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Consistent research over the past 40 years as shed light on racial disparities with school discipline. Black students are overrepresented in office referrals and exclusionary discipline. Today, schools and school districts have focused on improving equity to increase student achievement. Schools have also worked to close the discipline gap between Black and White students. However, despite school districts efforts to close the discipline gap with various solutions, racial disparities and discrimination continue to exist in school discipline. In recent years, researchers have focused more on student perception and amplifying student voice to counter the message that we consistently observe with discipline data. This research aims to add to that research.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gage Black secondary students' perceptions and experiences with middle school discipline. The research also aimed to identify and make meaning of differences across gender or age through indirect/direct experiences or observation. There is a dearth of research which focuses on middle school perception and this research seeks to add to the discussion.

I met with three focus groups each composed of three to four students. Focus groups were utilized because they have the potential to produce a great amount of data because of the face-to-face contact between participants and the interviewer (Parker & Tritter, 2006). The first two focus groups were composed of eighth-grade students who attended a small charter school. The last focus group included high school students who reflected on their middle school experiences at various traditional schools. Due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, I met with the

first two focus groups one time. I met with the third focus group twice. All focus group were conducted virtually using the Zoom platform and lasted 50-60 minutes.

After I conducted all three focus groups, the data was transcribed. I analyzed the transcriptions and disaggregated the data into topics or categories discussed. Based on those categories I have identified, I assigned codes in each category and broke down the nature of the student responses. Next, I grouped the codes into emerging categories and identified themes or patterns emerged.

Findings from my data reveal students perceive relationships between students and staff as a critical factor to improving equity, closing the discipline gap, and ensuring equitable treatment in the discipline process. Data from student perception also revealed students value teachers who show care and concern for their academic and non-academic affairs. One key implication from the research is the importance of highlighting student voice to transform and improve the school culture for students and staff.

"THAT'S NOT FAIR!" BLACK SECONDARY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND

EXPERIENCES WITH SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

by

Noelle Leslie

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Approved by

_____

Dr. Katherine Cummings Mansfield
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my three babies: my niece Za'Niyah Noelle and my nephews Maxx Christian and Nehemiah Ramon. May you do greater works than I will ever accomplish. I love you!

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Noelle Leslie has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Overall, my journey to complete my dissertation was challenging and rewarding at the same time, but I continued to keep God first, stay disciplined, and encourage myself. I wouldn't trade this process for anything, and I know that I came out stronger, smarter, and wiser. I am still amazed that I have finished this process and will have "Dr." at the beginning of my name for the rest of my life! When I am left to think about his faithfulness towards me, one verse comes to mind:

*"Commit your plans to the Lord and you will succeed" – Proverbs 16:33*

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Equity in education has been an ever-growing focus in educational reform for several decades. Working to ensure equity in schools entails the philosophy of giving students what they need rather than giving every student the same instruction and support. This approach is shaping the way educators think, plan, teach, and assess. Equity requires providing differentiation, a term which describes diversifying teaching and learning to meet and support students where they are. But what about equity issues related to discipline? Over the past two decades, there has been a significant amount of research on racial disparities in school discipline. Coined the "discipline gap" by Gregory et al. (2010), researchers are communicating the substantial disproportionality numbers of student discipline data based on race. Other researchers have also used terms interchangeably such as "racial disproportionality" (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Skiba et al., 2002) and "racial disparities" (Losen & Skiba, 2010) when discussing differences related to discipline of students of color as compared to White students.

The study of differential treatment of students who are disciplined in school has a long history. Over 40 years ago, the Children's Defense Fund (1975) created public awareness and gave national attention to this issue, releasing a report which showed Black students were two to three times overrepresented in school suspensions compared with their enrollment rates in areas across the nation. McCarthy and Hoge (1987) found that Black students are much more likely to receive inequitable disciplinary sanctions due to teachers' perceptions of students, their knowledge of past sanctions, and students' recent performance. As the 1990s rolled in and disparities continued, Congress passed the Gun Free Act of 1994 which required schools to expel students who brought guns and firearms to schools. This "no nonsense" ideal, as it was referred to, became broad and interpretive as to what schools considered absolute ground reasoning for

giving students exclusionary discipline. As a result, schools continued to widen the discipline

gap between White and Black students through enacting their "zero tolerance" policies.

Consistent research throughout the country has shown racial disparities regarding school

discipline, especially in suspension rates (Mendez Raffaele et al., 2002; KewalRamani et al.,

2007). This includes referrals sent to the administrator's office, consequences, and exclusionary

discipline (removing students from the classroom, such as in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-

school suspension (OSS)) students receive. Also, students of color have been found to receive

harsher consequences than White students for the same infractions. Researchers have attempted

to explain the gap by studying the influence of characteristics such as demographics, poverty,

low achievement, and differential behavior (Anyon et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al.,

1997). Researchers over the past decade have also provided implications and suggestions for

school leaders to fix the issue: however, racial disparities in school discipline continues (Gregory

et al., 2017; Lustick, 2017). There has also been discussion generated within the past decade

regarding the inequitable criminalization of school discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Researchers suggest students who receive exclusionary discipline, especially more than once are

a greater likelihood to be introduced to the juvenile justice system (Skiba et al., 2014), especially

since there has been an increase of criminal resources and practices in schools (Hirschfield,

2008). Researchers have also conveyed that middle school students have the most significant

long-term effects from exclusionary discipline which could involve introduction into the juvenile

justice system (Balfanz et al., 2003).

Given the enduring problem of inequities in disciplinary referrals and consequences,

researchers have expanded their scope of their research, including studying student perceptions

to investigate what students think about their school climate and if they perceive there are racial

disparities in school discipline. Consistent research on student perceptions has shown students verbalizing and observing racial inequities centering around school discipline, school support, and school climate (Bottiani et al., 2016, 2017; Kimberly-Lewis, 2013; Watkins & Aber, 2009). There are a number of studies, gauging the perceptions of Black males and females exclusive to gender. The purpose of the research is to examine students' experiences in schools and identify common themes according to their stories such as their encounters with differential treatment and microaggressions (Gordon, 2012; Henfield, 2011; Nasir et al., 2017; Wun, 2016;) and how students feel about their teachers. According to several researchers, urban middle school students of color are the most likely to experience disparities in educators' use of suspension and expulsion for discipline (Kimberly-Lewis, 2013; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). However, there is very little research gauging Black students' experiences with school discipline and comparing your responses. There is also very little research examining Black students' perceptions on what should be done to close the discipline gap. That is the purpose for this research.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine Black secondary students' perceptions of their experiences with school discipline in various school settings. These experiences relate to how they are treated at their schools by their teachers and other school staff and if that treatment is equitable. I hope to center and illuminate voices that are usually not heard or considered otherwise, especially when it comes to discipline disparities. Also, I hope to gather solutions that students provide which may help schools to improve their discipline policies and procedures to be more equitable throughout the school. I hope to convey a message of how significant and

useful the student experience is and how school leaders must leverage these experiences to make the school experience more equitable and inclusive for all children.

## Theory and Methods

My research is a basic qualitative study which proposes to illuminate and make meaning of participants' experiences through interviews, observations, focus groups, questionnaires, or surveys. What also characterizes the research as a basic qualitative study is the idea that knowledge is a construct that is constantly being fashioned and developed. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) This defines the idea of constructivism, which centers around individuals building on their existing knowledge to learn new information. This describes what the participants are doing as well as the researcher. As a researcher I am listening to participants' stories and how they interpret these experiences. Their stories aren't the same, but I am looking for commonalities among narratives. I am also looking for patterns or themes to see if their experiences are correlated to construct my own meanings of what has been shared. I am also interested in identifying the differences among their perceptions. This would include students who attend different schools and have varied perceptions of their experiences. However, differences could also vary in terms of students who attend the same school and have the same teachers but their perceptions vary in their encounters with those teachers. The latter would be very important to note and could lead to thinking about the reason behind their varied perceptions and whether it relates to their race, sex, or their background.

Pertaining to my own research, I interviewed groups of Black youth and listened to their stories about how they experienced and observed school discipline. I listened to how they made the meaning of these experiences and how this shaped their own worlds. I listened to how this made an impact on their beliefs on teachers, their school, and the education experience. My goal

was to make space to highlight experiences that would reverse what national discipline data emphasizes: the overrepresentation and inequitable treatment of African Americans receiving school discipline. This is also a key element of Critical Race Theory.

**Critical Race Theory**

I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens to view and interpret the experiences of Black students with school discipline. Critical Race Theory emerged in the 1970s as a result of scholars criticizing legal doctrine for considering the ideals of race and racism in law (Walker, 2014). Critical race theorists work to transform the connections among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). The foundational principles of CRT include racism as interwoven in our experiences, interest convergence, and storytelling as a method to reflect preconceived notions of how "Americans see race" (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012, p. 44). Through the lens of CRT, racism is a normal endemic part of our society so much that it is not recognized as racism. It is our job, especially in the educational field to identify it in order to find ways to counteract it. The second feature, interest convergence, notes that because racism benefits White individuals, including those that are wealthy and working class, there is little motivation to overturn racism. In fact, there is a level of sacrificing and empathy for those that in fact do the opposite.

One key feature of CRT involves the art of narrative and storytelling. Critical race theorists seek to shine light on the experiences of those who are usually silenced or ignored. CRT also challenges society's ideals based on "tacit agreements" and seeks to produce counter storytelling to deconstruct biases and assumptions we may have (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012, p. 48). Theorists believe that once stories are told that counteract people's beliefs, generalizations, stereotypes, and biases regarding experiences about people of color, then those ideals can be combated. One of the ways in which this can occur is through listening to individuals share their

experiences and their realities. The purpose of my research is to use CRT to understand students'

experiences, in order to construct the meaning of their lived realities, combat biases, and

assumptions, and highlight the voices of Black students in various school settings.

**Student Voice**

In the past decade there has been growing interest and research on student voice.

Researchers and practitioners have identified student voice to understand students' experiences

in schools. Mansfield (2014) studied young women's unique experiences attending an all-female

STEM academy and conveyed the importance of student voice. She discussed the insufficiency

of solely surveying students or using testing and discipline data to identify all the issues. Instead,

true advocacy involves "letting the students speak for themselves" (Mansfield, 2014, p. 398);

instead of "speaking *for* students, adults speak *with* students" (Mansfield, 2015, p. 28).

Positionally, this moves students from data source to active participants and change agents that

make room for transforming educational practice. Listening to student voices regarding their

experiences and taking their suggestions seriously can provide beneficial insight to possible

school improvement in terms of academics, behavior, and the school climate (Mansfield et al.,

2012). The above reasons indicate why I met with focus groups: to center and highlight student

voices and emphasize their role as active participants in assisting to improve the educational

experiences for all students, especially those historically minoritized. While minoritized students

have always possessed a voice, adults must be open to, and create the opportunities for, students

voice to emerge (Brasof & Mansfield, 2018; Lac & Mansfield, 2018).

**Methods**

I collected data from three focus groups that attended vastly different schools in the

southeastern region of the country. I asked middle and high school students of color to

participate in the study. Some students that participated in the focus group have not been referred to the office at least once in the three years at their school, while some have. There were three focus groups that were interviewed; two focus groups were conducted at a charter school and the third focus group was conducted with a mix of high schoolers who attended various middle schools. I worked with the administrator at the charter school to assist in identifying and selecting ideal participants for the study. The administrator and I worked closely to identify students, give, and collect permission slips, and schedule a time for us to meet. Due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic I was unable to consistently meet with all groups from the same charter school. I was challenged to find another group to interview which led me to speaking with several high schoolers to talk about their middle school experiences. Nonetheless, questions reflected the purpose of the study and facilitated an informal discussion between participants. Due to the effects of the pandemic and schools changed to remote, all interviews conducted were virtual and took place after the school day; I worked with the schools' administrator to conduct the interviews during a time that was least impactful on core instruction (i.e., lunch, homeroom, encore classes). Interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour and were recorded and later transcribed. I compared data results from all focus groups conducted and identified common themes.

**Research Positionality**

The idea for this research emerges from my experiences serving as a school administrator in a predominantly White suburban middle school. Black students represented approximately 20% of that school population but were significantly overrepresented in school discipline referrals and exclusionary discipline. When Black and Hispanic students were referred to my office, I inquired about the situation and students would share inequitable experiences which took place in their classes. For example, a White student and the Black student would engage in

the same misbehavior, but only the Black student was referred to my office. Another common experience was student perceptions in how their teacher targeted them because of their past history of misbehavior. Thus, the teacher concentrated more of their attention on the student, expecting the student to misbehave again. Many students expressed that they felt comfortable sharing these experiences, because I am an African American individual and assumed I would be able to relate. Some students had pre-established relationships with me from conversations around the school and were already comfortable in speaking with me about their experiences.

As the only Black administrator at the school, I too felt treated inequitably by parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and other staff members. Microaggressions such as avoidance, hate, or sly remarks were thrown at me regularly due to my race or the color of my skin. Therefore, I could relate to their experiences of feeling mistreated due to discrimination and implicit bias. I have also felt a sense of responsibility to expose, contend, and correct people's biases of students of color because I am African American.

Currently serving as an elementary principal, I continue to experience microaggressions and the inequitable treatment from some of my staff members, parents, and family. For example, several White staff members left the school during the school year and transferred to other schools because I was the new principal. White parents have shared with several White teachers that their children would not attend our current school next year for reasons related to my race. My own experiences, in addition to the stories I have already heard related to discipline, propelled me to begin researching secondary students' perceptions on their middle school's discipline process and any racial inequitable treatment that they observed.

**Significance of Study**

The data that was gathered from Black students' experiences can add to the previous research on students' perceptions of the discipline gap in their schools and can help to generate possible suggestions for eradicating those disparities. Additionally, the data results and analysis include students' suggestions to better improve the discipline process and encourage educators and school leaders to reflect on their discipline policies and procedures, making them fairer for every student in the classroom. On a district and school level, I hope that the research provides implications for reviewing and auditing policies and practices schools currently follow and enforce. I also believe the research pushes educators to consider student perceptions as they reflect on their level of cultural awareness and proficiency. The research not only encourages school leaders to ask students about their thoughts on their schools' discipline process, but also on the culture and climate of their school, which undoubtedly influences how discipline decisions are made. On a much larger scale, this research adds to the national discussion of the inequitable treatment of individuals of color, especially African American males in the United States, young and old. Due to the rise and use of social media and increased news coverage on the topic of racial injustice acts, minorities are filming and sharing their experiences of overt mistreatment from dominant and powerful figures such as law enforcement and the country's legal justice system. One would hope that repeatedly witnessing inequitable treatment would lead to fundamental changes in discipline at all levels.

**Overview of Chapters**

In the following chapters I outline, discuss, and share the scope and sequence of my research. In Chapter II, I provide an extensive review of the literature that informs my study. In this chapter, I also discuss research studies, journal articles, and other academic works that

provide insight on my topic and highlight key themes from the literature. The chapter begins discussing the problem of racial disproportionality and the different forms of disproportionality and discrimination in schools. Next, I discuss the historical elements of disproportionality including strategies which have exacerbated the problem including zero tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline. Then, I discuss factors that impact the discipline gap followed by students' perceptions on their school experiences related to discipline. I conclude the chapter discussing the research suggesting solutions to decrease racial disparities in discipline. In Chapter III, I discuss the methodology in greater detail which include the collection methods, participant selection, and a description of school sites. I also share and discuss my previous findings from my pilot research and how that research helped me to develop my current research methodology. Lastly, I discuss how I analyzed my data and ensured validity and trustworthiness of my research. In Chapter IV, I share and elaborate my findings and the themes that were identified and generated from my data results. Lastly in Chapter V, I discuss the implications of this study and make recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I share and discuss the literature on my topic to provide a foundation and argue the need for my research. First, I describe the problem of racial disproportionality in student achievement, educational support, and student discipline. I also discuss the unique ways gender and special education status intersect with race when discussing disproportionality in schools. I then share the research on how these issues play out at the secondary level. Next, I discuss the historical contributions which impacted more research examining school discipline data. Then, I present the research that discusses factors that contribute to racial disparities followed by proposed solutions shared by researchers. There are countless studies discussing causes of the discipline gap in school and suggestions for educators to close the gap. However, the gap continues to exist, and Black students continue to receive harsher punishments compared to their White peers. This fact has compelled researchers to continue investigating and discussing root causes and possible approaches to disrupting these issues in order to find solutions that would make a greater impact. In this review of literature, I explore what we know about the problem of inequities in discipline and proposed solutions, but I will also explain the importance of centering and utilizing students' voices as a critical solution to enact change. I organize this review by key themes in the literature. I will compare their findings and discuss how they relate to my research.

**The Problem of Disproportionality**

Schools throughout the country are experiencing racial disparities in achievement, support provided to students, and school discipline (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Bottiani et al., 2016, 2017; Watkins & Aber, 2009). The data are consistent and similar across contexts: African American students are less successful on standardized measures of achievement, overrepresented

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in school discipline, subject to harsher consequences, and not given equitable support compared to their White counterparts (Gregory et al., 2010). They have also identified certain factors that may aid in decreasing the use of exclusionary discipline (Hinojosa, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010). However, the discipline gap continues throughout the country. School data around the nation shows students of color are subject to more referrals and exclusionary discipline than their White peers.

**Racial Discrimination**

Increasingly, researchers share data confirming students of color are overrepresented in school referrals and receive harsher school discipline compared to their White peers (Mansfield, Fowler, & Rainbolt, 2018). The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Civil Rights Division (2014) referred to the disparity issue as "racial discrimination in school discipline" (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According to the U.S. Department's 2014 report, Black students represented an average of 15% of the student population, but 35% of the students were suspended once, 44% more than once, and 36% of students expelled. The Departments' data illustrate Black students received harsher and more frequent punishments than their White peers. Students who receive exclusionary discipline, especially those who receive it more frequently, lose hours of instructional time and are at a great risk of falling behind academically.

Additionally, there is research which has examined the types of behavior for which students are referred and whether consequences are aligned with the perceived behavior infraction. For example, in a multivariate study examining the contributing factors to disparities in high school discipline data, Gregory and Weinstein (2008) found that African Americans were overrepresented in referrals overall with overrepresentation in referrals for defiance, specifically.

Anyon et al. (2014) studied the K-12 Denver Public Schools' total discipline data and found Latino, Black, Native American, and multiracial students had significantly higher odds of office referrals when compared to White students. Study findings also reflected that Black, Latino, and multiracial students were often punished more harshly than White students for the same offenses. Noguera (2003) argues that schools have a "tendency to punish the neediest children, without conscious planning and deliberate orchestration" (p.341).

Researching 7 years of demographic and discipline data, Anderson and Ritter (2017) found the disparate use of exclusionary discipline in K-12 schools throughout the state of Arkansas, focusing on total disciplinary infractions and their resulting consequences. Overall, across the state, the data revealed students of color were disproportionately receiving harsher consequences than White students. Their data also showed that on average, for every 100 Black students in attendance, approximately one fourth of them received 24.6 out of school suspensions compared to 4.3 suspensions per 100 White students. The researchers also found that across the state, Black students were 2.5 times more likely to receive exclusionary discipline in the same grade for similar types of infractions with a similar number of previous infractions that year (Anderson & Ritter, 2017, p. 20). Regarding disparities within the school, findings indicated Black students were only slightly more likely to receive exclusionary discipline compared to their White peers in the same schools. Similarly, Hilberth and Slate (2014) studied discipline data of a Texas middle school from the 2008-2009 school year. The researchers found 6th grade Black students received OSS 5 times the rate of their 6th grade White peers and 7th grade Black students were 4.7 times more likely to receive OSS than their White peers. Overall, data throughout the country continues to show that Black students receive exclusionary discipline at a disproportionate rate when compared to White students.

**Gender Disproportionality**

Additionally, researchers have examined the intersection of race and gender in school discipline to identify the reasons for and the rates of exclusionary discipline for African American Males and African American Females (Skiba et al., 2002). However, compared with Black females there is consistent research revealing African American males experience more exclusionary discipline (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Skiba et al., 1997; Skiba et al., 2002; Losen & Skiba, 2010) and experience harsher consequences compared to their White peers (Anyon et al., 2014). Nonetheless, there are assumptions and generalizations of both Black females and Black males which are factors that contribute to teachers believing their students of color are "misbehaving."

There is a great body of research which dates back to the 1970s showing Black males receive more referrals and harsher consequences than any other subgroup. (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Skiba et al., 2002; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987). Research states that Black men are four times more likely to be suspended or expelled compared to any other subgroup (OCR, 2009) and that African American males are more likely to receive a suspension once referred to the office and at a significantly higher rate than girls; Black males are also suspended for a range of infractions from minor offenses to sexual acts (Skiba et al., 2002). Moreover, research also shows the overrepresentation of Black males receiving suspension beginning as early as in preschool (Chambers, 2019). But why are African Americans consistently overrepresented in school discipline? Many educators and researchers propose it is due to discrimination and bias which has socially constructed the way that individuals view, interact, and perceive Black males. In the U.S. criminal justice system, in 2017, Blacks represented 12% of the U.S. adult population but 33% of the sentenced prison population, while Whites accounted for 64% of adults but 30%

of prisoners (Surprenant & Brennan, 2019). Differential treatment and overrepresentation in school discipline is a direct representation of our nation's criminal justice system. Many researchers propose it is also due to the widening of the pathway from the school to the criminal justice system, called the school-to-prison pipeline, which is discussed later in this chapter.

