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## An Exploratory Multiple Case Study of Discipline Practices in a Major Metropolitan Public School District: A Look into the School to Prison Pipeline

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**An Exploratory Multiple Case Study of Discipline Practices in a Major  
Metropolitan Public School District: A Look into the School to Prison Pipeline**

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## **Abstract**

The school to prison pipeline is a phenomenon fed by exclusionary discipline practices that increase the likelihood that a student will have an interaction with the juvenile or criminal justice system at some time in their life; this phenomenon disproportionately affects Black students. Understanding the problem is key to slowing down the school to prison pipeline. This study of a school district in Missouri explores questions about how interpersonal relationships, implicit bias awareness, and school policies influence the learning environment, and how those factors relate to school discipline, which ultimately can lead to the school to prison pipeline. Drawing data from exploratory multiple case study interviews, numerous themes emerged. Relationships are important when making changes in schools. Staff were forced to develop plans to support students by building relationships, managing teaching expectations, and developing alternatives to suspension. The new policy positively affected law enforcement officers' interactions with students. The study has important implications for school practitioners; namely policy change is an effective method to lessen school suspensions thus decreasing the school to prison pipeline. The implications for law enforcement officers working in schools is that they can also work to reduce the school to prison pipeline through improved relationships with students and families. They are an invaluable resource to students, families, and school staff to support students and to prevent them from entering the criminal justice system later in life.

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## List of Abbreviations

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Acronym	Key Term
MO-ACLU	Missouri Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union
EDP	Exclusionary Discipline Practices
FTF	Forward Thru Ferguson
ISS	In-School Suspension
IBA	Implicit Bias Awareness
IDP	Inclusionary Discipline Practices
IR	Interpersonal Relationships
OSS	Out-of-School Suspension
SP	School Policy
STPP	School to Prison Pipeline

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The School To Prison Pipeline (STPP) is a phenomenon fed by exclusionary discipline practices in schools for behavioral and classroom management issues. In the 2015-2016 school year, over two and a half million students were subjected to out of school suspension at least once (Novak, 2019). Policies that reinforce structural racism, poor interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal biases elevate the chances that exclusionary practices will be used for punishment, further feeding the STPP.

If school districts commit to ending exclusionary discipline practices, through changing policies, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and providing opportunities for staff to identify intrapersonal biases, the school to prison pipeline should affect fewer students. Exclusionary disciplinary policies in school districts across the United States allow for the disproportionate suspension of children of color. Interpersonal and intrapersonal biases also contribute to the disproportionate dropout rates of children of color in the United States. Students who attend schools that use more punitive school punishments have reported weaker bonds to their schools and are not as engaged in their community growing up (Ramey, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

Exclusionary discipline measures continue to plague students in major metropolitan school districts. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (2018), in the 2015-2016 school year, “Missouri had the 10th highest gap between Black and White K-12 students in the nation for out-of-school suspensions and Black students were 16% of the state school population but were 46% of suspensions statewide” (p. 6). Exclusionary discipline practices support structural racism by further exacerbating certain

life situations such as poverty and disabilities among black students (Yang et al., 2018), creating one more path to escort them down the school to prison pipeline.

Exclusionary discipline practices employed at an early childhood educational level increases the opportunity for dropout in later grades, leading to a greater chance for students to come in contact with the juvenile justice system (Mallet, 2016).

“Experiencing only one suspension, for example, increases an individual’s risk of dropping out of school by over 77%” (Pigott, 2018, p. 123). In our research we explored the causal considerations when referring a student for suspension. We contend diminished positive interpersonal relationships between students and teachers, teacher and administrator’s lack of awareness of implicit biases, in conjunction with the inherently exclusionary or racist school policies that exist lead to a higher rate of suspensions.

The murder of Mike Brown in 2014 cast a brighter light on racist educational practices in the United States. Research shows that students experiencing out of school suspension (OSS) are more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system early in life and the criminal justice system later in life (Mallett, 2016). Systems have been implemented that seek to employ restorative justice or positive behavioral intervention and support frameworks, and while there have been decreases in the impact on Black children as a whole, disproportionality still exists (McIntosh et al., 2018b).

The ACLU and Forward Thru Ferguson (FTF) are two community organizations that have studied and published recommendations on changes to school discipline practices. In the past six years, several school districts have announced policies to eliminate out of school suspensions. In this dissertation, all school districts will remain

confidential. We focused on a major metropolitan public school district in the Midwest. In 2016, a Midwest school district's superintendent called to end the suspensions of students in grades K-2, then three additional superintendents declared their commitment to do likewise the following year, with many more Missouri superintendents following suit over the next five years. However, not much research exists on how this call to action has influenced the dispensation of exclusionary discipline measures and moved school districts toward inclusionary discipline practices.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this exploratory, multiple case study is to examine how interpersonal relationships between student and teachers, employee awareness of their implicit biases, and structural racism embedded in school policies affect efforts to eliminate exclusionary discipline and end the school to prison pipeline. We believe that moving toward more positive relationships, acknowledging and confronting biases, and changing systemically debilitating policies will lead to a decrease in exclusionary discipline practices and move toward more inclusive practices. Interpersonal relationships and implicit biases are explored in terms of their contribution to a positive learning environment. We also seek to expose school policies that reflect racist practices in the hope that by doing so we can challenge the systemically racist basis for administering such exclusionary disciplinary practices.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do student-teacher interpersonal relationships and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

RQ2: How do teacher, administrator and school resource officer (SRO) implicit bias

awareness and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

RQ3: How do school policy and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

We conducted our study to better understand how items in our conceptual model (Figure 1) interact with each other. We view disciplinary practices as mechanisms that enhance or inhibit the learning environment. We explored to what extent those practices influenced student learning, and under what circumstances those practices contributed to or detracted from the learning environment.

The school to prison pipeline (STPP) is influenced by discipline practices in schools. When schools have a high use of exclusionary discipline practices (EDP), such as out of school suspensions, more students are funneled into the STPP. When schools successfully reduce the use of EDP, and implement inclusionary discipline practices (IDP), then fewer students are funneled into the STPP.

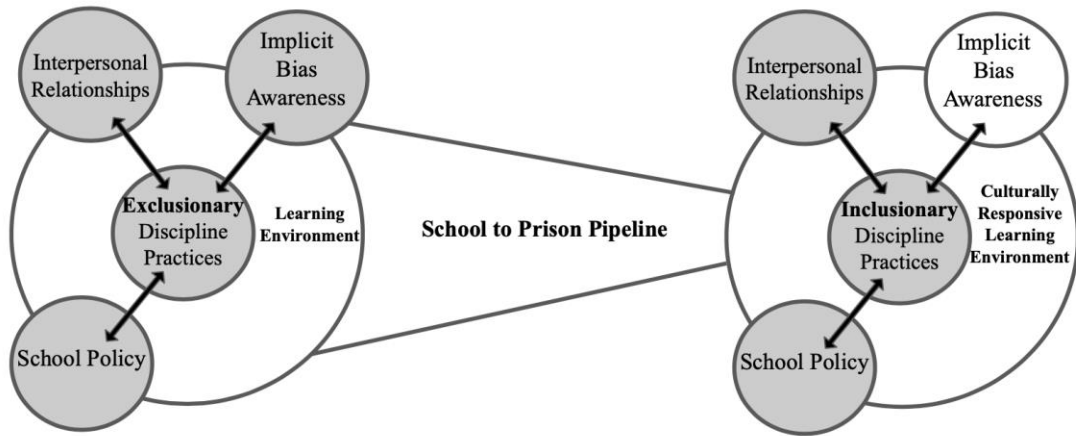
In Figure 1, on the left side, the outward arrows represent a scenario in which the high use of EDP is supported by school policy (SP), interpersonal relationships (IR) and a lack of implicit bias awareness (IBA) among the adults in the schools. On the left side, the inward arrows represent that the SP, IR, and lack of IBA reinforce the high use of EDP.

On the right side, the outward arrows represent when school districts change their policy to eliminate suspensions/EDP, the effect is that the SP, IR and IBA of adults in the buildings will support IDP. On the right side, the inward-pointing arrows represent when the SP, IR and IBA cease to support EDP, and support using inclusionary discipline

practices (IDP) instead. In this case, the number of EDP incidents will decrease and a culturally responsive learning environment will be created. Finally, the STPP shrinks as it moves toward the right-hand side of the conceptual model.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework for Creating a Culturally Responsive Learning Environment*



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, are the unalienable rights enumerated in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The implication for the current day is that these rights are applicable to everyone. Yet there is a segment of society we continue to fail, namely students who identify as Black or brown, disabled, LGBTQ+, or lower socio-economic status. Undoubtedly, access to equally resourced education is a critical factor on the path to the obtaining these rights, however the “promise has proven to be an illusionary one, marred by a history of segregation – de jure and de facto, by class and race disparities, and by gulfs in both funding and quality” (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 1). This unfulfilled promise continues to funnel these students into the school to prison pipeline (STPP).

The (STPP) is a social phenomenon of school-based exclusionary discipline practices, wherein relatively minor transgressions are met with zero-tolerance practices that directly lead to contact with juvenile and criminal justice systems (Abudu & Miles, 2017; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Bryan, 2017; Novak, 2019; Pigott et al., 2018). This phenomenon disproportionately channels minority (Barnes & Motz, 2018), special needs (Fitzgerald et al., 2019), and LGBTQ+ students (Palmer & Greytak, 2017) into direct contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems, often stripping those students of continuing education opportunities; typically, it is those who engage in cultural deficit thinking that implement exclusionary school discipline practices (Abudu & Miles, 2017; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Bryan, 2017; Novak, 2019).

Heitzeg (2009) identified the collateral consequences that result from these targeted, exclusionary actions. The punitive policies that lead to incarceration, also result in systemic injustices such as voter disenfranchisement and the inability to obtain federal

benefits which include housing, healthcare, and education. Felony convictions can result in loss of parental rights and decreased employment opportunities. These consequences can result in generational losses of accumulated wealth and education.

As illustrated in this literature review, many publications address the school to prison pipeline. The definition of the STPP that was provided above was developed through this literature review by analyzing the working definition in each publication we reviewed. We identified the following themes in the literature:

1. The majority of the literature identified the STPP as a phenomenon or mechanism.
2. The majority of authors identified the STPP as using exclusionary practices.
3. The majority of authors identified the STPP leading to contact with law enforcement.
4. The majority of authors identified the STPP disproportionately targeting poor, minority, special needs and/or LGBTQ+ students.

In this chapter, we review pertinent research related to racism in the learning environment, exclusionary school discipline, and the school to prison pipeline. This background was beneficial to understanding how exclusionary discipline served as a feeder to the STPP in America, how it has impacted African American students disproportionately, and why multiple public school districts have moved to a more inclusionary discipline model.

The American public school system provides a free learning environment for all school aged children. The learning environment is more than a school or a classroom. The “learning environment refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures

in which students learn” (Great Schools Partnership, 2013, para. 1). The culture of the learning environment is impacted by discipline practices. This research outlined how exclusionary discipline practices are fueled by a lack of positive interpersonal relationships and implicit bias awareness, as well as inequitable school policies. In contrast, inclusionary discipline practices are fueled by a culturally responsive learning environment where staff and students have positive interpersonal relationships, school staff are more aware of their implicit biases, and school policies are centered around equity.

### **Factors of Exclusionary Discipline**

#### **School Policy**

School policies guide discipline practices in the learning environment and impact not only the school culture but ultimately the pipeline that feeds the criminal justice system. As reported by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, “Missouri ranked last among 50 states in a UCLA study for having the highest gap in suspension rates between black and white elementary school pupils in 2011-12” (Crouch, 2015). According to Losen et al. (2015):

At 12.5 more Black elementary students than White elementary students suspended per every 100 enrolled, Missouri’s Black-White discipline gap was the widest in the nation at the elementary level, and it also had the highest Black elementary suspension rate of any state. (p. 17)

Research shows school suspension leads to arrest later in life and that racial inequities in school discipline directly impact racial inequities in arrest and incarceration rates later in life (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Novak, 2019; Bacher-Hicks, et al., 2019). Barnes and Motz



(2018) suggested that if the suspension gap was closed between Black and White students then there would be a 16% reduction in the racial inequity of arrest later in life. School policymakers have a responsibility to implement alternatives to suspensions and work towards equity in school discipline.

### **Implicit Bias**

Biases of school staff contribute to exclusionary discipline and many of those biases are implicit. Implicit bias refers to “a bias or prejudice that is present but not consciously held or recognized” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). Barnes and Motz (2019) note that teachers’ implicit biases make them more likely to refer a Black student for discipline than a White student for the same behavior which ultimately results in racial inequities in school discipline. “Biases are often implicit, meaning adults in schools are unaware that they act on subconscious ideas based on social conditioning over time”. (Payno-Simmons, 2021, p. 2). After a student is referred to the office, the administrator makes a decision on appropriate discipline, a decision which is impacted by the administrator's implicit biases. Making educational practitioners aware of their biases could have an impact on racial disparities in school discipline.

“Evidence suggests that principals and other school officials have considerable discretion over discipline policy, and when they lean toward harsher discipline it has negative long-run impacts on students, especially minority males” (Bacher-Hicks, et al., 2019, p. 28). “A potential intervention for reducing the effects of implicit bias on disproportionality is to provide specific guidance in making unbiased discipline decisions in ambiguous or snap-judgment situations” (McIntosh et al., 2018a, p. 147). Barnes and Motz (2019) argue that “a simple policy that makes teachers aware of their implicit biases

might be successful in, if only partially, eliminating racial inequalities in school disciplinary practices” (p. 2336). Racial inequities in criminal arrests could be eliminated when racial inequities are eliminated in school discipline.

### **Interpersonal Relationships**

Having a positive relationship with one’s teacher may be a factor that promotes positive outcomes and ameliorates risk for students who may be considered at risk for negative outcomes such as school dropout. However, a negative relationship may further promote negative outcomes for at risk students as well. (Decker et al., 2007, p. 85)

Intrinsically, we believe those who enter the field of education do so because they have the desire to uplift our children and to make the world a better place by shaping the lives of young people through education and classroom interaction. Education is an honorable profession, one where educational goals and personal ethical growth are intertwined (Carr, 1993). Merriam-Webster (n.d.-b) defines interpersonal relationships as ones that involve relations between persons, and when we consider that our educators are responsible for a significant portion of the personal and moral development of our children, it stands to reason that a strong positive interpersonal relationship is desirable to obtain optimal educational results. Educational results come in many forms, most apparent are the goals focusing on attaining grade level academic success. Social and emotional developmental goals also have their place in the classroom, and it is our contention that a more positive teacher-student interpersonal relationship will result in teacher feeling more invested in the student, causing a more caring approach to

disciplinary issues, and the student being more receptive of any disciplinary actions that take place.

Barriers exist that can be either protractive or prohibitive in the quest to create a more positive interpersonal teacher-student relationship when race is a factor. Dancy (2014) reminds us that the American educational system was originally designed to educate the white wealthy elite to adhere to the expectations that they would assume as adults (as cited in Yang et al., 2018, p. 4).

Over time, the behavioral norms and expectations established by the wealthy white majority have become codified into educational discipline policy and touted as colorblind. Colorblindness in this context is the assumption that good behavior is not bound by a particular cultural context; instead it is objectively defined, and all students should be held equally to the same standards (Yang et al., 2018, p. 4).

One tenet of Critical Race Theory, Whiteness as property, is described as a process that protects the rights of the dominant racial group at the expense of marginalized groups (Harris, 1993). This is problematic, because it looks at only one set of cultural behaviors as the normal standard when considering any disciplinary issues. Therefore, youth who tend to be seen as disruptive and dangerous, who are thus removed from class, tend to be students of color (Yang et al., 2018). Research shows that schools' reliance on exclusionary discipline is racialized (Wilson et al., 2020).

