ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AN EXAMINATION OF PATTERNS IN EDUCATOR'S DEMOGRAPHICS AND FACTORS IN THE DISCIPLINE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS THAT LEAD TO AN OFFICE DISCIPLINE REFERRAL

Brodell J. McNeil III, Doctor of Education, 2022

Dissertation directed by: Dr. Margaret McLaughlin, College of Education

The likelihood of a student being issued an office discipline referral for subjective offenses increases when students enter middle school, particularly for minority students (Theriot and Dupper, 2015). The problem investigated for this dissertation was the disproportionality of office discipline referrals issued to Black males in 6th grade and the discipline decisions made by classroom teachers in a large, suburban school district. The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore factors related to ODRs using existing system data followed by exploratory focus groups of selected sixth grade classroom teachers to better understand their decision-making processes for subjective behaviors identified as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination. Discipline data were collected from two middle schools designated as disproportionate by Maryland State

Department of Education in Mid Atlantic Public School System and four focus groups comprised of 6th grade classroom teachers from the two identified schools.

Findings from this study revealed that Black males in 6th grade received 59% of all subjective office discipline referrals issued to 6th grade students between 2016-2020 in both schools. Additionally, the study investigated classroom teachers' perceptions of the discipline decision making process. All classroom teachers participating in focus groups reported that relationships are critical to improving discipline outcomes, the structures in schools to support discipline decisions must be uniform and consistently implemented, and that teachers must have opportunities to authentically improve their classroom management skills.

This study affirms that Black males in 6th grade continue to experience subjective discipline at rates greater than their peers, how classroom teachers perceive student behaviors differs based on student race and gender, and how the discipline decisions made by classroom teachers relies on their perceptions of student behavior and what the teacher deems to be disrespect, disruption, or insubordination.

AN EXAMINATION OF PATTERNS IN EDUCATOR'S DEMOGRAPHICS AND FACTORS IN THE DISCIPLINE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS THAT LEAD TO AN OFFICE DISCIPLINE REFERRAL

by

Brodell Jeremy McNeil III

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
2022

Advisory Committee:
Dr. Margaret McLaughlin, Chair
Dr. Douglas Anthony
Dr. David Imig
Dr. Olivia Saracho, Dean's Representative
Dr. Pamela Shetley

Dedication

This study is only possible because of the Grace of God. It is a reminder that, "I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me." Philippians 4:13.

To my parents, Brodell and Frazalee, who did not have the opportunity to pursue higher education, thank you for your unwavering love, support, and sacrifices so that I could have this opportunity. Becoming a first-generation college graduate fulfilled your dreams and completing this doctoral journey extended it.

To my brothers, Michael, Jason, Edward, and Christopher, I am who I am because of you. Each of you pushed me to dream bigger, dig deeper, and have fun along the way. Thank you for always being my biggest hype men and most honest critics. I love you all dearly. This is only another brick in the legacy we build together.

To my sisters-in-love, Marylin, Courtney, Tyler, and Charmonique, thank you all for your support. To my niece, Morgan, and my nephews, Jordan, Jaylon, Jackson, Jason, Lincoln, Mason, and Maddox, let this accomplishment be an inspiration and guide to each of you. While this is certainly an accomplishment, nothing compares to the gift of family.

To my best friend, James, you've been on this journey with me through it all. Thank you for understanding and supporting me. I'm sure you will appreciate the reprieve from the long days and nights of reading and writing, however short it may be!

To Heanon and Nakeesha Tate, our paths crossing surrounded me with love and purpose. Thank you for always being the example of perseverance. Sarene, Auden, Aria, Brielle, Dreydon, Kelley, and Michael, you know how we roll!

To my late aunt, Chlorie, your strength, tenacity, and out of the box thinking, has never been forgotten. I dedicate this work to you. Your love comforts and the memories of you asking, “What’s next?” have never faded away.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Margaret McLaughlin, thank you for taking my hands and guiding me through this journey. Your wit, patience, and dedication to helping refine my thinking and practice is truly appreciated. I hope to be able to give back to others what you have selflessly given to me time and time again. To my committee, thank you for your critical feedback that refined my scholarship and thinking.

To my cohort members, I am truly grateful for our time together at UMD. Each of you added value to my academic experiences. Alice, thank you for being my critical thought partner and friend.

Mrs. Dora Howard, Mrs. Mary Chestnut, Mrs. Mary Hill, Mrs. Ella Chisolm, the late Mrs. Rosalind Rivers, and the late Mrs. Naomi Zeigler, you all instilled a thirst for knowledge that is appreciated. The foundation you help build prepared me to meet the challenges of today.

My colleagues whose unwavering support lit my path forward, thank you! My students, past and present, I carry the lessons learned from each of you and wish you success in your future endeavors.

Finally, thank you to all the welcoming principals and staff whose commitment to students, families, and each other is commendable. Thank you for extending to me a warm welcome into your schools. I look forward to using this work to create action that benefits all schools.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

An Examination of Patterns in Educator's Demographics and Factors in the Discipline Decision-making Process that Lead to an Office Discipline Referral

Section I

In the Mid-Atlantic Public School System (MAPSS), an Office Discipline Referral (ODR) is written documentation of observed student behavior in violation of an established student code of conduct written by school staff that may lead to consequence determined by school administrative staff (Sugai et al., 2000). Students have an opportunity to respond to an ODR which is then followed by a comprehensive investigation by a school administrator, resulting in a disciplinary decision to exclude or not exclude a student from attending school (MAPSS Student Code of Conduct, 2020). A review of school discipline research identified a focus on the consequences and outcomes of ODRs, and specifically exclusionary discipline[1], rather than referral counts or the reasons why referrals were written. The consequences of exclusionary discipline that begin with an ODR were found to include disengagement from school, lower academic performance, and an increased dropout rate which continues the school to prison pipeline (Balfanz et al., 2015; Cornell et al., 2011). According to Skiba et al. (2011), removing students from the beneficial aspects of academic engagement and schooling, [through exclusionary discipline] … may constitute a risk factor for further negative outcomes.

From early studies, such as the Children's Defense Fund (1975), to more recent studies (see Baker-Smith, 2018; Balfanz et al., 2015; Bryan et al., 2012; Girvan et al., 2016; Losen & Skiba, 2010) researchers continued to demonstrate that disproportionality in discipline was a pervasive issue in public school for marginalized student groups. Despite efforts to raise

[1] For the purposes of this study, Exclusionary Discipline/Exclusion will refer to any action that removes a student from the instructional setting (In-School and Out-of-School Suspension, Decision Making Room, In School Intervention, Detention in the Office, and/or Supervised Time Out)

educators' awareness regarding exclusionary discipline consequences through any practice that removes a student from the regular classroom setting for any specified period, Black[2] males, particularly in middle schools, were at the time of this study, more likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline than their White and Hispanic peers. Further, middle school aged Black males received disproportionate numbers of office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) for subjective offenses such as disrespect, disruption, and insubordination, which often led to suspension (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Morgan et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011).

Curran and Finch (2018), in a review of the student code of conduct in all 24 Maryland school systems, found exclusionary practices remained an option for many discipline infractions despite 2014 Maryland guidelines; and the degree of exclusion was dependent upon choices educators made in schools and classrooms. The Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) 13A.08.01.11 prevents Maryland public schools from issuing students in-school suspension or out-of-school suspension without written documentation of student misconduct on an ODR. Further exploration of Maryland's discipline data indicated that as students matriculated from elementary school to middle school, the likelihood of an exclusion increased. For instance, in 2018-2019 of 45,186 unduplicated exclusions, 15% were attributed to elementary schools and 85% to secondary schools. Among secondary exclusions, 51% were attributed to students in high school (grades 9-12) and 49% to students in middle school (grades 6-8), affirming Theriot and Dupper's (2010) assertion that ODRs rise significantly when students enter middle school.

In 2005, MAPSS and the Mid-Atlantic County National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) reached a mediated agreement due, in part, to the disproportionate representation of Black males who were excluded from school. The agreement

[2] For the purposes of this this research Black will refer to students often cited in literature as African American or students of color

focused on equitable application of disciplinary practices across all student groups and led to several policy changes and strategic initiatives. Even with a systemic focus on disparities in discipline, data indicated Black males experienced a disproportionate rate of disciplinary actions than their peers. From 2016-2020, there were 99,254 documented ODRs in secondary schools, and middle school students received 59.6% of all ODRs. A review of middle school data indicated 31.1% of ODRs were attributed to Black males in comparison to 25.2% for White males. Further exploration of data revealed that during the same time period, 55, 277 of all ODRs were written for subjective offenses. Data indicated middle school students received 65.9% of ODRs for subjective offenses, of which 31.7% were attributed to Black males. This was in contrast to 25.7% for White males. Digging deeper, 31.3% of ODRs for subjective offenses led to exclusionary actions[3] for Black males in comparison to 27.2% of ODRs leading to exclusionary actions for White males. In keeping with the mantra, "All Means All," MAPSS made efforts to improve disproportionality in discipline for all students by establishing a system level disproportionality committee charged with engaging in the state mandated accountability process; providing equity and diversity professional development to all system employees; implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Second Step, Social Emotional Learning and Restorative Practices in schools; and establishing school-based discipline review protocols. Despite these various initiatives, at the time of this study there continued to be a disproportionate number of disciplinary referrals in subjective offenses for Black males in middle schools, which warranted further examination as there continued to be a need for effective school disciplinary strategies.

[3] In Maryland, exclusionary actions for subjective offenses are prohibited from leading to an expulsion due to the 2014 MSDE Guidelines for a state code of discipline.

Scope of the Problem

This section will explore national, state, and school system data related to disproportionality in ODRs for Black males in middle schools. It is important to note there was little national and state data available on ODRs outside of a few studies by Hilberth and Slate (2014), Predy et al. (2014), Skiba et al. (2011), and Theriot and Dupper (2010). Within the research, *exclusionary* discipline was most often related to out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, but there were also in-school suspensions. For the purposes of this research, *exclusionary* discipline will refer to both in-school and out-of-school suspensions. It is important to note that while expulsion is an exclusionary action, at the time of this study, in Maryland, the decision to expel a student from school was at the discretion of the local Superintendent of Schools or his/her designee.

National Scope

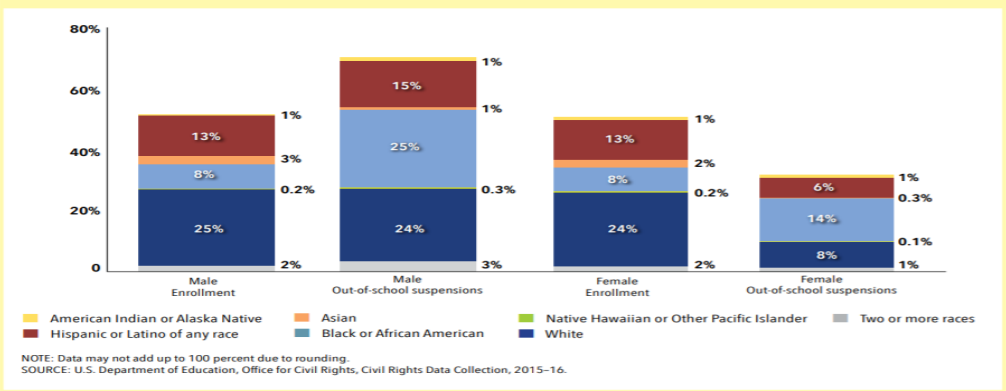
Literature highlighted not only that Black students were more often disciplined than White students, but they were also more harshly disciplined, (Gregory et al., 2010; Losen et al., 2015; Skiba, 2014). Rocque and Paternoster (2011), used data from 45 elementary schools from a large school district in a Mid-Atlantic state that included 19,645 students in grades K-5 during the 2005-2006 school year to examine whether students received ODRs for misconduct and the number of times students were referred to the office. They found Black students were more than twice as likely to receive an ODR and disciplinary action than students of all other races combined. The research of Skiba et al. (2011) suggested Black males were more frequently suspended or expelled as a result of disciplinary referrals for all offenses at 272 K-6 level schools and 92 6-9 level schools during the 2005-2006 academic year. As a result of disciplinary referrals, according to data from the Civil Rights Data Collection's 2009-10 statistics, Lewin

(2012) asserted Black students were three and a half times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers.

As seen in Figure 1, a 2018 report by the Office of Civil Rights highlighted the percentage of total enrollment in U.S. Public Schools which received one or more out-of-school suspensions by race and sex based on 2015-2016 data which showed no improvement from 2013-2014 data.

Figure 1

Percentage of Students receiving one or more suspension by race and gender



Note: Reprinted from the Office of Civil Rights (2018), p. 14

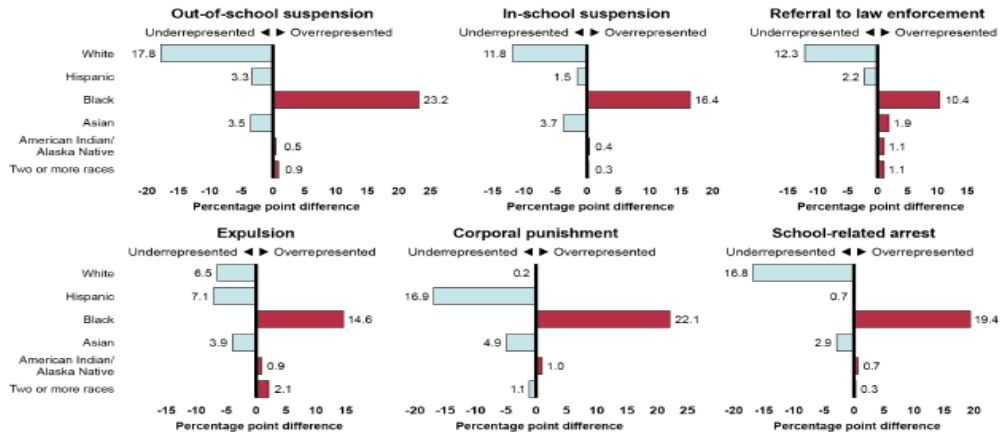
Based on the U.S. Department of Education 2015-2016 data, Black students represented approximately 15.4% of all K-12 public-school students, of which 7.9% were Black males (U.S Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2015-16). Further, the data showed Black males accounted for 34.1% of the students who received one out-of-school suspension (OSS), 37.7% of the students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions (OSS), and 30.4% of the students who received one or more in-school suspensions (ISS).

As seen in Figure 2, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (2018) found that in the 2013-2014 school year, Black male students enrolled in public schools were

disproportionately suspended and expelled compared to White males in grades K-12. The report also noted disparities were widespread and persisted regardless of the type of disciplinary action, level of school poverty, or type of public school attended.

Figure 2

Student group representation by exclusionary category



Note: Reprinted from the Government Accountability Office (2018), p. 14

A body of research concluded middle school students received more ODRs than elementary and high school students, and of all students that received a referral in middle school, Black males were more likely to receive an exclusion (Hilberth & Slate, 2014).

Losen and Skiba (2010) analyzed a cross section of 2006 suspensions that occurred in 18 middle schools that was compiled by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR). They concluded that although the average rate of suspension for middle schools was 11.2%, 46% of all suspensions were attributed to Black students, offering further support of research previously cited that concluded Black males were more likely to receive an ODR in middle school that led to an exclusion. This finding was supported in a study by Predy et al. (2014) which utilized a sampling of 401,852 students from 593 public middle schools in school year 2009-10. Their study

suggested trends in ODRs significantly increased in middle school, particularly for Black males. They encouraged more research to be done to understand why.

Despite national initiatives by the United States Department of Education (USDOE) to address the discrepant impact of discipline in schools, research demonstrated the pervasiveness of the discipline gap, particularly in middle schools. In January 2014, the US Departments of Justice and Education jointly issued a Dear Colleague Letter and other sub-regulatory documents (US Department of Education, January 2014) intended to assist public schools in meeting the mandates of Title VI regulations by addressing the discriminatory administration of discipline in the nation's schools.

Under the Trump administration, Secretary of Education Betsy Devos chaired a school safety commission (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018) with just four members of the Trump administration's Cabinet. The commission released a report in 2018 reversing the Obama-era guidelines meant to curb suspension and expulsions, especially for students of color. Through a series of hearings, field visits, and listening sessions, the commission heard testimony from various stakeholders who argued for and against the document, leading the commission to deduce the guidance encouraged schools and systems to respond to school discipline in a way that avoided legal jeopardy rather than achieving school safety. Therefore, in rescinding the Obama Administration's guidance document, the Commission sought to empower schools and school systems to implement policies and practices that worked best for them.

The commission's report asserted teachers were better suited to address student behavior and that any federal solution usurped the local school official's ability to address the impact of student behavior on school safety. Furthermore, the commission stated that rescinding the guidance could not force schools to make changes; instead, it removed political pressures on

schools to select students' civil rights over student safety (Blad, 2018). The report went on to cite several points from a report by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) which lamented safety issues arose when schools were compelled to keep students in school when removal was warranted. The commission particularly targeted the "disparate impact" language of the previous guidance, asserting the guidance lacked foundation in applicable law and had the potential to lead schools to adopt racial quotas or proportionality requirements. It suggested the previous guidance gave schools an incentive of federal funding to make discipline rates proportional to enrollment figures. As an alternative to the Obama Administration's 2014 guidance documents, the commission's report made the following recommendations:

1. The U. S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and the U.S. State Department of Education (ED) should develop information for schools and school districts that will identify resources and best practices to assist schools in improving school climate and learning outcomes… while maintaining overall student safety. (p. 72)
2. DOJ and ED should continue to enforce Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and provide information to assist schools and the public in understanding how cases of intentional discrimination will be investigated and resolved. (p. 72)

State Scope

Since 2008, Black students, also referred to in literature as African American students, have gone from being 1.95 to 3 times more likely to receive a suspension as a result of ODRs (MSDE, 2014). To address the continuing disproportionality, in 2009 MSDE began an examination of discipline policies in all 24 Local School Systems (LSS). This was in response to an August 2009 opinion released by the Maryland State Board of Education (MSBE) in response to an appeal hearing regarding the extended suspension of a ninth-grade student.

In 2011 the MSBE directed MSDE to review and address issues with zero-tolerance discipline policies in Maryland's LSS. Subsequently, in 2012 the MSBE released three reports: *School Discipline and Academic Success: Related Parts of Maryland's Education Reform*; *A Safe School, Successful Students*; and *A Fair and Equitable Disciplinary Process Go Hand in Hand*, that began to change the focus of discipline from punitive to restorative. These reports focused on the impact of exclusionary practices and surmised that for students to achieve academically they must be in school; therefore, exclusionary practices should be used only as a last resort; and if necessary, be applied equitably across student populations (MSBE, 2012). The review by MSDE extended over a six-year period and culminated in 2014, when MSBE adopted the student discipline regulations and policies outlined in COMAR 13A.08.01.11 and approved the Maryland Guidelines for a State Code of Discipline (MSBE, 2012). This provided a framework for LSSs to establish local codes of conduct and develop new discipline-related policies.

To address reform in the area of equitable discipline, MSBE also adopted COMAR 13A.08.01.21, which directed MSDE to develop a methodology for assessing disproportionality in discipline data. This policy required that each Maryland public school system revise its discipline code to include restorative practices and positive behavior interventions as well as to monitor discipline data regarding minority students in order to assess disparities in discipline rates (Clark, 2014; St. George, 2014). In 2017, MSDE proposed analyzing each school system's suspension and expulsion data by individual schools, using two distinct measures: *risk ratio,* which is the removal rate of a specified student group in a school divided by the removal rate of all other students in the same school, and *state comparison*, which is the removal rate of a specified student group in a school divided by the statewide removal rate. Risk ratio was

determined yearly based on the current data, whereas state comparison was a cumulative rate based on the prior three years of Maryland's suspension/expulsion and enrollment data. Figure 3 describes MSDE risk ratio and state comparison measures.

Figure 3

MSDE Risk Ratio and State Comparison Measure

$$\text{Removal Rate} = \frac{\text{Unduplicated Count of Students in Group Removed}}{\text{Total Count of Students in the Group}} \times 100$$

$$\text{Risk Ratio} = \frac{\text{Student Group Removal Rate}}{\text{All Other Students Removal Rate}}$$

$$\text{State Comparison Measure} = \frac{\text{Student Group Removal Rate}}{\text{Statewide Removal Rate (E or MH)}}$$

Risk Ratio Value	Level of disproportionality
1.00	Equal
2.00	Two times higher risk
3.00	Three times higher risk

Note: Reprinted from http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DSFSS/SSSP/DisproportionalityWebinarTalkingPoints040617.pdf

In accordance with COMAR 13A.08.01.21, MSDE contended if one or more student groups within a school met or exceeded a 3.0 threshold on both risk ratio and state comparison measure, that school was to be identified as having a discrepant impact. In March 2017, all Maryland LSSs received their exclusion data by school and an accompanying guidance document addressing school discipline practice. The LSSs were to use the data to analyze root causes of any disproportionality in the data and implement interventions to mitigate those outcomes in subsequent years. School systems were informed that by SY2018-2019, any of their schools identified for discrepant discipline data would be required to present a plan to MSDE on how the LSS and school would reduce the impact of disproportionality within one year and eliminate disproportionality within three years (MSDE, 2018b).

Despite all efforts, the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University issued a report stating [Black males] received more discipline referrals, and therefore, more out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, than other student groups across the state of Maryland (Staats, 2014). A review of the most recent MSDE data (2019) indicated that in 2018-2019 racial disparity in discipline still existed in Maryland public schools (Maryland State Department of Education, 2019a). The report indicated that during that school year there were a total of 79,306 suspensions and expulsions of which 58% were received by Black students. Furthermore, a district-by-district review of the same suspension rates in Maryland indicated that of the 45,186 unduplicated suspensions and expulsions, 57% were attributed to Black students. Table 1 presents the 2018-2019 school year suspension and expulsion data by LSS.

Table 1

MSDE 2018-2019 unduplicated suspensions and expulsion data by county and race

Local School System	Total Students	Race/Ethnicity							Gender	
		American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Black or African American	White	Hispanic	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	Two or More Races	Male	Female
Total State	45,186	131	526	25,644	10,831	5,653	51	2,350	30,348	14,838
Allegany	363	0	0	30	288	6	*	39	266	97
Anne Arundel	5,063	18	49	2,254	1,658	717	5	362	3,522	1,541
Baltimore City	4,383	8	9	4,017	166	161	1	21	2,561	1,822
Baltimore	7,085	39	99	4,410	1,602	551	4	380	4,617	2,468
Calvert	1,057	3	7	245	623	56	0	123	778	279
Caroline	423	1	3	100	220	41	*	57	310	113
Carroll	698	1	8	54	550	52	2	31	524	174
Cecil	1,338	6	2	236	876	105	3	110	948	390
Charles	1,535	7	11	1,163	178	71	2	103	1,059	476
Dorchester	662	*	2	428	157	22	*	53	424	238
Frederick	1,624	5	26	437	681	367	0	108	1,182	442
Garrett	69	*	*	0	68	0	*	1	55	14
Harford	2,788	5	32	1,124	1,156	216	11	244	1,975	813
Howard	1,312	3	75	775	228	143	2	86	927	385
Kent	267	*	0	100	123	19	*	24	170	97
Montgomery	2,854	1	123	1,233	357	1,025	0	115	2,023	831
Prince George's	9,030	24	55	6,883	172	1,783	14	99	5,920	3,110
Queen Anne's	206	1	3	35	136	17	*	14	152	54
SEED School	120	*	*	117	*	2	*	*	70	50
St. Mary's	696	3	8	342	247	35	1	60	467	229
Somerset	560	*	0	385	129	17	*	28	341	219
Talbot	140	*	0	49	65	18	*	8	93	47
Washington	1,324	1	8	318	715	120	2	160	957	367
Wicomico	1,195	4	6	780	238	85	2	80	729	466
Worcester	394	0	0	129	197	24	*	44	278	116

Note: Reprinted from the Maryland State Department of Education (2019a), p. 5

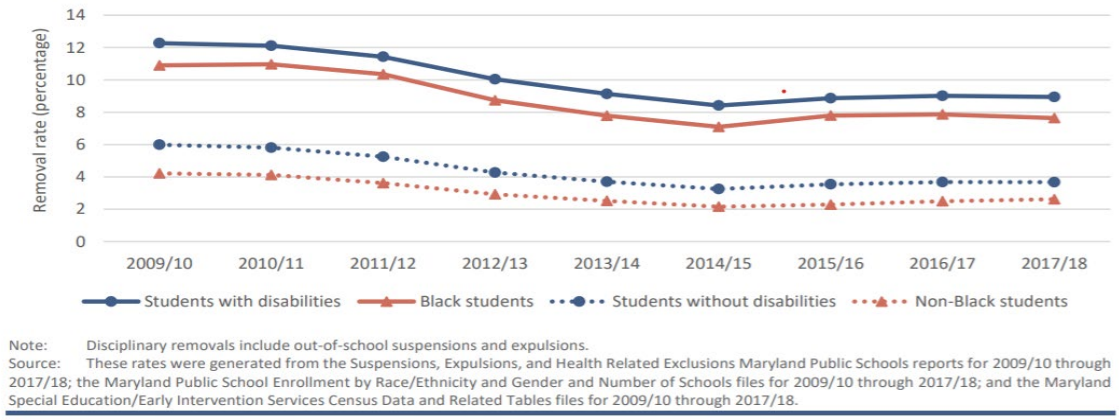
While data demonstrated a disparity in discipline data, it was important to note that as mandated by COMAR 13A.08.01.11, no student in Maryland Public Schools received an exclusionary discipline action without an ODR. Without an ODR, excluding a student from the

learning environment for any reason was in direct conflict with the protections provided to students under Maryland law.

A study conducted by O'Conner et al. (2014) used 2009-2010 through 2011-2012 Maryland suspension and expulsion data for K-12 public school students to examine if exclusionary discipline was applied in a way that had a discrepant impact on Black and other racial/ethnic students relative to the impact on White students. Their research found discipline rates were twice as high for Black students in comparison to all other student groups.

Figure 4

2009-2018 trend data for disciplinary removal rates



Note: Reprinted from Lacoe, J. and Manley, M. (2019), p. 4

As seen in Figure 4, even as the proportion of students being suspended and expelled from school overall fell from 5.6% to just below 4%, trends reported by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory as cited in Lacoe and Manley (2019) based on MSDE 2009-2018 data showed Black students in Maryland were more likely to be suspended and/or expelled than other student groups based on race.

As a result of the continued disparities in discipline data, MSDE required all 24 LSSs to report annually the number of students subjected to suspension and expulsion, delineated by

race, gender, and disability status. School systems with schools identified as having a discrepant impact on minority students and students with disabilities had to prepare and present to MSBE a plan to reduce the impact within 1 year and eliminate the discrepant impact within 3 years. If the school system failed to reach this goal, their schools were subjected to intervention by the state.

School System Scope

A 2019 report by MSDE, *Maryland Public School Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions 2018-2019*, indicated MAPSS ranked third in the State of Maryland for total suspensions and expulsions. Further exploration of data indicated 41% of the public schools in MAPSS suspended Black students more than other student groups. Based on the risk ratio formula set forth by MSDE and described earlier, in 2019, 10 schools in MAPSS exceeded the state risk ratio of 3.0 for removal of Black students. Exclusions, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions in MAPSS[4] were directly related to the submission of a Discipline Referral Form, sometimes referred to in the literature and hereafter in this study as an Office Disciplinary Referral (ODR). ODRs have historically been used by schools to monitor student discipline problems and evaluate the impact of school-based interventions and policies (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Losen & Skiba, 2010), as well as to make programmatic decisions regarding support services and programs both school-wide and for individual students (Gregory et al., 2011). MAPSS Policy JDA-RA (2019) stated explicitly, “An ODR shall be completed, citing the specific reason(s) for the referral, by an administrator, teacher, or other staff member who has witnessed or been made

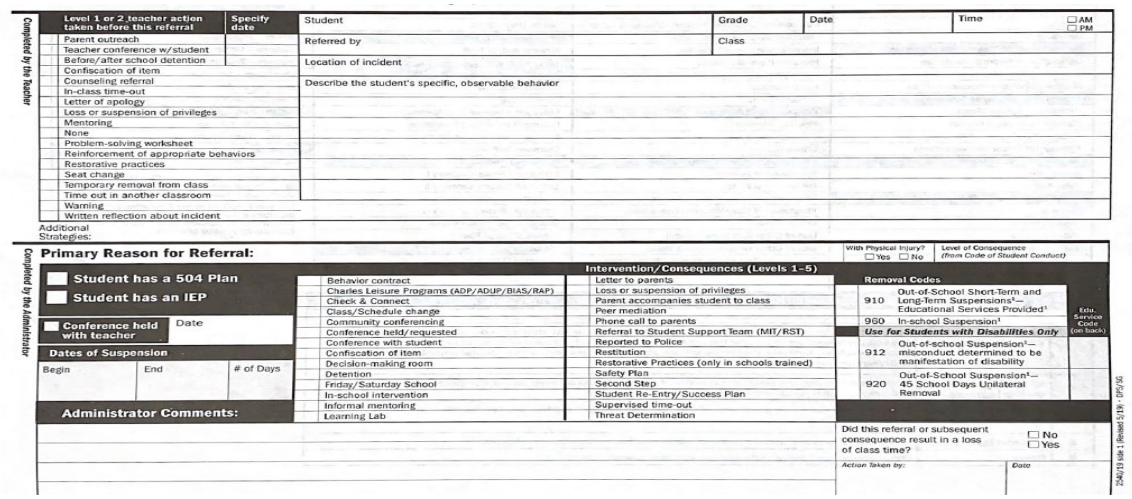
[4] In MAPSS expulsion does include documented student misconduct on a DR, however only the Superintendent of Schools or Designee may grant a school’s request to expel a student. All Expulsions must comply with federal and state laws and regulations.

aware of an infraction of the Code of Student Conduct that warrants an ODR. No student in MAPSS can be excluded from class or school without an ODR."

In 2014, MSDE issued Guidelines for a State Code of Discipline to identify how school systems coded violent and non-violent offenses. The guidelines provided a framework from which all 24 LSSs could revise and implement their student code of conduct. MSDE organized 27 potential infractions and 31 response options into a five-tiered system (Level 1- 5) of which teacher responses were tiered at Level 1-2 and administrator and exclusionary responses were tiered at Level 3-5. Teachers were responsible for handling Tier 1 and Tier 2 infractions and administrators were responsible for handling Tier 3, Tier 4, and Tier 5 infractions. Each local school system could then create an ODR that would be a visualization of how their local student code of conduct aligned with MSDE's guidelines. In MAPSS, ODRs (see Figure 5) were written by the classroom teacher describing a student's specific, observable behavior. Upon submission to the office, an administrator completed an investigation of the reported student behavior and then, if appropriate, issued an exclusionary consequence as outlined in Table 2.

Figure 5

MAPPS Discipline Referral



Source: Reprinted from MAPSS Office of Student Services (5/2019)

Table 2

MAPSS Consequences- Progressive Options to Address Student Behaviors: Grades 3-12

Consequences—Progressive Options to Address Student Behaviors: Grades 3–12		
Level 1 **Classroom Level interventions** If these interventions are successful, referral to the school administrator may not be necessary. Parent/Guardian Notification Required	**Level 2** **Appropriate when Level 1 intervention has been ineffective** In some cases, referral to the school administrator may be necessary. Parent/Guardian Notification Required	**Levels 3, 4, and 5** **Appropriate when subsequent intervention levels have been ineffective** AACPS office referral required Parent/Guardian Notification Required
· Preferential seating · Loss of privilege · Confiscation of item · Parent conference · Student Conference · Warning · Opportunity to apologize · Repair of harm · Restitution · Supervised calm/cool-down time inside of classroom · Referral to Charles E. Leisure Programs (RAP, ATUP, ADP, BMBP)	· Class or schedule change · Detention · Loss or suspension of privileges · Office referral · Repair of Harm · Restitution · Supervised calm/cool-down outside of classroom · Temporary removal from class · In-school Intervention (ISI) · In-school Suspension (ISS) · Bus Suspension · Suspension (short-term, 1–3 days, except for attendance-related offenses) · Suspension (long-term, 4–10 days, except for attendance-related offenses) · Referral to Charles E. Leisure Programs (RAP, ATUP, ADP, BMBP)	· Bus suspension · Detention · In-school Intervention (ISI) · In-school Suspension (ISS) · Suspension (short-term, 1–3 days, except for attendance-related offenses) · Suspension (long-term, 4–10 days, except for attendance-related offenses) · Extended Suspension (11–45 days) · Expulsion (45 days or balance of the school year) · Loss or suspension of privileges · Restitution · Temporary removal from class · Referral to Alternative Education Setting · Referral to Charles E. Leisure Programs (RAP, ATUP, ADP, BMBP)

MIT—Multidisciplinary Intervention Team
StIT—Student Intervention Team
CPI—Crisis Prevention Institute

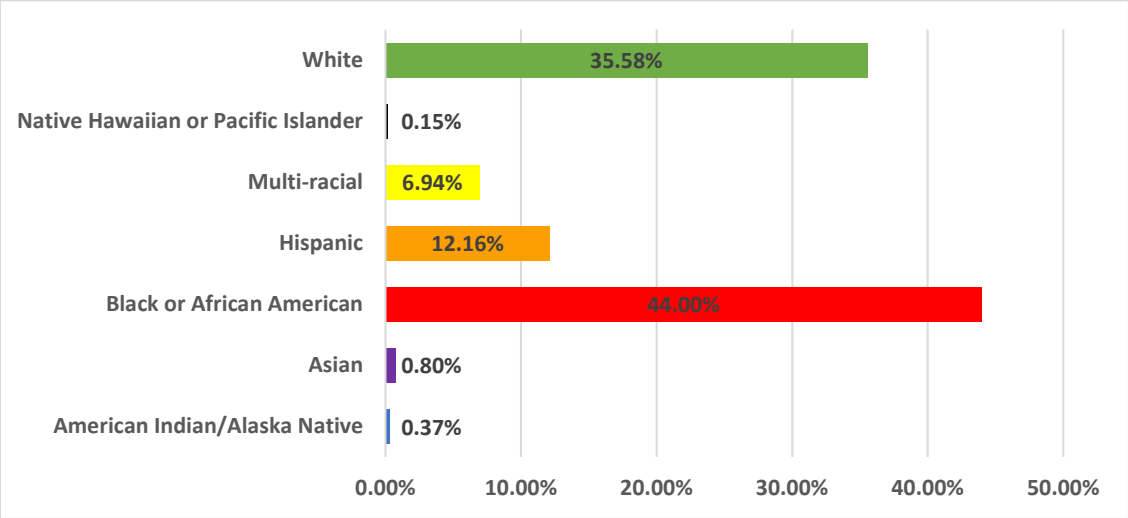
Source: Reprinted from the MAPSS Student Code of Conduct (2020)

According to MAPSS Instructional Data Division, a total of 99,254 ODRs were written in MAPSS between school year 2016 and 2020[5]. Of these, Black students received 44% of the ODRs, in comparison to White students, who received 35% and Hispanic students, who received 12%, (see Figure 6). During this same period, Black students represented approximately 21.1% of the total student population in MAPSS while White students represented approximately 51.3%, and Hispanic students represented approximately 17.1%. When gender distribution of the total ODRs mentioned above were considered, Black males received 29.4% of all referrals in comparison to Hispanic/Latino males, who received 8.8%, and White males, who received 26.3% (see Figure 7).

