ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PRINCIPALS AND BIAS IN DISPROPORTIONATE SUSPENSIONS OF BLACK BOYS

Tangela C. Scales, Doctor of Education, 2024

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This dissertation examines the decision-making processes of principals regarding out-of-school suspension of Black boys. Employing a mixed-method approach integrating survey questions and interviews, it delves into the multifaceted layers influencing disciplinary decisions in educational settings. A primary objective is to investigate the potential impact of implicit biases, training, and lived experiences on principals' suspension decision-making. This research sheds light on the underlying factors shaping educational leaders' disciplinary actions through a nuanced exploration of their perspectives and practices. It aims to contribute to more equitable disciplinary policies and practices in schools.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, misbehavior, discipline issues, and suspensions have surged in schools, with 87% of public schools reporting negative impacts on students' socio-emotional development and 84% on behavioral development during the 2021–22 school year. These issues, highlighted by increased classroom disruptions and disrespect towards staff,

underscore the need for comprehensive social, emotional, and behavioral support, as NCES Commissioner Peggy G. Carr emphasized.

The mixed-methods study found a correlation between disproportionality in disciplinary actions to lower academic achievement and a negative impact on student attendance. Implementing restorative practices was positively associated with student well-being, while alternative discipline approaches showed promise in reducing suspension rates without compromising safety. These findings underscore the importance of holistic disciplinary approaches for fostering equitable, supportive school environments conducive to student success. The findings also underscore the prevalence of disproportionate suspensions of Black boys as a result of principal disciplinary decision-making for a select group of principals in an identified school district. The results from this study illustrate that principals' decision-making for the select sample group of principals in the study is influenced by a combination of implicit biases and professional experiences, emphasizing their pivotal role in disciplinary actions. The results of this study help provide insight into the significance of restorative practices and cultural competency training in mitigating disproportionate suspension.

This study explores the interplay between lived experience, training, institutional policies, and sociocultural influences, illuminating the complexities of disciplinary practices in educational settings.

Keywords: principals, decision-making, out-of-school suspension, Black boys, implicit biases, training, lived experiences, disciplinary practices, equity, inclusion, professional development, sociocultural influences, restorative practices.

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PRINCIPALS AND BIAS IN DISPROPORTIONATE SUSPENSION RATES OF BLACK BOYS

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Preface

My decades of experience within the education landscape drives my profound curiosity in principals' decision-making process concerning out-of-school suspension. Having spent nearly a quarter-century navigating the dynamic roles of classroom teacher, administrator, and principal, I have witnessed firsthand the multifaceted challenges that educators encounter daily, particularly in student discipline matters.

Throughout my career, I have steadfastly committed to fostering an environment where every student feels valued, heard, and supported. My dedication to cultivating inclusive and equitable practices has been a guiding force, shaped by a deep understanding of student relations and a belief in the transformative power of restorative practices. This ethos has informed my professional endeavors and propelled me into equity training and implicit bias coaching, where I have spent over a decade advocating for fairness and justice within the educational system. This research stems from a desire to illuminate the nuances underlying school principals' decision-making processes when confronted with the prospect of out-of-school suspension. In particular, I am compelled to explore the presence of implicit bias and its potential influence on these critical judgments. Implicit bias, often operating beneath conscious awareness, can shape perceptions and behaviors in subtle yet profound ways, potentially impacting the educational trajectories of countless students.

My perspective as a Black boy mom adds a deeply personal dimension to this inquiry. Raising three sons has afforded me a unique vantage point that underscores the urgency of addressing systemic inequities within our educational institutions. I approach this research endeavor through this lens of lived experience, coupled with a wealth of professional insights.

In undertaking this study, I aim to uncover patterns or trends, spark meaningful dialogue, and inspire tangible action. By shedding light on the intersection of implicit bias and disciplinary decision-making, I hope to empower educators, administrators, and policymakers to enact positive change within their respective spheres of influence.

As I embark on this journey, I am acutely aware of the challenges ahead. Yet, I am buoyed by an unwavering belief in education's transformative potential and the profound impact that even the smallest of actions can have on the lives of our students. I sincerely hope this research will catalyze greater awareness, empathy, and equity within our educational communities.

> You may encounter many defeats. But you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats so you can know who you are, what you can rise from and how you can still come out of it.
>
> — Maya Angelou

> Yes, speak up for the poor and the helpless, and see that they get justice.
>
> —Proverbs 31:9, New Living Translation

With humility and determination,

Tangie Scales

Dedication

To my father, Walter Coleman, and my mother, Wanda Guy, whose unwavering belief in my abilities has been a beacon of encouragement throughout my life.

To my husband, William, whose steadying presence has kept me grounded through every challenge and triumph.

To my sons Patrick, Mario, and William, my grandchildren De'Vaughn, Amora, William III, and Laila, and all the children who have come into my life, each brings joy and meaning beyond measure. I fight for your future.

To my friends and family that encouraged me to finish.

Lastly, to Jesus, the cornerstone of my faith and the source of all my help and possibility in my life.

With heartfelt thanksgiving and love.

Acknowledgments

I express my deepest gratitude to my dissertation chair, Dr. Pamela Shetley, for her support, guidance, and feedback throughout this research endeavor. Her expertise, dedication, and encouragement have been instrumental in shaping this dissertation. I extend my appreciation to my esteemed committee members, Dr. Snell, Dr. Anthony, Dr. Imig, Dr. Neumerski, and Dr. McLaughlin, for their constructive critique, scholarly insights, and scholarly contributions that have enriched the quality and depth of this study. Their expertise and diverse perspectives have been instrumental in refining the research methodology and enhancing the overall rigor of the dissertation.

I am profoundly grateful for each committee member who has been indispensable in shaping my academic journey and contributing to the successful completion of this dissertation.

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Exploring the Role of Principals and Bias in Disproportionate Suspension Rates of Black Boys

Section 1: Introduction

According to the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Education (ED) (2014), "...racial discrimination in school discipline is a real problem" (p. 2). Suspensions are detrimental to Black boys, perpetuating stereotypes that restrict opportunities related to their education, self-esteem, and future livelihood. Their suspension numbers are disproportionate compared to other groups (Taylor et al., 2019). For Black boys, routine suspension fosters hostility toward school, as well as feelings of alienation and embarrassment (Brown, 2007).

In the context of educational discipline, certain practices, such as the routine suspension of Black boys, have been critically analyzed for their long-term impacts on students' attitudes toward school. Research suggests that these disciplinary actions often lead to feelings of hostility, alienation, and embarrassment among these students (Brown, 2007). These negative emotional responses are particularly concerning as they can exacerbate the challenges these students face in the educational environment, leading to decreased academic engagement and higher dropout rates. It is important to examine these practices through the lens of both equity and effectiveness, considering how they contribute to the disproportionate impacts on Black students compared to their peers.

Disproportionate suspensions of Black boys result in disenfranchisement, apathy, misunderstanding, rejection, a pipeline to prison, and unfulfilled promises (Allen, 2017). Under civil rights laws and the Code of Maryland Regulations, educators and school administrators are

mandated to provide an equitable education for all students. These regulations are designed to ensure that every student, regardless of race or background, has access to similar educational opportunities and resources. Specifically, these laws aim to protect students from discriminatory practices and to promote fairness within educational institutions. It is important for educational research to examine whether these regulatory standards are being met effectively across various demographics, including Black boys.

Problem Statement

Research indicates that disproportionate school suspensions of Black boys are a significant issue within public education systems. Studies show that these suspensions occur more frequently among Black male students compared to their peers, potentially impacting their educational outcomes and school experiences. Such disparities may contribute to academic setbacks and reduced educational equity, which are documented in various educational research publications. It is essential for educational policy and reform to address these discrepancies to foster an inclusive learning environment where all students can succeed regardless of race.

These disparities in discipline interfere with Black male students' opportunities to learn. Suspensions can lead to Black male students becoming academically disengaged, dropping out, and ending up in prison. “Racial disproportionality in discipline, suspensions…did not simply emerge full-blown in recent years. Racial discipline disparities are a consequence of U.S. history, of the biases and stereotypes created by that history, and of the still strong divisions” (Carter et al., 2017, p. 209). The established racial disparities in school discipline, particularly affecting Black boys, are not recent phenomena but are rooted in the historical context of the United States. More specifically, suspensions hurt the academic performance and prospects of Black male students from a young age. Suspensions of Black boys as early as preschool are a national,

state, and local district school system issue. Research has shown that Black preschool boys are more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts (Gilliam et al., 2016). Due to disproportionate suspensions, Black boys spend less time in the classroom. These inequities reflect deeply ingrained biases and stereotypes, perpetuating systemic divisions that call for dismantling the structures that perpetuate disparate disciplinary outcomes.

Patrick County Public Schools (PCPS) is a pseudonym of a combination of counties in Maryland, and as many other school districts across the United States, PCPS suspends Black boys at a disproportionately higher rate than students of other demographics. In the 2018-2019 school year, Black children comprised 54% of the enrollment but accounted for 72% of out-of-school suspensions, with males being the majority (73.9%) of the students suspended. This represents an 18% disparity. Similarly, in the 2014-2015 school year, Black students made up 56% of the PCPS population but received 74% of suspensions, resulting in an identical 18% difference. The suspension rate of Black boys in PCPS is concerning. There is little evidence that suspension is beneficial to anyone. However, suspension has been shown to cause students to fall behind academically and significantly disrupt their engagement with school and teachers, ultimately leading to dropout (Losen et al., 2015).

In this section of the paper, the researcher will:

1. Present data that illustrate the disproportionality of suspensions of Black male youth on the national, state, and local levels.
2. Discuss the negative impact of out-of-school suspensions.
3. Explore the root causes through a causal systems analysis.
4. Identify drivers that are aligned with the causal factors identified.

National Data

In U.S. schools, the disproportionate use of out-of-school suspensions as a disciplinary consequence remains a significant problem. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR, n.d.) collects data on educational indicators, including discipline, to determine the presence or extent of discrimination. Collated by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the most recent nationally available data from 2017-2018 show that Black children are suspended from school at three times the rate of white children. For every 5% of white students, approximately 15% of Black students are suspended (n.d.). Black students are not the only students of color who face disproportionate rates of suspension. Native Alaskan students are also suspended at a rate that is twice as high as their enrollment rate. Additionally, one study reported that one out of four boys of color with a disability received an out-of-school suspension, except for Latino and Asian American students (OCR, 2021).

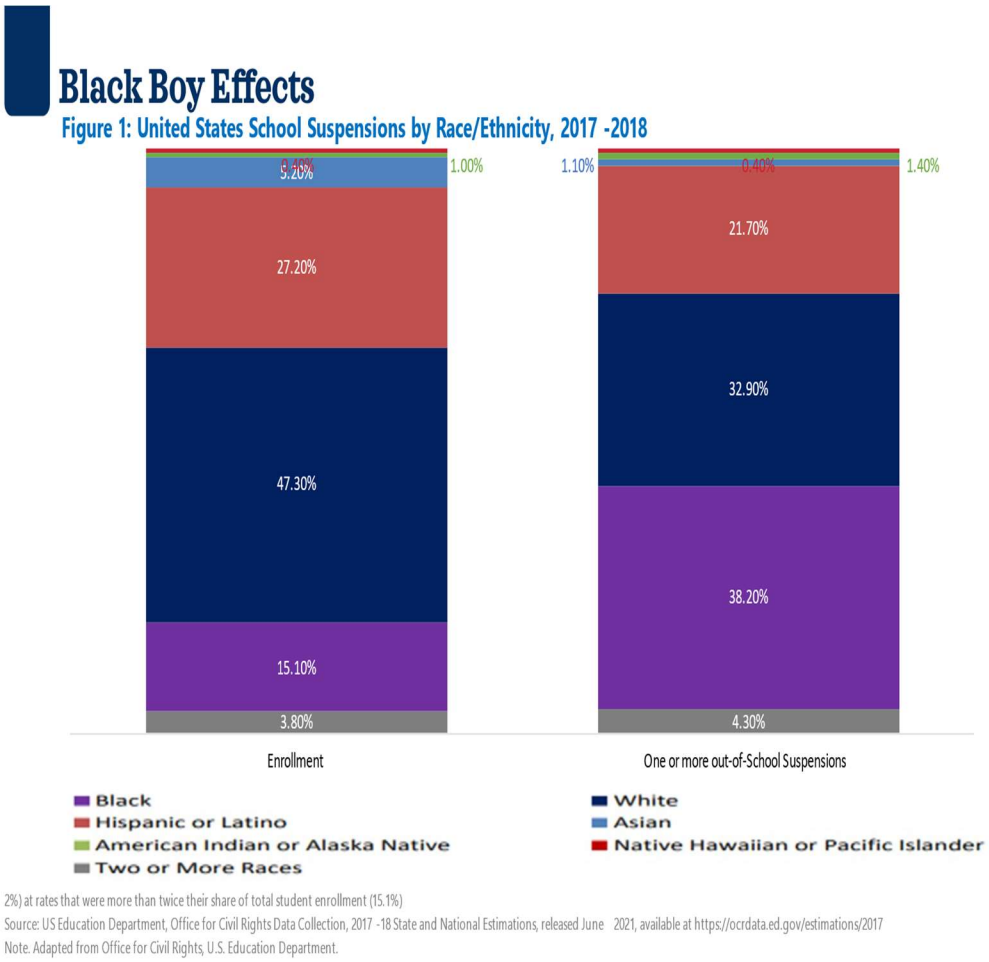
According to the Office for Civil Rights (OCR, 2014), Black students spend less time in the classroom due to disciplinary actions, further limiting their access to quality education. They are nearly twice as likely as white students to be suspended without educational services. Moreover, Black students are 3.8 times more likely than white students to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions. Despite constituting 19% of the nation's preschool population, 47% of Black children received more than one out-of-school suspension, illustrating that the suspension process for Black boys begins as early as preschool. In contrast, white students make up 41% of preschool enrollment, but only 28% have received more than one out-of-school suspension. Even more concerning, Black students are 2.3 times more likely than white students to be referred to law enforcement or arrested at school (OCR, 2014).

The latest OCR data from 2017-2018, compared to earlier years, indicate minimal improvements in disciplinary measures. According to the 2014 OCR data, Black students comprised 15.1% of K-12 public school enrollment, but 31.4% had one in-school suspension and 38.2% had one or more out-of-school suspensions. Black boys received out-of-school suspensions at three times the rate (24.9%) of their proportion of total student enrollment (7.4%). Furthermore, Black students in public schools accounted for 28.7% of those referred to law enforcement and 31.6% of those arrested for school-related incidents. Suspension frequently leads to a school-to-prison pipeline. Research by Bacher-Hicks et al. (2021) demonstrates a causal link between early school disciplinary actions and subsequent increases in adult crime, substantiating the existence of a school-to-prison pipeline. Additionally, their findings highlight that the adverse effects of stringent disciplinary measures are disproportionately felt by minority and male students, exacerbating pre-existing disparities in educational attainment and incarceration rates.

These figures should be contrasted with those of white students, who made up 47.3% of the enrollment in 2014, with only 37.8% receiving one in-school suspension and 32.9% receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. white students also accounted for 37.8% of law enforcement referrals and 34.4% of school-related arrests. Furthermore, according to the 2017-2018 data report, the disparity in disciplinary actions was widespread and affected Black boys from middle-class families as well as those living below the poverty line (OCR, 2021).

Figure 1

United States School Suspensions by Race/Ethnicity, 2017–2018



Note. Adapted from Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Education Department (n.d.).

Maryland Data

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE, 2018) defines suspension as a limitation in services that may include one or a combination of the following: a reduction in the amount of time a child may attend (hours or days); a requirement that the child not attend school for a particular period of time; a restriction on the child's attendance in the program unless accompanied by a parent, family member, or other adult identified by the family; a requirement that the child attend the program in a location other than their typical group or setting; or any

other conditions placed on the child's ability to attend and participate in activities with their peers. This research examines the disproportionate suspension rates of Black boys. According to MSDE (2017), Reducing and Eliminating Disproportionate Impact, the term "removal" refers to an out-of-school suspension or expulsion, excluding in-school suspensions and other forms of discipline in the Maryland model. The data used will be unduplicated, counting the number of students who received one or more removals rather than the total number of removals issued.

According to MSDE (2018) data on enrollment by race/ethnicity, gender, and number of schools, white students account for 36.5% of the enrollment of Maryland schools, while Black students account for 33.6%. Suspensions should be proportionate and equitable to each race's enrollment. Proportionality in this context means that the suspension rates for each racial/ethnic group should align with their respective enrollment percentages, ensuring no group is disproportionately disciplined compared to their representation in the student population. The risk ratio is a key measure used to assess disproportionality, comparing the suspension rates of each student group to those of all other students in the school; a risk ratio greater than 1.0 indicates that a group is suspended at a higher rate than their peers, highlighting potential inequities.

Maryland collects discipline data for each of its school systems based on race/ethnicity, gender, and disability. Table 1 shows the Maryland Public School in-school and out-of-school suspensions by school and major offense category for the 2018- 2019 school year. This data is being used in this study because they represent all information available about PreCOVID pandemic when the research initially started. According to Table 1, 67,608 students were reported suspended during that school year. Of the total, 40,924 students (>60%) were Black, while 14,796 (21.8%) were white. According to the Maryland out-of-school suspension data,

21.6% of Black students were suspended under the subjective label, “disrespect/disruptive.” Furthermore, males received 68.9% of suspensions, while females received 31%. The intersectionality of Black boy students is one of the primary factors contributing to higher suspension rates. A significant aspect of this intersectionality is the lack of representation and cultural connection, as most Black boys do not have educators who look like them or share similar backgrounds. Interestingly, only 3% of teachers and less than 11% of principals are Black men (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). This underrepresentation can lead to a disconnect in the school environment, where Black boys may feel misunderstood or marginalized, exacerbating disciplinary issues and contributing to higher suspension rates.

The Intersectionality theory of social identity of being a Black male in school suggests that to understand an individual's identity and experiences fully, we must consider how these interconnected elements influence each other. In the context of disproportionate suspensions of Black boys in schools, intersectionality helps to reveal how the combination of racial and gender biases, along with other factors like socioeconomic background, can create unique challenges and compounded disadvantages. By viewing each trait as inseparably linked with others, intersectionality provides a more comprehensive framework to analyze and address the systemic inequities leading to higher suspension rates among Black boys.

According to O’Conner et al. (2014), “in all 24 Maryland school systems, Black students received out-of-school suspension…at more than twice the rate of white students” (p. i). Due to inequitable discipline practices in Maryland, the Maryland State Board of Education (MSDE) passed a regulation in January 2014 requiring the Maryland State Department of Education to develop a plan to analyze school discipline data to determine whether these practices have a disproportionate impact on students of color and students with disabilities

(COMAR 13A.08.01.21). The regulation requires each Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to examine data on out-of-school suspensions to determine the disproportionate impact on students of color and students with disabilities (MSDE, 2019a).

Disproportionality in school discipline is measured using a risk ratio rather than the difference between the proportion of enrollment and the proportion of suspensions, according to the MSDE's (2019a) presentation related to the COMAR regulation. The risk ratio compares each student group's removal rate to that of a comparison group (i.e., all other students in the school), capturing whether the risk of removal for a student in one student group is lower or higher than the risk of removal for a student in the comparison group. In this context, risk refers to a student's likelihood of receiving an out-of-school suspension or expulsion. A risk ratio of 1.0 means the risk of removal is proportionate. A risk ratio below 1.0 means the risk is lower, while above 1.0 means a higher risk and, therefore, one that is disproportionate to some degree (MSDE, 2019a, p. 4). LEA's must meet a risk measure benchmark; otherwise, the school system is mandated to address the disproportionality of suspensions. MSDE agreed to use a 3.0 or higher risk ratio to identify disproportionality (MSDE, 2020). Nationally and in Maryland, suspension rates are decreasing.

In Figure 1 the data reveals notable disparities in school suspensions and expulsions, particularly concerning Black students and males, indicating potential intersectionality challenges in the subjective category of Disrespect/Disruption. For instance, while Black students constitute 58.3% of the total incidents in this category, their representation is only 32.5% of the overall student population. Furthermore, a deeper exploration of related categories, including Attendance, Fighting, and Weapons, is crucial to uncovering nuanced patterns and potential biases in disciplinary actions. Analyzing attendance records may uncover

disparities in school engagement. Examining incidents categorized as fighting can offer insights into the nature of conflicts, highlighting whether certain groups face higher scrutiny or harsher consequences. Additionally, scrutinizing incidents involving weapons may reveal disparities in interpreting or enforcing policies.

Table 1

Number of Suspensions and Expulsions by Major Offense Category, Maryland Public Schools, 2018–2019

Description of Data	Total	Attendance	Dangerous Substances	Weapons	Attacks/ Threats/ Fighting	Arson/ Fire/ Explosives	Sex Offenses	Disrespect/ Disruption	Other
All	79,306	1,004	5,347	1,579	36,479	489	1,653	30,125	2,630
Male	55,133	631	3,723	1,194	25,260	390	1,387	20,597	1,951
Female	24,173	373	1,624	385	11,219	99	266	9,528	679
American Indian or Alaska Native	239	3	16	2	92	2	4	105	15
Asian	749	8	114	20	334	10	29	206	28
Black or African American	46,221	333	1,686	836	23,250	280	905	17,511	1,420
Hispanic/Latino of any race	8,564	116	969	273	3,604	95	237	2,968	302
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	98	1	11	1	33	1	4	43	4
white	18,941	458	2,244	374	7,191	84	406	7,472	712
Two or more races	4,494	85	307	73	1,975	17	68	1,820	149
Students with disabilities	22,056	138	988	466	10,546	145	479	8,547	747

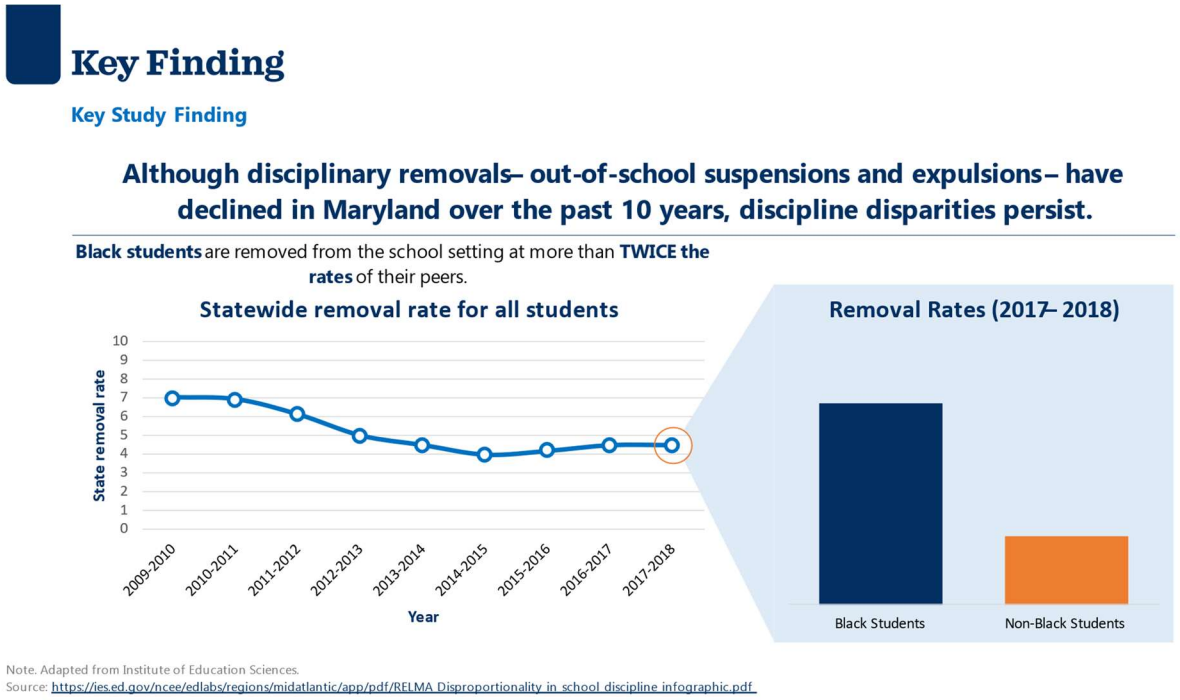
Note. Adapted from MSDE (2019a).

A local school district must meet a specific benchmark of the risk measure; otherwise, they are mandated to address the disproportionality of suspensions. MSDE agreed to use a risk ratio of 3.0 or greater for the identification of disproportionality (MSDE, 2020).

