

PRINCIPAL SENSEMAKING AND SPECIAL EDUCATION DISCIPLINE:
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY
BUILDING-LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS

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by
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined
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PRINCIPAL SENSEMAKING AND SPECIAL EDUCATION DISCIPLINE:

A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY

BUILDING-LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS

presented by Laura Gavornik Browning,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Sarah Diem

Professor Timothy Lewis

Professor James Sebastian

Dedicated to Max and Ben.

I love you both so very much!

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ABSTRACT

This multiple case study – utilizing an application of educational sensemaking theory – aimed to examine how building-level administrators made sense of disciplining students with disabilities. This study collected data from seven building-level administrators over four secondary schools within one school district. A three-part, in-depth interview protocol was undertaken with each administrator in addition to document collection and analysis. The findings suggested that the building-level administrators were constrained more heavily by certain aspects of sensemaking. Specifically, they (1) did not have the background knowledge/training in special education to draw from, (2) had previous experiences that reminded them of worst-case occurrences, (3) were given high amounts of autonomy in decision making with very few opportunities to increase knowledge outside of own initiative, and (4) relied on relationships with teachers to help shape their actions. These findings uncovered gaps in how administrators ultimately perceived their roles as leaders of special education and how that impacted their sensemaking when disciplining a student with disabilities. Finally, these findings suggest that districts create practices that identify and fill administrator knowledge gaps, that principal leadership preparation programs concentrate on more special education content, and that awareness be raised that building-level leaders are leaders of special education.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Disciplining a student with disabilities is often a sensitive but polarizing subject, where cases of an individual's rights to an education collide with codes of conduct and a broad interpretation of school safety. As traditional school disciplinarians, building-level administrators like principals hold the unique position of having to functionally reconcile these different concepts. However, evidence from the Council of State Governments Justice Center (Fabelo et al., 2011) suggests that individual considerations might not be given to students with disabilities at a rate that fosters appropriate educational benefit. Responding to these findings, on August 1, 2016, the United States Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, issued what is colloquially known as a "Dear Colleague" letter (see Appendix A). This letter gave significant guidance to Local Education Authorities (LEAs) regarding discipline, appropriate behavioral supports, and related potential violations of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). Specifically, it highlighted the importance of providing a school environment that is:

...safe, supportive, and conducive to teaching and learning, where educators actively prevent the need for short-term disciplinary removals by effectively supporting and responding to behavior...[T]his letter serves to remind school personnel that the authority to implement disciplinary removals does not negate their obligation to consider the implications of the child's behavioral needs, and the effects of the use of suspensions (and other short-term removals) when ensuring the provisions of FAPE [Free Appropriate Public Education]. (Swenson & Ryder, 2016, p. 2)

In essence, this letter was a call to school leadership detailing the importance of preventative behavioral measures and appropriate disciplinary considerations for students with disabilities.

While there are specialized practitioners with years of specific knowledge and training dedicating their professional lives to helping students with disabilities succeed, building-level administrators often do not have a background specific to such knowledge (Laskey & Karge, 2006; Praisner, 2003; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2006). Yet, they are tasked with making discipline decisions that could have long-lasting consequences for both students with disabilities (e.g., increased risk of dropping out, lower lifetime wages, and increased risk of incarceration) and the district (e.g., litigation) (Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild, & Legters, 2003; Rumberger, 2015; Sanford et al., 2011) . Building-level administrators, as the primary disciplinarian contact for students with disabilities, must make sense of and implement disciplinary practices in ways that consider the needs of students with disabilities and the protections granted through IDEA. However, little is known about how they manage the complex and potentially conflicting demands of a student's right to FAPE balanced with their knowledge levels, personal backgrounds, district's disciplinary policies, and overall context of the event. This study aims to explore just that.

Over the rest of this chapter, I first discuss my rationale for undertaking and completing this inquiry. I will then provide an overview of the literature and, in the process, identify the knowledge gap this study aims to address, as well as identify the problem and purpose of the study. I then give an overview of the theoretical framework, design, and methods used to frame this study. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion

on the significance and identify potential limitations of my research. At the very end of the chapter, definitions of relevant terms will be presented.

Rationale for the Study

To begin looking at the overarching question of building-level administrators making sense of disciplining a student with disabilities, it was necessary to turn to research to see what had already been discovered. While multiple sources of statistical data have shown a widely recognized discrepancy in the rate at which students with disabilities are excluded via disciplinary actions when compared to their peers in general education, I quickly realized that there was very little research on the sensemaking process that leads to such disciplinary actions. Therefore, I identified several strands of related research that, when interwoven, provide the instrumental base for this research, including applicable federal policy, discipline considerations and outcomes, and principal knowledge and leadership.

In short, this base demonstrated that building-level administrators shape their schools' climate, which impacts teachers, who in turn impact student achievement (e.g., Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). How building-level administrators respond to students with disabilities struggling with (mis)behaviors is important to the overall climate towards students with disabilities. The extant research also suggests that often, building-level administrators do not believe themselves to be leaders of special education (e.g., O'Laughlin & Lindel, 2015; Praisner, 2003). Likewise, they may not convey the importance of working with students with disabilities, especially effectively supporting those with more challenging behaviors that often lead to disciplinary action. In turn, in

many U.S. schools, the administrator led climate might be one that could perpetuate a situation where educators, too are not as attentive to the behavioral needs of students with disabilities as they should be.

Given that historically special education services, departments, and knowledge have been offered separate from general education operations (Martin, Martin, & Termann, 1996; Wright & Wright, 2016), it might not be surprising that building-level administrators do not think of themselves as leaders of special education. Undertaking this study from a sensemaking perspective allowed for the identification of unique factors that could potentially shape and address areas for teacher and administrator preparation programs as well as highlight areas important for future research. Furthermore, as IDEA is the most litigated area of all federal law (M. Yell, personal communication, October 29, 2018) it goes to stand that it is more important than ever for building-level administrators to be well versed on special education.

The broad research strands that I reviewed, and which will be discussed more in-depth in chapter two are principal leadership, special education policy, inclusion, discipline, behavior, and sensemaking theory. Because an important part of the rationale for this study involves understanding the current relationship between a building-level administrator and their school contexts I begin with a brief overview of principal leadership related to their roles in schools and as leaders of special education in the following sections. From there I go into the problem and purpose of the study.

Building-Level Administrators Role in Schools

Principals are typically known as the highest-ranking administrators in an individual school building. Generally speaking, they are responsible for overseeing the

operations of their respective buildings, often acting as manager, climate setter, disciplinarian, instructional and cultural leader, and school reformer. As research demonstrates, a principal's main effect on student achievement occurs indirectly through their responsibility for maintaining a favorable school climate (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Harbegger, 2008; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Further, in looking at schools that included students with disabilities in their activities, it was found that principal leadership was the strongest predictor of positive teacher attitudes regarding students with disabilities (Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin, 1993). Therefore, a principal not wholly invested in students with disabilities, not considering students with disabilities to be part of their purview or one that is nescient of special education might create a school climate that unintentionally inhibits students with disabilities from succeeding at a higher rate. Thus, how a principal makes sense of disciplining a student with disabilities might be considered representative of their overall attitude. In turn, this may potentially shape the entire school's climate towards students with disabilities. However, principals have not always been exposed to large numbers of students with disabilities, nor have their leadership training programs spent much time addressing special education. So, it currently remains relatively unknown how they regularly make sense of disciplinary interactions. To understand the challenges principals might face while navigating their responsibilities as leaders of students with disabilities, one has to understand some context behind the often-ambiguous term, special education policy.

The broad notion of special education policy emanates from four prominent sources present at both the federal and state levels: constitutional law, statutory law, regulatory law, and case law (Yell, 2014). Local districts also have the power to impose

additional special education policies. As an agent of the district, principals are tasked with making sure all individuals within their buildings adhere to federal/state/local policy and law, including special education policy and law. When a perceived violation of the law and/or policy occurs, lawsuits have been known to follow. Currently, the majority of all lawsuits filed against schools are brought about through the layered realm of special education, many of which have dealt with discipline and behavior (Strader, 2007; Yell, 2014) where principals that have been found failing in their responsibilities to students with disabilities have faced significant liability (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010).

Special education policy has profoundly impacted school districts in a long, mostly trickle-down process. It's been well over a decade since the last reauthorization and substantial amendments to IDEA and close to 50 years since the initial legislation. As such, many current principals have come to their positions during a time when special education has always been understood as part of a school's context, yet with the continued notion that special education students are best served by specially trained education practitioners (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). The potential conflict lies in the fact that the majority of students with disabilities are educated in general education classrooms, where the influence of a principal's school climate has real implications.

With each passing decade since IDEA, data has shown that students with disabilities are increasingly being educated in classrooms with their general education peers. This has brought students with disabilities increasingly under the purview of non-special education personnel, especially school principals (Pazey & Cole, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that

more than 60% of students with disabilities are educated in their local school district's home school, inside the general education classroom 80% or more of the time (NCES, 2016). This is up from 46.5% in 1997 and 53.7% in 2006. Running concurrent to the findings of increased education in general education settings is data that indicates students with disabilities are also being given exclusionary consequences (in-school and out-of-school suspensions) at increased rates (NCES, 2016).

Currently, the 6.7 million students with disabilities nationwide face suspensions at a rate almost three times higher than their general education peers (DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Atwell, & Ingram, 2017). This, in part, might contribute to the 21% lower graduation rate for students with disabilities than these same peers. As principals are ultimately considered responsible for all students, there are a number of critical factors that might impact sensemaking and interactions and between building-level administrators and students with disabilities: in-depth knowledge of special education legislative requirements, special education law and how it relates to discipline policy, and the nuance of preventative measures through appropriate means. While multiple analyses have shown that principals believe they have been adequately prepared for their roles (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Strader, 2007), Lasky and Karge (2006) found that most principals reported learning the "essentials on the job" (p.26). Illustrated widely is the belief that principals did not receive enough training, or that they felt inadequately prepared to lead students with disabilities (Cusson, 2010; Laskey & Karge, 2006; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Praisner, 2003; Wakeman et al., 2006). Therefore, the importance of how principals make sense of disciplining students with disabilities is timely.

While principals legally can discipline students with disabilities as a means of maintaining expectations and safety to the same extent as their non-disabled peers, recent guidance has indicated they should still be considering students' individualized needs. Further, they should address any behavioral needs explicitly through their Individualized Education Plans (IEP) if a series of exclusions does occur (U.S. DOE, 2016). The rationale behind the *Dear Colleague* letter shows that principals might not be considering those aspects while disciplining, again giving rise to questions of inadvertently creating a culture that does not fully consider students with disabilities. Looking towards studies of inclusionary practices, it is known that successful inclusion is partly related to principal leadership.

It has been found that principals who are highly effective in inclusionary practices exhibit several characteristics, for example, modeling the value of care, conveying positive attitudes regarding students with disabilities, and providing support to teachers (Hoppey & McLesky, 2010; Salisbury & McGregor, 2002; Wakeman et al., 2006). Additionally, research has demonstrated the overall importance of a principal's positive attitude for special education policy to be successful (Forlin, Earler, Loremenn, & Sharma, 2011; Livingston, Reed, & Good, 2001; Urton, Wilber, & Hennemann, 2014). However, it has been found that inclusion does not necessarily apply equally across all students with disabilities. McCarthy and Soodak (2007) found that behavior acted as an aggravating factor to the belief in the importance of inclusion. Indeed, many studies have pointed to a principal's attitude of inclusion is directly related to the behaviors exhibited by students (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Cook, Semmel, & Gerver, 1999; Praisner, 2003). Therefore, overall student success relied on a principal's attitude related to inclusion,

which is in agreement with the research on a principal's impact on school climate affecting overall student achievement (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Harbegger, 2008; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). The fact that positive inclusion attitudes hinged on student behavior(s), also helped to precipitate the interest and necessity of this study.

Research Problem and Questions

Principals are tasked with navigating and responding to complex issues which they might, or might not, have formal knowledge or experiences on which to make sense. As special education is one of the most regulated and complex areas in education, it can also be one of the most challenging to make sense of and operate within. Adding to these complexities are pressures to maintain an orderly and safe school environment. It is known that in doing so, students with disabilities are given exclusionary discipline at a rate substantially higher than their non-disabled peers. However, the right to discipline is still to be balanced with a student's right to an appropriate education (Hartwig & Ruesch, 2000).

In short, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) has defined that students with disabilities are to be given individual considerations, supports, and services to obtain a meaningful educational benefit (Dunn, 2017; Wright & Wright, 2016). Yet, discipline policy tends to confound these ideas. Discipline has been addressed through amendments to IDEA and its regulations, as well as through case law and specific guidance. Yet, little is known as to how principals navigate and makes sense of complexities when disciplining a student with disabilities, specifically in regard to: (1) knowledge of differing levels of policy, guidance and regulations present in special education, (2) overall district structures which might influence decision making, (3)

building community desire for “safe” schools juxtaposed with the concern for student outcomes, and (4) reliance on previous experience.

To address the lack of empirical research on principals as leaders of special education, focusing on disciplinary practice, the purpose of this study was to examine building-level administrator sensemaking as triggered by disciplining students with disabilities. The research questions for this study were guided by an educational sensemaking theoretical framework, as detailed in chapter two. This study was guided by one main research question and four sub-questions:

(1) How do principals make sense of disciplining students with disabilities?

a. What are the **individual-background** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, what was the influence of a principal’s preparation training program, or relayed personal experiences?

b. What are the **individual-personal** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, how is principal sensemaking shaped by cognitive and emotional responses?

c. What are the **structural** factors that influence principal sensemaking when disciplining a student with disabilities? For instance, how district discipline policies; discipline in general and/or special education identified as part of a principal’s evaluation; school safety measures?

d. What are the **relational** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, how is principal sensemaking shaped by social interactions?

Theoretical Framework

This section introduces educational sensemaking theory, starting with a brief overview, and then highlights how it is applicable as a way to understand the factors and processes behind principals' actions in disciplining students with disabilities. Heavily rooted in cognitive science and organizational theory, yet gaining popularity in educational research, investigations using sensemaking theory can help create understandings of novel situations or disruptive experiences (Walls, 2017). Sensemaking theorists contend that individuals respond to disruptive encounters by drawing upon past meanings that are constructed from an individual's previously held experiences and understandings. While sensemaking in organizations has tended to focus on extreme disruptions (Walls, 2017; Weick, 1993), sensemaking as a tool in educational research has been more interested in exploring responses to policy (Coburn, 2005; Dorner, 2012; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). Rather than examining a cosmology event (Weick, 1993) or conducting a policy implementation study, this study looked at (mis)behavior disruptions as a sensemaking triggering event for principals.

Currently, there are two main areas of investigation in educational policy sensemaking: individual and social, not mutually exclusive. While presented that this is not a policy study, per se, both areas of investigation have important contributions that shaped my framework. Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) put forth sensemaking as a more individual cognitive process, seeking understandings through the interaction of an institution and its human agents. Coburn (2005) investigated educators' meaning-making as it occurred through social networks and processes. Of particular importance concerning student outcomes, Coburn (2005) illustrated that what principals emphasized,

had a significant influence on how teachers communicated about policy. Looking at principal sensemaking regarding the disciplining of students with disabilities, one cannot surmise that the areas of social and individual sensemaking occur in isolation from one another. Rather, this study acknowledged and is concerned with factors present from both of these areas, albeit differing levels of influence with stronger considerations potentially given to one. Therefore, this study concurrently examined and emphasized both the social and the individual cognitive sides of sensemaking as part of meaning-making processes.

To more fully consider the unique processes, especially present in schools, Walls (2017) proposed a framework for educational sensemaking reflecting such simultaneously occurring, dual complexities (e.g., individual/social, cognitive/emotional). This framework came about after observing that most change situations in schools are not through what Weick (1993) would consider a cosmology event -- or a huge crisis -- rather, changes were found in usually lessor, varying degrees. While Walls (2017) stated that these changes are most often related to policy, a policy is often a gradual change initiative (Honig & Hatch, 2004), allowing its consideration as part of the underlying structural factors present in schools, not the main focus of study. Ultimately, Walls (2017) frame took into consideration the, "considerable room for both richer sensemaking frameworks in education and the ways that sensemaking is applied" (p.7). Therefore, utilizing student behaviors as a disruption that initiates a sensemaking event becomes an important tool to consider the factors that shape principals' actions in disciplining a student with disabilities.

Walls' (2017) framework further gave credence to the role emotions have during disruptions, especially when a disruption might lead to "many individual interruptions...

trigger[ing] a negative cascade” (p.10). Going further, Walls identifies emotions as being a “critical lever” (p.18) for sensemaking in his studies. While principals’ understanding of special education policy is of great importance, so are many other factors found in their unique contexts, as well as the emotions that easily occur during responding to student (mis)behavior.

In the application of the educational sensemaking framework, it is important to understand that principal sensemaking is dependent upon multiple factors specific to individuals’ experiences and their interactions with their environments (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Walls, 2017; Weick, 1995). Additionally, social pressures and contexts cannot be ignored in the construction of understandings (Coburn, 2005; Walls, 2017). Principals might be working in a district that explicitly acknowledges and evaluates them based on the discrepancy of discipline between students with disabilities and their general education peers. However, a principal might also be found in a community where the idea of school safety is prominent. A principal might be in a district which utilizes district-wide positive behavior interventions and supports. Furthermore, cosmology events taking place somewhere else in the nation (e.g., mass school shooting) might filter into a principal's sensemaking. A principal's amount of training in special education through teaching and leadership certification programs, district professional development opportunities, or personal experiences during an individual's life can affect sensemaking processes. Additionally, the resources they can access, for example, their special education director or teachers, might also influence their overall sensemaking. While this is not a comprehensive list of factors, it demonstrates there are many considerations associated with understanding principal sensemaking. This study aimed to utilize the

interactions of relational, individual- background, individual- personal, and structural characteristics as a means to analyze the factors that influenced principal sensemaking.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative, multiple case study design (Stake, 2006) to explore how building-level administrators made sense of disciplining students with disabilities. Since a study's research questions and problem should determine the study's research design (Creswell, 2014), and I had an interest which involved understanding building-level administrators and how they made sense of disciplining a student with disabilities, a qualitative research design was selected as being best suited towards this particular inquiry. Utilizing a multiple case study also allowed for deeper and more vivid understandings (Merriam, 2011). Therefore, to focus on building-level administrator sensemaking in disciplining students with disabilities, a detailed examination was undertaken. Seven building-level administrators (cases) were chosen from one Midwestern school district. This district was identified through personal connections and state data to provide variation of individual experience while maintaining similarity of structure. Thus, creating insights into the factors that influenced principal sensemaking. Utilizing a multiple case study analysis also provided the ability to compare and contrast across the cases. A more in-depth discussion of methodology and specific criteria of site selection is provided in chapter three.

Significance of the Study

If leaders of a building are not attuned to the myriad considerations afforded to students with disabilities, then one cannot expect the importance of such considerations

to be conveyed to teachers in the general education setting working with students with disabilities and overall school climate. Findings from this study could support: states incorporating special education law and policy courses into administration certification program requirements, facilitating important conversations regarding PK-12 leadership - allowing districts to implement a more holistic measures of leadership quality and potential lawsuit preventative, as well as demonstrating the importance of considering all students under the purview of building leaders, and building-leaders as leaders of special education. This study also highlights and adds depth of knowledge to the areas of principal sensemaking in disciplining students with disabilities and special education leadership overall.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, this study was limited by focusing specifically on the experiences of seven building level administrators in one district. While doing such allowed for an in-depth understanding of those specific administrators, as understood in case study research, findings cannot be understood as applicable to all administrators. What they provided, however, was new means for identifying and understanding factors not available through current quantitative analyses, potentially guiding further study. Secondly, the focus of this study was specific to the secondary level. Much research in special education is undertaken at the elementary levels. While this might limit the findings to situations facing middle and high schools, focusing on secondary administrators provided new understandings of those levels and descriptions of discipline that may be much different than those found at the younger ages. Lastly, this study was limited by depending on the truthfulness of those being interviewed, as well as

any biases associated with participants being willing to be a part of the study in general, including the researchers. Techniques to mitigate these limitations are further discussed in chapter three.

Definition of Key Terms

Building-Level Administrator: I use building-level administrator to encompass the range of leaders that shaped this study. Depending on the context of each district and level, it might be a head principal, assistant principal, dean of students, or someone else, who takes care of discipline for students with disabilities, and/or special education considerations. For this study, my interest was with the school leader that is most responsible for discipline.

Cognitive: The mental processes used to construct sense from lived experience. Additionally, cognitive as utilized in Walls (2017) sensemaking model also pays particular attention to the size of the disruption.

Discipline: The interaction between building-level administrators and students due to (mis)behaviors and as defined by Meridian West Public Schools: Consequences for violating the district's student code of conduct.

Exclusionary Discipline: As defined through a Midwestern State department of education reported special education disciplinary data. The disciplinary practices of in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-school suspension (OSS).

Free Appropriate Education (FAPE): FAPE is terminology that originated from the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975* (EAHCA; now the Individuals with Disabilities Act, or IDEA). Although still a much-litigated area, the law defined FAPE as special education and related services that: (a) are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (b) meet standards of the State educational agency; (c) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the state involved, and; (d) are provided in conformity with the

individualized education program. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C 1401 [a][18]) Although only applying only to the parties in the case, during this study, FAPE was impacted due to the *Endrew F.* Supreme Court ruling which took on the A in FAPE, setting a new educational benefit precedent of being “meaningful.”

Inclusion: While there is no one fully agreed-upon definition of inclusion, generally speaking, inclusion is considered the idea of students with disabilities spending time in general education settings. However, inclusion is oftentimes found used interchangeably with mainstreaming (outdated term) and least restrictive environment.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): Initially known as the EAHCA, this legislation provided a federal guarantee of educational rights to children with disabilities in states that receive federal funds.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): LRE is terminology that comes directly from IDEA:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities ... are educated with children who are not disabled; and special classes, separate schooling, or other. Removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aides and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (612(a)(5)(A)).

LRE is an environment where students with disabilities can benefit from instruction.

Manifest Determination: A mandated review process of the relationship between a student's disability and the behavior(s) which may have caused a suspension constituting a change of placement. Triggered by school officials wanting to place a student with

disabilities in OSS or expulsion over 10-days. If it is determined that there is no relationship, a student may be disciplined to the same extent as their non-disabled peers (IDEA, 2004). Regardless of outcome, educational services should be continued.

Policy: For the sake of this paper policy is understood in a very broad manner unless otherwise noted. In the overall school context, policy would relate to all the federal, state, and local policies as well as any applicable case law or specific guidance that might influence actions.

Principal: A principal is a building-level administrator, often times responsible for discipline. Principals are generally accepted to be responsible for setting a school climate, which may or may not give specific consideration to students with disabilities.

Sensemaking: A process in which individuals and groups construct reality from a flow of events (Walls, 2017).

Special Education: Services provided to students with disabilities that have been identified as having the rights and protections codified under IDEA.

Special Education Policy: See policy above. As it relates to special education-specific areas.

Students with Disabilities: Students with disabilities that have been determined eligible for special education services as mandated under IDEA

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review the literature that informed and became the foundation of this study. While there is a limited amount of empirical literature directly investigating principals or other building-level administrators as leaders of special education, there is an abundance of research on several related topics that, when woven together, formulate an appropriate base to study the question at hand. The terminology utilized in this study regarding building-level administrators reflects the terms utilized by each respective reference. Furthermore, depending on the context of each district, it might be a head principal, assistant principal, dean of students, or titled something else, who takes care of special education and discipline. For this study, my interest lies with the school leader that is most responsible for discipline. I use the term building-level administrator to encompass the range of leaders. To understand the complexities faced by building-level administrators who by proxy are responsible for enforcing the day to day legal mandates of special education, it is also important to undertake a review of the historical context specific to policies of special education leading to current-day conditions.

The following sections in this literature review begin with a brief history of educating students with disabilities in public school settings and then move on to present-day policies impacting students with disabilities. Next, a review of discipline literature is presented followed by literature on principal leadership, including leadership studies specific to special education. Lastly, this chapter provides a discussion on sensemaking theory, including an argument for its usefulness to this study.

Historical Context of Educating Students with Disabilities in Public Schools

Individuals with disabilities have often been targets of discrimination, isolation, and harsh treatment. Before federal interventions during the last half of the 20th century, public schools generally had discretion on whether or not to educate students with disabilities; their choices to do so usually depended upon perceived severity.

Conflictingly, even though many states had laws that provided educational rights to students with disabilities, they also had laws permitting administrators the ability to term a student “uneducable,” effectively relieving the district of their obligation to provide educational services (Martin, Martin, & Termann, 1996). While separate schools for children with blindness and deafness were increasingly founded during the 20th century, other students denied access to public education were left to be educated through means accessed by parent, most often in the home, in private, or in residential settings (Wright & Wright, 2016). Even when students were given access to public education with special education programming, this programming was not always provided in the interest of students with disabilities.

Towards the end of the 19th century, special education programming in urban areas targeted children considered at risk of delinquency. These early programs usually fell under two common foci: (a) teaching children manual training classes (e.g., carpentry, sewing, cooking, drawing) and (b) providing ‘moral training’ (originally targeting African-American students) (Wright & Wright, 2016). The ability to deny students with disabilities access to an appropriate public education was ultimately addressed by the U.S. Congress in 1975 through the *Education for all Handicapped Children’s Act* (EAHCA), now known as IDEA. The following section details how a

landmark civil rights decision and the concerted effort of parents through a multitude of lawsuits, gave rise to students with disabilities gaining the right to receive an education in U.S. public schools.

Beginnings of Federal Protections

For decades many students with disabilities were viewed as unworthy of public education. It was not until the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), cemented the idea that all students were entitled to an equal-opportunity public education, free of segregated settings, throughout the nation. *Brown* was not brought directly on behalf of students with disabilities yet became the seminal case that parents of students with disabilities have used and continue to use in asserting that excluding their children from public education settings violated their children's constitutional right of equal protection (Yell, 2014). Students with disabilities were first recognized by the federal government through PL 89-750, a 1966 amendment to the *1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA). This amendment redesigned title VI as the *Education of Handicapped Children* and created a grant program to assist states in the "initiation, expansion, and improvement of programs...for the education of handicapped children...at the preschool, elementary and secondary school levels" (§ 601 (a)).

The first standalone bill, the *Education of the Handicapped Act* (PL 91-230) in 1970, reiterated the notion of encouraging states to educate students with disabilities through grant funding. However, even though additional funding became available through these grants, states and districts were still left to their discretion, leaving many students unable to access public education. The course of action for students with

disabilities denied education by their local school districts was often referred to an institution, where little or no schooling might occur (Giodorno, 2007). While associated with these institutions, individuals with disabilities were effectively cut off from being a part of their peer groups and society at large, as was society at large and peer groups cut off from knowing the humanity of those within the institution. During this time, landmark lawsuits compiled to assert the educational rights of students with disabilities (e.g., *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971), and *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972)), and Congress was again induced to act.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Making notice of the lawsuits brought by parents pushing against the exclusion of their students with disabilities, and following a Congressional investigation finding that millions of students with disabilities were not receiving an appropriate education, were being excluded entirely from education, or were being “warehoused” in segregated facilities, Congress began work in 1972 on legislation to specifically address the educational needs of students with disabilities (Schiller, Bobronnikov, Fiore, O’Reilly, & St. Pierre, 2006; Wright & Wright, 2016). Concurrent to this legislation, and important to the overall recognition of nondiscrimination rights of individuals with disabilities, Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act* of 1973 was passed, finally granting some protection of law to all individuals with disabilities, in part stating:

No otherwise qualified individual with a handicap in the United States...shall, solely by

reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance (29 U.S.C. § 794 (a)).

While Section 504 was not written for education, it could have had an important impact on students with disabilities receiving a public education, however, it ultimately took several more years and a court order (*Cherry v. Mathews*, 1976) before regulations for Section 504 were written. Indeed, Martin, Martin, and Telman (1996) pointed out that even though parents could bring suit through Section 504 right away, its ability of recourse was ignored for almost 20 years. Section 504 continues to offer a means of legal recourse to students with disabilities through the fact that public schools received federal financial assistance. Another enduring concept out of Section 504 impacting a student's education is the definition of an individual with a disability as a person who: (a) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such person's major life activities, (b) has a record of such impairment, or (c) is regarded as having such an impairment (29 U.S.C. § 706 (7)(B)). Ultimately, Congress reversed the long-standing system of isolation and exclusion faced by students with disabilities through *The Education for All Handicapped Children's Act* of 1975 (PL 94-142) (EAHCA).

The Education for All Handicapped Children's Act of 1975. The *Education for All Handicapped Children's Act* (EAHCA) proclaimed access to free and appropriate education for all students with disabilities in every district, in every state (Yell, 2014). This act gave the promise that no longer would parents have to resort to filing lawsuits to enroll and obtain an education for their students with disabilities in their local public schools. As stated in the Senate report accompanying EAHCA, “. . . It should not . . . be

necessary for parents throughout the country to continue utilizing the courts to assure themselves a remedy” (S. REP NO. 168, 1975). Accordingly, due process rights became one of the main components of EAHCA. As found in the online archives of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, the four main tenets of this initial legislation on providing students with disabilities education, EAHCA, were:

- To ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them... a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs;
- to assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents ... are protected;
- to assist States and localities to provide for the education of all children with disabilities; and
- to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities (20 U.S.C. § 1401 (3)(c)).

School districts were required not only to educate students with disabilities, but also to provide evaluations, make team placement decisions with parental involvement during decision-making processes, and to keep students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment possible (Yell, 2014). Perhaps most importantly, students with disabilities would now have what is known as an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) showing the unique needs of each student and how those needs were to be addressed. The EAHCA signaled a radical change in how schools provided educational access to students with disabilities, as EAHCA federally mandated that all school districts could not deny and

must provide services for all students with disabilities for the first time in education history.

Realizing the monumental change to education, through EAHCA, Congress provided support to the buildings, including principals and teachers tasked with undertaking these changes (Osborne & Russo, 2009). Additionally, the Bureau of the Education of the Handicapped (now known as The Office of Special Education Programs) was created to oversee the implementation of new special education services and provide support for those working with students with disabilities. While the original language of EAHCA did not include any specific references to discipline, the first court case decided under the new legislation (*Stuart v. Nappi*, 1978) involved discipline (Osborne & Russo, 2009). Indeed, due to continued litigations and building strife, Congress has had repeated cause to address their intentions for the education of students with disabilities, especially concerning discipline. In contrast to the hope that parents would not have to utilize the court system for remedy, it was the increased continuation of litigious activity which catalyzed the need for Congress to undertake several amendments to the EAHCA.

Evolving Federal Protections

The test of time has shown that there have been far-reaching implications resulting from this legislation. With the right of due process and recourse, more parents began bringing court cases involving the education of their students with disabilities. These court cases along with the evolution of societal understandings of students with disabilities lead to amendments becoming necessary to maintain appropriate educational access for students with disabilities. Amendments were undertaken in years of 1986,

1990, 1997, and most recently in 2004. Combined, the amendments enacted have each contributed to the definition of the rights guaranteed to students with disabilities. The amendments of 1997 and 2004 provided huge changes to the law, especially concerning discipline, while the amendments of 1986 and 1990 only offered minor changes. The next section briefly discusses the 1986 and 1990 amendments before getting more in-depth with the 1997 and 2004 amendments.

Specifically, the 1986 amendment only added one provision, the ability for successful parent litigants to retrieve attorneys' fees, while the 1990 amendment saw several changes. Perhaps most noted, the amendment of 1990 renamed the EAHCA as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). IDEA continues to be known most colloquially and will be referred to as such here on out. Substantively, this amendment saw IEPs gaining new elements: A transition plan to address how a student will be supported in their transition from high school to post-high school goals by the student's 16th birthday, and assistive technology considerations and related services being identified as part of a student's educational needs. Furthermore, this amendment included traumatic brain injury and autism as independent disability categories. Representing an evolution in societal attitudes, schools were also required to adopt person-first language (e.g. Student with disabilities, children with disabilities, etc.). In contrast to the now considered light amendments, much more considerable changes in the law were seen with the amendments of 1997 and 2004.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997. According to Mead and Paige (2008), IDEA 1997 "affected nearly every provision of the Act in some way" (p.136). Focusing on improvements in achievement, students were given more access to both

special and general education curricula. Furthermore, students with disabilities were no longer able to be considered exempt from taking general state and district-wide assessments. Districts/LEAs must assess their students with disabilities as they did their peers in general education (while providing appropriate accommodations as necessary). Districts were also responsible for developing an alternative assessment for those students unable to access the general assessment, even with accommodations. True to the amendment's focus on a student's overall achievement, the IEP process strove to show academic progress. Parental information gathered as part of an evaluation would now be a part of the IEP document. Measurable annual goals now included short- and long-term objectives with benchmark goals and parents were given notice of their students' progress as often as parents of their non-disabled peers. No longer would it be tolerable for students with disabilities to have minimal sources of information showing their achievement. Perhaps the most substantial change in legislation, and under the roles of administration, was how schools were to handle behavior and discipline.

Discipline and IDEA 1997. The original language of IDEA did not include any specific references to discipline. Perhaps ironically, the first court case decided under IDEA (*Stuart v. Nappi*, 1978) involved discipline (Osborne & Russo, 2009). Between 1975 and 1997, an abundance of case law (continuing through present) concerning discipline, coupled with increasing reports of discipline disproportionality between students with disabilities and their general education peers, caused Congress to formally address their intentions for disciplining students with disabilities. Incidentally, Congress was careful to note the considerations of:

A careful balance between the LEA's (local educational agency's) duty to ensure that school environments are safe and conducive to learning for all children, including children with disabilities, and the LEA's obligation to ensure that children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (S. Rept. 105-17 (1997) as cited in Jones, 2002, p. 1).

Jones (2002) purported that much of what Congress proposed in 1997 was to codify already existing ideals found in case law, policy guidance documents, and regulations. Indeed, the Office of Civil Rights (1988) gave specific guidance on determining if repeated suspensions constituted a change in placement. The following OCR factors were incorporated in IDEA '97: (1) the length of each removal, (2) the proximity of the removals to one another, and (3) the total amount of time the student is excluded from school (Harwig & Ruesch, 2000). More than any other topic, the topic of discipline made the amendment process a controversial and contentious endeavor (Jones, 2002). The provisions added in 1997 addressing discipline would affect how school staff interacted with students with disabilities and behavior.

Starting in 1997, students with disabilities were no longer to be disciplined only in a manner consistent with a student in general education. Schools wishing to suspend or expel a student for a period of longer than 10-days would trigger a *manifestation determination* to identify if the behavior was a product of a student's disability, now provided specific steps to follow. Furthermore, IDEA (1997) required a functional behavior assessment (FBA) for any student that was to be suspended longer than 10-days, and steps to be taken through a behavior intervention plan (BIP) to address a student's misconduct. Additionally, a student's behavior now must be addressed in their

IEPs. Before this amendment, schools had been able to outright suspend a student without other consideration. Through IDEA (1997) schools gained the option of utilizing a hearing officer to place students into an interim alternative education setting (IAES) for periods of up to 45 days (20 U.S.C. § 1415; 34 C.F.R. § 300.530).

IDEA 1997 also addressed previous ambiguity by making it clear that school boards were still required to provide services to students with disabilities who had been expelled (20 U.S.C. § 1412). This amendment aimed to protect students with disabilities that caused behavior disruptions, who might have otherwise been kicked out of school. Now schools were to identify and plan solutions to prevent behaviors, as well as give considerations to a disability during the discipline process. Students were given another education setting, and their rights of services were again reiterated even if they were not in their regular placement. Lastly, the 1997 amendments required IDEA protections be extended to any students known, or that should have been known (due to parent or teacher expression of concerns, or parental request of evaluation to have disabilities) at the time of the behavior infraction to have a disability (20 U.S.C. § 1415; 34 C.F.R. § 534). While IDEA (1997) created many new challenges for school personnel, it was seen as an expansion of parental and student rights. Contrastingly, IDEA (2004) was seen as more limiting (Mead & Paige, 2008).

Current Context of Educating Students with Disabilities in Public Schools

Federal protections for students with disabilities were first enacted several decades before the most recent reauthorization of IDEA. However, students with disabilities continue to heavily rely upon legislative and judicial means to receive their mandated free and appropriate public education. The following section begins by looking

at the federal policies affecting disciplinary decisions, highlighting IDEA as in its current enactment. It then discusses non-IDEA federal protections before presenting federal exclusionary policies.

Current Day Federal Policies

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004. Before the amendments of 2004, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education recommended that "IDEA ... be fundamentally shifted to focus on results" (Boundy, 2006, p.551). The commission pointed out how instead of focusing on students, the process and provisions of IDEA more and more saw increased tension, fostered litigation, and focused teachers' time on paperwork (Boundy, 2006). As such, Congress acted, updating several provisions aimed at increasing student success through IDEA while trying to decrease process complexity. Substantively, the IEP process saw revisions. No longer would a student require short-term objectives and benchmarks unless they were exempt from state and local assessments. A team member would now be able to be excused from an IEP meeting after the submission of written input and with written parental approval, and importantly, IEPs were now able to be amended without a team IEP meeting under certain circumstances. The amendments of 2004 again addressed the concept of discipline.