[5] MACPS *Data for SY 19-20 are included in the statistics presented and is affected by the COVID-19 school closure in March 2020*

Figure 6

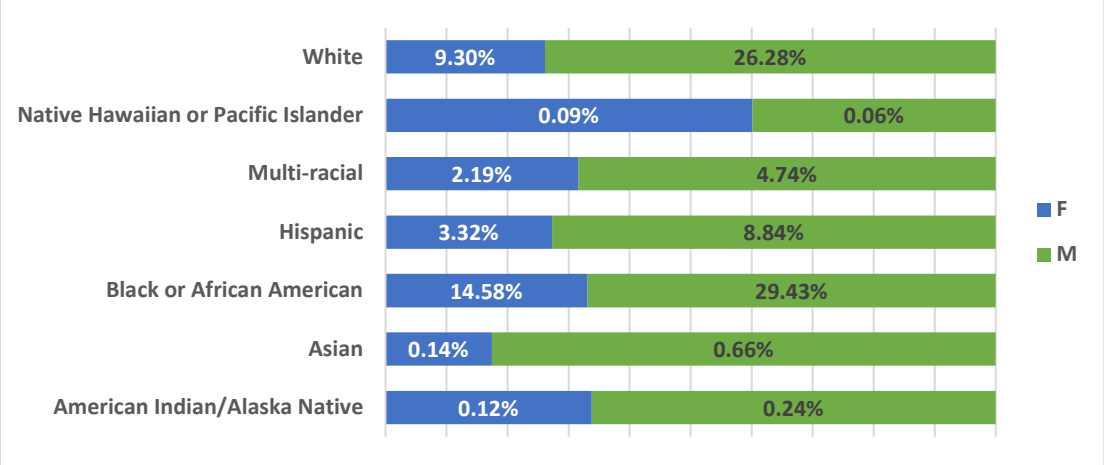
MAPSS Percentage of Total Referrals by Race, SY16-20



Source: Reprinted from the Office of Student Data (2020)

Figure 7

MAPSS Percentage of Total Referrals by Race and Gender, SY16-20



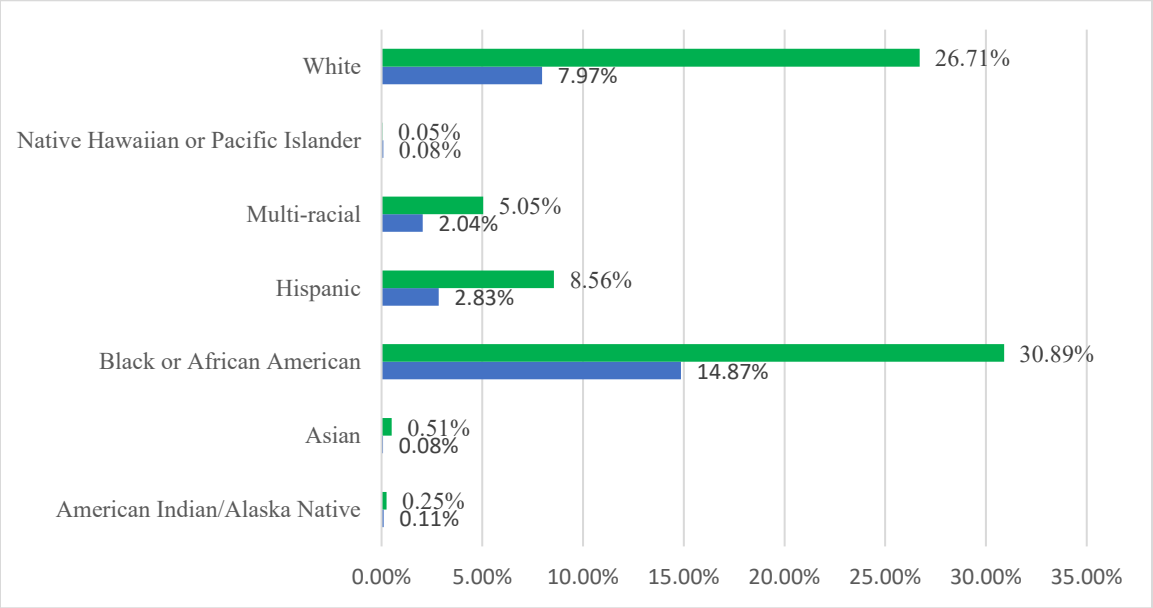
Source: Reprinted from the Office of Student Data (2020)

Subjective Offenses. In MAPSS at the time of this study, ODRs were issued for 47 reasons, some of which were considered subjective offenses defined as classroom disruption, disrespect, and insubordination. Of the 99,254 ODRs written in MAPSS between school years

2016 and 2020, 55,277 referrals were issued for subjective offenses. Of those, Black males received 31% compared to White males, who received 26.7%, and Hispanic males, who received 8.6%. MAPSS's data was consistent with previous research that indicated Black [male] students were more likely to be referred to the office for less serious subjective offenses than their White counterparts (Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011; Smolkowski, et al., 2016). Figure 8 presents MAPSS ODRs for subjective offenses by race and gender.

Figure 8

MAPSS percentage of total referrals for subjective offenses by race and gender, SY16-20



Source: Reprinted from the Office of Student Data (2020)

An exploration of data in all MAPSS's secondary schools since SY15-16 revealed there was still disproportionality in office discipline referrals for Black males despite efforts to reduce and eliminate disproportionality outcomes. MAPSS's five-year strategic plan (2018-2023) established the goal of ensuring that every student meet or exceed standards and achievement gaps were eliminated. Under the mantra of "all means all," MAPSS's goal was that all student

groups experience school in an equitable manner. However, as indicated by data, Black males continued to be more likely to experience exclusionary actions in MAPSS. This disproportionate trend was a significant concern for school system leadership, especially considering the possible detrimental impacts exclusionary actions have on students. Key factors in addressing inequity were an ODR and the disproportionate number of Black males who were referred for such offenses as classroom disruption, disrespect, and insubordination.

Consequences of Not Addressing the Problem

The impact of ODRs, some of which lead to suspension and expulsion, have negative consequences for all student groups nationally, statewide, and at the school system level; however, at the time of this study no student group was more vulnerable than Black males (Gregory et al., 2010b; Petras et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2014b; Skiba & Losen, 2012). According to a few researchers, as disproportionality in discipline continues in schools, there will be a continued trend towards negative outcomes that include school disengagement, academic difficulties, school dropout, and increased juvenile justice involvement (Gregory et al., 2010; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Petras et al., 2011). Skiba et al. (2014b) referred to these as risk factors for negative developmental outcomes. Although school discipline policies were enacted to maintain order in schools (APA Zero Tolerance Taskforce, 2008), a preponderance of research highlighted that the use of an ODR, suspension, or expulsion did little to change student behaviors. In fact, ODRs' cumulative negative impact on students was that they had the potential to lead to suspension and expulsion, creating a concern for parents, educators, taxpayers, and policymakers (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Dropping Out of School

Researchers (Horner et al., 2010; Hung et al., 2015; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014) cited numerous reasons for student misbehavior, but there was little to no empirical data to support the ideation that suspensions or expulsions were successful in preventing the recurrence of behaviors that resulted in the exclusion (Skiba, 2014). Being referred, suspended, or expelled from school may lead to long term consequences for students and, by extension, society. For example, exclusion from school was shown to increase the likelihood of school disengagement, which is a strong predictor of truancy (Toldson, 2011). Skiba et al. (2011) also asserted that students became more disconnected from school when they experienced higher rates of exclusion, and this perpetuated negative dispositions toward schools and teachers.

As students continue to disengage from school and truancy becomes an issue as early as middle school, so too is the probability of students dropping out of school. Evidence suggested suspension in middle school was a stronger predictor of dropout than grade point average or socioeconomic status (Losen et al., 2015; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). Balfanz et al. (2015) and Cardichon and Martens (2013) confirmed that even when schools provided optimal support for students, one suspension in ninth grade significantly increased the likelihood of school dropout. Skiba and Losen (2012) noted significant and lasting negative outcomes for students suspended in middle school. A study conducted by Balfanz et al. (2015) using longitudinal data from Florida of 181,897 first time 9th graders in 2000-2001indicated one suspension increased the likelihood of dropping out of school by 16% and subsequent suspensions increased that to 32%.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

One of the often-cited negative impacts of school suspension and expulsion is the link to incarceration. According to Darensbourg et al. (2010),

> The School to Prison Pipeline (STTP) proposes exclusionary discipline techniques (e.g., detention, out-of-school suspension, disciplinary alternative education placements) experienced by [Black] males alienate them from the learning process by steering them from the classroom and academic attainment and toward the criminal justice system. (p. 197)

A study by Novak (2019) using a sample of 837 children 18 years of age from the LONGSCAN consortium which included information from five sites: Chicago, Baltimore, North Carolina, San Diego, and Seattle, found that recurrent suspensions increased a student's odds of eventual justice system involvement. Furthermore, suspension experienced at younger ages had a significant, direct association with adolescent justice system involvement. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, Shollenberger (2015) cited the impact of exclusionary discipline actions on Black boys, finding more than 75% of Black males suspended for 10 or more days were more likely to be arrested by their late 20s. According to Fabelo et al. (2011), prioritizing the planning of prison space based on student discipline data demonstrated a connection between schools and prisons in the United States, which has continued to subject minorities and the impoverished to harsh disciplinary practices. The NAACP stated in their 2005 report that the challenge in education was the STPP:

> What has been true in the criminal justice system is also true in the School-to-Prison Pipeline: African Americans, especially young Black males, have felt the brunt of the dramatic policy shift away from education and towards incarceration… in 2003, African-

> American youths made up 16% of the nation's overall juvenile population but accounted for 45% of juvenile arrests.
>
> (NAACP 2005, p. 6-7)

The NAACP report went on to note the STPP unjustly targeted those students who were most at risk of experiencing exclusion from schools; and the discipline gaps that pervaded public schools were depriving Black students of the opportunity to learn (NAACP, 2005).

Loss of Instructional Time

Impacts on academic achievement were consistently cited as a major concern of exclusionary discipline practices for all students, but particularly for Black males, who were suspended and expelled at higher rates (Chapman et al., 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011). Research contended Black students, specifically males, demonstrated a negative correlation between achievement and school suspension and/or expulsion (Gregory & Thompson, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014). Students subjected to exclusionary discipline struggled to keep pace with their peers academically, and there was an increased likelihood these students, identified by academic performance measures as early as third grade, would leave high school without a diploma (Fabelo et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Morgan et al., 2014).

A major reason for linking low achievement to exclusionary disciplinary practices is the loss of instructional time as a result of being excluded from school. Losen et al. (2015) reported that in an examination of out-of-school suspension data in every school district in the country during the 2011-2012 school year, approximately 3.5 million students were excluded from school at least once, for an average duration of 3.5 days. This resulted in the loss of approximately 18 million days of instruction during that one school year. While Losen et al. (2015) only focused on out-of-school suspension, other researchers concluded in-school

suspension and expulsion results in significant instructional time loss (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Losen et al. (2015) also noted students who were excluded struggled with the demands of the classroom upon their return, which often translated into additional behavioral infractions. Other studies (Fabelo et al., 2011; Huang et al., 2012; Mallet, 2017) reported that of all students suspended, approximately 30%-50% continued to exhibit behaviors considered as disruptive to a school environment when they returned. These behaviors led to additional ODRs and the potential for more exclusionary actions, all of which had a negative cumulative impact on students' ability to receive adequate instructional time which resulted in academic regression. This negative impact on student achievement resulted in increased absenteeism, a negative perception of school, failing grades, and retention leading to dropping out of school.

Social-Emotional Wellness

While not every referral leads to a suspension, the act of writing an ODR may have a negative impact on students' social-emotional well-being. There was evidence to suggest a direct correlation between students' perceptions of teacher support and social development (Hung et al., 2015; Lee, 2012), because the quality of the student classroom experience was directly related to student behavior and social-emotional wellness in classrooms (Lee, 2012). According to Pufall Jones et al. (2018), young people wanted to feel respected, trusted, and heard. Because of heightened emotional intensity in adolescence and the punishments typically associated with "getting in trouble," disciplinary interventions were pivotal opportunities for students to feel either included and respected or shut down and ignored by schools. Several studies (Gregory & Thompson, 2010; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016) demonstrated students most at risk for high rates of exclusion, particularly Black males, had negative teacher-student relationships which exacerbated the discipline process.

Gregory and Thompson (2010), in a review of multiple studies examining teacher perceptions of student behaviors, determined Black students were issued harsher punishments than their non-Black peers even when the exhibited behaviors were less severe. Research confirmed students were reluctant to engage in school and classrooms when they felt targeted, prejudged, or misunderstood, and how students experienced their day had a significant impact on their social-emotional development (Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). Students' relationships with other students and their teachers impacted how they responded to unfavorable actions in the classroom. When Black students believed their teachers and school staff were not treating them fairly, they were less likely to be motivated to engage in the school process, which as discussed earlier, had the potential to lead to dropping out of school, low academic achievement, absenteeism, and poor teacher-student relationships (Gregory et al., 2010; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Petras et al., 2011 Skiba et al., 2014a; Skiba & Losen, 2012). Research highlighted that the use of exclusionary practices, including in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension, had serious consequences for students.

Theory of Action

In this section, I will discuss my theory regarding how the problem of disproportionate ODRs for Black males for subjective offenses, specifically in MAPSS, might be addressed. The section begins with a causal systems analysis which attempted to identify major factors that promote or perpetuate the problem. This will be followed by a discussion of two primary drivers of change that could potentially reduce or eliminate the problem.

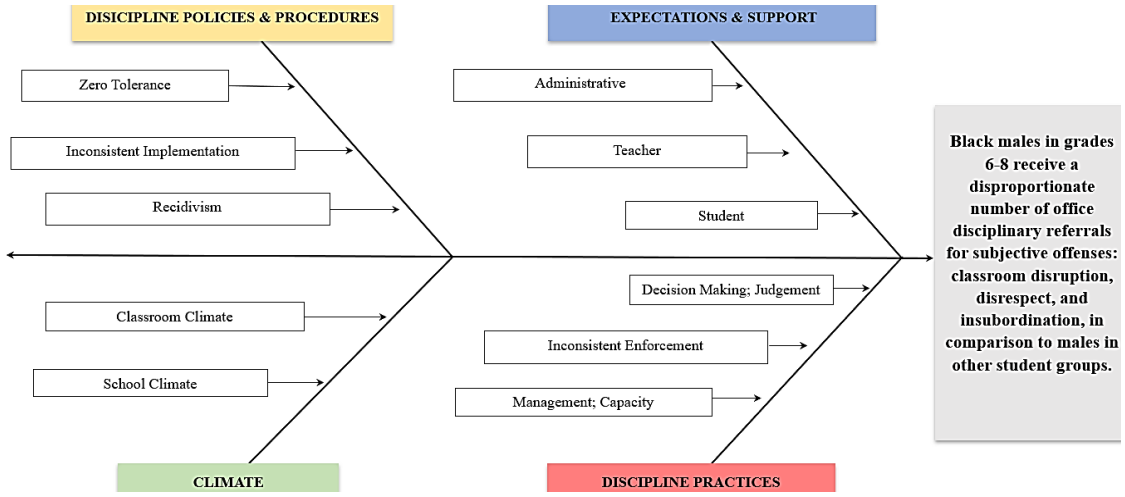
Causal System Analysis

Senge (2014) asserted there was a focus on developing more rules to account for student behaviors than on identifying underlying causes of the problem. Considering exclusionary

practices and negative outcomes for students, it is important to understand factors contributing to disproportionality in school discipline data, particularly for middle school Black males. For the purpose of this study, the following causal factors will be addressed: discipline policies and procedures, expectations and support, discipline practices, and climate. Figure 9 illustrates those major factors.

Figure 9

Fishbone Diagram outlining causal factors related to disciplinary referrals



Discipline Policies and Procedures

District and school discipline policies define students' behavioral expectations as well as interventions and consequences for infractions. In a review of school discipline literature highlights since the 1960s, schools were found to have been using out-of-school suspension to address and reduce increasing student misbehaviors. Research noted that in response to student behaviors, schools have used many iterations of discipline procedures including verbal reprimands, corporal punishment, after-school detention, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and fines (Gregory et al., 2010; Shollenberger, 2015; Staats, 2014; Welch & Payne, 2010). Literature continued to demonstrate that youth of color, particularly Black males, were

most affected by the enforcement of punitive school discipline policies and procedures (Skiba et al., 2014) which do little to deter a recurrence of student misbehavior.

According to MAPPS (2020), most common school discipline procedures were typically found in parent/student handbooks, student codes of conduct, and local school board policies, and supported a safe and secure learning environment central to success in school. While the evidence increased regarding negative impacts of exclusionary discipline practices, federal laws and state policies did little to regulate these practices, and educators continued to deem them necessary for keeping order in schools (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014). At the time of this study, in Maryland, while LSSs' Boards of Education was directly responsible for the review, revision, and adoption of policies that govern student behaviors, each school had the latitude to devise how they enacted and responded to student discipline (MSBE, 2012).

Zero Tolerance Policies. Beginning in the 1980s, school systems and state and local governments adopted zero-tolerance policies, defined by Skiba (2010) as the use of more severe penalties, primary suspension, and expulsion, for both major and minor violations of the school disciplinary code. Zero-tolerance policies were adopted under an assumption that removing the most serious offenders from schools would deter recurring student misconduct and improve overall school climate (Skiba, 2010).

In practice, zero-tolerance policies grew out of federal and state drug enforcement policies that resulted from the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act. This law required states receiving federal funding to expel any student for at least a year for bringing a firearm into school (Mongan & Walker, 2012; Skiba, 2014). In recent years, states and school districts have updated these types of policies to include aggressive behaviors, drugs, and alcohol (Fabelo et al., 2011). According to Skiba (2014), Zero Tolerance policies were enacted in response to a greater focus

on and a perception of an increase in school violence that began with the Columbine High School shooting. Yet, according to the USDOE Office of Civil Rights (CRDC) (2018), only a small percentage of suspensions occurred in response to behaviors that threatened school safety or security.

Research suggested schools that continue to operate under the philosophy of zero tolerance have not provided evidence to support the effectiveness of these policies (Hemphill et al., 2012; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). In fact, recent studies suggested students who were excluded from school once were more likely to be suspended or excluded again. Moreover, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013), Fabelo et al. (2011), Rosenbaum (2018), Skiba (2014), and others found that while well intended to reduce discipline disparities, zero-tolerance policies increased recurrence of student suspension, leading to academic failure and increased likelihood of student drop out.

Mongan and Walker (2012) and Skiba (2014) noted that zero-tolerance policies did not yield the expected result, to deter student misbehavior, and schools continued to focus on punitive discipline rather than the preventative programs needed to support zero-tolerance practices. This finding was supported by a 2010 MSDE report that indicated there was little evidence to confirm that exclusionary discipline improved student discipline. While zero-tolerance policies were supposedly enacted to ensure similar student behaviors receive similar consequences, research highlighted that administrators applied disciplinary actions in an inequitable manner (CRDC, 2018) and the number of discipline infractions were not reduced. Research continued to find that zero-tolerance policies along with other exclusionary discipline practices contributed to existing discipline gaps.

Expectations and Support

Students are vulnerable to the expectations of a school and its teachers. According to the theory of "self-fulfilling prophecy" supported by Brophy (1983) and Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), when students are expected to fail… they fail; and conversely, when students are expected to succeed… they succeed.

Teacher and Administrative Expectations. Girvan (2019) found teacher expectations for student behavior were one of the most important factors that led to a functional or dysfunctional school experience. Gentrup et al. (2020) asserted the expectations educators had for students affected students' current performance as well as influenced future performance, particularly in the early grades. The literature suggested inconsistent student expectations may lead to negative school experiences for all students. For example, Girvan et al. (2021) attributed this reality to teachers' lack of behavior management and unclear classroom expectations, supported by an idea that schools were structured from a White middle-class perspective; and if teachers were not explicit in student expectations, those students who did not come from a White middle-class home were disadvantaged. In comparison to their [White] counterparts, Black student behaviors were often considered inappropriate (Bryan et al., 2012), furthering the idea that when students, particularly Black males, did not behave in a way deemed "typical," they were labeled as problematic and subjected to harsher disciplinary actions (Markowitz & Puchner, 2014). Researchers agreed that negatively labeling students had adverse effects on student learning opportunities (Chin et al., 2012).

According to Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, and Swain-Bradway (2011), administrators agreed that following rules was important for all, but that not all children were prepared to understand schools' expectations; therefore, it was the school's responsibility to

teach them. Students were conflicted and unable to meet expectations when discipline policies were not reflective of their values; particularly when educators were predominantly White middle-class individuals (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011), highlighting a need for student expectations to be clear and developmentally appropriate. Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, and Swain-Bradway's (2011) research identified a need to instill a balance of reinforcing positive behaviors without explicitly focusing on correcting behaviors deemed inappropriate for a school setting. Hathaway (2015) suggested,

> With consistent school-wide expectations, students know what's expected of them throughout the school day. This allows them to feel more confident, engaged and connected to the school community. It also makes it easier for teachers to recognize positive behaviors and to correct problem behaviors to keep small problems small. (para 7)

However, males of color continued to have higher rates of disciplinary referrals and expulsions/suspensions because they had more "serious and frequent" breaches of behavioral standards, according to Kinsler (2011). This finding was consistent with the findings of Losen et al. (2015), USDOE Office of Civil Rights (2018), and others who suggested a likelihood of students experiencing exclusionary discipline was ordered: Black males, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and students receiving specialized education services. This suggested a need for school-wide structures that support consistent norms and expectations in every classroom.

Student Support. As noted earlier, educators decide whether to write an ODR, which may lead to suspension, believing it to be a deterrent to repeat behaviors; however, as Losen and Gillespie (2012) pointed out, oftentimes students were suspended two, three, or more times

during a school year, which challenged the idea of punishment as a deterrent. Instead, Losen and Gillespie (2012) and others cited a need for in-school behavioral support, such as access to a variety of educational opportunities and wrap-around services, as opposed to exclusion from school. By disregarding the need for support as alternatives to exclusionary discipline, schools contributed to the narrative that Black male students were more disruptive or committed more offenses than their peers when no evidence existed to support this claim (Anyon et al., 2014; Losen, 2015, 2018). Therefore, in order to impact students and decrease discipline gaps, an increased focus on implementing positive behavioral supports and interventions was suggested to be necessary (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Skiba & Losen, 2016). Researchers claimed gains required closing existing discipline gaps by utilizing developmentally appropriate supports and structures and recognizing students' unique attributes when crafting school norms and rules (Skiba & Losen, 2016; Wang & Degol, 2016). As research suggested, school-wide norms were only effective when they were supported by all stakeholders and with programming that fostered positive interactions amongst students (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Skiba & Losen, 2016). From the results of this study, one may conclude that schools were found to be most effective in reducing discipline gaps when they focused on improving how students perceived teachers' expectations, thereby suggesting the need to focus on implementation of school-wide structures that support the use of norms that are consistent from classroom to classroom.

School & Classroom Climate

Recognizing the negative impact of exclusionary discipline on student outcomes, the USDOE spearheaded a variety of initiatives with the aim of improving school discipline practices by focusing on improving school climate through discipline policies reform. First awarded in 2014, the USDOE's School Climate Transformation Grant provided resources for

State Educational Agencies to develop, enhance, or expand multi-tiered behavioral frameworks (i.e., PBIS) that highlighted the impact of a positive school climate on improving school discipline outcomes (USDOE, Press Office, 2014, September 23).

School Climate. School climate was defined by the National School Climate Center (2007) as the quality and character of school life, reflecting norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. What was not known was how these attributes interacted to form what we say is *school culture*. Daily interactions among students, staff, and community set the pulse of a school building. Students were found to be more likely to abide by rules and expectations when a school had a positive climate because it encouraged positive relationships (Wang & Degol, 2016). School climate was long considered a leading indicator of student emotion and behavioral outcomes, according to Maxwell et al. (2017). The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) suggested that schools measure "school climate and safety" as a nonacademic indicator of school quality or student success (ESSA; USDOE, 2015).

Research supported that the lack of a positive school climate contributed to higher rates of disciplinary actions (Daly et al., 2014). This was likely due to student perceptions of school policies and discipline structures which caused students to have strained relationships with adults. In contrast, other researchers concluded Black students who perceived their school climates to be built on care, attentiveness, and trust were less likely to receive any form of exclusionary disciplinary action (Maxwell et al., 2017), supporting the notion that a positive school climate impacts suspension rates and mitigates the impact of such consequences.

Findings from a study by Hung et al. (2015) contended school climate could in fact have a significant impact on student experience, acknowledging that students within the same school

experienced school in unique ways. Research found middle school students were most vulnerable to experiencing school difficulties because various changes in organizational structures and social supports were developmentally inappropriate. These researchers contended those difficulties then translated into what one would believe to be undesirable student behaviors, leading to an increase in adverse disciplinary actions.

Classroom Climate. Barr (2016) defined classroom climate as a broad construct, made up of students' feelings about their instructor and peers (p. 1). Although administrators establish and maintain the school climate, teachers work more consistently with students than administrators and play a vital role in establishing classroom climate that influences how students experience school. Schools must consider how they respond to the effect of classroom climate on student experiences in schools and how negative classroom climates may lead to increases in exclusionary disciplinary actions. When one considers student discipline, Hung et al. (2015) posited classroom climate, more so than school climate, had a greater impact on student experiences. Research has shown that well managed classrooms have more positive climates that impact the number of behavior incidents which result in a subjective referral, particularly for Black males (Hung et al., 2015; Maxwell et al., 2017; Postholm, 2013).

How students experience school has been attributed in literature to how connected they feel to the classroom and, most importantly, the teacher (Conner, 2014; Galván & McGlennen, 2012). Conner (2014) suggested that improving teacher-to-student relationships improves classroom climate. Hung et al. (2015), using a sample of 2,108 students in grades 6-8, determined that how a teacher responded to student behaviors had a strong correlation with student behaviors in the classroom. Furthermore, Hung et al. (2015) contended that students were more likely to report positive climates when they believed their teachers supported, cared, and

understand them. They found the teacher-student relationship was a significant factor in the development and sustaining potential of positive classroom climates which influenced a student's attitude and actions in a classroom and thereby impacted student success. The influence of teachers on students that Hung et al. (2015) noted, indicated that the decisions teachers make can negatively or positively impact how students experience discipline in schools.

Discipline Practices

School discipline is implemented to maintain safety and order in school (Osher et al., 2010). Studies have suggested that proactive school discipline leads to student behaviors which result in safer schools and fewer recurrences of misbehavior; however, many schools were found to rely on reactive discipline practices that most often resulted in increased ODRs that disproportionately impacted Black middle school males (Pane et al., 2014).

Management. America's public-school educators are increasingly aware of the existing discipline gap (Skiba et al., 2014), yet research revealed there continues to be a significant reliance on an office referral to "fix" student misbehavior (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010; Skiba, 2014). Research posited students of color, particularly Black males, in schools with a higher concentration of Black and Latino teachers, had a smaller chance of receiving an exclusionary disciplinary action because teachers of color were more likely to understand their students' cultural differences and exercise more discretion in school discipline (Lindsay & Hart, 2017) furthering the notion that relationships affect the response to student misbehavior. Mitchell and Bradshaw (2013) found an increasing number of schools and their teachers were ill-equipped to employ adequate classroom management skills to decrease student behaviors that led to an ODR and/or exclusionary disciplinary actions. While there have been varying approaches to classroom management, much of the research focus has shifted away from traditional reactionary

approaches to more culturally responsive and restorative approaches to disciplinary actions (Milner, 2016; Milner et al., 2015). How well educators are prepared to manage behaviors in the classroom environment may influence their decision to issue an ODR (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012). In a study of pre-service teachers enrolled in a teacher preparation program, Youngblom and Filter (2013) suggested a lack of practical application of behavior management strategies provided to pre-service teachers resulted in an increase in ODRs once in the classroom. Furthermore, O'Neill and Stephenson (2012) contended the lack of time committed to teaching pre-service teachers how to manage behaviors and the few opportunities provided for them to work with diverse student needs led to an increase in ODRs from classrooms where Black males were often treated in an inequitable manner because they challenged teachers' authority.

Inconsistent Enforcement of School Discipline. Successful behavior management strategies are highly dependent upon consistency in enforcement (Losen & Martinez, 2012). When students experience teachers who inconsistently enforce school rules, they often respond in ways that are deemed inappropriate and warrant further discipline, most likely an ODR (Gregory et al., 2011). Researchers (Gregory et al., 2010; Irby & Clough, 2015; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Osher et al., 2010; Skiba, 2014) inferred that inconsistently enforcing discipline contributed significantly to disproportionality in school discipline and had a disparate impact on students, particularly Black males.

A review of existing school discipline research (Carter et al., 2015; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2016; Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011) concluded there was no consistency from school to school nor district to district in enforcing discipline. In fact, these studies confirmed non-behavioral student characteristics were a better predictor of exclusionary discipline than student behavior, leading one to infer that

enforcing school discipline is not a finite practice. Furthermore, research identified several reasons for negative outcomes for students in schools, including inconsistencies in discipline enforcement, which often allow for leniency for some but punishment for others when committing similar offenses (Gregory et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2012).

Enforcing school discipline is a discretionary action of those tasked with maintaining a safe and supportive learning environment. How students experience school is related to educator discretion. Inconsistencies in how educators manage the learning environment and enforce school discipline creates dissonance between teachers' behavioral expectations and student behaviors, according to Irby and Clough (2015). In their study which included 47 self-selected participants with six months to 29 years of teaching experience from three middle and two high schools who took part in focus groups, they deduced students were more likely to comply with school rules and expectations when discipline was enforced consistently and fairly across all student groups. Consistency in practices were found to result in improved discipline outcomes. Inconsistency in enforcing discipline resulted in teachers and administrators upholding practices they were not necessarily partial to, making decisions in accordance with policies that were considered biased. Nonetheless, as suggested by Skiba et al. (2014), how educators manage student misbehaviors and determine when to issue an ODR should be consistent across student groups, rather than racially biased.

Educator Beliefs and Discipline Decisions. Educators hold fundamental beliefs which can shape decisions they make regarding student discipline. These decisions are discretionary in nature, and educators who effectively use preventive strategies to address student misbehavior were found to have a reduced likelihood of making emotionally charged decisions when faced with them (Hershfeldt et al., 2012). These educators enforced discipline in a manner that was

equitable and unbiased (Staats, 2014). Recent studies found there was an empirical connection between an educator's beliefs and the act of imposing exclusionary discipline (Hershfeldt et al., 2012; Kafka, 2011; Skiba et al., 2014b). These studies identified educator's principles and values and determined there was a significant correlation between the former and how one enforced discipline. Nonetheless, Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) and Unni et al. (2016) found that as educators gained experience, their approach to discipline changed resulting in a variance in student outcomes. However, it was important to note educators must approach their work within the scope allowed by federal, state, district, and local levels in making disciplinary decisions (Kafka, 2011), and this may force educators to make decisions that contradict their beliefs and/or practices in order to keep their jobs and satisfy stakeholders.

Deciding the best way to intervene in disciplinary incidents is a critical skill lacking in some educators, and their perception of students and school discipline policies significantly influences these decisions (Osher et al., 2010; Welch & Payne, 2011). To complicate the matter, Blake et al. (2016) suggested that even though teachers want to impose alternative strategies, their discretion is minimized due to existing school disciplinary practices. Implementing new forms of discipline procedures, interventions, and practices is challenging because it disrupts educators' perceptions of the best way to discipline children (Wormer & Walker, 2012). A review of literature uncovered few studies that considered educators' perceptions and opinions, suggesting a need to examine educators' perceptions of school discipline policies and practices in order to impact change (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Horner et al., 2010; Murphy, 2011; Osher et al., 2010).

Educator and Student Cultural Mismatch. Cultural conflicts between student and teacher norms creates a barrier of misunderstanding and prejudgment regarding a student's

motivations or actions, according to Bradshaw et al. (2010). Teachers who overlooked culture in relation to behavior often were found to attribute perceived misbehavior to students' negative qualities (Murphy, 2011), and most often attribute student misbehavior to out-of-school and individual issues (González, 2012). Startz (2016) stated:

> When it comes to student behavior, what's polite or rude—what counts as acting out versus what's seen as healthy youthful exuberance—depends not only on actual behavior but on how teachers read behavior. (para. 1)

Being aware of how students are perceived can impact how students are treated in schools and make a different in students' behavior. When teachers refer to students who have been excluded from school as "discipline problems" rather than as learners, this signals a greater focus on punishment and behavior modification than on academic learning (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016). Educators tend to apply perceptions of Black males derived from mainstream media in their decision-making process, conforming to stereotypes rather than becoming more culturally responsive educators (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2011). It was found that when teachers were not aware of cultural dissonance, they perceived those behaviors indicative of Black culture as unacceptable or threatening and resorted to administering discipline disproportionately to Black males even when their actions were not intimidating or threatening to the teacher (Gregory et al., 2011; Staats, 2014).

In a 2004 study, Gregory and Mosely (2004) studied teachers' perspectives about discipline gaps and found that White teachers tended to identify student behaviors and family structures as a reason for the overrepresentation of Black students rather than acknowledging their racial biases. This study highlighted how current research, as previously cited, affirmed that an educator's perception of a student can impact how a teacher determines whether student

behavior warrants an ODR. Losen (2015) contended that even when students from other groups committed similar infractions, educators were more likely to issue a disciplinary action to Black students. This suggested that educators' implicit biases contributed to the discrepant impact of school discipline, and that there was a dissonance between the perception of how Black student behavior was perceived and educators' expectations (Horner et al., 2010).

Social-labeling theorists suggested decisions to impose discipline were influenced by student behavior and educators' attitudes (Gregory & Thompson, 2010; Horner et al., 2010; Perry & Morris, 2014). In a study of approximately 4200 students in 49 elementary and 14 middle schools transitioning from fifth to sixth grade, Theriot and Dupper (2010) found there was an 18% increase in discipline referrals when comparing a student's last year of elementary school to a student's first year of middle school. This demonstrated an increase in student misbehavior or more negative teacher perceptions of student behaviors and an increased reliance on exclusionary school discipline.

