ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF DISCIPLINE POLICIES AND THE OVERREPRESENTATION OF DISCIPLINE OUTCOMES IN URBAN SETTINGS

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to my wife, Rachael. Without you, I would not have completed this process. You pushed me to be a better person, and with every crazy idea I have ever had, you have never asked why. You continue to be my biggest cheerleader through all of life's opportunities. Thanks for the sacrifices of time that have occurred through this process; though long and sometimes boring, in your opinion, I appreciated that you championed me to stick with it and influenced me to finish.

I also dedicate my dissertation to my parents. You both instilled the work ethic that I had to help me finish this process. There were many instances when giving up would have been easier than finishing, but each time I heard in my mind, "Coopers do not quit." Although I might give you all a hard time with how hard you all work, it does not go unnoticed. I also appreciate the importance you placed on me regarding education at such a young age. Whether or not I would proceed with education was never a question; it was always the expectation. Though I never expected to come this far, you all impacted my decisions. Thanks for all you have done for me.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate my dissertation to all the teachers I have ever had the pleasure of having. This is dedicated to all of my elementary, middle, high, and college teachers. As it would not be fair for me to shout out just a few, I appreciate every one of you. I appreciate you and your hard work to help me succeed. With all of the educators from whom I have had the pleasure of learning, every single one of you taught me that the sky is the limit.

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Abstract

Since the formation of schools, schools have developed ways of understanding discipline and ensuring a safe and orderly environment. Governmental personnel began to influence local school policies beginning in 1989, with United States President Ronald Reagan's *War on Drugs* campaign. This led to the creation and development of zero-tolerance policies. School districts implemented zero-tolerance policies, which helped lead to the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes (i.e., punishment) among certain demographics. Following the Critical Race Theory theoretical framework, I interviewed 12 participants to determine their perceptions of discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban settings. My participants included elementary principals and teachers across two large urban school districts across Tennessee. After interviewing 12 participants, I determined two things: elementary school teachers perceived the success of discipline practices and outcomes based on support from their administrators and whether teachers believed schools were considered safe, and elementary school principals perceived successful discipline policies and their role in discipline as their ability to support students during their school career and to give support to teachers so that teachers could support students. From the teachers' perspective, I determined that teachers viewed successful discipline policies depending on support provided by administrators and a safe environment. From the principals' perspective, I determined that principals viewed successful discipline policies depending on their ability to support students and to support teachers.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter I: Introduction

In the United States, political parties influenced school discipline policies dating back to the 1980s (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Since U.S. President Reagan's Administration's *War on Drugs* campaign, schools attempted to be safe by cracking down on violence (Kayama et al., 2015; Manay, 2009). President Reagan's Administration's *War on Drugs* campaign used the term *zero-tolerance* about those found with drugs by police; however, the term zero-tolerance quickly began to be used in schools (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [NCLB], 2002; Verdugo, 2002). The War on Drugs Campaign was just one of the political things that led to federal laws allowing schools to standardize discipline policies, which led to suspensions of black students at more than two times their peers (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Skiba et al., 2014). Researchers also found that black students were suspended as much as three times as their white peers for the same offense (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). Due to standard discipline policies, black students overrepresented all students in discipline outcomes (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2001). In my qualitative interpretive study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with elementary teachers and administrators in two large Tennessee school districts. I determined the perceptions of elementary educators on the effectiveness of discipline policies and the relationship between the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes on black students in urban settings.

Statement of the Problem

In school systems across the United States, from 1992-2019, researchers found a decrease in violence in schools by more than 80% (Browne, 2003;

Katzmann, 2002; National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2021);
however, school personnel continued creating discipline policies that
inadvertently led to students entering the criminal justice system, known as the
school-to-prison pipeline (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance
Task Force, 2008; NCLB, 2002; Verdugo, 2002). Starting during the 1980s, with
President Reagan's Administration through 2022, there was an inequality in
discipline outcomes, and black students were overrepresented (American
Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Barnes & Motz,
2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2001; Mallett, 2015; Mizel et al., 2016;
Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011,
2014; Verdugo, 2002). Congress enacted federal laws that standardized discipline
policies, such as zero-tolerance policies (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Skiba et al.,
2014). The enactment of these laws unintentionally led to the suspension of black
students more than two times more than all their peers (Barnes & Motz, 2018;
Skiba et al., 2014) and sometimes as much as three times compared to their white
peers (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). The American Bar Association realized the
overrepresentation of black students, so they created legislation to end policies
that caused this problem (Henault, 2001; Hirji, 2018; Martinez, 2009).

  Researchers found that school districts suspended students, specifically
black students, from schools due to educators being unprepared to handle at-risk
youth (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011,
2014). Schools were ill-prepared to handle students not meeting behavioral
expectations, predominantly minority students not meeting those expectations
(Archer, 2009). School personnel created zero-tolerance for offenses like illegal

drugs and students who were unsafe (e.g., fighting, weapons, assault) which researchers believed created a safer learning environment; however, these policies caused more harm than good (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Kayama et al., 2015; NCLB, 2002; Verdugo, 2002).

Researchers discovered that students excluded from a large part of the school year had adverse effects on their future lives because of the suspensions (Welsh & Little, 2018). One major consequence of being suspended from school resulted in low achievement scores (Anderson et al., 2019; Arcia, 2006; Cobb-Clark et al., 2015; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003). Researchers also found a greater chance of students being involved with the justice system before graduation when excluded from a large part of the school year (Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). There was an even higher chance of students dropping out of high school when the student was suspended or expelled from school (Chu & Ready, 2018; Suh & Suh, 2007). From an emotional well-being aspect, Morrison et al. (2001) discovered students who were suspended or expelled expressed feelings of isolation or disengagement compared to their peers who had not been suspended or expelled.

I designed this study to identify elementary educators' perceptions of the contributing factors from current discipline policies to the overrepresentation of black students in discipline outcomes. This study helped determine if elementary educators recognized inequality in discipline outcomes and, if they did, their perceptions of where these inequalities came from. I collected data from interviews with elementary school assistant principals, executive principals, and

teachers to accomplish this goal. Due to the immense research completed in secondary education and the lack of research focused on elementary education, I decided to focus this study on elementary schools in the urban setting. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as my framework, I conducted a qualitative interpretive study to investigate the perceptions of elementary school educators, using both teachers and administrators. I specifically looked at the impact of discipline policies, which resulted in inequalities in discipline outcomes and the overrepresentation of black students in two large school districts across Tennessee. This qualitative interpretive study aimed to investigate the perceptions of elementary school teachers and administrators about discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban elementary schools in two large school districts in Tennessee.

