ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE SUBJECTIVE EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN A LARGE SCHOOL DISTRICT
	Anita C. Walls, Doctor of Education, 2019
Dissertation directed by:	Dr. Jean Snell, College of Education

The problem investigated for this dissertation was the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices across a large, suburban school district adjacent to a major metropolitan area. The purpose of this descriptive, mixed methods study was to examine within five elementary schools if and how student discipline referrals varied across the subgroups of grade, race/ethnicity, and gender, and the reasons teachers gave for subjective discipline referrals. In addition, this study inquired into principals' processes for determining when a subjective student discipline referral warrants a suspension, and how their perspectives, beliefs, and experiences influence their use of exclusionary discipline actions. Student discipline referrals and suspension data were collected and reviewed from five elementary schools in Success Public Schools, as well as interviews from the principals in the identified schools.

The findings from the examination of the sampling of classroom referrals and suspension data revealed that African American male students had two to three times

as many student discipline referrals and suspensions as African American females in each school. Across the total population of all five schools for student discipline referrals, there were 49% for subjective offenses and 51% for objective offenses.

In addition to examining the student discipline referrals, this study also investigated the principals' beliefs. All of the principals who were interviewed for this study reported that they believe that suspensions should be implemented as a last resort and that alternatives should be considered, such as the following: after school detention, positive behavior intervention supports, and restorative practices.

This study confirms and highlights that students who are referred for subjective discipline offenses are suspended from school about half of the time. In addition, descriptions of behaviors that triggered a discipline referral for a subjective offense reveal that the interpretation of student behaviors heavily relies on teachers' judgements and their perceptions of what constitutes disrespect and disruption. Moreover, the study revealed that how administrators respond to subjective student discipline referrals varied from school to school.

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE SUBJECTIVE EXCLUSIONARY
DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN A LARGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

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Dedication

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, I thank you for leading and guiding me through this process. Thank you for completing the work you began in me.

To my parents, who made sacrifices so that I could be positioned to make a difference in children's lives. You instilled in me the importance of hard work, dedication, and resilience in achieving my goals.

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My fellow cohort members, we have been through this journey together. No matter the ups, downs, late night assignments, and headaches . . . I could not have made it without each of you!

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List of Abbreviations

CRT   Critical Race Theory

IIRP   International Institute for Restorative Practices

IRB   Institutional Review Board

MSDE   Maryland State Department of Education

PBIS   Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

SRRH   Student Rights and Responsibilities Handbook

SPS   Success Public Schools

Section I: Introduction

The overuse of exclusionary discipline practices, particularly for African American males, has become the subject of increased concern for educators and policy makers in recent years. Former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, stood on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama and spoke on the importance of strengthening civil rights enforcement in education, highlighting the alarmingly high rates of exclusionary discipline practices across the nation. Furthermore, he spotlighted the fact that there are significant disparities in the use of suspension and expulsion when comparing the rates for White students versus African American students (Duncan, 2010). Duncan suggested that students with disabilities and Black students, especially males, were suspended far more often than their White counterparts and often punished more severely for the same offenses. These exclusions from school, both suspensions and expulsions, cause several possible issues for students. Prior research has found that suspensions increased the probability of students being involved in the juvenile justice system, a higher rate of grade retention, and school dropout (Sullivan et al., 2009; Townsend, 2000). Students who are excluded from school are denied their access to education. And while some may argue that students are excluded due to their violation of school and district policies and practices, what more than 20 years of research into the use of exclusionary discipline has shown, particularly for African American males, is that many of these exclusions are subjectively enforced by teachers and administrators (Skiba et al., 2009).

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During my sixteen years as an African American female teacher and administrator in a school district similar to the one in this study, I have come to understand that my strict adherence to the district discipline policies and my execution of discipline decisions reinforced and perpetuated these problematic discipline practices without regard to the long-term effects. I contributed to the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices that has impacted many students, particularly African American male students, in a negative way. I am now on a journey of advocating for the rights of our most underserved students in communities similar to the school district in this study, and to reduce discipline disparities related to race/ethnicity and gender in schools. As a nation, there must be a relentless focus to disrupt the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices in schools so all students can succeed.

Problem Statement

The problem investigated is the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices, particularly for African American males, across a large, suburban school district adjacent to a major metropolitan area, which will be referenced as Success Public Schools (SPS). Exclusionary discipline, or the practice of removing students from the classroom in response to disruptive behavior (suspensions and expulsions), has long been an accepted discipline practice in our education system nationally and locally. The 2016 SPS Strategic Plan contained procedures to Improve Discipline Management across the district. The district provided a standard for discipline and the resources necessary for effective and consistent discipline management both in and outside the classroom. However, this plan has not yet helped the district successfully

address the fact that it currently has the highest number of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions in the state of Maryland (Maryland State Department of Education, 2016).

The overuse of exclusionary discipline has particularly impacted male students of color. Male students of color, specifically Black and Hispanic, are suspended at high rates, perpetuating racial and educational inequality (Skiba, 2010). The data showing that male students of color receive significantly more in- and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions than other races are not new. According to Skiba (2010), for over 30 years, persistent discipline disparities for African American students has been documented in national, state, district, and school level data. The overuse of exclusionary school discipline practices put racially and ethnically diverse students at increased risk for a range of negative outcomes because the amount of time students are in an academic setting is among the strongest predictors of achievement. Therefore, the exclusion of students of color from school through suspensions increases their risk of poor educational outcomes (Skiba, 2002).

This study closely examined what has been done in SPS to decrease the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices, including implementation of new, alternative, positive discipline systems, revision of the *Students Rights and Responsibilities Handbook* (SRRH), and provision of equity training. Nevertheless, there are still significant inconsistencies and gaps in the level of implementation and resources necessary to address the problem of persistent disparities in exclusionary discipline practices. Though the district has made a variety of attempts to address the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices, what does not yet appear to be on the

radar of district leadership is the role of student discipline referrals in perpetuating gross disparities in disciplinary outcomes. Furthermore, the district leadership has not addressed what disciplinary actions are imposed on subjective offenses, nor have they provided their principals with training regarding the selection of disciplinary consequences for these subjective referrals.

Therefore, given that the instances of subjective exclusionary discipline continue to be applied to African American males at high rates across SPS, my review of the research and data suggests that further investigation is warranted to determine how subjective student discipline referrals can lead to exclusionary discipline consequences for African American male students. Little research has been done on the subjectivity of disciplinary referrals for "inappropriate" behavior. Thus, my study focused on student discipline referral practices at the individual teacher level. I explored specifically how subjective student discipline referrals and teacher and principal beliefs, perceptions, and experiences may be playing a role in the perpetuation of subjective exclusionary discipline in SPS.

Scope of the Problem

National Level. Based on U.S. Department of Education 2011−2012 data (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014), persistent disparities in school discipline are not new, but have greatly increased over the years. According to the data, nationally, the suspension rate for all students rose from 7% to 11% between 1974 and 2010, and in that same timeframe the rate for African American students jumped from 10% to 24%. The data indicated that Black students represented 33% of the population of students who were suspended once from school, 42% of the

students who were suspended more than once from school, and 34% of the students who were expelled. Given their share of the total student population (16%), Black students are overrepresented in all these disciplinary actions. In addition, according to the data, Black, male students faced a much higher rate of out-of-school suspensions. Although these students were only 8% of the overall male student population enrollment, they accounted for 25% of all reported suspensions. Data on expulsions also revealed a significant gap for Black, male students compared to other groups. They made up 23% of all male expulsions (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). A 2009–2010 survey of 72,000 schools (Kindergarten through high school) showed that although Black students were only 18% of those enrolled in the schools sampled, they accounted for 35% of those suspended once, 46% of those suspended more than once, and 39% of all expulsions. Overall, Black students were three and a half times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers (Lewin, 2012). Figure 1 shows in detail how each group of students was underrepresented or overrepresented.

Figure 1

Government Accountability Office Describes Groups of Students Underrepresented or Overrepresented by Suspensions

This chart shows whether each group of students was underrepresented or overrepresented among students suspended out of school. For example, boys were overrepresented by about 18 percentage points because they made up about 51% of all students, but nearly 70% of the students suspended out of school.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education, Civil Rights Data Collection. | GAO-18-258

(U.S. Government Accountability Office)

In comparison, the number of Hispanic students who were suspended or expelled was about the same as their proportion of the enrollment. They composed 24% of the student population and represented 23% of the single out-of-school suspensions, 21% of multiple suspensions, and 22% of expelled students. White students, by contrast, were underrepresented in all disciplinary actions in relation to their composition of the enrolled population. Fifty-one percent of all enrolled students were white; however, white students represented only 35% of students who received one out-of-school suspension and 36% of students who were expelled (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

In an attempt to address the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices and the disparities in discipline practices for students of color nationally, in 2010 under the Obama Administration, former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, and former U.S. Attorney General, Eric Holder, each addressed a conference of civil rights lawyers in Washington, D.C. and affirmed their department's commitment to remedying harsh and inequitable discipline practices (Losen, 2013). As part of their promised efforts, they indicated that new guidelines would be released to help states and districts determine whether their discipline policies may have an unlawful impact under the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI regulations. In January of 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, and the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, issued a national "guidance" to assist public elementary and secondary schools in meeting their obligations under Title VI to administer student discipline without discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin.

State Level. To address the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices at the state level, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) has taken a progressive approach to reforming statewide discipline practices. In 2012, MSDE released two reports, *School Discipline and Academic Success: Related Parts of Maryland's Education Reform*, and *A Safe School, Successful Students, and A Fair and Equitable Disciplinary Process Go Hand in Hand*, that outlined reforms focused on rehabilitation rather than punitive discipline (MSDE, 2012). In July 2012, the MSDE issued a third report on school discipline practices, declaring that school discipline and academic success are equal partners in education reform. The report noted that school discipline practices, particularly out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, are linked to academic achievement for the simple reason that in order for students to have an opportunity to receive a world-class education, they first and foremost need to be in school. The State Board's report emphasized that out-of-school suspensions and expulsions should be used as a last resort, but, if necessary, they must be used equitably across the student population (MSDE, 2012).

In a further effort to reduce suspension rates, the Maryland General Assembly passed a bill to eliminate suspension of young learners and to create a commission to study restorative practices. The passage of SB651/HB425 bans the suspension and expulsion of pre-Kindergarten through second grade students, except in extreme circumstances where the student would create an imminent risk of serious harm as determined by the administrator in consultation with a mental health professional (MSDE, 2018). Additionally, in January 2014 the State Board adopted regulations that govern student discipline in Maryland public school. The board adopted a disciplinary

policy that required all public school districts to revise their discipline codes (St. George, 2014). Districts had to incorporate restorative justice and positive behavioral interventions into their codes, use suspension and expulsion as a last resort and only for major offenses, and monitor the discipline data for minority and special education students to assess disparities in discipline rates (Clark, 2014; St. George, 2014).

The impact of Maryland's change in disciplinary policies has been significant, cutting the overall suspension rate by nearly 40% between 2008 and 2014. Overall, the rate of removals for all students in Maryland declined between 2009–2010 and 2017–2018. Middle and high school student removals dropped from 10.4% to 6.9%, and elementary school student removals dropped from 2.8% to 2.3%. However, even as it appears that Maryland has succeeded in lowering its use of suspensions and expulsion to discipline students, the pattern of disparities widened. The risk ratio (the ratio between suspension rates of African American students and White students) has actually increased over the time period in which the use of exclusionary discipline has decreased overall. In fact, since 2008 African Americans have gone from being 1.95 times more likely to receive a suspension than Whites, to over 3 times more likely (MSDE, 2014). And more recently, according to the Kirwan Institute, African American students, and especially African American males, are disciplined more often and receive more out-of-school suspensions and expulsions than White students across the state of Maryland (Staas, 2014).

In 2017, a district-by-district examination of suspension rates in Maryland showed that there were racial disparities in suspension rates in every Maryland school district (Maryland Public Schools Suspensions by School and Major Offense

Category In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions 2017–2018,

MSDE, 2014). The report indicated that during the 2017–2018 school year, there

were a total of 76,719 in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Of the 76,719

suspensions, 46,783 were African American students. In the same year, the total

public school enrollment in Maryland was 886, 221, and of that total enrollment

338,454 were White, 301,781 were Black/African American, and 145,800 were

Hispanic.

A district-by-district analysis further reveals that out of 24 school districts,

African American students have the highest number of in-school, and out-of-school

suspensions and expulsions in 16 school districts. Similarly, in a study of school

discipline in Maryland, it was revealed that during the 2009–2010, 2010–2011, and

2011–2012 school years in all 24 Maryland school systems, Black students received

out-of-school suspension or expulsion at more than twice the rate of White students

(Prowski et al, 2014). See Figure 2 for the total number of in- and out-of-school

suspensions and expulsions by major offense category for the 2016–2017 school year

in the state. See Figure 3 for the total number of in-school suspensions by major

offense category for the 2017–2018 school year in the state. See Figure 4 for the total

number of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions by major category for the

2017–2018 school year in the state.

Figure 2

MSDE In- and Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion Data for the 2016–2017 School Year

State Totals

Number of Suspensions and Expulsions by Major Offense Category
2016-2017 In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions
Maryland Public Schools

Description of Data	Total	Attendance	Dangerous Substances	Weapons	Attacks/ Threats/ Fighting	Arson/ Fire/ Explosives	Sex Offenses	Disrespect/ Disruption	Other
All	76,719	1,302	3,403	1,852	32,783	512	1,632	31,975	3,260
Male	54,829	777	2,499	1,490	23,237	391	1,384	22,557	2,494
Female	21,890	525	904	362	9,546	121	248	9,418	766
American Indian or Alaska Native	208	4	12	6	100	1	3	71	11
Asian	583	19	59	27	257	5	15	171	30
Black or African American	46,783	495	1,451	1,081	20,936	298	933	19,633	1,956
Hispanic/Latino of any race	7,165	99	572	279	2,826	91	208	2,765	325
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	61	0	3	4	27	0	0	25	2
White	17,964	600	1,159	379	6,999	99	387	7,572	769
Two or more races	3,955	85	147	76	1,638	18	86	1,738	167
Students with Disabilities	21,042	202	687	502	9,492	134	469	8,661	895

Figure 3

MSDE In-School Suspension Data for the 2017–2018 School Year

State Totals

Number of Suspensions by Major Offense Category
2017-2018 In-School Suspensions
Maryland Public Schools

Description of Data	Total	Attendance	Dangerous Substances	Weapons	Attacks/ Threats/ Fighting	Arson/ Fire/ Explosives	Sex Offenses	Disrespect/ Disruption	Other
All	12,106	1,017	382	95	3,250	23	213	6,524	602
Male	9,011	617	288	79	2,568	18	189	4,812	440
Female	3,095	400	94	16	682	5	24	1,712	162
American Indian or Alaska Native	33	2	0	1	6	0	1	21	2
Asian	114	7	8	5	43	1	4	40	6
Black or African American	5,305	322	73	26	1,438	9	81	3,123	233
Hispanic/Latino of any race	1,262	117	44	21	309	3	36	678	54
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	13	1	1	0	1	0	1	8	1
White	4,494	487	230	37	1,227	9	77	2,170	257
Two or more races	885	81	26	5	226	1	13	484	49
Students with Disabilities	2,587	168	47	19	753	5	50	1,431	114

Figure 4

MSDE Out-of-School Suspension Data for the 2017–2018 School Year

State Totals

Number of Suspensions and Expulsions by Major Offense Category
2017-2018 Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions
Maryland Public Schools

Description of Data	Total	Attendance	Dangerous Substances	Weapons	Attacks/ Threats/ Fighting	Arson/ Fire/ Explosives	Sex Offenses	Disrespect/ Disruption	Other
All	63,664	0	4,100	1,628	28,988	536	1,390	24,873	2,149
Male	44,580	0	3,041	1,291	20,017	407	1,177	17,023	1,624
Female	19,084	0	1,059	337	8,971	129	213	7,850	525
American Indian or Alaska Native	145	0	3	4	58	1	0	69	10
Asian	545	0	98	20	255	12	13	114	33
Black or African American	39,173	0	1,522	969	18,883	289	766	15,425	1,319
Hispanic/Latino of any race	6,659	0	715	231	2,719	109	213	2,442	230
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	68	0	3	1	27	0	4	31	2
White	13,911	0	1,558	319	5,610	105	332	5,516	471
Two or more races	3,163	0	201	84	1,436	20	62	1,276	84
Students with Disabilities	18,209	0	800	452	8,711	137	409	7,053	647

As a result of these persistent disparities, Maryland began requiring each school system to publish an annual report detailing the number of students subjected to out-of-school suspension, disaggregated by race, gender, and disability status. School systems with large disparities in exposure to suspension amongst different subgroups are required to make substantive steps toward reducing the gap. More specifically, the system must address the disparity within one year, and resolve it within three years. If the school system does not reach this goal, it can be subjected to state intervention (MSDE, 2013).

District Level. According to MSDE (2017), SPS has the highest number of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspension, and expulsions in the state of Maryland with 14,533 during 2016–2017 school year, an increase from 12,287 during 2015–2016. An analysis of schools within SPS during the 2016–2017 school year,

revealed that 62 out of 208 schools suspended 10% or more of their enrollment.