As illustrated in Figure 2, suspension rates have declined in Maryland over the past 10 years. However, the disproportionality of suspension continues for Black students. Black students are suspended at twice the rate or more of any other race. Although students with a disability are suspended at a high rate, it is to be noted that although Black students are only 32% of the population of Maryland, they are 42% of the students identified with learning disabilities and 58% of the suspensions of students with disabilities.

Figure 2

Discipline Disparities Exist in Maryland Data on Suspensions



Note. Adapted from Institute of Education Sciences (n.d.).

Patrick County Public Schools (PCPS) Data

This study focuses on out-of-school suspension. PCPS principals suspend Black male students at a disproportionately higher rate than students from other demographic groups. In the 2018–2019 school year, 58% of PCPS students were Black. Yet, the out-of-school suspension rate for Black children suspension-was 72%, which indicates a 14% disparity between suspensions and enrollments. In 2014–2015, Black students accounted for 56% of total enrollment, but 74% of suspensions—an 18% difference. Although the overall number of suspensions has decreased slightly over the past few years, Black boys' suspensions persist at a disproportionately high rate. As shown in Table 2, the district used suspension disproportionately in the 2018–2019 school year. Black students, particularly Black males, are the most likely to be suspended in PCPS, followed by students with disabilities.

On the federal level, in 2014, the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Education's (ED) Office for Civil Rights issued a joint "Dear Colleague Letter" to K-12 schools. This communication questioned whether administrators were suspending Black and other minority children more harshly than white children for the same offenses. Furthermore, the "Dear Colleague Letter" offered guidance on how schools could strengthen oversight of their disciplinary processes to meet obligations under Titles IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act as they apply to racial discrimination (Epstein, 2014). As the DOJ and ED stated:

> Research suggests that the substantial racial disparities of the kind reflected in the CRDC data are not explained by more frequent or more serious misbehavior by students of color. Accordingly, this guidance will help public elementary and secondary schools administer student discipline in a manner that does not discriminate based on race. (Para. 5)

That guidance addressed a legal framework for different intentional treatment of students, disparate impact, and examples of how to move away from zero tolerance. Since its inception as an element of the 1980s federal drug policy, zero tolerance has primarily served to send a message that certain behaviors will not be tolerated by severely punishing all offenses, no matter how minor (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). It should be noted that this letter was written during the Obama administration. In 2018, during the Trump administration, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos overturned and rescinded the “Dear Colleague" guidance letter. As a result, data collection ceased, and no data were released. This document and the underlying issues are being reviewed by the DOJ and ED as of July 2021 by the Biden administration.

As previously stated, Maryland is in the final stages of the Reduction and Elimination Disproportionate Action Plan, which requires LSDs to allocate funds to address disproportionality. PCPS, like many other LSDs in Maryland, has not been able to lower its risk ratio below the 3.0 benchmark used to determine disproportionality.

Due to COVID there was a hold on the final stages of the Reduction and Elimination Disproportionate Action Plan. However, the data from Maryland Public Schools shows a significant decline in suspension and expulsion rates from 8.3% in 2007-2008 to 4.1% in 2021-2022. However, there was a notable increase post-pandemic, from 3.3% in 2019-2020 to 4.1% in 2021-2022. Despite the overall long-term decrease, Black students and male students remain disproportionately affected. In 2021-2022, Black students, particularly Black boys, faced higher suspension rates compared to other groups, influenced by factors such as biases and lack of representation among educators. For instance, Baltimore City reported a 5.3% suspension rate, while another southern LEA had 6.2%. These disparities highlight ongoing inequity and cultural disconnect in disciplinary practices (Maryland State Department of Education, 2022).

Table 2

Number of Suspensions by Major Offense Category, Patrick County Public Schools, 2018–2019

Description of Data	Total	Attendance	Dangerous Substances	Weapons	Attacks/ Threats/ Fighting	Arson/Fire /Explosives	Sex Offenses	Disrespect/ Disruption	Other
All	3682	23	199	79	2,005	19	79	1,200	79
Male	2,644	20	139	66	1,414	16	65	860	64
Female	1.038	3	60	13	581	3	13	340	15
American Indian or Alaska Native	19	0	3	0	11	0	1	1	2
Asian	23	0	5	0	11	0	2	4	0
Black or African American	2,543	14	89	52	1,467	12	48	813	51
Hispanic/Latino of any race	163	4	19	4	70	0	1	61	4
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	3	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
white	643	1	68	20	288	7	18	222	19
Two or more races	288	3	14	3	157	0	10	98	3
Students with Disabilities	801	8	21	16	462	1	38	251	21

Note. Adapted from MSDE (2019).

Negative Impact of School Suspensions

According to the data presented in this section, Black students, particularly boys, make up the largest group of students suspended across the U.S., as well as in the state of Maryland and, more specifically, Patrick County Public Schools (PCPS). If the Black boys who were suspended were not learning in school and were denied educational opportunities, this action could have long-term consequences (Gilliam et al., 2016). Research has documented many negative impacts of out-of-school suspension, including loss of instruction, academic failure, disengagement, and dropping out of school (Morris & Perry, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011). Poverty and a pipeline to prison are also long-term consequences of suspension. The "school-to-prison pipeline" refers to students who are suspended and arrested (Fabelo et al., 2011; Forsyth et al., 2013; Gregory et al., 2010; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Lamont et al., 2013; Skiba, Arredondo et al., 2014). Suspension creates an opportunity gap, reducing Black boys' ability to earn a living wage. Black boys have among the lowest graduation and college enrollment rates. Dropouts have a 40% higher unemployment rate than graduates, earn roughly half as much as graduates, and are twice as likely to be poor (Black, 2018). Suspensions also increase Black boys' likelihood of incarceration. The link between repeated school suspensions and later involvement with law enforcement is concerning.

According to the Task Force on the Education of Maryland's Black Males (2019), the suspension is a particularly ineffective deterrent for misbehavior. Instead, research has suggested that it either sets a child on the path to delinquency or accelerates their journey (Maryland Public Schools, 2019).

Many advocates and researchers have investigated the negative effects of disproportionate suspension and being subjected to all other disciplinary actions on Black boys,

including referrals for disrespect and disruption as well as in-school suspension. High suspension rates are frequently associated with a poor school climate, weak academic performance, increased negative behavior, and failure (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). (Black and Hispanic boys who attend schools with high suspension rates are significantly more likely to be arrested and jailed as adults (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021*)* Additionally, suspensions do not benefit students or the school climate. Furthermore, Skiba et al. (2011) stated most suspensions are used for trivial offences, such as day-to-day disruptions, minor infractions, and insubordination rather than serious and egregious situations. The loss of learning engagement in school leads to dropping out and to the school-to-prison pipeline and increased trauma.

Brown (2007) conducted a study with 37 students who were suspended or expelled from school. The students completed an open-ended questionnaire to express their feelings about exclusionary practices such as suspension; 28 of those students were Black. According to Brown (2007), students who were constantly suspended suffered educationally, socially, and emotionally. Brown added that the stereotype of Black students being unwilling to learn is untrue. Instead, Brown's research found that Black students' lack of motivation was caused by a lack of acceptance and the presence of ostracization and suspicion.

Effects on Learning

A student's suspension from school disrupts learning for all students. Overly punitive environments gradually destroy a school's moral authority, resulting in alienation and resistance. In such cases, punishment becomes an end, rather than a means to an end to normative social order (Perry & Morris, 2014). Morris and Perry (2016) discovered that high suspension rates have an impact on other students' achievement levels, even those of students who are not personally suspended. Suspension, according to Contenbader and Markson (1998), does little to

improve subsequent student behavior and may even exacerbate students' anger or apathy. Furthermore, suspensions can weaken school bonds, increasing the likelihood of other deviant behavior (Hirschi, 1969; Jenkins, 1997).

Disengagement From School and Dropping Out: Pipeline to Prison

School discipline and practices have a significant impact on the educational experience and the student's connection to school. Black boys' disengagement in school can occur for a variety of reasons, including dissatisfaction with school due to a lack of inclusive curricula, racial biases, and poor relationships with teachers (Toldson et al., 2013).

According to Fenning and Rose (2007), suspension has hampered Black students' education and futures, putting Black males on a path to unemployment or, worse, prison. Exclusionary disciplinary practices, such as suspension, have also been linked to the start of the school-to-prison pipeline, according to research. The school-to-prison pipeline, according to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, 2020), refers to policies and procedures that push the nation's schoolchildren, particularly the most vulnerable, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

The pipeline reflects a preference for incarceration over education (ACLU, 2020). Jones et al. (2018) found that the discipline interventions students experienced frequently did not address the root causes of their behavior, made them feel unvalued and unwelcome, and disrupted their learning. Furthermore, participants in the interviews expressed a desire to participate in school and succeed but found that their schools' disciplinary practices hampered their ability to do so. Finally, findings indicated a strong correlation between suspensions and dropout rates. Students who were suspended for more than one day dropped out at a higher rate than students who had fewer suspensions.

Suspensions can also serve as the start of the prison pipeline. According to Costenbader and Markson, “Students who reported they had been suspended externally over the school year were more likely to have been involved with the legal system” (1998, p. 67). According to Darensbourg et al. (2010), exclusionary discipline, such as suspension, eventually increases incarceration. These authors demonstrated that exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension, have a negative impact on Black males’ educational achievement and social adjustment, leading to disengagement. Black males experienced more punitive consequences for noncompliant behavior than any other group of students, and they frequently felt alienated from school because of suspension. Brown (2007) reported that students often feel marginalized, embarrassed, ostracized, and resentful. Allen (2017) asserted that many Black males felt targeted. The data on suspension rates validate their feelings of unacceptance.

Trauma From Suspension

Many students who have experienced trauma at home are unable to adapt and are repeatedly excluded from school, causing additional trauma. According to De la Vega and Etow (2019), suspensions aggravate pre-existing adverse childhood experiences and deprive students of meaningful opportunities for learning and growth. In addition, these practices can compound feelings of seclusion and fear, increase stress, and deepen mistrust between students and educators. States and Keyworth (2015) noted the most common reason for suspending students is to deter them from committing further infractions of school conduct rules. Unfortunately, many students disengage from school and find it far more aversive than other forms of punishment. This research suggests that suspensions may hurt the students who are most likely to fail in school, increasing the frequency of suspension and the number of students who drop out.

Suspension affects students emotionally and increases social and economic instability, chronic disease, low life expectancy, and emotional disconnect. (De la Vega & Etow, 2019).

According to Pufall Jones et al. (2018), schools should be viewed as a collaborative community center for learning rather than an exclusive country club or prison. Students should be able to make mistakes and learn how to repair them. Furthermore, schools should have a positive atmosphere. However, Pufall Jones et al. (2018) discussed how suspended students felt undervalued and unwelcome at school; the researchers cited Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) as having concluded that teacher responses could contribute to racial disparities in school discipline and drive racial differences in student behavior and differential treatment, which can lead to repeated misbehavior by Black students. Furthermore, teacher responses can make students feel unwelcome and undervalued, straining relationships with school personnel and peers.

Causal Systems Analysis

Many researchers, including Darensbourg et al. (2010) and Skiba and Rausch (2006) have investigated the reasons for the disproportionate use of out-of-school suspensions among Black students, particularly boys. However, their efforts have not yet resulted in a significant reduction in school suspensions for these students. According to Gilliam et al. (2016), no research explains why Black boys are more likely to be suspended, making it difficult to inform anti-suspension practices and disparities.

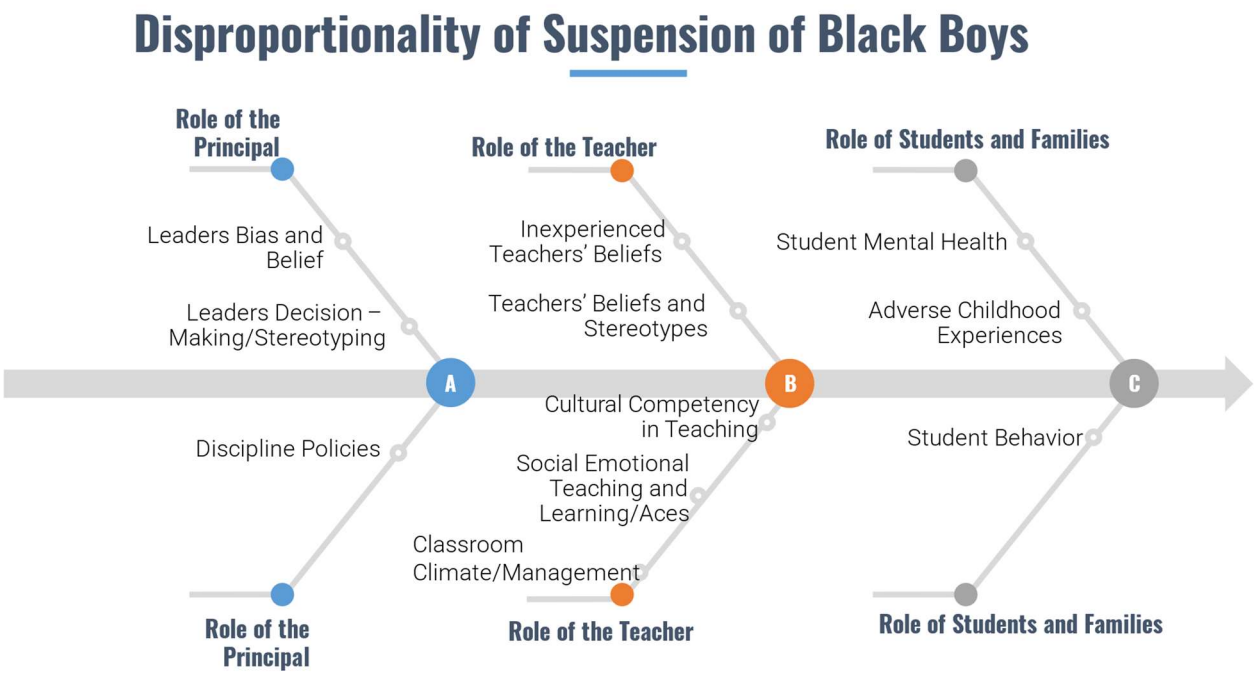
Finally, there is more to learn about trauma, culture, and climate in schools. A better understanding of the learning community's efficacy and personal beliefs is needed, as is additional research on trauma. Students and families are experiencing a variety of difficulties. Research shows trauma has a profound negative impact on student learning, causing students to

act out and lose motivation to learn. The trauma cycle that occurs both inside and outside of school must be addressed.

Figure 3 depicts the two major causal factors investigated in this study. Bias and beliefs, as well as inadequate educator preparation, comprise those factors, which are interconnected in several ways. These factors will be discussed in depth in this section, as well as how they contribute to the disproportionate suspension of Black males.

Figure 3

Fishbone Analysis of Causes of Suspensions of Black Boys



Note. Fishbone outline.

Causes of Disproportionality of Black Boy Suspension

Racial disparities in educators' perceptions of students have long existed in the educational system. Researchers have attempted to identify the causes and outcomes of each gap (Carter et al., 2017; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Morris & Perry, 2016). In the 1970s, the OCR began

tracking suspension data and hypothesized that schools were suspending Black students to manage or resist school desegregation. Three significant root causes have surfaced in the research on disproportion. They include but not are limited to the following:

1. The role of the principal
2. The role of the teacher
3. The role of the students and families

Role of the Principal

Research has shown that the principal plays a significant role in the dynamics of teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2021)**.** Principals must use all effective means available to ensure safety and provide the most effective learning environment possible. However, there is controversy about the means to this end (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Principals and assistant principals are the primary decision makers in a school's disciplinary response to behavioral issues. For perspective, principals oversee the school's structural operation, which includes maintaining order. Assistant principals are frequently in charge of daily operations, particularly when it comes to student conduct and behavioral order (Sorensen et al., 2022). Rumberger and Losen (2016) concluded that resistance to school discipline reform is more grounded. Administrators and teachers are usually the ones who readily admit that the current system of frequent suspensions and wide racial disparities in punishment is unjust. Principals lead schools and have a major influence on what happens in those schools.

Liebowitz and Porter (2019) suggested that principals play a central role in ensuring a positive environment and significantly influence student outcomes. Furthermore, they imply in their research that it is necessary to invest in the capacity of school leaders. There have been reforms sweeping the nation to better train principals. (Grissom et al. 2021) Findlay (2015)

observed that the decisions made by administrations are frequent, perhaps as many as 400 hundred a day, many taking less than four minutes.

Maryland and PCPS policies, like those in many other U.S. states, give principals discretion over suspension decisions (Sorensen et al., 2022). Each school's leadership team decides whether to suspend a student for minor infractions. The administrator determines the consequences and, if suspension is imposed, whether it will be in or out of school. School principals have the authority to suspend students for up to ten days. Principals can also request that the suspension be extended beyond 10 days or initiate expulsion proceedings. Principals exercise subjective disciplinary discretion daily; unfortunately, some of their decisions may be the result of lack of training, they are made too quickly, steeped in implicit bias (the continued existence of group-based disparities despite the rapid reduction or absence of explicit bias. An umbrella term for thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of which we may be unaware but that still create disparities in treatment. and without a full understanding of the result). One bad decision could change the outcome of a life; research on the training and the influence of decisions that principals make could give schools more insight on what steps are needed to make informed beneficial decisions when handling discipline and behavior.

Administrators play a crucial role in upholding discipline within schools. Principals may hold personal beliefs and philosophies regarding discipline, which in turn influence their approach. Some prioritize restorative practices, while others emphasize disciplinary measures like suspension. These beliefs and values significantly impact principals' disciplinary practices and interactions with students, parents, and staff. In their decision-making and guidance of disciplinary processes, principals draw upon their experiences and training (Williams et al., 2020). The nature of their experiences in student discipline can also vary depending on the school environment, the age group they oversee, and the specific challenges they face. While

some principals may have developed effective strategies, others may still be in the process of adjusting their approach.

Leader Bias and Beliefs

Racial stereotypes cause significant societal problems for Black males. According to Bohanon et al., (2006). Black boys appear the same to many people and face the same prejudices and biases whether they live in cities, suburbs, or rural areas. Implicit bias, according to Staats et al. (2015), consists of "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner" (p. 29). Stereotypes of Black people have been perpetuated throughout American history and there is a strong division in lived experience within races. Therefore, it is essential to look at implicit bias theory to better understand the discipline disparities in the context of racialized historical and current factors that shape schools in the United States (Carter et al., 2017).

Implicit bias contributes to the racial discipline gap. Studies have revealed that school administrators' levels of implicit racial bias explained a substantial portion of the differences between the severity of subjective discipline outcomes experienced by students based on their race (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). For example, in a study of Texas schools, it was found that when race, poverty, and other factors were controlled, higher percentages of white students were suspended on more serious non-discretionary grounds, such as possessing drugs or carrying a weapon, as opposed suspensions for discretionary offences which had a higher proportion of Black boys (Fabelo et al., 2011). In other words, unconsciously, administrators are disciplining Black male students more harshly because of the construct of race that is based on stereotypes in their subconscious.

There is a body of evidence that suggests that principals exert considerable influence over schools and discipline (Grissom et al., 2021). Sorensen et. al. (2022) discovered that the

level of racial bias of principals has a significant effect on the assignment of discipline, consequences that cause great academic loss for students of color and gains for white students. For example, administrators with a higher degree of pro-white implicit bias tend to assign students of color more severe discipline (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). Discipline policies are necessary but increasingly overly reactive to minor instances of student misconduct, too narrow and rigid, overly concerned with procedural requirements, and often causing more historical patterns of racism (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Moreover, Cook et al. (2018) suggested that discipline policies have been inequitable in response to problem behavior, leading to discipline disparities, especially with Black boys.

Leaders' Decision-Making/Stereotypes

Stereotypes are beliefs about the behaviors and traits that purportedly characterize a group of people based on attributions that involve stable causes and qualities. It enables people to predict and explain another individual's behavior, believing that stereotypical behaviors will recur whether they are controllable or uncontrollable (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Stereotypes about Black boys in the USA originated from the institution of slavery; these deeply held perspectives emerged from white racist beliefs that were utilized through oppressive and discriminatory actions that idealized how slaves should think and behave (Taylor et al., 2019).

Principals have a critical role in schools' decision-making processes, particularly in student outcomes. Decision-making is a fundamental aspect of leadership, but it is complex and individual. The environment in which decisions are made necessitates rational, logical, and realistic thinking. Amalia et al. (2020) emphasizes consistency and validity in decision-making.

It is important to note that implicit bias affects us all. According to Banaji et al. (2015), unconscious forms of bias pose a significant challenge to legal theory and practice because the

law often assumes that human behavior results from conscious and intentional decision-making. However, a rich body of research in experimental social psychology, from which the concept of implicit bias has emerged, challenges this assumption. This research shows that while some human thought processes are reflective, deliberate, and conscious, others occur automatically, unconsciously, and implicitly.

Gullo and Beachum (2020) discuss individuals' unconscious stereotypes and attitudes, which play a role in the racial discipline gap. They reference a study showing that school administrators' levels of racial implicit bias explain a significant portion of differences in discipline severity based on perceived race. Administrators with higher pro-white bias tended to give students of color more severe discipline, even when controlling for socio-economic status and behavioral infractions.

Discipline Policies

The cycle of subjective office discipline referrals for Black students is as much as two times the discipline disproportionality compared to white students who receive subjective Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) in classroom settings (Girvan et al. 2017). Office discipline referrals (ODRs) are incidents where a staff member observes a student breaking a school rule, documents the event, and submits it to the administrative leadership, who then administers a consequence to the student (Irvin et al., 2006). These findings suggest that an implicit bias may affect how teachers perceive and interpret students' behaviors that are not clearly and objectively defined (Hughes et al., 2020). Moreover, when ODRs are reviewed by administrators, implicit bias, as defined in the field of social psychology, is more likely to influence specific decisions, such as those that are ambiguous or snap judgments, or when individuals are physically or mentally fatigued (Kouchaki & Smith, 2014).

When responding to a violation, school administrators have several options, including conferencing with families, suspending students from class, expelling students, and/or reporting them to the police. Some principals, however, prefer suspension to prevention (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Sorensen et al. (2022) concluded that principals' propensity to remove students (PTR) based on racial bias predicts enormous future academic losses for non-white students and corresponding gains for white students (p. 9). Sorensen and colleagues (2022) also highlighted schools with tougher principals (those who were likely to suspend students); students in these schools were more likely to face juvenile justice complaints and were less likely to enroll in a four-year college.

In conjunction, there is a marked rise of zero tolerance policies in schools, which is one of several factors that have contributed to the disproportionate use of suspensions and exclusions of Black boys. The term "zero tolerance," which refers to policies that punish all offenses severely, no matter how minor, was first recorded in the Lexis-Nexis national newspaper database. It grew out of state and federal drug enforcement policies in the 1980s and was first used by the United States Navy in 1983. In late 1989, school districts in Orange County, California, and Louisville, Kentucky, implemented zero tolerance policies that called for expulsion for drug possession or involvement in gang-related activity. In New York, Yonkers Public Schools Superintendent Donald Batista proposed a zero-tolerance program to deal with disruptive students. The program included many of the elements that have come to characterize zero tolerance approaches in the last decade, such as restricted school access, a ban on hats, immediate suspension for any school disruption, and increased use of law enforcement. By 1993, school boards across the country had adopted those policies, which frequently expanded the term

to include drug, weapon, and tobacco-related offenses, as well as school disruptions (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

Role of the Teacher

Skiba (2000) stated that fear may also play a role in contributing to over-referral by teachers. Teachers prone to accepting stereotypes of adolescent Black boys as threatening or dangerous may react more quickly to relatively minor threats to authority, especially if such fear is paired with a misunderstanding of cultural norms of social interaction. These results have consistently suggested that cultural discontinuities may place Black students, predominantly Black boys, at a disadvantage in many schools (Darensbourg et al., 2010). Townsend (2000) suggested that many teachers, primarily those who are white, may be unfamiliar and even uncomfortable with the more active and boisterous style of interaction that categorizes Black boys. As a result, more students are suspended or their cases are referred to law enforcement for minor misbehavior, leading to a lifetime of consequences. Black (2016) admitted that many teachers work in chaotic and inadequate schools, where behavioral problems stem from poverty, school funding, teacher quality, and discipline pedagogy. Furthermore, according to Black (2016) and Skiba (2000), school suspension leads not only to suspension but also to law enforcement involvement. This pattern is similarly observed in Patrick County School, where white teachers frequently misinterpret the behavior of Black boys as problematic, resulting in disproportionate disciplinary actions.

Inexperienced Teachers' Beliefs

Inexperienced teachers are often unprepared to meet a diverse population's needs, which can significantly impact student achievement. These teachers are three times more likely to serve in high-poverty, high-minority schools (Sutcher et al., 2016). Unfortunately, these same teachers

have no experience in disciplining students. This lack of training and understanding of environmental factors, lack of resources, the prevalence of stereotypical thinking, and institutional racism continues disparities in education and discipline outcomes that support stereotypical views of Black boys (Taylor et al., 2019).