The argument is that white teachers often misread Black students' different behavioral styles (e.g., speech, dress, and energy level) as defiance. Black students may be puzzled to find that white teachers are angered by behavior that is

unnoticed or even rewarded in the students' homes and neighborhoods, [i.e. cultural norms] (Downey & Pribesh, 2004, p. 268).

This hierarchy of cultural norms, coupled with zero tolerance policies, have generally resulted in more frequent and more harsh disciplinary consequences such as suspension or expulsion for Black students for violations other than the drug or weapon violations they were intended to punish (Heitzeg, 2009).

Pantic and Wubbels (2012), found that teachers' ability to consider moral values and concern for relationships is even more important for teachers working in schools that operate within culturally diverse societies. Teachers' awareness of their own values and those of their students is identified as part of teachers' dispositions for culturally responsive teaching which can in turn affect student achievement (Gay, 2002), and we would add that it impacts the level of discipline levied on individual students. Teacher quality is another consideration when accounting for discipline gaps (Scott et al., 2019). "Higher teacher quality has been found to be associated with reduced achievement gaps across both socioeconomic status (SES) and race" (Heck 2007, as cited in Scott et al., 2019). It has also been established that highly qualified teachers tend to teach at advantaged schools (Clotfelter et al., 2006), and schools that serve large percentages of Black students are more likely to employ less experienced teachers (Aud et al., 2010; Mickelson, 2001). Research has shown that teachers tend to view students differently based on race, Asian students being viewed most positively, and Black students being viewed least positively by White teachers (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013), "Takei and Shouse (2008), found that both White and Black teachers rated students work habits differently solely based on race, with Black students' work and ability being rated lower,

even after controlling for behavior” (Scott et. al, 2019, p. 23). This is an indication that culturally responsive teaching skills must bridge racial boundaries.

Through our research, we show how increased positivity in interpersonal relationships between teachers and students is a beneficial goal. We propose that this increased positive relationship will elicit more effective classroom management techniques, instill a sense of pride, dignity, and confidence in students, and institute an overall decreased propensity to administer exclusionary disciplinary practices to Black students as a first response.

### **Exclusionary School Discipline**

Missouri’s school discipline is inequitable. For years, the disproportionate discipline of students of color and students with disabilities has prevented these students from achieving their educational potential. Missouri has one of the largest discipline disparity gaps in the country, ranking worse than 40 other states. (American Civil Liberties Union-Missouri, N.D., para. 2-3).

A contradiction exists in American schools between academic expectations and discipline policies. Academic state standards have been developed to prepare students for a college or career pathway; however, zero-tolerance discipline policies lead to inflated suspension and youth incarceration rates, which create a pipeline to prison that supersedes any intended pathway to college or career programs. This phenomenon disproportionately affects students of color (Barnes & Motz, 2018). State and federal laws dictate some school district discipline decisions which leads to premature and over incarceration of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Research showed a complex relationship between race, poverty, and school discipline. A quantitative analysis showed “school districts with greater black populations had higher rates of criminalized school discipline and lower rates of medicalization” (Ramey, 2015, p. 195). They also had higher rates of suspension, expulsion, and police referral or arrest. These results suggested districts with larger populations of economically disadvantaged youth, and a larger population of Black students, “organize their student discipline policies around the principles of the criminal justice system rather than the mental health system” (Ramey, 2015, p. 196).

Research in 1988 predicted that if we stay on a path of not taking responsibility for inferior student outcomes, there “will be a decline in the number of minorities in the teaching force and little improvement in the academic performance of minority students in the public schools” (Wilson, 1998, p. 196). In 2016, Slate et al. mapped several recommendations to lessen the disparities in discipline, specifically toward Black girls. Like Wilson, Slate et al. mentions teacher preparation as a cornerstone to change. Institutions must allow “opportunities to develop the cultural competency of both teacher and principal candidates... to evaluate and refine classroom management practices that interrogate and eliminate racial and gender biases in the classroom” (2016, p. 257).

### **Out of School Suspension (OSS) and Expulsion**

More than half of African-American male high-school dropouts will become incarcerated at least once by age 30, as a result of African-American suspensions increasing from 33% to 57% in just four years, from 2003- 2007 (Thompson & Allen, 2012). Hirschfield (2018) concurs, “schools with lower test scores and lower grades appear to use harsher disciplinary methods. Black students tend to attend schools that

have higher rates of suspension, extensive surveillance, more police officers, and harsher discipline” (Laub, 2018, p. 5).

Laub and Hirschfield both published articles in 2018 that dove into the complexities of the intersectionality of family, school, neighborhood levels, and looked for overlap to identify promising interventions. Laub promotes a theory that “cumulative disadvantage over the life course has a snowball effect. Specifically, early misconduct in childhood” (2018, p. 4). Hirschfield (2018) examines the school-to-prison pipeline in terms of what he calls micro-level aggressions, such as racist beliefs or actions held by a school principal, and macro-level aggressions, such as high suspension rates at school districts who serve primarily African American students.

Restorative practices used effectively in schools can cut down on expulsions and over-criminalization of students (Abudu & Miles, 2017). To cut off the prison pipeline, schools need to consider other forms of punishments in lieu of suspension such as restorative practices or Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS). Fowler (2011), found that students in Texas schools, as young as elementary school, are receiving Class C misdemeanor tickets for behaviors that could very well be school managed. African American and special education students suffer the most with this type of punishment. Youth who are referred to the courts are more likely to have poor school attendance, poor grades, and more likely to become a drop out and end up in the criminal justice system when older. “Texas students are increasingly receiving misdemeanor tickets for minor misbehavior, and being drawn into adult, municipal or justice of the peace court where they face fines of up to \$500, community service, and a criminal record” (Fowler, 2011, p. 69).

## **Zero-Tolerance**

Zero-tolerance policies do not produce equitable outcomes for all students. In 2016, “the suspension rate for Black students is more than 3 times as large as that for White students” (Curran, 2016, p. 647). No evidence suggests that zero tolerance policies reduce overall levels of misbehavior in schools, nor do they improve the learning environment of those students who remain in the school.

Since the 1990’s, the zero-tolerance disciplinary philosophy has been in effect in several school districts. A concept adopted from the President Regan era “War on Drugs,” zero tolerance has morphed into a system for school discipline that allows for limited or no subjectivity in the dispensation of student punishment (Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Research shows that zero tolerance policies adversely affect black and brown students (Mallett, 2016). According to McCurdy (2014), “the U.S. Department of Education identified in 2012 that in school districts with more than 50,000 students, African-American students represented 24% of enrollment but 35% of on-campus arrests, with lower, but still disparate rates for Hispanic students” (Mallett, 2016, p. 297). Until this discrepancy in practice is resolved, the school system will continue to serve as a feeder to the criminal justice system for our children of color. (Yang et al., 2018). The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and it disproportionately affects African Americans (“List of countries by incarceration date”, 2021).

Teachers, administrators, and school resource officer (SRO) bias exacerbates the STPP (Bryan, 2017). Pigott et al. (2018) studied zero-tolerance policies as well as suspension rates and concluded that no evidence suggests that SROs escalate rates of



arrest. However, it is important to note that experiencing just one suspension “increases a student’s risk of dropping out of high school by over 77%” (Pigott et al., 2018, p.123).

This suggests that school administrators contribute to the STPP more than SROs.

In 2014, Skiba et al. compared discipline consequence variations among different principals and by the same principal. In a study surveying 325 principals regarding their attitudes toward zero tolerance, suspension and expulsion, and violence prevention strategies, they “reported an association between principal attitude toward discipline and school disciplinary outcomes” (p. 647). Skiba et al. also noted that principals from low-suspending schools were “more likely to express a clear philosophy and vision (e.g., a strong commitment to African American education) that guided their disciplinary policy” (p. 647).

Recent studies highlighted the use of restorative justice in place of zero-tolerance measures in schools. Ramey (2020) specifically concluded that use of zero-tolerance and the criminal justice system as punishment in the schools has fed the STPP. However, Sandwick et al. (2019) demonstrates how a restorative justice model can minimize the STPP. Sandwick et al. concluded,

In these case studies, the perceived outcomes were substantial, reaching far beyond any particular disciplinary event; improved relationships, increased student leadership, enhanced empathy, greater feelings of physical and emotional safety, and so on. Thus, researchers and policy makers must expand beyond measures of punitive discipline and adopt a ‘wide lens’ of evaluation to document holistic Restorative Justice cultural shifts. (2019, p.26)

## **Other Exclusionary Discipline Practices**

Much of the research on exclusionary discipline practices focused on out of school suspensions (OSS) and zero tolerance policies. In addition to these practices other forms of exclusionary discipline exist that operate in the same manner, excluding students from the learning environment. In-school suspension (ISS) was created as a means of removing the student from the classroom as punishment while keeping them in school. "These centers were to provide the teachers with relief from unruly students while providing students access to educational opportunity" (Morris & Howard, 2003, p. 156). The educational opportunities provided in ISS are far different than the experience and instruction the student would be provided in their regular classroom. ISS mirrors the disproportionate outcomes identified for OSS, thus providing further inequitable exclusion from the classroom for Black students (Cholewa et al., 2018). There is a "negative association between ISS and academic outcomes, such that students receiving ISS had significantly lower GPAs and were four times as likely to drop out than their peers" (Cholewa et al., 2018, p. 198). One of the data sets we analyzed explored whether there was a correlation between OSS and ISS numbers. We did this by looking at whether ISS numbers increased when OSS numbers decreased. If schools replaced OSS with ISS, they would have done nothing to stop excluding students from the learning environment.

Another possible exclusionary discipline practice often encouraged among teachers is the use of a "buddy room". In a buddy room, teachers pair with another teacher and have an understanding that they can send students to each other's classroom as an alternative to sending the student to the office when they misbehave.

With this system, teachers keep a free seat in their room for a misbehaving student. The seat has a paper asking the student to reflect on their behavior - why it was inappropriate, how it may have been affecting others and themselves, and how they can improve in the future. (Swan, 2019, suggestion 2)

With this approach, students are excluded from their classroom to complete another task while missing instruction. If the student stays in the buddy room for an entire day this becomes a similar practice as ISS. Some buddy room practices may include short visits with individualized attention from another teacher who can help problem-solve with the student.

Another important benefit of buddy teacher time-out is that it allows the teacher to continue working with the class. With the buddy teacher taking care of the child for the moment, the teacher can continue with the lesson as planned.

(“Buddy Teachers”, 2005, Benefits of the Approach)

### **Inclusionary School Discipline**

Restorative practices imply that inclusion can be central to how discipline is meted out. We have already discussed zero tolerance as the backdrop within which school discipline decisions are made, a backdrop that generally results in students being suspended, expelled, or punished in some other exclusionary manner (Buckmaster, 2016). The punishment under zero tolerance, which is generally severe, does not take into consideration situational context, offender rehabilitation, or victim reconciliation (Mateer, 2010 as cited by Buckmaster). Kline (2016) stated, “restorative practices are an inclusionary, non-punitive alternative” (p. 97). Restorative practices, a derivative of restorative justice, utilize a preventative focus on educational interventions (McCluskey

et al., 2008). Kline pointed out that when enacted, restorative practices allow an opportunity for all participants to learn conflict resolution strategies and behavior management in a peaceful manner. Teske (2011, as cited by Kline, 2016), suggested a dualistic approach and that restorative practices have both a preventative and a reactive component. The preventative component focuses on in-school programming such as meetings, language development, and skill building. The reactive component focuses on restoring the impaired relationships (McCluskey et al., 2008).

Positive Behavior Support Interventions (PBIS) is another inclusive framework seeking to employ preventative and proactive disciplinary approaches as opposed to punitive ones (Bradshaw et al., 2010). The PBIS framework accentuates setting behavioral guidelines and expectations, as well as teaching appropriate behaviors (Chin et al., 2012). Based on behaviorist theory and social learning, PBIS include elements such as:

- (a) Universally adopted, consistently applied, well-defined expectations of behavior,
- (b) staff and students who are informed/trained on these expectations,
- (c) a reward system for students' appropriate behaviors, and
- (d) additional intensive supports to address student needs in addition to systemic universal, school-wide procedures (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Luiselli et al., 2005, as cited by Chin et. al., 2012, p. 160).

Other inclusive and preventative measures are emerging through research, utilizing frameworks like PBIS. Chin et al. (2011) cites research from Cantrell et al. (2007) that examines implementing school-wide peer mediation.

## **Culturally Responsive Learning Environment**

Cultural differences “are among the most misunderstood in the teacher-student dynamic and are often the things that cause students to get into the most trouble in the school discipline system” (Rucker, 2019, para.1). Educational research has begun to “redefine classroom management in ways that extend beyond the basic implementation of discipline by emphasizing relationships, people, power dynamics, and cultural differences” (Davis, 2017, p. 130). Culture includes language, beliefs, attitudes, religion, traditions, and many other aspects that people pass down throughout generations and an educator's cultural misunderstandings may be linked to problems with classroom management” (Weinstein et al, 2004). Culture affects how people, including students, interpret and respond to situations, and teachers must adopt an asset-based mindset in order to shift their approach to classroom management (Davis, 2017). Districts, schools, and teachers are responsible for creating a learning environment for students that is inclusive of cultural differences. Therefore, it is imperative that schools and teachers focus on how students’ cultures and backgrounds are dynamic (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) and understanding the context of their backgrounds will allow teachers to support and celebrate students’ differences (Weiner, 2003). Disproportionate school discipline will continue to feed the STPP until teachers are willing to provide a culturally responsive learning environment for all students (Bryan, 2017). We suggest that by responding to culturally unresponsive school policy, implicit biases, and the need to strengthen interpersonal relationships, schools can provide a culturally responsive learning environment for all students, thus lessening the flow into the STPP.

## **Local Organizations - ACLU and FTF**

With the school to prison pipeline in mind, Forward Through Ferguson (2015) released a “Path Toward Racial Equity” report, detailing what school districts can do to reduce the flow of students into the school to prison pipeline. Starting on page 105 of the report, in the section labeled, “Youth at the Center,” the report offers nine calls to action as listed in Table 1. Furthermore, the Missouri chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released a publication in 2018, outlining recommendations on the actions school districts can take to reduce the flow of students into the school to prison pipeline. In their publication, they made recommendations to educators, as well as to policy makers. Refer to Table 1 for a list of the recommendations.

School districts face a challenge in changing the culture from exclusionary disciplinary practices to inclusionary disciplinary practices. “Once criminalized disciplinary policies are implemented, evidence suggests that they remain in place and are rarely removed from the books” (Ramey, 2018, p. 187). There is also an associated risk when it comes to exclusionary practices. “Experiencing only one suspension, for example, increases an individual’s risk of dropping out of school by over 77%” (Pigott, 2018, p. 4).

Studies have shown that alternative, non-exclusionary disciplinary practices that address the behavior’s root cause should be policy.

Findings from this study suggest policy makers and practitioners should consider alternative, non-deterrence based disciplinary strategies when addressing misbehaviors in school. Rather than continuing to rely on exclusionary methods, policy makers and administrators should consider implementing practices and

programs with demonstrated success in reducing school suspension rates and improving youth behavior (Novak, 2019, p. 1176).