Maryland schools that have been identified as having exceeded established

suspension or truancy rates—schools where 10% or more of their enrollment was

suspended—are now required by state law to implement a positive behavioral

intervention and support program or an alternative behavior modification program in

collaboration with MSDE. Of the 62 schools identified, 19 are elementary, 22 are

middle, and 21 are high schools. Figure 5 shows in-school suspension data for the

2017–2018 school year in the district.

Figure 5

MSDE In-School Suspension Data for the 2017–2018 School Year for SPS

Number of Suspensions by Major Offense Category
2017-2018 In-School Suspensions
Maryland Public Schools

Description of Data	Total	Attendance	Dangerous Substances	Weapons	Attacks/ Threats/ Fighting	Arson/ Fire/ Explosives	Sex Offenses	Disrespect/ Disruption	Other
All	1,646	0	25	5	485	8	32	1,017	74
Male	1,161	0	15	4	365	5	26	695	51
Female	485	0	10	1	120	3	6	322	23
American Indian or Alaska Native	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
Asian	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0
Black or African American	1,187	0	14	3	391	5	16	702	56
Hispanic/Latino of any race	389	0	11	2	73	3	13	271	16
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	0
White	37	0	0	0	13	0	1	22	1
Two or more races	21	0	0	0	7	0	1	12	1
Students with Disabilities	374	0	1	2	127	0	9	218	17

In addition to the overuse of exclusionary discipline, discipline disparities for

African American males are a persistent trend in SPS. A review of the 2013

Discipline Report from the Civil Rights Data Collection found there were 13,506

students who received at least one out-of-school suspension in SPS. The student

profile of those suspended were as follows: 83.2% Black, 26.2% Hispanic, 2.1%

White, and 2.3% other. There were 2,164 students who received at least one in-school suspension. Of the total number of students suspended, 78.6% were Black, 14.9% were Hispanic, 2.5% were White, and 3% were other. The report further revealed that out of 187 students who received expulsions in 2013 from SPS, all were students of color: 71.1% Black, 25.7% Hispanic, 0% White: and <1% other. Based on measures identified by the state, these discipline statistics reveal a disproportionate effect on minority students in the district, given there are schools within the district that meet or exceed 3.0 on both the risk ratio and state comparison measures. Figure 6 details the out-of-school suspension and expulsion data for the 2017–2018 school year in the district.

Figure 6

MSDE Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion Data for the 2017–2018 School Year for SPS

Number of Suspensions and Expulsions by Major Offense Category
2017-2018 Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions
Maryland Public Schools

Description of Data	Total	Attendance	Dangerous Substances	Weapons	Attacks/ Threats/ Fighting	Arson/ Fire/ Explosives	Sex Offenses	Disrespect/ Disruption	Other
All	13,370	0	877	357	5,086	151	278	6,103	518
Male	9,238	0	685	284	3,514	110	217	4,050	378
Female	4,132	0	192	73	1,572	41	61	2,053	140
American Indian or Alaska Native	24	0	0	1	12	0	0	9	2
Asian	59	0	4	4	26	1	2	16	6
Black or African American	10,709	0	577	247	4,220	94	201	4,955	415
Hispanic/Latino of any race	2,108	0	253	86	647	51	64	927	80
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	25	0	1	0	11	0	3	9	1
White	256	0	30	9	105	5	5	95	7
Two or more races	189	0	12	10	65	0	3	92	7
Students with Disabilities	3,690	0	202	95	1,419	25	79	1,705	165

On March 21, 2019, civil rights groups, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., the Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Disability Rights Maryland, the National Center for Youth Law, and the Public Justice Center sent a

letter to SPS demanding changes to discipline policies and practices that

disproportionately impact students of color and students with disabilities. The letter

called for several immediate actions the district had to take, as follows:

1. Revising its policies and procedures to align with Maryland state and

   federal laws;

2. Providing comprehensive training and accountability for staff on laws

   governing student discipline, the use of school police and security

   referrals, and the effective implementation of alternatives to

   exclusionary discipline;

3. Strengthening resources for screening suspected disabilities among

   students exhibiting behavioral challenges; and

4. Engaging key stakeholders, including students, parents, and their

   advocates, in the process of discipline reform.

The Impact of the Problem

      Academic Effects. The scope of the problem nationally, statewide, and

district-level has a direct impact on student outcomes. The consequences of not

addressing the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices with regard

to minority students have been documented in the research literature. Skiba (2009)

has linked a number of negative academic outcomes with out-of-school suspension

and expulsion, including lower school achievement, and increased school dropout. A

U.S. Government Accountability Office report (2018) noted the research has shown

that children suspended from school lose important instructional time, are less likely

to graduate on time, and are more likely to repeat a grade and drop out of school

altogether. Furthermore, research suggests that its use does little to improve the overall safety of schools (Girvan et al., 2017).

When African American students miss school due to exclusionary discipline practices, graduation rates, dropout rates, and college enrollment are impacted. A single suspension can negatively impact a student's life long-term. One out-of school suspension or expulsion doubles the likelihood that a student repeats a grade, and this experience is one of the strongest predictors for dropping out of school (Kang-Brown et al., 2013). Elias (2013) asserts that suspension is a top predictor of dropping out and that educators must confront this practice if we are ever to end the "dropout crisis" or the so-called achievement gap. Losen and Wald (2003) noted that suspension is being used more frequently as a discipline practice. Yet, his and others research has shown that removing children from school does not improve their behavior. Instead, it greatly increases the likelihood that they will drop out and ultimately become part of the criminal justice system.

The overuse of exclusionary discipline has a profound academic impact on African American students' academic achievement. According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), students who missed 10 or more days of schools scored disproportionately in the bottom quartile on both reading and mathematics assessments, and were less likely to score in the top half of the student population. Across SPS, minority students are most negatively impacted by the overuse of suspensions. As seen in Figure 7, out-of-school suspensions resulted in 37,437 school days missed for all students in SPS. Black or African American students missed 31,876, and Hispanic students of any race missed 4,274 days of school.

Figure 7

Civil Rights Data Collection Survey Year 2015, School Days Missed in SPS
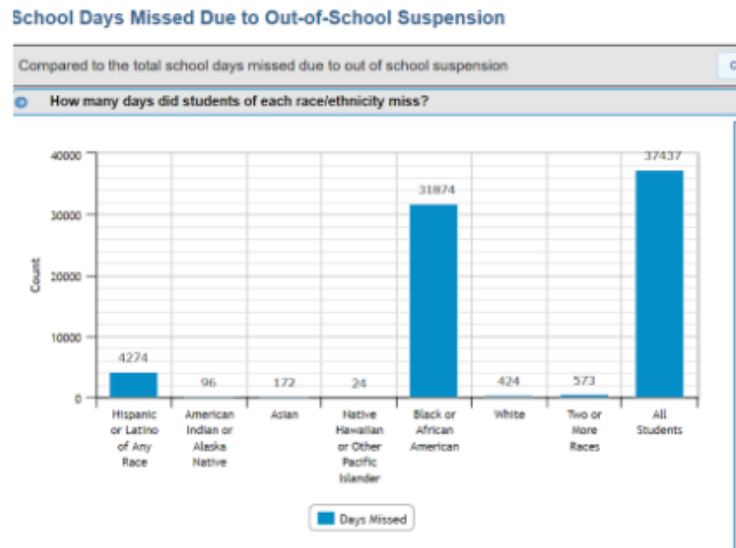
School-to-Prison Pipeline. In addition to academic effects, another

consequence of not addressing the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline

practices with African American students is the connection of these practices to the

juvenile justice system. The national research literature has recently begun to show

how the school-to-prison pipeline can be perpetuated through the overuse of

exclusionary discipline practices, particularly for African American males. According

to Elias (2013), a teacher's decision to refer students for punishment can lead to

students being pushed out of the classroom and thus much more likely to be

introduced into the criminal justice system. Policies that encourage police presence at

schools; harsh tactics, including physical restraint; and automatic punishments that

result in suspensions and out-of-class time are huge contributors to the school-to-

prison pipeline, but the problem is more complex than that (Elias, 2013). Similar to Elias, Heitzeg (2009) and the American Civil Liberties Union (n.d.) determined that the school-to-prison pipeline is facilitated through a combination of factors: increased police presence on school campuses, providing officers with more power to discipline students, criminalizing minor code of conduct infractions, failing schools that are highly segregated by race and income and poorly resourced, and the adoption of zero tolerance policies. These researchers uncovered how a police presence and the authority to directly discipline students have bypassed the traditional school discipline system and accelerated students into the criminal justice system.

For example, in the United States, over 70% of the students involved in school-related arrests or referred to law enforcement were Hispanic or Black (Education Week, 2013). More locally, according to Maryland Public Schools Arrest Data, out of 2,761 students arrested in the state of Maryland, 588 were students from SPS, the most in the state in comparison to other districts. Of the 2,761 students arrested in Maryland, 1,816 were Black or African American, 586 White, 241 Hispanic, and 25 were Asian. Of the 588 students arrested in SPS, 517 were high school, 62 middle, and 9 elementary. Furthermore, 225 were female, 363 were male, 522 Black or African American, and 50 students were Hispanic. Out of these 588 students, 492 were suspended in conjunction with arrest, 256 as assault for arresting offense, and 19 expelled.

Unfortunately, out-of-school suspension and expulsion serve as key predictors of a child's future involvement with the criminal justice system. Students from two groups, racial minorities and children with disabilities, are disproportionately

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represented in the school-to-prison pipeline. Black children constitute 18% of students, but they account for 46% of those suspended more than once (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). According to an NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund report (2017), once a student is involved in the criminal justice system, the student's personal and academic problems grow exponentially. The report further states that the effects of persistent disparities in discipline, particularly when they involve expulsion, arrest, and incarceration, continue to be felt by Black students throughout their lives (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017).

Causal Systems Analysis: Potential Causes to the Problem

Much research has been devoted to uncovering, understanding, and eliminating the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices and persistent disparities for African American male students. One of the key causes to the pervasive disparities in exclusionary school discipline appears to include an interplay of factors beginning at the policy level with the use of system-wide "zero tolerance" policies. Researchers have shown how student misbehavior also plays a role in the perpetuation of exclusionary discipline practices, even though there are several other factors to consider when pointing to student misbehavior as the primary cause for exclusionary discipline. These factors include parental support, trauma, and socio-economic indicators (Griffith & Tyner, 2019; Heilbrun et al., 2017). Additionally, the national research highlights how teacher practices and the school environment both contribute to the perpetuation of disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline (Elliot et al., 1996). The subjectivity in teacher referrals at the classroom level also

must be considered in the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices (Skiba, 1997).

See Figure 8 for potential causes of the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices.

Figure 8

Causes of the Overuse of Subjective Exclusionary Discipline Practices

Causal System Analysis:

	System Level "Zero Tolerance" Policies	School Environment	Student Misbehavior	

"Zero tolerance" policies"

Student Rights and Responsibilities Handbook/Code of conduct

Inconsistent policy implementation

Critical race theory

Inconsistent implementation of behavior plans/ Management

No implementation of behavior plans/Management

Punitive/Negative disciplinary approaches and environment

Student trauma

Social and economic (poverty) factors

Poor academics

Environmental factors

Poor peer relationships

Parental involvement

The Overuse of Subjective Exclusionary Discipline Practices

Poor relationships & communication

Low teacher skill/capacity

Behavior management/ Responding to misbehavior

Teacher implicit bias

Administrator implicit bias in decision-making

Subjective offenses

Teacher Practices

Classroom Referrals

"Zero Tolerance" Discipline Policies. A number of authors have argued that the increased use of system-wide zero tolerance policies are directly responsible for increasing persistent disparities in school discipline (Solari, 2007). According to Skiba (2010) and others (Solari, 2007) stated that the adoption of zero tolerance policies that prescribe mandatory sanctions, such as expulsion or suspension for specific infractions, were implemented because schools were becoming more violent, and are responsible for increasing racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline. In addition, the policies apply prescribed, mandatory sanctions, such as expulsion or suspension, for an infraction with minimal consideration given to the circumstances

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or consequences of the offense. A key component to zero tolerance is the focus on removing disruptive students from the learning environment. Hence, schools increased the use of suspensions (in-and out-of-school) and expulsions for both violent and minor behavioral infractions. In American public schools, Black students are disciplined more often and receive harsher punishments than their peers of all other races (Skiba, 2010).

Although zero tolerance policies were instituted in American public schools over 20 years ago, their ongoing use today continues to funnel students, particularly minority and special education students, into the school-to-prison pipeline. Over the years, schools have become a gateway to the criminal justice system—a consequence of a culture of zero tolerance and the increase of school resource (police) officers. This development is widespread in schools and deprives students of their fundamental right to an education (Skiba, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 19,000 police officers are stationed in schools across the U.S. The presence of police in schools disproportionately impacts students of color. The reliance of school resource officers compounds the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline and focuses on the punishment and removal of students (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017).

Zero tolerance policies contribute to the increased rates of exclusionary discipline for male students of color. One teacher stated, "African American boys are punished to the extreme in comparison to other demographics. Everybody knows this is a true statement, but no one does anything about it." The teacher further added, "I feel that these issues are systemic. They are tied to racial and ethnic tensions that date

back decades" (Griffith & Tyner, 2019, p, 25). According to Losen et al. (2015), the implementation of zero tolerance disproportionately impacts minority youth by suspending them at a much higher rate than their peers. In all grade levels, Black males, followed by Black females (and Hispanic males), typically experience the highest suspension rates when accounting for differences in enrollment by race and gender (Losen et al., 2015).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework in which education researchers, policy makers, and practitioners deconstruct oppressive policies, such as zero tolerance policies. By placing race at the center of analysis, CRT scholars interrogate policies and practices that are taken for granted to uncover the overt and covert ways that racist ideologies, structures, and institutions create and maintain persistent discipline disparities (Soloranzo, 1998; Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT can help to uncover how race, bias, and inequitable policies and exclusionary discipline practices impact male students of color and maintain racial inequality, and can help situate zero tolerance discipline policies (Billings & Tate, 1995). As such, CRT can assist in explaining how educators' racialized biases toward students can influence their decisions regarding which classroom behaviors provoke a referral and then lead to exclusionary discipline actions.

School Environment. The school environment plays a critical role in both promoting and decreasing exclusionary discipline practices (Heilbrun et al., 2017). A positive school climate has several favorable benefits to students, including higher student engagement, positive student adjustment, better student behavior, and lower suspension rates (Shirley & Cornell, 2012). In contrast, students who perceive their

school climate as punitive have more strained relationships with adults in the school (Daly et al., 2014). Skiba and Reece suggested that a punitive and stringent disciplinary climate that dominates schools leads to two important difficulties. First, like most approaches that rely solely on punishment, such a punitive disciplinary climate has not been effective, despite national policy explicitly encouraging tougher responses. Second, for special educators, overreliance on suspension and expulsion represents an important barrier that transforms any attempt to better meet the emotional and behavioral needs of students (Skiba & Reece, 2000).

Researchers have shown that how schools are structured has an impact on the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices. Schools with a strong, consistent, and equitable student disciplinary structure and student support have lower overall suspension rates. Yet, even when strong disciplinary structures and supports are in place in schools, there are often differential levels of implementation for major and minor infractions, which perpetuates persistent discipline disparities for male students of color. School discipline involves complex dynamics in which teachers and administrators must carefully navigate to ensure school safety, while simultaneously implementing equitable discipline practices (Skiba, 2000). According to Epstein and MacIver (1992), how schools structure students' opportunities to learn has been shown to influence academic achievement. The influence of the school environment points to several unique academic and social challenges faced by African American males that include: relatively low academic performance, tendency to avoid academic engagement and competition, decreasing college attendance rates, and their disproportionate numbers of suspensions and expulsions, (Epstein & MacIver, 1992).

Student Misbehavior. Student misbehavior in the classroom has also been shown to contribute to the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices. Students come to school from various environmental and family influences, both positive and negative that shape their behavior in class. According to Epstein and MacIver (1992), students are influenced by the family, school, and community contexts in which they develop. She referred to the three contexts as "spheres of influence," which overlap to a greater or lesser extent depending on the nature and degree of communications and collaborative activities among school personnel, parents, and community members (Epstein & MacIver, 1992).

Data on student misbehavior in school show that students' gender, age, and race are associated with the occurrence of fatal and nonfatal violent incidents. Male students are significantly more likely to bully others, be in fights, be threatened or injured with weapons, drink alcohol and smoke marijuana, and be involved in other delinquent and criminal offenses (Brener et al., 1999). As a result of their misbehavior, male students are more frequently subject to the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices.

In a report entitled *Discipline Reform through the Eyes of Teachers*, Griffith and Tyner (2019) conducted a study using a survey sample comprised of a nationally representative group of White and African American teachers in the U.S. who teach grades 3–12. The survey asked teachers a wide range of questions about how discipline policy is carried out in their schools. The data revealed that regardless of race, teachers in high-poverty schools report higher rates of verbal disrespect and physical fighting than teachers in low-poverty schools, and they are more than three

times as likely to say they have been "physically attacked" by a student. Unsurprisingly, these behaviors make it difficult for teachers to do their jobs, and more than half of teachers in high-poverty schools say student behavior problems are contributing to "a disorderly or unsafe environment that makes it difficult for many students to learn" (Griffith & Tyner, 2019). Another teacher shared the following: "The school system's discipline policies don't support the classroom teacher. I have observed students with chronic behavior problems repeat poor behaviors with little consequence." Another teacher specifically reported, "Over the course of my career, disrespect for adults on campus has grown . . . When the profession is disrespected as a whole, it's only logical that children are learning that it's alright to treat teachers as society does" (Griffith & Tyner, 2019).