How student characteristics and behaviors are perceived by educators influences the decision-making process regarding DORs, since these factors lead educators to decide whether or not to enforce discipline that may lead to an ODR. Though school systems employ various school-based and district-wide initiatives to decrease disproportionality in discipline referrals for Black males, research identified educators' perceptions of student characteristics and student behaviors as weak as their personal decision-making as critical factors in decreasing disproportionality (Murphy, 2011; Perry & Morris, 2014). Researchers did not discount student culpability, but rather affirmed that the power and decision to refer rests solely with educators (Horner et al., 2010).

Drivers of Improvement

This section will first present my theory of change followed by a discussion of the potential drivers of improvement and change initiative that could potentially reduce the number of ODRs for subjective offenses for Black males in two Mid-Atlantic School Districts' middle schools. Figure 10 presents my theory of change. My theory builds on the research literature that supports the importance of teacher perceptions and beliefs in discipline decision-making.

Figure 10

Theory of Action

If teacher's perceptions of subjective behaviors that lead to office referrals for Black students are identified and altered,

Then teachers' decision making about ODRs can be improved and implemented consistently,

Resulting in at least a 10% decrease in all subjective ODRs for Black males in two middle schools by the end of the 2023-2024 school year.

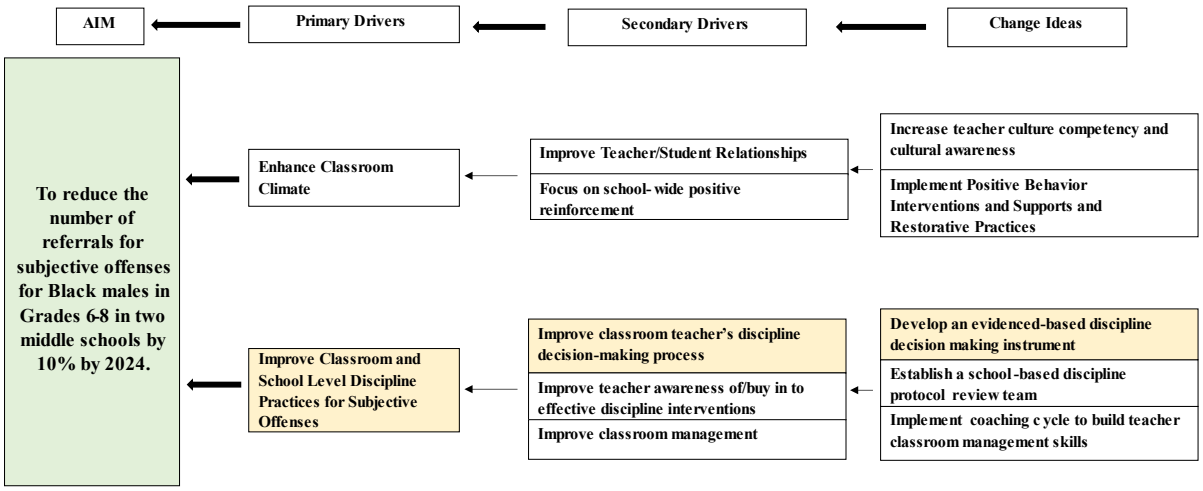
Figure 11, below, presents the drivers for improvement and change initiatives. The long-term aim of my theory of change is to reduce the number of office disciplinary referrals for subjective offenses among Black males in sixth grade for subjective offenses by 10% by the end of the 2023-2024 in two middle schools selected for their current designation by MSDE as disproportionate. There are two primary drivers: (1) Improve Classroom and School Level Discipline Practices for Subjective Offenses, and (2) Enhance Classroom Climate. These Drivers were identified based on research reviewed as well as my personal experience as an MAPSS middle school administrator. While the two drivers are not mutually exclusive, I am choosing to focus on teacher decision-making as a key contributor to Classroom and School Level Discipline Practices because I believe it has the potential to result in faster decreases in ODRs for subjective offenses. As previously noted, research indicated a sharp rise in situations that require discipline

as students matriculate from elementary to middle school (Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Predy et al., 2014; Theriot & Dupper, 2010). Losen and Martinez (2013) reported that the likelihood of Black males experiencing exclusionary discipline increased from 2.4% in elementary school to 11% in middle school. Therefore, this research focused on sixth grade because it was the entry point into middle school in the Mid-Atlantic School District that was studied.

The following section provides discussion of each of the two primary drivers.

Figure 11

Drivers to address disproportionality in discipline referrals for Black males



Enhance Classroom Climate

The first key primary driver is to improve classroom climate in all grade 6-8 classrooms. Classroom climate is defined as "the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn" (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 170). It is often influenced by school climate. Literature surrounding classroom climate indicated a positive correlation between optimal conditions and academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Cornell et al., 2016; Gage et al., 2016). Classroom climate indicators have become increasingly

pivotal to school improvement processes as educators and researchers continue to identify ways in which schools have refined practices to become safe and engaging (Thapa et al., 2013). According to Barr (2016), classroom climate is a broad term and is directly correlated to students' feelings about their teachers and peers. Hung and colleagues (Heilbrun et al., 2018; Huang & Cornell, 2018; Hung et al., 2015) stated that classroom climate influenced students, thus there was the expectation that a positive classroom climate may lead to fewer conflicts in the classroom.

To develop and sustain a positive classroom climate requires teachers to be socially and emotionally competent, according to Postholm (2013) and understand self and others (Huang & Cornell, 2018). This means that teachers consider how their own behaviors impact students as they attempt to move classroom climate towards becoming more supportive, engaging, and empowering (Rivers et al., 2013). For example, Kee (2012) found that a well-managed classroom yielded positive student outcomes and fewer behavior related issues. According to studies by Chin et al. (2012) and Pas et al. (2011), although most teachers contended with disciplinary issues, effective teachers were not overly reliant upon punitive disciplinary actions, and this had a significant impact on classroom environment.

Improve Classroom and School Level Discipline Practices

A primary driver of classroom and school discipline practices are the specific school discipline codes and system policies that define what teachers and administrators can and cannot do. Chief among these are the zero tolerance discipline policies that require educators to implement specific discipline actions in response to certain objective student behaviors. As discussed earlier, Skiba (2014), Gregory et al. (2016), and others suggested that despite being implemented over 20 years ago, zero tolerance policies continue to have discrepant impact on

students of color, particularly Black males, who were found to be disciplined more often and receive harsher punishments than their peers (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Losen et al., 2015).

Discretionary discipline, such as issuing ODRs for subjective offenses, also were found to have negative impacts on students and school climate. As discussed earlier under the scope of the problem, most of the discrepancies in discipline were noted to have begun in the classroom and resulted from teacher interpretation of subjective offenses. Research demonstrated that it was more likely for White students to be issued ODRs for objectively defined behaviors and for Black students to be issued ODRs for subjectively defined behaviors warranting a discretionary decision (Fabelo et al., 2011; Girvan et al., 2016). How a teacher perceived the subjective behavior drives an ensuing decision influenced in part by implicit bias (Girvan et al., 2016; Kouchaki & Smith, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011) and without supports providing guidance, classroom teachers and schools will continue to be ineffective in reducing disproportionality (Losen et al., 2015; Smolkowski et al., 2016; Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011), thereby perpetuating the negative student experience in classrooms and schools.

To address disproportionality, schools have turned to several research-based interventions such as Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Restorative Practices (RP) (Gonzalez, 2015 as cited in Losen et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2010; Osher et al., 2010), as well as a School Based Discipline Ladder to address student discipline and support teacher decision-making. Traditional models of the school discipline ladder rely on progressively punitive consequences such as detention, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion to address student behavioral infractions and should be revised to include tiered-interventions designed to address and support a variety of behavioral needs of students (Gregory et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2011). In MAPSS, schools are allowed to

develop their own discipline ladder (see Appendix I for an example of a school discipline ladder in MAPPS) to best meet the needs of their student population, since such schools within the system can have different discipline protocols despite following the same student code of conduct. These tools of supports were designed to provide classroom teachers with guidance and alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices; however, Osher et al. (2010) determined that a measure of discretion should be provided to teachers to implement these practices in the classroom (Osher et al., 2010). The decision-making process varies across schools and classroom due to intersectionality of subjectivity of district policies, student race and gender, student and school context, and the perceptions of student behavior held by the classroom teacher (Carter et al., 2015; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Horner et al., 2010; Osher et al., 2010, Skiba et al., 2011). To complicate the matter, Skiba et al. (2011) suggested that even though teachers want to impose alternative strategies, their discretion is minimized due to existing school discipline policies. Implementing new forms of discipline procedures, interventions, and practices was found to be challenging because it disrupted educators' perceptions of the best way to discipline children (Wormer & Walker, 2012). Researchers suggested that though positive results in reducing the overuse of ODRs exist, success was not observed to be consistent across schools and classrooms. Researchers have determined that classroom teachers can influence discipline outcomes within their schools based on their discretion and decision to impose discipline; however, there are limited studies that explore the relationship of teacher perceptions and decision-making and its impact on disproportionality outcomes.

While a relationship between teacher perceptions and teacher actions in the classroom that impact climate have been noted, there is also a straightforward relationship between what a teacher perceives as a subjective offense. Therefore, despite efforts on the part of MAPSS to

provide strategies and procedures to help teachers avoid issuing ODRs, the evidence suggested that there has been little to no effect in reducing the numbers.

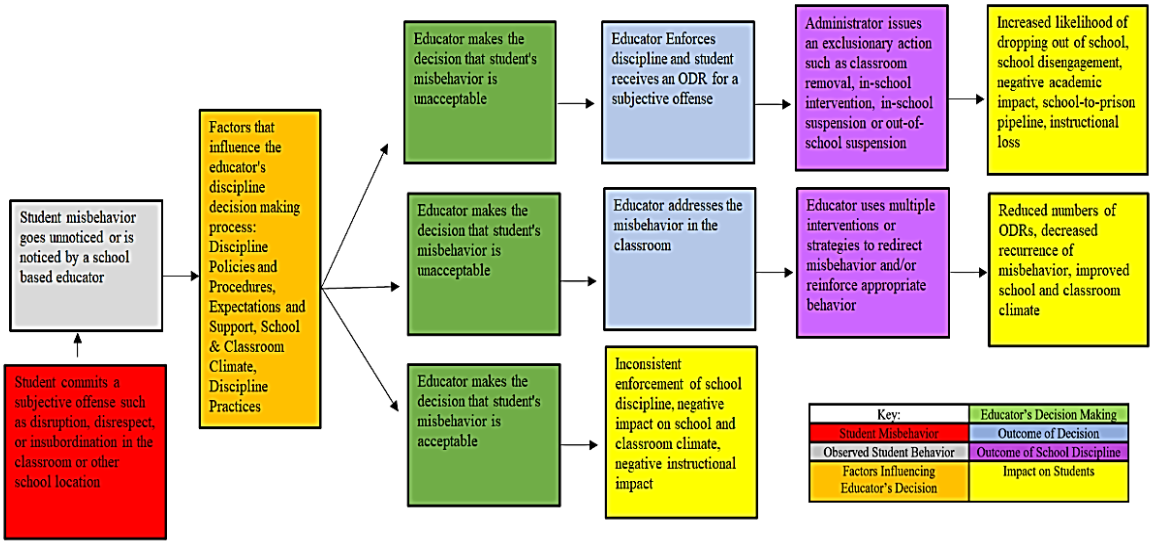
I intend to focus on improving classroom discipline decision-making at the school level as the primary driver for reducing ODRs for subjective offenses. I want to focus on the secondary driver of teacher decision-making around subjective offenses such as insubordination, disrespect, and classroom disruption.

Improve Educators' Discipline Decision-Making Process

Although decision-making leads to either an increase or decrease in exclusionary practices, including the use of ODRs to address subjective student behaviors, it also can improve or lead to school climate improvement. Research demonstrated that when educators implemented a multi-tiered approach to discipline, student outcomes were positively impacted (Balfanz et al., 2015; Garrett, 2015; Gregory et al., 2016; Marchbanks et al., 2014). Having prescribed tiers of intervention allowed for teachers to make informed decisions about discipline, rather than what Nance (2016) defined as ill-informed decisions. Teacher's actions have been found to affect student outcomes, making it critical for teacher's to be supported with structures that mitigate for moments of snap judgment and instead foster consistency in teacher decision-making when student misbehavior occurs. A review of literature found a few studies that considered educators' perceptions and opinions, suggesting there was a need to examine educators' perceptions of subjective student behavior, school discipline practices, interventions, and the decisions educators make in order to manage student behaviors (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Horner et al., 2010; Murphy, 2011; Osher et al., 2010). As shown in Figure 12, how educators make decisions about school discipline impacts student outcomes and can vary from teacher to teacher and school to school.

Figure 12

Educators Decision-Making Process to Enforce School Discipline



A teacher's lack of ability to use discipline strategies other than an ODR has been shown to have a significant impact on student outcomes (Garrett, 2015). In her article, Garrett suggested that teachers consider the following when trying to prevent student misbehavior:

1. How are you going to deal with minor misbehavior in your classroom?
2. How will you address more serious misbehavior in your classroom?
3. What type of consequences will you utilize?
4. Will you use behavior modification plans? Why or why not?

To enable better decision-making among teachers and reduce reliance on ODRs, schools must equip them with a variety of strategies and decision-making tools to address student behaviors. Meador (2020) suggested that classroom referrals should be used as a "last resort" and that teachers should utilize the following questioning protocol to determine if a referral is necessary:

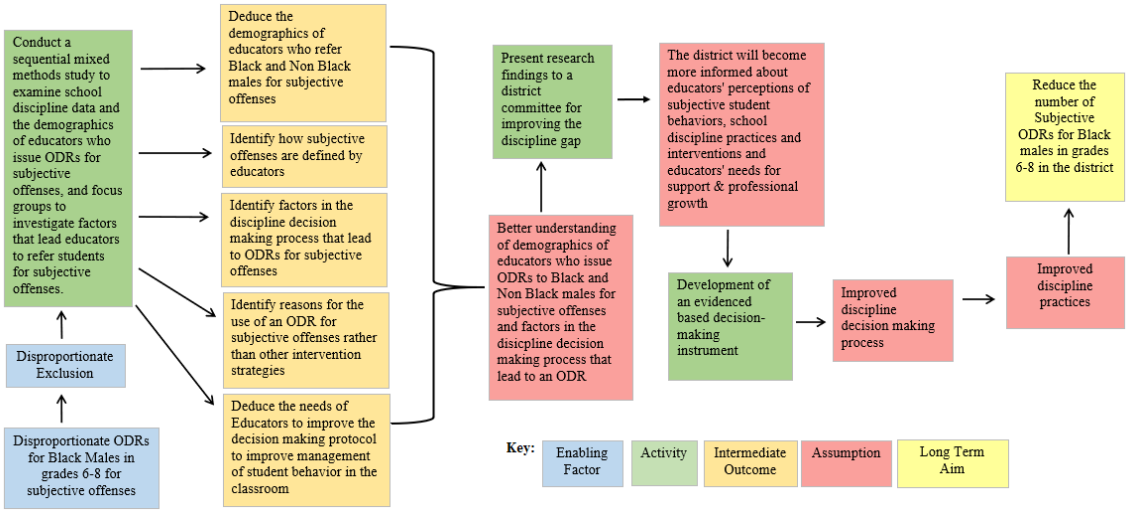
1. Is this a safety issue for a student or a threat to other students that requires immediate attention by an administrator? (If so, contact the administration immediately.)
2. For non-emergencies, what steps have I taken to handle this issue myself?
3. Have I contacted the student's parents and involved them in this process?
4. Have I documented the steps I have taken in an attempt to correct the issue?

Proposed Change Initiative

States and districts across the United States have engaged various initiatives to reduce reliance on ODRs and exclusionary discipline to change student behavior (Harper et al., 2019), yet research demonstrated that for many schools it was still a first option. If schools are to re-envision classroom discipline, there must be a focus on how teachers perceive subjective student behaviors, subsequent decisions classroom teachers make when enforcing discipline, and the ensuing outcomes. In order to improve the secondary driver of decision-making that surrounds ODRs for subjective offenses, the researcher will need to understand teacher's perceptions of subjective student behaviors and teacher understanding/buy in to discipline interventions. The researcher will also need to identify existing gaps in teacher practices and knowledge to uncover what teachers need to do or learn in order to avoid issuing ODRs as a first choice to address student behaviors. The researcher will ultimately use this knowledge to develop an improved evidenced-based decision-making protocol/ladder to support the classroom teacher's management of student behaviors which has the potential to reduce the number of ODRs issued for subjective offenses in two selected middle schools. Figure 13 provides a visual representation of how the proposed change initiative will influence this study's primary driver and aim.

Figure 13

Outcome Chain for Reducing ODRs for Subjective Student Behaviors



Interventions in MAPSS to Reduce Disproportionality in ODRs

At the time of this study, MSDE required that District Review Teams work with identified schools to address discrepant impact within one year and eliminate disciplinary gaps within three years. As a result of MAPSS' on-going disparities, each school was required to designate an Equity Leader (EL), who was responsible for serving as the intermediary between the school and the Equity Office (EO). The EO created modules for ELs to deliver mandatory professional developments during four annual professional development days. Module topics included cultural proficiencies, social/emotional learning, student and parent engagement, implicit bias, and de-escalation strategies. These modules were designed to increase educators' capacity to be equity minded by understanding and recognizing the impact of student trauma and how to support students. It is important to note, the EO served as support and not compliance. Schools were free to select from various resources based on school community needs; therefore, there were inconsistencies into the breadth and depth of professional development equity.

In order to move away from a reactive, punitive, and exclusionary discipline response to student behaviors, MAPSS shifted policy, procedures, structures, and practices to a proactive,

inclusive, positive approach to student behaviors. Training and coaching in a differentiated approach at all tiers of support for student behaviors included Check-in/Check-out, Check and Connect, and expanded school-based mental health services to address varying student behaviors. MAPSS provided school-based training in Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, Restorative Practices, Collaborative Decision-making, Double Check, Social Emotional Learning, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Functional Behavior Assessments to mitigate for school discipline and promote student achievement.

MAPSS's Strategic Plan 2019-2023 included an indicator that called for and sought to increase restorative practices to eliminate system-wide disparities. At the school level, administrators implemented strategic teams to address root causes of disproportionality. If a school was designated as disproportionate by MSDE, disproportionality review teams were required. Furthermore, schools had autonomy and flexibility to incorporate research-based interventions based on their needs. Schools were provided with a variety of programming to address and mitigate for disproportionality in discipline data, such as positive behavior interventions and support, community building circles, parent university, restorative practices, social/emotional resources, and other meaningful strategies to engage all stakeholders throughout the disciplinary reform process.

Purpose

As noted earlier, MAPSS attempted to address student inequities in discipline, yet Black males were still over-referred for subjective offenses, outpacing all other student groups. Prior attempts to address these disparities had minimal to no impact on MAPSS' discipline gap. While total number of suspensions declined, Black males still received higher numbers of ODRs than their peers. An ODR was the beginning of the pipeline that potentially led to suspension when

educators made decisions to refer a student for behaviors classified as classroom disruption, disrespect, and/or insubordination. There were other possible consequences as well, which included school disengagement, academic difficulties, school dropout, and increased juvenile justice involvement. Educators played a significant role in how students experienced discipline, but little was known about their perception of subjective student behaviors and the factors that lead educators to make the decision to refer students for subjective offenses.

Given the role of teacher decision-making regarding disciplining through the use of exclusionary discipline, the major focus of a change or improvement initiative was to obtain a deeper understanding of the classroom teacher's decision-making process. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore factors related to ODRs using existing system data followed by exploratory focus groups of selected sixth grade classroom teachers to better understand their decision-making processes for subjective behaviors identified as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination. Ultimately the findings from this study may be used to inform the future development of an evidence-based decision-making instrument.

Section II

Purpose Statement

Given the role of teacher decision-making regarding exclusionary discipline, the major focus of a change or an improvement initiative was, at the time of this study, to obtain a deeper understanding of classroom teachers' decision-making processes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore factors related to ODRs using existing school system data followed by exploratory focus groups of selected 6th grade classroom teachers to better understand their decision-making processes for subjective behaviors identified as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination. The aim was to identify areas for professional growth to decrease subjective ODRs for sixth grade Black males in two MAPSS middle schools by the end of the 2023-2024 school year. The goal of this study was to use these findings to inform future development of a robust decision-making tool for teacher use to reduce ODRs in middle school classrooms.

The following research questions (RQ) guided this investigation:

1. What is the total number, range, and median distribution of ODRs coded as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination issued by all 6th grade classroom teachers in each of the selected schools during SY2016-2020?
2. To what extent do ODRs coded as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination, issued by 6th grade classroom teachers differ based on teacher characteristics (race, gender)?
3. How do 6th grade classroom teachers perceive the discipline ladder as a tool for reducing suspension?

4. What factors (e.g., nature of offense, context) do select 6th grade classroom teachers report contribute to their decision to write an ODR for a subjective offense?

Design

This study used a sequential exploratory mixed methods design that included analysis of system level de-identified SY2016-2020 end-of-year discipline data from two selected middle schools followed by focus groups with purposely selected 6th grade teachers from two MAPSS middle schools. Existing school system discipline data was analyzed using descriptive methods to define patterns, identify trends, and make comparisons between student and teacher demographics within the study population. Data analysis informed the pool of potential focus groups participants. Data collected during focus groups were analyzed using coding and theme identification.

As noted above, this study was designed as a sequential (quant → QUAL) exploratory mixed methods study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Mixed methods research combines both quantitative and qualitative methods in one study to broaden breadth and depth of understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Johnson et al., 2007; Maxwell & Loomis, 2003). A mixed methods design aligned with the purpose of this study which was to examine patterns in school discipline data and the demographics of educators who issue ODRs to Black and Non-Black males in 6th grade for subjective offenses and to investigate factors in the decision-making process that lead to an ODR. The design included two sequential phases: (1) quantitative analyses of de-identified discipline data from SY2016-2020 in a mid-Atlantic school system, along with educator's demographics, followed by (2), a pre-focus group survey and four semi-structured focus groups comprised of 6th grade classroom teachers designated as issuing high or

low total number of ODRs for subjective offenses to gain a better understanding of the decision-making process as it related to subjective offenses.

Focus groups were selected as the qualitative research method because they allowed for exploration of a phenomenon by examining experiences and perceptions of a specific population (Leavy, 2014). Focus groups were also selected because they generate data through conversations and interactions that take place among group participants and data is produced via three levels: *individual*, *group* consensus, and *interactive* exchanges (Cyr, 2017).

School Selection

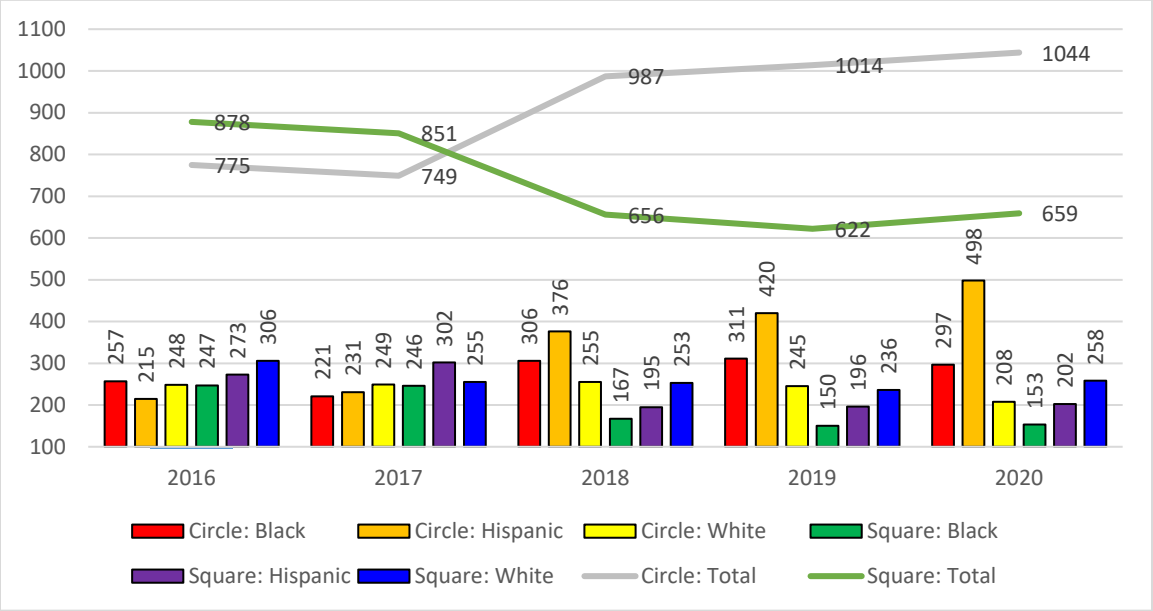
Research was conducted in two middle schools in MAPPS. The two middle schools ("Square MS" and "Circle MS") were identified as research sites for my study based on their designation of disproportionate discipline having a discrepant impact on one or more student groups by exceeding MSDE's 3.0 risk ratio (as discussed in Section 1). While both middle schools had a history of disproportionality in discipline for Black males, the disparity was exacerbated when the district approved a redistricting plan in April 2017 that moved approximately 250 students of color from Square MS to Circle MS as part of a plan to alleviate overcrowding at some elementary schools within the feeder system. The two middle schools, approximately 1.5 miles apart, served students from neighboring communities and the redistricting plan shifted certain communities from one school to the other. According to MAPPS officials, Circle MS feeder system was under-enrolled and could handle additional students and would ease over-enrollment in the Square MS feeder system, placing both schools at 62-65% of State Capacity. However, due to these efforts Circle MS became more racially and ethnically diverse, increasing its Black and Hispanic enrollment by 8% while Square MS became more homogenous as its Black and Hispanic enrollment declined and its White enrollment increased

by 11%. This change in enrollment concentrated students identified as economically disadvantage at Circle MS. Staffing at Circle MS was adjusted to account for increased enrollment, however despite the increase in students of color, staff remained majority White and female. Student demographics at Square MS began to mirror staff, but staff diversity was minimal as the staff remained majority White and female.

Though the number of Black students increased at Circle MS and decreased at Square MS, the ODRs of Black males in both schools remained at or above the rate prior to redistricting. In 2018, MSDE notified the district of 11 schools that had disproportionate discipline data, including both Circle and Square Middle Schools. See Table 3, below.

Table 3

Five Year Enrollment Trend Data for Circle and Square Middle School



As noted in Section I, research and my professional experience as a middle school administrator indicated that discipline referrals increased markedly as students matriculated from elementary to middle school, which was from 5th to 6th grade in MAPPS.

As shown in Table 4 below, Circle MS's five-year enrollment demographics demonstrated over the five-year period of my study that there was a net gain of 11 Black or African American students, a net decrease of 22 White students, and a net gain of 94 Hispanic students in 6th grade.

Table 4

2016-2020 6th Grade Yearly Enrollment by Demographics

School	School Year	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic	Multi-Racial	White
	15-16	7	97	86	10	79
	16-17	3	85	85	13	85
Circle	17-18	5	94	148	10	95
	18-19	4	107	161	4	67
	19-20	5	108	180	10	57
1604	**Five Year Total %**	**2**	**31**	**41**	**3**	**24**
	15-16	6	85	88	13	87
	16-17	3	82	105	6	86
Square	17-18	5	48	66	6	94
	18-19	7	47	10	10	79
	19-20	6	66	68	11	107
1255	**Five Year Total %**	**2**	**26**	**27**	**4**	**36**

Note: In any given year American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander enrollment was ≤ 2.

Square MS's five-year enrollment demographics demonstrated over the same five-year period that there was a net loss of 19 Black or African American students, a net increase of 20 White students, and a net decrease of 20 Hispanic students in 6th grade. 6th grade enrollment data aligned with whole school enrollment data and suggested that despite there being fewer Black students in 6th grade and across all grade levels, both schools being designated as disproportionate for student exclusion, indicated that Black students received more ODRs than any other student group. Therefore, the problem of practice chosen for this dissertation focused

on disproportionality in ODRs for subjective offenses at the 6th grade levels at the two middle schools.

Methods and Procedures

In the sections below I provided detail regarding both the quantitative and qualitative parts of my study. The first step in my study involved analyzing existing de-identified ODRs issued by 6th grade classroom teachers during SY2016-2020 in each of the two middle schools in order to address RQ 1 and RQ 2. The ODR data for each middle school was obtained from school system data files disaggregated by three subjective offense categories: disrespect, disruption, and insubordination; grade level; and other student variables. Sixth grade teacher data were obtained from a second system data base and included race and gender. I had intended to also obtain years' experience and content/subject matter taught, however due to the increased potential of identifying individual teachers, these analyses were omitted at the request of the school system.

Data that addressed RQ 3 and RQ 4 were collected through selection of 16 6th grade teachers from the two middle schools to participate in one of four focus groups. Prior to conducting the focus groups, I conducted a web-based pre-focus group survey of all 16 teachers via Qualtrics.

Following is a more detailed description of the study's methods.

Collection and Analyses of ODR Data.

I analyzed existing de-identified ODR data issued by 6th grade classroom teachers during SY2016-2020. After receiving principal approval, I requested ODR data for each subjective offense category from the Office of Student Data. The ODR data files contained a number of variables including student id, race, gender, grade level, socio-economic status, EL status, 504

status, IEP status, incident date, offense category, event concern, location of offense, referred by (employee name), employee identification number, administrator, disposition, 1st action, and secondary action(s). The office downloaded into *Microsoft Excel* the requested data files, excluding student identifying information but including teacher identification variables (employee name and employee identification number for focus group recruitment and analysis).

Using teacher identification numbers from the ODR data files, I requested teacher demographic data: race and gender from the district's Human Resources Division in *Microsoft Excel* format. After obtaining a *Microsoft Excel* file of ODR data from the Office of Student Data and teacher demographic data from the Human Resources Division for each middle school, I utilized *Microsoft Excel* to create combined data tables for subjective offenses: (1) disruption, (2) disrespect, and (3) insubordination. "Employee identification number" was utilized as the common data field. I visually inspected the data to identify missing and/or duplicate information.

Across the five school years, the ODR data file included 9,601 total 6th-8th grade discipline referrals for all offenses for both Circle and Square MS. This number was reduced to 7,798 when Employee IDs were not able to be matched to the data file obtained from Human Resources. An additional 347 ODRs were removed because race and gender could not be matched to the employee. The final number of ODRs for all offenses in both middle schools totaled 7,451. When the ODRs were disaggregated for subjective offenses, a total of 4,442 6th-8th grade ODRs were analyzed.

I then sorted for all 6th grade students, reducing the total number of subjective ODRs to 1,619, and then reduced to 1,109 ODRs issued to only 6th grade males in both middle schools. Of that number, 59% (n=657) were issued to Black males. This number represented the total number of ODRs analyzed in the study.

Data tables included total number of ODRs by school year, range, and median distribution of ODRs, and total number of ODRs by teachers' race and gender. Combined data tables were used to identify classroom teachers in the upper and lower 25% of the total number of ODRs by school year for each of the three subjective offenses, including teacher race and gender, and to develop a distribution table to inform focus group recruitment pools.

To address RQ1, I created a pivot table using *Microsoft Excel* with the specifications shown in Table 5, ODR Data Pivot Table Fields.

Table 5

ODR Data Pivot Table Fields

Filters	Columns	Rows	Values
School Location of Event Grade Level Student Gender Student Race	Year	Event/Concern Category Referred By	Count of Deidentified Student ID

I visually inspected ODRs coded as Disrespect/Insubordination/Disruption[6] and observed that Circle MS issued a total of 952 ODRs for subjective offenses over the five-year period and Square MS had issued 463. Data was then sorted by each school year to identify the median number of ODRs, the range of ODRs, and the total number of ODRs by school, student race and gender, and teacher race and gender. I sorted all data to determine the range of overall referrals spanning this study's five-year period, 2016-2020. I then determined which teachers were in the top 25%, middle 50%, and bottom 25% of ODRs written for disrespect, insubordination, and disruption.

To address RQ2, I created a pivot table organized using the specifications as seen in Table 6, Teacher Demographics and ODR Data Pivot Table Fields.

[6] In MAPSS subjective behaviors in end of year data files are collated into one category rather than individualized categories. The category of the referral offense is ultimately decided by the administrator processing the referral.

Table 6

Teacher Demographics and ODR Data Pivot Table Fields

Filters	Columns	Rows	Values
School Year Location of Event Grade Level Student Gender Event/Concern Category	Student Race	Employee Race Employee Gender	Count of Deidentified Student ID

Collection and Analysis of Focus Group Data

RQ3 and RQ4 were addressed through a pre-survey and focus groups. Focus groups are qualitative research methods that explore a phenomenon via examination of the experiences and perceptions of an objective population (Leavy, 2014). The goal was to populate each focus group with no fewer than four and no more than six purposively selected participants in alignment with what Krueger and Casey (2009) defined as an optimal size for data collection and diversity of experience.

Participant Selection and Recruitment. I began participant recruitment by electronically requesting permission from each school principal to conduct research with his/her staff (see Appendix A). The purpose and method of this study, as well as proposed participant characteristics were described, and a list of all current 6th grade classroom teachers was requested. Approvals for the study issued by the University of Maryland College Park IRB (see Appendix M) and the Research Office in MAPSS (see Appendix N) were also included.

Following approval from the principal of each school, I examined and analyzed the quantitative data to identify potential participants for the qualitative phase of this study. Only 6th grade teachers were eligible to participate.

In late August, I sent an introductory email (see Appendix B) to each potentially eligible participant. The email outlined the purpose of the study and indicated that the proposed study

had been approved by the University of Maryland College Park IRB, the Mid Atlantic Public School System Research Office, and their school's principal. It was highlighted that: participation was voluntary, all information collected was for dissertation research, and the identity of all focus group participants would be protected to the greatest extent. The email requested a response to confirm willingness to participate in this study.

My target recruitment was 16-24 participants representing top and bottom quartiles across four focus groups. As described above under quantitative methods, I determined which 6th grade teachers were in the top 25%, middle 50%, and bottom 25% of ODRs written for disrespect, insubordination, and disruption over the five-year period. For focus group recruitment, I intended to select 6th grade teachers from the top and bottom 25%.

Using the list of SY22 employees provided by each school, I determined that Circle MS had a total of 55 6th grade teachers that school year and Square MS had 41. I further refined my recruitment pool by excluding any teacher who had not been in the school for all of the five school years in this study. This resulted in the identification of 12 potential participants in the top and bottom 25% of ODRs written for subjective offenses from each school. During the recruitment process, when I received either a reply notification that declined participation or a participant withdrawal, I returned to the original potential recruitment pool using the middle 50%.

