiry was to determine the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality in a rural middle school. The inquiry examined how a teacher behavioral professional learning program impacts school discipline practices, teacher perceptions of student behavior, and the scholarly practitioner's leadership development. Behavioral Learning Theory, the theoretical framework for this inquiry, focuses on observable behaviors and the environmental variables that impact them (Zhong, 2008). The inquiry utilized an explanatory sequential, mixed methods design grounded in improvement science. The data concluded a change in the variance of teacher perspective of student behaviors, an increase in the discipline disproportionality gap between Black and White students, an increase in participant learning

because of having participated in the teacher behavioral professional learning program, and the infrequent implementation of learning by participants. The need to address discipline disproportionality remains. Failure to do so will increase program inequities, removing students from the learning environment; thereby prohibiting learning that is acquired through direct instruction and student collaboration.

A BEHAVIORAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM TO ADDRESS DISCIPLINE
DISPROPORTIONALITY IN A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ whose abundant peace grounds me in every aspect of my life, and to all those who have guided and inspired me—naturally, spiritually, and professionally. To my parents, John and Janet Corey Jr., thank you for your unwavering support of my educational journey and for always encouraging me to reach my highest potential. To my brother, John, who has blazed countless trails before me—your example has been both motivating and grounding. I am forever grateful. To Victoria, whose resilience and strength continue to shine in the face of life’s challenges—you are an inspiration. To my spiritual leaders, Apostle Ruth Peterson and Pastor Helen Williams, thank you for modeling biblical leadership and for continuously challenging me to develop character that honors both God and the faith. To all who have been part of my educational journey—from Rochelle Middle School, E.B. Frink Middle School, Kinston High School, LCPS Central Services, the LCPS School Board, Dr. Steve Mazingo and Mr. Brent Williams thank you for supporting my growth as a leader. Thank you to Dr. Lionel Kato and Dr. Steve Lassiter for your support and encouragement throughout my educational journey. I have learned much from your leadership. To everyone I did not name, thank you. Each of you has contributed a note to the melody of my life. I look forward to hearing the composition from what you have begun and from those yet to come.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Student school discipline data throughout the United States is alarming and inequitable. An examination of discipline data in K-12 schools reveals disparities between students of color and their White peers. White students when compared to their Black peers are four times less likely to be suspended for the same offense (Davis, 2019). Further, White students receive fewer consequences even when the level of offense is the same or similar (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2019). The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) investigated the Victor Valley Union High School District in Victorville, California, and discovered a consistent trend of more severe and frequent disciplinary measures being imposed on Black students compared to their White counterparts, spanning across different schools and grade levels (2023). The investigation highlighted that the district's actions resulted in a substantial increase in the amount of learning time denied to Black students (Office of Civil Rights, 2023). Such disciplinary discrepancies are not limited to California, but are also evident in North Carolina, the location of this inquiry.

A large district in North Carolina, was investigated for its disciplinary practices by the OCR. According to OCR's findings, Black students were 6.1 times more prone to get out-of-school suspension compared to White students. Additionally, Black students were disproportionately disciplined for subjective infractions, such as noncompliance with school rules. The district's code of conduct contained lower-level subjective offense categories that, if repeated, could lead to exclusionary consequences (Office for Civil Rights, 2023). In 2018, another school district in North Carolina entered into an agreement with OCR to address concerns written in data analysis reports (2023). These reports revealed that Black students were being referred for disciplinary action at higher rates compared to their White counterparts.

Additionally, Black students receiving discipline for a first offense were more likely to receive suspensions than White students (Office for Civil Rights, 2023).

Tens of millions of students in public schools, particularly those of color, have been suspended, expelled, or arrested as a result of zero tolerance policies, the presence of police officers in schools, and biases in disciplinary practices (Flannery, 2015). Suspension practices often begin in the classroom, where teachers depend on exclusionary strategies to manage inappropriate behaviors during instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2019). It is not that Black students behave differently from their White peers; rather, disciplinary bias is more prevalent in schools with higher populations of students of color (Davis, 2019). The focus of this inquiry is to examine the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality in a rural middle school.

Background of the Inquiry

The use of exclusionary consequences and the presence of police in schools were introduced by opponents to integration because of desegregation and discrimination laws throughout the United States (Bazelon, 2021). In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* unanimously overturned *Plessey v. Ferguson*, citing that segregation was unconstitutional (2021). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 further prohibited discrimination in programs that were federally funded. The enactment of these legislations increased fear among White populations (Black, 2016). With new laws, states were now expected to comply. In 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the County School Board of New Kent, Virginia, had to take immediate and reasonable action to ensure integration of students in its schools (2016). The court identified faculty, facilities, staff, transportation, and extracurricular activities as key measures to eliminate

racial discrimination in school admissions (2016). With integration legislation required, states were forced to comply with the law, but many did not comply without a fight.

In 1970, the Virginia Alexandria School District was engaged in the fight against integration by justifying its need to slow the rate of desegregation because Black students' lack of discipline would reduce educational quality and order in the classroom (Black, 2016). The idea that students of color do not value education and lack aptitude, goals, and work ethic is defined as cultural deficit thinking (Flannery, 2015). In 1971, Alexandria's superintendent disclosed a labor contract with teachers that enabled them to remove students from class through expulsion (Black, 2016). The revolt against desegregation was not limited to Virginia, but was also evident in Texas.

In *Hawkins v. Coleman*, a 1972 school desegregation case in Dallas, Texas, a suspended student filed charges alleging racial discrimination. Despite attempts to justify the suspensions, the court outlined discipline disparities affecting African American students, citing that rules were racially biased (Black, 2016). The defeat of anti-integration practices gave rise to zero tolerance policies in schools. Zero tolerance policies consist of predetermined repercussions, typically harsh and punishing, that are designed to be enforced without considering the seriousness of the behavior, mitigating factors, or situational context (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). These policies were adopted by school districts across the United States. By 2001, approximately 90% of U.S. schools incorporated policies favoring zero tolerance (American, 2017). Tens of millions of students in public schools, particularly those of color, have been suspended, expelled, or arrested due to the increased presence of police officers in schools, the enforcement of zero tolerance policies, and biases in disciplinary practices (Flannery, 2015).

Disciplinary biases arise when teachers form assumptions about student actions or behaviors (Scott, 2021). The correlation between the behavior of Black pupils and gang involvement or other related problems underscores the presence of biases among instructors (Walker & Brigham, 2017). Such biases in schools affect teachers' perceptions of students and , in turn, influence the frequency of office referrals and disciplinary penalties. This inquiry aims to examine, through a teacher behavioral professional learning program, the relationship between teacher perception of students' behavior and the subsequent occurrence of office referrals and disciplinary consequences.

Context of the Inquiry

The inquiry was conducted in a traditional public middle school in Rock County Schools, a pseudonym, located in eastern North Carolina. Rock County Schools follows a standard schedule from August to June. In 2024, Lighthouse Middle School (LMS), located within Rock County, served over 600 students in grades six through eight, representing rural and suburban communities. Compared to Rock County Schools, which had an average class size of 23 students, the average class size at LMS was 19. The school's percentage of economically disadvantaged students was 64%, which was nearly 15 percentage points higher than the state average. The school had no National Board Certified teachers. North Carolina uses the five standards of the Educator Evaluation System to report on the overall performance of teachers, which includes five standards: teachers demonstrate leadership, teachers establish a respectful environment for a diverse population of students, teachers know the content they teach, teachers facilitate learning for their students, and teachers reflect on their practice (NCDPI, 2009). Teachers are rated on the five standards as needing improvement, effective, or highly effective. Teachers rated as "needs improvement" are less than proficient in at least one standard, whereas

effective teachers demonstrate proficiency across all five standards. Highly effective teachers receive a rating of accomplished or distinguished on all five observational standards. Based on 2023 results, 36% of teachers at LMS were rated as needing improvement, 41% as effective, and 23% as highly effective (NC Report Card, 2023). Although the school met the state's academic growth measures, it was classified as a low performing school for two consecutive years.

North Carolina defines a low-performing school as one with a D or F school letter grade. School letter grades comprise school achievement and growth scores (Public Schools First, n.d.). Schools receive an achievement score based on the academic proficiency of students. The growth score is determined by the Educator Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), which measures students' annual growth on standardized assessments administered across North Carolina (NCDPI, n.d.). The school achievement score counts for 80% of the school letter grade, while the growth score counts for 20% (NCDPI, 2023). These scores are combined on a 15-point grading scale to determine the school's letter grade, with A representing an overall performance score of 85 or higher, B an overall performance score of 70 to 84, C an overall performance score of 55 to 69, D an overall score of 40 to 54, and F being the lowest score of 0 to 39.

As indicated by the school's low performing status, the number of students meeting grade level proficiency or college and career readiness standards in reading, math, and science was below district and state averages. Approximately four out of every five Black students did not meet grade level proficiency in reading or math. College and career readiness numbers revealed that 90% of Black students were not ready for post-secondary education or the workforce-based on reading or math performance. Disproportionality exists not just in academics but also in the distribution of disciplinary consequences for behavior. During the 2022-2023 school year, Black students at LMS received short-term suspensions (1-10 days) at rates four times higher than their

White peers. Further, Black students received in-school suspensions at more than twice the rate of White students (see Figure 1). Excessive use of suspensions hinders students from attending classes, impeding their ability to keep pace with their peers (Kline, 2016). Removing children from the classroom contributes to lost instructional time, lower school engagement, and decreases trust between students and adults (Davis, 2019). Teacher and staff perceptions of student conduct were documented through the Teachers Working Conditions survey at LMS, a biannual survey administered to all educators in North Carolina to evaluate the working conditions for teachers in educational institutions. Schools utilize the survey data to ensure that educators have a conducive environment that promotes student achievement. The 2024 Teachers Working Conditions survey at LMS revealed that 80% of staff agreed that disorder in the classroom was a student conduct issue (see Figure 2). When questioned if students comply with behavioral expectations, 63% of staff disagreed (see Figure 3). Nearly 95% of staff identified student disrespect towards teachers as a conduct issue (see Figure 4). More than two-thirds of staff members concurred that administrators consistently enforce student conduct rules (see Figure 5), and 73% reported feeling supported by administrators when attempting to keep the classroom in order (see Figure 6). However, more than 25% of staff believed that teachers do not consistently enforce student behavioral expectations (see Figure 7).

Statement of the Focus of Practice

The focus of this inquiry is to determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can effectively reduce discipline disparities resulting from zero tolerance policies, biases, and school policing. Zero tolerance rules in schools have a disproportionately negative impact on students of color. Black pupils are four times more likely than White students to receive a suspension for the same infraction (Davis, 2019). Harsher punishment often results

from the racial biases, wherein Black students' behaviors are perceived as more problematic when compared to those of their White peers (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). The presence of police in schools does not make them safer; instead, it leads to an increase in arrests and exclusionary practices (Bazelon, 2021). Teachers often depend on exclusionary practices to minimize inappropriate behaviors during instruction. However, this practice has been shown to be ineffective and produces program inequity, limiting the right to learn and minimizing academic success for students of color (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2019). Addressing discipline disparities at LMS may reduce programmatic inequities and increase learning opportunities for students. This study seeks to determine whether alternative discipline methods and professional learning for workforce development can reduce discipline disparities associated with zero tolerance policies, biases, and school policing.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

This inquiry is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on student discipline disproportionality?
2. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on teachers' perceptions of student behaviors?
3. How does the experience of leading this inquiry impact the scholarly practitioner's professional leadership style and development?

Overview of Inquiry

To answer the questions guiding this inquiry, the scholarly practitioner employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. Behavioral Learning Theory is the theoretical framework for this inquiry.

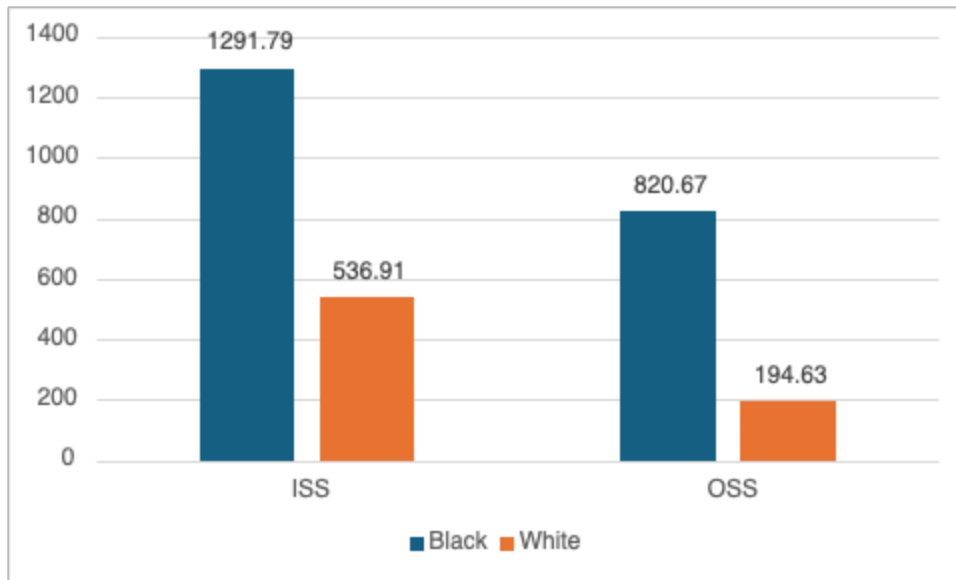


Figure 1. In-school suspension and out-of-school suspension count by race, 2022-2023.

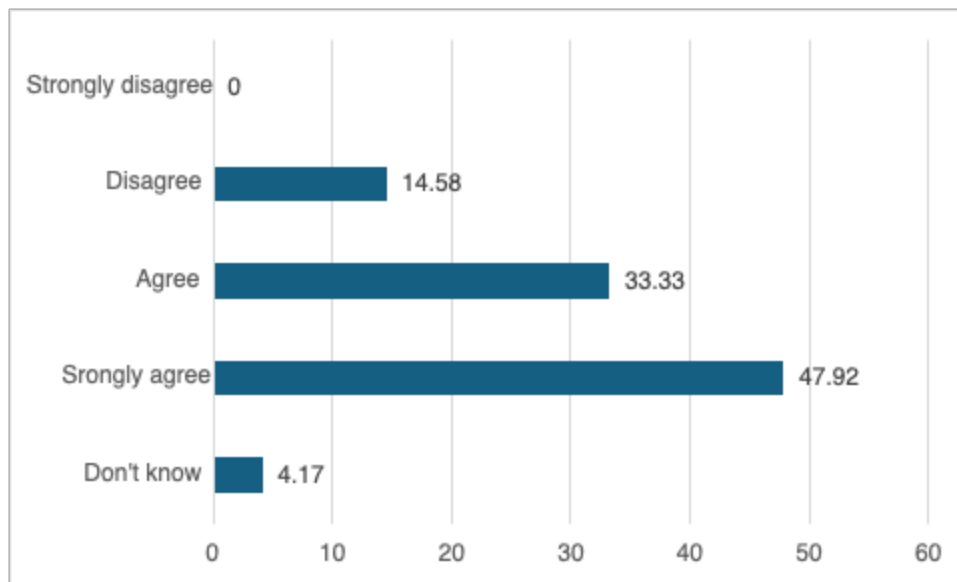


Figure 2. Disorder in the classroom when asked by teachers, 2023-2024.

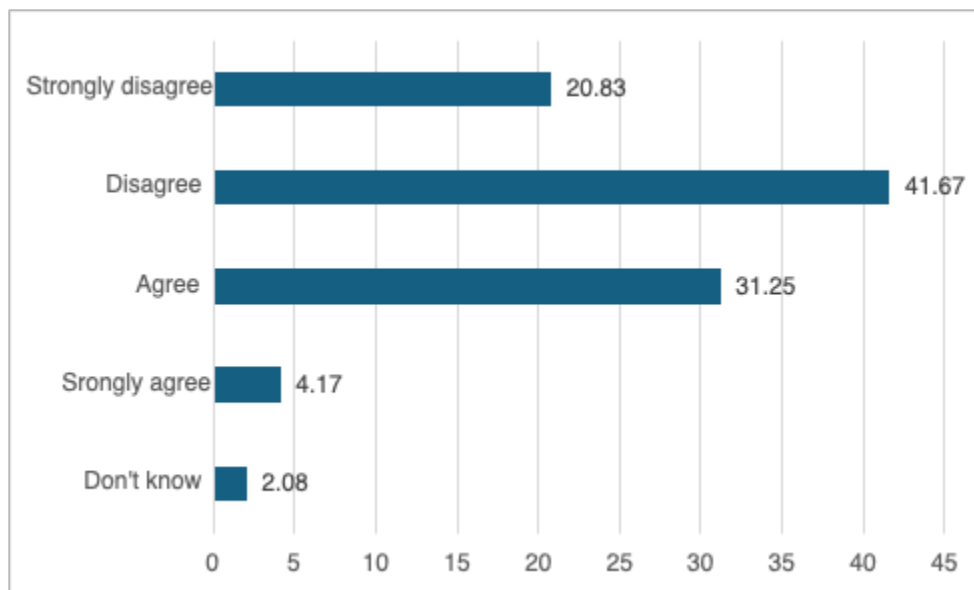


Figure 3. Students at this school follow the rules of conduct, 2023-2024.

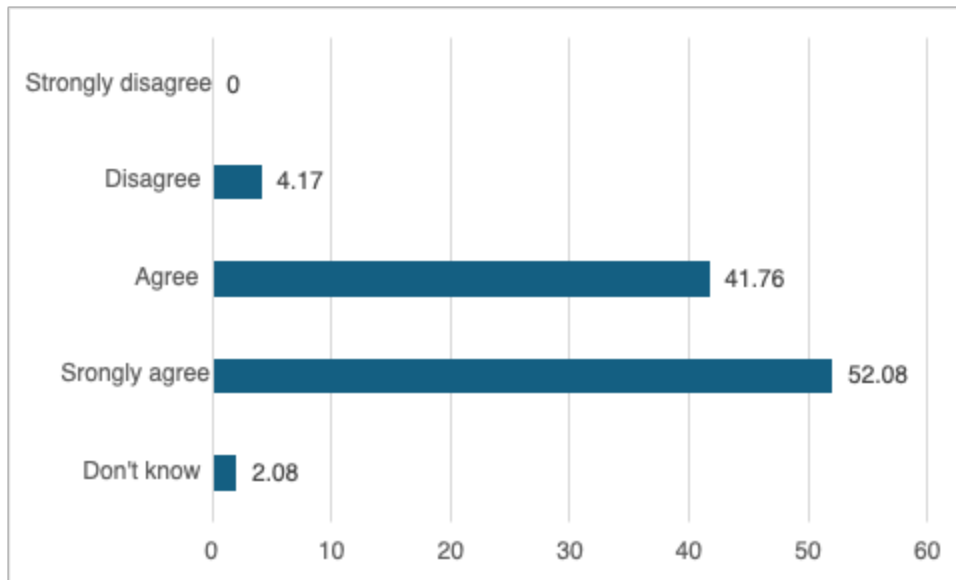


Figure 4. Student disrespect of the teacher when asked, 2023-2024

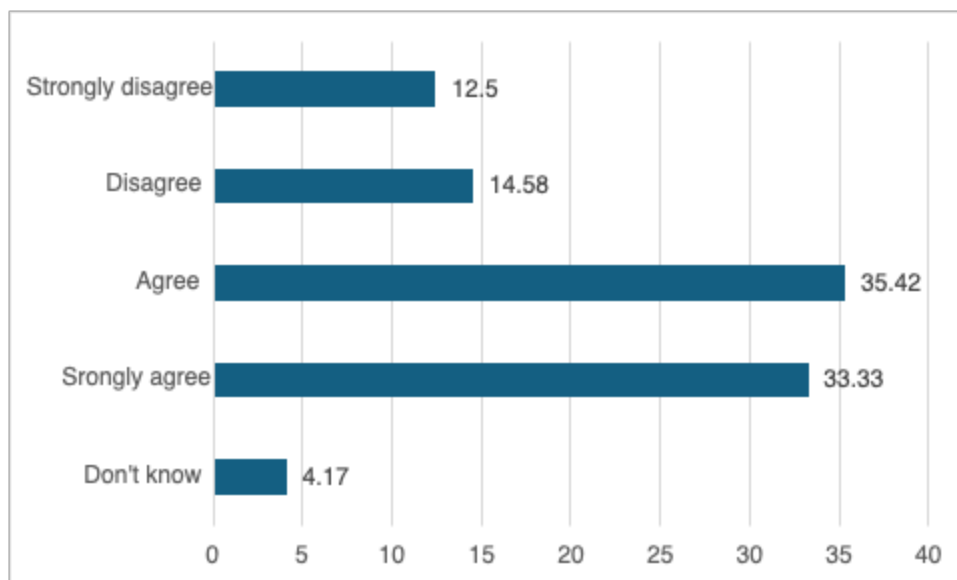


Figure 5. Enforcement of rules by school administrators, 2023-2024.