Discipline and IDEA 2004. In 2004 Congress loosened disciplinary provisions, giving school officials more latitude in removing students from classrooms if their behavior was not a function of their disability (Osborne & Russo, 2009). While the *manifestation determination* process was kept, it required behavior be directly connected to a students' disability before a relationship could be determined (20 U.S.C. §1415;

C.F.R. § 300.530). These amendments also required a student to remain in their disciplinary setting when a challenge of placement was requested until the hearing officer decided (20 U.S.C. §1415; C.F.R. § 300.533). Further clarification determined that students who were removed from their existing educational placements due to non-disability related behavior were still entitled to services in an alternative setting (20 U.S.C. §1415; C.F.R. § 300.530). These alternative settings were also determined to be placements for students with disabilities that violated the *Zero-Tolerance* laws, as discussed below (20 U.S.C. §1415; C.F.R. § 300.530).

There is no denying that IDEA has had a profound effect on the lives of students with disabilities. The history of being excluded from schools to having the full protection of law to remain in schools is one that has been in process for many decades yet continues to create confusion for many today. As can be gleaned from the need for many different iterations of the federal law, this process of protection has not always been smooth. Indeed, much of what drove policymakers into action came about as schools and parents, knowingly or not, pushed the boundaries of the concept of what education looked like, and to who is it available, evoking flurries of lawsuits. While lawmakers attend to education in one way, those working in individual buildings are faced with providing that education. In individual buildings, building-level administrators are ultimately responsible for making sure that teachers are providing the services that students with disabilities have a legal right to, as well as making sure that any discipline handed out is also done with consideration to a student's rights. However, just holding a basic knowledge of IDEA might not be enough to ensure compliance, as the many provisions and regulations, as well as changes over the years, makes IDEA very complex.

As building-level administrators are made to navigate IDEA, other federal policy considerations must also be taken into account to understand the complex environment in which building-level administrators' function. The following sections address additional federal policies that protect students with disabilities or have the potential to exclude students with disabilities.

Non-IDEA Federal Protections for Students with Disabilities

In the years between the amendments discussed above, other laws came into being that has implications for students with disabilities and those in schools responsible for providing their services. The *Americans with Disabilities Act* of 1990 (ADA) prohibits discrimination in public and private sectors, covering the full range of state and local government services (42 U.S.C. § 12101). It has been seen as an act extending the protections of Section 504 to all realms and closing loopholes that were questioned under 504 (Osborne & Russo, 2009). ADA, like Section 504 and IDEA, provides protections to individuals with disabilities. While it has been generally accepted that the other two laws give more considerations to children in schools, a child is ultimately covered by the law that offers the greatest protection. Students with disabilities and their families can use ADA as an avenue for recourse to actions that deny students their rights. While the ADA is not specifically written to address education, there is another federal policy that does pertain to education although not written only for students with disabilities. In turn, it is critical to review how the two recent reauthorizations of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965 have had important implications for students with disabilities.

In 2001, ESEA was reauthorized as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). While the federal government had been involved in education for many decades by this point,

NCLB entrenched the relationship even further. At its most basic, NCLB established standards for all students to be academically tracked to ascertain if adequate yearly progress was achieved, regardless of disability. Districts became responsible for tracking data, for all students, but also disaggregated subgroups, including students receiving special education services (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, Terry, & Farmer, 2010). While increased scrutiny was welcomed by many parents of students with disabilities who had been arguing for more achievement oversight of their students for years, many students with disabilities were now put into positions of taking tests on content material for which they had never been given instruction (Harriman, 2005). As NCLB accountability measures increased the transparency of the achievement of students with disabilities, so increased was the call to give students with disabilities more access to the curricula they were being tested on. This saw the continued rise in inclusion efforts as more students were being pushed further into the general education settings. As much of NCLB's responsibilities for continued growth towards academic proficiency ultimately fell under the purview of building leaders, so too did the responsibility of the academic achievement of students with disabilities. NCLB has a much-debated legacy encompassing a large range of opinions from being born of noble purpose to those that decry the misery that accountability through assessments brought into schools (Harriman, 2005). Despite personal opinion, NCLB was again reauthorized in 2015.

With the reauthorization of 2015, ESEA again changed its name, to the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) (PL 114-95). Broadly, this act reduced some of the federal government's involvement in specific contexts of education. The ESSA gives more

leeway to states in determining what measures should be considered towards showing achievement and gives the ability to measure progress by a combination of academic and school-quality factors. ESSA also gave states the ability to use tests other than state assessments and encouraged states and districts to get rid of unnecessary testing. While IDEA has not been updated since the amendments of 2004, provisions in ESSA have effectively amended parts of IDEA. Pursuant to students with disabilities, ESSA limits the number of students that can be given an alternative assessment to 1% of all students who might take an alternative assessment. This means that the vast majority of students with disabilities are expected to take the general assessment (Darrow, 2016). In the area of discipline, ESSA requires states to address how they are going to prevent the overuse of disciplinary practices and aversive interventions. States must also create a plan to address the disproportionately targeting bullying of students with disabilities (Darrow, 2016). As previously required by IDEA, ESSA removed the provision that special education teachers had to be considered “highly qualified” in each area they taught. In turn, districts no longer have to identify those hired after ESSA’s implementation as well. It is too early to determine any positive or negative outcomes of ESSA; however, other policies have had detrimental effects on some students with disabilities.

Federal Policies of Exclusion

As the numbers of students with differing needs rose in schools, so too did differing means of exclusion, potentially militated by federal policy. Adding to the complexity of principal understanding, these federal policies might conflict with state policy regarding similar violations. Important for principals is the knowledge that for a student with disabilities, state policy gives way to federal policy unless the state policy

offers greater protections to students with disabilities (Crabtree, 2014). The following sections cover zero-tolerance policies that inspired the discipline exceptions in IDEA (2004) where a student with disabilities could be removed from their current school placements for longer than 10-days without having to undergo a manifestation determination to change their placement.

Zero-tolerance policies. The term *zero-tolerance* was introduced into the American lexicon in the early 1980s through at the time President Ronald Reagan's War on Drugs (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). The national thought revolved around the concept of mandatory harsh punishments to prevent certain undesirable behaviors to maintain safety. By the end of the decade, Congress extended the idea of zero-tolerance to all schools in the U.S. with the passage of the *Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act* (1986/1989). This law required education agencies to adopt mandatory disciplinary measures for students and employees found using, in possession, or distributing drugs or alcohol. If education agencies did not comply with this act, they put themselves at risk of losing federal funding. Widespread compliance was quickly adopted under the guise of school safety resulting in often severely punitive punishments that did not allowance of context (APA, 2008). Indeed, national news began picking up cases of the more outrageous applications (e.g. a 10-year old girl suspended for having a small knife in her lunch to eat an apple, and the expulsion of a boy who was caught talking on a cell phone to his mother, a soldier in Iraq whom he hadn't spoken with in a month).

Zero-tolerance policies in schools were again bolstered by the *Gun-Free Schools Act* of 1994, which required states to create and pass further laws requiring educational agencies to expel students found in possession of a gun for no less than 1-year (180

days). This time, due to the increased protection afforded to students with disabilities, Congress explicitly referenced that students with disabilities were bound by IDEA, giving superintendents power to modify the mandatory 1-year penalty on a case-by-case basis. As zero-tolerance policies ultimately fell to the local level (i.e. school board) there is a true lack of coherent definition with policies differing from one district to the next. Studies in the late 2000s began showing the disproportionate suspensions impacting students with disabilities, especially students with emotional and behavior identifications, utilizing these policies (APA, 2008).

As iterated previously, measures to combat the arbitrary removal of students with disabilities from schools were included by Congress in provisions both in the 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations to IDEA. These additions were meant to help schools maintain and educate students with differing, especially behavioral needs (IDEA, 2004; IDEA 1997). Case law “made it clear that disregarding behavioral issues is a denial of a free appropriate public education (FAPE)” (Poucher, 2015, p. 471). However, in looking at the discipline and graduation rates of students with disabilities, it might be considered that many students are still falling short of the educational opportunities intended by IDEA.

School Resource Officers (SROs). Not a direct federal policy, per se, but promoted federally through large sources of funding, SROs rose in popularity concurrent to the promotion of zero-tolerance policies. School resources officers were found only in one percent of schools nationally during the 1970s (NIE, 1978), but by 1997 had jumped to 22% (Heaviside, Rowland, Williams, & Farris, 1998). According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, SROs reached 54% in 1999 and almost 70% by 2013. These increases were seen as likely occurring due to public perception of juvenile crime,

especially school shootings as juveniles becoming more dangerous (McKenna, Martinez-Prather & Bowman, 2014). This perception also helped usher in the zero-tolerance policies discussed above. The utilization of police officers in schools has been seen as a way to deter crime and zero-tolerance infractions from within the schools themselves. When at schools SROs are often treated as school staff and can be a direct report to a school principal (School Safety Center, 2016). Although roles can be vaguely defined, a nationally recognized triad model sees a combination of three roles (1) enforcing the law, (2) counseling students, and (3) teaching students and staff about ongoing safety issues (School Safety Center, 2016). SROs are not able to discipline in the district policy sense; however, they may be utilized to effectively remove students from the school setting during certain (mis)behaviors. In this manner, SROs have also been known to provide a direct link for students from schools to the juvenile justice system (Coon & Travis, 2012).

Discipline and Students with Disabilities

In *Honig v. Doe* (1988) the U.S. Supreme Court emphasized that one intent of EAHCA (currently known as IDEA) was to prevent school administration from excluding students with disabilities exhibiting disruptive behaviors that were a product of their disability. Hundreds of other court cases (see Appendix B for select cases) have been brought in the area of discipline. Attempting to prevent subjective and arbitrary exclusion from education in both 1997 and 2004 Congress explicitly addressed the disciplinary measures of students with disabilities (IDEA, 1997; IDEA, 2004). Yet, thirty years later, nationally, schools continue to use exclusionary discipline (suspensions and expulsions) on students with disabilities at a rate almost three times higher than their non-disabled peers (DePaoli et al., 2017). In the state this study takes place, the rate is almost double (State

Department of Education, 2016). While building-level administrators, as granted through board policy, usually can discipline students with disabilities as a means of maintaining school safety and eliciting desired behaviors, Yell, Rozalski, and Dragsgow (2001) point out the necessity of teaching as a means of discipline. Students with disabilities often need to be taught how to control and manage their behavior and of its potential effect on others (Yell, Rozalski, & Dragsgow, 2001). This supports Dwyer's (n.d.) assertion that by not offering "specialized services to change the disruptive and dangerous behavior and to make sure that whatever discipline is used works in preventing a reoccurrence of that behavior" the district is not providing an appropriate education. The following sections give a brief history of discipline in public schools, reviews the research pointing to disparate outcomes of students with disabilities in the area of discipline, and briefly discusses its effect, further endorsing the need to look into factors potentially contributing to these outcomes.

Brief History of Discipline in Public Schools

School discipline has mirrored societal views of youth discipline, which, historically has revolved around the concept of corporal punishment, or punishment that involves physically hitting someone with something (e.g. hand, ruler, paddle, switch, etc.). During the 17th and 18th centuries, wooden canes were commonly used in classroom discipline giving way by the mid- to late- 1800's to tree branch switches -- commonly cut by students needing correction, and leather straps. During the 1890's, the introduction of the paddle, still found in some schools today, became the favored deterrent of maladaptive classroom behaviors (Stewart, 1998).

Today, school discipline often refers to the process of seeking compliance from students to some given code of behavior, or set of school rules, usually through negative consequences given as a result of transgression of said code or rule. Therefore, the term school discipline often alludes to being punished for breaking school rules. This theory of discipline was to create a safe learning environment in classrooms (Black, 1982).

However, many of the problems still reported in schools today are the same problems that have been reported for decades, e.g., talking, disrespect, bullying, getting up without permission (Maag, 2001). More broadly, the concept of school discipline is complex, including more than punishment, such as developing student self-discipline (Bear, 2005; Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010). Disciplined behavior is "mediated and/or moderated by the developmental needs of students; teacher, student, and school culture; student socioeconomic status; school and classroom composition and structure; pedagogical demands; student and teacher role expectations and capacity to meet the institutionally established expectations for their roles; and school climate" (Osher et al., 2010, p.48). The interactions that produce disciplined (or (in)disciplined behavior) involve, "issues of student-school fit; bonding to school; academic demands; school support for at-risk youth; differential beliefs and responses of adults to challenging behaviors; and race, gender, and cultural factors" (Osher et al., 2010, p.48). However, school safety continues to dominate the conversation due to the perception of school violence.

More recently, schools have been dealing with increasingly violent behaviors (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). During the 2015-2016 school year, 79 percent of public schools recorded that one or more incidents of violence, theft, or other crimes had

occurred, of which 47 percent of schools reported one or more of those crimes to the police (NCES, 2019). Overall, this was lower than every prior survey year (NCES, 2019). Yet, after a long period of decline, serious violent incidents were found to be on the rise (NCES, 2019; Sawchuck, 2019). The perception, however, of school violence, is one of being continually on the rise, especially in the era of mass shootings (Kominiak, 2018; Pitofsky, 2018; Sawchuk, 2019). Due to the issue of school safety, in 2018, 31 states brought forth 67 bills related to school safety, 64 of which passed (Macdonald, 2018). Yet, ineffective punitive school discipline is still utilized as one of the main forms of deterrent for lack of student compliance. Indeed, although found ineffective, exclusionary discipline is the most widely used form of discipline for serious misconduct violations (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

Effectiveness of punitive discipline. Many researchers have found that punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices were ineffective at both changing behaviors and preventing future misbehaviors (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; Maag, 2001; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Yet, there are still many that believe alternatives to exclusionary discipline are making schools less safe (Sawchuck, 2019). According to B. F. Skinner, “The trouble is that when we punish a person for behaving badly, we leave it up to him or her to discover how to behave well, and then he or she can get credit for behaving well” (as cited in Maslow, 1970, p. 62). It has been reported that underlying this issue is fundamental misunderstandings between the terms punishment and discipline (Maag, 2001). Discipline should be, “training that is expected to produce a specific pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement” (Maag, p. 117), while punishment only decreases unwanted behaviors temporarily. When

students are punished utilizing punitive and exclusionary discipline, there is no way to ensure that the students have learned the appropriate behaviors expected in a classroom setting. Excluding students does not explicitly teach them how to act appropriately.

Discipline Disparities

There are marked disparities in discipline between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. For example, Vagins and Humphrey (2012) found that students with disabilities received more punitive discipline for similar incidents than their peers. In many schools, exclusionary discipline was unequally distributed to students with disabilities and can be given for anything from tardiness and missing assignments to more subjective offenses such as cursing, disrespect, and insubordination (Osher et al., 2010; Skiba, 2002). The Office of Civil Rights (2014) points to students with disabilities being twice as likely to receive OSS (13%) than their non-disabled peers (6%).

Meanwhile, in a national survey including almost 85% of all students in U.S. public schools, the Center for Civil Right Remedies at UCLA's Civil Rights Project reported that one in five secondary school students identified under IDEA were suspended at a rate three times the rate of their non-disabled peers (19.3% v. 6.6%) (Losen & Martinez, 2013). These numbers underscore that one of the most widely used and detrimental acts a school can impose upon a student with disabilities is utilizing a form of exclusionary discipline as punishment (Poucher, 2015; Skiba, 2002).

In an extensive study on how school discipline led to involvement in the juvenile justice system, Fabelo et. al. (2011) found that almost 75% of students with disabilities in Texas were given at least one suspension, with higher rates in differing categories (i.e. 3 out of 4 students with specific learning disabilities (LD) and 9 out of 10 students with

emotional disturbances (ED). Furthermore, they found that 50% of the aforementioned students in the categories of LD and ED were suspended or expelled 11 or more times. These findings are supported by Osborne and Russo (2009) who asserted that students excluded at the highest rate were those who “were difficult for school personnel to handle” (p. ix). Yet, looking at students with disabilities and discipline, one must also note another form of disparity. Looking at the intersection of race, disability, and discipline, it has been found that a Black student with a disability is 2.8 times more likely than their peers with disabilities to receive exclusionary discipline (Skiba, Middleberg, & McClain, 2013).

Racial disproportionality. Racial disproportionality has been consistently reported in special education and exclusionary discipline. In 1975 Congress found that Black children were overrepresented in special education. These findings were still noted during IDEA '04 (Wright & Wright, 2016). Racial disproportionality in special education is a subject that has been explored, litigated, and researched for almost as long as IDEA has existed (Dunn, 1968; Morgan et al., 2017). While there are differing hypothesis behind this overrepresentation, Black students, especially those in high poverty environments, are found to be more likely to be referred to special education services, be overrepresented in the "judgment" categories of LD, ID, and EBD, and be placed in more restrictive education environments (Albrecht, Skiba, Losen, Chung, & Middleberg, 2012; Losen, Ee, Hodson, & Martinez, 2015; National Research Council, 2002; OCR, 2014; Skiba et al., 2013). Furthermore, boys overall, and students of low socioeconomic status (SES) are also considered to be overrepresented in special education (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, Choong-Geun, 2005). The overrepresentation of

Black students in special education correlates to the overrepresentation of Black students in the administration of school discipline (Togut, 2011).

Black students represent about 16% of the overall student population. However, when looking at discipline data, Black students receive 32% of ISS, 33% of OSS, 42% of multiple OSS, 34% of expulsions, 27% of referral to law enforcement, and 31% of school-related arrests (OCR, 2014). Examining forty years of discipline data, Losen, Martinez, and Okeola (2014) found that Black students were suspended at a rate more than twice (16%) that of Hispanic students (7%) and more than 3 times that of White students (5%). Indeed, as OSS rates were found to have increased nationwide over the past 40 years, so too did the gap in racial disproportionality of these discipline practices (Losen et al., 2014). Numerous studies have documented that disciplinary practices are employed in a disproportionate manner for students of color, especially Black students (Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Sartain et al., 2015; Skiba, 2001; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

Monitoring. Starting in 1990 states were required to monitor racial minority representation in special education, but with no consequence when overrepresentation was found. Currently, federal law mandates that states must monitor their districts for minority overrepresentations in special education (including discipline) and initiate sanctions if so caused (34 CFR 300.646). If a district is found with overrepresentations, the state must review to see if inappropriate identifications or discipline took place. If found to be inappropriate, schools must then use 15% of their federal Part B funds for Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CEIS).

Identifying overrepresentations in special education is considered a complex issue, as many confounding variables are making the issue more difficult to study, including inconsistent disability definitions across states, disparate data collection practices, and influences of SES proxy (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). Utilizing risk ratios has been considered an accurate measure of disproportionality. Risk ratios compare a group's risk of receiving services to a comparison group's risk (Bollmer, Bethel, Garrison-Mogren, & Brauen, 2007).

Gender disproportionality. Males are overrepresented when it comes to both special education and discipline. While males comprise roughly half of the student population, they were 74% of those expelled (OCR, 2012). Compared to other races and genders, Black males are the group most likely to be overrepresented in receiving disciplinary consequences (Skiba, Shure, & Williams, 2011; OCR, 2014). Overall, it was reported that more than 25% of Black males and 20% of Black female receive OSS at least once in their school careers (OCR, 2014). Furthermore, Mendez and Knoff (2003) found that Black males were suspended 2.5 times more than white males while Black females were suspended 3.6 times more than White females. For students with disabilities facing these increasing and abundant disciplinary exclusions, one might expect that these forms of punishment at least diminish the behaviors being targeted.

Exclusionary Discipline Outcomes

A variety of research studies and other outlets of reporting have found that students with disabilities have worse overall outcomes in all categories than their non-disabled peers. Academically, the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers has grown significantly in the past decade (Pane, 2017). Students

with disabilities that graduate and enroll in higher education fail to graduate/dropout at a much higher rate (Sanford, Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver (2011). Furthermore, up to 85% of youth in juvenile detention are considered to have disabilities that would make them eligible for special education services, yet only 37% received services (National Council on Disability, 2011). The extent of which these disparate outcomes can be directly linked to discipline practices is not well understood, however, it is known that being suspended just once in high school decreases a student's chance of graduation (Rumberger, 2015). The American Academy of Pediatrics found that exclusionary discipline jeopardizes a student's health and safety (2011), and the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) reported that students out of school are more likely to repeat a grade, drop out, have children in their teens, and participate in delinquent behaviors. Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild, and Legters (2003) reported that suspensions are a top predictor for students incarcerated by the ninth grade.

Looking at particular categories of IDEA, students qualifying under ED are subjected to the most disparate outcomes. Fifty-five percent (55%) of students with ED drop out of school with 40% never earning a high school diploma; 75% read below grade level and are expelled at a rate much higher than their non-disable and disabled peers. Additionally, they have the poorest employment outcomes, and 47.5% of incarcerated youth have been identified as ED (Bradley, Doolittle, Bartolotta, 2008).

Associated with the overrepresentation of students with disabilities being excluded from school through discipline practices, one might be led to think that the use of exclusionary discipline has to negatively affect the overall potential for students with disabilities' academic success. Furthermore, exclusionary discipline has been found to

increase undesired behaviors (Noguera, 1995; Nolan, 2008). As so much is at stake, the continued use of exclusionary discipline, especially for students with disabilities, which has been found ineffective in mitigating behaviors, defies the expectation of reducing ineffective practices. The use of exclusionary discipline does not stay in existence due to a lack of guidance on any other practice. Indeed, a "plethora of recommendations for reducing exclusionary discipline use and disciplinary disproportionality have been made" (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010, p. 60).

Alternative Approaches to Exclusionary Discipline

Though many alternatives exist, Osher, Bear, Sprague, and Doyle (2011) presented three known alternatives to exclusionary discipline that are considered to improve student behavior: ecological approaches to classroom management; school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS); and positive youth development (PYD). Furthermore, a growing body of research has been looking at restorative approaches as a way to decrease misguided behaviors (Anfara, Evans, & Lester, 2013; Cameron & Thorsborne, 1999; Suvall, 2009).

Ecological Approaches to Classroom Management

Ecological approaches to classroom management include increasing instructional practices to maintain the engagement and participation of students (Doyle, 2006).

Classrooms are a place where activities can provide direction for student behavior. It has been found that the strength of the activities diverts (mis)behaviors by creating and maintaining order (Doyle, 2006). Osher, Bear, Sprague, and Doyle (2011) found that this approach assumes that a well-managed classroom encourages self-discipline.

Furthermore, the ecological considerations of a classroom also provide, "the essential

conditions for caring support clear expectations, and guidance that foster healthy student development" (p. 49). Ecological approaches to classroom management have been supported most often through preservice teacher training programs rather than implemented schoolwide(Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2011). These approaches are thought to supplement schoolwide implementations such as SWPIS.

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

SWPBIS is an evidence-based approach that consistently shows reductions in discipline incidents, supports gains in academic achievements, and improve school culture when implemented with fidelity (Freeman et al., 2016; Lewis & Sugai, 1999). SWPBIS is a system aimed at establishing and teaching communication and rules which facilitate a school culture in which teachers and students expect and support one another with appropriate behaviors (National Institute of Justice, 2015). Sugai et al. (2010) found commonalities of schools that SWPBIS when implemented with fidelity. They clearly define, teach, and reinforce expectations; make data-based decisions; offer multiple levels of support in response to student need, and establish systems to maintain progress. It has been shown that SWPBIS is a comprehensive and preventive method of discipline which decreases the need for exclusionary discipline (National Institute of Justice, 2015; Sprague & Golly, 2004). SWPBIS is especially relevant to students with disabilities. In 2016, OSERS guidance was issued which clarified, "In the case of a child whose behavior impedes the child's learning or that of others, the IEP Team must consider – and, when necessary to provide FAPE, include in the IEP – the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies, to address that behavior" (p.1). SWPBIS has been found to significantly reduce the number of students receiving exclusionary

discipline and increase the perceptions of improved school safety (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Horner et al., 2009).

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development is concerned with a youth-centered focus that aims to build youths' strengths (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019). A well-known approach, though with limited empirical data, to PYD in schools is social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL focuses on building qualities that contribute to self-discipline, e.g., moral development and positive mental health (Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier & Battistich, 2006; Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2011). According to Osher, Bear, Sprague, and Doyle (2011), the goals of SEL are, “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making” (p.51). These skills, in turn, promote behaviors desirable in the classroom, increased academic performance, and decreased exclusionary discipline (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

Restorative Approaches

Restorative approaches in schools most recently came out of the criminal justice system. Most often referred to as restorative justice or restorative practices, these approaches emphasize repairing relationships harmed through misbehavior, and the need for mutual respect, communication and fair process, the need for structure and support, and committing to building relationships rather than focusing solely on misbehaviors (Macready, 2009). Suvall (2009) suggested that while exclusionary discipline failed to produce safer schools, and in many instances exacerbated misbehaviors, restorative approaches aimed to change the conditions that led to school violence. Though there is

limited but ongoing empirical data on restorative approaches in schools, much like IDEA, restorative approaches recognize that each individual is unique and requires unique considerations and supports (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

Summary

As presented above, exclusion from the classroom environment and instruction, while detrimental to all students, is most detrimental to students with behavioral and/or academic disabilities (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011). Principals have had to navigate discipline through special education policy that continues to dictate what must be taken into consideration regarding students with disabilities. Yet, even with known alternative methods of supporting children, decades of laws, regulations, and guidelines aimed at protecting students with disabilities from exclusion through disciplinary measures, the use of exclusionary discipline continues to be prevalent in schools. Even with district special education directors and superintendents, if principals are unaware of the negative consequences befallen the excluded students with disabilities, one must consider that principals, as leaders of schools and often responsible for overseeing the enactment of special education policy, should, in their own right, be looked upon as leaders of special education.

Principal Leadership

During the 2015-2016 school year, more than 6.7 million students received special education services (DePaoli et al., 2017). As principals have been found to have an impact on the effectiveness of their buildings, principals should be viewed not only as leaders of their schools in general but also as leaders of special education. Across the nation, building-level leaders have the extraordinary job of being responsible for the

safety and education for millions of children, including the approximate 6.7 million students receiving special education services.

Lacking a consistent definition, a principal's job can vary from day to day, oftentimes encompassing both the extremely serious and the downright inane (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Moreover, since NCLB, principals have increasingly been held responsible for performance in areas traditionally not recognized as being in the purview of the role (McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). Importantly, principals are responsible for ensuring that each student, including those with disabilities, in their school buildings are receiving a fair and equitable education. While there is little research on principals specifically as leaders of special education, there is research that points to how a principal might potentially affect students with disabilities through understanding how they affect the achievement in the building overall. This section begins by providing a review of research on what we know about principals and their effect on student achievement, and then more specifically to what we know about influences of leading students with disabilities.

Principals and Student Achievement

Great value is placed on the responsibilities of a principal, as research has indicated that they have positive measurable effects on student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). While it is fairly acknowledged that building leadership is second only to classroom instruction in school-level factors affecting student achievement, how these effects are realized has not reached an ultimate consensus (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Lewis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Nettles & Herrington, 2007). The above research references a multitude of studies finding effects ranging directly through

principals' actions, to more indirect influences through school culture/climate, support of family involvement, and the practices put into place. Several meta-analyses on principal leadership identified categories where principals positively influence student achievement, including but not limited to providing a safe and orderly environment, maintaining high expectations for student learning, creating a positive and supportive climate, and being a role model (Cotton, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). More recently, an analysis of Chicago Public Schools found that the only significant path reflecting a principal's ability to effect change on student achievement was indirectly through their ability to create the school's climate (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Sebastian & Allensworth 2012). In looking just toward the population of students with disabilities, Nettles and Petscher (2007) found evidence suggesting principals do have a positive and significant direct effect on reading achievement. While there is a consensus that the role of a school principal is important, little research past the previous study has looked into the importance of school leadership for special education. The research that does focus on principal leadership for special education is most often through the lens of inclusion and broadly points to the influence of a principal's beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives in whether/how students experience special education services.

Principals and Inclusion

Research has demonstrated the importance of a principal's attitude in the implementation of special education policy, with much attention given to exploring the concept of inclusion (Cobb, 2014; Cook, Semmel, & Gerver, 1999; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Praisner, 2003; Theoharris, 2007; Urton et al., 2014). Commensurately, principal leadership has also been found to be an influential predictor of positive teacher

attitudes towards inclusion (Stanovic & Jordan, 1998). Looking across more veins, Marzano, et al. (2005) and Cotton (2003) found that principals best support inclusion by their attitudes, establishing an inclusive school climate, and modeling inclusive behaviors (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003). This is important as often a building-level administrator acts as LEA during IEP meetings, helping to guide the decision making of a student's placement as well as influencing the school climate.

Attitudes. Irvine, Lupart, Loreman, and McGhie-Richmond (2010) found that a principal's attitude towards classrooms of diverse learners affected teacher practices; however, Urton, Wilber, and Hennemann (2014) found that a school principal did not have a significant influence of the teacher's attitudes towards inclusion. Acarmadis, Bayliss, and Burden (2000) reported that teachers' attitudes are impacted by school climate and can serve as a barrier to successful inclusion practices, and Urton et al. (2014) just found that principal and teachers' attitudes were connected. However, Cook et al. (1999) determined that while positive attitudes seemed to influence how schools implement policy, positive attitudes did not guarantee success.

Highlighting a principal's attitudes towards amounts of inclusion, Praisner (2003) reported that administrators' attitudes and values were pertinent for supporting change efforts with placements of students with disabilities. Although an older study (yet well after the passing of IDEA), Praisner showed that only 21.1% of principals were positive about inclusion. Additionally, 2.7% were negative, and 76.6% were in the uncertain range. Praisner's study determined that the more favorable the attitude of a principal, the more appropriate they believed in the least restrictive environment (LRE). However, this only held for the categories of disabilities, "without emotional or social needs and who

tend to fit in academically" (p. 141). These findings seem to be in direct conflict with Goor, Schwenn, and Boyer (1997) beliefs of accepting all children as part of their school community, rather it seems more accepting of the children that "fit in." Confirming these same findings, Ngwokabuenui (2013) found that the perceptions of principals are necessary for the implementation of less restrictive placements. In a recent discourse analysis of LRE, O'Laughlin and Lindel (2015) found that most principals held an attitude of indifference, "[principals were] aware of LRE, but not in a way that led them into specific professional decision rules" (p. 149), as they deferred their decision-making power to the special education teachers. Additionally, attitudes seemed to be in line with positive or negative past experiences (Cook et al., 1999).

Beliefs. In an inclusion study back-tracking from a point of success in the attempt to discover some contributing characteristics, Hoppey and McLesky (2010) analyzed a school deemed *highly effective* in inclusion practices, suggesting that the principal's effectiveness was in part due to his belief in the value of care. A belief in care was also found during a study conducted by Wakeman et al. (2006). Utilizing a survey to elicit information on relationships between principals and their knowledge of fundamental special education ideas, principal respondents overwhelmingly reported the belief that the education of all of the school's students was their responsibility, while also reporting the belief that it was a teacher's responsibility to teach all students (Wakeman et al., 2006). Contrastingly, when looking specifically towards discipline, McCarthy and Soodak (2007) had a different outcome with principals in their study, reporting the importance of school safety:

- I'm an advocate not for the child [with disabilities] but for the other 799 kids in the building.
- There are just certain things you have to do to assure the safety of the whole school and not just protect the rights of an individual student.
- Well, yeah, you have to maintain the rights, the due process of the kid, but at the same time, you have to maintain the integrity of our discipline code and safety of the building (p. 463).

McCarthy and Soodak postulated when it came to the safety of the building and the rest of their school, a student with disabilities right to an education was not as important to principals. They further demonstrated that some principals seem to believe that even if a student with disabilities had a behavior that was a manifestation of that disability, it wasn't fair that they might get a more lenient punishment. This idea of fairness and the belief of having to choose between safety or the educational rights of one student is one that is also reflected in much of the literature regarding discipline (Skiba, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). Many of the above-reported findings came directly from principals' experiences with students with disabilities, all of which potentially add to their knowledge of special education. However, as mentioned previously, a principal might or might not receive training specific to special education. This is especially problematic when considering studies have found that even special education teachers report being undertrained in special education issues (Sands, Adams, & Stout, 1995). The following section looks at the research indicating the importance of a principal's knowledge and experience with special education.

Principal Knowledge of and Experience with Special Education

In a survey of 205 principals from California, experience was determined to be one of the most important factors in the knowledge of working with students with disabilities (Lasky & Karge, 2006). Most principals agreed that they learned the "essentials on the job" (p. 26) with several relaying that "nothing can replace experience" (p. 27). Going along with a similar thought, Praisner (2003) found that positive experiences with students with disabilities had favorable results for expectations of further interactions. Additionally, positive experiences were related to a positive attitude and better program implementation. Praisner further found that the nature of experiences was more important than the length of experience and that a length of an experience did not have a significant relationship on a principal's attitude. Types of experiences have also been found to vary by disability category, with most negative experiences being reported around students with emotional disturbances (ED). The way principals perceive students from one school to another, either positive or negative, could affect the way students are perceived at their next location. The mandate of assessment accountability became a large source of negative experiences.

Wakeman et al. (2006) reported that over 3 years, 48% of principals reported a bad experience with the requirement of having to show annual yearly progress (AYP). Principals considered including students with disabilities as unrealistic and unreasonable. One consistent finding among all the studies covering principal experiences was the report of feeling not enough training was received or feeling inadequately prepared. However, Wakeman et al. (2006) found that having a personal experience with an individual with disabilities did go on to increase the amount of knowledge a principal

reported. When looking at a principal's response to questions outside their experience or knowledge, Laksy and Karge (2006) found evidence for the majority of principal respondents leaning on their own personal networks, namely their special education office (46.2%), a district program specialist (10.44%) or their own special education teachers (23.3%). Only 1.4% of principals reported the need of having phoned an outside specialist.

Knowledge. It might be expected that a principal with experience must have gained formal knowledge on the process of special education. However, holding only basic knowledge of special education process is not enough. A principal must know regulatory requirements and how to implement them, have an understanding of the various disabilities students may exhibit and what their general needs are, and be able to maintain the requirement for a LRE (Fuchs et al., 2010; Walker, Emanuel, Grove, Brawand, & McGahee, 2012). As an instructional leader, teachers inevitably look towards the principal for help providing appropriate instruction to students with disabilities as more students are getting access to the general education classrooms and curriculum (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010). Additionally, special education is an evolving concept, offering new content, be it through guidance from the Department of Education (e.g. U.S. DOE, 2016), legal findings, or state or local policy changes.

In a study by Wakeman et al. (2006), it was found that principals held only some fundamental knowledge and had a real lack of understandings regarding current issues. For instance, principals reported a clear understanding of discipline requirements of IDEA but lacked the understanding of how to use functional behavior assessments (FBAs). This potentially coincides with the previous findings of principals reporting that

they received most of their experience with special education through on the job training. If a principal learned about FBAs at a site where they were not properly being used, their knowledge of and ability to support teachers in another location would be based on flawed learning. However, learning from principal training programs might not be much better.

In a 2016 report by the Wallace Foundation, concerns arose that many of the nation's principal training programs were falling short of providing appropriate and relevant programming. This report gives evidence of dissatisfied district leaders, with 80% agreeing that improvement is needed to a large or moderate extent. However, these findings are not unique. Over the past two decades, there have been numerous examples supporting the need for more effective principal training programs utilizing teachers experienced in the realities of current issues (McHatton et al. 2010; Levine, 2005; Whitaker, 2006). Recent findings from McHatton et al. (2010) show that principals' perceptions regarding their training specific to special education are no different than perceptions of overall programs.

The importance of adequate trainings is underscored by Pazey and Cole (2013) who point out that special education has continually been one of the most litigious issues facing school leaders, that liability and recourse may be placed upon principals that are inadequate in their duties, and that with the focusing on social justice across leadership programs, special education is, itself, about social justice (Theoharis, 2007). No matter the adequacy training, a principal in practice will be confronted by the challenges that have resulted from the implementation of special education policies (Lynch, 2012; Walker et al., 2012).

Principals' Best Discipline Practices

As reported earlier, building-level administrators play an important role in establishing school culture. This culture includes discipline. As building-level leaders, principals are responsible for promoting and assisting with the best practices for discipline. Some of the easiest to implement practices found in well-disciplined schools included being highly visible, and easily accessible (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Best practices must consider methods outside of the 'typical' punitive discipline policy. The National Associations of Elementary and Secondary Principals, School Counselors, School Psychologists, School Social Workers, and School Resources Officers (Cowen, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt., 2013) recommend the following best practices for creating safe and successful schools:

- Fully integrating learning support services within a collaborative approach;
- Implementing multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)
- Improving access to school-based mental health professionals; integrating positive climate and safety efforts with crisis prevention and response training;
- Combining reasonable physical security measures with efforts to enhance school climate and build trusting relationships;
- Employing effective, clear, consistent, positive, and equitable schools discipline that functions with school climate and safety;
- Considering the local context to provide appropriate supports; and
- Acknowledging that sustainable and effective change takes time.