**Table 1**

*American Civil Liberties Union-Missouri (ACLU-MO) and Forward Through Ferguson's Suggested Actions for School Districts to End the School to Prison Pipeline*

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**Forward Thru Ferguson**

- Reform rules pertaining to school disproportionality of behavior referrals, suspensions, expulsions, special education, advanced courses, etc. and ensure that multi- tiered levels of support are in place to prevent disproportionality and systems are created to monitor and create accountability.
- Eliminate the option for out- of-school suspensions and expulsions for students in pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade.
- Update school discipline policies to align with positive youth development and restorative justice frameworks.
- School personnel, where appropriate, should work collaboratively with parents, students, and community organizations, including law clinics and legal service organizations to develop alternative interventions for different types of behavior.
- Mandate annual cultural responsiveness and anti-racism professional development training for teachers and staff – including teachers, staff, community partners and law enforcement officers in schools (i.e. School Resource Officer – SRO).
- Ensure that any school-based law enforcement officers' roles focus on improving school safety while reducing inappropriate referrals to law enforcement.
- Create a public reporting system for discipline data and alternative education placements. Ensure that data can be disaggregated by misbehavior type, age, gender, race/ethnicity, date of incident and response. For each student referred to alternative education, data collection should also include alternative service provider name, attendance, actual services provided, and graduation. All data should be carefully reviewed for disproportionality with special attention given to: A. High schools where suspension and expulsion rates and consequences can be high; B. Disparities in suspensions and services for African American students, especially boys; C. Prevention and de-escalation of conflict, especially between students and teachers.
- Juvenile court, municipal court, and related staff and service providers should be trained on educational rights issues, anti-bias, and cultural responsiveness and ensure court-involved, court-supervised, and/or state-placed youth are provided with appropriate educational services and supports, including change-of-

placement reviews, special education services, and other supports. To ensure accountability and enforcement, create the Missouri Youth Justice Ombudsman Office.

- Mandate training for school personnel and partnering community-based organizations on the needs and legal and constitutional rights of students, as well as resources available for students.

#### **ACLU-MO Suggestions for Educators**

- Make sure teachers, staff, and administrators are engaged and informed about the communities they teach in and prioritize understanding what their students' home lives look like, and how that might affect their in-school behavior.
- Increase use of inclusionary (vs. exclusionary) discipline with an eye towards restorative practices.
- Inform students of their rights. Clearly explain disciplinary procedures.
- Districts should conduct internal evaluations in partnership with community members to learn more about why students are being disciplined.
- Educators should keep track of discipline data in their classroom for their own self-study and correction.
- Eliminate language in the school code of conduct that punishes vague infractions such as “defiance” or “disruptive behavior”.
- Educators should pay particular attention to providing equal access for students with disabilities and enforce disciplinary actions are never taken for behaviors connected to students' disabilities.

#### **ACLU-MO Suggestions for Policymakers**

- Require more detailed reporting of student discipline, including information about length of suspension and the reason for taking disciplinary action. This information should be readily accessible to the public. Schools should have internal reports on disciplinary trends that are available to teachers, students, and parents.
- Consult with parents, teachers, students and community members when creating or updating discipline policies.
- Work to eliminate out of school suspension and expulsion.
- Fund mandatory teacher anti-bias training to educate about trauma-informed practices, racial/economic equity, and issues for disabled students.
- Be specific about how and when restraint and seclusion can be used. Take immediate action to reduce the use of restraint and seclusion, particularly for students with disabilities.
- Hire more counselors and implement trauma-informed practice



- Draft clear MOU agreements to limit the role of officers in discipline matters.  
Review agreements annually with public consultation.

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(ACLU-MO, 2018; The Ferguson Commission, 2016)

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The Missouri ACLU and Forward Thru Ferguson both made recommendations to eliminate suspension for grades kindergarten through third grade. We contacted, and received permission to study, a public school district in the Midwest that made a commitment to stop suspending students in grades kindergarten through second grade. Our research looked at school policy, implicit bias awareness, and interpersonal relationships in select schools in that school district, both before and after the commitment to end out of school suspensions for this age group.

This research study took a qualitative methods approach to look at the experience of educators, school administrators, and juvenile detectives as it relates to the school district's mission to eliminate OSS for students between kindergarten and second grade. We initially requested data from school districts to assist us in choosing schools to participate.

We conducted a study using an exploratory multiple case study approach. We chose this method to explain and interpret findings in our qualitative study, and also to further explore the phenomenon of eliminating suspension from kindergarten through second grade.

Public discipline data was obtained from the school district. The data included the number of out of school suspension and in school suspension incidents for all K-2nd grade students from 2013-2019 in the public school district we studied. We did not include the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years because the data would be skewed by the schools offering virtual instruction for part of both of those school years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Special attention was paid not only to raw numbers, but percentages of suspensions/expulsions as it pertains to the full student body population.

Discipline data was analyzed, and another descriptor was added for schools that showed the largest decrease and the schools that showed the largest increase in suspensions after the public school district pledged to end suspensions. The discipline data will not be shared directly in order to maintain school district confidentiality.

We received a letter of support from one of the four school district superintendents who we initially chose to study, so only that school district was studied. Using the schools that were identified, we then used an exploratory multiple case study to gain understanding of the experiences of administrators, teachers, support staff, and the Juvenile Division of the police department in those schools. Using a qualitative approach gave us a way to collect data that told a more complete story and amplified the voices of teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders who were pioneers in ending early childhood suspension, thus helping to slow the STPP. We interviewed participants about their experiences with school policy, interpersonal relationships, and implicit bias awareness as it relates to student discipline within their school. The interview transcripts were then coded to identify key themes. The researchers provided a summary of the findings that will offer possible implications related to school policy, implicit bias awareness, and interpersonal relationship when school suspensions for students in kindergarten through second grade were eliminated.

### **Research Questions**

As stated in Chapter 1, our research questions are:

- RQ1: How do student-teacher interpersonal relationships and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?
- RQ2: How do teacher, administrator and school resource officer (SRO) implicit

bias awareness and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

RQ3: How do school policy and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

### **Researcher Positionality**

This study is interesting, relevant, and uses a reliable methodology. Due to the diverse positionality of our research team we maintain that our study generated trustworthy results related to school discipline, restorative discipline techniques, and key elements of the STPP. Additionally, our diverse work roles and responsibilities, and the way our careers interface with the school-to-prison pipeline, provides a balance to our study. E. King is a high school assistant principal, K. Calvert-French is a high school counselor, N. French is a high school [police] resource officer, and P. Jackson is an associate director for campus life at a university. We also have demographic diversity in terms of gender, age, race, and religion.

### **Study Location and Participants**

The sample schools were drawn from a Midwest, urban public school district that educates kindergarten through second grade students. We requested disciplinary data from the school district, worked closely with a district leader to identify employees and selected schools to target for our research. Of the schools selected, some had statistically achieved the largest decrease in exclusionary disciplinary actions reported and some had statistically achieved the smallest decrease or no change in exclusionary disciplinary actions reported.

Once schools were selected, we selected teachers and staff, administrators, and juvenile detectives from each school for a total of 13 participants. All interviewees had been employed by the public school district or corresponding police department during 2014-2019 and were currently employed by the district. Of those interviewed, five were Juvenile Detectives within the selected schools, four were Administrators in the selected schools, and four were Teachers/Staff of the selected schools. Of those in the Teachers/Staff category, two were teachers, one was a school counselor, and one was a social worker within the selected school district. Within those interviewed, five were males, and eight were females; ten were African American, three were Caucasian.

We identified four public school districts in the Midwest that made changes to their student code of conduct regarding student suspensions at an early age; this was in response to the call to action following the death of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. We reached out to all four school districts. We submitted the required district research application and documentation for our research proposal to School District 1 and were approved by the committee to conduct our study. We were unable to obtain a letter of support from the other three school districts. School District 2 cited COVID-19 as the reason they would not be able to support our study at this time. Specifically, the district did not want to put any unnecessary stress or additional tasks on their staff members after an already challenging couple of years.

To identify the schools to be studied in School District 1, discipline data was requested from the district. We specifically requested OSS and ISS data for the years immediately before and immediately after the policy change in 2016. The school district did provide discipline data for each school in the district. Each school's suspension rate

was determined by dividing the number of suspensions for grades K-2nd grade by the total population of K-2nd grade students to produce an overall percentage. This was done for every school year from the 2013-2014 school year, through the 2018-2019 school year. Once each school's suspension rates had been calculated, we compared the overall decrease or increase in suspension rates for the 6 school years. To narrow down the number of interviews, the schools were ranked, as best as possible, on their overall performance in decreasing student suspensions. However, because we had a low number of participants agreeing to participate in our study, we ended up using this data more for the purpose of participant descriptors than for participant selection.

We then used that data to identify the four schools with the lowest overall change in suspension numbers and the four schools with the highest overall change in suspension numbers. The remaining schools were ranked between the two extremes, allowing for multiple secondary options for study. We began by reaching out to the administrators at the schools via email, then following up with a phone call requesting their participation in our study. The administrators that we interviewed provided staff names for those who had been employed prior to the policy change in 2016. We then solicited interviews from those teachers and used a snowball method to reach out to other recommended staff members. Once we reached out to all the potential participants via email and phone multiple times and did not receive many responses, we decided to widen our potential pool by expanding the schools that we were targeting. Using the same suspension data that we requested from the school district, we received. We were approved to reach out to ten additional schools. To solicit feedback from law enforcement officers, a detective was contacted in the juvenile unit that responds to school reports. To obtain further officer

feedback, a snowball method was used and detectives in the same unit that were referred from their peers were interviewed. Ultimately, we interviewed four administrators, four staff members, and five officers. Interviews with the above-mentioned teachers, administrators, staff, and juvenile officers continued until data saturation was achieved.

### **Data Collection**

Once the participants volunteered, an individual open-ended narrative interview was conducted with each participant. Each interview was conducted by one of the four researchers. Participants from different racial and gender backgrounds were interviewed. Example of these questions include but are not limited to the following example:

How was the change in exclusionary discipline practices received by the faculty, both administrators and teachers?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

Considering the changes in discipline practices in 2016, tell us about how these changes in the disciplinary practices affected the relationships between students and teachers?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

For this study's interview protocol, see Appendix A. As indicated in the interview protocol, the interviewer may ask questions or lead the conversation in a direction germane to the subject. Yin (2018) addresses this line of open-ended questioning, stating "The nature of the interview is open-ended, and an interviewee may not necessarily stick to your line of questions" (p. 98).

Yin (2018) suggests that interviews should be conducted in the teachers', administrators', or police officers' institution. He states, "...you are intruding into the

participants' world rather than the reverse; under these conditions, you are the one who may have to make special arrangements to become an observer or a participant-observer" (p. 98). Interviews were conducted using Zoom where participants were able to be in their element. Participants were able to choose the day and time that worked best for them. Interview lengths ranged from 16-90 minutes. The total interview time was 398 minutes for the 13 participants.

Once the interviews were completed, all interviews were transcribed. Through Zoom, the video was temporarily saved on a server known as a "cloud". This video was only accessible to the host of the Zoom call, and was password protected. Once the Zoom auto-generated transcription was downloaded, and corrected for errors by the researcher, the video was permanently deleted and removed from the cloud. The transcriptions were then uploaded into Dedoose, which is password protected. Only the researchers had access to study files in Dedoose. Care and concern were taken to keep the district, schools, teachers, administrators, staff, and juvenile detectives' information confidential. To maintain confidentiality in the study, district, school, and participant names are not used. A codebook is kept on a document on researcher K. Calvert-French's computer. The computer is password protected. The codebook will be kept secure for five years, and then deleted. The following coding protocol was used to secure confidentiality, while identifying who was interviewed: School districts were given a unique number, schools were given a unique letter, participants were divided into groups of juvenile officers and staff (including teachers, counselors, and social workers) and were also assigned unique numbers. Some participants were currently associated with more than one building or were associated with more than one school during the time period between 2016 and



2019. Some of the administrators had unique perspectives because they had been teachers in the district during the 2016 school year, and that was noted in our research as well.

### **Data Analysis**

Our collaborative coding methods add to the reliability of the research conducted by our diverse research group. Smagorinsky (2008), argues that the method sections in reports “often lack sufficient detail to make any results that follow from the analytic method trust- worthy.” (p. 389) However, our study combated this by offering a detailed picture into this phenomenon from a diverse group of participants in schools. We also did not divide the coding tasks. Each researcher coded every transcript. We then compared our codes and had rich discussions around our thought process, thus bringing an extra layer of reliability to the coding process.

To begin our data analysis, we followed the Terry and Hayfield (2021) five phase process of developing themes: familiarization, coding, initial theme generation, developing and reviewing themes, and naming and defining themes. In phase one each researcher became familiar with the data by listening to the audio for the interviews, reading each transcript, and making familiarization notes along the way. “Familiarization notes capture your thoughts as you read and think about the content” (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, p. 31). Becoming familiar with the data early on helped to structure future interviews. The Dedoose application was utilized by all researchers for data analysis. All transcripts were uploaded into the platform. After becoming familiar with the data, phase two began with using a deductive approach to creating codes. We identified 20 a priori codes based on previous literature research and entered them into Dedoose. An inductive approach using in vivo coding allowed for blind coding of all transcripts by each

researcher and codes were added along the way as deemed necessary. After completion of all coding, we each familiarized ourselves with the transcripts, discussed our individual thought processes, and shared journal notes. After all transcripts were coded, phase three, initial theme generation began. All codes were looked at in terms of the depth and richness of data gathered. Some codes were eliminated based on lack of value offered to the story of our data related to our research questions. The remaining codes were then clustered into groups. Clusters are formed when “codes that share a story about a particular aspect of the data are brought together” (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, p.47).

Once we divided our codes into clusters, five prototype themes were developed. These prototype themes were identified not only by what the participants said in the interviews, but also by what notes and memos were taken during the coding. While maintaining a reflection journal, the researchers interpreted these common themes and codes to better understand the phenomenon of the STPP. By using the exploratory multiple case method, the researchers explored the school to prison pipeline through the eyes of teachers, administrators, and police officers working in different school settings. Our data was sorted based on the prototype themes and data were reevaluated by each researcher. We discussed the ways in which the prototype themes had their own strong central concept and contributed to answering the research questions. During this process in phase four, we were able to consider the boundaries of the themes, condense it to four themes, and create a thematic map. In the final phase, we used quotes to name our themes and ground our themes in the data. We then developed definitions for each theme. After completing this process, we had a solid understanding of the data and in chapter 4, we “have a story to tell” (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, pg.63).

### **Study Limitations and Delimitations**

Due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, most public schools across the nation provided virtual learning for part of both the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. With students not being in person for the full years, discipline data was not comparable to the previous years. For this reason, the researchers did not utilize quantitative data from those years.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a swift shift to a virtual learning environment and eventually a hybrid learning environment, we found teachers to be at their capacity for professionally related extracurricular activities. The response rate was minimal when we reached out to teachers to request participation. We respect their decision not to reply.

Lastly, we were unable to reach out to school district personnel unless we had the support and permission of the superintendent. We only received one letter of support and approval, which limited our participant pool.

### **Ethical Issues**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted, obtaining an exempt status. The quantitative data in this study was public knowledge, free to access for any public entity who requests the information. The exploratory multiple case method did require interviews with adults, no one who was interviewed is a member of a protected population, nor are any questions asked sensitive in nature.

Confidentiality of participants is important, and measures were taken to protect the confidentiality of each participant, school, and school district. It is public knowledge that various school districts have implemented policy changes to eliminate suspension of

early elementary school students. To protect the participants in the study, the school district, schools, and participant names will remain confidential. The names of the schools were kept on K. Calvert-French's locked computer and were referred to as a letter name. Before we began our interviews, we informed each participant that if they felt uncomfortable, they should skip a question or end the interview at any time. Their responses are confidential, even to the other participants (teacher, student, juvenile detective, principal) in that school or district. We recorded the conversation and deleted the recording after it was transcribed. We also let the participants know that we will not use any identifiable information.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter contains the findings of the research conducted to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do student-teacher interpersonal relationships and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

RQ2: How do teacher, administrator and school resource officer (SRO) implicit bias awareness and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

RQ3: How do school policy and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

This chapter also continues our discussion of the thematic analysis and the process of generating the final themes. During the research process, 13 individual interview transcripts were analyzed leading to the development of the themes described in detail in this chapter. Through our research process, including utilizing the Terry and Hayfield (2021) five phase process of thematic analysis, we identified four main themes. Five prototype themes are illustrated in Table 2. We devote the bulk of the chapter to an analysis of the final four themes that we developed through our analysis.