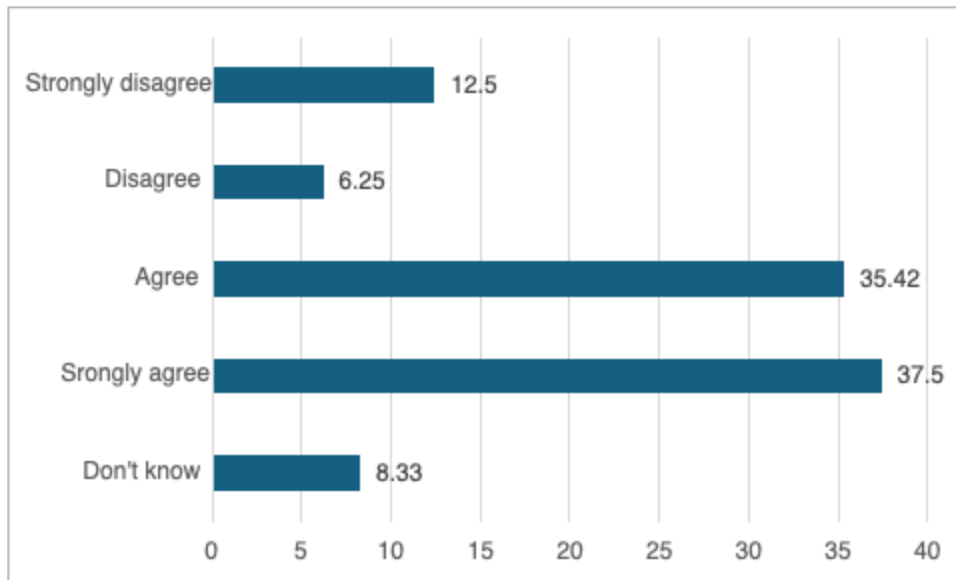


Figure 6. Support of teachers' efforts by school administrators, 2023-2024.

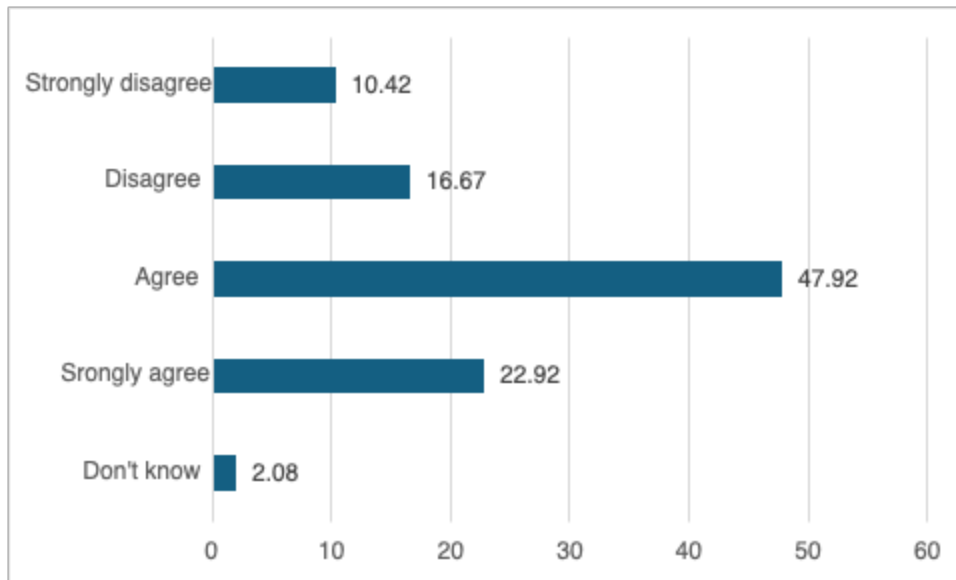


Figure 7. Enforcement of rules by teachers, 2023-2024.

The Behavioral Learning Theory is a theoretical framework focused on observable behaviors and the environmental variables that impact them (Zhong, 2008). Of the two forms of learning addressed within this theory, this inquiry design focuses on operant conditioning. Operant conditioning is a psychological method that uses reinforcement or punishment to modify and regulate behavior, aiming to increase or decrease specific behaviors or reactions (Reynolds, 1975). The behavioral learning program provided professional learning to support teachers in implementing social contracts and Behavior Specific Praise.

This inquiry was organized using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle of improvement and was conducted in three phases. The first phase of inquiry analyzed data collected with collaborative inquiry partners (CIP) to identify the population in need of support and to explore programs aimed at improving student behaviors. Discipline data were obtained from the Educators Handbook and analyzed. The Educators Handbook is a digital platform used to record and analyze student minor incidents and office referrals (Educator's Handbook, n.d.). The second phase involved the analysis of data with CIPs on the development and implementation of social contracts in classrooms. A classroom observation tool was utilized to measure teacher implementation. The final phase included focus groups, the analysis and reporting of student discipline data and teacher perception data to communicate the impact of the teacher behavioral professional learning program.

Collaborative Inquiry Partners

Collaborative Inquiry Partners (CIPs) were used throughout the inquiry to address the focus of practice. The scholarly practitioner met with the school improvement team prior to the start of the school year to discuss the problem of practice using data and a proposed intervention. The team identified the problem of practice through the collective analysis of student data. As a

group, they discussed the implications of the problem and strategies to mediate it to support a decrease in the discipline disparities among students. Meetings were held throughout the year with the principal, instructional coach, and school counselors throughout the year to discuss progress and implementation. CIP engaged with staff regarding data to support continuous implementation.

Theoretical Framework

This improvement science inquiry is grounded in the Behavioral Learning Theory of John Watson and B.F. Skinner. The Behavioral Learning Theory is a theoretical framework focused on observable behaviors and the environmental variables that influence them (Zhong, 2008). Behaviorism was introduced by John Watson in 1913, arguing against structuralism and functionalism (Moore, 2011). Structuralism and functionalism focus on understanding the intersection of behavior and the mind (Zhong, 2008). Watson argued that behavior could be measured through experimental observation rather than through cognitive processes (Shaffer, 2000). B. F. Skinner later expanded on this, asserting that the environment influences behavior. The "Skinner box" was an apparatus used to demonstrate his theory that behaviors are influenced and reinforced through rewards and punishment (Zhou & Brown, 2015). Behaviorism focuses on classical and operant conditioning as the primary forms of learning.

Classical Conditioning, the association of a stimulus with an involuntary response, was identified through Ivan Pavlov's experiment. Pavlov demonstrated that a dog could be conditioned to salivate, a conditioned response, at the sound of a bell, a conditioned stimulus (Zhou & Brown, 2015). Classical conditioning was the basis for Watson's stimulus-response theory. In 1937, B.F. Skinner introduced operant conditioning.

Operant conditioning is a psychological method that uses reinforcement or punishment to modify and regulate behavior, aiming to increase or decrease specific behaviors or responses (Reynolds, 1975). A reinforcer is any stimulus that increases the probability of a particular behavior happening (Kazepides, 1976). If a stimulus improves the probability of a response occurring again in the future when it is presented after the response, it is classified as a positive reinforcer. If removing a stimulus after a response increases the probability of the behavior happening again in the future, the stimulus is classified as a negative reinforcer (Reynolds, 1975). Operant conditioning is a psychological method that aims to modify a voluntary response by either increasing or decreasing its frequency. This inquiry is grounded in B.F. Skinner's theory of behavioral learning known as operant conditioning.

Operant conditioning, as defined by Skinner, refers to a behavior that is influenced by the outcomes or consequences it produces (Staddon & Cerutti, 2003). It is a process in which the frequency of a behavior is altered by the repercussions of that follow it (Reynolds, 1975). This inquiry examined whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program increases or decreases student actions or responses through the use of reinforcement or punishment.

Definition of Key Terms

This inquiry contains terms essential for comprehending the research inquiry. The following definitions convey significance and context to facilitate accurate interpretation.

Affective Statements – statements that humanize individuals by communicating an emotional state produced by another's action (Joseph-McCatty, 2022).

Behavior Specific Praise – verbal praise provided to a student or group that specifically articulates the precise behavior exhibited to fulfill expectations (Iris Center, 2025).

Confirmation Bias - the unintentional propensity to look for information that supports our opinions even when there is contradictory evidence (Staats, 2016).

Discipline disproportionality – the excessive disciplinary consequences, such as suspension and expulsion, imposed on students of color in comparison to the overall student population within a school (MAEC, 2020).

Implicit Bias – the unconscious beliefs that impact the opinions, decisions, and actions of individuals (Staats, 2016).

Restorative Practices – a collection of relational techniques that seek to develop connections, trust, and understanding among students and staff and a sense of belonging in classrooms and schools. (Augustine et al., 2018; Kervick et al., 2019)

Social contract - *expected classroom behaviors developed by students to foster student accountability and ownership* (Rhea & Singh, 2020).

Social-emotional Learning – instruction that improves student awareness and management of emotions and interpersonal relationships (Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Zero Tolerance Policies - Predefined repercussions, typically harsh and punishing, that are designed to be enforced without considering the seriousness of the behavior, mitigating factors, or situational context (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

Assumptions

This investigation has a number of underlying assumptions. Assumptions are claims made by researchers that have not been corroborated but are alleged to be true (Mertler, 2022).

This inquiry, grounded in behavioral learning theory, examines the assumptions made to

determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can effectively improve discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment.

The initial assumption is that every teacher will facilitate the creation of social contracts as prescribed. All teachers participated in Capturing Kids Hearts two-day training, where they were instructed on developing a collaborative social contract with students. However, the development of the social contract may differ among classrooms. The second assumption is that every student will be actively involved in the process of developing the social contract. Although social contracts are aimed at encouraging the participation of all students in their creation, it is not obligatory. Additionally, social contracts are intended to enhance the learning environment and cultivate the relationship between students and teachers; however, it is impossible to predict the exact extent of their influence. The last assumption is that the teacher behavioral professional learning program will lead to a reduction in the disproportionality of discipline.

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the factors employed to restrict the scope of an inquiry. The inquiry design is delineated by specifying the elements that will be eliminated and included in the inquiry (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The scope communicates how the areas of focus have been narrowed to make the inquiry more manageable and focused. Considerations are presented here to offer the reader a clear understanding of what the inquiry entails and what it excludes. There were no delimitations regarding participants' gender. The inquiry focuses on the effects of student behaviors on teacher's perceptions and discipline. Also, the inquiry examines only those teachers working at a specific rural public school district in eastern North Carolina. There are no teachers from other school districts who participated in the inquiry during the 2024-2025 school

year. While all teachers participated in the teacher behavioral professional learning program only the seventh-grade teachers and their student cohort were involved in this inquiry.

Limitations

Limitations refer to the factors in the inquiry that are outside the researcher's or scholarly practitioner's control. These elements of the inquiry can influence the results (Mertler, 2022).

The scholarly practitioner acknowledged the presence of several key limitations within this study, including challenges related to implementation, limited classroom observation time, potential observer bias, and the absence of a control group.

Teachers were enrolled in a behavioral professional learning program that provided insight into the benefits of positive reinforcement, use of social contracts, and behavior specific praise. Classroom observation time was limited to ten minutes. I conducted the behavior professional learning program and classroom walkthroughs. The inquiry was not structured to compare the effects of a teacher behavioral professional learning program with those of a school that did not participate in such a program.

Significance of the Inquiry

The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), administered by the National Center for Education Statistics during the 2023-24 school year, revealed an academic decline in reading and math compared to the 2019-20 assessment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Despite these academic declines, schools are still experiencing an increase in out-of-school suspensions (Davis, 2019). An increase in academic performance will require that students be consistently present for learning. Davis (2019) identified learning time as one of the most effective predictors of academic achievement. However, continued suspension of pupils hinders the development of strong connections between students and adults, classroom

participation, and academic performance (Davis, 2019). This inquiry seeks to determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can effectively improve discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment resulting from by zero tolerance policies, biases, and school policing.

Zero tolerance policies have a disproportionately negative impact on students of color. Black pupils are four times more likely than White students to receive a suspension for the same infraction (Davis, 2019). Harsher punishment results from the racial biases that frame Black students' behaviors as more problematic than those of their White peers (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Police presence in schools does not make them safer; instead, it leads to an increase in arrests and exclusionary practices (Bazelon, 2021). Teachers frequently depend on exclusion practices to minimize inappropriate behaviors during instruction; however, these practices have been shown to be ineffective and exacerbate program inequity, limiting the right to learn and minimizing academic success for students of color (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2019).

Addressing disproportional discipline at LMS may minimize programmatic inequities and increase learning opportunities for students. This study seeks to determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can effectively improve discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment brought on by zero tolerance policies, biases, and school policing.

Advancing Equity and Social Justice

The current disparities in discipline can be traced to desegregation and discrimination law (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017). In response to these legislations, critics of desegregation advocated for the deployment of law enforcement personnel in educational institutions to uphold

discipline. The utilization of force by the police was motivated by prejudices regarding the conduct and intellectual capabilities of students of color (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017). The introduction of police presence in schools later resulted in the introduction of zero-tolerance policies, which have later caused a disproportionate level of discipline in schools (Flannery, 2015). Black students are suspended at a higher rate than their peers. The racial achievement gaps in Grades 3 through 8 in districts across the United States are positively correlated with the racial disciplinary gaps (Pearman et al., 2019). The repercussions of suspensions have enduring effects. According to Mittleman (2018), suspensions have a disproportionate impact on students, increasing their chance of incarceration by more than two times.

Schools aiming to rectify discipline disproportionality strive for social justice by ensuring that all children receive an education in an environment that is devoid of prejudice, exclusionary methods, and harmful school policing strategies. This study seeks to advance equity and social justice at LMS through a teacher behavioral professional learning program.

Advances in Practice

As previously noted, this inquiry builds upon discipline disproportionality in the classroom because of zero tolerance policies, biases, and school policing. This inquiry seeks to offer an alternative to zero tolerance policies in schools that arose after the US Congress passed the Gun-Free School Act in 1994 that provided funding only to schools who adopted policies (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). The American Psychological Association conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies and found limited evidence to support their usage (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Huang & Cornell, 2021; Irby & Coney, 2021). Black students do not exhibit distinct behavior compared to their White peers, but implicit bias is more common in schools where a significant percentage of

students are people of color (Davis, 2019). This inquiry may challenge the utilization of police officers for the purpose of regulating student conduct, which has led to the suspension, expulsion, or arrest of a significant number of students in public schools, particularly those belonging to racial minority groups (Flannery, 2015). Further, this aims to provide evidence regarding the use of a teacher behavioral professional learning program to reduce discipline disproportionality.

It is anticipated that this inquiry will provide evidence to support the use of a teacher behavioral professional learning program to reduce discipline disproportionality. This investigation is likely to provide a prospect of early intervention and preventive skills in schools, offering a proactive approach to student discipline. Implementing a teacher behavioral professional learning may improve classroom management and increase student engagement, hence addressing program inequities, biases, and discipline disproportionality in schools.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the background and context of the inquiry. It gave specific details on the overview of the inquiry, guiding questions, collaborative partners and the theoretical framework on which the inquiry is based. The definitions of key terms, scope, and delimitations, as well as the contribution of the inquiry to equity and social justice, also support the significance of the inquiry. Chapter 2, explores the possible causes of discipline disproportionality and its effects. Additionally, the chapter explores the strategies and measures that schools and districts are implementing to address this problem. Chapter 3 thoroughly examined the research methodology and data gathering tools employed to conduct the inquiry.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Potential Causes of Discipline Disproportionality

One of the most extensively recorded educational inequalities in the United States is the disproportionate number of children from racially marginalized groups who face disciplinary actions in schools (Gregory et al., 2017). The disproportionate percentage of disciplinary actions for students of color in the United States illustrates inequity (Dionisio & Gray-Nicolas, 2023). White students have a suspension rate that is one-fourth of that observed among black students, even when both groups commit the same violation. Black students do not exhibit different behavior compared to their White peers; rather, their behavior is similar (Davis, 2019).

Black boys faced a higher probability of being referred to the principal's office because they are perceived to be more culpable. Increasing data indicates that male students who are enrolled in special education programs are more likely to experience Office Discipline Referrals and exclusionary discipline compared to their counterparts (Nowicki, 2018). Discipline disproportionality in schools has been affected by various factors, including biases, zero tolerance policies, and school policing.

Biases in Schools

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious stereotypes and attitudes that a person can possess without knowing them (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). Implicit bias occurs unconsciously and unintentionally and impacts opinions, decisions, and actions. Implicit biases affect people from all backgrounds, are pervasive in all situations, and can have catastrophic effects (Staats, 2016). On January 6, 2021, irate protesters who supported the plans of Former President Donald Trump to challenge the 2020 United States presidential election attacked the U.S. Capitol building and destroyed it. Although there were warnings regarding the sizable crowd expected at the "Stop the

"Steal" rally, Capitol police were understaffed. Few people were detained when mayhem broke out. Conversely, on the Black Lives Matter protest that took place months before January 6, the Capitol police were on high alert, and protesters were forcibly taken into custody (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021). These opposite reactions demonstrate how implicit bias can be applied in law enforcement. Compared to the Black Lives Matter marches, which attracted primarily Black participants, the "Stop the Steal" rally was primarily attended by White people. It was believed that the White protesters posed no threat and did not require a significant police presence. The Black protesters, on the other hand, were perceived as violent and frightening, needing strict oversight (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021). The manifestations of implicit bias are not confined to rallies and protests but can be easily found when examining the disproportionate application of discipline in public schools.

Implicit bias and the disproportionate discipline of Black students are linked. Teachers construct their own biased assumptions of what actions or behaviors students are most likely to adopt (Scott, 2021). Walker and Brigham (2017) found that adults were more prone to assume that the actions of students were the product of gang activity and other unproven or subjective factors. Teachers' biases place labels on students. Students of color are more likely to have unpleasant experiences with adults, perform poorly academically, or incur exclusionary discipline (Scott, 2021). Suspension, an exclusionary consequence, could be a byproduct of implicit bias. Students who have previously received a suspension are more likely to receive future suspensions (Scott, 2021). In schools, the corrosive cycle of unconscious prejudice can have a negative effect on students while strengthening confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias is the unintentional propensity to look for information that supports our opinions even when there is contradictory evidence (Staats, 2016). Okonofua & Eberhardt

(2015) studied confirmation bias by ascertaining the right level of punishment for unacceptable student acts like throwing a pencil or interrupting the teacher. Participants included 190 K–12 teachers from California. Participating teachers were required to read descriptions of behavior occurrences, grade students' actions, and indicate how severely they should be disciplined. Except for a name change, researchers gave teachers the same circumstances. The scenarios used racially coded student names. Students with names that were ethnically coded as "Black" were subject to harsher recommendations from teachers (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). This research showed that educators were biased against students of color when there was no objective evidence. The prevalence of bias is not limited to a single study.

Teacher bias has been observed when blaming students for inappropriate behavior. According to Owens (2022), blameworthiness is the tendency to hold people from certain backgrounds more accountable than others for behavior that is objectively the same. Owens (2022) investigated the responses of teachers to three vignettes. The first vignette showed a late-arriving student slamming the door as they entered the classroom. The second vignette showed a pupil disturbing the class by tossing a pencil in a trash receptacle, while the third vignette depicted a student who was texting during a test. The student behavior vignettes were viewed by 1,339 teachers from 295 schools across the United States. According to the results, Black boys were judged as being more blameworthy for the same inappropriate behavior (Owens, 2022). This further supports instructor bias in the classroom when Black students are held accountable for the same actions as other students. Additional research reveals the effect of student blame by teachers on referrals to the office.

Further evidence of implicit bias may be found by looking at a teacher's referral choice. According to a survey on high school discipline in an urban area, Black pupils are more likely

than other students to be reported to an administrator for disruptive behavior (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019), resulting in the desire for Black students to receive harsher consequences for their actions. Disciplinary measures against Black students are more severe and subjective than those against White peers. Owens (2022) also concluded that being Black increased the likelihood of being referred to the principal's office because Black boys were seen as being more blameworthy. Implicit bias may have a significant impact on the decision making process of teachers.

Black children should have the utmost trust in their teachers and principals, but they sometimes face discrimination from these individuals (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). Principals and teachers might not be conscious of the discrepancies they cause because of implicit bias, but the consequences of their actions could be long-lasting for students of color (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017).

Stereotypes have a major impact on the decisions teachers make about which students to discipline, especially when combined with disciplinary guidelines that describe wrongdoing in ambiguous terms (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). The elimination of biases in school is a daunting task; however, there are strategies that can support healthy relationships between teachers and students. Incorporating wise feedback, social belonging, and empathic discipline has been demonstrated to be among the viable interventions that can be used to facilitate the reduction of implicit bias in the classroom (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017).

Wise feedback is feedback given to students that reaffirms their capabilities and teacher belief. Students who recognize that their teacher believes they can meet academic standards have an elevated level of teacher trust. Such trust between teacher and student leads to student engagement and less punitive discipline (Yeager et al., 2014). Social belonging seeks to establish positive relationships between teachers and students in the wake of the emotional and social

anxiety that is typical during the first year of middle school (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017).

Empathic discipline intervention encourages teachers to value student perspectives and maintain positive relationships with students. Intervention allows teachers to hear student perspectives about their experiences and anxieties related to school. As a result, teachers develop empathy and are more successful with understanding how situations and events affect student choices and behaviors (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017).