The home environment is also an important influence on student misbehavior. Snyder and Patterson (1987) concluded that certain parenting styles, disciplinary approaches, parental monitoring, family problem-solving strategies, and levels of conflict within the home all are predictive of delinquency among juveniles. In addition to individual student and family characteristics, the neighborhoods in which families and schools are located may affect student misbehavior. Many have argued that the social and cultural organization of neighborhoods shapes the socialization processes of families and schools (Elliott et al., 1996).

Environmental and social-emotional factors that create social and educational inequities and impact student achievement also need to be considered as causes for the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices (Beckett, 2014). Each year, almost 60% of children either experience or witness some form of violence, often multiple

times, and as many as 15% experience six or more incidences (Finkelhor et al., 2013).

Children who live with poverty are more likely to be exposed to abuse, loss, and

violence (Wade et al., 2014). As a result, they may be more reactive to stressors and

less likely to possess behavioral and emotional regulation skills (Jaycox et al., 2012).

Exposure to trauma and chronic stress can have a major impact on children's social,

emotional, cognitive, and academic growth (Ganzel & Morris, 2011). The

environmental adversity associated with poverty, such as unsafe housing and

inconsistent caregiving, is correlated with higher stress levels. What the research

concludes is that when students have experienced trauma in their lives, they have

higher stress levels that can manifest in the classroom. Consequently, student

behavior is influenced by a student's home environment, community, and life

experiences, which impact and contribute to the overuse of exclusionary discipline

practices.

Teacher Practices. Researchers also have found that a teacher's lack of

behavior supports within the classroom has an impact on student discipline.

According to Collier-Meek et al. (2018), teachers are responsible for delivering

classroom management and behavior support plans; however, many struggle to

implement them successfully. When teachers provide high quality behavior support

alongside academic instruction, students are more academically engaged, whereas in

classrooms with few behavior supports, students are more likely to demonstrate

disruptive behavior.

Teacher and student relationships, cultural awareness, communication, and

strong classroom management are connected to the rates of disciplinary referrals and

actions. According to Milner and Tenore (2010), disconnections between teachers and students are a major reason for many management conflicts that surface in the classroom. Such conflicts are often couched in misinterpretations that seem to be shaped by socio-economic, cultural, racial, and ethnic inconsistencies that exist between teachers and students. When teachers do not build relationships with students and lack cultural awareness, students' social development is impacted and often times misunderstood by teachers (Milnore & Tenore, 2010). Another teacher reported, "I also feel that lack of connection to the community and students' families exacerbates the issues." One more teacher stated, "Out of school suspension is completely ineffective. I have had students purposely act out to try to get suspended so they can avoid school. It is far better to get counselors and parents involved to help the child see the need to be in school" (Griffith & Tyner, 2019).

  Classroom Referrals. Skiba et al. (1997) conducted a study to examine issues related to school discipline as documented in archived disciplinary referral data. These documents were analyzed in order to examine the reason for the referral, circumstances of the situation, the extent of use of various disciplinary response options, and the rate of student suspensions. The researchers found that the behaviors that led to an office referral were primarily not those that threatened safety but, instead, those that indicated noncompliance or disrespect. The behaviors that were shown to be the primary causes of office referrals and suspension were disrespect, noncompliance, defiance, and general school disruption. The researchers discovered that most disciplinary referrals originate in the classroom, and they reported significant inconsistencies between the seriousness of the classroom offense and the

severity of the disciplinary consequence. They further documented patterns of disproportionality in the administration of discipline based on race, socioeconomic status, gender, and disability (Skiba et al., 1997). Skiba et al.'s research highlights the central role of teachers in initiating exclusionary disciplinary outcomes through the gateway of classroom referrals. Moreover, the research underscored the fact that many discipline referrals are subjective in nature and influenced by the teachers' and students' demographic factors.

A student discipline referral is a form teachers or other school personnel complete when they want the principal or school disciplinarian to address a student issue. A referral typically means that the issue is serious or that the teacher has tried to handle it without any success. Teachers complete a student discipline referral in response to student misbehavior in the classroom, such as fighting, weapons, physical attacks (objective offenses) and disrespect, and classroom disruptions (subjective offenses). Skiba et al. (date) reported a "differential pattern of treatment, originating at the classroom level, wherein African American students are referred to the office for infractions that are more subjective in interpretation" (p. 317).

Prior research has shown that when committing the same or similar subjective behavior offenses, African American students are more likely to receive severe disciplinary consequences (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010b; Skiba et al., 2002). This research spotlights how these discipline practices are subjective, and how teachers have the authority to move a suspension forward in most disciplinary cases. If there are differences among teachers in understanding what appropriate or typical behavior is for a student, the teacher has

the authority to interpret students' behaviors based on their experiences (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010b; Skiba et al., 2002).

Welch and Payne (2015), found that in schools more heavily populated with African American students, educators were more inclined to use severe discipline, such as suspensions, for similar infractions than those schools who had fewer African American students. Moreover, they reported that adults in the school system who had received focused training on their district discipline policies were more likely to respond harshly to student misbehaviors. Skiba et al. (2002) found that White students were referred for discipline for causes that were more objective, such as vandalism or smoking, while African American students were disciplined for more subjective reasons, such as disrespect and excessive noise. This subjective use of discipline becomes an equity issue as more students of color are being suspended in schools for the same offense.

Researchers who have studied student disciplinary outcomes have helped to uncover the use of classrooms referrals and the inherent subjectivity of these referrals. Another group of researchers have explored one aspect of this inherent subjectivity by studying educators' implicit bias. According to Nance (2017), a number of researchers posit that one of the causes of the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices within the classroom and school is the racial biases of teachers and school administrators, which manifest themselves in unconscious forms. He suggests that as we unconsciously rely on racial stereotypes and attitudes to help us make quick decisions, those stereotypes and attitudes bias our perceptions, judgments, and ultimately our decisions without our awareness or intent. "A teachers' implicit bias

towards students affects decision making automatically, or without conscious thought, and is based on a student's race/ethnicity" (p.1068). According to Staats (2016), teachers' experiences and automatic unconscious associations can shape their interpretations about what merits discipline, and can contribute to persistent discipline disparities based on race.

Skiba found that students of color were more likely to be sent to the office and have other disciplinary measures for offenses such as disrespect or excessive noise, which are subjective. Unconscious associations can be the difference between one student receiving a warning for a confrontation and another student sent to school security (Skiba, 2009). Monroe (2005) concurred, finding that many teachers may not explicitly connect their disciplinary reactions to negative perceptions of Black males, yet systematic trends suggest that teachers may be implicitly guided by stereotypical perceptions that African American boys require greater control than their peers and are unlikely to respond to nonpunitive measures. Based on a report from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, teachers develop implicit biases that cause them to interpret otherwise innocent behavior as part of a pattern of negative behavior inherent in the students (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017).

Furthermore, according to Girvan et al. (2017), racial disparities in the suspension rate for male students of color may be at least partially the result of implicit bias. According to Staas, the implicit biases we hold, both positive and negative associations, are activated based on characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, and religion. Implicit biases begin to develop at a very young age

through exposure to direct and indirect messages. Implicit biases can be considered as cognitive shortcuts for making an array of quick decisions (Staas, 2014).

Research from social psychology shows that implicit bias is more likely to have an influence on specific decisions, such as those that are ambiguous or require snap judgments, or when individuals are physically or mentally fatigued (Kouchaki & Smith, 2014). Specific to school discipline, evidence implicating implicit bias comes from research showing increased disproportionality for behaviors in which violations are more subjective and therefore require more teacher judgment (e.g., disruption, as opposed to theft) (Skiba et al., 2011). Girvan et al., found that discipline disparities are largely attributable to racial disparities in discipline referrals for subjectively defined behaviors, which accounted for 68% of the total variance and 46% of the unique variance in total disproportionality in elementary schools (Girvan et al., 2017).
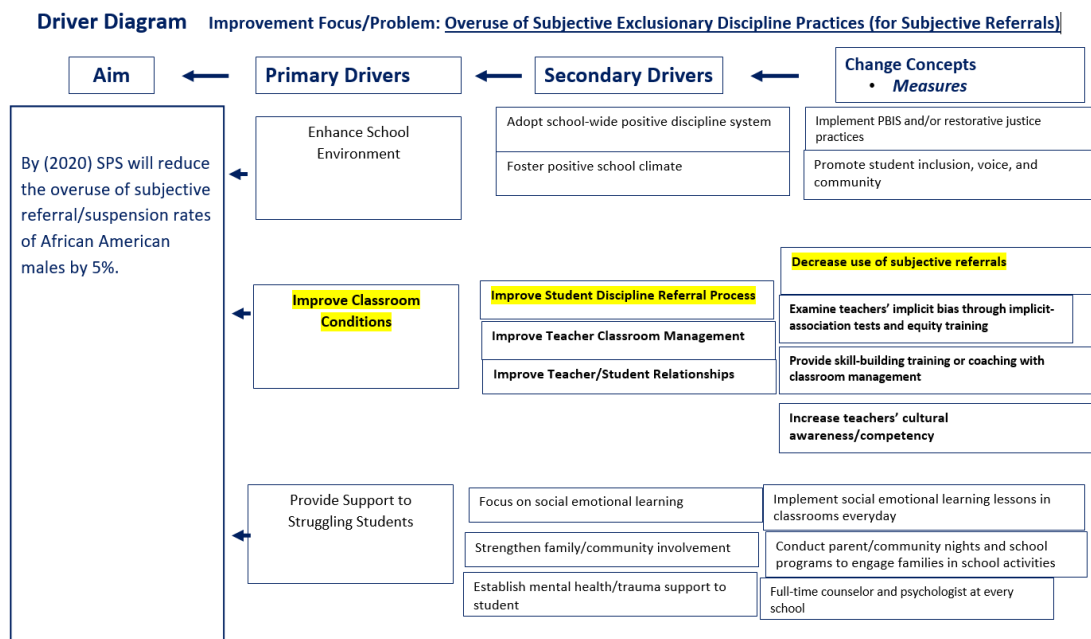
Driver Diagram: Potential Solutions to the Problem

To address the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline rates across SPS, a review of the research literature and federal policy guidelines suggests that there are three primary drivers that can be leveraged to decrease these practices: Enhance School Environment, Improve Classroom Conditions, and Provide Support to Struggling Students. Although school and district structures have a role to play in decreasing exclusionary discipline, the research points to the role of the teacher and classroom conditions as the most critical lever in transforming the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices and rates (Gage et al., 2018). And while it is important to acknowledge the research on the effects of alternative discipline systems, particularly given the commitment that SPS has made to investing in Positive

Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and restorative justice practices, the body of research points back to classroom-level practices and beliefs of the teachers. More specifically, the research highlights the connections between teachers' classroom skills and the quality of their interactions with students as linked to improving disciplinary outcomes (Nance, 2018). Additionally, the role of discipline referrals and the administrators' follow-up actions are important levers for improvement. See Figure 9 for the core drivers to potentially address the overuse of exclusionary subjective discipline practices.

Figure 9

Core Drivers to Potentially Address the Overuse of Exclusionary Subjective Discipline Practices

Driver Diagram   Improvement Focus/Problem: <u>Overuse of Subjective Exclusionary Discipline Practices (for Subjective Referrals)</u>

Aim	←	Primary Drivers	←	Secondary Drivers	←	Change Concepts • *Measures*
By (2020) SPS will reduce the overuse of subjective referral/suspension rates of African American males by 5%.		Enhance School Environment		Adopt school-wide positive discipline system		Implement PBIS and/or restorative justice practices
				Foster positive school climate		Promote student inclusion, voice, and community
		Improve Classroom Conditions		Improve Student Discipline Referral Process		Decrease use of subjective referrals
						Examine teachers' implicit bias through implicit-association tests and equity training
				Improve Teacher Classroom Management		Provide skill-building training or coaching with classroom management
				Improve Teacher/Student Relationships		Increase teachers' cultural awareness/competency
		Provide Support to Struggling Students		Focus on social emotional learning		Implement social emotional learning lessons in classrooms everyday
				Strengthen family/community involvement		Conduct parent/community nights and school programs to engage families in school activities
				Establish mental health/trauma support to student		Full-time counselor and psychologist at every school

Enhance School Environment. In order to establish and promote a positive school environment, schools can adopt alternative disciplinary school structures to replace zero tolerance policies. According to a U.S. Government Accountability Office report, a good number of school districts are implementing discipline models

that emphasize preventing challenging student behavior and focus on supporting

individuals and the school community, such as PBIS and restorative justice practices

(U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018).

According to the Technical Assistance Center on PBIS, PBIS is an

implementation framework for maximizing the selection and use of evidence-based

prevention and intervention practices along a multi-tiered continuum that supports the

academic, social, emotional, and behavioral competence of all students. By

implementing PBIS in schools, students develop and learn social, emotional, and

behavioral competence, supporting their academic engagement. In addition, educators

develop positive, predictable, and safe environments that promote strong

interpersonal relationships with students through teaching, modeling, and

encouragement. When PBIS is implemented with fidelity, schools experience

reductions in major disciplinary infractions, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and

aggressive behavior. Conversely, schools experience improvements in emotional

regulation, academic engagement and achievement, perceptions of organizational

health and school safety, and in perceptions of school climate. Reductions in teacher-

and student-reported bullying behavior and victimization, and reductions in teacher

turnover are also noted (PBIS, 2018).

According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP),

restorative practices promote inclusiveness, relationship-building, and problem-

solving. These practices use restorative methods such as circles for teaching and

conflict resolution, as well as conferences that bring victims, offenders, and their

supporters together to address wrongdoing. Instead of punishment, students are

encouraged to reflect on and take responsibility for their actions and come up with

plans to repair harm. Case studies and evaluations conducted in schools worldwide

indicate that restorative practices improve relationships among students and teachers,

reduce disciplinary problems, and build community. The experiences documented by

restorative practices trainers, educators, and researchers suggest that, while restorative

practices require time and dedication to implement, they ultimately produce an

environment that supports positive behavior and relationships and learning (IIRP

News, 2017).

Further research concludes that schools can improve their climates by

implementing initiatives such as restorative justice practices or school-wide PBIS. In

addition, the research indicates that teachers and school leaders need training to help

them understand and implement these evidence-based strategies effectively (Nance,

2018). Payne and Welch further examined why disproportionality exists in schools

that utilize restorative practices. The study investigated three different schools that

were utilizing restorative practices as an explicit means of reducing both their overall

suspension rates and the district-wide racial discipline gap. The findings revealed that

despite keeping suspension rates low, restorative practices ultimately reinforced

traditional practices of order in the school. The deans at each school used restorative

practices to maintain order and silent student resistance, rather than improve

relational trust (Payne & Welch, 2017).

Griffith and Tyner (2019) reported survey results from teachers. All three of

the "alternative" discipline approaches that were asked about—PBIS, restorative

justice, and trauma-informed practice—were deemed at least "somewhat" effective

by over 80% of teachers. However, 88% of teachers also said that "establishing specific consequences for misbehavior" is at least "somewhat" effective. In a similar vein, although 62% of teachers agreed that "suspended students fall further behind academically," overwhelming majorities also said that out-of-school suspensions have their uses, including "sending messages to parents about the seriousness of infractions" and encouraging other students to follow the rules (p.10).

An analysis of the literature reveals that implementing alternative discipline models, like PBIS and restorative justice practices, do decrease exclusionary discipline practices. When restorative justice practices and PBIS have been implemented, schools have had better behavior outcomes than when exclusionary models of discipline, zero tolerance policies, and law enforcement tactics are utilized (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Brown, 2013). For example, restorative practices in schools have been shown to improve peer relationships, reduce suspensions, and decrease disciplinary referrals. In addition, the utilization of PBIS has been shown to have a positive effect on student academic performance, as well as significant positive impacts for the overall school environment. Furthermore, the adoption of PBIS has led to reductions in special education services and counseling needs, as well as teacher-reported student to student bullying, victimization, and aggressive behavior. Improvement in students' concentration, prosocial behavior, and emotion regulation have also been reported (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Brown, 2013).

Improve Classroom Conditions. In an effort to address the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices, Kaufman states that improving students' relationships with teachers has important, positive and long-lasting implications for both students' academic and social development. Students who have close, positive

and supportive relationships with their teachers will attain higher levels of achievement than those students with more conflict in their relationships (Kaufman, 2018). According to Postholm, a key to good classroom management is that teachers have self-understanding and social and emotional competence. The teachers then can be supportive in the teacher-pupil relationship, serve as positive role models for students, and may then be able to contribute to a good classroom environment and decrease student discipline referrals (Postholm, 2013).

Farneth contend that teachers require additional support and training in implementing effective and culturally competent methods of classroom management in order to reduce the number and rates of classroom referrals (Farneth, 2008). For example, Flynn et al. (2016) conducted a study to explore the potential impact of professional development interventions delivered in New York City Public Schools on two disciplinary outcomes: suspensions and behavior incidents. The professional development interventions' focus was on teaching classroom behavior management skills through both training and one-on-one coaching with a goal of reducing behavior incidents, and ultimately exclusionary discipline practices. The schools targeted by the intervention were schools with a high risk for exclusionary discipline practices. The schools served students who are primarily low-income and predominately Black and Hispanic, and had a high percentage of special education students. The results indicated that when teachers are equipped with the necessary skills and strategies to support students who exhibit challenging behaviors within the classroom, those students are more likely to have greater access to education and improved outcomes (Flynn et al., 2016).