Similarly to these recommendations, Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin & Cohen (2011) found that best practices to reduce the number of students in exclusionary discipline required a

combination of facilitating a positive school climate, offering tiered levels of behavioral interventions; and maintaining a collaboration among leaders in education, law, and the courts to prevent youth from being arrested for minor misconduct in school.

Summary

As presented in the above literature, the realm of special education, as dictated through IDEA, contains a huge amount of complex and specialized considerations codified through various channels. As the leader of a building, a principal is responsible for enforcing these legal mandates as well as making sure those in his building are doing the same. As time has increasingly passed since the initial legislation, students with disabilities have increasingly become educated in the general education setting. With the rise in population, so too has risen the population of students with disabilities facing exclusionary discipline measures. Exclusionary discipline carries with it a variety of negative implications which impact a student's overall chance of success. Perhaps not surprisingly given the societal pressures of safe schools, one of the most contentious areas concerning special education is that of responding to and disciplining a student with disabilities. As the traditional disciplinarian of the building, all of the above complexities converge under the purview of the principal, who might or might not have specialized training in special education, or even consider themselves leaders of special education. Yet, the attitude, belief, and role modeling conveyed by the principal has major implications for the overall school climate. A principal not invested in students with disabilities, not considering students with disabilities to be part of their purview, or one that considers their knowledge of special education as lacking might create a school climate that unintentionally inhibits students with disabilities from succeeding at a higher

rate. As the primary contact for students with disabilities, principals must make sense of and implement disciplinary practices in ways that consider the needs of students with disabilities. Yet, little is known about how they manage the complex and potentially conflicting demands of a student's right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) balanced with their school's disciplinary policies. As I discuss in the following section, utilizing a sensemaking framework will afford for understandings of principals and disciplining students with disabilities necessary to address the current lack of research.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies sensemaking theory as a way to understand the process underlying administrators' responses and actions when disciplining students with disabilities. Heavily rooted in organizational studies, sensemaking is generally concerned with how individuals or groups drawing meaning from actions through interpretation (Evans, 2007). Perhaps most well-known for its applications examining decision-making in crisis situations (Weick, 1993), sensemaking has also been applied in various other fields, for example, business management (Dutton, Ashford, Oneill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997; Parry, 2003) policymaking (Feldman, 1989) and military operations (Alberts & Garstka, 2004). Increasingly, sensemaking can be found in educational studies where researchers have been utilizing its analytic power to expand understandings of how "complex and often abstract inputs become concrete outputs or outcomes" (Walls, 2017, p. 3).

As a frame that does not have one universally recognized definition or application, sensemaking can take into consideration a school's unique and complex

environment, social expectations, and emotions, as well as an individual's background (Walls, 2017). Utilizing a take on existing sensemaking frameworks heavily influenced by Weick (1995), this study investigates the process of how, after decades of IDEA enactments regarding discipline, administrators understand and make sense of disciplining students with disabilities. The rest of this chapter begins with an overall description of sensemaking theory, then moves into educational uses of sensemaking, followed by the specific model of sensemaking utilized by this study. This chapter concludes with a review of principal sensemaking research.

Sensemaking Theory

According to Weick (1995), the term sensemaking simply means, "the making of sense" (Weick, 1995, p. 41). However, sensemaking is not that simple. It is the complex process of "placing stimuli into some kind of framework...to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict" (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, p. 51). Most concepts of sensemaking utilize spoken narratives to facilitate the process, since, as originally understood, sensemaking dictated the turning of circumstance into a "situation that is comprehended explicitly in words" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409).

Sensemaking is particularly useful when confronting adaptive challenges, or those that require response outside of our personal knowledge (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky 2009), as sensemaking involves creating plausible understandings, testing these understandings with others and through actions, and then refining or abandoning them to reflect a shifting understanding (Ancona & Bresman, 2007). Sources of these challenges can be found, for example, with occurrences of conflicting goals, paradoxes, situations where there are limited resources available with which to act, and lack of clarity

concerning roles and responsibilities (Weick, 1995). However, to utilize a sensemaking framework, having an understanding of the main tenets are necessary.

As mentioned earlier, sensemaking as a lens of analysis is probably most well-known through its application by Karl Weick (1993) in analyzing actions exhibited by firefighters in severe crisis during the Mann Gulch Fire disaster of 1949. Viewing the group of firefighters as an organization, Weick (1995) was able to analyze the changes that occurred throughout their ordeal, identifying and describing seven different properties that underpinned his application: Identity, retrospection, enactment, social, ongoing, extract cues, and plausibility over accuracy.

- According to Weick *identity* refers to who an actor believes they are in their specific context. Moreover, these beliefs can occur at both the individual and group levels. This context-specific identity plays a role in shaping an individual's understandings of events, and in determining the course of action they pursue as a result. However, it is important to note that identity is not a static concept, rather can change depending on the environment and situation which surrounds a person. A good metaphor in understanding how an environment might change an identity would be in looking at the concept of forced perspective, an example of which is when wanting to make someone look shorter, you surround them with much taller individuals, or if you want to make someone seem taller, you surround them with much shorter individuals. Sensemaking relies on how we understand ourselves specific to the context we are in.
- *Retrospection* is understood as the space in which there is opportunity for sensemaking. Instead of planning and then acting, Weick posits that people act

first and then examine their actions. It is not until there is time to process an event that one can map the processes that occurred. Not only is one able to understand the occurrence, but they are also able to utilize that understanding to make future predictions. Weick was adamant that sensemaking occurs when we look back at events and can make meaning from them.

- *Enactment* occurs when people further their understandings of the event, allowing for the organization of knowledge from the event, and giving thought to predicting future events.
- Sensemaking is *social* in the way that it relies on meanings made from shared ideals and values of others within the actors setting. Further, in another study, Weick, Suttcliff, and Obstfeld (2005) discussed a more nuanced concept of sensemaking and social power, positing that those with power can strongly influence a social reality, whereas those without power, or with less power, have less influence in shaping values and beliefs.
- Sensemaking is *ongoing*, both working to react to the situation as well as working to reinforce or challenge the social values of the group.
- *Cues* are extracted while sensemaking from the situational context of the interruption, allowing one to determine what previous ideas are relevant and what might be occurring.
- Weick (1995) describes *plausibility* as being of higher value over accuracy because he contends that accuracy is “fruitless” (p.61) given the many different conflicting interests and multiple identities of people.

Although not originally discussed, Weick et al. (2005) later asserted that sensemaking always has to be understood as part of the greater social and cultural contexts of a system. From the analysis of these characteristics within the social and cultural contexts of a system, one can construct understandings of ambiguous information (how did that happen). Given the potential to detangle the processes behind an event, various analyses have applied a sensemaking framework to educational studies.

Studies of sensemaking in education policy. While sensemaking in organizations has tended to focus on extreme disruptions (Walls, 2017; Weick, 1993), numerous researchers in education have looked towards sensemaking as a means of understanding how school leaders and teachers respond to change situations (Coburn, 2001; Coburn, 2005; Datnow & Park, 2009; Dorner, 2012; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Spillane et al, 2002). These studies have mainly focused on how individuals have interpreted and responded to policy (Spillane et al., 2002), and how contexts shape responses to policy (Coburn, 2005; Dorner, 2012). Throughout the rest of this section, I highlight representative studies of both areas and then discuss sensemaking studies specifically concerning principals.

Unlike traditional policy implementation, which posits that individuals' lack of understanding policies or vague policies cause their failure, Spillane et al. (2002) used sensemaking to explain how different individuals differently interpret the same information, which in turn leads to implementing policy in ways that may or may not match with a policy's original intentions. Heavily emphasizing the role of the individual, these authors pointed out that comprehension mainly relied on personal backgrounds. Their frame foregrounded the individual in the sensemaking process, reducing a focus on

the social aspects of sensemaking. However, they did not ignore the importance of a school's social context, or as Weick might interpret, the implied presence of others. Rather, they focused on individuals' interpretations and thoughts. To look at the individual as sense maker, Spillane et al. emphasized three elements: the individual implementing a policy (cognition), the situation in which sensemaking occurs as understood by the individual, and policy signals.

Converse to the previous studies that focused on the individual cognitive importance during sensemaking, studies attending more to the social process as shaping meaning emphasized the importance of factors outside the individual. For example, Coburn (2001) studied how a teacher's response to policy is shaped by their social networks. Examining the interactions of teachers trying to navigate the implementation of changes in reading policy, Coburn found teachers make sense of policy through their sensemaking processes but especially rely on the sensemaking that occurs in the context of professional communities and collaborative conversations. Coburn also documented different groups understood the policy in different ways. Dorner (2012) emphasized the importance of context through the lens of time and place in studying how parents understand the policy and, in turn, make choices for school programs. Louis, Mayrowetz, Murphy, and Smiley (2013) also used sensemaking to show the importance of social sensemaking. Studying a high school that implemented distributed leadership, Louis et al. found that giving space for sensemaking created teachers as sense givers, which provided momentum for the reform. In this way, making space for social sensemaking increased the school's uptake of a new policy. Adding to the literature, they also emphasized the

powerfulness of the social, as an individual can become too entrenched in their own beliefs making any change to such seem unreasonable.

Principal sensemaking. Sensemaking theory as a tool to understand principal leadership has been underutilized. To date, nowhere in the literature has sensemaking been used as a means to study principals and discipline, let alone principals and the discipline of students with disabilities. What researchers have often explored, however, is the relationship between principals and policy, and principals and teachers (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007; Jennings & DiPrete, 2010; Matsumura & Wang, 2014; Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Walls, 2017). These studies point to their overall influence on school ideologies and how those ideologies are in part due to a principal's personal beliefs.

In a study of two elementary level principals, Coburn (2005) identified significant changes in a teacher's discourse of policy based upon a school's climate as shaped by a building's principal, even when operating in the same state and same district. The policy message relayed to teachers was dependent upon a principal's sensemaking processes. Just like in her study of teachers sensemaking, Coburn found that principals tend to link new policies with their prior understandings of similar policy and respond to social interactions and professional development accordingly. Indeed, the same reading policy was interpreted by one principal through interventions utilizing small group guided instruction, and the other focusing broadly on reading comprehension skills. Somewhat similarly, Jennings (2010) found that the ways principals made sense of an accountability system utilized in New York's school choice measures greatly influenced their various responses. Jennings reported that a principal's belief system, ego, and presence of

structured networks affected if they went about recruiting students to their schools or allowed pure student choice, the intent of the policy.

Evans (2007) evaluated how school leaders made sense of race and demographic change in their schools, finding that generally, leaders responded in ways that were related to their specific local contexts, district ideologies, and personally held views of identity. This study pointed to the importance of social characteristics through a principal's interactions with the school community. These interactions shaped how a principal constructed their identity. The principals' personally held views had implications for whether they challenged ideologies related to demographic change. More recently, Spillane and Anderson (2014) looked at how novice principals made sense of their new roles immediately following the boundary passage from preparation program into their first year as principal. They found that a new principal's sensemaking focused on challenges related to the organization, namely legitimacy, and integrity. These new principals drew upon personal experience and institutional logic, oftentimes being inconsistent and contradictory. Looking to increase the understandings of instructional coaching initiatives, Matsumura and Wang (2014) explored why coaching programs are taken up differently in schools. In doing so, they investigated the role of the principal's interpretations and practices. Findings suggested that principals were instrumental to the coach's ability to be seen as experts and attend to their position. In schools where the principal supported the specific coaching program, the coaches themselves were situated as experts in literacy. In other schools where principals were indifferent to the program, coaches were treated as support staff or even requisitioned for tasks unrelated to literacy.

The previous studies show the importance of principal belief and identity construction to the overall culture of a school. Principals affect how teachers understand policy, attend to school functions, and how they influence other teachers. If a principal deems an initiative important, these studies support the idea that the school climate will then begin to deem the initiative important. This supports the notion that if a principal does not see themselves as leaders of special education, then everything in the realm of special education might be interpreted as being only the purview of those having specialized training. To explore this further, I scaffolded my study with an existing educational sensemaking model (Walls, 2017), originally rooted in Weick's (1995) strand, with influences by Spillane et al. (2002) model of giving attention to individual cognition.

Educational Sensemaking Framework

Walls (2017) conceptualized a new framework on sensemaking specific to understanding sensemaking in schools. Contending that although sensemaking is a powerful tool for educational researchers, which has helped build upon Weick's (1995) concept in valuable ways, its use in education has tended to narrowly focus on "moderately sized change initiatives to understand diverse outcomes [mainly] in policy implementation" (p. 7). This, according to Walls, has ignored a main component of sensemaking, whether looking prospectively or retrospectively, its temporality. Additionally, Walls also contends that the educational use of sensemaking theory thus far has left out a valuable concept explored in other iterations of sensemaking, namely the importance of emotion (e.g. Weick's focus on fear in Mann Gulch).

In looking at emotion, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) found that emotion was of paramount importance in sensemaking, influencing it dictated by intensity. Walls (2017) contends that emotions have the potential to explain how situations can “spin out of control” (p.10). In the case of intense negative emotions, sensemaking can be derailed altogether, but such strong emotions can also act as a signal that change is necessary, as well as becoming the impetus of social sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Particular to discipline, emotions may promote actions that exacerbate a situation, either through the notion of a power struggle, not wanting to be seen as weak, or worrying about control. Walls (2017) posits that by utilizing a combination of educational approaches with Weick’s (1995) model, one can provide a richer understanding and application of sensemaking, especially being able to provide clarity where quick decision making was necessary.

Walls’ concept holds the following assumptions in the application of sensemaking:

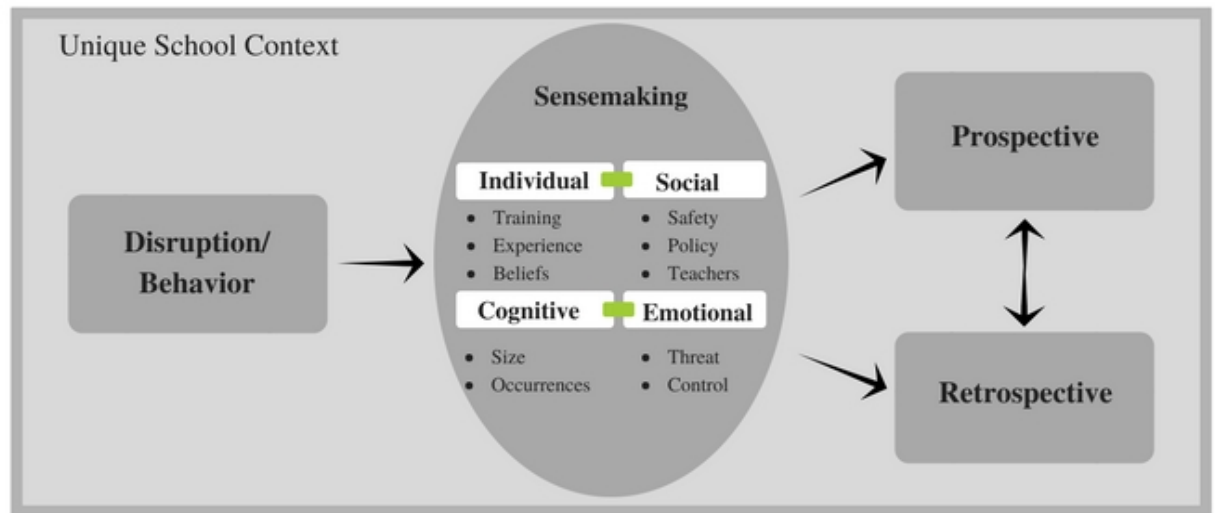
- (1) sensemaking begins with a disruption to the status quo (normal flow of events); (2) the status quo is an individually and socially constructed state; (3) sensemaking evaluates a disruption with respect to one’s understanding of the state of affairs prior to the disruption – importantly, if the disruption has the characteristic of leading to many individual interruptions, it may trigger a negative cascade and disruptions occur with particular levels of organizational freedom or dissent/expression operating in the background. (p. 10-11)

Importantly, this frame takes into consideration the ideals of a complex interplay between the individual and social, cognitive and emotional, and retrospective and prospective aspects, all within the unique contextual characteristics operating in the background of a school setting which, too, shape sensemaking processes.

My use of Walls (2017) framework depends less upon a school-wide change (policy, failure) as the source of triggering sensemaking, but rather looks to a student disruption as leading to a sensemaking event (see Figure 1). When a student exhibits a behavior(s), situations can escalate out of control raising both emotions and the need to quickly regain control. While this is still not a cosmology event, it can become rather intense, as evident in utilizing law enforcement to help with certain behaviors.

Depending on the specific context of a particular behavior, a principal might be called to the student's location, might be nearby already, or might have a student show up in their office outside of the initial event occurrence. When these disruptions occur, they are a change to the expected flow of normalized behaviors in a school setting, therefore triggering a sensemaking event. As Walls contends, sensemaking incorporates characteristics of individual [**background**] and [**relational**] social considerations, [**personal**] cognitive and emotional consideration, and interactions with prospective vs. retrospective considerations, all within the [**structural**] unique context of schools.

Figure 1: Educational Sensemaking



In determining how to discipline a student with disabilities who has exhibited behavior leading the principal into sensemaking, both individual background characteristics (e.g., principal preparation training courses, personal beliefs, past experiences) and relational factors (e.g., school safety, teacher wellbeing, pressures of community beliefs) must be considered as contributing to a principal’s response. While there is agreement in much of sensemaking literature that “cognition matters a great deal” (Walls, 2017, p. 11), Walls (2017) points out that one cannot discount the impact of emotion. While other frameworks also accept the importance of emotion on cognitive processes, Walls’ frame expands its definition by applying Maitlis, Cogus, and Lawrence (2013) understanding that, cognitively, disruptions are more understood according to size, whereas emotionally they are understood in how they threaten one’s identity. Indeed, a range of emotions might be present when a student exhibits behaviors, depending on intensity. Even though one might appear to remain calm, behavior incidents can personally be extremely stressful, upsetting, frustrating, angering, and scary depending on what is occurring, e.g., a student attempting to harm themselves or another

versus a student throwing a book, versus a student continuously knocking on a wall. Big or small, these incidents might serve as a threat to the identity of a principal, a school's source of authority and maintaining normalcy, catalyzing certain responses. However, these above-mentioned concepts and their understandings cannot be viewed as occurring in isolation. How all of the characteristics interact and are applied are often looked at through the ideas of retrospection and prospection.

Walls (2017) identifies that no sensemaking can occur without referring to previous knowledge of lived experience, or as he states, "what is happening in the present can only be understood based on what has happened in the past" (p.12). Therefore, Walls thinks of sensemaking as more referential in which all sensemaking can be both retrospective as well as prospective. This concept brings up important nuance when disciplining students with disabilities. Past experiences might dictate that a student is choosing to misbehave, or allow for the behaviors as justified by knowledge of student background, however, sensemaking that results in the use of prospective by creating a plan to prevent more disruptions, should ultimately be considered as both the best interest of the student as well as being understood in the overarching policy context of a free and appropriate education.

In the application of this sensemaking framework, it is important to understand that principal sensemaking is dependent upon multiple factors specific to an individual's experiences and context and interactions with their environment (Spillane et al., 2002; Walls, 2017; Weick, 1995). Yet, social pressures and contexts (policy) cannot be ignored in the construction of understandings (Coburn, 2005; Walls, 2017). A principal might be working in a district that explicitly acknowledges and evaluates them based on the

discrepancy of discipline between students with disabilities and their general education peers, or, a principal might be in a community where ideas of school safety are more prominent. Even large-scale events taking place somewhere else in the nation (i.e., mass school shootings) might be a factor. A principal's amount of training in special education, through their leadership program, or through district professional development might influence their sensemaking process. The resources they can access, for example, their special education director or teachers, might also influence their overall sensemaking. While this is not a comprehensive list of factors, it demonstrates there are many considerations associated with understanding principal sensemaking. This study aims to utilize the interactions of individual/social to account for personal-background and relational factors, cognitive/emotional and prospective/retrospective to account for personal-individual factors, all within the unique structure of schools as means to analyze how principals make sense of disciplining a student with disabilities.

Summary

While sensemaking in organizations has tended to focus on extreme disruptions (Walls, 2017; Weick, 1993), sensemaking as a tool in educational research has been more interested in exploring responses to policy (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2006). Some have studied a more cognitive process seeking understanding through the interactions of an institution and its human agents (Spillane et al., 2002), while others have investigated the shaping of reactions specifically through social processes and context (Coburn, 2005; Dorner, 2012). In sensemaking studies of principals, it has been identified that principals exert influence on how teachers communicate about policy (Coburn, 2005). However, the study of principal sensemaking regarding disciplining students with disabilities has to be

concerned with the cognitive, individual, and social but is not able to be looked upon through the lens of a new policy change. Rather, special education policy has unfolded over a long period (there has not been an overall policy change to IDEA in over a decade, since the last reauthorization in 2004), more akin to a gradual change initiative (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Each of these studies highlights the usefulness of utilizing sensemaking in an educational setting to study principals in some manner. However, researchers have not yet applied sensemaking theory to understand how principals make sense of disciplining students with disabilities. Further highlighting the need to understand sensemaking in a special education setting, Wakeman et al. (2006) illustrated that although principals reported inadequate pre-service training in special education topics, they had been learning about special education through their experiences. Utilizing an adaptation of Walls (2017) educational sensemaking framework will allow for identifying, investigating, and understanding the processes and factors that principals use while making sense of disciplining a student with disabilities.

Conclusion

In looking at a principal's interactions regarding disciplining students with disabilities, one might consider the status quo, or the ongoing flow of events to be the expectations of normalized behaviors. Traditionally, if a student has been unable to maintain those expectations, the consequence follows. The choice of consequence depends on many factors. The consequences that are handed out from administrators generally come from district policy, set by the school board. Although prescribed in policy, oftentimes there is a broad range of subjectivity involved with what follows due to a vagueness within the policies (e.g., Disruptive conduct or speech. First Offense:

Principal/student conference, in-school suspension, 1-10 days out-of-school suspension. Subsequent Offense: In-school suspension or 1-180 days out-of-school suspension, or expulsion and possible documentation in student's discipline record (MWPS BOE, 2017)). Therefore, administrators have to navigate multiple layers of policy, e.g. IDEA (federal), state department of education, and local district policy. While zero-tolerance offenses usually carry a uniformed response, most minor offenses are at a district's discretion. Ultimately, how a principal reacts to disruption could result in incredibly detrimental effects on students' overall school outcomes including failed grades, not graduating from high school and in the extreme, a pathway toward incarceration.

IDEA has been in effect for almost 50 years. Yet, as shown in the literature reviewed in the sections above, even after decades of enactment there are still many considerations at play when faced with a disrupting situation, and many nuances a principal must navigate when disciplining a student with disabilities. However, due to a lack of understanding, a belief that all students must be treated the same regarding discipline until IDEA's manifest determination kicks in, or something else entirely, administrators continue to utilize exclusionary discipline for students with disabilities at a much higher rate than with their non-disabled peers. In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodologies utilized in this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As stated in previous chapters, the purpose of this study was to examine how building-level administrators made sense of disciplining students with disabilities. Utilizing a sensemaking framework, this study identified and addressed the interactions of structural, relational, and individual factors that impact the sensemaking process. To analyze building-level administrators' sensemaking processes, and the factors that impacted such, qualitative research was utilized. This chapter discusses the research design selected and the methods utilized to undertake this study. It begins by presenting the guiding research questions, followed by the design and the rationale for its choosing. The chapter then discuss the selection of site and participants, followed by data collection procedures. Following the discussion on data collection, I address data analysis methods. This section concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and researcher bias.

Research Questions

As previously mentioned, this study came about due to an organic interest in understanding how principals navigated complexities surrounding the disciplining of students with disabilities, making sense of their responsibilities. I did not want to focus my work on one policy's implementation, i.e. IDEA, since it has been in practice for almost 50 years, last updated more than a decade ago. Rather, I was interested in the unique factors that helped determine how a principal made sense of disciplining a student with disabilities. The research questions for this study were guided by a sensemaking theoretical framework, as detailed in chapter two. This study has one main research question and four sub-questions:

- (1) How do principals make sense of disciplining students with disabilities?

- a. What are the **individual-background** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, what was the influence of a principal's preparation training program, or any related personal experiences?
- b. What are the **individual-personal** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, how is principal sensemaking shaped by cognitive and emotional responses?
- c. What are the **structural** factors that influence principal sensemaking when disciplining a student with disabilities, for example: district discipline policies; discipline in general and/or special education identified as part of a principal's evaluation; school safety measures?
- d. What are the **relational** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, how is principal sensemaking shaped by social interactions?

Qualitative Research Design

A study's research questions and problem should determine the study's research design. (Creswell, 2014). While qualitative research has sometimes been maligned as having "an aura of methodological second best about it" (Thomas, 2011, p. 575), Gerring (2007) argued that sometimes, "in-depth knowledge" (p.1) of phenomena can provide more help than fleeting knowledge about large examples. For example, it has been known that an achievement gap has persisted the entire time national school data has been gathered, yet other than its existence, the data hasn't shed light on how or why. As my interest involved understanding building-level administrators and how they made sense of disciplining a student with disabilities, a qualitative research design was selected as being best suited towards this particular inquiry. This fits Merriam (2009) who attributes

qualitative research to the search for understanding how individuals interpret, construct, and give meaning to their experiences. Merriam further acknowledged four key features of qualitative research:

- The focus is on probes, understanding, and meaning;
- The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis;
- The process is inductive; and
- The product is richly descriptive (p. 14).

Moreover, the fundamental constructivist ontological assumptions associated with Walls (2017) educational sensemaking theoretical framework, as well as its reliance on a narrative process also indicated the use of a qualitative research design (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Constructivist

A constructivist worldview holds several assumptions regarding knowing. First, constructivism states that learning is an active process of personal experiences within an environment (social). Second, constructivist views hold that knowledge is "not simply imprinted on individuals" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8), but are formed through social interactions, past experiences, and culture (Ertmer & Newby, 1993; Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1980) Thus, constructivist thought leads a researcher to look for "the complexity of views rather than narrowing meaning into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell, 2014, p 8). A constructivist researcher is concerned with answering questions of how (Roulston, 2007). The tools utilized in constructive research often revolve around discourse, narrative, and conversation analysis (Roulston, 2007). Constructive thought dictates that researchers should rely as much as possible on their participants' views on

the phenomenon under study. Moreover, meanings are usually produced through discussion with participants, often facilitated through broad, general questions (Creswell, 2014). Indeed, qualitative research aims to understand how people make sense of their world based on individual experiences (Merriam, 2009) Therefore, this study was designed to explore multiple participants' views on a particular phenomenon utilizing qualitative case study methods.

Case Study

To answer the research questions previously presented, a case study approach was selected. "How" questions favor a case study design, as does asking about events in which the researcher had little or no control (Yin, 2009). Case studies are also able to focus on creating extremely rich and descriptive understandings of the processes and meanings of particular phenomena (Merriam, 2009). Indeed, the case study is one of the most often utilized qualitative methodologies (Yazan, 2015). Accordingly, the overarching purpose of this study was to investigate how building-level administrators made sense of disciplining students with disabilities.

For all the use of case study designs, there is not one single approach endorsed by all methodologists. Three prominent and seminal methodologists, Yin (2011), Stake (1995), and Merriam (2009) all hold differing perspectives on case study research, most notably, a seeming incongruence of methodological paradigm. Yin has been understood as leaning more positivist/post-positivist (yet never explicitly claiming such) (Crotty, 1998; Lauckner, Paterson, & Krupa, 2012; Yazan, 2015), with Merriam and Stake holding to constructivist paradigms. Merriam maintains that "the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based in the view that reality

is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" (Merriam, 1998, p.6). Stake, too, maintained that, "most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered" (Stake, 1995, p. 99). Although Yin has been mostly understood under a differing paradigm, he is in agreement that, "nearly every qualitative study calls for presenting the meaning of social reality from the perspective of a study's participants (people whose lives are a large part of the subject of study)" (Yin, 2011, p. vii). Paradigm aside, they all converge on various procedures and the importance of analysis and trustworthiness (Yazan, 2015). All three methodologists agree that case study research is flexible in its approach to the researcher utilizing the method. Therefore, while my methods are more dependent on Merriam and Stake's constructivist approaches, Yin was drawn from where appropriate, as he stated that his methods have an "adaptive orientation" (Yin, 2011, vii).

A case study is a method to be utilized when a researcher is looking for an "in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). Cases are found in various sizes, from large representations down to a single person representative of the phenomenon under investigation (Gerring, 2007, Merriam, 2009). Stake (2006) emphasized that the cases studied are an example of a phenomenon, or quintain, that were bounded together by a common characteristic. Lapan and Armfield (2009) presented common characteristics of case studies:

- Contextualization of a case, where certain details are provided for the reader;
- Triangulation of data collection methods and data sources;
- Purposeful sampling, where information-rich sources are sought because that is where the answers to the study questions are likely to be found; and

- Summaries are used to review and synthesize results offering interpretations that do not reflect judgments (p. 177).

Case studies are a preferred approach if a researcher is attempting to answer “how” questions (Yin, 2009). As my study aims to understand *how* principals made sense of disciplining a student with disabilities in their contexts, a multiple case study method was selected as an appropriate approach to this inquiry. Relying heavily on Stake (2006) and Merriam (2009), this case study aimed to produce naturalistic generalizations, not statistical generalization (Yin, 2011). The following sections go further into detail on the specific case study design utilized for this research.

Multiple case design. Although case studies can be understood as either single- or multiple-, this study relied on a multicase design (Stake, 2006), as it analyzed multiple in-depth perspectives of individual building-level administrators. In multicase design, more than one case is utilized in the investigation of a phenomenon. Utilizing a multicase design entailed collecting and analyzing data as gathered over multiple cases to understand the similarities and differences across the cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Stake (2006) considered a multicase design as enabling a researcher to look closely at several cases that are linked together. Utilizing Stake (2006) I selected a multicase study as I was interested in analyzing multiple building-level leaders (cases) to investigate how and why individual administrators may make sense of disciplining students with disabilities (quintain) in similar or different ways. To reduce policy variation, I also decided that all cases should all be located within one school district. The following sections describe further considerations of a multicase study method.

Quintain. Stake (2006) explained, "In multicase study research, the single case is of interest because it belongs to a particular collection of cases. The individual cases share a common characteristic or condition. The cases in the collection are somehow categorically bound together. They may be members of a group or examples of a phenomenon" (p. 5-6). Stake calls this a "quintain." Case studies are utilized to understand function, but function itself is not a case but can be quintains (Stake, 2006). Quintains are conditions of which one would seek examples to study. My quintain is the phenomenon of building-level administrator sensemaking in disciplining students with disabilities. Since there are building-level administrators in almost every school, I further narrowed down my study site from which I found my cases to one school district.

Local Knowledge Case. Thomas (2011) states:

Here, in your own place of work, your placement or even your home, you have intimate knowledge. You know and can 'read' the people who inhabit the arena – you may know it like the back of your hand. This is a ready-made strength for conducting a case study (p.76).

As I had many years as a special education teacher spending extensive time working in public schools, I had familiarity with the public-school setting and the building-level administrators' roles I interrogated. Furthermore, my experiences better positioned me to explore and explain the study's findings than someone without such knowledge (Yin, 2014). I treat my understanding of how schools function as a significant factor in understanding, constructing, and interpreting the factors that influence building-level administrators' sensemaking of disciplining students with disabilities in a Midwestern school district.

Case Selection and Study Site

Merriam (2009) posited that identifying the case was the single most defining characteristic of case study inquiry. To help researchers identify cases, Stake (2006), illustrated three main criteria:

- Is the case relevant to the quintain?
- Do the cases provide diversity across contexts?
- Do the cases provide good opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts?

My cases consisted of seven different building-level administrators. I settled on seven with nod Stake's recommendation that less than four cases, or more than 10 cases, can be limiting. To identify my cases I answered the above three questions. All of my cases are relevant to the quintain as they were all building-level administrators who were responsible for disciplining students with disabilities. Secondly, I found that there was diversity across contexts. All of my cases had unique background experience, their assignments spanned five different buildings, and they were representative of multiple races, genders, and ages. My cases are bound both as individuals and, for consistency of certain conditions and practicality of data collection, collectively within a single Midwestern school district. Any district or individual names identified in this study were pseudonyms. Choosing to keep all administrators to one district minimized the level of variation of overarching policies that could have been found between districts. The unit of analysis for this study was each individual building-level principal. Conceptually, I explored the unit of analysis by examining the relationship between individual, structural, and relational factors as relayed by the building-level administrators with support from

state and district documentation, local news reports, and other documents. I chose one district site for my cases.

The rationale that guided the selection of the site included: (a) purposeful convenience sample as I targeted building-level administrators in a district with which I had personal connection (Merriam, 2009); (b) size that promoted maximal sampling, or selecting cases that might show differing perspectives (Creswell, 2014); (c) available publicly assessable data reported by the state as part of district special education monitoring. Part of this monitoring involved identifying various discrepancies in rates between students with disabilities and their general education peers.

Meridian West Public Schools. Meridian West Public Schools (MWPS) was a public-school district in the Midwest that served a student population close to 20,000 students in 30 buildings, including 4 high schools and 6 middle schools, at the time of the study. The area in which the district resided had a higher education attainment of those aged 25+ almost double that of the state in which it resides. The overall district free and reduced lunch populations were lower than the state average at 45% v. 51%. As shown in Table 1, student racial population makeup percentages both in the district as a whole, and as represented in special education varied from the state.

Table 1

Percentage of demographic populations, district and state, rounded.

Race	District %	State %	District SPED %	State SPED %
White	61	72	51	71
Black	20	16	33	18

Hispanic	6	6	7	5
Am. Indian/Alaskan Native	0.4	0.4	*	0.5
Pacific Islander	0.5	0.3	*	0.1
Asian	6	2	2	1
Multiple	7	4	7	3
Total Minority	40	29	48	28

Source: State Department of Education Reports from the 2016-2017 school year.

While finding a school that was equivalent to state average demographics might have been utilized if I were trying to generalize across the state in some way, in actuality it was more realistic to find schools that were more extreme than the state average. As such, my site had a higher overall population of total minority students. MWPS also had a considerably higher percentage of minority students represented in special education compared to their overall population yet did not report disproportionality.

The exclusionary discipline ratio of students with disabilities to their general education peers in MWPS was also higher than the overall ratio of the state. As shown in Table 2 a student with disabilities in MWPS was given out-of-school suspension (OSS) at a rate of 5.83 times higher than their peers in general education and 2.19 times higher for in-school-suspension (ISS). These are both higher than the state. Lastly, as shown in Table 3, the transition rates for students with disabilities in MWPS were lower than students with disabilities in the state overall while overall the district had higher than overall state transition rates.

Table 2

Exclusionary discipline, district and state, rounded.

Student Count	District Ratio IEP : Non-IEP	State Ratio IEP: Non-IEP
OSS – All	6	2
ISS – All	2	2
Total ISS & OSS	4	2

Source: State Department of Education Report from the 2016-2017 school year.

Table 3

4-year transitions, district and state, rounded.

2016-2017	District %	State %	District SPED %	State SPED %
Graduation	90	90	76	78
Dropout	2	2	4	2
Enrolled in higher education	72	67	6	29
Competitively employed	12	22	18	31

Source: State Department of Education Report from the 2016-2017 school year.

Research Participants (Cases). Once the site was selected, I turned to participant selection. I wanted a selection of participants that allowed for maximum variation of context across the single district (Stake, 2006). The maximum variation allowed for a "more conceptually dense" (Merriam, 2009, p. 78) understating of phenomena. As such, I sought out building-level leaders from multiple middle and high schools throughout the

district. Additionally, I wanted a representation of longevity as building-level administrators to capture differences within the time spent on the job.

I had personal connections with three building-level administrators. The remaining four participants were identified through snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009) where I was referred to others by my contacts. As shown in Table 4, the average amount of time the administrators had worked in education overall was 19 years, ranging from 10-28 years. The average amount of time spent working in their current building as an administrator was 5 years, ranging from 1-13. On average the administrators spent 10 years teaching before becoming going into administration, ranging from 5-20 years. Five of the 7 administrators had worked as an administrator in another building and 2 had only worked in their current building as an administrator. Overall the administrators were highly educated with a total of 7 undergraduate degrees, 10 Master's degrees, 5 EdS, 2 Doctorates, and 4 working on doctoral degrees. Within this highly educated group, all participants but one were either actively or just graduated from EdS or EdD within the past five years. Additionally, the participant that had not been a student within the past five years has been a university professor/instructor in these programs for more than a decade.