Zero Tolerance Policies and Student Behaviors

For decades, zero tolerance policies have contributed to discipline disparities for Black children compared to their White peers (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). In the 1970s, civil rights groups began noticing an upward trend in the suspension of students of color. The federal drug policy of the 1980s and the fear of violence gave rise to zero tolerance policies in school districts throughout the United States. Schools in urban neighborhoods increased security technology and personnel (Skiba & Losen, 2016). In 1994, the U.S. Congress enacted the Gun-Free School Act that required public schools receiving federal funding to adopt zero tolerance policies (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). What was initially designed to prevent violent incidents in schools led to disciplinary action, increasing disparities in suspension and expulsion (Skiba & Losen, 2016). To maintain order and follow policy, students receive consequences that some would question. As an example, in 2019, three high school students were corporally punished because they participated in a national walkout against violence, which was deemed a violation of school policy. Others were suspended for being in possession of cough drops, which were classified as drugs (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). The application of zero tolerance policies creates exclusion and does not consider the antecedents to behaviors.

Zero tolerance, as defined by The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008), is “predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (p. 852). Schools with zero tolerance policies harshly penalize major and minor offenses (Pavelka, 2013). The impacts of these policies have had adverse effects on students of color. During the 2017-2018 academic year, 24.9% of Black boys received one or more out-of-school suspensions, despite representing only 7.7% of the total student enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2022). Zero tolerance policies extend beyond elementary and secondary schools. When compared to their White peers, Black pupils experienced disproportionate suspension, even in preschool. Black preschoolers have a 3.6 times higher suspension rate than White preschoolers (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

The American Psychological Association created a task force to examine the impact of zero tolerance policies and practices. The results demonstrated that despite the long-standing use of zero tolerance policies in the United States, there is little evidence supporting their effectiveness in school discipline (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Huang & Cornell, 2021; Irby & Coney, 2021). Zero tolerance policies are not only ineffective but are also not uniformly applied to students. Heilbrun & Cornell (2015) examined principals’ perceptions of zero tolerance and their impact on more than 300 Black and White high school students in Virginia. The findings showed that less than half as many White students were suspended as Black students. While Black students were often suspended for disruptive behavior, White students were suspended for using drugs and alcohol. Zero-tolerance discipline

attempts to make a statement by severely penalizing both major and minor infractions (Moreno & Scaletta, 2018).

Zero tolerance practices have negative short- and long-term effects. In the short term, there is an increased risk of negative behaviors continuing and a decrease in academic achievement (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Long-term consequences are scholastic failure, dropping out of school, and juvenile justice system involvement (Kline, 2016). The overuse of suspensions causes students to miss learning opportunities, making it difficult to keep up with their peers. Frustration may result in repeat behaviors when the student returns to school, which would then perpetuate a cycle of exclusionary discipline (Kline, 2016).

Alternatives to zero tolerance policies that exclude students from the learning environment have enhanced classroom management and decreased inequality. Strategies that have proven successful have incorporated building relationships, social-emotional learning, and structural interventions (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Improving student-teacher rapport decreases exclusionary practices (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Teachers implementing MyTeachingPartner, a program focused on educating teachers on alternatives to exclusionary consequences, reported a decrease in discipline disparities in classrooms (Gregory et al., 2014). Fostering positive student teacher interactions can have a positive impact on inequities and support social-emotional learning.

Social-emotional learning improves students' awareness and management of emotions and interpersonal relationships. Students who participate in social-emotional learning programs have increased their behavioral performance and reduced school suspensions (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Structural interventions address disciplinary systems in schools and introduce new systems such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Alternatives to zero tolerance policies have proven effective in addressing discipline inequities in schools.

Zero tolerance alternatives are not limited to the school level. District policies must be examined to decrease exclusionary practices and promote a favorable school climate (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Sullivan et al. (2013) noted that “appropriate program and policy development should reduce reliance on exclusionary procedures as the response to students’ behavioral infractions, especially minor and/or subjective offenses, paying particular attention to prevention and nondiscriminatory practice” (p. 112). State and district policies must acknowledge the harmful effects of zero tolerance and seek to ensure students maintain access to the learning environment.

Several states passed new legislation to combat disciplinary inequities in schools as early as 2014. The 2014 California education law opposes exclusionary methods for infractions such as disruption and defiance and limits out-of-school suspension to instances where alternative disciplinary measures have been thwarted (Skiba & Losen, 2016). The capacity of administrators and superintendents to suspend K–3 students are similarly limited by the California legislature (Skiba & Losen, 2016). As part of its system for holding schools accountable, Georgia launched a statewide program for managing school climate in 2014. The state board is authorized to create sample disciplinary guidelines, rate disciplinary actions taken in schools, and employ techniques that support constructive interventions based on research each year (Skiba & Losen, 2016). In accordance with new laws that took effect for the 2014–2015 academic year, school districts in Massachusetts must offer educational services to students who are suspended or expelled. Additionally, long-term suspension is discouraged unless other options have failed (Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Although federal, state, and district policies and guidelines oppose the use of exclusionary consequences, educators must be equipped with tools and resources to counter practices that are ingrained in educational systems (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Educators can be provided tools that disaggregate discipline data and provide technical assistance. Administrative support that advocates for expanded codes of conduct, parent awareness, and support of less punitive measures, collaboration with community agencies, and more mental health and instructional support personnel is critical to the success of effective discipline alternatives (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Without professional learning and dedicated time, teachers will be ineffective with implementing alternatives to exclusionary consequences. As noted by Skiba and Losen:

In order for teachers to integrate these strategies into their instruction, schools and districts must ensure that sufficient time for professional development and technical assistance are available to train and coach teachers in implementing such approaches as restorative practices, culturally responsive approaches to PBIS, social and emotional learning, implicit bias training, and culturally responsive classroom management. (Skiba & Losen, 2016, p. 10)

Transparency is required to reform school discipline policies (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Collection and analysis of data is essential when measuring the impact of alternatives to exclusionary practices. Data creates a baseline that defines successes and opportunities for growth. It will be challenging for schools to quickly respond, build upon what is working, or change a policy that is not performing as planned if they do not consistently monitor their discipline statistics (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Making discipline trend data available by race, gender, and disability can educate parents on the need to implement new systems to support student learning. Also, the measurement of implementation efforts of alternative discipline practices provides insight into

successful practices for schools. The use of mental health professionals and instructional support specialists is an additional way to support learning for all students (Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Gaining support from parents to practice less punitive approaches can be challenging when considering that support for zero-tolerance policies is inconsistent amongst parents (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Other parents support the exclusionary measures when they feel that other students are disruptive to learning.

Advocates of zero tolerance believe that these policies are needed to make schools safer, but opponents believe that they are a major cause of disparities in discipline in schools (Huang & Cornell, 2021). To assess the link between school safety and student discipline, Virginia in 2019, conducted a middle school survey that included approximately 109,000 students and 11,000 teachers. The survey reported that 74% of teacher participants approved of zero tolerance practices as a strategy to minimize discipline in schools. A positive correlation was identified between schools that encouraged zero tolerance and the number of out-of-school suspensions (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Also, students and teachers reported a decrease in the sense of safety in schools that welcomed zero tolerance. The use of suspension and expulsion has not improved student behavior or school safety (Skiba & Losen, 2016), demonstrating the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance to promote a culture of safety in schools (Huang & Cornell).

School Policing and Student Consequences

The origins of school policing can be traced back to the relocation of Blacks north to seek financial opportunity. Jim Crow laws made economic growth difficult for Blacks in the South. To achieve opportunity, many sought residency in industrial towns. Discrimination was prevalent in the North as Whites used racial covenants, zoning regulations, and tax codes to preserve segregation in neighborhoods and schools (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017).

Policing increased in neighborhoods and Black youth were deemed delinquents. The *Brown v. The Board of Education* verdict gave rise to opponents of integration. Claiming that Black students could not control themselves and that instructional quality would be impacted by their presence, Whites advocated for police presence in schools (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017).

The Gun-Free School Act, approved by the U.S. Congress in 1994, mandated that public schools that received federal funds have zero tolerance policies (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). About \$9 billion was designated to increasing police presence in communities (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017). School shootings supported the notion that youth crime was on the rise resulting in Congress establishing the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) in Schools grant program.

The 1999 school massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado subsequently escalated police presence in schools (Davis, 2019). In response to these horrific tragedies, police officers were assigned to schools to enhance safety (Advancement Project, 2018). By 2005, data reported that community policing did not lead to its intended effect, thus decreasing federal aid and support. Although federal dollars were decreased, schools still sought juvenile reform policies that further criminalized student behavior (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017).

The increased presence of police officers in schools resulted in youth being considered candidates for the criminal justice system (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017). Some schools were encouraged to categorize students as pre-delinquents. This resulted in constant and intense monitoring of students and arrests despite the absence of a crime (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017).

Effects of Discipline Disproportionality

Since 1975, researchers have engaged in discussions with parents, children, school authorities, community members, and youth service officials regarding the detrimental consequences of suspensions. It is widely agreed upon that suspensions negatively impact pupils in four distinct ways. Suspensions:

- (1) take away educational time that may cause marginal, weak, or poorly motivated students to drop out permanently;
- (2) label children as "troublemakers" thereby making repeated behavior problems more likely;
- (3) deny children needed help, and
- (4) contribute to juvenile delinquency by putting unsupervised children and those with problems into the streets. (Washington Research Project, 1975, p. 62)

Despite decades of quantitative and qualitative research, schools continue to suspend students, increasing discipline disproportionately in schools. These decisions can have an impact on students' academic performance and increase the likelihood of involvement with the juvenile justice system (Washington Research Project, 1975).

School-to-Prison Pipeline

Law enforcement does not improve safety but supports the criminalization of students, creating a pipeline from school to prison. Discrimination towards Black students in classrooms is exacerbated by the inclusion of school resource officers, or SROs (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). SROs are often ill-equipped to work with students and are prone to apply exclusionary consequences or the law to illicit compliance (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). A correlation exists between school policing and minor misbehavior arrests across the United States (Advancement

Project, 2018). Data from the National School Survey on Crime and Safety indicates that a school's likelihood of referring students to the legal system rises when an SRO is present at least once per week (Nance, 2016). A study comparing student arrests in 13 schools with SROs and 15 schools without SROs found that having an SRO increased the number of arrests for disorderly conduct and decreased the number of arrests for weapons and assault (Theriot, 2009).

Despite the harmful effects of police in schools, increased law enforcement continues to be the response in the wake of school shootings (Advancement Project, 2018). School shootings often result in calls for more police officers in schools. Advancement Project (2018) argues that a decrease in police officers in schools, support for communication and connectedness, and a reduction in federal funds that encourage school policing will produce safe and effective schools. A nurturing school climate that builds positive relationships between teachers and students and the implementation of community-building programs such as restorative practices that foster healthy relationships and conflict resolution skills create safe schools and eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline (Advancement Project, 2018).

Student Achievement

A variety of suggestions exist as to why the achievement gap persist between Black and White students. Some attribute lower academic outcomes to poverty, learning loss, and lack of educational resources. Bell & Puckett (2023) assign the continued existence of the achievement gap to inequalities in disciplinary practices within schools. A separate investigation carried out by Morris & Perry (2016) examined the impact of suspension on reading and math performance, with a focus on racial differences. The study analyzed a comprehensive hierarchical and longitudinal dataset containing school and student records. According to the analysis conducted by Morris and Perry (2016), suspension accounted for 20% of the disparities in school

performance between Black and White students. Clark & Kjellstrand (2024) conducted a study using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Their investigation unveiled that students from Black and economically disadvantaged families exhibited a greater tendency for suspension and poor academic achievement by the age of nine. Students who were subjected to exclusionary discipline at the age of nine had an increased likelihood of suffering academic failure and an increased likelihood of being subjected to exclusionary discipline at the age of 15 (Clark & Kjellstrand, 2024).

Addressing Discipline Disproportionality

The disproportionate number of disciplinary actions employed against students of color in the United States exemplifies systemic inequality (Dionisio & Gray-Nicolas, 2023).

Addressing the disproportionate suspension of Black students requires the implementation of research-based practices that have yielded results. Though not always supported by schools, restorative practices, culturally responsive teaching, Capturing Kids Hearts, and Behavior Learning Theory have contributed to lowering discipline disparities in schools.

Restorative Practices in Schools

Restorative justice is a reactive and proactive approach to addressing harm. Reactively, restorative justice brings together everyone impacted by wrongdoing, while proactively seeking to establish a community culture in which individuals experience value and success (Davis, 2019). Restorative justice is a relational process that guides the offender and those harmed to discuss ownership of actions with the purpose of repairing harm and creating community between all parties involved (Davis, 2019). By offering the individual who inflicted the injury a chance to reconcile with the victim and the surrounding community, the restorative process

attempts to undo the harm (McNeill et al., 2016). Schools have increasingly recognized the dual reactive and proactive nature of restorative justice.

The implementation of restorative justice in the criminal justice system gave rise to restorative practices in education (Augustine et al., 2018). The proactive nature of restorative practices supports positive relationships among students and staff and a sense of belonging in classrooms leading to a positive school climate where students are less likely to misbehave (Augustine et al., 2018). The utilization of punitive measures increases problems for students, schools, and communities (Sullivan, 2013). Restorative practices are a collection of relational techniques that seek to develop connections, trust, and understanding. The use of affective statements, restorative questions, community circles, and structured restorative conferences to address and heal harm can all be examples of this in the classroom (Kervick et al., 2019). What began as a practice in the criminal justice system has made its way into schools.

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) has created resources to support schools. The SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change program, developed by the IIRP, introduces a preventive and responsive approach to restorative practices (Rainbolt et al., 2019). Affective statements and proactive circles are two elements of the preventative model. Affective statements humanize individuals by communicating the emotional impact of another person's actions. Proactive circles are a communication practice that supports the building of community and relationships (Joseph-McCatty, 2022). Restorative questions and restorative circles are two elements of the responsive model. Restorative questions assist the offender in understanding how their actions affected another person and the victim in reflecting upon what is needed to repair the relationship (Rainbolt et al., 2019). Restorative circles are designed for two or more students to communicate feelings to each other and ponder the imprint of their choices (Rainbolt et al.,

2019). Restorative circles create an environment where issues can be addressed (Joseph-McCatty, 2022). Restorative practices are being increasingly implemented by schools.

McNeill, Friedman, and Chavez (2016) studied the impact of restorative practices compared to traditional exclusionary practices and noted that restorative practices increased positive outcomes for students and improved the school climate. Restorative practices have emerged as a plan of action employed by school districts, constituents, and policymakers to decrease the disproportionate suspension of students of color (Augustine et al., 2018).

Practitioners and policymakers propose restorative practices in schools as a substitute for exclusionary discipline practices (Augustine et al., 2018). Exclusionary consequences are counterproductive because they seek to reform behavior while removing students from the classroom (McNeill et al., 2016). In contrast, the restorative approach attempts to increase interest and empathy for other people while allowing all parties to convey their sentiments of frustration, anxiety, and shame, without judgment (Mansfield, 2018b). Restorative practices improve school climate and teacher-student relationships.

The use of restorative practices benefits both teacher and student relationships. Gregory et al. (2016) conducted a comparative study between two high schools with varying restorative practices. The survey measured student perceptions of student-teacher relationships. The findings revealed that students perceived more positive relationships between students and staff where restorative practices were present. Teachers in schools with restorative practices were identified as decreasing the number of office referrals and variance among race/ethnicity (Gregory et al., 2016). Other schools with lower restorative practice implementation maintained discipline discrepancies between race and ethnicity groups (Gregory et al., 2016).

Alternative discipline framework, Don't Suspend Me!, was introduced to 52 California administrators to examine their beliefs about discipline and hindrances to the implementation of alternative disciplinary strategies. The framework encouraged the use of restorative, reflective, and instructional practices instead of exclusionary practices (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019). Restorative practices encouraged the restoration of relationships between the two parties. Reflective practices supported providing the opportunity for students to reflect on inappropriate choices. Instructional practices amplified the need for students to be taught skills to help them choose proper behaviors. Pre and post inventories concluded a change in school administrators' perspective of how discipline can be administered to decrease recidivism (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019).

The incorporation of restorative practices into schools is not free of challenges. Time and will are reported as significant hindrances to restorative practices (Dhaliwal et al., 2021). Teachers have multiple responsibilities daily and time to convene restorative circles is limited. Though the challenge of implementing restorative practices is apparent, research continues to support the implementation of restorative practices to counter discipline disparities in schools. The implementation of restorative practices has been shown to improve teacher-student relationships in schools. Teachers who implemented restorative practices at an elevated level noticed that relationships with students improved (Gregory et al, 2014). As a result, fewer discipline referrals were issued, and students' perceptions changed. Students noted an environment of mutual respect (Gregory et al, 2014). Even so, teachers who causally implemented restorative practices incorporated more exclusionary consequences than teachers who intentionally implemented restorative practices (Gregory et al, 2014).

Restorative practices are a collection of resources that teachers can use to build enduring connections with their students and stakeholders (Kline, 2016). Restorative techniques are used in response to conflict and to mend broken relationships (Kline, 2016). As a result, these techniques enhance school culture by encouraging inclusiveness, community, self-efficacy, and self-worth, as well as teaching everyone involved how to settle disputes amicably and deal with misbehavior (Pavelka, 2013).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

The diversity of schools throughout the United States has shifted. The proportion of Hispanic pupils enrolled in public schools rose from 24% to 29% between the fall of 2012 and the fall of 2022. The proportion of White students attending public schools dropped from 51% to 44%, while the proportion of Black students declined from 16% to 15% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Providing sufficient instruction to all student demographic groups is an educational concern, as the student body in K–12 public schools becomes increasingly diverse (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). Demographic changes in schools have created a demand for minority teachers in schools (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021).

Of all public-school instructors in 2020–21, 80% were White, 6% were Black, and 9% were Hispanic. White pupils, on the contrary, comprised 46% of the student body, and Hispanic students were 28%. This gap proves that the diversity of students is rising at a higher rate than the diversity of teachers, which is why culturally relevant teaching is essential to ensure that diverse populations benefit (Bonner et al., 2018).

Teachers were urged in 2015 to think of innovative approaches to teaching pupils from low-income families (Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Gay (2010), a proponent of culturally responsive teaching urged teachers to recognize the benefits of incorporating students' culture

with learning. If diverse students are failing due to cultural differences in how they learn best and are taught, higher percentages of students in the United States will continue to perform below grade level unless teachers alter their pedagogical approaches (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Thus, to guarantee that their children succeed both at school and at home, teachers must gain an awareness of cultural ramifications and reduce any potential conflicts in the classroom (Gay, 2018). The first step to becoming a culturally responsive teacher is the willingness to learn student cultures (Tanase, 2022).

Culturally relevant teaching has been defined in a variety of ways, with the main emphasis being on integrating student culture into the educational process. Teel and Obidah (2008) defined culturally relevant teaching as a method of challenging the status quo and guiding curriculum development by using cultural knowledge of varied populations to create caring learning communities where cultural heritages are honored. It involves relating new material to students' prior knowledge and presenting it in ways that accommodate their natural learning style (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Culturally relevant teaching is the process of "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2018, p. 36). Building on students' language and cultural backgrounds as teaching and learning take place is the goal of culturally responsive teaching (Cruz et al., 2019).

There are numerous advantages to educating in a culturally appropriate way. An increase in student engagement is a byproduct of culturally relevant teaching (Vescio, 2016). Also, an awareness of culturally relevant teaching can increase teacher introspection, unveiling unconscious biases that influence daily classroom instruction (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). When culturally relevant teaching is paired with proactive behavioral management, teachers can

identify biases, especially in the disciplining of minority students (Larson et al., 2018).

Incorporating culturally relevant teaching creates an inclusive learning environment and improves academic performance (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021).

The use of culturally relevant teaching helps teachers manage student behaviors and increase academic outcomes (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021). In 2017, a quantitative study involving 274 teachers found that the use of culturally relevant teaching practices enhances student engagement (Larson et al., 2018). In 2016, researchers surveyed 315 students on their teachers' constructivist teaching and cultural engagement. Constructivist teaching is the incorporation of various teaching tools, including videos, guest speakers, or real-life examples. Students reported that their interest in learning increased when they could learn more about their culture in school (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021).

A 2017 study examined the instructional strategies of seven highly regarded educators working in urban schools across the southernmost part of the United States (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). Teachers were interviewed with an emphasis on how they built relationships with students and involved them in everyday classroom learning. Incorporating multicultural viewpoints and perspectives into the classroom was one of the four themes that arose from the research (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017).

Capturing Kids' Hearts

The Flippen Group created Capturing Kids' Hearts (CKH), a program specifically designed to assist schools in fostering positive teacher-student and student-student interactions, while simultaneously decreasing negative student behaviors (Holtzapple et al., 2011). The EXCEL Model strategies make up the framework of Capturing Kids' Hearts. The first strategy is to actively involve pupils as soon as they enter the classroom. This approach advocates for

teachers to commence each day by offering a pleasant salutation to validate and embrace every student, thus fostering a conducive atmosphere for learning. Engaging students before the start of class has numerous advantages. One major advantage is that the greeting provides teachers with a chance to demonstrate social and professional aptitude. During the welcome, students are introduced to concepts like posture, eye-contact, facial expression, and tone. All skills that can be used professionally to communicate one's full attention to an individual (Capturing Kids' Hearts, 2024). The next strategy is x-plore.