In the final phase of the thematic analysis each individual theme was named and defined, with clusters of codes attributed to them. Terry and Hayfield state, “It should become straightforward, as analysis develops, to write a coherent paragraph about a theme, exploring its boundaries and central organizing concept” (2021, p. 50). In this chapter, we name and define our themes, and explore the boundaries and central concepts of each theme as it relates to our research questions. Data from the interviews support the

themes and tell a cohesive story about the district policy change and how it affected K-2nd grade OSS from the perspective of the juvenile detectives, administrators, and other staff members.

Table 2 illustrates the prototype themes we developed from an analysis of the coding tree we developed in Dedoose.

**Table 2**

*Prototype Themes Tell a Cohesive Story About School Discipline and Learning Environments*

<b>1. Relationships</b>	<b>2. Resources</b>	<b>3. Learning Environment</b>	<b>4. Threats to the Learning Environment</b>	<b>5. School Policies</b>
Classroom management	Lack of funding/resources	School culture and climate	School to prison pipeline	Communication
Cultural awareness	Academic interventions	Social Emotional learning	Resistant to change	Training and development
Implicit bias awareness	Community partners	Behavioral norms	Equity	Restorative justice
Family relationships	Supports		Racism	Inclusionary discipline
			COVID-19	
			Poverty	Exclusionary discipline
			Trauma	Classroom expectations

Our final themes are as follows:

Theme 1: “To create a learning environment for these different kids with all these different backgrounds”: A culturally responsive learning environment supports inclusionary discipline practices.

Theme 2: “Having the systems in place and the routines and the procedures so that students know exactly what's expected of them while allowing them some autonomy”: School Policies Function as the Backbone of the Learning Environment.

Theme 3: “Principal, how are you going to support me?”: Support policy change with resources.

Theme 4: “Kids don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care”: Students succeed through positive interpersonal relationships.

**Theme 1: “To create a learning environment for these different kids with all these different backgrounds”: A culturally responsive learning environment supports inclusionary discipline practices.**

Districts, schools, and teachers are responsible for creating a learning environment for students that is inclusive of cultural differences. Culturally responsive learning environments are impacted by factors in and outside of the school’s control: school policies, relationships, and resources. A culturally responsive learning environment that supports inclusionary discipline: gives a voice to students, teachers and families, using a restorative approach; partners with community organizations, including law enforcement; articulates, teaches and re-teaches expectations using PBIS language; prioritizes staffing to not only fill vacancies, but hire the right people for the position and

invest in their success.

**“It’s the language to make kids feel like they are being heard”: Student, teacher, and family voice are an essential part of a culturally responsive learning environment.**

A culturally responsive learning environment that supports inclusionary discipline gives a voice to students, teachers and families, using a restorative discipline approach.

Teacher #1 boasted:

I think that we have worked really hard to build a culture where kids felt like they had a voice, so that when things did feel crazy and ridiculous, you know, like everyone had an opportunity to tell their side of the story, everyone is listened to, including teachers.

This school brags for good reason: they have not suspended a K-2nd grade student since 2016. This teacher went on to say they are “giving a lot of time and energy to student voice, even with little kids” using restorative justice practices because “it’s the language to make kids feel like they are being heard.” Another staff member from the same school, Counselor #1, added about letting kids express themselves, “with me you're fixing things, this is a safe space we're growing, we're problem solving.”

Principals from other buildings echoed similar sentiments. “How involved are the students in the process? How involved are parents in the process? How involved are teachers in the process?” asked Administrator #2, in reference to student and teacher voices in the discipline process. This principal is also an expert on inclusionary discipline, as they have not suspended a K-2nd grade student since 2014. “It did improve the learning environment because again teachers had to have conversations, not only with



their classroom the students in that class, but they also had to have conversations with their colleagues.”

Administrator #1 is also making huge strides in decreasing exclusionary practices in their school, with over a 13% decrease in OSS since 2016. They stated that teachers, “use more restorative practices and not rely on just being able to enter referrals...teachers work a little harder to build those relationships ...use more reflection, recovery and try to keep kids in the classroom as much as possible.”

A culturally responsive learning environment that supports inclusionary discipline clearly articulates expectations using PBIS language, teaches and reteaches expectations. Teachers and principals spoke specifically about PBIS as a cornerstone of their learning environment. Tier 1 PBIS principles they mentioned included: designing effective classroom environments, developing and teaching predictable classroom routines, explicitly posting and teaching positively-stated classroom expectations, and acknowledging students with specific praise.

“[We] created environments also, where there were not as many pockets or traps,” Teacher #1 explained how they set the tone:

Preventative work, I think, doing the heavy lifting at the beginning about classroom expectations and building expectations and the school counselor really coming in and teaching, especially for the younger kids who are new to the school, you know, like defining what is personal space, defining using our words defining what we call our peaceful days, which are days where no one put their hands on anybody like there were no altercations, and doing a lot of incentivizing and kind of hyping up, and building community on the front end.

Teacher #2 continued by explaining how they involve parents and review the rules when students were not meeting the expectations:

You've been taught, we reviewed, we do boot camps, so I don't know if that's with any other school, I can only speak about what we did at our school, but those things even the parents knew what the rules were and what the goals were and what the steps were so you know when we had those conversations that's, the first thing that we say, did you do your steps so knowing to be able to give me the verbiage now what were your consequences because you didn't follow the steps.

One of the main elements in PBIS is teaching and re-teaching the universal classroom and school expectations. When rules need refreshing at our school Teacher #1:

Boot Camp, where each class rotates to these different stations where they learn the school's expectations. So they'll like to come and learn like hallway expectations, and so, then the teachers or older students will act out the proper behavior and expectations or the improper. And then the kids will get to practice it a few times, and then so everyone sort of goes through this in one day at the beginning of the year, and then we do a refresher again when we come back for a second semester.

Positive incentives and celebrations in the learning environment are another important aspect of PBIS. "When we celebrate, we celebrate and we do it up, and we do it really big and when it's time to be respectful and get work done, you know we also you know, like you just know." Not only does Participant School A report a 0% OSS rate for K-2nd grade, more impressively has not used ISS for K-2nd grade since 2018.

Juvenile Detectives shared viewpoints that were interestingly similar to some basic PBIS principles. PBIS schools expect that universal classroom and school expectations should support the needs of 80-90% of students to follow those classroom expectations, and also that you should use positive rewards to incentivize those students instead of punishing the 80-90% who are doing the right thing. Juvenile Detective #5 shared:

When I talk to the new recruits and the Academy, I tell them about the 90/10 rule. 90% of the police 90% of the people that you come in contact within these neighborhoods are going to be law abiding citizens. That 10% shouldn't make you treat that other 90 bad.

“There's a push for the PBIS again to be able to incentivize students to behave appropriately. We want to acknowledge the positive more to than the negative,” Administrator #3 admits to struggling after COVID because they had not been using PBIS this year. They explained how not having the incentives this year was a hindrance, and that they would be going back to PBIS next school year.

**“They help with food, they help with everything”: Community partners help to create a culturally responsive learning environment by filling the gaps where schools lack resources or supports.**

A culturally responsive learning environment that supports inclusionary discipline is open to partnering with community organizations, including law enforcement. “Getting outside community partners to come in and support the staff and to support families, so that if mom needs more help with something, to help with behaviors at home, we can also help with behaviors at school”, Teacher #1 explained how her principal advocates for

resources for her school so that “when our kids are in the building they're not just learning academics, they're also learning character skills, they're learning how to be people in the world.” Administrator #3 explained the challenges their school faced this year and is looking forward to “partnering with the community partners”.

Juvenile Detectives described essential elements of their partnerships with schools to create a positive learning environment for kids. Juvenile Detective #1 described the importance of their role in the schools, they said it “changes the way they [students] think about law enforcement... be there and talk to them and show them that we’re people.” Juvenile Detective #2 talked about how juvenile detectives strengthen the learning environment for kids: “juvenile officers come there for positive visits and now those officers created relationships, especially with those younger kids.” Juvenile Detective #3 added:

One of the first departments to have an actual family advocate located in our office. We have access 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and she actually goes to the homes with us when we do home visits to the schools and she does a lot of school activities so that's one of our biggest resources.

Juvenile Detective #4 commented about the way they dress in the schools actually affects the learning environment:

On our end as law enforcement officers we didn't wear uniforms, we wore suits or we wore khakis and khaki pants and polo shirt so we're kind of having a soft approach to it, and I think that works, a little better than coming in with a full uniform and kind of authoritative figure.

Poverty threatens the school learning environment. Often students don't have their needs met and the school must rely on community partners for clothing, food, and to help parents with basic needs. Juvenile Detective #1 told a story through a unique lens:

We have our social workers if we see that a child has issues that are more in depth than what we can deal with. Like I said I had kids that were very smart. Both of her brothers are in jail, they were out carjacking. And this girl, she was 11 and she was carjacking with her brothers. When I tried to, we tried to take her home. Both of her parents were addicts. They didn't have all the basic necessities and utilities in their home and in a child's mind she thought she was hustling for the family I'm saying yep it's like she choose she didn't have the socialization or she didn't have the compassion to understand that you're hurting people, she just felt like we were doing this to make sure our lights on.

Juvenile detectives often provide a unique perspective, and when partnering with schools, can help to bridge the gap between teachers and the community. Juvenile Detective #3 shared the following story:

We did notice that the needs of the students were pretty extensive to the point where a lot of the teachers were not able to meet those needs in terms of just their educational needs, but their home needs, their social socio economics, just all of that all the way around in terms of their home environment. So, in terms of that respect from a law enforcement perspective, we did see that a lot of the students' needs are not being met by the teachers, whether the resource is what that was due to where they have the knowledge of that these needs need to meet it to be that or the students were in need of those of assistance. And so that kind of opened the

door for us as an agency by providing some additional resources to those children to meet those needs that would not be met by the classroom.

When the needs of students are not being met, schools partnering with community agencies is essential. Teacher #1 shared how partnerships work at her school:

We also now have a partnership with [community agencies] and so now, we have two contracted social workers who are in our building but they're not District 1 employees, they are employees of the community agencies and they're in our building to help with some of the non-school issues that might be causing behaviors so whether it's like clothing, you know, electricity they help with transportation issues, they help with food, they help with everything. Some of the at-home situations and circumstances are better, so that when kids are at school, you know they're not worried about home.

Juvenile Detective #5 describes a student's un-met needs that were preventing him from focusing on school and being a positive contributor to the learning environment: "You know some of the issues at school were him coming to school and not feeling good about himself, because he didn't have the newest clothes and other kids did he would be hungry". Community partners really fill the void when there is a huge need due to poverty in school. Teacher #1 explains how this works:

You know we've had kids who really needed more than we could provide like whether it was behavior interventions or the family needed help and so she has done a really great job of getting outside community partners to come in and support the staff and to support families, so that, you know, if mom needs more help with something, to help with behaviors at home, so that we can also help

with behaviors at school, you know she's just on a really nice job of advocating for resources for our school, so that when our kids are in the building they're not just learning academics they're also learning like character skills they're learning how to be people in the world.

Juvenile Detective #4 describes how poverty is addressed in the community before students even get to school:

We will go with the social workers to these addresses a lot of times, we will go to these homes and here we have generational levels of people living there. You had grandma, grandpa, you know mama and uncles, grandpa, everybody's kind of living in the home, which didn't you know it wasn't big enough for all the people lived in there, so kids are sleeping on mattresses with their brothers and sisters and there wasn't enough bedrooms and so we really kind of saw the social problems that these kids are facing firsthand and then we kind of you kind of could get an idea why there are these issues at school.

Teacher #1 reflects on the effect of poverty she sees in her school:

If we can't build confidence and if we can't build these important skills that they need, then, you know, like we have, I feel like a lot of ways, until we are more honest about the systemic poverty and the systemic racist racism issues in urban public schools, we cannot just put band aids on behaviors and think that that's going to fix this pipeline.

Poverty affects the whole family and makes it difficult for parents to interact with the school in ways schools often require of students with discipline concerns. Juvenile

Detective #1 offers uniforms as a solution to helping to bridge the poverty gap in schools:

Definitely have parents that work, like two or three jobs, so it's not that easy for a parent to, just like, run up to the school. You know I think that we have impoverished kids. I think that we had like one thing they do that I think is effective that I've seen is having uniforms because like there's a lot of things that are nonverbal that we don't see that means something to them having on certain shoes. You have impoverished kids and they're not in uniform when everybody's in uniform they don't have to be feeling self-conscious as much about not being on the same level as everyone else that they have uniforms.

**“They were like the nurse on days when the nurse wasn't there”: Staffing is the backbone to creating a culturally responsive learning environment**

A culturally responsive learning environment that supports inclusionary discipline prioritizes staffing to not only fill vacancies, but get the right people for the job, and invest in their success. Teachers, principals, counselors, and juvenile detectives all recognized staffing as a huge factor that contributes to the learning environment in schools. Administrator #4 reported no OSS for K-2nd grade students since 2018. They explained how this issue of staffing is a complicated one:

This year was challenging. I don't know if you have had issues with staffing, but we are lucky enough that we have building subs, and so they're here, but then, if teachers aren't here, or they quit in the middle of the year, then they're utilized, and then other people are out, then you don't have anybody for the classroom.

Then depending upon who's in the classroom, is how well or not, it runs and how if that particular person believes that's going to work or not, so if I'm a principal



and I don't believe that that's going to work and obviously it's not it's not going to work in my building.

They also spoke to the importance of not only filling the vacancy but getting the right person for the job. “You have to have the right person in that position to make sure that works. It's not just a position to be filled, you have to have the person who's actually going to work.”

“Some of our schools don't have an ISS, or even an allocation for ISS”

Administrator #1 explained. “The schools that don't have in-school suspension monitors, are like I need an in-school suspension monitor, somebody filling that role, whether it's an allocated role or not.” Counselor #1 described that even filling the role doesn't ensure they can perform their duties throughout the day:

They were supposed to have an in-school suspension person, but, in-school suspension person was also a sub, they were the family Community specialist, so they were like the nurse on days when the nurse wasn't there. Oh, this is a great idea that kids are going to come down here and they're going to reflect and they're going to work on things and they're going to grow when in reality it didn't work like that, because the person was pulled to a million different places.

Counselor #1 also addressed the need to invest in training once you get the right staff hired:

Invest in who you hire, invest in the training, investing in appreciation, invest in... okay I'm going to have this person go into this classroom and I expect them to have these scores, and this curriculum and this but realize what they have going

on, and that they're supposed to get here, but they're here, and they have nothing to get them here, like that's not fair, they're going to leave.

Hiring the teachers, staff and juvenile detectives who represent your student body contribute to the learning environment. “My first couple years there, I was the only white teacher... [My principal] admittedly, very intentionally, she tries to find teachers that are culturally reflective of the student body. And she does a really nice job.” Teacher #1 shared “My students see themselves in the leaders of the building. The majority group of teachers understand a lot of what [students] go through and understand their experiences.”

Juvenile detectives also consider the learning environment when determining who to bring into schools. Juvenile Detective #1 explains how being a male officer in an educational learning environment with mostly female adults contributes positively to the learning environment.