Gilliam et al. (2016) found that Black teachers were more likely than non-Black teachers to have higher expectations for Black children and were less likely to escalate their disciplinary responses. Unfortunately, the current teacher workforce does not reflect the majority of non-white U.S. students, and this disparity has grown in recent years. There are a variety of ways in which the demographics of teachers influence whether students are suspended (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). white teachers may be unfamiliar with Black male interaction patterns and may misinterpret their actions as disrespectful or inappropriate. Discipline disparities may be exacerbated by a cultural disconnect between administrators and teachers and Black male students (Townsend, 2000).

The teacher shortage can also hurt disciplinary infractions (García & Weiss, 2019). Students in high-poverty, high-minority schools are disproportionately affected by teacher shortages. Underprepared, inexperienced, and out-of-field teachers are more likely to be assigned to economically disadvantaged and Black students (Sutcher et al., 2016). Teachers quickly appraise infractions, determine which students were involved, and decide whether the student's behavior warrants an office discipline referral (ODR). The ambiguous and subjective nature of discipline referrals and the speed with which teachers must respond provide the context for teachers being susceptible to biased decision-making (Hughes et al., 2020). It can be difficult for inexperienced teachers to deal with students who live in poverty and exhibit behaviors that are inconsistent with their experience. Due to the lack of proactive behavior

management, educators' decision making becomes more vulnerable to implicit biases regarding perceived problem behavior; they write a referral because they lack the training to handle misbehavior in their classroom (Cook et al., 2018).

Teachers can find minor infractions committed by Black students as "big deals" and demand that they be disciplined and removed from classes by the administration. Students of color were more likely than white students to be sent to the office and face other punitive measures for subjective offenses like disrespect, disruption, or excessive noise, whereas white students were more likely to be sent to the office for objective infractions like smoking or vandalism (Staats, 2015). Brown (2007) also stated that Black males are often suspended for more subjective reasons such as teacher bias and, according to Halberstadt et al. (2018), "These depictions of Black Americans as aggressive and disruptive may well result in differential perceptions and expectations of Black students in the U.S. educational system" (p. 127).

Arcia (2007) and Neal et al. (2003) discovered that Black students were more likely to be suspended early in their educational career, as well as more frequently, due to school staff bias and perceptions of adolescent Black culture being tough and defiant. When students are judged based on their appearance, they are perceived as disrespectful and threatening. According to the data presented earlier, most suspensions of Black male students have been for disruptive, disrespectful, or defiant behavior rather than violent or dangerous behavior (Skiba et al., 2002). Black males are the most vulnerable to these referrals, according to Arcia (2007), because males are more likely than females to respond aggressively to stressful, threatening, unfair, or repressive environments. Some researchers have speculated testosterone reduces males' tolerance to frustration and their likelihood to

respond aggressively (Buchanan et al., 1992). New and inexperienced teachers who lack understanding about behavior and discipline may rely on instinct and automation.

According to social psychology research, implicit bias is more likely to influence specific decisions (Kouchaki & Smith, 2014). Further, educators report low levels of self-efficacy in discipline (Dicke et al., 2014); those who lack skill in behavior management strategies and thus fail to prevent emerging issues and effectively respond to problem behaviors may contribute to discipline disparities (Skiba et al., 2011). Students who are frequently suspended have less access to the teachers who provide the best instruction and classroom management. Qualitative studies have documented that the same student can behave very differently in different classrooms (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Misbehavior and suspensions tend to decrease as engagement increases (Osher et al., 2010). Classroom disruption tends to increase or decrease depending on the teacher's experience and ability to provide engaging instruction and classroom management. When both administrators and teachers lack the knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy to prevent and address perceived problem behavior, the likelihood of using suspension to address problem behavior increases (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). When both administrators and teachers lack the knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy to prevent and address perceived problem behavior, the likelihood of using suspension to address problem behavior increases (Skiba & Peterson, 2003).

Teacher Bias and Stereotypes

Teachers' implicit biases may contribute to discipline disparities (Bell, 2020; Cook et al., 2018; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015), making minor infractions appear major and then responding more harshly than necessary (Cook et al., 2018; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015), which can lead to suspension for students. Research has found a mismatch in student-teacher

racial demographics as well as indications that non-Black educators have significantly lower academic and behavioral expectations for Black students than do Black educators (Bell, 2020; Gilliam et al., 2016). Those low expectations may be due to long-held beliefs and stereotypes (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019).

When looking at the disproportionate discipline data of Black boys, there appears to be a correlation between bias and discipline. Okonofua et al. (2022) state that racial stereotypes can increase teachers' punitive discipline and escalate punishments. Previous studies have found that teachers are more likely to use stereotypes about students of color in response to minor behavioral problems. In addition, research highlighted teachers' underperformance academic bias toward Black students (Thomas et al., 2009). The bias applies to academics and behavior (Gilliam et al., 2016) and can greatly affect the student's cycle of discipline. A cycle can exist when the teacher believes, based on stereotypes, that the students only can learn so much; with that in mind, teachers do not prepare for the intellectual stimulation of Black boys. The students feel inadequate, unwelcome, and do not feel that they can learn. The students display minor behavior problems. The teacher expects this behavior (Taylor et al., 2019) and increases punitive discipline by referring the student to the administration. Stereotypes may be one reason why disparities in discipline arise, primarily for offenses that rely on subjective interpretations. For example, Black children were more likely to be referred for subjective offenses like the expression of disrespect or threat (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Students who could be seen or treated through the lens of a negative or demeaning stereotype struggle with experiences that could signal that they are evaluated in biased ways. Research has shown that implicit biases (the automaticity of stereotypes) are linked to discriminatory outcomes ranging from the seemingly mundane, such as poorer quality interactions between teachers and students

(McConnell & Leibold, 2001) to disproportionate discipline referrals (Darensbourg et al., 2010).

Cultural Competence in Teaching

Over 79% of teachers in America are White, yet over 50% of students are students of color (NCES, 2020). The mismatch in cultures often leads to misunderstandings. Cultural competency can help students succeed when conversations about gender assignments, racial identity, social classification, and ethnic affiliation are not regarded as dangerous, uncomfortable, or unapproachable. Engagement and intentional conversations about students' background can lead to knowledge, but these conversations cannot happen overnight. Training must happen, and practiced conversations are necessary. Concerns have been raised about the cultural mismatch between educators and their students, as research has shown that students' race, ethnicity, and cultural background all have a significant impact on their learning (Skiba et al., 2011).

Social Emotional Teaching and Learning

A significant barrier to promoting a supportive social/emotional climate is that many teachers do not receive adequate pre-service education on student mental health, child social and emotional development, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)and Social Emotional Learning (SEL; Keane & Evans, 2022). Many teachers do not understand or have not been trained to deal with trauma and ACEs, according to the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services (2018). (Belanger et al., 2018, p. 13). ACEs can manifest as inattention, sleep dysfunction, distractibility, hyperactivity, aggression, angry outbursts, or withdrawal. For example, what appears to be disrespectful or "acting out" may be a student's way of coping with a current situation. Disengagement from school is another way students may cope with ACEs, which teachers may perceive as a behavior problem. According to the Health Resources &

Services Administration (HRSA), children between the ages of six and 17 who have had two or more ACEs are twice as likely as their peers who have had no ACEs to be disengaged from school (Belanger et al., 2018).

Classroom Climate and Management

Research has shown that school suspension is associated with racial disparities and examples of hidden inequality embedded within routine educational practices (Morris & Perry, 2016). white teachers can perceive Black students to be more problematic and stereotypical (Skiba et al., 2011). Many teachers are unaware of their white privilege, benefits, and safeguards that come with their skin color (McIntosh, 1989), e.g., when white people claim their accomplishments as earned entitlements with no acknowledgement of unearned privilege due to racism. white teachers within educational systems may experience defensive feelings when challenged about white privilege within policies, curricula, and system-level practice (Watt, 2007). Legette et al. (2021) asserted that "[s]ocialization experiences greatly inform one's racial belief within a macrosystem" (p. 2). That macrosystem has a significant impact on how the world thinks and feels about people. It establishes a prominent social structure that eventually becomes the norm. These promoted structures are internalized and processed to influence thinking, which is then put into action. Racial inequities can be communicated through actions based on perceived abilities or deficits in cases involving teachers (Legette et al., 2021). Teachers, no matter that race are more likely to closely monitor Black boys, which may contribute to the documented sex and race disparities in the suspension of preschool Black boys (Gilliam et al., 2016). Humans' implicitly biased minds unconsciously try to prove what they are thinking is correct, causing the bias to persist (Legette et al., 2021). While the cited research does not explicitly link white privilege in the classroom to discipline disparities, it

provides a framework to understand how perceptions shaped by white privilege can lead to biased disciplinary actions against children of color.

Role of Students and Families

Students do not always follow the rules at school, and students sometimes act in ways that confirm teachers/administrators biased beliefs resulting in disproportionate disciplinary action. (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2015). The cultural misunderstanding of Black boys and self-fulfilling prophecy of the biased adults can contribute to a cycle that continues throughout the Black boys' school career.

Student Mental Health

Research has also demonstrated a strong association between racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline and community violence (Gregory et al., 2010). Students may be reacting to their environment. According to the ACLU, students are experiencing record levels of depression and anxiety due to numerous forms of trauma (Whitaker, 2019). High exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can result in anxiety, anger, and depression in children (Felitti et al., 2019~~), w~~hich may contribute to disruptions in the classroom. Students of color attend schools with fewer resources and support (Whitaker et al., 2019). Instead of feeling safe, students feel scared and mistrusted, resulting in a negative school climate (Hughes et al., 2019). Furthermore, students in poverty may be at greater risk for ACEs, which may result in office disciplinary referrals and school suspensions. Many low-income students may have experienced violence, crime, and substance abuse in their families and neighborhoods. Studies have demonstrated a correlation between exposure to violence and student behavior in the classroom (Gregory et al., 2010).

Adverse Childhood Experiences

While teachers must understand and embrace culturally relevant instruction, students come to the classroom having lived through ACEs, which affect their health and achievements and, in turn, impact how they interact in the classroom. ACEs, as defined by Felitti et al. (2019), are potentially traumatic events that can have long-term negative effects on health and well-being. Emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; violent treatment of one's mother; substance abuse in the home; mental illness in the family; parental separation or divorce; having an incarcerated household member; and emotional or physical neglect are all examples of trauma.

Student Behaviors

Research has shown that Black boys can more readily respond with aggression to stressful, threatening, unfair, or repressive environments than their female counterparts. Black boys demonstrate more oppositional attitudes toward schools (Arcia, 2007); those from urban, economically disadvantaged backgrounds receive disproportionately higher reports of classroom adjustment problems and are overrepresented in terms of emotional support services at school. The student's behavior can prompt conflict and discipline issues (Taylor et al., 2019). Students who often get into trouble are not passive victims; many understand the severe consequences of violating school norms (Noguera, 2003). As a result, these students internalize their attached labels and can reflect the negative mindset of their teachers, fulfilling the prophecy that they are "bad" (Taylor et al., 2019). Students begin to realize the educational limitations placed on them and lose their motivation to follow school rules (Noguera, 2003).

Coupled with this, there has been research showing that Black families can feel targeted. According to Bell (2020), a child's home life can come into question when discussing the disproportionality of suspension; he found that students whose fathers did not have full-time

employment had higher suspensions and that Black parents and students perceived suspension was a result of racism. Gregory et al. (2010) found that Black students with lower economic status, low academic achievement, and exposure to violence and abuse can experience disproportionate treatment in the form of suspensions (Bell, 2020).

As discussed, three significant causal factors surfaced in the research on disproportion, including the roles of principals, teachers, students, and families. This section has focused on factors contributing to the disproportionality of the suspension of Black boys in American schools, of which there is no more significant element than the role of the principals, who ultimately decide whether to suspend students. Before determining the consequences, a teacher must refer the incident to the administrator (Sorensen et al., 2022). How administrators and teachers handle referrals and discipline is often done with some bias in the decision-making process (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). As illustrated, some research shows the role that students and family experiences play in this dilemma of the disproportion of suspension for Black male students. As a result, a subjective cycle begins that interrupts the student's learning while the student continues disruptive behavior, causing more referrals and suspensions (Hughes et al., 2020). For clarification, this research will specifically examine the role of the principal, the impact of implicit bias, and the decision-making processes involved in school disciplinary actions.

Addressing the Problem

PCPS Previous Attempts

PCPS has implemented many disciplinary programs that address student behaviors, and ultimately impact Black boy discipline. The state of Maryland and PCPS have allocated funds for a variety of programs and initiatives, which include:

- **Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS)** practices encourage positive behaviors. PBIS is a framework for selecting, integrating, and implementing the best evidence-based practices for improving academic and behavioral outcomes for all students.
- Expansion of **Restorative Practices (RP)** in all schools through ongoing training of staff. RP addresses the needs of all students in dealing with matters of discipline. The philosophy and set of tools actively engage students in dealing with conflict management. RP provides tools to help students, faculty, and administration form stronger bonds. RP allows students to repair the harm done and engage those who have been harmed and affected to learn the full impact of their actions and be restored to the community.
- Staff receive ongoing **Formative Assessment for Maryland Educators (FAME)** training. FAME is a year-long, job-embedded professional learning experience that explores the elements of the formative assessment process. This experience includes digital self-study modules, application activities, community of practice meetings, and leadership support. FAME's goals are to encourage and support teacher reflection and dialogue, to assist teachers in revising and redefining their current practice, to increase teachers' capacity to make data-informed decisions, and to create long-term cultural change in the school.
- System-wide book study on **Fostering Resilient Learners**, a book about cultivating a safe environment where everyone feels valued, important, and capable of learning. The book describes the four areas of need that drive student behaviors—emotional, relational, physical, and control—and shows how to meet these needs with interventions centered around the new three R's (reassure, return to routine, and regulate).

- On-going **Mental Health First Aid training** for professional development for administrators: Mental Health First Aid is an adult public education program that aims to increase participants' knowledge and change their attitudes and perceptions about mental health and related issues, such as how to respond to individuals who are experiencing one or more acute mental health crises (e.g., suicidal thoughts and/or behavior, acute stress reactions, panic attacks, and/or acute psychotic behavior) or are in the early stages of one or more chronic mental health problems (e.g., depressive, anxiety, and/or psychotic disorders which may occur with substance abuse).
- **Data collection** at all schools via a student information system that provides access to student information and functions, such as student records, attendance, grades, discipline incidents, and schedules to school administrators.
- **Student Support Teams (SST**), also known as Intervention Teams, School-based Problem-Solving Teams, or Child Study Teams, are responsible for the threat assessment process. SSTs are a formalized structure in which a group of educators, administrators, and other staff meet regularly to address concerns about individuals or groups of students. They are intended to help students by anticipating and preventing problems before they occur, as well as providing interventions and/or resources when problems do arise.
- **Implicit bias training** with a consultant group (ISA). Board members, the superintendent's executive, operations staff, and principals all complete a 16-hour, eight-week implicit bias training. The task force intends to roll out the training to all PCPS teachers. The goal of implicit bias training is to give all PCPS employees the tools they need to progress toward cultural proficiency and equity in all areas of the school community. The training will teach staff that differences between students and staff are an

asset to the learning community. The training is expected to result in fewer discipline referrals as staff members gain a better understanding of implicit bias and its effects on student behavior and performance. During professional development, instructional staff will also discuss implicit bias and equity and how they affect instruction.

- **Equity Training** in which PCPS provides an overview of equity and cultural awareness to all employees. Engaging and reflective conversations about cultural competency, equity, bias, and a variety of other topics are used to facilitate training. This interactive training allows participants to reflect on classroom practices, peer-to-peer interactions, and how this impacts students, staff, and community to make the school system more equitable and inclusive.
- **Handle with Care**. Handle with Care indicates that this student is going through a difficult time. Personal questions will not be asked. Support will be provided if they are experiencing academic or socio-emotional difficulties. The student may be directed to seek assistance from administration or counseling.
- School counseling lessons (**Second Step Curriculum**, **Zones of Regulation**). Second Step provides teachers with social and emotional learning through units on skills for learning, empathy, emotion management, friendship skills, and problem-solving. The program includes lesson plans for prekindergarten through eighth grade.
- Partnership with **Tri-County Counselors**. The Tri-County Youth Services Bureau, Inc. (TCYSB) school-based program provides integrated mental health services to Patrick County school-aged children. Our TCYSB school-based clinicians work with students in elementary, middle, and high school to help them overcome behavioral, emotional, and social challenges that impede academic and personal success.

- Increase the number of **full-time psychologists** in all elementary schools. School psychologists have specialized training in psychology and education. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other mental health professionals to ensure that every child learns in a safe, healthy, and supportive environment.
- **Move This World** is a pre-K through high school social-emotional program that uses stress-relieving strategies to foster a sense of community. Teachers and administrators who have completed a multi-step professional development program explore self-efficacy, learn tools to build their school community, and integrate these tools into the daily curriculum and school culture.
- **Disproportionality Review Teams** are diverse teams that analyze discipline data points to identify trends in disproportionality among student groups. Individual school teams should review the data to determine what can be done to address issues of disproportionality.
- **Development of a new equity policy for the system**. In October 2019, the Patrick County Board of Education adopted Policy 1820: Educational Equity. The policy emphasizes the principles of inclusion and fairness to provide students with essential academic, social, emotional, and economic resources and supports. Three priority focal areas for educational equity are included in the policy.
- In Patrick County, **Discipline Review Committee** meetings are held with all stakeholders to review the code of conduct, school practices and procedures, changes, and other discipline issues.
- **Check and Connect (CnC)** is a comprehensive intervention designed to improve marginalized and disengaged students' school and learning engagement through

relationship building, problem-solving, capacity building, and persistence. The goal of this program is to foster school completion with academic and social competence.

- **Black Boy Initiative,** in which schools assistance to improve academic performance, provide behavioral support, and provide a sense of belonging to Black boys.
- **BASE** is a secondary school online therapeutic intervention that offers a social-emotional learning curriculum and assessment based on mental health and wellness principles and supported by clinical research while keeping the child in mind. Education should be student-centered. Teaching and learning should be prioritized when disciplining students. Everything should be centered on what is best for the students.

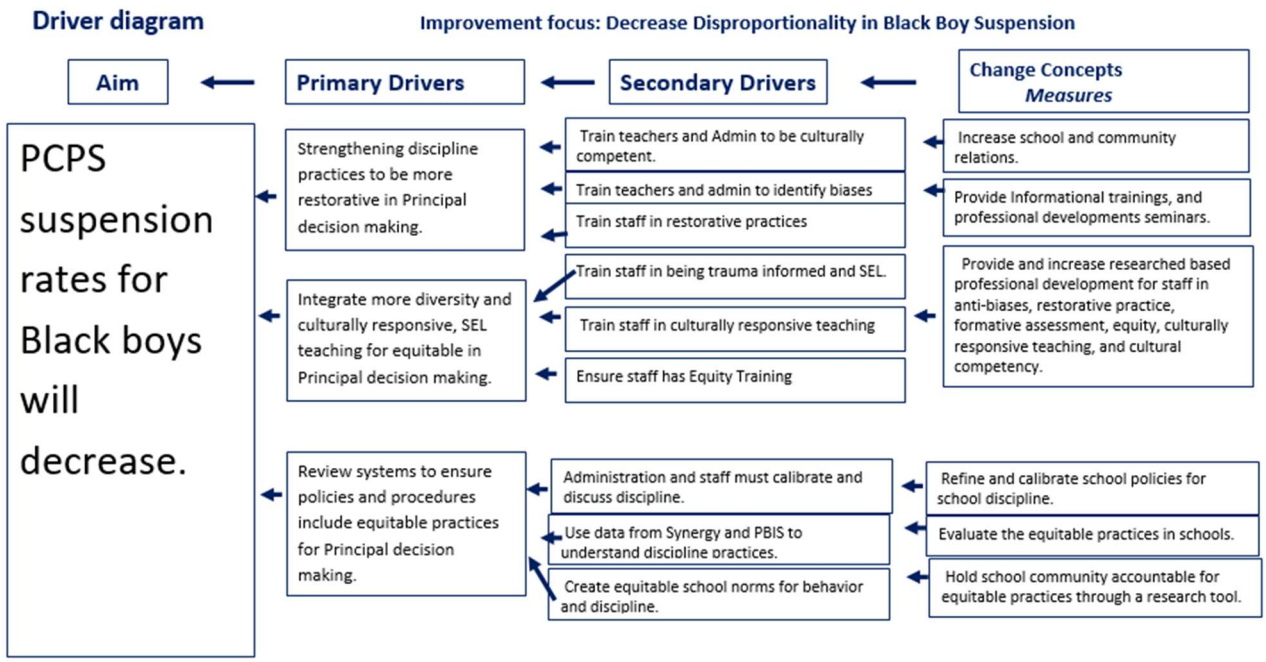
Displayed above is a list of programs that are used in PCPS and the state of Maryland to combat disproportionality of suspension. According to MSDE State data, these programs have minimal to no impact on reducing suspension rates or addressing the disproportionality in suspensions of Black boys.

Drivers for Improvement

Figure 4 depicts the factors that can contribute to a resolution of this problem by supporting Patrick's County's ability to reduce the suspension rate of Black boys. These include drivers aimed at strengthening restorative discipline practices, incorporating more diversity and culturally responsive practices, and reviewing systems to ensure policies and procedures include equitable decision-making practices. However, these drivers are not all-encompassing and provide only a glimpse into possible factors that could lead principals to utilize the most impactful change concepts in lowering suspension rates of Black boys.

Figure 4

Identified Strategies to Reduce Disproportionate Suspension Rates Among Black Boys



Note. Scales factors that may contribute to disproportionate school suspensions of Black boys. The *Disciplinary Action in Public Education Literature Review* by Shore Research, Inc. (2012), research aligns with the findings in this literature review: build staff understanding of culturally responsive instruction and classroom management strategies; analyze the data; and use alternative policies beyond adherence to the idea of zero tolerance developed through knowing the student and calibrating responses to best fit that student. Holistically, the research echoes the sentiment that there is a need to strengthening discipline practices to be more restorative through training, integrating more diversity and culturally responsive practices through training, and the review of systems to ensure policies and procedures include equitable practices through training and accountability.

Strengthening Discipline Practices to Be More Restorative.

Restorative Practice. The International Institute of Restorative Practice (IIRP) (2020) stated that "[r]estorative practices are an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities" (p. 1). Restorative practices should not be used in isolation, but in conjunction with other best practices. A collaborative approach involving counselors and behavior specialists, teachers, administrators, parents, and students can help in the development of alternatives to suspensions. Change is possible with the right resources, a shared vision, and efficacy, allowing all students to learn and staff to get to root causes of issues.

Instead of using zero tolerance to gauge infractions, principals, teachers, and other school staff could use the opportunity to connect with students and have meaningful relationships that instill safety and belonging to the school community. School restorative practices aim to create an equitable and positive culture by strengthening relationships and connections between students and adults (IIRP,2020). Policies aimed at equalizing disciplinary treatment across student groups, implementing non-punitive interventions, and increasing transparency in disciplinary decisions could reduce racial disparities in suspensions and potentially incarceration (Sorensen et al., 2022).RP creates as sense of community, responsibility and ownership for all.

Fenning and Rose (2007) asserted that "[c]hanging the punitive nature of discipline policies and finding more proactive responses to address behavioral concerns of all students are of paramount importance" (p. 5). Training usually involves intervention, being proactive and preventative. It also includes de-escalation, conflict resolution, and problem solving. All the while, all community members have a voice, and anyone can facilitate a restorative circle offering a sense of autonomy. Recent research has shown that restorative practices are successful

in reducing exclusionary discipline rates and that staff were likely to use restorative practices if they had support from their school administrators (Augustine et al., 2018).

Trauma Informed and ACES. Chronic exposure to violence and toxic stress disrupts the process of normal childhood development, causing ACES, but a caring adult can help change that. To improve the classroom climate and instruction, teachers must be trained to build genuine relationships with students (especially students with ACES and childhood trauma). When teachers are writing referrals and principals are making decisions to suspend, consideration of the whole child and their ACES is crucial.

Keane and Evans (2022) reported that one caring relationship with an adult can make a big difference in a student's outcome. Child-teacher relationship training (CTRT) and The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) school health model are two models used to help students with multiple ACES. According to Keane and Evans (2022), most Teacher Student Relationship (TSR) interventions consisted of teacher education and skills training. Teacher training ranged from a three-hour training to a 15-week training that integrated classroom training and coaching.