Nance (2018) stated:

> Schools must also replace harsh disciplinary measures with evidence-
> based practices that create safe, positive learning climates. For
> example, school officials at the state, district, and local levels must
> help teachers improve the quality of their classroom activities and
> develop better classroom management skills. Schools should help
> students develop better intrapersonal skills, attributes, and character;
> emotional and social stability; and racial literacy or race-relations
> intelligence" (p. 1071).

Effective classroom management is the foundation for positive student-teacher relationships, student learning, and equity. According to Gage et al. (2018), teachers' classroom management practices have a direct impact on a student's probability of success. Teachers continue to report that disruptions, noncompliance, and disengagement are among the most consistently challenging and frustrating behaviors they deal with on a daily basis (Alter et al., 2013). Gage et al. examined the degree to which teachers implemented evidence-based classroom management practices, and whether there was a relationship between use of those practices and students' time engaged in instruction and rate of disruptions. The results indicated that students in classrooms with low rates of classroom management practices were less engaged in instruction, but no differences in disruptions were found (Gage et al., 2018).

Similar to Gage et al. (2018), Korpershoek et al. (2016) examined which classroom management strategies and programs enhanced students' academic, behavioral, social emotional, and motivational outcomes in primary education. The

objective of the study was to conduct a meta-analysis of the effects of various classroom management strategies and classroom management programs aimed at improving student behavior and academic performance. The results showed that interventions focused on social emotional development of the students were somewhat more effective than interventions without that focus. The second finding of this meta-analysis study was that those interventions with a focus on changing teachers' classroom management, such as keeping order, introducing rules and procedures, and disciplinary interventions, had a small effect on students' academic outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Improve Classroom Referral Process. Meander (2018) suggests teachers should manage and evaluate student misbehavior correctly to determine if the situation warrants a discipline referral. Teachers should never send a student to the office simply because they "need a break" or "don't want to deal with it." He further suggests that minor offenses be handled by the teachers themselves. Such offenses may include failure to follow directions, not completing assignments, not prepared for class, passing notes, and conflicts among students. In contrast, he asserts that major offenses should result in an automatic referral, such as cheating on a test, fighting, theft, threats, and verbal abuse toward students and adults. His research suggests that teachers should use fair and appropriate judgment in the exercise of any discipline, and that the goal of any teacher's disciplinary actions should be to prevent the inappropriate behavior from occurring again (Meander, 2018). Meanders's research offers a framework for teachers in the form of questions they should ask themselves

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before completing a referral to improve the student discipline referral process. These questions include:

1. Is this a serious issue (i.e., fight, drugs, alcohol) or a potential threat to other students that requires immediate attention by an administrator

2. If this is a minor issue, what steps have I taken to handle the issue myself?

3. Have I contacted the student's parents and involved them in this process?

4. Have I documented the steps I have taken in an attempt to correct this issue? (Meander, 2018)

Given that teachers complete student discipline referrals in the midst of complex classroom dynamics, researchers have begun to study how teachers' snap judgements can be modified in order to reduce disparities in disciplinary outcomes. To offset educators' snap judgments, Nance (2018) recommends that, "school officials and teachers receive training to understand the concept of implicit bias and learn neutralizing techniques" (p. 1072). As a condition for receiving federal funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the U.S. Congress should require states to develop programs to provide implicit bias training to teachers and school administrators on an annual basis. Alternatively, state legislatures should pass legislation requiring such annual training" (p. 1072). Similar to Nance, Quereshi and Okonofua (2017) recommend that teachers, administrators, and any other school officials who have the power to suspend, expel, or otherwise discipline students to undergo training regarding their implicit biases and how they can affect their

disciplinary interactions with students. The research further recommends implementing interventions that encourage teachers to provide their students who have perceived misbehaviors with feedback that involves dialogue, understanding, and other empathic principles (Nance, 2018).

In addition, McIntosh et al. (2014) presents a conceptual model for addressing explicit and implicit biases that can affect disciplinary outcomes in schools. The conceptual model makes it clear that discipline disparities result from an interaction between the behavior of students and the behavior of adults within schools. The researchers further suggest that practices that create clear guidelines for what incidents should be handled in the classroom versus an office discipline referral should reduce ambiguity in decision situations, and as a result, the influence of implicit bias (McIntosh et al., 2014).

The literature review further revealed that reforms targeting administrative decision-making in the application of disciplinary consequences and interventions can reduce the use of exclusionary sanctions in schools. According to McIntosh (2018), a potential intervention for reducing the effects of implicit bias on disproportionality is to provide specific guidance in making unbiased discipline decisions in ambiguous or snap-judgment situations. In particular, this guidance would be imperative when completing student discipline referrals that may describe a subjective offense—suspensions typically begin with a student discipline referral. All classroom discipline is grounded in teacher judgement, thus, McIntosh's model proposes a comprehensive, multi-component approach. It includes guidance in making unbiased discipline decisions in ambiguous or snap-decision situations, which may manifest in subjective

student discipline referrals. The model provides guidance in the development of school-wide systems of academic and behavior support, the use of effective instruction to address the achievement gap, and the development of district policies with accountability for disciplinary equity (McIntosh et al., 2014).

Critical Analysis of Local Efforts to Address the Problem in SPS

SPS is the district with the highest rates of exclusionary discipline in Maryland, and it is also a district wherein African American males are most significantly impacted by these exclusionary discipline practices. In an effort to reduce exclusionary discipline practices overall, Maryland schools that have been identified as having exceeded established suspension or truancy rates (10% or more of their enrollment was suspended) are now required by state law to implement a PBIS program or an alternative behavior modification program in collaboration with MSDE. An analysis of schools within the SPS district during the 2016–2017 school year, revealed that 106 schools out of 209 schools have implemented PBIS programs. Using funds from the PBIS grant, the state trained approximately 1,200 PBIS school-level coaches in the district during the 2017–2018 school year on PBIS implementation and equity (Freeman-Jones, 2018).

Across SPS, close to half of the schools have and are implementing a variety of alternative discipline strategies such as PBIS and restorative justice practices. The school teams have been trained in these programs, however not all schools have adopted the frameworks or are using data to support implementation. Furthermore, there is high staff and administration turnover across SPS in these PBIS implementation schools, which leads to inconsistency in implementation. Moreover, there are not yet consequences or accountability from the district for schools that

choose not to implement the programs consistently and with fidelity. The district does not yet have a rigorous and consistently monitored discipline accountability system in place (Freeman-Jones, 2018; McNair, 2018; Talley, 2018).

Alongside the implementation of new and alternative discipline strategies, SPS has also developed the SRRH to address the problem of high student discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsion rates. The SRRH provides a framework for academic standards and positive student behavior. The handbook outlines the expectations for students and parents/guardians; the procedures to teach students decision-making and problem-solving skills; and the processes for consistently applying rules, expectations, and discipline in schools (SRRH, 2018). The handbook acknowledges that there are instances in which formal disciplinary measures must be used, but it also directs teachers and administrators to develop and utilize a variety of informal disciplinary and guidance strategies to maintain effective learning conditions.

According to the handbook, discipline should be both corrective and instructive and designed to foster growth and understanding in the student. It should not be determined by the age and maturity of the student. These discipline strategies include, but are not limited to the following: a behavioral intervention plan, community conferencing, community service, conflict resolution, detention hall, functional behavioral assessment, parent shadowing, police contact, PBIS, probation, restorative justice practices, and a reflective essay, as opposed to in- or out-of-school suspension. If an offense warrants a suspension, the handbook indicates that the

administrator should follow the chart key in the handbook to identify common areas of behavior that result in a level of response (SRHH, 2018).

At the beginning of the 2019–2020 school year, the district issued changes and updates to the SRRH as part of its restorative approaches to discipline. For example, for PreK–second grade students, if all measures have been exhausted, the child's suspension cannot exceed five school days. Expulsion of students in grades PreK–second grade are limited to certain circumstances as required by federal law. Disruptions can only be levels of response one and two, disrespect is levels one and two, and only one to three days in-school suspensions are permitted (SRRH, 2018). However, there are concerns regarding the implementation of these updates and levels of response in relation to referrals for disrespect and disruption. One administrator may impose a lesser consequence, such as a parent-teacher conference for classroom disruption, whereas another administrator may apply a harsher consequence, such as three days in-school suspension.

In addition to the use of the SRHH, the district's Department of Student Services has recently established a district-wide committee to address the high suspension rates. Currently, the Department of Student Services is in the process of creating a comprehensive program to track suspension through an equity lens by using a system-wide dashboard that will capture suspension based on gender, race, disability, and socio-economic status. The Department of Student Services has also suggested alternatives to suspension, such as community service and providing professional development to teachers on classroom management techniques to decrease office referrals (Talley, 2018).

While SPS has made progress toward decreasing the overuse of exclusionary discipline through the measures described above, the district has not yet been effective in reducing the rates of exclusionary discipline for African American males. In fact, persistent discipline disparities remain across the district. In an attempt to address the problem of persistent disparities in discipline, as well as academic outcomes across the district, SPS appointed an Officer of Diversity, Latina/o Affairs in 2016. In this role, the officer addresses the academic and social needs of the diverse families served by the school district, with a special focus on Hispanic children, parents, and communities. During her initial year, she reviewed current diversity policies, procedures, and practices; developed new initiatives; increased organizational awareness; and developed communication and outreach strategies (Morales, 2018).

As a result of her district review, the district began providing equity training to schools on how to best meet the academic and social needs of all students. She has trained about 50 schools within the district, by request only. The training is customized for each school, and consists of providing an overview of the students who are in the school based on data and recommended outcomes for the school based on needs (Morales, 2018). Although equity training has been implemented at the school level in a small sampling of schools in the district, this training has not been scaled across the district. Furthermore, the evidence base has not yet been established to show the effects of equity training at scale. And most importantly, for the purposes of this study, the district-sponsored equity training does not address the issue of disparities in the use of classroom referrals or exclusionary discipline practices for

African American male students (Nance, 2018; Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017; McIntosh et al., 2014).

After closely examining what has been done in SPS to decrease the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices—implementing new, alternative, positive discipline systems; revising the SRRH; and offering equity training—significant inconsistencies and gaps in the level of implementation and resources necessary to address the problem of persistent disparities in exclusionary discipline practices remain. What does not yet appear to be on the radar of district leadership is the role of student discipline referrals in perpetuating gross disparities in disciplinary outcomes. The district has not addressed what disciplinary actions are imposed on subjective offenses, nor has it provided its principals with training regarding the selection of disciplinary consequences for these subjective referrals.

Given that the instances of subjective exclusionary discipline continue to be applied to African American males at high rates across SPS, my review of the research and data suggests that further investigation is warranted to determine how subjective student discipline referrals can lead to unequal exclusionary discipline rates for African American male students. Little research has been done on the subjectivity of classroom referrals, nor how classroom referrals can lead to the imposition of suspension or expulsion. Thus, my study focused on student discipline referral practices at the individual teacher level. Second, it explored the role of principals who also play a critical role in the perpetuation of exclusionary discipline practices in SPS.

Theory of Improvement. It has long been agreed that discipline disparities exist based on race, gender, and disability, yet there is no consensus on what to do about it. Research has shown that decreasing educator bias by providing equity training; improving teacher's classroom management, knowledge, and skills; and implementing alternative discipline approaches can decrease exclusionary discipline practices. However, because almost all exclusionary discipline practices begin with a discipline referral written by a teacher in response to student misbehavior in the classroom, the classroom referral process itself warrants further examination. Therefore, if the district were to focus on disrupting their discipline disparities with honest, data-driven conversations about the role(s) of bias, subjectivity, race, and gender in completing student discipline referrals and imposing disciplinary consequences, it could be a starting point to decrease the number of classroom referrals for subjective infractions, as well as the number of suspensions given for these subjective infractions. In summary, by reducing the number and frequency of classroom referrals for African American males, particularly for subjective offenses, then the rate of exclusionary discipline actions could also be significantly reduced.

Purpose of the Investigation. This research focused on the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices for African American males, because in order to undo the inequities in schools, we must first see, name, and talk about how disparities manifest in school discipline. This investigation focused on how the use of subjective discipline referrals and the imposition of exclusionary discipline consequences may be reflective of teachers' and principals' unconscious beliefs toward African American males, specifically for behavior considered to be

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disrespectful and disruptive. Given the subjectivity of student discipline referrals and educators' unconscious associations toward African American males, it is important to investigate if and how discipline referrals varied across the subgroups of grade, race/ethnicity, and gender, and the reasons teachers gave for subjective discipline referrals. Because principals determine the disciplinary action that is imposed across all classrooms, it is also important to investigate principal decision-making regarding what conditions would make a student discipline referral lead to suspension.

In this descriptive, mixed-methods study, I examined if and how discipline referrals varied across the subgroups of grade, race/ethnicity, and gender and the reasons teachers gave for subjective discipline referrals within five elementary schools. In addition, I interviewed the principals regarding their considerations for determining if and when a subjective student discipline referral warrants a suspension. This investigation will potentially contribute to the knowledge and practice base in the school system regarding why students are referred to the office for disrespect and disruption and how principals determine suspension for these behaviors. This category is the most prevalent reason for a student discipline referral and the most subjective in interpretation.

Section II: Study Design

As noted in Section One, the problem investigated in the SPS district was the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices, specifically suspension and expulsions. Because the research indicates that suspensions most often begin with a disciplinary referral, the purpose of this descriptive, mixed-methods study was to examine in a select number of schools if and how discipline referrals varied across the subgroups of grade, race, and gender, and the reasons teachers gave for subjective discipline referrals. In addition, the study explored the principals' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences with implementing exclusionary discipline practices.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide this investigation and were addressed through analyzing student discipline referrals and conducting principal interviews:

1. What proportion of student discipline referrals in each of the selected schools are coded as disrespect or disruption (subjective offenses), and what are the specific student behaviors reported by teachers that result in a student discipline referral coded as disrespect or disruption?

2. What administrative disciplinary actions, such as administrator-parent conference, administrator-student conference, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, detention hall, and temporary removal from class, were assigned for subjective offenses?

3. What factors or processes do principals consider when administering suspensions upon receiving a student discipline referral, particularly for a subjective offense?

4. What are the principals' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences with implementing exclusionary discipline practices in each individual school?

Design

As noted above, this study was designed as a descriptive mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2007). In this design, quantitative data (e.g., student discipline referrals and administrative actions) were collected and analyzed for each school site prior to the qualitative interviews with principals. A mixed-methods study provides a more complete and synergistic utilization of data than do separate quantitative and qualitative data collections and analyses. Mixed-methods research is an approach to research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods into one study in order to provide a broader perspective (Creswell; Caracelli & Greene, 1997). The quantitative data are used to describe the characteristics or behavior of a population being studied and are useful for investigating a variety of educational problems. The qualitative data in the mixed-methods design give a voice to the principals and ensure that the study findings are grounded in participants' experiences, in order to provide a more complete story than either method would alone. This design involved two phases: (1) a quantitative documentation of student discipline referral and suspension data for each of the selected schools, followed by (2) structured qualitative interviews with the school principals in order to gain a deeper understanding of the student discipline referrals and suspension data.

Methods

  School Selection. The research was conducted in five elementary schools in a large, suburban school district adjacent to a major metropolitan area. The majority of teachers and students in this district are Black/African American. The five elementary schools participating in the research were selected through a multiple stage process.

  As noted in Section I, MSDE prepares an annual report on discipline. The report contains data on the number of disciplinary actions in each school system and in each school for the following categories: out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, in-school suspensions, and combined in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. The MSDE data are disaggregated by gender, race, and disability. Based on the 2017–2018 school year report, during the summer of 2018, 60 school principals in SPS received notification from their central district office that their school had been identified as having exceeded MSDE established suspension and/or truancy rates. The 60 district schools that exceeded the MSDE benchmarks represented 29% of all schools in SPS. Among the 60 identified schools, 29, or about 48%, were elementary schools. In my experience as a teacher and as an administrator, student discipline referrals and suspension practices begin at the elementary level, therefore I chose to focus on elementary schools rather than secondary schools in this group of 60. Of the 29 elementary schools, only 11 included on the MSDE list exceeded the suspension benchmark; the other 18 schools had exceeded the established truancy rates.

  Among the 11 schools, five schools had suspension rates of 20% or more of their enrollment, and 50% of these suspensions had been coded for the subjective

offense "Disrespect/Disruption." (See Table 1 below.) Considering the problem investigated was the overuse of subjective disciplinary referrals and exclusionary discipline, the decision was made to select the five schools with the highest rates of suspensions. All five schools had similar enrollment and demographic data, and all received Title 1 funding. Student enrollments were under 600. The average enrollment for African American students was 79% with a range of 65% to 85%, Hispanic student enrollment was 18%, and students of other races was 3%.

Each of the five schools has been given an alias to protect the school's identity. Franklin Elementary School has a total population of 490 students, including 263 males, 227 females, 383 African American, 92 Hispanic, and 15 other races. Harvard Elementary School has a total population of 489 students, including 246 males, 243 females, 414 African American, 63 Hispanic, and 12 other races. Panthers Elementary School has a total population of 598 students, including 314 males, 284 females, 510 African American, 71 Hispanic, and 17 other races. Pineview Elementary School has a total population of 368 students, including 194 males, 174 females, 238 African American, 109 Hispanic, 12 two or more races, and 9 other races. Sampson Elementary School has a total population of 345 students, including 176 males, 169 females, 265 African American, 66 Hispanic, and 14 other races.