The first round of recruitment emails was sent in August 2021 to a total of 24 teachers from both middle schools. The recruitment email explained the study and invited participation in one of four focus groups to be held following completion of a pre-focus group survey (See Appendix A). This yielded nine potential participants.

I sent a second round of the initial recruitment emails in mid-September 2021 to the 15 non-respondents and received five additional potential participants. A third round of recruitment emails was sent in October 2021 which yielded another six potential participants. A total of 20 6th grade teachers expressed interest and completed the pre-focus group survey to be discussed later in the study.

A follow-up email (see Appendix C) was sent to each of the 20 6th grade teachers that had indicated interest in participating in the focus groups. The follow-up email included the following information: (a) a personal link to a pre-focus group survey, (b) a consent form (see Appendix L), (c) a request for either their availability on four preset dates and times or a suggested alternate availability for participation in a focus group, (d) information communicating how and when participants would receive notification of the date and time of their scheduled focus group, and (e) information as to when notification of their scheduled focus group should be received.

Final selection of focus group participants. I reviewed each participants' response regarding their availability to participate in one focus group and scheduled each participant based on (a) their first-choice option, (b) their teacher variables, such as years of experience, work location, and content area, and (c) purposive sampling, the selection of individuals or groups of individuals knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). One week in advance of the scheduled focus groups, I sent all 20 potential participants an email (see Appendix E) embedded in a calendar invite that included: the link to access the Zoom meeting, a reminder to complete the participation consent form prior to the scheduled focus group, and a link and reminder for participants to complete a five-minute pre-focus group survey, as noted above.

Four teachers were unable to participate in any focus group due to undisclosed schedule conflicts. Several attempts were made to accommodate their schedules, which ultimately were unsuccessful. Therefore, 20 participants completed the pre-survey and 16 participated in one of the focus groups: nine participants from Circle MS and seven from Square MS (see Table 7 for Focus Group Participant Characteristics).

Table 7

Focus Group Participant Characteristics

Focus Group	Participant Characteristics
Group A	• Participant 1001, Circle Middle School, White, Female • Participant 1002, Circle Middle School, White, Female • Participant 10012, Circle Middle School, White, Female • Participant 10013, Square Middle School, White, Male
Group B	• Participant 2003, Square Middle School, White, Female • Participant 2004, Circle Middle School, White, Female • Participant 2005, Circle Middle School, Black, Female • Participant 2006, Circle Middle School, White, Male
Group C	• Participant 3008, Circle Middle School, White, Female • Participant 3009, Circle Middle School, White, Female • Participant 3010, Circle Middle School, White, Male • Participant 3011, Square Middle School, White, Female
Group D	• Participant 4016, Square Middle School, White, Female • Participant 4017, Square Middle School, Hispanic, Female • Participant 4018, Square Middle School, Black Female • Participant 4020, Square Middle School, Black Female

District guidelines in response to COVID-19 in Maryland were in place at the time of this study and encouraged in-person meetings on a limited basis. As such, focus groups were conducted using the videoconferencing platform, *Zoom*. Focus groups were conducted between September and October 2021.

Pre-Focus Group Survey. Prior to following up with the 20 potential participants, I created a 7-question web-based pre-focus group survey (see Appendix D) designed to obtain demographic information (race, gender, years of experience, and content taught) about all focus group participants to determine their knowledge about the MAPPS discipline ladder and their perceptions regarding its effectiveness in supporting teacher decision-making when addressing student (mis)behavior in the classroom. This information was only available in aggregate form to reduce the potential to identify participants. In addition, the survey instrument asked participants to rate their perspective of the discipline ladder's effectiveness in supporting discipline decision-making. The five-minute pre-focus group survey was administered through the automated process in *Qualtrics.* Responses from this survey were used to address RQ3.

Conducting the Focus Groups. As noted earlier, RQ4 was addressed via analysis of focus group discussions and interactions among participants. Focus Groups averaged 50 minutes in length (ranging from 42 to 59 minutes) and were conducted from September through October of 2021. Two focus groups convened during after school hours, while two focus groups convened in the early afternoon during teachers' nonduty hours of the school day. Each focus group met via the Zoom video conferencing platform as scheduled and began by having participants test their audio. After confirming that all participants were present, I greeted and thanked each of them for agreeing to participate in this study. I then asked each participant for verbal consent to record the focus group. After receiving verbal consent from all participants, I reviewed the purpose of the focus group and the written consent which was received prior to participation in the focus groups, as well as the allotted time commitment and how privacy and confidentiality would be maintained. I then allowed time for participants to ask questions. Typical questions across the four focus groups were:

- How will responses be used?
- Are research questions specific to participants or generalized?
- Are participants allowed to add additional information they aren't comfortable sharing in the open forum?

With all questions answered, focus group participants introduced themselves by name, shared what content they taught, their work location, and a favorite hobby or leisure activity. Throughout the remainder of the focus group, I closely followed the discussion protocol (see Appendix F) to ensure collected data aligned with the research questions. I was cognizant of not sounding formal, so I did not read the questions verbatim. I first asked a series of questions about their teaching experiences, their perceptions of subjective student behaviors, and what they believed influenced their decisions to issue ODRs. These questions established a level of comfort and were asked in a non-evaluative tone. Two scenarios were introduced, and individuals were then asked (a) to elaborate on their thoughts about the decision-making of the teacher in each scenario, (b) explain how they would manage the student's behavior to provide insight into a teacher's decision-making process, and (c) how that process may or may not differ across teacher groups.

When a response or discussion was unclear during a focus group, I asked probing questions such as, "What are you all referring to when you say 'steps'?" or "How might the admin-teacher communication chain be improved?" I also balanced participation in the focus group by asking, "Would anyone else like to comment?" or "Does anyone else want to offer their thoughts?" As focus group discussions proceeded, I noted participants' verbal behaviors (e.g., agreeing or disagreeing with fellow participants, overtalking other participants, echoing already stated responses) and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., checking their watch/phone, folding their arms,

rolling their eyes), engaging in unrelated activities (e.g., eating dinner, attending to children, sorting mail) and other nonverbal actions. Following the discussion of both scenarios, I provided time for any closing comments, conveyed that the results would be reported in aggregate format, thanked all participants for completing the study, and reminded participants that a $10 gift card would be sent via email as a token of appreciation for their participation.

Analysis of Focus Group Data. I asked a series of five questions during the focus group aimed to glean insight into classroom teachers' perceptions of school discipline. After questions two and five, I inserted a discipline scenario and asked two related questions to gather teachers' perceptions of the disciplining of subjective student behavior. Researchers agreed that qualitative data analysis begins as soon as the data collection process begins (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; National Science Foundation, 1997; Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). To support the analysis of focus group data, I selected Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory is an inductive technique used to interpret data about a social phenomenon in order to build theories about that phenomenon (Birks & Mills, 2015). The use of a grounded theory approach allowed more nuanced codes to emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, the iterative process of grounded theory supported the refinement of data; therefore, I was able to assemble data into broader relationships and make interpretations about the phenomenon of interest while mitigating any preconceived biases I held about the phenomenon.

As focus groups took place, I captured anecdotal notes to highlight details of interactions, particularly my thoughts and reactions to observed behaviors and participant interactions. When participant responses were not clear, I asked probing questions to gain understanding. Following each focus group, I wrote a reflective memo to capture my thoughts and observations about the focus group and participant's interactions and to capture my initial interpretations of the data (see

Appendix H for an example). I analyzed 14 cross cutting topics to address Research Questions 3 and 4 as recommended by Kriukow (2019) and Curry (2015) to identify six topics in summarizing the experiences of the group rather than any individual and drew conclusions about the findings by sorting the data into three emerging themes.

After the conclusion of all 4 focus groups discussions the following occurred:

1. I first downloaded the audio file for each focus group from Zoom.
2. I embarked on a listening tour to transcribe the audio from each focus group audio recording via Zoom.
3. Following transcription, I removed information that could potentially identify participants (e.g., participant name, content area taught, work location, years of experience at a specified work location, and other school employee names).
4. I created an Excel spreadsheet (see Appendix G) and labeled 16 columns with each participant's identification number. Participant columns were grouped, and color coded according to their focus group.
5. I listed each of the five focus group discussion questions and two scenarios with the two related questions in individual rows.
6. I then copied from the transcript the verbatim comments of each participant to each focus group question/scenario into the Excel spreadsheet. I initially identified phrases and sentences within the transcripts that expressed key ideas and concepts related to the research questions (see Figure 14 for an example of the coding process) and I then labeled these words, sentences or phrases as a key idea or topic. I

did this by color coding and highlighting phrases and sentences that conveyed similar key ideas across all participants in each focus group, to signal an emerging topic to be considered.

7. I then created a summary of participant responses by discussion/scenario question and focus group using the Excel Spreadsheet. I began with Focus Group A, read all participant responses by question and identified patterns, connections, and common ideas, using the compare and contrast method. This resulted in the development of a list of 20 initial topics or codes. Coding of each cross-focus group discussion question and participant responses was completed by looking at response statements or segment to avoid researcher's bias and influence coding decisions based on a participant's response to an unrelated question. I wanted to ensure that I looked at each participant's response objectively and that I approached the coding process for each response with consistency. Figure 14, below, provides an example of how I coded.
8. I then provided the list of initial topics and the deidentified participant responses of Focus Group A to a critical friend, who read and coded the data. The critical friend and I met via *Zoom* to discuss our separate initial codes and rationales and together refined the codes.
9. The critical friend and I independently engaged in coding Focus Group B responses and reconvened via zoom a second time to discuss and further refine the coding process to improve research validity (Morse, 2015).

10. Through the peer consulting process, initial codes were further refined, and boundaries established for words, phrases and sentences that conveyed similar topics or ideas. Through this process, 14 cross cutting topics were identified: Empathy, Reflective Practices, (Dis)Respect, Bias, Emotions, Expectations, Safety, Accountability, Authority, Threat, Collaboration, Teacher Preparation, Teaching & Learning, and Avoidance. I then used the 14 topics and the peer collaborative discussion to refine the coding of Focus Group A and to code Focus Groups C and D.
11. Participants verbatim responses were then analyzed using a *compare and contrast* method and assigned to one of the 14 topics as blocks of text.
12. Topical blocks of responses were then further reduced into six themes using the compare and contrast method as described earlier. I looked across the topics to further refine the coding process by creating groups of topics with similar phrases and sentences. This allowed me to identify six as seen in Figure 15.
13. I then *pawed* (e.g., cut and sort or what Bernard (2013) refers to as the ocular scan or eyeballing method) through all 6 categories to identify key concepts and ideas which resulted in identification of three major themes.

Figure 14

Example of the Data Coding Process

Q: What is the purpose of school discipline?

P2: "The purpose of school discipline is to maintain **safety** and **order** in a school building and provide teachers a place to go if they need extra **help** with students in terms of discipline or behavior."

P1: "to establish a **safe** and **orderly** environment you know where all people are able to learn because there is a sense of calm and peace and **order**. But extending beyond that, I feel that the point of discipline is to also prepare students for the future because whether they're in a job or higher education like they're always going to need to follow a set of rules and regulations and I think school kind of helps them to be able to survive in greater society."

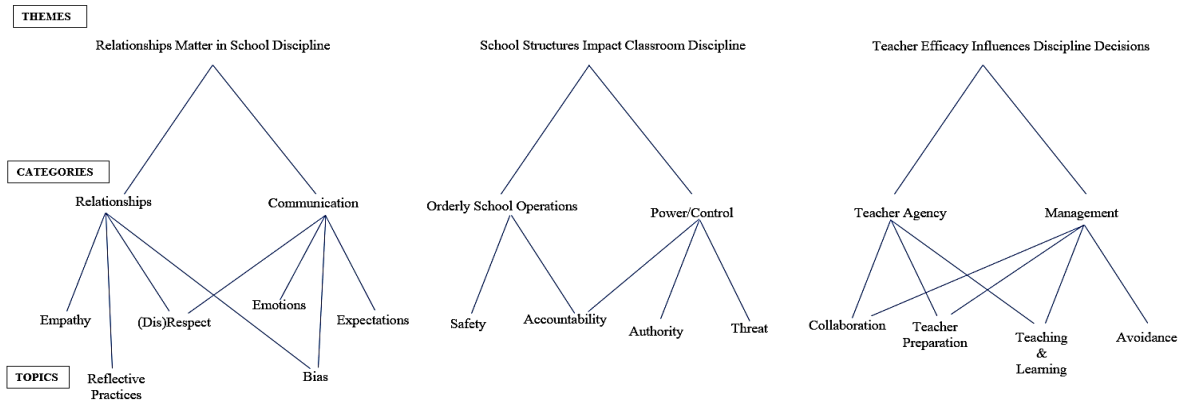
P10: "When it comes to discipline for disruptive behavior and my request escalates those behaviors for whatever reason, it becomes a **safety** issue, then yes, I'm going to **call the office** for sure. Because who knows what they could do. They could get hurt or hurt someone, especially if they're upset, so yeah, at that point, I think I usually don't mess around too much, and would just call the office."

Common Ideas: Safety, Order, Support

Topic: Safety

Figure 15

Diagram of the Coding Levels and Organization in Focus Group Data



Creswell (2009) suggested that it is difficult for researchers to separate their own experiences, backgrounds, and understandings from the interpretation of qualitative data, therefore, to draw conclusions and address Research Questions 3 and 4 I relied on my experience

as a former classroom teacher to determine categories and relationships and emerging themes, I used the themes and connections to develop a narrative summary of the findings.

As described above, to test the reliability and credibility of my coding, I provided my categories and one redacted transcript to a peer. Peer consultation was selected because researchers Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that peer consultation increased validity while minimizing bias in data analysis. I asked my peer, currently holding a terminal degree, to code the focus group using my initial topics. The initial reliability measure was 65%. I then met with my peer to discuss our interpretations and refine the codes or the process. We then each conducted a blind coding of another focus group transcript. We engaged in collaborative conversations to reflect on the initial topics and confirm categories resulting in a final reliability measure of 80%. Through the analysis of teacher level ODR data, focus group data, and the pre-focus group survey, I engaged in a triangulation process to cross-reference participants responses with their actual school-based practice to confirm alignment of participant perception and reality.

In Section III, I discuss findings of this investigation, as well as implications and limitations of these findings.

Section III

This section presents the findings, conclusions, and implications and recommendations of the study.

As previously noted in Section I, in 2014 MSDE required that all LSSs in Maryland revise their codes of conduct and develop new protocols to address existing racial/ethnic and gender disproportionality in student discipline actions. Since 2004, despite efforts to address disproportionate discipline of Black males in MAPSS, these students continued to receive a disproportionate number of ODRs for subjective offenses, referred to as disrespect, insubordination, and disruption. This was found to be a particular problem at grade 6 when students matriculate from elementary school to middle school, a fact that was consistent with prior research on disproportionality in disciplining Black males (Theriot & Dupper, 2010).

Given the role of teachers in decision-making regarding the issuance of ODRs for subjective infractions, the purpose of this study was to explore teacher factors that were related to ODRs using existing system data followed by exploratory focus groups of selected 6th grade classroom teachers. The goal was to better understand how teachers decide when to issue an ODR to a student they believe has shown disrespect, been disruptive, or been insubordinate. The following research questions guided the investigation:

1. What is the total number, range, and median distribution of ODRs coded as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination issued by all 6th grade classroom teachers in each of the selected schools during SY2016-2020?
2. To what extent do ODRs coded as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination, issued by 6th grade classroom teachers differ based on teacher characteristics (race, gender)?

3. How do 6th grade classroom teachers perceive the discipline ladder as a tool for reducing suspension?
4. What factors (e.g., nature of offense, context) do select 6th grade classroom teachers report contribute to their decision to write an ODR for a subjective offense?

Results

This section first presents the findings that address each of the research questions. The findings will be followed by a discussion of the meaning of the results in terms of next steps in addressing the problem of practice and disproportionate use of ODRs with Black males in MAPSS.

***Research Question 1*: What is the total, range, and median number of ODRs coded as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination issued by all 6th grade classroom teachers in each of the selected schools during SY2016-2020?**

As previously noted in Section II, existing data was used to address the first research question. Two data sources were used: The ODRs for subjective offenses were obtained from the Office of Student Data for the five school years included in this research study. The data file was then merged with a de-identified data file from the Human Resources Division. In Section I, I reported systemwide data showing that between SY2016-2020, 55,277 Office Disciplinary Referrals were issued for subjective offenses defined as disrespect, disruption, and insubordination. Of these, Black males received 31% compared to White males, who received 26.7%, and Hispanic males, who received 8.6% of all ODRs for subjective offenses. Further exploration of ODR data indicated students in grades 6-8 received 36,399 ODRs for subjective offenses of which nearly 75% were received by males in MAPPS.

As noted in Section II, I selected two middle schools, Circle and Square, as the research sites for my study because they had both been designated as above the state defined benchmark for suspensions of Black males. For those two schools, 4442 ODRs for subjective offenses in the classroom were written between SY16 and SY20 in grades 6-8. Of these, 69% (n= 3081) were issued to males and 31% (n=1361) to females. A total of 1619 ODRs for subjective offenses were issued to 6th grade students and 1109 to all 6th grade males. Of these, 657 (41%) were issued to Black 6th grade males. Table 8 presents the total, range, and median number of ODRs for subjective offenses issued to 6th grade students by school year for each of the five school years.

Table 8

Total, Range, and Median numbers of ODRs issued by Teachers to 6th Grade Students by SY and School

School	Year	Total Number OF ODRs issued	Range Issued/teacher	Median number issued/ teacher
Circle	SY16	130	1-22	3
Square	SY16	208	1-40	4
Circle	SY17	86	1-19	2
Square	SY17	98	1-11	3
Circle	SY18	593	1-89	8
Square	SY18	78	1-15	2
Circle	SY19	234	1-30	5
Square	SY19	57	1-10	2
Circle	SY20	89	1-14	1
Square	SY20	46	1-8	1.5
5-Year Total		**1619**	**1-144**	**4**

Table 9 presents the total, range, and median number of ODRs for subjective offenses issued to Black males by school year for each of the five school years. It is important to note that SY18 was the year of redistricting that resulted in a demographic shift between the two middle schools. The ODRs issued to Black males increased by 606% at Circle MS but decreased by

28% at Square MS. This might have been due to the changing student population; however, the large discrepancy decreased the following year.

Table 9

Total, Range, and Median numbers of ODRs issued by Teachers to Black and White 6th Grade Males by SY and School

School	Year	Total Number OF ODRs issued		Range Issued/teacher		Median number Issued/ teacher	
		B	W	B	W	B	W
Circle	SY16	57	1	1-8	1	2	1
Square	SY16	93	14	1-14	1-4	2	1
Circle	SY17	34	22	1-7	1-8	2	1
Square	SY17	39	1	1-5	1	1.5	1
Circle	SY18	240	9	1-27	1	5	1
Square	SY18	28	7	1-8	1-2	1	1
Circle	SY19	95	9	1-10	1-4	2	1
Square	SY19	22	12	1-6	1-2	1	1
Circle	SY20	37	-	1-5	-	1	-
Square	SY20	12	12	1-3	1-4	1	1
5-Year Total		**657**	**87**	**1-37**	**1-8**	**3**	**1**

It is unknown what other factors might have increased the subjective discipline referrals for Black males. At its height, the average daily referral rate[7] for subjective offenses for 6th grade students at Circle MS was 3.2 per day in SY18 and 1.1 per day at Square MS in SY16. Data demonstrated that in SY18 and SY19, teachers issued subjective ODRs to Black males more frequently than they did to White males at an approximate ratio of 27:1 in SY18 at Circle MS and 4:1 at Square MS. In the following school year, while the total number of ODRs decreased for Black males at both schools, they remained the same for White males at Circle MS and had a slight increase for White males at Square MS. While the number of referrals issued to Black males in 6th grade still outpaced their peers, Circle MS data increased over the first three years

[7] The average daily referral rate is calculated by dividing the total number of referrals by the number of school calendar days (181 in MAPSS).

and declined in the last two years of the five-year period; however, data revealed that White males at Circle MS in SY20 did not receive any ODRs for subjective offenses in contrast to 42% of ODRs that were issued to Black males in that same school year.

At Square MS in SY20, Black and White males received the same number of subjective ODRs; however, in comparison to Black males' proportion within the student body, there is still disproportionate discipline. It is important to note that SY20 was a year of hybrid instruction due to the closure of schools in March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While data historically demonstrated that by the end of the school year Black males receive more ODRs for subjective offenses, the data for SY20 was influenced by school closure. Nonetheless, how students experienced discipline in the classroom was reflected throughout the data at both schools. Data demonstrated that it was more likely that Black males in 6th grade would receive subjective ODRs more frequently than their peers, in alignment with research previously cited. Table 10 presents the number of 6th grade Black male students who received one or more ODR, the range of ODRs received, and the median number of ODRs by SY and School.

Table 10

Total Number of Unduplicated 6th grade Black Male Students receiving one or more ODR, Range of ODRs received, and Median number of ODRs by SY and School

School	Year	Total Number of Students	Range of ODRs	Median Number of ODRs
Circle	SY16	19	1-18	2
Square	SY16	24	1-17	2
Circle	SY17	20	1-8	1
Square	SY17	12	1-6	1
Circle	SY18	33	1-46	4
Square	SY18	8	1-4	2.5
Circle	SY19	26	1-8	2
Square	SY19	6	1-11	1.5
Circle	SY20	18	1-6	1
Square	SY20	5	1-3	1
5 Year Total		**165***	**1-46**	**2**

Data revealed that while the number of referrals issued to Black males at both middle schools outpaced other student groups, the number of students receiving those referrals were few. Noticeably, at Circle MS in SY18, of the 33 6th grades males who received one or more ODRs for subjective offenses, one student received as many as 19% (n=46) of all subjective ODRs issued to Black males. In SY19, as previously noted, the total number of referrals decreased at Circle MS; however, there was only a slight decrease in the number of students issued one or more ODRs. In SY16 Square MS, issued 45% (n=93) of subjective ODRs to 24 Black males. While redistricting in SY18 was supposed to lead to better outcomes for all students, data revealed that Black students, particularly Black males, continued to experience discipline disproportionately in the classroom at both schools**.**

Research Question 2*:* **To what extent do ODRs, coded as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination, issued by 6th grade classroom teachers differ based on teacher characteristics (race and gender)?**

Data from the merged data sets were used to address this research question. As shown in Table 11 below, the total numbers of teachers in Circle MS increased by about 18% (n=17) between SY2016 and SY2020 with the largest increases among teachers who were Black or Hispanic. However, White teachers represented about 79% of the total number of teachers over the five-year period and Black and Hispanic teachers each represented about 9.5% of teachers. In comparison, Square MS experienced a decrease (n=18) in the total number of teachers over the five-year period of this study. Nonetheless, White teachers represented 77% of the total number of teachers while Black teachers represented 14% and Hispanic teachers represented 6%. At both Circle and Square MSs, White females greatly outnumbered all other grades 6-8 classroom teachers. At Circle MS, White females represented 61% of the entire faculty and at Square MS,

they represented 63%. Black female teachers were only 7% of all teachers in Circle MS and almost 10% of the teachers at Square MS. Table 11 presents the racial/ethnic data for total number of teachers at each of the middle schools for each of the five school years.

Table 11

Total Number of Black, Hispanic, and White Teachers by Gender, SY and School

		Black		Hispanic		White		Year Total
	SY	F	M	F	M	F	M	
CIRCLE MS	2016	5	2	4	1	48	15	77
	2017	4	1	4	2	52	16	81
	2018	3	3	6	3	54	18	89
	2019	6	3	8	1	54	18	91
	2020	11	3	12	-	54	12	94
	Total	29	12	34	7	262	79	432
SQUARE MS	2016	7	4	2	2	59	11	88
	2017	8	2	4	1	49	10	76
	2018	7	3	2	1	42	11	68
	2019	8	2	4	-	45	9	71
	2020	8	3	5	1	40	10	70
	Total	38	14	17	5	235	51	373

Note: In any given year there were 1-2 teachers identified as Asian or Multi-Racial

A review of ODRs issued to 6th grade Black males by classroom teachers revealed that over the five-year period of study, White female teachers issued 49% of all subjective ODRs to Black males at Circle MS and 38% at Square MS. In SY17 at Circle MS, data indicated that White females issued an equal percentage of subjective ODRs to both Black and White males, which could be attributed to an increase in teacher awareness of disproportionality or other factors that led to a change in teacher disciplining behaviors.

Skiba et al. (2002) indicated that a mismatch of student and classroom teacher gender and race/ethnicity predicted discipline disproportionality. Table 12 below presents the percentage of ODRs issued for subjective behaviors to Black, Hispanic, and White 6th Graders by Teacher Race and Gender, SY, and School.

Table 12

Percentage of ODRs issued for subjective behaviors to Black, Hispanic, and White 6th Grade Males by Teacher Race and Gender, SY and School

		CIRCLE MS STUDENT RACE																				
		2016			2017			2018			2019			2020			5 Year Total		
		B	H	W	B	H	W	B	H	W	B	H	W	B	H	W	B	H	W
TEACHER RACE AND GENDER	Black																		
	F	-	1	-	10	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	5	-	2	1	-
	M	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	1	3	4	-	-	2	-	1
	Hispanic																		
	F	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	2	3	-	-	-	-	1	1	-
	M	2	-	-	3	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
	White																		
	F	51	21	1	26	3	26	52	37	2	56	16	1	35	19	-	49	28	4
	M	12	6		7	-	1	3	1	-	5	2	2	18	7	-	6	2	1
	Total	**63**	**28**	**1**	**47**	**3**	**30**	**56**	**38**	**2**	**70**	**22**	**6**	**66**	**31**	**-**	**61**	**32**	**6**
		SQUARE MS STUDENT RACE																	
		2016			**2017**			**2018**			**2019**			**2020**					
		B	H	W	B	H	W	B	H	W	B	H	W	B	H	W	B	H	W
TEACHER RACE AND GENDER	Black																		
	F	2	1	1	3	-	-	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	12	2	-	2
	M	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	4	6	-	-	3	3	3	2	-	1
	Hispanic																		
	F	-	-	-	-	5	-	2	2	-	2	-	2	9	3	3	1	1	1
	M	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	White																		
	F	43	12	6	47	19	2	44	26	6	21	19	21	18	3	18	38	16	9
	M	16	2	1	6	8	-	4	-	-	15	4	2	6	6	-	11	4	1
	Total	**62**	**15**	**9**	**56**	**32**	**2**	**52**	**28**	**12**	**44**	**23**	**25**	**36**	**15**	**36**	**54**	**21**	**14**

Note: Numbers in this table represent percentages and are rounded to the nearest whole number. Asian and Multi-Racial teacher data was excluded due to the likelihood of identifying those teachers (N≤2).

SY18 data suggested that the progress made in SY17 was short-lived as this teacher group issued 52% of subjective ODRs for Black males, 37% for Hispanic males, but only 2% for White males. However, ODRs alone does not reveal the specific contributing factors that led to the disproportionate number of in SY18. Yet, one may infer that there was less tolerance of subjective (mis)behavior for students of color, particularly Black males, and more tolerance of subjective (mis)behavior for White males.

In Section II, I explained that MAPSS redistricted to improve outcomes for students at both Circle and Square MSs; however, Black males continued to experience discipline at Square MS at levels similar to those in years preceding redistricting in SY18. In SY19 and SY20, however, Black and White males were issued an equal percentage of subjective ODRs by White female teachers. Overall, Black males still received a greater portion of ODRs for subjective offenses at Square MS in those same years and 29% more ODRs were issued to Black males by White female teachers at Square MS over the five-year period of this study.

Summary of Findings for Research Questions 1 and 2

Review of quantitative ODR data for subjective offenses defined as disruption, disrespect, and insubordination demonstrated that despite MSDE requiring schools to revise codes of conduct to include support that reduced referrals, Black males in both Circle and Square MSs received a disproportionate number of ODRs in the classroom.

A deeper dive into ODR data at both schools indicated that ODR data differed significantly for Black males and White males in 6th grade. Over my study's five-year period, classroom teachers wrote a total of 463 ODRs at Circle MS for Black males in comparison to 41 for White males; a ratio of 11:1. In that same timeframe at Square MS, classroom teachers wrote a total of 194 ODRs for Black males in comparison to 46 for White males; a ratio of 4:1. As demonstrated in Table 12, despite efforts in the district to reduce disproportionality in discipline for Black students, Black males in Circle and Square MSs were issued a disproportionate number of subjective ODRs. Moreover, during SY16-20, 77% (n=505) of the total ODRs issued to Black 6th grade males were written by White female teachers juxtaposed against 67% (n=58) of the total ODRs issued to White 6th grade males. Furthermore, and also concerning, while the

numbers were significantly different, Black female and male teachers issued more ODRs for subjective offenses to Black 6th grade males (n=38) than White 6th grade males (n=16).

At the time of this study, White females were predominant in school staffing in both of the middle schools; however, teachers in all classrooms were expected to follow common discipline protocols. Despite that, the data indicated that in each of the five school years in this study, what was considered *acceptable* behavior was a moving target. During each school year the extent of disproportionality changed. While differences in school and classroom expectations may lead to varying classroom management processes, researchers, as previously cited, contend that disproportionality is exacerbated by a changing teacher mindset about what constituted *keeping control* of their classrooms; a larger systemic issue that led to the over- disciplining of Black males in middle school.

The data analysis supported the significance of MSDE's 2014 mandate that required all LSSs to revise their codes of conduct to include supports and interventions that targeted the reduction of referrals and any resulting exclusion from the classroom or school. However, data indicated how schools within districts that followed the same prescriptive methods experienced variable outcomes. In both Circle and Square MSs, there was a predominance of White teachers at the time of this study; however, I was unable to draw conclusions that this is the only contributing factor to the overrepresentation of Black males in ODR data. To gain further context into why Black males continued to experience discipline at disproportionate rates, there was a need to understand what factors lead to the decision to refer students for subjective behaviors. Through the exploration of quantitative data, I was left with the following questions:

1. *What factors in climate and culture of the school contribute to the overrepresentation of Black males in ODR data?*

2. *How do teacher biases contribute to a decision to refer students for subjective behaviors?*
3. *How are teachers supported in their understanding of discipline decision-making?*
4. *How effective are teachers in using progressive discipline?*

Research Question 3: **How do 6th grade classroom teachers perceive the discipline ladder as a tool for reducing suspensions?**

Research Question 3 was primarily addressed through analysis of a web-based pre-survey as described in Section 2. While incidental comments about the discipline ladder were recorded during the focus groups, the data presented below come from the pre-survey responses. The intent of Research Question 3 was to determine how teachers perceived the MAPSS discipline ladder and its ability to support the reduction of ODRs and student exclusion from the classroom. As described in Section 1, at the time of this study the district annually published a Multi-Tiered System of Supports that included various research-based interventions with a focus on proactive and preventative strategies that define, support, and reinforce appropriate student behaviors (AACPS, 2021). Schools in MAPPS were encouraged to utilize the MTSS Framework to craft a discipline ladder specific to their building in order to help teachers make decisions about the management of classroom discipline. The discipline ladder was intended to support students and teachers to avoid recurrent disciplinary actions and interventions as well as increase student engagement and encourage prosocial behavior.

The pre-survey was designed to obtain information from those 6th grade teachers selected to participate in the focus groups. The survey contained seven questions. The first four questions asked about specific demographics of the focus group participants. Three questions concerned

the discipline ladder. Teachers were asked to respond to each of these questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The results of the survey are presented below.

Survey Results. As noted in Section 2, a total of 20 6th grade teachers were eligible to be invited to participate in one of the focus groups (11 from Circle MS and 9 from Square MS). The 20 teachers were each sent a link to the pre-survey in a recruitment email. All 20 of the teachers completed the pre-focus group survey. Of these 16 (80%) were female and 4 (20%) were male. Fifteen (75%) were White, three (15%) were Black/African American, one teacher was Hispanic, and one was American Indian/Alaskan Native. A fifth (n=4; 20%) of the respondents had 2-4 years of teaching experience, (n=3; 15%) had 5-7 years of experience, (n=2; 10%) had 8-10 years of experience, and (n=11; 55%) had 11+ years of experience. The 20 teachers represented the following departments: English Language Arts, Math, Music, Health, Physical Education and Dance, Sciences, Social Studies, and World Languages.[8] Following are the frequencies of responses to each of the three questions regarding the discipline ladder:

Q5 - On a 5-point scale, with 1 being not that familiar and 5 being very familiar, how familiar are you with your school's discipline ladder? Of the 20 responses to this question, almost two-thirds (n =12; 60%) indicated being not familiar to moderately familiar, and two-fifths (n=8; 40%) of responses indicated being very familiar to extremely familiar with the school's discipline ladder. About half (n=9; 45%) of the teachers indicated being moderately familiar with the discipline ladder.

Q6- The discipline ladder provides me with the resources I need to make sound decisions when managing student behavior at my school. The discipline ladder is designed to provide teachers with the necessary resources to administer discipline in the classroom. Sixteen

[8] Percentages of respondents from each department was omitted to reduce the potential of identifying study participants.

(80%) respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that the discipline ladder contained the necessary resources to make sound decisions when managing student behaviors. Only three (15%) respondents replied that they somewhat or strongly disagree that the discipline ladder contained the necessary resources needed to make sound decisions when managing student behaviors, while one (5%) respondent neither agreed nor disagreed that the discipline ladder supported sound discipline decisions.

Q7- There are opportunities for teachers to provide feedback on the discipline ladder's effectiveness at my school. Thirteen (65%) of the teachers responded that they somewhat or strongly agreed that there were opportunities to provide feedback on the discipline ladder's effectiveness. However, five (25%) of the teachers disagreed that these opportunities existed for all teachers and two (10%) of teachers neither agreed nor disagreed that there were opportunities to provide feedback on the discipline ladder at their school.

Note: During the focus groups, participants occasionally referred to the MAPSS discipline ladder and responded to questions about its effectiveness. These findings will be discussed in the next section about results of the focus groups.

Research Question 4: **What factors (nature of offense, context, time of day) do select 6th grade classroom teachers report contribute to their decision to write an ODR for a subjective offense?**

Four focus groups were conducted during the study. All focus groups were conducted virtually using *Zoom* and were recorded using the record feature of the platform. Each focus group was comprised of four 6th grade classroom teachers and averaged approximately 50 minutes in length. Each focus group began with background on the purpose of the study and brief introductions. This was followed by a series of questions that were asked in a

conversational tone and designed to encourage collaborative conversation. Throughout discussion of the questions, each of two discipline scenarios was presented and focus group participants were asked to discuss how they would interpret the behavior exhibited in the scenario and how they would manage the behavior in their classroom. The following section presents a summary of each focus group followed by a discussion of each focus group discussion question.