During x-plore, teachers have the opportunity to learn about where students are personally, emotionally, and academically prior to class. Teachers employ several techniques such as listening, close observation, demonstrating empathy, asking probing questions, and using open-ended questions to delve into the experiences and circumstances of pupils. One activity within this strategy, Good Things, is a brief three- to five-minute exercise that facilitates exploration and connection between teachers and students. During this activity, students express their gratitude by sharing something they are thankful for. Good Things provide teachers with an opportunity to display their interest in children, foster a good atmosphere in the classroom, and exhibit optimistic thinking (Capturing, 2024). The subsequent EXCEL approach is to engage in effective communication.

Teachers initiate the process of communication by first comprehending the significance of body language, tone of voice, and choice of words in conveying a message. Teachers convey their subject matter by facilitating discourse between the teacher and students, as well as among the students themselves. Teachers who effectively implement this technique demonstrate exceptional skill in guiding education for students and establishing connections between subject and real-world issues. Teachers also promote pupils' communication skills by utilizing the

"S.O.L.E.R." strategy. This technique encourages students to listen with more than just their ears. Students are asked to adopt a squared-up position, keep an open posture, lean in, consistently maintain eye contact, and respond actively (Capturing, 2024). The next strategy is Empower.

Teachers empower students by affording them the opportunity to showcase their acquired knowledge. Knowledge acquired through communication is applied to assess the students' level of learning. Students who can apply what they have learned develop greater skill. Teachers effectively empower students by establishing a secure environment that encourages students to take risks in their learning. A climate of empowerment is achieved when students perceive failure as an integral aspect of the learning process (Capturing, 2024). The final strategy is to initiate the Launch.

Launch refers to the process by which teachers conclude a lesson and transition students to their subsequent class. Launch refers to a deliberate emphasis on how to wrap up the session and get the students ready for what will happen next. Effective teachers employ questioning techniques to assess students' understanding of the learning objective. The Launch approach equips teachers with the necessary tools to highlight the essential concepts that students should retain before the subsequent session (Capturing, 2024).

In addition to the EXCEL strategies, CKH focuses on the creation of a social contract. A social contract is an agreement of behavior that is developed with student input. The social contract communicates how students want to be treated by the teacher, peers, how students believe the teacher wants to be treated, and what to do in case of conflict (Capturing, 2024). Holtzapple et al. (2011) reported that the implementation of CKH resulted in a 22% decrease in discipline referrals for participating schools, while control schools increased in referrals by 11%.

CKH has been implemented in schools throughout the United States and continues to produce classroom environments ripe for learning (Holtzapple et al., 2011).

Behavioral Learning Theory

John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner are the pioneers of behaviorism, which is based on the premise that psychology should focus on quantifiable events and actions (Zhong, 2008).

Behaviorism, or Behavioral Learning Theory, emphasizes the connection between environmental stimuli and their effects on behavior. External stimuli can be reinforced either favorably or negatively. Positive reinforcement transpires when a stimulus is introduced into an environment to promote a behavior. Negative reinforcement transpires when a stimulus is eliminated from an environment to promote a behavior (Reynolds, 1975). Operant conditioning is a psychological technique that use reinforcement or punishment to alter and control behavior, with the objective of enhancing or diminishing particular behaviors or responses (Reynolds, 1975). Employing behavioral learning theory to promote suitable student conduct has benefits.

A benefit of behavioral learning theory is that it offers an objective approach for assessing student development (Tprestianni, 2023). Behavior learning offers a systematic method for educators to convey expectations and implement routines within the classroom. Furthermore, behavioral learning assists pupils in developing self-regulation and instructs them on how to monitor and manage their conduct (Tprestianni, 2023). Students cognizant of the incentives for acceptable conduct are more likely to regulate their behavior. Ultimately, educators can administer positive and/or negative reinforcement to elicit a specific response. Positive reinforcement can bolster student confidence, promoting the recurrence of favorable conduct. Negative reinforcement can assist kids in evading adverse situations and alleviating anxiety

(Tprestianni, 2023). Token economies and behavioral contracts exemplify reinforcement mechanisms employed by educators to augment student engagement and learning.

Token economies are interventions that offer students a tangible token to promote appropriate behavior, which may subsequently be exchanged for a reward (Carnett et al., 2014). Token economies have been effective for pupils identified with learning disabilities (Doll et al., 2013). Higgins et al. (2001) investigated the effects of token economies by awarding tokens to a student for exhibiting suitable conduct. Tokens were allocated to the student every minute. The student may utilize the tokens for educational activities, computer usage, and recreational reading. The research revealed that token economies effectively diminished improper behaviors among students (White et al., 2018).

Behavior contracts have been utilized by educators for years to outline behavioral expectations and rewards (Cooper et al., 2019). Behavior contracts hold greater significance when collaboratively developed by the educator and the student. The contract must delineate the target behaviors, monitoring schedule, implications for achieving or failing to achieve target behaviors, along with signatures from both the student and teacher. Behavior contracts are applicable in various contexts and necessitate minimal time for development and execution (Majeika et al., 2020). Token economies and behavioral contracts are two strategies that correspond with behaviorism. By comprehending and using the ideas of behavioral learning theory, educators can develop successful methods of instruction, cultivate favorable educational settings, and improve student participation (Tprestianni, 2023).

Summary

Numerous potential explanations exist for discipline disproportionality; nevertheless, research identifies biases, zero tolerance policies, and school policing as major contributing

factors. The implications of discipline disproportionality are evident in the school-to-prison pipeline. Equally alarming is the number of students who encounter program inequity, frequently leading to lower academic performance. Amid the detrimental impacts of discipline disproportionality, studies indicate that restorative practices, culturally responsive teaching, the Capturing Kids' Hearts program, and Behavioral Learning Theory have been pivotal in mitigating it and enhancing students' learning opportunities. In Chapter 3, a comprehensive overview of my investigation, detailing the inquiry design, research questions, phases, rigor, data collection instruments, and the researcher's role as a scholarly practitioner.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

The focus of this inquiry is to determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can impact discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment. The inquiry was conducted at LMS in Rock County Schools. Rock County Schools is in eastern North Carolina and follows a standard schedule from August to June. In 2024 Lighthouse School served over 600 students in grades six to eight representing rural and suburban communities. Approximately four out of every five Black students do not meet grade level proficiency in reading or math. College and career readiness numbers reveal that 90% of Black students were not ready for post-secondary education or workforce, based on reading or math performance. Disproportionality exists not just in academics but also in the distribution of consequences for behavior.

At LMS, Black students receive short-term suspensions at four times greater than their White peers. Further, Black students receive in-school suspensions at more than two times greater than their White peers. Excessive use of suspensions hinders students from attending classes, impeding their ability to keep pace with their peers (Kline, 2016). Removing children from the classroom contributes to lost instructional time, lower school engagement, and decreases trust between students and adults (Davis, 2019). In this chapter I thoroughly present the research methodology and data gathering tools that were employed to carry out my inquiry.

Inquiry Guiding Question

This inquiry is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on student discipline disproportionality?

2. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on teachers' perceptions of student behaviors?
3. How does the experience of leading this inquiry impact the scholarly practitioner's professional leadership style and development?

Each of the inquiry questions aligns to the focus of determining whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can impact discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment. The first inquiry question was answered through analysis of student discipline data before and after the teacher behavioral professional learning program. Discipline data from 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years were compared and analyzed. A classroom walkthrough tool was utilized to assess the teachers' implementation of learning. The second inquiry questions ascertained teacher perceptions on student behaviors as a result of the behavioral professional learning program. Teachers completed a modified Teacher Working Conditions Survey (TWCS) prior to this study. Teachers completed the same modified TWCS at the conclusion of the study to understand their perspectives of student behaviors at the implementation of the behavioral professional learning program. A focus group was conducted to assess teacher perception on student behaviors because of the teacher behavioral professional learning program. The last inquiry question sought to determine the impact of this inquiry on the practitioner's leadership. The practitioner, through journaling, will reflect on the inquiry implementation and learnings.

Inquiry Design and Rationale

The focus of this inquiry is to determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can impact discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment. The inquiry utilized an explanatory sequential, mixed methods design grounded in improvement

science. Improvement science is an approach to solve problems of practice by scholar-practitioners (Hinnant-Crawford). The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle is a method utilized in improvement science to achieve continuous improvement (see Figure 8).

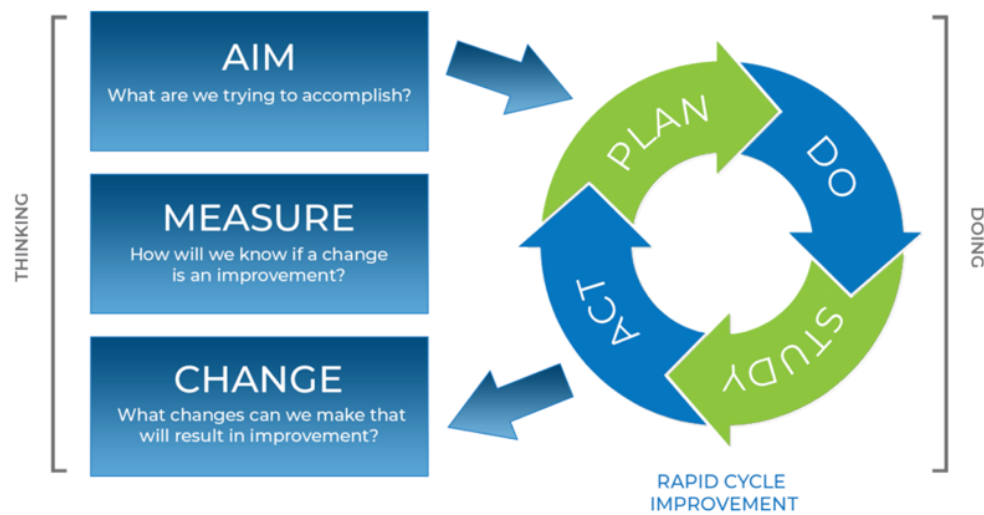


Figure 8. Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle for improvement

The PDSA improvement cycle involves developing, testing, and revising a theory of change based on findings (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). According to Hinnant-Crawford (2020), the PDSA cycle seeks to answer three questions:

1. What are we trying to accomplish?
2. How will we know that a change is an improvement?
3. What change can we make that will result in improvement?

The “Plan” phase involves developing a plan to test the change. The “Do” phase is the implementation of the plan. The “Study” phase is where the analysis of the implementation occurs, and the “Act” phase reveals modifications needed to further impact change outcomes (Christoff, 2018). The PDSA cycle embedded within a mixed methods research design supported the inquiry into a teacher behavioral professional learning program's effectiveness. Explanatory sequential designs (see Figure 9) are mixed methods design that begins with quantitative research and concludes with qualitative research. The qualitative research is used to provide meaning to the quantitative research (Mertler, 2022).

Quantitative research seeks to find answers to inquiries through deductive reasoning (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Deductive reasoning aims to draw precise conclusions using descriptive statistics, which are numerical metrics like mean, median, and mode, used to characterize quantitative data (Mertler, 2022). School disciplinary data is quantitative data that was gathered to assess the existence or absence of discipline disproportionality. Examining discipline data and conducting descriptive statistics analysis helped address the initial research inquiry question. What is the effect of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on the disproportionate distribution of student discipline?

Explanatory Sequential Design



Figure 9. Explanatory sequential design

A second quantitative data point was collected by conducting a survey to answer my second inquiry question. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on teachers' perceptions of student behaviors? Teachers at LMS completed a modified TWCS that captures their beliefs of student behaviors. At the conclusion of the study, the same modified TWCS survey was administered to evaluate changes in teacher perception before and after the teacher behavioral professional learning program. The modified TWCS provided quantitative data regarding teacher perceptions of student behaviors. The third quantitative data point was the classroom observation tool. The classroom observation tool was utilized to evaluate the instructional environment's impact on student behaviors. The explanatory sequential mixed methods began with quantitative research and progressed to qualitative research. The qualitative research provided meaning on teacher perception of student behaviors.

Qualitative research seeks to find answers to inquiries through inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning aims to derive generalizations from specific observations and evidence (Mertler, 2022). Qualitative research utilizes qualitative data such as focus groups, interviews, or observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study utilized focus groups to address the second question of inquiry and investigate teachers' opinions, values, and perceptions. A protocol was created and utilized to support focus group facilitation with participants.

Qualitative data acquired through journaling and field notes was analyzed using inductive analytical coding to answer the third research question. How does the experience of leading this inquiry impact the scholarly practitioner's professional leadership style and development? Integrating the PDSA cycle and the explanatory sequential design aided in determining whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program could impact discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment.

Context of the Inquiry

The inquiry took place at a traditional middle school in Rock County Schools. Eastern North Carolina's Rock County Schools operate on a regular schedule from August through June. Lighthouse School, a sixth- through eighth-grade school in Rock County, served more than 600 kids in 2024 who came from suburban and rural areas. LMS has an average class size of 19 students, while Rock County Schools has an average class size of 23 students. At 64% of the student body, the school has a larger percentage of economically disadvantaged students than the state average by over 15 percentage points. There are no National Board-Certified teachers at the institution. In order to report on the overall performance of teachers, North Carolina uses the five standards of the Educator Evaluation System: teachers must exhibit leadership, create a respectful environment for a diverse student body, be knowledgeable about the material they teach, assist students in learning, and reflect on their practice (NCDPI, 2009). Based on their evaluations on the five standards, teachers are categorized as effective, highly effective, or in need of improvement. Instructors rated as "needs improvement" fall short of meeting one of the five standards. Instructors who score proficient on all five standards are considered effective. On all five observational standards, highly effective teachers receive ratings of accomplished or distinguished. According to the 2023 statistics, 23% of FMS teachers were highly effective, 41% were effective, and 36% required improvement (NC Report Card, 2023). Despite meeting the state's requirements for academic development, the school was labeled as low performing for the past two years.

The school's low performance rating indicates that fewer pupils than the district and state norms in reading, math, and science are meeting grade level competence or college and career readiness standards. Roughly 50% of Black children are not proficient in math or reading at their

grade level. Based on their reading and math proficiency, 90% of Black children are not prepared for post-secondary education or the workforce, according to data on college and career preparedness. Disproportionality is present in both the distribution of behavioral consequences and academic performance.

Black pupils at LMS are four times more likely than White peers to be placed on short-term suspensions. Moreover, compared to their White counterparts, Black children are suspended from school more than twice as frequently (see Figure 1). Overuse of suspension makes it difficult for children to attend lessons and keeps them behind their peers (Kline, 2016). Children being taken out of the classroom results in wasted instructional time, decreased student participation, and a decline in adult-student trust (Davis, 2019).

Collaborative Inquiry Partners

The utilization of CIPs were employed throughout the inquiry process to specifically address the focus of practice. The principal, instructional coach and school counselor were essential collaborators in the process of critical inquiry. Collectively, we convened to identify the problem at hand by thoroughly analyzing student data. The CIP along with the school improvement team reviewed the data and brainstorm strategies to mitigate it, aiming to reduce the disciplinary discrepancies among pupils. We engaged in collaborative professional learning sessions, implemented the change intervention, and documented the results.

Ethical Considerations

To conduct this inquiry of study, there were ethical protocols and guidelines required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), East Carolina University, and Rock County Schools. IRB is a requirement under the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations that requires a formal group to approve and monitor research to ensure the rights of humans participating in

research are maintained. The IRB reviews the application and notifies individuals regarding their request (see Appendix A). East Carolina University requires the completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) course. Social and Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel were the CITI modules required for my inquiry. Rock County Schools have specifications for anyone involved in educational research and study. Applicants must complete a Research Request Application to obtain authorization for research in the district. This protocol aims to assure adherence to school board policies, uphold the confidentiality of participants, and confirm agreement with the district's school improvement objectives.

All participants were informed about the following concepts that directed this inquiry's design and practice:

1. Voluntary participation: participants in this inquiry were invited to participate with the understanding that they could opt out of participating
2. Informed consent: participants were made aware of the purpose, benefits, and risks associated with this inquiry before signing informed consent form (see Appendix B).
3. Confidentiality: the school district, school, and teachers were made aware that a pseudonym would be used to protect confidentiality of the school. Participants were informed their personal identities would remain confidential throughout this inquiry. The research data was safely saved in ECU's Microsoft cloud and would be permanently destroyed after 3 years.

Instrumentation

The focus of this inquiry is to determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program could impact discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment. Data collection from participants involved the use of instrumentation instruments

such as the modified TWCS, classroom observation tool, and focus group protocol. This section provides an overview of the piloting process and establish alignment between the inquiry question and the instrumentation method.

The instrumentation tools used in this inquiry were piloted by four educational consultants and a classroom teacher. Two of the educational consultants have served as a classroom teacher, school administrator, and district administrator. The two additional education consultants have served as a classroom teacher and school administrator. Each of the educational consultants have obtained a post-graduate degree. One has earned a PhD and the others have an earned EdD. The classroom teacher at the time of the study, served as an educator in a middle school in Rock County Schools. The teacher did not teach at LMS. An analysis was conducted to assess the usability of the Likert scale used in the modified TWCS. The classroom observation tool was analyzed with each participant to determine if the questions supported disaggregation of the data during the analysis phase. The piloting sessions revealed a need to ensure that my questions provided the data needed to measure the impact of my inquiry. A major critique of the classroom observation tool focused on the use of Behavior Specific Praise (BSP). Originally, I was seeking to capture if BSP was utilized. The pilot study revealed the need to gather data on each specific component of BSP to measure the impact of the teacher behavioral professional learning program and support in developing subsequent behavioral professional learning program session with staff. The pilot study helped me to establish alignment between the inquiry questions and the instrumentation method.

The first inquiry question in this study aimed to assess the extent to which a a teacher behavioral professional learning program effects the disparity in student discipline. A classroom observation tool was utilized for data collection. Classroom observations were performed to

assess the learning environment and its influence on desirable student behaviors. The self-developed observation tool (see Appendix D) provided insight on the classroom setting, the application of positive reinforcement strategies, and the frequency of positive reinforcement employed in the classroom. Positive reinforcement strategies such as the utilization of positive language between teachers and students and among students was assessed. The classroom observation tool assessed the presence of the social contract and the use of Behavior Specific Praise in the classroom. Finally, observers tallied the total the number of positive reinforcement statements/cues (verbal and non-verbal) observed in the classroom. The classroom observation tool included a notes section for an observer to document any events that occur during the observation.

The second inquiry question in this study ascertained the extent to which a teacher behavioral professional learning program influences teachers' perceptions of student conduct. A modified TWCS and a focus group were conducted for this inquiry. The modified TWCS (see Appendix C), a secondary data set, was reviewed at the beginning of the study and re-administered as a post survey during the inquiry process. The modified TWCS was given to teachers only. The Likert nine question survey asked participant to assess statements based on the extent to which they strongly disagree, agree, or were unsure. The focus group was comprised of grade 7 teachers. Seven self-developed questions (see Appendix E) were employed to stimulate discussion regarding student behaviors, teacher reinforcement of student behaviors, and the influence of social contracts and positive reinforcement strategies in the classroom learning environment. The instrumentation used in this inquiry sought to determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can impact discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment.

The third inquiry question in this study ascertained the impact of leading this inquiry on the scholarly practitioner's professional leadership style and development. The scholarly practitioner, through journaling and field notes, documented thoughts, feelings, and learnings throughout the inquiry that were analyzed to measure the impact of this inquiry on his professional journey.

Inquiry Procedures

The focus of this inquiry was to determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can impact discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment. This study sought to investigate the three research questions using diverse methodologies, instrumentation, and data analyses. The inquiry process had three distinct phases, each driven by a cycle of inquiry known as the plan, do, study, act cycle. Each phase was thoughtfully coordinated with my team of CIPs.

Phase I

Plan

Phase I began with the collection of 2023-2024 data. The data was collected from various sources, such as NC Report Card and Educator's Handbook. Data from NC Report Card informed our study about the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions of students at LMS from the previous year relative to the district and state. The Educator's Handbook provided student discipline data by demographics. Teachers at LMS completed a modified Teacher Working Condition Survey (TWCS) that was reviewed with my collaborative inquiry partners. The Likert scale survey gathered data concerning teacher perceptions on student expectations and the role teachers play in the classroom environment. Likert scale inquiries began with a declarative statement, followed by a request for respondents to provide their response on a

continuum ranging from strongly agree to unsure (Mertler, 2022). The survey has five points; strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, and unsure.

Additionally, a classroom observation tool and focus group protocol were created. The classroom observation tool measured the implementation of the teacher behavioral professional learning program. The scholarly practitioner conducted classroom walkthroughs and documented teacher implementation of the behavioral professional learning program. The focus group protocol was created to understand teacher perspective of the behavioral professional learning program implementation. Lastly, the first teacher behavioral professional learning session was created to deliver to teachers at LMS.

Do

To gather feedback on the classroom observation tool and focus group protocol, a pilot study was conducted. A pilot study is a preliminary investigation conducted to assess the data gathering process and identify any necessary modifications prior to commencing the actual data collection. The pilot participants consisted of an educator and educational consultants. After participants reviewed the instrumentation tool independently, an interview was scheduled with each pilot participant to gather feedback on the instrumentation tool and focus group protocol. We reviewed each question in the classroom observation tool and focus group protocol process together. The interview began with an overview of the purpose of the study and the data the instrumentation tool and focus group protocol was designed to collect. This stage concluded with me providing teachers with their first behavioral professional learning.