Table 4

Information of research participants

*Pseudonym

Administrator*	Years in education	Years as admin. in current building	Admin. elsewhere	Years teaching	Degrees/ continuing education
Klein	23	2	Y	20	BS in content; MS in content; MEd in content; MEd Ed Leadership; working on PhD in Ed Leadership
Lord	28	13	Y	8	BS in Ed content; MEd Curriculum & Instruction; EdS; PhD Ed Leadership
Clark	13	5	N	9	BS; MEd; working on EdD Leadership
Rusty	10	1	Y	7	BS content; MEd Instruction; EdS; working on EdD Leadership
Wright	18	5	N	13	BA Ed; MEd Curriculum & Instruction; MEd Administration; EdS; working on EdD Leadership
Joseph	17	4	Y	8	BA content; MA in Ed; EdS
Adams	14	2	Y	5	BS in Ed; MEd Curriculum & Instruction; EdS; EdD Leadership
Range	10-28	1-13	n/a	5-20	n/a
Average	18	5	n/a	10	n/a

Methods

Data Collection

With consideration to a qualitative case study approach, this multiple case study relied on extensive data collecting from multiple sources (Creswell, 2104). This study relied primarily upon the following sources of data: interviews, district policy documentation, minutes from district board meetings, printed and online news stories, and other online communication documents. Utilizing these sources of data was made in consideration to both the assumptions of constructivism, the sensemaking framework, and practical limitations of school contexts. The length of data collection was approximately a year, from Fall 2018-Fall 2019.

Interviews. Interviews are a way to gather information from events that cannot be reproduced, from situations we cannot observe, or when information regarding a person's interpretations are sought (Merriam, 2009). Interviewing was the main data collection method to understand each building-level leader's experiences and what factors contributed to sensemaking related to disciplining students with disabilities. To elicit the amount of data desired, while being mindful of the amount of in-person interview time required of participants, each participant agreed to the following multi-step interviewing process.

- Step 1 of data collection was an online Qualtrics survey (See Appendix C) in which various background information was gathered from participants through specific, probing questions. Asking these questions as part of the main, in-person interview would have added a substantial amount of time. The types of background information sought included: number of years teaching before

administration, education levels and locations, certifications, content areas, years at current position, and any previous buildings, etc.

- Step 2 of the data collection was an in-person, in-depth interview (See Appendix D). This main interview utilized a semi-structured protocol with broad, open-ended questions (Merriam, 2009). The questions were developed utilizing the broad categories of (1) principal background information (2) school contexts (3) principal leadership and (4) discipline. This will give multiple opportunities for responses to include information indicative of the sensemaking categories (i.e., structural, relational, individual-personal, individual- background). This method of interviewing allowed for focusing on the building-level leader's views, illuminating factors that shaped how they make sense of their unique backgrounds, knowledge, and contexts. The interview duration ranged from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes with an average of around an hour for each. The interview sites were located in local coffee shops or restaurants which were chosen at the convivence of the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of each participant. The recordings were then transcribed for analysis. As qualitative methods usually see data collection and analysis occurring simultaneously, and reflexivity allows for my subjective influence to be understood, immediately following each interview I wrote memos to ensure the retention of ideas that might be significant at a later date, but might otherwise be lost to time (Glaser, 1978).
- Step 3 of data collection consisted of in-person and electronic follow-up questionings (See Appendix E). All of the participants gave their enthusiastic

support and availability for such methods and differing numbers of follow-ups were conducted. All participated in at least 1 electronic follow-up question, and 4 participated in in-person follow-ups.

Before the first participant interview, I assessed my protocol by completing two pilot interviews with school administrators that did not fall into the cases under analysis. This allowed for the determination of needed revisions, and if a 45-60-minute desired timeframe was realistic. Undertaking the pilot interviews helped to identify questions that were not worded well, questions that interrupted the flow of the interview, identify needed follow up questions, and aided in deleting questions that ended up being redundant or not of the importance initially regarded as.

Document review. The information found within documents can be a valuable source of data, sometimes offering a more complete understanding of a subject than interviews and observations (Merriam, 2009, p. 155). My decision to collect documentation rested upon sensemaking theory's understanding that individuals construct meaning by drawing from their background knowledge and experience interacting with their specific environments (Walls, 2017). The data gleaned from the document review was interwoven with the data from the interviews to present a more credible and thorough understanding and analysis of the context in which the cases operated. Therefore, it was especially important to gather and analyze district-specific documents of: (1) official board policies – for prescribed structure – found through hundreds of pages of board policy documents, especially those pertinent to discipline, special education, special education discipline, administrator evaluations, and professional development; (2) individual school handbooks and other board policy documents including superintendent

PowerPoints on direction of district; and (3) district board meeting minutes for the 2016-2017 school year. In addition to the district documents, over 30 news stories related to the school district, legal matters, discipline, and special education were reviewed. Lastly, dozens of other online communications from schools (including a Principal Newsletter to only staff) were reviewed. These documents helped me examine questions of how and why principals discipline like they do, providing insight into the structural factors present during building-level administrator sensemaking. District policy documents were organized through the categories of discipline, discipline-specific to individuals with disabilities, and anything else that might impact the knowledge and actions of building-level administrators. The additional areas that comprised this last category were principal evaluation policy and professional development policy. Additionally, legal cases relating to special education discipline were also analyzed. Further documentation reviewed included newspaper articles relevant to anything discipline or students with disabilities related in the district, administrator newsletter, and district and state data demographic data. The collection of special education monitoring documents from the State department of education also gave a more in-depth look into the overall context of the district as it pertains to special education students. Special education documents collected consisted of reports on rates of exclusionary discipline discrepancies, rates of transition discrepancies, and enrollment demographic information. I also collected data from the U.S. Census for the socioeconomic and educational attainment of the district purposes.

Data Analysis

Following a qualitative design dictates that data analysis is conducted throughout the study, simultaneously collecting and analyzing (Merriam, 2009). As multicase study

research generates a considerable amount of data, e.g., transcripts of interviews, memos, documents, and research notes, careful management was utilized. All interview data went through two main stages of analysis, first as an individual case analysis, and second as a cross-cases analysis. During the interview analysis, document review information was utilized as contextual support to interview data. While the intent was to do an in-depth individual case analysis, I found presenting too much information on each case would have compromised participants' anonymity. The individual case analysis focused on participants' career backgrounds, demographics of their buildings, thoughts on mission of special education, understandings of special education, their typical day, what they identified as the most challenging part of the job, personal leadership style. Therefore, the individual case analysis was utilized in a more descriptive manner, to give additional context to the cross-case analysis. Stake (2009) presented that it is common for individual case reports, "sometimes abbreviated" (p.39) to be included in the multiple case report. As it became necessary to minimize the individual, by default the majority of findings in chapter four came about through the cross-case analysis.

In order to best manage my data, during the within-case and cross-case analyses, I implemented a system based on Marshall and Rossman's (2006) seven analytic phases of analysis: (a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes (see Table 5); (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understandings; and (g) writing the report.

Table 5

Sensemaking category Creation with Themes

Walls (2017) Categories	New Categories	Themes (codes)	Examples
Individual	Individual-background	Collegiate Training	“So through my education, I was not thoroughly prepared to the world of special education.”
		Previous PD	“The last school district that I was an administrator, which was a smaller school district, we actually did have training. It was kind of neat.”
		Previous Experiences	“A lot of it has been through just my own self-discovery and making calls.” “A lot of OJT.”
		Beliefs	“No, because I was not involved with special education in my previous districts.”
Cognitive	Individual-personal (incorporates both cognitive & emotional)	Process of discipline	“You’re getting the discipline you’re supposed to get.”
		Size of disruption	“It was crazy. There was a four-on-four brawl last year that involved a parent.”
Emotional		Teacher emotions leading to thoughts of position	“They want to feel supported.” “They want to be able to teach.”
		Not in control	“It’s hard. We’re dealing with big kids. Big kids can be scary.” “I had one student that I thought would come back

			and try to shoot me or something.”
		Obedience	“So there was ultimately a limited amount of time we had, so you'd get to the point with that person that you'd have to say, Today's not gonna work.”
Prospective	Prospective	Need to work with case manager	“Which is why I think it is important to consult the case manager because they should know a lot about that kid.”
		I've noticed something I should look into	“You have to understand functional behavior. Most students we know are trying to get something or get out of something.”
Retrospective	Retrospective	Consequences follow behavior	“I would say it's more reactive than proactive.” “We had a list of non-negotiables. This would have you sent home, and this would involve some sort of out-of-school suspension.”
		I knew they would be back	“High flyers, repeat offenders. The same kid doing the same thing over and over.”
Social	Relational	Keeping teachers happy	“They expect if they take the time out of their day to send a referral then they want something done.” “They want consistency and accountability for students.”
		School Safety	“Does your student feel safe at school?”

	Student(s)	“We need to have true alternatives for students”
Structural	Formal District Policy	Conference, detention, in-school-suspension, 1-180 Days out-of-school suspension or expulsion. “Inconsistent. Different expectations for different adults, for different students.”
	Legal Considerations	“That you need to follow the laws, that is it. Finding them you’re on your own, but follow them.” “The buck stops with me.”
	Evaluations	“Not that I’m aware of. No”
	Professional Development	“There isn’t any unique special ed professional development.”
	School Context	“We say we do restorative practice. But it’s not consistent and everyone is trained at a different level with it.”
	Informal Policy	“I don’t even know what the referrals are regarding special education because that’s not really one of the things that we even look at.”

I organized my data first through an excel spreadsheet and then through utilizing an online data management system, Dedoose. I further charted all of my participants' answers together under each respective question. This allowed for analysis on a question

by question basis making it easier to find similarities and differences. I kept files for the different types of documents collected and limited myself to one field journal.

Furthermore, I utilized the memo writing capabilities within the data management system during my coding process.

Immersing myself in the data began immediately following each interview where I undertook memo writing. I sat and kept track of my thoughts, reflections, and additional ideas in a field journal that I utilized throughout my study. These memos served as the beginning of data immersion and analysis as well as a guidepost for additional data needed. My field notes were also utilized as a check to ongoing interpretations of raw data, providing for a more thorough analysis (Merriam, 1998). Throughout the study I continued to immerse myself in the data while analyzing by reading and rereading the transcripts individually, reading and rereading participant answers collectively by interview question and by listening to the interviews several times each. Furthermore, I coded my data multiple times, once through excel and a second time through Dedoose. This multiple coding allowed for ample opportunity to become more immersed than if just utilizing one system.

Analyzing the cases began framed with specific categories as dictated by Walls' (2017) dichotomous pairs sensemaking framework. This included individual/social, cognitive/emotional, and prospective/retrospective. While Glaser and Strauss (1967) cautioned using preselected categories tends to mask relevant data, I allowed for overarching categories to emerge where I found they existed.

For example, after the first pass of coding utilizing Walls' pairs, other themes emerged that required Walls' (2017) framework to be altered (see Table 5). The initial

category of individual was too large to be effectively navigated. Thus, the decision was made to break individual into individual-personal, which encompassed the cognitive/emotional dichotomous pair, and individual-background, which looked at historical milestones, events, and interactions. This was a natural break dictated by participants attending to both their historical lives and their current at-the-time functions. Though initial coding took place utilizing excel, transitioning from excel into Dedoose allowed for these large categories to be more effectively analyzed into themes. The themes that first emerged in the category of individual-background were previous experiences and previous training. These themes were still too large to determine the potential impact of each; therefore, previous experiences were further broken down into previous experiences personal and related to work experiences, and previous formal PD. In the process of these multiple reviews, the theme of personal beliefs also emerged. Moving from individual-background into individual-personal Walls' (2017) dichotomous pairs of cognitive/emotional were utilized during initial coding.

Looking at the cognitive aspect of sensemaking, Walls (2017) prescribed paying attention to the size of disruption as being a potential militating factor. While the size of disruption was sought in participant interviews, I found the theme of understanding the process of discipline was forefront during cognitive processing. Indeed, the idea of a disruption occurring due to (mis)behavior presented as being understood to be followed by a consequence for the (mis)behavior which caused the disruption. The emotional aspect of sensemaking continued with Walls thoughts of position and control over the building. However, the theme of fear quickly emerged to the forefront of the data. Looking towards social sensemaking, the category of relational took over with themes

expanding on ideas of school safety and teachers. More precisely, while the theme of school safety remained, keeping teachers happy and the ideas of relationships with both teachers and students also emerged. Lastly, the idea of structure was expanded from Walls.

Structure in a school setting tends to be directed through formal board policy, however, the themes of informal policy and legal understandings were salient in looking at the sensemaking of participants. Further breaking down formal district policy, the themes of evaluation, professional development, and individual school context were identified. Different than Walls' (2017) understanding, prospective and retrospective were given their own categories as a way to identify how the other categories (e.g., Structural) might participate in administrators' understandings. For instance, knowing that the majority of discipline policy operated in a retrospective manner was able to be contrasted with the prospective policy of professional development in alternative discipline techniques.

As immersion in the data and coding commenced, notes were utilized to record thoughts, making connections between participants and themes, and recording additional thoughts to seek out answers within the data. These notes helped with organization and to connect the data from interviews to corresponding data from the document reviews. As the themes above emerged and were being understood across cases, their utility was evaluated through Stake's (1995) theme/case rating worksheet.

To attend to all participants' responses and understandings and not just focus on what I thought might be of most interest, I made a point to maintain a fairly consistent representation of participant's ideas through quotes, selecting between 29-39 quotes as

evidence from each participant. After the cases were analyzed individually and comparatively, I undertook a review to promote trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

Merriam (2009) stressed the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research.. In order to promote trustworthiness, qualitative research is concerned with establishing how credible and trustworthy the findings are (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Maxwell, 2005). To attend to trustworthiness, limitations were identified and considered using multiple techniques during analysis The conclusions from my study were supported through the use of triangulation, checking interpretations with participants, having peers comment on emergent findings, and by attending to my own reflexivity and bias.

Triangulation. This study relied on the truthfulness of participants. Therefore, triangulation was utilized as a way to check findings My study utilized two main strategies of triangulation: the use of multiple sources of data and the use of multiple methods of collecting the data (Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). The use of multiple sources of data (interviews and documents) allowed for comparison through multiple points of contact and multiple interviews in different times and places. Being able to compare multiple sources of data across time, place, and perspectives promoted trustworthiness of findings. Having the information gleaned from data correspond to what participants were relaying during interviews strengthened the content of participant response. Utilizing multiple methods to collect data (interviews, documents, state data) allowed me to check what was being understood from an interview through what I read in documents. Indeed, relying on just one type of data source would have promoted questions of trustworthiness.

Checking interpretations. Also known as member-checks, was an important way in which I prevented creating misinterpretations of what a participant has conveyed. Maxwell (2005) pointed to member-checks as being an important way for a researcher to identify their own biases through faulty interpretations of data. During member-checking I explicitly sought out the assurance of participants who were providing the data. This was done in the form of transcript review, as emailed to participants, where they were able to review and expand upon or contest what was said. Three administrators sought out clarifications to their original statements: Administrator Rusty, Administrator Joseph, and Administrator Wright. Furthermore, member checking in the form of in-person statement review was completed with Administrator Rusty, Administrator Lord, Administrator Wright, Administrator Clark, and Administrator Joseph.

Peer review. A form of credibility that is widely accepted and utilized throughout all forms of research is that of peer review or having others knowledgeable about the topic and methods comment on your work. Not only was this process inherently built into the dissertation, but I also utilized peer review through 3 other graduate students, not all necessarily as familiar with my topic, to gain valuable insight on how my data was being interpreted.

Reflexivity and bias. Maxwell (2005) suggested that a researcher's bias can influence a study through selecting data that fits with a researchers' preconceptions. To avoid this threat, a researcher must identify their previously held values and assumptions. Creswell (2014) identified making biases visible to the audience as a strategy to combat their influences, as it allows readers to understand how the researcher interpreted the data.

As a former special education teacher with multiple years of observing principals and their interactions with my students has potentially left me looking towards the outcome of this study from a place of deficit thinking. This assumption might have been compounded during the literature review with the seeming greater amount of research pointing to a principal's failings as a leader of special education. However, knowing this, I will combat these assumptions by being very careful with my analysis of a principal's responses. Furthermore, I am very aware that my identification as a special education teacher and doctoral candidate researcher might unduly influence a principal's response through their preconceived notions of such an identification. Utilizing open-ended questioning, probing for understandings, and asking questions that might be seemingly unrelated to perceived "guilt seeking".

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the methods utilized in my study with the rationale behind their choices. Additionally, an in-depth look at my participants and site was discussed. Lastly, how data was collected and analyzed was presented. In Chapters 4-5 I present the findings from my study and then provide further discussion and recommendations.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from this multiple case study, which was undertaken to identify how building-level administrators made sense of disciplining students with disabilities. This study presents insights into seven administrators within a single school district, over four school buildings, utilizing document analysis and interviews which elicited perceptions of discipline, special education, and leadership practices. Accordingly, this chapter answers the following main research question and four sub-questions:

(1) How do principals make sense of disciplining students with disabilities?

a. What are the **individual-background** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, what was the influence of a principal's preparation training program, or any relayed personal experiences?

b. What are the **individual-personal** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, how is principal sensemaking shaped by cognitive and emotional responses?

c. What are the **structural** factors that influence principal sensemaking when disciplining a student with disabilities, for example: district discipline policies; discipline in general and/or special education identified as part of a principal's evaluation; school safety measures?

b. What are the **relational** factors that influence principal sensemaking?

For instance, how is principal sensemaking shaped by social interactions?

The following sections begin with an abbreviated look at individual cases (as discussed in Ch. 3) discussing their career backgrounds, a self-reported demographics of their

buildings, their thoughts on mission of special education, and some in-depth understandings of special education. Each administrator then describes their typical day and what they identify as the most challenging part of the job. After individual cases, the multicase finding sections will address each research sub-question, respectively.

Individual Cases

Administrator Klein

Administrator Klein has worked in education as both a core content teacher and an administrator in multiple districts at the secondary level. Administrator Klein has been an assistant and head sports coach, and a sponsor of multiple extracurricular clubs. In their capacity as teacher, Administrator Klein reported routinely working with students with disabilities. When describing their building Administrator Klein estimated the racial demographics within 5% of actual reported numbers but did not mention anything related to free and reduced lunch numbers or special education percentages. When asked to describe the mission of special education in their building Administrator Klein stated, "Independence and maximum academic development and preparation for life beyond high school." When asked to describe in their own words what options a student with disabilities has to be suspended both between 1-10 days and beyond the 10-day mark, Administrator Klein responded:

1-10 days the student's suspension history should be documented and evaluated for any patterns of suspension. Beyond 10-days requires a meeting to determine services on the 11th day and beyond if no pattern has been created. A manifestation destination meeting is required if the student is subjected to a long-term suspension.

Administrator Klein reported that they were not familiar at all with the Dear Colleague guidance letters that are issued from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. When asked to walk through a typical day, Administrator Klein stated:

Primary responsibilities would be safety and supervision of students at the school, then support, and guidance, and mentorship of teachers within the school. Daily means all day before school, during school, after school, those responsibilities exist. There's meetings and things that we have to do, and those takeaway, but the work does not go away. It's still there. 100% of my time is spent on school specifically and directly related to supervisory support tasks, very little on professional development and things like that. I have to do that at different times.

When asked to identify a leadership style, Administrator Klein relayed that they were a relater that was interested in building relationships. Administrator Klein identified adult struggles as the most challenging part of their job. Administrator Klein has been an administrator for 2 years in their current building but had previous experience in another district as an administrator. Administrator Klein was responsible for overseeing all the special education students in their building.

Administrator Lord

Administrator Lord has worked in education as both a core content teacher and an administrator. Administrator Lord has only ever worked in 1 district but has experience in two different buildings as an administrator. All of Administrator Lord's experience has been at the secondary level. Administrator Lord has been a coach and extracurricular for multiple clubs, one for 14 years. Administrator Lord reported that in their capacity as a core teacher they taught ~5-10 students with disabilities a year but could only remember

~ 2 students participating over the years as a club sponsor/coach. When describing their building, Administrator Lord underestimated the diversity in their building by over 10% and slightly overestimated the FRL percentage. They reported that they were at a “privileged” school. Administrator Lord did not mention special education when discussing their building, but later described the mission of special education in their building:

To serve students and to help level the playing field for them to their non-special ed peers. About 10-12 years ago we went to a resource model and stopped class within a class and I don't believe that's a successful model given the number of students that are failing...Special ed students that are failing. I don't like that model. But we don't really look at data and we don't really do anything with the data, so it just continues along because...teachers like it because it's easy.

When asked to describe in their own words what options a student with disabilities has to be suspended both between 1-10 days and beyond the 10-day mark, Administrator Lord responded:

If the offense is as a result of the student's disability, then he/she cannot be suspended for it. If the offense is not a result of the disability then the student may be suspended but educational services must be offered, typically through a homebound placement.

Administrator Lord reported that they were not familiar at all with the Dear Colleague guidance letters that are issued from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. When asked to walk through a typical day, Administrator Lord stated:

Well, no two days are the same. Although, sometimes it feels like Groundhog's day and it's the same thing day after day. Typically, there's discipline related to attendance issues. There's student management issues somewhat. There's instructional leadership. There's PLT meetings. There's IEP meetings. There's advisory meetings. A lot of meetings. Ideally, my day would be at least 50 percent instructional leadership. That doesn't often happen. Coaching, evaluating. Whatever. I think in the Fall before things got pretty crazy, I was able to go to about five classrooms a day and that was my target; what I was trying to do... Since Thanksgiving, that's not happened at all. It's just been off the chain with discipline. I am unique in that I am the administrator for the tier three kids. And so, they've just been off the charts discipline wise. A lot of mental health issues...It's been really ... There's a reason they're tier three. This is a behavioral tier three.

When asked to identify a leadership style, Administrator Lord relayed that they believed in servant leadership. "That's my job is to serve. But I also believe in equity, and so I very much try to bring social justice into the work that I do. And so, I think it's not transformational; it's transformative." Administrator Lord identified lack of accountability among stakeholders, including adults, as the most challenging part of their job. Administrator Lord has been an administrator for 13 years in their current building but had previous experience in another building within the same district as an administrator. Administrator Lord teaches collegiate level leadership and education law courses, including special education topics.

Administrator Clark

Administrator Clark has worked in education as a core content teacher in multiple districts at the secondary level. Administrator Clark was a coach for multiple sports. In their capacity as teacher, Administrator Clark reported routinely working with students with disabilities. When describing their building Administrator Clark estimated the racial demographics within 2% of actual reported numbers for Black students but did not mention anything related to other groups. Administrator Clark estimated that free and reduced lunch numbers had been increasing in their building but underestimated the percentage by over 20%. Administrator Clark did not mention special education. When asked to describe the mission of special education in their building Administrator Clark stated, “I mean, it's just to make sure that our ... nothing is in the way of our special education students being as successful as their general education students.”

Administrator Clark reported that they were familiar with the Dear Colleague guidance letters that are issued from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services but was unfamiliar with the one referred to in the introduction of this study. When asked to walk through a typical day, Administrator Clark stated:

A big role I have is doing classroom observations. So we are supposed to do five observations a year on our non-tenured teachers and then do three on our tenured teachers. So that is like, that's a priority to get into those classrooms and that's where I enjoy. So that's something you hope to be able to do. So that's like a number one priority is really getting those observations in and being an educational leader for those teachers. But then, throughout the day, it's dealing

with discipline issues as they arise. I have one assistant principal, so she usually takes the lead or is the first responder. So if she's busy or if she's working on something or if she's doing observations herself, that's something that then I have responsibility for. But then it's just also like day to day operations, signing work orders, signing leave forms, double-checking the budget so we can order things. Kind of those kind of management type duties, which I hadn't experienced before in an assistant principal role.

When asked to identify a leadership style, Administrator Clark relayed, “like connectiveness, positivity, I just feel myself as a glass half full type of leader and kind of relaxed. So I think, my leadership style I would say is calm in a storm. So not letting a lot of things rattle me to keep the even keel, keep things steady.” Administrator Clark identified the role as middle between things that come from district and their teachers. Administrator Clark has been an administrator for 5 years in their current building. Administrator Clark works at the middle school level.

Administrator Rusty

Administrator Rusty has worked in education as both a core content teacher and an administrator in multiple districts at the secondary level, middle school, and high school. Administrator Rusty has been a sports coach for multiple sports. In their capacity as teacher, Administrator Rusty reported routinely working with students with disabilities, but only ~1-3 per class. Administrator Rusty passed the certification test for special education but had never worked as a special education teacher. When describing their building Administrator Rusty estimated the racial demographics within 4% of actual reported numbers but overestimated free and reduced lunch numbers by almost 20%.

Administrator Rusty did not mention anything related to special education when describing their school. When asked to describe the mission of special education in their building Administrator Rusty relayed their school did not have a mission-specific to their special education department. When asked to describe in their own words what options a student with disabilities has to be suspended both between 1-10 days and beyond the 10-day mark, Administrator Rusty responded:

Students with IEPs that are suspended in the first 10-days of the suspension are treated just like students without IEPs. As the days get closer depending on how frequent the suspensions, the school may want to look at whether or not the IEP is adequate. At 10- days the school must do a manifest meeting and determine whether or not the behavior causing the suspension is part of the student's disability. Schools must even if deciding to suspend for longer than 10-days provide SPED services to the student.

Administrator Rusty reported that they were not familiar at all with the Dear Colleague guidance letters that are issued from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. When asked to walk through a typical day, Administrator Rusty stated:

I do the whole school's athletics programs, so on a daily basis working with coaches and then athletes and a wide array of stuff. I do student discipline, although that's not my main focus of my job. It's something that is definitely prevalent within the job itself. Supervision is really a big part of the job, is being seen, being around, being accessible to teachers and students alike. I would say that it's expected at our school to be an instructional leader. I try to get into a few classrooms per week and observe and give feedback to the staff members. To me,

I mean a lot of people that the most important part of the job is the instructional leadership. I would say that yes, I think that instructional leadership is probably the most important with the way that instructional leadership is ... the way we implement it is not as important. Giving feedback, obviously, is good, but creating a safe, disruptive-free environment is probably one of the most important things we can do. And we do that by being visible in the classrooms, being visible in the halls, having good relationships with our students, empowering our staff to be able to create a good, I would say the disruptive-free environment.

Administrator Rusty identified a lack of support from the district inhibited them from doing what they felt was right. Administrator Rusty has been an administrator for 1 year in their current building but had previous experience in another district as an administrator.

Administrator Wright

Administrator Wright has worked in education as a non-core content teacher and an administrator in one district. Administrator Wright has been an assistant and head sports coach, and a sponsor of multiple extracurricular clubs. In their capacity as teacher, Administrator Wright reported routinely working with students with disabilities estimating around 10-20% of their classes were students with IEPs. When describing their building Administrator Wright did not mention racial demographics but overestimated free and reduced lunch numbers by 24%. Administrator Wright did not mention special education. When asked to describe the mission of special education in their building Administrator Wright stated, "We do not have our own mission. If I could give it a mission right now, based upon what I see, if I had to guess what it was, it would

be, to survive." When asked to describe in their own words what options a student with disabilities has to be suspended both between 1-10 days and beyond the 10-day mark, Administrator Wright responded, "I can say what options we give...If suspended 1-10 days, typically they will go to our Suspension center. When being suspended over 10-days they are put on homebound." Administrator Wright reported that they were not familiar at all with the Dear Colleague guidance letters that are issued from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. When asked to walk through a typical day, Administrator Wright stated:

So I typically start with a meeting of some kind, and then I supervise students. I see students on discipline referrals. I see students who have requested to see me and just have an issue they need to talk about. I have a list of 22 students that I triage with, 16 out of those 22 are daily triages, so I try to see them within the first two, two and a half hours of school starting...The other six is just a weekly triage where we meet for a few minutes and just check-in. I try to get into one or two classrooms a day and just do a teacher observation. I also try to get in my teachers' classrooms, the teachers that I supervise their classrooms, as frequently as I can, not to do an observation but just to be present or ask what I can do to support them, or just so the students see that we are out, and we are involved. Much of the day is spent with just supervision. So from 10:20 to about 1:15 every day, it is strictly student supervision in the halls and in the commons. Obviously, if there's a major issue with a student, so a drug issue, a fight, an assault, anything of that nature, then we break away from that supervision. But a lot of supervision.

And then in the afternoon, I tend to catch up with students on discipline referrals, triage situations that are going on, call parents.

When asked to identify a leadership style, Administrator Wright relayed that they were an encourager and cheerleader, trying to support, but holding consistent expectation.

Administrator Wright also hoped that people saw her as a leader with integrity.

Administrator Wright identified a lack of support from their bosses as the most challenging part of their job. Administrator Wright has been an administrator for 5 years in their current building.

Administrator Joseph

Administrator Joseph has worked in education as both a core content teacher and an administrator in multiple districts at the secondary level. Administrator Klein has been a sports coach and been a part of district committees. In their capacity as teacher, Administrator Joseph reported routinely working with students with disabilities. When describing their building Administrator Joseph was upfront about not knowing their numbers but said they would probably be able to ballpark them. When asked to describe the mission of special education in their building Administrator Joseph stated, "I mean, it's super vague. It's really a generic, but our mission is to serve our students, get them on grade level, provide them- And get them in the least restrictive environment that we can have them in." When asked to describe in their own words what options a student with disabilities has to be suspended both between 1-10 days and beyond the 10-day mark, Administrator Joseph responded:

A student suspended out of school between 1-10 says has the option of attending a

suspension center where their work is sent for them and certified staff are present to assist them. They may also choose to remain out of school and may receive their work electronically. All work can be completed and turned in for full credit. All students suspended in school are ensured their SPED minutes by making sure the assistance they need is provided by specialists. Students on IEPs may not be suspended over 10-days without a manifest hearing/meeting.

Administrator Joseph reported that they were not familiar at all with the Dear Colleague guidance letters that are issued from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. When asked to walk through a typical day, Administrator Joseph stated:

I would have loved to have gotten in one classroom a day. But that didn't happen most times, maybe two a week. And I was discipline revolving door. Just next, next, next, next, next, next, next, next. I'd say 90, 95%. So I would have to supervise the cafeteria, so I'm counting those situations. And maybe I shouldn't, so maybe 80, 85%, and 10 percent supervision and maybe five percent instructional leadership. I mean those are all arbitrary numbers. You can write down any variation of that, the vast, vast majority. Was discipline, yeah. And a lot of times when you're supervising, you're trying to knock out some discipline at the same time too. Hey John, I got to see you anyways about that thing, let's talk real quick.

When asked to identify a leadership style, Administrator Joseph relayed that, "I work for students. And then I work for teachers. I don't know if that's servant leadership, I don't know, I believe in servant leadership, but I call it, I work for you." Administrator Joseph identified negative or conflict conversations as the most challenging part of their job.

Administrator Joseph has been an administrator for 4 years in their current building but had previous experience in another district as an administrator. Administrator Joseph was responsible for overseeing all the special education students in his building.

Administrator Adams

Administrator Adams has worked in education as both a core content teacher and an administrator in one district secondary level. Administrator Adams was a sponsor of a few extracurricular clubs. In their capacity as teacher, Administrator Adams reported routinely working with students with disabilities. When describing their building Administrator Adams estimated the racial demographics within 1% of actual reported numbers but did not mention anything related to free and reduced lunch numbers.

Administrator Adams overestimated the special education population as being at 30%, which was probably higher than one school but lower than the others. When asked to describe the mission of special education in their building Administrator Adams stated, "I would say to support students with special needs as much as possible." When asked to describe in their own words what options a student with disabilities has to be suspended both between 1-10 days and beyond the 10-day mark, Administrator Adams responded:

Fewer day OSS include things like fighting, drugs, alcohol. Rarely is a student ever assigned 10-days OSS after one incident. 10-days OSS are for things like weapons, felony charges, things that might happen in the community like murder, robbery, etc. Most times an IEP student can accumulate smaller infractions of OSS that add up to more than 10-days OSS.

Administrator Adams reported that they were not familiar at all with the Dear Colleague guidance letters that are issued from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. When asked to walk through a typical day, Administrator Adams stated:

So I would work with attendance, discipline, student needs, concerns that they would bring to us or want us to know as the administration. Anything that deals with schedule changes, those types of things too. We work with two counselors. I also supervise [two departments]. And so as far as teacher evaluations, classroom walkthroughs, any concerns of those departments, I attend those department meetings. So anything that works with those two departments then I kind of supervise them, the conduit between them, I guess, and the principal or the larger leadership team.

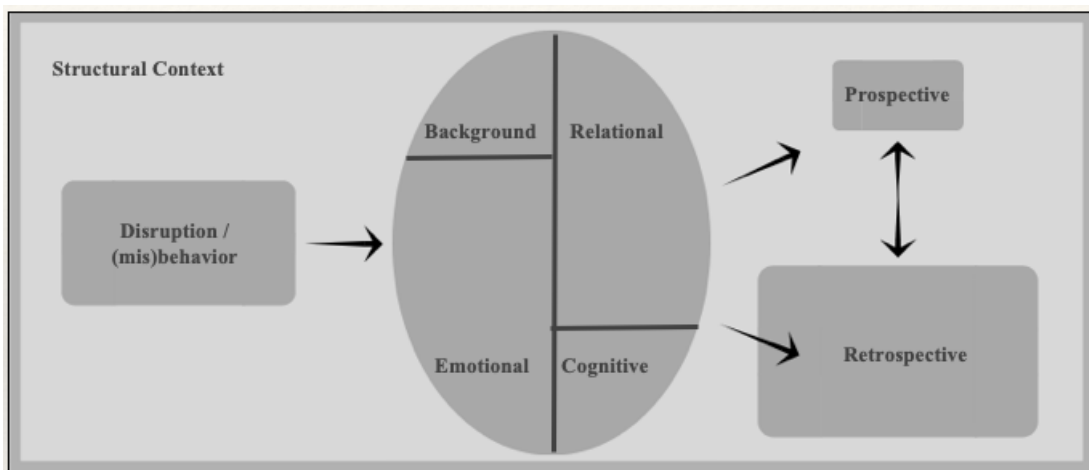
When asked to identify a leadership style, Administrator Adams relayed, “I think I’ve called it adaptive leadership. I think that I have just taken what I have learned from other people, even my first few years, and then my experience that I have learned over the last several years and adapted and become a different person based on those experiences.”

Multicase Comparative Findings

Sensemaking, as guided by Walls (2017) framework, gave a generalized and equal overview of different areas from which administrators might draw to make sense of a disruption or novel situation. Walls’ framework was based on the dichotomous pairs of individual/social, cognitive/emotional, and prospective/retrospective. However, based on the findings presented in this chapter the following figure (see Figure 2) gives a more accurate representation of my participants sensemaking and which aspects were more heavily drawn upon (relational over individual-background, and emotional over

cognitive) when disciplining students with disabilities. My figure also shows that administrators were more retrospective in their actions, or tried to stop (mis)behavior by reacting to the (mis)behavior, not prospectively by trying to prevent a (mis)behavior for occurring. As will be discussed in the following sections, administrators relied more heavily on emotions and relationships when disciplining, as guided through limited background knowledge and corrective structure, and acted mainly retrospectively.

Figure 2: Educational Sensemaking Discipline



Individual-Background Factors in Sensemaking

This section examines the individual-background factors that shaped principal sensemaking in this study. Analyzing interview transcripts and follow up conversations, an all-encompassing individual-background theme presented: *Not having in-depth background knowledge/ preparation caused building-level administrators to seek out special education meaning-making information through self-directed and alternative means.* From the sensemaking framework presented in Figure 2, this is understood through the shrinking of the background aspect. Understanding the influences of a person's background and previous experiences is vital to see how it might affect their current sensemaking processes. In discussing backgrounds, it quickly emerged that the

administrators in the study did not have the background knowledge/preparation to give highly individualized considerations to students with disabilities. Indeed, none of the participants felt they received anything in their training over a superficial level of understanding. For example, two administrators flat out responded that they had no formal university training in special education, however, one later stated they did concerning the legal understanding of importance. Much the same, four others pointed to a bare minimum understanding conveyed that it was an area of legal importance. One participant stated they thought they must have had a class during their training, but could not really remember. The participants also did not have the background knowledge and/or training to consider influencing behaviors in ways other than through punitive, exclusionary discipline practices. Indeed, they readily mentioned their lack of official background knowledge and training as well as not being prepared to work with students with disabilities.