Principal Participants. There were five principals who participated in the study and agreed to be interviewed. Of the five principals interviewed four were African American females and one was a White male. The teacher demographics at each school were similar. Harvard Elementary School had 20 classroom teachers of which 16 were female, four males, 17 were African American, two White, and one

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Asian American. Panthers Elementary School had eight Asian American females, two

White males, one White female, two African American males, and 20 African

American females. Pineview Elementary School had 17 classroom teachers of which

three were White, two Asian American, and 12 African American. Sampson

Elementary School had 16 classroom teachers of which five were males, 11 female,

10 African American, four White, one Asian American, and one multiracial.

Student Discipline Referral Data. Research questions one and two were

addressed through a review of school student discipline referrals (Table 1).

Table 1

*2017–2018 Out-of-School Suspension Data at Five Schools in SPS Based on Race,
Gender, and Offense*

School	Total	African American	Hispanic	Other	Subjective (disrespect, disruption)	Objective (fighting, physical attack, weapon)	Male	Female
Franklin	(79)	(71) 90%	(2) 3%	(7) 7%	(39) 49%	(40) 51%	(63) 80%	(16) 20%
Harvard	(114)	(114) 100%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(80) 73%	(34) 27%	(98) 86%	(16) 14%
Panthers	(56)	(53) 95%	(3) 5%	(0) 0%	(22) 41%	(34) 59%	(45) 80%	(11) 20%
Pineview	(69)	(63) 91%	(5) 7%	(2) 2%	(28) 41%	(41) 59%	(62) 90%	(7) 10%

School	Total	African American	Hispanic	Other	Subjective (disrespect, disruption)	Objective (fighting, physical attack, weapon)	Male	Female
Sampson	(46)	(42) 92%	(2) 4%	(2) 4%	(7) 16%	(39) 84%	(34) 74%	(12) 26%
Total	(364)	(343) 94%	(12) 3%	(11) 3%	(176) 48%	(188) 52%	(302) 83%	(62) 17%

Source: MSDE Suspension Data, 2017–2018. Maryland Public Schools Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions

Individual student discipline referral forms were collected from each of the five schools. The student discipline referral forms were reviewed and coded to provide information on specific incidents and behaviors that prompted the referral. The forms also provide a space for administrators to indicate which disciplinary action was assigned to the referral. District policy requires that a discipline referral form be completed each time a student is referred to the office by a teacher for a disciplinary infraction. The forms are generally submitted to the school administrative office by teachers themselves, or the form is sent with the student who is being referred. The forms are maintained in the office by the Principal Designee, usually the Professional School Counselor or Principal's Secretary. The form has space for the teacher to write a description of a student action or behavior and identify the specific category of offense from a pre-populated list (see Figure 10.). (See Appendix G for a copy of the complete form.)

Figure 10

Specific Behaviors Identified on the Student Discipline Referral Form

Source: SPS SRRH

In addition, each referral form includes a section that notes administrative

follow up. See Figure 11 for all of the possible disciplinary actions an administrator

could assign to a specific discipline referral.

Figure 11

Administrator Disciplinary Actions

Source: SPS SRRH

Data Collection Procedures. The study began after approval from the district and

the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board (IRB). After selecting the five

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schools, I sent an introductory invitation email to each of the principals (see Appendix A). The email explained the purpose of the research and provided an introduction to the study, as well as the approval letter from the University of Maryland and the district IRB offices (see Appendix J). The email asked if the principal would be interested in participating in the study and would permit me to gather the student discipline referral data. I followed up the email with a phone call in order to make personal contact with the school principals. During the phone call, I again shared the purpose of the study, how the data would be collected, and provided a brief description of the research benefits, risks, and the consent process. Principals were reminded that no identifying information about their school, teachers, or students would be collected and that their personal information would not be shared with others.

Phase 1. Once the principal agreed to allow me to conduct the study in the school, I requested access to a sample of their student discipline referral forms for the months of October, February, and May from the 2018–2019 school year. These three months were selected to capture different points within the school year, beginning, middle, and end. I explained that 20 referral forms for each of the three months would be selected by a staff person authorized to view the forms (such as a secretary or counselor). The designated staff person was to be asked to select the first 20 hard copies of student discipline referral forms from each of the three months. If there were not 20 referrals in a specific month then the designee was directed to select the remaining number of forms from the following month. The designee was asked to redact all identifying information for the student and teacher except for the grade, to

note gender and race/ethnicity on each referral form, and then to make a copy of the form.

Once the 60 referrals forms were gathered with de-identified information, the principal designee placed the forms in a sealed folder or envelope, and I picked up the referral forms within two weeks after the principal gave permission to conduct the study. Prior to leaving the school, I reviewed each referral form to ensure there was no identifiable data on the forms before leaving school property. In the event there was identifiable data on the forms, I gave the form back to the principal designee so the information could be redacted. I provided each designee with a $10 Amazon gift card as an incentive for their participation and to help offset costs associated with obtaining the referral forms.

This process resulted in a total of 300 disciplinary referral forms for review. Because the forms were de-identified, there was no way to know how many students were actually referred nor how many teachers submitted referrals. Therefore, the sample could include repeated referrals for the same student or from the same teacher.

Phase 2. Following the analyses of the quantitative student discipline referral forms and suspension data, I conducted a structured interview with each of the five school principals. I sent an email to each principal to schedule a day and time that worked best for them to conduct the interview (see Appendix E). The principals were given two weeks to schedule the interview. A weekly reminder email was sent to the principals regarding the scheduling of the interview (see Appendix F). Before conducting the structured interview, each principal signed the informed consent form

(see Appendix C). All of the principal interviews took place after school in the principal's office.

During the interviews, I followed the script closely and each interview was audio recorded using a digital voice memo application. I recorded the principals' responses to each question and did not ask follow up questions or probe further. The intent of the interviews was to learn more about the individual principal; the student discipline referral process; how disciplinary consequences are assigned for each referral, including suspension; and to explore the principal's beliefs, perceptions, and experiences regarding suspension and expulsion (see Appendix D for the interview guide and the specific research questions addressed by each question). The principal interviews ranged from 20–30 minutes and at the completion of the interview, I provided each principal with a $10 Amazon gift card as a thank you for participating.

Data Analysis

Phase 1. In the first phase, quantitative analyses were conducted using student discipline referral data from the five selected schools. After obtaining all of the student discipline referral forms from the schools, I reviewed each form and using an Excel spreadsheet, entered the students' grade, race/ethnicity, gender, and subjective and objective category of offense. There were also columns for descriptions of behavior, disciplinary actions, and time of year of referral. A final column allowed for a paraphrased description of specific teacher written behaviors. A separate spreadsheet was created for each school (see Appendix H). Using the spreadsheet, I

then reviewed each of the referral forms and calculated frequencies for each of the major headings.

Phase 2. In the second phase of the investigation, a narrative qualitative analysis of principal interview responses was conducted. An analysis began with a transcript of each audio-recorded interview using an application called "Transcribe." I then reviewed all of the principal responses transcribed from the interviews. Using an Excel spreadsheet, I labeled three columns: principal alias, interview question, and verbatim response (see Appendix I).

I began the coding process as I entered the verbatim responses and made notes or comments on similarities and differences. I also looked for frequency of certain responses and then grouped responses by categories. For example, all five principals noted the SRHH, and three mentioned the importance of student-teacher relationships. As I organized the first level of coding, I looked for additional patterns and connections regarding suspension decisions and beliefs. I then used the themes and connections to address my research questions and to construct a story about each principal. In the next section, I discuss the findings of my investigation and also discuss the implications of these findings.

Section III: Results and Conclusion

In this section, the findings and results are presented, as well as the conclusion, implications, and recommendations for the district. This study was designed to explore four research questions. The following research questions are addressed in this section.

1. What proportion of student discipline referrals in each of the selected schools are coded as disrespect or disruption (subjective offenses), and what are the specific student behaviors reported by teachers that result in a student discipline referral coded as disrespect or disruption?

2. What administrative disciplinary actions, such as administrator-parent conference, administrator-student conference, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, detention hall, and temporary removal from class, were assigned for subjective offenses?

3. What factors or processes do principals consider when administering suspensions upon receiving a student discipline referral, particularly for a subjective offense?

4. What are the principals' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences with implementing exclusionary discipline practices in each individual school?

The results and conclusions of the student discipline referral and suspension data, as well as the principal interview data are further described below.

Results

Research Question 1. What proportion of student discipline referrals are coded as disrespect or disruption (subjective offenses) versus objective offenses, such as fighting, and what are the specific student behaviors that result in a student discipline referral and are coded as disrespect or disruption?

Student Discipline Referral by Offense Category. As shown in Table 1 in Section II, the 2017−2018 MSDE suspension data for all five elementary schools and the percentage of subjective versus objective offenses leading to suspensions revealed that slightly more suspensions were for objective offenses (52%) than subjective offenses (48%). In addition, 94% of the students suspended were African American students, 83% were male, and 17% were female. For that same school year (2017−2018) across the five schools, the subjective versus objective suspension percentages ranged from a low of 16%−84% at Sampson Elementary School to a high of 73%−27% at Harvard Elementary School.

Table 2 presents the student discipline referral data for each of the five schools in SPS by race/ethnicity, gender, and category of offense (subjective versus objective). As noted in Table 2, 98% of all 300 student discipline referrals that were reviewed were given to African American students and 75% were to male students. Across the five schools, 49% of the student discipline referrals were coded for subjective offenses (i.e., disrespect, disruption) and 51% were for objective offenses (i.e., fighting, physical attack, and weapon). The referrals for subjective offenses versus objective offenses ranged from 30%−70% at Sampson Elementary School to 75%−25% at Pineview Elementary School.

Table 2

Student Discipline Referral Data by Race/Ethnicity, Offense, and Gender for Three Months

School	Total	African American	Hispanic	Other	Subjective	Objective	Male	Female
Franklin	60	(60) 100%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(21) 35%	(39) 65%	(54) 90%	(6) 10%
Harvard	60	(60) 100%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(35) 58%	(25) 42%	(46) 77%	(14) 23%
Panthers	60	(60) 100%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(26) 44%	(34) 56%	(44) 73%	(16) 27%
Pineview	60	(58) 97%	(2) 3%	(0) 0%	(45) 75%	(15) 25%	(40) 67%	(20) 33%
Sampson	60	(57) 95%	(3) 5%	(0) 0%	(18) 30%	(42) 70%	(41) 69%	(19) 31%
Total	300	(295) 98%	(5) 2%	(0) 0%	(145) 49%	(155) 52%	(225) 75%	(75) 25%

Table 3 presents the student discipline referrals by grade level and school. Of the total student discipline referrals reviewed, the most frequent referrals were in fourth grade and the fewest in sixth grade (only one school had a sixth grade). The PreK data came from two schools, and 10% of the referrals came from Kindergarten. Across four of the five schools, the data revealed that the percentage of referrals were as follows: PreK

9%, Kindergarten 10%, first grade 6%, second grade 15%, third grade 18%, fourth grade

29%, fifth grade 10%, and sixth grade 3%. Franklin Elementary School did not provide

student discipline referral data by grade level.

Table 3

Student Discipline Referrals by Grade and School

School	PreK	K	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Franklin	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Harvard	(0) 0%	(10) 16%	(3) 5%	(1) 2%	(25) 42%	(21) 35%	(0) 0%	NA
Panthers	(0) 0%	(5) 11%	(3) 7%	(17) 38%	(10) 22%	(9) 20%	(5) 2%	N/A
Pineview	(1) 1%	(5) 9%	(0) 0%	(3) 5%	(0) 0%	(28) 49%	(14) 35%	(6) 11%
Sampson	(17) 31%	(2) 4%	(7) 13%	(12) 22%	(4) 7%	(5) 10%	(7) 13%	N/A
Total	(18) 9%	(22) 10%	(13) 6%	(33) 15%	(39) 18%	(63) 29%	(26) 10%	(6) 3%

In order to determine the specific student behaviors that resulted in a student

discipline referral coded as disrespect/disruption, I examined the teachers' written

descriptions of the student behaviors. I looked for patterns in how teachers described

and captured students' offenses to determine if the offense was subjective or

objective. Some referral forms were very descriptive, and the referring teachers provided thorough written accounts. The teachers included several behaviors on the student discipline form that allowed me to determine whether or not the offense was subjective or objective. Other referral forms contained very brief and vague descriptions of behaviors such as, "student was being disrespectful" or "disruptive" without providing any specific descriptions regarding the behaviors. Overall, 20 specific behaviors were coded as disrespectful/disruptive.

A sampling of what teachers wrote on the student discipline referrals that was coded as subjective included such behaviors as not following directions, not completing assignments, out of seat, walking/ran out of class, not listening to the teacher, talking to other students, yelling/screaming/making noises, disrespectful/disruptive behavior, not taking responsibility for actions, and arguing with the teacher. Based on overlapping descriptions, such as "ran out of class" or "walked out of class," I clustered the subjective referrals into several categories. For example, "not following directions" and "not listening" were clustered together into one shared category, just as "yelling," "screaming," and "making noises" became another category. I identified five broad categories of subjective behaviors included on the student discipline referral forms:

1. No description (stated only "disrespect/disruptive") (45%),
2. Not following directions and not listening (25%),
3. Yelling/screaming/making noises (12%),
4. Walking/ran out of class (11%), and
5. Not completing assignments (6%).

Table 4 presents the frequency of these five specific behaviors by school.

Table 4

Frequency of Subjective Behaviors by School

School	No Description Provided "Disrespect/ Disruptive"	Not Following Directions/ Not Listening	Yelling/ Screaming/ Noises	Walk/Ran Out of Class	Not Completing Assignments
Harvard	(8) 16%	(8) 28%	(4) 31%	(6) 50%	(2) 29%
Franklin	(20) 41%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Panthers	(7) 14%	(5) 19%	(2) 15%	(1) 8%	(1) 14%
Pineview	(8) 16%	(11) 41%	(5) 38%	(5) 42%	(3) 43%
Sampson	(6) 12%	(3) 11%	(2) 15%	(0) 0%	(1) 14%
Total	(49) 45%	(27) 25%	(13) 12%	(12) 11%	(7) 6%

Research Question 2. What administrative disciplinary actions, such as administrator-parent conference, administrator-student conference, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, detention hall, and temporary removal from class, were assigned for subjective offenses?

Administrator Disciplinary Actions Taken for Subjective Offenses. An analysis of the student discipline referral forms also revealed which student behaviors resulted in a specific disciplinary action, such as administrator-parent conference, administrator-student conference, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, detention hall, and temporary removal from class. Out of a total of 300 student discipline referral forms reviewed, only 131 (44%) included a disciplinary action taken by an administrator. Overall, disciplinary actions taken for both objective and subjective offenses included the following: 10% detention, 19% temporary removal from class, 31% in- or out-of-school suspensions, and 40% administrator-parent conferences. The disciplinary actions taken for the 60 (45%) subjective offenses included 12% detention, 20% in- out-of-school suspensions, 21% temporary removal from class, and 47% administrator-parent conference. Disciplinary actions for the 71 (54%) objective offenses included 8% detention, 17% temporary removal from class, 34% conference, and 41% in- or out-of-school suspensions.

Summary of Findings School by School.

    Franklin Elementary School had a total population of 490 students: 263 males, 227 females, 383 African-American, 92 Hispanic, and 15 other races. An analysis of the selected student discipline referral data revealed that 35% of the school's referrals were for subjective offenses and 65% for objective offenses. However, based on 2017–2018 MSDE data, 52% of the suspensions were for subjective offenses and 48% for objective offenses. The data also revealed that African American students received 100% of student discipline referrals and 90% of suspensions. Of the students receiving student discipline referrals, 89% were males

and 11% were females. In addition, for students receiving suspensions, 80% were males and 20% were females. The school did not provide the grade levels for students receiving student discipline referrals. The forms only provided disciplinary actions for nine of the 60 referrals (15%), all of which were for objective offenses: 78% in- or out-of-school suspensions and 22% conferences.

Harvard Elementary School had a total population of 489 students, including 246 males, 243 females, 414 African American, 63 Hispanic, and 12 other races. More male students than female received student discipline referrals, with 70% male and 30% female. An analysis of the school's student discipline referrals revealed that 58% of their referrals were for subjective offenses, whereas 42% of their referrals were for objective offenses. In comparison, 2017–2018 MSDE suspension data for Harvard indicated that 73% of the suspensions were for subjective offenses versus 27% for objective offenses. The 2017–2018 MSDE suspension data also revealed that male students were almost three times more likely to be suspended for a subjective offense versus an objective offense (70% male and 30% female for a subjective offense). Of the Harvard students receiving discipline referrals and 2017–2018 suspensions, 100% were African American students. For student discipline referrals by grade, they were as follows: PreK 0%, Kindergarten 16%, first grade 5%, second grade 2%, third grade 42%, fourth grade 35%, and fifth grade 0%. The school provided disciplinary actions for 51 referrals (85%): 61% of the 51 were for subjective offenses and 39% were for objective referrals. The disciplinary actions for the subjective referrals included 3% in- or out-of-school suspension, 6% detention, 35% temporary removal from class, and 56% conference. The disciplinary actions for

the objective referrals were 5% suspensions, 5% detention, 30% conference, and 60% temporary removal from class.