Research Questions

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated researchers centered research questions around the most critical areas of the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicated researchers based future discussions around research questions. Research questions also helped by narrowing down the purpose statement of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purpose of using my study's research questions was to better understand elementary school educators' perceptions about discipline outcomes and policies and how it resulted in an overrepresentation of black students in discipline outcomes. I used the two research questions below to help guide my research.

Research Question 1

According to elementary school teachers in two large, urban school districts in Tennessee, what were their perceptions of discipline policies and outcomes in elementary schools?

Research Question 2

According to elementary school administrators in two large, urban school districts in Tennessee, what were their perceptions of discipline policies and outcomes in elementary schools?

Theoretical Framework

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated a theoretical framework guided research and was the lens the researcher used to study the research. Anfara and Mertz (2015) stated, "There are a large number and wide variety of theoretical frameworks available for qualitative researchers to consider" (p. 15). With all the given frameworks to study, Anfara and Mertz (2015) stated frameworks allowed the reader to see anything through their lens. For this reason, I chose to use CRT to guide this study. Dutil (2020) stated, "Critical race theory thoroughly examines the concepts of racism, power, and policy within the legal field and is an appropriate theoretical framework to apply to the issue of school discipline and its relationship with race, historical oppression, and trauma" (p. 171).

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) stated CRT was a theory predominantly discussed in higher education and law schools because of the influence CRT had on specific demographics. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) highlighted CRT relating to race and not one specific act but a series of actions used by the legal system to place one group of people above others.

5

In the education system, the school-to-prison pipeline resulted from the creation of zero-tolerance policies the federal government forced schools to create and implement starting in the early 1980s (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Cerrone, 1999; Mallett, 2015; Manay, 2009; Verdugo, 2002). Laws such as NCLB, the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1993 (GFSA), and the Drug-Free Schools Act followed the teachings of CRT because all of these laws led to the specific demographics, in this case, black students, being disadvantaged for extended periods of time (Cerrone, 1999; GFSA, 1994; Kaufman et al., 2001; Mallett, 2015; Manay, 2009). For this reason, I decided to use CRT as the theoretical framework for my research.

Figure 1

Critical Race Theory Tenants

Tenant 1	Centrality of Race	Race is a mediating factor; people are treated differently based on race.
Tenant 2	Challenges Dominant Ideology	Begs question to dominance and uses race as the way of thinking.
Tenant 3	Social Justice and Praxis	Focuses on equity based on race and looks at how people interact based on race.
Tenant 4	Centrality of Experience	Looks at individual reactions given racial interactions and acknowledges experiences being the cause.
Tenant 5	Historical Context	Looks at the historical lens of race and views all interactions through race.

Source: Parker and Villalpando (2007).

Edwards and Schmidt (2006) presented five tenants of beliefs that characterized CRT. As stated by Parker and Villalpando (2007), the first tenant of

CRT covers race at its center, stating that people were treated differently based on race. Parker and Villalpando (2007) presented the second tenant of CRT and stated people think the way they do base on their race. The third tenant looked at how people interacted based on race and focused on equity and access dependent on race (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). The fourth tenant, similar to the second tenant, focused on racial interactions. Still, it also acknowledged that race causes people to have different past experiences, which caused them to interact in different ways (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). Lastly, the fifth tenant looked at race from a historical lens and viewed everything through racial interactions (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). For the purpose of my study, I chose to focus on the third tenant and the fifth tenant. My study focused on equity in discipline and the role race plays in discipline outcomes, as well as the historical presence of race in discipline and policies that have been created because of it (Parker & Villalpando, 2007).

Creating the school-to-prison pipeline was a direct example of what CRT set out to explain (Stanford & Muhammad, 2018). The school-to-prison pipeline was a systematic problem that disadvantaged black students from an early age through ways of the public school system (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Skiba, 2014; Verdugo, 2002; Wilson, 2014; NCLB, 2002). I recognized that I am not the first to research the relationship between the overrepresentation of black students in discipline outcomes with current discipline policies, which led to the pipeline, and how it related to CRT; however, a lack of research was completed at the elementary level. I believed two

7

things for my study: my research was essential and needed completion, and it was necessary to use CRT as the framework of my research.

Significance of the Study

Due to the focus on life outcomes, most of the literature about my topic focused on secondary education because of the importance of life outcomes (e.g., prison vs. high school graduation). Because of that, it was necessary to focus on the elementary age range and the perceptions of administrators and teachers, in an urban setting, on discipline policies and their potential outcomes. For my study, I focused on the elementary age range, K-5th grade, specifically in the urban setting. Also, researchers discovered school districts with primary urban, high-poverty schools had the highest expulsions per 100 students (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). In the state of Tennessee, the state where my study took place, secondary education was considered grades 6-12th. Most of the studies presented in the literature review took place at the secondary level. I wanted to better understand issues presented in elementary education and whether this could help students before entering secondary education to help all stakeholders get ahead of the discipline curve.

Since race was the leading factor in my study, it was essential to focus on this setting since diversity was more likely to occur in it. I also needed to focus on the urban setting because my study focused on black students being overrepresented in discipline outcomes. There was a large population of black students in both of the urban school districts represented in my study. Through my research, I filled a gap in the literature regarding elementary education and the focus on discipline policies and outcomes. I decided to research the perceptions of

teachers and administrators to get a better understanding of if there is a disconnect between these parties when it comes to discipline and the ideas of how discipline works. I wanted to get a clear picture of whether or not teachers and administrators blamed each other for discipline outcomes or if they believed similar things about discipline outcomes.

Description of the Terms

I used a description of terms to assist the reader in a better understanding of how terms were used in my study.

Discipline Outcomes

For my study, I defined discipline outcomes as the consequence or response when a student received an office referral. For instance, I did not focus on the number of referrals to the office but on the result of being referred to the office. I did this to focus on discrepancies, if any, in referral outcomes for black students compared to white students receiving the same office referral. Some examples of discipline outcomes were as simple as administrative warnings towards students to as harsh as expulsion from school.