Focus Group A

Comprised of three White female teachers from Circle MS and one White male teacher from Square MS, Focus Group A was homogeneous in terms of race. Each participant was equally vocal and contributed to the conversation. While Participant 1001 was more of the catalyst of the conversation, participants 1002, 10012, and 10013 were verbose contributors. Participant 1002 was often distracted by family members over the duration of the focus group; however, this did not seem to deter the other participants. The interruptions provided moments of laughter when there were moments of silence or a thought-provoking statement was made that gave the other participants pause. For instance, during a moment when one participant shared a personal experience with discipline that was particularly troubling, another participant's toddler and dog came into view with the toddler saddled on the dog. Overall, while all participants shared their opinions without hesitation throughout the discussion, there were times when their input was first in agreement with the statement made by a fellow participant, followed by a personal anecdote that provided context to their agreement.

Focus Group B

Comprised of one White female, one Black female, and one White male teacher from Circle MS and one White female teacher from Square MS, Focus Group B was dominated by

Participant 2005, who often had anecdotes to add after the response of another participant. There were several instances when the personal anecdotes led to the participant asking me to restate the question or apologizing for "rambling." Each time Participant 2003 spoke, they chose to restate the question prior to providing a response. I interpreted this as providing a few extra moments of *think time* and perhaps to constrain the conversation of a peer who frequently attempted to overtalk the other participants. Participant 2004 made mention of being a career changer and being surprised by the challenges of the classroom but was still sure that the decision to teach was the right choice. Both 2003 and 2004 appeared to be bothered by Participant 2005's interruptions but did not verbalize their annoyance. Instead, they subtly shifted their body position or displayed tense smiles. More so than not, they acquiesced to Participant 2005's interruptions or simply paused before providing a response, just to ascertain they would not be interrupted. While I elected to allow the conversation to continue with minimal interference of my own, there were moments of prompting to remind participants that we were collaborative partners and that it was important to allow other participants the opportunity to speak and engage in the conversation without interference. Participant 2006 responded to questions and discussion throughout the focus group but did not turn on the camera and was driving during the first 35 minutes of the discussion. This participant mentioned the need to be traveling due to another obligation after the conclusion of the focus group. More often than not participant 2006 elected to agree with Participant 2003 and then perhaps provided a personal experience to expand on that response.

Focus Group C

Comprised of two White female teachers from Circle MS, one White male teacher from Circle MS, and one White female teacher from Square MS, Focus Group C offered collaborative

and succinct contributors. This focus group began with me having to work through technology issues with two participants. Initially, I believed that we would not be able to complete all the questions due to the 10 minutes it took to work through those technology issues, but because participants were focused on their responses throughout this focus particular group, unlike the others, participants maintained a consistent order of responding, beginning and ending with the same participant after each question or scenario. This moved us through the questions at a brisk pace, which allowed this focus group to finish in less time than the others. All participants in this focus group provided insight and expounded on their thoughts about the discussion questions and there were few, if any, interruptions throughout the duration of the focus group. There were several times that I did notice Participant 3010 was regularly checking the time or scrolling through a phone, but it did not interfere with the participant's level of engagement in the discussion. In fact, Participant 3010 was the most vocal of the participants. Participants 3008, 3009, and 3011 were all logged in from their classrooms, while Participant 3010 was at home. Of all the focus groups, this group reflected on and admitted their mistakes in how they handled discipline in the past or currently. Overall, responses from this focus group elaborated more than others on their perceptions about school discipline and their experiences in the classroom.

Focus Group D

Comprised of four female teachers from Square MS, Focus Group D was the most racially diverse of the focus groups. There were two Black, one White, and one Hispanic classroom teachers. This focus group was also the most talkative and forthcoming of all the focus groups once I affirmed that the conversation was confidential, and findings would not contain personal references. Throughout the duration of the focus groups, participants were eager to share their perspectives, experiences, and beliefs about school discipline. There were several

moments of laughter, a few moments of silence, preferencing responses with personal anecdotes, clarifying when they were referring to their current work location or a previous work location, and concluding with their desire that those who seek to make improvements really work towards improvement rather than simply providing unproven resources. Due to how lively their discussion was, it was difficult for me to remain neutral and not display my reaction to their comments and experiences. This focus group flowed more like a conversation and less like a formal structured interview. Participant 4017 was the first to share comments or experiences and spearheaded the conversation. Participant 4018 was not as forth-coming as the other participants but did offer personal commentary and expanded upon the comments of other participants. The personal anecdotes shared by Participant 4018 provided specific examples of their thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about school discipline, describing in detail one's experience in the classroom and in schools. Participants 4016 and 4020 were more matter of fact in their responses. They answered the questions with some elaboration but would often speak over one another. It was noted that participants in this focus group had a lot to share, and to that point there were quite a few times that I had to remind participants, for confidentiality purposes, not to share the names of other school staff or students in their responses. Nonetheless, and, they provided colorful and elaborative responses.

Focus Group Findings on School Discipline

During the focus group participants were asked to provide a response to five structured questions and discuss two discipline scenarios. It was evident that across all focus groups, while their approach to discipline differed, teachers all felt that they had a responsibility to improve discipline outcomes for students and that it was equally important that there be a concerted effort amongst stakeholders to improve discipline outcomes. Furthermore, through the focus groups,

the need to change the approach to how teachers are prepared and supported in managing school discipline was amplified as it became evident that teachers within the same district and school responded to student behaviors without consistency despite the use of common structures that supported their decision-making.

After each focus group I transcribed the discussion as explained in Section II, by isolating each question and scenario to accurately reflect the sentiments of the participants across all focus groups. Following is a summary of focus group responses across the five discussion questions and two discipline scenarios. Discussion questions and scenarios are not addressed sequentially; they are presented in clusters for ease of interpretation.

Focus Group Question 1: What is the purpose of school discipline?

- Establish a safe/orderly environment.
- Prepare students for the future.
- Facilitate learning.
- Model correct behavior for children to help them mature.
- Teach kids how to exist as humans.
- Behavior modification.

Overall, respondents felt the purpose of school discipline was to establish a safe/orderly environment, prepare students for the future, facilitate learning, model correct behavior for children as they mature, teach students how to exist as humans, and modify behavior. Focus group participants shared varied responses to the purpose of school discipline, and there was consensus that safety and learning were the primary reasons for effective discipline, but that the focus can shift when teachers internalize a student's behavior or when a teacher's personal background and values are not aligned with that of the students in their classrooms.

> "Yes, discipline in schools is important. It is designed to ensure that schools and classrooms are safe for all students and that the teacher can teach. One thing I have learned over the years is that I cannot assume that students will misbehave because then I have justified my need to be the disciplinarian in the classroom." "Before I give any consequences for behavior, I always ask what I did that contributed to it [the student's behavior]. If I find that I am emotionally charged, I take a step back and look at the situation objectively before I make a decision."

All participants across all 4 focus groups agreed that discipline in schools is necessary and that how discipline is approached is vital to the success of teachers and students in schools. Additionally, all of the teachers agreed that it is necessary to be emotionless when enforcing student discipline in order to ensure that their response to student behavior is not influenced by their personal feelings or experiences in response to a particular student.

Focus Group Question 2: Please share 3-5 adjectives that describe your perception of subjective student behaviors.

Figure 16

Adjectives that describe teacher's perception of subjective behaviors

Participants across all focus groups described subjective student behaviors in a variety of ways. The data is represented Figure 16 above in a word cloud, a visual representation of words that make the most frequent words prominent. Chaotic, attention-seeking, defiant, undermining, and frustrating were the most frequent words from focus group participants. Participants cited that these words best reflect their interpretation of subjective student behaviors but that even these can be misrepresented if decisions about student behaviors were made in haste. These words indicated that classroom teachers struggled most with student behaviors that engaged an emotional response from the teacher, challenged their authority, and affected their ability to maintain order in the classroom or engage an emotional response from the classroom teacher. Commonalities in participant responses were found. What was unique was how teachers managed student behaviors in the classroom.

Most of the classroom teachers believed that the subjectiveness of the discipline process can be simplified if the expectation is that teachers will become more consistent in how they manage discipline in the classroom.

> "When I first started teaching, I had to be right... It's my way or the highway. But honestly, I honestly think that my referral writing days for even repeated behaviors are over at this point in my career, because I have learned better ways to manage behavior."

They also shared that discipline cannot improve if the goal is to reduce the number of referrals without changing the behaviors of both students and teachers.

> "If you had asked me this question years ago, I would say that I would not let up until students complied, but then I started realizing that it was more about my ego more so than about the student and their behavior."

What became evident was that changes in how teachers managed student behavior differed; some participants stated that change in their approach to classroom discipline was related to a need to improve their agency,

> "What I have found is that when I improve my own practices and my consistency and credibility with students improve, so do the behavior of my students."

Other teachers seemed motivated to change their discipline practices in order to not be singled out or labeled as an ineffective teacher by administration or colleagues. It was more important to fall in line rather than hold others accountable for enacting discipline.

> "I don't want to be labeled as the problem teacher and sometimes it is just easier to find another answer, even when I know I have gone above and beyond to change the behavior. Sometimes it's easier to not get into a power struggle with admin."

Despite the framework and guidance provided by the school district for schools to develop an appropriate discipline ladder, teachers agreed that the discipline ladder was rather complicated to navigate and often felt disjointed. Teachers agreed that there is a need for schools to have discipline protocols and school structures that support their decision-making rather than confusing the process.

> "Even with the best discipline ladder, though, teachers can still manage/misinterpret subjective behaviors. So yeah, I think if you ever want to take the subjective part out of the discipline process, it really does rely on the school creating a good discipline ladder within the school, that is not conflicting. How can teachers better manage behaviors if the tools we have don't work?"

Data revealed that teachers felt a more collaborative approach around setting clear expectations for student discipline would benefit teachers and students. This collaborative

support would lead to consistency across schools and classrooms and could improve discipline decision-making and its impact in the classroom.

> "In order to be successful at managing discipline in a school, we should be working closely with admin and asking, "What do you want us to do about this type of situation. We're all seeing this behavior." We should be able to ask, "What would you like us to do? What would your next steps be?" and like, have that open dialogue with our administration, so that we are all on the same page and so that the entire team, especially in middle school, and especially right now, is consistent in our expectations for handling student behaviors."

An analysis of data revealed that most classroom teachers believed that school discipline had changed over the years and that it was necessary for schools to be prepared to respond to the needs of teachers and teacher should be prepared to respond to the needs of students.

> "I have found that the best years of my teaching career was when we truly had time to sit and collaborate and make decisions together. Now we have to make decisions in haste, and it has not gotten us anywhere. Now it's about not making waves. But I believe it is important for admin and other leaders to support teachers in their discipline decision-making and if we are wrong, they should help us get better rather than criticize or label us for seeking support."

Most participants agreed that teachers' experience and background can and did influence how they managed student behaviors and that led to an increase in discipline referrals.

Focus Group Question 4*: *What are the factors that lead you to decide that a student's behavior warrants an Office Discipline Referral?

- Repeated behavior that continues to impact others.

- Frequency and type of behavior.
- All attempts to correct the behavior has proven ineffective.
- When safety and learning are threatened.
- When I can no longer balance the needs of the misbehaving student and the needs of the class.
- Last resort: after all interventions and strategies have been exhausted.
- When the situation or behaviors escalate beyond my control.

Participants suggested there were a variety of factors that led to issuing a subjective ODR. Across all focus groups, participants agreed that there was a threshold that influenced the issuing ODRs in the classroom that varied from classroom to classroom. Several participants agreed that how students experienced discipline in their classroom now was much different than how they experienced discipline in their classroom in the past, and this is related to their growth in managing the classroom and understanding the whole child. Participants in the top 25% of referral writers expressed less tolerance for behaviors that threatened their ability to maintain safety, order, or the ability to teach. Participants in the lower 25% of referral writers expressed that while they did have to consider the impact of the student's behavior in the classroom, there were underlying factors that influenced the student's behavior.

> "I would always try to resolve it in my classroom, but if it was a situation that I really felt was out of my control, and was so disruptive... I'm not talking about any level of disruption, I'm talking about so disruptive like, you know, where there may be a high level of aggression or something like that where I just don't feel like I can handle it on my own. That's when I draw a hard line. But I know there is more going on with this student, but I must also protect the learning that must occur in my classroom."

The teachers in the lowest 25% of ODR writers sought to uncover the root cause, implement strategies to change the behaviors, and only wrote a referral when sustained efforts were not successful.

> "I only write referrals for, you know, things that the county says is referral worthy. Most of the time I prefer to call parents or other outside supports to help students. It has to be really extreme for me to write a referral and that referral comes when I have exhausted all available resources that I can implement and now I need additional support."

All participants also suggested that how soon the ODR was written sometimes depended on the frequency of the exhibited behavior. What stood out among the responses of all top 25% of ODR writers were the instances of assigning varying degrees of subjective behaviors and how those variances could influence how quickly the student was issued a referral.

> "When I think about student behavior and when to write a referral, I consider how frequent the behavior occurs, the student's prior history and the impact of the behavior in the classroom, and how the student responds to interventions. If I believe I have gone above and beyond to support the student, then I write a referral."

This comment and others similar to that suggested that there was even greater teacher subjectivity when considering ODRs for subjective offenses and how prevalent teacher biases are in discipline decision making. This suggests that there is a need for schools and systems to focus on understanding and mitigating implicit and explicit biases, particularly for teacher decision-making around subject student behavior.

Do you believe the discipline ladder is effective in helping teachers manage classroom behaviors?

Across all four focus groups, teachers expressed moderate support for the purpose of the discipline ladder. However, they also had reservations about its effectiveness for several reasons, most of which pertained to the capacity of the individual school and teacher. An example of a response that highlights this belief is:

> "That [question] is very subjective because the use of the discipline ladder can help and harm my autonomy in managing behaviors in my classroom. What I mean is that when it is so rigid and I am unable to be flexible, it hurts. I have been in schools where the ladder changes daily, weekly, monthly. So, if you're asking can it help, then I would say, "Yes," but it depends on the school and the administrators."

Participants all agreed that while the discipline ladder provides a starting point for discipline management, it is not designed to give one every step in the discipline process, but rather it is there to guide one's decision-making.

> "As a teacher, I think the discipline ladder helps me know where to begin, but it does not help me understand what to do. There are so many steps involved and with so many students, it can be challenging to manage that process. The discipline ladder is there to guide my thinking regardless of my status as a classroom manager. Yeah, uh, I think that the discipline ladder is only as good as the person behind it and if there is no support from administration, it is ineffective."

Are there opportunities for classroom teachers to provide feedback on the discipline ladder at your school?

Across all four focus groups teachers expressed that this school year was the only time they recalled having an opportunity to provide feedback on the discipline ladder in their school.

> "This year was the first time we've had a chance to, I believe, or I've been asked. And we have a brand-new matrix. It's not a ladder. And this year, the week after the new matrix was introduced to us as a faculty, we did have a professional development where we had the opportunity to give feedback."

Most teachers at a school that offered feedback opportunity, commented that they appreciated the opportunity but remained skeptical of future opportunities.

> "Yes, we have had opportunities to provide feedback at this school, and I have been to several schools where this opportunity does not exist. I cannot tell you if our feedback is valued, but I am not sure that opportunity will continue to exist, though I hope it does."

A few teachers stated that while their colleagues may have had the opportunity to provide feedback, they did not because they were teaching at the time of the feedback sessions. Several lamented that they did not have any opportunity to provide feedback on the discipline ladder, but felt that if they wanted to, they could approach administration about the discipline ladder at their school.

> "While this opportunity may have been available for my colleague, because of my teaching schedule I was not able to attend this PD because it was not offered during a time that I was not teaching."

Findings suggested that it is important to teachers to have the opportunity to provide feedback on the discipline ladder. Participants indicated that to have their voices heard creates greater belief

that the administration values their input and will make change to ensure that teachers feel supported in their discipline decision-making.

Focus Group Question 6. Do you believe some subjective behaviors are less tolerable than others? Why?

- Yes, if they take it personally.
- Could be a generational thing (some teachers allow calling out whereas others prefer students to raise hands).
- Disrespect, because it's like they are disrespecting you as a person.
- Disrespect is more harmful to the teacher.
- Behaviors are less tolerable when the teacher can no longer teach.
- Insubordination when it leads to an unsafe environment.
- Disruption because it interrupts other students from learning.
- I've been in a lot of schools where tolerance of behaviors and referrals are racially motivated.

Participants had varying beliefs about whether some subjective behaviors are less tolerable than others and why. Disrespect was less tolerable because it was like the student was disrespecting the teacher as a person and so disrespect was more harmful to the teacher. Insubordination was noted as less tolerable when it led to an unsafe environment. Disruption was noted as less tolerable because it interrupted other students from learning. One participant noted being in a lot of schools where tolerance of behaviors and referrals were racially motivated. While ODR data suggested that some teachers were more likely to refer Black males more than their peers, across all focus groups, it could not be interpreted, based on the available data, that one teacher tolerated instances of student misbehavior more or less than others. What was noted

was that teachers identified in the top 25% of referral writers relied on their ability to enact rules and consequences, feeling obligated to follow through in an effort to maintain credibility; whereas teachers identified in the lower 25% of referral writers relied on building authentic relationships with students to manage student behaviors because they sought to understand the root cause of the misbehavior. The high referral writer cited that they elected to write a referral for subjective offenses when they deemed the behavior had risen to the point where it was impeding their ability to teach and manage the classroom, believing that it was now time to seek administrative support. Contrarily, the low referral writer considered the whole child and made efforts to resolve behavior issues themselves.

Focus Group Question 7. What do you believe is your role in improving discipline outcomes for students?

- Not my responsibility; admin is key to help support the discipline in the classroom or they can undermine it.
- Yes, it's my responsibility to address the behaviors before the entire class gets drawn in.
- Having empathy for students.
- My responsibility is to provide a predictable, consistent, structured environment with clear expectations; and to learn about my students.
- Building relationships with students; being more tolerant.
- Learning good management strategies.
- Communication and letting students share their opinions and thoughts.
- Manage my emotions and not act out of haste.
- Creating good lessons to keep students engaged.
- Being consistent with expectations.

- Noticing students' moods/dispositions each day.
- Giving students more ownership of the classroom so they feel vested.
- Being polite when I give directives.
- Model the right behaviors and support students in improving their behaviors.

Participants had varying beliefs about their role in improving discipline outcomes for students. One participant accepted no responsibility for improving student behavior and noted administration was key to help support discipline in the classroom and administration was key in undermining discipline in the classroom. Most other participants accepted responsibility for improving discipline outcomes for students. They believed that the relationship between student and teacher was more likely to change the behavior of the student than a referral for which the teacher had no opportunity to provide input on the consequence once the referral was submitted. Those teachers who wrote high numbers of referrals relied on the need for students to be able to follow rules and accept consequences as a valuable life skill. They believed not allowing students to "get away" with misbehavior was not preparing students for their future endeavors. Low referral writers, on the other hand, expressed that in most cases, the referral did not change the behavior, but the referral did create a further divide between the teacher and student. They were of the belief that there were other ways to manage subjective student behaviors that did not end with administrative intervention. Despite the differences in their approaches to managing student discipline, both groups of teachers agreed that universities and colleges can do more to support classroom teachers in being prepared to manage diverse populations of students, often referring to the lack of preparation they receive around classroom management. Furthermore, participants concurred that professional development in schools needed to be more interactive and focused on the needs of the individual teacher rather than the cookie cutter approach to

school discipline. Overall focus group participants agreed that teachers have the responsibility to establish order in their classrooms, and how that is achieved is highly reliant upon the decisions they make and how detrimental they deem a student's behavior as a threat to the inherent power and control they hold as the teacher in the classroom.

Focus Group Scenarios. In addition to responding to discussion questions, each focus group was asked to read and then discuss two scenarios by responding to the following prompts, (1*) In thinking about this student's behavior… would you determine it to be disrespect, disruption, or insubordination? Why?* and (2) *How might you manage this behavior in your classroom?* The scenarios are discussed below.

Scenario A. Scenario A, discussed after question 2, focused on Saadiq, a Black student who is more physically developed than his peers. He becomes visibly upset when the teacher refuses to change his grade on an assignment he handed in but was given no credit for.

While focus group participants were diverse in their perspectives, they all offered an initial response to the scenario; and most provided highly descriptive personal anecdotes on their experiences with school discipline. From the focus group scenario, I deduced that those teachers who were identified as high referral writers struggled with control and management in their classrooms, seeking the need to establish and maintain authority. They sought to disassociate themselves from behaviors, indicative of a need for power and control, by referring to themselves in third person voice.

> "A teacher would say its disruptive. They would feel like in this scenario Saadiq's feelings are 100% valid, but how he goes about it came across as disruptive and prevents the teacher from continuing instruction. If instruction can no longer occur, that is crossing the line, especially when he walked out and slammed the door."

> "One could see why a teacher would consider this behavior disrespectful… honestly, because it's like the student brought in like a race issue, along with like you hate me, along with you are whack and almost like a threat… I'm telling my mom. A teacher could see this as being disrespectful in how the student is speaking to him or her, as insubordination because the student isn't complying, and as a class disruption because the student is impacting the teacher's ability to teach."

Teachers in the focus group who had been identified as low ODR writers through the data analysis tended to rely on relationships and alternative strategies in their classrooms. They recognized that much of the student's behaviors were directly related to the teacher's response to the situation. Most agreed that the student behavior could be considered either of the three subjective offenses, disrespect, disruption, or insubordination, but that had the teacher listened rather than try to assert authority, the incident most likely could have been avoided.

> "I'm sure I've probably had an encounter like that before. I know I've had an encounter like that before, and it's hard in that moment to be one step ahead of yourself, you know. It's hard in the moment to stop and think about what's going through this student's head right now. Either way, I would acknowledge the student in the moment and then circle back at another time to get the student to see how that moment was not the best to interrupt instruction. I wouldn't turn it into a power struggle because no one wins unless you consider brandishing control a win."

> "I really don't think it would ever get to this point in my class because of the relationships I have with my students. Even if I don't teach a kid, the time I have spent in classrooms would allow me to see that there is more to this student than what I can see, and what we

all see is a student not following instructions. But more importantly, we see a teacher on a power trip that wouldn't have gone this far if the teacher was truly pro-student."

Over the course of the discussion around Scenario A, participants espoused how they have had similar situations in their classroom and how they managed those behaviors. What continued to resonate with me from those focus group participants who were identified as high ODR writers was how teachers justified their aversion to identifying ways to address student (mis)behaviors by relying on the need to consider their responsibility to teach and attend to the needs of students who regularly followed school rules.

> "It is not that I don't care about the needs of the misbehaving student… I just know I was hired to do a job and that I have a responsibility to other students as well. We focus a lot of our attention on those students who need multi-tiered supports, but what about the students who come in every day and do all that we ask and expect? Who is advocating for them?"
>
> "I'm all for helping a student in need. I just need to know that I will be supported when I can no longer place that student's needs above the needs of the other students."
>
> "I understand where my colleagues are coming from. We have to try to put aside our emotions. I realize that teaching is more than just the curriculum, it is about the whole child. As teachers we give so much to the few and sometimes, I feel guilty about how little is given to the many."

In contrast, the low referral writers deemed that in most cases when you put a kid out of class for a subjective offense, the student is receiving the response from you they wanted – to leave the classroom.

> "I know my students and I know when they are trying to escape the room. I try not to reward their behavior with an exit because that is what they want. But I do try to dig deeper and discover why they are exhibiting those behaviors. At the end of the day, you will find that the behavior has nothing to do with you but is related to something else."

Scenario B. The second scenario, which was discussed after Question 4, focused on a student named Wyatt. Wyatt becomes upset and storms out of the room when the substitute teacher demanded that he work in a group, contrary to the subplans provided by the teacher of record. Participants across all the focus groups agreed that the handling of this scenario was not the way they personally would have handled it. However, where there was a clear distinction between teachers designated as low and high ODR, high writers were less sympathetic with the student. They expressed more comments about feeling that the teacher's request was reasonable, and that the response of the student was unwarranted, considering one was only asking the student to work cooperatively with others.

> "I don't think that the teacher did anything wrong here. Yes, the original plans were not followed, but that does not justify the student's response."

> "I have had to cover classes before, so I can understand that the sub plans may not have been working and that there was a need for some change, but for the student to respond in that manner, I believe, is beyond what is a reasonable response."

On the other end, participants who were low ODR writers felt like the teacher was out of line for making changes to the lesson plans and then provoking the student's response. They felt the teacher was responsible for initiating the series of events in this scenario.

> "I rest on my response to the first Scenario. A teacher could find something to write a referral for disrespect, disruption, and insubordination. But again, the response of the

teacher was not the best, considering all things. You walked into someone else's classroom and revamped the lesson, but perhaps the teacher set it up that way because you are not prepared to handle Wyatt's aversion to group work."

"I agree 100% with everything you said. One hundred percent. I think that Wyatt's reaction was invited. And yes, you could make the argument that it's insubordinate or disruptive, or disrespectful, but I think it's excusable under the circumstances."

What became evident as the conversation continued was the need for more context, which I identified as a need to know the racial identity of the student. How students experience discipline in the classroom is directly related to one's race and gender and some participants alluded to that fact. Participants were not explicit with this request to know if Wyatt was White or Black; however, their wonderings implied that they would be able to better understand the teacher's response if the race of the student was more apparent. However, three participants expressed their efforts to not consider race when managing student behaviors.

"It seems to be some implicit bias here. Unlike the first scenario, much about this student is not known. If that information was clear, I would be able to determine why a teacher would respond that way. I mean, let's be honest. Kids are targets because of who they are. That's not how I do things in my classroom… I look at the whole child not just one aspect of the student, but it's not like that in all classrooms."

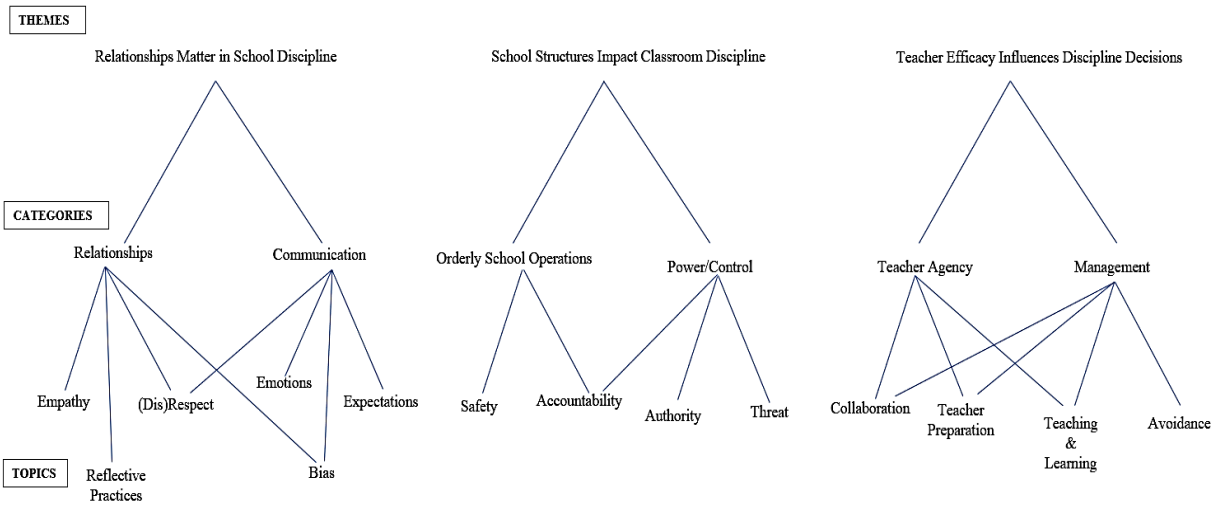
"It's difficult to understand the behavior of the student and the teacher. We don't have a vivid description of Wyatt as we had of Saadiq. Perhaps it would make a difference in understanding the teacher's response and the student's aversion to comply with what seems like a reasonable request."

Across the focus groups it was apparent that those who were considered low referral writers struggled with the need for a teacher to exercise their authority, while high referral writers struggled with the student behavior and response to what they deemed to be a reasonable request. Furthermore, the participants all agreed that there was a disconnect with the teacher and that one's inability to implement small strategies to build rapport with the student was concerning. By the end of the conversation around Scenario B, participants agreed that more should be done to support the teacher in professional growth and the management of classrooms.

Second Level of Analyses. As described in Section 2, I identified and coded focus group transcripts, initially identifying phrases and sentences within the data that expressed key ideas and concepts related to the research questions and labeling these key ideas to describe the content. A list of 14 topics were identified by highlighting phrases and sentences that conveyed key ideas across all participants in each focus group, signaling an emerging topic to be considered. Phrases and statements were grouped by topic and using the peer consulting process, further refined and the boundaries for a code were established. Through this process, 14 cross cutting topics were identified: Empathy, Reflective Practices, (Dis)Respect, Bias, Emotions, Expectations, Safety, Accountability, Authority, Threat, Collaboration, Teacher Preparation, Teaching & Learning, and Avoidance. Participants' statements were compared and contrasted across the 14 topics and further sorted into six predominant categories: Relationships, Communication, Orderly School Operations, Power/Control, Teacher Agency, and Management, also seen in Figure 15 below.

Figure 15

Diagram of the Coding Levels and Organization in Focus Group Data



I then pawed through the six categories and engaged in identifying key concepts and ideas in the chunks of text as recommend by Bernard (2013). Using this method and re-sorting text, I identified three major themes: Relationships Matter in School Discipline, School Structures Impact Classroom Discipline, and Teacher Efficacy Influences Discipline Decisions, also seen in Figure 15.

Table 13 provides examples of the data that guided the identification of major categories and themes during data analysis. The data in Table 13 was derived from participant quotes from the focus groups. The six categories from the data informed the identification of three major themes.

Table 13

Example of Supporting Data for 6 Categories

Category	Example of Supporting Data
Orderly School Operations	"There's multipurpose in school discipline. I mean, obviously, the first thing is to facilitate learning. So, if there're no discipline problems or behavioral problems that distract from the learning that's going on in the classroom, that certainly facilitates learning. Behavioral problems can also create a negative environment for the students and turn a positive learning experience into a more stressful or negative learning experience." "I was gonna say almost the exact same thing about the purpose of school discipline… School discipline is necessary just to establish a safe and orderly environment, you know where all people are able to learn, because there is a sense of calm and peace and order."
Communication	"I mean, I think, first of all, it's just the way that the teacher said those things. I think that is not how I would have gone about it. I would not have used my words dismissively. It's not about what you say… If you know your students… it's about how you say it and to whom." "Okay, um, well, you know, if I'm going to provide consequences for any type of behavior, I want to make sure that I'm consistent, that I've communicated my expectations frequently as to what will and will not be accepted. I want to make sure I'm clear and consistent and the kids understand exactly what I expect because the nature of the term itself can

	differ from classroom to classroom, and I want to make sure that consequences are predictable yet fair.”
Relationship	“And I think the difference that you're going to find in, you know, teachers who are just starting out, versus teachers who have some sort of culturally responsive education, or even just saying relationships come first and actually being given time by the administration and the school to actually try to create relationships so that you wouldn't have to make an empty threat to write a referral over a situation that had nothing to do with a referral.” “You make a good point because I had an experience where a young African American male was getting a referral every day in this one classroom. So, I pulled him to the side and asked, “What is going on?” And you know, he said, “Well, no one ever asked me that…” So, you're right about building those relationships, and at least listening and asking them the reasons behind their behavior.”
Power/Control	**“**I've had administrators tell me, by the time you get a referral, by the time a referral comes to my office, what you're basically telling me is you've done absolutely everything you can to correct the situation, and you have no more resources. And you're, it's beyond your ability to, to, to alter or correct the behavior, at which point it's the administrator who says, now it's my turn. So, that was when, as a faculty, a lot of us... not here but at another school had

	asked, ‘Well, why aren't we consulted on the consequences?’ And that was the response I was given.” “When student’s walk into my classroom, I have an obligation to teach. When students cannot bring their behavior down to a certain level, then I must make the decision to change the student’s behavior. I do not struggle with students in my classroom. I command respect and I make it clear that my classroom will operate and function without disruption.”
Teacher Agency	“My responsibility is to provide a predictable, consistent, structured environment with clear expectations, and to learn what I don't know, because right now I don't know what I don't know, and there's so much more that I have to learn about my students, and that I didn't. There's so much I didn't know about how often and how many students are affected by trauma and the impact it has in the classroom, and how I just have a responsibility to learn the things that I don't already know, and to keep learning about my students so that I can effectively empathize with them, because it's clear that they do not know how to articulate to me what I need to know about them, at this time.” “Yeah, I agree with what they're saying about the training. But I don't think that is really about how to write a referral but, I think what your study is getting at is that we're not consistent in how we decide when or when not to issue referrals, right? So, I think we need to have more sort of across-the-board school wide training on what our discipline plan looks like. So that, you know, we're all taking the same steps. We're all giving referrals for the

	same thing. So, it's not, you know, this teacher gives a referral on a whim. And the teacher is taking all these steps. So, it's not just how to write the referral. It's the steps we take before the referral process that needs to be consistent across the board."
Management	"It's the inconsistency from teacher to teacher, I think, that students can either monopolize on or they find very confusing and therefore they feel like they're, you know, treated unfairly perhaps by one teacher, but not by another." "It is not necessary to struggle for power in discipline situations. I believe students will come to respect you more when the teacher manages the classroom with different approaches. Not everyone is there yet. This was me when I first started teaching. I had to be right, and it was my way or the highway. But honestly, I honestly think that my referral writing days for even repeated behaviors are over at this point in my career, because I have learned better ways to manage behavior."

Relationships Matter in School Discipline. Nearly all participants conveyed that relationships were important when it came to school discipline and that these relationships played a role in how students experienced school. Furthermore, teachers indicated that relationships must be authentic, and that the importance of relationships extended beyond the student-teacher dynamic and had to be interwoven into the entire school community. Below are illustrative examples.

> "I mean, I think, first of all, it's just the way that the teacher said those things. I think that is not how I would have gone about it. I would not have used my words dismissively. It's not about what you say. If you know your students… it's about how you say it... and how students feel in the classroom."

All focus group participants agreed that the approach one takes with students can impact the relationship one has with students. According to most teachers, it is important that you lead with first seeking to understand rather than make assumptions. Furthermore, most participants stated that one should consider the tone and affect of the student. Even if you are not familiar with the student, one should be able to deduce the needs of the student by listening.

> "In the case of the scenario, I think it is important, especially when you are going into a classroom where you may not know the students, to approach each situation with respect to the person and their lived experiences... I would seek to understand the student's concern and then engage the student in a conversation about how to appropriately seek my attention and support. However, I think it is important to acknowledge the student's concern so that he doesn't feel disregarded. All students want to be respected at the end of the day, just like teachers wish to be respected."