Teacher Student Relationship intervention builds relationships with students who experienced trauma. TSR is a form of child-centered play therapy taught to teachers that involves extensive pre-service and ongoing training. TSR studies that addressed ACEs were preliminary and primarily focused on teachers' experience in learning TSR skills. The intervention improved those skills and, in one study, was found to be effective at building student relationships. TSR research can inform strategies to promote resilience among students that experienced multiple ACEs (Keane & Evans, 2022). However, schools and educators often have competing priorities and are affected by outside influences that make implementing

interventions challenging. High positive to negative interactions, which include praise, encouragement, greetings, or other positive interactions, help build positive relationships. Classroom management strategies that involve pre-teaching and predictability can help students be less reactive. Teachers should also proactively engage in practices to recognize and resolve teacher-student conflict in a restorative manner.

Colleges and universities must seek to integrate the concept of developing a supportive social/emotional climate into teacher education to ensure educators are prepared and confident in their ability to build TSRs and educate children who experienced ACES (Keane & Evans, 2022).

Teacher Student Relationship (TSR) intervention, a form of child-centered play therapy taught to teachers through extensive pre-service and ongoing training, aims to build relationships with students who have experienced trauma. In practical applications, TSR involves creating a safe classroom environment where students can express their feelings through play activities, with teachers observing and responding empathetically to non-verbal cues. Studies have shown that such training enhances teachers' abilities to connect with and support their students, particularly those with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). For instance, Keane and Evans (2022) found that teachers who underwent TSR training reported significant improvements in their ability to build strong, supportive relationships, helping students feel more comfortable and secure in the classroom. One case study highlighted how TSR techniques helped a student who witnessed domestic violence to open up and improve his behavior and engagement in class. This research suggests that TSR can promote resilience in students, aiding them in coping with their traumatic experiences.

To further combat ACE exposure and psychological distress, research has demonstrated that trauma-informed schools that provide opportunities for interventions and positive and protective relationships with teachers, other adults (such as administration), and their peers promote school connectedness and school-wide success (Clements-Nolle & Waddington, 2019).

With the right amount of intervention, support, and care, students who experience one or more ACEs can still have positive, successful school experiences and productive lives. In addition, schools can become a healing environment for troubled children when teachers and administrators understand the role of the environment in neural development and the anomalies caused by early trauma histories (Craig, 2016). Principals, teachers, and staff should be trauma-informed and trained to identify adverse childhood experiences' symptoms (ACES) and work as a team to meet the needs of students.

Teachers and staff can be trained to:

- Be willing to work with students during difficult times.
- Remain objective during de-escalation.
- Attending support meetings to discuss students' needs and tiers for interventions.
- Use clear and precise language to prevent problems; and
- Co-plan with other teachers and team members to address social needs and embed dialogic teaching in lesson plans (Craig, 2016).

Administrators can help support students with ACEs by:

- Training teachers to differentiate for all students' needs.
- Training teachers on positive behavior interventions and supports as part of their classroom behavior management plans.
- Review policies to ensure that they reflect trauma sensitivity; and

Providing staff training on de-escalation of aggressive and hostile behavior (Craig, 2016).

Integrate More Diversity and Culturally Responsive Instructional/Classroom Practices.

Cultural Competency. Building on the work of Ladson-Billings' work, Geneva Gay (2000) coined the term "culturally responsive teaching" to describe an approach that emphasizes ethnically diverse students' cultural knowledge, personal background knowledge, frames of reference, and performance styles to make learning encounters more relevant to and operative for students. Gay also developed a framework to improve student learning by focusing on teachers' strategies and practices, such as instructional techniques, instructional materials, student-teacher relationships, classroom climate, and self-awareness. Students from various cultural groups have shown great success with culturally responsive teaching. Both Ladson-Billings and Gay emphasized the importance of giving students opportunities to think critically about inequities in their personal and peer experiences (Muñiz, 2019).

To improve classroom climate, teachers must receive professional development in order to adopt the pedagogy necessary to build genuine relationships with students. Teachers must continue to teach and meet students' learning needs. Educators must be aware of their identity and beliefs. According to Campbell Jones et al. (2020), teachers and administrators should have authentic conversations about culture, race, and class and use these conversations to build learners. A culturally responsive leader builds teachers' cultural capacity to effectively teach diverse students and promote pedagogy that validates and affirms student backgrounds. Further, Jonathan Supovitz et al. (2021) recently researched the effect of culturally competent and culturally responsive teachers and pointed to a promising approach to identifying and addressing systemic inequities. They found that culturally responsive schools have positive

learning environments linked to lower high school student suspension rates. A culturally responsive leader builds teachers' cultural capacity to effectively teach diverse students and promote pedagogy that validates and affirms student backgrounds.

Addressing Implicit Bias. Since many educators struggle with implicit bias in their roles at school, often in ways that can unknowingly perpetuate racism and harm students, they should receive training to be made aware of the outcomes that they create. Takeaways from Gilliam et al. (2006) suggest that teachers may benefit from increased training and ongoing guidance on implicit bias reduction and empathy; they believe this training should start in preservice. Moreover, principal decision-making plays a critical role in shaping school culture and policies, making it essential for principals to undergo training in implicit bias to ensure fair and equitable disciplinary practices are implemented school wide.

Staats et al. (2015) cited the work of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity when noting that biases are malleable and can be changed and that researchers have studied various debiasing techniques to counter existing biases. Debiasing is the process of reducing susceptibility to implicit biases or dismantling them. This begins with awareness and then moves on to remove, overcome, or dismantle its effects on decision making, including:

1. Social contact: Making connections with people who are different from us.
2. Counter-stereotypic training: Repeatedly and explicitly stating "no" when facing a stereotype.
3. Cuing positive exemplars: Representing positive examples of people of different groups; and
4. Counter-stereotypic image reinforcement: Teaching a new, different association can have positive effects are some types of training that need to be executed in school.

Review Systems to Ensure Policies and Procedures Including Equitable Practices Looking at Suspension Data and PBIS Practices. The suspension discipline database is now used in conjunction with PBIS in PCPS. Suspension data allows teachers and administration to analyze data. In 2013, the Hanover Research organization completed a review on PBIS use for discipline in schools. In addition, Hanover has examined best practices in providing equitable discipline, through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

PBIS is used throughout the country, including in Maryland. It is a part of every school in Patrick County. PBIS is researched and proven to be effective. PBIS is implemented to lower the total number of disciplinary incidents and to respond to disciplinary infractions with an evidence-based approach focused primarily on positive reinforcement of desired behaviors. Hanover (2012) summarizes that although PBIS does not address the racial disparity in school discipline, it reduces the number of disciplinary events, and it also can be used to mitigate racial disparity. School-wide PBIS (SWPBS) appears to be across demographics. PBIS allows principals to establish and define school expectations, teaches expectations to students, acknowledges students for demonstrating desired behavior, develops the consequence system, uses data to establish effects on student outcomes, establishes targeted group interventions, and establishes intensive individual interventions. There are currently defined best practices for SWPBS at the planning and implementation stages. In planning, districts are recommended to focus on teaming, obtaining staff buy-in, creating a PBIS-friendly school policy, engaging the whole community and child (Hanover Research, 2013).

Using suspension discipline data allows principals to put students whose performance is not responding to the universally implemented supports of PBIS receive more intensive support.

Data allows administrators to view discipline data for individual students or groups, link attendance, and generate reports.

Create Equitable School Norms for Behavior and Discipline. As previously stated, redistribution of quality teachers is required to achieve equity in learning, but the redistribution must be based on a value-added model (Rice, 2010). According to McLaughlin (2010), educational equity was previously defined as society removing economic barriers to a free education regardless of where you lived with access to a standard curriculum. Education equity was simply access; however, it could not be interpreted as access if the requisite was the child's and family's choice (McLaughlin, 2010). Furthermore, equity fell short because it did not evaluate the outcome. Educational equity will require the collective efforts of the school system, the school, the administration, teachers, and other staff to fully support the child.

Maryland has a system of expectations, responsibilities, and accountability through MSDE and each LSD (MSDE, 2017a). According to the Office of African American Male Achievement, to achieve educational equity, the disproportionate rate of Black males being excluded from the classroom and schools, specifically through suspension, must be reduced. School leaders should "critically examine…systemic practices through a racial equity lens to assess and build capacity for our system to engage, empower and educate our Black male students" (Seattle Public Schools, 2020, para. 1). It is not about fixing the student; it is about improving the system that marginalizes the student while failing to incorporate practices that benefit them. Researchers and policymakers are still concerned about racial achievement disparities between white and Black children. Today, this issue remains a complex and perplexing social issue (Morris & Perry, 2016).

MSDE requires all 24 LEAs to develop a guide for the implementation of equity initiatives at the local level, including sample components of high-quality policies and guidance on how to apply an equity lens within priority birth, according to COMAR 13A.01.06. MSDE identifies four "equity focus" areas: academic achievement and growth; leadership and human capital; climate and culture; and educator and staff capacity. To close the gap between culture and achievement, teachers should develop cultural competence so they can effectively serve students of diverse backgrounds.

Administration and Staff Must Calibrate and Discuss Discipline Case-by-Case. Principals have a weighty task ahead of them (Fullan, 2016). According to Hughes et al. (2019), principals need to ensure that discipline is first non-biased, preventative, trauma-informed, restorative, and relationship building (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2019), and part of a collaborative community (Supovitz et al., 2010). Administrators' fluency in evidence-based behavior-management strategies to prevent or restore situations or de-escalate problem behavior is essential to effective professional development. Positive intervention can happen if administrators have participated in effective professional development, which is necessary for preparing and supporting educators in building positive relationships with students' behavior strategies. Garza et. al.'s (2014) research suggested that school leadership is critically important in sustaining and changing schools. Administrator development training should (1) review the situation, giving students due process; (2) review the code of conduct and school norms created by stakeholders (3) review data and consequences of students in similar situations (4) check biases, and (5) calibrate, and reflect with fellow administrators.

"Window washing" (recognizing and removing biases) and cultural competency can aid in the elimination of teacher stereotyping and biases while also honing academic acumen and

teaching skills. In the Disciplinary Action in Public Education Literature Review submitted by Shore Research, Inc. (2012), the research reiterated these findings; ten years later, the steps to be taken remain relevant: develop culturally responsive instructional and classroom management strategies; train teachers in those strategies; analyze the data; and use alternative policies beyond zero tolerance. Teaching must begin with empathy. Educators must regard their students as humans and equals (Metz, 1990). As a school, it is crucial to form relationships and share a common language. The school community (administration, teachers, and students) must speak the same language; this must result from a shared dynamic driven by data via a system such as Positive Behavior Intervention (PBIS). Finally, most literature sources have stated that reviewing policies and redesigning behavior guidelines, codes of conduct, and referrals require a team of stakeholders.

Theory of Action

Although there are many potential areas in which to focus when it comes to the disproportionality of suspension of Black boys, this research will delve deeper into the practices of principals since they are responsible for much of the implicit bias in decision-making in the suspension of students. Based on the findings in the literature and causal systems analysis, this researcher posits the following theory of change. **If** we ensure that administrators have a clear understanding of equitable, culturally competent disciplinary practices and the role of implicit bias in disciplinary decision-making and are influenced to become more reflective and accountable for their disciplinary decision-making, **then** PCPS suspension rates in PCPS for Black boys will decrease.

Several mechanisms can be employed to address principal accountability and reflection, specifically in discipline. Professional development programs offer principals tools and strategies

to assess their performance, set goals, and reflect on their actions in disciplinary matters. Guided visits facilitate regular observations and meetings where principals exchange ideas, share experiences, and provide mutual support, enabling reflection and learning from each other's successes and challenges. Mentorship and coaching pair principals with experienced mentors or coaches who offer guidance, feedback, and encouragement, creating a supportive environment for reflection and accountability. Feedback mechanisms establish formal channels for collecting feedback from stakeholders like teachers, students, parents, and community members, providing insights into leadership practices and areas needing attention. Data-driven approaches involve implementing systems for analyzing data related to school discipline, enabling principals to reflect on objective measures of effectiveness and areas for improvement. Participating in Action Research projects allows principals to address specific disciplinary challenges or test innovative approaches, deepening their understanding and enhancing accountability. Adhering to standards such as those outlined in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL3) can guide the development of transparent performance in equity and cultural competency in the evaluation systems, providing clear benchmarks for reflection and accountability. Additionally, involvement in community engagement initiatives prompts principals to consider the impact of disciplinary decisions on diverse constituencies, fostering transparency and accountability in their disciplinary methods. Through these mechanisms, principals can cultivate a culture of reflection and accountability in disciplinary practices, ultimately promoting positive school environments and student success.

Section 2: Study Design

To maintain the anonymity of the participants and the integrity of the data in this dissertation study, two school districts in Maryland were combined and assigned the pseudonym, Patrick County Public Schools. This approach ensures that the specific identities of the schools, principals, and students involved are protected, allowing for a more honest and open exploration of the issues without compromising confidentiality. The pseudonym enables a detailed analysis while safeguarding the privacy of the individuals and institutions studied. This methodological decision aligns with ethical research practices, ensuring the focus remains on broader patterns and insights rather than identifiable specifics.

Disproportionate suspensions of Black boys have been a longstanding and systemic concern. Patrick County Public Schools exhibits a significant disparity in suspensions, which disproportionately impacts Black boys, resulting in many long-term problems. Despite a decrease in suspension rates over the past decade, disparities in discipline persist for students of color. More research is needed to identify the characteristics of school leaders' decision-making that contribute to higher suspension rates among Black boys compared to their peers Skiba et al. noted that principals in schools with low suspension rates demonstrate a reduced reliance on subjective judgments for expulsion, minimizing the impact of non-behavioral factors. How do principals prioritize contextual considerations and articulate philosophies guiding their disciplinary policies, particularly about commitments to African American education? This study aims to explore whether comprehensive on-the-ground analyses through a mixed-methods approach can better illuminate the factors contributing to and perpetuating inequities in school discipline. Building on Skiba's study, this study aims to identify patterns based on lived experiences, training, and implicit bias that influence decision-making when disciplining Black

boys. Perhaps some of these characteristics discussed by Skiba will show similarities in the interviews. This mixed-methods study will explore administrator biases, characteristics and their decision-making processes that may contribute to the disproportionate suspension rates of Black boys in PCPS with the goal of reducing these rates in the future.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to explore and analyze the decision making of school principals in the context of the disproportionate suspension of Black boys in public schools, specifically the influence of principal biases on disciplinary actions when compared to their counterparts. In exploring these factors, this study aims to identify underlying biases affecting disciplinary decisions within educational institutions and contribute to the development of more equitable disciplinary practices.

For this study, the focus was on the role of school administrators as the key factors in determining disciplinary actions. Typically, principals oversee the school's structural operations, which include maintaining order, while assistant principals often handle these duties daily, particularly concerning student conduct and behavioral order (Sorensen et al., 2022). However, assistant principals are not allowed to make the ultimate decision of suspension. They present information to the principal so the principal can judge or make a decision to the final consequence. Specifically, this study will explore whether implicit bias, specific training, experience, or the amount of training or lived experience impact principals' decision-making regarding the suspension of Black boys.

Research Questions

The researcher framed the following research questions for this study:

1. What are the principals' philosophy and approach to administering discipline?

2. How do principals' lived experiences impact their approach to administering discipline, particularly student suspensions?
3. What professional experiences have contributed to principals' discipline decision making?
4. What systems and supports are missing for principals that contribute to the disproportionate suspension of Black boys?

The research questions are structured to delve deeply into various aspects of principals' decision-making processes regarding discipline and suspension, focusing on understanding how implicit biases may play a role. The question about principals' philosophy and approach to administering discipline seeks to uncover principals' underlying beliefs and values about discipline. By understanding their philosophy and approach, the researcher can identify whether there are any patterns or principles that implicit biases might influence. For example, if a principal believes in zero-tolerance policies, it's essential to examine if and how such beliefs disproportionately affect certain student groups.

The question on how principals' lived experiences impact their approach to administering discipline, particularly student suspensions, aims to reveal how a principal's background might influence their disciplinary decisions. Lived experiences, including personal background, education, and interactions with diverse groups, shape an individual's worldview and decision-making. Implicit biases often stem from these lived experiences, so identifying these influences can highlight how personal history might affect the fairness and equity of their disciplinary actions.

Exploring the professional experiences that have contributed to principals' discipline decision-making is a crucial step in our research. It allows the researcher to understand what

professional norms and practices might contribute to biased decision-making. Professional experiences, such as previous roles in education, training received, and mentorship, can significantly impact a principal's approach to discipline. For instance, if a principal has predominantly worked in environments where harsh disciplinary measures are the norm, they might be more inclined to replicate those practices, potentially reflecting implicit biases absorbed from those environments. This enlightening exploration will provide our audience with a deeper understanding of the factors influencing principals' disciplinary decisions.

The question targeting what systems and supports are missing for principals that contribute to the disproportionate suspension of Black boys is not just an academic inquiry, but a call to action. It aims to identify systemic issues and gaps in support that might lead to disproportionate suspensions, with the ultimate goal of informing policy and practice changes. By identifying missing supports, such as training on cultural competence or resources for alternative disciplinary measures, researchers can pinpoint where the system fails to mitigate implicit biases. This research has the potential to transform the way we approach school discipline, ensuring a more equitable and just system for all students.

These research questions are not isolated inquiries, but part of a comprehensive approach designed to uncover both the explicit and implicit factors that influence principals' disciplinary decisions. They help explore implicit bias by examining principals' foundational beliefs, personal history, professional norms, and systemic gaps in support. This comprehensive approach, with its wide-ranging scope, aims to provide a deeper understanding of the various factors influencing principals' disciplinary decisions, particularly how implicit biases may contribute to inequitable outcomes. By leaving no stone unturned, this research strives to provide a robust and nuanced understanding of the complex issue of equity in school discipline.

Using a mixed-methods research design, this study examined Black boys' suspensions in relation to principals' perceptions of their disciplinary action. The study will consist of two phases. First, a web-based survey will be administered to principals in PCPS, a school district in the state of Maryland (Phase 1). This survey will ask questions about demographic and background information. Second, the researcher will use the foundational results from the survey to conduct interviews with a subset of principals who were surveyed (Phase 2). Through the interviews, the researcher will explore principals' disciplinary practice throughout their careers and what has influenced their disciplinary decision-making, especially regarding the suspension of Black boys through the web-based survey.

Methods

In this study, a mixed-methods approach will be used to identify and address comprehensive research questions by integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Lingard et al., 2008). Specifically, this study will use a mixed-methods approach. In phase 1, quantitative data will be collected through a web-based survey using Qualtrics. The survey responses will inform and guide the direction of interview discussions that were conducted in phase 2. During Phase 2, qualitative data will be used to elucidate identified findings from Phase 1.

In this mixed-method study, a principal survey is followed by interviews to ensure a diverse range of attitudes and backgrounds are represented, allowing for a thorough exploration of the varying disproportionality in Black boy suspensions. The quantitative phase precedes the qualitative phase, which uses the initial information gathered to identify the best participants based on diversity for the follow-up qualitative phase, which explains the nuances behind the quantitative results. The data from each phase can stand alone to answer the research questions

independently. The choice of a mixed-methods design is informed by frameworks supporting the study's aim, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issue by integrating numerical data and personal perspectives. The qualitative phase is prioritized as the dominant aim of the research, offering more profound insights into the implications of the quantitative findings.

Participant Recruitment/Selection

PCPS principals were the sample population for this study. This study focused on principals because of their crucial role as decision-makers at the school level, where they hold the authority to suspend students or provide alternative consequences and support, as well as the power to initiate future changes. Principals are considered superintendent designees and must sign off on every suspension for the school. PCPS is a pseudonym for two school districts located in Maryland. Thirty-three out of 50 principals from PCPS participated in the web-based survey.

The researcher initiated contact with PCPS principals by sending an introductory email [APPENDIX A]. This email described the study's purpose and rationale for conducting the study. There was an explicit mention that the study is part of the researcher's Doctor of Education (EdD) program and a copy of the institutional review board (IRB), and accountability office approval was also provided. A follow-up email was sent to the principals encouraging them to participate in the linked survey [APPENDIX A].

A link to the survey [APPENDIX B] was included in the email. The survey, which was available in English, began with a page explaining the purpose of the research study and a brief description of the survey questions. The survey was both confidential and voluntary. Principals who continued to Phase 2 of this research, the interview, was based upon two components (1.) survey question number 14: principals indicated that they have recently suspended a Black boy, and (2.)

survey question number 15: those that indicated that they wished to participate in an interview by providing their name and contact information. The researcher, subsequently, followed up with this sub-sample directly. As a qualification question, the penultimate question confirmed whether the respondent had suspended a Black student in the past year. As a final question, the researcher asked the participant's consent to share their name to enable the researcher to contact the participant for the interview portion of the study. The consent and participant name were crucial for the subsequent stages of the research.

To ensure a comprehensive and diverse representation of principals in Patrick County Public Schools, the researcher interviewed nine principals from various educational levels, including elementary, middle, and high schools. The interviewees encompassed a mix of Black and white individuals, both male and female, with various leadership styles. Additionally, they represented several different age groups and varied social and economic backgrounds. An essential criterion for selection was that each principal had suspended at least one Black boy within the current year. This diverse group provided various perspectives and experiences, enriching the study with varied insights into disciplinary practices. Most of this information was gathered through an initial survey, which facilitated the selection of a representative sample for the interviews.

Phase 1: The Preliminary Demographic Survey

The Phase 1 survey remained open for one month, so participants could complete it at their convenience, either using a computer or a smartphone, within a one-week timeframe. All fifty principals received personalized reminder emails during the second week of the survey to encourage timely completion. An additional follow-up email was sent to all PCPS principals

after another week, encouraging them to complete the survey if they had not already done so. This final email served as motivation to achieve the desired number of participants.

Thirty- three principals took the survey. At the end of the demographic web-based survey, participants were asked if they were willing to participate in an interview to provide anecdotal insight into their suspension process and equitable practices for supporting Black boys during suspensions. Upon consenting, these volunteers were directed to another survey where they were asked to provide their names, schools, email addresses, and cellphone numbers so that the researcher could contact them.

The goal was to recruit between six and nine participants from primary and secondary schools for the Phase 2 interviews. Nine participants were selected. Crouch and McKensie (2006) assert that interviews with a small sample size can produce new knowledge and understanding, particularly in analytic, inductive, and exploratory research. The researcher's goal was to ensure that principals from various backgrounds represented the principal population. Fifteen principals volunteered to participate in the interviews.

As soon as the survey window closed, the researcher contacted those participants who expressed an interest in participating in an interview [APPENDIX A]. During this outreach, the researcher reiterated the study's objectives and explained the focus on principals. AIM principals from diverse backgrounds were selected to ensure a representative sample. Included were five primary and 4 secondary principals. Those who agree to an interview received an email detailing the date and time of the interview. They were then asked to respond and register for the time slot that was most convenient for them. Once a participant confirmed a date, the researcher sent a follow-up email to confirm the time date of the interview [Appendix B].

Data Collection. To gather information about the participants' characteristics and backgrounds, a demographic survey was conducted. Ziegenfuss et al. (2021) emphasized the significance of survey questions in research. These questions assisted in characterizing the surveyed population, bringing to light existing disparities, and promoting equity within the study's context. Obtaining these data enabled the researcher to identify patterns, discern trends, uncover disparities or inequities, and gain valuable insight into how specific factors might influence the study's results. Demographic data facilitated subgroup analysis, which provided a context for understanding how different participant groups may have differing opinions, behaviors, or distinct needs in relation to their lived experiences (Ziegenfuss et al., 2021). For this study, the researcher collected the following demographic information from participants: gender; age; race and ethnicity; socioeconomic status; years of teaching experience; years of teaching a diverse group of students; years of administration experience; leadership style; any training, courses, or professional development related to restorative practices, discipline, equity, cultural competency, and/or implicit bias.

In Phase 1, the researcher administered a web-based survey to principals with questions that were later coded as a part of the research analysis. The aim of the survey was to determine whether principals have a recent history of suspending Black boys and whether they have participated in professional development related to equitable leadership practices. The survey comprised two question subsets with two additional questions. The first subset included four basic demographic questions that inquire about ethnicity and race, as defined according to the Office Management and Budget's guidelines (Wallman et al., 2000). The second subset included eight questions about lived experiences, which encompassed years of teaching in the classroom,

years of teaching students from diverse backgrounds, socioeconomic status during upbringing, years in an administrative role, any training and the types, and leadership style.

Phase 2: The Interview

For the second phase of the study, the researcher sent an email inviting principals to participate. Given that Black boys are disproportionately suspended and that principals' decisions, often influenced by implicit bias, play a crucial role in this disparity, this study seeks to understand the underlying factors contributing to the decision-making to these suspensions.