In recent years, a growing body of research has revealed Black girls are also frequently receiving school discipline much higher than their peers. Annamma et al. (2019) revealed in their research that disciplined Black girls were

> significantly more likely than disciplined girls from all other racial backgrounds to be eligible for free and reduced lunch (86% vs. 84%), homeless (7% vs. 4%), labeled as less English proficient (93% vs. 65%), have a disability that meets eligibility criteria for special education (18% vs. 14%), and classified as having an emotional disability (4% vs. 2%). (p. 211)

In a qualitative study examining out of school suspension data for females, Paul and Araneo (2018) found African American females represented 8% of the population but represented over 20% in expulsions for the 2011-2012 school year. Even more, the total population for African American females in New Jersey reflected the total population in the United States, but the percentage of suspensions were higher than the total percentage for the nation.

Researchers are also drawing attention to the fact that disproportionality affects girls more than boys at the intersection of race and ethnicity. For example, Morris and Perry (2017) found that African American girls are three times as likely to receive a disciplinary referral than their White counterparts; this is higher than the probability for African American males compared to White males. The researchers also found Black females are more likely to be referred for subjective vague offenses such as "disruptive behavior, dress code violations,

disobedience and aggressive behavior" (Morris & Perry, 2017, p. 144). This is also consistent with other research findings that have found Black females referred for similar behaviors (Blake et al., 2011) and research examining girls' perception of the reasons they are referred (Murphy et al., 2013). Furthermore, similar to African American males, African American females are overrepresented in referrals and exclusionary discipline, some data showing higher rates of overrepresentation then their male counterparts.

**Special Education**

Not only are Black students overrepresented in school discipline, but research also shows students who are identified with disabilities are disproportionately given exclusionary discipline. According to the Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1975), students identified as having disabilities are guaranteed protections under the law. Protections which include a right to a free and appropriate education which includes specialized educational services. However, research shows that protections have not been afforded to students of color: African American students who qualify for specialized educational services are vastly overrepresented in school discipline (Losen et al., 2021). National data from the U.S. Department of Civil Rights (2014) in 2011, found that Black males with disabilities represent over 12% of the total student population but are overrepresented in out-of-school suspensions by 12%. Specifically, by region in the Midwest, Black females with disabilities represent 4% of the population are overrepresented in out of school suspensions by 4%. This is consistent with Gage et al. (2019) that found Black students with or without a disability were disproportionately overrepresented in discipline, the gap at its widest between Black and White students with disabilities. Fitzgerald et al. (2019) examined the referral data of students, specifically special needs students from eastern rural Oklahoma and found for every percentage added to the African American population, referrals

for special needs students increased on average by 0.23 points. Furthermore, the data demonstrates African American students who have disabilities are disproportionately represented in consistent data throughout the nation.

**Middle Schools**

In recent years, researchers have focused their efforts in examining disparities at the middle school level, finding that students are at a higher risk of getting referred to the office during their middle school years (Anyon et al., 2014). According to an analysis from a secondary level data report in Florida, middle school suspension rates are higher than high school rates (Raffaele et al., 2003). Losen and Skiba (2010) examined the large racial disparities found in suspension rates at the middle school level. Using school and district level suspension level data from the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data Collection, they found 28.3% Black males and 18% Black females were suspended. Out of 18 districts that were part of the data set, 11 districts' data revealed that one in three Blacks were suspended. Other researchers have found significant numbers of African Americans referred to the office compared to other ethnic groups (Skiba et al., 1997) and given ISS and OSS at least two times the rate of their White peers (Hilberth & Slate, 2014).

Furthermore, the aforementioned data clearly states that Black students are disproportionately given harsher consequences and many times introduced to the juvenile penal system. Data has proven this reality, time and time again for the last three decades. But how did we begin to become knowledgeable that there was a discipline gap and discrimination problem? In the next section I expound upon the historical findings of racial disproportionality in school discipline.

## Historical Background of the Problem

At the wake of the 1970s, schools were slowly becoming integrated, and the U.S. had just conducted the U.S. census. As this information was collected, research individuals began to notice and inquire why there were so many youths out of school. The Children's Defense Fund found in their research, that a substantial number of students were out due to exclusionary discipline. This propelled the organization to inquire and research further why schools use suspension, how they use it and students' perception. Researchers found that Black students were three times suspended more than White students at the secondary level (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). Studies investigating and revealing schools and their disproportionate discipline data began to emerge into the 80s and 90s decades. Unfortunately, even as research began to develop and solutions were suggested and proposed, the discipline gap continued, and in many cases widened after the passing of legislation in the 1990s to ensure safe schools. (Wallace et al., 2008)

### Zero-Tolerance Policies

Zero tolerance policies entered into schools nationwide after the passing of the Gun Free Act of 1994; this act stated that schools were required to suspend students for at least a year for bringing firearms to school (Department of Education, 1994). However, the result of the legislation empowered schools to broaden their zero-tolerance policies to other areas, including those that weren't clearly defined, such as disrespect, insubordination, and bullying (Walker, 2014). The result of schools and school districts adhering to their own developed policies led to the perpetuation of Black students disproportionately receiving more school discipline than White students. Not only are Black students disciplined more often for similar offenses, but they are also disciplined more harshly (Skiba et al., 2002).

According to researchers, zero tolerance policies are more likely to exist in large urban schools and areas where there is a higher proportion of minority students (Verdugo, 2002). While educators are responsible for ensuring student and staff safety, research has found zero-tolerance policies are subject to educators' ambiguous interpretations which complicate the so-called discipline gaps (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Hoffman (2012) studied the effects of one urban school district that implemented zero tolerance policies and required school leaders to suspend students for five days and recommend them for expulsion; This shift from handling discipline at the school level corresponded to a doubling of the percentage of Black students recommended for expulsion when compared to their White and Hispanic peers. Hoffman also found that there was an additional 700 days of instruction "lost to suspension for Black secondary students" (Hoffman, 2012, p. 88). These findings are consistent with a four-year longitudinal study conducted in the early 2000s (Balfanz et al., 2014) which demonstrated African American students, economically vulnerable, or students with disabilities, were suspended longer or more harshly than their otherwise similar peers. Overall, the data reveals zero tolerance policies exacerbate existing racial disparities (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Additionally, the overuse of suspensions and expulsions for minor, subjective, or trivial events is a problem. Educators often perceive Black students, especially males, as threatening or disrespectful and thus treated unfairly in the discipline process (Verdugo, 2002). Furthermore, there is a lack of research that shows zero tolerance policies effectively improve school safety or student behavior (American Psychological Association, 2008; Verdugo, 2002; Skiba & Knesting, 2001) nor do they target or focus on the behaviors that are most often punished in schools. According to the Children's Defense Fund (2012) zero tolerance policies "ignore root causes of behaviors and prevent the teaching of appropriate behaviors. Rather, educators' responses to zero tolerance policies and

practices have seemed to intensify and heighten challenging student behaviors and widen the racial discipline gap.

**School Criminalization**

In addition to the above, educators have responded to zero tolerance policies by developing practices that resemble those utilized in the criminal justice system. Schools, especially those that are in urban districts that serve minority students, increasingly resemble school prisons due to criminal justice-type structures and habits taken on by authorities working there. Hirschfield (2008) defines criminalization as "the shift toward a crime control paradigm in the definition and management of the problem of student deviance" (p.80). Criminalization has been shown to occur more prevalent where disadvantaged students of color are the majority (Waquant, 2001) and most criminalizing actions are demonstrated toward African American males. Monroe (2005) argues that this is due to popular views of threatening and connotative images of Black men in the news and in the media that portray and highlight cultures of drugs, crime, violence, and delinquency.

Originally, the main objective of the shift was to ensure safety and order, however this purpose has led to schools taking on very penal practices. One common form of criminalization includes using criminal system type language. For example, Weissman (2015) notes how school leaders now use the term "assault" a "law enforcement connotation" as a way to describe students fighting (Weissman, 2015, p.89).

Another method of criminalization is in the procedures that school leaders utilize. Hirschfield (2008) suggests school punishment mirrors criminal justice institutions by following procedural and uniform guidelines for punishing students. In other words, instead of relying on the discretion of staff members, school leaders are subjected to follow school discipline

guidelines that serve as the "law book" of the district or school. The influence of criminal justice practices in schools is another form of criminalization and involves the use and presence of school resource officers, metal detectors, and methods for handling school discipline (Hirschfield, 2008). This is even at a higher rate when there is a higher percentage of minorities and students who receive free or reduced lunch (Verdugo, 2002).

**School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The execution of nationalized zero tolerance policies and use of law enforcement in schools has also opened a pathway, leading students who are frequently disciplined into the criminal justice system; this is known as the school-to-prison pipeline. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, 2008) defines the school-to-prison pipeline as "the policies and practices that push our nation's schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems" (ACLU, 2008, p. 1). Students who receive more exclusionary discipline are more at risk of being introduced to the juvenile justice system (Cregor & Hewitt, 2011). The school-to-prison pipeline is reflective of our nation's inequitable criminal justice system. For example, in Washington DC over 60% of Black men are in jail, prison, or on probation on a given day (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). Disparities in school discipline reflect our nation's criminal system in terms of the numbers of Black youth that are overrepresented in receiving exclusionary discipline (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 1997).

Researchers are investigating school staff and district staff who are knowledgeable and aware of the existence of disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline leading to the penal system. In a phenomenological study investigating support staff's beliefs on the root causes of the school-to-prison pipeline, Yang et al. (2018) discovered that that support service staff are

aware of the disproportionality in school discipline and identified structural and systematic factors as causes for the school-to-prison pipeline. Most educators interviewed conveyed the school as the one responsible for minimizing this pathway. Such strategies identified were relationship building and strategies that were more restorative in response to misbehavior. Although many staff blamed factors out of students' control that caused the school-to-prison pipeline, some still believed that it was the intrinsic factors, such as a child's motivation and behavior which were the cause for them being involved in school discipline. Noguera (2003) writes about an assistant principal who articulated a self-fulfilling prophecy of an elementary student who he predicted "(t)here's a prison cell in San Quentin waiting for him." (Noguera, 2003, p. 341) Thus, demonstrating that there are school leaders who believe that some students are destined to enter the criminal justice system due to their intrinsic factors which they believe is a choice to misbehave.

Researchers have also discussed various legislative responses to the school-to-prison pipeline in order to identify more sustainable solutions. Boyd (2009) shares the elements of two legislative acts which are responses to the Jena Six case, when six Black male youth were charged with attempted murder and conspiracy after allegedly beating up a White student in a school yard. The treatment and overextension of their charge and punishment (which was later dismissed) encouraged policy makers to create the Youth Promise Act which focuses on preventative measures such as training law enforcement, mentoring programs, and providing solutions contextual to the community's needs.

<div align="center">**Factors That Impact the Gap**</div>

Countless research has indicated and confirmed disparities in school discipline nationwide. Black students are receiving exclusionary discipline at a higher rate than their White

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peers; Black students are also receiving harsher consequences for the same infraction as White

students. Nonetheless, as the data has been shared, researchers have attempted to identify and

discuss probable explanations as to why these disparities exist. Students have shown that the

disparities in exclusionary discipline are caused by a range of school factors (Skiba & Knesting,

2001). The following subsections are organized by themes which were identified through

multiple studies that discuss causes of the discipline gap. The themes reflect the behaviors and

actions of schools in their role of continuing and widening these gaps.

**Teacher Bias and Beliefs**

In the past two decades there has been developing research on teachers' beliefs and views

on how they interpret behavior and their perspective on the reasoning behind the

overrepresentation of Blacks in school discipline. Due to the majority of discipline originating in

the classrooms (Skiba et al., 2002), researchers have sought to investigate teachers' thoughts on

the causes of student behavior and why there is a discipline gap. The research suggests that

educators are aware of the inequities happening with school discipline, noting its presence in the

schools where they work (Yang et al., 2018). Several researchers have revealed teachers

perceiving students as the main source for discipline issues (Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1981;

Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) conducted two experiments testing

the hypothesis that discipline disparities are driven by teachers' racial stereotypes. Student

discipline was treated more harshly if Black students misbehaved compared to White students.

Their findings also revealed that female teachers increased their response for a Black student

more so than a White student when the student had only one past incident and both were

considered minor misbehaviors. The researchers also found that teachers were more likely to

identify and label Black students as troublemakers, more likely to think a student was Black if

the student had a pattern of misbehavior, and also more likely to suspend the Black student versus the White student. Thus, the research revealed the thinking systems of teachers and the impact of race on their decisions to label and suspend Black students. Similarly, Gregory and Mosely (2004) investigated the teacher's perception on the causes of discipline issues and how they believe race and culture are considered. Their data revealed that teachers view students as the main source of the problem and institutional level forces as the source of the problem. This is in congruence with findings from Yang et al. (2018) who found that some teachers believe students who find themselves in school discipline are innately bad but also that it was not the school's responsibility to address and manage student behavior but the student and their families.

Teachers' varied interpretations of student misbehavior leads into referring students of color for subjective "hard to measure" reasons. Often the referrals are more subjective for Black students compared to objective, concrete actions from their White peers. In a multi-study examination of disciplinary data from an urban school district and one urban middle school, Skiba et al. (1997) found that two of the most common behaviors referred from teachers were disobedience and disrespect. Also, the most common reasons for referrals from discipline data at the urban middle school were lack of cooperation and insubordination. In a qualitative study examining the experiences of eleven Black students who have been labeled as "persistently bad" by their teachers, students reported disparities in office referrals were due to teachers and their subjective judgement and was not managed equally by all educators (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016). Additionally, Skiba et al. (2002) found White students were significantly more likely than Black students to be referred for objective reasons such as "smoking, leaving without permission, vandalism, and inappropriate language" (p. 332). Additional research has identified similar findings; Black students are referred for subjective reasons compared to White students

(Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Anyon et al., 2014; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Consistent research findings suggest that educators are referring to students for vague behaviors which are prone to be observed and judged differently based on the individual teacher.

*Teachers' Perceptions of Femininity*

Teachers are making decisions about discipline due their own beliefs reflecting gender roles and norms. Discipline data shows Black females are overrepresented in disciplinary infractions (Blake et al., 2011). More research is investigating the reasons why Black females are overrepresented in discipline data. Researchers suggest that African American females are subjected to school discipline due to a lack of practicing dominant forms of femininity because teachers perceive them as assertive, aggressive, loud, and over sexual (Murphy et al., 2013; Blake et al., 2011; Morris, 2007). These, in fact, are not teachers' ideal perceptions of how young girls are supposed to behave, which is "quiet, pretty, and passive" (Murphy et al., 2013, p. 599). Morris (2016) shares that, Black females are quickly identified and labeled as "undisciplined deviants who reflect the most negative stereotypes of Black femininity" (p. 43). Another way African American females shared that they are called out is by the volume level of their voice. Morris (2007) researched the experiences of African American girls and found that teachers discipline students for being perceived as loud; some teachers linking to disruption and disrespect. Murphy et al. (2013) identified this when hearing a Black girl shared that she was in trouble when the teacher accused her of doing something and responded by yelling back at him. Many times, teachers will use their internalized notions of feminine roles to influence control of students.

Another way Black females may not demonstrate societal norms of femininity is through their perceived level of assertiveness and aggressiveness. Many times, teachers interpret Black

girls' assertiveness as questioning, challenging authority, or trying to take control. Morris (2007) noticed through observing several classes that teachers focused more on improving social demeanor and behavior than academics with Black females. Body language such as "neck rolling," "eye-rolling," have caused other teachers to feel the need to target their attention to these behaviors (Morris, 2016, p. 58). Overall educators believe that they must target and attempt to improve Black girls' actions that do not reflect societal norms of femininity.

### Teachers' Perceptions of Black Males

Research has shown teachers to often perceive Black students, males especially, as troublemakers (Kunjufu, 2005; Noguera, 2003). Findings also indicate teachers predicting deficit outcomes based on their cultural movement styles (Neal et al., 2003). Black males have negative stereotypes and perceptions linked largely due to the media structures, overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, and our hegemonic culture. Steele (2003) refers to this as a stereotype threat, when one is viewed "through the lens of a negative stereotype or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (p. 111). As a result of teachers perceiving males of color through this lens, they will focus their efforts on controlling student behaviors in schools populated with the students who are the most vulnerable. (Monroe, 2005) This is possibly due to teachers holding beliefs which reflect African American males as aggressive, violent, and intimidating. These beliefs are perceived in schools where teachers attempt to utilize punitive strategies to control males and over-punishing them. Teachers may also project microaggressions towards students to implicitly demean or belittle them. Pierce et al. (1978) defines microaggressions as "… subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of Blacks by offenders … the cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in blunt-White interactions" (p. 66).

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Microaggressions include verbal interactions to denigrate a person and can also reflect

differential treatment and experience feelings of invisibility. One type of microaggression

Henfield emphasized was the assumption of deviance, where "teachers assume Black males all

behave in wrongdoing or criminal behavior" (Henfield, 2011, p. 151). The researcher describes

teachers recognizing and highlighting the negative in every situation. For example, disregarding

a student's good score, but emphasizing the mistakes, or ready to issue a consequence if a Black

male student tosses a pencil at someone. Furthermore, teachers' thinking systems and biases

contribute to their differential treatment of African American Males. Their discriminating beliefs

may reflect stereotypes and norms about Black men in our culture. As a result, the way they treat

their students may include throwing microaggressions or showing differential treatment.

**Small Group of Referrers**

A plethora of research has found students of color are overrepresented in office referrals,

however some research has found that these referrals are coming from a small group of teachers.

Skiba et al. (1997) found that in one school, half of the referrals were from a small group of

teachers who made high numbers of referrals. The researchers concluded that further research

should focus on identifying school-based factors that are correlated with office referrals and

discipline and whether specific interventions were utilized. Similarly, Gregory and Weinstein

(2008) found out of 250 African American students referred for defiance, the average number for

teacher referrers was two adults. Researchers also found one-to-two adults referred 185 students,

three adults referred 31 students, four adults referred 11 students and five to six adults referred

18 students, and seven to eight adults referred 5 students. The researchers also conclude that

behaviors such as defiance have a variance of interpretation and thus are handled differently in

teachers' classrooms. Data results from the study showed 14% of the defiance referrals for

African Americans students were from four or more students; conversely 86% of defiance-referred African American students were from one to three staff members. As previously stated, students of color are referred for subjective and clearly undefined reasons such as defiance and disrespect, these referrals are coming from a small group of teachers. Researchers are suggesting that there are additional factors such as teacher bias and expectations and cultural and social misunderstandings (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008) that may impact teachers' decision making in referring students.

Additionally, there is also research which demonstrates teachers are utilizing other methods to manage misbehavior in the classroom in a more corrective and restorative manner. Instead of simply referring students to the office, teachers are utilizing restorative practices to strengthen the teacher/student relationship and reduce students receiving exclusionary consequences. Rainbolt et al. (2019) surveyed teachers to gage how teachers are trained in restorative practices, how they currently implement this program, how they receive support for their practice, and their perceptions of restorative practices in their building. The study revealed half of the teachers indicated that they used restorative practices often and 19% indicated they used the practices almost daily. This suggests that the majority of teachers are using more effective and corrective methods in handling misbehavior instead of handling situations punitively.

**Student Perceptions of Discipline**

For several decades school data has consistently shown the disparities in school discipline between White and Black students. Consistent studies demonstrate the unequal use of exclusionary discipline (Anderson & Ritter, 2016) and even differential treatment towards African American students (Skiba et al., 2002). Discipline data used in research has identified

behaviors that are constantly referred to the office (Hilberth & Slate, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). In recent years, there has been a growing body of research focused on gathering students' perceptions of their school experience, including their perception of the school environment, how valued and inclusive they feel within their school, and whether they perceive there are racial disparities in their schools with behavior, referrals, and exclusionary discipline (Bottiani et al., 2016, 2017; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Ruck & Wortley, 2002; Watkins & Aber, 2009). In the following sections, I share the various perceptions of students and group them by theme to emphasize similarities among their experiences.

**Overall School Climate**

In recent years, researchers have centered students' thoughts on their school's climate. Watkins and Aber (2009) defined climate as "a quality of life or atmosphere in schools" and "how students feel at school; experiences at school" (p. 396). A school's climate may include how caring, trusting, and supportive their teachers are, their perceived sense of belonging, and how equitable their school is in terms of school discipline. There is data that shows Black students perceive lower levels of belonging, care from teachers and adjustment problems than their White peers (Bottiani et al., 2016, 2017). There is also research that shows consistently referred African American have a lower level of trust in their school (Shirley & Cornell, 2011) and hold a negative perception of their teachers (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016) compared to other students who are not persistently disciplined. Researchers are also beginning to discuss how these factors relate to Black students' inequitable discipline experiences as well. Watkins and Aber (2009) conducted a quantitative study, gathering over 800 middle school students' perceptions on the racial climate in their respective schools. Utilizing a school climate survey tool, the researchers collected data from both Black and White students. Their data suggested

Black students had less favorable perceptions of the school racial climate than their White peers. African American, poor, and female students perceived the racial climate more negatively than their White, non-poor, and male peers. The researchers also found that African Americans tended to convey neutral perceptions about the need to change the school system to address racial inequities. Conversely, White students chose to disagree about the need to change the school system to address racial inequities. The researchers further concluded that racial differences could be caused by "cultural discontinuities in values, norms, and expectations that exist between students' home cultures and the school culture" (p. 407). Similarly, Voight et al. (2015) examined the within-school racial disparities perceived by high school students using a climate survey. Data results demonstrated that Black students on average revealed lower safety, connectedness, and adult-student relationships compared to White students; the numbers were especially larger in schools where achievement gaps between Black and White students were significant. Overall, the data consistently demonstrates that Black students have negative perceptions and experiences of their school's climate. They do not feel that they belong or trust the educators in the building.