Additionally, many participants expressed that relationships with students are critical to the success of any discipline approach in schools, and equally important are the relationships one has with colleagues and the greater school community. Most participants iterated that they found greater success when they included outside resources in their approach to resolving discipline matters in the classroom.

> "Many of my colleagues today have discussed relationships. I can agree that relationships do matter, but I want to consider that we must also think about the relationships teachers

> have with each other, with families, with administration, and with the community. It's great that we build relationships with students, but the school is more than just the students. If we are really going to change anything, then we must build better relationships of respect, trust, and cooperativeness with the whole school community, not just the students and classroom."

Finally, all participants concurred that student to teacher relationships are the foundation of any initiative within the school. Many expressed that without support, teachers are destined to repeat the mistakes previously made. As such most participants indicated that teachers cannot be tied to their old way of thinking and be opposed to different approaches. All participants agreed that positive relationships thrive when teachers relinquish this idea of individual power and control and embrace a more collaborative approach to discipline. Many participants expressed that schools and systems must become more aware of the unique context and cultures that exists in individual schools and classrooms and be willing to embrace the notion that schools can follow common policy and practices, in tandem with the autonomy to tailor policies and practices to the specific needs of the school community.

> "I can go on, I think my role is, is, I think, I think relationship building is critical. I think if you can build a good relationship with your students, colleagues, parents, administration, and anyone else who wants to support, you will have much better success with reaching your discipline goals. We want to be in control, the administration included, but we have to get everyone on board, or we are just trying make a square round. Everyone keeps saying just implement best practices this and MTSS that, but every school and classroom is different. We have our unique challenges, and we ought to have the autonomy to make it work for us but keep the intent of the initiative firm. Every

> year I have been teaching, we are implementing this new idea, but no one has ever come to the teachers and asked us what we thought of all of this and we are the ones who have to learn it and implement it, with no consideration of what we need to do to make it work."

Overall, most participants expressed that relationships mattered and without a specific focus on the intersection of relationships within the schools and classrooms, teachers and schools with disproportionate discipline would continue to apply discipline disproportionately.

School Structures Impact Classroom Discipline. All participants espoused how the structures in place in schools and classrooms had a significant impact on disciplining and student experience in the classroom. Across all focus groups, participants shared that the structures in place were only effective when there was consistency across all classrooms in schools. Furthermore, participants indicated that the structures to support discipline must be user friendly and consistently implemented across all classrooms.

> "Yes, so I was gonna say, kind of the same thing. You know, what one teacher may find, okay, and allows in their classroom, another teacher may find intolerable. And that can be like a generational thing. Right? You know, like older teachers may want all their students to raise their hand before answering a question. Whereas other, you know maybe younger, teachers are okay with everybody responding or calling out. In order for school discipline to work, there has to be consistency in classrooms. Why expect students to have to learn a different set of rules for each classroom. When procedures and practices are not consistent, that's when these types of incidents occur, and I've been guilty of it myself. We blame the students rather than point the fingers at ourselves."

Many participants expressed that the discipline ladder in schools mattered and that their understanding of the discipline ladder and structures impacted how discipline was imposed. Several agreed that if the discipline ladder is utilized only as a checklist to get to the referral, then the high and disproportionate number of ODRs for subjective offenses will continue. Further, several participants highlighted that when they began to understand the restorative interventions within the discipline ladder, they were able to make a difference in how and when they issued ODRs in the classroom.

> "Yeah, I mean, I was just thinking that the best way to, like, make discipline better is if the school itself has not only a great discipline ladder, but also school and classroom structures that work. If we have those things, then that can take some of the subjective part out of that discipline process. And not all schools, like, have their discipline ladder posted or it's not always reviewed at the beginning of the year. So, then it falls on the teacher to just figure it out. Even with the best discipline ladder, though, teachers can still manage to make bad judgment calls. So yeah, I think if you ever want to take the subjective part out of the discipline, it really does rely on the school creating opportunities for improvement, or having teachers practice with real scenarios... like in situation X, Y, or Z, you know, you should do this, this, and this before a referral is written. But without a good discipline structures and an understanding of those structures within the school, it's going to fall back on the teachers and their personal decision about who gets a referral and for what."

Moreover, many participants highlighted the need for opportunities to collaborate with school administration and other teachers and that regular dialogue about discipline should be welcomed rather than discouraged. In general, they expressed that teachers should not be

criticized for seeking support but should be recognized for taking steps to find alternatives to the practices used within their classroom and improve their discipline practices.

> "In order to be successful at managing discipline in a school, I should be working closely with my administrator and like having that open dialogue with our administration, so that we are all on the same page and so that the entire team is consistent in our expectations for and in the handling of student behaviors. I think you just have an overall better discipline structure in the school and the kids aren't frustrated and the adults aren't frustrated, and the discipline actually becomes more effective, and then you don't need to maybe write as many referrals, or call for admin support as often, because that way we set it up, the students know exactly what's coming, exactly what the procedures are, and the adults know exactly what their steps are."

Focus group participants agreed that the opportunity for collaboration should include opportunities to provide feedback about the discipline structures which would lead to an improvement of the structures because the administration would understand teachers' needs. Participants lamented the many changes are made in schools with little to no input from teachers.

> "This year was the first time I believe we've had a chance to, or I've been asked, and we have a brand-new matrix. It's not a ladder. Our principal implemented a new discipline matrix and there's more teacher buy-in because the feedback we shared was considered and our suggestions were included. Now we feel like we have a vested interests in the success of this ladder, because our needs are being met. I won't say there is 100% of teachers on board, but it is significantly more teachers following the new model than are not, because they [administration] listened."

Participants all agreed that regardless of the structures in place to support school discipline within the classroom, mandating change should include the voice of the teachers implementing the change. Most participants understood that not all decisions about how to improve discipline data can include the teacher voice; however, all participants expressed that the structures in place to meet those measures should include opportunities for teacher feedback in order to impact improvement.

Teacher Efficacy Influences Discipline Decisions. Participants asserted that teachers need to reconcile who they are with how they manage student behavior. Across each focus group, participants contended that their initial years of teaching were not their best in terms of classroom management; that their classroom practices improved over time and they lamented that this is not always the case for all teachers. Despite schools establishing discipline protocols, focus group participants indicated that how students experience school was reliant upon the individual will of classroom teachers to become better classroom managers.

> "I try not to write referrals. The referrals that I have written this year were because I was told I had to write the referrals. I try not to refer students to admin, but I also realize that I have a responsibility to the other students in my class and trying to balance that with the needs of the constantly misbehaving students is hard. A referral is the last straw, particularly when I have spent time trying to resolve the issues in the classroom."

What is evident from responses of the participants is that every teacher is on a discipline continuum in terms of their decision making based on the circumstance of the student and the offense. However, participants expressed that it is important for teachers and administration to realize that there is still more to learn and understand about students and student behavior as it changes over time. As such, participants agreed that teachers must have time to hone their

discipline skills through professional growth opportunities that includes opportunities to unpack discipline events.

> "Um, I think as a teacher you have to, especially for new teachers, you really have to practice these [discipline] scenarios. I think that's very helpful and sometimes purposeful reflections when things happen. So, if a teacher does write a referral for something and the administration feels that it was a subjective type of referral that should have been handled in the classroom, as a teacher, you know, take time to reflect and consider, how could I have handled that differently and would my choice have been different if it was another student. And it takes, like I said, practice; It's not something, especially with new teachers, that you master right away."

If teachers are to realize improvement in their practices, participants agreed that there must be a reconciliation of the lived experience of the teacher and that of the students. This was interpreted as teachers coming to understand that their expectations of students must be free of bias and preconceived ideas of the student's disposition. Participants also expressed there is no quick fix to the disproportionality in discipline, but progress can be made when the resources and supports are available to assist teachers in improving their practice individually and collectively.

> "I'm a career changer and it took me sometime to realize that my experiences and background was not like what my students experience in their lives. I don't know where they are coming from and rather than being quick to decide that their behavior disrupts my idea of the ideal classroom, I've learned to empathize and try to understand where they are coming from. I will never know what it feels like to be in their shoes, but I can learn to understand them and find ways to change their behaviors rather than continuously write referrals. We can't do it alone, and we must have support, and that is

> what is missing today. We are expected to solve it within our four walls, and when we ask for help it can be frowned upon, and when you don't ask for help it can be frowned upon. So, what do we do? Well, I can tell you what's happening now… teachers resign and move on."

Lastly, teachers agreed that discipline in the classroom for subjective offenses is a problem. Participants indicated that the power struggle is often the most challenging obstacle to overcome in the classroom. It is inherent that as the teacher there is a positional power vested that is wielded in the classroom. However, participants expressed that this authority has the power to hurt or help students and that it is the decision of the teacher and by default administration, how it is used in the classroom. Becoming better classroom managers is not relinquishing this "power"; it is the opposite – it gives teachers greater influence over how students experience school.

> "It is not necessary to struggle for power in discipline situations. I believe students will come to respect you more when the teacher manages the classroom with different approaches. Not everyone is there yet. This was me when I first started teaching. I had to be right, and it was my way or the highway. But honestly, I honestly think that my referral writing days for even repeated behaviors are over at this point in my career, because I have learned better ways to manage behavior."

Teacher perceptions of their ability to manage classrooms is vital to the success of any discipline model. This impacts their decision-making around school discipline, their desire to implement discipline structures, and their relationships with students, colleagues, parents, and others. As conveyed through the focus groups, "how I see myself in the classroom has a direct impact on how students experience the classroom," and this leads to positive or negative change.

Summary and Findings of Research Questions 3 and 4

The majority of participants agreed that the discipline ladder was a familiar resource in schools and that it provided teachers with the resources, supports, and structures needed to support discipline decisions. Furthermore, participants asserted that there were opportunities in schools to provide feedback about the discipline ladder's effectiveness in support of managing student behaviors. ODR data demonstrated that over time the discipline ladder may have contributed to a decline in the number of subjective ODRS issued to all 6th graders at Circle and Square MSs, but it did not resolve the disparity that existed amongst Black males and their peers. Data demonstrated that Black boys continued to outpace their peers in ODRs for subjective offenses. Focus groups illuminated that both schools recognized that the discipline ladder, in its previous iteration, was not effective and was revised to better support teachers and students. Focus group responses related to the effectiveness of and opportunities to provide feedback about the discipline ladder aligned with responses from the pre-focus group survey. The majority of participants confirmed that they believed the discipline ladder was effective in supporting discipline decisions in the classroom and that teachers had opportunities, formal or informal, to provide feedback to school leaders about the effectiveness of the discipline ladder. This feedback may have contributed to both Circle and Square MSs revising their discipline ladder (see Appendix J and Appendix K) to better support teacher management of student behaviors. It is evident that both Circle and Square Middle Schools provided space for feedback and based on that feedback opted to move towards a discipline ladder that better met the needs of their teachers.

Participants identified as low referral writers attributed their growth in managing student behaviors to the following:

- Restorative practices;
- Having their own children;
- Becoming more culturally proficient;
- Recognizing that the power of the pen didn't change student behavior(s); and
- Recognizing the bias in who gets referred and why.

Participants identified as high referral writers recognized the importance for alternative discipline strategies but most often made the decision to issue ODRs for subjective offenses rather than rely on interventions and strategies to manage student misbehavior because discipline was necessary to ensure:

- Safety and order are maintained;
- Teachers can teach;
- Students can learn; and
- Students are prepared for their next steps in life (e.g., college or career).

When considering how teachers make decisions about discipline, participants' responses varied across all focus groups. All considered the type of offense and the level of the offense prior to making a discipline decision. Where participants differed was in the process followed to make discipline decisions. High referral writers most often followed the discipline ladder closely. They were focused on ensuring they had done all they could do (e.g., warning, call home, conference, etc.) before writing the referral, particularly if it was for repeat behavior(s). Additionally, high referral writers expressed that they understood that they may be emotionally charged when disciplining students; however, this did not make them less objective when writing

the referral. Instead, they believed that the writing of a referral maintained their authority and responsibility to teach. Low referral writers admitted they followed the discipline process as well. However, they were more likely to reflect on their actions prior to issuing a referral. These teachers were cognizant of not writing a referral in haste. Moreover, low referral writers believed it was more important to show respect for a student's culture rather than force students to assimilate into a culture of rigid rules. They sought to identify and resolve the root cause of the behavior, which allowed teachers to return to teaching before a behavior escalated to levels deemed inappropriate or referral worthy.

Additionally, participants agreed that as they matured in their professional practices, classroom management improved. Most agreed that as a new classroom teacher they were unprepared to manage classrooms with diverse needs, as they came from teacher preparation programs that did not prepare them properly to manage student behaviors, and that this capacity was built over time through daily interactions with students, self-reflection, and overall improvement of the skills necessary to manage diverse classrooms.

Black, Hispanic, and White Classroom Teachers Contrast. Over the course of the focus groups, it was evident that Black and White teachers varied in their responses. White teachers tended to emphasize current buzz words in their responses. They emphasized that they were aware of the common trends in teaching students of color. However, when considering ODR data, their verbiage was in misalignment with their practice. Moreover, White teachers were more likely to allude to the idea that school administration was critical to the success of discipline in the classroom. They felt that they had a duty to teach and that it was important for administration to maintain order and safety in the school and classroom. Additionally, some

alluded to the idea that over the course of their careers, they were deserving of improved classroom environments.

In contrast, Black and Hispanic teachers kept their verbiage simple. They did not over-emphasize education jargon but instead followed their statements with personal anecdotes that emphasized their beliefs in their teacher education coupled with their lived and practical experiences which prepared them to be effective managers of student behaviors in the classroom. Nonetheless, just like their peers, ODR data misaligned with their beliefs, demonstrating that they did not put into practice their ideologies of what classroom management and discipline should look like in the classroom.

Unlike their peers, Black and Hispanic teachers loathed being considered the school disciplinarian. They cited often being assigned the most "challenging" students because they were more effective in managing student behaviors. They felt there was a need for all teachers to be focused more on relationships but stopped just short of saying that all White teachers were not good classroom managers. Instead, they hoped for a change in how Black, Hispanic, and other minority teachers were perceived in schools.

Female and Male Classroom Teachers Contrast. The focus groups were majority female. Primarily they focused on relationships, empathy, and care. They iterated how their approach to classroom discipline changed over time as they considered their own children when interacting with students in the classroom. Much of the conversation from female teachers was centered around the need to make a difference and impact change in the lives of the students they taught. Female teachers often cited the need for support from administration and wanting to feel valued and included in the decisions made about discipline in schools, particularly those policies and procedures that would impact their classroom practices. Furthermore, they felt consistency in

implementing school discipline practices was critical to the success of any school discipline model. On the contrary, the male voice was more focused on preparing students for the future and how it was important for students to understand that life is about choices. Male teachers were less likely to empathize with students, but instead they often placed value in emphasizing the need for students to understand the importance of following rules. Male teachers did not emphasize a need to feel supported by administration. Instead, they relied on the idea that their adherence to school discipline policies was not enough; that administrators should model these expectations rather than develop policies and expect implementation with fidelity.

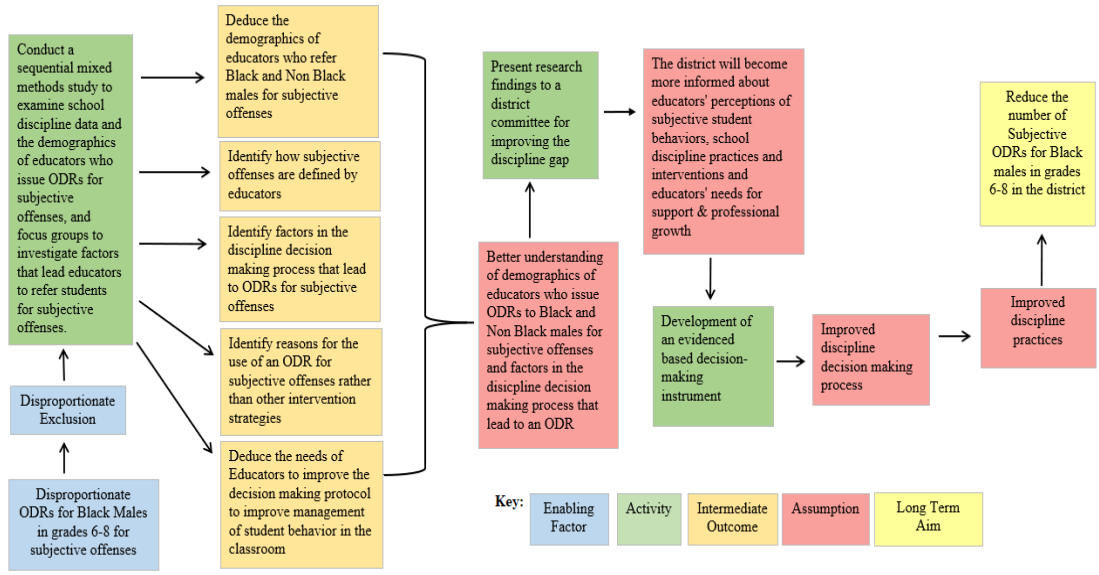
Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that lead to an ODR for subjective student behaviors identified as disruption, disrespect, and insubordination. Literature acknowledged that Black students, particularly Black males, were overrepresented in ODR data and are excluded at rates higher than their peers. The study was guided by existing ODR data, and focus groups explored classroom teacher's perceptions of subjective student behaviors and the factors that lead to issuing ODRs. Analysis of ODR and Focus Group data led to the identification of three major themes: Relationships Matter in School Discipline, School Structures Impact Classroom Discipline, and Teacher Efficacy Influences Discipline Decisions. It is important to consider that the conclusions of this study represent trends and not specific classroom teachers. A reduction in the discipline gap in MAPSS is a serious moral imperative that underscores the purpose of this study. Classroom teachers are the catalyst for discipline decision-making, yet few studies focus on this position. The findings of this study may be used to inform future opportunities for research and inform future development of an improved

evidence-based decision-making instrument that would lead to a reduction in the number of subjective ODRs issued by teachers in the classroom, seen in Figure 13.

Figure 13

Outcome Chain for Reducing ODRs for Subjective Student Behaviors



The study sought to identify the demographics of classroom teachers most responsible for issuing ODRs to Black and Non-Black males for subjective offenses and factors in the decision-making process that lead to an ODR. Research contended that a teacher's decision to refer students can lead to students being pushed out of classrooms and into the STPP (Elias, 2013), and that persistent discipline disparities continue to impact Black students, particularly males, throughout their lifetime (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). As previously cited in Section I, disciplinary referrals increase as students enter middle school. Middle school classroom teachers may have higher rates of referrals because developmentally, students are likely to test limits with adults. However, the inherent authority given to teachers creates an imbalance of power that may(not) lead to disproportionate discipline outcomes for students, particularly Black males.

Discipline outcomes (in the case of my study, ODRs), were directly correlated to the interactions between teacher and students, the extent of their relationship, and how the exhibited behavior was interpreted and managed by the classroom teacher. The following section presents the conclusions of this study and recommendations to improve discipline outcomes in MAPSS.

Demographics Differences between Teachers Issuing Subjective ODRs

Data illustrated that White teachers were more likely to refer students of color, particularly Black males, at higher rates than their peers. The quantitative data explored indicated how a teacher's response to subjective student behaviors varied by race and gender. For instance, regardless of gender, Hispanic classroom teachers demonstrated greater consistency in issuing ODRs regardless of student racial demographics, in contrast to Black and White female classroom teachers who referred more Black males.

What the quantitative data revealed was that in years with high ODR totals the likelihood of a classroom teacher interpreting a Black student's behavior as unacceptable was greater than in years with low ODR totals, particularly for Black males in 6th grade. However, even in years with low total ODRs for subjective offense, Black males were still issued more ODRs by White and Black teachers. Researchers Wallace et al. (2008) asserted that there was little discipline disparity in student racial demographics for objective offenses and concurred with Skiba et al. (2002) and Skiba and Williams's (2014) assertion that Black students were referred at higher rates for behaviors in the classroom, and that these behaviors were more subjective in nature. Researchers, as previously cited, supported the idea that while students were culpable in their own behavior, the discipline disparities were not a result of student "misbehavior" but rather a result of the classroom teacher's "misinterpretation" of what was and was not acceptable student behavior.

The analysis of ODR data at both Circle and Square MSs clarified key points regarding the use of demographics to explain discipline outcomes. However, the unexpected finding that Black female teachers issued more referrals to Black males than White males indicated the significance of approaching the problem of the discipline gap through demographic data alone. To this point, while this study uncovered who was referring students for subjective ODRs, additional data is needed to fully realize the extent to which the intersection of teacher and student demographics influence discipline outcomes in MAPSS.

If school systems truly want to understand patterns in ODR data and the teachers who issue those ODRs, I recommend the school system improves the documentation of both teacher and student level demographic data throughout the ODR process, as the intersection of the two can highlight unexpected patterns. The findings in my study highlighted the complexity in distinguishing the relationship between race, gender, and subjective referrals, compelling researchers to not focus narrowly on teacher or student level data alone which may lead to only a partial understanding of the issue. What is most critical in future research on the discipline gap in MAPSS is the collection of more complete data sets that will allow for greater exploration of the intersection of teacher and student demographics. For instance, by nature of their staffing numbers, White females issue more ODRs to Black males, a finding that does not reveal additional information about the discipline gap. Improving the documentation of demographics, student, and teacher level, would provide the system the opportunity to engage the greater school community in understanding the discipline gap that leads to greater collaboration in addressing gaps in knowledge that exist in the various cultures represented in the school system. Furthermore, improved data sets would allow for richer discussion and greater cultural proficiency surrounding effective strategies to manage student behavior.

Teacher-Student Relationships Matter

Research data suggested that teachers were more likely to refer students when they did not have positive relationships with students. Data from this study indicated that teachers who sought to form positive relationships with students found creative ways to manage student behaviors that did not result in an ODR for subjective offenses. Focus group participants highlighted that by focusing on understanding more about the student and the root cause of the behavior, they were able to reduce the number of discipline events resulting in a subjective ODR in the classroom. It was also noted that several teachers who quantitatively struggled with classroom management and student (mis)behavior were verbose about the love they had for students and their jobs. Furthermore, they took the stance that by allowing students to misbehave without consequence was not teaching the student responsibility for their actions and would result in future misbehavior.

ODR data suggested that students never learned what the referee believed the referral would teach the student. Furthermore, it indicated that the teacher's expectations were often situational and moving targets because in some cases the same student was referred multiple times for the same offense by the same teacher. Moreover, there was no empirical evidence to suggest students will be better prepared for college or career, as mentioned by focus group participants who agreed that when they enforce discipline, they were preparing students for the future, because students have been issued a referral for subjective offenses. Lastly, teachers assumed that a swift response to student behavior maintained the teacher's status of authority in the classroom; but one could argue that their authority was usurped because the act of issuing the referral relinquished the teacher's ability to influence the outcome of the situation.

Data revealed that low referees balanced the personal and academic aspect of students. They led with empathy, care, and support without jeopardizing their authority in the classroom. Moreover, they consistently held all students to high expectations and engaged the whole child in the academic process, whereas high referees identified student behavior as needing to be controlled and corrected. They valued order and obedience, engaging in a "give" and "get" relationships. At its core this is a textbook case of the authoritarian vs authoritative teacher, which was first distinguished in literature by Baumrind (1966). That said, the relational contrast between students and low referral writers and students and high referral writers, while not fully realized in this study, may lead to the identification of effective strategies and supports to improve discipline practices of classroom teachers who issue high numbers of ODRs for subjective offenses. As such, there is much to be learned from descriptive characteristics of low and high ODR writers, to include traits of effective teachers that align with previous research and the identification of strategies and supports to improve the disciplinary practices of high ODR writers. I recommend that the district engage in case studies that will identify best practices in relationship building that could be incorporated into systemic professional development and thereby support the improvement of relationship building for teachers who struggle to maintain relationships in the classroom. Furthermore, there should be a review of current practices within the system to begin to understand what current evidenced-based strategies yielded positive results for classroom teachers, in order to ensure that teachers are receiving high quality directives that lead to improved outcomes for all students. Furthermore, authentic relationships provide opportunities for classroom teachers to build trust with their students. As such, a focus on how low ODR writers build and maintain strong relationships could be beneficial for classroom teachers, particularly White female teachers.

Inconsistency in Classroom Discipline

Because teacher practices and classroom management are operationalized in the climate of the school, teachers are more likely to do what they are told to do and observe in their school. It is important that schools provide sound structures that support teachers in making decisions around school discipline that are equitable and provide a more objective approach to issuing discipline decisions. Although MSDE adopted new disciplinary guidelines in 2014 to reduce the discipline gap, disparities between Black boys and their peers increased, suggesting that simply reducing the number of ODRs does not necessarily reduce disproportionality. Those identified as high referees sought to follow the rules and deemed it necessary for others to follow those rules to the letter.

Data demonstrated that teachers were reliant upon a discipline ladder to scaffold their decision-making when administering school discipline. What was not known was how extensively schools train their teachers to understand and implement the discipline ladder consistently across classrooms. Data suggested that over the five-year period of my study, both schools improved their discipline outcomes for students, however, Black males were still overrepresented in the ODR data. This suggested that even though teachers were familiar with the discipline ladder, there were other factors that contributed to the disparate data. Furthermore, the discipline ladder in isolation was not able to mitigate for disproportionality in the administration of discipline in classroom. The use of a discipline ladder included individual decision-making based on teacher understanding of the (mis)behavior occurring in the classroom. Low referees were able to identify within themselves the autonomy to act while high referees were reliant on the established rule and order set forth by school administration and the school system. Without opportunities to form behavior decision-making, teachers will continue

to make decisions that lead to disproportionate outcomes for students. As previously stated in Section I, the district convened a collaborative workgroup to discuss several key issues in MAPSS, including discipline disparities. In order to improve the effectiveness of the discipline ladder, I recommend that the district convene a team of educators, to include central office personnel from student support services and safe and orderly schools, school-based administrators, and classroom teachers to develop a systemic framework that will be leveraged by schools to implement an improved discipline ladder to support teacher decision-making. These stakeholders would provide a multi-disciplinary approach to the development of an appropriate discipline structure that would reduce subjectivity in teacher decision-making in the disciplining of students for subjective offenses. The initial meeting would include a reporting of my study's findings to provide a baseline of awareness of teacher's perceptions of school discipline and the discipline ladder's effectiveness in supporting their decision-making.

While this study does not address student behaviors or perceptions of school discipline, it aligns with previous researchers' (Barrett et al., 2017; Skiba & Williams, 2014) conclusions that discipline disparities were not the result of differences in behaviors across different student groups but rather the inconsistencies in educator's response to various student behaviors. In order to leverage the student voice, this committee would meet with students to gain their perspective and understanding of the existing discipline structures and how those structures might be improved to support classroom discipline in all schools.

Teacher Support for Classroom Discipline

As data suggested, without a focus on the structures necessary to support teacher decision-making, Black males in 6th grade will continue to be issued more ODRs for subjective behaviors despite engaging in similar behaviors as their peers, aligning with Goff et al.'s (2014)

suggestion that White males were more likely to benefit from an assumption of childhood innocence whereas Black males were more like to be held responsible for their behaviors.

Focus group data suggested that teachers disagreed regarding the identification of how to best implement school structures to support discipline in the classroom. Data showed that classroom teachers who were often deemed high referral writers were often scrutinized by their colleagues and school administrators. Whereas classroom teachers who were more lenient with discipline structures were often frowned upon by their colleagues because it created a more challenging classroom environment for those who do adhere to discipline structures. Considering the data, it was evident that regardless of one's status as a low or high ODR writer, classroom teachers conveyed a need to be supported by school administration when making discipline decisions.

A significant challenge in improving discipline outcomes in any school system is establishing opportunities to provide support that is appropriate and non-threatening to classroom teachers managing students' (mis)behavior. My study sought to understand teacher perceptions about school discipline and the factors that lead to the decision to issue an ODR for subjective behaviors. The assumption was that if these perceptions about school discipline could be identified, then the decision-making process could be altered and implemented consistently, which would lead to a decrease in the number of ODRs issued for subjective student behaviors.

These findings suggested the need for schools to consider how teachers are trained to make discipline decisions in the classroom, and what opportunities exist to provide support for teachers struggling to manage student behaviors. I recommend that the district incorporate opportunities for new and returning teachers to receive prescriptive scenario-based trainings that norms discipline practices across classrooms and schools. These trainings would be implemented

bi-annually system-wide but more frequently, if needed, for teachers experiencing difficulty managing student behaviors. Supports would include regular meetings with behavior support specialists, school administrators, and other support personnel as needed to help teachers improve the use of effective discipline practices and consistency in discipline follow-through. Furthermore, schools could differentiate supports based on teacher needs that include opportunities for reflections.

Authority and Teacher Efficacy in Classroom Discipline

Weinstein et al. (2004) suggested that one's biases, understanding of students' cultural background, and an awareness of the social, economic, and political landscape and its influence on students' cultural experience are all paramount to the success of a classroom teacher's management of diverse classrooms. Researchers suggested that these were critical contributors to one's identity as a classroom teacher and discipline decision maker; thus, classroom teachers with fewer ODRs for subjective behaviors were more astute in understanding how their own biases and cultural expectations influenced the decisions they made when managing student behaviors. This also supported the necessity for teachers to become culturally competent in an effort to disrupt the discipline gap.

In my study, I found that teachers who excelled in classroom management experienced high levels of self-efficacy, attributing their success to fair and consistent discipline practices. Whereas teachers who struggled with classroom management experienced low levels of self-efficacy and were more likely to attribute their lack of success to school or student related factors rather than purposeful on self-reflection. How teachers perceived their own effectiveness impacted not only their feelings of their own teaching practices and discipline decision-making, but also their relationships with students, parents, and other educators. Those who were

considered high ODR writers were less likely to accept any responsibility for the discipline outcomes in their classrooms. Instead, they sought to place blame on competing factors over which they had “no influence”. On the contrary, low ODR writers accepted responsibility for discipline outcomes in their classrooms and sought opportunities to improve their individual agency which led to improvement in discipline outcomes for all students in the classroom.

According to ODR data, Square Middle School teachers had more success around discipline decision-making than Circle Middle School as there was a greater decline in the total number of ODRs issued over the study’s five-year period. However, what was not known was the quality of the interactions that teachers had with students at both schools that could have influenced the decision-making of the teacher. Likewise, the individual agency of the teacher in the classroom may have played a significant factor in their response. The most basic assumption would be that teachers with better management skills were likely to find that the discipline ladder had the necessary resources to support their decision-making, whereas teachers experiencing less success in managing student behaviors were likely to communicate that the resources within the discipline ladder were not sufficient in supporting their decision-making. As such teachers with minimal classroom management skills or an unwillingness to adapt to the change in student expectations and student behaviors were responsible for greater number of ODRs and were therefore more likely to have less tolerance for behaviors deemed inappropriate in the classroom.

Failure of teachers to recognize how their power and control in the classroom influenced how students, regardless of race and ethnicity, experienced discipline for subjective behaviors can promote a widening of the discipline gap due to lack of consistency in discipline decision-making. In sum, teacher beliefs about their efficacy in managing classrooms and student behaviors were found to vary across specific students and student groups (Zee et al., 2016), and

the decisions teachers made around discipline were directly related to how teachers perceived student behaviors and how to best manage subjective student behaviors in the classroom. These findings pinpointed the need for classroom teachers to understand their discipline beliefs and have a clear discipline approach that moved beyond issuing an ODR and turning the "problem" over to school administration and clarified the extent to which teachers lacked consistency in their beliefs about the purpose of school discipline; how they managed and interpreted student (mis)behavior and approached the discipline decision-making process.

It became evident that for teachers to improve their practice, their position on school discipline must be challenged, and they must be supported throughout the improvement process. This approach must provide the opportunity for high ODR writer to be reflective of their practices without judgment. The opportunity for dialogue with school administration that is focused on a high ODR writers' use of effective management strategies rather than their deficits and their concerns about student (mis)behaviors that impacts the climate and culture of their classroom and the development of a collaborative plan to improve their efficacy. As such, to improve discipline in all classrooms, I recommend that future study of the discipline gap in MAPSS should include other grade levels to ascertain school discipline challenges and identify common trends in discipline decision-making to inform future development of an improved evidenced based decision-making instrument. Additionally, having high ODR writers evaluate their own practices in the classroom may lead to greater understanding of teacher needs and the types of administrative supports necessary to reinforce the improvement of teacher practices. These administrative supports should be teacher specific to address personally identified areas of growth, as well as systemic, to move all teachers toward a consistent model of implementation regardless of school placement. This area of future study should be promising, given the

relationship between teacher efficacy and classroom management. Additionally, I recommend that future research in the district explore the differences in teachers' understanding of how race, gender, and economics influence relational authority in the classroom. A study of this nature could explore the extent of understanding teachers have of the inherent power given to teachers who comprise specific demographical categories and how this "power" influences discipline outcomes in schools.

Implications for MAPSS

The findings of this study present opportunities for change at both the individual and organizational levels. Classroom teachers, as individuals, are responsible for beginning the discipline process when they issue an ODR. While teachers do not determine whether a student will remain in or be excluded from school and the duration of this exclusion, current negotiated agreement states that students receiving an ODR shall not return to the classroom without there being communication of intervention/consequence from school administration to the issuing teacher. When this communication does not occur, teachers can demand that the student is removed until the referral has been properly adjudicated. The teacher feedback loop must become better. How administrators communicate with a teacher after an office discipline referral is written is critical. Teachers should understand what has happened and feel supported by administrators. Thus, communication should allow for teachers and administrators to come to an understanding of expectations regarding how classroom discipline should be managed including the behaviors that prohibit progress towards school wide goals. Administrators and classroom teachers should together develop a set of expectations for student behavior and staff discipline practices that lead to school wide discipline goals. Furthermore, administrators and teachers should identify the supports and strategies for teachers that struggle with discipline. These should

include (1) recognizing good teacher practices exhibited in their classrooms and (2) developing professional learning opportunities specific to the needs of the teacher that will lead to an improvement in their efficacy in managing student (mis)behavior in the classroom.

Additionally, it is important for district level leaders to convene work groups with classroom teachers to discuss the challenges of classroom discipline and how district resources can support teachers in managing student behavior. These workgroups should be focused on the current structures in schools and how they align with district, state, and national policies and mandates that guide discipline practices. System leadership must ensure that discipline priorities are aligned with required practices and that there is a reconciliation of district priorities that are tied directly to improving discipline outcomes for all students. District administrators should also examine the various iterations of the discipline ladder currently being used across schools and develop a common model that will promote consistent application of discipline decisions across schools.