Elementary School

According to The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (2022), elementary education was the first stage in a child's educational career. As stated in Tennessee Code 49-6-301, elementary schools serve students in grades K-6, generally 5-10 years of age; however, for my study, I used grades K-5. Also, even though some elementary schools serve students in pre-kindergarten, I did not use pre-kindergarten teachers or students in my study. Tennessee Code 49-6-201

stated that students must be five years of age at least, to enter a kindergarten program in an elementary school.

School Administrator

According to Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) (2022), a school administrator, or instructional leader, must have three years of experience in teaching and complete education through a state board-approved preparation program. For my study, I used both executive principals and assistant principals. According to Merriam-Webster (2022), the principal was the person with the highest authority in an organization. For this study, I used both assistant principals and executive principals when interviewing school administrators in elementary schools. In my study, I used the term *admin* when referring to principals to keep anonymity.

Teacher

According to the TDOE (2022), a licensed teacher holds at least a bachelor's degree from an accredited university or college or is currently enrolled in a teacher preparation program. Since there is no requirement for how long a teacher must teach in a given day to be considered a certified teacher (TDOE, 2022), for my research, a teacher met directly with students for more than 50% of their school day. I did not use instructional coaches in my study unless the instructional coach worked with students for more than 50% of the school day. Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012) stated that instructional coaching was a "reciprocal process between peers" (p. 101) and because of it, I decided to focus on classroom teachers who work with students.

Urban Schools

Schaffer et al. (2017) stated that urban areas "refers to districts located in large cities with populations over one million and demographic data indicate these densely populated urban areas are home to a large number of minority and immigrant children as well as children who live in poverty" (p. 12). I used urban schools for my research because the school was in a large metropolitan city, and the school districts used had a large minority population. I used urban schools across two large school districts in Tennessee for my study.

Organization of the Study

In Chapter I of my study, I introduced my topic of elementary educators' perceptions of discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban settings; the statement of the problem; research questions about elementary educators', both teachers and school administrators, perceptions of discipline policies and discipline outcomes; my theoretical framework of CRT; the significance of the study; and the description of important terms. In Chapter II, I provided a review of literature relating to discipline policies and the history of laws that contributed to the overrepresentation of black students in discipline outcomes with the adverse effects that resulted in exclusionary discipline policies. I also focused on elementary schools and how discipline structures worked.

Following the literature review, in Chapter III, I described my methodology and research design for my study. I then discussed my role as the researcher along with the participants I selected. Next, I described my qualitative interpretive research design and semi-structured interviews used to collect my data and how I analyzed the data. I then explained the trustworthiness of my study

with any limitations and delimitations. I finished Chapter III with any assumptions about things I took for granted in my study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

After completing my study, I reported the results of my research in Chapter IV. After using my interview protocol with all participants, I transcribed the interviews. The next step was to code my findings into open codes, axial codes, and selective codes. This process allowed me to develop answers to my research questions. Since I had two research questions, I developed two answers using the coding process. In Chapter V, I discussed the findings from my research study. I listed implications for practice based on my research findings and listed recommendations for future research. I finished my study with the conclusions of my study, where I summarized the study.

The first chapter of this study was the introduction of my research. I followed my first chapter with the Review of Literature in Chapter II. During the review of literature, I focused on historical references to discipline policies and expanded the explanation of elementary schools and school discipline policies.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Between 1992 and 2019, researchers reported a decrease in school violence by more than 80% (Browne, 2003; Katzmann, 2002; NCES, 2021). Although violence in schools declined (Browne, 2003), school personnel continued to create discipline policies incorporating the justice system wording (i.e., offense, victim, and assault) more than before (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; NCLB, 2002; Verdugo, 2002).

Since the beginning of legislation regarding discipline policies, such as the Drug-Free Schools Act and the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, presidential administrations have influenced the relationship between school discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline from 1980 to 2021 (Mallett, 2015). What started with U.S. President Ronald Reagan's administration and continued with every president with the passing of each version of the Improving America's Schools Act, policymakers allowed for inequality in discipline statistics with policies that targeted black students more than other races (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2001; Mallett, 2015; Mizel et al., 2016; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014; Verdugo, 2002). Furthermore, federal laws standardized discipline policies, such as zero-tolerance policies, which led to the suspension of black students at more than two times the rate of their white peers (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Skiba et al., 2014) and sometimes as much as three times compared to their white peers (Cruz & Rodl, 2018).

I conducted a qualitative, interpretive study to investigate the perceptions of elementary school teachers and administrators about discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in two large urban school districts in Tennessee. To understand extant literature related to my study, I began with the historical background of how legislation helped create the overrepresentation of black students in discipline policies. I used CRT as my theoretical framework to explain how legislation helped springboard the overrepresentation of black students in discipline outcomes. I then focused on laws that introduced zero-tolerance policies, their effect on education, and the implementation of those policies.

After discussing zero-tolerance policies, I focused on the school-to-prison pipeline and the adverse effects the pipeline had on schools, students, and communities because of exclusionary discipline. I then presented literature to understand better what it meant for a school to be considered safe. To do this, I discussed police officers and cameras at schools. I then discussed alternative ways of handling discipline like Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and trauma-informed practice. I finished Chapter II by providing an overview of elementary schools. In this qualitative interpretive study, I aimed to investigate the perceptions of elementary school educators, teachers, and administrators, of the impact of discipline policies that resulted in inequalities in discipline outcomes and the overrepresentation of black students in two school districts across the state of Tennessee.

Historical Background of Discipline Policies

In 1989, during U.S. President Ronald Reagan's administration's *War on Drugs* campaign, lawmakers first used the term *zero tolerance* in the Drug-Free Schools Act (Mallett, 2015). At the beginning of zero-tolerance implementation, school personnel removed students from schools for any reason, citing broad policies when making decisions about these removals (Mallett, 2015). In 1989, schools in California and Kentucky began implementing zero-tolerance policies (Verdugo, 2002). Before 1993, school personnel implemented discipline policies however the schools saw fit; however, by 1993, U.S. schools began implementing zero-tolerance policies, which outlined severe, pre-determined consequences for undesired behaviors (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Verdugo, 2002).