The qualitative approach is particularly valuable "when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event, or phenomenon of interest in its natural real-life context" (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 1). The purpose of these interviews was to explore the relationship between participants' lived experiences, backgrounds, implicit biases, and decision-making processes, and how these variables affect disciplinary decision-making of Black boys in schools.

Lived experience is defined as the "representation and understanding of an individual's human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge" (Skelton-Wilson et al., 2022, p. 2). Within this context, the experiences of principals encompass various aspects of life, school systems, research, policies, practices, and programs designed to address decision-making, discipline, and equity, offering valuable insights (Skelton Wilson et al., 2022).

The principal interviews followed an approved protocol, beginning with an opening question, an introductory question, and a transition question designed to establish a comfortable environment for participants. The principals were then asked a series of questions regarding demographics, training experiences, and potential biases related to the suspension process and their decision-making. Among these questions are:

1. What is the function of suspension?
2. How has training affected your decision-making?
3. What is the process of your decision-making concerning student suspension?
4. What about your decision-making practices ensure equity?

Interviews were conducted using the Zoom online conference platform, outside of regular school hours, and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes which then were transcribed by the researcher. The researcher used the Zoom digital voice recorder to capture the conversations. The recordings were transcribed for analysis. To maintain each participant's anonymity a unique code was assigned at the study's outset. Measures to safeguard data include secure, encrypted storage, de-identification of personal details, and restricted access limited to authorized personnel. The informed consent process explicitly outlined the significance of using assigned codes rather than personal information. A confidentiality agreement was also incorporated into the consent form, reinforcing the commitment to maintaining participant privacy. Secure communication, restricted access, and data-handling protocols provide a robust framework. Ensuring interviews occurred in secure locations further minimizes inadvertent disclosure. Collectively, these measures aimed to establish a trustful and ethically sound research environment, prioritizing the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants.

Data Analysis

After the survey period ended, the researcher used descriptive statistics to analyze participant responses to each survey item. Research questions two and three connected to the survey questions, this initial analysis aimed to evaluate how principals responded to the survey statements. Graphs and tables were then generated. In the subsequent analysis phase, the researcher delved into the overall data and examined how principals make decisions within their respective schools. The researcher analyzed the differences identified in decision-making

practices among principals. As noted, the research employed the Informed Grounded Theory methodology to comprehensively analyze interviews focused on implicit bias and the decision-making process of principals in disciplining black boys. This approach allowed for the extraction of patterns and insights from the data, in order to explore correlations between factors such as race, age, experience, and background against the backdrop of principals' lived experiences. By employing this process, the researcher was able to identify perspectives contributed to an understanding of the dynamics that influence discipline decisions in Black boys' educational context. During this phase of the analysis, the researcher identified common themes in both the survey and interview responses from the principals. It served as a solid basis for analyzing the strategies discussed in principals' narratives. This framework helps to show how educational leaders embrace practices informed by cultural understanding, systemic equity, and student diversity. As articulated as the process for this study, the researcher looked for themes related to implicit bias, training, and shared life experiences. This ongoing process involved refining, revising, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

Patton (2003) asserts that interviews offer valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of others, which may not be readily observable. These insights help us better understand a particular phenomenon. The interviews provided anecdotal data that complemented the survey responses and shed light on the alignment of practices with those responses. The transcriptions were then transferred into a Word document for analysis. The initial analysis included examining each response within the transcribed data. These responses were incorporated into an Excel spreadsheet with participant quotes that provided anecdotal evidence to support each interview question. Through this analysis, the researcher was able to identify common threads among the emerging themes resulting from the integration of both survey and interview data, summarizing the findings.

Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology aimed at developing theories grounded in systematically gathered and analyzed data. Though less defined, thematic analysis serves as a foundational method in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It is flexible and can be applied across different theoretical frameworks and epistemologies, distinguishing it from more rigid methods like conversation analysis or interpretative phenomenological analysis. Grounded theory seeks to generate theory directly from data with thematic analysis (Braun& Clarke, 2006). The researcher conducted a qualitative analysis of interviews with school principals to explore the implicit biases, life experiences and training that influence the suspension of Black boys and the decision-making processes in schools. The detailed process of the data analysis is outlined below.

In the next part of the analysis, the researcher considered potential next steps for the county school district in light of principals' feedback. The researcher also identified any new themes that emerge from these interviews. Using qualitative data analysis, research questions focused on the factors that impact student suspensions based on principals' perspectives of their lived experiences (personal life experiences, training, and school context). In addition, leader practices that principals have been exposed for their decision-making process with respect to student suspensions, especially among Black boys was a part of this examination. The researcher also discussed possible recommendations to reduce the suspension rate for Black boys in the county. During this process, the researcher reflected on a fundamental theme that characterizes the nature of this lived experience, and then provided a description (Creswell et al., 2007).

Protection of Human Subjects

To safeguard the privacy of the participating principals, the researcher submitted a request for an expedited IRB review for the study due to the identifiable nature of the participants. The University of Maryland, College Park, and PCPS provided IRB approval

for the study to safeguard the privacy of the participating principals. To protect the privacy of both PCPS and the University of Maryland, the researcher implemented specific procedures to prevent the use of identifiable participant data throughout the research. These procedures included:

- Providing all survey participants with a detailed email explaining the survey's nature and purpose.
- Protecting principals' identities by assigning pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.
- Presenting the final reports in aggregate form without disclosing individual participants' information.
- Granting principals, the option to request a copy of the aggregate results once the study is completed.
- Electronically storing survey and interview data on an encrypted flash drive, which is further secured by a password-protected computer. The researcher will not share these data with anyone and will destroy them after five years.

By strictly adhering to these measures, the researcher was able to ensure the protection of personal information and uphold the study's integrity.

PSEL Standard 3

For over three decades, Maryland has focused on understanding and improving the experiences and achievements of Black boy students. A pivotal report from 1993 highlighted issues in various areas, including education, employment, health, and criminal justice. Despite numerous efforts and recommendations, progress has been limited. Suspension and expulsion rates for Black boys in Maryland remain high. There is a pressing need for renewed efforts to address these disparities and dismantle systemic racial barriers, as emphasized by the state (Walker et al., 2021).

According to the Maryland State Department of Education (2019), principals in the state are evaluated based on Standard 3 of the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL), titled "Equity and Cultural Responsiveness." PSEL is a framework established by the National Policy Board for Educational Administrators (NPBEA, 2015) to guide administrators in their practices, improvement, and development. Standard 3 assesses administrators' ability to "demonstrate equitable and culturally responsive practices" (p. 10). It emphasizes ethics, equitable practices, cultural responsiveness, and reflection to enhance student well-being and outcomes (NPBEA, 2015). Standard 3 plays a pivotal role in administrators' informed decisions about student suspensions and offers an effective means to manage and align such decisions.

The discussion surrounding principals' philosophies and approaches to administering discipline, particularly in exploring suspension alternatives, aligns well with the framework proposed in the PSEL. This framework, which likely emphasizes culturally responsive leadership and equity in educational practices, provides a robust foundation for understanding and critiquing the strategies highlighted in the principals' narratives. The PSEL framework, does not specifically address implicit bias or disproportionality of suspension, presumably advocates for educational leaders to adopt practices that are deeply informed by an understanding of cultural nuances, systemic inequities, and the diverse needs of student populations. The principals' reflections on employing alternatives to suspension, recognizing and addressing implicit biases, and emphasizing the importance of SEL components in decision-making processes can be seen as manifestations of such a culturally responsive leadership approach.

In particular, the principals' emphasis on using suspension as a last resort, resonates with the principles of equity and inclusivity central to PSEL standard 3, with alternate strategies

including: noticing and aiming to rectify racial disparities in disciplinary actions, offering supportive interventions before considering suspension, as well as ensuring safety and building community through understanding and responsive practices and introducing innovative disciplinary alternatives such as community service or specialized programs . This approach suggests a shift from traditional disciplinary measures toward more constructive, rehabilitative strategies that address behavior with the educator aiming to understand and mitigate the underlying causes, such as systemic bias, lack of support, or cultural misunderstanding.

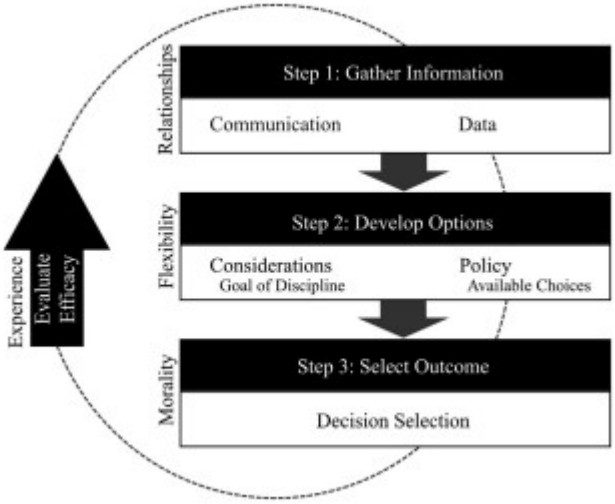
The conversation between principals' real-life experiences and the theories from PSEL enriches our discussions about school discipline. It highlights the importance of adopting a leadership stance that is both reflective and responsive to the complex realities of students' lives, thereby fostering environments where all students have the opportunity to succeed and excel.

Decision-Making Model

This research aims to identify gaps in principals' decision-making capacities by reviewing transcribed statements and assessing the systems and supports in place. This study aligns with Gullo and Beacham's (2020) administrator discipline decision-making model, which includes the key themes of relationships, flexibility, morality, and experience. The study will systematically analyze disciplinary situations involving administrators by evaluating interpersonal dynamics, trust, communication, and power dynamics (relationships), adaptability and openness to change (flexibility), ethical considerations and fairness (morality), and the influence of past experiences on decision-making strategies (experience). By exploring these themes, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how principals' implicit bias and leadership styles impact disciplinary outcomes and identify areas for improvement in decision-making processes.

Figure 5

Administrator Decision-Making Model



Note. Administrator Discipline Decision-Making Model visualized as an iterative cycle inclusive of four parts (three steps and a recursive loop; Gullo & Beachum, 2020).

Summary

Research methods were selected for this study with the aim of obtaining information from principals, emphasizing their perspectives, and learning about their lived experiences. Specifically, these methods explored principals' decision-making practices regarding the suspension of Black boys, as well as aspects of equity and implicit biases. A description of the study's methodology was presented in this section. The following section discusses the results of the study.

Section 3: Results and Conclusions

The current investigation was conducted in two phases to examine the disproportionate suspension rates of Black boys in public schools and to identify effective strategies for addressing this issue. In the first phase, the researcher analyzed the principals' demographic data, specialized training, and experiences to explore suspension patterns. In the second phase, the researcher interviewed principals to understand disciplinary approaches. This section presents findings from both phases. Using prior empirical findings and relevant pedagogical and behavioral science theory, this study posed the following research questions:

1. What are the principals' philosophies and approaches to administering discipline?
2. How do principals' lived experiences impact their approach to administering discipline, particularly student suspensions?
3. What professional experiences have contributed to principals' decision-making?
4. What systems and supports are missing for principals that contribute to the disproportionate suspension of Black boys?

Findings of the Quantitative Phase

The researcher administered the Exploring the Role of Principals (ERP) survey to a purposive sample of elementary public-school principals from a large suburban district in the mid-Atlantic United States. The ERP survey included 13 items: five multiple-choice questions for demographic data and eight questions for professional experience and training, requiring responses in years or hours. Survey participation was voluntary. The researcher provided participants with uniform instructions to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The survey was administered online, allowing principals to complete it at their own pace and modify responses as needed. The collected survey data was paired with full-year school suspension data for each

principal's school. This data was sourced from the Maryland State Department of Education's 2022–2023 report on suspensions and expulsions. A total of 33 principals participated in the ERP survey component of the study.

Demographic Data Findings

Table 3 summarizes the demographic data of the school principals who participated in the study. The gender distribution of the sample was nearly equal, with 17 females (51.5%) and 16 males (48.5%). The largest racial group was African American (17; 51.5%), followed by White/European American (14; 42.5%). One respondent (3.0%) identified as Asian American, and one (3.0%) identified as mixed/other ethnicity.

Regarding socioeconomic status (SES) during childhood, over half (20; 60.6%) identified as "working class," three (9.1%) as "lower class," seven (21.2%) as "middle class," and three (9.1%) as "upper middle class." For leadership styles, the most common was "traditional" (10; 30.3%), followed by "collaborative" (6; 18.2%). Five (15.2%) and four (12.1%) participants, respectively, selected the "servant" and "student-centered" leadership styles. "Transformational" leadership was selected by three participants (9.1%), "strategic" by two participants (6.1%), and "participative," "democratic," and "coach-style" by one participant (3.0%) each.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Principals' Demographic Data

Descriptive characteristics of survey respondents ($N = 33$)

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender of Respondent			
Female	17	51.5%	51.5%
Male	16	48.5%	100.0%
Ethnicity of Respondent			
Black/African American	17	51.5%	51.5%
White/European American	14	42.5%	94.0%
Asian American	1	3.0%	97.0%
Mixed/Other	1	3.0%	100.0%
SES of Respondent Growing Up			
Lower Class	3	9.1%	9.1%
Working Class	15	45.5%	54.6%
Middle Class	12	36.3%	90.9%
Upper Middle Class	3	9.1%	100.0%
Leadership Style of Respondent			
Servant	5	15.2%	15.2%
Collaborative	6	18.2%	33.4%
Participative	1	3.0%	36.4%
Student Centered	4	12.1%	48.5%
Democratic	1	3.0%	51.5%
Coach-Style	1	3.0%	54.5%
Transformational	3	9.1%	63.6%
Traditional	10	30.3%	93.9%
Strategic	2	6.1%	100.0%

Note. $n = 33$.

Eight items of the ERP survey captured data regarding the principals' professional experience and training, measured in years or hours. Additionally, two variables from the school district's online database were used: the percentage of Black males suspended and the overall percentage of males suspended in the schools represented by the participants. Table 4 summarizes the descriptive statistics for these variables.

The principals' years of experience as classroom teachers ranged from 5 to 25 years, with an average of 10.88 years ($SD = 4.55$ years). They reported teaching diverse populations for 5 to

36 years (*M* = 14.36 years; *SD* = 7.25 years). Their administrative experience ranged from 5 to 29 years, with an average of 13.91 years (*SD* = 6.81 years).

In terms of principals' training hours dedicated to student behavior management and discipline strategies, respondents reported participating in "restorative practice" training for 1 to 50 hours (*Mdn* = 14.82; *SD* = 10.82). The principals' hours of "equity/cultural competency" training ranged from 3 to 200 hours (*Mdn* = 33.76; *SD* = 48.26). Their "discipline" training ranged from 3 to 200 hours, with a median of 26.24 hours (*SD* = 40.70). Their "implicit" training ranged from 0 to 36 hours (*Mdn* = 14.66; *SD* = 10.53). Lastly, for the school year 2022–2023, the principals' annual suspension percentage of Black boys ranged from 0 to 100 (*M* = 14.82%; *SD* = 19.57%). The all-boys suspension rate ranged from 33.3 to 100, with an average of 33.76% (*SD* = 17.03%).

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Principals' Experience, Training, and Suspension Percentage

Descriptive analyses for experiential, training, and suspension percentage variables for the research sample (*N* = 33)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Years of Experience			
Classroom Teacher	10.88	4.55	5 - 25
Diverse Population Teacher	14.36	7.25	5 - 36
Administrator	13.91	6.81	5 - 29
Hours of Training			
Restorative Practice	14.82	10.82	1 - 50
Equity/Cultural Competency	33.76	48.26	3 - 200
Discipline	26.24	40.74	2 - 200
Implicit	14.66	10.53	0 - 36
Annual Suspension Percentage			
African American Males	14.82	19.57	0 - 100
All Males	33.76	17.03	33.3 - 100

Note. *n* = 33.

Comparative Analysis Findings

In this section, the researcher presents the findings of the quantitative analyses that addressed specific research questions. This study's problem statement highlighted a lack of empirical findings on principals' decision-making regarding the suspension of Black boys. While existing literature on school discipline provides useful information, studies on suspension disparities involving African American children are limited. Although this study was exploratory, the collected data from the participants allowed for certain *ex post facto* statistical analyses (Borg & Gall, 1979; Ferguson & Takene, 1989; Hays, 1973). To conduct comparative analysis for this study, the researcher recoded select response data from the ERP survey and combined it with the data on annual suspension percentage (continuous-level measures) gathered from the school district database. The comparative analysis addresses the study's second and fourth research questions.

A key item on the ERP survey looked at how many hours principals spent on discipline training. The hours ranged from 2 to 200, with a median of 12 hours (see Table 4). The participants were split into two groups by using the median number of discipline training hours as the cutoff point: those with up to 12 hours of training (low/moderate; $n = 17$) and those with more than 12 hours (high; $n = 16$). An independent t-test was used to determine if there was a significant difference in annual suspension percentages between these two groups.

Table 5 shows the results of the independent t-test analysis. The test found a significant difference ($t = 2.10$, $p < .01$) in the annual suspension percentages for Black males between principals with low/moderate discipline training ($Mdn = 79.6$; $SD = 11.7$) and those with high training ($Mdn = 66.2$; $SD = 24.0$). However, when looking at all male annual suspension percentages, there was no significant difference between the two groups.

Table 5

T-test for Annual Suspension Percentages: Low/Moderate vs. High Discipline Training Levels

Summary of t-tests on annual suspension percentages for *low/moderate* (n = 17) and *high* (n = 16) training levels of discipline training for school principles

Annual Suspension Percentage	Level of Discipline Training				*t-ratio* (df = 31)
	Low/Moderate		High		
	mean	*sd*	*mean*	*sd*	
Black Males Suspended	79.6	11.7	66.2	24.0	2.10*
All Males Suspended	71.5	14.2	71.6	20.5	0.10

*p< .05; **p< .01

Note. n = 33.

To further explore research questions two and four, the researcher applied contingency table analyses to data gathered from the school principals. This approach offers robust probability tests for non-normal distributions or small sample sizes (Guilford, 1965; Siegel, 1956; Winborne, 1992). For the dependent variable, this comparative analysis used two recoded variables: annual male suspension percentages and leadership styles from the ERP survey. The annual male suspension percentage variable was split into two groups: principals with "low/moderate" suspension rates (≤68.7) and "high" suspension rates (≥70.3).

For the independent variable of the nonparametric test, responses to the ERP survey on perceived leadership style were recoded into two groups. The "people-centered" group (n = 17) included principals who chose "collaborative," "servant," "student-centered," "participative," and "democratic" styles. The "manager-centered" group (n = 16) included those who chose "coach-style," "transformational," and "traditional styles. Table 6 shows that the analysis produced a chi-square value of X^2 = 3.68 (p <.05), indicating that principals with "people-

centered" leadership styles had a significantly lower annual all-male suspension percentage compared to those with "manager-centered" leadership styles. The result is significant at the 95% confidence level.

Table 6

Chi-Square Test for Annual All Male Suspension Levels by School Principals' Leadership Style

Summary of chi-square tests for annual overall male suspension levels by leadership style ($N = 33$) of school principals

Leadership Style	Level of Suspension				Chi-Square† (Contingency Coefficient)
	Low/Moderate		High		
	f	%	*f*	%	
People Centered ($n = 17$)	11	64.7	6	35.3	3.69*
Manager Centered ($n = 16$)	5	31.2	11	68.8	0.32

†*df* = 1; *p< .05; **p< .01

Note. $n = 33$.

For the final comparative analysis, the researcher paired recoded participants' SES responses from the ERP survey with the dichotomized annual Black male suspension percentage variable. Table 7 summarizes the contingency table analysis using these recoded variables. The original SES variable was recoded into two categories: "lower/working" class ($n = 18$) and "middle/upper middle" class ($n = 15$). The chi-square analysis value for this analysis was $X = 3.64$ ($p < .05$), indicating that principals from the "lower/working" class group had significantly lower annual Black male suspension rates compared to their "middle/upper middle-class" counterparts. This finding is significant at the 95% confidence level.

Table 7

Chi-Square Test for Annual Suspension Levels by School Principals' Socioeconomic Status Growing Up

Summary of chi-square tests for annual black male suspension levels by "socioeconomic status (SES) growing up" ($N = 33$) of school principals

Class Status (SES)	Level of Suspension				Chi-Square† (Contingency Coefficient)
	Low/Moderate		High		
	f	%	*f*	%	
Lower/Working ($n = 18$)	12	66.7	6	33.3	3.64*
Middle/Upper Middle ($n = 15$)	5	33.3	10	66.7	0.32

†*df* = 1; *p< .05; **p< .01

Discussion of Quantitative Phase Findings

The quantitative portion of this study was designed independently of the qualitative component, aiming to uncover patterns and correlations in suspension data. However, integrating the principals' perceptions, beliefs, personal experiences, and implicit or known biases during decision-making added complexity to the analysis. Based on the demographic data provided by the principals, they identified as White, Black, Asian, and biracial. These principals also indicated that they practiced different leadership styles, which indicates an absence of a uniform approach to school management and discipline. The majority of the principals described their SES during childhood as either "working class" or "middle class."

The suspension data reveals a gender difference in suspension rates, with male principals suspending slightly more often than female principals. Moreover, the suspension rate by race was evenly split, showing a 50/50 distribution in the survey sample. These findings underscore the complex interplay of factors influencing suspension decisions and highlight the importance

of considering race, gender, training, and socioeconomic background in understanding disciplinary practices in educational settings.

The results of the comparative data analyses provided meaningful answers to research questions 2 and 4. An independent t-test using a dichotomous version of the discipline training hours variable yielded a statistically significant outcome. This finding suggests that the level of specialized training in student management and discipline influenced how principals performed in their buildings. In this study, higher training levels were associated with lower suspension rates, particularly for Black boys. Similarly, those trained in social-emotional learning (SEL) were also less likely to resort to suspension.

The contingency table analyses also provided statistically significant outcomes, particularly when looking at principals' leadership styles and SES during their upbringing. These two variables appeared to influence principals' decision-making processes. Principals with people-centered leadership styles, as opposed to manager-centered styles, showed a lower propensity to suspend students. These findings suggest that principals with people-centered leadership approaches prioritize forming relationships, understanding the reasons behind students' behaviors, and adopting a more humanistic approach. This relational and empathetic stance may stem from their ability to relate more closely to students' experiences, potentially fostering a more inclusive and supportive school environment. For SES during upbringing, principals from the "lower/working" class group had lower overall suspension rates for male students compared to those from the "middle/upper middle" class subgroup. Notably, all principals from the low/moderate suspension group grew up under a working-class SES.

Findings of the Qualitative Phase

The quantitative portion of this study was designed independently of the qualitative

component, aiming to uncover patterns and correlations in suspension data. However, integrating the principals' perceptions, beliefs, personal experiences, and implicit or known biases during decision-making added complexity to the analysis. Based on the demographic data provided by the principals, they identified as White, Black, Asian, and biracial. These principals also indicated that they practiced different leadership styles, which indicates an absence of a uniform approach to school management and discipline. The majority of the principals described their SES during childhood as either "working class" or "middle class."

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The results of the comparative data analyses provided meaningful answers to research questions 2 and 4. An independent t-test using a dichotomous version of the discipline training hours variable yielded a statistically significant outcome. This finding suggests that the level of specialized training in student management and discipline influenced how principals performed in their buildings. In this study, higher training levels were associated with lower suspension rates, particularly for Black boys. Similarly, those trained in social-emotional learning (SEL) were also less likely to resort to suspension.

The contingency table analyses also provided statistically significant outcomes, particularly when looking at principals' leadership styles and SES during their upbringing. These two variables appeared to influence principals' decision-making processes. Principals with

people-centered leadership styles, as opposed to manager-centered styles, showed a lower propensity to suspend students. These findings suggest that principals with people-centered leadership approaches prioritize forming relationships, understanding the reasons behind students' behaviors, and adopting a more humanistic approach. This relational and empathetic stance may stem from their ability to relate more closely to students' experiences, potentially fostering a more inclusive and supportive school environment. For SES during upbringing, principals from the "lower/working" class group had lower overall suspension rates for male students compared to those from the "middle/upper middle" class subgroup. Notably, all principals from the low/moderate suspension group grew up under a working-class SES.

Findings Related to Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What are the principals' philosophies and approaches to administering discipline? Table 8 provides a summary of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview as related to research question 1.

Theme 1: A Shift Toward Last-Resort Discipline in Schools. Principals consider suspension a last-resort measure, preferring to explore other disciplinary actions first. They use alternatives like Saturday school, in-school intervention, and restorative practices. One principal candidly stated, "But honestly, I'm not a huge [su]spender. Um, suspension for me is the last resort." Another principal stated, "I think suspension is necessary when somebody proves a safety threat." This shift reflects a broader philosophy of proactive engagement and support, moving away from purely punitive measures.