I know that in the schools, especially here in the elementary level, the majority of the authority figures are female. And those female teachers love having officers come into the classroom, but sometimes it's like a double-edged sword, because you expect me to come in and bark at the kids. I'm not going to do that. My mission is to come in and let children know that I'm a real person. I love; I have children, I'm somebody's son. I care about you and I'm a person and I'm here to help, not to hurt and not to yell and fuss. I'm just trying to change those children's perception of law enforcement, because a lot of them come from environments where we're the bad guy. Yeah, no matter what, so I can be the nicest guy in the world.

**“Kids going to bed every night hearing gunshots – how do you think that would affect you?”: Trauma-informed teaching is essential to creating a culturally responsive learning environment.**

Trauma is prevalent in schools, is often misunderstood by staff, and it comes with needs outside of the scope of the school. This is a threat to the learning environment.

Trauma-informed teaching is a relatively new concept, and law enforcement officers in the school often provide a unique perspective. Juvenile Detective #1 shared the way trauma can affect school relationships with adults:

Some of these kids have some other trauma that they've experienced and so some of those kids who would not open up to a person with different color from them, they wouldn't open up to somebody who's a male or female, or they have some idea about this person. And some of them are just very guarded because this is what they're taught from their parents, especially in dealing with law enforcement.

Juvenile Detective #2 shared about the school staff's lack of readiness and general misunderstanding of trauma and mental health “staff that just truly didn't understand it or the principals, the AP's, and the principals, who truly didn't understand what was going on, or didn't understand mental wellness”. Juvenile Detective #2 shared his story that he tells teachers to help explain trauma “these kids going to bed every night hearing gunshots– how do you think that would affect you? And it brought the levels down, some of the teachers and got them to try to understand a little bit more.” Juvenile Detective #5 added:

Yesterday we had a four-year-old and a seven-year-old in here that were wandering around downtown. Mother went to work, and some guy was supposed

to be watching them, but we had to place the kids [in care] and we brought them to the office and we got [them] food.

Trauma manifests itself in a lot of different ways, all of which can negatively impact the learning environment at school. “Trauma a lot of them have, you know, struggle with food issues, struggle with impulse control”, shared Teacher #1. Juvenile Detective #1 added that PTSD can be found in children as well, adding “they all come with different issues, especially those who have been suspended. They’re coming from broken homes, you have abuse, addiction, alcoholism, they really need a school because some of them are not getting it at home.” Juvenile Detective #5 talked about how prevalent trauma is in our students, “his mom was a recovering addict and father wasn't in the picture... mental illness and addiction runs rampant. Kids are dealing with grown up problems that would cause problems for me, let alone a second grader, first or kindergarten.”

A structured learning environment is healthy for students who have experienced trauma. Juvenile Detective #1 shared:

I think that our children need structure whether they admit it or not. So we need some basic structure for the kids and if for those their toes when we don't when they're not being affected by those basic things we have in place, we have to have something and sometimes it's outside the scope of all our abilities but to have counseling and support for those kids who have issues that can't be necessarily dealt with exclusively by government agencies such as the police and school.”

Administrator #1 explains the need for schools to be fully staffed to support students who have experienced trauma. “And then not all of our schools have full time social workers

or counselors to then also assist with providing some of those services around social emotional learning and some trauma therapy and all that.”

Failure to identify the needs of students and their issues is a threat to the learning environment. School personnel are often unaware of the cause of the behavior, unable to identify the cause, or unequipped with the knowledge or personnel to identify the needs of the students with behavior concerns. The learning environment is compromised when the adults don't know there is a problem. “We can't help with things that we just don't know about, so a lot of times we just don't know some of the stuff that's going on,” said Teacher #1. Counselor #1 from the same school echoed “a lot of times the adults are making, just assuming, kind of creating a narrative of why the kids are what they did. They didn't ask the kid what or give them the chance to even process.” Administrator #4 shares similar sentiments “I think the biggest challenge is teachers jumping to conclusions when students do something instead of trying to understand why, or what the student did before just you know being quick to judge, being quick to judge.”

Law enforcement reports to feel the same way when they enter schools. Juvenile Detective #2 shared “we go into schools, and you know you got a second grader tearing the room up. What? Wait a minute. How did that happen? How did we get there? What happened [during] all these steps before we got there?” Juvenile Detective #3 recalled, “we did see that a lot of the students' needs are not being met by the teachers, whether they have the knowledge that these needs need to meet it, or the students were in need of those of assistance.”

Social Worker #1 shared that it's difficult to sometimes identify what exactly the child needs. “Actually assessing exactly what the child needs could be a challenge as

well.” Administrator #1 said “We talked a lot about the restorative practices and the relationships piece. So, for my school in particular, we do a lot of book studies around cultural responsiveness and trauma informed practices and recognizing those triggers”, Administrator #1 continued, “what's the root cause? Was the child trying to gain something, or avoiding a task?”

Schools are unequipped to identify some student issues. Outside agencies and community partners need to step in to help identify issues and provide services that schools just aren't equipped to provide. Juvenile Detective #4 shared:

I did see that the school Commission or coalition was kind of getting more involved with those kids, or troubled children, to get the families involved and to get the families resources to find out like I said normally for kids act now there's gonna be some underlying issues at home and why that kids acting out and I think the clinicians that there's those clinicians at those schools we're doing a better job at addressing those issues with kids around.

Juvenile Detective #1 shared similar concerns:

Policy or not, I know that in schools many of the people I talked to were more concerned about how those things affect the children. And you know kids are like snowflakes, they're all different, they all have different issues, and a lot of times we don't have the expertise or the resources to help those specific children who were being suspended.

Juvenile Detective #2 noticed holes in the staffing that might otherwise be able to help identify issues with students. They pointed out that it starts by having social workers,

having people that can get an appropriate medical diagnosis for the child or situation, and allocating the correct resources to the child's home.

The Global Pandemic of COVID-19 is a threat to the learning environment. COVID-19 caused training to be postponed and other training to be diluted in an online format, many incentive programs (including PBIS) were modified or ceased to exist, and it paused academic advancement in some children. Training about discipline practices, implicit bias awareness training, and other important supports were altered, postponed or canceled due to the global pandemic. Juvenile Detective #4 recalled:

Once COVID hit, everything kind of went to a standstill, so some of the things that we were discussing or some of the things we were wanting to see change, changes we really weren't able to get to the meat and potatoes of because COVID kind of stopped everything.

Juvenile Detective #3 repeated some of the sentiments above and recalled that they have moved some training to an online platform.

Expectations during online learning, and COVID restrictions after schools returned in person really changed the learning environment in schools. Teacher #1 remembered "during COVID because we were like, okay, what do our expectations now need to look like because of COVID." Counselor #1 was brainstorming ways to return to a PBIS pre-COVID school:

How we can bring it back with, you know, because we had had a lot of those intervention things hadn't quit because of COVID or didn't make sense, virtually and now we're back in the building it's like, well flames are everywhere, because kids back and they're back with full force.

School G abandoned PBIS practices altogether after returning from virtual education.

Administrator #3 from that school reported:

Unfortunately, with Covid, although we were not doing the PBIS we didn't have the incentives to incentivize students doing the right thing. With the pandemic it has really shifted us not in a positive manner. We're hoping that within the next full year to be able to bring back those programs. Because we realize with students being out of school almost 18 months and really not having instruction this year was really trying to get students back on track and getting them to be the students that they weren't previously, to Covid.

Administrator #4 told a story about a student who missed preschool and kindergarten due to COVID-19 and is having trouble adjusting to the school learning environment:

We had one that was just kicking and screaming, and you know, we just you know I don't know what we're gonna do without one but we haven't figured out but well as a first grader this is his first year in school. You know so he's technically a preschool behavior with the first-grade intelligence, so we have to work with him and his parents to help them understand that you know he's we've got to figure out what strategies we can that work for him a couple days a week, we send him in preschool and give him his first grade work and he does just fine you know.

**Theme 2: “Having the systems in place and the routines and the procedures so that students know exactly what's expected of them while allowing them some autonomy”:** School Policies Function as the Backbone of the Learning Environment

School policy is instrumental in creating a supportive, culturally responsive,



learning environment for students. School policies are put in place to guide uniform day to day operations of a school and can be established from the district, school, or classroom level. Policies must be communicated to all parties including staff, students, and families for them to be effective. Making policy changes at the district level can create drastic changes for how schools are operated and can impact student outcomes.

We heard from many participants about the initial roll out of the policy change, including training for teachers and staff. Many participants felt that minimum resources were provided to support the policy change. When Teacher #1 was asked about how it was presented to the teachers and staff, they stated, “it was just non-negotiable, so it was what it was, and they had to come up with solutions, and they had to come up with ways to make teachers feel like there were still consequences.” Along the same lines, there was a lack of communication when it came to the roll out of the policy change. When asked how they heard about the policy change, Administrator #3 stated, “To be quite honest, I found out when the decision was publicized.” The decision was made, the policy was changed, even this school principal was not communicated with directly about this policy change. Administrator #3 further stated, “It came more so from the district, and it trickled down from our individual school leadership.” The district-wide roll out of an important and groundbreaking policy lacked the proper communication to administrators, teachers, staff and the police.

**“You know you have to figure it out”: Teachers, administrators, and juvenile detectives support eliminating suspensions.**

School districts create a code of conduct to have uniformity in their expectations for student behavior. Each school has a responsibility to ensure they are following the

policies set forth by the district regardless of individual opinion. There was concern from the school staff on how they were going to implement the new policy for no suspensions at the K-2nd grade levels. The concern was around what they were going to do in lieu of writing office referrals. Counselor #1 commented:

I think it's kind of one of those things where, on paper, it makes so much sense, but in reality, it's like okay well, what are we going to do? Because the behaviors aren't you know, we know we're going to have situations that are going to need a severe consequence and the severest consequence, at least for elementary, is OSS.

Administrator #3 had a similar recollection:

Well, I think we mainly had concerns about what was the alternative if you were taking suspensions away, then what would you have in place to support students who struggle with behavior. What would you have in place as a consequence to deter the inappropriate behavior. Those with the main concerns.

Although there were challenges, the staff were supportive of the change especially after reflecting on the data of disproportionate suspensions of black males. Administrator #2 states, "Faculty, staff, and administrators, for the most part at our school, were receptive to the non-suspension of students, particularly when we looked at data around which particular students were suspended more often than others." Participants were aware of the disproportionate suspensions of black males and recognized the rationale for the policy change. Juvenile Detective #3 stated:

Initially we didn't, we weren't very happy with it, but after thinking and sitting and talking about it and thinking about the type of children that we interact with and the type of kids that we deal with on a daily basis, and we thought that it was

actually a better idea.

According to the data, once teachers were told they could no longer send students to the office it forced teachers to offer alternatives to office referrals which were typically the catalyst for suspensions and exclusionary discipline. Administrator #1 said:

I think it kind of deters, it makes teachers work a little harder to build those relationships and deters them from just putting in a referral. Puts more onus I think on a teacher to kind of figure out that culture and climate within the classroom.

Although from different schools, similar to Administrator #1, Teacher #1 said:

Teachers had to come up with very detailed classroom management plans, and it has to be posted in every classroom. And it has to not just align with, not just the district, but then it has to align with the schools expectations as well, and in the school's language, so I think teachers who defaulted often to kicking kids to the principal's office struggled a little bit, because now they're having to put up with behaviors that they normally would send out of the room so they're having to kind of teach through those reactions.

Administrator #3 agreed that once the option was taken away to suspend students it forced staff to come up with alternative solutions to behaviors. They stated, “write a referral and the kid could be excluded, but that was taken off the table, so it really forced educators to come up with alternative methods as far as dealing with those more common behaviors.” The Juvenile Detectives also commented on their observations after the policy change.”

Juvenile Detective #4 stated:

We weren't receiving calls on the little kids like we were, you know, a first grader is acting out, and you can call the police when we got to the point where we weren't on those calls anymore.

**“We just don't have hardly any in-school suspensions or out of school suspensions, even [in] the upper grades, because of all the expectations that we've taught from the very beginning of school”: Preventative measures and universal expectations are used to support student success**

Teachers and administrators agree that setting expectations from the beginning is crucial to preventing behaviors that could otherwise escalate to office referrals.

Expectations need to be communicated early and often for students to understand what behaviors are and are not acceptable. According to participants, School District 1 supports the PBIS model for setting school and classroom expectations for all students. Part of the PBIS model is offering incentives to students who are exhibiting positive behaviors as outlined by the behavior matrix. It can be a lot of work, but the work up front can pay tenfold in the end. Teacher #1 believes that the effort to teach student expectations early on builds a community and prevents some discipline actions.

The administrators interviewed also spoke about the importance of student expectations. Administrator #3 agreed that their school “really relies heavily on PBIS. Having teachers to follow the behavior rubric and restating those positive expectations and we did a lot with incentive to try to incentivize students behaving appropriately.” Administrator #4 said:

I think you know if they know those systems and those procedures and they know what their boundaries are you know it is not changing on a daily basis they should

be able to run the classroom if everything's going and the routines are the same, every day, the students know what to do, every day, even if the teacher is not in there, so they are then learning how to self-discipline and not having those issues you know I don't think it should always be just do things because I said so, the reason is, we have these procedures and systems in place, because to keep you safe but this is what you're allowed to do and you know, there should be some autonomy that they get that little bit of choice, and this is how it's done just so that it doesn't feel like it's like so rigid.

However, a challenge for implementing PBIS from the perspective of Administrator #1, is that “sometimes with teachers it’s just recognizing the value in having systems in place, and in following through consistently.” They elaborated on this by explaining:

I think, with teachers, a lot of times still they'll start off the school year with like letting kids, like not consistently holding kids accountable to the classroom expectations, and once you teach kids that oh it's okay to do it, and sometimes not do it, you will put yourself at a disadvantage, because then you lose that, you lose that control. As far as expectations, these are the expectations of our classroom, you set them, they hold yourself accountable to them, you know, relentlessly, because this is the culture and climate in our classroom, this is how we treat each other in our classroom.

Juvenile Detective #1 agrees that “we need some basic structure for the kids”, which appears to be a common understanding among all groups interviewed.

Student expectations and a clearly communicated PBIS behavior matrix will be enough for most students to not need any other interventions. However, there is still a

need to have responses ready for those students who are not following the code of conduct. With the elimination of OSS from the options, school personnel had to get creative with how they can handle student discipline. Participants discussed alternative methods that were used in lieu of office referrals that previously may have led to OSS.

Schools created a list of acceptable discipline based on the offense. Counselor #1 described the process at their school:

In the beginning we mapped out okay these are our classroom handled behaviors, these are office behaviors. When I tell you what office behaviors were, it was like a false fire alarm, we had to literally put physical fights with blood, like with physical injury, so we had to make it to where everything else, disrespect, all that stuff was classroom handled.

Administrator #2 discussed the change in communication between teachers and students:

Where teachers had to have more conversations with students around behaviors that would typically send them to the administrator's office and now how we're going to solve problems. More conversations around expectations in the classroom, in the hallway, at recess, in the cafeteria. So it opened, I feel the path for teachers and students to begin having more conversations, so that those expectations were clear versus just being written on the chart paper, these are the classroom rules and we yeah we've read them we've talked about them everybody signed off on them. Now I'm having conversations because you're going to be here. So how do we make this work?

Juvenile Detective #3 recognized the change in discipline practices as they describe here:

I can say that they really try to deal with the kids in a different way, perhaps

rather than suspending them, taking away a field trip, taking away party time or taking away a specific activity for that child to participate in. We do an activity where we go into the schools, we do pizza with the police. Some of those kids were pulled out of activities like that because they were facing discipline.

The juvenile detectives overall agree with the change in exclusionary discipline measures and recognizes the importance of students being in the learning environment. Juvenile Detective #5 stated, “I don't think that's rectifying the situation if they're just staying at home and not getting any help for the reason why they were suspended in the first place.”