**Students' Perception of Teachers**

Most school experiences largely center around students interacting with teachers. As a result, it is important for teachers to demonstrate care, support, and encouragement to all students regardless of their race or their behavior. However, research suggests that students, particularly those of color, do not perceive their teachers to demonstrate the above qualities. Bottiani et al. (2016) examined students' perceptions of school support in terms of equity, caring, and high expectations. Findings indicated that perceived caring from teachers was lower overall for Black students and was not impacted by the student diversity or the SES level of the school Black and

White students however, perceived similar levels of high expectations from their teachers. Noguera's (2008) survey findings also illustrated high school minority and poor students conveying significantly high levels of distrust in their teachers. Noguera conveyed that if students do not believe their teachers care about them and actively care about their academic progress, then the possibility of their success is significantly reduced. In terms of support, research suggests that African Americans are less likely to seek help from adults and teachers. They do not trust issues such as bullying and other personal challenges in school (Shirley & Cornell, 2011).

**Lack of Student-Teacher Relationships**

It is crucial for teachers to develop relationships with their students including familiarizing themselves with their students' backgrounds, interests, and current academic levels. However, researchers are noticing relationships are less of a priority as students transition to the secondary levels, Kennedy-Lewis (2013) gathered middle school student perceptual data who had two or more out of school suspensions in the previous year at an elementary school. Findings revealed students consistently describing their middle school transition as "the beginning of them getting in serious and repeated trouble" (p. 104). Students' responses also suggested that teachers focused more on control of the class than on building relationships with students. One student reported, "I didn't really get in trouble [in fourth grade] because he [would] never write me up. If I get in trouble, he [would] just talk to me outside" (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 104). Furthermore, relationships are key in ensuring academic success for students. This includes centering on their personal and academic strengths and inquiring about their interests outside of school (Caton, 2012). It is crucial that all students feel that their teachers are supportive and fair. Students are keenly aware when there is a lack of support and assistance from teachers, including students

who are consistently referred to (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Research shows that if these two factors are in place, suspension rates are lowered (Heilbrun et al., 2018; Hinojosa, 2008).

**Differential Treatment**

There is also data revealing Black students' perceptions of being treated differently than their White peers, especially when teachers believe them to have misbehaved. Ruck and Wortley (2002) surveyed high school students on their perceptions of their school's disciplinary practices and determined Black students were substantially more likely to perceive those teachers at their school treated Black students more harshly and face discriminatory treatment than students from all other racial groups. Morris (2007) examined the perceptions and experiences of Black girls. The participants revealed that teachers treated the girls differently because of their perceived loudness and lack of femininity according to current cultural norms. This propelled teachers to single the girls out and send them to the office. Some inequities, students perceive, are applied to their overall school experience in terms of quality of teachers, curriculum, and lack of resources (Storz, 2008). Even high achieving girls are noted as experiencing discrimination. Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2012) analyzed the experiences of high achieving African American high school girls and found the teachers of these young women demonstrated a preference for girls who were considered "preppy," of non-African girls, and girls who were of African or Caribbean descent instead of those that were perceived as "thuggish" (p. 210). Overall, students are aware of the inequities in their schools and note higher levels of inequities where Black students are the minority. Bottiani et al. (2016) found certain races were significantly linked with perceived levels of equity; Black students reported significantly lower equity on average as compared with White students who reported high levels of equity in mostly White schools. Conversely, equity was found to be perceived higher from Black students in mostly Black schools. Researchers also

found lower levels of perceived equity and caring among both Black and White students in more racially and ethnically diverse schools. This could suggest that because students are around a more diverse population, they are more sensitized and aware of inequities with other populations. Overall, research suggests that Black students perceive higher levels of inequities and lower levels of caring, belonging and inclusiveness.

**Negative Perceptions of Students**

Students can sense when teachers care and support them, but also sense when their teacher is less favorable of them due to certain factors which include their past history of misbehavior (Caton, 2012) or if they did not demonstrate cultural norms and expectations (Morris, 2007). Some students have even shared teachers not giving them a chance to explain themselves and assumed they were guilty based on previous experiences (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016). Other students have shared that it is the teachers' attitude and perception of them that has impacted their behaviors in class. Some students perceive their teachers to hold negative perceptions of them which can result in disproportionate referrals and unfair teaching practices. African American girls have reported getting in trouble for talking, responding disrespectfully to teachers, or demonstrating off task behavior (Murphy et al., 2013). In Morris's book *Pushout* (2016) Gina, a Black student, shares teachers will "talk to you any ol' kind way" (p. 84), which she felt provoked her own misbehavior. In Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein's (2012) research, students described teachers making racist comments and preferring students who are quiet, on task, and well-spoken instead of students who they perceive are loud and argumentative. Morris (2007) implies that there are other factors such as teacher actions which provoke females to respond in a way that is perceived as disruptive and disrespectful. All of these contributions cause students to feel a lack of support and inclusiveness in the classroom.

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Researchers have also shared Black girls' perceptions of varying levels of teacher care and support and the impact it makes (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Murphy et al., 2013; Wun, 2018). Blake et al. (2011) suggest that teacher-student relationships could assist in increasing student engagement and inclusiveness while decreasing disproportionality in discipline. The researchers suggest that teachers who assist in explaining material and providing extra assistance are teachers who students consider are helpful. Overall, some students feel as though teachers do not look at some of them through the same lens as their White counterparts, but of a lesser value and treat them as such. African American females desire to be successful (Murphy et al., 2013), and high achieving, taking Advanced Placement courses (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012); however, these students are continuing to be overrepresented in discipline when compared to White females and have contested to a lack of support and equitable treatment from their teachers and their schools.

**Microaggressions**

Recently, researchers have delved into the thoughts and realities of Black male students to gauge their perceptions on another form of differential treatment aimed at them which are microaggressions. Pierce et al. (1978) define microaggressions as "… subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of Blacks by offenders … the cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in blunt-White interactions" (p. 66) Microaggressions include verbal interactions to denigrate a person and can also reflect differential treatment and experience such feelings of invisibility. In a qualitative study, examining Black male students and how they navigate through microaggressions, Henfield (2008) found that Black males are knowledgeable and aware of microaggressions that they experience. One type of microaggression Henfield emphasized was the assumption of

deviance, where "teachers assume Black males, all behave in wrongdoing or criminal behavior" (Henfield, 2008, p. 151). The researcher describes teachers recognizing and highlighting the negative in every situation. For example, disregarding a student's good score, but emphasizing the mistakes, or ready to issue a consequence if a Black male student tosses a pencil at someone. Nonetheless, many Black males are a part of families that know how to achieve success despite microaggressions through the social and cultural resources that the family encompasses. Similarly, Allen (2010) researched the schooling experiences of African American males in Arizona's secondary schools and their use of social and cultural capital to overcome microaggressions. Allen revealed that despite the microaggressions these males experienced such as differential treatment and invisibility, their families' knowledge and resources assisted them in achieving success. Resources included parents giving skillful advice on how to overcome racial issues, providing their child lessons on test preparation, and parents' influence and involvement in schools.

**Impact of Zero Tolerance Policies**

Many Black students, particularly Black male students are victims of zero tolerance policies and rules that school leaders follow; laws that were originally designed to punish students for actions that affected school safety, were broadened to other behaviors tied to disrespect, bullying, and non-compliance (Walker, 2014). Caton (2012) examined the perceptions of Black male student dropouts and the impact of zero tolerance policies on their schooling experiences. The researcher revealed the individuals encountered their school as a hostile environment due to the security measures such as the metal detectors and security guards present in their schools. This brought on feelings of anger, resentment, and distrust. Other participants shared how there was a lack of strong student-teacher relationships due to teachers

verbally discouraging students and overreacting to students' misdeeds. This is consistent with the concept of assumption of deviance Henfield (2008) shared, which is the assumption that Black male are "deviant" and classic candidates for incarceration. Wun (2016) explored the Black girls experiences and the intersections of violence and school discipline and found girls perceived that their schools were not sensitive and considerate of the outside factors which caused their anger problems that later caused discipline issues. Outside of school, the girls are struggling to navigate many forms of violence. Instead of addressing the structural issues of violence that they were experiencing, their school's zero tolerance policies "targeted them for punishment and neglect" (p. 433).

Overall, the experiences of African American students are varied, but many of them shed light on their inequitable realities around their schools' climate and school discipline. There is consistent research documenting differential treatment from teachers and administrators in terms of perception, support, and even due process. There is also consistent research indicating Black students perceive that they receive more discrimination than other races.

## Proposed Solutions to the Discipline Gap

Disparities in school discipline is an ongoing issue in many schools. However, there is emerging research identifying and discussing possible solutions to narrow the gap. Many solutions that researchers suggest including practices educational leaders should ensure are visible in their schools. Practices include reviewing data regularly, aligning educational goals, and ensuring due process is executed (Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Townsend, 2000; Townsend Walker, 2014), Other researchers suggest reviewing and adapting district policies to ensure that they are fair, equitable, and consistent with positive and restorative behavior (Anyon et al., 2014; Fenning & Rose, 2007). Other researchers focus on the

development of teachers' cultural awareness and proficiency (Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2002), while others stress providing individual teachers with classroom management strategies (Caton, 2012; Skiba et al., 1997). There is also consistent research stressing the importance of student-teacher relationships (Anyon et al., 2018; Gregory & Weinsten, 2008; Townsend 2000) since this has a significant impact and, in many cases, the determining factor for initial student discipline. In the following sections, I discuss relevant and significant solutions that are emergent in the research. More recent research has emphasized the importance of implementing restorative practices as a way to address gaps in due process, strengthen relationships, and give teachers the tools they need to increase proficiency (Rainbolt et al., 2019).

**Review Discipline Data**

Several researchers propose for schools to review their school's data in order to identify where schools currently stand in terms of exclusionary discipline rates and if there is a differential pattern in assigning consequences (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Townsend, 2000). Other researchers suggest for educators to look at the motives behind disciplinary decisions since they can have a significant impact on racial disparities in discipline (Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). In their report discussing urban schools' suspension data around the nation, Losen and Skiba (2010) recommended for schools and school districts to regularly disaggregate data by race and gender. Townsend (2000) proposed for schools to use a common definition of disproportionality and assign their African American students' exclusionary discipline less than their percentage representation of the population. The researcher proposes if the percentage is more than their percentage of the population, then that school's exclusionary discipline is disproportionate. Fenning and Rose (2007) suggested for schools to conduct, review, and monitor "frequency counts and percentages of the types of school responses for

infractions by ethnicity" (p. 550). The authors also suggested monitoring whether they are giving exclusionary discipline for minor or major offenses. Furthermore, researchers are proposing for schools to consistently review, disaggregate, and respond to their suspension data in order to identify frequent behaviors referred and punished, who are suspended more frequently, who are referring, and alternatives to utilize instead of suspension.

**Listen to Students**

One informal but powerful approach to collect data is to collect and elevate the thoughts of students. The literature that collects student perception proposes that student perception is a powerful tool to understand and make meaning of the student experience. Researchers are using student perception more as a tool to reveal marginalized students' experiences. There is also emerging research arguing the value of a student voice not only as a data source but as a catalyst for change. Mansfield et al. (2012) speak on the value of students voicing their experiences and collaborating with adults to identify solutions. The researcher argues that "prioritizing the authentic voice in educational research is the only genuine means of evaluating school reform efforts and facilitating more socially just educational environments and outcomes" (p. 23). Students may not have all the right answers, but they could possibly have ideas on what could improve discipline policies and practices at their school. Noguera (2008) researched the causes of racial violence in five high schools in Northern California. Instead of utilizing the police, which was deemed ineffective, Noguera led and facilitated discussions with student focus groups to identify solutions which were practical and realistic ideas to undertake. Noguera later argued that too many schools operate with the notion that adults primarily have the answers to the problems that involve our most vulnerable children. Allowing students to have a seat at the "decision-making table" can not only send a message of value and significance to our students

but also can empower students to think critically and creatively about what can be done to improve the schooling experience for every student.

**Build and Sustain Relationships**

One solution to substantially impact and decrease the discipline gap is for all educators to focus more on building relationships with their students. Building and sustaining positive relationships can increase the trust between teachers and students. It can also encourage students to listen to their teachers and become more receptive when their teacher is attempting to correct behavior in the classroom. Broadly speaking, it can challenge the disparities and discriminatory practices in school discipline (Yang et al., 2018). Kennedy-Lewis (2013) researched urban students' transition to middle school who had a history of persistent referrals. Students shared how they perceived that their middle school teachers were focused more on order of the class and assigning punitive consequences then establishing relationships with students. The researcher later argued for middle school teachers to focus less on control and more on curriculum and care, developing positive relationships with students and developing empathy-based classroom communities. The research also argues for strong teacher-student relationships in order for students to achieve academic success. This is especially important for African American males who are disproportionately excluded from school which can put them behind in their academic work and thus at a greater likelihood not to finish school. Anyon et al. (2018) researched non-punitive and non-exclusionary strategies used in over 30 schools with substantially low exclusionary rates. The researchers found that one of the most common solutions shared from teachers' strategies was relationship building. The educators explained relationship building provided the foundation for problem solving during occurrences of conflict between teachers and students. The researchers also shared "awareness of student's strengths, triggers, coping

resources, and areas of growth helped adults understand the underlying motivation behind

misbehavior" (Anyon et al., 2018, p. 225). Understanding the context behind a student's

misbehavior can substantially impact a teachers' thought process and decision making in

handling conflicting situations with students. Teachers can also assist when students struggle

with socio-emotional issues. Educators should also think about building relationships with

families. Anyon et al. (2018) suggested actions such as conducting home visits and positive

phone calls. The researchers conveyed proactively conducting these actions or "investments" to

produce a greater return in building relationships with families. Relationship building helps when

staff must call parents when students misbehave; parents are much more inclined to trust staff

and communicate that they agree with educators.

**Ongoing Teacher Development**

In order for the discipline gap to narrow, teachers must receive ongoing professional

development on building relationships, providing rigorous instruction, and executing proactive

strategies (Green et al., 2018). In recent decades emerging research has surfaced regarding the

importance of preservice teacher preparation for managing school discipline equitably. In a

qualitative case study investigating teachers who are closing the discipline gap, Monroe (2009)

asserted that one commonality with all the teachers that she interviewed was their student teacher

experiences. These successful teachers all mentioned their experiences in teaching in "high

poverty, culturally diverse schools" (Monroe, 2009, p. 335). Due to their early practice and

development in urban schools, they were able to gain experiences with a diverse set of students

and acquire skills from effective cooperating teachers who had a unique set of skills that they

could emulate. Similarly, Skiba et al. (1997) argued for all teachers in general to receive training

on less punitive measures in dealing with non-compliance behavior specifically, thus helping to

decrease office referrals overall. Research has also delved into the impact of coaching teachers to improve with their classroom management. Gregory et al. (2017) examined the impact of a two-year coaching program on discipline racial disparities. Researchers found that by the second year, the control group (teachers without coaching) were two times more likely to issue a referral to their Black students compared to their peers who received the coaching. Teachers that received coaching had no racial discipline gaps according to office referrals by the second year. Also, the year after coaching ended, the likelihood for a Black student to receive a referral versus a non-Black student was less in the coached teacher's office referrals. Furthermore, the research suggests that students need ongoing teacher professional development on classroom management and best practices may help teachers to continue developing their pedagogy and instructional expertise. This is especially needed in pre-service education, so undergraduates are provided with more practical tools. More frequent and direct coaching may need to be utilized for teachers who may need more support with classroom management and relationship building. On the school level, providing teachers with consistent training and support may significantly reduce discipline gaps.

**Cultural Awareness and Responsiveness**

In the last three decades, there has been developing evidence proposing for educators to develop their cultural awareness. Ladson-Billings (1994) asserts in her book *The Dream keepers* that teachers' instruction should consider and reflect the cultures of the students in a classroom. The author shares benefits in a culturally relevant literacy classroom including student's real-life experiences are "legitimized" (p. 117) because it is a part of the curriculum, students who are at risk of low achievement and success are helped to be intellectual leaders in the classroom and students are learning by doing instead of solely receiving knowledge the traditional way.

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Similarly, Monroe (2005) argues for teachers to disrupt expectations and approaches that reflect "White norms" and become culturally responsive; that is to become knowledgeable of cultural behavioral norms and practices and interweave these cultural practices in their instruction. Moreover, school leaders should provide culturally relevant training to the staff which includes how to respond to students' behavior (Skiba et al., 2002). Training allows teachers to become aware of their own implicit bias and thinking systems (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015) and also microaggressions they communicate to students (Allen, 2010). Gregory and Mosely (2004) propose a new framework called Cultural Relevant Discipline, a lens that educators can look through when identifying factors behind student misbehavior, considering the impact of race and culture on misbehavior. Researchers also push for culturally relevant training to take place in pre-service teacher education to familiarize students with culturally behavior norms and how to respond in a culturally familiar way known to students (Monroe, 2009). Townsend (2000) suggests for educators to familiarize themselves with minority cultures that make up their schools to prevent "cultural discontinuity" (p. 386) when there is a misunderstanding between various cultures. The author urges teachers to become cultural brokers who could teach others about linguistic dialects to their colleagues to increase understanding, communication, and relatability among teachers and students.

Schools can also strive to involve outside stakeholders to assist in creating systems and practices that increase the cultural responsiveness in the school community. Bal (2015) presented a developmental intervention procedure known as Learning Lab, an opportunity for local stakeholders to create culturally responsive behavior systems. The cycle involved questioning the existing discipline system, analyzing current challenges, discussing new ideas, creating an ideal system, and planning for its future execution. While the research did not focus on the

implementation of the new culturally relevant discipline system, Bal centered on the process and emphasized the benefits of involving multiple individuals who represent the school community to incorporate various perspectives.

Furthermore, the research suggests for schools to make themselves aware of the cultures that reflect their school population and create practices and systems that are most familiar with their students' backgrounds and ultimately encourage educators to increase their cultural awareness of their school, improve their instructional relevance in classrooms and enhance their cultural responsiveness with all students.

**Multi-Tiered Systems Approach**

There is also existing research which stresses the concepts of prevention and intervention strategies to be utilized in the classroom, thus having a greater impact on the likelihood that students are responding appropriately (Skiba et al., 1997). Lustick (2017) argues that positive discipline practices will ultimately reduce the disproportionate representation of minorities in school discipline and proposes positive approaches labeled Proactive Practices, Moderate Intervention and Intensive Intervention. These practices, she contends, are better alternatives to suspension and the use of zero tolerance policies. Teske (2011) conducted a case study on the use and impact of a multi-integrated systems approach in the juvenile justice system in one county in eastern North Carolina. Results reflected a reduction in students detained on school offenses by 43% and a reduction of minority youth referred to the courts on school offenses by 86%. There was also a by-product reduction of weapon related offenses found in schools by 73%. Multi-tiered systems and practices are becoming more and more adopted and utilized in school districts as an alternative to giving students exclusionary discipline. Interventions can not

only improve students' success in academics, but also assist to close the racial achievement gap (Cohen et al., 2006).

### *Restorative Practices*

The use of restorative practices has increased over the past several decades. The purpose of restorative practices (RP) or interventions is to "restore relationships between the offended and offender when an infraction does occur" (Kane et al., 2007). RP aims also to proactively ensure that negative behaviors are not repeated. Students are taught to think about how their actions have affected others and what they can do to come to restoration, amending, and reconciliation. Teske (2011) suggests a binary approach involving the school community and providing additional resources to respond effectively to disruptive students. Supporters of restorative practices encourage practitioners to involve the school community, especially those who are involved in wrongdoing. Additionally, the approach has a proactive and reactive approach. Under the reactive approach, the offenders and the school community are led through restorative justice circles, where all members who are involved or impacted sit in a circle, promoting the idea of connectivity, inclusiveness, and community (Kline, 2016). Ideally through the process, students develop maturity as well as their problem-solving skills, empathy, and self-awareness (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). There is increasing research which supports RP as an effective strategy to use to decrease office discipline referrals and exclusionary discipline days as well as decrease the discipline gap between Black and White students (Anyon et al., 2014; Mansfield, Fowler, & Rainbolt, 2018; McClusky et al., 2008).

### *School and District Policy*

On a micro level, school leaders and district leaders are encouraged to assess their current policies to ensure that they are equitable and do not push for the removal of students out of

school for non-violent and non-threatening behaviors. Instead, researchers suggest utilizing

matrices for offenses, consequences, and interventions which can ultimately have a positive

influence on school culture (Anyon et al., 2014). Losen and Skiba (2010) suggest for the possible

monitoring of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) on schools that have a greater likelihood of racial

and gender-based discrimination; more specifically, auditing policies that could have the

potential to enable discrimination. Additionally, schools should seek to think proactively in

creating policies to prevent challenging behaviors. Fenning and Rose (2007) suggest creating

significant revisions to discipline policies and making them more consistent with approaches that

reflect positive behaviors of support.

## Conclusion

For decades the research has shown racial disproportionality exists between Black and

White students in terms of achievement and discipline. Researchers and educational leaders have

shared and discussed countless strategies to close the achievement gap as well as the discipline

gap. Nonetheless, across the nation racial disparities in school discipline continue to exist. A

different perspective is needed in order to examine how schools execute school discipline. This

perspective is the student experience. Drawing on student voices can be a powerful way to

understand how policies and practices are experienced at the student level, especially so that they

can be reformed in more equitable ways. Although I have presented various research that has

studied student perception, research gathering and comparing the experiences of middle school

Black students are lacking. There are numerous studies understanding students' perceptions by

collecting and merging the data, analyzing them as a whole entity. However, more research

should collect and compare students' perception data between certain schools that are

demographically and culturally different. Student perception data found in my future dissertation

could assist in forwarding the work of individual schools and central offices toward equitable

support and treatment with school discipline. The data could also provide a lens from the

stakeholders who receive school discipline. Student perception data results could also challenge

and encourage to improve strategies students observe are ineffective.

# CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to share the methods I used to conduct this study. I begin with a reiteration of the study's purposes followed by important background information that undergirds this work. First, I describe my positionality and role as the researcher before sharing the findings from a pilot study I conducted during my doctoral coursework. The rest of the chapter gives greater details about my adjusted plan and design, including theoretical approach and data collection tools. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of my study along with how I worked to ensure trustworthiness in my research.

## Purpose and Contributions of This Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand how African American secondary students perceive their experiences with school discipline. I also aimed to understand how students' experiences and perceptions might vary across cases. An important commitment in this study was to illuminate the voices of marginalized students to help define problems and solutions. In addition, my position as both investigator and practicing administrator in bringing the study's findings to bear on practice were essential considerations.

## Researcher Positionality/Role

As stated, prior, my research interests emerged from my personal experiences serving as a school administrator in a mostly White suburban school in a large school district. As I received and managed office referrals, I noticed most of the referrals represented Black students, and many of them were referred more frequently than White students. While talking to students about the causes of their referral, some students would convey how unfair or unreasonable their teachers were with consequences. More specifically, students described how teachers would not provide consequences fairly to students who misbehaved similarly. Other times, students

informally would share certain teachers were unfair in how they treated students overall. This propelled my desire to study students' thoughts and beliefs on equity issues related to handling school discipline. More specifically, how do students perceive teachers, staff members, and administrators conduct school discipline? Thus, my personal journey sparked interest in my research. Moreover, my positionality mattered during my conversations with students in this study. For example, as I shared my experiences as a Black administrator with participants, I feel I created an open, safe, and honest setting that encouraged and empowered students to openly share.

## Previous Pilot Research

The data collection originally began while I was an Ed.S. student and working at the school where I am currently employed. After listening to Black students and their experiences, I wanted to continue researching this topic to see if more Black students felt this way at schools similar to our school's makeup. The first time that I collected data, I interviewed a group of 7th and 8th grade Black and Hispanic students. I asked questions; however, the questions were very structured and generalized and did not produce a rich discussion amongst the participants. The next group that I interviewed were four African American eighth-grade students in a focus group which consisted of two males and two females. All four students had been referred to an administrator's office at least once in their three years at the school. The questions that were asked included the students' definition of the word "fair" and what were their overall thoughts on how fair their school was with managing school discipline. Students immediately began talking about a teacher who unfairly gave consequences to minority students instead of White students for the same misbehaviors. I then asked them about inequities with discipline in the classroom in regard to their race and the students responded by giving me their own experiences. My results

indicated when asked about inequities in the classroom, students primarily brought up two teachers, one of which three of them shared. Both teachers were White males: one new to the school and one who has taught for over 20 years, half of that time at the current school. When asked about inequities conducted by their school administrators, one student gave an example of an administrator not conducting an equitable discipline outcome between him and a White female student. Also, when asked about suggestions to improve school discipline practices, students' suggestions included "hearing both sides," "looking for the truth" and "going to everybody" involved in the incident. Students were also asked to provide names of teachers that they felt were equitable with their discipline practices and the students named two teachers who both happened to be Black females. Overall, the interview produced responses from students who shared similar experiences and felt teachers and administrators were not racially equitable with school discipline. The interview, however, lasted roughly 28 minutes. As I reflected on the interview and how to refine my methodology, I concluded I wanted to increase the number of participants in an effort to increase the data for my study. Upon reflection I also realized that I became a little more comfortable with asking questions which provoked more in-depth student responses. Then I also decided to add more questions at the beginning of the interview to get a better idea of their overall middle school experience.

Finally, throughout this particular time, I collected as much data as possible in order to get more comfortable with interviewing, asking more thought-provoking questions, and having the opportunity to interview at other middle and high schools which would align with my study's objective. Using these objectives, I was able to collect data at three very distinct schools in terms of population, location, and participants. I also continued to use my school as a site to collect data. Unlike the previous semester, I increased the number of participants to seven compared to

four and included seventh-grade students. The second site I used was an urban magnet middle

school where Black students represented the majority population and had a much more diverse

staff in which the number of White and Black teachers are close in number. The participants

were seven eighth-grade Black students; four girls and three boys. The third site was a middle

school in a district directly south of the school district where the first two schools were located.

The third school serves a majority of Hispanic students and Black students are the second highest

population. Participants at this school were seven sixth-grade students: two Hispanic students

and four Black students. I learned from students that the majority of the school staff is White

with a small group of Black and Hispanic staff members. I began each interview by asking about

students' overall experiences in middle school, including what they liked and didn't like. Next, I

asked about their thoughts on words such as "fair," "school discipline," and "fair school

discipline." Then I asked about their overall experiences with school discipline and

consequences. This was followed by asking about their experiences with receiving or observing

unfair school discipline practices. I was fortunate enough to collect data at two of my classmates'

schools and both assisted in identifying students who could participate in the interview.

However, as I collect data for my current research, I may have the opportunity to work with staff

members to organize a group that would have great synergy, add to the discussion, and work

with me to ensure logistics were managed. I realized I have to be specific but flexible regarding

the participant criteria in the event that I am unable to due to things like parental consent or the

ability to find willing participants.

I also realized I wanted to interview eighth-grade students because they are more likely to

have many more experiences since they have attended their school longer. When I interviewed

the sixth-grade students at the third school, students would continuously veer off from the

questions that were asked. I assumed students were very excited at one point they were trying to outtalk each other. The sixth-grade students also had more side conversations than the older students even though I instructed them not to do so at the beginning of the interview. This may have been due to the excitement and enthusiasm for being a part of the group. However, this was not the case in the first two schools where participants were 7th and 8th graders. Also, I noticed older students were increasingly mature and tended to have better communication skills such as pausing, listening, and answering the questions asked. What was also more salient was the patience 8th graders encompassed and utilized; this was shown through waiting until the other person was speaking finished their thought, answering the questions that were explicitly asked, and elaborating on their truths rather than solely agreeing with their peers.

The previous pilot studies allowed me to narrow my scope of what I wanted to research and clarified the pieces of my methodology, including the participants, location, and questions asked. My previous research has also allowed me to develop and refine my research questions based on my findings and areas of opportunity lacking from existing research.

## Methodology

As noted in Chapter I, I conducted this study using a basic qualitative study methodology (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016) using counter-storytelling, an essential feature of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011). Two research questions drive this study:

1. What are Black secondary students' perceptions and experiences with school discipline?

2. Are there differences in perceptions or experiences across gender or age?

Since interpreting students' perceptions and experiences was an essential component to this study, qualitative collection tools were appropriate. According to Merriam and Tisdale

(2016), the purpose of qualitative research is to examine "how people interpret their experiences

… how they build their worlds … what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24). In a

qualitative study, the researcher drives the study with general questions and collects detailed

information that answers those questions. The answers are reflected through words and images.

The researcher then takes those words and images and identifies patterns and themes. The

researcher uses findings to reflect on their own positionality, extend findings from previous

research, and draw implications for further research.

In this study, I collected the varied experiences of Black secondary students who shared

their stories of relationships with teachers, admin, and other school staff. Aligned with the focus

of my research, students also shared their experiences or observations of inequities with school

discipline. I provided students with the opportunity to share and interpret their experiences

through guiding questions I asked; ultimately helping them to share their world with others.

Teachers and school leaders make decisions in which they assume or believe are in the best

interest of students, often without considering students' thoughts and experiences. I also

highlighted some common beliefs and actions from students' responses, which I will go into

further analysis in the next chapter.

My original plan was to conduct a case study analysis of a charter school in the

southeastern part of the country, interviewing several eighth-grade student focus groups from the

school. I wanted to not only interview the students, but also the sole administrator and several

teachers at the school in order to paint a full picture of the school's discipline process.

Additionally, I planned to create a portrait of the school's histories, traditions, and community

context in order to elaborate as to how all these elements contributed to the core beliefs and

values of the school. My original plan also included interviewing students face-to-face during a

time after school to avoid interrupting their instructional day as much as possible. In order to make this study more realistic, I attempted to select a representative population using specific sampling criteria. I planned to include students who had received at least one discipline referral and who had been at the site all three years. The reasoning for these decisions were centered around finding students who have not only experienced discipline procedures first-hand but had the necessary institutional memory who attended their school across the middle school grades. Only those students returning their signed parent/guardian permission forms would participate. Unfortunately, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenge to find students to participate through virtual means, I was not able to carry out my initial arrangement. At the start of the pandemic, when schools transitioned into becoming virtual, the charter school had a difficult time holding students accountable to attend their classes. As a result, the only option was to use convenience sampling. With the administrator's assistance, I was able to encourage and find students that were available and committed to serving as a participant in the study.

## Site Selection

Initially, I planned to focus on one charter school and center the voices of current middle school students and share their perspectives on their schools' disciplinary practices. However, as a result of the pandemic, I was forced to modify my plans and extend my invitation to other students who currently attended traditional high schools. All schools, including the charter school, are in close proximity to each other in the same locality which are situated in the southeastern region of the country. The traditional public schools are a part of the third largest school district in the state that serves around 74,000 students. One significant benefit to serving in this particular district where the schools are located, was the strength in access to obtain students for my research.

**Population and Sample**

The population included students from middle and high school. The first two focus groups conducted were with eighth-grade students that attended the charter school. The first focus group was with students who were near the end of their eighth-grade year. The second group was composed of students who were in the middle of their eighth-grade year. The last focus group reflected a group of traditional high school students who attended two different middle schools in the district where I currently serve. Using convenience sampling, I worked with the charter school administrator to identify students who would participate in the focus group. Due to the study involving minors, parental consent was needed. Parents of those students were informed of the purpose of the study and provided a parental permission form. Once those forms were collected, students were informed of the study and if they agreed, were asked to complete an assent form stating they would agree to participate. Students that were chosen for the study were asked to identify pseudonyms to keep their private information secure and protect their privacy. Students were also asked to come up with pseudonyms for their schools.

**Data Collection Methods**

I conducted semi-structured focus groups with students via Zoom. I initially selected focus groups in order to facilitate a discussion between students on their experiences with inequitable and equitable school discipline practices rather than collecting answers from every student in the group as an investigator (Smithson, 2006). Focus groups were utilized because they have the potential to produce a great amount of data because of the face-to-face contact between participants and the interviewer (Parker & Tritter, 2006). A great deal of data can also be produced from virtual focus groups. For instance, middle schoolers from the charter school shared common experiences because they attended the same school, although their experiences

differed because of context; for example, they came from different backgrounds and had different interactions with teachers and other staff members.

I asked all of the focus groups a set of questions that guided the discussion among the participants. Questions were strategically pre-selected to facilitate an ongoing dialogue between the participants. I also asked follow-up questions based on students' responses to the pre-selected questions. This was to elaborate and extend on their experiences and to draw out richer discussion and more in-depth data. As mentioned previously, in my previous attempts of collecting data for my research, I conducted one-on-one interviews and group interviews; due to the small amount of data that was produced, and the lack of synergy created I concluded a focus group would be the best structure to utilize.

At the beginning of every focus group, I introduced myself and shared my overall purpose for the focus group. I asked their names and other questions to get familiar with them. This contributed to the increase in comfort level, safety, and synergy in the virtual setting. I also shared the purpose for the focus group and let them know confidentiality would be utilized. I emphasized that their responses would not be shared with their teachers, administrators, or anyone at their school. I elaborated on the structure of the interview including the estimated time length and how focus groups were orchestrated. I wanted students to understand that the structure would not reflect a question/answer but a facilitation type environment, where I would ask a question and students would share their experiences informally. Once I began to record every focus group, I communicated several expectations which included group norms (letting others finish before you share your experience, answering the question asked, etc.). I also asserted that all students keep other's experiences confidential; in the lens of confidentiality, I

asked students to think of and decide on a pseudonym to replace their real name for the focus group.

I asked all three focus groups 10-12 questions that inquired about students' thoughts on their school's discipline practices. I began the conversation by asking about their overall experiences at their schools and their teachers, including sharing some good and bad memories of the middle schools they attended. Next, I asked about their thoughts on how their school manages school discipline including their teachers, school staff, and administrators. During the discussion, I prompted students to provide examples to elaborate on their experiences and observations of other students' experiences. I sometimes had to probe for more responses through pausing and asking, "what else?" Lastly, I inquired about their suggestions for improving school discipline practices at the middle school they attended and in general. Each focus group lasted around 50-60 minutes. I initially planned to interview the administrator from the charter school who was in charge of handling school discipline. And interview a teacher who was known for referring students for misbehavior. The interviews would have provided some additional insight and another perspective on the school's discipline practices. However, due to the barriers in staying in consistent communication with the administrator from the school and the challenges with COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to conduct other interviews with other stakeholders.

All interviews were recorded using the recording feature via the Zoom format. Field notes were taken to highlight key concepts or themes that aided in the data analysis process. After interviews were conducted and recorded, I transcribed interviews and coded based on commonalities I identified from the data.

Students became comfortable over time as a result of the transparency and authenticity of the conversation. Conducting the focus group virtually allowed me to record the session, so that I could replay, review, and potentially observe changes in body language based on questions asked. This is a benefit versus conducting the focus group face-to-face. Students were also in their own homes, which provided an added level of comfortability for them; they were in a location that was familiar.

## Data Analysis Strategies

After focus group discussions were transcribed, I read the transcriptions and disaggregated the data into topics or categories discussed. Based on those categories I have identified, I assigned codes in each category and broke down the nature of the student responses. Next, I grouped those codes into emerging categories by identifying themes or patterns that I noticed. After I identified those emerging themes through student responses, I reflected on how the themes within each category related to each other.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) counter storytelling was used as a lens to analyze responses from students that dispute the narrative on the causes for Black students overrepresented in school discipline and common practices that schools currently use in schools. Through the CRT lens, some of students' responses opposed commonly used educators and school responses to student behavior. This leads to a greater discussion on the effectiveness of chosen methods to manage school discipline and challenges school staff to reflect on their classroom practices and think deeply on whether these practices are equitable for all students.

## Strengths of the Study

Through the data collection process, I noticed that there were various strengths and limitations to conducting focus groups. As previously noted, one of the benefits of conducting

focus groups allows the researcher to gain a large amount of data in a short amount of time, especially if students are familiar with each other. Parker and Tritter (2006) convey how the method is "cost effective" in comparison to other methods and has "emerged as a 'vogue' practice" (p. 25). Another advantage of using the focus group method is the potential to create a "synergy" (p. 26) with the participants as they discuss, respond, and interact with each other around the topic. The virtual aspect of the focus group provided an additional challenge to developing a comfortable atmosphere, but students became more comfortable as we delved more in the discussion.

## Limitations to the Study

The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic increased the limitations to my research due to the changes to my original plan. The site selection, participants, and chosen methodology were adjusted due to the transition of public schools from face-to-face to remote instruction. As stated in the previous paragraphs, selecting participants became an obstacle; I had to choose convenience sampling and find participants who were willing and able to participate. This affected my original plan to choose students who had a history of being referred to the office. Another major limitation was the risk of confidentiality since students were interviewed from their own homes. There was a risk of family members hearing and sharing what was heard from our conversations. To prevent this from happening, I encouraged all participants to find a quiet empty room to work in to avoid other members in the household to hear any stories being told. Another limitation was a potential risk of dominance by one or several participants in the group. I attempted to prevent this by setting the expectation before we began the discussion; I emphasized how everyone's views were encouraged and valued and that students should be mindful to allow their peers to share their perspectives. Another potential limitation included the

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risk of low synergy. Therefore, it was important to choose participants who were confident and vocal enough to share their stories and experiences without feeling they need to "shy away" because of their unfamiliarity with the facilitator or the other students. Also, I planned to meet with students more than once for this "group cohesiveness" to develop so students become comfortable with participating in the group. Although I was only able to meet with the third group twice, fortunately all groups' synergy was strong at the beginning of the focus group conversation. Another limitation to the study included the inability to interview other stakeholders that could provide an additional lens to the study; this included administrators and teachers from the participants' school.

<p align="center">**Trustworthiness**</p>

Several strategies were used to ensure trustworthiness in this study. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of my research I elaborate on my own biases, experiences, and views surrounding the topic of inequities in education and explain how this impacts my research. Creswell (2016) shares that by "sharing these biases/beliefs, the accounts become more accurate" (p. 192). My experiences include my current role as a teacher and an administrator, how I have personally managed discipline with students, and my own efforts to ensure that those experiences were equitable for children. I also elaborate on my experiences as a staff member who is a part of the minority group at my school and how this impacts my working relationship with other staff members, parents, and students. Not only am I constructing the meaning of students and their experiences, but I am also deciphering how this connects to my own beliefs and experiences.

I also conducted member checking with the participants. The purpose of member checking is to ensure that you present participants' reflections and responses as accurately and precisely as possible (Efron & Ravid, 2013). After initial interviews were conducted with

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students, I met with them an additional time to elaborate on their initial thoughts and to share the transcriptions, codes and themes that I concluded based on their responses. This process allows students to verify or clarify their stories and to confirm the meaning behind their stories.

**Conclusion**

In the current chapter I shared the chosen methodology and methods for this current study. I took my experiences from my previous pilot studies to enrich and strengthen my methodology for this current study. Although my methods, participants, and site selection were adjusted due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to adjust and sustain the focus, which was to collect secondary students' experiences around school discipline. The process allowed me to gain insight from participants' experiences on their experiences around school discipline. The focus groups also allowed me to hear how students constructed meaning around their experiences. Participant stories were transcribed in order to analyze the thought patterns and behaviors of the students' that were interviewed. Data analysis from these interviews will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore Black secondary students' experiences and perceptions with school discipline in middle school. I also wanted to gage whether their experiences varied across age and gender. The goal was to hear their thoughts and stories around whether their experiences and observations were equitable. As I interviewed with them and shared their experiences, I aimed to highlight students' voices, which often goes unnoticed and unappreciated since students are not usually recognized as school leaders who make the day-to-day decisions. There is countless and continuing evidence that shows that African American students are overrepresented in school discipline referrals and consequences. Using CRT storytelling as a lens, my goal was to counter the data of this exhausted and worn-out narrative that is told time and time again.

The goal of the chapter is to share my findings of my data collection but first, I share some important information about the students who comprised each focus group and additional details that may influence the reading of these findings.

The composition of each group was varied but also had some similarities. All three groups were individuals who dominated the conversation more than the other group members. There were times in the group that they would agree on each other's responses. Several of them were familiar with each other because they went to the same school, shared the same classes, or experienced the same teachers. All three focus groups were conducted online which brought common challenges such as the usual technical difficulties (audio issues, ensuring that they were in a quiet setting, Wi-fi clarity, etc.). Sometimes students' wireless connection would break up or other noises in participants' houses would drown out their own responses. The first two groups were students at Evangel Prep Charter school and the last group were composed of students that

attended two different middle schools the previous school year. Technically the first group and the third group were the same age. The last group, which was composed of ninth-grade students in high school, were much more thorough and detailed with their responses compared to the other two groups of eighth-grade students. They were much more willing and bolder to call actions what they were in society (i.e., racism) and used stronger language than the other two groups. Students were not asked to give information about their family's socioeconomic status or background. Table 1 gives more detailed information describing the various compositions of each focus group.

**Table 1. Focus Group Composition**

| |
| --- |
| Focus Group 1-Evangel Prep 8th Students (19-20 school year) |
| <ul><li>Four students in the focus group; three male and one female</li><li>Names-Joshua, John, Torrain, & Sarah</li><li>Three students have been enrolled all three years; one of the male students came at the beginning of 8th grade</li><li>All four students knew of each other and shared classes together</li><li>Three out of the four spoke mainly contributed to the conversation</li><li>All four students' similar stories about certain teachers that they shared</li><li>Three of the four students who carried the conversation agreed when discussing certain teachers</li><li>Synergy was high from the beginning of the conversation</li><li>Met with the group once</li></ul> |
| Focus Group 2-Evangel Prep 8th Students (20-21 school year) |
| <ul><li>Three students in the focus group; all females</li><li>Ren, Alex, and Jasmine</li><li>One student had been there for 9 years; second individual, 4 years; the third individual, was her 1st year</li><li>The students knew of each other but were not friends.</li><li>Two of the three females (who were at the school longer) contributed more to the conversation</li><li>Two of the three students' similar stories about certain teachers that they shared</li><li>Synergy level was relatively high</li><li>Met with the group once</li></ul> |

Focus Group 3-Ninth Grade students (20-21 school year)
- Three students in focus group; two females and one male
- Kim, Lola, and Michael
- Male and one of the females attended same middle school; all three attended different high schools
- Students grew up together in the same neighborhood; parents are friends
- Females contributed more to the conversation then the male
- Synergy level was high
- Met with the group two times

As indicated in Table 1, all three groups were very unique in composition and background. However, they all shared their experiences and observations around school discipline. Nonetheless, all of the focus groups were completed, and students' responses were collected, transcribed and coded. In the following paragraphs I outline and discuss the data collected using several themes.

## Theme 1: The Importance of Staff and Student Relationships

Throughout my time with all the students it was evident that relationships were a significant indicator of students' experience with school discipline at the middle school level. When I began the conversation with every focus group and asked them about their overall experiences at the school, every group had at least one individual who elaborated on a relationship they had with either a teacher or an administrator. In the following paragraphs I discuss how these particular relationships with school staff impacted and affected their perceptions and experiences with school discipline.