In 1994, U.S. President William Clinton signed the GFSA (1994) into law as part of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994. With the enactment of this bill, the government allowed schools continued autonomy, similar to the past, in creating punitive policies, such as zero-tolerance policies (Cerrone, 1999; Mallett, 2015; Manay, 2009). Unlike before, researchers found that states funded schools to enforce the policies (e.g., expelling students from school for at least one year for breaking the rules related to violence or drug use) (Cerrone, 1999; Mallett, 2015; Manay, 2009). By 2001, over 90% of U.S. schools implemented zero-tolerance policies in schools (Kaufman et al., 2001).

As the United States moved into the 21st century, U.S. President George Walker Bush signed the NCLB (2002). One part of NCLB was to create safe schools by ridding the schools of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs (Manay, 2009;

NCLB, 2002). Federal government officials created policies, such as the earlier GFSA and NCLB, to provide a vision that schools were safe (Heitzeg, 2014), which resulted in the creation of policies to include police and cameras on school grounds to make schools safer (Kayama et al., 2015; Manay, 2009). With the passing of NCLB and GFSA, school officials used words like *safe* and *orderly* when creating discipline policies (Kayama et al., 2015); *safe* and *orderly*, though, created a false sense of security because these words did not address the underlying problems in schools (Bon et al., 2006; Kayama et al., 2015). By 2016, as an unintended consequence of policies like the War on Drugs, the GFSA, NCLB, and school discipline policies trends, student arrests in U.S. public schools increased almost 500% annually (Mallett, 2015).

Researchers wanted to know how discipline in schools related to the criminal justice system; to determine this, researchers studied the relationship between discipline suspension forms for students and compared those forms to the language used in the criminal justice system (Kayama et al., 2015). Researchers followed this by surveying 31 black students and asking about their perceptions of the language used in their schools' discipline policies and how it compared to the language used in the criminal justice system (Kayama et al., 2015). In this research, researchers found that schools used 51 legal and criminal justice terms when implementing out-of-school suspensions or expulsions (i.e., offense, victim, and assault) (Kayama et al., 2015).

Researchers interviewed 25 teachers from rural and urban settings in a different study to better understand establishing a safe classroom (Bon et al., 2006). During the study, researchers discovered that teachers believed there was a

double standard when implementing discipline practices, especially when dealing

with violence, like bringing weapons to school, especially for students covered

under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (Bon et al., 2006). The enforcement of

zero-tolerance policies caused turmoil in schools because it created a double

standard, and students with disabilities were given different disciplinary

consequences due to the IDEA (Bon et al., 2006).

Federal laws mandated suspensions or expulsion for students who brought

weapons or drugs to school (NCLB, 2002) and for students performing violent

acts at school; therefore, stakeholders believed zero-tolerance policies made

schools safe (National Association of School Psychologists, 2008). Researchers

found, however, that zero-tolerance policies led to confusion about what the word

safety meant in a school because schools were not safer after implementing

zero-tolerance policies that allowed students to be suspended or expelled for

infractions deemed *unsafe* (e.g., students suspended for throwing a pencil in class,

which landed near the teacher) (Bon et al., 2006; Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015;

Johnson et al., 2018; Kayama et al., 2015; Martinez, 2009; Pipho, 1998; Talwar

et al., 2011). Discipline policies over-consequenced subgroups of students for

behaviors, causing inequality, such as an overrepresentation of black students

receiving suspensions compared to their peers of different races (Barnes & Motz,

2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Mizel et al., 2016; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010;

Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014).

Overrepresentation of Black Students in School Discipline

When studying the influence of demographics on discipline outcomes,

researchers also found that black students were more likely to be suspended

compared to their white peers (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Mizel et al., 2016; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Payne, 2017; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014). In 1975, the Children's Defense Fund compiled data from the United States and completed a study for the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. The resulting statistics indicated discrimination against the students receiving zero-tolerance punishments (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). In this study, researchers determined that black elementary school students were twice as likely to be suspended as white peers (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). In another study, Stone (1993) looked at surveys to determine how 35 school districts handled discipline violations. Stone (1993) discovered that school personnel suspended or expelled black students from school 250% times more than their white peers. Likewise, the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014) compiled data from K-12 schools across the United States and found that while black students comprised 18% of preschool students, black students accounted for 42% of suspensions from preschool.

In a similar study, Losen and Gillespie (2012) determined that schools in the United States in K-12 public education suspended 17% of black students during the 2011-2012 school year. Losen et al. (2015) completed a study for the Office for Civil Rights Remedies, which focused on suspension rates of all large district K-12 schools during the 2011-2012 school year and compared those numbers to previous years. In that report, Losen et al. (2015) found that schools in Memphis, Tennessee, suspended 29% of the population of black students during one school year. During the same study, researchers determined Tennessee ranked

18

10th in the United States in the highest gap between black and white suspensions, with Memphis being a leading contributor (Losen et al., 2015). In a later study, Cruz and Rodl (2018) used archival data from a diverse school district in California and found schools suspended black students three times more than their white peers.

Skiba et al. (2014) studied discipline outcomes as a result of discipline referrals and compared students of different races to their discipline outcomes to determine any discrepancies among races. During the study, the researchers determined that school personnel used suspensions more than any other form of discipline consequence (Skiba et al., 2014). Researchers also determined that black students, regardless of gender, were disproportionately suspended compared to their white peers (Skiba et al., 2011, 2014). When looking at discipline statistics, researchers found that school personnel suspended and expelled black students more than any other race (Morrison et al., 2001; Skiba et al., 2014). Welch and Payne (2010) researched the *racial threat perspective* by looking at 294 schools. Researchers discovered that private and public schools with more black students were more punitive when assigning consequences for discipline compared to schools with a high population of white students in attendance (Welch & Payne, 2010). Researchers also discovered that schools with more black students in attendance, even with fewer discipline referrals, were more likely to have discipline policies that mirrored the criminal justice system while having harsher consequences than schools with more white students in attendance (Welch & Payne, 2010).