Administrator #3 also agreed with the detective's sentiment, that:

We can't continue to just put kids out of school because I mean, suspension, we found yeah you might remove a child from school, but when they come back, if there's nothing in place, no restorative practice, no support system put in place the behavior continues, and it just becomes like a never-ending cycle.

Restorative practices were initiated after the policy change as an alternative to office referrals and other exclusionary discipline practices. Administrator #3 said:

Before the decision being made, our student code of conduct mapped out the types of consequences and it leaned more so towards excluding students out of school out of school suspension or in school suspension. But now, the handbook relies heavily on restorative practices, it gives more so, more intervention, in place of actual concrete consequence.

Administrator #1 believes “that it forces teachers to use more restorative practices and not rely on just being able to enter referrals”. Teacher #1 reflected on restorative justice initiatives from a teacher perspective:

We're doing a lot of that restorative work, were building relationships and keeping expectations and everything very developmentally appropriate and giving a lot of time and energy to student voice, even with little kids... There were teachers that were resentful that now they had to spend all this time doing the restorative justice, so they were resentful that they were losing instructional minutes to have these class meetings in these sort of like kumbaya circles is like one of the phrases that came up alot.

In addition to restorative justice, other alternatives to exclusionary discipline took place. Participants mentioned think sheets, buddy rooms, mentors, reflection recovery, calling parents, and parent meetings. Teacher #2 described the think sheet:

The think sheet is telling what you did, what you could have done, and now, how do you fix it, how do you remedy it and so being able to write out Okay, I did this. Why did you do that? Because I was angry. What were you supposed to do if you're in line and somebody is bothering you?

The buddy room and mentors are used in the think sheet process as further described by Teacher #2:

They have to take their think sheet over to a buddy room and their mentor sees them walk in, and we have a designated area, every classroom has a designated area, that they don't have to come in and really get embarrassed when they have to go into their mentors room with a think sheet and they have to discuss with their mentor what took place, and then you know it's just reaffirming because you don't really get the classroom teacher too much involved in that because that's what that mentor is for. These are things that we're working on.



Administrator #1 discussed a similar form of inclusionary discipline that they utilize.

“Use more reflection and recovery to try to keep kids in the classroom as much as possible, so it has to be pretty extreme for them to be, you know, removed, and removed long term.”

**“Every year it's gotten better”: Discipline practices improved after the OSS policy changed.**

Not everything can happen overnight, so when the suspension policy was changed in 2016 there were still some exclusionary practices, other than OSS, occurring in the schools while the staff were learning alternative strategies to handle discipline. There were some schools that had a drop in OSS but an increase in ISS. Which meant that students were not forced to stay home but were also not in their classroom. One school that had a large decrease in OSS for K-2nd grade students, had a large increase in ISS the first year of the policy change during the 16-17 school year. However, when you look at the 17-18 and 18-19 school year for the same school, there was a decrease in the use of ISS for K-2nd grade students. It appears that immediately after the policy change ISS was used as an alternative to suspension, but as the years went on, different strategies were put in place.

There is a difference of opinions on the use of ISS as an alternative to OSS. An administrator reflected on the use of other exclusionary methods. “There was probably an increase in kids going to in-school suspension because there wasn't OSS, so probably more exclusionary practices because there were more, you know, kids in in-school suspension, more like lunch detention.” A Juvenile Detective did notice a change in discipline practices in the schools and had a slightly different outlook on ISS. They

stated, “They tried to do more in school suspensions, they tried to do this right, having practices for the children to keep them in school.” From the perspective of the Juvenile Detective, the students being at school, even if they are in ISS and not in their regular classroom, is a positive step towards keeping the students from being excluded from school.

Administrators found other ways to exclude students from school as discipline without coding it as an out of school suspension. Teacher #1 described changes made initially when suspensions were eliminated:

In the beginning when we couldn't suspend the little kids, we would do things like “return with parent”, which meant that you could not come back to school until your parent came up and had a meeting with the principal, the teacher, and the school counselor.

This practice is difficult for some parents, especially those parents who work days and/or have other children at home. This leaves the teacher and administrator not knowing exactly when this student will be able to return to school. In addition, when an administrator reports this type of discipline, it will not be coded as an OSS. In theory the administrators could continue to “suspend” students this way and not have the numbers reflect negatively on their school. Administrators struggled in the beginning to think outside of forcing students to stay home.

**“After the commitment to not suspend, there became more of an awareness, but also an intentionality around ensuring that there was training available for teachers and administrators”: Training and professional development support the learning environment.**

All participants were aware of the policy change for eliminating suspensions in K-2nd grade. There was communication on the change in policy and there were some types of professional development and training around cultural awareness and implicit bias and alternatives to handling behaviors that would normally lead to suspension. However, not all participants could vocalize what training they received and how it has helped them.

Administrator #1 explained:

Before 2016, it was really more school-based if there was any training around explicit bias. I don't think, as a district, it was something that was put in the forefront. And I think after 2016 when we went to no suspensions, there was a lot of talk around cultural responsiveness, and trauma or practices, and then restorative justice, and you know a lot of it was kind of felt like buzz words because there still wasn't really any like intensive training for teachers, especially, a lot of the training in the district is done at like the administrative level, and then it's up to the administrator to unpack that for the staff and make it more of a practice within our schools.

As far as training on how to manage behaviors without using suspension, an administrator explained there was no training on managing behaviors post policy change:

Explicit training on how to manage behaviors in lieu of suspension, it was really more of you can't suspend them so figure it out. So, training... no. I remember

being a teacher... there was really no training, you know, and we can't suspend them. We can't suspend them, so it forces you to figure out another way to manage behaviors.

Teacher #1 believes there needs to be more work on implicit biases before there will be a change:

I think the decision to get rid of those suspensions was a start into reducing the school to prison pipeline. It's not enough and I think it's time to up the ante or...I don't think just saying we can't suspend preschool through second graders is enough, it's just not. I think we need to do a lot more implicit bias work, I think we need to get quite a bit uncomfortable before we can even say we've put a dent in the pipeline.

Two different administrators said they remember having training but had trouble remembering specifics about the training. Both mentioned there was a book from the training, but neither could remember the name of the book. When asked about the training they've had, one administrator stated, "We have had culturally responsive teaching training and I cannot recall the person's name, because we actually did two different sessions, the principal path summer intensive." Another principal stated:

We did do some, we've had two different trainings and I should know what they are and I'm trying to see if I, um this is terrible we've gone through two trainings. One was like a book study, and I was starting to see if I could find the book, but I couldn't find the book.

A third principal stated "They spent quite a bit of equity training. There's been diversity and inclusion and training there's been several book studies around equity and inclusion

and classroom management.”

The Juvenile Detectives appeared to have more knowledge on their training and they could be because they are required to have a certain number of continuing education units to keep their certification. They were aware that they are required to have eight hours of implicit bias training per year. One detective acknowledged that there has been more of a focus on cultural awareness training since recent events and the training has been one of the good things to come from the unrest. Juvenile Detective #1 said:

I think that being culturally aware, is going to help us in all aspects of police work but is going to help in knowing that when you deal with all of these children, they all come with different issues, especially those who have been suspended, they are coming from broken homes, you have abuse, addiction, alcoholism, their socialization, they really needed a school because some of them are not getting it at home and that's what I'm talking about.

Juvenile Detective #2 stated:

When [implicit bias training] started they wanted officers to understand there are different types of people out there, and you know what, we all have biases. You know just to get officers to understand we all have biases, but it's how you act on those biases. We all look at somebody and we immediately think something, but we have to start getting our brains to think otherwise, and that's what implicit bias training is about.

Juvenile Detective #3 said:

I think my unit is unique in terms of that we have a diverse group of detectives who are working in the school and we do extensive training in terms of learning about what the kids actually need to be successful.

**Theme 3: “Principal, how are you going to support me?”: Support policy change with resources.**

Supporting the policy change with resources identifies not only budget and manpower concerns within the school, but also what can be offered to students in need outside of the learning environment. Those subjects interviewed often identified the lack of support and resources as their main concerns when it came to reducing the flow of students into the school to prison pipeline. As quoted by Teacher #1:

We need to allocate resources based on need, not based on enrollment, and we need to provide teachers with quality professional development and skills to handle some of the academic issues and the behavioral issues in order to sort of even begin to think that we're putting a dent in this pipeline.

These resources included supports, both in school and out of school, community partners, academic interventions, as well as addressing issues of lack of funding/manpower.

**“It's caused a lot of teachers to leave because they don't feel supported”: It takes a village to support the learning environment**

To institute such a policy change, a strong support system must be in place to address the issues that may arise in response. These supports are not limited to school staff. Outside agencies, like the police department or community partners, can provide great support for the policy change. Juvenile Detective #1 stated:

So we have social workers who, if we have that kind of childhood, these more in depth services, then we would have refer to our social workers and if the school where there is a social worker, they work in concert with them and then we will get the State involved to try to either place a child or her and her siblings and just

try to get them the help if they need it. They're not going to get it from all the obvious places.

This example demonstrates the overlap that can occur, and how that overlap should be viewed as a positive support. But not all schools have that kind of support. Administrator #1 observed this in person:

Not all of our schools have full time social worker or counselor to then also assist with providing some of those services around social emotional learning and some trauma therapy and all that, so we have several schools that split social worker, counselor, and so um that that kind of that that right there is a detriment to schools.

The data showed that these supports were going to be needed, even before the policy was instituted. Administrator #3 was worried about the roll out, and what kind of strain that would put on students and families. “What supports would the district be willing to put in place to be able to help those students in those families?” Even if the supports are anticipated, the data showed that the decision and the needed supports were not always in concert with each other. School Counselor #1 stated:

Somebody's creating, they're not realizing the manpower and the logistics of it on the ground if that, you know, does that make sense, which is very, very frustrating too, and especially with, I think it's caused a lot of teachers to leave because they don't feel supported.

**“We need to have a better partnership with the school”: Supporting the learning environment with community partners**

The data showed that one of the most effective ways to support the policy change

is through community partners. Working hand in hand with the support staff, like social workers and school counselors, community partners can address the issues outside of the learning environment, to support the entire family. Administrator #1 described the ideal situation:

We're fortunate at our school that we do have full time in-school suspension, full time counselor, full time social worker, in addition to having a partnership with [community agencies], we have two partners who are also here full time they kind of do like these community based social worker, wrap around supports to support the whole family. Okay, so we're fortunate to have it on a team to support students like pretty much as needed.

The Police Department should be considered a strong community partner. The data showed that the police are ready, willing, and able to partner with the school districts.

Juvenile Detective #4 stated:

I think that our department needs to be more embedded with the public school system then we are kind of, we're too hands off with the schools. I'm not saying we need to be there in a uniform every day. I'm not saying that, but I think we need to have a better partnership with the school, so that we can address things that come up before they become big things because the first thing we say is OK, these men, you know you have a shooting at school or guns are brought to school before we get to that point, I think we need to have some serious dialogue about how do we stop these stop these instance from happening and and bringing the police in on a more proactive in and then, then the reactive is it's going to pay dividends, you know, like I said, I don't think we need to be in there in uniforms



all the time and, and you know you know show our presence like that, but I do think we still need to be somewhat better partners with the the public school system and other ways, you know, so you know, I think, for the most part the we all can do better, from both sides, you know we all can do better on both sides, but I think it's going to take the public schools, and the police department in a joint effort to come together and come up with some changes there are so much needed.

The partnerships should not be limited to just the Police Department. Any community organization dedicated to a safe learning environment can and should partner with the school. Administrator #1 described previous attempts at partnerships:

I know a couple years ago we did have some partnerships with a couple of different organizations for certain schools like, Alive and Well, so like a lot of schools participated in Alive and Well and so each school like a representative from the schools that participated, that would go to like these train-the-trainer type sessions. And then Alive and Well would maybe even staff PD or things like that. I know that at my school, we have a partnership with EdPlus.

A good community partner can work in or outside the learning environment to address any issues that cause disruptive behavior. Connecting the family with community partners that can provide resources, from anything as simple as a meal, to helping out with a high electric bill, can alleviate the tension in the home, which in turn can address the behavioral issues in the learning environment. Juvenile Detective #4 believed the school district is excelling in this capacity:

I think the school was doing a better job at connecting the family resources to

kind of find out hey what's the core. What's the core issue here of why this kid is where he's at in learning and what things are happening at home that's causing them to act out at school. So I did see a little bit of a change in that area.

The community partners bring in funding and resources that aren't readily available through traditional means of school budgets. The data showed that a lack of funding and resources severely limit the effectiveness of the policy change.

**“If we just had more grownups...”: Funding correctly to support the change**

The lack of funding and resources is at the forefront of the data. But it's more than just funding, it's funding correctly. You can hire 10 new staff members, but if they are all math teachers, this doesn't address the needs of the student and family. Juvenile

Detective #2 stated it best when asked about the allocation of resources and supports:

Having a social worker or somebody on staff that can evaluate and figure out, do we need a medical diagnosis, you know for this child, first and foremost, or are there other factors? But when you start to do that, you start to dig in now you got to be prepared for, to have resources. Because there may be some resources that are needed in the home, to help that kid, that's the first thing you have to have to have the proper personnel to properly diagnose what's going on with those kids and then you got to have the resources.

Uncovering the root cause of unwanted behavior may open a request or need for funding and resources that a school district never anticipated. But to begin to get to the point of identifying problems, the school district must have people on staff that can identify the need for resources. School counselors and social workers are an integral part of this process. Unfortunately, the data has shown that these positions are understaffed. Teacher

#1 stated, “Our school counselor can only do so much. You know she's only one person. Our social worker technically works there one and a third day a week. If we just had more grownups some day's would be awesome.”

Even with the personnel in place, daily behavioral issues can go unaddressed in certain circumstances. The data shows that this is not an uncommon issue. Teacher #1 put it succinctly:

If you've got this kid who's having this meltdown and, like the person that's their mentor is busy, and then the school counselor is putting out a fire over here, and then the principal is at a principal's meeting. And then, you know, then you've got like the secretary, just like, kind of holding this kid and helping out, you know what I mean? So sometimes it's just, you know, we have a skeletal staff because the district is just short staffed and then we are only allotted a certain number of people in our building based on attendance, not based on need.

Juvenile Detective #2 echoed this statement, as well as bringing up the major issue that school districts, like police departments, are simply underfunded.

You know the problem that you run into with social workers is they are all overworked. You know you got one social worker in a school with 700 kids. They can't ever get above water. The biggest challenge was funding you know everybody's strapped for cash, everybody strapped for cash.

**“Reading at a kindergarten level... you act out to not look dumb”: Students disrupt the learning environment when they are academically achieving below grade level**

A lack of academic expectations and interventions are a major contributor to discipline events. Teacher #1 shared why they feel academic supports are so connected to

student discipline:

If we were able to better scaffold and meet an entire group of 20 to 30 kids' academic scenarios, then we wouldn't be dealing with as many of the behavioral scenarios. And if we just continue to push kids along to fourth, fifth grade that are reading at a kindergarten level, then they're going to go to middle school and and it's just sort of like it doesn't get better, and so you can you know, come up with as many behavioral systems and hurdles and programs that you want, if we are not getting kids closer to where they need to be to be academically successful, it just doesn't matter if they behave or not.

In a follow up question, Teacher #1 specified which resources are needed for academic interventions, and they replied, "they need more teachers, because we need more interventions: we need smaller groups." Not only are interventions important, but lesson objectives should be tied to grade-level standards. If students are presented with below-grade-level objectives, then students will perform below-grade-level. Administrator #1 explained this idea: "For the most part, having high expectations for our students. And not just assuming because they're below grade level that they shouldn't have the opportunity to work at grade level." Counselor #1 explains the direct relationship between academic achievement and student behavior:

Even like with academic support, like if a kid is acting up because they're not doing well in school, they don't understand. Like, I had kid, you know, they're reading at a kindergarten level and they're in fifth grade, you feel stupid, you know, like that's horrible so you act out to not look dumb.