Table 8

Themes and Subthemes Related to Research Question 1

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: A Shift Toward Last-Resort Discipline in Schools	• Suspension Alternatives • Last-Resort Policy • Rethinking Discipline Through Support and Intervention
Theme 2: Proportionate Discipline and Equity	• Equity in Disciplinary Actions • Suspension Demographics Alignment • Disproportionality Awareness
Theme 3: Emphasis on Relationship Building	• Relationship-Centric Discipline • Understanding Student Backgrounds • Teacher-Student Connection
Theme 4: Acknowledging Implicit Bias in Staff and Leaders	• Self-Reflection and Awareness of Implicit Bias: • The Influence of Societal Stereotypes on Perceptions of Black Boys

Suspension Alternatives. Principals discussed various alternatives to suspension, including keeping students in the office and providing SEL support. One principal mentioned, "We really try to use suspension as a last resort," while another observed, "Lack of supports or interventions for them. So, it's often an automatic jump to that [suspension], rather than a build to that."

Last Resort Policy. A suspension is only considered when other interventions fail. Principals emphasize support and fairness. One principal stated, "Suspension is almost like a last resort for me. I really try to exhaust all my levels before I get to that component." Another shared, "I find it more effective honestly, to remove a child from their environment and keep them with me for a while in my office."

Rethinking Discipline Through Support and Intervention. Some principals stressed the need to address behavioral issues through support and interventions to mitigate the disproportionate suspensions of Blacks boys. One principal said, "Maybe the Code of Conduct needs to be looked at and revisited where suspension isn't so easy to justify for certain things." Another emphasized the importance of keeping students in school, "I'd rather have you in school being supervised, and encouraged to do work, than at home, falling behind."

Theme 2: Proportionate Discipline and Equity. The data from the interviews shed light on the principals' philosophies and methods for enforcing discipline, particularly concerning fairness, relationship-building, and understanding students' backgrounds. The principals highlight the disproportionate suspensions of Black boys and acknowledge that while certain patterns are observable across all schools, each school's unique characteristics influence perceptions of disciplinary actions. One principal remarked, "What I see is a common trend that you see as your highest numbers are always your Black boys." The principals indicated that they are committed to achieving equity in disciplinary actions and are aware of the disproportionate impact of suspensions on Black boys. Their responses indicate the principals' dedication to aligning disciplinary measures with principles of equity and fairness.

Theme 3: Emphasis on Relationship Building. The principals emphasized the disproportionate suspension of Black boys and the urgent need to address this issue. They highlighted the importance of fostering strong, positive relationships between educators and students. The principals expressed that they believe in understanding students' backgrounds and fostering connections. One principal stated, "It's about relationship building. It's about getting to know students and their backgrounds." Taking this approach is viewed as essential for meaningful and effective discipline. The data illustrate that principals view relationship-building

as a critical strategy for reducing disciplinary disparities and creating a more supportive school environment.

Theme 4: Acknowledging Implicit Bias in Staff and Leaders. When principals were asked about implicit bias, many acknowledged its presence both within their staff and themselves. One principal candidly admitted, “If I have an implicit bias, I think it is towards [helping] Black boys. The administrative team is overly cognizant of it.” Another principal expressed a similar awareness, stating, “Well, I would like to say that no, I do not have bias, but I'm sure that I do, and often, ‘other’ lenses are based on personal beliefs.” Another principal echoed this sentiment, saying, "Yes, I do. And when I say it's an implicit bias... I've caught myself falling into the traps of looking at situations sometimes differently, and then I have to catch myself saying, well, why did you think that?" .

One principal commented,

> But I think it also is connected with just the at large perspective that we have of Black boys of Black men in society. So, when, when the news or when television or movies are telling you that there's a fear, that's that, you know, is inherent, you know, coming from black boys or black men, I think, you know, we, all of us, wear that, we inherit that, and we all just take that with us wherever we go.

Another principal expressed concern about the impact of these stereotypes, stating

> I think that, um, unfortunately, I'm in schools especially like the ones where in our little brown and black boys get the short end of the stick, so to speak, you know, they're oftentimes singled out or targeted for doing behaviors that may or may not be within their control.

These quotes highlight how societal views can perpetuate biased disciplinary practices that may contribute to the disproportionate suspension rates of Black boys.

Analysis of Findings Related to Research Question 1. The themes and subthemes related to this study's research question 1, supported by participants' quotes, reveal that principals are increasingly adopting supportive and equitable disciplinary practices. Principals acknowledge their own implicit biases and recognize these biases among their staff. They emphasize alternatives to suspension, equity, and relationship building. These findings suggest a shift towards restorative practices in school discipline, which can improve student outcomes and reduce suspension disparities, especially among Black boys. By prioritizing non-suspension measures and understanding students' backgrounds, principals are fostering more inclusive and equitable school environments. This approach addresses immediate behavioral issues and promotes long-term positive relationships and student engagement. The principals' commitment to equity and support indicates potential systemic changes in school disciplinary policies, encouraging broader adoption of these practices for fairer and more effective disciplinary systems across educational institutions.

Findings Related to Research Question 2

Research Question 2: How do principals' lived experiences impact their approach to administering discipline, particularly student suspensions? Table 9 provides a summary of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview as related to research question 2.

Table 9

Themes and Subthemes Related to Research Question 2

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Personal and Cultural Backgrounds	• Personal Discipline History • Cultural Influence on Discipline • Empathy and Cultural Relativity
Theme 2: Proportionate Discipline and Equity	• Discipline Philosophy Evolution • Impact Assessment of Disciplinary Actions • Professional Growth Through Reflection

Theme 1: Personal and Cultural Backgrounds.

Personal Discipline History. Principals' backgrounds and personal histories with discipline significantly influence their current approaches. Several principals reported that their parents instilled in them strong values of education and discipline. For example, one principal shared, “I am from another country. The way I grew up, it was corporal punishment...Teachers beat their children [and] their students, and it was allowed.” Another principal reflected, “In school, as a student, personally, I struggled a bit with discipline. I was suspended several times as a student.” Their responses illustrate that their experiences have shaped their understanding and empathy towards students facing disciplinary actions today.

Cultural Influence on Discipline. The principals’ cultural backgrounds also significantly influenced their disciplinary approaches. One principal stated, “Discipline for me is something that it's two completely different worlds...it was a learning experience for me to practice discipline here in the US versus what I was accustomed to growing up in the Caribbean.” Another shared, “My county has tried to have professional development around disproportionate suspension data...But help me? No...I can't say that anything stands out in my mind that helped me determine how I handled it.” These insights highlight the importance of cultural context in

understanding and administering discipline. Furthermore, the principals' responses illustrated how their upbringing and personal experiences directly influenced their perception of discipline, thereby emphasizing the importance of education and respecting authority figures.

Empathy and Cultural Relativity. The data collected during the interview phase also demonstrated that principals acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and challenge their students face. Consequently, they exhibited empathy and a culturally relative approach to discipline. One principal shared, "It's about relationship building. It's about getting to know students and their backgrounds. And knowing which students live with a grandparent or some other extended family member." Another stated, "I think everyone comes with particular biases because we're people, and sometimes our frame of reference is what we've experienced." These statements reflect a commitment to understanding and addressing the unique needs and circumstances of each student.

Theme 2: Reflection Practice on Discipline.

Discipline Philosophy Evolution. The principals discussed how their discipline philosophies have evolved over time, usually shifting from punitive to supportive and interventionist approaches. One principal explained, "I believe the thought is to punish a child, remove them from the environment, to hopefully teach them something so when they come back, they can change the behavior...Now, I think suspension is being used for a lot of other reasons." This evolution highlights the shift toward understanding the root causes of behavior and employing restorative practices.

Impact Assessment of Disciplinary Actions. Principals are increasingly assessing the impact of disciplinary actions on students' academic achievement and the overall school culture. One principal noted, "Suspension overall has a negative impact on school culture...It affects

attendance and academic achievement." Another stated, "If you're not trying to prevent and you're not trying to support kids, yeah, you're going to suspend a lot of them."

Professional Growth Through Reflection. The data illustrates that principals emphasized the importance of professional growth and reflection in improving disciplinary practices. One principal shared, "During COVID, we had implicit bias training...[which] allowed me more time to think about practices that pertain to my school." Another mentioned, "No, there hasn't been any...No one sat us down as administrators and said, 'This is how you should approach discipline.'" The principals' responses indicated that they believe self-reflection and professional development are essential for developing equitable and effective disciplinary practices as part of their leadership craft.

Analysis of Findings Related to Research Question 2. Research question 2 examined how principals' lived experiences influenced their approach to administering discipline, particularly student suspensions. The thematic analysis revealed that principals' personal and cultural backgrounds, along with their reflective practices, significantly shaped (a) their disciplinary philosophies and (b) the methods they use when disciplining Black boys. While some principals previously employed strict measures such as corporal punishment, their current approaches are more restorative and empathetic, focusing on understanding students' backgrounds and providing support. These insights advocate for a shift towards equitable and culturally sensitive disciplinary practices that address the root causes of behavioral issues and promote positive change.

Findings Related to Research Question 3

Research Question 3: What professional experiences have contributed to principals' discipline decision-making? This research question investigates the professional experiences that

shape principals' discipline decision-making. Table 10 provides a summary of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview as related to research question 3.

Table 10

Themes and Subthemes Related to Research Question 3

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Professional Development and Training	• Equity and Bias Awareness Training • Restorative Practices Training • Continuous Learning Emphasis
Theme 2: Administrative Collaboration	• Sharing Best Practices • Supportive Administrative Network

Theme 1: Professional Development and Training. As discussed earlier in this study, professional development and training are fundamental in shaping principals' approaches to discipline. During the qualitative phase of data collection, equity and bias awareness training emerged as crucial elements, with principals recognizing the need to understand and mitigate their implicit biases. Some principals reflected on recent county-provided training aimed at enhancing equity awareness and the importance of continuous self-reflection. One principal noted, "I don't think we, up until recently, some of the equity pieces and implicit biases that I have been involved in, in the county...," highlighting the evolving nature of these training programs. Another principal emphasized the reflective opportunities afforded by implicit bias training during the COVID-19 pandemic, stating, "During COVID, we had implicit bias training...[it] allowed me more time to think about practices that pertain to my school." Additionally, research has supported the idea that restorative practice training is essential for fostering a relational approach to discipline. The principals indicated during the interviews that they found restorative practices helpful in addressing behavioral issues without resorting to

suspensions. One principal shared, “I've taken a lot of training for RP...I think restorative practices [have] definitely helped me,” underscoring the importance of continuous professional development. Another principal discussed the broader implications of such training, noting the integration of restorative practices with social-emotional learning (SEL) components.

The subtheme of “continuous learning emphasis” further highlights the need for sustained professional development to handle discipline effectively and ensure equitable treatment of all students. The principals shared about their counties’ efforts to address disproportionate suspension rates through professional development. However, they also pointed out the lack of comprehensive guidance, with one principal stating, “None... No one sat us down as administrators and [said], this is how you should approach discipline.”

Theme 2: Administrative Collaboration.

Sharing Best Practices. The principals’ responses indicated that collective decision-making and support networks among administrators are essential for effective leadership decision-making. The subtheme “sharing best practices” emerged as a key element, with principals valuing the process of gathering comprehensive information and consulting with colleagues before making disciplinary decisions. One principal described their approach: “I try to find as much information about the incident that occurred...before deciding to suspend.” Another principal highlighted the collaborative effort to identify and address biases within disciplinary referrals.

Supportive Administrative Networks. The subtheme of “supportive administrative network” emphasizes the need for support from the central office and the importance of buy-in from all staff. The principals expressed challenges in ensuring consistent disciplinary practices across different schools and the need for genuine engagement from educators. One principal

remarked, “Some staff are going to do it (go to training) just to dot their i's and cross their t's...If there was a way to get the staff to buy into that....” This statement reflects the ongoing struggle to achieve a cohesive and committed approach to discipline.

Analysis of Findings Related to Research Question 3. The professional experiences that shaped principals’ discipline decision-making were illustrated in the interviews to be multifaceted, based on participant remarks. Repeated commentary highlighted the importance of professional development and administrative collaboration. The findings reveal two key levers: (a) a significant gap in guidance and training for equitable disciplinary approaches, and (b) the need for continuous learning and policy support.

Findings Related to Research Question 4

Research Question 4: What systems and supports are missing for principals that contribute to the disproportionate suspension of Black boys? This research question investigated the systems and supports that are lacking for principals, thus contributing to the disproportionate suspensions of Black boys. The interviews identified several critical gaps, including the need for continuous professional development, a lack of resources for alternative interventions, and insufficient cultural competency and relationship-building initiatives. Table 11 provides a summary of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview as related to research question 4.

Table 11

Themes and Subthemes Related to Research Question 4

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Need for Continuous Professional Development	• Ongoing Equity Training • Updates on Restorative Practices • Professional Adaptability Enhancement
Theme 2: Lack of Resources for Alternative Interventions	• Resource Constraints for Intervention Programs • Need for Specialized Support Staff • Infrastructure for Restorative Practices
Theme 3: Cultural Competency and Relationship Building	• Training in Cultural Awareness • Strategies for Effective Relationship Building • Community Engagement for Cultural Competency

Theme 1: Need for Continuous Professional Development. This theme highlights the need for ongoing equity and updated restorative practices training. The principals noted that while there have been efforts to address disproportionate suspensions, these have not significantly changed their decision-making. They emphasized that suspension should be the last resort and preferred keeping students in their office as an alternative. The importance of building strong relationships with Black boys to address behavioral issues was also stressed. For example, one principal stated, “I utilize all of those pieces before I'm deciding if I'm going to suspend, regardless of the race or background of the student.”

Theme 2: Lack of Resources for Alternative Interventions. This theme revealed the resource constraints that limit effective intervention programs. The principals discussed how suspension often fails to address the underlying behavioral issue and emphasized the need for specialized support staff and infrastructure for restorative practices. One principal expressed, “Suspension for me is the last resort... because the intended reason, which I think was the punishment, was supposed to help get rid of the behavior, which it doesn't.” Participants’

responses revealed that having insufficient resources can lead to a reliance on suspension as a default measure.

Theme 3: Cultural Competency and Relationship Building. This theme underscores the need for training in cultural awareness and effective relationship-building strategies. Principals emphasized the importance of educators being equipped to build relationships with students from diverse backgrounds, especially Black boys. The principals' responses indicate the significance of community engagement in promoting cultural competency among educators. One principal remarked, "We need more cultural development around understanding our Black boys and how to develop relationships with them... it's relational." Furthermore, this theme also emphasized the need for a diverse teacher workforce that reflects the student body, which can help reduce suspensions.

Analysis of Findings Related to Research Question 4. The principals interviewed agreed that the county lacks many systems of support, which contribute to the disproportionate suspension of Black boys. They emphasized the importance of continued professional development, alternative disciplinary solutions, cultural awareness, and community involvement in addressing disparities in disciplinary measures. The principals called for ongoing equity training, updates on restorative methods, and infrastructure support for restorative practices. They stressed the need for educators to gather comprehensive information before resorting to suspension and highlighted the critical role of solid relationships in addressing behavioral issues. Additionally, they stressed the importance of equipping educators with the necessary knowledge and skills to build relationships with students from diverse backgrounds.

The principals interviewed played a pivotal role in transforming their disciplinary decision-making practices. They are at an awareness stage where they recognize the profound

impact of their decisions and acknowledge their beliefs, biases, and barriers. While they are making strides, the suspension patterns at the district still reflect systemic issues, underscoring the need for more concerted efforts to fully realize equitable and restorative disciplinary practices.

Summary of Qualitative Phase Findings

In the qualitative phase of this study, the researcher used the research questions to examine how principals' practices affect broader educational outcomes, particularly the disciplinary measures applied to Black boys. This phase of the study explores the lived experiences and beliefs of school administrators, their professional trajectories shaping their disciplinary approaches, their philosophies on order and correction, and the systemic frameworks that either support or hinder equitable disciplinary action. The findings of the thematic analysis provide a comprehensive view of how principals influence school discipline and fairness. By understanding these factors, educators can better grasp why Black boys are suspended more often and identify areas where policies might need to change.

The key findings from the study, based on a thematic analysis of the principals' interviews, are as follows:

1. **Shift Toward Last-Resort Discipline in Schools:** Principals are moving toward using suspension only as a last resort, favoring alternative discipline measures.
2. **Proportionate Discipline and Equity:** There is a concerted effort to ensure equity in disciplinary actions among principals. This includes an awareness of the problem of disproportionality in suspensions, particularly among Black boys, and a commitment to address this issue through equitable disciplinary practices.

3. **Emphasis on Relationship Building:** Principals emphasize the importance of building strong, positive relationships between educators and students to lay the groundwork for effective discipline. This approach aims to foster an environment where discipline is meaningful, impactful, and supportive of student growth.
4. **Use of Restorative Practices:** The study highlights a significant shift towards the principals' use of restorative practices in school discipline.
5. **Concerns Over Automatic Suspension:** Most principals in this study express concerns about the "automatic jump" to suspension, highlighting systemic issues where supports or interventions are lacking.
6. **Suspension for Safety Threats Only:** Most principals believe suspension is necessary only when a student poses a significant safety threat, emphasizing the need for alternatives that keep students engaged in their education while addressing behavioral issues.
7. **Diverse Disciplinary Approaches:** Principals report that disciplinary practices and philosophies vary significantly across schools, influenced by each school's demographics and specific challenges.
8. **Recognition of Systemic Biases:** All principals interviewed acknowledge systemic biases in educational discipline, noting that similar behaviors often result in harsher actions against Black boys and some Latino students. They recognize their own and others' implicit biases.
9. **Supportive and Intervention-Based Approaches:** Most principals advocate for a shift towards more supportive and intervention-based disciplinary strategies, moving away from traditional punitive measures.

10. **Innovative Alternatives to Suspension:** Many principals in the study are exploring innovative alternatives to suspension, such as Saturday school and community service, to keep students engaged in their education while addressing disciplinary needs.

Due to the anonymity requested by the county and participants, the researcher did not have individual suspension data for each principal interviewed. However, aggregated suspension data from the Maryland State Department of Education (MDSE) for the 2022–2023 school year was available. This data provides a comprehensive overview of disciplinary outcomes across districts, allowing for an analysis of how principals' stated philosophies and approaches to discipline align with actual suspension rates. By examining the county-wide data, trends and discrepancies can be identified, highlighting the broader impact of principals' disciplinary strategies and the ongoing challenges in achieving equitable and supportive practices.

The 2022–2023 Maryland school suspension data reveals a significant disparity: nearly 60% of suspended students are Black, and 62% are male. This stark disproportionality underscores a gap between principals' commitment to equitable practices and the actual outcomes, suggesting unresolved systemic challenges. The suspension data reveals significant challenges and disparities, particularly affecting Black students and males, suggesting that these intentions are not fully reflected in current practices. The disparity between the stated philosophies of the principals and the suspension rates highlights the necessity for a more substantial implementation of the advocated strategies, which address systematic biases and ensure the effective deployment and consistent application of supportive interventions across all schools. These findings highlight an understanding of school discipline, emphasizing the need for equitable, restorative, and relationship-centered practices. The principals' insights suggest a

significant shift in the conception and execution of discipline, advocating for approaches that are supportive, understanding, and conducive to the holistic development of students.

The nine interviewed principals are more like case studies than definitive examples of transformed disciplinary decision-making. While they provide valuable insights into contemporary disciplinary approaches, the study does not assume their practices are universally exemplary. Instead, these principals offer diverse perspectives and strategies that reflect a range of approaches to discipline. By examining their methods, the researcher could identify common themes, innovative practices, and potential areas for improvement. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how different principals navigate disciplinary challenges and strive for equity without presuming their methods are the only or best solutions.

Conclusion

The following section includes the conclusion of this research study, an analysis of limitations affecting the study, and recommendations and insights on addressing the decision-making process in the suspension of Black boys.

Limitations

While this research focuses on equity and diversity, it is noted that there is a limitation in the representation of Hispanic/Latino principals. The minimal representation of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish-origin individuals could point to a lack of diversity within the sample or may indicate the demographic characteristics of the broader community or region. These data are crucial for understanding the ethnic composition of the group, which could have implications for the survey's relevance to different ethnic communities. It also raises questions about the inclusiveness of the group and whether the experiences or perspectives of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish-origin individuals are adequately represented in the overall findings of the study.

Researching educational disciplinary practices, particularly those affecting Black boys, comes with inherent challenges. One significant limitation often encountered in such studies is the potential for response bias. The instruments and measures used in the study, the survey and the interviews, carry their own limitations. Many principals said they did not have time to participate, and those who did noted that anonymity was important. In educational settings, administrators, teachers, and even students may unconsciously or consciously provide responses that reflect what they perceive as socially acceptable rather than their true beliefs or actions. This skew in data can lead to conclusions that are overly optimistic or detached from the less palatable realities of discipline within schools.

The method of gathering data through surveys or interviews can introduce another layer of limitation. These approaches are susceptible to individual subjectivity. Participants might interpret questions differently, leading to responses that could compromise the data collected. This issue is further complicated when other data, such as classroom observations or policy analysis, are not considered or used to triangulate the self-reported data collected, which could limit the objectivity of the findings' generalization to other school districts beyond PCPS.

Another limitation to consider is the centralized policies that school districts must adhere to. Principals are required to operate under codes of conduct that shape and sometimes constrain their decision-making. Education policies and laws that govern disciplinary actions directly impact the principal's autonomy in their decision-making process. Moreover, several counties declined to participate in this study, and the counties that did participate had strict and limiting guidelines for their participation, which could have impacted their responses to the survey and the interview.

The data's time frame is another limitation. Disciplinary practices and their effects on students are not static; they evolve over time. Given that the study captured a finite period, it restricted the researcher's ability to examine administrators' practices over time in a longitudinal capacity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on students' socio-emotional and behavioral development. A National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report reveals that 87% of public schools reported negative impacts on student socio-emotional development during the 2021–2022 school year. Additionally, 84% noted adverse effects on students' behavioral development. The pandemic has led to a surge in classroom disruptions (56%), rowdiness outside classrooms (48%), disrespect towards teachers and staff (48%), and prohibited electronic device use (42%). NCES Commissioner Peggy G. Carr reiterates the critical importance of providing immediate and adequate social, emotional, and behavioral support.

Finally, another limitation of this study is the inherent challenge of accurately assessing implicit bias among participants. Implicit bias, having a pervasive and automatic nature and often operates independently of conscious intent, is usually dissociated from individuals' explicit values and reflects an unspoken preference for one's own group or dominant societal groups. This characteristic makes it a formidable task to accurately gauge its true impact on behavior. Despite the unanimous acknowledgment of bias among the principals who were interviewed, and the quantitative data (see Table 3) hinting at a potential correlation between lower socioeconomic status (SES) and a decreased suspension rate.

Implications of the Study

This study has revealed the impact of these biases, demonstrating how they contribute to the disproportionate suspension rates of Black boys, thus highlighting systemic issues within the educational discipline framework. Exploring how principals' lived experiences, training, and institutional policies shape their disciplinary decisions offers a nuanced understanding of the factors at play. This comprehensive view identifies areas for intervention and improvement in training and policy development. The principals' reflections during the interviews highlight the need for disciplinary measures that support rather than hinder students' educational progress. The findings also highlight the importance of culturally responsive leadership in addressing and mitigating implicit biases and disproportionate disciplinary actions. Principals trained in and committed to culturally responsive practices are better equipped to create equitable and inclusive school environments, thus promoting equitable and inclusive decisions.

This study shows the necessity of ongoing professional development focused on cultural competency and restorative practices. By prioritizing these training areas, school leaders can develop the skills to make more informed, fair, and effective disciplinary decisions. The positive outcomes associated with restorative practices and alternative disciplinary methods further underscore the importance of holistic approaches to student discipline, which culturally responsive leaders are more likely to implement. These practices contribute to better student outcomes, ensuring that all students, particularly marginalized groups like Black boys, have the opportunity to succeed academically and personally.

The study has analyzed the factors influencing principals' disciplinary decision-making, highlighting the pivotal role of school leaders in fostering equity and support in schools. The findings make a compelling case for integrating culturally responsive leadership principles into

educational policies and practices, emphasizing the importance of school leaders in addressing systemic inequities and promoting justice within the school discipline framework.