 Panthers Elementary School had a total population of 598 students, including 314 males, 284 females, 510 African American, 71 Hispanic, and 17 other races. An analysis of the school's student discipline referrals revealed that 44% of the referrals were for subjective offenses, whereas 56% of the referrals were for objective offenses. In comparison, Panthers' 2017–2018 MSDE suspension data showed that 41% of the suspensions were for subjective offenses and 59% were for objective offenses. In addition, African American students received 100% of student discipline referrals and 95% of suspensions. Of the students receiving student discipline referrals, 73% were males and 27% were females. Similarly, for students being suspended, 80% were male and 20% were female. For student discipline referrals by grade, they were as follows: PreK 0%, Kindergarten 11%, first grade 7%, second grade 38%, third grade 22%, fourth grade 20%, and fifth grade 2%. The school provided disciplinary actions for 40 (66%) referrals, 43% were for subjective offenses and 57% were for objective referrals. The disciplinary actions for the subjective referrals were 12% temporary removal from class, 35% in- or out-of-school suspension, and 53% conference. The disciplinary actions for the objective referrals were 5% detention, 43% suspensions, 52% conference.

 Pineview Elementary School had a total population of 368 students, including 194 males, 174 females, 238 African American, 109 Hispanic, 12 two or more races, and 9 other races. An analysis of the school's student discipline referrals revealed that 75% of the referrals were for subjective offenses, whereas 25% of the referrals were

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for objective offenses. In 2017–2018, according to MSDE data, 41% of the suspensions were for subjective offenses versus 59% for objective offenses. The data revealed that African American students receive 97% of the student discipline referrals and 91% of the suspensions. Of the students receiving student discipline referrals, 67% were male and 33% were female. Likewise, of the students suspended, 90% were male and 10% were female. Student discipline referrals by grade were as follows: PreK 1%, Kindergarten 9%, first grade 0%, second grade 5%, third grade 0%, fourth grade 49%, fifth grade 25%, and sixth grade 11%. Pineview Elementary School did not provide disciplinary actions on their student discipline referrals forms.

Sampson Elementary School had a total population of 345 students, including 176 males, 169 females, 265 African American, 66 Hispanic, and 14 other races. An analysis of the school's student discipline referrals revealed that 30% of their referrals were for subjective offenses and 70% of their referrals were for objective offenses. The 2017–2018 MSDE suspension data indicated that 16% of the suspensions were for subjective offenses and 84% were for objective offenses. Of the students receiving student discipline referrals, 93% were African American, and 92% of those receiving suspensions were African American. Regarding student discipline referrals and suspensions by gender, 67% of males and 33% of females receive student discipline referrals, while 74% of males and 26% of females receive suspensions. Student discipline referrals by grade were as follows: PreK 31%, Kindergarten 4%, first grade 13%, second grade 22%, third grade 7%, fourth grade 10%, and fifth grade 13%. The school provided disciplinary actions for 31 referrals (52%): 39% were for subjective offenses and 61% were for objective referrals. The disciplinary actions for the

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subjective referrals were 17% conference, 42% detention, and 41% in- or out-of-school suspension. The disciplinary actions for the objective referrals were 21% detention, 21% conference, and 58% suspension.

Discussion of the Quantitative Data Results. The MSDE data report for 2017–2018 indicated that across the five schools, roughly half of all suspensions were for subjective offenses and half were for an objective offense. The study's analysis of discipline referral forms from a quantitative data analysis reveals that the percentage of student discipline referrals for subjective behavior (49%) is almost the same as the percentage of suspensions for subjective offenses (48%). Similarly, there was an even distribution of student discipline referrals submitted for subjective and objective offenses across all five schools during the three months (October, February, and May) in which data was collected.

It is important to note that nearly half (47%) of the specific behaviors listed on the student discipline referral forms were generic, e.g., "student was disrespectful" or simply "disrespect/disruptive." Furthermore, the reports received from Franklin Elementary School did not include any specific behavior descriptions and, instead, only indicated the broad category offense such as fighting, physical attack, arson, disrespect, or disruption. These results limited the ability to define more precisely the actual behaviors teachers found to be disrespectful or disruptive.

Because of the predominantly Black/African American student and teacher populations in the five schools, I could not draw any results about the discipline disparities of referrals or suspensions for African American students. However, both the suspension data and the sampling of student discipline referrals revealed the

overrepresentation of male students. A review of student discipline referrals also revealed that fourth graders received the most forms at 29%, while third grade was not far behind at 18%. The decrease in student discipline referrals at the fifth grade level at 10% was a little surprising, given my years of experience as an elementary school teacher.

The discipline referrals for PreK students were alarming. Only Sampson Elementary School had a PreK program, but 31% of the discipline referrals were for PreK students. Furthermore, PreK to second grade student discipline referrals submitted across all five schools accounted for 40% of the referrals. This data confirmed the importance of the Maryland General Assembly's bill, which prohibits the suspension and expulsion of pre-Kindergarten through second grade students, except in extreme circumstances where the student would create an imminent risk of serious harm, as determined by the administrator in consultation with a mental health professional (MSDE, 2018).

My examination of the written descriptions of behaviors for subjective referrals, such as making noises, not completing assignments, and disrespecting the teacher (without observing the actual behavior and its context) revealed pressing issues. It is problematic that teachers were completing referrals for offenses, such as excessive talking, that could result in an administrative consequence causing a student to then miss valuable instruction. Of the 60 referrals for subjective offenses that had a disciplinary action, 41% resulted in students missing direct instruction from the teacher because of consequences such as temporary removal from class or in- or out-of-school suspension. The school system's SRRH (2018), which provides guidelines

for disciplinary actions to be taken by principals, indicates that disrespect and disruption should be a level 2 response, detention or in-school suspension. Overall, in four of the five schools, the disciplinary consequences assigned to each student discipline referral for subjective offenses were assigned lesser consequences, such as conferences, compared to objective offenses that were assigned harsher consequences, such as in- or out-of-school suspensions. However, the principal disciplinary actions applied to subjective offenses varied across the five schools. For instance, a referral for disrespect/disruption could result in a conference for one student while another student received out-of-school suspension.

Research Questions 3 and 4.

      3. What factors or processes do principals consider when administering suspensions upon receiving a student discipline referral, particularly for a subjective offense?

      4. What are the principals' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences with implementing exclusionary discipline practices in each individual school?

      Discussion of Principal Interviews. The principals who participated in the interviews were all former colleagues of mine, and I had their full cooperation to participate in the study. In addition, I did not probe during the structured interview. I followed the interview script and asked all of the principals the same questions. The principal demographics were as follows: four out of the five principals were African American females and one was a white male. Their years of experience as a principal ranged from 2 to 14 years. As a result of the interviews, I hoped to determine a principal's rationale for actively implementing suspensions, including the behaviors

which lead to a decision to suspend, and the principals' perspectives and beliefs about suspensions.

After analyzing the principals' responses to the five questions connected to principal decision-making and beliefs, I found confirmation of some broad themes. In relation to research question 3, what factors or processes do principals consider when administering suspensions upon receiving a student discipline referral, particularly for a subjective offense, all five principals indicated the following:

1. They consider the whole child and the circumstances surrounding the specific behavior before assigning a disciplinary action;

2. They use the SPS SRRH as a guide when determining the consequences for a disciplinary infraction;

3. They speak with the teacher, child, and witnesses regarding the incident; and

4. They recognize how teacher perception, bias, and relationships play a critical role in how teachers complete a student discipline referral form.

Regarding research question 4, what are the principals' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences with implementing exclusionary discipline practices in each individual school, all five principals indicated that they believe that suspensions should be implemented as a last resort.

Principal Moore at **Franklin Elementary School** had two years of experience as a school leader, all at Franklin. This elementary school had an enrollment of 490 students, including 263 males, 227 females, 383 (78%) African American, 92 (19%)

Hispanic, and 15 (3%) other races. Franklin had the second lowest percentage of

subjective discipline referrals (35%) among the five schools and the second highest

percentage of suspensions for subjective offenses (49%). She indicated that the

school-wide discipline process at Franklin Elementary School begins with contacting

the crisis intervention teacher and other teachers in the grade level. She explained that

if teachers are unable to control the issue, they will write a student discipline referral

and send the student down to the office with the form. She expressed that she

generally talks with the student to try to figure out exactly what happened, then will

contact the teacher, and then will contact the parents. The principal indicated that,

"Students are referred to the office most often for physical attacks, followed by

continued class disruption and disrespect."

When asked the question, "How do you decide what consequence to assign to

a subjective referral?", the principal stated, "So normally for continued classroom

disruption and disrespect we do not suspend, per our new protocol. Now in the district

it is a level 1 or level 2 offense for disrespect and disruption. We do not suspend but

we do talk to the student and see if it's something that we can handle and that maybe I

can invite the counselor to see how they went wrong if they can fix the problem."

When asked, "What are your beliefs regarding exclusionary discipline, such as

suspension, expulsion, and referrals?", the principal stated, "I believe that there's [*sic*]

always two sides to every story. I try to get a true balance. So for me, it's really for

them to understand the why and how they can correct it." In regards to what would

make the biggest difference in reducing suspensions at the school, she stated,

"Classroom management—we cannot control what we're getting but we can control how we interact with them."

Principal Butler at **Harvard Elementary School** had eight years as a school principal, all at Harvard in a school with an enrollment of 489 students, including 246 males, 243 females, 414 (85%) African American students, 63 (13%) Hispanic students, and 12 (2%) of students of other ethnicities/racial groups. Harvard had the second highest percentage of subjective discipline referrals (58%) among the five schools and the highest percentage of suspensions for subjective offenses (73%). This principal reported that her school has a school-wide color card behavior system. Principal Butler explained that if a student misbehaves repeatedly in the same day in class and gets to "red," then the teacher will contact administration. If the behavior continues further, they will write a referral to the main office or professional counselor. She referenced behaviors such as fighting, the use of foul language, and disrespect to the teacher as those that warranted being elevated straight to the principal. The principal stated that the teacher's level of patience and classroom management determines when students are sent to the main office to speak to either her or the assistant principal. She further stated, "I know the teachers and what trigger[s] certain responses from them."

Regarding subjective and objective offenses, the principal indicated that she considers several factors in classifying an offense, such that sometimes fighting is even subjective. Principal Butler stated, "A teacher may write 'fighting' on the referral because they know that's something that would potentially be a suspendable offense." When determining what consequence to apply to a subjective referral, the

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principal reported that she considers the student's habitual behavior patterns, how the teacher interacts with the student, and the type of rapport the teacher has with the class more generally. She also considers any biases she thinks the teacher may have toward the student. She further considers things she may have heard the teacher say, hears all sides of the story, and gathers all of the information before issuing the consequence. Principal Butler stated, "I try to follow the Student Rights and Responsibilities Handbook to determine the consequence, so even if the offense is valid, it may not necessarily warrant a suspension."

When asked, "What do you think would make the biggest difference in reducing the suspension rate your school?", she stated, "I believe that relationships with the students in the school would have a huge impact and then also with the parents at home would make the biggest difference." She also indicated that she wishes and believes that schools should have equitable resources when it comes to working with students who are exhibiting challenging behavior. She stated, "For example, training the teachers on different strategies and in extreme cases having people actually come into the school from the mental health field. By having someone trained to handle various behaviors will ensure the punishment fits the crime."

Principal Washington at **Panthers Elementary School** has been a principal for 14 years at her current school. This school has an enrollment of 598 students, including 314 males, 284 females, 510 (85%) African American, 71 (12%) Hispanic, and 17 (3%) other races. Panthers had the third highest percentage of subjective discipline referrals (44%) among the five schools and tied for the second lowest percentage of suspensions for subjective offenses (41%). The principal stated her

discipline referral process begins with teachers completing a basic referral form for minor behaviors. Minor behaviors are listed on this basic in-house student referral, but serious behaviors, such as fighting or bringing a weapon to school, go on a student discipline referral form. She noted that some teachers do put the minor behaviors on the student discipline referral form. The principal stated, "Teachers are quick to complete a student discipline referral form, which is the most serious form. She further stated, "They will write, 'not coming to school prepared,' 'student walked around the classroom,' 'student rolled their eyes at me.' They say that was disrespectful, but once I'm investigating I say, okay, tell me what were they doing to be disrespectful? They will say anything such as they sucked their teeth or was insubordinate."

When asked about what would make the biggest difference in decreasing suspensions at her school, she stated, "We are a PBIS school, and so that reduces it here most of the time. Everyone is on board, though I shouldn't say everyone because you have some people who are not, but the majority of our staff is on board. We have been trained on the different crisis intervention strategies that the teacher can use within the classroom with the student to de-escalate, or to be proactive with that student helps a lot at the school."

Principal Berry at **Pineview Elementary School** has been principal at her current school for 11 years. The student enrollment is 368 students, including 194 males, 174 females, 238 (65%) African-American, 109 (30%) Hispanic, 12 (3%) two or more races, and 9 (2%) other races. Pineview had the highest percentage of subjective discipline referrals (75%) among the five schools and tied for the second lowest percentage of suspensions for subjective offenses (41%). The principal

reported that the student discipline referral process begins with a checklist that all teachers follow. The final step in the school discipline system is an actual student discipline referral form. The form goes home to the parents the same day so they have an opportunity to see what the student did, then they sign it, and return it. The counselor collects the forms and reviews them monthly to look for a pattern of behaviors. The principal explained it this way: "The behaviors that come to me most often are objective such as fighting, however, many come to me for disrespect and disruption as well. What I find is that it is twofold. It's either the student was trying to avoid the work because they really didn't understand and so they were just acting out, and when the teacher tries to address them they were kind of put on the spot. It's a level of frustration from the student and the teacher." When determining how subjective student discipline referrals reach the suspension level, Principal Berry stated, "First, I always go to the Student Rights and Responsibilities Handbook to follow the code of conduct based on the grade level and what the consequences that could be tried for that offense. We always try to start with the lowest level of consequence in the beginning depending if it's their first offense or not. We provide some type of in-school detention whether it's time out to another classroom, or a parent conference with both parties if it's fighting."

In regard to her beliefs about exclusionary discipline practices, Principal Berry stated, "But for the most part I find that suspension does not really affect the child, so sending them home most of the time does not change the behavior. The older kids, they want to be home so they may act up because they're like go ahead

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send me home. They want to go home because they know they can do what they want to do and then it just puts them more behind."

Principal Overton at **Sampson Elementary School** has been the principal at Sampson Elementary School for four years. The student enrollment is 345 students, including 176 males, 169 females, 265 (77%) African American, 66 (19%) Hispanic, and 14 (4%) other races. Sampson had the lowest percentage of subjective discipline referrals (30%) among the five schools and the lowest percentage of suspensions for subjective offenses (16%).The principal had established an after-school detention program at the school as an alternative to suspension. He stated, "Students would rather go home so they do not see suspension as punishment." He found that students do not like staying after school for detention, so that has worked to reduce student suspensions. Principal Overton stated that students are referred to the office most often for disruption or for a physical attack. He indicated that he gathers statements from other students to try and see what happened before he moves to disciplinary action. The principal stated, "I review the student code of conduct and look at the level of response that we are allowed to use. I really try to get a whole picture of what's happening and why the referral came in before jumping to any consequence right away, but trying to get a full understanding of what's going on."

Regarding his belief about exclusionary discipline, Principal Overton described how he used to believe that each student needed to go home, but realized students enjoy going home. He reported that now he believes in taking alternative routes so students are not being suspended and missing instructional time, and

therefore, he tries not to give suspension as a consequence. In response to the question regarding has made the biggest difference in reducing suspension rates at your school, the principal stated, "Since we brought in detention, we've had a reduction in suspension rates."

Principal Interview Data. To answer research questions 3 and 4, the principals of each of the five schools were interviewed and asked the following questions:

1. What is your in-house student discipline referral process?
2. How do you decide what consequence to assign to each subjective teacher referral?
3. How do these subjective teacher referrals reach the suspension level?
4. What are your beliefs regarding the use of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension or expulsion?
5. What do you think will make the biggest difference in reducing suspension rate at your school?

In the following sections, I present the responses to the interview.

Research Question 3: Factors that contributed to principals' decision to suspend.

All five of the principals indicated that they consider the whole child and the circumstances surrounding the specific behavior that triggered a student discipline referral for a subjective offense when deciding to administer a suspension. First, all five of the principals mentioned using the SPS SRRH as a guide when determining the consequences for a disciplinary infraction. Principal Berry's comment echoed those of her colleagues when stating, "I always go to the Student Rights and

Responsibilities Handbook to follow the code of conduct based on the grade level and what [are] the consequences that could be tried for that offense."

In addition to citing the use of the district handbook, each of the principals also reported that they speak with the teacher, child, and witnesses (if possible) of the incident, consider if it is a repeated behavior or offense, and they also get a feel for the quality of the student/teacher relationship. Principals Butler and Washington mentioned the importance of knowing how their teachers respond to various types of students and behaviors. For example, Principal Butler stated, "I know the teachers and what trigger certain responses from them. A teacher may write 'fighting' on the referral because they know that's something that would potentially be a suspendable offense. Though the teacher indicated fighting on the student discipline referral, it may not have been any type of physical contact." Similarly, Principal Washington stated, "Teachers are quick to complete a student discipline referral form. Once I read the form, the behaviors that I would consider as 'minor' have been written on the form." She further stated, "They will write 'not coming to school prepared,' 'student walked around the classroom,' 'student rolled their eyes at me.' They say that was disrespectful."