College Preparation Programs

Just as teachers are prepared to become educators in college, administrators are also meant to be prepared for their roles through college degree/certification course programs. Yet, the administrators in this study revealed they did not receive background training that prepared them to be leaders of students with disabilities. This is not totally unexpected as the state department of education only recently (2017) mandated a single training courses for general education teachers in special education content and currently does not mandate any specific special education training for administrator preparation. Having to make sense of disciplining students with disabilities without explicit teaching and conversations within their degree programs could impact their ability to shape actions

based on content knowledge. Thinking back to both teaching and administrator programs, it quickly emerged that the administrators interviewed did not receive an amount of information that led them to consider themselves knowledgeable in working with students with disabilities as either teachers or administrators. All seven of the administrators made statements similar to the following from MR:

So, through my education, I was not thoroughly prepared to the world of special education. So, when I had students in my classes, when I was in the classroom, with IEPs, 504s, I did a lot of my own research and what does it mean when an IEP says this? Moving into administration, I have had to learn a lot more if I'm going to support those individuals giving that instruction to those students. And again, a lot of it has been through just my own self-discovery and making calls, consulting with colleagues, looking up laws and regulations and statutes. That you need to follow the laws, that is it. Finding them, you're on your own, but follow them. (Administrator Wright)

Even though all administrators acknowledged lacking background information, several did mention they received cursory instruction during preparation. This lack of content depth from preparation was reflected in statements like the following from Administrator Joseph:

I guess in my education classes I absolutely learned about special education, on some superficial level. Right now, my most challenging obstacle is I'm, in the principal role, you're supposed to know everything. So, I'm supposed to know. So, I've got to make a decision right now, and I'm not equipped to make these decisions honestly.

Administrator Adams acknowledged, "it was my specialist degree or leadership degree where some of that law and policy was finally explained and looked at a little more," and Administrator Klein, too, was forthcoming with the training deficit, stating, "Specifically, certification courses extremely limited. It was the minimum exposure to be aware of things like 'free and appropriate' and making sure that we knew that these things were legal responsibilities and obligations from an academic standpoint."

Administrator Clark's take on what was learned, "I mean, I can't really give you one example of anything I learned about it. I would say, maybe legality...but no, I can't."

Administrator Rusty too wasn't confident in their knowledge through training, either, stating, "Nothing. I didn't have any classes in my principal certification...I think I have very little knowledge of special education." However, reflecting upon meetings with other administrators stated, "but I probably have more knowledge than the average assistant principal." With one administrator acknowledging zero training and the others reflecting very little, relying on background knowledge to make sense of disciplining students with disabilities becomes based on alternative factors or knowledge that was picked up through other means.

There was also evidence of the desire for more training in special education from preparation programs, but skepticism about whether they could receive such. Again, reflecting on the administrative program, Administrator Rusty shared:

I wish that we could've at least had the conversation in these classes. But I think that you're just not going to get qualified people to be in there to have those conversations that has actually had the experience in a classroom, too. I think like 20% of all students are special education, and that may be a high ball. But just

think of that. We have 20% of our students in special education. A lot of schools have 40%-50% free and reduced lunch. A very diverse group of kids and we're really only being taught how to treat one segment.

On the Job Training (non-professional development)

The theme of “on the job training” as a means of background special education knowledge acquisition was prominent from administrators in this study. This theme emerged as participants discussed where they felt they most learned about special education. For example, administrators stated, “As a teacher, I learned about special education in a [my] class setting,” (Administrator Joseph) and, “I would say when I became the most aware of it [special education knowledge] was probably my fourth year of teaching” (Administrator Clark). Similarly, Administrator Adams also considered most of their knowledge came about through, “on the job learning process...[pause] relying on others.”

One administrator presented that special education knowledge might not be needed until directly involved with being responsible for it, and then lots of on the job training. Administrator Klein highlighted, “I was not involved with special education in my previous districts. This is my first direct experience with governing and being responsible for special ed this year. Lots of OJT [on the job training] this year.” In a follow-up conversation, Administrator Klein relayed that they were previously responsible for teaching students with disabilities in their general education courses. The thought that a teacher would not be responsible for students with disabilities in their classes might shape actions when working with those same students in different situations.

As demonstrated earlier in this study, all of these interviewees have had extensive collegiate training in not only general education teaching, but also administration and leadership. Yet, all seven relayed that their knowledge of special education came mainly from on the job training, self-discovery, and others on which they can rely. Such a limited individual-background knowledge base decreases what ideas they can draw upon during their sensemaking about disciplining students with disabilities.

Self-Reflection on Lack of Training Impact

In thinking of the lack of learning and how it might have impacted their work, two administrators felt overall unprepared to help students. Administrator Joseph stated, "I don't know what people truly need and what they don't need and so I'm working on that," while Administrator Wright shared that they were not, "prepared as far as just the knowledge base that one should have, no." The other administrators did not feel as unprepared however, relayed the importance of their past experiences. For example, Administrator Clark stated:

I think they [Special Education Department Chair] taught me what I didn't know along the way and I've never been afraid to ask questions so it's like, why are we doing it this way? Or why is this happening? Or why aren't we doing this? And I think, you've got to be able to ask to try to get that knowledge. It was really helpful for me just having her explicitly say this is a legal document. You can't try to do it. This is what you have to do to support these kids. It's not okay some of the time, it's not half the time. It's just, this is what you're required to do.

Administrator Rusty also realized that their knowledge was lacking, "I felt like I did, but I didn't. I think that as a principal you have to do a really good job at really ... you have to

do a really good job of trusting some of the people that work for you and their own expertise, so I feel like we lean on our SPED department really well." While acknowledging the lack of training left administrators unprepared to make decisions based on knowledge, some administrators utilized the opportunity to rely on their special education personnel as experts in their field, as is further discussed below in the section on social context.

Personal Beliefs

Some administrators presented that they did not really consider themselves responsible for special education, even as a teacher, while others were more aware of their responsibility, yet still maintained a separateness between their responsibilities and special education. This siloed thinking potentially shaped not only actions during discipline, but also their schools' ideology and culture. These conversations also illuminated some misinformation held regarding students with disabilities and administrators' ability to implement consequences.

Five administrators out of seven believed that special education was not fully their responsibility, or that they did not have to make decisions on their own. For example, Administrator Rusty wasn't able to answer some of the questions fully because, "it's done by the principal that specifically works with students with disabilities."

Administrator Adams stated:

Anytime a special education student was sent to the office for a discipline reason there was always another person that you could lean on and account for and bounce ideas off of that knew that student better than what I did or maybe even than the classroom teacher did.

When having to make sense of working with students with disabilities, the thought that it is not your purview can be inhibiting.

Good teaching. One administrator conveyed that good teaching might be enough to dissuade negative behaviors for students with disabilities. Administrator Wright, “I am a huge proponent and supporter of when instruction is good and it’s engaging, behaviors are minimized in the classroom. I believe that, that good instruction can take care of so many discipline issues.” This belief can overlap relational factors (see more below) while potentially shaping sensemaking in multiple ways.

Misinformation. Six administrators shared beliefs that were not fully informed by special education regulation. Several believed that there was nothing that can be done when a student with disabilities misbehaves, and others relayed that there were discipline practices that could not be utilized. Administrator Joseph remarked, "We have some students who are so incredibly disruptive to the learning environment that we are not allowed to do anything with, so again, we're not able to learn." Administrator Lord, too, believed there was nothing that could be done, if a student's referral was a result of their disability, "if it's a manifestation of their disability, they can't be disciplined for it. Like, if you've got a kid that has impulse control issues you can't discipline them for doing something that's impulsive." This was also close to what Administrator Wright also believed, "is just the discipline that you can and cannot utilize in a behavior when it's a manifestation of what a child is dealing with." These administrators believed that a student manifesting behavior that was a product of their disability cannot be disciplined. However, prevailing special education policy dictates that discipline can happen but some considerations and procedures must be followed. Furthermore, there are arguments that

ignoring behavior is not following the law. These administrator beliefs were seemingly in conflict with their understandings that a student could be suspended for 10-days before anything needs to be done.

Ten days. There was a belief by all seven administrators that there were 10-days available to suspend a student with disabilities before having to take into consideration the disability. The idea of not having to do anything before 10-days is in line with none of the administrators being familiar with the Dear Colleague (OSEP, 2014) letter which gave guidance on this practice. As shown in the following, Administrator Wright stated, “you’ve got to worry about those ten days of OSS.” The implications of 10-days were further explained by Administrator Rusty:

I think that there's this huge fear that when we have a student that has even the most minor discipline, or most minor disability, that when we get to 10-days of suspension that we're having to do this manifest meeting. I just think that a lot of districts are so, ours, in particular, there's a definite fear to being sued based on something that is federally regulated such as that, and they don't even want to deal with it.

Only a couple of administrators pointed to looking further into a student's behavior while still within the 10-days of suspension before a manifest determination. These thoughts were reflective of prospective sensemaking. Administrator Klein stated that, "the student's suspension history should be documented and evaluated for any patters of suspension," and Administrator Rusty pointed out that, "depending on how frequent of the suspensions, the school may want to look whether or not the IEP is adequate." However, stating, "the school may want to look," doesn't indicate who in

particular is responsible. This could indicate thoughts being shaped by the belief that it is someone else's purview. However, the overwhelming majority of the personal belief sentiment was of wanting to help students succeed.

Previous School/Home Experiences

All seven administrators expressed impactful experiences, both positive and negative in their previous positions that shaped their beliefs. The positive experiences were felt as benefitting them in their current positions. However, not all experience discussed had been good. Six of the administrators discussed experiences that had altered the lives of those around them or themselves going forward in negative ways. These experiences, both positive and negative, might lead to administrators reacting in certain ways during sensemaking regarding discipline. This ties into the emotions in sensemaking. They might give be more willing to work with certain students based on their previous experiences or be more apt to go into a heightened state during discipline interactions. Emotions are discussed more below in the section on personal factors in sensemaking.

Positive interactions. Administrators DC and BJ both discussed positive interactions they had in previous school districts where they felt they were part of a knowledgeable team working towards student success. They also pointed to their previous districts' structure being incredibly beneficial:

There was such a great relationship...there was one team, there was a math teacher, a reading and writing teacher, a science teacher, a social studies teacher, and then our SPED teacher. So, we met almost daily, the five of us. And those interactions with that special education teacher and her really advocating for her

students. I had a lot of IEP kids, but I was oftentimes alone with those kids. So that would kind of be a formative experience for me of just having that relationship to be able to talk about it and having her be vocal and be a partner with me as we try to like lesson plan and figure out how we were going to do things.

Administrator Rusty echoed a similar sentiment,

I had a lot of conversations with the SPED director of the district. It was really small enough to where you can call her and get her input and get her expertise and we would do it quite often when working with special education students. There was nothing and we'd walk through all of what we were going to do with discipline and then she would say, ask us certain questions that needed to be asked as an advocate for the child.

These statements suggest that it was important and beneficial to have access to people who would help in understanding working with students with disabilities. Administrator Clark had a daily structure where students with disabilities were discussed and plans created, while Administrator Rusty had an accessible special education director that helped create awareness of need through advocacy. The structure of Administrator Clark's formal building was created while Administrator Rusty had to seek out the conversation on his own. However, both were looked upon as positive learning as part of a to better help students with disabilities succeed.

Negative interactions. Imprinted in minds, negative interactions have the ability to impact future sensemaking and shape outcomes completely un-related. The negative interactions discussed by all administrators revolved around intense and violent student

actions, wrought with heightened emotion. For example, Administrator Joseph described a particular incident that is carried in the back of their mind:

We had one of our SPED students had gotten agitated and we had all sorts of methods to calm him down, things to do. And his teacher was right there, in the office doing things that were supposed to be done. He attacked her. He beat her up. And that had all sorts of impacts. The teacher didn't come back to work for a period of time. That teacher is always still scared til this day, on some level.

We're talking about a 230-pound kid and he loves her. He was on the ground being restrained by three adult men screaming, "Ms. Clark ok. Clark ok. I hurt Clark. I hurt Clark." Any other person in that situation would have been arrested...and then when they came back, we changed case management and we changed our course of study for the student. She was doing all the things that were in his plan to do. Something just went wrong. Nothing we could ever explain.

Similarly, Administrator Lord brought up an incident and their awareness of one of their teachers who had been injured by students with disabilities numerous times stating the teacher has, "had four concussions from being beat up by kids." Administrator Wright had a similar interaction, that ended up with an injury themselves:

We had a pretty volatile student, but he and I always had a really strong cognitive relationship, even when I had to administer consequences. And so I bring him in the office, and we are talking, and the other administrator in there with me is just in there for support, and I'm getting ready to search and the kid starts acting really weird. And I knew something was not right. But because of my relationship I had with the kid, I may have let my guard down just a little bit. And so my stance was

probably not where it should've been, and I was probably too close, and so he refused to empty several of his pockets. And so I said, "Well then I'm going to have to empty them, or I'm going to have to call the officer in here to empty them." And he said, "Okay." So as I went to open a pocket on his knee, he got up and threw me into the wall, had his forearm up against my neck holding me there, so I was being choked. And then he finally got the door open and slammed the door open into my head and was holding me there with the door and then tried to run out through the office. He was tackled by five other adults. But that was my second concussion that I've had from a student altercation. So the fact that I did have a really good relationship with this kid and that's what happened, was bothersome.

These interactions stayed with administrators and were referenced as considerations in their sensemaking process.

Family backgrounds. Two administrators shared that they didn't begin to understand the importance of special education until their children were diagnosed with disabilities. Administrator Clark shared:

Being on the parent side of things, that was another aha moment where it was like, okay. Something kind of changed a little bit when it became your own kid. And it wasn't anything like really he needed super accommodations for, but it was like, not that I was not taking it seriously, but it's just like, pay more attention in these IEP meetings I go to as a teacher, as an educator to really help these kids.

Administrator Wright, too, shared the impact of her family background towards her work:

I also have a child who has an IEP, so once that process started. I feel like only then is when I totally understood because I'm gonna make sure that everything in that IEP plan is followed and is followed correctly. So that probably gave me the most value in looking at how these parents, what they want for their children, how they feel like they should be supported, how we have to support the parents through that, but also how we have to support the teachers.

These statements show that when it became the most personal, as with being a parent to a student with disabilities, that administrators began to see the importance of IEPs and school personnel working towards the success of students with disabilities.

Individual-Personal Factors in Sensemaking

This section examines the individual-personal factors that shaped administrator sensemaking in this study. Since administrators perceived they did not receive training from their preparation programs that made them feel confident in their knowledge of special education, and their negative experiences seemed prominent in their minds, it might be that MWPS administrators were more reliant on individual-personal factors during sensemaking. Analyzing interview transcripts and follow up conversations, an all-encompassing Individual personal factor theme presented: *Building-level administrators recognized the importance of student individualization, however, when safety was perceived to be threatened sensemaking became heavily retrospective.* This is illustrated through the inflation of emotion in sensemaking as seen in Figure 2 above (p. 118). As discussed below, the emotional response of fear was responsible for this inflation, even if not in result with a particularly violent disruption, as violence is high-leverage, causing a

response of over-caution (Walls, 2017). The following sections specifically discuss the sensemaking impact of cognitive and emotional aspects of individual-personal factors.

Cognitive

Much of sensemaking appears to be cognitive (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002). Indeed, using one's mind to understand a discipline event is a key component in sensemaking. The rational ability to understand what has happened and what should follow next is rooted in cognitive processes (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Walls, 2019). All seven of the administrators demonstrated this through their discussions on the discipline process. For example, Administrator Adams explained:

Discipline now is what has happened? Is there a consequence that needs to be assigned? Where do we go next? When do you inform the parents? How do you work with the teachers that are in mediation that needs to be held?

Similarly, Administrator Clark stated, "We've laid out, these types of behaviors automatically are sent home or OSS or whatever it is." These statements demonstrated considerations to sensemaking that were hinged on the logical understandings of the discipline process being utilized (which is by design of policy, see more in the section on structural factors). However, there was also a cognitive understanding of treating students with disabilities from a more individualized approach. Administrator Clark relayed when working with students with disabilities:

I think where I can differ with some of *those students* [emphasis added] is we involve their case worker. And not necessarily...well sometimes to bounce the consequence off of them. How does this kind of...Is this a product of their disability? Is this something because of that...they may say, "Yeah, you know

he...” They may give me more of a back story or whatever....sometimes we’ve had is a case worker will say, “Hey, instead of ISS, can he just be in my room?” Or something like that.... Sometimes you know what’s going to work for the student. Some student you can just talk to mom, and they’re never going to do it again. Another one, you need to suspend them for a couple of days to get them to not do it again.

This attends to the idea that individual students might need individual considerations and that not all discipline consequences might be appropriate for all students.

Thinking of students with individualized considerations might lead to prospective thinking. However, Administrator Clark does not fully engage in a prospective sensemaking process, which would be what is being done to prevent this in the future before they engage in a discipline interaction. Administrator Wright also demonstrated considerations with the student in mind, but remained retrospective as well:

This is what we are dealing with, this is what happened, there is more than enough evidence, the kid admitted it, this is the consequence that should be given. However, I don't think that's what's best for this student. To keep them out of classes for another six days is the most asinine thing I have ever heard of. And so after talking with the case manager, the compromise was that looking at the class schedule the one day, the kid was gonna be shut down with the [SPED] case manager the last half of the day and the opposite day the first half. So it was essentially a day of ISS, but just a creative way. And the kid has a great relationship with that individual but does not want to be shut down and the teacher is hard on that kid where they’re gonna sit there and work and the

agreement was if work wasn't done, if the kid doesn't get to a point where they can restore and repair what they have damaged and those relationships, then we are gonna stay in the shut-down hall. And it was very effective, but you can't do that with every student.

This administrator realized that there would be harmful consequences for keeping this student out for the usual consequence timeframe, so altered the consequence to something they believed more appropriate considering the individual. Similarly, Administrator Klein subscribed to the cognitively understood punitive plan underscoring discipline in this study:

I think the term I've heard used is high flyers, repeat offenders. The same kid doing the same thing over and over again. That's kind of a two-fold way of dealing with the discipline. It's one where I said the student gets whatever the discipline marker mandates, but then there's the ongoing restorative practice piece.

This administrator followed the process of consequence for misbehavior but changed slightly by also adding in the restorative piece once considering a student a repeat offender to repair any damage to a relationship that might have occurred as a result of their behavior. While administrators held to the understood discipline process while involving some prospective sensemaking with restorative practices, as seen here there was an indication of cognitive conflict.

Function of behavior. Several administrators brought up student behaviors as contributing to their thinking about discipline. That is, at least four were thinking not only about the fact that a certain (mis)behavior occurred, but *why* did it occur. But

administrators were not always sure what to do with this thinking. For instance, Administrator Clark recognized that behavior served a function although they were not quite sure yet where to go with that realization:

I mean, it's just the idea of what is the function of these behaviors? Why are they doing what they're doing? But I think for me, personally, like a lot of times, it is our special education students. So, how could I be a better contributor to those conversations by maybe learning more when it comes to that as behavior supports and the different things that we can do.

Administrator Joseph also relayed:

Hey, let's be realistic about this. It's almost easier ... and shame on me, but it's almost easier to see all those students' behaviors as a function of something else. So, real easy in those situations to see innocence and then to remove all personal feelings from everything. The thing I learned from special education was you have to understand the functional behavior. Most students we know are trying to get something or get out of something and then understanding that, removing yourself from that and looking at it as a scientist instead of an educator is really the best way to go about that because you don't take things personally when you do that.

These statements demonstrate how administrators were making sense of discipline by thinking through the type of behavior. Yet, being able to identify that student behavior might mean something else didn't always translate in ways that reduced punitive consequences. However, the evidence of thinking in this more prospective sensemaking manner brought actionable considerations to light for Administrator Adams:

So is it hunger, is it attention? What's the need that not being met, and then trying to get students support in whatever that area might be. So that might be then a conversation with somebody else, a crisis counselor or one of the counselors, or a teacher the student feels comfortable talking with. So what is then the next step that I need to do to support the student support the teacher, get whatever the need is that is not being met?

Even with the prospective view of something is missing, maybe I can get it for that students, this administrator never conveyed that what might be missing is explicit learning on how a student needs to behave or anything outside of a tangible or relationship need.

All of the above examples show that the administrators interviewed tried to follow a process as they cognitively understood it, with allowances for the notion of maybe there's something more that needs to be done. However, they were not fully able to make sense of what actions would satisfy their thoughts of something more needing to be done, potentially due to a lack of knowledge or training. Even though Administrator Joseph attempted to illustrate the rational thought behind being able to separate the personal from student behavior. As suggested in the "positive/negative" sections above, they recognized emotion, "removing yourself from that and looking at it as a scientist instead of an educator is really the best way to go about that because you don't take things personally." While Walls (2017) posited that disruptions are understood more cognitively according to size, accounting for why consequences grow more punitive when there is a disruption that impacts more individuals or when there are repeated behaviors, emotionally, disruptions threaten the identity. Emotions of fear play a major role in

sensemaking (Walls, 2017). As described below, separating out emotions might not have been fully possible.

Emotional

The emotion of fear involved in every violent behavioral interaction experienced or the aftermath of someone else's heightened all emotional sensemaking for administrators. All seven of the building-level administrators understood that little behavioral disturbances could become violent very quickly and reacted more punitively. For example, Administrator Joseph stated:

It's hard. We're dealing with big kids. Big kids can be scary. There was a four-on-four brawl last year that involved a parent...It was crazy. Adults getting hurt. I saw adults get struck last year. That was hard...I saw kids get kicked in the head.

This administrator acknowledged that there was emotion, a real fear, in working with kids once you've seen violence further stating:

I take a step back and inside I'm crying. I can tell you about students that we caught with drugs that would fight police officers. When you're at the level where you're fighting with a police officer, I don't. That blows my mind. I've had one student that I thought would come back and try to shoot me or something.

Administrators get traumatized, too, and want to reduce the potential for reoccurrence of these incidents.

Administrator Klein demonstrated their reliance on emotional sensemaking when there was violence involved, stating, "anything physical towards a teacher, the IEP doesn't matter... you threaten or physically interact with a teacher, you're getting the discipline that you're supposed to get." As the law dictates, the IEP matters at all times.

Furthermore, the law gives students with disabilities additional due process protections that always need to be considered, violent interaction or not. The blending of more emotional and punitive sensemaking was apparent in conversation when any sort of violence or perceived violence was involved. Administrator KL exemplified this idea with the following statement:

I think I would like to see stiffer accountabilities for students who fight. Physical involvement with another person, I would like to be a lot stiffer. Maybe that would serve as a better deterrent instead of going home, OSS that day, alternative education center three days, ISS for a day. You make the decision you are going to fight in a public-school setting, setting matters, and disrupt the entirety of a school of almost 2000 people, you should be gone a minimum of five days, maybe ten days.

Administrator Clark realized that safety was not a joking matter with a jarring experience:

I didn't get into this job to have kids arrested. Especially 11-year-old sixth graders, which happened my first couple weeks as an assistant principal. Some kid brought a knife, he was just, stupid kid, and he ended up getting taken out in handcuffs. And I'm like, 'Holy crap, I didn't think this was gonna happen.'

Threats and violence were not something that this administrator was used to and seeing the response to a knife seemed to make a huge impact, imprinting the necessity of quickly eliminating a perceived threat. However, threats and emotion existed in concert with another of the major factors looked at, the relational, or social factor. Since emotional sensemaking is understood through thoughts of alteration of identity, a threat to a

building-level administrators identity of leaders who were responsible for school safety, or keeping teachers and students safe, violence would quickly elicit this. Again,

Administrator Clark demonstrated:

Discipline feeds into whether or not a student feels safe at school, and perception is the reality. So, we may have two fights, but they're major fights. Now, all of a sudden you have fights all the time, or they're at the wrong time of day. So I can think like, we had a pretty big fight first semester that happened when kids were leaving to class at the beginning of the day. Probably the worst time, because it was like the maximum exposure.

The above example of fighting also served as an example of triggering a negative cascade in which many individual interruptions occurred, completely disrupting the normal school environment, as now all the student's exposed react to the violence in some way. To prevent more fighting and maintain the school setting, this sort of incident might cause Administrator Clark to react in a more punitive manner with the students in the fight, as both an example and a means to maintain the identity of leader and school as a safe place. Similarly, Administrator Joseph stated, "The most draining, I think the most that took away from our building, is fighting. Again, behavior." Even with a lack of a negative cascade, violence altered the sensemaking in even the most understanding administrator. As presented earlier when Administrator Joseph described the violent interaction between a student with disabilities and his much-loved teacher, even though the student didn't get arrested, big changes had to be made to maintain an identity as a leader and protector of building safety. The identity aspect of emotional sensemaking is closely tied with both relational sensemaking and structural sensemaking. Giving harsher

consequences as prescribed through structure, especially in emotionally charged or fear situations might be a means to maintain an identity as a building leader.

Structural Factors in Sensemaking

This section examines the structural factors that influenced the principal sensemaking in this study. As reported by Spillane et al. (2006, 2002) institutional contexts and how human agents work within them were found to affect sensemaking. With a perceived lack of knowledge and training and a focus on fear having experienced certain negative incidents, it could be that MWPS administrators would turn to policy, structures, as a context for support. However, what they found was an autonomy that did not give much support allowing for the other aspects of sensemaking to play different sized roles (see Figure 2). As discussed more below, structure does have the ability to impact administrators actions, and it goes to reason that it could also prevent the different aspects of sensemaking from being inflated or shrunk in certain manners. Analyzing interview transcripts and follow-up conversations, board policy, district documentation, and media articles, an all-encompassing structural theme presented: *The overall structural set-up in Meridian West Public Schools was highly autonomous regarding discipline and related practices, outside of Safe Schools Violations, causing administrators to seek out meaning-making factors and experiences beyond school or district policies or support structures.* The following paragraphs specifically explore how individual autonomy was found in formal board policy, district initiatives from the superintended/central office, and building initiatives.

Board of Education Formal Policy

Meridian West Public Schools (MWPS), like most public schools in the U.S., has an elected Board of Education that at the most basic level is tasked with overseeing taxpayers' dollars. Often through the realm of policy, the Board is to ensure that the intent of public schooling in the state is being met in a manner beneficial to their community (Reimer, 2015). As such, it is a common expectation that all staff, including administrators, follow the policies set forth by the Board. Indeed, there is a district policy in MWPS that proclaims all board policy must be followed, "All employees, students are required to follow the Board of Education's policies and the district's rules and procedures... administrators and supervisors of the district are required to implement and enforce Board policies and administrative procedures" (Board of Education Policy, 2019). Therefore, it is a clear basic level of functioning in MWPS to follow Board policy. Administrators in MWPS have guiding policy supports for their positions. Before delving into the principals' actual sensemaking experiences, the following sections each first review board policies in areas that are most likely to affect sensemaking while disciplining students with disabilities in the areas of: discipline, administrator evaluations, professional development, and other informal policy.

Discipline policy. Meridian West Public Schools had specific Board policies that dictated how personnel were to handle discipline. According to the district, the policies on discipline were necessary to, "maintain a classroom environment that allows teachers to communicate effectively with all students in the class and allows all students in the class to learn." To sensemaking, this policy set a status quo of behavioral expectations. The Board of Education also maintained a discipline code of conduct which "addresses

the consequences, including suspension and expulsion, for students whose conduct is prejudicial to good order and discipline in the schools or impairs the morale or good conduct of other students." (Board of Education, 2019) Further, the Board specifically recognized a separate policy pursuant to the discipline of students with disabilities stating in part that, "students with disabilities will be disciplined in accordance with the district's discipline code applicable to all students, subject to the modifications mandated by law" (Board of Education, 2019). Acknowledging that students with disabilities were to be disciplined in the same way as all students, but with the consideration of law, or IDEA, sets the scene to give administrators pause that there might be more consideration to discipline than just assigning a consequence.

Discipline autonomy. All seven of the administrators interviewed recognized that there were Board policies regarding discipline procedures in which violations of the code of conduct were to be followed by consequences. However, at the time of the interviews, there was a consensus that within this policy structure there was a wide margin for building-level administrators to utilize their own sense of discretion and interpretation. Indeed, the prescribed consequences in the Board's discipline policy showed a large level of individual autonomy when it came to what kind of consequences were assigned to students who engaged in behaviors outside of expectation.

In the Board discipline code, the majority of prohibited conduct carried the weight of the following broad consequence statement:

Administrator/student conference, detention, in-school suspension, 1-180 days out-of-school suspension or expulsion. Restitution if appropriate. May include loss of privileges including, but not limited to: Confiscation of the contraband

item, Loss of parking privileges, Loss of technology privileges, (Board of Education, 2019).

Within this large range of potential consequences, Board policy authorized "administrators to more narrowly tailor potential consequences as appropriate for the age level of students" (Board of Education, 2019) (thus signaling that they were providing latitude for individual decision-making). While some administrators found the autonomy to be necessary, there were realizations that such autonomy could lead to unfairness of discipline practice both across the district as well as in individual buildings. For example, during our discussion about discipline and school district oversight Administrator Clark reflected:

...it seems like in some ways, almost too much autonomy. There's often talk about how are we being consistent, or how are we being fair across the district? With a district like MWPS, there is a significant amount of transiency between buildings, and throughout a school year, throughout an educational career. And I think there's a possibility, and probably it does happen, where you do something at one school, you're going to get one kind of consequence. You do that same thing at another; you're going to get a different kind of consequence. And so it's awesome for me to be able to make that decision myself, but then also it's kind of unfair to that student to not know those expectations. Or if I'm suspending kids all the time, and then at the other school they're not, that's not really fair.

Here, Administrator Clark acknowledged that the structure produced by Board policy, and the autonomy it allowed with consequences, caused unfairness and could result in students not knowing the behavioral expectations across the district.

On this same note, speaking to this about their building, Administrator Lord stated:

We have multiple principals [in our building] that do discipline and each one had their own style. I would describe two of them as laissez-faire in that they don't do discipline. They just throw their referrals away. And then I would describe another one as mostly fair. I would describe myself as mostly fair or fair.

Administrator Lord was very cognizant of the disparities between the administrators in their building to the point where two of them do not do discipline. Stated bluntly, Administrator Wright shared that discipline within their own (one) school was, "A mess. Inconsistent. Different expectations for different adults, for different students." Indeed, these administrators identified that there were different levels of consequences given to students that seemed based on nothing other than which administrator they happened to have. As the administrators pointed out, the ambiguity of consequence guideline allowing for individual autonomy left students open to both confusion and the subjective interpretations/whims of whichever particular administrator they happened to be assigned to. This inequity was pointed out as a result of too much autonomy, however, there was one area where administrators did not seem to perceive autonomy at all in discipline: in cases of Safe School Violations, where referral to SROs were automatic.

School resource officers (SROs) in MWPS. Due to the district's memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the local police department and adopted board policy consequences from the state's Safe Schools Act and the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, police officers were present in all four of the high school buildings and two shared between the middle school buildings. In having the Safe Schools type acts, administrators

reported their hands being tied in certain code of conduct infractions. Thus sensemaking in certain circumstances was shaped directly by structural factors. These Acts dictated that any student who brought or possessed a weapon [while involved in a school setting or related activity] would automatically be suspended for at least one calendar year and would be referred to law enforcement (Board of Education, 2019; State Department of Education, 2019). While not in the above-mentioned acts, there was another board policy dictating that students with controlled substances would also be referred to local law enforcement.

According to School Board documentation, the purpose of the School Resource Officer Program was to promote and assist MWPS in providing a safe learning environment, while also attempting to "provide a positive role model and promoting a better understanding of law enforcement officers' role in society" (MWPS Handbook, 2019). Overall, MWPS considered their SROs as, "valuable member of the educational team" (MWPS Student Handbook, 2019). Outside of the above-mentioned violations, the structural setup of having SROs in the school buildings led to several different sensemaking considerations among the interviewed administrators. Some looked towards SROs as being able to better deal with violence, while others wanted them to be a part of any escalation that might require physical contact. A third way SROs shaped sensemaking was more prospectively, hoping to prevent future behaviors through their support, albeit by pointing out punitive consequences of actions.

In questions regarding when and how administrators utilized their SROs, Administrator Wright initially stated that SROs were, "only to be involved if we invite their involvement" when dealing with disciplinary events including students with

disabilities. However, Administrator Wright later mentioned that, “They [SROs] may involve themselves without an invitation if it is a violent situation where someone could be hurt.” Administrator Wright further mentioned that, “I personally utilize my school resource officer after there has been a physical altercation or when there's a suspicion that a student either has a weapon or drugs on them.” Often this administrator also wanted their presence nearby during interactions with students, “I'll ask them to stand outside my office door.” At first mention, this administrator only thought of a specific incident approach to SRO, but then as they continued to discuss and think, continued to add in more desired usages of their SRO. This was fairly consistent with responses from the other administrators, however, Administrator Klein, the administrator overall students with disabilities in their building, was more apt to utilize their SRO in any type of incident where physical intervention might be necessary.

According to Administrator Klein, they would invite SRO involvement:

If and whenever physical intervention is required, and I am not going to physically intervene with the student. We shouldn't be doing that. Specifically my quote to the students and the staff, the SRO can force cooperation. We have to inspire cooperation. So if cooperation is necessary to be forced, then I call the SRO.

Utilizing the SRO with every potential physical intervention was in contrast to Administrator Rusty, who reported not even using an SRO with every fight, “Not every fight. That's usually a judgment call. [Only] If an adult is hit during the process, or if the fight is pretty violent. Our resource officer stays pretty busy.” Agreeing with the

necessity of involving the SRO in certain incidents, Administrator Adams also took the interactions a step further:

We are looking to involve them [SRO] any time we can, just to have a conversation with kids about what could happen or what shouldn't happen in the school setting. So it could be through texting or sexting, or bullying, or speeding away in the parking lot. So there are several things that we can involve a school resource officer in just to have a conversation with students. It doesn't have to mean that they're involved, and they have to then write a ticket or respond. But they can also be there as a support for students as well.

Especially shown through these statements, the autonomy provided through the structural set up of the discipline policy and having police officers in schools provided multiple opportunities for the use of judgment calls dependent on individual administrators and their interpretations.

As shown in the above sections, building-level administrators sense the unfairness of Board policy towards students, while still operating under it. The administrators brought up perceptions of unfairness in that adults may make very different decisions (choose different consequences) for similar infractions or when to involve police officers in student interactions. Yet, these are not the only structural factors that might influence administrator sensemaking when disciplining students with disabilities. To ascertain how administrators of MWPS perform, Board policy regarding administrator evaluation was created. If administrators are evaluated on their discipline practices, especially if looking at their discipline practices with students with disabilities, sensemaking might be impacted.

Administrator evaluation policy. As regulated by state law, MWPS has a district policy that requires, “a program of comprehensive, performance-based evaluations for the teachers and other professional staff members” (BOE, 2019). One of the guiding principles of these evaluations is to, “Establish indicators of performance articulated across differentiated levels with standards specifying expectations at all levels of practice” (BOE, 2019). Stated otherwise, evaluations should cover the most important responsibilities required of administrators. Therefore, administrators might anticipate that what they are being evaluated on is of most priority to their district. When engaged in interactions that led administrators into sensemaking, administrators might give more thought to the interaction and future outcomes if it was part of their evaluation. Even though Board policy utilized words such as comprehensive, performance-based, indicators of performance at all levels of practice, when asked about district evaluations covering discipline in any way, the majority (6/7) of interviewees agreed that their evaluations did not formally cover discipline.

For example, Administrator Adams stated, "Not that I'm aware of. No." whereas Administrator Lord gave a resounding, "No." Administrator Rusty also echoed, "No." The only administrator that contended that they were evaluated on discipline was Administrator Klein who brought up the idea of numbers as being part of their evaluation as a building, but not individually. Number pressures will be discussed more below, as this pressure was not a specific board policy, but a recently-imposed initiative aimed at reducing race-specific discipline gaps highlighted through an Office of Civil Rights (OCR) complaint filed against the district. Although individual administrator evaluations did not directly address areas specific to discipline and students with disabilities, or

discipline in general, another structure set through Board policy that had the potential to greatly impact sensemaking was professional development.

Professional development. MWPS Board of Education had a specific policy that stressed the importance of professional development for faculty to maximize the knowledge and skills of the teacher and enhance student learning and achievement. However, the professional development model of MWPS, in part, depended on building-level administrators to provide departmental specific training to the departments for which they were responsible.-Specific to the discipline of students with disabilities and student discipline MWPS's Board policies stated:

All employees of the district shall annually receive instruction related to the specific contents of the district's discipline policy and any interpretations necessary to implement the provisions of the policy in the course of their duties, including, but not limited to, approved methods of dealing with acts of school violence, disciplining students with disabilities, and instruction in the necessity and requirements for confidentiality. The administration shall emphasize, as part of the in-service training program for administrators, counselors and teachers, training in *current alternative disciplinary techniques and strategies* [emphasis added] (BOE, 2019).

As sensemaking is dependent on an individual's knowledge (Spillane et al., 2002; Stern, 2016; Walls, 2017) having yearly training over disciplining students with disabilities as well as alternative disciplinary techniques could vastly alter sensemaking. However, the majority (6/7) of administrators interviewed felt that this was not occurring on a level that they considered helpful, or even as professional development.

Administrator Lord stated the only professional development related to special education received in the past five years was on, "504 information." Having little to no reported training on special education in at least five years, this administrator also pointed out that part of their responsibilities was to lead professional development for new teachers in the building, and that general special education information was, "one of the lessons that all new teachers get." This shows that administrators with very little training in special education are tasked with disseminating knowledge to the new teachers in their building.