**Theme 4: “Kids don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care”: Students succeed through positive interpersonal relationships**

This theme identifies that positive interpersonal relationships are a critical component of the successful educational experience. Our initial research question intimated that the quality of the student/teacher relationship was the sole influencer of the learning environment. Through interviews, we have learned that positive interpersonal relationships between all components of the educational team are necessary to achieve a successful educational experience. While the nature of the student/teacher relationship is the primary indicator of how the student will navigate the classroom in particular and the school environment as a whole, we have found that it is equally important that the teacher/administration, teacher/teacher, teacher/support staff, student/student, and law enforcement/all educational community members thrive as well. Validating the African adage, it takes a village.

Relationships in general are hard to cultivate and even more challenging when the unsurety of presence looms. Interviews have indicated that teacher turnover rate in area schools are high, and this attrition is one of the challenges with forming more substantial interpersonal relationships among teachers and students. Counselor #1 stated that “[forming relationships] takes a little bit longer because these kids are used to people leaving, so it takes you time to get their buy-in and to get them to know you are sticking around and that you care about them.” Relationship formation is a two way street. The teachers need to know the students and the students need to know that the teachers will be around. Counselor #1 goes on to say “new teachers that came in .....didn’t realize that the kids are going to kind of test them” indicating that the students will do their best at

first to push the teachers away, reluctant to form a close relationship because of past disappointments. Part of the testing process from students comes in the form of acting out, as Counselor #1 indicates “bad attention is better than no attention.”

In an effort to recruit the best staff, the administrator at School A has been “very intentional about finding teachers that are culturally reflective of the student body”, according to a staff member. A result of the intentional recruiting is staff retention, they commented that “she keeps teachers too, so she doesn’t have to fill many positions every year.”

**“The relationship between students and teachers changed in a way”: Open communication enhances relationships.**

A positive student-teacher relationship is critical for achieving success in the classroom. Prior to the commitment to end student suspension, the occurrence of opportunities for teachers and students to engage in conversation around disciplinary measures were minimal. Some interview responses revealed that the initial reaction to the policy change created feelings of resentment resulting in an aversion to adjusting previous practices. However, both teachers and juvenile officers discussed the change in both the frequency and depth of conversation between students and teachers as it pertained to behavioral expectations and consequences. The desire and ability to have these conversations can only enhance the success of classroom management.

While it is the responsibility of the teacher to set the standards of expectations and rules of the classroom, inclusive conversations about expectations, actions, and consequences have proven to result in improved relationships and more effective classroom management. Teacher #1 stated “as a class, they worked together to come up

with what the rules and the expectations were, they came up together as a class to figure out what the consequences were going to be.” This collaborative method not only improves classroom management, but also increases student’s emotional development. Teacher #1 goes on to state that “teachers that were doing a lot of restorative work were building relationships and keeping expectations and everything very developmentally appropriate.” Even at an early age, communication is important and inclusive conversations can only set our students up for success.

Check-in buddies are another indication of how beneficial positive student-teacher relationships are to the success of the student. Administrator #2 has supplemented appointments with the school counselor with teacher check-ins, “ if the student seems to gravitate towards you and you guys have a great relationship, now you have that person as a check-in buddy for that particular student.” This relational type of support is also displayed through mentoring. Teacher #2 stated, “we had mentors in our building, so if a kid had a problem, they had a mentor that they would talk to about what’s going on.” These two support systems are examples that positive relationships are vital to success.

**“Conversations with colleagues to find out how they were handling things”:**

**Collaborative efforts with peers encourage more positive relationships**

Collegial support in any industry is necessary for success, but it seems to be even more necessary in the field of education. Classroom management being both an art and a science, can only benefit from sharing the experiences that work and those that don’t. The change in policy has inspired more collaborative efforts between teachers as well. Administrator #2 discussed the more intentional efforts put forward to collaborate on effective efforts. Even casual conversations like “okay what are you doing? Is that

working? Is this something I can incorporate in my classroom?” proved to be extremely beneficial. The ability to have a space to share professional challenges and successes is invaluable. A sharing space develops positive collegial relationships that only enhances the learning environment.

**“Our common juvenile officers come there for positive visits and now those officers have created relationships”: Officers are educational partners, not punishers**

One of the most tenuous relationships that exist of late, is that of the police and the community. The educational community is not much different. Juvenile Detective #5 stated that “relationships that were already solid stayed the same...the whole defund the police and how we were villainized and vilified in the media played a part.” The districts that we spoke with did not have individual school resource officers (SRO), however the schools do have juvenile officers assigned to them.

Despite the desire to have a positive and supportive relationship with students, many of the officers interviewed indicated that before the policy change, many teachers called them for punitive measures only. Juvenile Detective #2 talked about their interactions prior to the policy change:

A lot of schools were quicker to call us, you know hey come get this kid, get him out of here. After the changes it was more so, hey we got a kid here, can you all come and talk to them? We’ve been talking to them about what’s going on.

Each officer interviewed expressed the desire and determination to create and maintain positive and nurturing relationships with the student, and indeed it is equally important to foster positive relationships with teachers and administrators. In their interview, Juvenile Detective #4 mentioned the ability to “get in there and build these relationships with



some of the elementary principals and cultivate a good relationship with those elementary schools.” However, each officer interviewed indicated their primary concern was for the well-being of the student. In reference to relationship building, Juvenile Detective #1 stated:

You expect me to come in and bark at the kids. I’m not going to do that. My mission is to come in and let children know that I’m a real person. I love; I have children, I’m somebody’s son. I care about you as a person and I’m here to help, not to yell and fuss.

Juvenile Detective #2 was adamant that anyone who called themselves a juvenile officer needed to be a “kid person”. He talked about constantly combating the stereotype of the punitive police officer:

People get the misconception that juvenile officers just go to schools when something bad happens, but the way I ran my unit was we visited schools all the time...our common juvenile officers come there for positive visits and now those officers created relationships, especially with those younger kids.

The officers realize that their reputations may proceed them, as many students and their families have had negative interactions in the community. Therefore, in an effort to be seen as human, they trade their uniforms for polos and khakis and offer to read at story time, along with other actions that will hopefully aid in forming relationships throughout the school. The hard work that the officers do to cultivate the positive relationships inside the school doesn’t stay there. The officers shared stories about the students’ personal challenges outside of the classroom. Juvenile Detective #2 recalls witnessing a colleague in a dispatch training session answering a call regarding a student with whom he had

previously formed a relationship. Upon receiving the call, the detective was not only able to identify the student, he was able to dispatch resources to help de-escalate the situation, and avert any contact with the juvenile justice system.

The detectives interviewed all valued the relationships made with the educational team and understand the initial propensity to distrust them. Juvenile Detective #2 states:

When you're a police officer, you are a part of that community now what part, you determine that, but you're going to go there every day and you have to decide this, you have to decide whether you're going to police when you're going to patrol you know and there is a difference in both of those, and when you decide that and you convey that, community that you serve can see that, through your actions, then you get them beyond they uniform, and also the skin color.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

RQ1: How do student-teacher interpersonal relationships and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

RQ2: How do teacher, administrator and school resource officer (SRO) implicit bias awareness and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

RQ3: How do school policy and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment for K-2nd grade students?

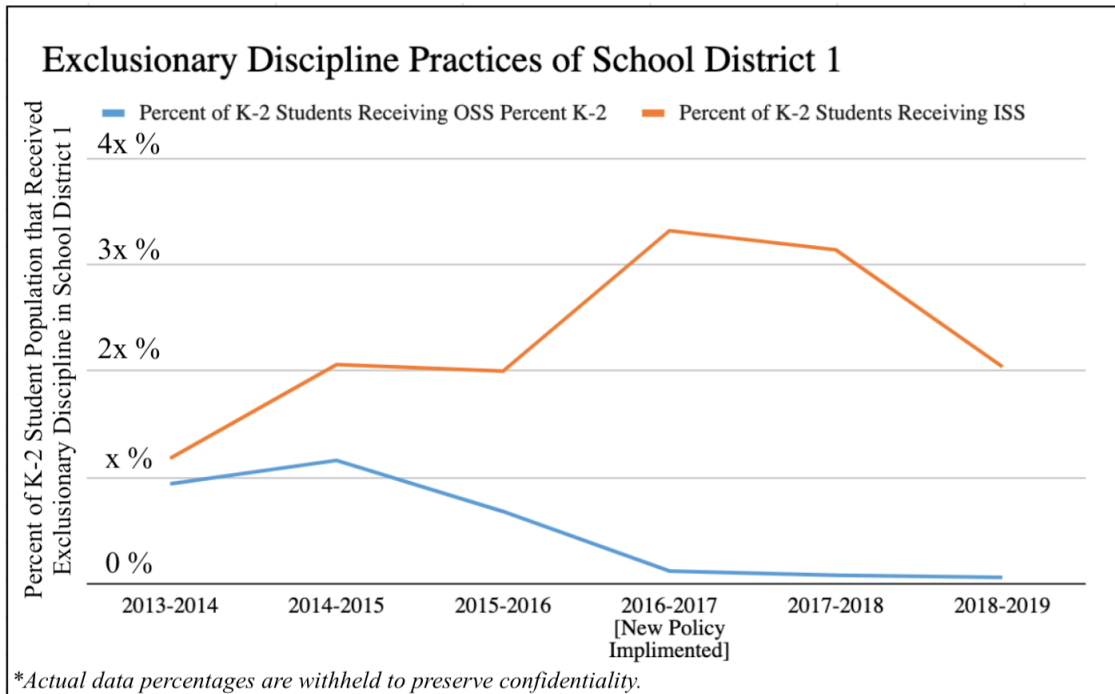
The purpose of this exploratory, multiple case study is to examine how interpersonal relationships between student and teachers, employee awareness of their implicit biases, and structural racism embedded in school policies affect efforts to eliminate exclusionary discipline and end the school to prison pipeline. The themes outlined in the previous chapter help to tell the story of a school district who bravely changed their school policy to stop suspending students in grades K-2nd grade. With hours of interviews describing nuanced ideas from teachers, administrators, and juvenile detectives about what could improve, we celebrate the success of a district that is paving the way for all other school districts who wish to also find alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices, and thus narrow the funnel of students into the STPP.

Shown below, Figure 2 puts the stories from Chapter 4 into context. The graph shows the percentage of the K-2 student population in School District 1 that received exclusionary discipline consequences. The percentage of students receiving ISS and OSS over the 5 year period are shown in the figure. The actual data percentages are withheld from the figure to preserve confidentiality, though the vertical scale is proportionally

accurate. The blue line represents the percent of K-2 students in the district who received OSS each year; the orange line above represents the percent of K-2 students in the district who received ISS each year. A significant decrease in suspensions is shown the year of the policy change in the 2016-2017 school year; the percent of K-2 students receiving OSS moved close to 0%, and this figure illustrates how the district maintained a near 0% OSS rate for 3 years after implementing the policy. The figure illustrates the spike in the percent of K-2 students receiving ISS during the initial policy change, then shows ISS rates returned to percentages like pre-policy change years.

**Figure 2**

*Exclusionary Discipline Practices of School District 1*



## **Interpretation of the Findings**

Our initial premise around interpersonal relationships was that positive relationships between students and teachers would elicit more effective classroom management techniques, instill a sense of pride, dignity, and confidence in students, and decrease the occurrence of suspension. Indeed our research does indicate that the relationship between teacher and student is the foundational relationship that impacts a student's educational outcome, however our research also uncovered the critical secondary relationships that must be present and intact as well.

Through a series of interviews with teachers, counselors/social workers, principals, and juvenile detectives we identified and defined secondary relationships as teacher/teacher, teacher/administrators, juvenile detectives/teacher/administrators, and juvenile detectives/students. While the necessity of these relationships may seem obvious, the connection was not made in literature that we reviewed.

The peer relationships between teachers proved beneficial in establishing mentoring relationships for students with other teachers, providing alternate classroom space for disciplinary needs, and being a resource for each other on classroom management techniques. The collegial relationships between teachers and counselors is necessary, as teachers are not expected to be equipped with the same skill set as counselors or social workers. Openly communicative relationships at this level have allowed the teachers to better relay the actions happening inside the classrooms as well as prompted some counselors to share some techniques for working through problem behaviors in the classrooms. As you go up the reporting line, the relationship between principals and teachers, and really all school staff, is critical to not just classroom

success, but whole school success. Being able to clearly and respectfully articulate goals and expected outcomes up front, allow for productive conversations around why a teacher may have disciplined the way he or she did.

Most surprising in our findings was the consistent message of relationship cultivation that emanated from the interviews with the juvenile detectives. They indicated the need and desire to relationship-build with staff, given the current climate and attitude toward police. It was important to them that the teachers see them as a partner in the lives and well-being of their students. Each detective recounted their attempts to be seen as an everyday person there to provide the support necessary for the student to be successful. Each also expressed the hope to be in on the building of the relationship so that they are not called in for punitive measures only.

The importance of positive relationships extend past the classroom. Incorporating the student's family is integral to successful educational outcomes. Because our research question focused on the student teacher relationship, our interview did not delve into the depth of support that is needed from and given to families. However, we had two principals, who at a macro level, discussed the importance of support or care groups. These groups include the teacher, counselor or social worker, principal, and parent, and are formed if a student is presenting a behavioral challenge that is difficult to manage solely within the classroom. Parental involvement is key to ensuring a student's success, and cultivating that parental relationship is essential to ensuring a substantive level of involvement on the part of the parent. The information discussed on family relationships was developing enough trust to gain insight on issues or needs in the home that may be preventing the student from showing up as their best self. Multiple participants

referenced community entities that partner with their schools. These partners serve as resources and support for personal family needs and can assist where needed. These supports extend past the students to the parents as well. Being in a relationship extends beyond the one-on-one interaction, to ensuring environmental needs of the individual are met as well.

Although our interviews elicited discussion around implicit bias awareness, we did not directly answer the question of how implicit bias awareness and disciplinary practices interact to influence the learning environment. We did confirm that the increased quality of relationship between student and teacher directly correlated with the decreased propensity to deem undesired behavior as punishable through exclusionary measures. The policy change forced educators to rethink the how and the why behind disciplinary measures, making socioeconomic status and family home life considerations as the decisions on discipline are decided. While we initially desired to further investigate the impact that race has on bias, many of our participants were the same race as the students they taught, yet still held these unconscious biases. This discovery further supports the need for culturally relevant curriculum as we prepare educators to go into the field and continued training for those currently in the field.

The research we discussed in Chapter 2 is clear: black students are being suspended at higher rates than their white peers, implicit bias plays a part when teachers refer students to the office, and as a result, something needs to be done to stop suspending students and funneling them from schools to prison. School District 1 listened to the research and the recommendations that were made from organizations (e.g. ACLU, FTF) regarding the effects of suspending students during early grades. A bold policy change

was made to eliminate suspensions in grades K-2. This policy change set the foundation for schools to support inclusionary discipline methods like restorative justice and to create systems of support for students. Herbert (2019) believes:

“As we move forward with expanding SRO programs once again, a therapeutic or restorative approach should be considered, not a repetition of the historical actions of criminalizing youth behavior and generating more disadvantages for youth.