Study

Analysis and revision of the piloted classroom observation tool and focus group protocol were made based upon feedback from pilot participants. After revisions, I sought official district

approval to begin research. The participating school district requires a Research Request Application Form that outlines the purpose and participants. Request to conduct research in the school district and from the East Carolina University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought to begin inquiry into the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on the discipline disproportionality in a rural middle school.

Act

Upon revisions and IRB approval, collaborative inquiry partners and teachers received an overview of the classroom observation tool. Collaborative inquiry partners and teachers learned about the tool's usage and observation duration. The classroom observation tool collected quantitative data during a ten-minute observation. To support transparency of the tool, teachers received training on the classroom observation tool and its usage. The training aimed to familiarize all participants with the tool and address any inquiries regarding its implementation and data utilization. CIP and educators participated in an in-depth review of the instrument and its elements. Once orientation and training on the classroom observation tool was completed, the classroom observation schedule was created and finalized with collaborative inquiry partners and Round 1 of classroom walkthroughs using the classroom observation tool began (Appendix D). The scholarly practitioner documented experiences through journaling and field notes for reflection on leadership.

Summary Phase I

Phase I consisted of data collection, secondary data review, instrumentation creation and piloting, and professional learning. Quantitative data collection was gathered through Educator's Handbook, NC Report Card, and the classroom observation tool. The secondary data review of the modified TWCS provided insight into teacher perceptions about student behaviors. The

classroom observation tool and focus group protocol were created and thoroughly reviewed during the piloting sessions. The behavioral professional learning program began to examine its impact on discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment. Phase I aimed to support the facilitation of a successful investigation through data acquisition, instrumentation, educator feedback, and professional learning. This phase concluded with me reflecting on my leadership journey.

Phase II

Plan

Phase II began with analyzing the data obtained from the first round of classroom observation tool. The tool informed collaborative inquiry partners on the classroom environment and positive reinforcement practices employed by the teacher during the observation. The scholarly practitioner utilized the ATLAS protocol for data analysis. The ATLAS protocol focuses on describing, interpreting, and identifying implications of data sets. Insights from the data was used to identify subsequent topics for the upcoming behavioral professional learning session.

Do

After engaging in the ATLAS protocol, findings from the first data collection were disseminated to my collaborative inquiry partners and teachers. Results were shared with staff during grade level professional learning community meetings and strengths and opportunities for improvements prior to the second round of classroom observations were discussed. Teachers received the teacher behavioral professional learning session two, to continue building their capacity on student behaviors.

Study

Collaborative inquiry partners revisited the classroom observation schedule to guarantee the collection of adequate data. Upon review, round two of data collection using the classroom observation tool began. Each observation measured the classroom environment, the use of positive reinforcement techniques, and the frequency of reinforcement. The classroom observation tool evaluated the existence of the social contract and the application of Behavior Specific Praise in the classroom.

Act

Data from the second round, using the classroom observation tool, was analyzed. The tool informed collaborative inquiry partners and teachers on the classroom environment, positive reinforcement practices, and positive reinforcement statements employed by the teacher during the observation. The scholarly practitioner utilized the ATLAS protocol for data analysis. The ATLAS protocol focuses on describing, interpreting, and identifying implications of data sets. Results from round two data collection using the classroom observation tool was disseminated to my collaborative inquiry partners and teachers. The scholarly practitioner documented the experience through journaling and field notes for reflection on leadership.

Summary Phase II

The data gathered from the classroom observation tool was analyzed utilizing the ATLAS protocol. The scholarly practitioner communicated with teachers areas in need of improvement and strengths. Professional learning session two was delivered to continue building teacher capacity on student behaviors to impact discipline disproportionality in a rural middle school. The observation schedule was utilized by the scholarly practitioner to perform classroom observations to assess the implementation of the teacher behavioral professional learning

program. Data analysis and data dissemination occurred upon the completion of round two. This phase concluded with the scholarly practitioner reflecting on their leadership journey.

Phase III

Plan

Phase III began with data collection of 2024-2025 data. The data was collected from NC Report Card and Educator's Handbook. Data from NC Report Card informed the study about the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions of students at LMS relative to the district and state. The Educator's Handbook provided student discipline data by demographics. In addition, teachers completed the modified TWCS as a post assessment. The modified TWCS was identical to the secondary data survey reviewed in the plan stage of phase I.

Do

Focus groups were conducted with teachers to gather qualitative data on intervention implementation. The focus group protocol provided a script to follow that explains the purpose, ground rules and process for asking participants questions. The scholarly practitioner conducted the focus group. A semi-structured process was used to ask participants five questions. A semi-structured occurs when the researcher asks the initial question, but is permitted to follow up questions with additional questions if needed (Mertler, 2022).

Study

The focus group, modified TWCS, classroom observations, and discipline data were analyzed. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics were used for analysis. Thematic analysis is an organized method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data, then extracting meaning from these patterns as they reflect overarching concepts within the data (Mertler, 2022). Thematic analysis was used to analyze focus group data. Descriptive statistics

was used for quantitative data analysis. Mean, median, and mode are common statistics used when analyzing numerical data (Mertler, 2022). Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the modified TWCS, classroom observation, and Educator's Handbook data.

Act

After analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the findings from the study were distributed to the school district and principal. This stage concluded with recommendations made to inquiry partners and school leadership. Table 1 summarizes the PDSA cycle phases of this inquiry to determine the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on a rural middle school. The scholarly practitioner documented experiences through journaling and field notes for reflection on leadership.

Summary Phase IV

The final phase of this inquiry began with the collection of summative data from Educator's Handbook on student discipline during the 2024-25 school year. Teachers completed the modified TWCS again as a post-survey. The focus group was conducted with teachers to gather qualitative data on the inquiry experience. All data collection for the duration of the inquiry was analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings from the inquiry were documented and shared with Rock County Schools and Lighthouse Middle School. This phase concluded with me reflecting on my leadership journey.

Table 1*PDSA Cycles by Inquiry Phase*

Phase	Plan	Do	Study	Act
Phase I	2023-2024 data collection on student suspensions (NC Report Card, Educator's Handbook)	Pilot classroom observation tool	Analyze piloted classroom observation tool and make revisions	Classroom observation tool training and orientation with collaborative inquiry partners and teachers
	Review modified TWCS	Pilot focus group protocol	Analyze pilot focus group protocol and make revisions	Develop a classroom observation schedule with collaborative inquiry partners.
	Create Classroom Observation tool	Conduct first professional learning session		Conduct round 1 of classroom observations
	Create Focus group protocol		IRB approval	Document phase I experience of leading this inquiry.
	Plan first professional learning session			
Phase II		Disseminate classroom observation results to inquiry partners and teachers		Analyze classroom observation results from round 2
	Analyze classroom observation results from round 1	Conduct second Professional Learning session.	Conduct round 2 of classroom observations	Disseminate classroom observation results to inquiry partners
	Plan second professional learning session			Document phase 2 experience of leading this inquiry

Table 1 continued

Phase III	2024-2025 data collection on student suspensions (NC Report Card, Educator's Handbook)	Conduct focus groups	Analyze quantitative and qualitative data.	Disseminate findings
	Administer modified TWCS posttest			Provide recommendations of next steps. Document phase 3 experience of leading this inquiry.

Inquiry Design Rigor

Inquiry design and rigor refers to the degree of quality in research (Mertler, 2022). The articulation of the methods used to attain rigor in research conveys the soundness of the scientific inquiry. The measure of rigor applied is relative to the specific research. Validity and reliability are used to determine the quantitative aspects of research. Validity is the ability to accurately measure your question of inquiry. Reliability is the ability to replicate the process to produce a relative outcome (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Qualitatively, rigor refers to the trustworthiness of the data (Mertler, 2022). The purpose of rigor is to reduce researcher bias (Mertler, 2022). Quantitative and qualitative rigor was used in this inquiry to determine the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality. The methods used in this inquiry to provide evidence of rigor are repeating the cycle, experience with the process, member checking, and participant debriefing.

Repeating the cycle is the process by which we examined our inquiry. Action research such as that used in improvement science designs should involve multiple cycles of inquiry (Mertler, 2022). The PDSA cycle as previously outlined includes multiple phases. Each stage of the cycle provides information to support subsequent phases, enhancing the research's precision. As an employee of a research institute, the scholarly practitioner had experience conducting focus groups and qualitative analysis. The scholarly practitioners experience with research participants and thematic analysis supported the data collection and examination processes. Participant debriefings focuses on the emotional experience of participants throughout the study (Mertler, 2022). Participant debriefings were employed to observe and assess the emotional state of participants during this investigation and to ensure agreement on what was observed. This

inquiry to examine the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality in a rural middle school was rigorously designed and implemented.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

Delimitations were included in this investigation to restrict the range and guarantee that the investigation remained focused. The inquiry did not have any restrictions or constraints regarding the gender of the participants. The investigation focused exclusively on educators employed in a rural public school district in eastern North Carolina. The educators employed at Lighthouse school took part in the investigation. No teachers from external school districts or schools within Rock County Schools participated in this research. The investigation was conducted over the academic year of 2024-2025. Although all teachers participated in the teacher behavioral professional learning program, only grade 7 teachers and their corresponding student cohort were included in this inquiry. This inquiry was subject to delimitations and limitations.

Limitations refer to the factors or aspects of the investigation that could impact the outcomes. The implementation of the teacher behavioral professional learning program by teachers was a limitation to the inquiry. Implementing practices from the teacher behavioral professional learning program was the teachers' discretion. Classroom observations lasted for ten minutes, thereby limiting the amount of observation time in each classroom. There was also the potential for observer bias when conducting classroom observations. The study was absent of a control group limiting the comparability of schools engaged in a teacher behavioral professional learning program and those that were not involved.

Assumptions are assertions stated by researchers that lack substantiation yet are supposed to be accurate (Mertler, 2022). It was initially assumed that all teachers would follow the set guidelines and assist in the construction of social contracts. Teachers participated in CKH two-

day training that provided guidance to teachers on how to establish cooperative social agreement with students. However, the establishment of the social contract may have varied among different classrooms. Another presupposition is that each student in the class actively participated in the development of the social contract. While social contracts encourage the engagement of all students in their creation, participation is not obligatory. The ultimate presumption was that the teacher behavioral professional learning program would enhance the learning environment. While the teacher behavioral professional learning program aimed to improve the learning environment and foster the student-teacher connection, its precise impact cannot be accurately foreseen.

Role of the Scholarly Practitioner

The scholarly practitioner conducting this inquiry at LMS is an employee of a research institute and a non-employee of the local school district. The school district granted the scholarly practitioners request to complete their research on the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality in a rural middle school. The scholarly practitioner, planned, organized, and lead collaborative sessions with my inquiry partners. The scholarly practitioner lead each phase of the PDSA cycle, conduct professional learning with staff, and conduct focus groups. The scholarly practitioner initiated member checking sessions with inquiry partners and participant debriefings throughout the inquiry. Participants within this study did not work under my supervision; therefore, my responsibility to report findings free from the influences of my own biases and presuppositions was maintained.

Summary

This inquiry sought to examine the potential impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality. The inquiry employed a research methodology

that combined explanatory sequential and mixed methods approaches, rooted on improvement science. The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle is a technique employed in improvement science to support continuous growth. A pilot study was carried out to enhance the implementation processes and instrumentation tools. The inquiry involved the participation of CIPs. Chapter 4 presents conclusions and reflections derived from the findings of the inquiry.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

School discipline rates in K-12 schools throughout the U.S. amplify discipline disproportionality. White students are four times less likely to be suspended than their Black counterparts for the same offense (Davis, 2019). The number of children from racially marginalized groups that face disciplinary actions in school is one of the most frequently documented inequalities in U.S. schools (Gregory et al., 2017). Biases, zero tolerance policies, and school policing have all contributed to the disproportionate suspension of students. The purpose of this inquiry was to determine the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality in a rural middle school.

This investigation employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach based on improvement science. Improvement science is a methodology employed by scholar-practitioners to address practical issues (Hinnant-Crawford, date). Improvement science research involves multiple cycles of inquiry (Mertler, 2022). The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle is a methodology employed in improvement science to facilitate continuous improvement through cycles of inquiry.

A teacher behavioral professional learning program consisting of two professional learning sessions served as the intervention during the inquiry. The first behavioral professional learning program session began with understanding Behavior Specific Praise (BSP) and its core components. The session also focused on what happens in the brain when positive relationships are built with students. Participants utilized the 3-2-1 protocol while reading *Building positive relationships with students: What brain science says* (Kaufman, 2020). The 3-2-1 protocol engaged participants in identifying three things they learned, two things they want to learn more about, and one thing they are going to apply. Participants engaged in open dialogue regarding

text before learning about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their impact on the brain, body, and behavior. After learning about ACEs, participants debriefed by reflecting on two questions:

1. How might this information be used to assist with inappropriate classroom behavior?
2. How might this information not be used to assist with inappropriate classroom behavior?

At the conclusion of the first teacher behavioral professional learning program, a classroom observation was scheduled and conducted to measure the implementation of learning. The collected data was shared with teachers during the second behavioral professional learning in addition to the core content. The core content of the second behavioral professional learning program focused on reinforcing BSP and positive teacher and student relationships. Participants read *Strategies for teachers to develop positive relationships with students* (Meador, 2019) and completed the start/stop/continue/change protocol. After reading the article, participants reflected on what they wanted to start, stop, continue, or change pertaining to building and maintaining a positive relationship with students. The behavioral professional learning program was the intervention in this study. In this chapter, I provide the purpose of the inquiry, the inquiry questions, and how the inquiry was implemented. Details are provided about how the change intervention was implemented, overview of the instrumentation, and how the focus groups were structured. An overview of the demographics provides insights into the background and characteristics of the study participants. The data collection and analysis section provide the results of the study findings and the themes that surfaced in relation to the inquiry questions.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

1. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on student discipline disproportionality?
2. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on teachers' perceptions of student behaviors?
3. How does the experience of leading this inquiry impact the scholarly practitioner's professional leadership style and development?

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted by four educational consultants and a classroom teacher using the instrumentation tools. A teacher perception survey on student behaviors, classroom observation tool, and a focus group protocol were the instruments used in this study. The teacher perception survey measured the pre and post perceptions of teachers. The pilot study strengthened the need to use a Likert scale to capture teacher perceptions. While the initial Likert scale was a four-point Likert scale, feedback from pilot study participants concluded that a five-point Likert scale consisting of strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, and unsure be utilized. Pilot study participants' feedback was implemented. The questions used in the teacher perception survey were modified from the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 2024). The classroom observation tool was analyzed with each participant to determine if the questions supported disaggregation of the data during the analysis phase. The piloting sessions revealed a need to ensure that my questions provided the data needed to measure the impact of my inquiry. A major critique of the classroom observation tool focused on the use of Behavior Specific Praise (BSP). Originally, I was seeking to capture if BSP was utilized. The pilot study revealed the need to gather data on each specific

component of BSP to measure the impact of the teacher behavioral professional learning program and support in developing the subsequent behavioral professional learning program session with staff.

When implementing BSP, participants of the behavioral professional learning program were encouraged to incorporate four components when recognizing students. These included: identification of students or group in a way that it is known who is being praised, the inclusion of a term of praise, acknowledging the specific rule or behavior demonstrated, and linking the recognition to school-wide expectations. Measuring each component provided insight into strengths and opportunities of growth when implementing BSP. Lastly pilot participants supported the use of the focus group protocol that provided an overview of the study, ground rules, and a statement of confidentiality. However, pilot participants believed that some questions could be combined and others tailored specifically to capture the opinions of participants. Questions were edited to elicit positive and/or negative experiences relative to each question. Further, one question was edited to support participants in identifying the impact of the teacher behavioral professional learning program had on the most challenging student. This level of specificity supported a deep reflection from participants in measuring the impact of the teacher behavioral professional learning program.

Data Collection

This inquiry was organized using the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle of improvement and consisted of three phases. Data collection during phase I consisted of qualitative and quantitative data collection (see Table 2). Data collection efforts focused on student suspension records to establish a baseline understanding of behavioral trends. In addition, the modified Teacher Working Conditions Survey (TWCS) was reviewed to ensure alignment with the goals of the

Table 2*Data Collection Methods and Data Types by Research Cycle*

Research Cycle	Data Collection Instrument	Qualitative	Quantitative
Phase I	Modified TWCS Pre Survey Field Notes	X	X
Phase II	Walkthrough Tool		X
Phase III	Disciplinary Data Focus Group Modified TWCS Post Survey	X	X X

inquiry. New data collection instruments were designed and subsequently piloted to assess their effectiveness and clarity.

Planning and preparation were conducted for the first behavioral professional learning session, with attention given to instructional focus and staff engagement. Following the pilot phase, the collected instrumentation data were carefully analyzed to identify areas for refinement. Staff members also participated in an orientation on the classroom observation tool to ensure consistent understanding and application. In collaboration with inquiry partners, a classroom observation schedule was developed to support systematic data collection. The first classroom observation was then conducted in accordance with the established plan. The process concluded with an inquiry leadership reflection.

Data collected on student suspensions was retrieved from Educator's Handbook. Educator's Handbook is a digital platform that records and analyzes student discipline (Educator's Handbook, n.d.). The collection and review of discipline data was used to identify the population in need of support and to explore programing to support the improvement of student behaviors. Data was collected and shared with critical inquiry partners (CIP) who supported the inquiry into a teacher behavioral professional learning program. The modified TWCS, classroom observation tool, and the focus group protocol were created for data collection. Piloting was next in the process to gather feedback on whether the tools were designed in alignment with my inquiry questions. My inquiry partners and I agreed that it was important for teachers to be aware of the classroom observation tool and its components. A classroom observation tool orientation was conducted with staff to support transparency. A classroom observation schedule was created with CIPs and round one of the classroom observations began followed by a reflection of my experience.

Phase II of inquiry consisted of analyzing and sharing results from classroom observation data, planning and conducting the second round of classroom observation, analyzing and sharing results from the second round of classroom observations and reflecting upon my experience leading this inquiry. The analysis of the data was shared with teachers to communicate areas of strengths and opportunities of growth regarding the implementation of the teacher behavioral learning program. A planning meeting with CIP to determine schedule for second round of classroom observations was held. The second round of classroom observation began, followed by analysis and data sharing with teachers. Phase II concluded with a leadership reflection on my experience.

Phase III of inquiry consisted of collection of 2024-2025 student discipline data from CIP, conducting focus groups, analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, dissemination of findings, providing recommendations of next steps, and reflection of my leadership experience. Data collected from CIP from the 2024-2025 school year revealed incidents, office referrals, and incident locations. The collection of this data was used in my analysis to determine the impact of the teacher behavioral professional learning program. The focus group for the inquiry was designed to learn from the experiences of the teachers regarding the impact of the teacher behavioral professional learning program. The focus group data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Finding from the inquiry, recommendations for next steps, and a reflection of my leadership experience concluded phase III.

Data Analysis

In this inquiry, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to measure the impact of a behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality. The data

collection and analysis are organized as follows: a modified Teacher Working Conditions Survey (TWCS), a classroom observation tool, school discipline data, and a focus group.

Modified Teacher Working Conditions Survey

The North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions survey (see Appendix C) developed by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction was modified and administered to participants prior to the beginning of the study. The survey was administered for the second time at the conclusion of the study to assess teacher perception of student behaviors. Survey participants responded to each statement based on their level of agreement. Scoring was used to prepare the data for analysis. Scoring is the process of assigning a numerical value to every variable (Mertler, 2022). With a numerical value assigned to each response, descriptive statistical calculations began.

Measures of central tendency were used in this study. To calculate the mean for the pre and post survey, a numerical value was assigned to each participant's response. A strongly agree received a 5, agree a 4, disagree a 3, strongly disagree a 2, and unsure a 1 (see Table 3). With each question scored, a mean of 9 was calculated for each participant's response. An overall mean for the pre and post surveys was calculated separately.

To determine teachers' perceptions of student behavior, inquiry question number 2, the mean score was calculated for each participant (see Tables 4 & 5). For the purpose of determining whether the means of the two participant groups differ significantly, an independent samples t-test was used (see Table 6). The mean scores for both pre and post groups were identical at approximately 4.438 (see Figure 10). However, the analysis of the distributions revealed that the pre-test scores were more tightly clustered around the mean, whereas the post-test scores exhibited greater variability. Although the group means did not differ statistically, the

broader spread observed in the post-test suggests increased heterogeneity in responses over time. Over time, participants' responses became less uniform and more varied. While the typical outcome did not shift, individual differences did, so the range in variability can be important.

Table 3*TWCS variable scoring system*

Variable	Value
Strongly Agree	5
Agree	4
Disagree	3
Strongly Disagree	2
Unsure	1

To determine how teachers' perceptions of students behavior changed over time, the mean score was calculated for each question (see Tables 4 & 5). Teacher perspective of students understanding of classroom expectations decreased over time as well as the perception that students should play a role in creating the social contract. Teacher perspective increased concerning the role of positive reinforcement and body language to manage student behaviors.

Classroom Observation Tool

The classroom observation tool was created to determine the implementation level of the behavioral professional learning program. Throughout the study, classroom observations occurred twice. A behavioral professional learning session occurred prior to each observation. One criterion of the classroom observation tool was used to measure whether the teacher displayed the social contract in the classroom. Classroom social contracts were developed by both teachers and students to establish classroom behavior norms for the teacher and students. During observations, the observer was to record whether the contract was displayed and if it was referenced. Furthermore, observations were used to evaluate the use of positive language between teacher and student and peer to peer. The classroom observation tool gathered the total number of non-verbal cues to reinforce positive behavior and the total number of positive reinforcement statements/cues observed.