Researchers looked at longitudinal youth statistics and discovered three risk factors influencing students dropping out of school: academic failure, low socioeconomic status, and behavioral issues (Suh & Suh, 2007). Similarly, Chu and Ready (2018) studied the relationship between suspension and adverse school outcomes (e.g., poor attendance and test scores) using a quasi-experimental research design. The researchers found that suspension rates of black students were an indication of whether that student would graduate (Chu & Ready, 2018; Suh & Suh, 2007). Researchers determined that students who exhibited behaviors placing the student in one of the identified risk categories were less likely to graduate from high school (Chu & Ready, 2018; Suh & Suh, 2007).

Researchers continued the discussion about the inequalities in discipline, specifically about the overrepresentation of black students when receiving consequences for similar infractions as those of their white peers (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Mizel et al., 2016; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014). Barnes and Motz (2018) studied discipline statistics from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health of over 100 middle and high schools. The researchers found that even though black students accounted for less than half (23%) of the study's population, black students received almost two times more punitive consequences, such as long-term suspensions, than their white peers (Barnes & Motz, 2018).

Noltemeyer and McLoughlin (2010) explored school classification (i.e., urban, rural, suburban) and student ethnicity and focused on the school setting and socioeconomic status of the student's parents. Some researchers focused on the

20

ethnicity of the students and how school personnel disciplined based on race (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014). Noltemeyer and McLoughlin (2010) completed a qualitative study in 326 school districts in Ohio. The researchers discovered that school districts with primary urban, high-poverty schools had the highest expulsions per 100 students (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). The researchers also found that black students had a 16.6% higher chance of being expelled from school than white students (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010).

Mizel et al. (2016) completed a study of students in grades 10th-12th from 16 schools in Southern California and looked at how family factors, such as parental education, influenced discipline outcomes. In this study, Mizel et al. (2016) found what other researchers had also proven: black students were most likely to be suspended. The researchers also found students with parents with more education (e.g., undergraduate college degree, graduate degree) were less likely to be suspended from school. Overall, researchers determined school exclusion, in the form of suspension or expulsion, to be a risk factor for graduation rates, encounters with the justice system, and lower high-stakes testing scores (Morrison et al., 2001; Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014; Wilson, 2014). Researchers determined that black students overrepresented school discipline statistics compared to their white peers, often for the same consequence (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Kiema, 2015; Mizel et al., 2016; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Paulson, 2014; Payne, 2017; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014; Stone, 1993; United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

Zero Tolerance Policies

Pipho (1998) suggested as violence in schools increased, Congress began to force states to follow strict discipline policies that mandated how schools handled suspensions and expulsions. One such mandate, the GFSA, aimed to increase school safety (Martinez, 2009). The implementation of the GFSA led to the creation of zero-tolerance policies, which gave district personnel the authority to suspend students from school for participating in violent acts, including having guns and weapons at school and bringing drugs or alcohol into the school setting (Martinez, 2009; Pipho, 1998). To assure enforcement of the policy, Congress urged school districts to comply with the mandates of the GFSA; the federal government took funding from noncompliant districts and did not have strict rules outlining infractions that followed zero-tolerance policies (Martinez, 2009; Pipho, 1998). Congress then forced school districts to comply by withholding funds from ESEA if schools failed to implement zero-tolerance policies (GFSA, 1994; Martinez, 2009; Pipho, 1998). The ESEA played a pivotal role in disciplining students by forcing schools to comply with creating and implementing zero-tolerance policies or risk defunding (GFSA, 1994; Martinez, 2009; Pipho, 1998).

The creation of zero-tolerance policies resulted in the implementation of the GFSA (Martinez, 2009; NCLB, 2002). By 1999, schools began adding to their zero-tolerance policies, including non-violent offenses such as dress code violations, consistent non-compliance, swearing, and truancy (Axman, 2005; Essex, 2004; Henault, 2001; Martinez, 2009; Wald, 2001). With zero-tolerance policies came increased safety procedures, such as placing police officers in

22

schools (Teske, 2011). Teske (2011) researched the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies in schools by conducting a case study on juvenile court cases in Georgia. Researchers discovered placing officers in schools created the unintended consequences of suspending students for non-violent things, like constant disruptions and general defiance (Axman, 2005; Essex, 2004; Henault, 2001; Martinez, 2009; Pipho, 1998; Wald, 2001).

The purpose of zero-tolerance policies was to rid schools of violence; however, zero-tolerance policies contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Skiba, 2014; Wilson, 2014). School districts created zero-tolerance policies because stakeholders determined consequences did not always equal the offense (Browne, 2003). Researchers also discovered schools did not implement zero-tolerance policies equally across states and districts (Browne, 2003); therefore, the American Bar Association began the move to end zero-tolerance policies or implement a new restructuring of the rule (Henault, 2001; Martinez, 2009).

Researchers determined that since schools began placing police officers in schools in the early 1990s, juvenile court referrals spiked by almost 1,300% by 2004; however, the same researchers determined that felony offenses did not increase (Teske, 2011). In the same school district, out-of-school suspension rates increased while graduation rates decreased by almost 60% (Teske, 2011). For this reason, in 2001, The American Bar Association discussed ending zero-tolerance policies for discipline reasons in schools (Henault, 2001; Martinez, 2009); however, these policies continued.

In 2002, Congress enacted the newest version of the ESEA, NCLB (2002). With NCLB (2002), Congress prioritized zero-tolerance policies. As with all previous versions of ESEA, Congress expected schools to create and enforce zero-tolerance policies or lose funding (Martinez, 2009; NCLB, 2002). In 2015, U.S. President Barrack Obama reauthorized the ESEA by signing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA specifically focused on disparities in discipline outcomes between black students and students of other races (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). While knowing one reauthorization of the ESEA could not reverse all of the adverse effects since its origination in 1965, the ESSA was a positive change for schools because of new accountability measures (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). Most notably, the ESSA (1965) created a new way to grade schools, which held school districts accountable for disparities in academic and behavioral outcomes and withheld funding when schools failed to meet goals or make changes (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016).