The literature review substantiates that the issue of racial bias in school disciplinary actions, particularly the excessive suspension rates of Black boys, is a profound and historically entrenched problem. Scholarly investigations and governmental bodies, such as the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Education (ED), have underscored the harmful repercussions of these suspensions. Such punitive measures perpetuate negative stereotypes and curtail educational prospects for Black boys. The persistence of these disparities, exemplified in instances in various educational districts including Patrick County Public Schools, highlights the systemic nature of this problem. This study's findings are congruent with prior research, indicating that disciplinary decisions are still influenced by underlying biases—often in subtle ways. Nonetheless, there is an emerging recognition among school principals regarding the imperative for more equitable disciplinary approaches. The findings of this study emphasize the critical role of culturally responsive leadership and continuous professional development with a focus on cultural competency and restorative practices. These approaches contribute to fairer disciplinary decisions and enhance academic achievements, especially for historically marginalized groups like Black boys. By integrating these principles into educational policies, this research advocates for a paradigm shift towards justice and equity within the framework governing school discipline.

Contributions to the Body of the Literature

Researchers acknowledge disparities in school discipline, particularly affecting Black boys. Administrators play a crucial role in influencing suspensions and exclusionary practices.

This study explored administrator characteristics that could help reduce the disproportionate suspension rates of Black boys within Patrick County Public Schools (PCPS).

Supovitz et al. (2010) provided empirical evidence showing that principal leadership indirectly impacts student learning through teachers' instructional practices. They emphasized the importance of collaboration between principals and teachers to effect change. According to Leithwood et al. (2004), leaders must support the implementation of research-based school and classroom conditions to enhance the achievement of diverse student populations. They highlighted the importance of leaders helping staff establish shared understandings and goals to foster a sense of purpose and vision. Furthermore, they suggested that leadership practices in setting directions significantly contribute to a leader's impact by motivating individuals with compelling and achievable goals. Finally, they emphasized the crucial role of district and school leadership in bridging reform initiatives to ensure genuine student improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004). This belief applies not only to academic instruction but to all learning.

This study adds to the existing literature on school discipline, equity, and cultural responsiveness. While much of the existing research focuses on theoretical frameworks and broad statistical analyses, this study provides in-depth, quantitative insights into school principals' perspectives, experiences, and training. It adds a valuable dimension to the literature by highlighting the experiences and challenges faced by those directly responsible for implementing disciplinary policies. In this study, the researcher captures a notable shift in disciplinary philosophy towards viewing suspension as a last-resort measure and prioritizing proactive, supportive, and restorative approaches. This finding aligns with and reinforces the broader trend in educational research advocating for restorative justice and positive behavioral interventions (Gregory et al., 2016; Smith & Harper, 2015).

By emphasizing principals' efforts to ensure equity and address the disproportionality in suspensions, particularly among Black boys, this study contributes to the critical discourse on racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline (Losen & Martinez, 2020; Skiba et al., 2014). The study offers up-to-date, localized evidence on persistent inequalities and the measures implemented to alleviate them. Furthermore, the study's findings on the significance of relationship-building and the implementation of restorative practices offer actionable examples of these strategies' application in schools. This study enhances previous research by demonstrating the application of theoretical concepts and pinpointing factors that support or hinder their efficacy (Wachtel, 2016).

The study highlights the challenges and barriers principals face in implementing fair and supportive disciplinary practices, such as automatic suspensions and lack of support. These insights help understand the gap between policy and practice and can guide future research and policy development. By documenting creative alternatives to suspension and different approaches based on school context, the study shows solutions that can be shared and used in other schools. This research adds to the growing body of knowledge on alternative disciplinary practices and their impact on students (Anyon et al., 2016).

This study aimed to enhance understanding of the persistent issue of disproportionate suspension rates among Black boys by exploring the specific disciplinary philosophies and practices of principals in Maryland schools. It addresses gaps in the existing literature by providing an on-the-ground analysis of how contextual considerations and equity-driven policies are implemented at the school level, examining the alignment between principals' stated commitments to supportive and equitable discipline. This research responds to concerns raised

by Maryland schools by offering insights into how disciplinary practices can be transformed to reduce inequities and promote a more inclusive educational environment.

Discussion Related to the Study's Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) argues that historical patterns of racism are ingrained in the law and other modern institutions. The legacies of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow still create inequitable opportunities for Black people and other people of color. These beliefs are embedded in institutional policies and agents, and both factors continue to influence each other to either change or perpetuate specific outcomes over time. Applying this perspective, schools are viewed as structures and teachers as social agents (Legette et al., 2021). Training should ensure that teachers recognize and work to remove implicit bias from their practice. The movement considers many of the same issues as conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious.

Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which emphasizes incremental progress, CRT questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 4). CRT asserts that racism is embedded in the structure of legal institutions, including education, in the United States. The theory explores the subtleties of racism in America through scholarship that looks at the policing and judicial systems, employment, the workplace, and educational institutions. According to Delgado et al. (2017), CRT-based studies inform public civic institutions—such as government, schools, and churches—and private, personal, and corporate lives. This study applied CRT to examine disproportionate school suspensions among Black boys in a public school district.

Black boys are treated differently than White boys in society and education. Applying CRT to this study allowed for a deeper analysis of racial suspension inequity by examining systemic flaws and biases in societal institutions like education and legal systems that perpetuate inequality (Payne, 2010). By identifying, analyzing, and challenging distorted notions or deficient thinking about Black boys, CRT helps uncover systemic racism influencing disciplinary practices. The intersectionality of being both Black and male compounds these biases, leading to disproportionate suspension rates. In this research, principals have acknowledged their implicit biases and those of others, admitting these biases have affected their decision-making. Through a CRT lens, this study highlights how institutional racism and implicit biases shape principals' disciplinary decisions, contributing to the inequitable treatment of Black boys in schools. This perspective underscores the need to address these systemic issues to foster more equitable educational environments.

Study Implications to the District

Since 2005, the state of Maryland has proposed various solutions to address educational challenges. Additional solutions have been published in journals or presented through other research dissemination methods. Numerous researchers concluded that revisions to the code of conduct and policies are necessary. Some argue for enhanced educator training to ensure equitable treatment of Black children, while others emphasize the importance of educators recognizing their implicit biases and fostering a nurturing environment for all students. A potential gap is the lack of systematic accountability and investigation into the traits of exemplary schools and administrators that prevent disproportionality. Moreover, it is crucial to provide educators with adequate training and support to better help students.

Under COMAR 13A.01.06, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) mandates that all 24 local education agencies (LEAs) develop a guide for implementing equity initiatives at the local level. The guide should include exemplary components of high-quality policies and guidance on applying an equity lens from the outset. MSDE identified four "equity focus" areas: academic achievement and growth, leadership and human capital, climate and culture, and educator and staff capacity.

To bridge cultural and achievement gaps, it is essential that teachers possess the cultural competency needed to effectively serve all students, regardless of background. Self-regulation and reflection by those in power can be strategies to improve equity and eliminate bias. The lack of resources and training can cause school staff to address behavior incorrectly and unfairly. It can lead to overdiscipline and suspensions for Black boys. Principals without proper training may make biased suspension decisions. Training should cover implicit bias, restorative practices, equity, and culturally responsive education, followed by accountability measures like monthly discussions and calibration sessions. Exclusionary discipline affects students—often leading them to drop out—but also impacts families and schools, with parents facing financial burdens and schools experiencing negative climate and achievement outcomes (MDSE, 2017). These cumulative adverse effects highlight the need to closely monitor the disproportionate suspension rates of Black boys, similar to how districts oversee instruction through guided visits, principal walkthroughs, discussions, and strategic collaboration.

When school leadership makes decisions, everyone should be aware of the protocols, rules, procedures, and expectations within the community. These actions should be reflective, calibrated, and rooted in equity, cultural competency, and research. Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes each student's

academic success and well-being, as well as that of their family. Leaders must continually reflect on their practices and grow in equity. Policies that aim to equalize disciplinary treatment across student groups, implement non-punitive interventions, and enhance transparency in disciplinary decisions could close racial gaps in exclusionary discipline, achievement, educational attainment, and potentially incarceration (Sorensen et al., 2022).

District leaders, including human resources, are responsible for hiring the best individuals to lead schools toward excellence. This study emphasizes the importance of empathy and humanistic leadership qualities in hiring principals. Developing a scale to identify leaders with these traits, potentially aligned with Gallup's traits, could enhance hiring practices. Furthermore, districts should prioritize selecting empathetic leaders.

Aligning the findings with PSEL Standard 3 on Equity and Cultural Responsiveness provides a concrete framework to evaluate and improve school leadership practices. This connection helps link academic research with professional standards, giving school leaders practical insights to enhance equity and cultural responsiveness. In summary, the study adds detailed accounts of principals' experiences, showing the challenges and progress in moving towards fairer and more restorative disciplinary practices. By offering practical insights, identifying barriers, and aligning with professional standards, this research offers valuable guidance for educators, policymakers, and researchers regarding promoting equity and cultural responsiveness in schools.

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) recognizes restorative practice as a developing field focused on reinforcing individual relationships and community ties. Chmelynski (2005) noted that restorative practices in educational settings encompass peer mediation, problem-solving classroom circles, and family group conferencing—all aimed at

addressing the broader consequences of student misconduct with direct involvement from those affected by it. Fenning and Rose (2007) advocated for policy reform through a team-developed proactive discipline strategy emphasizing positive behavioral interventions, data collection tools, establishing school norms—including social norms and consistent language use—and integrating these elements into the school's culture. They stressed student participation in norm setting to ensure engagement, representation, and community integration. They also highlight the crucial role of the broader community, which encompasses not only students but also teachers and other community members, who should collaborate to establish expectations, protocols, and solutions for school discipline discussions.

Summary of Implications

The implications of this study are directly linked to data from principal interviews, revealing how training impacts suspension decision-making. Principals trained in restorative practices and equity view suspensions as a last resort, reflecting a shift in disciplinary philosophy (Finding 1). Training that prioritizes addressing the underlying causes of behavior over punitive measures influenced this shift in philosophy. Additionally, training in cultural competency and equity heightens principals' awareness of disproportionality in suspensions, particularly among Black boys (Finding 2), leading them to implement more equitable disciplinary practices. Training also empowers principals with restorative practices, reducing their reliance on suspensions by providing constructive behavioral interventions (Finding 4). Cultural competency training enables principals to recognize and address systemic biases in their schools (Finding 8), resulting in fairer disciplinary decisions.

CRT provides a framework for understanding systemic racism's impact on disciplinary practices. By applying CRT, this study shows how equity and cultural competency training help

principals identify and mitigate biases, leading to more equitable outcomes. CRT also emphasizes the importance of relationship building, aligning with findings on fostering strong educator-student relationships (Findings 3 and 4). CRT, which contextualizes these disparities within historical and structural inequities, informs principals' efforts to address the disproportionate impact of suspensions on students of color (Finding 2).

This study demonstrates a clear link between training in cultural competency, equity, restorative practices, and principals' suspension decision-making. Incorporating CRT provides deeper insights into how collaboration, processing decision-making and trainings influence principals' awareness of systemic biases and their commitment to equitable discipline. It shows how targeted training can lead to more effective and fair school disciplinary outcomes.

Recommendations

Each recommendation is not only informed by but also directly linked to the specific findings from the survey and interviews with principals. This direct connection underscores the credibility and relevance of the recommendations, which collectively aim to address systemic issues, promote equity, and support the shift towards restorative and supportive disciplinary practices. By clearly linking recommendations to the data, the study provides a clear, actionable roadmap for improving disciplinary outcomes in the district.

Recommendation 1. *Develop a companion guide for administrators to complement the Code of Conduct to aid collaboration and calibration.*

This recommendation, derived directly from findings on diverse disciplinary approaches based on individual school culture (Finding 7) and concerns over automatic suspension due to insufficient support (Finding 5), is a practical resource. It provides administrators with consistent, calibrated guidelines and strategies that align with the broader shift towards last-

resort discipline (Finding 1) and equitable practices (Finding 2). By standardizing approaches, the guide aims to reduce variability in disciplinary measures and ensure a more cohesive application of the Code of Conduct across different schools, empowering administrators to make a tangible difference.

Recommendation 2. *Maintain data collection on suspension and discipline within the district, utilizing it for educational purposes and training opportunities.*

The findings related to recognizing systemic biases (Finding 8) and the effort to ensure proportionate discipline and equity (Finding 2) underscore the need for ongoing data collection. Continuous data collection, a shared responsibility, allows the district to monitor trends, identify disparities, and assess the effectiveness of implemented strategies. Utilizing this data for educational and training purposes ensures that principals and staff remain informed about current issues and best practices, promoting a culture of continuous improvement in disciplinary approaches and providing reassurance about the effectiveness of the recommendations.

Recommendation 3. *Hold principals accountable for data management.*

This recommendation emphasizes the importance of principals being accountable for suspension and discipline data. Such accountability aligns with the need for more supportive and intervention-based approaches (Finding 9) and addresses concerns over automatic suspensions (Finding 5). Principals play a crucial role in driving change by regularly reviewing disciplinary practices and aligning them with the district's equity and restorative practice goals. This accountability mechanism is crucial for driving meaningful change and ensuring that the principles discussed in the interviews are reflected in actual practices.

Recommendation 4. *Sustain training initiatives on cultural competency, equity, and restorative practices.*

The emphasis on cultural competency and equity in the principals' interviews (Findings 2, 3, and 4) highlights the need for ongoing professional development. Sustained training initiatives like restorative practice and implicit bias ensure that principals and educators have the necessary skills and knowledge to implement restorative practices effectively and address systemic biases. This recommendation builds on the recognition that building positive relationships (Finding 3) and employing restorative practices (Finding 4) are foundational to reducing suspensions and promoting an equitable school environment.

Recommendation 5. *Establish structured visits for guidance on suspension and discipline matters.*

Structured guided visits by principals on suspension and discipline matters draw from the principals' expressed need for supportive infrastructure (Finding 5) and diverse disciplinary approaches based on school context (Finding 7). These guided visits would provide tailored support in behavior management and decision-making, allowing for the exchange of best practices and ensuring that schools receive the guidance needed to implement equitable and effective disciplinary strategies. This recommendation supports the principals' advocacy for proactive, context-sensitive interventions and helps sustain momentum toward reducing reliance on suspensions.

Final Synopsis

This study aimed to explore implicit bias and decision-making regarding the disproportionate suspension of Black boys in public schools. The study was conducted in two phases: quantitative and qualitative. In the quantitative phase, the findings indicated that principals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with restorative leadership styles and training in equity-centered and inclusive leadership, were less likely to suspend students. For the

qualitative phase, interviews revealed emerging themes: a shift from zero-tolerance policies to using suspension as a last resort, a desire for more training, and a need for collaboration and strategies to keep Black boys in school. Also, most principals acknowledged the presence of implicit bias in themselves and others and believed that that they are thinking of Black boys and how adopting a restorative approach is vital.

To reduce the suspension rate of Black boys, training in restorative practices and cultural competency is necessary. Principals should be held accountable for suspension data by adhering to the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) Standard 3.

The researcher developed the following action plan for Patrick County Public Schools:

1. **Restorative Practices Professional Development**
    - Complete restorative practices training for all staff.
    - Provide refresher training for those who have not had it in the past three years.
    - Continue to include cultural competency in the systemic new teacher orientation and restorative practices training.
    - Create district training videos to improve cultural competency.
2. **Leadership and Collaboration**
    - Hire a director focused on suspension data, school climate, culture, and training.
    - Develop a guide for principals to collaborate, visit each other's schools, conduct walkthroughs, and share strategies.

By implementing this plan, PCPS aims to ensure suspended students are included in PBIS-tiered interventions and have follow-ups to keep them in the classroom and school.

Appendices

Appendix A

Email Inviting Principals to Participate in the Survey

Dear Recipient Name:

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project looking at decision-making practices in the district as they relate to the disproportionality of suspension of Black boys. I am completing my studies at The University of Maryland College Park, and I need your help. This dissertation study, "Exploring the Role of Principals and Implicit Bias in Disproportionate Suspension Rates of Black Boys," is for my personal dissertation and it is designed to explore practices of principals' decision making as it relates to discipline and suspensions. I would like to ask you to participate in this study by completing this attached survey. The survey will only take approximately 5 minutes and can be completed at school, or at home. Principals, please complete it ASAP. The survey will be coded to ensure confidentiality. If you choose to complete the survey, this is the link: https://umdsurvey.umd.edu/jfe/form/SV_3gChwvMdSmYGtgO

This is a multifaceted study that will also include one-on-one interviews that will include and a review of school's data with a select number of principals who choose to participate. After the survey is completed, I will email you to ask if you would be willing to participate in the second phase of this study, a one-on-one interview which is meant to provide more anecdotal data on practices, beliefs and perspectives on discipline, suspensions, decision making and training, and equity. If you choose to participate in the interview phase of the study, you will be asked to provide identifying information, which will only be used to invite you to the second phase of the study. Participation is voluntary and will have no impact on employability at your school district.

Survey results may be presented at professional conferences or published in professional journals. Completion of this survey indicates your consent to participate in the study. The results of the study may help inform the district on the current challenges of disproportionality of suspension and discipline as well as a possible need for further development of training practices around implicit bias and discipline. Thank you in advance to all those who have already committed to helping me with my research. Please keep this email for your records, and feel free to contact me with questions or comments via email at tscales@umd.edu.

Respectfully,
Tangela C. Scales
Doctor of Education Candidate

Appendix B

Survey: Exploring the Role of Principals

1. What is your gender? ___ Male ___ Female ___ Other (RQ 2)
2. What is your age? ___ Under 18 ___ 18–24 ___ 25–34 ___35–44 ___45–54 ___ 55–64 ___ 65-74 ___ 75–84 ___ 85 or older (RQ2)
3. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? ___ Yes ___ No (RQ 2)
4. How would you describe yourself? (*Please select all that apply*).

   ___ white ___ Black or African American ___ American, Indian, or Alaska Native___ Asian ___ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander RQ___ Other, please specify _____
5. What was your family socioeconomic background growing up? _____ (RQ 2)
6. How many years did you teach in the classroom? _____ (RQ 3)
7. How many years have you spent teaching a racial diverse population? _____ (RQ3)
8. How many years have you been an administrator? _____ (RQ3)
9. How many hours of Restorative Practice training have you received? _____ (RQ3)
10. How many hours of Equity/Cultural Competency training have you received? _____ (RQ3)
11. How many hours of discipline training have you received? _____ (RQ3)
12. How many hours of implicit bias training have you received? _____ (RQ3)
13. What is your leadership style? _____ (RQ1)
14. Have you suspended a Black boy this school year for a Level 3 or 2 infraction (not Level 4)? ___ Yes ___ No (RQ3)
15. I give consent to sharing my name and contact information to be invited for an interview (*Your name will be kept confidential)*.

    _____

Appendix C

Email Inviting Principals to Participate in Interviews

Dear Recipient Name:

Thank you for participating in the initial survey for my dissertation study, "Exploring the Role of Principals and Implicit Bias in Disproportionate Suspension Rates of Black Boys." I am completing my studies at The University of Maryland College Park. You have provided valuable insights into your background and the leadership style that you currently employ in order to enhance a safe and orderly school.

This next phase of the study will focus on elaborating on the statements from the survey, with specific questions about your practices and beliefs in your school. The one-on-one interview phase of the study will take approximately 30 to 60 minutes to complete and I will later review your MSDE data. I need a minimum of six participants in the study.

If you are willing to take part in this phase of the study, it will take place on Zoom. We can meet on Zoom the first week of March. I will be using the Zoom audio recording to complete my study. You will be compensated with a $20 virtual gift card through email. Participation is voluntary and will have no impact on employability at your school district. Please let me know if you are still interested in participating by replying "yes" to this email with your selected date and time. I will send a confirmation email as well as a consent form once we have confirmed. If you have any questions or concerns, please email me at **tscales@umd.edu.**

Respectfully,

Tangela C. Scales,
Doctor of Education Candidate

Appendix D

Alignment of Research Questions to Interview Questions

Alignment of Research Questions to Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
1. How do principals' lived experiences of impact student suspensions?	• What are your thoughts on the disproportionate suspension of Black boys? • What gaps do you identify in the suspension of Black boys and why? • Do you believe you have any implicit biases that may influence how you discipline Black boys? Please provide an explanation. • Describe your background and compare your perception of discipline to how it is implemented in your school. • How do you think suspensions impact school culture?
2. What trainings or practices have principals undergone to enhance their decision-making process in relation to suspending students, especially Black boys?	• What is the purpose of suspension? • Have any specific professional development experiences helped you prepare for the decision-making process regarding student suspensions, particularly for Black boys?
3. What are the perceived gaps in Patrick County Public Schools that contribute to the disproportionate suspension of Black boys?	• How do your decision-making practices ensure equity when it comes to suspensions? Can you walk me through your process? • In your opinion, what steps does the district need to take to address and resolve the issue of disproportionate suspension of Black boys?

Appendix E

Approved PCPS Principal Interview Protocol

Introductory Remarks (5 minutes)

- Welcome and thank you for participating
- Review purpose of discussion: talk about the life of a principal and all the decisions they have to make in the course of a day
- Discuss the power principals have to make and implement change in our schools
- Explain why PI am doing the study
- Give assurances of confidentiality and anonymity of responses
- Remind participants that every time they speak loudly and clear
- Encourage free-flowing conversation among principal and PI to expand responses
- Convey researcher's desire to hear their personal perspective

Opening Questions (5 minutes)

- What prompted you to accept my invitation to this interview

Researcher will begin an interview that will last 30- 45 minutes.

Each of the research questions presented guide the study:

1. Need to add the 1st research question
2. How do principals' lived experiences affect suspensions? (Personal experience)
3. What are the trainings and practices that principals implement that support their decision-making when suspending students (in particular Black boys)? (Training on equity practices)
4. What systems and supports are missing for principals that contribute to the disproportionate suspension of Black boys? (Future remedies)?

Core ***Interview Questions***

A. What do you believe is the function of suspension?
B. What do you think about the disproportionality of suspension of Black boys?
C. Describe your (personal) background and how it has influenced your approach to discipline in your school.
    a. Probe: did you grow up in a diverse area/community?
    b. Probe: What social/economic class would you describe your family?

    ~~c.~~ Probe: How about in terms of your approach to discipline for Black boys?

D. What are the professional development experiences that have helped you organize your decision-making processes regarding suspension?
    a. Probe: What trainings have contributed to your disciplinary decision-making for Black boys, in particular?
    b. Probe: Have you engaged in any training on implicit bias?

E. How do you think implicit bias may be influencing how you discipline Black boys?
    a. Probe: Please Explain.

F. What about your disciplinary decision-making practices ensure equity?

G. What do you specifically think the county needs to do to help school administrators decrease the suspension rates for Black boys?

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate today. I will be combining your responses and aggregating all the data to help make recommendations to the district about what we now understand around principals' perceptions of suspension disproportionality, equity training and decision-making. If you have any questions about your participation in this interview, or any additional comments or concerns you would like to convey, you can contact me via email at tscales@umd.edu.

Appendix F

Quotes From Principal Participants

(RQ1) What are the principal's philosophy and approach to administering discipline?

Principals expressed a common concern over the "automatic jump" to suspension, highlighting a systemic issue where supports or interventions are either lacking or insufficiently implemented for example a principal noted *"Lack of supports or interventions for them. So it's often an automatic jump to that, rather than a build to that."* While another principal described their experiences as *"So it's odd, it's often an automatic jump to that rather than a build to that. So especially being at multiple schools, I see where a lot of intervention levels are not put into place."*

According to one principal …

> *I think suspension is necessary when somebody proves a safety threat. And we need time as a school to figure out how we're going to address that safety threat going forward…So, I think we can do some work with it. I guess specifically, I think that we could probably, you know, build some more, or spend more time working on getting to know our communities and making sure that our staff is, you know, culturally responsive, you know, and just kind of knows what's going on.*

A principal reflected *"We have tried to employ other means of suspension, you know, such as Saturday school, like community service. We've also created a yield program to keep kids in school and allow them the opportunity to be get caught up on their work."*

Principals reported *"And then you have the kids that continue to do the behaviors that now I'm making sure that before I suspend, has the counselor talk to them…, can you please pull him and let him know that he needs to get his butt to class or he needs to stop messing with that*

kid? or talking to the vice principal? Like, have we touched base?" One Principal was more specific and said *"I find it more effective honestly, to remove a child from their environment and keep them with me for a while in my office."*

According to a principal, *"I don't, it's just not something that we that we like to do. And I will only go to suspension as a as a last resort."* This approach signifies a broader educational philosophy that values proactive engagement and support over punitive measures. One principal emphasized a thorough exploration of all available options before considering suspension, portraying it as the final step in a comprehensive disciplinary strategy. He commented *"Suspension is almost like a last resort for me... I really try to exhaust all my levels before I get to that component."* This was mentioned by Principal 4 in these words *"However, what is also a common trend that you see is your highest numbers are always your black boys."*

Participant 8 reflected *"We really try to use suspension as a last resort because I cannot give you specific quantitative data. But I look at the number of our black males who are living with a grandparent or are domiciled "But honestly, I'm not a huge suspender. Um, suspension for me is the last resort."*

Rethinking Discipline Through Support and Intervention

According to a principal...