(p.89)

The data showed that a change in policy required teachers and administrators to shift their disciplinary practices and ultimately focus on how to support the students. Once suspension was not an option, administrators and teachers worked to create a learning environment that was culturally responsive and that responded to student social and emotional needs. When a teacher could no longer send a student to the office with a referral, they had to find a way to continue to have the student in the classroom and address the behavior in another way. Welch (2022) supports alternatives to exclusionary discipline:

The results from the present research provide support for the argument that limiting the use of exclusionary responses to student misbehavior can be a key to reducing future arrests and subsequent incarcerations. Accordingly, schools should restrict the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions and instead strive to adopt alternative forms of student sanctioning in order to guide behavior and reduce school disruptions. (p. 36)

The administrators were able to support teachers by implementing PBIS in the schools as a preventative measure, and to practice restorative justice and create mentors and buddy



rooms as a response to behaviors that could have previously resulted in OSS. Our participants were staff members who have been employed prior to 2016. It was mentioned during our interviews that the policy change did cause staff to leave the school district because they did not feel supported. Since we did not interview staff members who left after the policy change, we cannot say exactly what the district could have provided that would have made a difference for them.

The District also attempted to support the change by requiring cultural awareness training. They recognized that to combat a disproportionate number of black students being disciplined, the staff had to be educated. The staff did understand the rationale behind the policy change was largely due to the higher rate of Black students being suspended than white students. However, the cultural awareness training offered by the District seemed to fall short. The staff that did remember that there was training but were not able to articulate the name of the training, recall the book, or have any additional information they could offer. On the other hand, the Juvenile Detectives were knowledgeable about the implicit bias training that is required by the police department.

Throughout our data, in almost every interview, resources, or the lack thereof, was addressed. This mirrors the findings of the literature review, which stated that, “additional intensive supports to address student needs in addition to systemic universal, school-wide procedures” were needed (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Luiselli et al., 2005, as cited by Chin et. al., 2012, p. 160). Our data, coupled with the literature review, indicate that resources should be a priority when addressing the school to prison pipeline. This is not just from school districts. Police departments, community partners, school counselors and social workers all need the resources to address the fundamental issues students are

facing. To decriminalize classroom management, all parties involved have to have the proper training coupled with the resources to implement that training.

School districts also must address policies that are currently in place, with the understanding that some policies will need to change to slow the flow of students into the school to prison pipeline. In the literature review, Ramey (2018) states it best, “Once criminalized disciplinary policies are implemented, evidence suggests that they remain in place and are rarely removed from the books” (p. 187). Teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers, and juvenile detectives are all resistant to change, it’s human nature. Admitting a policy that was detrimental to the students and needs to change will be met with resistance. Administrator #3 reflects what we discovered in the literature review when they said, “When you are part of the old guard, and you're used to doing things in a certain manner, sometimes you're skeptical when we change it up.”

### **Revised Conceptual Framework**

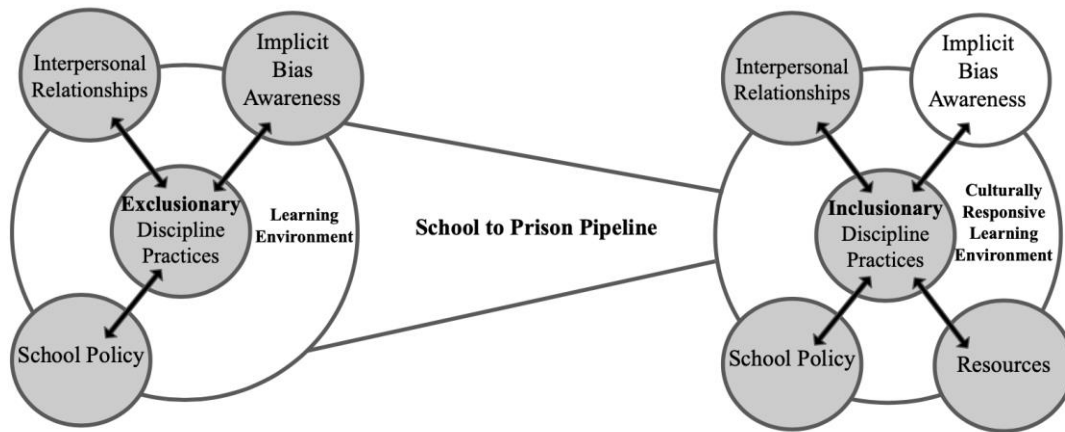
Through our research we listened to participants who have learned from experience and have knowledge on what happens when OSS is eliminated. Based on the data that we heard from participants, resources are important to being able to move away from exclusionary discipline methods and support inclusionary discipline methods. Resources include but are not limited to staff, training, or supportive programs that respond to the needs of students. Therefore, in Figure 3 we added another element to the right side of the conceptual framework. We recognize that resources are key to moving students away from the STPP.

Additionally, since we were not able to answer research question #2 but believe nonetheless that further research can and should be conducted, the implicit bias

awareness element is not filled in. Implicit bias awareness was also moved close to interpersonal relationships. The information we gathered suggests that implicit bias awareness and interpersonal relationships are closely related.

**Figure 3**

*Revised Conceptual Framework for Creating a Culturally Responsive Learning Environment*



### Implications for Practitioners

Findings from this research may be useful to: 1) school district leaders who are considering changing their discipline policy, 2) educational leaders, who wish to advocate for changes in resources, 3) building principals preparing to begin a school year with new district policies in place, 4) Law enforcement or school partners in communities who have high levels of exclusionary discipline and 5) future researchers interested in school policies, SROs, implicit bias, school resources, interpersonal relationships in schools, exclusionary or inclusionary discipline practices.

### **Time Allocated for Student Voice and Teacher Collaboration**

Teachers and administrators agree that student voice is one of the most important ingredients to eliminating exclusionary discipline practices and successfully creating a culturally responsive learning environment. Teacher voice and family voice are also key ingredients to success. As a school principal noted, there won't necessarily be "explicit training on how to manage behaviors in lieu of suspension, it was really more of you can't suspend them so figure it out," and part of figuring it out includes working collaboratively to create expectations and resolve conflict.

### **Emphasis on Teaching Universal School Expectations**

Successful implementation of inclusionary practices includes the teaching, re-teaching and rewarding of school policies and expectations. PBIS practices are strongly encouraged, as the participants in this study emphasized a shift from punitive discipline for misbehavior to re-teaching of appropriate behaviors through restorative practices.

### **Make Policy Change**

Ending suspension in K-2nd grade schools is accomplished by policy change. The reality is that schools will never feel like they are completely ready to make the policy change to stop suspensions, but they should not let this deter them from making immediate changes to end suspension. Schools should fully attempt to make the above suggestions but making the actual policy change is the most important action. As the data shows in Chapter 4, the district that we studied did not have a perfect set of circumstances to eliminate suspensions, but despite lacking resources and a detailed plan to eliminate exclusionary discipline practices, this school district was successful at

eliminating OSS to less than 1% for three consecutive years. Change takes time, but it is worth it.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The opportunity for future studies around police within schools is vast. This study was limited to one school district and focused on the Juvenile Detectives assigned to every school within the jurisdiction. Although there have been some studies in the wake of ever increasing school violence and mass shootings, there remains a gap in research within this data.

There has been a national movement to remove the police from schools. Numerous school districts around the nation have removed police officers and juvenile detectives from the schools. A mixed methods study on attitudes and perception of safety both before and after the removal of the police from schools would make for a fascinating study.

The police officers and juvenile detectives' individual attitudes about the school to prison pipeline will make for another interesting study. Our data showed that the Juvenile Detectives within this jurisdiction believed their role was to keep students out of the school to prison pipeline. Juvenile Detective #2 stated:

Officers to go into schools and interact with the children get them beyond the uniform don't we can be so quick to be punitive you know now, of course, there are some things that they need punitive reactions, but we can't always be so quick to it...they have a rapport with those kids now we start to break down that school to prison pipeline.

“Specific to juveniles, agencies are starting to include topics such as adolescent brain development, trauma-informed care, mental health, and conflict mediation. The inclusion of this training may be the acknowledgement of role expansion among police.” (Herbert, 2019, p. 89). A study addressing the attitudes of police officers and juvenile detectives, in an attempt to understand if they see themselves as accelerating the students into, or gatekeepers assigned to keep students out of, the school to prison pipeline would be an engaging study indeed.

Many districts have added new policies to eliminate and/or decrease suspensions for various grade levels. A narrative study to compare the types of inclusionary and exclusionary discipline measures in those schools would provide some insight into how these policies are put into practice during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many school districts are offering virtual options for students. However, virtual education as an alternative to suspension should be studied to determine if this is an exclusionary discipline practice and has similar effects as OSS.

Future studies will hopefully also include districts who expand their suspension policies to include older students. Many teachers and school leaders made mention that the schools that include older elementary students also significantly decreased their suspension rates in those older grade levels as well. How are the attitudes and practices of teachers in older grades impacted by the policy change of younger grades? What inclusionary practices will teachers and principals implement to meet the needs of older students who would have otherwise been suspended?

In Chapter 2 we discussed the use of “buddy rooms” as an exclusionary discipline practice because it is taking the student out of their classroom where learning is taking

place. However, the participants in our study discussed using buddy rooms as an alternative to exclusionary practices. This could be an area for future research. There seems to be a need to determine the effects of using a buddy room to keep the student in school but remove them from their classroom. Length of time the student is removed, whether they are able to access the curriculum, and how the student views the buddy room could be areas to explore.

### **Conclusion**

If you believe that suspension is a direct pipeline to prison (as the research and literature demonstrates), and if you believe that eliminating suspension would significantly narrow the pipeline to prison, then the time and effort it takes to eliminate suspension is worth it. The district we studied successfully reduced their suspension of K-2nd grade students to almost 0% over the first three years of the policy change. Despite a plethora of other factors such as resources, relationships and consistent expectations, this district has shown that making the commitment to eliminate suspension in K-2nd grade can certainly be accomplished. Hopefully time will tell that this generation in this community is lucky enough to be a part of the district that acted quickly to change policies on exclusionary discipline following prominent reports and recommendations and will see a sharp decline in students funneling into the STPP.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

### **Introduce Self**

“My name is Kristin French, I’m doing research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and I’m working in a research team with 3 other doctoral students. I have degrees in education and social work, and I’ve served as a math teacher and currently as a school counselor at a local high school. I am also married, and we enjoy traveling.”

“My name is Neil A.J. French, I’m doing research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and I’m working in a research team with 3 other doctoral students. I’ve been in the field of law enforcement for 19 years. I have a Bachelors and Masters degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Central Missouri.”

“My name is Phyllis Jackson, I’m doing research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and I’m working in a research team with 3 other doctoral students. I’ve worked at a local university for over 30 years, and a big part of my identity is the work I do at my church. I am married, and a parent of 3 grown children, and 4 grandchildren.”

“My name is Erin King, I’m doing research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and I’m working in a research team with 3 other doctoral students. I’ve been in the field of education for 18 years: 14 as a classroom teacher, 4 as a high school assistant principal, and I am also a parent of 2 elementary aged children.”

### **Give purpose**

“I’ve been studying the School to Prison Pipeline (STPP) and eliminating Out-of-School Suspension (OSS). I’m interested in learning about your perspective from your experiences at your school regarding this topic. I would like to hear your thoughts as a \_\_\_\_\_ (teacher, administrator, police officer) because you will provide a unique perspective.”

### **Ethical statements**

“If you feel uncomfortable, let me know you’d like to skip that question. Your responses are confidential, even to the other (teachers, administrators, police officers) I will be interviewing. This interview will last less than 60 minutes. I’m recording the conversation so I can pay attention and remember what you said, but I will be deleting this recording after it has been transcribed, and you have my word that your name or any identifiable information will never be used. You can stop the interview at any time for any reason. Do you have any questions? Do I have your consent to proceed?”

### **Questions used, such as:**

1. I am specifically interested to hear how your experiences before and after your school district made a commitment to stop suspending students in grades K-2nd grade. This happened in 2016. Have you been a member of the \_\_\_\_\_ [insert name of school] school community during that time, both before and after 2016?
2. Were you aware of the commitment your school district made to stop suspending K-2nd grade students?
3. How was the change in exclusionary discipline practices received by the faculty, both administrators and teachers?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

4. Considering the changes in discipline practices in 2016, tell us about how these changes in the disciplinary practices affected the relationships between students and teachers?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

5. How did this change in exclusionary discipline practices affect the learning environment?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

6. What implicit bias awareness training, or cultural relevancy training of teachers, administrators and SROs were you aware of before and after 2016?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

7. Considering the changes in discipline practices in 2016, how did training influence the way discipline practices were applied, both before and after 2016? Specifically, was there a noticeable change in exclusionary discipline practices, and if so, what changes were made?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

8. Considering the changes in discipline practices in 2016, what replacement discipline practices were implemented? Did your school replace OSS with other

exclusionary discipline practices? Or were exclusionary discipline practices strictly replaced by inclusionary practices?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

9. What supports are in place to address discipline concerns without excluding students from the learning environment?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

10. What were the challenges of implementing these supports with teachers, students, and administrators?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

11. What does effective discipline look like to you?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

12. Is what your school district doing working to lessen the STPP? What additional changes do you think that your school district should make to continue to decrease the school to prison pipeline?

*Possible Follow-Ups: Tell me more about... What do you mean by...*

### **Concluding statements**

“Your insight has been invaluable today. Thank you so much for sharing your story. If I need to follow up, is this number \_\_\_\_\_ the best way to contact you? I really appreciate your time. I may be in touch.”

## **Appendix B: Recruitment Email**

Date:

Re: Study of Discipline Practices

Dear xxx,

As a group of Doctoral students at the University of Missouri- St. Louis we are kindly requesting your participation in our research study. This research will play an important role in advancing our understanding of how discipline practices contribute to the school to prison pipeline and help lead to possible improvements in discipline practices in education.

The following information summarizes the study and what it involves:

### **An Exploratory Multiple Case Study of Discipline Practices in a Major Metropolitan Public School District: A Look into the School to Prison Pipeline**

#### **Study Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the research on how interpersonal relationships between student and teachers, awareness of one's implicit biases, and structural racism embedded in school policies affects efforts to end the school to prison pipeline in Kindergarten to 2nd grades.

#### **Participation Requirements:**

You will be asked to participate in an approximate one hour virtual or in person interview at your convenience.

#### **Contact Information:**

If you are interested in participating in this study or learning more about it, you can contact: Kristin Calvert-French [calvertfrenchk@umsystem.edu](mailto:calvertfrenchk@umsystem.edu)

Sincerely,

Kristin Calvert-French, Neil French, Phyllis Jackson, Erin King  
Ed.D. Candidates  
University of Missouri - St. Louis

## Appendix C: IRB Approval



December 07, 2021

Principal Investigator: AJ French (UMSL-Student)  
Department: Education EDD-Doctorate

Your IRB Application to project entitled An Exploratory Multiple Case Study of Discipline Practices  
A Look into the School to Prison Pipeline was reviewed and approved by the UMSL Institutional Review Board according to the terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number	2069162
IRB Review Number	335638
Initial Application Approval Date	December 07, 2021
IRB Expiration Date	December 07, 2022
Level of Review	Exempt
Project Status	Active - Exempt
Exempt Categories (Revised Common Rule)	45 CFR 46.104d(1)
Risk Level	Minimal Risk Corrected consent form

Approved Documents	Recruitment email This is the sample of questions we will be using during interviews. Pre-interview script
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The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

1. Enrollment and study related procedures must remain in compliance with the University of Missouri regulations related to interaction with human participants following guidance at <http://www.umsl.edu/recd/compliance/umsl-guidance-covid19-policy-7.2021.pdf>.
2. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
3. All changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation utilizing the Exempt Amendment Form.
4. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date to keep the study active or to close it.
5. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.

If you are offering subject payments and would like more information about research participant payments, please click here to view the UM Policy: [https://www.umsystem.edu/ums/policies/finance/payments\\_to\\_research\\_study\\_participants](https://www.umsystem.edu/ums/policies/finance/payments_to_research_study_participants)

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the UMSL IRB Office at 314-516-5972 or email to [irb@umsl.edu](mailto:irb@umsl.edu).

Thank you,  
UMSL Institutional Review Board