Echoing similar sentiment but from a different building perspective, Administrator Wright relayed:

There's none [PD] through district. At all. From the building level, our special ed department chair has put together a PowerPoint presentation that was requested about four years ago to share with the new teachers, because it's not something that we typically cover in new teacher orientation. So for our brand new to education teachers, they're really behind when it comes to just knowledge of what that looks like, what the laws are. And so that has been modified and tweaked just a little bit to where it focuses on the LEA, what's the role of that individual, and the most significant and important laws and things that go on in an IEP meeting that you are in charge of making sure everyone is complying with. And so the initial PowerPoint presentation has been tweaked a little bit, it gets sent out to all the administrators in our building once a year if someone remembers to request it being sent out. And if not, just whenever the special ed chair sends it out. So the

goal is that everyone goes through that beginning of the year, and then there is unless you set something up yourself, there is nothing.

Here is evidence that at least this building is doing something related to special education knowledge every year; however, it is not specific to an administrator's role being modified from a new teacher PowerPoint and might or might not come out in a timely manner.

Speaking to the setup of their building's professional development, Administrator Adams responded that while they weren't aware of any training specific to special education, "I wouldn't say that there are any." Rather, explained that a lot of the professional development is specific to a department, so, "the fine arts department does professional development on fine arts and special education would do special education. They're going to their own training. I've never been to those. I'm not in charge of that department, so I always try to go to my department trainings on those days" (Administrator Adams). This points to special education training being available to those already in the special education department. Thus, the setup of professional development did not seem to be providing the training in special education as was mandated by policy. Furthermore, this department-specific setup ignores that the majority of students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom.

Similar to Administrator Lord, in yet another building, even when training was provided on special education topics, it was not provided by someone with the content knowledge. When asked about professional development opportunities in special education topics, Administrator Klein, who is their building's administrator specifically

over students with disabilities and the special education department, responded about professional development opportunities:

Some opportunities come up, but in terms of something specifically focused on special education I am the professional developer, ok... there isn't any unique special ed professional development.

This administrator is a second-year special education administrator that had no previous special education preparation in their background and no formal training. Someone who has no experience in special education might find it difficult to understand and make sense of the school's needs regarding professional development. Even when some training is given, with a lack of overall special education knowledge, the training might not seem useful. Another administrator who had also previously filled this unique position within their school responded:

I got to go to State-CASE one year when I took on the job of being the assistant principal working exclusively with special education. I don't know how useful that was for me, but it may have just been I didn't know enough to learn what I needed to learn along the way. Just co-teaching, and then just a lot of, Hey, we've gotta do these things for these students. We're accountable for all of this, type of meetings.

This structural set of allowed for at least two administrators who didn't have special education-specific backgrounds but were tasked with being overall students with disabilities, also leading to potential issues of sensemaking with discipline. Furthermore, these administrators provided professional development to other staff members on special education. Finally, finding someone that reported professional development that

discussed special education topics, Administrator Rusty had recently been through a district employee taught restraint training which targeted students with disabilities with potentially violent behaviors. They stated:

The majority of what we get for special education professional development deals with the behavioral special education, like in behavioral situations and handling with difficult children who are usually ODD ...and how to work within specific incidents. That's pretty much it. I would say once a semester. It was mandatory this last time, but I know a lot of our PD is like you can choose your own path. I usually go to that because that's really the students that I work with.

At the time of the interview, this administrator was under the impression that all administrators had to be certified in restraint techniques and would also have this training, "...anyone in our district, if you're going to be an administrator, you have to take restraint training and things...and you have to re-up once a year." However, in a later follow-up, they relayed that they had since found out that not everyone has taken the training, including the current administrator working exclusively over special education.

Informal development. While discussing professional development opportunities, Administrator Clark brought up the sensemaking opportunities through peer conversation:

Not much. We have our SPED director throughout the year, we'll talk about kids, we'll talk about IEPs, we'll talk about our roles in those IEP meetings. So if anything, it's not formal, it's more informal. I would say the most informal piece we have is at times in our principal meetings, we have SPED director for the district or district admin come in and kind of talk about ways that we are trying to

work with our special education students, how we are disciplining our special education students, how sometimes we are disproportionately disciplining our special education students. But I wouldn't even classify that as PD, it's more informational if anything.

In general, while there were policies for the district and buildings to follow regarding professional development, in practice, it seems few administrators felt they had received structured training in how to support/discipline students with disabilities. Moreover, some administrators, even though they were without professional development or training, were responsible for designing training for their staff/building. Without opportunities to make sense of special education law and practice for students with disabilities, it is possible educators could not only misunderstand or misapply the law but also cause potential harm.

Central Office Informal Policy

The School board might be the entity that created formal policies for MWPS but making sure those policies were implemented fell to the superintendent and central office. Collectively, they were responsible for dissemination, creating initiatives to address policy, and oversight of the buildings. Knowing that institutions shape sensemaking (Spillane et al., 2006), the informal policies and initiatives created at the district's central office had the potential to impact sensemaking. Two of the themes which emerged during data collection were pressures by the central office to decrease discipline numbers as well as a lack of support to do so. The below sections discuss the pressures exerted on administrators by the central office and how those pressures have shaped

responses. Feelings of lack of support and different behavior initiatives found in the buildings follow.

Pressure to decrease (some) exclusionary disciplinary numbers. Like many schools, MWPS had targeted areas of focus presented by the superintendent to the district administrators. An area of focus disseminated from the central office for the past couple of years had been on reducing the number of discipline referrals to reduce racial disproportionality in discipline-specific to African American students. This particular focus might have been in response to an Office of Civil Rights (OCR) complaint filed against the district-specific to race and disproportionality in discipline, not special education (though there is a correlation between the two). No matter the reason for the new focus, the pressure to reduce the amount of African American kids being excluded through discipline (ISS, OSS), was indicated by all seven of the interviewees. It was only in this context that administrators relayed any consideration to race. Administrator Wright was the only participant to exclusively mention the connection between disproportionality, race, and special education, however, discounted it somewhat, stating:

If you look at our numbers, one would say they're very disproportionate, especially when you're looking at African-American males, and even more so African American males with IEP's. I see it more as being an issue of poverty versus an issue of a race.

Administrator Joseph relayed that, “my boss would constantly communicate with me related to discipline things that were important for the school.” Expanding upon this a little further, Administrator Rusty stated:

I would say the only pressure comes in a form of what the statistics actually look like, how many referrals. Not that any of the referrals mean anything as much as how much referrals. And then what's the demographics of the referrals. I think that those are the two, and honest, I don't even know what the referrals are regarding special education because that's not really one of the things that we even look at. We look more about race. We don't look at poverty or special education...but as far as outside of suspensions...most of the discipline is not even looked upon by central office.

Administrator Rusty highlighted three important sensemaking considerations. (1) There is currently a heightened central office focus on discipline, thus, administrators should be cognizant of their practice, but (2) the discipline focus and therefore conversations are not focused on students with disabilities because central office is currently focused on race and discipline, and (3) there is a perception that anything outside of that focus doesn't matter much because central office does not look at it.

Supporting this, Administrator Lord noted, "Nobody checks. That goes back to accountability. At one point about three weeks ago there were 177 referrals sitting in the electronic system. Some of them were over a month old." If 177 referrals were sitting in the system, then 177 reported code of conduct violations, some over a month old, were being ignored. The ability to ignore discipline referrals without implications from central office might reinforce the notion that only certain discipline interactions are important and that everything else can be disregarded. Furthermore, there could be implications for tracking a potential escalation of frequency for students with disabilities, which might need to be addressed through their IEPs. Since the central office did not check the

number of open referrals, rather just the number of consequences handed out, which discipline consequences were being targeted by the central office were sought out.

According to Administrator Wright:

They're constantly looking at our [numbers], specifically our ISS numbers, our OSS numbers, our referrals to the alternate education center, long term suspension numbers...I know that I was talked to by a central office employee at the beginning of September because of my discipline numbers, despite the fact that I had a Safe-Schools Act Violation, some felony crimes that occurred. Some serious things. So I was reprimanded for numbers and that is at least a monthly thing that I have experienced as an administrator. It has a terribly negative impact. We have teachers that won't send kids out no matter what they're doing, because they don't want it to look like they're giving a lot of discipline referrals. And then, what that does, it cripples the instruction and learning that can occur in a classroom...I look at how the leaders of the building are discouraged and frustrated...it just affects morale, it affects how individuals feel about student safety and security. Safety and security of yourself. It's like a big black cloud surrounds us.

These statements offer a paradox from the overall finding of structural factors in administrator sensemaking, that the autonomy present in the structure is such that administrators have to rely on other influences to make meaning of disciplining students with disabilities. Though formal policy did not play a key sensemaking tool for principals due to the autonomy it afforded informal policy, through a heavily monitored central office initiative, heavily influenced sensemaking only in certain circumstances. This

initiative seemed true even regarding the previous identified concrete notion of Safe Schools violations. However, the previous quotes continue to reinforce important factors to administrators' sensemaking disciplining of students with disabilities processes, (1) importance was given to certain characteristics of discipline which were monitored; and (2) that discipline outside those characteristics were looked at by central office leading to belief of non-importance.

Influence of building context. It is possible that administrators in different buildings felt different pressures due to having higher numbers. Supporting this, Administrator Adams, who previously worked in the same building as Administrator Wright and BJ, but had been serving in a different building the school year of the study, reflected:

I would say there's not as big of a district oversight as what I have seen in my past eight years. So it feels like, at some meetings in the past, there's been a lot of data that's been thrown out on the table and compared. Well, this one has more OSS than this one, and I don't see that as much anymore.

This administrator felt that he no longer had as much pressure of discipline numbers as when he was in a building with higher ISS/OSS numbers, validating Administrator's MR thought of the district seemingly not accounting for individual building context. For sensemaking, context matters and the administrators in different buildings might have cause to attend to sensemaking in different ways.

Lack of support to prevent punitive discipline. As presented above, central office can influence sensemaking by attending to, and monitoring an initiative. It was relayed that outside of a pressure exerted to reduce numbers; central office did not offer

consistent support to impact discipline numbers in a more positive way. Administrator Rusty touched on this concerning their building context:

I'm not sure anyone in our district knows the right answer regarding how to fix our discipline issues. We have the majority of the poverty in our school district lives in our school boundary lines... We are the most diverse school also. So the numbers are pretty comparable to the number statewide on what it looks like with the students of lower-income and students of color. We have some of the [behavior] special education programs that are specific to our building that other kids come to that. So I mean, there's a lot of reasons why our discipline numbers are the way that they are. So I'm not sure that our district truly knows how to support us.

The lack of support to impact discipline in a way that reduced numbers organically, while navigating pressures from central office to do so, left many of the administrators feeling unsure of what to do and overwhelmed. As previously stated by Administrator Wright, this pressure, well-intentioned or not, had the impact of creating some questionable sensemaking practices to reduce numbers.

Gaming the numbers. When faced with pressures to reduce discipline numbers while given few resources, sense was made, and discipline actions shaped, in part, by finding ways to portray the appearance of reduced numbers without actually changing exclusionary discipline practices. Administrator RM stated:

really, it becomes a matter of how do you play the numbers game, what else can we call something. So if you look at ISS and you do it for .49, it's not reported to the state, it has to be five or above. It's not pulled by the district because they are

looking at overall numbers....put in consequence of ISS at .49 and a consequence of ISS at .49. So the kid is still getting a day of ISS, but it's not gonna show up on anything that's reported. Is that ethical? I don't know. It's a numbers game you know? You can also put it as individual instruction. So whether they have a disability or not, they are getting individual instruction in the ISS environment and that, it doesn't matter, you could put ten days of that and it's gonna not show up. It doesn't have to be reported.

Due to the central office pressures of reducing certain discipline numbers, without consistent tools to do so in a way outside of punitive means, this administrator responded by finding a way to continue using in-school suspensions as a consequence for students that violated the code of conduct while making it seem as if it wasn't happening. However, this administrator was not alone. There was evidence of finding another way to continue exclusion without reporting it.

In a MWPS Middle School staff newsletter, discovered through an internet search, the Principal [not an interviewee] instructed:

Remember we are no longer submitting minor referrals that are assigned a *recovery room* [emphasis added] through the school system. MJ sent out a link to the google doc where we will continue to track minor referrals...Some of our students offer some serious challenges to us on a daily basis...Your efforts are reflected in our discipline data and I thank you for all that you do!

This school had something called a recovery room in which students got excluded for minor referrals but was not being tracked through the district's discipline number

reporting system, rather just an internal google doc. This not-interviewed principal reported a practice that matched what Administrator Clark reported from their building:

Recovery is, our *recovery room* [emphasis added] is in-school-suspension, basically, but kids are in their kind of for two reasons. So, they can be in there for getting into a fight and being in, in-school-suspension, or they're in there to process for recovery. So, ideally, it's just like, you're not making it in class, and you're refusing to follow teacher's directions, it's time out.

Both buildings found a way to implement ISS without calling it such and having to report to the district that they are sending students to ISS. Reflecting similar sensemaking, another alternative recording system was mentioned. Administrator Joseph discussed alternative methods for recording some of the misbehaviors in their building:

Yeah, so every student on a behavior plan [behavior] with a google doc, teachers all had access to that google document. So we were collecting data for our own proprietor's monitoring. They had goals about the behavior, so we did our own internal progress monitoring. It was not reported to the state. And then we would also have the official office referral that is reported to the state if they are spending time out of class. It's really two methods.

Behavior initiatives. Having behavior initiatives at the district level that instructed ways to prevent behaviors could facilitate a prospective sensemaking approach. This structural support, especially if consistently applied to all grade levels district-wide, might, in turn, alter the outcomes of a discipline event. The majority of administrators interviewed were able to point to an initiative used in their building.

However, the initiatives reported varied from administrator to administrator with various levels of understanding demonstrated. Furthermore, none had been applied districtwide.

Restorative practices. Five administrators pointed to some form of “restorative” practices used at various levels:

We say that we do restorative practice. But it’s not consistent and everyone is trained at a different level with it. So I don't think there are even two administrators that are totally certified and trained in it. I wouldn't call it...I'd hate to call it an initiative because it's not done with fidelity, it's not done with consistency...That's probably as close as we could get to an initiative.

(Administrator Adams)

A real kind of informal superficial restorative. I don’t mean to insult it, I thought it was powerful. It worked a good amount of the time, but it was really making sure that we mended those fences before we put things back to normal or tried to mend those fences. (Administrator Joseph)

So I would say that restorative practice is a discipline initiative that has been research-based and successful. And so we're working on integrating that more into our schools. We have trained facilitators in our schools. And I think there was a big push to go through several trainings a couple of years ago, and that's kind of gone by the wayside.(Administrator Adams)

These administrators from different buildings relayed that at some point the district provided a supporting structure that could act as an alternative to punitive discipline and impact how administrators made sense of discipline. Yet, depending on the context, it was considered informal, inconsistent, or being pushed a couple of years ago, showing

that sensemaking opportunities (like policies) can come and go. However, another interpretation offered regarding restorative practices is that it was never meant to replace the existing and punitive Board discipline policy. Administrator Klein mentioned that they [restorative practices] were to be done, "In addition to, not in replacement of, any other disciplinary measures. So we constantly want to restore, build relationships with people so that they can move forward."

Incentive reinforcements. Two administrators mentioned incentive reinforcements as behavior initiatives to potentially shape sensemaking. Administrator Rusty discussed a reward system in which students could earn different incentives for, "not having certain discipline infractions. It's not having certain behaviors, not having referrals. Not having a certain number of tardies and stuff like that." While Administrator Clark stated:

We don't formally do PBIS, but we do some positive reinforcers. So, we do goal cards. If you have all A's and B's, no discipline referrals, minimal tardies, you get a gold card, and you get to eat lunch outside when it's nice. You get to go to the front of the line. You get to go to the media center in the morning, and you get into sports events. We also do positive office referrals. So, throughout the week, teachers can write positive office referrals for kids, and then on Friday we call them up and give them to the kids at lunch, and then give them candy.

In contrast to all the other buildings, Administrator Lord said, "no" their building didn't [partake in any sort of behavior initiative].

The district did not offer an across the board positive behavior initiative as a way to prevent punitive discipline consequences. It was apparent that most administrators

considered their buildings trying something which potentially could shape sensemaking, especially if the discipline they were sensemaking involved a student that had been earning the reinforces offered for positive behaviors. However, most of the administrators considered that what was being done was not done consistently, and nothing was meant to replace the punitive discipline system. Without strong, meaningful frameworks to utilize, people may pay more attention to social considerations during their sensemaking (Walls, 2017; Weick, 1993).

Relational Factors in Sensemaking

This section examines the relational factors that influenced principal sensemaking in this study. With the perceived lack of knowledge and training, a focus on fear having experienced certain negative incidents, and a structure that gave a high level of autonomy, it could be that administrators' relationships in their buildings offered the needed context for sensemaking support. Analyzing interview transcripts and follow up conversations, board policy, district documentation, and other media, an all-encompassing relational theme presented: *Building-level administrators made meaning especially through their relationships and interactions with teachers*. The consideration of teachers wanting to teach without disruption led to exclusion and alternative placements for disruptive students. This was especially evident when a teacher who didn't often refer students sent one. The importance of attending to relationships with teachers, inflated the relational aspect of sensemaking (see Figure 2) during disciplining a student with disabilities. The following sections present how leaders made sense of disciplinary practices through their schools, as influenced by relationships with both teachers and students.

Relationships with Teachers

Traditionally administrators are considered in a higher position at schools than teachers. However, most administrators interviewed acknowledged that they worked for their teachers, not the other way around. They strived to highlight the decision making and building leadership importance of their teachers and recognized the need to maintain good relationships so that they were better able to work together towards the goal of educating kids. With a great deal of social contact between administrators and teachers, social sensemaking would be expected (Louis et al., 2013).

Discussing their self-perceived leader/teacher relationships, Administrator Lord considered themselves a, “servant leader.” stating their job was, “to serve.” Administrator Wright considered themselves an, “encourager and a cheerleader. I'm willing to support both kids and adults in getting to where they're meeting that consistent expectation, but I'm also not afraid to address issues or barriers that exist in getting to them,” whereas Administrator KL presented themselves as a, “relater, building relationships as a relater and a resource.” Administrator Joseph viewed that they, “work for students. And then I work for teachers. I don't know if that's servant leadership, I don't know, I believe in servant leadership, but I call it, I work for you. And I try to frame everything through that lens.” Administrator Clark identified their top strength as being, “connectedness.” All of the administrators conveyed that they were personally connected to their staff. All administrators were especially aware of the importance of maintaining their relationships with staff. It could follow that the relationship with teachers was a consideration when it came to discipline. Indeed, administrators identified the

considerations of teachers as part of their discipline sensemaking process, valuing their perspective above all.

Teacher input. If the path to referral began in the classroom, then the teacher's statement would often be the first piece of knowledge consumed by the administrator, or the piece of knowledge most desired. For instance, Administrator Lord often utilized the teacher's perspective to determine consequences before having an interaction with the students, "I escalate my referrals so I can print them off, whatever they are, and I kind of know in the back of my mind what the consequence should be based on whatever the offense is." This shows an administrator reacting based solely on a teacher's word. In making sense of how to discipline, it was the teacher as a trusted source that told the story utilized. Administrator Klein, too, showed supporting the teachers was a main consideration with behavior, stating, "In order to support our teacher and communicate throughout our building some philosophies of how we are doing business, any infraction is going to be dealt with from a disciplinary standpoint. Each and every one."

While the previous two administrators exclusively mentioned teachers, Administrator Adams balanced the teachers' perspectives with the students' but shared the student's perspective with the teacher during their sensemaking process:

Usually, I'll have some communication back with the teacher about what the student said happened. If the student has written a statement, I'll get that back to the teacher, and then decide from there what's the next step. So is there a consequence that needs to be assigned?

Pointing out that students might not be trustworthy when trying to make sense of discipline, Administrator Rusty contended:

If a student's being sent to the office there's obviously a reason a student's being sent out all the way to the office...the smaller ones are kind of harder because the teacher's not going to write that up immediately. You're now taking the perspective only of the student, not of what, and the student's usually not being completely honest with what happened. Now you're having to make the decision are you sending the student to the next class and then figuring out what's happening. You got to figure out a way to get to the teacher without disrupting the classroom even more.

Administrator Rusty not only showed that students are being sent out of instruction for reasons that do not warrant immediate contact with an administrator, but that the teacher's perspective is still needed because the student is probably not being honest. More than just utilizing their perspectives, the administrators in this study also offered similar opinions on how to keep good relationships with their teachers based on fulfilling the idea of what teachers wanted overall from discipline.

Teacher expectations. Administrators seemed to be very aware of what their teachers expected out of their discipline. Teachers want to teach, many educators believe, and this idea shaped leaders' sensemaking about disciplinary practices. For example, several administrators shared that teachers should be teaching, rather than dealing with multiple disruptions:

That's the thing. They want to be able to teach without having to be a bouncer or guard or whatever. I mean, they didn't sign up to do that as teachers. They signed up to teach whatever subject they teach and that's what they want to do. So, they expect if they take the time out of their day to send a referral then they want

something done. They are tired of that behavior in the classroom. (Administrator Lord)

I think they want to be able to teach and they want students to learn...a huge number of teachers felt like the district and our building continues to allow these students that we know are violent, they've demonstrated their violent tendencies at school, we still allow them to walk through our hallways, to sit in our classes. We have some students who are so incredibly disruptive to the learning environment that we are not allowed to do anything with, so again, we're not able to teach, kids can't learn. And our teachers are very giving, they're very compassionate, they're very empathetic, they're just phenomenal individuals and teachers. But, when you can't teach, that really weighs on them. (Administrator Wright)

These administrators believed that if there was a disruption, the teachers wanted it taken care of quickly, and this shaped their sensemaking and actions around discipline.

In turn, this led to a range of quick classroom removals. The idea of a quick resolution was also conveyed by Administrator Rusty, "...immediate support. When something happens it is taken care of immediately rather than having to wait." Teachers wanted threats removed. Both of these ideas were supported by Administrator Clark who perceived, "they want us to intercede when a student's behavior is getting in the way of them being able to teach the students, that's getting in the way of other students' learning."

The idea of stopping interruptions was also similar to the administrators who believed teachers wanted (mis)behavior to change out of discipline. Administrator Joseph remarked, "...they want students to come back to their class and be students. They want

discipline that *fixes* [emphasis added] students. They want discipline that changes behaviors.” While mentioning behavior change this administrator also utilized the term fixed. This might show the belief that teachers think misbehavior is due to something inherently wrong with a student, not a product of the environment. When trying to make sense of discipline, the notion of behavior change was echoed by Administrator Adams, “they want something that’s going to change the behavior in their classroom. So whatever that might be, whether it’s disrupting behavior or insubordination or not working in that class, they want to see a change in behavior on the student’s behalf.”

Since administrators were so aware of what they thought teachers wanted out of their discipline, they might be more apt to allow this understanding to shape their actions and remove students based on keeping their teachers happy. There was also the realization that teachers kept tabs on the outcome of the discipline process.

According to Administrator Adams, “I feel like our teachers always are looking for what is the consequence that was assigned to see if it matches the crime.”

Just as administrators were aware that teachers hold expectations of certain consequences based on what action a student took. It was also apparent that some teacher reactions influenced sensemaking more than others.

Staff reaction. Staff reaction could influence sensemaking and the resulting discipline outcome. However, not all administrators were in consensus on this topic. Some administrators pointed to certain staff members being able to influence based on their relationship with the administrator. Administrator Rusty stated, "Depending on the staff member. If the staff member has any kind of cache with the admin or something like that," while Administrator Wright echoed, "...each administrator is close to a certain

party, certain teachers in the building. I think it can impact [discipline]." Others pointed to the influence based on the number of previous referrals a teacher has had.

So, if teacher "A" sends a kid down and they're always sending down kids, I may take their complaint with a grain of salt, but teacher "B" never does an office referral, I'm gonna take that maybe a little bit more seriously. I think that's kind of ... They're kinda reputation or past behavior's influences what I'm gonna do.

(Administrator Clark)

There's also a handful of teachers who rarely write a referral, it's not because they love chaos, it's because they do a phenomenal job of managing their students, of engaging their students and so when we do get a referral from someone who might fall into that category, it's like whoa, this must have been horrible for them to send you out of class. (Administrator Wright)

Being a teacher that hardly wrote referrals could result in harsher consequences for a student based on the perception that you must have done something really bad to be sent out of this teacher's classroom. These statements show the influence teachers can have on the discipline sensemaking process of administrators and how they can shape consequences. However, not all administrators thought that teacher influence was a conscious choice.

Administrator Adams thought that staff reaction could influence discipline, however, thought it was, "all part of unconscious bias." If unconscious, then administrators would not be aware they were allowing teachers to influence them. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some administrators outright gave teachers the option of consequence generation.

I think they do...A lot of times I just say to the teacher, what do you want me to do? What do you think needs to happen? Is this something where you need him shut down for the day or do you just need him to go to a buddy room? What do you need to have happen? And then also, can he come back tomorrow? That's even for major things I might have a major situation that happens with a kid that results in him being suspended for "x" number of days or even just a day. I try to talk to that teacher and say, Are you ready for him to come back to class? Are you ready for them back in there? Because that emotion ... that relationship goes both ways. (Administrator Clark)

“Absolutely. That's necessary to support teachers. We're talking about serious disciplinary infractions where maybe there's a physical nature. Anything physical towards a teacher, the IEP doesn't matter” (Administrator Klein). Admittedly, this administrator valued the teachers over the students. However, as previously mentioned, administrators highly valued their relationships with students, too, expressing an explicit understanding that they wanted to help students do well, also shaping sensemaking.

Relationship with Students

The majority of educators get into the teaching profession because they want to make a difference in students' lives (Menzies et al., 2015). All seven of the administrators interviewed agreed that they wanted all students to succeed [which could also be examined under principal belief]. The idea of all students succeeding could heavily influence sensemaking, especially if considering behavior prevention prospectively, or thinking of ways to prevent behaviors before they occur. However, for an administrator tasked with deciding what to do during violations of the district code of conduct policies,

considerations of the majority of students in the school over one student's success, seemed to take precedent when sensemaking. Administrator Rusty stated:

The administration needs to create a safe environment for every student...we allow students who may pose a danger to other students back in the building and I think that creates fear amongst some students and it definitely creates less opportunity for students to learn because of that [fear].

Whereas Administrator Klein, solely over students with disabilities, who's most rewarding part of being an administrator was creating, "relationships and helping students accomplish their goals," went to the need for harsher consequences as a potential deterrent, especially when there was violence:

Financial accountability provided. If you have to be arrested, your parents get a \$200 bill for the police having to leave the streets, come in here, arrest you...I think I would like to see stiffer accountabilities...I would like to be a lot stiffer. Maybe that would serve as a better deterrent instead of going home. You make the decision that you're going to fight in a public-school setting, setting matters, and disrupt the entirety of a school of almost 2000 people, you should be gone a minimum of five days, maybe ten.

In conflict with the previous sentiments, the same administrator also echoed the need for opportunity and access to students with behavior difficulties.

The challenge was to make sure that we were still able to provide those educational opportunities while holding the student accountable for their behaviors and their actions relative to themselves and everyone else. So how do we keep this student in class, keep them in challenging academic modes, get them

ready for college and career when their behavior is limiting their time that they're exposed to us? Specifically, we've tried online, homebound, one-on-one, outside of the school support and those things are specifically to maintain the student's academic opportunities because their behavior has cut a clear line that you can't be in the building. So now we've also tried after school program. We've created a program with this student and students like this in mind that we think will be a tremendous benefit because they can get some academic support without the social issue of being in the building with the other 1700 people. (Administrator Klein)

In self-noticing this conflicting sentiment between helping all students while trying to balance discipline, Administrator Clark remarked, "One of the most challenging is that you want to do what's right...for all students." However, the overall consensus on how to handle students that are deemed not succeeding behaviorally in the general school setting, while still wanting to maintain their educational opportunity came down to the need for more alternative placements.

My whole perception has morphed over the years in that I think it's time and I believe that we need to have true alternatives for students, you're violent students, your ones that are talking about or shooting at the community, that are truly violent, we need to have an alternative system for them, but we have to have an alternative opportunity for students who just don't want to do school.

(Administrator Wright)

I would like our district to have options for kids that are model of school doesn't seem to fit their needs. And I would like them to offer some type of different option for them. (Administrator Lord)

If it were up to me, the first thing I would do with the resources that we have, I would create a true alternative-type setting within our building, within our current setting. I would divide our resources so that within this alternative setting, within the regular setting, there was administrator representation of school communicator, guidance counselor, outreach counselor, and I would maintain the freedom of movement of students that struggled, and I think in looking at discipline, you have the true overt behaviors that are an issue. (Administrator Adams)

The above section discussed how relational influences, especially with teachers, had a prominent place in administrators' sensemaking processes. The importance of maintaining relationships with teachers, even allowing teachers to help in sensemaking to do so, was apparent. There were also demonstrations of an internal battle, wanting to reach all kids, but being aware of the influences behaviors have on the learning of others and teachers. The administrators' responses regarding the importance of teachers and students showed the influence of relational factors on the sensemaking process. In the next section, the influences of individual-personal factors will be analyzed.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings for how principals made sense of disciplining students with disabilities. It found that sensemaking was constrained by administrators not having in-depth background knowledge/ preparation which caused them to seek out

meaning-making information through alternative means. These means might have been through the structural set-up of the district, however, the overall in MWPS was highly autonomous regarding discipline and related practices, outside of Safe Schools Violations. This too caused administrators to seek out meaning-making structures and experiences beyond district policies. While administrators often made meaning through their relationships and interactions with teachers, sensemaking was truly impacted when there was a perception of safety being threatened. This could be found in the form of violence, or even perceived violence, as administrators allowed previous negative experiences to influence their future sensemaking. When emotion, specifically fear, was present, sensemaking became heavily retrospective even though building-level administrators seemed to identify the importance of student individualization. The demonstration of findings altering the framework was presented visually in the alteration of Walls (2017) (see Figure 2, p. 110). Walls' framework, gave a generalized and equal overview of different areas from which administrators might draw to make sense of a disruption or novel situation. Based on the findings presented in this chapter the altered figure gives a more accurate representation of my participants sensemaking and which aspects were more heavily drawn upon (relational over individual background, and emotional over cognitive) when disciplining students with disabilities. My figure also shows that administrators were more retrospective in their actions, or tried to stop (mis)behavior by reacting to the (mis)behavior, not prospectively by trying to prevent (mis)behavior from occurring. The following chapter and sections present a further discussion of the findings and implications for theory, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The following sections in this chapter discuss the findings and implications from this multiple case study, based on its original purpose, to explore the sensemaking process of building-level administrators in disciplining students with disabilities. To explore this topic, the following main research question and four sub-questions were developed:

- (1) How do principals make sense of disciplining students with disabilities?
 - a. What are the **individual-background** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, what was the influence of a principal's preparation training program, or any relayed personal experiences?
 - b. What are the **individual-personal** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, how is principal sensemaking shaped by cognitive and emotional responses?
 - c. What are the **structural** factors that influence principal sensemaking when disciplining a student with disabilities, for example: district discipline policies; discipline in general and/or special education identified as part of a principal's evaluation; school safety measures?
 - d. What are the **relational** factors that influence principal sensemaking? For instance, how is principal sensemaking shaped by social interactions?

As a former special education teacher and researcher, I interpret and discuss the findings of this study situated in literature and by using my familiarity of the specific contexts of special education policy and law coupled with the experience of working under building-level and district leaderships that were seemingly not as well versed on

special education policies and law. Overall, the findings of this study suggested that combining autonomy with limited formal knowledge and lack of relevant training opportunities could lead to discipline practices that did not proactively address behavioral difficulties. Failure to address behavior impacts a student's access to a free and appropriate education (Swenson, & Ryder, 2016). The findings also illuminated building-level administrator perceptions of their knowledge, support, structure, unique contexts, experiences, and challenges that influenced their sensemaking capacities. Utilizing a sensemaking framework allowed distinctions to be made between and within each aspect of sensemaking, i.e. individual/relational; cognitive/emotional as constrained by structure (Walls, 2017). Although the study separated these aspects of sensemaking, is important to remember that all aspects of sensemaking exist in concert, not in isolation. Indeed, it is difficult to fully separate their interactions (Walls, 2017). While there was overall self-reporting that participants were leaders for all students, in retrospect, they presented data that implied that they were not comfortable considering themselves fully as leaders of special education.

The following sections give a summary and discussion of key findings from the study, starting with background factors that impacted sensemaking, then personal (cognitive and emotional) factors, structural factors, and finishing with relational factors. This is followed by the implications of the study and then ends with potential areas of future research.

Summary and Discussion of Key Findings

The findings of this multiple case study demonstrated that the building-level administrators were making sense of disciplining students with disabilities constrained

more heavily by certain aspects of sensemaking. Specifically, they (1) had very little formal knowledge of special education to draw from, (2) had previous experiences that reminded them of worst-case occurrences, (3) were given very few opportunities to increase their knowledge outside of own initiative, and (4) relied on relationships with teachers to shape their actions.

The key findings from this multiple case study were:

1. *Not having in-depth background knowledge/ preparation caused building-level administrators to seek out special education meaning-making information through alternative means.*
2. *Building-level administrators recognized the importance of student individualization, however, when safety was threatened sensemaking became heavily retrospective.*
3. *The overall structural set-up in MWPS was highly autonomous regarding discipline and related practices, outside of Safe Schools Violations, causing administrators to seek out meaning-making structures and experiences beyond school or district policies or support structures.*
4. *Building-level administrators made meaning especially through their relationships and interactions with teachers.*

Background Factors

Not having in-depth background knowledge/ preparation caused building-level administrators to seek out special education meaning-making information through self-directed or alternative means.

College preparation programs. The highly educated building-level administrator participants in this study agreed that they were unprepared by their preparation programs to become leaders of special education. Their lack of knowledge inhibited their ability to make sense of disciplining students with disabilities in a manner that emphasized individual behavioral needs, especially from a prospective lens. It has been found that a principal must have background knowledge to be effective leaders for students with disabilities, needing to know regulatory requirements and how to implement them, having an understanding of various disabilities and what the general needs are, offering FAPE, and maintaining LRE (Fuches et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2012). Furthermore, even when a principal had a clear understanding of discipline through IDEA, they still lacked nuance, e.g. how to use functional behavior assessments (Wakeman et al., 2006). Therefore, not having a solid knowledge base would imply it difficult to be an effective leader of special education.

On the job training. This study found that the all participants identified knowledge acquisition in special education mainly being informed through on the job training and personal inquiry, not their preparation programs. For example, Administrator Wright referenced utilizing computer searches and Administrator Clark relayed that it was during their fourth year of teaching, through multiple conversations, they gained their knowledge. While this agrees with studies that found on the job training being one of the most important factors in knowledge of working with students with disabilities (Lasky & Karge, 2006), on the job training does not ensure the knowledge being gained is correct and timely. Indeed, even special education teachers have been found undertrained in special education issues (Sands et al., 1995).

Personal beliefs. Personal beliefs emerged as an important aspect of sensemaking. Several administrators held the belief that special education was not their full responsibility. This belief is reminiscent of early days in special education where the responsibility was mainly the purview of special education departments/directors (Pazey & Yates, 2012). One administrator mentioned that they were unable to answer certain questions because all students with disabilities were assigned to only one administrator. Another always leaned on someone else when working with students with disabilities. Reinforcing the need to rely on others in sensemaking (more discussion in relational factors section), this study also found that multiple administrators held misinformed beliefs in discipline through the interpretation of IDEA.

Multiple administrators believed that there was nothing that could be done if a student's disability was producing the misbehaviors under question. However, this is incorrect, and as shown through case law, is considered a denial of FAPE (Poucher, 2015). If there is a concern about a behavior interfering with a student's performance, they need behavior supports (Swenson, & Ryder, 2016). Furthermore, students with disabilities can still be disciplined just like their peers, as long as additional protections are considered (Yell, 2014). When disciplining, there was also the belief of 10 free days of OSS held by some of the administrators before having to "worry" about a manifest determination. This also ignores the above-mentioned need to provide behavior supports.

Since it is known that administrators' personal beliefs have an overall influence on building culture (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007), it makes sense that building-level administrators with very little knowledge or formal training in special education, especially those with mis-held beliefs regarding IDEA, would create a culture that

perpetuated a lack of behavior supports for students with behavioral needs. Indeed, McCarthy and Sodak (2007) found that principals who ignored the needs of students with more challenging behaviors also believed their education was not as important as other students. Students with challenging behaviors also impacted the sensemaking for administrators of future interactions with different students.

Previous school experiences. Previous experiences were important in the sensemaking process of administrators. As found by Praisner (2003) positive experiences increased the expectation of further positive experiences. However, negative experiences, especially those with behavioral challenges, decreased attitudes towards special education overall. Administrators relayed positive experiences that referenced expectations as working with other adults as a team in the best interest of a student with disabilities. However, the negative experiences all referenced interactions with students that turned violent and resulted in serious injury to an adult. As it is known there is a complex interplay between the aspects of sensemaking, these negative background experiences can be understood in conjunction with emotional sensemaking and will be discussed more in the below section.