The first classroom observation revealed that 63% teachers displayed the social contract in their classroom while the second classroom observation showed an increase to 67% (see Figure 11). While one-third of the teachers displayed the social contract by the end of the second observation, none of the teachers referenced the social contract. Teachers took the time to create the social contract, post it in their room, but there was no evidence that teachers referenced the social contract to reinforce positive behaviors in the classroom.

Table 4*Pre-TWCS mean calculations*

TWCS Survey Questions	Participants Scores						Question Mean
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	
Q1. Students understand expectations for their conduct in the classroom.	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.67
Q2. Students follow classroom rules of conduct.	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.17
Q3. Teachers rely on positive reinforcement to maintain student behavior.	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.17
Q4. An important part of classroom management is the establishment of relationships.	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.67
Q5. When dealing with students, body language is a powerful form of communication.	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.5
Q6. There are strengths to be found in student mistakes.	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.33
Q7. Students should play a major role in creating the social contract.	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.67
Q8. Students are our customers.	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.33
Participant Mean	4.50	4.37	4.87	4.50	4.00	4.37	

Table 5*Post – TWCS mean calculations*

TWCS Survey Questions	Participants Scores								Question Mean
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	
Q1. Students understand expectations for their conduct in the classroom.	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.5
Q2. Students follow classroom rules of conduct.	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.25
Q3. Teachers rely on positive reinforcement to maintain student behavior.	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.25
Q4. An important part of classroom management is the establishment of relationships.	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.75
Q5. When dealing with students, body language is a powerful form of communication.	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.75
Q6. There are strengths to be found in student mistakes.	5.0	4.0	4.0	1.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.125
Q7. Students should play a major role in creating the social contract.	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.62
Q8. Students are our customers.	5.0	5.0	1.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.25
Participant Mean	5.00	4.25	3.87	3.75	4.62	4.25	5.00	4.75	

Table 6*Independent Sample t-Test*

	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	4.4375	4.4375
Variance	0.0796875	0.23214286
Observations	6	8
df	12	
T Stat	0	
P(T<=t) one tail	0.5	
T Critical one-tail	1.78228756	
P(T<=t) two-tail	1	
T Critical two-tail	2.17881283	

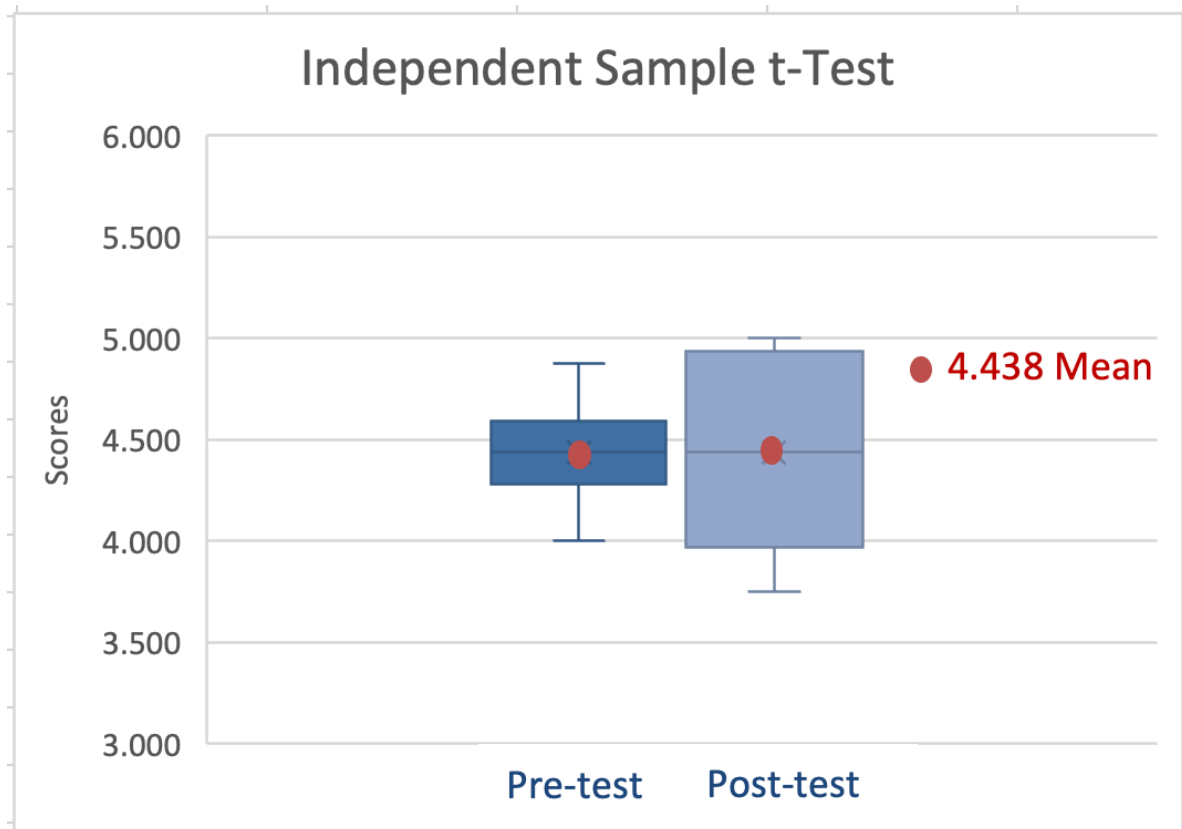


Figure 10. Independent Sample t-Test Boxplot

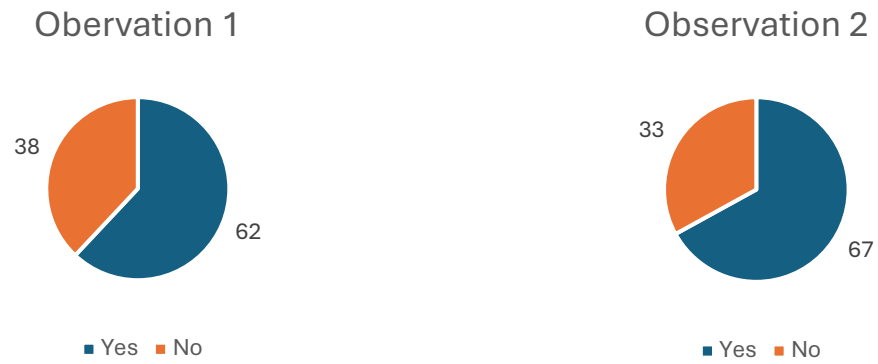


Figure 11. Percentage of classroom with posted social contract

Behavior Specific Praise (BSP) was one of the core components of the behavioral professional learning program. Teachers were trained to include four critical components when engaging in Behavior Specific Praise. The first component was designed to stress the importance of identification of the student or group. Next the teacher was to provide a term of praise to the student. Having identified the student and provided them praise, next the teacher was to link the behavior to the acknowledged rule on the social contract. Upon linking the behavior to the social contract, the teacher was to link the behavior to the school-wide expectations. The classroom observation instrument was designed to measure each component of BSP independently to determine areas of strengths and opportunities of growth. During observation two, observed teachers were intentional about identifying the students' name 67% of the time. During observation two, observed teachers were more intentional about providing a term of praise to student responses or actions 100% of the time. Teachers did not acknowledge the rule or behavior that aligned with the social contract expectations, nor did they link the behavior to the school wide expectation (see Figure 12).

Teachers were given credit for BSP if they included a component at least once throughout the classroom observation. Moreover, the classroom observation instrument also measured the use of positive language between students and the students towards their teacher. Neither of these were observed during the time of the classroom observation. Despite the lack of positive language use during observations, the use of non-verbal cues was observed. Common non-verbal cues included head nods and thumbs-ups. Observation two saw a 50-percentage point increase in the total number of both verbal and non-verbal positive reinforcement statements/cues (see Figure 13).

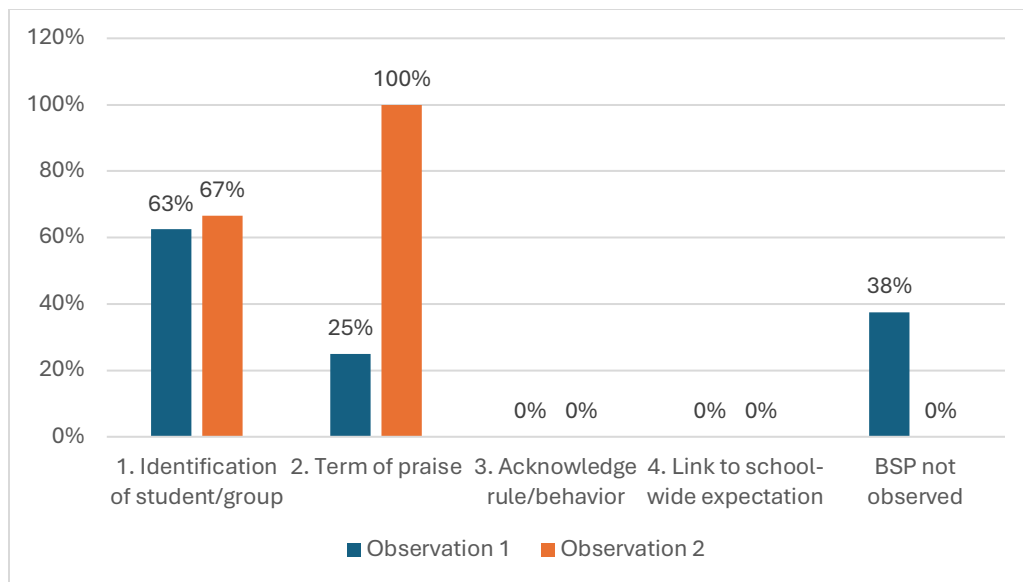


Figure 12: Behavior Specific Praise

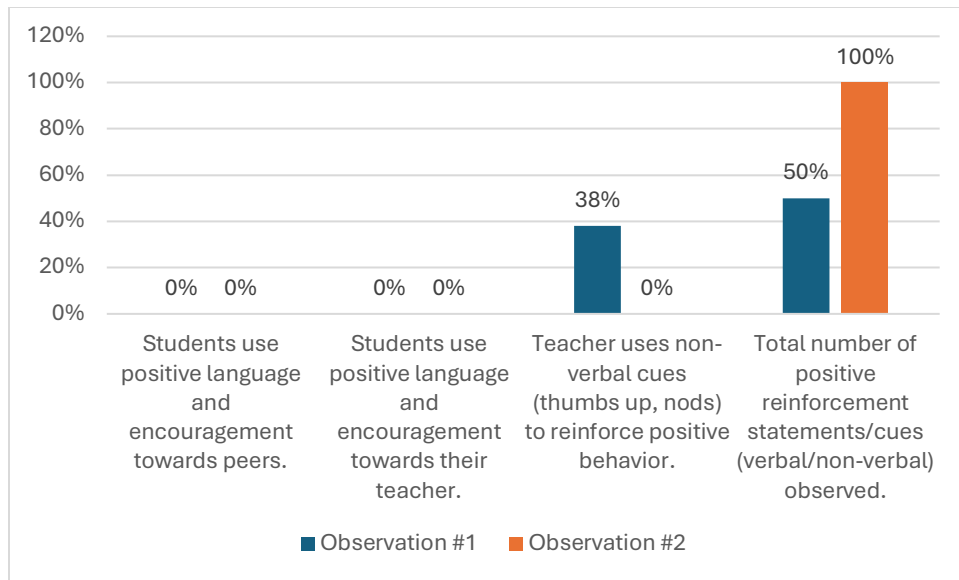


Figure 13: Classroom Observation Verbal/Non-verbal reinforcement

Discipline Data

In order to identify student behaviors that resulted in disciplinary actions by administrators, Educator's Handbook discipline data on the grade 7 cohort was collected. The frequency of ISS/OSS assignments, minor incidents, office referrals, and incident location was collected to answer inquiry question one.

An analysis of the data comparing AY2023-2024 with AY 2024-2025 was conducted. The total number of office referrals during the AY2023-24 was 160. Office referrals decreased to 80 during the AY 2024-2025 school year. The data showed a twenty percentage point decrease in the percentage of students assigned to ISS. Students who received ISS because of their behavior were permitted to come to school and complete work in an alternate location with limited interaction with peers. While there was a decrease in ISS, there was an increase in the percentage of students receiving OSS. However, the decrease in the total number of office referrals contributed to the percentage increase in OSS assigned to students for inappropriate behaviors.

Further investigation revealed that there was a decrease in specific minor discipline incidents (see Table 7). The top three incidents included: (a) disrespect/insubordination, (b) classroom disruption, and (c) horseplay. Of these three incidents there was a decrease in disrespect/insubordination and horseplay. The only minor offense that did not decrease from the 2023-2024 to the 2024-2025 school year was classroom disruptions. Office referral data was also collected revealing disrespect/insubordination, fighting, and aggressive behavior as the top three office referrals. All three offenses that resulted in an office referral decreased from 2023-2024 to 2024-2025 (see Table 8). The data shows a decrease in classroom and hallway, as location of

incidents in Table 9. Classroom incidents decreased by 61.2% between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school year. Incidents in the hallway decreased by 71.4%.

Figure 14 shows ISS and OSS suspensions for Black and White subgroups. Seventy-five percent of the Black subgroup received ISS during the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years. White students assigned to ISS increased from 2023-2024 to 2024-2025. The total number of ISS referrals were 71 during the 2023-24 school year and 24 during the 2024-25 school year. Out-of-school suspensions for Black students increased from 78% during the 2023-2024 school year to 95% during the 2024-2025 school year. As Black students OSS suspensions increased, White students decreased from 18% in 2023-2024 to 11% in 2024-2025. The total number of OSS referrals were 40 in 2023-2024 and 37 in 2024-2025.

Focus Groups

After completing the behavior professional learning program, a focus group session with 7th grade teachers was conducted virtually to gain a deeper understanding of student behaviors in the classroom. Participants were notified of the confidentiality of their responses, and a protocol was designed to ensure that their anonymity was maintained. This approach fostered open and honest feedback, ensuring the data collected was both reliable and insightful. The protocol also helped build trust among participants, encouraging them to share their experiences without fear of judgment or repercussions. The Grade 7 teachers were asked that only one person speak at a time to ensure each response was heard. They were asked to use respectful language to aid in the facilitation of an open discussion, avoiding any words or statements that may be offensive to other members of the group. Everyone was asked to participate to ensure perspectives and experiences are captured. Once the protocol was employed, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and engage in the open-ended focus group questions (see Appendix

Table 7*Minor Incidents*

	2023-2024	2024-2025	Change
Disrespect/Insubordination	215	121	-43.7%
Classroom Disruption	194	220	13.4%
Horseplay	101	5	-95%
Disorderly Conduct	89	82	-7.9%
School/Class Attendance	67	58	-13.4%
Misuse of School Technology	37	16	-56.8%
Aggressive Behavior	32	7	-78.1%
Dishonest Acts	28	23	-17.9%
Inappropriate Language	22	12	-45.4%
Unauthorized Use of Electronics	19	22	15.8%

Table 8*Office Referrals by offense from 2023-2024 to 2024-2025*

	2023-24	2024-25	Change
Disrespect/Insubordination	46	19	-58.7%
Fighting	26	19	-26.9%
Aggressive Behavior	20	6	-70%
Disorderly Conduct	13	11	-15.4%
Classroom Disruption	9	2	-77.8%
Communicating Threats	8	1	-87.5%
Horseplay	6	0	-100%
Dishonest Acts	4	4	0
Possession/Use of Nicotine	4	1	-75%
School/Class Attendance	3	4	33.3%

Table 9*Classroom and Hallway incidents from 2023-2024 to 2024-2025*

	2023-24	2024-25	Change
Classroom	85	33	-61.2%
Hallway	28	8	-71.4%

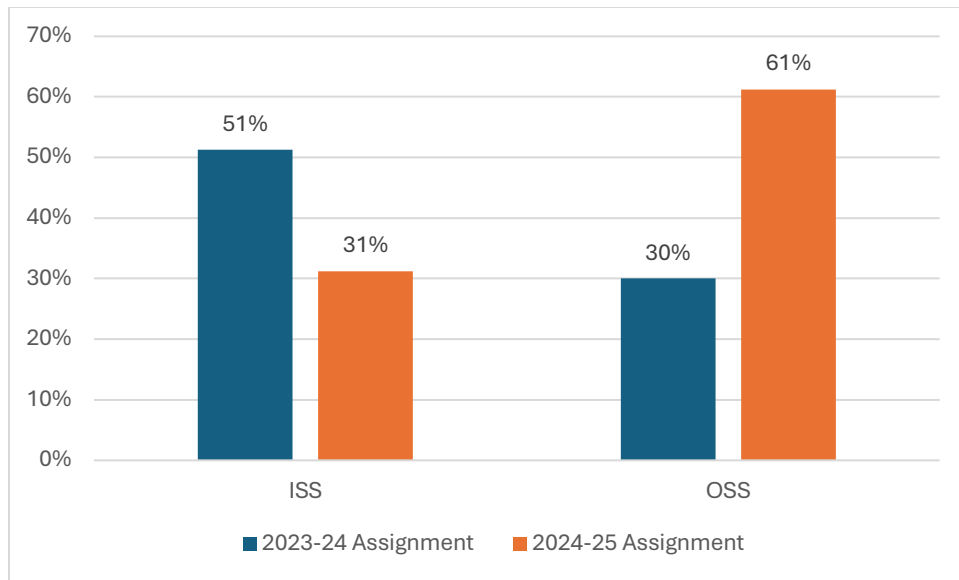


Figure 14: ISS/OSS disciplinary action

E). Following the session, participants were thanked for their participation and informed that their results would be shared with them and school leadership.

The focus group session provided insights into the impact of the behavioral professional learning program on specific challenges teachers face in managing student behavior. Thematic analysis was used to analyze focus group data. Thematic analysis is an organized method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data, then extracting meaning from these patterns as they reflect overarching concepts within the data (Mertler, 2022). The process of thematic analytical coding began with transcribing the data. A free online application was used to transcribe the virtual focus group to text. With the transcription complete, the identification of emerging codes that frequently appeared in the transcription began. Codes such as peer-to-peer correction, token economy, and intentionality as well as others emerged. The codes were then categorized into four categories: student behaviors, student impact, teacher behaviors, and teacher impact. From these four categories three themes emerged: Positive reinforcement as a driver of student motivation, shared accountability and classroom community, and growth in teacher intentionality and reflective practice (see Table 10).

When questioned concerning the most common behaviors observed among students in the classroom teachers provided common messaging around peer accountability despite inappropriate behaviors from students. Teachers reflected on the impact of positive peer pressure when rewarding students for participating in class. One teacher stated, “it’s kind of like once they see someone else participating, it kind of spreads that positive, you know.” Another teacher amplified peer accountability within the learning environment. “Because they know the class, you know, expectations and they kind of get on each other before I have to get on them, which is, which is nice.” “I’ve seen some students that are kind of catching each other and reminding each

Table 10*Focus group: Themes, Categories and Codes*

Themes	Categories	Codes
Positive Reinforcement as a Driver of Student Motivation	Teacher behaviors	Verbal praise, token economy, behavior-specific praise, redirection
	Student behavior and engagement	Class participation, focused behavior, peer-to-peer correction, off-task behavior, improved behavior
Shared Accountability and Classroom Community	Learning environment and classroom management	Social contract visibility, accountability, consensus, peer correction
	Student behavior and engagement	Focused, self-regulation, awareness, group cooperation
Growth in Teacher Intentionality and Reflective Practice	Teacher reflection and professional growth	Reflection, intentionality, awareness, tone awareness

other what your expectations are, instead of me.” “Some try to correct their peers when they are doing wrong in class.” Teachers consistently identified the presence of peer accountability within the classroom learning environment, its role in supporting classroom behaviors and positively reinforcing class expectations.

When questioned concerning the impact of social contracts, teachers communicated that social contracts promoted shared expectations for students and teachers, “The positive impact is that it holds them accountable to what they agreed upon.” “They definitely hold the teacher accountable.” Another teacher stated, “[Social Contracts] maintains a sense of expectation in the classroom.” Social contracts were critical for setting shared accountability for teachers and students in the classroom.

Regarding the behavior professional learning program and its impact on teachers’ professional growth, teachers amplified they have more resources and knowledge to support a positive learning environment. “This has given us time to seriously reflect upon behaviors, whereas we used to just vent to one another. Now we have more tools and more information about why things are and aren’t working in class.” “The behavioral learning program reminds teachers and students to be more positive. We all need those positive words sometimes.” “It makes me be intentional about doing it.” The behavioral professional learning program supported the growth and development of teachers at LMS.

Thematic analysis was also used to analyze field notes. Personal reflection occurred at the conclusion of each behavioral professional learning session and during observations. Notes were then analyzed for codes. BSP, ACEs, teacher-student relationships, social contract, and implementation were some of the codes identified. Codes were then placed in three categories. From these categories, three themes emerged. An increase in knowledge and awareness, positive

reception and engagement in professional learning, and gaps between training and practice (see Table 11).