Classroom teachers who participated in the focus groups agreed that the management of student discipline is critical to the success of any school program. It is important for school systems to establish structures that are consistent across schools to provide a more equitable classroom experience for all students across the district. In doing so, school systems should consider how they provide training and support for teachers to understand how to interpret and implement the discipline ladder as a tool for reducing subjectivity in discipline decision making. Teachers should be provided with opportunities to engage in professional learning communities (PLCs) that would better prepare them to manage discipline events in the classroom. These PLCs should include various school-based staff who are able to speak to the discipline issues experienced in the classroom and offer objective feedback that would

support teachers in the discipline process. These structures should support the improvement of teacher efficacy in managing student behaviors and include a deep dive into how current structures align with policy and how these are implemented in schools and classrooms. Based on the results of this study, teachers would appreciate opportunities to explore various discipline scenarios and discuss how to approach the management of the exhibited student behavior. This would allow for teachers to learn and replicate good practices from their colleagues as well as receiving specific administrative support around the discipline concerns specific to the whole school and individual classrooms. Through the PLCs teachers would take ownership of identifying best practices to manage student behaviors in the classroom. PLCs should be fluid in nature allowing teachers to engage at any point and time, to ensure that teachers receive timely support when the need arises. PLCs should be non-evaluative and provide opportunities for peer observation and well as administrative support to ensure there is a focus on improving teacher practice through targeted support. Furthermore, school and system leaders should engage in collaboration with other leaders across the system, state, and nation to learn from other educators and utilize their collective experiences to identify best practices that work in response to the current needs of students in schools.

At the organizational level, school systems and teacher certifying programs must create effective and sustainable partnerships to ensure that the next generation of classroom teachers are adequately prepared to effectively manage diverse classrooms. The findings from this study indicated that classroom teachers struggle most with managing classrooms in the first 3 years following completion of their pre-service programs. The research suggested that pre-service programs include training on social justice, equitable practices, restorative practices, and discipline decision-making beyond the traditional routes of issuing an ODR. School systems

should partner with teacher preparation programs to develop programs of study that align with the challenges teachers will experience in the classroom with a focus on alternative strategies to managing student (mis)behavior. Novice teachers should not be made to believe that all students engage in behaviors deemed inappropriate for the classroom, but they should not be uninformed of the discipline challenges that are prevalent in schools and the structures in place to support the management of those exhibited behaviors.

As school systems and schools continue to respond to the needs of students and their diverse needs, there are potential opportunities for social change. Since the initial OCR complaint, discipline disparity has been a pervasive issue in MAPSS. If the system expects to see sustainable change in teacher and school practices, there must be an official position and accountability for schools and teachers to engage in on-going professional learning to negotiate the challenges of disproportionality. School systems must develop and implement across all school campuses structures that engage novice and veteran school staff in trainings that lead to the reduction of disproportionate discipline practices.

Most focus group participants stressed the importance of relationship building in the classroom to improve the the experience for both teachers and students. School systems should recognize and support relationship building as an intervention to reduce discipline issues in the classroom. This will require a recommitment to identify and improve and protect existing structures or develop new ways to support relationship building. A focus of relationship building is to understand which students are receiving disciplinary referrals and which teachers are writing these referrals. Then the system as a whole and individual schools can engage teachers in improving their practice and in building greater connection with families and the school community. The voice of students, parents, and community stakeholders are critical to the

success of a relationship building initiative and may uncover additional opportunities for improvement.

All of the efforts of the school system and individual schools must be rooted in equity and a clear understanding of what equity means in the district, school and classroom. This must be made transparent and operational for the entire school community to ensure equitable practices are operationalized in all schools and all classrooms. Finally, equitable practices in discipline must be evaluated in an ongoing way beyond documenting numbers of offenses or ODRs. Evaluation of the impact of discipline policies and practices on all students must occur as well as identifying promising practices that support continuous improvement.

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on two middle schools designated as disproportionate by MSDE, rendering its findings as not generalizable to other middle schools and teachers. However, because of its focus on the discipline decision-making process, the findings may be beneficial to other schools seeking to improve discipline outcomes for students and the disciplinary effectiveness of classroom teachers, particularly for schools comprised of student populations similar to both Circle and Square MSs and comprised primarily of White, middle class, female teachers. The two schools selected for this study were in an urban location within the district, creating challenges to the connections at rural and suburban schools within the system and nationally because they lack the influences of urban communities on the school's population. As public schools become more segregated and White middle-class females continue to dominate the workforce, it may become unlikely that schools that are demographically comparable to Circle or Square MS can be found.

In March 2020, school operations throughout the world were interrupted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, school leaders thought schools would only be closed for a period of weeks; however, schools transitioned to being virtual then to a hybrid model, which limited in-person teacher-to-student interactions and student-to- student interactions. As such, teachers have become out of practice at managing in-person student behavior and writing office discipline referrals for approximately 16 months, a factor referenced on numerous occasions during this study. The pandemic was an unexpected occurrence and schools being forced to alter operations was unprecedented. The pandemic dictated that focus groups occurred in the virtual setting, reducing opportunities for me to observe, analyze, and interpret nonverbal participant communication. Furthermore, it created the opportunity for a reduced level of participant comfort because one is not able to ascertain who may be listening to the discussion, perhaps interrupting the flow of conversation. At the time of the study, full-time in person instruction had resumed in September 2021. Schools and teachers during the nearly 16 months of virtual instruction were not tasked with managing student behaviors prevalent in the classroom. Participants in the study were reliant upon their experience with discipline prior to March 2020, contributing to a gap in experience and practice which may have influenced the results of the study.

The 16 participants included in this study represented a small sample size which limited the generalizability of results. The study focused solely on 6th grade classroom teachers at the middle school level, which limited comparison of results to classroom teachers in other grade levels. Participants included in this study were limited to teachers currently assigned to either Circle or Square MS. This posed challenges to accurately reflect the perspectives of referral writers, as teachers with significant numbers of referrals were not eligible participants because

they were no longer assigned to either school selected for this study. The absence of the student and administrative voice from this study prevented the opportunity for triangulation of the study's results which would incorporate more depth of insight into how discipline was experienced as data would include the perceptions and experiences from the one who received a disciplinary referral, one who issued a disciplinary referral, and one who adjudicated the disciplinary referral.

Finally, the demographics of students enrolled in both middle schools that were the sites for this study and the demographics of classroom teachers, who were predominately White and female impacts both the interpretation of the data and focus group results. If this study were to be replicated in other schools, it would be critical that the researcher considered the intersection of student demographics and classroom teacher demographics. Particularly important is the understanding of how race and gender of teachers influences the perceptions of students and their (mis)behavior in the classroom. This study also highlights the importance of the teacher voice in improving discipline outcomes for students, particularly as the teachers and their practices are the ultimate source of improvement. A deeper understanding of what teachers may need and want to improve their practice as well as how school can support that can led to sustainable change for students in all schools.

Appendix A

Permission to Recruit Teachers for Research Study

Re: Subjective Referrals and School Discipline Decision-making

From: Brodell McNeil (bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu)

To: Principal Email Address

Dear Principal,

My name is Brodell McNeil, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Maryland College Park. I am writing to request your permission to invite up to 12 6th grade classroom teachers from your school to participate in a focus group related to my dissertation research. I have obtained permission from Anne Arundel County Public Schools and the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct research under the supervision of Dr. Margaret McLaughlin, UMD.

AIMs of the Research

I am conducting research on how teachers make decisions about when to write an office discipline referral (ODR) for subjective offenses. The focus groups will explore how classroom teachers describe subjective student behavior and what they consider as they decide on their response to those behaviors. Losen & Martinez (2013) posits the likelihood of Black males experiencing exclusionary discipline increases from 2.4% in elementary school to 11% in middle school, therefore, I am focusing on 6th grade since that is a student's entry point to middle school in the district. Participation in the approximately 1-hour focus group will occur outside of school hours and be totally voluntary.

I have two requests which I am asking you to consider:

(1) Grant permission to recruit teachers from your school to participate in my research study, and
(2) Provide me with a list of teachers at your school with a 6th grade teaching assignment by content area.

I look forward to receiving your decision, and I am available to answer any additional questions you may have about my study. Please see my contact information below.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and all you do for students.

Brodell McNeil

bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu

(843) 251-9764 (C)

Appendix B

Teacher Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Re: Research Study Participants Needed

From: Brodell McNeil (bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu)

To: All Eligible Participants (Sent as a Bcc:)

Dear {NAME}Potential Participant,

My name is Brodell McNeil, assistant principal at XXXX. I am a doctoral student at the University of Maryland College Park, and I am inviting you to participate in a confidential focus group discussion with 3-5 other teachers to discuss perceptions about ODRs. You are being invited because you are a 6th grade classroom teacher at {NAME OF SCHOOL} who has issued at least one ODR for a subjective student behavior defined as disrespect, disruption, or insubordination. I have obtained permission from your principal to contact you and inquire of your interests in participating in my research study. I have obtained permission from Anne Arundel County Public Schools and the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct research under the supervision of Dr. Margaret McLaughlin, UMD.

AIMs of the Research

I am conducting research on factors in the discipline decision-making process that lead to an office discipline referral (ODR). The research aims to examine how classroom teachers describe subjective student behavior and their responses to those behaviors. Conducting focus groups will provide the teachers' voice to understanding the processes and how to support teachers in making the decision to write an ODR. The focus group will be conducted via Zoom at a mutually agreed upon day and time after school hours. Each focus group will last approximately one hour.

Your confidentiality is assured to the extent permitted by law. The information obtained from the focus groups as well as any materials such as an acceptance email will not identify you personally nor will any findings be reported in a way that might identify you or your school. Participants will be eligible to receive a $10 e-gift card as compensation for their time. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have about my study and ***If you are interested in being considered for participation in the study, please respond to this email. I will then follow up with you to discuss next steps in scheduling the focus group.*** Sharing your perspective and experiences could lead to positive change in the school system. Thank you for your consideration of this request and all you do for students.

Brodell McNeil

bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu

(843) 251-9764

Appendix C

Focus Group Participant Acceptance Notification

Re: You have been selected!

From: Brodell McNeil (bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu)

To: {NAME}All Selected Focus Group Participants (Sent as a Bcc:)

Thank you for expressing interest in my research study and I appreciate your contributions to my dissertation research.

You have been selected to participate in one of 4 focus groups! I look forward to hearing your thoughts and perspectives on subjective student behaviors and factors in the decision-making process that leads to an office discipline referral in 6th grade.

Here are the important next steps:

Attached is an Informed Consent document. Please read carefully and sign to indicate your consent to participate. Please return the consent form prior to the scheduled focus group. In your response, please respond of your preference for the following dates and times:

1. XXX
2. XXX
3. XXX
4. XXX

If you are not available during any of the above dates and times, please include some dates and times that you are available to participate in one of 4 focus groups. One week prior to the scheduled focus group, you will receive a calendar invite with the Zoom invitation.

- You have previously received a personal link from Qualtrics to complete a brief five-minute Pre-Focus Group Survey. Please complete this survey prior to participating in the scheduled focus group.
- Following the completion of the focus group, I will send a $10 e-gift card to your personal email address within 1-2 business days.

Thank you for your participation in the focus group. Please feel free to contact me at any time with any additional question or concerns.

Brodell McNeil

bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu

(843) 251-9764

Appendix D

Pre-Focus Group Survey

I am conducting research on the effectiveness of the discipline ladder to support a classroom teacher's discipline decision-making. I would love to hear from you. This information will be used to inform future development of a robust decision-making tool that has the potential to reduce ODRs in middle school classrooms.

The survey should only take 5 minutes, and your responses are completely anonymous. Your submission of the survey will be interpreted as informed consent.

If you have any questions about the survey, please email me: bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu

I really appreciate your input!

Q1 How would you describe your gender?

- o Female
- o Male
- o Transgender Female
- o Transgender Male
- o Gender Variant/Non-Conforming
- o Not Listed _____

Q2 Which of the following best describes you?

- o American Indian/Alaskan Native
- o Asian
- o Black/African American
- o Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin
- o Multi-Race _____
- o Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- o White
- o Prefer not to disclose

Q3 What is your current years of education experience?

- o 2-4 years
- o 5-7 years
- o 8-10 years
- o Over 10 years

Q4 What content area do you teach? (Select all that apply.)

- Arts
- AVID
- English Language Arts
- Family and Consumer Science
- Maths
- Music
- Health, Physical Education and Dance
- Science
- Social Studies
- Technical Education
- World Languages

Q5 On a 5-point scale, with 1 being not that familiar and 5 being very familiar, how familiar are you with your school's *discipline ladder*?

- 1- Not Familiar
- 2- Slightly Familiar
- 3- Moderately Familiar
- 4- Very Familiar
- 5- Extremely Familiar

Q6 The discipline ladder provides me with the resources I need to make sound decisions when managing student behavior at my school.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Q7 There are opportunities for teachers to provide school leaders with feedback on the effectiveness of discipline ladder at my school.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Appendix E

Pre-Focus Group Survey Reminder

From: Brodell McNeil (bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu)

To: {NAME}Selected Focus Group Participants (Sent as a Bcc:)

Thank you for expressing interest in my research study and I appreciate your contributions to my dissertation research. The joining link for your scheduled focus group has been sent in a calendar invite to your disclosed email address or can be accessed below.

- **Follow this link to Zoom:**
  ${l://ZoomLink?d=Access Zoom}

Records indicate that you have not completed the pre-focus group survey. As a reminder, it is requested that you complete this survey prior to participating in the scheduled focus group on XXXX. The survey should only take 5 minutes, and your responses are completely anonymous. You received an email from Qualtrics that included a personal link to the survey. If you no longer have that email, please see below for details on accessing the survey.

- **Follow this link to the Survey:**
  ${l://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}

Your participation appreciated.

Please feel free to contact me at any time with any additional question or concerns.

Brodell McNeil

bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu

(843) 251-9764

Appendix F

Focus Group Protocol

Welcome and thank you for being here today. My name is Brodell McNeil, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, under the supervision of Dr. Margaret McLaughlin, UMD. Your participation in today's focus group is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. With your verbal consent I would like to begin recording this session ***(Obtain verbal consent from participants)***.

Educators, across the nation and in the district, are aware that ODRs and discipline disproportionality is a problem in schools. I would like to consider us as collaborative partners in solving this problem. So that we can be more informed and contribute to the development of classroom supports and interventions to address the problem, I would like to engage you in an interactive group discussion to better understand factors in the decision-making process that lead to an ODR, and by extension, exclusionary discipline. Specifically, I want to understand how your perceptions and experiences with subjective student behaviors influence your decision to issue or not issue an ODR. Once I understand the factors that influences discipline decision-making, I can then contribute to the development of an evidence-based decision-making instrument to improve the classroom experience for both teachers and students.

Prior to participating each of you had the opportunity to review and sign the consent document, agreeing to the following:

1. You are 18 years of age or older.
2. All information shared today is confidential.
3. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and has no benefit or impact on your employment status in the district.

I appreciate everyone for honoring and maintaining the confidentiality of your fellow participants. Before we begin, does anyone have any questions?

Opening Question: Let us begin with introductions. **Please share your name and something you love to do in your spare time**. (Allow each participant to introduce themselves).

Transition Question: What would you say is the purpose of school discipline?

Key Question: Please take a moment to jot down 3-5 adjectives you feel are representative of what you perceive as subjective behaviors (Pause 30 seconds). I was wondering if anyone would like to share some of those words.

Statement: I want you to reflect on your experiences with subjective student behaviors. What does that look like and feel like in your classroom and in your practice… Feel free to jot down any words, phrases, feelings, as you are thinking (Pause for 45 seconds). Now take a moment to

think about your response to these types of student behaviors. Again, feel free to jot down any words, phrases, feelings, as you are thinking (Pause for 45 seconds).

Scenario A: Prior to today's session you received a discipline scenario. Please take a moment to review the scenario. (Share Scenario with Participants. Pause for 45 seconds).

> *Sadiq, a sixth-grade student, stands at 6 feet tall and 160 pounds. As you are handing out weekly grade sheets, Sadiq realizes his recorded grade is a zero on an assignment he not only turned it, but received an A. Immediately, he comes to your desk to inform you that there was a mistake on his grade sheet; however, you said, dismissively, "Sadiq you need to sit down!" Sadiq retrieves the graded assignment from his notebook and brings it back to your desk and says, "Here's the graded assignment. I got an A. Can you please change my grade?" Without looking, you tell Sadiq, "I said, sit down! If you say one more thing, you are getting a referral!" While walking back to his seat, Sadiq becomes visibly angry and starts screaming "This is whack! You just don't want the Black student to have the highest grade in your class. I'm telling my Mom! I told y'all this teacher hates me!"*

Key Question: In thinking about this student's behavior… would you determine it to be disrespect, disruption, or insubordination? Why?

Key Question: Imagine that this behavior did happen in the classroom, how might you manage this behavior?

Probing Question (if necessary): Would anyone respond in the same way? Differently? Tell me more about that?

Key Question: What are the factors that lead you to decide that a student behavior warrants an Office Discipline Referral?

Scenario B: It looks like we have time for another scenario. Please take a moment to review the scenario. (Share Scenario with participants. Pause for 45 seconds).

> *You have been asked to cover Wyatt's class and decided to have students work in groups instead of following the regular teacher's assignment of allowing students to complete assignments individually. Thinking you were doing the students a favor, instead of completing the work individually, you asked the class to break into triads. The whole class was excited about working with their friends, but Wyatt, a known introvert, became visibly uncomfortable and put his head down. After everyone got into groups except Wyatt, who still had his head down, you say, "You need to find a group like everyone else" tapping his desk. You circulate the room and nearing Wyatt's desk you say, "Young man, pick your head up and get into a group." Wyatt pushes all his books on the floor and yells, "Miss! Get out of my face!" He proceeds to walk out and slams the door.*

Key Question: In thinking about this student's behavior… would you determine it to be disrespect, disruption, or insubordination? Why?

Key Question: Imagine that this behavior did happen in the classroom, how might you manage this behavior?

Key Question: Do you believe some subjective behaviors are less tolerable than others? Why?

Probing Question: Does that influence your decision in how to best manage that behavior?

Closing Question: What do you believe is your role in improving discipline outcomes for students?

Thank you for your time and sharing this useful information with me. As a token of appreciation, please accept this $10 gift card. It will be delivered to the personal email address you provided. You will receive this gift card in 1-2 business days. Have a great remainder of your day. This focus group has now concluded.

Appendix G

Focus Group Analysis Instrument

Focus Group Question	Participant #	Participant #	Emerging Codes/Themes	Narrative Summary of Responses
What is the purpose of school discipline?				
Please take a moment to jot down 3-5 adjectives you feel are representative of what you perceive as subjective behaviors (Pause 30 seconds). I was wondering if anyone would like to share some of those words.				
Scenario A - Sadiq, a sixth-grade student, stands at 6 feet tall and 160 pounds. As you are handing out weekly grade sheets, Sadiq realizes his recorded grade is a zero on an assignment he not only turned it, but received an A. Immediately, he comes to your desk to inform you that there was a mistake on his grade sheet; however, you said, dismissively, "Sadiq you need to sit down!" Sadiq retrieves the graded assignment from his notebook and brings it back to your desk and says "here's the graded assignment. I got an A. Can you please change my grade?" Without looking, you tell Sadiq, "I said, sit down! If you say one more thing, you are getting a referral!" While walking back to his seat, Sadiq becomes visibly angry and starts screaming "This is whack! You just don't want the Black student to have the highest grade in your class. I'm telling my Mom! I told y'all this teacher hates me!" **In thinking about this student's behavior… would you determine it to be disrespect, disruption, or insubordination? Why?**				
Scenario A- Management - Imagine that this behavior did happen in the classroom, how might you manage this behavior?				
What are the factors that lead you to decide that a student behavior warrants an Office Discipline Referral?				
Scenario B- You have been asked to cover Wyatt's class and decided to have students work in groups instead of following the regular teacher's plan of allowing students to complete assignments individually. Thinking you were doing the students a favor, instead of completing the work individually, you asked the class to break into triads. The whole class was excited about working with their friends, but Wyatt, a known introvert, became visibly uncomfortable and put his head down. After everyone got into groups except Wyatt, who still has his head down, you say, "You need to find a group like everyone else" tapping his desk. You circulate the room and nearing Wyatt's desk you say, "Young man, pick your head up and get into a group." Wyatt pushes all his books on the floor and yells, "Miss! Get out of my face!" He proceeds to walk out and slams the door. **In thinking about this student's behavior… would you determine it to be disrespect, disruption, or insubordination? Why?**				
Scenario B- Management - Imagine that this behavior did happen in the classroom, how might you manage this behavior?				
Do you believe some subjective behaviors are less tolerable than others? Why?				
What do you believe is your role in improving discipline outcomes for students?				

Appendix H

Notes From Focus Group A

I am quite surprised by the initial focus group. Though I tried to remain objective, I found myself wanting to react to the responses of the participants as many of their thoughts either aligned or misaligned with my own. As a previous classroom teacher for 11 years, I understand the challenges that the teachers face when issuing ODRs and how it can be perceived by school administration. What I did not plan for was how now as an administrator, I wanted to defend an administrative point of view. As the conversation ensued, I began to see common topics that resonated across participants:

- Safety
- Teaching and Learning
- Relationships
- Bias
- Self-Reflection
- Authority

From this focus group there was a profound belief that relationships between students and teachers, teachers and teachers, and teachers and administration is important in discipline success. To that extent, I was surprised that there was not much said about the parent role in school discipline. Perhaps, they believed this isn't as critical because parents are not a member of the immediate school community. I'll be sure to pay close attention to the idea of relationships in future focus groups. Additionally, the idea of who has authority seemed to be prevalent. While participants stopped short of identifying colleagues, they did seem to allude to this idea that authority was a touchy subject in classrooms and in schools.

I wonder how and if these will develop in future focus groups. These resonated with me because I understand how these might have influenced my own thinking around discipline as a classroom teacher.

While I see the benefit of completing this study using Zoom, I wonder if I would have had more in-depth responses had this focus group occurred in person. During the focus group several participants were distracted by their environment. For instance, there were interruptions by family pets and children that often required me to refocus the participants or revisit the question to get the participant back on track. While I hope that it did not come across as annoyance, I could see that the other participants were more cognizant of their engagement during the allotted time. Perhaps with additional focus groups I will be more understanding of interruptions but remain objective in completing the research process.

Overall, the participants were respectful of each other and the energy was positive. There were minimal instances of cutting a speaker off or a lack of response from participants. They were quite eager to share their thoughts and perspective. One participant did naturally assume the lead

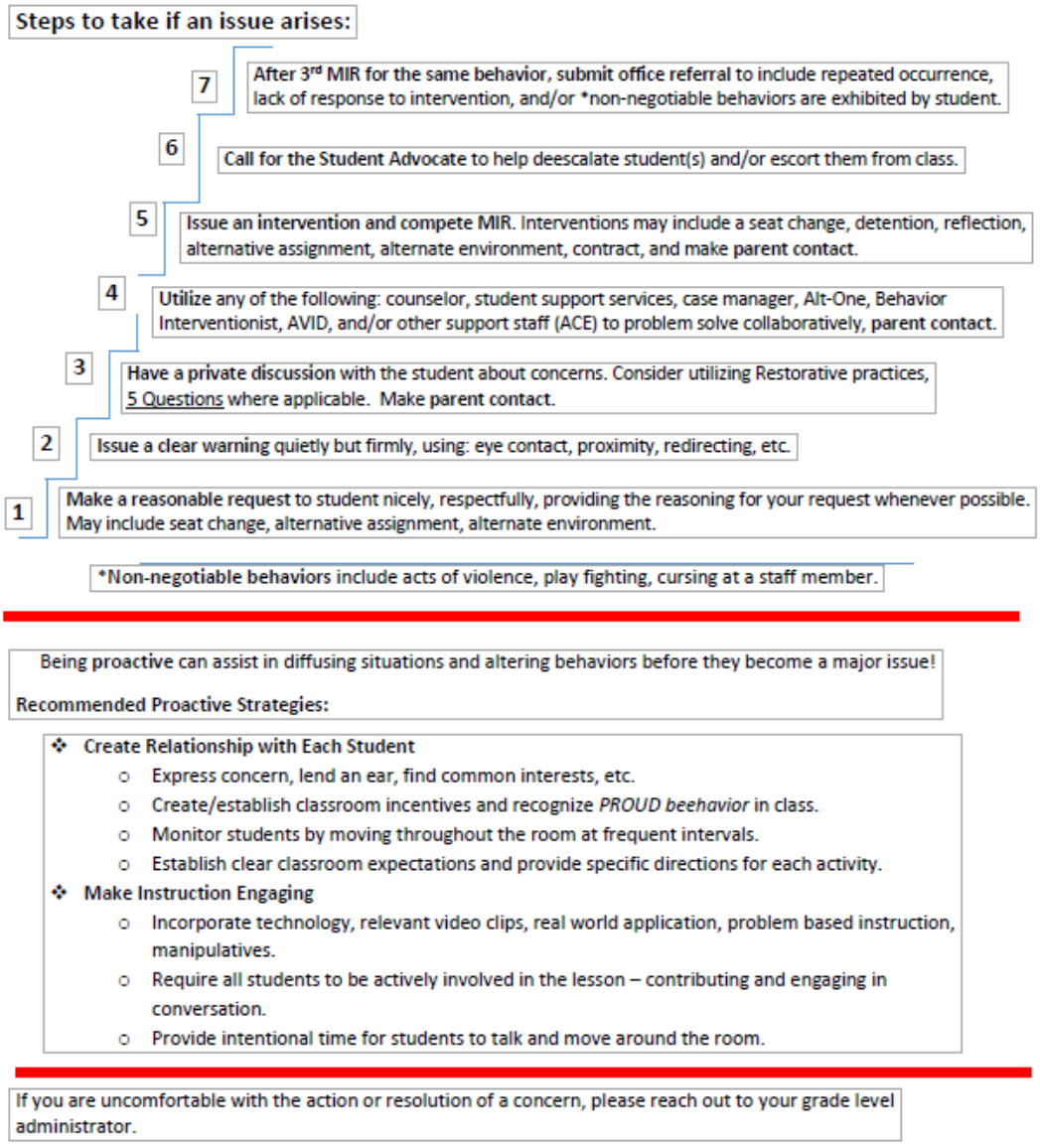
role in the focus group and her comments often spurred the conversation from others. It was as if they drew names from a hat and stuck to that order in responding.

Things to consider for future focus groups:

- Stay objective and remain stoic despite your feelings.
- Don’t come across as perturbed when having to refocus participants.
- Don’t be afraid to cut off a participant who is rambling off topic.
- Reiterate that participants do not have to respond in any fixed order.

Appendix I

Student Behavior Management Process



Appendix J

Middle School Data Tracking Sheet

Student Name: _____ **Quarter:** 1 2 3 4

Teacher Name: _____ **Class Period:** _____

Parent Contact Information:

Parent(s) Name:_____Phone Number:_____Email: _____

What do you know about the student?	**Examples:** Hobbies – Arts - Sports – Family – Interests 
TRIGGERS for BEHAVIOR	**Examples:** Raised voice – Called out in front of peers – embarrassed – lack of movement or interest – trigger academic words (homework, essay, math) – the "look" – spoken down to – sarcasm – rigor of work – lack of choice - hungry – test day – tired/sleepy 
POSITIVE INTERACTIONS 	Phone calls home – Positive Behavior Referral – XXX Bucks for specific behaviors – Help Day Support – I&I Support – Classroom Store (please avoid edible rewards) o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____ o Date:_____Notes: _____

Who is a support person within the building for this child? (Circle and identify name)
- Alt-1 - AVID - Counseling - ACE Teacher- favorite teacher (kids at hope language) - Admin/Department Chair

Smiling is the best instructional strategy!

Appendix K

Four Core Elements of MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports

4 CORE ELEMENTS of MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports)

AcknowledgementofBehavior Expectations ErrorCorrection Requesting assistance

EVERYDAY IS A NEW DAY WITH THIS CHILD & the goal is to build community. 😊

○ Reminder of classroom/school-wide expectations: XXX Way, Community Agreements, Kindness ○ Quick in classroom strategy: • Seat change • Proximity • Reteach CHAMPs ○ Break IN classroom (calming space/corner with mindful strategies) ○ Teacher/Student Break: water, bathroom, walk, take a "note" to another teacher ○ Give opportunities for student voice (written or verbal) ○ IDT Team Detention / Teacher Detention (lunch/after-school) ○ Restorative Circle with Teacher, Student, and Counseling Staff ○ Private conversation with student (beyond class time) ○ Discuss student during IDT ○ Google Form for Grade Level Admin Requesting Strategies about specific student - 6th Grade: Click Here - 7th Grade: Click Here - 8th Grade: Click Here ***PARENT OUTREACH for relationship building for success for the child** (call, email, text, etc.) *	○ Work avoidance ○ Attention seeking ○ Conflicts with other students ○ Power control ○ Prior incident in previous class ○ Situation beyond the school day ○ Frustrated with rigor/amount of work	

Automatic Referral (Photocopy this document and staple directly to referral):

☐ Fighting ☐ Obscenities directed at teacher/ adult ☐ Threatening and/or causing injury to people or property	Date: _____ Date: _____ Date: _____ Date: _____

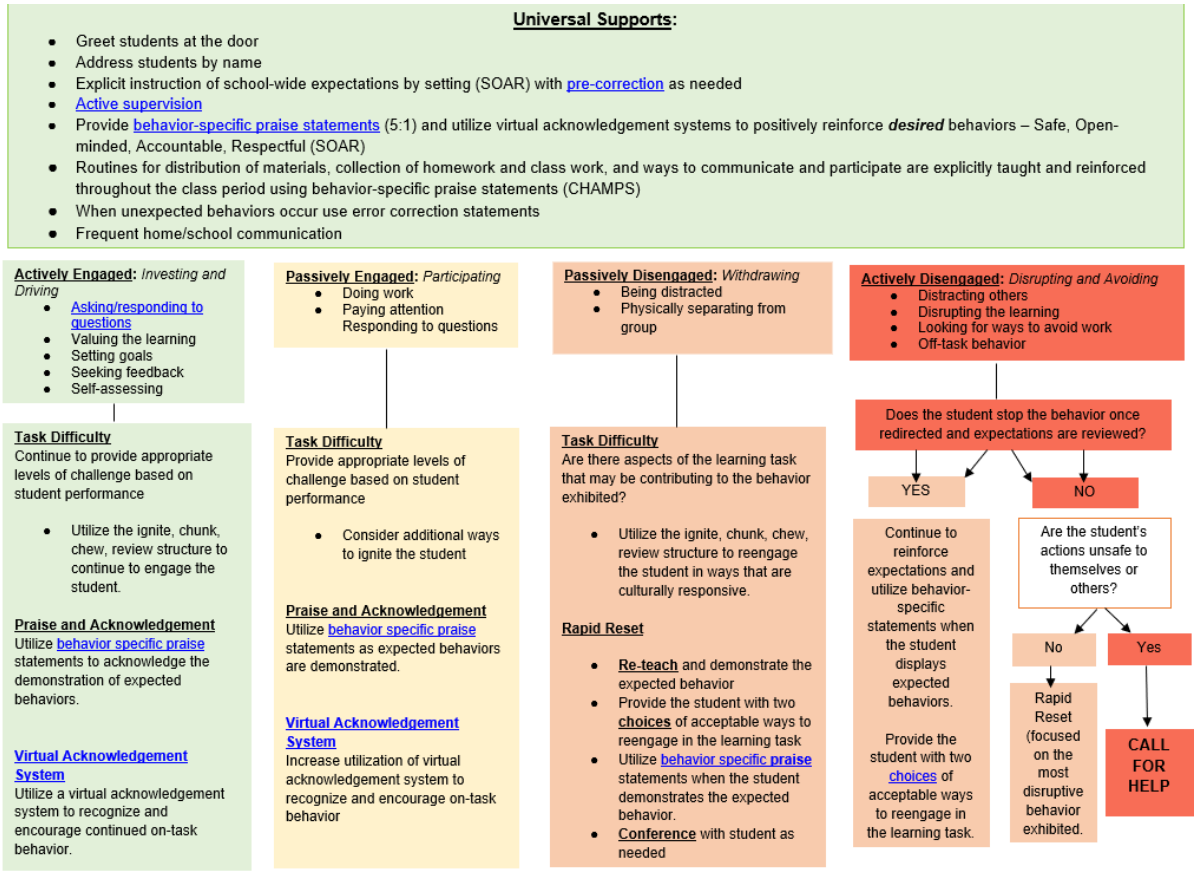
Tardies (allow the student in and record) Record LU in PowerSchool. Record dates below.

Smiling is the best instructional strategy!

TARDY	1	2	3	Team Detention (Parent Contact)	4	5	6	Photocopy of this tardy sheet to administrator, parent contact. Administrator assigns Saturday School.
DATE								
REASON (# of minutes & why)								

Appendix L

Middle Classroom Management Decision-Making Matrix



Appendix M

University of Maryland Institutional Review Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

1204 Marie Mount Hall
College Park, MD 20742-5125
TEL 301.405.4212

FAX 301.314.1475

irb@umd.edu
www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

DATE: July 9, 2021

TO: Brodell McNeil, EdS, MT, BA

FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, MD 20742-5125 TEL 301.405.4212

FAX 301.314.1475

irb@umd.edu www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1754827-1] AN EXAMINATION OF PATTERNS IN EDUCATOR'S DEMOGRAPHICS AND FACTORS IN THE DISCIPLINE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS THAT LEAD TO AN OFFICE DISCIPLINE REFERRAL

REFERENCE #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: July 9, 2021

EXPIRATION DATE: July 8, 2022

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 5 & 7. Waiver of Written Consent:45CFR46.117(c)(1).

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Prior to submission to the IRB Office, this project received scientific review from the departmental IRB Liaison.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of July 8, 2022.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Unless a consent waiver or alteration has been approved, Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Project Title	An Examination of Patterns in Educator's Demographics and Factors in the Discipline Decision-making Process that Lead to an Office Discipline Referral
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by **Brodell J. McNeil** at the University of Maryland, College Park as part of his dissertation research. It is directed by Dr. Margaret J. McLaughlin, advisor. The purpose is to solicit information from sixth grade classroom teachers to better understand their decision-making processes for subjective behaviors that may lead to an ODR and teachers' perception of the discipline ladder's effectiveness to support teacher management of student behavior.