Since the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, school administrators have suspended students at alarming rates (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color, 2016; Kiema, 2015; Payne, 2017; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Stone, 1993; United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Researchers determined that school administrators believed enforcing zero-tolerance policies ensured schools would be safer (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Stakeholders also believed students received the same consequence for the same infractions regardless of students' race, gender, or ethnicity (Skiba & Knesting, 2001); however, researchers determined enforcement among school districts varied (Kayama et al.,

24

2015; Martinez, 2009; Payne, 2017; Talwar et al., 2011). Researchers determined school personnel believed the purpose of zero-tolerance policies was to create a safe environment by suspending students from school when the students created a non-safe environment (Kayama et al., 2015; Martinez, 2009; NCLB, 2002). Since school personnel was allowed to develop their zero-tolerance policies, researchers determined schools suspended black students more because of the subjectivity created by the new policies (Payne, 2017). Since schools created and enforced zero-tolerance policies with few guidelines, black students received harsher punishments for the same infraction as non-black students (Paulson, 2014).

Researchers found schools not to be any safer when enforcing zero-tolerance protocols than the schools were before implementing the protocols (Clark, 2002; Noguera, 1995). Researchers also determined that school personnel began enforcing their exclusionary discipline practices under the umbrella of zero-tolerance policies, which led to removing students from school for nonviolent offenses (Kayama et al., 2015; Martinez, 2009; Verdugo, 2002; Wald, 2001). As these students repeatedly missed school for these suspensions, educators referred students to law enforcement (Wald & Losen, 2003). Students became criminalized when school personnel used terms like *charge*, *offense*, and *guilty* as reasons for these punitive consequences (Archer, 2009; Kayama et al., 2015). This mirroring of schools to the justice system led to local school boards and federal legislature allowing schools to selectively suspend problem students, creating the *school-to-prison pipeline* (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; NCLB, 2002; Verdugo, 2002).

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline became national news when a media outcry suggested a generation of super predators was being raised (Martinez, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Researchers discovered a decrease in school violence by more than 80% from 1992-2019 (NCES, 2021). Even though violence in schools decreased (Browne, 2003; Katzmann, 2002; NCES, 2021), stakeholders believed schools needed to strengthen safety protocols to make schools safer (Kayama et al., 2015; Talwar et al., 2011). Wald and Losen (2003) described the school-to-prison pipeline as a school system created to mirror the prison system, whether intentionally or coincidently. Researchers described the school-to-prison pipeline as a segue for students from school to prison if students did not learn the necessary skills to succeed (Wald & Losen, 2003). Researchers found this happened because students were suspended from school without reason (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Rocque and Snellings (2018) examined the school-to-prison pipeline and found that teachers unintentionally treated black students differently than white students (Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Teachers reported that black students behaved less traditionally than their white peers (e.g., cultural differences the difference in communication styles) (Rocque, 2010), which resulted in more office referrals (Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Regarding the overrepresentation of minority students, specifically black students, in discipline outcomes, researchers determined the following:

- School exclusion was widely used and increased in frequency (Skiba et al., 2014; Wilson, 2014);

26

- School exclusion fell disproportionality on specific subgroups (Skiba, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014; Verdugo, 2002);

- School exclusion was a risk factor for further adverse outcomes (e.g., encounters with the police, drop-out rates, and lower high-stakes test scores) (Morrison et al., 2001; Skiba, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014; Wilson, 2014); and

- It was unknown whether the school-to-prison pipeline was created intentionally (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Monahan et al., 2014; NCLB, 2002; Skiba et al., 2014; Verdugo, 2002).

Furthermore, researchers determined a relationship between the future predictor of arrest and educators' ability to handle discipline in an equitable, positive manner (Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Although not one law or policy independently contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline, researchers discovered policies such as the War on Drugs, GSFA, zero-tolerance policies, and NCLB influenced the school-to-prison pipeline (Cerrone, 1999; Heitzeg, 2014; Mallett, 2015; Manay, 2009; NCLB, 2002).

Effects of Exclusionary Suspensions on Students

When school districts excluded students from educational settings for behavioral reasons, students had adverse long-term outcomes for their academic careers and lives (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018). Anderson et al. (2019) stated that students excluded from school for behavioral issues performed

worse on achievement tests and retained less knowledge. Although the push for high test scores was something prioritized by schools, other things were more alarming to communities; students who received suspensions that excluded the students from school were more likely to be involved with the juvenile system as opposed to their peers not suspended (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017).

Researchers determined a relationship between exclusionary practices in student discipline and achievement (Anderson et al., 2019). Of the research surrounding the relationship between discipline and achievement, researchers found students suspended more had lower achievement scores compared to students with fewer suspensions (Arcia, 2006; Cobb-Clark et al., 2015; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003), and students retained (i.e., who did not pass to the next grade level) were more likely to cause behavior problems (Beck & Muschkin, 2012). Researchers determined a correlation between student misbehavior and lower achievement scores (Arcia, 2006; Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Cobb-Clark et al., 2015; Kinsler, 2013; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003). Researchers found having one disruptive student placed in a class of 20 or more decreased test scores by two percentage points (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2010; Kinsler, 2013).

Suh and Suh (2007) focused on the relationship between behavior and the likelihood of a student dropping out of school before graduation. Three factors contributed to dropout: GPA, socioeconomics, and behavioral problems (Suh & Suh, 2007). Chu and Ready (2018) discovered students suspended during their first three semesters in high school were more likely to drop out compared to their

peers who were not suspended and had similar demographics. The cause of this relationship was undetermined; however, researchers discovered students suspended or expelled also expressed feelings of isolation and disengagement, determined to be a cause of dropouts (Johnson et al., 2018; Morrison et al., 2001; Skiba et al., 2014). Further, when researchers looked at the national database of suspensions, Morrison et al. (2001) found students' emotional well-being was negatively impacted when excluded from school due to discipline consequences.

Researchers discovered that students who had been suspended or expelled had a significantly higher chance of being involved with the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). Wolf and Kupchik (2017) extended the research of Fabelo et al. (2011) by looking at data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health and determined students suspended from school had a 72% greater chance of being in prison later in adult life. Monahan et al. (2014) used participants from the Pathways to Desistance Study, which included students aged 14-17 who committed a serious felony. They found suspended students were more than two times more likely to get arrested in the month the participant was suspended (Monahan et al., 2014). Like the findings regarding race and discipline outcomes (i.e., black students were overrepresented in discipline outcomes) (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014), Rocque and Snellings (2018) determined that race played a prominent role at being a predictor for future arrests. Overall, researchers discovered a correlation between the overrepresentation of black students in school discipline and outcomes with the overrepresentation of black arrests (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Rocque, 2010; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Welch & Payne, 2010). Barnes and Motz (2018) suggested

the disparities in arrest (i.e., arrests of black people compared to white people) would close if the racial gap in school discipline outcomes (i.e., overrepresentation of black students in discipline suspensions) closed.