**Student and Admin Relationships**

Participants in each of the focus groups spoke on their various relationships with their administrators. School administrators are the individuals who are not only receiving the referrals from teachers but also assigning consequences to students. Students also spoke of individuals

who are also serving as an additional level of support and sometimes have administrator-type authority and responsibilities. The eighth graders in the first and second focus group spoke of Mr. Best, the sole administrator and principal at Evangel Prep Charter school. One of the participants, Sarah an eighth grader in the first focus group, shared her current close relationship with Mr. Best:

> So, Mr. Best, we have a really big relationship. Because one, he calls me his second daughter, and I know his, like his real daughter, Jamari. Um, so we like, like me and him, like, as soon as I come in in the morning, I do announcements almost every day, me and my friend, Zach. So, we go and do announcements and then we go by his office, you know, we chill, we talk about anything … [h]e has this little jar of candy and most of the time, I just go in there for the candy. I get a piece of candy and get out. But I mean, me and him have a like a really good relationship. Joshua, another participant in the same focus group agreed with Sarah and stated that he also has a good relationship with Mr. Best sharing that he "give[s] him a fist bump" every time he sees him.

Both Joshua and John, who were other eighth-grade students a part of the first focus group shared that Mr. Best knew both of their families outside of school but that was the extent of their relationship. Joshua shared "[H]e knows my brother. He knows him from track." John agreed with Joshua and described his relationship with Mr. Best:

> Well, I mean, Mr. Best knows my family because he used to teach my sister when she was in high school. So I kind of already knew Mr. Best before he came to the school. But me I never had like a real like, like me and him never talked talked like that before outside of track.

John later on in the interview shared that he enrolled at Evangel Prep "because of Mr. Best." Ren, a participant of the second focus group shared that she ran track for Mr. Best outside of school.

Sarah from the first group, also indicated that she also had a close relationship with the former principal of the charter school, Dr. Boone, and how her relationships with both administrators were close-unlike her experiences at her other traditional middle school: "[E]ven before Mr. Best, Dr. Boone was our principal. So I mean we was close, but we wasn't as close as Mr. Best, like I know, like I used to go to her office, chill with her, talk about like, you know, different stuff. She had me doing stuff with her."

High school individuals from the last focus group did not exhibit the same close relationships with their middle school administrators compared to the students in the first two focus groups, but they did share stories of administrators that they liked. Lola from the third focus group shared an administrator she admired during her sixth-grade year:

Well, at Mercy, we had, we had a principal that was, that left in sixth grade, my sixth-grade year, well, late sixth-grade year, and we got a new principal, but the one before that, he was really nice. He was a funny guy. A lot of people liked him. No one really had problems with him because he was—he would crack jokes. He was like a really chill, laid out principal, and when the other one came, it was a lot more rules.

Likewise, eighth-grade students from the charter school, expressed their close relationship to another individual who served in many cases similar to that of an administrator: the behavior support teacher. Used interchangeably with other roles such as behavior interventionist or dean of students, a behavior support teacher serves as an additional layer of support to prevent students from ending up referred to the office for a misbehavior. Sarah, one of

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the participants in the first focus group elaborated on her close relationship with the behavior support teacher, Mr. Earnhardt at Evangel Prep:

> I'm close with Mr. Earnhardt. He was the behavior support teacher for this year, but last year he was the art teacher. Me and him just been really close because he's like, he's just the type you know, to like to save you, like everything you do he saves you. Not like a lot of stuff, but like, you know, some stuff, he'll just not just like saying, okay, you don't have to do this, he'll sit down and make you talk to him like what's going on? Is there anything you would like to change, like what would you like to do? Do you need me to help you with anything, stuff like that, like he'll make you feel better, he won't just let you like if you get in trouble, okay, you don't have to get the consequence. You don't have to get the consequence, but I'm talking to you to where like I'm gonna help you like, you know, reduce the amount of consequences that you get for the same thing.

John also spoke on his close relationship with the dean of students at his previous school, which was a traditional public school:

> Like at GMSA, our dean, his name was Dr. Smith, me and him was really close, like he was close to all the students there. Like at first, me and him, we was kind of had like a rough, like we didn't like each other a lot because I didn't get, I wasn't in trouble, but I was always in the class that was in trouble, so he kind of looked as the class as a whole as uh, y'all just bad, y'all just talk, and I was like no, that's not me. And so we would argue about that a lot, but then after we got over it and he actually got to see like who I am and then we got to talk, then me and became cool. And then he would get me out of trouble or like if I had an issue with a teacher, he would just pull me out and I could sit with him in his office and he would buy me food and all of that.

Ren, an eighth-grade participant from the second focus group, shared her experience and dislike

for her administrators at the traditional middle school she previously attended:

I didn't really like the administration at Sacklern. They, they were like all over the place,

they didn't really—I feel like they didn't really care for the students. They were just there

to be there. They didn't really, you know, involve theirself, they were just like, is

basically like they were just at work just to be there. They didn't really care.

Similarly, Lola, a high schooler in the third focus group shared that she didn't have a close

relationship with her administrators during middle school; much less interacted with them:

I never really interacted with administration, administrators. I mean, I never really had

any problems out of 'em. I was, I wasn't like, the only time I think you would actually

interact with them as if you got into trouble. Or you got kicked out of class or something.

But I've never, so I don't really know about administrators, really.

Michael, a high schooler who was a part of the same group, agreed with Lola. Thinking back on

his time as an eighth grader, Michael reasoned that he did not misbehave which is why he never

went to the administrator's office.

Yeah, I never, I never got in trouble. Or like, needed to go to like to see one. So I never

had a problem with any of my administrators, so it was just like, I was cool with them. I

didn't have a problem with them at all.

From what Lola and Michael shared and experienced, they believed that the main reason

students went to an administrator's office in middle school was due to misbehavior or being

referred. However, students who attended the charter school experienced visiting the principals'

office for reasons outside of misbehavior and more related to the relationship they encountered

with the administrator.

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Nonetheless, the eighth-grade participants who attended the charter school expressed more positive experiences of relationships with the administrator at the charter school. Participants who spoke of the lack of relationships with admin at other traditional middle schools suggested their primary concern, which was school discipline and order. Ren shared that these same administrators in the traditional middle school setting, because their perceived lack of concern for the students, also held a sense of apathy toward the students and did not handle misbehavior equitably:

> We did have a lot of fights at that school and they will break them up, but they would take the wrong people, like the people that started it, both of them, I mean, like both of the people got in a fight but the people that started it, they would not get in trouble and the people that didn't just trying to defend theirself, they would get in more trouble than the other person. They would suspend people for no reason. It was a lot of chaos at that school.

Overall, each focus group had at least one participant who articulated a close relationship they encountered with a current or former administrator in middle school. The eighth graders in both focus groups from Evangel Prep had more experiences of a close relationship with their administrator compared to the students who attended traditional public middle schools. Students in the second and third focus group also shared their beliefs of administrators who, in their eyes, didn't truly care for the students and thus at times would affect their decisions in creating a safe, fair, and equitable environment for students. Much of what students articulated on their viewpoint of relationships or lack thereof was due to the actions from the admin team; their actions demonstrated whether the administrators had a level of care for students regardless of if they were in trouble or not. These experiences helped to shape students' perceptions of school

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administrators, either as sole authority figures who have a position of power or individuals in an authority position who led with care and influence.

**Teacher and Student Relationships**

Many of the students spoke about their positive and negative experiences with administrators, but all participants in each focus group had stories to share about their relationships with their middle school teachers. When asked to communicate their good and bad experiences in middle school, most of the stories were connected to a classroom teacher. These stories included words to describe teachers, actions of teachers, and teachers' responses to managing school discipline in their classrooms. Several participants brought up particular teachers who not only cared about the content their students learned but also cared about their development holistically. Torrain, an eighth grader from the first focus group, spoke of Coach Sockwell:

> [B]ut Coach Sockwell, he will really tell you, like tell you a story, um, what's like, like a good example for his story and what's asking us questions for ourselves to see how our grades are doing. How are you doing personally, um, straight up, talk like just trying to see um, like, have you been having a great day or something like that, like something have not set you like in a bad way. But Coach Sockwell has really helped as a coach because he would like, he would always coach you do everything, especially in sports, so.

Sarah, who was also a part of the focus group agreed with Torrain, elaborating on the conversation that would go on between the students and Coach Sockwell.

> [S]o I go hey, Coach Sockwell, how are you? He's like, good, how are you? He's like how are you doing in class? How are your grades looking? Like, are you staying like on track? Like I don't need you in trouble. He was like you get—you have good grades and

stuff, he's like I don't need you getting in trouble. Like, so he was a real help, like he was

a really big help.

From what Sarah shared, Sockwell cared not only about the academic portion of students' lives,

but also about the personal aspect of their lives as well. Sarah referred to him as a "coach to life."

Sarah also shared a similar experience with a teacher who she felt was dependable and an

advocate for her "Like um, you know how it's like, this one teacher that it's like she'll basically

do anything for you or like, you know, like, I don't know, she always got your back. I like those

type of teachers."

Kim, a high schooler who was a part of the third focus group reflected on her middle

school experience and shared her accounts of the perfect teacher:

I had the perfect teacher. She was the teacher who cared about mental health and about

school at the same time. So she would constantly take breaks and give us a time to relax

and regroup, and she would ask if we were okay. It could be eight o'clock at night, nine

o'clock at night, and we would be doing homework, and you could text her. And she's still

up giving, trying to give instruction and trying to explain on how to do things. So, and she

was very patient …

Lola and Michael, other high schoolers, who were also a part of the focus group, agreed with

Kim's response when sharing their idea on the type of teacher that they needed.

Throughout the conversation with the third focus group, students conveyed teachers in

school who took on the parental role. When asked to describe a favorite teacher they had in

middle school and why, Kim compared one of her teachers to a mother figure:

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She was really heavy. Like, it was like a mom type. And it gave you like a homey feeling

to it like, hey, if you don't do this, I'm gonna, I'm cracking down on you. I'm not even

gonna go to your mom. Like it was those type of teachers who I, who I needed.

As students voiced their perceptions and experiences of a good teacher, the concept of

respect emerged. Students began to share their viewpoint on the importance of respect and

understanding as part of the relationship between students and teachers. In the second focus

group, Jasmine, an eighth grader who attended Evangel Prep, communicated her thoughts on this

philosophy:

Like a good teacher knows how, like to understand the child and don't fit in just because

your child, you can still feel like you're being disrespected. Because like I don't really like

people who think that they just deserve respect, and that they can treat you any way and

you just have to treat them better just because they're an adult. I think that sense of

superiority will make a child not really want to interact with you.

Ren agreed with Jasmine and further elaborated on what she believed:

I think it's like the connection, like if a teacher is like, words, like, you know, making a

connection with the students in the class, then they'll have like, you know, the kids will

listen to him more, the kids will respect him more. And like, you know, I feel like the

same way like Jasmine said, like, just because you're an adult doesn't mean we have to

give you respect if you're not going to treat us the same way.

Lola, from focus group three also stated a similar response when describing what makes an

individual a good teacher.

Some of the individuals also revealed teachers who weren't willing to take the necessary

steps to develop a relationship with their students. Teachers did not explicitly state that they

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didn't want a relationship or disliked their students, but students interpreted this through their actions. Alex, a current eighth-grade participant from the second focus group, described a teacher that she felt didn't like her outside of her being in her class:

> And Miss Shaw, I'm just kind of getting to know her because before I was in her class, it seemed like she didn't like me. It seemed like, I don't know, she always had an attitude towards me until I was officially in her class.

Furthermore, Alex felt as though the teacher didn't take steps to develop a relationship with her until she was officially assigned to her class. Sarah from the first focus group shared her experiences with a teacher who she felt didn't like her because she didn't encompass the same personality traits as her brother.

> In sixth grade when I first came, my brother used to go there and so I was a very outgoing person. And like, I'm very interactive with my teachers and my peers and stuff. But my brother is a very quiet person, and he doesn't like, like he doesn't interact as well. He's just like, John, like, he says, no, but it's like he's very quiet. But, so I used to always get like, you know, I used to talk in the classroom and stuff like that. But I used to always be the one like, they used to be like, you're not like your brother and stuff like that. So there was this one teacher that's like, she compares me and my brother, so she wasn't the type—she was the type to, like, you know, like more of my brother, because she's a quiet, you know, she always used to compare us. And that teacher always, like, she still— in fifth grade, she just didn't like me. Like, she used to like my brother and she just complains to my mom. She will call her like every day, and be like, *[Sarah]* talks a lot, she's not like her brother and stuff like that. So in seventh grade, I thought, you know, let me build a relationship with her, you know, and try to fix everything. And it's also the

same thing. My brother was in eighth grade, he was graduating. I was like, okay, she still

doesn't want to build a relationship, but I mean, I still respect her and stuff, but I mean,

she's still like, you know, she's just like a teacher to me. She's not like, my other

teachers. Like, I have relationships with my other teachers. I get to my eighth-grade year

now that my brother is gone. I also try to build a relationship, I mean, it's getting better,

but it's not like, you know, my other teachers, like they still like—basically just, you

know, a teacher. And I still like, you know, I'm fine with that. I mean, I still try to build

like a relationship, a relationship with her.

Sarah shared that this particular teacher initially did not develop a relationship with her because

her personality was unlike her brother, as a result the teacher compared her to her brother when

speaking with Sarah's parents. Sarah also took the initiative to develop a relationship with this

teacher, but it took her brother not being at the school and her being in her class for the teacher to

finally come around to begin building the relationship. The teacher could not distinguish, accept,

and appreciate the differences between Sarah and her brother. Fortunately, the teachers' behavior

did not impact Sarah's achievement and performance:

Like I said, she's always compared me and my brother to each other, even though she

like, she knows, like I'm, like I'm a straight A student and she knows, she's like, like, at

the end of the year for like the last couple of weeks, she only made a relationship with me

because she used to always be with my ELA teacher, she was my math teacher. So they

used to always be together talking about our, you know, test scores and stuff. And I used

to come in there and chill with my reading teacher, my ELA teacher. And she used to

always like, you know, she got—she tried to talk to me, you know, so she won't show

like, you know, that emotion. But I mean, I did everything I could, and I got transferred

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to Math 1 after that, so I didn't really have her for the remainder, the remainder of the year. But I mean, I still try. At the end of the year, she was a little better, but she's, she wasn't like, yeah, like all that great teacher.

From Sarah's viewpoint, the primary reason why her math teacher began to develop a relationship with her was because of the teacher's relationship with her English Language Arts teacher, who had a relationship with Sarah. But the relationship did not develop fully into a meaningful long lasting one, due to her being transferred to a higher math class, thus not impacting her achievement.

Furthermore, students in the third group were asked to provide a list of words that describe teachers they developed and sustain relationships with and shared these responses:

Lola:      Energetic.

Kim:       Kind-hearted.

Lola:      Compassionate.

Michael:  Energetic.

When asked to provided words to describe teachers they disliked and did not develop relationships with, the students identified the following characteristics:

Lola:      Short-tempered.

Kim:       Easily frustrated. Impatient.

Michael:  Mean.

Overall, students believed that if teachers were more intentional about developing relationships with their students, they were more likely to provide students with what they needed individually, thus increasing the number of equitable measures and impacting their level of success in the classroom. Students never shared that their teachers explicitly stated whether

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they liked them or not, but through their actions, deciphered whether their teachers cared to develop relationships with them. There was also a greater level of respect between teachers and students when teachers were more willing to develop relationships with their students. Additionally, findings from student responses demonstrated that teachers that demonstrated patience, care, extra effort, and a passion for their job were favored by students and much more likely to have less discipline issues.

From what students voiced, it is clear that relationships with administrators and teachers play a significant role in students' feelings of acceptance, respect, and level of comfortability in the school environment. Students consistently communicated the importance of relationships with students and how this potentially impacts the level of achievement that a student attains in the classroom. It is not what the adult explicitly says, but what the individual does that determines if students feel liked and appreciated, and if the staff member is going out of their way to provide each student with what they need.

**Theme 2: Engaging and Caring Teachers Less Likely to Manage Misbehavior Punitively**

Based on student responses in the above section, it was clear that the relationships students had with school staff were important through their middle school educational experience. The teachers that students described indirectly showed them that they were willing to establish relationships with their students because it was important enough to them to do it. Nonetheless, based on students' notions, it was just important that teachers desired to develop and sustain a relationship with students. It was also important that staff members took the additional effort to model care and concern for their students. The focus group participants verbalized the ways in which teachers and staff were caring and engaging enough which ultimately led to engaged students who cared about their academic success. This section shares

students' encounters with teachers who went above and beyond to show that they cared about their students and ensured that their class was more engaging.

**Care and Concern Actively Demonstrated**

There were accounts in every focus group that communicated their experiences with staff who authentically demonstrated how they cared for their students. In talking about her current middle school experiences during the pandemic, Alex from focus group two shared these experiences:

Yeah, it's good experiences here. I like how a lot of times, you may feel like you're at home at the school, because even though you're being yelled at, sometimes, it's like, they yelling at you for good intentions a lot of times. Or if you really, actually need help with something, there's always somebody there to help you. Whether it has to do with school or at home.

Later on, throughout the interview, Alex talked about her music teacher, Ms. Stewart: "Anytime you can always talk to her and you could always like play with her or anything. And she was like, really good to talk to, I guess because she knew a lot, I guess." John from the first focus group described his science teacher who exhibited her care by inspiring and encouraging him specifically:

I never really had the kind of relationship that she has with her teachers, like, I got close with maybe one teacher, and that was my science teacher at the beginning of the year. And, you know, like, she would pull me aside after class, and she'd be like, uh, I'm a good example and I need to keep doing what I'm doing, she'll be like inspiring me after, like, every day after class. And like, she would use me as examples and stuff like that, but it was never really like a friendship. Like, I know I could go to her and we could do, we

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could chill and I could talk to her and she'll go over test scores with me, and she'll tell

me that I'm—how do I say it? How I put it, I don't know, we were just like she was there

for me, you know, so...I feel like she put in the most effort. And like, how she was more

like easier to talk to and we connected more than other teachers.

Kim, a ninth grader, from the third group described teachers who demonstrated more care than

other teachers:

There were some teachers who cared more than others. And those were the teachers who

would reach out to parents and would give students their numbers and emails and would

check on students at home. Like I had a teacher who would text me at eight o'clock to

remind me hey, Kim, this is due tonight, have this due by tonight, this is, like, this is what

needs to be turned in, this is what you're missing. And some teachers like you would

email and you wouldn't get a email back until your parents had to step in. Um, some,

some teachers cared more than others, like differently, not about just work, but about

students' feelings, like what, like some teachers would ask, "Hey, are you okay?" Like,

give us a break. Let us like, rejuvenate as a class, because it gets overwhelming at times,

and I think some teachers saw that more than others. So that was nice.

Kim later articulated more on what teachers did to demonstrate their care through movement and

interaction with her students compared to students who did not demonstrate this same care:

Some teachers know how to interact with the students, like one of my teachers now she

knows how to get up and move around the classroom and she's not afraid to come up to

our desk and say, hey, is this what you need help on? Stay after class, I'll work on you,

I'll work on this with you. And it's just that relationship that has like been built, like hey,

contact me if you need me. Some teachers aren't like that and it's frustrating. 'Cause why

do you have to have, like why does it have to go to where my parents have to step in.

Like I care, why don't you? So it gets irritating, at times.

Not only did teachers demonstrate their care and concern for students' academic achievement but would also show their level of care in terms of handling students when they would be off track.

Other participants, however, did not have this same experience. Students in focus group three also shared their experiences with teachers who did not take the steps to show that they care about their students. Ultimately, this spilled over into their efforts to ensure that their students mastered the material that was taught. Kim spoke about a teacher that never provided any personalized learning to support her understanding of the material:

Just I, well, I, he was my social studies teacher in seventh grade. And, like, like, um, Lola said, it was just a lot of classwork and it wasn't even like one-on-one, there was no one-on-one time, like he never took the time to like say, hey, do you need this? Like I would, like I would ask I'll be like, hey, can you go over this one time and he'd be like, oh, it's in the notes, just go over your notes. I've been doing that, I'm still not getting it. And I would bomb the tests and my grade was just go down and I would ask and I would ask, and I'd be like, hey, can I retake it? I've studied some more. No, I don't do retakes. How am I supposed to, like that's my grade. It was, it was just, he was rude to parents. I just didn't like his class.

Lola, a ninth grader who was a part of the same focus group, also shared her experiences in middle school with a teacher who provided large amounts of work but also didn't provide any personalized learning.

And she—she just, she never gives you, gave you study guides, like she just gave you classwork, classwork, classwork, classwork, classwork. Even if you had a question, she

may go over it once but you can't really retain anymore. Like it just, like I have to do it like by myself. She never had one-on-one time, so like she never. Her tutoring, I would go to her tutoring because it wasn't many people in the class to try to get a better understanding and she still couldn't really help you. It was, she just didn't know how to teach, honestly.

In the second interview Lola expressed the importance of a teacher caring about her students and how this leads to a teacher providing her students with what they need to succeed.

[L]ike, a lot of like, get a teacher, like teachers that understand you and can alter levels with different students like one student who gets the work a lot or gets the teaching a lot quicker than other students, they know how to maintain it. Like keep it easy for everybody. And also get it like locks in your brain.

Kim from the third focus group expressed similar views as Jasmine and Ren. When asked about her perception on why teachers who care had less discipline, she had voiced this belief:

Because with fun teachers, it's different. Like you, you care more, because they care more. You show them more respect, because they show you more respect. They don't really, like they'll, they have fun, like, class catchers, or attention catchers. So they just make it to where, like, hey, I want to listen to what the teacher has to say.