This study found that the administrators interviewed in this study were similar to past findings of principals being underprepared to lead special education, rather learned about special education through on-the-job training. Administrators also held beliefs that were not always in line with current regulations of IDEA. Fitting the understanding that what is happening is understood based on what has happened previously (Walls, 2017), every administrator had negative experiences with students that remained with them, impacting their future interactions.

Building-level administrators recognized the importance of student individualization, however, when safety was threatened sensemaking became heavily retrospective.

Cognition involves acquiring and understanding knowledge through multiple processes, e.g. thought, experience, the senses, etc. Cognition is an integral part of sensemaking that can be dependent on preexisting habits (Walls, 2017). There are some obvious applications of conscious reasoning that administrators held regarding discipline. Perhaps the most emphasized through interviews was that punitive consequences should follow misbehavior. This thinking shaped expectations going into discipline, and shaped thoughts on how to prevent future discipline. This tradition-bound practice has been found in schools since the inception of public education (Stewart, 1998) is the product of beliefs exerting a deep hold on minds (Kuhn, 1996). This deep hold might explain why for decades research has found that punitive disciplinary practices were ineffective at changing behaviors and preventing future behaviors (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Maag, 2001; Skiba & Peterson, 2000) yet, districts and administrators continue to rely on the practice.

This study found that the building-level administrators recognized the importance of individualized considerations for students with disabilities but maintained those considerations within the cognitively understood sensemaking process of punitive consequences for misbehaviors. Although several administrators were able to identify that behaviors could serve another purpose for students, e.g., that maybe there were unmet needs, they were not equipped to prospectively address behavioral needs. Walls (2017) found that more prospective sensemaking is more likely to creative and

aspirational and can depart from the past, or habitual ways of acting. However, due to the lack of in-depth knowledge of alternative discipline practices, administrators weren't confident in how to prospectively approach students with behavioral needs.

The sensemaking framework this utilized in this study held that cognitively, disruptions were understood according to size (Walls, 2017, p.11) However, the administrators demonstrated that a disruption of significant size, or more importantly perception of violence, switched sensemaking to be more dependent on emotion. Maitlis et al. (2013) suggest that the type of emotion can determine whether sensemaking is retrospective. The administrators in this study were often in situations where fear was the dominant emotion. As discussed in the previous section, drawing from their past experiences that involved violence, it was found that the more emotions were heightened based on the perception of violence or actual violence, sensemaking became more retrospective. As Walls (2017) suggested, the more retrospective the sensemaking, the more it pulls from the past. Thus, as was demonstrated by the administrators, the more emotional a situation became based on misbehavior, the more punitive (exclusionary discipline) the sensemaking shifted.

Since one of the main responsibilities of administrators' role was to keep their schools safe (Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005), when disruptions occur, their identity as a leader and protector were under threat. These threats also indicated emotional sensemaking taking over. McCarthy and Sodak (2007) found that many principals will put the needs of the majority of students over the individual considerations of few. Especial in the name of school safety. The conflict of student rights while maintaining the integrity of school safety, caused at least one administrator to declare, "anything physical

towards a teacher, the IEP doesn't matter, you're getting the discipline you're supposed to get.”

Emotion, specifically fear, emerged as being very important to the administrators' sensemaking processes. Emotions of fear, loss of control, and as will be discussed more in relationships, of doing what is expected worked in conjunction with previous experiences that reinforced the idea of negative outcomes, and grounded sensemaking in heavily retrospective understandings, i.e. punitive discipline.

Structural Factors

The overall structural set-up in MWPS was highly autonomous regarding discipline and related practices, outside of Safe Schools Violations, causing administrators to seek out meaning-making structures and experiences beyond school or district policies or support structures.

Formal policy. The most prominent theme that the participants reported was multiple examples of autonomy that left them feeling unsupported as well as outright confused about their roles. This began with the structure of the district's code of conduct. Like many districts nationwide (Losen & Martinez, 2013), MWPS had specific board policies relating to discipline rooted in punitive consequences, including exclusionary practices (BOE, 2019). All administrators functioned within this system and were responsible for assigning consequences for violations consistent with the code of conduct. Having discipline rooted in punitive practices is known to create an environment that causes harm to students, especially students with disabilities (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Osher et al., 2011; Skiba, 2002). Exclusionary discipline was found to jeopardize a student's health and safety (APA, 2011). Indeed, being suspended one time in high

school decreased a student's chance of graduation (Rumberger, 2015), while out of school suspensions were found to be a top predictor of a student being incarcerated by the 9th grade (Balfanz et al., 2003). Administrators functioning in this system had to do so with relatively little guidance on appropriate consequences due to the nature of the policy.

Having concrete policies involving discipline might seem the opposite of autonomous; however, for each offense, consequences could be anywhere from a conference with administrator, to losing parking privileges, to 180 days out-of-school suspension. Worded to give latitude to administrators regarding severity or number of infractions, these policies have allowed for disproportionate suspensions for students with disabilities (State Department of Education, 2019) and administrator feelings of unfairness.

Vagins and Humphrey (2012) found that students with disabilities received more punitive discipline for similar incidents than their peers. The Office of Civil Rights (2014) found students with disabilities were twice as likely to be suspended than their peers, and Losen and Martinez (2013) found 1 in 5 students was suspended at a rate three times higher. MWPS suspended students with disabilities out-of-school at a rate four times that of their non-disabled peers (State Department of Education, 2019). The administrators readily identified the potential unfairness regarding these policies pointing to students being disciplined based on the whim of whichever administrator they so happened to get. Furthermore, multiple administrators identified the autonomy as being too much; producing too much unfairness.

Evaluations. Sensemaking, as constrained by structure, could come through an oversight in an evaluation process. Formative and summative assessments for administrators have been found as valuable strategies to identify potential areas for improvement and to target professional development needs (Brown-Sims, 2010). However, administrator evaluations neglected regard to any special education topics, including discipline. This lack of expectation shaped administrators' thoughts of areas of priority. This practice also missed the opportunity to identify and offer professional development necessary to increasing administrators ability to effectively support students with disabilities and potentially balance out their sensemaking processes.

Professional development. As previously discussed, knowledge in special education was crucial for an effective leader of students with disabilities (Fuches et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2012) Not only did the administrators feel like they did not have a solid background through preparation programming, they felt like they were not receiving any effective training in special education during their time at MWPS. Furthermore, according to the administrators interviewed, they were mostly the ones providing training to their teachers. Thus, if they were lacking in special education knowledge, they were ill-equipped to be providing any training in special education to their teachers. Without the ability to develop "rich and thorough" (Walls, 2017, p. 6) understanding of a topic, sensemaking is not ongoing (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002).

School resource officers (SROs). The one area of sensemaking which seemed fairly concrete to administrators was born out of the zero-tolerance policies of the 1980s- (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Utilizing SROs, when certain code of conduct violations occurred, was understood as sacrosanct for the majority of the administrators. Having

access to SROs has also allowed administrators to invite police presence during any interactions they see fit. While several administrators wanted SRO involvement to have conversations with kids of potential future outcomes if they did not change behavior, most of the administrators wanted the SROs close by just in case situations escalated and they were needed. Having police officers in schools has been cited both as a way to maintain a safe school environment and a starting point for the school-to-prison pipeline. According to the ACLU, the school-to-prison pipeline is when students, many of which have learning disabilities, are funneled out of school and into the criminal justice system (ACLU, n.d.). Indeed, students with disabilities do not receive any IDEA considerations when they are being reported as committing a crime to the SROs (James, 2009).

In one high school building context, the administrator overall students with disabilities believed physical contact was not part of their job. If any physical contact was needed towards a student, it should be the SRO to do it... This leaves potentially minor behaviors having the consequence of police involvement and potentially arrest. This practice turns a small incident of a student refusing to do something for a teacher into a potential arrest, exemplifying the above-mentioned school-to-prison pipeline.

Informal initiatives. Sensemaking, as constrained by structure, was also shaped through the informal initiatives of central office. In response to a racial disproportionality of discipline in the district, building-level administrators felt heavy pressure to decrease the number of suspensions given to Black students. Racial disproportionality has been consistently reported in exclusionary discipline for decades (Wright & Wright, 2016). On one hand, this might have had an impact on how administrators made sense of disciplining students with disabilities due to heightened district scrutiny on discipline. On

the other, it led administrators to believe that the discipline that was going on outside of the targeted group didn't matter. Instead, administrators believed that having decreased numbers (not even the corresponding behaviors) was the only aspect that was being monitored.

Alternative behavior initiatives. Having behavior initiatives at the district level that instructed ways to positively prevent behaviors could facilitate a more prospective sensemaking approach by the administrators. Unlike exclusionary discipline (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Noguera, 1995; Nolan, 2008), positive-type behavior initiatives are considered to improve behavior (Osher et al., 2011; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). These approaches rely on prospective thinking concerning discipline. The administrators across MWPS reported some knowledge of alternative measures aimed at creating improved behaviors. Several administrators reported the use of restorative practices and incentives for certain achievements. However, all the administrators also acknowledged several implementation problems with these initiatives (1) lack of consistent training, (2) given out for characteristics that many students think is unobtainable (e.g., high grades, attendance, lack of behavior referrals), and (3) used as an additive to punitive practices, not in place of. Much research has focused on the benefits of Positive Behavior Systems (PBS). Indeed, in 2016 OSERS guidance was issued that included the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies to address behavior, specific to students with disabilities. However, any research or evidence-based practice must be implemented with fidelity (Sugai et al., 2010). Without the district implementing with fidelity and maintaining the practice consistently across time and place, the

administrators seemed to look on these initiatives as another area they were just not that confident of knowledge.

Since sensemaking involves drawing meaning from actions through interpretation (Evans, 2007) the district having a high level of autonomy limits the base from which administrators can draw to make sense of disciplining students with disabilities. The concrete structures that were provided, i.e., the discipline code, SRO, still left too much autonomy or the thought of no choice. Discipline through the code of conduct becomes the main sensemaking factor during behavior interactions. Punitive in nature, and without structures that supported other options, utilizing escalating punitive responses to continued behaviors was considered the way to extinguish unwanted behaviors. While there were brief mentions of helping students in different ways, ultimately there was not enough guidance or oversight provided by the district through any route to make sure that alternatives to punitive measures were at the forefront of administrators sensemaking processes. Without alternate structures from the district, other factors had to occupy a prominent place while trying to make sense of discipline interactions. The next section reports on how relational factors influenced the administrators' sensemaking process.

Relational Factors

By product of their roles, building-level administrators have a great deal of contact with the teachers in their buildings (Louis et al., 2013). This high frequency of contact sets up an ideal situation for social sensemaking (Walls, 2017). However, administrators are considered in charge, and as such are ultimately responsible for the discipline decisions that are made. Even though the power dynamic was that of hierarchy, it was found that many of the administrators considered themselves not necessarily over

teachers but working for their teachers. It was their job to support and be a resource. Some administrators considered themselves servants while one verbalized that maintaining a good, collaborative relationship with teachers allowed them all to better work towards a common goal. Indeed, social sensemaking can amplify actions when responses are collaborative and collectivized (Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005). The administrators in this study relied on different forms of relational sensemaking taking into consideration relationships with teachers and students.

Teachers. Similar to Coburn's (2001) findings of teacher sensemaking shaped by collaborations, the administrators in this study, too, relied on collaborations with teachers during their discipline sensemaking process. Identifying a teacher's perspective became the most important piece of information an administrator considered. Administrators often had a back-and-forth with their teachers on consequences and some administrators outright allowed teachers to determine what consequence should be. This was repeated several times concerning not wanting a student back in their classroom for a little while. Administrators were also very aware of their teachers' expectations out of discipline. These relational considerations set students up to be pushed out of time in class.

This awareness is also linked with emotional sensemaking as, "emotionally, disruptions can be best understood in terms of the extent to which they threaten or alter one's individual or organizational identity" (Walls, 2017, p. 11). As social sensemaking is understood in part by power relations, an administrator not functioning to teacher exception might bring into question their identity as a leader responsible for school safety. Also linked with a previous idea, cognitive sensemaking, was in part dependent on the size of disruption. Thus, the size of staff reaction to student behavior influenced

sensemaking, too. Teachers, especially ones that did not have a history of many discipline referrals got the highest considerations in the sensemaking process, resulting, as put by several administrators, a harsher consequence. Teachers were not the only entity within the school that the administrator would consider.

Students. Some tension arose when discussing student relationships. The majority of educators get into the teaching profession because they want to make a difference in students' lives (Menzies et al., 2015). All of the administrators readily presented that they wanted all students to succeed. While this might have impacted sensemaking more, the concept of all students became fuzzy when balancing one student's needs against a whole classroom, or building. When working with students with more challenging behavioral needs, principals were more accepting of those whose behaviors did not impact other students (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997; Ngwokabuenui, 2013; McCarthy & Sodak, 2007).

Further Discussion

One of the top priorities for most schools is to keep kids safe. Taken as part of their responsibilities, this was also a main consideration during discipline interactions for the interviewed building-level administrators. Those that had reported violent experiences or interactions were even more apt to want to use punitive removal methods to eliminate potential violence from the building if even for a short period. These measures were often considered not only as a way to let those involved, especially teachers, get space to cool off but also as a deterrent for others that might be considering similar behavioral actions. Yet, it is known that exclusionary discipline is highly ineffective in both changing behaviors and preventing future behaviors (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Maag, 2001; Skiba

& Peterson, 2000). However, with lack of little else to rely upon (both background knowledge and perceived district support), and the desire to protect other students and teachers from the potential violence, finding alternative placements to deter behavior, usually outside of a student's normal schedule of curriculum was in the forefront of administrator decision making. The larger the disruption, the more the emotion, and the more the emotion, the more reactive sensemaking became. It is alarming that our educational decision-makers are relying on their emotions and relationships to determine discipline consequences students, especially those with disabilities. This can be seen as directly feeding into the crisis of disproportionate discipline procedures as well as disparate educational outcomes suffered by those who are excluded from education. Administrators should be on the front line of improving discipline practices but they are not since they are still heavily relying upon retrospective actions. Furthermore, they are not stemming the flow of students into the school-to-prison pipeline through these same retrospective actions. In turn, this hurts African American students at a higher rate than those of any other race.

Especially important to students with disabilities, the lack of consistent and implemented with fidelity alternative, positive type discipline methods, perpetuated negative consequences. Students might be lacking in expected behavior skills as a product of their disability. If the expected skills are not being explicitly taught, then it is unreasonable to expect all students to know them based on verbal telling or punitive disciplinary actions. No matter how many levels of discipline a student faces, they might still not know or understand what is expected.

However, instead of implementing supports and the teaching of appropriate social behaviors (Osher et al., 2011; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010), many looked to alternative placements for the students that were not maintaining compliance (NCES, 2019; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). In a middle school context, for example, there were options to send a student to another classroom of the same subject to see if they did better there. However, considerations were not in place for students that this might potentially create a harder time, such as in dealing with the transition or being removed from their familiar setting. There was also a room that students would be sent to if their time in the "other classroom" didn't work out. Unsurprisingly, many of the students that were sent out of their curriculum were ultimately sent to the room that was not called in-school-suspension officially but was considered such by the building-level administrators. Unfortunately, this "not ISS, ISS room" was created by administrators looking to prevent the use of exclusionary discipline since they had received pressure from the district (see previous section) while thinking they were offering innovative and good options for students to learn to improve their behaviors (Thomas & Loxley, 2007). However, just changing the name does not improve the practice. At the high school level, the administrators interviewed, who overall had witnessed more violence than their MS counterparts, considered even more restrictive alternatives, in one case creating an option that removed students from the main school day. These administrators did not have much consideration for being able to teach appropriate behavioral skills, due to sentiments of not having the time, resources, or knowing how to students being too old or too entrenched in their ways. However, these ideas can be discounted since it is known that schools that proactively address undesirable student behaviors through means outside of

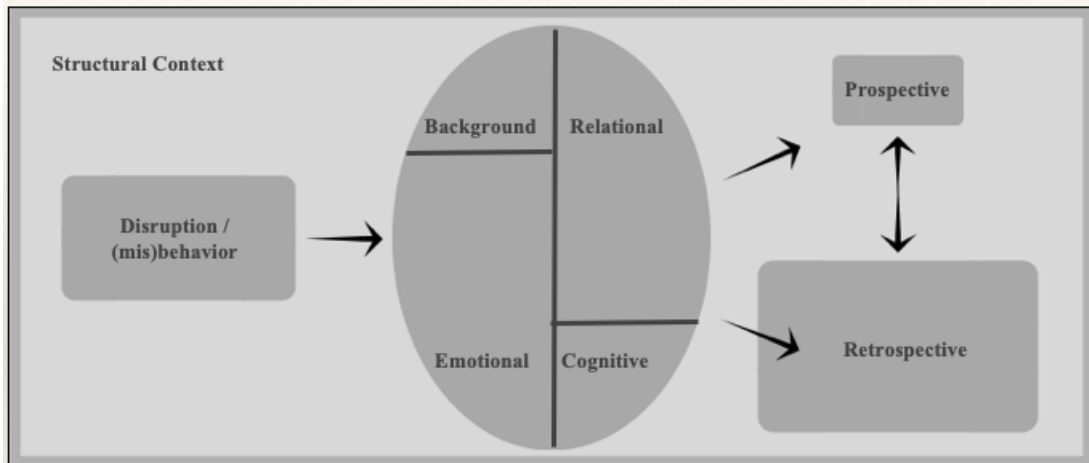
exclusionary practices have the highest student achievement (Black, 2018). Especially important to students with disabilities that might be lacking in these skills as a product of their disability. If the skill has not been taught, then it is unreasonable to expect all students to know them based on verbal telling. No matter how many levels of discipline a student faces, they might still not know or understand what is expected. Outside of wanting to keep the school safe, administrators' sensemaking processes relied heavily upon their relationships with teachers.

Knowing that principals set the climate of a building, they have a great responsibility to students with disabilities to set a climate that recognizes the responsibility and importance of considering the individual student and their needs and recognizes that discipline is much more than a punitive reaction to (mis)behavior. Principals must convey confidence as leaders of special education so that the building will not have an undertone of I can't help you, or it's not important. Furthermore, if not directed by the district, principals have a responsibility to implement discipline practices that do show improvement in (mis)behaviors. While not exclusive to their purview, principals can stress the importance of filling the gaps in their knowledge when planning professional development. The stakes for students with disabilities are too high for principals to continue to function at a level that has been perpetuating a rate of exclusion far beyond that of their peers.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Theory

Figure 2: Educational Sensemaking Discipline



Sensemaking, as guided by Walls (2017) framework, gave a generalized and equal overview of different areas from which administrators might draw to make sense of a disruption or novel situation. Walls' framework was based on the dichotomous pairs of individual/social, cognitive/emotional, and prospective/retrospective. However, based on the findings from this study, Figure 2 gives a more accurate representation of my participants' sensemaking and which aspects were more heavily drawn upon (relational over individual background, and emotional over cognitive) when disciplining students with disabilities. My figure also shows that administrators were more retrospective in their actions, or tried to stop (mis)behavior by reacting to the (mis)behavior after it occurred, not prospectively by trying to prevent a (mis)behavior from occurring. While this study looked specifically at disciplining students with disabilities, based on the amounts of knowledge specific to alternative practices of influencing (mis)behaviors, it goes to reason that administrators would making meaning in a similar, if not more

retrospective and harsh way with students that were not given individual considerations based on IDEA.

Sensemaking, as a tool of educational analysis, is often employed as a way to understand moderate change situations (Walls, 2017). However, until now it has not been applied at an educational scale of individual disruptions, such as individual periods of misbehavior during school. As such, this study offers several implications to sensemaking as a frame of educational analysis. Sensemaking was applied to this study for several reasons: (1) educational sensemaking has been fairly limited in the scope of its educational investigations to mainly understanding new policy initiatives (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002); (2) behavior disruptions are understood as occurring when there is a difference between expected and perceived state (Weick et al., 2005). However, not all behavior disruptions are equal, with some quickly escalating out of control, creating a more intense crisis situation (Weick, 1993); and (3) IDEA has been around for decades with the most recent update 15 years ago. The following sections will discuss implications for sensemaking theory.

In education, ongoing sensemaking has been considered to give time to develop rich and in-depth understandings of an initiative (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002). This could prevent sensemaking from being based more through relationships and emotions. Yet, this study found that even after decades of enactment, administrators did not have a rich or in-depth understanding of IDEA or especially IDEA as it related to discipline. Furthermore, while educational sensemaking has attended to diverse outcomes in policy implementation (Honig & Hatch, 2004) the outcomes with discipline are still fairly consistent across the nation. Students with disabilities are consistently given more

exclusionary discipline than their peers without disability (Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Osher et al., 2010; Skiba, 2002). This is not unexpected when considering decisions are being made based on emotions of fear and relationships with teachers.

Previously, social sensemaking was found to improve the opportunity of a substantive change (Louis et al., 2005). However, social sensemaking was not powerful enough to overcome the entrenchment in punitive school discipline. Teachers were found to be a high-leverage influence of administrators' sensemaking of disciplining students with disabilities. This inflated the amount administrators relied on teacher relationships in their sensemaking process. However, teachers' understandings of misbehavior supported punitive discipline. This might be due to teachers not holding enough knowledge or skill themselves, without more focused training in alternative discipline methods to allow them to be sense givers when collaborating with administrators.

Emotions as a part of sensemaking have been understood as impeding cognitive processing (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). However, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) found that moderate emotions are likely to provide valuable insight. However, in disciplining students with disabilities, emotions militated insight, rather entrenched administrators further in punitive practices. In discipline, temporality is not ignored. Discipline requires relatively quick interactions where administrators are moving on to the next task or incident without much time to ponder. Without longevity to process and ponder (Walls, 2017) discipline, there was little chance to understand the functions of the behaviors. Behavior disruptions in schools had a destabilizing presence that amplified negativity throughout (Walls, 2017). Emotions, specifically that of fear, responded to the behavior

disruptions in an amplified manner, guiding sensemaking towards the retrospective, particularly as emotions increased.

This study supports that sensemaking is a complex interaction of multiple aspects as dependent on individuals' unique situations and contexts, the interplay of which is dependent on circumstance. When presented with a behavioral disruption to the status quo, the disruption or knowledge of disruption puts an administrator into sensemaking. An interplay of individual and social, cognitive and emotional all function in concert, building a meaning-making structure to help make sense of what is chaotic, a departure from expected functioning. Reacting retrospectively, or acting prospectively becomes dependent, in part on the knowledge one holds to be able to take action prospectively. For students with disabilities, a deep and lasting idea of punitive discipline continues to shape disciplinary action as predicated based off administrators responding with heightened attention given to emotions (fear) and relationships with teachers. This, too has implications for sensemaking theory, as it has been understood that individuals look to experts, yet this study finds that this was not happening as a rule.

Practice

As a special education teacher and educational leadership scholar, I propose changes that could result from this study which would enhance awareness of discipline sensemaking practices of building-level leaders to support the success of students with disabilities. Three changes that could result are: (1) awareness of districts as they hire future building-level administrators; (2) more in-depth awareness of the knowledge gaps in administrators' knowledge of special education from their preparation programs; (3) awareness of the importance of districts utilizing prospective approaches to discipline

implemented across all levels and buildings in the district. First and foremost, this should be understood as an in-depth way to identify what knowledge/content is missing (needs assessment), and purposively providing training to fill the gaps, not just allowing attending any professional development in special education or alternative discipline topics and hope it covers what is needed. Indeed, this study has the potential to impact school district practice and policy implementation, school leadership training programs, and principal leadership practices.

District Implications. The findings from this study provide several starting points for districts to enhance sensemaking opportunities for building-level administrators. One of the ways they can change is to provide more training to administrators that would fill the gaps in their knowledge bases. To identify gaps in existing administrators, districts could utilize a holistic and rigorous evaluation process that included assessing areas specific to special education practice. Hiring practices for newly hired administrators should also include a way to identify areas of special education knowledge still needing development.

Since much of the learning of administrators occurred on the job, or as they needed to know, districts could set up a system where administrators shared their experiences in a manner that captured the information needed depending on the situation. This would provide a repository that administrators could access dependent upon what they were facing. Another way districts could address the knowledge needs of administrators and teachers, would be to ensure that any professional development offered is implemented by highly knowledgeable content experts. Furthermore, districts could make mandatory special education topics as part of all staff required professional

development. As the majority of students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom (NCES, 2016) teachers, too, need to be exposed to the knowledge they missed out on in their preparation programs. This would also serve as another pipeline of creating administrators that are knowledgeable in special education content. Lastly, districts could ensure consistency of alternative discipline practice by enacting positive discipline initiatives across all buildings in the district.

Research has indicated that principals have a positive effect on student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996) especially through their influence on school climate (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Allensworth & Sebastian, 2012). However, there have not been any studies that measure the relationship of principals training in special education to students with disabilities achievement.

Principal Leadership Preparation Implications. Studies continuing to point out the discrepancies in the training levels of principals from their preparation programs should bring a great awareness of areas needing development (Wallace Foundation, 2018). All of the principals in this study acknowledge that they were not prepared well enough to be leaders of special education. The continuing general education knowledge strands of preparation programs leave areas such as special education and discipline underserved. All of the principals interviewed indicated the realization that they did not have enough knowledge in special education before becoming administrators. Administrators and districts would be well served if preparation programs concentrated on increasing knowledge dissemination in special education law, especially procedural and substantive areas. Additional recommendations would include more training on the IEP document, responsibilities of the LEA, MTSS, SWPBIS, and review of research on

punitive discipline outcomes. Utilizing more case study reviews and pre-service internships in special education might be a way to increase understandings.

Principal Leadership Implications. Raising awareness of principals as leaders of special education may increase the communication between university special education departments and educational leadership departments. It may also increase communication between existing principals and their special education content leaders in their districts and personal networks. Several of the principals interviewed pointed out the importance of this connection, so with increased awareness, more connections and collaborations might occur. Administrators have a responsibility to students to implement positive behavioral supports in their buildings and to take proactive measures for students that are struggling with expected behavior. The connections of these two departments might also increase awareness of the ineffectiveness of punitive discipline at changing behavior (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Maag, 2001; Skiba & Peterson, 2000) and increase the importance of utilizing positive discipline approaches (Osher et al., 2011). More awareness of the gaps in administrators' knowledge in special education and how districts can provide remedy will provide for school climates where students with disabilities will be provided better access to a successful education career (Pazey & Cole 2013).

Recommendations for Future Research

Continued research into building-level administrators and their sensemaking processes is needed to identify further areas of principal development. Just as students should not be expected to demonstrate skills that they have not been explicitly taught, administrators shouldn't be expected to act in the best interest of a student with disabilities when they have not been given explicit instruction in what that is. Similar to

previous research conducted on principal preparation (Wakeman et al., 2006), some of the administrators in this study were lacking basic procedural understandings of IDEA, resulting in practice that did not provide appropriate educations to the students in their buildings. This study intended to expand the research on principal sensemaking and in doing such it was revealed that lacking preparation hurts sensemaking. There is not an area in school more litigated than special education (M. Yell, October 29, 2018, personal communication), yet administrators are graduating without a class dedicated to growing their knowledge of special education policy and practice. This study also found that the administrators wanted more knowledge from their preparation programs. Research into why preparation programs do not offer a better understanding of special education to future administrators and how to remedy this oversight is overdue.

To prevent more exclusionary discipline for students with disabilities, it has been researched that utilizing positive discipline initiatives (Osher et al., 2011) improves behavior while exclusionary discipline does not (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Maag, 2001; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). This study found that administrators wanted to help students with disabilities succeed behaviorally yet did not have the tools or resources to do so. More research into ways of facilitating alternative discipline approaches might result in a better proliferation of the tools and resources the administrators were lacking.

Lastly, sensemaking has not been previously utilized as a means to study principal discipline interactions in school settings. While it has been utilized to understand reactions to change situations such as with new policy enactments (Coburn, 2001; Coburn 2005; Dorner, 2012; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). These studies have mainly focused on how individuals have interpreted and responded to policy (Spillane et

al., 2002) and how contexts shape the response to policy (Coburn, 2005; Dorner, 2012). Further research into principal sensemaking at the level of disruptions throughout the school day could result in ways that principals need further development in the everyday tasks of leading a school.

Appendix A



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATIVE SERVICES

August 1, 2016

Dear Colleague:

The U.S. Department of Education (Department) is committed to ensuring that all children with disabilities have meaningful access to a State's challenging academic content standards that prepare them for college and careers. Consistent with these goals, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles each eligible child with a disability to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet the child's unique needs.¹ 20 U.S.C. §§1412(a)(1) and 1400(d)(1)(A). Under the IDEA, the primary vehicle for providing FAPE is through an appropriately developed individualized education program (IEP) that is based on the individual needs of the child. 34 CFR §§300.17 and 300.320-300.324. In the case of a child whose behavior impedes the child's learning or that of others, the IEP Team must consider – and, when necessary to provide FAPE, include in the IEP – the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies, to address that behavior. 34 CFR §§300.324(a)(2)(i) and (b)(2); and 300.320(a)(4).

The Department has determined that this letter is significant guidance under the Office of Management and Budget's Final Bulletin for Agency Good Guidance Practices, 72 Fed. Reg. 3432 (Jan. 25, 2007). See www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/fy2007/m07-07.pdf. Significant guidance is non-binding and does not create or impose new legal requirements. The Department is issuing this letter to provide LEAs and other responsible public agencies with information to assist them in meeting their obligations under the IDEA and its implementing regulations.

If you are interested in commenting on this letter, please email us your comment at iepgoals@ed.gov or contact Lisa Pagano at 202-245-7413 or Lisa.Pagano@ed.gov. For further information about the Department's guidance processes, please visit www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/significant-guidance.html.

Recent data on short-term disciplinary removals from the current placement strongly suggest that many children with disabilities may not be receiving appropriate behavioral interventions and

¹While this letter focuses on requirements under the IDEA relating to FAPE in the least restrictive environment, students with disabilities also have rights under two civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability—Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (Title II). The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Education enforces Section 504 in public elementary and secondary schools. Also, in this context, OCR shares in the enforcement of Title II with the U.S. Department of Justice. More information about these laws is available at: www.ed.gov/ocr and www.ada.gov.

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The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparedness for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

supports, and other strategies, in their IEPs.² During the 2013-2014 school year, 10 percent of all children with disabilities, ages 3 through 21, were subject to a disciplinary removal of 10 school days or less, with children of color with disabilities facing higher rates of removal.³ For instance, nineteen percent of black children with disabilities, ages 3 through 21, were subject to a removal of 10 school days or less within a single school year.⁴ In light of research about the detrimental impacts of disciplinary removals,⁵ including short-term disciplinary removals, the Department is issuing this guidance to clarify that schools, charter schools, and educational programs in juvenile correctional facilities must provide appropriate behavioral supports to children with disabilities who require such supports in order to receive FAPE and placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE). As a practical matter, providing appropriate behavioral supports helps to ensure that children with disabilities are best able to access and benefit from instruction.

The IDEA authorizes school personnel to implement a short-term disciplinary removal from the current placement, such as an out-of-school suspension, for a child with a disability who violates a code of student conduct. 34 CFR §300.530(b)(1). The Department strongly supports child and school safety, and this letter is not intended to limit the appropriate use of disciplinary removals that are necessary to protect children. Rather, the letter is a part of the Department's broader work to encourage school environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to teaching and learning, where educators actively prevent the need for short-term disciplinary removals by effectively supporting and responding to behavior.^{6,7} In keeping with this goal, this letter serves to remind school personnel that the authority to implement disciplinary removals does not negate their obligation to consider the implications of the child's behavioral needs, and the effects of the use of suspensions (and other short-term removals) when ensuring the provision of FAPE.⁸

² For purposes of this letter, we use "behavioral supports" to generally refer to behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies to address behavior.

³ U.S. Department of Education, EDFacts Data Warehouse (EDW), OMB #1875-0240: "IDEA Part B Discipline Collection," 2014.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Council of State Governments Justice Center and the Public Policy Research Institute. (2011). Breaking schools' rules: a statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement. Available at https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Breaking_Schools_Rules_Report_Final.pdf

⁶ "The Act and the regulations recognize that school officials need some reasonable degree of flexibility when disciplining children with disabilities who violate a code of student conduct. Interrupting a child's participation in education for up to 10 school days over the course of a school year, when necessary and appropriate to the circumstances, does not impose an unreasonable limitation on a child with a disability's right to FAPE." 71 Fed. Reg. 46717 (Aug. 14, 2006).

⁷ More about the Department's work is available at www.ed.gov/rethinkdiscipline

⁸ This letter does not address the obligations of school personnel following a disciplinary change in placement, including obligations to provide behavioral supports. This letter is intended to supplement the June 2009 Questions and Answers on Discipline Procedures (as revised) from OSERS, which provided guidance on discipline policies for school-age children to personnel in State educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs), and parents. Further, as the obligations of school personnel covered in this letter also apply to school personnel serving children with disabilities in juvenile correctional facilities, this letter is also intended to supplement the December 5,

Additionally, this letter provides alternatives to disciplinary removal which schools can apply instead of exclusionary disciplinary measures.

We are issuing this guidance to clarify that the failure to consider and provide for needed behavioral supports through the IEP process is likely to result in a child not receiving a meaningful educational benefit or FAPE. In addition, a failure to make behavioral supports available throughout a continuum of placements, including in a regular education setting, could result in an inappropriately restrictive placement and constitute a denial of placement in the LRE. While such determinations are necessarily individualized, this guidance is intended to focus attention on the need to consider and include evidence-based behavioral supports in IEPs that, when done with fidelity, often serve as effective alternatives to unnecessary disciplinary removals, increase participation in instruction, and may prevent the need for more restrictive placements.

This letter is organized into five areas:

- IDEA’s procedural requirements regarding evaluations, eligibility determinations, IEPs, and behavioral supports;
- IDEA’s IEP content requirements related to behavioral supports;
- Circumstances that may indicate potential denials of FAPE or of placement in the LRE;
- Implications for short-term disciplinary removals and other exclusionary disciplinary measures;⁹
- Conclusion, including additional information for parents and stakeholders.

I. IDEA Procedural Requirements Regarding Evaluations, Eligibility, IEPs, and Behavioral Supports

The IDEA and its implementing regulations require IEP Teams to follow certain procedures to ensure that IEPs meet the needs, including the behavioral needs, of children with disabilities. See 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d) and 34 CFR §§300.320-300.324. Those needs are generally identified during the initial evaluation or reevaluation, which must, among other matters, use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental, and academic information about the child, and assess the child in all areas related to the suspected disability,

2014 OSERS Dear Colleague Letter on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requirements that apply to the education of students with disabilities in correctional facilities. The June 2009 guidance can be found at http://idea.ed.gov/object/fileDownload/model/QaCorner/field/Pdffile/primary_key/7 and the December 5, 2014 letter can be found at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/correctional-education/index.html>

⁹ For purposes of this document, we use “exclusionary disciplinary measures” as a descriptive term to discuss the range of actions that school personnel implement – in response to a child’s misbehavior or violation of a code of student conduct – where the child is removed and excluded from their classroom, from school grounds, or school activities either formally (e.g., suspension) or informally (e.g., asking the parent to keep the student at home for a day or more). Additional information regarding exclusionary disciplinary measures may be found in Section IV of this document.

including, if appropriate, social and emotional status. 34 CFR §§300.304(b) and 300.304(c)(4); see also 34 CFR §§300.304-300.311. Further, the evaluation must use technically sound instruments that may assess the relative contribution of cognitive and behavioral factors, in addition to physical and developmental factors. 34 CFR §300.304(b)(3). Parents, classroom teachers, and other service providers will also have formal and informal information about an eligible child's current functional (e.g., behavioral) performance for the IEP Team's consideration. 34 CFR §§300.321 and 300.324. Once the IEP is developed, IEP Teams must: (1) review the child's IEP periodically, but not less than annually, to determine whether the child's annual goals are being achieved (34 CFR §300.324(b)(1)(i)), and (2) revise the IEP, as appropriate, to address any lack of expected progress towards the annual goals in the child's IEP and in the general education curriculum, the child's anticipated needs, or other matters. 34 CFR §300.324(b)(1)(ii).

There are a number of special factors that IEP Teams must consider in developing, reviewing, or revising a child's IEP. The IDEA specifically requires IEP Teams to consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies, to address behavior for any child with a disability whose behavior impedes his or her learning or that of others. 20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(3)(B)(i). This requirement applies to all IEP Teams, regardless of the child's specific disability, and to the development, review, and revision of IEPs (34 CFR §300.324(a)(2) and (b)(2)). Incidents of child misbehavior and classroom disruptions, as well as violations of a code of student conduct, may indicate that the child's IEP needs to include appropriate behavioral supports. This is especially true when a pattern of misbehavior is apparent or can be reasonably anticipated based on the child's present levels of performance and needs. To the extent a child's behavior including its impact and consequences (e.g., violations of a code of student conduct, classroom disruptions, disciplinary removals, and other exclusionary disciplinary measures) impede the child's learning or that of others, the IEP Team must consider when, whether, and what aspects of the child's IEP related to behavior need to be addressed or revised to ensure FAPE. If the child already has behavioral supports, upon repeated incidents of child misbehavior or classroom disruption, the IEP team should meet to consider whether the child's behavioral supports should be changed.