Procedures	You are being asked to participate with up to five other sixth grade classroom teachers in a virtual focus group lasting approximately one hour. The discussion will be organized around the following topics: your perception of and experience(s) with subjective student behaviors defined as disruption, disrespect, or insubordination, factor that influence your response to subjective student behaviors in the classroom setting, and your beliefs about the role of teachers in improving discipline outcomes for students. For example, you may be asked: what is the purpose of discipline in the classroom? The focus group will be conducted virtually, using a web-based video conferencing service, after school hours. Prior to the focus group discussion, you will also be asked to respond to an anonymous 6 question pre-focus group survey. The survey will take no more than 5 minutes to complete. The survey will request the following information: gender identification, racial identification, content area taught, current years of teaching experience, and solicit your perception of the discipline ladder's effectiveness. Focus group discussion will be recorded with verbal permission from the participants.
Potential Risks and Discomforts	There are no known risks to participants. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Participants may skip any question they do not wish to answer. All findings will summarize comments by teacher category and any quotations that might support the analyses and findings will use pseudonyms.
Potential Benefits	There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, it is hoped that the district's increased understanding of teacher perception of student behavior and the discipline ladder's effectiveness may inform future development of a robust decision-making tool for use by teachers that has the potential to reduce ODRs in middle school classrooms.
Confidentiality	Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by removing the name of participants and schools from all notes, transcripts and other research materials. Each participant and school will be assigned a pseudonym prior to the focus group and that code will be used in all reporting documents. Digital recordings, transcripts, notes, and other research documents will be maintained on secured password protected computer. I will be the only individual with access to research materials. Any written reports or articles about this research study will protect your identity to the maximum extent possible. The

	findings of this research will not focus on an individual participant or school but will be presented in the aggregate. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.
Compensation	*At the completion of participation in the focus group you will receive a $10 gift card at your personal email address.*
Right to Withdraw and Questions	**Your decision to participate or not participate in this study will have neither a positive or negative impact on your employability with the district or relationship with your respective school.** If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized. However, you may not be eligible to receive the gift card. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator: ***Brodell J. McNeil*** ***7715 Lexington Court*** ***Glen Burnie, MD 21061*** ***bjmcneil@terpmail.umd.edu*** ***843-251-9764*** ***Or*** ***Dr. Margaret J. McLaughlin*** ***College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park*** ***mjm@umd.edu***
Participant Rights	*If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:* University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678

	For more information regarding participant rights, please visit: https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants *This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.*	
Statement of Consent	*Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.* *If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.*	
Signature and Date	**NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please Print]**	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	

Appendix N

Anne Arundel County Public Schools to Conduct Research

ANNE ARUNDEL
COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
2644 Riva Road, Annapolis, MD 21401 | 410-222-5000 · 301-970-8644 (WASH) · 410-222-5500 (TDD) | www.aacps.org

August 19, 2021

Mr. Brodell J. McNeil
c/o Brooklyn Park Middle School
bjmcneil@aacps.org

Re: Research Application

Dear Mr. McNeil:

Thank you for your interest in conducting **An examination of patterns in educator's demographics and factors in the discipline decision making process that lead to an office discipline referral** in Anne Arundel County Public Schools. The Research Review Committee reviewed your request.

All requests to conduct research in Anne Arundel County Public Schools are reviewed in regard to three major criteria. First, does the research have a potential positive contribution towards improving the delivery of instruction to students attending Anne Arundel County Public Schools? Second, does the research have procedures and processes in place to insure the confidentiality of all participants in the study? Third, does the research obtain its data in such a way that it will have a minimal impact upon the instructional time of students and/or staff?

The proposed study examines the demographics and school factors related to office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) that are made by 6th grade classroom teachers. At this time, your application to conduct research in Anne Arundel County Public Schools at [School Name Deleted] and [School Name Deleted] is approved with the following conditions:

- Deidentify all AACPS information from your research.
- Teachers must agree to participate in your study
- All consent forms must be signed and collected for documentation
- Solicit recruits only from schools where the principal has approved participation on file with the research application
- Data requests need to be facilitated through your AACPS Point of Contact (POC), Kellie Katzenberger, Senior Manager of Research (kkatzenberger@aacps.org).

I have also reviewed the study to determine how well it ensures the confidentiality of all respondents. There is nothing that would suggest that personal identifying information will be divulged outside of the research team.

In closing, I would like to ask that you consider this letter as formal approval of your request to conduct your research project in Anne Arundel County Public Schools. Please ensure that all school, teacher, or student identifying information is removed from any prepared documents, either paper or electronic, that may be a part of any final drafts of documents relating to your study. We look forward to the information that our district can gain from your research. As such, please forward a final draft of your completed report to our office.

On behalf of the Research Office, I wish you success in the conduct of your study.

Sincerely,

Kellie Katzenberger, Ph.D.
Senior Manager of Research
Instructional Data Division

cc: Mr. Jason Dykstra, Executive Director of the Instructional Data Division
[Name Deleted], Principal, [School Name Deleted]
[Name Deleted], Principal, [School Name Deleted]
Ms. Kathleen Orndorff, Senior Manager Records/Quality Control

ELEVATING ALL STUDENTS ... ELIMINATING ALL GAPS

References

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., & Lovett, M. C. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching.* Jossey Bass.

American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health. (2013). Policy statement: Out-of-school suspension and expulsion. *Pediatrics*, *131*, e1000–e1007. doi:10.1542/peds.2012-3932

Anne Arundel Public School System. (2018). Relationships. Rigor. Readiness. *Anne Arundel County Public School System Strategic Plan 2018-2023*. MD.

Anne Arundel County Public School System. (2020, September). *A guide to student rights & responsibilities: Student handbook.* Mid-Atlantic Public School System. https://www.aacps.org/studenthandbook

Anne Arundel County Public School System & Anne Arundel County Government. (2020, November). *Joint initiative to eliminate the opportunity gap*. https://www.aacps.org/cms/lib/MD02215556/Centricity/Domain/1741/OpportunityGapReport2020-11-06.pdf

Anyon, Y., Jenson, J. M., Altschul, I., Farrar, J., McQueen, J., Greer, E., Downing, B., & Simmons, J. (2014). The persistent effect of race and the promise of alternatives to suspension in school discipline outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *44*, 379–386. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.06.025

American Psychological Association Zero Task Force. (2008). Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations. *American Psychologist, 63*, 852-862.

Baker-Smith, E. C. (2018). Suspensions suspended: Do changes to high school suspension policies change suspension rates? *Peabody Journal of Education*, *93*(2), 190–206.

Balfanz, R., Byrnes, V., & Fox, J. (2015). Sent home and put off-track: The antecedents, disproportionalities, and consequences of being suspended in the ninth grade. In D. J. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the school discipline gap: Research for policymakers.* Teachers College Press.

Barr, J. J., & IDEA Center. (2016). *Developing a positive classroom climate. Idea paper #61*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED573643.pdf

Barrett, N., McEachin, A., Mills, J. N., & Valant, J. (2017). *What are the sources of school discipline disparities by student race and family income?* https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/111417-Barrett-McEachin-Mills-Valant-What-Are-the-Sources-of-School-Discipline-Disparities- by-Student-Race-and-Family-Income.pdf

Beaty-O'Ferrall, M. E., Green, A., & Hanna, F. (2010). Classroom management strategies for difficult students: Promoting change through relationships. *Middle School Journal, 41*(4), 4-11.

Bernard, H. R. (2013). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Birks, M., & Mills, J. (2015). *Grounded theory: A practical guide*. Sage.

Blad, E. (2018). Here's what the end of Obama-era discipline guidance means for schools. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/heres-what-the-end-of-obama-era-discipline-guidance-means-for-schools/2018/12

Blake, J. J., Smith, D. A., Marchbanks, M. P., Wood, S., Seibert, A., & Kim, E. S. (2016). Does teacher student racial/ethnic match predict Black students' discipline risk? In R. J. Skiba, K. Mediratta, & R. M. Karega (Eds.), *Inequality in school discipline: Research and practice to reduce disparities.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Booker, K., & Mitchell, A. (2011). Patterns in recidivism and discretionary placement in disciplinary alternative education: The impact of gender, ethnicity, age, and special education status. *Education and Treatment of Children 34*(2), 193-208.

Bradshaw, C. P., Mitchell, M. M., O'Brennan, L. M., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Multilevel explorations of factors contributing to the overrepresentation of Black students in office discipline referrals. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 102*, 508–520.

Brophy, J. E. (1983). Research on the self-fulfilling prophecy and teacher expectations. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *75*(5), 631–661. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.75.5.631

Bryan, J., Day-Vines, N. L., Griffin, D., & Moore-Thomas, C. (2012). The disproportionality dilemma: Patterns of teacher referrals to school counselors for disruptive behavior. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 90*(2), 177-190. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1556-6676-2012.00023.x

Cardichon, J., & Martens, R. (2013). *Climate change: Implementing school discipline practices that create a positive school climate*. Alliance for Excellent Education.

Carter, P., Skiba, R., Arredondo, M., & Pollock, M. (2015). You can't fix what you don't look at: Acknowledging race in addressing racial discipline disparities (Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Briefing Paper Series #4). http://rtpcollaborative. indiana.edu/briefing-papers/

Chapman, C., Laird, J., Kewal-Ramani, A., & National Center for Education Statistics (ED). (2010). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972-2008. Compendium report. NCES 2011-012*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED513692

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.

Children's Defense Fund. (1975). *School suspensions: Are they helping children?* Washington Research Project.

Chin, J. K., Dowdy, E., Jimerson, S. R., & Rime, J. (2012). Alternatives to suspension: Rationale and recommendations. *Journal of School Violence, 11*(2), 156-173. https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2012.652912

Civil Rights Project (Harvard University), Advancement Project., & National Summit on Zero Tolerance. (2000). *Opportunities suspended: The devastating consequences of zero tolerance and school discipline policies: Report from a National Summit on Zero Tolerance, June 15-16, 2000, Washington D.C*. Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, Advancement Project, A project of Community Partners.

Clark, J. (2014). *Maryland to of the class in movement to end zero-tolerance school discipline*. ACLU of Maryland. https://www.aclu-md.org/en/news/maryland-top-class-movement-end-zero-tolerance-school-discipline

Conner, T. (2014). Relationships, school climate, and camaraderie: Comparing perceptions of an elementary school faculty. *Review of Higher Education & Self-Learning*, *7*(23), 116–124.

Cornell, D., Shukla, K., Konold, T. R. (2016). Authoritative school climate and student academic engagement, grades, and aspirations in middle and high schools. *AERA Open*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858416633184

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Curran, R. C., & Finch, M. A. (2018). *Maryland schools' codes of conduct: Comparing discipline policy across districts*. https://edpolicylab.umbc.edu/files/2018/04/Maryland-Schools-Codes-of-ConductComparing-Discipline-Policy-Across-Districts.pdf

Curry, L. (2015, June 23). Fundamentals of qualitative research methods: What is qualitative research (module 1) [Video File]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/wbdN_sLWl88

Cyr, J. (2017). The unique utility of focus groups for mixed-methods research. *Ps: Political Science & Politics*, *50*(4), 1038–1042. https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651700124X

Daly, B. P., Sander, M., Nicholls, E., Medhanie, A., VandenBerk, E., & Johnson, J. (2014). Three-year longitudinal study of school behavior and academic outcomes: Results from a comprehensive expanded school mental health program. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion, 7*, 24-41.

Darensbourg, A., Perez, E., & Blake, J. J. (2010). Overrepresentation of African American males in exclusionary discipline: The role of school-based mental health professionals in dismantling the school to prison pipeline. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, *1*(2), 196-211.

Elias, M. (2013). The school-to-prison pipeline. *Teaching Tolerance*, *52*(43), 39–40.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, Public Law No. 114-95, S.1177, 114th Cong. (2015). https://www.congress. gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95. pdf

Fabelo, T., Thompson, M., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks, M., & Booth, E. (2011). *Breaking schools' rules: A statewide study of how discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement.* Council of State Governments Justice Center.

Federal Commission on School Safety. (2018). *Final report of the Federal Commission on School Safety*. United States Department of Education.

Feuerborn, L., & Chinn, D. (2012). Teacher perceptions of student needs and implications for positive behavior supports. *Behavioral Disorders*, *37*(4), 219–231.

Gage, N. A., Larson, A., Sugai, G., & Chafouleas, S. M. (2016). Student perceptions of school climate as predictors of office discipline referrals. *American Educational Research Journal, 53*(3), 492-515. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216637349

Galván, A., & McGlennen, K. M. (2012). Daily stress increases risky decision-making in adolescents: A preliminary study. *Developmental Psychobiology*, *54*(4), 433–40. https://doi.org/10.1002/dev.20602

Garrett, T. (2015). Misconceptions and goals of classroom management. *Education Digest, 80*(5), 45-49.

Gentrup, S., Lorenz, G., Kristen, C., & Kogan, I. (2020). Self-fulfilling prophecies in the classroom: Teacher expectations, teacher feedback and student achievement. *Learning and Instruction, 66*, Article 101296. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2019.101296

Girvan, E. J. (2019). The law and social psychology of racial disparities in school discipline. In B. H. Bornstein, & B. H. Miller (Eds.), *Advances in psychology and law.* (pp. 235–276). Springer.

Girvan, E. J., Gion, C., McIntosh, K., & Smolkowski, K. (2016). The relative contribution of subjective office referrals to racial disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *32*(3), 392–404. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000178

Girvan, E. J., McIntosh, K., & Santiago-Rosario, M. R. (2021). Associations between community-level racial biases, office discipline referrals, and out-of-school suspensions. *School Psychology Review*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1838232

Goff, P. A., Jackson, M. C., Di Leone, B. A., Culotta, C. M., & DiTomasso, N. A. (2014). The essence of innocence: Consequences of dehumanizing Black children. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *106*(4), 526–545. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035663

González, T. (2012). Keeping kids in schools: Restorative justice, punitive discipline, and the school to prison pipeline. *The Journal of Law of Education, 41*, 281.

Gonzalez, T. (2015). Socializing schools: Addressing racial disparities in discipline through restorative justice. In D. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion* (pp. 151–165). Teachers College Press.

Government Accountability Office. (2018). K-12 education: Discipline disparities for Black students, boys, and students with disabilities. *Report to Congressional Requesters*. Author.

Gregory, A., Allen, J. P., Mikami, A. Y., Hafen, C. A., & Pianta, R. C. (2014). Effects of a professional development program on behavioral engagement of students in middle and high school. *Psychology in the Schools*, *51*(2), 143–163.

Gregory, A., Bell, J., & Pollock, M. (2014). How educators can eradicate disparities in school discipline. In R. J. Skiba, K. Mediratta, & M. Rausch, *Inequality in school discipline:*

Research and practice to reduce disparities (pp. 39–58). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51257-4_3

Gregory, A., Cornell, D., & Fan, X. (2011). The relationship of school structure and support to suspension rates for Black and White high school students. *American Educational Research Journal, 48*, 904-934.

Gregory, A., Cornell, D., & Fan, X. (2012). Teacher safety and authoritative school climate in high schools. *American Journal of Education, 118*(4), 401-425. https://doi.org/10.1086/666362

Gregory, A., Hafen, C. A., Ruzek, E., Mikami, A. Y., Allen, J. P., & Pianta, R. C. (2016). Closing the racial discipline gap in classrooms by changing teacher practice. *School Psychology Review*, *45*(2), 171–191. https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR45-2.171-191

Gregory, A., & Mosely, P. M. (2004). The discipline gap: Teachers' views on the over-representation of African American students in the discipline system. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, *37*(1), 18-30.

Gregory, A., & Roberts, G. (2017). Teacher beliefs and the overrepresentation of Black students in classroom discipline. *Theory Into Practice, 56*(3), 187194. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2017.1336035

Gregory, A., Skiba, R., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher, 39*, 59-68.

Gregory, A., & Thompson, A. R. (2010). African American high school students and variability in behavior across classrooms. *Journal of Community Psychology, 38*(3), 386-402.

Harper, K., Ryberg, R., & Tempkin, D. (2019). Black students and students with disabilities remain more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions, despite overall declines. *Child*

Trends. https://www.childtrends.org/publications/black-student-disabilities-out-of-school-suspensions

Hathaway, E. (2015). *How to set consistent expectations to improve student behavior*. https://www.kickboardforschools.com/blog/post/the-value-of-consistent-expectations

Heilbrun, A., Cornell, D., & Konold, T. (2018). Authoritative school climate and suspension rates in middle schools: Implications for reducing the racial disparity in school discipline. *Journal of School Violence, 17*(3), 324-228. https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2017.1368395

Hemphill, S. A., Herrenkohl, T. I., Plenty, S. M., Toumbourou, J. W., Catalano, R. F., & McMorris, B. J. (2012). Pathways from school suspension to adolescent nonviolent antisocial behavior in students in Victoria, Australia and Washington state, United States. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *40*(3), 301–318.

Hershfeldt, P. A., Pell, K., Sechrest, R., Pas, E. T., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2012). Lessons learned coaching teachers in behavior management: The PBIS Plus coaching model. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 22*, 280–299.

Hilberth, M., & Slate, J. R. (2014). Middle school Black and White student assignment to discipline and consequences: A clear lack of equity. *Education and Urban Society, 46*(3), 312-328.

Horner, R. H., Fireman, G. D., & Wand, E. W. (2010). The relation of student behavior, peer status, race, and gender to decisions about school discipline using CHAID decision trees and regression modeling. *Journal of School Psychology, 48*, 135-161. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2009.12.001

Huang, H., Ryan, J. P., & Herz, D. (2012). The journey of dually-involved youth: The description and prediction of rereporting and recidivism. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *34*(1), 254–260. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.10.021

Huang, F. L., & Cornell, D. (2018). The relationship of school climate with out-of-school suspensions. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *94*, 378–389. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.08.013

Hung, A. H., Luebbe, A. M., & Flaspohler, P. D. (2015). Measuring school climate: Factor analysis and relations to emotional problems, conduct problems, and victimization in middle school students. *School Mental Health: A Multidisciplinary Research Practice and Journal, 7*(2), 105-110. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-014-9131-y

Irby, D., & Clough, C. (2015). Consistency rules: A critical exploration of a universal principle of school discipline. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *23*(2), 153–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2014.932300

Johnson, R., Onwuegbuzie, A., & Turner, L. (2007). Toward a definition of mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, *1*(2), 112–133.

Kafka, J. (2011). *The history of "zero tolerance" in American public schools.* Palgrave-Macmillan.

Kee, A. (2012). Feelings of preparedness among alternatively certified teachers: What is the role of program features? *Journal of Teacher Education*, *63*(1), 23–38.

Kennedy-Lewis, B. L., & Murphy, A. S. (2016). Listening to "frequent flyers": What persistently disciplined students have to say about being labeled as "bad". *Teachers College Record*, *118*(1).

Kinsler, J. (2011). Understanding the Black - White school discipline gap. *Economics of Education Review, 30*(6), 1370-1383. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2011.07.004

Kouchaki, M., & Smith, I. H. (2014). The morning morality effect: The influence of time of day on unethical behavior. *Psychological Science*, *25*(1), 95–102. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613498099

Kriukow, J. (2019, January 22). Validity and reliability in qualitative research: 6 strategies to increase validity [Video file]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/B_dEsGCT7CE

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Lacoe, J., & Manley, M. (2019). *Disproportionality in school discipline: An assessment in Maryland through 2018*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic.

Leavy, P. (2014). *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.

Lee, J. S. (2012). The effects of the teacher–student relationship and academic press on student engagement and academic performance. *International Journal of Educational Research, 53*, 330-340. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2012.04.006

Lee, T., Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). High suspension schools and dropout rates for Black and White students. *Education and Treatment of Children, 34*, 167-192.

Lewin, T. (2012). Black students face more discipline, data suggest. The New York Times, March 6. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/education/black-students-face-more-harsh-discipline-data-shows.html

Lindsay, C., & Hart, C. (2017). Teacher race and school discipline. *Education Next, 17*(1), 72-78.

Losen, D. (2015). *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion.* Teachers College Press.

Losen, D. J. (2018). *Disabling punishment: The need for remedies to the disparate loss of instruction experienced by Black students with disabilities*. Civil Rights ProjectProyecto Derechos Civiles. https://today.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/disabling-punishment-report-.pdf.

Losen, D. J., & Gillespie, J. (2012). Opportunities suspended: The disparate impact of disciplinary exclusion from school. *UCLA: The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED534184

Losen, D. J., Hodson, C. L., Keith II, M. A., Morrison, K., & Belway, S. (2015). Are we closing the school discipline gap? *UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles*. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2t36g571

Losen, D. J., & Martinez, T. E. (2013). Out of school and off track: The overuse of suspensions in American middle and high schools. *UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED541735.pdf

Losen, D. J., & Skiba, R. J. (2010). Suspended education: Urban middle schools in crisis. *UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles*. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8fh0s5dv

Marchbanks, M. P. III., Blake, J. J., Smith, D., Seibert, A. L., Carmichael, D., Booth, E. A., & Fabelo, T. (2014). More than a drop in the bucket: The social and economic costs of dropouts and grade retentions associated with exclusionary discipline. *Journal of Applied*

Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk, *5*(2). https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk/vol5/iss2/17/

Markowtiz, L., & Puchner, L. (2014). Racial diversity in the schools: A necessary evil? *Multicultural Perspectives, 16*(2), 72-78. doi:10.1080/15210960.2014.889568

Maryland State Board of Education. (2012, February). *A safe school, successful students, and a fair and equitable disciplinary process go hand in hand: A study of school discipline practices and proposed regulatory changes*. Maryland State Board of Education. http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/StudentDiscipline/SchoolDisciplineReport02272012.pdf

Maryland State Board of Education. (2012, July). *School discipline and academic success: Related parts of Maryland's education reform*. Maryland State Board of Education. http://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/StudentDiscipline/SchoolDisciplineandAcademicSuccessReport0712.pdf

Maryland State Department of Education. (2014). *The Maryland guidelines for a state code of discipline*. Author. http://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DSFSS/SSSP/StudentDiscipline/MDGuidelinesforStateCodeDiscipline_08072014.pdf

Maryland State Department of Education. (2017). *Suspension, expulsions, and health related exclusions Maryland public schools 2016-2017.* Author. http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/SSP/20162017Student/2017ProdSuspExpulHRExc.pdf

Maryland State Department of Education. (2018a). *MD public school suspensions and expulsions by school and major offense category out-of-school suspensions and*

expulsions 2017-2018. Author. http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/SSP/20172018Student/2018SuspensionsbySchoolOUT.pdf

Maryland State Department of Education. (2018b). *Reducing and eliminating disproportionality in school discipline* (Guidance Document). Division of Assessment, Accountability, and Information Technology, Maryland State Department of Education.

Maryland State Department of Education. (2019a). *MD public school suspensions and expulsions by school and major offense category out-of-school suspensions and expulsions 2018-2019.* Author. http://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/SSP/20182019Student/2019SuspensionsbySchoolCOMBINED.pdf

Maryland State Department of Education. (2019b). *Task force on student discipline regulations: A report for the Maryland State Board of Education.* Author. http://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/08272019/TaskForceStudentDisciplineRegulations082019.pdf

Maryland State Department of Education Division of Student, Family, and School Support. (2010). *Report to the Maryland State Board of Education on the provision of educational services to long-term suspended and expelled students in Maryland public schools*. Maryland State Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED519839.pdf

Maxwell, J. A., & Loomis, D. M. (2003). Mixed methods design: An alternative approach. In *Handbook of mixed methods in social & behavioral research*, Eds. Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie, 241–271. Sage.

Maxwell, S., Reynolds, K. J., Lee, E., Subasic, E., & Bromhead, D. (2017). The impact of school climate and school identification on academic achievement: Multilevel modeling with student and teacher data. *Front. Psychol*. *8*, 2069. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02069

Meador, D. (2020, August 29). A teacher's basic guide to making a referral. https://www.thoughtco.com/a-teachers-basic-guide-to-making-a-referral-3194361

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Milner, H. R. (2016). A Black male teacher's culturally responsive practices. *Journal of Negro Education*, *85*(4), 417–432.

Milner, IV, H. R., Murray, I. E., Farinde, A. A., & Delale-O'Connor, L. (2015). Outside of school matters: What we need to know in urban environments. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *48*(4), 529–548.

Mitchell, M. M., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2013). Examining classroom influences on student perceptions of school climate: The role of classroom management and exclusionary discipline strategies. *Journal of School Psychology*, *51*(5), 599–610. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2013.05.005

Mongan, P., & Walker, R. (2012). "The road to hell is paved with good intentions": A historical, theoretical, and legal analysis of zero-tolerance weapons policies in american schools. *Preventing School Failure*, *56*(4), 232–240.

Morgan, E., Salomon, N., Plotkin, M., & Cohen, R. (2014). *The school discipline consensus report: Strategies from the field to keep students engaged in school and out of the juvenile justice system*. The Council of State Governments Justice Center.

Morrison, B. E., & Vaandering, D. (2012). Restorative justice: Pedagogy, praxis, and discipline. *Journal of School Violence, 11*, 138-155. https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2011.653322

Morse, J. M. (2015). Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, *25*(9), 1212–1222. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315588501

Murphy, H. H. (2011). *Understanding the role of teachers' culture on student discipline*. Dissertation, Regent University.

Nance, J. (2016). Over-disciplining students, racial bias, and the school-to-prison pipeline. *University of Richmond Law Review*, *50*, 1063-1074. https://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1766&context=facultypub&httpsredir=1&referer=

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (2005). *Interrupting the school to prison pipe-line*. Author.

National School Climate Center. (2007). The school climate challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy. https://www.schoolclimate.org/themes/schoolclimate/assets/pdf/policy/school-climate-challenge-web.pdf

National Science Foundation. (1997). *User friendly handbook for mixed methods evaluations*. http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/1997/nsf97153/

Noltemeyer, A. L., Ward, R. M., & McLoughlin, C. (2015). Relationship between school suspension and student outcomes: A meta-analysis. *School Psychology Review, 44*(2), 224-240.

Novak, A. (2019). The school-to-prison pipeline: An examination of the association between suspension and justice system involvement. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *46*(8), 1165–1180. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854819846917

O'Conner, R., Porowski, A., & Passa, A. (2014). Disproportionality in school discipline: An assessment of trends in Maryland, 2009–12 (REL 2013–033). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs

Okonofua, J. A., & Eberhardt, J. L. (2015). Two strikes: Race and the disciplining of young students. *Psychological Science, 26*, 617–624.

O'Neill, S., & Stephenson, J. (2012). Does classroom management coursework influence pre-service teachers' perceived preparedness or confidence? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *28*(8), 1131–1143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.06.008

Osher, D., Bear, G., Sprague, J., & Doyle, W. (2010). How can we improve school discipline? *Educational Researcher*, *39*(1), 48-58.

Pane, D. M., Rocco, T. S., Miller, L. D., & Salmon, A. K. (2014). How teachers use power in the classroom to avoid or support exclusionary school discipline practices. *Urban Education*, *49*(3), 297–328.

Pas, E. T., Bradshaw, C. P., & Mitchell, M. M. (2011). Examining the validity of office discipline referrals as an indicator of student behavior problems. *Psychology in the Schools*, *48*(6), 541-555.

Perry, B. L., & Morris, E. W. (2014). Suspending progress: Collateral consequences of exclusionary punishment in public schools. *American Sociological Review*, *79*(6), 1067–1087.

Petras, H., Masyn, K. E., Buckley, J. A., Ialango, N. S., & Kellam, S. (2011). Who is most at risk for school removal? A multilevel discrete-time survival analysis of individual- and context-level influences. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 103*, 223-237.

Postholm, M. B. (2013). Classroom management: What does research tell us? *European Educational Research Journal*, *12*(3), 389–402.

Predy, L, Mcintosh, K., & Frank, J. F. (2014). Utility of number and type of office disciplinary referrals in predicating chronic problem behavior in middle schools. *School Psychology Review, 43*, 472 – 489.

Pufall Jones, E., Margolius, M., Rollock, M., Tang Yan, C., Cole, M. L., & Zaff, J. F. (2018). *Disciplined and disconnected: How students experience exclusionary discipline in Minnesota and the promise of non-exclusionary alternatives.* America's Promise Alliance.

Quereshi, A., & Okonofua, J. (2017). Locked out of the classroom: How implicit bias contributes to disparities in school discipline. NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund, Inc. https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/LDF_Bias_Report_WEB-2.pdf

Rivers, S. E., Brackett, M. A., Reyes, M. R., Elbertson, N. A., & Salovey, P. (2013). Improving the social and emotional climate of classrooms: A clustered randomized controlled trial testing the RULER Approach. *Prevention Science*, *14*(1), 77–87. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-012-0305-2

Rocque, M., & Paternoster, R. (2011). Understanding the antecedents of the "school-to-jail" link: The relationship between race and school discipline. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, *101*(2), 633–665.

Rosenbaum, J. (2018). *Educational and criminal outcomes 12 years after suspension*. Youth & Society. Advance online publication. https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1177/0044118X17752208

Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom: Teacher expectation and pupils' intellectual development.* Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Senge, P. M. (2014). *The fifth discipline field book.* Random House LLC.

Shollenberger, T. L. (2015). Racial disparities in school suspension and subsequent outcomes: Evidence from the national longitudinal survey of youth. In Daniel J. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the school discipline gap: Research for policymakers*. Teachers College Press.

Skiba, R. (2010, September). Zero tolerance and alternative discipline strategies. *National Association of School Psychologists Communiqué, 39*(1), 28-30.

Skiba, R., Horner, R., Chung, C., Rausch, M., May, S., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review, 40*, 85-107.

Skiba, R. J. (2014). The failure of zero tolerance. *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 22*(4), 27-33.

Skiba, R. J., & Losen, D. J. (2012). Suspended education: Urban middle school in crisis. Southern Poverty Law Center. https://www.splcenter.org/20100831/suspended-education-urban-middle-schools-crisis

Skiba, R. J., & Losen, D. J. (2016). From reaction to prevention: Turning the page on school discipline. *American Educator*, *39*(4), 4–11.

Skiba, R. J., Arredondo, M. I., & Williams, N. T. (2014). More than a metaphor: The contribution of exclusionary discipline to a school-to-prison pipeline. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *47*(4), 546–564.

Skiba, R. J., Chung, C. G., Trachok, M., Baker, T. L., Sheya, A., & Hughes, R. L. (2014a). Parsing disciplinary disproportionality contributions of infraction, student, and school characteristics to out out-of-school suspension and expulsion. *American Educational Research Journal, 51*, 640-670.

Skiba, R. J., Mediratta, K., & Rausch, M. K. (2016), *Inequality in school discipline: Research and practice to reduce disparities.* Palgrave MacMillan.

Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *The Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, *34*(4), 317–342. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021320817372

Skiba, R. J., & Williams, N. T. (2014). Supplementary paper I: Are Black kids worse? Myths and facts about racial differences in behavior: A summary of the literature. The Equity Project at Indiana University.

Smolkowski, K., Girvan, E. J., McIntosh, K., Nese, R. N. T., & Horner, R. H. (2016). Vulnerable decision points for disproportionate office discipline referrals: Comparisons of discipline for African American and White elementary school students. *Behavioral Disorders*, *41*(4), 178–195.

Staats, C. (2014). *Implicit racial bias and school discipline disparities: Exploring the connection.* Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.

Startz, D. (2016, February 22). Teacher perceptions and race. *Brown Center Chalkboard*. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2016/02/22/teacher-perceptions-and-race/

St. George, D. (2014). Maryland school board approves new discipline regulations. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/maryland-approves-new-school-discipline-regulations/2014/01/28/c11ad4de-8385-11e3-bbe5-6a2a3141e3a9_story.html

Students, MAPSS. Stat. § JD-Student Suspension and Expulsion (2014 & Revised 2019).

Students, Md. Stat. §13A.08.01.11 (C) (2014 & Amended 2018).

Students, Md. Stat. §13A.08.01.21 (2014).

Sugai, G., Sprague, J. R., Horner, R. H., & Walker, H. M. (2000). Preventing school violence: The use of office discipline referrals to assess and monitor school-wide discipline interventions. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 8,* 94–101. doi:10.1177/106342660000800205

Taylor-Powell, E., & Renner, M. (2003). *Analyzing qualitative data*. University of Wisconsin Extension. https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0145/8808/4272/files/G3658-12.pdf

Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, *83*(3), 357–385. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654313483907

Theriot, M. T., & Dupper, D. R. (2010). Student discipline problems and the transition from elementary to middle school. *Education and Urban Society, 42*, 205-222. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245093495583

Toldson, I. A. (2011). *Breaking barriers 2: Plotting the path away from juvenile detention and toward academic success for school-age African American males*. Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc.

Unni, A., Blake, J. J., Salter, P., Solari-Hall, K., & Keith, V. M. (2016, May). The objectification of Black youth: Racial and gender differences in decisions about school dress-code violations. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Psychological Science, Chicago, IL.

U. S. Department of Education. (2018). Digest of education statistics. Table 233.20. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_233.20.asp

U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. (2012). 2009-10 civil rights data collection: 2009-10 state and national estimates. Author. https://ocrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/Projections_2009_10

U.S. Departments of Education & Justice. (2014). *Guiding principles: A resource guide for improving school climate and discipline.* U.S. Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. (2016). 2013-14 civil rights data collection: 2013-14 state and national estimates. Author. https://ocrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/Estimations_2013_14

U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. (2018). 2015-16 civil rights data collection: School climate and safety. Author. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf

Vincent, C. G., Randall, G., Cartledge, G., Tobin, T. J., & Swain-Bradway, J. (2011). Toward a conceptual integration of cultural responsiveness and school-wide positive behavior

support. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 13*(4), 219-229. https://doi.org/10.1177/109830071139765

Vincent, C. G., Swain-Bradway, J., Tobin, T. J., & May, S. (2011). Disciplinary referrals for culturally and linguistically diverse students with and without disabilities: Patterns resulting from school-wide positive behavior support. *Exceptionality, 19*, 175–190.

Wallace, J. M. J., Goodkind, S., Wallace, C. M., & Bachman, J. G. (2008). Racial, ethnic, and gender differences in school discipline among U.S. high school students: 1991-2005. *Negro Educational Review*, *59*(1-2), 47–62.

Wang, M. T., & Degol, J. L. (2016). School climate: A review of the construct, measurement, and impact on student outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review, 28*(2), 315-352. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9319-1

Weinstein, C. S., Tomlinson-Clarke, S., & Curran, M. (2004). Toward a conception of culturally responsive classroom management. *Journal of Teacher Education, 55*(1), 25-38. Doi:10.1177/0022487103259812

Welch, K., & Payne, A. (2010). Racial threat and punitive school discipline. *Social Problems, 57*, 25-48.

Wormer, K., & Walker, L. (Eds.) (2012). *Restorative justice today: Practical applications*. Sage.

Youngblom, R., & Filter, K. (2017). Pre-service teacher knowledge of behavior function: Implications within the classroom. *Electronic Journal of Research in Education Psychology*, *11*(31). https://doi.org/10.14204/ejrep.31.13063

Zee, M., de Jong, P. F., & Koomen, H. M. Y. (2016). Teachers' self-efficacy in relation to individual students with a variety of social–emotional behaviors: A multilevel investigation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 108*(7), 1013–1027.