What Makes Schools Safe?

Researchers found the need to define what made a school safe or perceived safe and the adverse effects of a more punitive environment along with the vocabulary used in schools to ensure safety (Johnson et al., 2018; Kayama et al., 2015; Talwar et al., 2011). Johnson et al. (2018) looked at how students perceived their school and its level of safety by the number of cameras and security officers at that school. Researchers determined students perceived schools with more cameras as less safe, less equitable, and less supportive for students and their well-being (Johnson et al., 2018). On the contrary, Johnson et al. (2018) found students felt safer and perceived their school safer when there were more cameras outside the school. When determining perceived safety, Johnson et al. (2018) found students living in a disadvantaged community perceived their school to be less safe. Researchers used this to better understand the perception of safety and whether having more police and cameras led to a belief that a school was safer (Heitzeg, 2014; Johnson et al., 2018).

To better understand the unintended consequences of current discipline policies and their effect on the justice system, Cuellar and Markowitz (2015) gathered data from administrative reviews and the juvenile justice system with students aged 14-17 years old to determine the adverse effects suspensions had on students' interactions with the justice system. Researchers determined students suspended from school had a higher chance of being involved with the justice

system (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017).

Kayama et al. (2015) examined the effects of using criminal justice language in everyday school vocabulary. Kayama et al. (2015) determined school systems used words like *victim*, *felony*, *misdemeanor*, *charge*, and *guilty* when dealing with discipline, which began the idea of the school system mirroring the justice system. Talwar et al. (2011) completed a study to show how punitive environments did not lead to a thriving learning environment. Researchers determined when students 3-6 years old were exposed to a more authoritarian environment, using corporal punishment, students showed even more elevated scores of impulsive behaviors in schools (Talwar et al., 2011). Researchers found schools with a more positive learning environment, compared to those with a more punitive environment resembling the justice system, showed more success in all aspects (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Kayama et al., 2015; Talwar et al., 2011). If these things were addressed, it will lead to greater safety in schools.

Pre-Service Teacher Training on Discipline

Researchers found teachers were not well-prepared for their teaching careers when it came to knowing what was needed to begin their job regarding discipline (Bornstein, 2017; Goldstein et al., 2019; Raible & Irizarry, 2010; Sleeter, 2017). For example, researchers found most college and university-level education courses had one or two diversity classes assigned; however, all other classes mainly were taught from a white worldview (Sleeter, 2017). Researchers also discovered teachers needed better professional development compared to what teachers currently received and helped with using school resources so

teachers could be well-prepared (Bornstein, 2017; Goldstein et al., 2019; Raible &
Irizarry, 2010).

Raible and Irizarry (2010) emphasized the need for pre-service training:
the planning of teachers before entering the teaching field and how it related to
the school-to-prison pipeline. Researchers discovered new educators did not have
enough information on how to interact with students with undesirable
characteristics, and teachers felt unprepared to control students who exhibited
challenging behaviors (Hemmeter et al., 2008; Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Since
85% of new teachers were white women, schools needed to educate new teachers
on how to respond to the needs of students who did not look or act like the
teachers (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Todd et al. (2016) found the faces of black
boys were enough to trigger others into a heightened threat mode. Until more
diversity appeared in the teachers entering the field of education, pre-service
education had to focus on training all teachers (Raible & Irizarry, 2010; Todd
et al., 2016). Researchers discovered schools needed more professional
development on positive behavior reinforcement, alternative ways of handling
discipline, proper interaction with at-risk students, and promotion of safety in
schools (Bornstein, 2017; Goldstein et al., 2019; Powers, 2021; Raible & Irizarry,
2010).

Alternative Ways of Handling Discipline

Researchers found that excluding students from school for disciplinary
reasons did not benefit the students (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Goldstein et al., 2019;
Welsh & Little, 2018). Researchers found multiple ways of handling discipline,
like the use of school diversion programs (Goldstein et al., 2019; Teske et al.,

2013), PBIS (Powers, 2021; Walker et al., 2005), and trauma-informed practices (Prewitt, 2016; Rossen & Cowan, 2013; TDOE, 2022).

Community-Led Diversion Programs

Stakeholders acknowledged the need for alternative ways of handling discipline other than suspending students for every discipline occurrence (Bornstein, 2017; Goldstein et al., 2019; Massar et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2000). Researchers discussed an alternative route to suspension with a diversion program (Goldstein et al., 2019). Researchers addressed the use of a *diversion program* in a school district in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Goldstein et al., 2019). Law enforcement and community members created a diversion program to keep high school students from getting into trouble by assigning officers to be mentors to the students (Goldstein et al., 2019). The goal of the diversion program was to prevent future arrests for school-aged students, to increase school attendance and grades, and to promote positive outcomes with community-based services (Goldstein et al., 2019).

Before implementing the program, researchers discovered there were 1,584 school-based arrests by the Philadelphia Police Department (Goldstein et al., 2019). With the program's implementation, school personnel trained stakeholders to ensure arrests were not the automatic response to every situation (Goldstein et al., 2019; Teske et al., 2013). The Philadelphia School District realized the diversion program was not sufficient by itself; therefore, the school district ended its use of zero-tolerance policies in 2012 (Goldstein et al., 2019). Goldstein et al. (2019) also noted the school district in Philadelphia wanted to make a change to create a safe environment and dismantle the school-to-prison

33

pipeline by all means necessary. During the first year of implementation, researchers found a 54% reduction in school-based arrests for the Philadelphia School District and an overall 84% reduction in school-based arrests since the beginning of the program (Goldstein et al., 2019). Due to the success of the diversion program, The Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program became the model for police school diversion programs across the United States (Goldstein et al., 2019).