Overall, the teachers who exhibited care and concern to the participants modeled their care in a variety of ways; whether it was exhibited through communicating after school hours, providing encouraging and inspirational words, or giving students a break to relax and rejuvenate students sensed the guidance and support through their teachers' actions. Students also revealed their teachers' actions had a domino effect on the level of care for their own success; because teachers showed their authentic care toward students, it then compelled students to care about their work.

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According to the participants, a teacher's level of care also affected student misbehavior in the classroom; further, teachers who demonstrated a high level of regard for students decreased the amount of misbehavior that the teachers observed in the classroom.

**Fun and Engaging Staff Led to Less Punitive Discipline**

The students in the focus groups not only appreciated and articulated teachers that showed their personal interest in students, but students also spoke highly of teachers who were intentional about ensuring that classes were fun and engaging. Lola from the third group shared what her middle school teachers used to do to ensure that their classes were fun:

Some teachers put in a lot more effort, too. Like, they make class fun, they give you notes back-to-back to back so you can remember it, and then they'll do like really fun Kahoots where you can remember it. And then some teachers won't do it at all, and they'll teach once and then you'll have a test, but you don't really retain anything…"

Kim agreed and later spoke more specifically about what a teacher would do to make her class fun and motivate students to complete work:

[S]he would give us homework, and if we got questions right, she would be like, if you got five questions right and we would have to raise our hand, she would throw us candy or like our favorite bag of chips. And she would like have, she would always have this big box of toys or something or like candy or snacks. And at the end of the week, if you had either, I think it was a 70 or higher on last, on this week's test, then you got something. And nobody really got below a 70 because she always had homework, and we were always on the topic. Like, it wasn't boring in her class, like, oh, I'm gonna fall asleep. Like it was very, like, get up and go like music. We would like brain breaks, like,

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what's that, um, I don't know what it's called, Go Noodle. We would do Go Noodles, and it was just really fun. And like it made you excited to go to class.

Lola then spoke about an energetic male teacher that also provided incentives to motivate students:

[H]e was very energetic, and he would give out treats if you got stuff right and extra credit. So like study guides, like easy study guides, if you do 'em you may get like 10 extra points on your test, and he would do Cahoots. He was, he would crack jokes every now and then and some would be awkward, but it'd be really funny. And he would give you breaks. And he cared about you personally. Like sometimes he'll pull everyone out of it like single people out of the class and bring them to his desk and just have a talk with them and see where they're at with the class and see if there's anything he needs to go back over before the test. And he was just, he was really fun. He's a nice teacher.

Michael, a tenth grader from focus group three, agreed and reflected on his eighth grade experience with a teacher who also awarded prizes to students for their work:

Her name was—I forgot her name. I'll be real. But she was fun because she's like, she would help us learn better. She let us do group assignments, she would give us prizes if we got the questions right during, like, during class. And she was just like a great teacher. Like, she never like complained. Just a good teacher.

During their second interview, Lola elaborated more on the impact of teachers who were more purposeful about bringing fun and engagement to the class: "Like, you'll be really excited to go to their class, like, I can't wait to go to so and so's class tomorrow." Kim agreed with Lola and had this to add to the discussion:

Because with fun teachers, it's different … [t]hey don't really, like they'll, they have fun, like, class catchers, or attention catchers. So they just make it to where, like, hey, I want to listen to what the teacher has to say.

The students also emphasized that due to the high level of fun and engagement from these classes, teachers in these classes didn't experience many problems with students. Lola first conveyed this conclusion:

It was like in the classes that were a lot of fun, and the better teachers, they didn't really have any trouble out of the class, like the class would be very into the teaching, because they were such a fun teacher. But when it comes to like, the more boring and teachers that can't teach, the kids act out a lot more.

Kim agreed with Lola's conclusions and added this to her statement: "And in the classes where everyone wanted to be there and wanted to learn, the only time we really had to like, like, hey, snap back into it was when we got overly excited." Michael shared that these particular teachers have different methods in dealing with challenges in the classroom:

They handle it a little bit differently. They want it to do too much like other teachers. Other teachers might like write you up for like, a little thing. The one that I liked didn't really do all that, he was kind of chill.

Participants conveyed teachers who were methodical about ensuring their classes were fun and engaging were the teachers that were memorable and teachers that students got along with. Additionally, according to participants in the group, teachers they observed experienced less issues with discipline.

**Theme 3: Students' Experiences with Equitable and Inequitable Treatment**

Students also vocalized their experiences and observations with equitable and inequitable treatment from school staff members. The inequitable treatment that they experienced were for various reasons, including their race, gender, or because they were a part of certain athletic teams. Students were also able to identify and communicate the equitable treatment students encountered from school staff. Whether it was with teachers or admin, students shared accounts that happened to them or to someone that they knew personally during your middle school years.

**Inequitable Treatment**

The inequitable treatment students described were connected to a variety of reasons; some identified as due their gender or their race. Participants also shared that they were unsure of the reason, but it was noticeable to them. For example, Ren a current eighth grader from the second focus group shared her previous experiences at Sacklarn Middle before she attended Evangel Prep. She describes the inequitable treatment from the administrators at her school.

> We did have a lot of fights at that school and they will break them up, but they would take the wrong people, like the people that started it, both of them, I mean, like both of the people got in a fight but the people that started it, they would not get in trouble and the people that didn't just trying to defend theirself, they would get in more trouble than the other person. They would suspend people for no reason. It was a lot of chaos at that school.

Alex, another eighth grader who was also a part of the group, compared the inequitable treatment of the current administrator to the previous administrator. Although both administrators seemed to have students from the focus group who shared a close relationship with them, regarding

school discipline, Alex shared her perception of Mr. Best's handling of school discipline, which was much more equitable compared to Dr. Boone.

> Her name was Miss Boone before Mr. Best, she really wasn't the best. If you went to her about something, she'll say she'll handle it but it will never be handled or if you were to get in trouble it seemed like it would be handled in a whole different situation than if you were to come to her about a problem you have. But Mr. Best it's way different. If you have a problem, he will handle it. And it'll be handled right. Better than she did and Mr. Best has it more put together than she had. When she was the principal or the administrator it seemed like she was all over the place all the time than Mr. Best.

Eighth-grade students from the second focus group spoke on the inequitable experiences in the area of athletics. When asked about her middle school experiences with school discipline, Alex had this to share:

> I know that I was a cheerleader for sixth- and seventh-grade year. And I realized that, especially in my sixth-grade year, that if you're a cheerleader versus a basketball player, that if you get in trouble maybe once, it's uh, you know, you better act good or you're gonna get kicked off the team. But when a basketball player they'll get in trouble multiple times and, you know, it will be a, you know, this is your last warning. But you'll just hear that over and over again with the basketball player versus the cheerleader. And now probably be the same way how it is in school.

Jasmine another eighth grader, also agreed with Alex and stated that the cheer coach was stricter on the cheerleaders than the other coaches were for their teams, thus reflecting differential treatment in expectations for misbehavior and the way that misbehavior was handled.

Many of the inequitable experiences were described from participants in the third focus group. They used such phrases as "racism" and gave very specific examples of what this reflected in terms of who exhibited racism and which subgroups were affected. When asked to reflect on the "not so good" memories when they attended middle school, Kim had this to share:

Um, we didn't have any like fights, but it was just a lot of racism that was let slide. And if you looked really closely, well, you didn't even have to look closely to see it was there. Like it could happen right in front of your face with our principals, the way he treated some of their Black students and their Hispanic students. They treated them differently than how they treated their White students because they had different relationships with parents. Um, it was disgusting at times. So that's where the hate comes from in a relationship, in a love-hate relationship.

Later on in the interview, Kim described how students who were considered "fair skinned" were more favored and treated better than other students with darker complexions:

But some teachers really favored their fair-skinned students. But that's just how New Hope is. And again, it's noticeable. But as students, what can we do but tell our parents … [u]m, in gym class, I saw these bare-skinned boys in the locker room. There was a lot of commotion. They would go down there and they would do this thing called tap or box. The fair-skinned students, they would just get a pass. Hey, stop. But a student my color, we would go like straight to the principal's office, straight to the assistant principal, straight to the guidance counselor, we would have to like—it, the punishment was way worse than our fair-skinned students.

Kim from the third focus group described a situation in eighth grade where she observed a teacher referring students to the office because they were advocating for themselves in the form of sharing how they didn't understand what the teacher was teaching:

> Mainly, the teacher who I didn't really care for wrote someone up it was the student was arguing their point on how the students felt. So we would be telling him like, hey, we don't understand, like, what you're teaching us isn't making sense. And he'll be like, oh, well, if you're paying attention in class, and if you're taking the notes you're supposed to be taking, we don't know we're supposed to be taking, like you're just writing. Like there's no, there's no like explanations. So we would, we would be, like we would be arguing our point and trying to get our point across but he would take that as disrespect. And so it got to the point where we stopped and we were just like, hey, whatever we get we get, and I think that's where a lot of teachers go wrong. They think us expressing our feelings as disrespect but what we're trying to tell you that we don't understand but you guys don't listen. Like it's just about listening.

Lola agreed with Kim and further stated this conclusion ineffective teachers:

> Some, most of the times, it would be unfair, but sometimes it would be fair, because even the class clowns if they did get in suspension, and it was like two days, they would come back and do the same thing. So it would just be a cycle. And it was never, it was never steady, constant, like, well, it was never steady, I guess. And the times it wasn't fair were like, if the teacher were like, was far beyond frustrated, she would just give the whole class. Like, even if it wasn't many students, and it was just like four or five, she would just give the entire class silent lunch or even if she did kick certain students out, it would still happen. Mainly with the more teachers that can't really teach, well I can't really say

that, but the teachers who were—weren't good teachers, it, they gave a lot of unfair consequences.

Students also identified occurrences when they themselves were given differential treatment. Alex an eighth grader from focus group two expressed a situation in which she received unfair treatment because of different levels of parental involvement:

I know when it happened to me, it was just me, and there was a parent involved, and I still thought that was completely unfair, especially when my mom knew before I even said anything to the girl, any of us said anything to the girl, my mom had already knew. So when I told her and the next day came to school, and was like Alex come in, they told her she don't need to come in, but in my opinion, I felt like she did because my mom knew what was going on from the beginning. The other girl's parent was involved, but then didn't want to bring my mom into it.

Ren, another eighth-grade participant in the same group, described her middle school experiences with receiving unfair treatment:

I remember one time in like tennis, I had some gum in my lunchbox. And like it was—I wasn't eating it or nothing, it was in my lunchbox. And this other student took it out of my lunchbox after I told him he couldn't have it. And once I stepped out of the line we were in, he wasn't in the line. But I stepped out of the line we were in, and then I was the one that got yelled at and had to sit out for the class. And when I tried to explain what happened, he wouldn't listen to me, and he said the tennis coach she told me that I was acting childish. Excuse me.

When asked did she ever think that it was a "gender or race thing" Ren responded by stating: "A gender thing, definitely. 'Cause I felt like, he was a lot nicer to all the boys and the girls."

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Michael, a high schooler from the third group, described a situation with a teacher who he felted targeted by: "A few times. There's one teacher, one teacher and she kept calling me out when there was other people doing the same thing. And she will always call me out again."

When Michael was asked his views on why the teacher behaved this way, he had this to share:

Honestly, I don't know. It was like they were doing the same stuff I was doing and she didn't call them out. So, I guess he had something against me, but I don't really know. She was like this old lady, probably in like her 60s. I mean in like her 60s. She had like gray hair. She wore glasses. She was my math teacher. And she always, she always got on me every day.

When asked about the race of the teacher, Michael communicated that the teacher was White. Afterwards, Kim and Lola reflected on similar stories from middle school as Michael:

Um, this teacher would kind of like what Michael said, there would be other kids around doing the same thing I was doing, like chatting and talking, and he would only get on me and my friend about it. And it was kind of hard to deal with the teacher because he was very disrespectful. And I get that they're adults, but they're still human, we're still human, I feel like we should be treated with some type of respect, too. So, it was constant, like comments he would make, and specifically towards me that he wouldn't make towards any other kids in the class.

Lola agreed with Kim and shared her personal account of differential treatment:

Same thing, Kim said, like they would target us. I don't know, like, um, for example, say I was talking. Another student was talking, and we weren't talking together, but we had our own friends to talk to, I would be the one to get called out on and not the other student who was talking. And the teacher would be White. And same thing that Michael

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said, older. Yeah. Like, and then like another teacher would, they would call you out and

not only targeting you, but specifically, like if they're having a speech or something, and

they'll be like, well, some students don't understand the subject, so we have to go over it

again. And it's, like, very unprofessional type of teachers.

Students talked about their experiences with differential treatment with different admin and staff

in the building. One additional area that students observed differential treatment in was the area

of dress code. Kim shared the inequitable treatment with female girls of color around dress code

versus their White counterparts and how they were treated:

New Hope was a uniform school. So it wasn't very fair with dress code. And I'm not

talking about with boys and girls, I'm just talking about with girls. Because I mean, most

guys that went to New Hope, didn't wear skirts. It was really just shorts and pants with

them. So like, there's really no, like you couldn't sag, you always had to have a belt. But

girls could wear skirts. And there are going to be some girls who have a lot more than

other girls. It was just the fact that Olivia could walk into school with a skirt on a—like,

above her mid-thigh point. And I would walk into school with the same length skirt on

and I will get dress coded. I get that I have more than her, but it shouldn't be like that, in

my opinion. I think we should have, like if we had a rule that the skirt couldn't be above

our thighs or above our knees, they didn't really listen, but if I weren't to listen, then I

would get dress coded. It was just irritating at times to see all of my friends having to go

home and having their parents called when they didn't have to have their parents called.

It was frustrating. Like to the point where it was just pants, like we didn't even try

anymore. Like it was strictly pants, we just wore pants. I didn't try to wear shorts

anymore. I didn't even let my mom buy me skirts because I knew what was going to

happen. And so I just stopped before it could lead to something that I didn't want it to lead to. So I just let them have it at that point in administration, like we took it to administration, a group of us took it to administration. Yes. Like girls that it's happened to before. And like we've pointed it out, and some of the girls who haven't been dress-coded even took our side on it and was like, we see it happening, too. Administration was just like, we can't do anything about that. What do you mean? Like it shouldn't—again, in my opinion, shouldn't be like that. So administration really, it, they really let stuff just blow past their heads. And it was a lot of, like how I said in the beginning, systematically like racist. Like it was noticeable, but as students, what can we do about it but tell our parents?

When asked who received more favorable treatment with dress code, Kim had this to share:

The light-skinned ones and the White girls. They would, I mean, most of them didn't have much of a figure, so they're, they would always bring up that their clothes looks different than it would on our body. But I personally don't think that's fair. So we would always get called out for it because of the way we were shaped and built. Um, and there's nothing like we can do about that.

During the initial interview with the third group, Kim voiced the issue of racism that was evident in her middle school. During the second interview Kim elaborated on how racism was exhibited from her White peers:

Um, there would be racist comments from students, and Black kids would have to endure it and we would try to go talk to our administrators about it and they will be like, well, they can't do anything about it. They would make—I've had this person make monkey noises. I mean, you can't do anything but laugh because, hey, you look stupid, um, like,

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and it got to the point where the monkey noise would get out of control. And the teacher would turn the lights off, and I'm pretty sure this happens at everyone's school, but they would say, hey, where did such-and-such go, because of our dark skin. Um, the teachers would hear it, they would, it's like through one ear and out the other. I've had kid, like I've had friends cry to me about it. And what can we do but just sit here and say like, it's—oh well, like it got to the point where we just like, hey, oh, well, like we stopped going to administrators about it 'cause all they would do was say, they would call the kid in their office and say, "Apologize for this," or like it'll be a phone call home. We would get the apology, but it's gonna repeat, like and all we got was an apology.

Kim was asked what in her opinion should have been done equitably from the teachers and administrators. Kim conveyed this response:

I just know that if a African American student were to say something disrespectful back to the students, we would be in trouble. Because I, I'll say our jokes are far more worse than what they say to us, but hey, they, I mean, why would we get in trouble, and they don't. Like it's racially insensitive. But if we say something racially insensitive back, then we're the ones who automatically have to call home. Like I've had a friend sit out of a basketball game because some students said something to him, and he said something back. It's irritating.

From what Kim conveyed, staff members provided consequences, but the consequence did nothing to fix the situation in which behavior was changed. Additionally, according to her viewpoint, if her fellow Black peers would have demonstrated the same behavior, the consequence would have been far worse, further modeling more differential treatment.

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Overall, students shared the inequitable experiences that they encountered or observed from other students and teachers and administrators. The inequitable treatment that was modeled to students were given in the area of academics and school discipline. Students also identified this differential treatment as connected to their race or gender. Additionally, when it involved student misbehavior and discipline, students' experiences reflected situations where consequences were given that weren't equitable on both sides, or consequences did not match the misbehavior that was performed.

**Equitable Treatment**

In addition to explaining their experiences with inequitable treatment and racism, students also articulated various experiences that they perceived as handled in a fair and equitable manner. Eighth grade participants in group one were asked to reveal actions from teachers and admin that were equitable and John responded with this account:

> I know I can't think of a time that we—because when I got in trouble, I guess you could say it was unfair, that instead of getting in trouble, how it really how it normally would have happened. I got like, I got less of a punishment, so. But everything else that I'd seen or paid attention to, I guess it was fair.

Sarah agreed with John and voiced her impression on the school's staff.

> Oh, yeah, when they're giving, when they're giving out consequences, I think every teacher is fair. But I just feel like sometimes we feel like we're not in the wrong but we're actually, like we actually are. But at the moment, we, sometimes we are heated and sometimes we're just after you sit down and think about it, like if you see like, you know when you're in the wrong, so like, take advantage of it.

Sarah later reemphasized her conclusion of equitable treatment from the staff when asked what solutions she would provide to administrators and stated, "So most of the part they were pretty fair with like consequences and stuff." The other participants John and Torrain agreed with Sarah's response. John then described the reasoning between staff demonstrating equity when it came to school discipline: "Yeah, like, they were laid back." Sarah also agreed with John, further explaining that students rarely received an office referral from the teacher.

Alex, an eighth grader from focus group two shared her personal experience where she was involved in an altercation and the result, in her opinion, was equitable:

> One time I got into a fight and the both of us was suspended. It was fair … [i]t happened
> at school and we both were suspended just because of a altercation, so there wasn't no
> other way to go around it.

When asked if the teachers of color demonstrated inequitable practices with school discipline Michael, the tenth grader from the third focus group, shared "Not really, I would say most of like my Black teachers that I had in my middle school career. They were all pretty fair." Michael also shared experiences with one of the administrators who in his perspective handled school discipline in a fair and equitable manner:

> I liked one of mine. She was cool. She didn't—she didn't really like do too much. She
> would, you know, kind of talk to you if you did something bad. She wouldn't try to like,
> just punish you right away. She was like make sure that both sides were fair. Like she
> wouldn't like just judge you just because you got in trouble. She was, she was nice.

Lola, another high school participant in the same focus group, agreed with Michael and elaborated on what this reflected in her school.

[P]ersonally, they were really, they know that, "well, this doesn't really sound like you, but I'm gonna hear both sides. And then I'm going to hear it from your point of view," because some teachers will just add more to it because they, they, I don't know, they would just add more to it and the principal from before he would hear your side out. And it was really nice

Eighth grade charter school students from the first focus group gave examples of how their administrator, Mr. Best and Mr. Everhart, the behavior specialist, provided equitable treatment when it came to school discipline. John specifically shared how Mr. Everhart shielded them from serious consequences.

And that was 'cause there's some stuff that happened in the classroom and a teacher ended up getting hit with a pen, but it was Mr. Everhart kind of saved us because he was like, you know, we usually good and we're not in trouble often, so he helped us out. Instead of us getting suspended for a week, we only had ISS for 2 days. So that kind of— that was a relief.

Thus, Mr. Everhart saved students from receiving consequences and served as a support to them due to them rarely getting in trouble.

In regards to Mr. Best, students in the first focus group describe how Mr. Best works to ensure he is fair on both sides when handling discipline.

[But] [one] of them that's going to make sure everything is fair, is one Mr. Bradley, because he always, like he gets both sides of the stories and stuff. And he makes sure like he, you know, makes everything fair.

Mr. Best, the school administrator at Evangel Prep also was an equitable source, not only with discipline, but also with academics. Sarah from the first focus group shares how Mr. Best put things in place to provide more equitable academic support for students.

> [B]ut the fact that like Mr. Best, like he told teachers to like, not just 24/7, like we're not just gonna sit in a classroom 24/7 … when Mr. Best came, honestly, there is a big difference. Like he's added Math 1, he added a track team. He's like, he's working better, like the classrooms are much more like, they're much more inter, like interactive and stuff, like he—he's making sure the teachers are like, you know, keeping us active, knowing that, we can't like, like, you know, we can't just sit down in a classroom and be quiet and just watch like for a whole hour and a half. So he's changing stuff like that to make sure that they're like interactive.

John agreed with Sarah's description of how Mr. Best provided academic equitable support and elaborated on his own experience with Mr. Best:

> Yeah, because I know, we noticed earlier on in the year. When I first got here, it was chill, like I knew that stuff that was going on, I knew the material, I got it done. But when we start working on a material for too long, he kind of like, like, I would like zone out the class. And [Mr. Best] started noticing that, so then that's when he started like giving us extracurricular stuff for us to do so that we're not just sitting there bored in class.

The students believed that Mr. Best not only supported students in the area of school discipline and relationships but also through another significant area, which was in academics. Mr. Best identified the needs of his students and changed structures within the school day so that students obtained what they needed to be successful.

## Students Experiences with Voice and Being Heard

Within their discussions students also shared various ways that either teachers or admin would provide opportunities for students to elevate their perspectives. Kim the ninth grader from the third group stated that sometimes teachers would solicit feedback to improve their teaching.