Conducting this inquiry impacted my leadership because I became more aware of the necessity of providing behavioral professional learning to staff to support a positive learning environment. Upon concluding my first behavioral professional learning session, one of my CIPs stated, “This was what we needed.” Participants were maintained a positive reception and engagement in the professional learning experience. Although teachers were engaged in the behavioral professional learning, the observations amplified gaps between training and practice. Teachers’ capacity increased as a results of the behavioral professional learning program; however, implementation of learning was not always apparent during classroom observations.

Demographics

The inquiry was conducted at LMS in Rock County Schools. Rock County Schools is in eastern North Carolina and follows a standard schedule from August to June. In 2024 Lighthouse School served over 600 students in grades six to eight representing rural and suburban communities. The sample for this inquiry was 7th grade. This sample was chosen because the study desired to examine quantitative discipline data from a cohort of students. Quantitative discipline data examined the percentage of incidents, office referrals, and suspension gaps between the Black and White subgroups. Examining 7th grade students provided secondary data from their 6th grade that could then be measured against them once they completed 7th grade. Providing insights into how student consequences remained the same or differed as a result of the behavioral professional learning program. Eight, two male and six female, grade 7 teachers were followed in this inquiry. The two male participants were international teachers. Among the six female teachers, one served as a remedial teacher, two were alternative license teachers, and

Table 11*Field notes: Themes, Categories and Codes*

Themes	Categories	Codes
Increased Knowledge and Awareness	Professional Learning	Behavior-specific praise (BSP), adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), teacher-student relationships
Positive reception and engagement in Professional Learning	Perceptions and Beliefs	Protocols, session engagement, session feedback
Gaps between training and practice	Application in Practice	Social contract, implementation

three were veteran teachers with traditional licensure. All participating teachers taught core content areas, including Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, or Social Studies. The study included representation from all seventh-grade teachers.

Results

The purpose of this inquiry was to determine the impact of a behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment. The investigation involved the collection and analysis of multiple data points from a variety of sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the behavioral professional learning program's effects. The findings from this analysis were synthesized to address the three inquiry questions (see Table 12).

Analysis of Inquiry Question #1

Inquiry question #1: What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on student discipline disproportionality? The synthesis of the quantitative findings revealed that the behavioral professional learning program did not positively impact the discipline disproportionality at LMS. While ISS disciplinary actions remained the same for the Black subgroup between the 2023-2024 to 2024-2025 school year, there was a 3% increase in White subgroup. While the 3% increase reflects a slight decrease in the discipline disproportionality in ISS, the gap remains. OSS discipline numbers reveal an increase in the number of Black students suspended between 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years. Black students' suspension rose 21.8%. The increase in Black suspension was met with a 38.9% decrease for White students. When disaggregated by minor incidents the data notes an increase in classroom disruption by 13.4%. Classroom observations indicated that although teachers developed and displayed social contracts, these agreements were not consistently referenced

during instruction to reinforce expectations or redirect student behavior. This lack of active implementation suggests that classroom disruptions may have increased as a result of the social contracts not being effectively integrated into daily instructional practices. With the 2024-2025 ISS gap being 72% higher for Black and White students and OSS in 2024-2025 being 88% higher, it is concluded that the teacher behavioral professional learning program did not positively impact the student discipline disproportionality (see Figure 15).

Analysis of Inquiry Question #2

Inquiry question #2: What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on teachers' perceptions of student behaviors? Although the independent t-test concluded no significant change in teacher perceptions of student behaviors, an analysis of pre and post survey questions unveil mixed perspectives in the perception of student behaviors by teachers. The modified TWCS revealed a decrease in teacher perception of students' understanding of expectations while the focus group amplified the social contract setting expectations for student behavior. One of the teachers reported that "[Social Contract] maintains a sense of expectation in the classroom." There was also a decrease in the perception that students should play a role in creating the contract. Furthermore, the use of the social contract was praised as an instrument of accountability. "The positive impact is that it holds them accountable to what they agreed upon." While there are variability in the perception of student behaviors by teachers, there are areas where the modified Teacher Working Condition Survey data is supported through other instrumentation results.

The modified TWCS highlight an increase in teacher perception regarding the benefit of applying positive reinforcement in the classroom to manage student behaviors. During classroom observations, there was an 100% implementation of positive reinforcement both verbal and non-

verbal in classrooms observed. Positive reinforcement can bolster student confidence, promoting the recurrence of favorable conduct (Tprestianni, 2023). The modified TWCS also revealed an increase in teacher perception regarding the use of non-verbal communication such as body language to communicate student behavioral expectations. The classroom observation data identified a 100% increase in the total number of verbal and non-verbal positive reinforcement statement/cues in the classroom. Improvements in teacher perception were noticed when a teacher stated, “I think this helps all of us have a reflection on what we could do better, help each other and help ourselves.” Although there are some improvements in teacher perspectives, it is not enough to conclude that teacher perspectives were altered as a result of the professional learning program.

Analysis of Inquiry Question #3

Inquiry question #3: How does the experience of leading this inquiry impact the scholarly practitioner’s professional leadership style and development? The experience of leading this work as a scholarly practitioner whose leadership style is servant leadership has furthered my desire to build the capacity of others. Robert Greenleaf, the founder of the term servant leadership, explains servant leadership as the desire to serve first and the social responsibility to be concerned about the marginalized (Northouse, 2022). While Greenleaf was able to place context to servant leadership and identify subsequent actions of followers, the term servant leadership remained unsettled, leading Larry Spears to identify 10 characteristics based on Greenleaf’s writings. Listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community are the 10 characteristics identified by Robert Greenleaf (Northouse, 2022). This experience has magnified three of Greenleaf’s characteristics

Table 12*Inquiry and Findings*

Inquiry Questions	Method	Data Source	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings
What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on student discipline disproportionality?	Discipline data collection	Educator's Handbook	Disciplinary actions decrease in ISS	
	Observation tool	NC Report Card Classroom observation tool	Disciplinary actions remain constant for OSS	
			Decrease in subjectivity (disrespect and insubordination)	
			Increase/decrease in discipline disproportionality	
			Inconsistency among teachers	
What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on teachers' perceptions of student behaviors?			Lack of reinforcement of the social contract	
			Teachers affirm correct answer, not student	
			Increase use of positive reinforcement	
	Discipline data collection	Educator's Handbook	Decrease in office referrals from teachers	Peer accountability enhances classroom management
	Focus group	Focus group protocol	No change in teacher perspective regarding student behaviors	Social contracts promote shared expectations
	Survey	Modified TWCS		Behavioral professional learning supports teacher growth

Table 12 Continued

How does the experience of leading this inquiry impact the scholarly practitioner's professional leadership style and development?	Journaling	Field Notes	Servant leadership Growth mindset among participants
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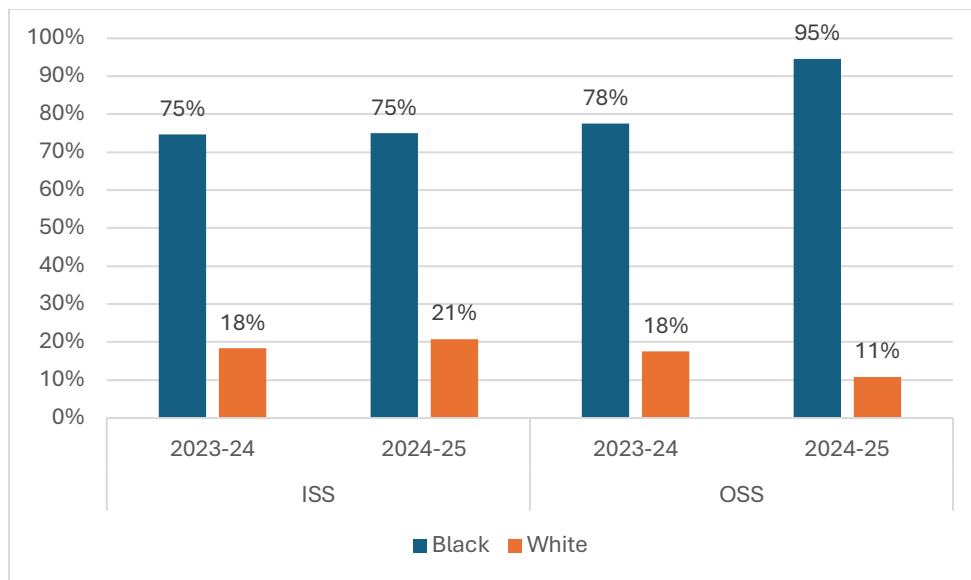


Figure 15: ISS/OSS subgroups

that were applied during my work: listening, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

The professional behavioral learning sessions were designed to align with the needs of the school. Conversations were held with critical inquiry partners to discuss the study and identify trends based on data. Listening to school leadership and staff and understanding interventions that were to be employed during the time of my study, directed me to the content that aligned with school initiatives. Themes from teachers during focus groups acknowledged an increase in learning and a positive reception and engagement in the teacher behavioral professional learning sessions. Listening to align professional learning to school initiatives was servant leadership.

The professional behavioral learning sessions were designed to engage and increase the capacity of teachers demonstrating a commitment to growth and community building. Leading this inquiry and observing the inconsistent application of BSP challenged my growth and development. The observation and field notes highlighted gaps between training and practice. As a servant leader, I began to question what could have been done to aid teachers in applying BSP consistently. Could we have measured the implementation of the components in a gradual progression, adding a new component every 1-2 weeks? My leadership was also developed as I sought for ways to support a growth mindset among participants. Overall, I believe this experience has aided me in my growth and development as a servant leader.

Summary

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analyzed to answer three inquiry questions. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on student discipline disproportionality? What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning

program on teachers' perceptions of student behaviors? How does the experience of leading this inquiry impact the scholarly practitioner's professional leadership style and development? The data analysis concluded that while there remains a gap in discipline disproportionality, the behavioral professional learning program produced a variance in teacher perceptions of student behaviors and increased the leadership of the scholarly practitioner. In Chapter 5, I summarize my quantitative and qualitative findings based on instruments, surveys, and focus groups. I provide interpretations based on my theoretical framework, align interpretation to my literature review, and discuss the limitations of the study amplifying aspects of the study that were outside of my control as a researcher. I also discuss the implications of my findings for practitioners and recommendations for practice and future study to support individuals interested in replicating this study. I conclude the chapter with a reflection on my leadership as a scholarly practitioner.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of disciplinary data in K-12 institutions uncovers discrepancies between Black students and their White counterparts. White students are four times less likely to be suspended for identical offenses compared to their Black counterparts (Davis, 2019). Moreover, White students face fewer repercussions even when the severity of the infraction is identical or comparable (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2019). Numerous students in public schools, especially those from minority backgrounds, have faced suspension, expulsion, or arrest due to zero tolerance policies, the deployment of police officers in educational institutions, and biases in disciplinary measures (Flannery, 2015).

Zero tolerance policies are redefining punitive measures, often severe and disciplinary, intended to be applied without regard for the gravity of the action, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Zero tolerance policies at educational institutions adversely affect pupils of color disproportionately. The presence of police in schools does not enhance safety; rather, it results in a rise in arrests and exclusionary measures (Bazelon, 2021).

According to the National School Survey on Crime and Safety, the probability of a school referring pupils to the legal system increases when a School Resource Officer is present at least weekly (Nance, 2016). A study examining student arrests in 13 schools with School Resource Officers (SROs) and 15 schools without SROs revealed that the presence of an SRO correlated with an increase in disorderly conduct arrests and a decrease in arrests for weapons and assault (Theriot, 2009). Educators rely on exclusionary strategies to mitigate undesirable behaviors during school instruction. This technique has proven ineffective, resulting in program unfairness that restricts the right to learn and diminishes academic progress for children of color

(Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2019). Suspension practices originate in the classroom, where educators rely on exclusion methods to mitigate inappropriate behaviors during instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2019). Black pupils do not exhibit distinct behaviors compared to their White counterparts; instead, bias is more pronounced at schools with a substantial proportion of students of color (Davis, 2019).

A teacher's implicit biases cause them to misconstrue innocent actions as indicative of a trend of undesirable student behaviors. Stereotypes significantly influence teachers' decisions about student discipline, particularly when coupled with disciplinary standards that define misconduct in vague terms (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). Eliminating prejudices in educational institutions is a formidable challenge; yet, there are ways that help foster positive interactions between educators and students while mitigating implicit bias in the classroom (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). The focus of this inquiry was to determine whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program for teachers can effectively reduce discipline disparities rooted in zero tolerance policies, school policing, and biases.

The disproportionate number of disciplinary actions employed against students of color in the United States exemplifies the presence of inequality (Dionisio & Gray-Nicolas, 2023). Despite the presence of discipline disproportionality data, emphasis within schools focuses on employing programs to address student behaviors and disregard the responsibility of adults to develop positive teacher student relationships thereby conditioning students to respond appropriately in the learning environment. Behavioral learning theory is the theoretical framework for this inquiry. Behavioral Learning Theory focuses on observable behaviors and the environmental variables that impact them (Zhong, 2008). Of the two forms of conditioning, classical and operant, this inquiry design focuses on operant conditioning. Operant conditioning

is a psychological method that uses reinforcement or punishment to modify and regulate behavior, aiming to increase or decrease specific behaviors or reactions (Reynolds, 1975). A behavior learning program was the designed intervention that provided professional learning to support teachers in implementing social contracts and Behavior Specific Praise.

A social contract is a classroom set of norms that outline the expected classroom behaviors developed by students to foster student accountability and ownership. The social contract is created through a series of questions designed for students to reflect on how they prefer to be treated by their peers and teacher. The process involves students' reflection on how the teacher desires to be treated by students. The social contract establishes the behavioral expectations of teachers and students.

Behavior specific praise is the way in which educators can operantly condition students for the appropriate response and behavior in their classroom. Behavior specific praise includes the direct acknowledgement of a student, and a term of praise that is specific to the behavior observed. This inquiry integrated the social contract and behavior specific praise by providing professional learning for teachers to acknowledge the students, provide a specific term of praise, associate the term of praise with the social contract and school wide expectations.

An explanatory sequential, mixed methods research design grounded in improvement science was used to examine the inquiries of the study. Explanatory sequential is a mixed methods design that begins with quantitative research and concludes with qualitative research. The qualitative research is used to provide meaning to the quantitative research (Mertler, 2022).

Quantitative research seeks to find answers to inquiries through deductive reasoning (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Deductive reasoning aims to draw precise conclusions using descriptive statistics, which are numerical metrics like mean, median, and mode, used to

characterize quantitative data (Mertler, 2022). School disciplinary data is quantitative data that was gathered to assess the existence or absence of discipline disproportionality. Examining discipline data and conducting descriptive statistics analysis helped to address the initial research inquiry question. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on student discipline disproportionality? A second quantitative data point was collected by conducting a survey to answer my second inquiry question. What is the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on teachers' perceptions of student behaviors? The survey was a modified Teacher Working Conditions Survey (TWCS) that was administered before and after the behavioral professional learning program. The modified TWCS provided quantitative data regarding teacher perceptions of student behaviors. A third quantitative data collection tool, the classroom observation tool, was used. The classroom observation tool was utilized to evaluate the instructional environment's impact on student behaviors.

Qualitative research seeks to find answers to inquiries through inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning aims to derive general conclusions and generalizations from specific observations and evidence (Mertler, 2022). Qualitative research utilizes qualitative data such as focus groups, interviews, or observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study utilized focus groups to address the second question of inquiry and investigate teachers' opinions, values, and perceptions. Qualitative data acquired through journaling and field notes was analyzed using inductive analytical coding to answer the third research question. How does the experience of leading this inquiry impact the scholarly practitioner's professional leadership style and development? The explanatory sequential mixed methods design was integrated with the PDSA improvement cycle.

The PDSA improvement cycle involves developing, testing, and revising a theory of change based on findings (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The “Plan” phase involves developing a plan to test the change. The “Do” phase is the implementation of the plan. The “Study” phase is where the analysis of the implementation occurs, and the “Act” phase reveals modifications needed to further impact change outcomes (Christoff, 2018). The integration of the explanatory sequential mixed methods design and the PDSA improvement cycle aided in determining whether a teacher behavioral professional learning program can impact discipline disproportionality in the classroom learning environment.

This inquiry was organized using the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle of improvement and consisted of three phases. Data collection during phase I consisted of data collection on student suspensions, a review of the modified TWCS, instrumentation creation, instrumentation piloting, planning of first behavioral professional learning session, analyzation of piloted instrumentation, classroom observation tool orientation with staff, development of a classroom observation schedule with collaborative inquiry partners, conducting classroom observation number one, and an inquiry leadership reflection. Phase II of inquiry consisted of analyzing and sharing results from classroom observation data, planning and conducting the second round of classroom observation, analyzing and sharing results from the second round of classroom observations and reflecting upon my experience leading this inquiry. Phase III of inquiry consisted of collection of 2024-2025 student discipline data from CIP, conducting focus groups, analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, dissemination of findings, providing recommendations of next steps, and reflection of my leadership experience. Upon the collection of data, its analysis, findings emerged amplifying the impact of the behavioral professional learning program.

Summary of the Findings

Quantitative data was collected through school discipline data, the modified TWCS, and the classroom observation instrument. School discipline data was retrieved from Educators Handbook. Educators Handbook provided grade 7 cohort data on the frequency of ISS/OSS assignments, minor incidents, office referrals, and incident location was collected and analyzed. The findings revealed a decrease in ISS and an increase in OSS (see Figure 14). Data collected on the consequences provided to Black and White students indicated a consistent percentage of Black students receiving ISS and a slight increase in White students. Regarding OSS, the data showed an increase in the percentage of Black students who received OSS and a decrease in the percentage of White students receiving OSS.

The modified TWCS revealed that the average perceptions of teachers regarding students' behavior remained unchanged; however, the variance of responses was greater in the post survey, communicating a level of change in participant responses regarding their perspective of student behaviors.

The classroom observation instrument tool revealed an increase in the percentage of classrooms with a posted social contract. Regarding BSP, the data showed an increase in identification of student and the use of a term of praise. However, 100% of teachers did not associate the behavior of students to the social contract or link it to school-wide behavior expectations. There was also a decrease in the number of classrooms that BSP was not observed. The classroom observation also examined the use of verbal and non-verbal praise in the learning environment. The data showed that 100% of students did not use positive language and encouragement to peers, nor towards their teacher. There was a decrease in the percentage of

non-verbal cues used by the teacher between observation 1 and 2. Overall, the data amplified a 50% increase in the total number of positive reinforcement statements in the classroom.

Qualitative data was collected through focus groups and field notes. The focus group session provided insights into the impact of the behavioral professional learning program on specific challenges teachers face in managing student behavior. Peer accountability enhances classroom management, social contracts promote shared expectations, and behavioral professional learning supports teacher growth were the themes that emerged from the focus group. A careful analysis of field notes resulted in the following themes emerging: an increase in knowledge and awareness, positive reception and engagement in professional learning, and gaps between training and practice.

Interpretation of the Findings

Behavioral learning theory serves as the theoretical foundation for this inquiry. Behavioral learning theory is the conditioning of behavior based on two methods: classical conditioning and operant conditioning. Classical conditioning is the involuntary response to a stimulus. In schools, there is a belief that students should know how to behave appropriately and that response should be intrinsic. In other words, students should know how to behave in an educational environment and their response should be innately appropriate for learning. Students should involuntarily respond to the behavioral norms of a school upon entering the classroom. This belief is false. Students arrive to school with a plethora of experiences that influence how they respond in the learning environment. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) affect students' brain development, behavior, and emotional, mental, and physiological health outcomes (Desautels, 2018).

Operant conditioning is the second method of the behavioral learning theory. Operant conditioning is a psychological method that uses reinforcement or punishment to modify and regulate behavior, aiming to increase or decrease specific behaviors or reactions (Reynolds, 1975). Operant conditioning is the voluntary response to a stimulus. Operant conditioning is what causes students to choose a behavior. Some students have been operantly conditioned that how they behave is based upon how they are treated or how they feel. This level of conditioning that occurs outside of school can only be matched when the core concepts are applied in school. Educators and school leaders will be successful when they consistently apply operant conditioning to reinforce student expectations.

The reinforcement of behavior is necessary to generating a voluntary response from students. Reinforcement can be positive or negative. Positive reinforcement transpires when a stimulus is introduced into an environment to promote a behavior. Negative reinforcement transpires when a stimulus is eliminated from an environment to promote a behavior (Reynolds, 1975). The findings from this study highlighted three key interpretations: an increase in teacher learning, inconsistent and incomplete implementation of social contracts and positive reinforcement strategies, and variability in teachers' perceptions and interpretations of student behavior.

The findings from this study demonstrate an increase in teacher learning as a result of the behavioral professional learning program. A teacher stated, "This has given us time to seriously reflect upon behaviors, whereas we used to just vent to one another. Now we have more tools and more information about why things are and aren't working in class." While the disproportionate ISS data decrease was minimal, the overall data showed a decrease in the number of students receiving ISS, communicating an intentionality to keep students in the

classroom to decrease program inequities. Program inequity is limiting the right to learn and minimizing academic success for students of color (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2019).

The findings from this study reveal that teachers did not consistently apply operant conditioning to elicit the desired student behavior they sought. While there was an increase in the posting of the social contract, a third of classrooms visited did not have the contract posted in the classroom. Not only was the contract not posted, it was not referenced during classroom observations. Furthermore, 100% of teachers did not communicate to students the alignment of their behavior to the social contract in their classroom. Teachers complied with the expectation by the school in its implementation of Capturing Kids Hearts program but did not provide feedback to students on their implementation of the social contract. The inconsistency of the educators in incorporating feedback on the use of the social contract indirectly impacted the data collected from the observation walkthrough and teacher perception of student behaviors.