Three of the five principals indicated that they recognize how teacher perception, bias, and relationships play a critical role in teachers completing student discipline referral forms. For example, when determining what consequence to apply to a subjective referral, Principal Butler reported that she considers how the teachers interact with the students and the type of rapport they have with them. She stated, "I know the teachers and what trigger certain responses from them. I know how the

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teacher interacts with the students, and the type of rapport the teacher has with their children." She also considers any biases she thinks the teacher may have toward the student. She further considers things she may have heard the teacher say, hears all sides of the story, and gathers all of the information before issuing the consequence. Principal Berry stated, "It's really a case-by-case situation when determining a consequence. In the same way, Principal Moore stated, "I believe that there's always two sides to every story. I try to get a true balance between all sides and factors."

Research Question 4: Principals' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences. Responses to the interview question, "What are the principals' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences with implementing exclusionary discipline practices in each individual school?" were consistent across the five principals. All five principals stated that suspensions should be implemented as a last resort and that alternatives should be considered, such as after-school detention, positive behavior intervention supports, and restorative practices. As a group, these principals expressed not wanting students to be suspended, out of school, and missing valuable instruction time.

Two of the principals also indicated that their perceptions of and experience with implementing exclusionary discipline practices have shifted their decisions over the years. Principal Overton used to believe that suspensions were the answer to correcting unwanted behavior. However, he stated, "I now understand the importance of building relationships with students and implementing behavior support strategies to prevent misbehavior." Principal Berry stated, " . . . I find that suspension does not really affect the child, so sending them home most of the time does not change the behavior. The older kids, they want to be home . . . " Echoing his colleague, Principal

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Overton expressed, "I used to believe that each student needed to go home, but realized students enjoy going home. I try not to give suspension as a consequence because students are missing instruction and falling behind."

While principals across all five schools expressed the importance of students being in school and that providing alternatives to suspension is key, there appears to be a disconnect between their expressed beliefs and their actions in four of the five schools. Principal Overton's beliefs and actions are reflected in his school's suspension data because only 16% of the suspensions are for subjective offenses. On the other hand, Principals Washington and Berry, had 41% of their suspensions for subjective offenses, Principal Moore had 49%, and Principal Butler had 73%.

In regard to what principals shared regarding subjective offenses such as disrespect and disruption, Principal Butler's student discipline referral and suspension data connect to what she stated regarding disrespect. She referenced disrespect to the teacher as behavior that warranted being elevated straight to the principal. Her school had the highest percentage of subjective suspensions (73%). Principal Moore indicated that, "Students are referred to the office most often for physical attacks, followed by continued class disruption and disrespect." As seen in her student discipline referral data, 35% of her school's referrals were for subjective offenses. However, when deciding when and how a referral reaches the suspension level she noted, "Normally for continued classroom disruption and disrespect we do not suspend, but we do talk to the student." Yet, 49% of suspensions at her school were for subjective offenses.

For offenses in which students are referred to the office most often, Principal Overton stated that students are referred to the office most frequently for disruption or a physical attack. However, his school's data revealed that 30% of student discipline referrals were subjective. Similarly, Principal Berry explained it this way: "The behaviors that come to me most often are objective such as fighting, however many come to me for disrespect and disruption as well." Nevertheless, for Principal Berry's school, 75% of student discipline referrals received were subjective in nature not objective. In addition, Principal Washington stated, "Teachers will write 'not coming to school prepared,' 'student walked around the classroom,' 'sucked their teeth,' 'student rolled their eyes at me'" on a student discipline referral form. These behaviors are subjective, and the data at her school showed that 44% of the student discipline referrals were for such subjective offenses.

Summary

Based on my review of student discipline referral data, it is clear that exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions, are overused in SPS, and that African American males receive more student discipline referrals for subjective offenses and suspensions than any other student subgroup. Additionally, while discipline referrals do vary across the grade levels, the high proportion of Kindergarteners and primary grade students receiving these referrals is particularly troubling. Given that the research indicates how a single suspension can negatively impact a student's life long-term, such as the increased probability of students being involved in the juvenile justice system, a higher rate of grade retention, and school

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dropout, the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices needs to be addressed (Sullivan et al., 2009; Townsend, 2000).

This study further confirms and highlights that students who are referred for subjective discipline offenses are suspended from school about half of the time. The study showed that descriptions of behaviors that triggered a discipline referral for a subjective offense heavily rely on teachers' judgements and their perceptions of what constitutes disrespect and disruption. Moreover, my study revealed how an administrator's response to subjective student discipline referrals varied from school to school. Despite the guidance provided by the school system, the data obtained from the referral forms indicated a discrepancy between principals stated beliefs that suspensions should be implemented as a last resort and their disciplinary actions. In four of the five schools, students are referred for subjective offenses and receive suspensions for these offenses at high rates. These findings are consistent with the work of Skiba (2010) and others who have found African American students to be referred more often for disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering behaviors than students in other racial or ethnic groups.

Limitations of the Study

There were a number of limitations of this study. One limitation was that I was only able to represent a small sample size of five schools. Moreover, only including elementary schools in the study sample was a limitation because having a small sample size reduces the power of the study and increases the margin of error (Brutus, 2013). Several limitations were connected to the student discipline referrals. For example, I did not know the race/ethnicity and gender of the teachers who

completed the student discipline referral forms. The information on the form was de-identified to only include student information. This was a limitation because I was not able to make connections between the race/ethnicity and gender of the teacher and the written description of the behavior. I also did not have the specific written descriptions for disrespect and disruption from one school, thus I was not able to gather the specific student behaviors that prompted the discipline referrals. In addition, I did not know how many referrals were made by each teacher for which students given the data was de-identified, thus I was not able to refute what principals stated regarding which teachers refer students to the office most often. Also, teacher voice is missing from the data. I did not interview the teachers to understand the reason for the referrals and to gain context around the written description.

Another limitation was not being able to gain access to student discipline referral data for students with disabilities because that information is kept confidential. I was not able to determine if a student who received a referral has an emotional or behavior disorder that could trigger multiple discipline referrals. This data would have been helpful in the study given the research regarding the suspension rate of students with disabilities. The last limitation of the study was conducting structured interviews and not probing during the interview. By doing so, I was not able to gain a deeper perspective regarding the principals' decisions and processes for implementing disciplinary actions. Moreover, I was not able to ask about any discrepancies between their stated beliefs and their referral and disciplinary action data.

Further Considerations and Implications for the District

As a result of the study, I have learned that exclusionary discipline continues to be a serious problem in SPS across the sampled elementary schools. Given the commitment the district has made to reduce disparities in their discipline practices, this study reveals several significant implications for district leadership. To begin, I recommend future research to include further investigation into the exclusionary discipline practices within the entire district, across elementary, middle, and high schools. Given that the current study was limited to five elementary schools located in one suburban district, a broader sampling that would include all elementary schools in a district, or a combination of middle and high schools, could provide more comprehensive information about exclusionary discipline trends. Moreover, having a larger sample size of schools would decrease variability and statistical error (Stephanie et. al, 2019).

There is also a need to address the variability and subjectivity in the completion of student discipline referrals, beginning with the student handbook. Although the handbook provides administrators with guidance regarding the disciplinary action to impose on a student infraction, there does not seem to be consistent understanding of what constitutes disrespect or disruption from the teacher level. This is an important fact to consider as student discipline referrals are written in response to student misbehavior. Consequently, the disciplinary actions currently administered, such as temporary removal from class and in- or out-of-school suspension, may result in students missing valuable instruction. These disciplinary

actions have a negative impact on student achievement and perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline.

Principals should be required to review their discipline data more regularly, not only to track suspension and expulsion data, but also to monitor teachers' behavior management practices and patterns for subjective student discipline referrals. For example, the district could lead strategic efforts to help teachers and principals examine their student discipline referral and suspension data ask "why" it has those numbers. In addition, it should be required that teachers provide a specific behavior every time a discipline referral form is completed. The district should also further investigate what role educator's subjectivity plays in these persistent trends. Based on this study and prior research, there is a need for teachers and principals to address their perceptions and biases regarding what constitutes inappropriate behavior in the completion of student discipline referrals. Additionally, the perceptions and biases that play a role in how an administrator assigns disciplinary actions to those referrals should also be addressed.

In an effort to manage the problem of discipline disparities, the district could also consider what kind of support teachers and principals need in order to greatly reduce student discipline referrals for an array of subjective behaviors. The district needs to better align disciplinary consequences to developmentally appropriate behavior expectations. Principals should also revisit the revised SRRH as it relates to the appropriate response level for disciplinary actions. Disrespect and disruption violations no longer warrant an out-of-school suspension. In addition, principals with high suspension rates should be required to provide monthly or quarterly data on

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referrals, which would include the percentage of multiple referrals for the same student and the number of teachers who complete referrals.

And finally, given what is suggested from this study regarding teachers' and principals' perceptions and beliefs toward student discipline, it appears to be important to further explore what constitutes "disrespect/disruption." The district may want to consider a revised policy for suspension added to the SRHH, which would differentiate objective versus subjective offenses, especially considering how subjective behavior is the basis for half of the student discipline referrals. The revisions could include more specific definitions and descriptions of what constitutes disrespect and disruption. Moreover, changes to the referral form itself could be made to decrease the overuse of subjective referrals by eliminating the disrespect and disruption option as a behavior offense.

Conclusion

As an African American female, former teacher, and principal in a school and school district with similar demographics and statistics to those described in this study, I learned through this investigation that my leadership style played a critical role in the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices in the district and state. I, too, believed that suspensions should be implemented as a last resort. However, I prided myself that I had a "no nonsense policy" related to student behavior. It was important to me that the school was a safe and orderly environment for students and staff. As such, looking back I can see how I was quick to assign an exclusionary consequence to a student discipline referral that was for disrespect/disruption. Though I followed the SRHH, similar to the principals interviewed, there were many instances where I

assigned the maximum consequence allowed in the handbook versus the lesser consequence. As a result, at the end of my last school year as a principal, I had suspended 20% or more of the student enrollment. I did not realize that I perpetuated the problem of the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices until I left the district and began studying equity and bias. As I examined equity and bias as they relate to exclusionary discipline practices for African American males, I realized that the decisions I made were not in the best interests of students, specifically students from marginalized communities. Once I began to know better, I wanted to investigate the problem of exclusionary discipline practices across the district because I saw myself in the data and research.

My story as a principal is part of a much bigger story that permeates public American schooling today. We know from careful investigation at the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education that children of color and those with disabilities often receive harsher disciplinary interventions than their white and nondisabled counterparts for the same offenses (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). This mixed-methods study in its examination of how student discipline referrals and suspensions data varied by type of offense across student subgroups and the principals' processes, perspectives, and beliefs, could shed light on how teacher and principal perceptions and unconscious associations may manifest in school-level discipline referrals and consequences. More specifically, examining the types of behavior that are coded as disrespect or disruption could expose the inherent subjectivity of the referral process, as well as the unconscious associations of educators who label student behavior as "disrespectful" or "disruptive."

In closing, in reflecting on my years as a teacher and administrator in a district like SPS, the most important question that comes to mind as a result of my study is how to remove some of the subjectivity that is so prominent in the overuse of exclusionary discipline, given the connection to unconscious beliefs and automatic assumptions that are within everyone. There must be a change in the mindset of teachers and principals as it relates to African American males, especially considering what society has helped to perpetuate that lives and breathes in schools today. As I reflected on my practices as a teacher and principal, I knew I needed to shift my mindset around my perceptions toward African American males in order to see a change in the outcomes for students. As a result of this study, I hope other teachers and principals will do the same. Thus, these implications, recommendations, and considerations are important for the SPS district to examine in order to see a decrease in the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices for African American male students.

Appendix A: Email to Principals

Re: Exclusionary Discipline Practices
From: Anita Walls (awalls28@umd.edu)
To: Principal Email Address

Dear Principal,

I am writing to ask if your school would be willing to participate in a study to determine if and how discipline referrals varied across the subgroups of grade, race, and gender and the reasons teachers gave for subjective discipline referrals. In addition, what principals consider when administering suspensions upon receiving a referral. This study will be conducted through an analysis of student discipline referral data, MSDE suspension data, and Principal interviews. This information could help the school district and school leaders like yourself in learning more about how teacher referrals for subjective offenses can lead to exclusionary discipline practices.

If you are willing to have this study conducted in your school, I would like to set up a time to discuss the study with you either in person or over the phone. At the end of the study, I also plan on sharing the aggregate results with you and your school.

I have been approved by the University of Maryland and the county, Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this study. Please find a description of the study (cover letter) and IRB approval from UMD and the county attached to this email.

Thank you for considering conducting this study at your school and I look forward to hearing from you soon. Please note your employment status in the county will not be affected by your participation or non-participation in this study. This study is for my dissertation.

Thanks,
Anita Walls
awalls28@umd.edu
(301) 938-4735

Appendix B: Study Cover Letter

The study will examine if and how discipline referrals varied across the subgroups of grade, race, and gender and the reasons teachers gave for subjective discipline referrals. In addition, the factors or process Principals consider when administering suspensions upon receiving a referral and Principals perceptions, beliefs, and experiences that contribute to exclusionary discipline practices within selected elementary schools across Success Public Schools.

I have approval to conduct this study through the County Research Office and the University of Maryland Research Office. If you have any questions about the study, please contact Anita Walls (awalls28@umd.edu) to set up a meeting or a time to talk by phone. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and discuss the study in more length if needed.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Purpose
The purpose of this descriptive, mixed methods study was to examine, in a select number of if and how discipline referrals varied across the subgroups of grade, race, and gender and the reasons teachers gave for subjective discipline referrals. In addition, the factors or process Principals consider when administering suspensions upon receiving a referral and Principals perceptions, beliefs, and experiences that contribute to exclusionary discipline practices within selected five elementary schools.

Procedures
Your participation in the interview would include a response to 8 questions. The questions will be related to your beliefs around discipline and the teacher referral and suspension process.

Risks/Discomforts
There are no more than minimal risks known to participants. In order to prevent a breach of confidentiality, your responses will be coded and anonymous.

Benefits
The direct benefit of this study to the participant is to bring awareness of the subjective behaviors that occur in the classroom that lead to teacher referrals and suspensions.

Confidentiality
All data obtained from participants will be kept confidential and will only be reported in an aggregate format (by reporting only combined results and never reporting individual ones). All audio recordings will be concealed, and no one other than the primary investigator listed below will have access to them. The data collected will be stored in the HIPPA-compliant, secure database until it has been deleted by the primary investigator.

Incentive
All participants will receive a $10 Amazon Gift Card for participating in the interview.

Informed Consent Page 1 of 2

Participation
Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your employment status in the county. If you desire to withdraw, please do not answer any additional interview questions.

Questions about the Research
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator: Anita Walls, at 301-938- 4735 or awalls28@umd.edu

Questions about your Rights as Research Participants
If you have questions you do not feel comfortable asking the researcher, you may contact (Dr. Margaret McLaughlin, Professor), 301-405-2337, 3119 Benjamin Building, mjm@umd.edu.

I have read, understood, and printed a copy of, the above consent from and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

☐Yes   ☐No

Informed Consent Page 2 of 2

Appendix D: Interview Guide and Principal Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a principal? **Principal Demographics**

2. How long have you been a principal here at your current school? **Principal Demographics**

3. What is your in-house student discipline referral process? **Research Question #3**

4. Why do you think students are referred to the office most often for subjective (disrespect, disruption) offenses vs. objective (fighting and bullying) offenses? **Research Question #3**

5. How do you decide what consequence to assign to each subjective teacher referral? **Research Question #3**

6. How do these teacher referrals reach the suspension level? **Research Question #3**

7. What are your beliefs regarding the use of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension or expulsion? **Research Question #4**

8. What would make the biggest difference in reducing suspension rates at your school? **Research Question #4**

Appendix E: Email to Principals

Re: Exclusionary Discipline Practices Interview
From: Anita Walls (awalls28@umd.edu)
To: Participant Email Address

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time today to speak with me regarding my study to examine, in a select number of schools, if and how discipline referrals varied across the subgroups of grade, race, and gender and the reasons teachers gave for subjective discipline referrals. In addition, the factors or process Principals consider when administering suspensions upon receiving a referral within selected elementary schools. I am excited you have agreed to participate in this study. Your participation could assist the county in developing future trainings for Principals regarding how they assign consequences to subjective teacher referrals.

The interview should take you no longer than 30 minutes and upon completion, **you will receive a ten-dollar Amazon gift card.** Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated and will be kept completely confidential. All data obtained from participants will be kept confidential and will only be reported in a group format and will not identify you individually. In addition, all names in the survey are immediately replaced with a unique number identifier and no identifiers will be reported.

Your employment status in the county will not be affected by your participation or nonparticipation in this study. The data collected will be used for my dissertation.

Thanks,
Anita Walls
awalls28@umd.edu
(301) 938-4735

Appendix F: Reminder Email to Participants

Re: Exclusionary Discipline Practices Interview Reminder
From: Anita Walls (awalls28@umd.edu)
To: Participant Email Address

REMINDER: Exclusionary Discipline Practices Interview

Dear Participant,

You should have received an email regarding my study to examine if and how discipline referrals varied across the subgroups of grade, race, and gender and the reasons teachers gave for subjective discipline referrals. In addition, the factors or process Principals consider when administering suspensions upon receiving a referral within selected elementary schools. Your participation could assist the county in developing future trainings around equity and discipline.