Um, I've had some teachers who would do Google Forms, and they would ask for feedback and how we would learn better in their class. So, we would um, that would help the—that teacher a lot.

Sarah an eighth grader from the first group, shared how Mr. Best would allow her to sit in his office to discuss practices and structures at the school that could possibly change for the better for students.

So we go and do announcements and then we go by his office, you know, we chill, we talk about anything, we talk about stuff we can change at the school. And we talk about a lot of stuff. We also discuss with him like if there's something that we don't like, or we're not, like we're not very comfortable with it or something, we go talk to him in the morning.

From what the students shared, there were some staff members who provided opportunities where students could highlight and share their perspectives with them in order to create some area of change either within the school setting or throughout the school.

Overall, the inequitable experiences students shared within their focus group were either those that they experienced or observed happened to someone else. Most of the students' equitable experiences were accounts that they themselves experienced. When students were asked what solutions they would provide to improve the discipline practices at the school Jasmine from the focus group made the follow suggestion: "Maybe to not jump to conclusions

and hear the full story before even you know, trying to go and discipline this personal or discipline that person without knowing the full story."

Lola, a high schooler from the third focus group, also expressed a similar response to Kim:

Hear both sides out. So it's been a lot of times where they just go straight from what the teacher said and just punish you like that, and then like it may never even been that bad. And I would say figuring out why the kid is acting out, you know, because it could be from home. It could be stress from school, it could be the teacher, and they don't have an outlet, so they use class as an outlet, I guess to act out, I don't know, but—yeah.

Ren from group two suggested for administrators to be fully active in the investigative process to get the full story, instead of taking the teachers side of the story:

Like they should be involved in like more stuff instead of just like the really big stuff. Because just having the teacher's decision, I feel like that's just one side and it usually have different point of views to see when it come to proving of what type of punishment to give that student.

Kim suggested for school staff to practice empathy when handling school discipline

I would just say don't be so blind to situations. Put yourself in the child's shoes for one, for one minute. See how the child feels, like listen. Listen to what we have to say. That's really it.

Michael agreed with Kim and suggested that school staff also demonstrate and practice patience with students.

Overall, we were able to vocalize a number of incidents where teachers and admin demonstrated differential treatment to them or their middle school peers. These acts of

differential treatment were related to school discipline and teaching and learning. Students were able to emphasize the racism that occurred and the inequitable treatment that resulted from it. Students were also able to provide solutions on how schools can manage school discipline much more equitably. From what students expressed, hearing and listening to both sides was more valuable to students and demonstrated more equitable treatment.

Furthermore, although students voiced their unique experiences with school discipline in middle school, the focus group responses revealed students had many similarities in what they valued and appreciated as equitable treatment. Overall, students valued relationships and appreciated teachers who worked to develop authentic and strong relationships with them. Data results also demonstrated that students appreciated teachers that worked hard to provide engaging and fun lessons which also decreased the amount of discipline teachers had to manage. From the data, students articulated the inequitable accounts that they experienced or observed. However, some students were able to articulate some of the equitable practices that they experienced either with an administrator or another teacher. From the participants' perspective, students appreciated when staff took the time to hear both sides and provide consequences when needed that were appropriate for the misbehavior.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to explore Black students' perceptions of their middle school experiences in various school settings and identify if there were reflections of racism, differential, and inequitable treatment that was reflected in prior research. I also wanted to identify and highlight any noted comparisons across race, gender, and age. Not only were participants of various ages, but they were in various grade levels. Most of the students at the time were eighth graders but high school students were also interviewed and asked to reflect on their middle school experiences.

There are several potential contributions this study can make. There is growing research examining the perceptions of high school students and their perceptions of their schooling experiences, however there is a dearth of research that focuses on middle school youth and their perceptions of their schooling experiences. In addition, as the literature review indicates, the overrepresentation of students of color in exclusionary discipline is a persistent problem with solutions offered in the literature as slim to none.

Honoring Critical Race Theory (CRT)'s emphasis on counter storytelling, my goal was to highlight the voices of Black students and identify areas that would counter the overheard narrative of Black students overrepresented in school discipline; more specifically in office referrals and receiving harsher school consequences. Historically, the research continues to shine light from one lens which is through the view of school discipline data. I aimed to add more to the research and hear from the students' themselves and collect the data on their perceived realities at their schools.

I also aim to elevate suggestions that they provided to their teachers, administrators, and school about the systems and structures used for school discipline. The goal was not only to

center the thoughts and experiences of students receiving school discipline, including how equitable they perceive their school's practices are, but also to empower them to provide solutions to their schools on how to better manage the process of school discipline. This is to counteract the fact that schools do not make it a common practice to collect and use the thoughts and beliefs of students who are subject to school discipline, and a primary reason I concentrated on the student voice in dissertation study. Studies on student voice argue that there is great value in not only collecting student voice but using it shape educational policies and practices (Fielding, 2001; Mansfield & Lac, 2018); however, Silva (2001) argues that student voice that is utilized for educational practice are often those that represent students who are apt to participate in school leadership opportunities, college bound, or high achieving and less on marginalized students who may receive school discipline more frequently. But what about students who do not fit these criteria? Their experiences are as important if not more, especially in the area of school discipline.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss in greater depth what I learned conducting this study. That is, answer the research questions and discuss their implications:

1. What are Black secondary students' perceptions and experiences with school discipline?

2. Are there differences in perceptions or experiences across gender or age?

Three major themes emerged from my research findings in Chapter IV which were the importance of staff and student relationships, engaging and caring teachers managing misbehavior less punitively and students' experiences with equitable and inequitable treatment. In the following chapter, I elaborate on these themes and answer the research questions in greater

detail. I also share my conclusions as well as recommendations for further research that is related to my topic.

**What are Black Secondary Students' Perceptions and Experiences with School Discipline?**

Based on the results from the participants in the focus group, the interaction among various staff members had a significant impact on students' educational experience and their perceptions of school discipline. When asked about their overall experiences at the middle school level, the students that shared their encounters all spoke about their interactions with either teachers or administrators. These interactions were academic-focused or non-academic. Relationships and the evidence of those relationships were a dominant focus of conversation during the focus groups. Based on what the students shared, students either had a negative or positive outlook on schooling based on their relationships with staff members.

## Staff and Student Relationships

My findings from the focus groups show that students value relationships among staff members. Students shared their experiences of relationships or lack of relationships with administrators. The participants from the charter school conveyed that the staff at school were mostly African American but represented a variety of races at the other traditional middle schools they attended. The first and second focus group, comprised of students from Evangel Prep, both had nothing but positive things to say about their administrator, Mr. Best. From what they shared, Mr. Best had developed close relationships with students, parents, and families. He knew several of the students and their families, because he had coached track for the student or one of their siblings. One student from the first focus group even stated that he had come to Evangel Prep because of the administrator. Mr. Best took the initiative to get to know his students in the focus group; more specifically he let students spend time with him in his office,

sharing sweet treats with him, and collaborating on ways to make their school a better experience for all students. Evidence of the relationship also included the gestures that he exchanged with the students including a fist bump or tripping a student in the hallway as a way to have fun and joke with the students.

Sarah from Evangel Prep also spoke of their behavior support teacher, who in a lot of ways exhibited the administration role, but provided additional support for students. The participant shared that Mr. Earnhardt built his relationship by demonstrating care for the students, asking them about their lives and how their grades were. This also played a part when the student was on the verge of making bad choices. As a result of the student's relationship with Mr. Earnhardt, the student was much more receptive to listening to Mr. Earnhardt's advice. Another student, John from the first focus group, spoke of another administrator-like person, the dean of students who he had developed a close relationship with after the dean was intentional about getting to know the student.

What's important to note is that the students who spoke highly of their administrators came from schools where there was a smaller student population. These schools are also charter schools, which are public schools but orchestrated by charters or governing boards. Contrastingly, students who attended traditional public schools did not share any evidence of positive relationships with their administrators. In fact, Michael from the third focus group, verbalized that there was never a reason to go to the principal's office since he didn't get in trouble, which suggests some students believe that the only reason to interact with an administrator is solely when that student is in trouble. Based on student responses, the data suggests that students who attend schools with a lower student population are more likely to have a relationship with their administrators. A smaller population of students makes it more feasible

for administrators to learn students' names and become more aware about their students. In regards to school discipline, students feel more comfortable and receptive to listening to administrators when they are potentially at the risk of receiving school discipline. This provides an equitable experience for students, because administrators are providing students with what they need to ultimately be successful.

Students from the focus groups overwhelmingly spoke more about their relationships with teachers than any other staff member in their schools. When prompted to speak about their overall experiences, students initiated sharing stories about their relationships with teachers. Students in the first focus group spoke highly of their PE teacher, Coach Sockwell. The PE teacher would intentionally ask students about their lives pertaining to school including how students were behaving in class, what their grades were, and if they were staying out of trouble. Sockwell developed his relationship with students by inquiring about their academic lives and their personal lives. Students in the group also revealed their experiences with other teachers who developed their relationship with students by caring about their mental health. This reflected allowing students to take breaks and also being available past school hours if their students needed additional academic support. Teachers also played the role of a "mom" figure because they would hold high expectations for students, while at the same time providing the support they needed which was warm and "homey."

Students also shared their experiences with teachers who were not willing to develop a relationship with them. The teachers were reluctant to build relationships with teachers through vague and different reasons, including personality differences from their siblings who shared the same teacher or simply having an attitude towards the student for an unknown reason.

Responses from the focus group indicate that students appreciate teachers who were willing and intentional about developing positive relationships with their students. As a result, this willingness allowed students to develop a connection with their teacher. The willingness of the teacher also revealed their desire to familiarize and understand her students, in order to provide each student with what they needed. When students were provided the necessary level of support, students felt included, welcomed, safe, and supported. This suggests that when students feel this way, students are less likely to misbehave, receive school disciplinary actions, and get referred to the office. Because teachers have developed relationships with their students, they are more likely to manage behavior restoratively instead of punitively. Evidence from student responses on positive relationships with teachers and administrators challenges Kennedy-Lewis's (2013) findings, which suggest that middle school teachers focus more on punitive consequences than building relationships with students. Nonetheless, the ideology of relationship building among teachers and students supports the work of Anyon et al. (2018) who concluded that teachers who are intentional about building relationships, build trust between themselves and students and their families. Teachers are also more prone to increase their understanding of students including the reason behind misbehaviors that they might observe.

**Engaging and Caring Teachers Less Likely to Manage Misbehavior Punitively**

Students from each of the focus groups shared stories of teachers who were intentional about creating classroom environments that were caring and engaging. The teachers modeled and exhibited care and concern for their students. This, according to Alex, one of the participants in group two, made the school environment feel like "home at school." This suggests that the staff created a welcoming, comfortable, and safe environment for students. According to the participants from the charter school, there were some teachers, such as the music teacher, who

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emphasized to students that they were available to talk at any given time. John also described a science teacher that would encourage and inspire him and would tell him frequently that was a model student. According to Kim, a participant in focus group three, some teachers were so intentional and went above and beyond so much they would check on students after school hours, providing students with their phone numbers, in case they had a question about homework and needed academic assistance after hours. This suggests that some teachers had exhibited the mindset of "whatever it takes" for their students. More importantly, students observed this notion and appreciated it. Students, such as Kim and Lola from the third focus group, also expressed their experiences with teachers who did not demonstrate individual care. Instead, these teachers would provide work to their students demonstrating apathy about students' individual needs and providing the extra support. Lola, spoke of a teacher who continued to give unending classwork with no scaffolding support. These two students also verbalized the lack of one-on-one support that teachers gave to their middle school students. This perhaps suggests the teachers who failed to provide support were focused on the control of their classroom versus developing relationships with their students.

Participants also spoke highly of teachers that were strategic and intentional about creating a fun and engaging classroom environment. Participants indicated that teachers were interested in including online quiz games, brain breaks, and group assignments into their instruction. All three students from the third focus group described teachers that gave out treats for earning a particular grade, an assessment or getting a certain number of questions accurate on their homework. As a result of teachers being purposeful in their efforts to make sure students were engaged in teaching and learning, students articulated that this helped them increase their learning. Students' responses are consistent with Noguera's (2008) conclusions, stating that if

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students do not believe their teachers care about them and actively care about their academic progress, then the possibility of their success is significantly reduced. Students conveyed that their teachers increased the amount of engagement which led them to be successful, because they put support in place.

Students also communicated teachers' efforts to provide a caring and engaging classroom environment which led to a decrease in the management of misbehavior in the classroom. Kim stated that the students were "very much into the teaching" which suggests that students cared about their work and their teachers because they knew their teachers cared about them. Students in the third group verbalized that the class they wanted to be in were the classes where discipline was rarely an issue. However, when there were discipline issues in classrooms with fun and engaging teachers, students shared teachers were calm and methodical about handling the situation, which was different from other teachers and did not include referring students to the front office.

There is consistent research which finds Black students have a lower perception of belonging, connectedness, trust, care and equity among Black students, compared to their White peers (Bottiani et al., 2016; Noguera, 2008; Voight et al., 2015). However, my findings are consistent with the research that states when Black students are more likely to seek help from staff members that they trust for personal challenges that are related to academic and/or personal support. Overall, the students from the focus group shared their various experiences with teachers who cared enough to provide encouragement and inspiration, exceptional support, and plan fun and engaging lessons. According to participants in the focus group, due to some of their teachers' nurturing and care toward students led to less issues with school discipline and less inequitable experiences which the Black students observed.

**Inequitable and Equitable Treatment**

Students also discussed the inequities in school discipline which included the classroom and around their school. The students in each of the focus groups shared their observations and experiences with inequitable and equitable treatment in each of their middle schools. The participants had several occurrences to share, with the majority of instances occurring with teachers. Students perceived the inequitable treatment stemming from several reasons including their race, gender, and their involvement on certain athletic teams. Inequitable treatment was observed both at the charter school and at the traditional public middle school and came from administration and from various teachers.

For example, Ren, one of the participants from the second focus group, spoke about an inequitable experience at her former traditional middle school. Ren shared her observation of students who initiated a misbehavior and did not receive a consequence; however, the ones who were defending themselves received a consequence. Alex, in the same focus group shared her encounters with a former administrator who couldn't handle the situation the way that she told the students that she would. Jasmine, the third participant in the group, shared the differential and inequitable treatment with the cheerleading team versus the basketball team. Jasmine elaborated on how there were multiple chances given to the basketball team when they misbehaved but this same treatment wasn't given to the cheerleading team. The students from the second focus group did not indicate that any of these occurrences were race-related but did note that the issues were handled unfairly overall.

Nonetheless, there were participants in focus group three who verbalized that the differential treatment that they observed was related to race. Kim revealed the differential treatment between White students and Black and Hispanic students due to staff's different

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relationships with the parents. The participants also articulated the differential treatment and favoritism toward the fair-skinned students. Students would exhibit the same behavior and according to the participant, the fair skinned student would receive grace while the dark-skinned student was referred to the front office. The participant shared that this type of different treatment was very noticeable to all students, especially students of color.

Some students also verbalized receiving differential treatment from White teachers. Michael stated that a teacher kept calling him out for doing the same thing other students in the class were doing. He also indicated he didn't know the reason but described the teacher as an older White lady. The other participants in the group agreed and also reported the differential and inequitable treatment that they experienced, but the treatment stemmed from older White teachers. The inequitable treatment that Black students received is consistent from a number of studies indicating students perceiving more harsh differential treatment (Ruck & Wortley, 2002) and lower equity from teachers on average (Bottiani et al., 2016).

Additionally, the female participants also spoke about the inequitable treatment around the dress code. Kim verbalized the reason behind targeting Black girls wearing the same skirts as White girls was due to differing body shapes. She vocalized that students were sent home or their parents were called, which she found irritating because her White girls did not receive the same treatment. Her perceptions are consistent with findings from Morris and Perry (2017) that Black girls are more likely to be referred for subjective vague offenses which include dress code violations.

Differential treatment toward the students from group three was also evident from the racism they experienced. The participants spoke of White students exhibiting monkey noises toward Black students, and the teachers' response would include warning those students to stop,

apologizing or at the most, a phone call home. According to students, this was detrimental and traumatic but would only get handled in an underwhelming small way. The participants shared that if the situation were reversed, Black students would have received harsher consequences. Nonetheless, all of the inequitable experiences that students perceived were race related were observed in the traditional middle school setting. According to students, their teachers represented a variety of races, but the staff members that exhibited inequitable treatment due to race, were revealed to be White teachers.

Additionally, students also provided some situations where the teachers and admin did demonstrate equitable treatment toward them. All of the equitable experience's students conveyed happened to them personally. Participants from focus group one and two shared occurrences when the consequences teachers assigned to students were equitable and matched the misbehavior conducted. John from the first focus group identified a situation that was unfair, because the students actually were given a lesser consequence which was out of the norm for that particular action. Sarah, who was a part of the same group agreed with John and further elaborated on how at times, students don't own up to their mistakes, but in actuality, they are in the wrong.

Students from focus group one and three both describe teachers who provided equitable treatment as laid back. Students indicated that the staff members would talk to the students whenever they misbehaved, instead of referring them to the office. This suggests that these particular staff members were gentle, easy-going, and found ways to handle the situation in an informal manner and in students' perception, this reflected equitable treatment.

The students in the first two focus groups highlighted the administration at the charter school sharing reasons why they believe Mr. Best the principal exhibited equitable treatment to

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students. This was due to Mr. Best hearing both sides of the story to ensure that the investigative process was fair. These same participants also perceived that their administrator Mr. Best demonstrated equitable practices with not only school discipline, but also with academics. The students described Mr. Best advocated for more rigorous Math preps which exposed students to the high school curriculum and required teachers to include more engaging and fun lessons with their instruction, instead of having students sit and listen passively the majority of the day.

Nonetheless, the majority of equitable experiences were perceived and observed more from students at the charter school, where students from the school reported most of the staff members were African American. This is consistent with Bottiani et al.'s (2016) findings which found that equity was found to be perceived higher from Black students in mostly Black schools. The researchers also found lower levels of perceived equity and caring among both Black and White students in more racially and ethnically diverse schools.

### Are There Differences in Perceptions or Experiences across Gender or Age?

Girls were the numerical majority and the most vocal of every focus group. The girls in both the second and third focus groups were more candid about sharing more inequitable experiences that they experienced and they observed what was happening to others. This could be due to the girls experiencing and observing more situations or because the girls tended to be more communicative overall. The female participants did speak about injustices that specifically happened to them that were related to dress code and inequitable treatment in the athletic field. These are two areas that the participants either were in favor of (Lola from group three said that she liked the dress code policy because of bullying) or took part in (Alex being a part of the cheerleading team in sixth and seventh grade).

**Inequitable Treatment to Girls**

Most of the testimonies regarding inequitable treatment came from the female students. Students either shared experiences that they themselves experienced or observed. For example, Jasmine, a participant in the second focus group, shared a situation which involved a girl who was treated unfairly by her peers and by the administration. This girl was picked on because of her clothes. Trying to defend herself, the girl would find herself in a number of fights, demonstrating her anger onto others. Jasmine stated that this anger would be evident through yelling at her peers and teachers and would result in days of suspension because she was viewed as a threat. Jasmine stated that she would convey the students' issues with bullying to the administrators, but nothing would be done to support the student or alleviate the situation. This occurrence supports findings from Annamma et al. (2019), which stated that disciplined Black girls are more likely to be living in poverty than disciplined girls from other races. This also supports findings from Morris and Perry (2017) which found that African American girls are referred for subjective offenses such as disruptive and aggressive behavior.

Some of the treatment students spoke on was minor differential treatment. Sarah from the first focus group spoke on the differential treatment she experienced from a teacher because she was more extroverted than her brother who was quieter and more introverted. The teacher would consistently compare her to her brother in a negative way and refuse to initially develop a relationship with her. Because Sarah didn't mirror the teachers' beliefs on how students should act, the teacher did not want to engage in a relationship with Sarah. Her experience mirrors findings from Murphy et al. (2013) who found that teachers' ideal perceptions of young girls include behaving in a "quiet, pretty, and passive" (p. 599) manner. The teacher's beliefs about how girls should behave clouded her decisions to develop a relationship with the student.

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Although Sarah took multiple actions to initiate a relationship with the teacher, the teacher did not desire to build a relationship with her.

### Implications for Policy, Practice, and Professional Development

**Equity in Due Process**

Every focus group was asked to provide solutions they would give their teachers and administrators to improve the discipline practices at their school. Both the first and second focus group suggested improving the area of due process. Both groups also suggested hearing all sides to obtain the full story and gather a thorough understanding of the situation. This could include both sides of each student's perspective of the incident. This could also reflect hearing the perspective of the teacher and the student before making a final conclusion and determining next steps. Lola from the third group suggested for teachers and admin to gain an understanding as to the reason behind the actions and investigate the cause for students responding in a particular way. The reasoning could include previous occurrences that were done by other students or their background/home life experiences. The idea of ensuring equity in due process relates to school policy, in which school leaders work to ensure that whenever situations happen that must be investigated, the process is handled in a fair, objective, and equitable manner, making sure that all voices are heard and valued. This idea also relates to listening to students and valuing student voice (Mansfield et al., 2012). The research suggests listening to students and their experiences, and allowing them to identify solutions to certain issues, elevates and prioritizes their voices and indirectly sends a message that what they have to say is significant and impactful enough to spark change.