The observation walkthrough revealed that 100% of students did not use positive language towards their peers or their teacher. This data amplifies the importance of operant conditioning. While there was data to support an increase in the teacher use of positive reinforcement statements in the classroom, teacher modeling did not result in students providing praise to their peers nor their teacher. The integration of the social contract and BSP asked of teachers to acknowledge the student, praise the student, link praise to the social contract and the school wide expectations. The practice of educators associating student responses to the social contract was omitted; thereby students did not incorporate praise to peers or teachers despite it being a part of the process when creating social contracts.

Upon examining the modified TWCS, there was a decrease from the pretest (4.67) to posttest (4.5) on students understanding the expectations. This further demonstrates the inconsistency of teachers to reinforce expectations through referencing the social contract that was created to communicate expectations of student and teacher behaviors.

Lastly, the findings from the study conclude a variance in the perspective of teachers on student behaviors. While the average mean on the modified TWCS showed that teacher perception of student behaviors did not change as a result of the behavioral professional learning program, the variance in the response shows that teachers perspectives shifted. Findings show a change in how teachers perceived students' ability to follow rules, the reliance on positive reinforcement in classroom, and the importance of positive teacher-student relationships. The mean for teacher perception of students' ability to follow rules increased from 4.17 to 4.25. The mean for the reliance on positive reinforcement to maintain student behaviors increased from 4.17 to 4.25. The mean for the importance of positive teacher-student relations to support classroom management increased from 4.67 to 4.75. As a result of the teacher behavioral professional learning program, teachers perceived that students are more able to follow classroom expectations, teachers are apt to use positive reinforcement to support appropriate student behaviors, and teacher-student relationships have been strengthened.

Limitations of the Inquiry

Limitations are defined as the factors or aspects of an inquiry that could potentially impact the outcomes of a study. This inquiry acknowledged four limitations: implementation of learning, limited program sessions and classroom observation time, observer bias, and lack of a control group. Participants in the behavioral professional learning program participated in two professional learning sessions. The sessions amplified the importance of creating the social

contract, referencing the social contract, incorporating positive reinforcement in the learning environment, and the use of behavior specific praise. The data revealed that while most teachers created the social contract, there was limited reference to the social contract when providing student praise. The behavior professional learning program was designed for teachers to reinforce appropriate behavior by acknowledging the student and the element of the social contract that was being followed. Teachers who did not link student behavior to the social contract missed an opportunity to reinforce appropriate behavior with all students in the classroom and amplify the agreed upon expectations for the learning environment.

There were two teacher behavioral professional learning programs in this study. Increasing the number of sessions could have provided insights into the impact of a teacher behavioral professional learning program on discipline disproportionality. Classroom observations were limited to ten minutes each. The observer could not collect data on the full duration of the class period to capture the total frequency of verbal and/or non-verbal cues implemented by the teacher due to time constraints. The limitation of ten minutes also resulted in observations being conducted at various periods of the instructional block. Ten minutes at the beginning of the class period could include more references to the social contract verses the end of the period.

Observer bias was potentially present in the inquiry. I facilitated the professional learning program and collected data from classroom observations. There was the potential presence of bias when measuring the use of behavior specific praise and verbal and nonverbal positive reinforcement. Having an observer who was blind to the intervention could have protected the inquiry against subjectivity of teacher behaviors. However, the scholarly practitioner was intentional to decrease the perceived bias by adhering to observation times.

This inquiry did not use a control group, thereby limiting its ability to measure the impact of the professional learning program against non-participating schools. The inquiry was limited in its ability to examine the quality of the professional learning program. The use of a control group could have examined disproportionality between Black and White subgroups between two or more schools.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

The findings from this research provide implications that can be applied to building the capacity of educators, the application of change management practices by school leaders, and addressing district discipline policies. Instructionally, the findings in this inquiry conclude the need for further professional learning on the use of positive reinforcement within the learning environment. Social contracts are created collaboratively between teachers and students to establish expectations for the learning environment. The social contract identifies agreed upon behaviors for teachers and students. The creation of the social contract generally occurs within the first days of the school year. The majority of teachers were compliant in creating the contract, realizing that their classroom would be audited to see if it was posted. However, the posting of the social contract is not sufficient. Posting classroom behaviors and not positively reinforcing the behaviors could be counter intuitive in producing the learning environment that is conducive for learning. Teachers desire a classroom environment where students' behaviors support learning; however, there may not be a willingness to teach nor reinforce the behavior. Teachers who do not use tools such as social contracts to hold students accountable for behaviors are missing an opportunity to leverage community commitments with students. Much learning is needed regarding the benefits of positive reinforcement in the classroom.

The findings from this inquiry could support school and district leaders change initiatives. Schools create improvement plans and districts create a strategic plan, yet both could use more attention to implementation. Schools and districts are well versed in the collection of academic and student behavioral data. There is a gap in the collection of implementation data. Collecting data on the implementation of professional learning could highlight successes and opportunities for growth. Collecting how programs and initiatives are implemented and sharing the implementation data with teachers and district leaders could identify areas of support for teachers and inform school and district leaders concerning the level of communication necessary to establish expectations. Schools and districts should also incorporate the PDSA cycle to support the continuous improvement of teachers and student outcomes. Each phase of the PDSA cycle is designed to provide actionable steps that support change efforts.

Additionally, the findings could support schools and districts in alignment of professional learning to existing behavior frameworks. This inquiry aligned social contracts from Capturing Kids Hearts with behavior specific praise. The alignment of behavior specific praise with a school initiative supported teacher receptivity. Teachers in the study highlighted that tools they received through the teacher behavioral professional learning program were useful in increasing their understanding of student behaviors. Schools and districts would do well to seek alignment of initiatives and not implement isolated programming.

Lastly, the findings from this inquiry can be used to support the examination of zero tolerance policies and develop new discipline policies for students. The top offense for office referrals were insubordination and disrespect. Both of which resulted in students receiving ISS or OSS. Office referrals such as insubordination and disrespect are subjective. Teachers and administrators determine consequences based on situational circumstances. Districts can use

these findings to support amendments to their current discipline policies. School districts could engage school administrators, teachers, and community constituents in amending discipline policies that produce program inequity and increase discipline disproportionality.

Implications of the Findings for Equity

The findings from this research provided implications that can be applied to equity. Discipline disproportionality continues to exist in schools between Black and White subgroups. The findings show that while overall discipline decreased, the gap between Black and White subgroups increased. The need to address discipline disproportionality remains. Failure to do so will increase program inequities. Program inequity occurs when students are continually removed from the learning environment. Removal from the classroom prohibits learning that is acquired through direct instruction and student collaboration, thereby limiting the acquiring of knowledge to successfully demonstrate proficiency on assessments. The result is that students are often further behind, increasing the probability of inappropriate behavior.

Zero tolerance policies, biases, and school policing do not produce equitable outcomes for students. The American Psychological Association conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies and found limited evidence to support their usage (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Huang & Cornell, 2021; Irby & Coney, 2021). Black students do not exhibit distinct behavior compared to their White peers. In fact, implicit bias is more common in schools where a substantial proportion of students are people of color (Davis, 2019). Police presence in schools does not make them safer; instead, it leads to an increase in arrests and exclusionary practices (Bazelon, 2021).

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings from this inquiry, I would recommend schools incorporate a continuous teacher behavioral professional learning program. Schools across the United States focus on providing interventions to students regarding their behaviors yet not enough on building the capacity of educators to teach and understand student behaviors. Students come to school having experienced a variety of challenges beyond their control, that influence how they behave in school. Schools should focus more on how we prepare teachers for student behavior in the learning environment. It is also important for teachers to learn how to reinforce desired behavior. The lack of attention provided to students who demonstrate the appropriate behavior could reinforce students to seek attention gained from inappropriate behavior. Educators who reinforce appropriate behavior are not only rewarding students, but they are reinforcing appropriate behavior for others in the educational environment. More emphasis must be placed on the collective impact of positive reinforcement in classrooms and schools. Additional time to build the capacity of teachers is a significant recommendation for this inquiry.

Research has shown that professional learning strengthens teacher instruction, improves student outcomes, encourages teacher retention and supports teacher recruitment efforts (Learning Forward, n.d.). There is also a positive link between teacher professional learning, teaching practices, and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Professional learning increase teacher capacity to implement successful practices such as restorative practices, culturally responsive teaching, and Capturing Kids Hearts.

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) has created resources for schools. The SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change program developed by the IIRP introduces a preventive and responsive approach to restorative practices that can be used for

professional learning (Rainbolt et al., 2019). Professional learning on culturally responsive teaching can support culturally relevant teaching, thereby helping teachers manage student behaviors and increase academic outcomes (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021). There is growing evidence that educators who successfully apply culturally relevant teaching can become change agents in their schools, promoting more equitable learning opportunities (Gay, 2010). Developing educators' capacity to implement culturally responsive teaching extends beyond K–12 settings and should be led by teacher preparation programs as a foundational component of educator development. Capturing Kids Hearts was designed to assist schools in fostering positive teacher-student and student-student interactions, while simultaneously decreasing negative student behaviors (Holtzapple et al., 2011). CKH has been implemented in schools throughout the United States and continues to produce classroom environments ripe for learning (Holtzapple et al., 2011).

Recommendations for Future Study

Based on the findings from this inquiry, I would recommend an experimental design study, an inquiry into principal, students, and family perspectives of teacher discipline recommendations, an examination of a behavior professional learning program through an adult learning theoretical framework. Additionally, I recommend incorporating coaching as a support to strengthen implementation and promote a continuous improvement cycle.

An experimental design study would support comparison between teachers who received the teacher behavioral professional learning program as an intervention and those who did not. Having a control group whose demographics align with the experimental group could provide insight into discipline disproportionality and teacher bias. Implicit bias and the disproportionate discipline of Black students are linked. Teachers construct their own, biased assumptions of what

actions or behaviors students are most likely to adopt (Scott, 2021). Walker and Brigham (2017) found that adults were more prone to assume that the actions of Black pupils (in contrast to White students) were the product of gang activity and other unproven or subjective factors. Teachers' biases place labels on students. Suspension, an exclusionary consequence, could be a byproduct of implicit bias.

Further inquiry into the perceptions of principals, students, and family on discipline recommendations and consequences would further expand the reach of this study. Principals often receive discipline referrals explaining inappropriate student behavior from teachers. Teacher referrals are often linked to subjective factors such as disrespect and insubordination. An inquiry into the perspective of students and families on discipline consequences could provide insight in addressing discipline disproportionality. Students are impacted the most from discipline disproportionality. Learning from student experiences on the impact of discipline actions of teachers and principals would be meaningful. Lastly, hearing from families regarding the discipline practices in schools could amplify perspectives on student discipline decisions. I recommend hearing from families whose child is disciplined frequent for inappropriate behavior and families whose child does not receive discipline consequences to determine insight into family perspectives. Learning from principals, students, and family perspectives can offer insight into discipline disproportionality.

As the scholarly practitioner, I recommend considering the implications of a teacher behavioral professional learning program through adult learning theory. Understanding andragogy and its impact on teacher learning and application is an inquiry worth examining. Research from this study found that teachers benefited from the behavioral professional learning program; however, the learning was not consistently applied. An examination of the behavioral

professional learning program structure, content, and delivery could reveal strengths and opportunities of growth in the design of a behavioral professional learning program.

Lastly, to support the application of learning, I recommend the incorporation of coaching into the intervention. Coaching is the integration of learning and practice with sustained personalized support (Killion et al., 2020). Coaching supports teachers in the implementation of professional learning. This inquiry included professional learning and observation. Incorporating coaching would have provided an additional layer of support in building teacher capacity and implementation of a behavioral professional learning program.

Conclusions

Historical data on discipline disproportionality prompted this inquiry into a behavioral professional learning program. Two behavioral professional learning programming sessions were provided to teachers at LMS, a pre and post survey was administered to measure teacher perspective of student behavior, classroom observations were conducted to measure the implementation of the behavioral professional learning program, and focus groups were held to learn the experiences of teachers who participated in the behavioral professional learning program. The data concluded a change in the variance of teacher perspective of student behaviors, an increase in the discipline disproportionality gap between Black and White students, an increase in participant learning because of having participated in the behavior professional learning program, and the infrequent implementation of learning by participants. A behavior professional learning program increased teachers' knowledge and provided strategies to produce a productive learning environment for students; however, the learning must be applied. Lastly, discipline disproportionality is a systemic challenge that must be addressed through ongoing

professional development that could produce a level of discomfort for participants, but it is necessary for student success.

Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership

As a scholarly practitioner, leadership development has been a byproduct of this study. Throughout this study, I have learned academic and professional skills and gained a new perspective on learning.

Academic and professional skills such as project management, research analysis, and communication were developed because of this inquiry. Project management was developed as this was a multi-year endeavor. It required planning, organization, and execution. Time management was necessary to complete this inquiry. My ability to conduct detailed research into a topic increased tremendously. An understanding of discipline disproportionality historically throughout the United States, within North Carolina, and in LMS provided the context needed to pose the questions into my inquiry. The data collection process informed my approach on how to collect quantitative and qualitative data and analyze the results relative to my inquiry questions. I have more appreciation for qualitative research and the value it provides when understanding the experiences of participants within a study. My communication skills were developed as I interacted with district leadership, school administration, school leaders, and educators. Ongoing communication was essential to managing the demands of this study.

A new perspective on learning was gained because of this inquiry. Learning for me prior to this experience did not begin with the examination of existing research. Having conducted research, I now have an increased desire to examine literature before implementing educational practices. This newfound perspective also creates an awareness of the context of the research. It

is not enough to know that an intervention worked. I must inquire into the context and implementation of the research to determine its potential impact on future problems of practice.

Overall, this inquiry has grown my capacity as an educational leader to learn from the implementation of others when seeking solutions to problems of practice. If I believe a practice should be implemented to address my problem of practice, data should be collected and analyzed to determine its effectiveness in my school context. As an educational leader, the skills acquired through this inquiry will serve me as I pursue excellence in educational leadership.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB

To: [Brian Corey](#)

CC: [Elizabeth Hodge](#)

Date: 12/10/2024

Re: [UMCIRB 24-001491](#)

A Behavioral Professional Learning Program to address discipline disproportionality in a rural middle school

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 12/10/2024. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1,2AB.

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
Brian Corey - Chapters 1-3 (11.13.24).pdf(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Classroom Observation Tool.docx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Communication Email.docx(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Focus Group questions (protocol).docx(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Informed Consent 11.21.24.docx(0.02)	Consent Forms
Modified TWCS.docx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires

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 FORM

**A BEHAVIORAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM TO ADDRESS
DISCIPLINE DISPROPORTIONALITY IN A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL**

Principal Investigator: Brian Corey

You are invited to participate in a **research study** titled “A BEHAVIORAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM TO ADDRESS DISCIPLINE DISPROPORTIONALITY IN A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL” by Brian Corey, a doctoral student at East Carolina University in the College of Education LEED department. The study involves surveying grade level teachers on working conditions relative to student discipline and behaviors. Next, participants will receive professional learning (PL) on behaviorism to support a positive learning environment. Professional learning participants will complete a survey after each PL session to inform subsequent PL sessions. A walkthrough tool will be used to evaluate participants on their implementation of PL material. The initial survey will be administered at the end of the study to reassess teacher working conditions. The study will conclude with a focus group to learn teacher perspectives on student behavior. Focus groups will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. Focus groups will be recorded using Microsoft Teams, transcribed, and confidentiality maintained. Names will not be utilized. No data will be released or used with your identification attached.

Your participation in the research is **voluntary**. You may choose not to answer any or all questions, and you may stop at any time. We **will not** be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study. There is **no penalty for not taking** part in this research study. Please call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Principal Investigator: _____

APPENDIX C: MODIFIED TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS SURVEY

Modified TWCS

Please complete the survey. Assess each statement based on the extent to which you strongly disagree or agree.

1. Which grade level or area do you teach?
 - a. 6th
 - b. 7th
 - c. 8th
 - d. Exploratory
 - e. Exceptional Children
 - f. Other
2. Students understand expectations for their conduct in the classroom.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree
 - e. Unsure
3. Students follow classroom rules of conduct.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree
 - e. Unsure

4. Teachers rely on positive reinforcement to maintain student behavior.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree
 - e. Unsure
5. An important part of classroom management is the establishment of relationships.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree
 - e. Unsure
6. When dealing with students, body language is a powerful form of communication.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree
 - e. Unsure
7. There are strengths to be found in student mistakes.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree

- e. Unsure
8. Students should play a major role in creating the social contract.
- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree
 - e. Unsure
9. Students are our customers.
- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly Disagree
 - e. Unsure

APPENDIX D: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION TOOL: POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Classroom Observation Tool: Positive Reinforcement

Observer Name:

Teacher Name:

Grade Level: Choose one:
6th, 7th, 8th, exploratory, exceptional children, other

Class Period

Subject

Directions: Respond to each statement based upon your observations.

1. Teacher displays the social contract in the classroom.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Temporarily displayed (not anchored)
2. Teacher references and/or reviews the social contract
 - ☐ Not observed
 - ☐ 1-2
 - ☐ 3-4
 - ☐ 5 or more
3. Teacher uses Behavior Specific Praise (BSP) to reinforce student behaviors.
(MULTIPLE ANSWER - Select the components of BSP you observe: 1. identification of students/group in a way that it is known who is being praised 2. include a term of praise 3. describe and acknowledge the rule/behavior being recognized 4. link to school-wide expectation. Select all that apply)
 - ☐ Identification of student/group in a way that it is known who is being praised (ex: name)
 - ☐ Include a term of praise (ex: good job)

- Describe and acknowledge the rule/behavior being recognized (ex: social contract - respect)
 - Link to school-wide expectation (ex.PBIS matrix - Patriot Pride)
 - BSP not observed
- 4. Students use positive language and encouragement towards peers.
 - Not observed
 - 1-2
 - 3-4
 - 5 or more
- 5. Students use positive language and encouragement towards their teacher.
 - Not observed
 - 1-2
 - 3-4
 - 5 or more
- 6. Teacher uses non-verbal cues (thumbs up, nods) to reinforce positive behavior.
 - Not observed
 - 1-2
 - 3-4
 - 5 or more
- 7. Total number of positive reinforcement statements/cues (verbal/non-verbal) observed.
 - Not observed
 - 1-3
 - 4-6

- 7-9
- 10 or more

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Group Questions

Title of Inquiry:

Date & Time of Focus Group:

Location of Focus Group:

Facilitator:

Note Taker (if any):

Audio/Video Recording Tool:

Focus Group Participants (Names or Identifiers):

[Introduction Text]

“My name is _____, and I will be the facilitator for today’s focus group on student behaviors and teacher perception. The purpose of this focus group is to learn more about your perspective on student behaviors in the classroom. Each of you has been asked to participate because you are teachers at the school. It is our expectation that your opinions and experiences will help us learn more about how educators respond to appropriate and inappropriate student behaviors. After the conclusion of the focus group, the information we discussed will be coded and categorized to identify themes across participants. Your personal information will not be connected to the results of this focus group.”

“I am passing around a consent form. By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in the student behaviors and teacher perceptions focus group. If you feel uncomfortable for any reason signing this form, you are free to leave at any time. Please take a moment to read it over.”

[Pause until every participant has reviewed, signed, and returned the consent form to you.]

“Before we begin, first I would like to notify you that this session will be recorded to support transcription accuracy. I would like to go over a few ground rules for the focus group. These are in place to ensure that all of you feel comfortable sharing your experiences and opinions.”

[Ground Rules]

1. “*Confidentiality* –Please respect the confidentiality of your peers. As facilitator, I will only be sharing the information from this focus group anonymously.

2. *One Speaker at a Time* – Only one person should speak at a time in order to make sure that we can all hear what everyone is saying.
3. *Use Respectful Language* – In order to facilitate an open discussion, please avoid any statements or words that may be offensive to other members of the group.
4. *Open Discussion* – This is a time for everyone to feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints. You will not be asked to reach consensus on the topics discussed. There will be no right or wrong answers.
5. *Participation is Important* – It is important that everyone’s voice is shared and heard in order to make this the most productive focus group possible. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation!”

“Are there any questions before we start?” [*Pause, answer any questions as appropriate*].

“Thank you, now let’s begin.”

[Questions to be Asked, Listed Fully and in Order]

1. What are the most common behaviors, positive and/or negative, that you observe among your students in the classroom?
2. How do you reinforce or acknowledge positive behaviors among your students?
3. What has been the impact of Behavior Specific Praise with students?
4. Describe the impact, positive and/or negative, that social contracts have had on your classroom learning environment.
5. Describe the impact, positive and/or negative, of the behavioral professional learning program.
6. Describe the impact of the behavioral professional learning program on your most challenging student(s).
7. Do you have anything else you would like to share or that has not been addressed in our questioning?

[Conclusion Text]

“Thank you for participating in today’s focus group. As a reminder, I will share the information learned during this session with the school leadership team to help improve student behaviors. If you have any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share later, please contact me at coreyb03@students.ecu.edu. Have a great remainder of your day!”