In general, IEP Team meetings provide parents (who are required members of the team) critical opportunities to participate in the decision-making process, raise questions and concerns regarding their child's behavior, and provide input on the types of behavioral supports their children may need to facilitate their child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum. 34 CFR §§300.320(a), 300.321(a)(1), and 300.324(a)(1)(ii). Parents have the right to request an IEP Team meeting at any time, and public agencies generally must grant a reasonable request from a parent for an IEP Team meeting.¹⁰ See 20 U.S.C.

¹⁰ Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities and Early Intervention Programs for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities, Final Rule, 64 Fed. Reg. 12406, 12581 (Mar. 12, 1999) explains, in response to public comment, that "A[regulatory] provision is not necessary to clarify that public agencies will honor 'reasonable' requests

§1414(d)(4)(A)(i)(III) and 34 CFR §300.324(b)(1)(ii)(C). We believe it would be appropriate for a parent to request an IEP Team meeting following disciplinary removals or changes in the child's behavior that impede the child's learning or that of others, as these likely indicate that the IEP, as written or implemented, may not be properly addressing the child's behavioral needs.¹¹ Whenever appropriate, the child with a disability should also be present during IEP Team meetings. 34 CFR §300.321(a)(7).

When an IEP Has Already Been Developed for a School Year

In instances where a child with a disability is subject to a disciplinary removal after the IEP for that school year has been developed and the parents and the relevant school officials agree that the IEP needs to be revised to address the behavior, but circumstances prevent the IEP Team from convening prior to the child's return to school, the IDEA regulations permit the parent and public agency to agree not to convene an IEP Team meeting and instead to develop a written document to amend or modify the current IEP. 34 CFR §300.324(a)(4)(i). This option could be used to provide the child with the necessary behavioral supports upon the child's return to school. However, if changes are made to the child's IEP in this manner, the agency must ensure that the IEP Team is informed of those changes. 34 CFR §300.324(a)(4)(ii).

II. IDEA's IEP Content Requirements Related to Behavioral Supports

Research shows that school-wide, small group, and individual behavioral supports that use proactive and preventative approaches, address the underlying cause of behavior, and reinforce positive behaviors are associated with increases in academic engagement, academic achievement, and fewer suspensions and dropouts.¹² In short, children are more likely to achieve when they are directly taught predictable and contextually relevant school and classroom routines and expectations, acknowledged clearly and consistently for displaying positive

by parents for a meeting to review their child's IEP. Public agencies are required under the statute and these final regulations to be responsive to parental requests for such reviews.”

¹¹ T.K., S.K., individually and on behalf of L.K. v. New York City Department of Education, Brief of the United States as Amicus Curiae Supporting Appellees (2015). Available at <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2015/03/16/tknyedobrief.pdf>

¹² Christle, C. A., Jolivet, K., & Nelson, C. M. (2005). Breaking the school to prison pipeline: identifying school risk and protective factors for youth delinquency. *Exceptionality*, 13(2), 69-88. See also Crone, D. A., & Hawken, L. S. (2010). Responding to problem behavior in schools: the behavior education program. Guilford Press. See also Liaupsin, C. J., Umbreit, J., Ferro, J. B., Urso, A., & Upreti, G. (2006). Improving academic engagement through systematic, function-based intervention. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 29, 573-591. See also Luiselli, J. K., Putnam, R. F., Handler, M. W., & Feinberg, A. B. (2005). Whole-school positive behaviour support: effects on child discipline problems and academic performance. *Educational Psychology*, 25(2-3), 183-198. See also Putnam, R., Horner, R. H., & Algozzine, R. (2006). Academic achievement and the implementation of school-wide behavior support. *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Newsletter*, 3(1), 1-6.

academic and social behavior, consistently prompted and corrected when behavior does not meet expectations, and treated by others with respect.¹³

However, when a child with a disability experiences behavioral challenges, including those that result in suspensions or other exclusionary disciplinary measures, appropriate behavioral supports may be necessary to ensure that the child receives FAPE. In the same way that an IEP Team would consider a child's language and communication needs, and include appropriate assistive technology devices or services in the child's IEP (34 CFR §300.324(a)(2)(iv) and (v)) to ensure that the child receives a meaningful educational benefit, so too must the IEP Team consider and, when determined necessary for ensuring FAPE, include or revise behavioral supports in the IEP of a child with a disability exhibiting behavior that impedes his or her learning or that of others. 34 CFR §§300.320(a)(4) and 300.324(a)(2)(i).

Therefore, as part of the development, review and, as appropriate, revision of the IEP, IEP Teams should determine whether behavioral supports should be provided in any of three areas: (1) special education and related services, (2) supplementary aids and services, and (3) program modifications or supports for school personnel. 34 CFR §300.320(a)(4).

IEPs should contain behavioral supports supported by evidence—IDEA specifically requires that both special education and related services and supplementary aids and services be based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable. 34 CFR §300.320(a)(4). As a matter of best practice, we strongly encourage schools to consider how the implementation of behavioral supports within the IEP could be facilitated through a school-wide, multi-tiered behavioral framework, described at greater length below.

Special Education and Related Services

Behavioral supports provided as part of a child's special education and related services may be necessary to ensure that the child's IEP is designed to enable the child to advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals specified in the IEP, to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum, and to participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities. 34 CFR §§300.320(a)(4)(i) and (ii). Interventions and supports that could assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education may include instruction and reinforcement of school expectations, violence prevention programs, anger management groups, counseling for mental health issues, life skills training, or social skills instruction. Please see the end of this section for additional tools and resources to assist with the implementation of behavioral supports.

¹³ Algozzine, B., Wang, C., & Violette, A. S. (2011). Reexamining the relationship between academic achievement and social behavior. *Journal of Positive Behavioral Interventions*, 13, 3-16. See also McIntosh, K., Chard, D. J., Boland, J. B., & Horner, R. H. (2006). Demonstration of combined efforts in school-wide academic and behavioral systems and incidence of reading and behavior challenges in early elementary grades. *Journal of Positive Behavioral Interventions*, 8, 146-154.

Supplementary Aids and Services

Public agencies must comply with the requirement to make available a continuum of alternative placements as required under 34 CFR §§300.114-300.116, which includes the provision of supplementary aids and services (e.g. behavioral supports) throughout the continuum. Under 34 CFR §300.42, supplementary aids and services are defined to include aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education classes, other education-related settings, and in extracurricular and nonacademic settings, to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate in accordance with 34 CFR §§300.114-300.116.

Appropriate supplementary aids and services could include those behavioral supports necessary to enable a child with a disability to be educated in regular classes or the setting determined to be the child’s appropriate placement in the LRE. Such behavioral supports might include meetings with a behavioral coach, social skills instruction, counselor, or other approaches. In general, placement teams may not place a child with a disability in special classes, separate schooling, or other restrictive settings outside of the regular educational environment solely due to the child’s behavior when behavioral supports through the provision of supplementary aids and services could be provided for that child that would be effective in addressing his or her behavior in the regular education setting.¹⁴ 34 CFR §§300.114-300.116. Children with disabilities may only be removed from the regular educational environment when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. 34 CFR §300.114(a)(2)(ii).

Program Modifications or Supports for School Personnel

In addition to the behavioral supports that may be provided directly to children with disabilities, program modifications or supports for school personnel, provided on behalf of the child, may also be necessary to support the child’s involvement and progress in the general education curriculum, advancement towards attaining the annual goals specified in the IEP, and participation in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities. 34 CFR §§300.320(a)(4)(i) and (ii). School personnel may need training, coaching, and tools to appropriately address the behavioral needs of a particular child. Supports for school personnel may be designed, as appropriate, to better implement effective instructional and behavior management strategies and specific behavioral interventions that are included in the child’s IEP.

¹⁴ We refer to the “placement team,” rather than the IEP Team, as IDEA’s implementing regulations specify that placement decisions must be made by a group of persons, including the parents, and other persons knowledgeable about the child, the meaning of the evaluation data, and the placement options. 34 CFR §300.116(a)(1).

Implementation of a Multi-Tiered Behavioral Framework

Research shows that implementing evidence-based, multi-tiered behavioral frameworks can help improve overall school climate, school safety, and academic achievement for all children, including children with disabilities.¹⁵ In general, behavioral supports are most effectively organized within a multi-tiered behavioral framework that provides instruction and clear behavioral expectations for all children, targeted intervention for small groups not experiencing success, and individualized supports and services for those needing the most intensive support. In recent years, the Department has disseminated a number of tools and resources to assist schools in the creation of safe and supportive school climates conducive to learning, including the implementation of effective alternatives to disciplinary removal. These resources include:

- *Supporting and Responding to Behavior: Evidence-based Classroom Strategies for Teachers*, a document summarizing evidence-based, proactive, and responsive classroom behavior support and intervention strategies for teachers.¹⁶
- *Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports: Implementation Blueprint and Self-Assessment*, a guide to develop local capacity for sustainable, culturally and contextually relevant, and high-fidelity implementation of multi-tiered practices and systems of support.¹⁷
- *2014 School Discipline Guidance Package*, including guidance on how public elementary and secondary schools can meet their legal obligations to administer discipline without discriminating on the basis of race, color or national origin and a set of guiding principles to assist communities in improving school climate and school discipline.¹⁸

These and other resources can be found at www.ed.gov/rethinkdiscipline and <http://ccrs.osepideasthatwork.org>.

III. Circumstances that May Indicate Potential Denials of FAPE or of Placement in the LRE

It is incumbent upon IEP Teams to implement IDEA’s procedural and substantive requirements to ensure that children with disabilities receive the behavioral supports they need to enable them to advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals specified in their IEPs and to be

¹⁵ Bradshaw, C., Koth, C.W., Thornton, L.A., & Leaf, P.J., (2009). Altering school climate through school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports: findings from a group-randomized effectiveness trial. *Prevention Science* 10(2), 100-115.

¹⁶ Available at <https://www.osepideasthatwork.org/evidencebasedclassroomstrategies/>

¹⁷ Available at <http://www.pbis.org/blueprint/implementation-blueprint>

¹⁸ Available at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/fedefforts.html#guidance>

involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum.

20 U.S.C. §§1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(IV); 1414(d)(3)(B)(i) and 1414(d)(3)(C). A failure to implement these procedural requirements or provide needed behavioral supports to a child with a disability could result in the child not receiving a meaningful educational benefit, and therefore constitute a denial of FAPE and/or a denial of placement in the LRE (i.e., an unduly restrictive placement).

A determination of whether there is a denial of FAPE is a fact-based determination, to be made on a case-by-case basis. Factors to consider include: whether the public agency has failed to follow the procedures IDEA requires when developing, reviewing, or revising the child's IEP, or has failed to consider and/or provide a child with a disability with necessary behavioral supports when the child's behavior impedes his or her learning or that of others; or whether the child's IEP is reasonably calculated to provide a meaningful educational benefit in the absence of behavioral supports.

Circumstances that may indicate either a procedural or substantive failure in the development, review, or revision of the IEP include, but are not limited to, the following¹⁹:

- The IEP Team did not consider the inclusion of positive behavioral interventions and supports in response to behavior that impeded the child's learning or that of others;
- School officials failed to schedule an IEP Team meeting to review the IEP to address behavioral concerns after a reasonable parental request;
- The IEP Team failed to discuss the parent's concerns about the child's behavior, and its effects on the child's learning, during an IEP Team meeting;
- There are no behavioral supports in the child's IEP, even when the IEP Team determines they are necessary for the child;
- The behavioral supports in the IEP are inappropriate for the child (e.g., the frequency, scope or duration of the behavioral supports is insufficient to prevent behaviors that impede the learning of the child or others; or consistent application of the child's behavioral supports has not accomplished positive changes in behavior, but instead has resulted in behavior that continues to impede, or further impedes, learning for the child or others);
- The behavioral supports in the child's IEP are appropriate, but are not being implemented or not being properly implemented (e.g., teachers are not trained in classroom

¹⁹ Under 34 CFR §300.513(a), a hearing officer's determination of whether a child received FAPE must be based on substantive grounds. In matters alleging a procedural violation, a hearing officer may find that a child did not receive FAPE only if the procedural inadequacies: (1) impeded the child's right to FAPE; (2) significantly impeded the parent's opportunity to participate in the decision-making process regarding the provision of FAPE to the parent's child; or (3) caused a deprivation of educational benefit. 34 CFR §300.513(a)(2)(i)–(iii). Although best viewed as a procedural requirement, a failure to follow 34 CFR §300.324(a)(2)(i) could result in a substantive denial of FAPE if any of the circumstances in 34 CFR §300.513(a)(2)(i)–(iii) are present. As this is a fact-based determination, Section III provides examples of facts and circumstances that may indicate that a procedural failure has resulted in a denial of FAPE.

management responses or de-escalation techniques or those techniques are not being consistently implemented); or

- School personnel have implemented behavioral supports not included in the IEP that are not appropriate for the child.

Circumstances that may indicate that the child's IEP is not reasonably calculated to provide a meaningful educational benefit include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The child is displaying a pattern of behaviors that impede his or her learning or that of others and is not receiving any behavioral supports;
- The child experiences a series of disciplinary removals from the current placement of 10 days or fewer (which do not constitute a disciplinary change in placement) for separate incidents of misconduct that impede the child's learning or that of others, and the need for behavioral supports is not considered or addressed by the IEP Team;²⁰ or
- The child experiences a lack of expected progress toward the annual goals that is related to his or her disciplinary removals or the lack of behavioral supports, and the child's IEP is neither reviewed nor revised.

A determination of whether there is a denial of placement in the LRE is also a fact-based determination. Factors to consider include whether the child's IEP is designed to enable the child to be educated and participate with nondisabled children in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities in the absence of behavioral supports. Circumstances that may indicate that the child's placement in the LRE may not be appropriate include, but are not limited to, a scenario in which a continuum of placements that provides behavioral supports is not made available (e.g., behavioral supports not provided in the regular educational setting), and, as a result, the IEP inappropriately calls for the child to be placed in special classes, separate schooling, or another restrictive placement outside the regular educational environment (e.g., home instruction, home tutoring program, or online learning program).

IV. Implications for Short-Term Disciplinary Removals and Other Exclusionary Disciplinary Measures

Schools should note that recent research demonstrates that disciplinary measures such as short-term removals from the current placement (e.g., suspension), or other exclusionary disciplinary measures that significantly impede the implementation of the IEP, generally do not help to

²⁰ Under 34 CFR §300.536 a series of disciplinary removals that constitute a pattern is a change in placement. A pattern of removals is a series of removals that total more than 10 school days within a school year, for behavior that is substantially similar to the child's behavior in previous incidents that led to removals, with consideration for additional factors such as the length of each removal, the total amount of time the child has been removed, and the proximity of the removals to one another.

reduce or eliminate reoccurrence of the misbehavior. In fact, there is a growing awareness that school suspensions produce unintended and undesirable results. Longitudinal studies, for example, have found that suspension from school does not deter misbehavior. These studies found a high rate of repeat offending in out-of-school suspension, ranging from 35% to 42%.²¹ Research also shows that suspension from school is associated with significant adverse consequences for the children suspended.²² Suspensions from school are consistently associated with lower academic performance.²³ As a suspended child's education is interrupted, he or she is more likely to fall behind, to become disengaged from school, and to drop out.²⁴

Removals from the current placement generally do not address the needs of a child with a disability for positive behavioral interventions and supports. Accordingly, we remind States, LEAs, and IEP Teams that while 34 CFR §300.530 explicitly permits school personnel to implement short-term disciplinary removals from the current placement, such removals may indicate a need to review and revise the child's IEP to address his or her behavioral needs. In addition, exclusionary disciplinary measures that do not constitute a removal from the current placement may also indicate the need to review and revise the child's IEP.

Authority of School Personnel under 34 CFR §300.530

Under IDEA and its implementing regulations, school personnel have the authority to remove a child with a disability who violates a code of student conduct from his or her current placement to an appropriate interim alternative educational setting, another setting, or suspension, for up to 10 consecutive school days in a school year, to the extent those alternatives are applied to children without disabilities, and for additional removals of up to 10 school days in the same school year for separate incidents of misconduct, provided that the additional removals do not constitute a change of placement. 34 CFR §§300.530(b) and 300.536.²⁵

While the IDEA and its implementing regulations recognize that school officials need some reasonable degree of flexibility when disciplining children with disabilities who violate a code of student conduct and that school safety is paramount, the Department cautions that the use of short-term disciplinary removals from the current placement may indicate that a child's IEP, or

²¹ Skiba, R.J., Shure, L.A., Middelberg, L.V., & Baker, T.L. (2012). Reforming school discipline and reducing disproportionality in suspension and expulsion. In Jimerson, S.R., Nickerson, A.B., Mayer, M.J., & Furlong, M.J. (Eds.) *Handbook of School Violence and School Safety*, 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge.

²² Lee, T., Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Xitao, F. (2011). High suspension schools and dropout rates for black and white students. *Education & Treatment Of Children*, 34(2), 167-192. See also Brooks, K., Schiraldi, V., & Zeidenberg, J. (2000). *School house hype: two years later*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute / Covington, KY: Children's Law Center. See also Civil Rights Project. (2000). *Opportunities suspended: the devastating consequences of zero tolerance and school discipline policies*. Cambridge, MA.

²³ Id.

²⁴ Id.

²⁵ Disciplinary removals of more than 10 consecutive school days or a series of removals that cumulate to more than 10 school days in a school year that constitute a pattern are considered a change in placement. 34 CFR §300.536.

the implementation of the IEP, does not appropriately address his or her behavioral needs. This, in turn, may result in the child not receiving a meaningful educational benefit, which could constitute a denial of FAPE. As noted above, these determinations are highly factual, and would be made on a case-by-case basis. We are concerned, however, that some SEAs and LEAs may have erroneously interpreted the IDEA to provide school personnel with the broad authority to implement short-term removals without restriction and without regard to whether the child's IEP is properly addressing his or her behavioral needs. It has come to the Department's attention that there are a number of legal memos and technical assistance documents which have erroneously characterized the 10-day period as "free days."²⁶

This characterization may discourage school personnel from considering whether behavioral supports are needed to address or improve patterns of behavior that impede learning before, during, or after short-term disciplinary removals are implemented. The Department reminds SEAs and LEAs that, under IDEA, IEP Teams have an obligation to develop appropriate IEPs based on the individual needs of each child. Teachers must also be fully informed about their specific responsibilities related to implementation of the child's IEP, including the specific accommodations, modifications, and supports that must be provided for the child in accordance with the IEP. 34 CFR §300.323(d). Further, IDEA requires States and LEAs to ensure that all personnel necessary to carry out the purposes of Part B of IDEA are appropriately and adequately prepared and trained. 34 CFR §§300.156 and 300.207. This responsibility would include appropriately training teachers and other school personnel to provide required behavioral supports to children with disabilities. Therefore, a failure to provide appropriate behavioral supports (because they are not offered or because teachers and other staff are not adequately trained to implement such supports) that results in the child not receiving a meaningful educational benefit may constitute a denial of FAPE.

Use of Exclusionary Disciplinary Measures

Schools should take care when implementing exclusionary disciplinary measures that significantly interfere with a child's instruction and participation in other school activities. In some schools, staff are properly trained to implement and document measures such as the use of study carrels, time outs, and restrictions in privileges, in a manner consistent with a child's right to FAPE.²⁷ However, in other schools, staff may not be properly trained in the appropriate use of

²⁶ National Council on Disability. (2015). Breaking the school-to-prison pipeline for students with disabilities. Available at https://www.ncd.gov/sites/default/files/Documents/NCD_School-to-PrisonReport_508-PDF.pdf. This report highlights an excerpt from a legal pamphlet designed for school districts: "Schools have free use of up to 10 school days of short-term removals per school year without IDEA implications. The days can be used in any combination, quickly or slowly, although caution would warrant using the 10 'free' days judiciously over the school year, and avoiding multiple suspension days if at all possible."

²⁷ The Department has previously stated that the use of measures such as study carrels, time outs, or other restrictions in privileges is permissible so long as such measures are not inconsistent with a student's IEP (OSEP Memorandum to Chief State School Officers, Questions and Answers on Disciplining Students with Disabilities, April 1995).

these measures; consequently, their improper use of these measures could rise to the level of a disciplinary removal. These exclusionary disciplinary measures also could include:

- A pattern of office referrals, extended time excluded from instruction (e.g., time out), or extended restrictions in privileges;
- Repeatedly sending children out of school on “administrative leave” or a “day off” or other method of sending the child home from school;
- Repeatedly sending children out of school with a condition for return, such as a risk assessment or psychological evaluation; or
- Regularly requiring children to leave the school early and miss instructional time (e.g., via shortened school days).²⁸

In general, the Department does not consider the use of exclusionary disciplinary measures to be disciplinary removals from the current placement for purposes of 34 CFR §300.530, so long as children with disabilities are afforded the opportunity to continue to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum, receive the instruction and services specified on their IEPs, and participate with nondisabled children to the extent they would have in their current placement.²⁹ It is likely that the exclusionary disciplinary measures listed above, if implemented repeatedly, would constitute a disciplinary removal from the current placement. For example, when school personnel regularly require a child with a disability to leave school early and miss instructional time due to their behavior, it is likely that the child’s opportunity to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum has been significantly impeded; in such circumstances, sending the child home early would constitute a disciplinary removal from the current placement. To the extent that schools implement exclusionary disciplinary measures in a manner tantamount to a suspension – or other removal from the

²⁸ We have deliberately omitted from this list of examples any reference to referrals to law enforcement authorities due to our recommendation to schools, described in the Department’s *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline*, that school resource officers not be involved in routine disciplinary matters. The Guiding Principles can be found at www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf

²⁹ The Department would apply the same analysis to the use of exclusionary discipline measures that apply to in-school suspensions, for purposes of 34 CFR §300.530. In the Preamble to the August 14, 2006 final Part B regulations, the Department explained: “It has been the Department’s long term policy that an in-school suspension would not be considered a part of the days of suspension addressed in 34 CFR §300.530 as long as the child is afforded the opportunity to continue to appropriately participate in the general curriculum, continue to receive the services specified on the child’s IEP, and continue to participate with nondisabled children to the extent they would have in their current placement. This continues to be our policy.” The explanation concludes by indicating that whether an in-school suspension would constitute a day of suspension would depend on the unique facts and circumstances of each case. 71 Fed. Reg. 46715 (Aug. 14, 2006).

child’s current placement – they are required to fulfill their statutory obligation to report such removals,³⁰ and act within the authority of school personnel provided under 34 CFR §300.530.

Further, as we noted earlier, the use of exclusionary disciplinary measures may indicate that a child’s IEP, or the implementation of the IEP, does not appropriately address his or her behavioral needs. To ensure that each child receives a meaningful educational benefit, IEP Teams must consider the need for positive behavioral interventions and supports for children with disabilities whose behavior impedes their learning or that of others, and, when determined necessary to ensure FAPE, include or revise needed behavioral supports in the child’s IEP. Such behavioral supports also may include supports for school personnel, so that teaching staff are trained in best uses of such behavioral supports.

V. Conclusion

Children with disabilities are at a greater risk of disciplinary removals that significantly interrupt their learning, often unnecessarily. These risks are increased for children of color with disabilities. In many cases, we have reason to believe these removals are due to minor instances of misbehavior that are unrelated to issues of child or school safety, and can and should be addressed through supports and guidance.³¹

When behavioral supports are not provided and, as a result, a child with a disability is repeatedly removed from his or her current placement through suspensions for behavior that impedes his or her learning or that of others, a number of options are available to assist parents in challenging the appropriateness of their child’s IEP. First, as noted earlier, parents have the right to request an IEP Team meeting at any time, and public agencies generally must grant a reasonable parental request for an IEP Team meeting. Parents may be particularly interested in making such a request following changes in the child’s behavior that result in disciplinary removals. Further, parents, individuals, and organizations may also pursue child-specific or systemic remedies through the State complaint procedures outlined below.

³⁰ IDEA mandates that States provide data each year to the Secretary of Education and the public on the use of long-term suspensions and expulsions (20 U.S.C. §1418(a)(1)(A)(v)(III)) and on the incidence and duration of disciplinary actions, including suspensions of one day or more, by race, ethnicity, limited English proficiency status, gender, and disability category (20 U.S.C. §1418(a)(1)(D)). Further, States are required to collect and examine data to determine whether significant disproportionality based on race and ethnicity is occurring in the State and the LEAs of the State with respect to the incidence, duration, and type of disciplinary actions, including suspension and expulsions (34 CFR §300.646(d)(1)(C)), and whether significant discrepancies are occurring in the rate of long-term suspensions and expulsions of children with disabilities among LEAs in the State or compared to the rates for nondisabled children within LEAs (34 CFR §300.170).

³¹ Skiba, R. J., Chung, C. G., Trachok, M., Baker, T., Sheya, A., Hughes, R. L. (2014). Parsing disciplinary disproportionality: Contributions of infraction, student, and school characteristics to out-of-school suspension and expulsion. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51, 640-670.

When conditions persist and a denial of FAPE is suspected, a parent or a public agency may file a due process complaint to request a due process hearing on any matter relating to the identification, evaluation, or educational placement of a child with a disability, or the provision of FAPE to the child. 34 CFR §300.507(a). If the dispute cannot be resolved through the resolution process, the parent or public agency must have an opportunity for an impartial due process hearing. 34 CFR §§300.511(a), 300.512, 300.513 and 300.515.

A second important method for resolving disputes available under IDEA is the mediation process described in 34 CFR §300.506. The mediation process, which must be voluntary, offers a less formal opportunity for parents and public agencies to resolve disputes about any matter, including disciplinary removals, under 34 CFR part 300, including matters arising prior to the filing of a due process complaint. 34 CFR §300.506(a).

Lastly, States are also required to establish and implement their own State complaint procedures, separate from their due process procedures, for resolving any complaint that meets the requirements of 34 CFR §300.153. 34 CFR §300.151(a)(1). Any organization or individual, including one from another State, may file a signed written State complaint alleging that a public agency has violated a requirement of either Part B of the Act or the Part B regulations.

Additional information regarding dispute resolution is available at:

- Questions and Answers on IDEA Part B Dispute Resolution Procedures, revised July 2013 (OSEP Memo 13-08) (<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/acccombinedosersdisputeresolutionqafinalmemo-7-23-13.pdf>); and
- Dear Colleague Letter on a public agency's Use of Due Process Procedures After a Parent Has Filed a State Complaint, April 2015 (<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/dcl04152015disputeresolution2q2015.pdf>)

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) is committed to ensuring that children with disabilities have access to learning environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to learning. In such learning environments, educators have the skills and tools to prevent disciplinary incidents before they happen, use effective behavioral supports, teach behavioral expectations, and implement other behavioral management strategies. In many schools, effective behavioral supports have been implemented within a multi-tiered behavioral framework to organize school efforts to support children with disabilities and their peers. In this way, schools facilitate the provision of FAPE by providing children with disabilities with the behavioral supports they need to prevent, or bring an end to, disciplinary approaches that may unduly interfere with instruction and the implementation of IEPs. Further, this focus on prevention helps to ensure that educators receive the training, coaching, and other supports they

need to help children with disabilities, and their peers, to focus on learning and succeed in school.

To better develop and implement appropriate IEPs for children whose behavior impedes the child’s learning or that of others, and to ensure that behavioral supports are available throughout the continuum of placements, including in the regular education setting, OSERS has enclosed with this letter two technical assistance documents that we first released in November 2015 as part of the 40th Anniversary of IDEA:

- 1) Supporting and Responding to Behavior: Evidence-Based Classroom Strategies for Teachers:

<https://www.osepideasthatwork.org/evidencebasedclassroomstrategies>

- 2) Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: Implementation Blueprint and Self-Assessment:

<http://www.pbis.org/blueprint/implementation-blueprint>

These two documents provide additional information on evidenced-based classroom strategies to support and respond to behavior and on organizing practices in an integrated manner in a multi-tiered system of support.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact the Office of Special Education Programs Education Program Specialist, Lisa Pagano at 202-245-7413 or Lisa.Pagano@ed.gov.

Thank you for your support and your continued interested in improving education access and opportunity for children with disabilities.

Sincerely,

/s/

Sue Swenson
Acting Assistant Secretary
Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

/s/

Ruth E. Ryder
Acting Director
Office of Special Education Programs

Appendix B

Case Law Discussion

Much of the changes related to school policy comes from case law. This section looks at a few of the cases around the country that addresses either schools' or students' rights when it comes to discipline practices for students with disabilities.

Montuori & Bayard v. District of Columbia, (D.D.C. 2018). School district failed to provide FAPE due to district's failure to properly implement Behavior Intervention Plan and did not appropriately address his disability classification and escalating behaviors.

Middleton v. District of Columbia, 312 F. Supp. 3d 113 (D.D.C. 2018). Court determined that the district denied FAPE because they failed to give the student, who they changed from a self-contained setting to a general education setting, an appropriate placement to address truancy issues.

Reyes v. Manor Independent Sch. Dist., 67 IDELR 33 (W.D. Tex. 2016). 19-year-old student with ID and autism with a history of severe behaviors, including self-injurious behaviors, assaulting adults, through things, and highly unpredictable aggressive behaviors ended up being isolated from peers to receive all education services alone with a BCBA and two aides. Parent sued for inappropriate LRE and insufficient progress on goals. Court found that "no school can guarantee the success of an IEP," and found that the school properly individualized to the student's needs, especially evident with the amount of resources offered. They further stated that slow and inconsistent progress was progress nonetheless given the profound nature of the student's disabilities. The LRE argument was also found in favor of the district as the students removal from their peers

was necessary “because his aggressive behaviors threatened others and impeded his learning.”

U.S. v. Georgia (N.D. Ga. 2016). Court found the state of Georgia failed to provide thousands of public-school students with behavior-related disabilities appropriate mental health and therapeutic educational services and supports in settings that allowed for the most integration with their non-disabled peers.

Appendix C

Consent and Pre-Interview Questions

Through Qualtrics

Welcome to the research study!

This study is interested in understanding how building-level administrators draw upon their previous experience and knowledge bases, as well as case by case contexts, to make sense of discipline interactions specific to students with IEPs. If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to both answer background questions per online survey*, and participate in an in-person interview. Please be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential. All identifying information will be removed from responses and kept secure. Any writings or analysis will utilize pseudonyms.

This online questionnaire should take less than 10 minutes to complete, whereas the in-person interview should take about an hour. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice. If you would like to contact the Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please e-mail [Laura Browning;](mailto:laura.browning@mizzou.edu) laura.browning@mizzou.edu

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

*Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible for use on a mobile device.

Individual Background Questions

1. How long have you worked in education?
2. How long have you been a building-level administrator in your current building?
3. Is your current building the only building you have worked as a building-level administrator?

If no-

- How many other buildings/districts have you worked in as a building-level administrator, and at what levels/settings?
4. How long were you a teacher prior to becoming a building-level administrator and what subjects/grades did you teach?
 5. If you were not a special education teacher, did you have the opportunity to teach students on IEPs in your general education setting? If yes, please elaborate as to how common of an occurrence teaching students on IEPs was in your class.
 6. What, if any, other positions have you held in schools (e.g., aide, coach, extra-curricular positions, club sponsor, etc.)
 7. What degrees do you hold and from what institutions?
 8. Do you have any national certifications, or certifications in any other state than the one you are currently certified?

Appendix D

In-Person Interview Protocol

Introduction Statement: Hi, thank you again for agreeing to participate in my dissertation research and allowing me to interview you. Like I said earlier, and as has been found in prior interviews I anticipate this interview taking around 45-60 minutes. I begin by asking just a few questions related to your specific school context and then get into leadership and discipline.

Are you ok with me recording our interview for my own confidential use? Remember, all participants are completely anonymous and no identifying information will be disclosed. Would you like to create your own pseudonym?

Begin recording: (Where I am and the role of the person I'm interviewing)

School Context [all letters are for researcher's potential follow-up only, not additional questions, per se]

1. Would you describe your school for me?
 - a. Pretend I'm new to the area and I want to know more about your school
 - b. demographics, etc.
2. Will you share something that stands out that might capture your school's uniqueness?
 - a. (unifying culture)

Principal Leadership (pay attention for mentions of special education activities)

1. What are your daily responsibilities in a typical school day? Which of these are most important?
 - a. Who/what are you over? How is work delegated? What work do you keep for yourself?
 - b. self-identified leadership style
2. Could you lead me through a typical day as principal of your school? How much time do you usually spend on core tasks or activities?
 - a. Tasks/Activities
3. What has been one of your most challenging obstacles/problems you have faced as a school administrator?
 - a. Specific incident? What did you do?
 - b. Looking back would you have done anything differently?
4. Same question as above but rewarding.
5. What do you think your staff want from your leadership?

Special Education Knowledge

1. Tell me about your knowledge of special education?
 - a. OJT, education, etc.
2. What professional development do you receive regarding special education in general?
 - a. How often are those trainings provided? All staff or just those that choose?
 - b. How are those trainings provided? School, district, state, etc.?

3. Is there anything that sticks out from any former district(s) regarding special education that provided memorable learning experiences?
4. If you think back to certification, what did your principal certification coursework teach you about special education?
 - a. Did you feel prepared to work with special education as a principal?
5. What have you learned about special education since becoming a principal?
 - a. How did you learn these things?
6. Are there any areas you would like additional training in special education? Which?
7. What would you describe as the mission of your school's special education program?
8. Describe to me your understanding of principal liability regarding special education students.
9. Who/where do you go to when special education questions arise?

Discipline

13. How would you describe discipline in your school?
 - a. School District Oversight (heavy or autonomous) and any pressures from a numbers standpoint.
 - b. Does your district evaluation cover discipline in anyway [pay attention for initiatives involving special education].
 - c. School resources
 - d. Discipline initiatives (Positive Behavior initiatives)
 - i. Successes
 - e. Is discipline something discussed in peer meetings (e.g. with other principals)

2. What do you think your teachers want out of school discipline?
3. Will you explain if and how your view of discipline has evolved over the years?
4. Will you tell me a little about any overall discipline issues present in your building?
5. What do you feel are the positive aspects of the way discipline is handled in your building?
6. Same as above but the negative aspects.
7. Will you give me an example / tell me a story of a typical discipline interaction you've experienced here?
8. Will you tell me about the most difficult discipline interaction you've ever faced?
9. Will you walk me through the process that occurs when a student gets sent to office for disciplinary action?
 - a. Positives and negatives during this process?
 - b. when disciplinary consequences are taken who is contacted (if anyone)?
10. Based on your experiences, is there anything you would (or have) change regarding the discipline process overall?
 - a. What are those changes? Have you been successful with them? If not, what prevents those changes?
11. How do you know if your discipline program is successful?
 - a. Do you consider your school's program successful?
12. When, if ever, is a school resource officer utilized or the police involved?

Special Education Discipline

1. Will you walk me through the discipline process for a student with disabilities?

- a. Does your school maintain a separate discipline process for students with disabilities?
 - b. Do you usually know their category of eligibility?
 - c. If there is a behavior plan? How do you handle when a behavior plan might not have been followed?
2. What do you think teachers want out of discipline for students with disabilities?
 - a. Does staff reaction influence discipline?
 3. Do you have any follow-up procedure after a discipline interaction for a student with disabilities?
 - a. Do you follow up with the sending teacher and case manager regarding students with disabilities?
 4. Does anything change when you have a student that is a repeat offender?
 5. How are discipline events recorded for student with disabilities?
 6. Will you share an event that gets internally recorded vs. shared with MOSIS?
 7. Will you share an event of a student with disabilities struggling with behavior that resulted in discipline?
 - a. How did you first learn of this student?
 - b. What did you believe was happening?
 - c. What did you do?
 - d. How did staff reaction influence your decisions?
 - e. Did their case manager become involved? When/how?

8. Do you have an example of a student with disabilities that was struggling with discipline and
was able to turn around?
 - a. What do you think influenced their turn around?
 - b. Who was involved?
9. What, if any, does a student's disability factor into consequences for behavior?
 - a. When do those factors become important?
10. What do you feel are the staff's responsibilities for students with disabilities that are struggling with behaviors?
 - a. administration; general ed; special ed
11. Who do you rely on when you have questions about disciplining a student with disabilities?
12. Do you think I forget to ask a question I should have asked?
13. Do you have anything else you want to add?

Appendix E

Brief Follow-up Questions

Through Qualtrics

1. Are you familiar with the “Dear Colleague” letters that the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services issue?
2. Do you specifically recall reading the “Dear Colleague” letter from August 1, 2016 which offered guidance relating to students with disabilities, behavior, and discipline?
3. In your own words please explain what options a student with an IEP has to be suspended both between 1-10 days and beyond the 10-day mark.

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VITA

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