*Implications for Policy*

Based on perceptual data results, there are implications for the improvement of certain educational policies. As previously stated in the literature review, zero tolerance policies emerged in the 1990s as a result of the Gun Free Act of 1994 to provide a "no nonsense" message to students for serious actions. However, these zero tolerance policies spread to other acts including those that were not clearly defined such as insubordination, bullying, and disrespect (Walker, 2014). This has ultimately led to schools and school districts interpreting and developing their own policies and Black students disproportionately represented more in suspensions compared to their White peers. As indicated from student perceptions from this research study, the wrong students are also receiving exclusionary discipline.

As districts are working to develop school policies centered around school discipline, policies which are designed must guarantee due process for students. Not only does this reflect and align with the 5th amendment in the U.S. Constitution, it allows for students to be treated fairly and provides an opportunity for students to be heard and for a consistent protocol to be utilized. As previously stated, there is a lack of research that shows zero tolerance policies effectively improve school safety or student behavior (American Psychological Association, 2008; Verdugo, 2002; Skiba & Knesting, 2001) nor do they target or focus on the behaviors that are most often punished in schools. Schools and school districts should continue to move away from zero tolerance policies and work to ensure that their policies have more of a corrective and restorative lens that holds students accountable but also pushes for students to repair what has been harmed or broken.

Additionally, there should be an opportunity for students to serve on policy committees to give their input and their suggestions to ensure that policies are as equitable and student focused

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as possible. Students from a variety of cultures, schools, and backgrounds could serve on the committee. Districts could have a process to identify students with the assistance of school staff. Criteria could also reflect pulling students that represent a variety of experiences with school discipline. Different cultures have their own definitions and interpretations of what constitutes "respect" and "disrespect" or "insubordination." and it is important for all stakeholders to come to a consensus on what certain hard-to-define behaviors look like. The impact of students serving on policy committees promotes the idea that schools and school districts value student voice and believe it is a necessary component to enacting positive and transformative change. Students serving on committees also brings to light the collaborative and democratic process. Ultimately, the opportunity could expose them to educational and political policy and open a door for those that want to continue in the field as they graduate high school and move on to postsecondary education.

### *Implications for Practice*

Schools should also make it a common practice to gage the thoughts and feelings of students on their school experiences. This action can come through quarterly student culture and climate surveys asking about their perceptions on how safe, inclusive, inviting the school and staff are. The survey could also ask for suggestions to improve their school's discipline practices. Students can also create opportunities for students to participate in leadership roles such as student council, student ambassadors, and principal advisory councils. The groups give students a chance to elevate and highlight their voices and ideas on what they would like to see implemented in their schools.

*Implications for Professional Development*

School districts must also provide training on what equitable due process reflects. Many times, school leaders are left to figure out how to investigate students and situations when occurrences happen in school. This leaves administrators to assign consequences without fully investigating the whole situation. Often times, school leaders will only take teachers' accounts of what happened and won't listen or hear students' perceptions. This can lead to certain students or groups of students unfairly assigned consequences based on an inaccurate or incomplete investigative process. School districts must teach and model the correct process and practices administrators need to follow in order execute an equitable and balanced due process.

Additionally, professional development on classroom management should also be provided for teachers that need to improve this skill in their classrooms. Misbehavior that is referred to the office often develops and occurs in the classroom setting. Previous data has indicated that referrals to office comes from a small percentage of teachers (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008), which suggests certain teachers are in need of support with improving their classroom management and relationship building skills. Nonetheless, all teachers should continue working to improve their instructional practices and their cultural proficiency. Every year brings a different set of students that represent various cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds. Teachers should receive yearly training and development to continue building their cultural proficiency and gain strategies on how to make their classrooms more culturally relevant and responsive.

**Demonstrate Care and Concern**

Students also suggested for teachers and administrators to demonstrate care and concern in a variety of different ways. Alex from the second focus group suggested for staff to be more

considerate of students' and their individual situations. Michael suggested for teachers to be more patient with all students. Kim, who was in the same focus group as Michael, agreed and suggested for staff members to put themselves in the child's shoes, implying that staff should show empathy to their students as much as possible. Showing care and concern to students also assists staff in developing and sustaining relationships with their students, which was supported in the research (Anyon et al., 2018; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013).

*Implications for Policy*

To support the notion for teachers to demonstrate care and concern with students, policies should focus on hiring teachers who are passionate about the field of education. During the hiring process, district leaders should work to design questions that school leaders could all use that would gage a prospective teachers' level of interest, passion, and intentionality toward serving as a teacher. If teachers aren't passionate about their work and who they serve, there is a less likely chance that teachers will demonstrate care and concern toward their students.

More policies should also improve around teacher pay and teacher bonuses to attract more qualified teachers to the field of education. According to the Southern Regional Education Board, (SREB, 2020) the average teacher salary in 2018-2019 was $62,304. In Mississippi, the average teacher salary was $45,105 and the starting salary was $35,067 (SREB, 2020). Many gifted and qualified teachers have left the field of education because of the insufficient salary that they receive. A number of teachers feel that the teacher pay doesn't suffice for the amount of time, work, and sacrifice that they put into their work every day.

*Implications for Practice*

There are several considerations for teacher practice based on students' perceptual data. Schools should emphasize the importance of building and sustaining relationships with students.

Relationships are the starting place to ensuring that students are receptive to feeling safe, embraced, and respected by adults in the building. Strong relationships with students may impact students' choices in the classroom and also play a part in how teachers perceive and respond to misbehavior in the classroom. Administrators should work to develop strong relationships with students outside of the context of when students misbehave. School leaders should also spend time in classrooms and lunchrooms learning students' names and familiarizing themselves with students' backgrounds. This prevents students from developing the perception that administrators only interact with students when they are referred to the office for misbehavior.

### *Implications for Professional Development*

Much of what the participants vocalize centered around the idea of authentic relationship building with students and engaging students with relevant and enthusiastic lessons and incentives. Schools should work to provide ongoing opportunities for professional learning around developing relationships with students, familiarizing themselves with their students' backgrounds and cultures (developing their cultural proficiency) and designing engaging lessons that excite students about the content.

### Planning Engaging Lessons

Participants from all three groups gave suggestions for teachers to be more effective with teaching and learning. Both students in the first and third focus group suggested for teachers to create engaging lessons. John used the word "entertaining" and suggested for teachers to get students involved in the lessons. Kim from the third group suggested for teachers to include fun activities and be intentional about planning fun games. When teachers provide access to the curriculum in a fun and engaging way, students are more likely to learn and understand the material and appreciate the teachers' efforts.

*Implications for Policy*

More policies should develop on the requirement of teacher engagement and cultural responsiveness in teacher evaluation standards. Most states require teachers to be observed and evaluated throughout the school year. Teacher engagement and cultural responsiveness must be embedded in all states' evaluation processes. This promotes the idea that teacher engagement is a priority and necessary component for students to access and relate to the content that they are learning.

*Implications for Practice*

Collaboration is a necessary component for teachers to use in order to share and discuss best strategies for lesson engagement. During Professional Learning Communities, (PLCs) a time for teachers to plan lessons, analyze data, create assessments, teachers should regularly collaborate on high leverage engagement strategies that will yield a high return on students learning the material. This must happen especially at the secondary level, where teachers often work in isolation because they are more specialized in their content area, compared to elementary teachers. School leaders should also create space and opportunities for teachers to observe other teachers outside of their grade level or department. This allows teachers to learn from their colleagues and gain best practices from their instruction.

*Implications for Professional Development*

Furthermore, professional development must occur that guarantees developing teacher capacity on cultural proficiency and responsiveness in the classroom. Teachers must learn how to familiarize themselves with the cultures that make up their classroom and how to utilize this information in planning high engaging lessons. Teachers must also become aware of their own cultural proficiency and areas that they need to develop in for the benefit of their students.

Depending on the needs of the staff at each school, professional development could occur as a whole school or could be differentiated based on teachers' current level of cultural proficiency.

## Conclusions

Based on my research inequitable treatment and discrimination in school discipline continues to be a fundamental issue to this day. As stated in my literature review, there is data findings that span back over 40 years, showing the disparate use of exclusionary discipline on Black students. Consistent research continues to speak on the causes of the discipline gap, which include zero tolerance policies and differential processing and selection from school staff (Mansfield et al., 2020). This is a smaller scale of what we see in the criminal justice system. Although prison populations have narrowed between Black and White individuals, African Americans continue to be incarcerated at significantly higher rates than White individuals. African Americans represent 12% of the total U.S. population, but 33% of the prison population. Contrastingly White individuals represent 64% of the total population but 30% of the prison population (Lustick et al., 2021). Countless research has provided solutions to close the gap, but the gap continues to exist.

It is important for schools and school districts to drastically change how we "do school." One way is to continue to amplify the voices of those that are on the receiving end of what educational leaders decide to put in to place: our students. Consistent research findings reveal the overall benefits of giving students agency and empowering them to voice their perceptions and experiences and use that data to create a student-focused environment (Lac & Cummings Mansfield, 2018; Mansfield, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2012) Amplifying the voices of students also gives them a chance to participate in social justice affairs that impact their everyday experiences. It can also improve the schooling process overall. Mansfield (2014) argues that students must be

considered and included in school reform efforts so that true transformation can take place. School leaders must send the message that they prioritize and value student perceptions and experiences.

Additionally, as my data research shows, staff and student relationships are paramount in ensuring that students are successful. This is consistent with countless research emphasizing the importance of relationships. Research also shows the importance of schools creating a family like atmosphere where authentic relationships with students are developed and sustained (Mansfield, 2015). School leaders and staff must create a supportive, inclusive, and equitable environment where students can feel the care and concern from their teachers. To ensure that this occurs, the right staff members must be in schools. Educational leaders must hire the right people who are intentional with building robust relationships with students. School leaders must hire teachers that have the passion for supporting students by eliminating barriers for them to be successful. Hiring the right people includes partnering with colleges and universities to ensure student teachers are adequately prepared and obtain jobs in these connected schools. School leaders also must ask questions that require prospective teachers to share their purpose and desire for teaching, core values, and how they would serve as an asset to the school. Relationships have been shown consistently that it has a positive impact on student achievement and on narrowing the discipline gap between White and Black students. Overall, relationships and amplifying student voice are two significant strategies that can not only improve student achievement and discipline disproportionality but also expose students to social justice reform and transform school culture.

## Recommendations for Further Research

While students' perspectives and middle school experiences around school discipline were collected, students were not inquired about their feelings of safety, inclusiveness, and belonging at their middle school. This would build on previous data collecting middle and high school students' perspectives on their sense of belonging and inclusiveness to the school (Bottiani et al., 2016, 2017; Voight et al., 2015). There is data which reveals teachers at the middle school level are more focused on control than relationships (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013), and discipline data is higher in middle schools but was that the perspective of these students and did it differ by the school?

While both girls and boys shared their experiences, it was evident that the girls were more vocal in their experiences. More research should focus on the thoughts and experiences of African American males; perhaps having male focus groups would help them be more candid about their experiences. More research should also continue to gage middle school Black students and their experiences focusing on marginalization or discrimination experienced by staff members due to gender or race.

Due to the challenges brought on from the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to conduct convenience sampling to obtain participants for my focus groups. These participants were willing to join the focus groups but did not reflect the original criteria that were desired, which were students who were referred to the office at least once. Many of the participants, especially the males, vocalized their observations of inequitable treatment to other students and not themselves. Additional research should center around students who have been referred to the office at least once, so that they can articulate their experiences and speak more to their experiences with due process of school discipline.

I also believe that it would be very beneficial to the field of educational leadership to shed light on schools that are doing the work to decrease the disproportionality between Black and White students. More case studies should develop around schools that are implementing certain methods which are producing substantial declines to Black students overrepresented in school discipline data, referrals to the office, and harsher consequences given. Previous research has provided several solutions which includes building and sustaining relationships (Yang et., 2018), providing ongoing teacher development (Green et al., 2018; Monroe, 2009; Skiba et al., 1997), using multi-tiered systems of support (Lustick, 2017; Teske, 2011) and restorative practices (Teske, 2011). This will counter the consistent narrative that is told throughout the educational system and in the media.

Upon reflection, I realized that I observed more tenets from Critical Race Theory than I was expected. My research findings went beyond counter storytelling to also include evidence of the idea of White supremacy in education. Based on student responses, there is a system that includes educational policies and practices that determine what is "right, acceptable and appropriate behavior." We have seen the effects of this concept through zero tolerance laws and the school to prison pipeline. We have also seen unfair discipline practices that have been evident through the practice of differential selection and differential processing; more specifically referring students of color to the office due to subjective behaviors and providing harsher consequences to Black students (Mansfield et al., 2020). Through this lens, because our educational system was designed to favor and benefit White students in academics and discipline, students of color are given inequitable treatment. As such, if our system doesn't reimagine and transform education with all students in mind then student disproportionality in school discipline will not change.

**Final Thoughts**

The purpose of this research was to explore the middle school experiences of secondary Black students with school discipline. The topic emerged from my own personal encounters as an Assistant Principal with students of color and the stories they told about the differential treatment and inequitable consequences that were assigned to them. My goal was to highlight their stories and elevate their voices to counter what is commonly told and heard in the educational field; Black students are overrepresented in school discipline data.

This narrative is also commonly and exhaustively observed and communicated in the media, which are that Black individuals, specifically Black males are treated unjustly by law enforcement and overrepresented in our nation's penal system. African American males have been overrepresented and treated unfairly in our justice and legal system for many decades. It is not so much the actions of the individual, but the whole system which is collectively not designed in favor of minorities. The same could be said for our nation's education system. Flawed, and still having a stain from the emergence of the era when zero tolerance policies emerged in the 90s, many schools are still throwing Black students out of school and suspending them, instead of providing preventive support to target, decrease and eliminate the cause of the behavior that is observed in schools.

In order to counter the worn-out narrative about Black students overrepresented in school discipline is to study and center the voices of those who are often the victims of these actions in the school. This provides educators and educational leaders a comprehensive picture of what is actually occurring in our schools. Noguera (2008) also stated that elevating students' voices creates the space for children to be a part of the problem-solving process. If we want to produce students that are problem solvers, allowing them to be a part of an issue that is relevant to them

and their communities is the first step to doing so. This was confirmed at the end of collecting data from the first focus group; they were very appreciative and thoroughly enjoyed being a part of the process.

In this current age where equity is the commonly used buzzword in education, if we are serious about providing students with what they need to be successful and eliminating barriers to learning, we must transfer this same ideology with school discipline. Overall, based on what students shared, building relationships is the most important practice that teachers can act in to ensure that students are successful. Rita Pierson once said, "[K]ids don't learn from people they don't like." It is the responsibility of the teacher to create the conditions to build and sustain relationships and establish human connections with all of their teachers. Teachers must understand their students' background and experiences and be intentional in demonstrating care and concern for their students. Teachers must also ensure that they personalize the learning environment for their students and plan for engaging lessons. All of these factors contribute to decreasing discipline and increasing student trust, belonging, and inclusiveness.

More importantly, it is my hope that my research adds to previous research which explores secondary students' perceptions but also sheds light for educational leaders on steps that they could take to improve their school's culture and climate for the benefit of their students.

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# APPENDIX A: STUDENT RECRUITMENT LETTER

*The below was used a pre-recorded script use to record a video sent from to the school administrator to share with students' teachers:*

Good Afternoon!

My name is Noelle Leslie and I am a researcher University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am interested in Black students' experiences with school discipline. I want to learn more about your accounts, perceptions, and thoughts around how your school manages school discipline. I would love to hear your thoughts. I want to hear from you in particular because you have also been here all three years of middle school, so you have a pretty good idea and understanding of your school's culture. This experience allows you to share your story with nothing tied to simply sharing your experience. Because you are a minor, I am required to obtain parental consent. If you are interested, your teachers will send your parents a parent permission form for them to read and sign. The parent permission form provides detailed information and purpose on the study and the reason why you have been selected. If they sign, your parents should send it back to me. Once I have received your parent's permission slip, I will then send your parents an assent form which also gives you detailed information on the study and ask you are you willing to participate. You can always choose to not participate at any time and your parents can change their minds at any time. I will need your parents to take a picture of their signature and your signature. I have also given your parents my email address. Once I have parent permission forms and assent forms back and signed stating that you can and will participate, we will meet through Skype as a group to talk about your experiences. We will meet two or three times that is convenient for you so that I can verify what I collected was what you communicated. This focus group is confidential, and your name or information will not be shared with anyone at your school or in the district. You will create a fake name to use in the study.

At the conclusion of the study a thank you incentive will be provided to you for participating. I hope that you agree to participate!

Version 1.1

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO**

**CONSENT FOR A MINOR TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM**

Project Title: **That's Not Fair! Students' Perceptions and Experiences with Middle School Discipline.**

Principal Investigator: Noelle Leslie

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Katherine Mansfield

Participant's Name: <u>(Name of student)</u>

**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

*Your child is being asked to take part in a research study. Your child's participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose for your child not to join, or you may withdraw your consent for him/her to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.*

*Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to your child for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose for your child not to be in the study or you choose for your child to leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship or your child's relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.*

*Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about your child being in this research study.*

*You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.*

**What is the study about?**

This research study focuses on African American middle school students' perspectives and experiences centering around school discipline. I will collect students' experiences at a school and compare my findings. Students will be a part of a focus group and questions will be asked to the group and individuals can talk about their varied experiences.

**Why are you asking my child?**

The reason I am selecting your child is because your child meets the criteria of African American, in middle school, and has attended the school all three years.

**What will you ask my child to do if I agree to let him or her be in the study?**
As indicated above, I will ask students questions centering about their experiences with school discipline. Questions will be asked such as the following: *Tell me about your overall experience here at _____ Middle School. Tell me about your experiences with your teachers. Talk about any fair or unfair experiences with school discipline.* Questions will be asked to the group and students are free to answer or not answer. The focus group interview will last about 45-60 minutes. Due to COVID-19 pandemics and stay-at-home orders from local government leaders the focus group will be conducted through Skype. Your child may feel a rise of emotions including sadness, frustration, or anger from thinking about a particular situation or experiences with school discipline. This is perfectly normal. Your child is free to request a break if need be. Your child can also assent to stop at any time.

**Is there any audio/video recording of my child?**

Students' responses will be audio recorded to later be transcribed into words. Because your child's voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, confidentiality for things said on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

**What are the dangers to my child?**

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. Feelings of sadness, frustration, or anger may emerge or reemerge. Students may also communicate or share experiences that emerged with their peers or staff members after the interview, although they will be requested not to do so. Students may also miss instructional time although our first priority is to lead a focus group during a non-instructional time range.
If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact (Noelle Leslie, principal investigator at nsleslie@uncg.edu or Dr. Katherine Mansfield, Faculty Advisor at kcmansfi@uncg.edu ).

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of my child taking part in this research?**

The experiences that are shared may help center the voices of African American students and may add to previous research on African American middle school students' experiences with school discipline. Ultimately the goal is for researchers and educators to think about their school discipline policies and practices and strive for a more equitable discipline system.

**Are there any benefits to *my child* as a result of participation in this research study?**

There is a benefit of students being able to tell their stories, outside of the context of being involved with school discipline. This experience is only for research purposes only. Many times, students share their experiences, they have been referred to the office or have "misbehaved." This opportunity solely highlights their voice outside of the realm of them receiving any school discipline.

**Will my child get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything for my kid to be in this study?**

There are no costs to you or payments to you or your child as a result of participation in this study. However, students will receive a thank you incentive for taking part in the study. Students will receive a gift card through the mail after the second meeting with students.

**How will my child's information be kept confidential?**

Students background information will be kept confidential. Student information will be kept in a locked office. Online documents will be kept locked using the Box website. I will require students to pick a pseudonym name that they can use during the focus group and I will use in my research data analysis. Also, data that is provided from students will not be shared with school administration or school staff. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. By law I am required to report any abuse that might supersede these confidentiality promises. Due to the group setting, I cannot guarantee that the other students may not repeat what someone has said in the group, but that I will ask the group to keep everyone's responses confidential.

**Will my child's de-identifiable data be used in future studies?**

Per UNCG policy, data must be stored for five years following study closure. Your child's de-identified data will not be used in future research projects.

**What if my child wants to leave the study or I want him/her to leave the study?**
You have the right to refuse to allow your child to participate or to withdraw him or her at any time, without penalty. If your child does withdraw, it will not affect you or your child in any way. If you or your child chooses to withdraw, you may request that any data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your child's participation at any time. This could be because your child has had an unexpected reaction, has failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness allow your child to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you have read it or it has been read to you, you fully understand the contents of this document and consent to your child taking part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are the legal parent or guardian of the child who wishes to participate in this study described to you by <u>Noelle Leslie</u>.

_____ Date: _____

Participant's Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature

APPENDIX C: STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

**Overall Experiences**

- Talk about your overall experience here at _____Evangel Prep. How long have you attended the school? Include any good experiences and bad experiences.

- What are some good memories that you have attending this school? What are some bad memories that you have at this school?

- What are your experiences with school discipline here at the school?

**Experiences with teachers:**

- Talk about your overall relationships that you have with their teachers?

- Talk about a teacher that you like. Why do you like this teacher? Talk about a teacher that you don't like. Why may not like this teacher.

**Experiences with administrators:**

- Talk about your overall relationships that you have with the administrators?

- Talk about an administrator that you like. Why do you like this administrator? Talk about an administrator that you may not like. Why don't you like this administrator?

**Finding solutions to improve teacher/administrator practices**

- What solutions would you provide to make your school a better place overall?

- What solutions would you give your school to have better discipline practices?

- What solutions would you give to make teachers more effective?

- What solutions would you give to teachers to have better discipline practices?

- What advice would you give your peers that relate to school discipline?

**Reflection**

Is there anything that I didn't ask that I should have asked?

Is there anything additional that you did not share that I should know about your school experience here at _____Evangel Prep?