> *"We have had a couple of them in terms of just the fight just because the fights were just so, so brutal. And so you know, to the point that we had to send a message to the parents that we need to help. But also we had had to send a message to the students that, okay, when you do this, and we've warned you, and we've given you tools, we've given you strategies, all these kinds of things, when you don't take these things seriously, or you don't apply these things, and this, this is what can happen to you."*

"Maybe the Code of Conduct needs to be looked at and revisited where suspension isn't so easy to justify for certain things." A principal highlighting the role of SEL, noted, *"I probably do some more training and, and, and coaching around... understanding my black boys and how to develop relationships with them…so as far as the county providing some, like I said more recently, the implicit bias, however, I do think the SEL components tie into that and also tie into my decision-making process."*

"So, I mean, honestly, [suspension] is to give people a break. That is the best, the number one thing that separates the offender from the victims.". This sentiment was repeated by several principals.

Proportionate Discipline and Equity

One principal pointedly notes the higher suspension rates among minority students for behaviors that, when exhibited by their peers of other races or ethnic groups, do not lead to the same consequences. They noted, *"Um, well, they're definitely being suspended at a higher rate. Um, some of the instances that they seem to be getting suspended for other races or ethnic groups are, are probably doing the same type of behaviors, but are not being suspended at the same rate."* This observation was echoed by another Principal 4 1 who recognizes this pattern as a significant problem that urgently needs addressing. He stated, "*I think that it's definitely a problem that needs to be addressed."*

Principal reported this in these words *"So it's odd, it's often an automatic jump to that rather than a build to that."*

A participant noted...

> *What I usually saw was that there will be something, anything that was very small that could have been that can be physical, that can be emotional, that could be*

some kind of reaction that a student has… And, and the reaction to that student was that the student was being what was being aggressive or the student was being you know, inappropriate, the student was being unsafe.

A principal reflected, *"If you know if it's happening to the same kid over and over again, if it's happening to the same groups of kids over and over again, I definitely feel like it sends a message..."*

A Principal pointed to a troubling inconsistency in how disciplinary measures are applied. He said "*I mean, I think it's a tragedy. I think that um, unfortunately, I'm in schools especially like the ones where in our little brown and black boys get the short end of the stick, so to speak, you know, they're oftentimes singled out or targeted for doing behaviors that may or may not be within their control."*

"I think, you know, we need to recruit a more diverse teacher workforce. That's another huge idea. But it I think it relates; I don't know what research says. But my hunch is that when the teacher workforce in a building more reflects the student body, that's a good thing for reducing suspensions.

Disproportionality and Bias Awareness

In the words of a principal, *"So I do ask myself that question based off of the whole student. And I think I do that no matter what their race is."*

"I think everyone comes with, you know, particular biases... But for me, in particular, I try to take the whole situation and see what's going to be what the half what the medium is going to be for the person and the school."

"So I also value the input of those that are involved. And if there's a piece that they share that makes me reflect and think, I'd like to say that I go and do that rather than just jumping right to it."

"Yes, I do. And when I say it's an implicit bias... I've caught myself falling into the traps of looking at situations sometimes differently, and then I have to catch myself saying, well, why did you think that?" (and)*"However, what is also a common trend that you see is your highest numbers are always your black boys."*

"But I think implicit bias is a tricky thing to talk about, of oneself. Because, I mean, even the phrase itself, you know, like that hidden bias, like sometimes we're not even. We're not even aware of it maybe in the moment. We need other people to point it out."

"*I don't know if there's a way for them to actually show the staff what it's like to be In the position of a black male, because or if you haven't raised a black male, if you haven't been a part of that culture, you're never truly going to understand it."*

One Principal…

But I think it also is connected with just the at large perspective that we have of black boys of black men in society. So when, when the news or when television or movies are telling you that there's a fear, that's that, you know, is inherent, you know, coming from black boys or black men, I think, you know, we all of us wear that, we inherit that, and we all just take that with us wherever we go.

"I mean, I think it's a tragedy. I think that um, unfortunately, I'm in schools especially like the ones where in our little brown and black boys get the short end of the stick, so to speak, you know, they're oftentimes singled out or targeted for doing behaviors that may or may not be

within their control. So I just think it's, um, I mean, I think it's the truth, I think it happens. And you know… not sure what we can do to change it, but I definitely believe it's a concern".

One principal articulates the comprehensive consideration of a student's context, including race and background, before making disciplinary decisions, emphasizing the need for a holistic view of the student's life and challenges. They commented *"So I utilize all of those pieces before I'm deciding if I'm going to suspend, regardless of the race or background of the student."*

Another principal reflected *"But at least in my school, my teachers that have the bigger problem with my black boys and my brown boys are the ones who have difficulty developing relationships with my teachers who can, and this is regardless of the color of the teacher's skin."*

Principal 4 stated *"But the thing that people don't talk about often is, you know, when that person, let's say, the offender, you know, comes back from being, you know, suspended, how they are reoriented, or welcome back to the, to the community..."*

"We need more cultural development around understanding my black boys and how to develop relationships with them... it's relational."

"But I also think experience helps a lot to experience and just overall relationships... If you're doing some questionable practices, and you keep thinking those are right, you know, that could be a problem."

This approach is not just about the disciplinary moment but about the broader context of the student's life, incorporating insights from parents and understanding the child's overall situation *"So for me, as I mentioned before, I like to look at the whole picture of the child, process that information, get the correspondence from the parents..."* another principal said, *"So I think my decision-making is based off of those pieces."*.

Another principal stated, *"It's about getting to know students and their backgrounds...we see a lot more of that, especially our males, who are living with one parent or grandparent."* This understanding is not a one-time effort but requires ongoing attention and commitment from the entire school staff to maintain an environment where every student feels seen and supported. *"So as principal, I think it takes a lot of constant monitoring, constant reminding your staff that this is where we are."*.

"I think restorative practices has definitely helped me." highlights the positive impact that restorative practices have had on one educator's ability to manage discipline more effectively. *"So we have to help these teachers know how to relate to these students. Because it's relational."* Underscoring the necessity of fostering relational skills among teachers to better connect with and understand their students, thus facilitating a more empathetic approach to discipline. *"So, I utilize all of those pieces before I'm deciding if I'm going to suspend, regardless of the race or background of the student."* This reflects a commitment to considering a broad range of factors and contexts before resorting to suspension, emphasizing a fair and inclusive approach.

"So, for me, as I mentioned before, I like to look at the whole picture of the child, process that information, get the correspondence from the parents..." Here, the importance of understanding the student's entire situation is highlighted as a crucial element in the decision-making process regarding discipline. Acknowledges the significance of paying attention to the nuances of student behavior and the underlying messages they may convey.*" I know why my bias sometimes shows up. And I think it's just because I grew up in a place of where, where, unfortunately, there were some kids who were violent, and there were some kids who are doing certain things, whatever."* This admission of personal biases and their impact on disciplinary

actions underlines the importance of self-awareness and reflection in the pursuit of equitable discipline.

"We've seen most of our new enrollments come from neighboring counties...parents will admit, like, we moved to "PCPS" to maybe get away from X, Y, and Z... So we see a lot more of that, especially our males, who are living with one parent or grandparent." Points to the broader social and familial contexts influencing student behavior and the need for a sensitive approach that takes these factors into account. *"Process that information, get the correspondence from the parents, anything happened at home today, anything going on in the family."* Emphasizes the role of ongoing communication with parents and guardians in understanding and addressing student behaviors comprehensively.

"And then next year, I've actually already talked to the team about making sure we, we get more restorative, because actually restorative practices as part of our culture and climate initiative."

One Principal reflected a proactive approach to discipline, exploring alternatives and interventions before resorting to punitive measures, highlighting the importance of seeking solutions that benefit the student's growth and learning. He stated, "And then look at what interventions can be put in place, what else can I do?" Also a principal acknowledged the real challenges teachers face in maintaining composure and understanding in the heat of the moment underscores the human aspect of educational discipline, reflected *"And that's often hard for a teacher, especially in the moment when they're frustrated."*

One principal suggested a shift in the perceptions of firmness in discipline, pointing to a broader debate about the changing dynamics between educators, students, and parents over time. He said, *"But at the same time, I feel like parents are not as tough. I don't think teachers are as*

tough with kids as they once were." One principal reflected on the complexities of discipline in diverse educational settings, this highlights the nuanced perceptions of behavior and compliance across different racial and cultural backgrounds. *noted "I felt it was very flat. And then I thought, what to the kids who say, oh, these kids are very compliant. And you know, why? Because well, they're, they're all white kids."* A principal sharing a personal perspective on the value of education and the expectations set by parents, emphasizing the role of upbringing in shaping attitudes towards school and discipline, *"My parents had a mindset that education would be the key...They valued education...and their philosophy was the only phone call I better get is a good phone call."* Another principal pointed to the necessity for continuous education and training for all staff members to ensure that disciplinary approaches are informed, equitable, and effective. They commented *"It has to do with education at every level... It's not just the administrators, but there also needs to be education of the faculty and staff..."*

A principal underlined the importance of understanding the context and triggers for student behavior, emphasizing the role of teacher-student relationships in effective discipline. He commented *"Also the teacher's relationship with the student, the teacher's interaction with them, what was the antecedent for the student to result that way?"* Another principal Highlighting the lasting impact of educational experiences beyond academic content, stressing the importance of the emotional and interpersonal aspects of learning and discipline stated, *"But the end result, to me, I tell teachers all the time, your content, I'm sorry, does not matter." "Because we adults don't remember anything we were taught in school. But you remember skills, you remember moments of how you felt."*

(RQ2) How do principals lived experiences impact their approach to administering discipline particularly student suspensions?

One principal recounted the use of corporal punishment in their upbringing in another country, indicating how such experiences might inform their understanding of discipline's role and effectiveness in educational settings. They noted *"I am from another country. the way I grew up, it was corporal punishment... teachers beat their children, their students, and it was allowed."*

Another principal contrasts by noting a different personal experience, emphasizing that their perspective is shaped by their individual background rather than a collective cultural practice. *"I didn't grow up like that personally. I can only speak on my experiences."*

The acknowledgment of bias towards black boys by one educator reflects a conscious effort to support a demographic that often faces disproportionate disciplinary actions. *"I have a bias. And my bias is really towards black boys... And I'm just trying to root for them."*

Recounting personal struggles with discipline during school years, another principal shared, *"In school, as a student, personally, I struggled a bit with discipline. I was suspended several times as a student, mostly in middle and high school, not elementary school, that I recall."*

"Interesting question. I will say that my implicit bias shows itself if I am frustrated or annoyed. And I have to be mindful of that..." This acknowledgment of the impact of personal feelings on disciplinary actions.

Cultural Influence on Discipline

A principal acknowledged the uniqueness of the perspective, shaped by their cultural background, and recognized the importance of being aware of these differences in the educational context. *"But I also realize my lens is different than somebody else's. So for me that grabs my attention as well."* .

"My county has tried to have professional development around disproportionate suspension data... But help me? No... I can't say that anything that I can, that stands out in my mind that I felt helped me determine how I handled it."

"Well, my parents put the fear of God in me... They valued education... perceive teachers as being the equivalent of doctors, lawyers, judges...".

"Discipline for me is something that it's two completely different worlds... it was a learning experience for me to practice discipline here in the US versus what I was accustomed to growing up in "another country".

"But again, that's kind of like my, I don't even know how to explain it. It's kind of like me reading the room reading, the aura reading the energy, what do I feel is best if it was my child, what would I want?".

"But there was also, you know, a dynamic of talking and teaching and making expectations clear."

Empathy and Cultural Relativity

"And if you know there's a piece that they share, that makes me reflect and think I'd like to say that I go and do that, rather than just jumping right to it."

"I would venture to say, no... I think my perspective is a little bit different. And I think I relate to them a little bit better... I don't believe that I show implicit bias when disciplining them."

"I think everyone comes with particular biases because we're people, and sometimes our frame of reference is what we've experienced...So, the short answer is yes."

"...knowing which students live with a grandparent or some other extended family member..."

"I think needs to be all-round education... so that the teachers know what really truly is a "suspendable offense."

. "...I think all parents and all families, I assume the positive that there is discipline at home, because in my background, there was discipline in my house, and I still got, you know, suspended."

One principal discussed how their own stress and workload can inadvertently influence their disciplinary decisions. *"It's my own emotions that that's where my bias comes in. And it's it's sad because it really comes down to like workflow and stress and like deadlines, right? So as as your list gets long, and you're trying to complete your duties, but yet you're you keep hearing calls on the walkie but you know, you got to meet with these teachers and you're just like, Can I have a day, you might be faster to say keep them home."*

Reflective Practice on Discipline

"I believe the thought is to punish a child, remove them from the environment, to hopefully teach them something so when they come back, they can change the behavior... Now, I think suspension is being used for a lot of other reasons."

"It takes a lot of constant monitoring, constant reminding your staff... This is where we are."

"So, my experience with being in various schools, where it's not consistent across discipline is has been handled, especially when I was an assistant principal..."

. "...in the late '90s... school started adopting the zero-tolerance policies because of things that were happening around the nation...people perceive how we've changed or modified discipline practices."

. "...as a teacher, I believed that effective planning and instructional delivery could prevent discipline problems... moving into administration, we follow the code of conduct..."

"My approach to discipline has had a lot to do with the psychology of things... So I've had to change the way that I do things."

"But then there are also ways to discipline students, you know, where they can still come in the school building and have a different experience."

"I have to you have to, I have to identify in those moments that I'm acting emotionally, I'm acting agitated. And that, before I provide a consequence, I will say many times I'm too emotional to give you a consequence."

Impact Assessment of Disciplinary Actions

"I don't believe it necessarily helps it... those students, when they're suspended, they come back to school, and you see the same type of behavior, it didn't go away, it didn't change, it didn't help."

A principal noted, *"I think that people have developed some biases about who's doing certain things...people just, in general, think that consequence is what needs to happen."*

"Suspension overall has a negative impact on school culture... it affects attendance and academic achievement."

. "So, because I can't hit a kid, and my staff cannot hit a kid... I've had to change the way that I do things, but to make it effective as well."

. "So, if you're not trying to prevent and you're not trying to support kids, yeah, you're going to suspend a lot of them."

"Like, there'll be times even like with, with even a fight with parents outside their home tomorrow, I need to kind of let things settle tonight in my evening and kind of think about all this

over again. And I will call you tomorrow, if I'm adding days or if like, like, that's kind of what I have, how I'll handle it, or why don't you keep them home, and I'll call you in the morning and let you know what we're doing."

Professional Growth Through Reflection

A principal openly acknowledged the disparity in out-of-school suspensions, particularly affecting black boys, underscoring a personal and systemic challenge that requires attention. *"I don't do a whole lot [of out-of-school suspensions] ... But oh, my boys, I'm telling you about black? Because that's what I got."*

"But I also do think across the county, making it more consistent with the options you have for interventions."

"As administrators, we're receiving a lot of pressure to...do something about certain behaviors...the pressure is coming from the community to do something about certain behaviors."

"During COVID, we had implicit bias training... allowed me more time to think about practices that pertain to my school..."

"No, there hasn't been any... No one sat us down as administrators and said, 'This is how you should approach discipline'... So, I've gone in and pulled some of the most outrageous referrals... and had them determine who was being biased towards whom."

"But again, that's kind of like my, like …I don't even know how to explain it. It's kind of like me reading the room reading the aura reading the energy, what do I feel is best if it was my child, what would I want?"

(RQ3) What professional experiences have contributed to principal's discipline decision making?

A principal questioned the influence of implicit bias in disciplinary actions, offering a personal reflection on the similarity between their own racial identity and that of the students in question. They reflected on the question, "*But I want to say no, and that's only because I believe that I can relate to them a little bit better and kind of understand*."

One Principal suggested that sharing a racial identity with black boys provides a unique perspective that influences their disciplinary approach positively. "*I would venture to say, no, because I am the same color as them. I see my son, you know, kind of, generally speaking, and I see, you know, someone that could be related to me."*

A principal commented, *"I don't think we, up until recently, some of the equity pieces and implicit biases that I have been involved in, in the county, but nothing that there are other things that I have done on my own, or that I have signed up to take part in just for my own personal benefits.*

A principal reflected, *"I think restorative practices has definitely helped me. You know, I've taken from the, you know, from part one to restorative conferencing. So, I've taken a lot of training for RP."*

According to a principal *"Well, I would like to say that no, I don't, but I'm sure that I do. Simply because I'm on the other end, I'm not a black boy... But I'm sure that there are times that I may lean towards one component then versus the other..."*

"And, and the reaction to that student was that the student was being aggressive, or the student was being inappropriate, the student was being unsafe. What I was found is that, you know, we took it very much out of proportion, that if a white student was to do that very same thing, we will look at it very differently."

"Back home, there is corporal punishment... When I finally joined the school system here, you realize that it's totally different. There is no such thing as corporal punishment in the schools here. So, you have to approach discipline in a totally different way."

"And while you could show me a lot of trainings, I, you know, I may still have those biases, people still may have those or those microaggressions are those components. And that could be across any race. But I don't know if there's a fix for that. But I think we could do a better job of at least putting it out there as a required piece. I also feel that some staff are going to do it just to dot their I's and cross their T's. So, they're not going to buy into it. So, if there was a way to get the staff to buy into that, I don't know if there's a fix for that. either."

Inconsistency in Training and Decision Making

"Because it's relational. Okay, so what the county needs to do with money is get coaching done on how to build, how to build relationships, and I keep using the word coaching because it's More than just a one-day PD, it's going to be you know, multiple steps."

"My experience with being in various schools, where it's not consistent across discipline is has been handled, especially when I was an assistant principal, because you work under different leaders, and they have different views or different beliefs, or even just different procedures, that often can be a struggle."

"So, all those things go into it. But, you know, like I said, having a pattern of consistency is important as well, to make sure that we are being fair, you know, because now we have to use, we do have I think the words fair and equity have to come into play."

A principal said, *"So I've done like the restorative practices piece, the zones of regulation pieces and components that go with that for the SEL."*

"The one thing that has bothered me for many years is that the number of opportunities for all students, but specifically black males, is the inability to allow them to take CTE programs at STEM."

"It was a learning experience for me to practice discipline here in the US versus what I was accustomed to growing up in "another country becoming a teacher in "another country."

"I mean, my county has tried to have professional development around disproportionate suspension data that come about and how we choose to discipline the different ethnic groups and cultures within our schools."

" I utilize all of those pieces before I'm deciding if I'm going to suspend, regardless of the race or background of the student, I always like to refer to the code of conduct, look at the levels, look at my options, and kind of gauge where they're at there."

"You know, having a pattern of consistency is important as well, to make sure that we are being fair, you know, because now we have to use, we do have I think the words fair and equity have to come into play. And in what order? I don't know, it all depends. But I do think we have to look at both."

"What I appreciated about that county was as wide as they were, I felt like they did far more than I feel like this county does. And they just, they just took it head on... We need to be honest about who we're teaching, we need to be honest about the fact that..."

"None... You really, there really isn't or hasn't been any, anything. No, no one said this is, or sat us down as administrators and say, this is how you should approach discipline."

(RQ4) What systems and supports are missing for principals that contribute to the disproportionate suspension of black boys?

"I try to find as much information about the incident that occurred. So, what, what did we talk about? Is it a fight? And if it was a fight, was there any injuries that anybody, you know, did anybody get hurt?"

"But not every principal. Like I said, I've been in multiple schools, not every principal is consistent. You go from school to school, it's different. How they're gauging that, and I don't know if there's a fix for that either."

"Yes, but it is a process. But yes, we do have some protocols, and there's some things that the county has done to, to make sure we are doing things like that."

"However, what is also a common trend that you see is your highest numbers are always your black boys. And while a population might be higher with black boys, that kind of makes a little bit of sense that because it's a higher population that they could be a higher value."

"The first one would be, which I don't know if you're familiar with this, whatever. But anyway, the book by Glenn Singleton called Courageous Conversations. It is a training that goes along with that."

"I think it takes a lot of constant monitoring, constant reminding your staff that this is this is where we are... I tell them that we need to take some time to know what it's like to be in the shoes of some of our kids."

"So what I have done, and what I plan to do at the beginning of next school year, again, is many of the teachers in the past have said they like that idea is I've gone in and pulled some of the most outrageous referrals that have been written for the school year, and I redact the names, and I put the consequences, and they have various consequences as options."

Supportive Administrative Network

"I also feel that some staff are going to do it just to dot their I's and cross their T's. So they're not going to buy into it. So, if there was a way to get the staff to buy into that, I don't know if there's a fix for that either. It's just like with any component that they have to do, or that's required, or that's optional for them, you get those same people..."

"So, like I said, having a pattern of consistency is important as well, to make sure that we are being fair, you know, because now we have to, we do have think the words fair and equity have to come into play."

"The function of suspension? I would say the function of a suspend function is to discipline the students."

"I think I prefer to do that I could not sleep with myself knowing that I would I have people who thought that way, about our students... While I like to respect my teachers, I always tell them, it goes two ways. And it goes both ways."

"But even now, you hear folks talking about hands being tied because the discipline is not strict enough... I think they need to educate us. And we need to educate."

"To me, suspension is not even really on the table outside of weapons and drugs and all that stuff. It's not even really on the table until we've tried a lot of supports, and a lot of lower-level consequences."

Glossary

Black boy: can be used interchangeably with male, used to reiterate that they are children (D., & Leaf, P. J. 2021).

Critical race theory (context of education): (CRT) is a set of legal theories contending that racism is normal, not aberrant, in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013) A explanatory tool for understanding educational issues of inequity in schools. The theory explains disparate disciplinary outcomes such as suspensions and expulsions, tracking and ability grouping, assignment to special education, curriculum opportunities, funding inequities, and even the rise in school takeovers by education management organizations. Ladson-Billings, G. (2017). "Makes me wanna holler": Refuting the "culture of poverty" discourse in urban schooling. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *673*(1), 80-90.

Cultural mismatching: when a student's behavior is misunderstood or misinterpreted by the teacher as defiant or noncompliant (Townsend, 2000).

Discipline policies: A school discipline policy is a set of rules and consequences governing student behavior within an educational institution. It outlines expectations, prohibited actions, and disciplinary measures to maintain a positive and safe learning environment.

Disproportionality: Disproportionality in suspension, as per Skiba, is the unequal distribution of school suspensions among demographic groups, particularly affecting minorities. Skiba emphasizes addressing and rectifying these disparities in disciplinary practices.

Implicit bias: (a) is pervasive, (b) is dissociated from conscious intent and values, (c) reflects preferences for one’s own group or dominant groups in society, and (d) influences behavior. Implicit bias is an umbrella term for thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of which we may be unaware but that still create disparities in treatment (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013).

Intersectionality: The study of overlapping or intersecting social identities. The theory suggests that—and seeks to examine how—various biological, social, and cultural categories […] other sectarian axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels. The theory proposes that we should think of each element or trait of a person as inextricably linked with all of the other elements in order to fully understand one's identity.

Out-of-school suspension: Refers to when a student is temporarily removed from their regular school for at least half a day for disciplinary purposes to another setting, such as their home or a behavior center. Removals are counted as an instance of out-of-school suspension regardless of whether educational services are provided.

Racial and ethnic groups: This report uses "Hispanic or Latino of any race"; "Native American" instead of "American Indian or Alaska Native"; "Pacific Islander" instead of "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander"; "Black or African American." (Leung-Gagné, M.et.al, 2022).

Students with disabilities: Includes an Individualized Education Program (IEP) as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) but does not include students receiving aids and services under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Suspension rate: The percentage of students, based on the student group population, who received at least one out-of-school suspension. It does not represent the number of suspensions overall. A student suspended multiple times is only counted once when calculating this rate.

Suspension gap – The difference in suspension rates between the two groups. We discuss suspension gaps in two ways: absolute percentage differences between the two groups (e.g., 5 percentage point gap) and the relative magnitude of one group's rate versus another (e.g., four times as likely to be suspended).

Whiteness (White privilege): Whiteness is a forced group membership that originated by oppressing people of color (Williams, 2020)

Zero tolerance: Zero Tolerance is a strict policy initially designed for drug enforcement but later applied in schools during the early 1990s. It mandates predetermined severe consequences without considering the behavior's seriousness, mitigating circumstances, or situational context. The prevalence of such policies in American schools is challenging to estimate due to the absence of a single definition.

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