The interview should take you no longer than 30 minutes and upon completion, **you will receive a ten-dollar Amazon gift card.** Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated and will be kept completely confidential. All data obtained from participants will be kept confidential and will only be reported in a group format and will not identify you individually. In addition, all names in the survey are immediately replaced with a unique number identifier and no identifiers will be reported.

Your employment status in the county will not be affected by your participation or nonparticipation in this study. The data collected will be used for my dissertation.

The last day to conduct the interview is DATE.

Thanks,
Anita Walls
awalls28@umd.edu
(301) 938-4735

Appendix G: Student Discipline Referral Form

STUDENT DISCIPLINE REFERRAL

SCHOOL _____ STUDENT _____ TEACHER _____ SUBJECT_____

GRADE _____ TIME REFERRED _____ PERIOD _____ DATE/YEAR _____

Special Education: ☐ Yes ☐ No   504: ☐ Yes ☐ No   ESOL: ☐ Yes ☐ No

CHECK CONDUCT OF STUDENT BELOW

Describe student's conduct:

☐ Alcoholic beverages
☐ Arson
☐ False Alarms
☐ Possession of fireworks or explosives
☐ Inciting others to violence or disruption
☐ Physical attack and/or threat thereof
☐ Possession or use of weapons
☐ Shakedown and/or strong arm
☐ Possession, use or distribution of a
   controlled dangerous substance
☐ Vandalism and/or destruction of property
☐ Fighting
☐ Theft
☐ Continued class disruption
☐ Disrespect
☐ Distribution of unauthorized printed materials
☐ False reports
☐ Forgery
☐ Gambling
☐ Loitering
☐ Smoking
☐ Unauthorized sale or distribution
☐ Sexual Harassment
☐ Class Cutting
☐ Other

INDICATE PRIOR ACTION TAKEN BY TEACHER TO RESOLVE STUDENT'S PROBLEMS
(Send to office with student)

☐ Teacher/Student Conference   ☐ Teacher/Parent Conference   ☐ Parent Notification: ☐ E-mail ☐ Phone

☐ School Counseling Intervention

☐ Other Disciplinary Action Taken by Teacher: ☐ Timeout ☐ Lunch Detention ☐ Other _____

☐ FBA / BIP   ☐ 504 Plan   ☐ MDT Meeting

Teacher's Signature_____

CHECK ACTION TAKEN BY ADMINISTRATOR BELOW

Other Disciplinary Action Taken:

☐ Teacher-student conference
☐ Teacher-parent conference or contact
☐ Teacher-counselor conference
☐ Counselor-student conference
☐ Counselor-parent conference
☐ Administrator-student conference
☐ Administrator-parent conference
☐ Student Program adjustment
☐ Referral to Student Services
☐ Student Services-student/parent contact
☐ Detention Hall / In-School Suspension
☐ Behavioral Probation
☐ Temporary removal from class
☐ Short-term suspension
☐ Long-term suspension
☐ Referral to Security Counselor

Conference held with teacher _____

Date Student returned to teacher _____

_____ Administrator's Signature
Send all copies to office with student

WHITE COPY – Administrator   COPY – Returned to Teacher   COPY – Cumulative Folder   COPY – Other

PS 74 (7/15)   PCIN 7540 3074   (See Reverse Side for Instructions)

Appendix H: Student Discipline Referral Data

Month		Grade	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Behavior Code/Offense		Written Description of the Behavior		Subjective (Disrespect, Disruption, etc)		Objective (Fighting, Arson, etc)
October											
1		4	Black	M	disrespect		The student would not sit down and get loud		X		
2		3	Black	M	Disruption		disrupting the class by yelling, singing inappropriate songs, walks out of class		X		
3		3	Black	M	disrespect		walked out of class		X		
4		3	Black	F	physical attack		student elbowed another student in chest				X
5		3	Black	M	disrespect		Student wont come to class		X		
6		3	Black	M	disrespect		student left the classroom		X		

Appendix I: Interview Transcription

Franklin Elementary School

Principal Moore

Researcher: Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today to answer a few principal interview questions. So how long have you been in a principal?

Moore: 2 years

Researcher: How long have you been a principal at your current school?

Moore: I have only been a principal here for 2 years.

Researcher: What is your student discipline referral process?

Moore: We try to intervene before there's actually a referral. We have a crisis teacher. They try to work with other teachers in the grade level if they are unable to control the issue they will write a PS 74. They'll send the student normally down with a PS 74 and then I will first talk to the student and try to figure out exactly what was going on. I will then try to contact the teacher, contact the parent, and I try to get us all on the same page. I'll let the parents know the severity of whatever it is and then I will walk them through the protocol of how I'm going to select what their consequences are going to be based on the child.

Researcher: What offenses are students referred to the office most often for?

Moore: So most recently a lot of physical attacks. I would say followed by continued class disruption and disrespect. I think in a lot of the classrooms what we're trying to work on here is having no matter where they're in the building that we all have the same procedure of how to handle students that certain students are not given different things. The other students wouldn't be given for example, if we're saying that all students must come in quietly if they come in loud then we take them out and then we redo, not allowing them to come in already in disarray. So we see a lot of classrooms when it's dark and chaotic that we get a lot of referrals and so really classroom management. I would say it is the big one that we're building and are working on.

Researcher: How do you decide what consequence to assign to a subjective referral?

Moore: So normally for continued classroom disruption and just respect we do not suspend per our new protocol. So now in the district. It is a level 1 or level 2 offense for disrespect and disruption. So we do not suspend but we do look at first to talk to the student and see if it's something that we can handle and that maybe I can invite the counselor. She works very closely with us to see if they can see how they went

wrong and see if they can fix the problem. I allow them to do so, so if we talk and like last week, we had a student who was frustrated that he wanted to use a comic book and that wasn't at a table. So he started yelling leaves a room. So he comes to me and I'm like, why are you upset I wanted to use the book. She wouldn't let me use the book.

Researcher: What are your beliefs regarding exclusionary discipline such as suspension and expulsion referral?

Moore: So, I believe that there's always two sides to every story. I try to get a true balance. I know that is important that as admin that we respect our teachers and we value things that they bring to us, but on the other hand, we have students that we have to make sure that we are not always escalating and going to the final result that we're trying to make sure that we're working our way up that ladder kind of understand because when we send them home not always do they understand, so it's a repeat that we're just going to come back and they're going to do the same thing. So for me, it's really for them to understand the why and how they can correct it.

Researcher: What would make the biggest difference in reducing suspensions at your school?

Moore: Classroom management. We cannot control what we're getting but we can control how we interact with them. So classroom management, being able to start fresh everyday that we are the educators we're the ones that are trained to do this work and really letting kids start fresh each day, giving them expectations, but definitely that classroom management.

Researcher: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.

Harvard Elementary School

Principal Butler

Researcher: How long have you been a principal?

Butler: 8 years

Researcher: How long have you been a principal at your current school?

Butler: 8 years

Researcher: What is your in house student discipline referral process?

Butler: We just have a school-wide behavior using the color card system. Once they get to red then the teacher will contact us. If behavior continues they will write the referral to the main office or the counselor

Researcher: So what will contribute the referral going straight to you and the main office versus going to the school counselor?

Butler: Referrals come to me for fighting or if they were disrespectful to the teachers like using you know aggressive or foul language or anything like that. Sometimes other classmates is it really depends on the teacher's level of patience. I know their tolerance level.

Researcher: What are behaviors are students referred to the office most often for?

Butler: I'm going to say this fighting, sometimes fighting is even subjective. They may write fighting on the referral because they know that that's something that would get a consequence, it doesn't mean that there wasn't any type of physical contact. It would not warrant the consequence that a fight would.

Researcher: What's your process or things you consider when deciding what kind of consequence you're going to apply to that infraction?

Butler: If this is a student who habitually exhibit some of those behaviors and how they interact with students the type of rapport they have with children. If teachers have any biases. I think the teacher may have things that I may have heard them say when they find out version of what took place and so I consider all of those pieces of information before I issue the consequence.

Researcher: How do you determine how an offense reaches the suspension level?

Butler: I try to follow the student rights and responsibilities handbook it is supposed to be for those things. So even if it is appropriate, it would not necessarily warrant a suspension. And so with the list of all the different things you can do.
 I've had some write letters to apologize for what they said and apologize. I try to make sure that the slate is clean when they come back into the room, but sometimes I have to suspend. You just have to weigh all of the pieces of evidence you have for each situation.

Butler: What do you believe regarding exclusionary discipline practices?

Researcher: What do you think would make the biggest difference in reducing suspension rates at your school?

Butler: Relationships with the students in the school would have a huge impact and then also with the parents at home.

Appendix I: Interview Transcription (Continued)

Panthers Elementary School

Principal Washington

Researcher: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I know you are busy. I appreciate you just taking a few moments to answer key questions, First question is how long have you been a principal?

Washington: 14 years

Researcher: How long have you been here at your current school?

Washington: 14 years

Researcher: What is your student discipline referral process?

Washington: Well, we start with a referral and those are for behaviors such as if a teacher says a child was rolling her eyes, minor behaviors, and serious behavior such as fighting, bringing a weapon to school.

Researcher: So what do you think contributes to that from teachers, teachers say they were disrespectful or were disrupting.

Washington: The class is based on those minor things you just mentioned. That is being disrespectful more of a personal perspective. Also on the way that you've been raised rolling of eyes back in my day a parent would consider that as being very disrespectful and something serious or sucking the teeth or not responding to them when they're talking.

Researcher: How do you decide what consequence to assign to that behavior?

Washington: I look at the child the whole child. I'll look at the number of infractions. They may have accumulated throughout the year as if it's a first offense of second offense. I love to see if the student has a 504 or an IEP and then again just a constant infraction. They may have throughout that day when you're four so far then so I use all of those things to determine whether that is a serious behavior or not. I will also out of respect have a conversation with the teacher just so that they'll know. Yes you being supported but let's talk this through.

Researcher: Once you have all the information how do you determine if the student needs to be suspended.

Washington: Suspension if it's physical or level when we consider in the student code of conduct a level 3 or level 4 offense if it's something that is major to the point

to where it does require suspension then that's when we react and it's usually like if they're fighting if they found matches or something like that.

Researcher: What do you think would make the biggest difference in reducing suspension rate at your school?

Washington: So we are a PBIS school and what I think what will reduce it here is time. Everyone is on board everyone and I won't say everyone because you have some people who are the majority. Our staff have been trained on the different strategies, crisis intervention strategies that the teacher can use within the classroom with the students to de-escalate or to be proactive with what student helps a lot. It helps when everyone is on the same accord and has the same goal to help support and grow a child. Also the big piece is parent support what we do at the beginning of the year during our back to school night. We stress behavior with our parents. We let them know our expectations. We let them know what PBIS is, that it is not a program, but its activities that we do to promote positive behavior.

Researcher: Thank you for sharing.

Pineview Elementary School

Principal Berry

Researcher: Good afternoon. Thank you for allowing me to come in today to interview you. How long have you been a principal?

Berry: 10 years

Researcher: How long have you been a principal at your current school?

Berry: 10 years

Researcher: What is your in house student discipline referral process?

Berry: So we have a checklist that are teachers follow. It has steps that they have to do that are basically like intervention kind of sort of response. So they follow the steps and then once they get to the fifth step then they will complete a behavioral referral form. It just kind of captures the behavior that was done. This is a form that stays with the child through the life of there on time frame in the school system and is recommending suspension, we use at the last resort, be moved about their behavior for house referral form and it's are referred most often for so thinking about subjective versus objective.

Researcher: What are the offenses that students are sent to the office most often for?

Berry: Most of the objective offenses are fighting or physical attack but not always is it that a child was hitting back. It could be that they just hit one time, you know. We do get many of those but for the most part its disrespect for insubordination. What I find is that is twofold. It's either the student was trying to avoid the work because they really didn't understand and so they were just acting out and when the teacher try to address them they were kind of put on the spot. So they respond in a disrespectful tone. Sometimes it's disrespectful it could be but often times. It's that you were challenging me and I'm the adult and so the teacher is tired of it and just automatically just goes to the referral form and in feeling that they have to also show all the other kids you're not going to talk to me or you're not going to do this. So it's kind of like they go back and forth and the teacher feels like I'm in control. I have the you know, the final say so I'm going to write you up so, you know, that's how I think it's subjective. It's a level of frustration from the student and the teacher.

Researcher: How do you decide what consequence you're going to assign to that referral the teacher?

Berry: What have they tried what steps have they tried? Number one, a parent has had to have been in if you're giving me a referral if that has not had I given the throwback at a time. I'll also try to find out if there was a trigger, you know, like what led to this Behavior they just come and just so you know what you know where there's some other things a lot of times. I find that when kids are not understanding what the work was adult behavior that somehow could have changed that would have prevented the disrespect. You know, what a subordination whatever happened in the. The first I looked always go to the student rights and responsibilities handbook to follow the code of conduct based on the grade level and what the consequences that could be tried for that one. And so we always try to start with the lowest level of consequence in the beginning.

Researcher: So what do you really believe when it comes to exclusionary discipline?

Berry: So many different things that I've seen over the years and it really is a case-by-case situation. But for the most part I find that suspension does not really affect the child. So sending them home most of the time the older kids they want to be home so they may act up because they're like go ahead send me home. They want to go home because they know they can do what they want to do and then it just puts them most of them if they are already, you know behind. It's sometimes creates disconnect with the fact the family and their guardian the parents because they feel that we're targeting their child by keeping them home and take it personal

Researcher: What would make the biggest difference in reducing suspensions referrals at your school?

Berry: It is important that teachers build relationships with their students. I find that teachers who have built relationships with their student have lower classroom referrals.

Researcher: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today.

Sampson Elementary School

Principal Overton

Researcher: Hi, Good afternoon. Principal Overton. Thank you for willingness to participate in this research study. How long have you been the Principal here at your current school?

Overton: I have been here four years all together.

Researcher: What is your student discipline referral process?

Overton: Well, we have a flow chart on behaviors that start with student reflection. If students missed the mark they reflect on their behavior through the first two to three incidences depending on which behavior it is and then if it's continuous then it can move to a PS 74 but a lot of times we shy away from those. We make sure that the teachers are communicating with parents with what they're bringing to me about behavior. You actually getting a referral most time the teachers had conversation already with the parent.

Researcher: Talk to me a little bit about like why are certain students referred to the office for various reasons?

Overton: Disruption or they are referred to the office with a physical attack. Communicating with parents about subjective offenses and having those conversations or parents conferences. We try to get parents to work with us to get the desired behaviors. They're coming to your office because they were disrespectful or disrupting the class. Yes, but sometimes they come with that disrespectful or disruption will still take statements from other students to try and see what's going on before we move to disciplinary action.

Researcher: So once you receive a teacher referral, how does it reach the suspension level?

Overton: Look at the level of response that we're allowed to do and I mean, they used to be level 1-3. Now, they just kind of changed our book this year. So it's different behavior. But a lot of times I'll try and do a detention if I can or temporary removed from class. A lot of kids think its vacation when they're suspended so we send them home they get what they want and they get a free day at school. So I'd rather do something in-house that we can do here for disciplinary action rather than send students home for free day. We decide what the consequences are going to be based on his student rights and responsibilities handbook. I talk to multiple students to get a whole picture of what's happening and why the referral came in before jumping to any consequence right away, but trying to understand what really

happened because sometimes it is one-sided. This is what one person said or did and really just trying to get a full understanding of what's going on.

Researcher: What do you honestly believe as a principal about those practices?

Overton: I used to believe that each of the kids needs to go home. But students enjoy going home... So I try not to do suspensions, you know, if I don't have to I can come up with a consequence because you're out of class missing instruction. You're falling further behind.

Researcher: So what are some of those alternatives that you started?

Overton: So instead of just suspension, we have detention we started that here. We started one day a week. If that's not working sometimes a temporary removal from class. We don't have in school suspension, but we'll just move them to another grade or class for the day.

Researcher: What has been the biggest difference in what you just said, but what has been the biggest difference for your school in reducing suspension rate?

Overton: Since we brought in detention, we've had a reduction in suspension rates. I have definitely seen a reduction in the rate since we started detention. So really have to understand each situation in each student what's going on with the student outside of action. Understanding kids they make mistakes misbehaving to get kicked out of school.

Researcher: Thank you.

Appendix J: University of Maryland and District IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

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College Park, MD 20742-5125
TEL 301.405.4212
FAX 301.314.1475
irb@umd.edu
www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

DATE:	July 11, 2019
TO:	Anita Walls
FROM:	University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	[1409255-1] An Investigation into the Disproportionate Exclusionary Discipline Practices in a Large Urban School District
REFERENCE #:	
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
ACTION:	APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE:	July 11, 2019
EXPIRATION DATE:	July 10, 2020
REVIEW TYPE:	Expedited Review

Dear Ms. Walls:

The review of your request to conduct the research study *"An Investigation into the Disproportionate Exclusionary Discipline Practices in a Large Urban School District"* has been completed. Based on the examination, I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved.

Authorization for this research extends through the 2019-2020 school year only. If you are not able to complete your data collection during this period, you must submit a request for an extension through the online tool you used when you completed your original application. We reserve the right to withdraw approval at any time or decline to extend the approval if the implementation of your study adversely impacts any of the school district's activities.

Before you begin data collection, you must secure written approval of the principals of your proposed research sites using the attached Principal Permission to Conduct Research Study forms. The original signed copies of these forms should be forwarded to this office and a copy given to each respective Principal. Should you revise any of your data collection documents or procedures, the revisions and the revised procedure must be approved by this office before being used in this study.

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