Due to the successes of The Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program, a school district in Clayton County, Georgia, and another in Cambridge, Massachusetts, implemented a similar diversion program as an alternative way of handling discipline (Goldstein et al., 2019; Teske et al., 2013). In Clayton County, Georgia, first-time school-based offenders were enrolled in the diversion program to prevent students from becoming repeat offenders (Goldstein et al., 2019; Teske et al., 2013). Researchers found a 67% decrease in juvenile court referrals and a 43% decrease in school referrals for black students (Teske et al., 2013). School personnel allowed any student with a non-violent school-based offense the opportunity to enroll in the program; however, the one difference in this program was that this school district entered into a service contract with mental health professionals to help with the students as well as helping train the police officers to approach students differently (Goldstein et al., 2019). In Cambridge, Massachusetts, stakeholders reduced school-based juvenile arrests by 50% by implementing a diversion program (Goldstein et al., 2019).

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports

First introduced in 1996, PBIS addressed issues to positively promote discipline, academic performance, and social/emotional development (Powers, 2021; Walker et al., 2005). PBIS was an alternative way for school staff to work with students who exhibited disruptive behaviors (Massar et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2000). In a traditional school setting, school personnel removed students from the school setting for being disruptive and causing discipline problems; however, when schools implemented PBIS, personnel taught students how to replace disruptive behaviors with wanted behaviors (Pike, 2017). Students who exhibited negative, unwanted behaviors were given positive responses when exhibiting appropriate behaviors (Sugai et al., 2000). When schools participated in PBIS, students could build a solid moral character and become better people (Davidson et al., 2011; Pike, 2017), which affected the entire school by building a strong school culture (Loukas, 2007).

PBIS had a positive impact on students and could be an alternative to the overrepresentation of black students in discipline outcomes (Bornstein, 2017; Boston, 2016; Davidson et al., 2011; Pike, 2017; Sugai et al., 2000; Walker et al., 2005). Not only did PBIS show to build strong character in students (Davidson et al., 2011; Pike, 2017), there was a positive relationship between schools implementing PBIS and a lower number of behavior referrals, a more robust school climate, and higher academic achievement (Boston, 2016). Draper (2020) determined PBIS reduced students' off-task behavior and other behavior problems. Researchers also determined in schools with PBIS structures, students' social-emotional well-being was strengthened (Draper, 2020).

Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2009) studied 53 schools in Missouri to determine the relationship between juvenile referrals and school discipline referrals. Researchers determined that when school systems began an alternative way of discipline, such as PBIS, students were less likely to enter the juvenile system (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Researchers also found that when juvenile systems implemented programs like PBIS, offenders were less often repeat offenders (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Wilson (2014) also studied incarcerated individuals and determined the negative effects zero-tolerance policies had on students' school careers, such as early experiences with the justice system and an increased risk of school drop-out. Through this study, researchers discovered the importance of changing discipline to be more positive because of the adverse effects exclusionary discipline policies had on students' lives even after their K-12 education (Wilson, 2014).

Bornstein (2017) explained the relationship between PBIS and its role in the school-to-prison pipeline; however, Bornstein specifically focused on teacher training and the need for teachers to be trained on handling student discipline appropriately. Bornstein (2017) knew the importance of an alternative to the prison pipeline and understood the influence teachers had on students; therefore, Bornstein (2017) focused on the fidelity of the program. Researchers determined the need for schools to prioritize helping teachers handle student behavior because teachers were the main component when prioritizing the needs of students and ensuring students received the education necessary to succeed (Bornstein, 2017).

Trauma-Informed Practices

As stated by the Centers for Disease Control (2021), adverse childhood experience (ACEs) was any traumatic event that happened to a child between the ages of 0-17 years of age. Between 1995-1997, the Centers for Disease Control conducted a study, known as the CDC-Kaiser Study, with a sample size of around 17,000 people to norm what came to be known as ACEs (Centers for Disease Control, 2021). The purpose of this study was to understand the different backgrounds of people and how different experiences early in life had a lasting impact later in adult life (Centers for Disease Control, 2021). Like other things, the nationally normed sample for ACEs was predominantly middle-class and white (Dutil, 2020). Some examples of ACEs were substance abuse in the household, mental health problems in family members, abuse or neglect, and many more (Centers for Disease Control, 2021).

Collins et al. (2010) found that 83% of urban youth reported experiencing one or more traumatic events. When students experienced traumatic events (e.g., gun violence, assault, or abuse), the trauma altered their brain structure (Walkley & Cox, 2013), and how students responded to crises by fighting the opposition or completely escaping situations altered brain structure due to those traumatic events at an early age (Perry, 2006; Walkley & Cox, 2013). Stakeholders found it challenging to handle discipline with students who experienced ACEs because they were often disrespectful, disruptive, too loud, or aggressive (Dutil, 2020; Perry, 2006; Walkley & Cox, 2013). To help every student at every school, ESSA required schools to create trauma-informed practices and culturally responsive teaching to help meet the needs of all students, especially students determined

high-needs according to state report cards (Prewitt, 2016; Rossen & Cowan, 2013).

For the state of Tennessee to comply with the ESSA, Tennessee schools adopted *Building Stronger Brains,* which began the state's push to be prepared for trauma-informed practices. The Building Stronger Brains Initiative was a 6-step process that helped educators better understand how to successfully reach students with different childhood experiences (TDOE, 2022). During this approach, school personnel changed their way of handling discipline that helped foster relationships between students and teachers (TDOE, 2022). Like the Tennessee initiative, a school district in the state of Washington successfully lowered discipline suspensions by recognizing trauma and acting on it (Stevens, 2012; Walkley & Cox, 2013). This school was successful because it focused on a framework of attachment, regulation, and competency when approaching ACEs (Stevens, 2012; Walkley & Cox, 2013). To successfully implement trauma-informed practices, schools had to be aware of the unique stressors specific to certain geographic areas, such as urban, suburban, and rural (Pachter et al., 2017). An authentic trauma-informed approach in schools couples with CRT to understand what all students needed to succeed (Dutil, 2020).

One method commonly used to assist in the success of trauma-informed practices was restorative practices. The purpose of restorative practices was to address wrongdoings and build relationships (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2014). Restorative practices fostered safety and trust, which were two things instrumental to effectively working with students who experienced trauma (Rossen & Cowan, 2013). Researchers discovered school

districts that implemented restorative practices in their schools showed a decrease in discipline referrals by more than 50% (Mirsky, 2007). Researchers found that students and teachers stated the school better understood the school climate when implementing restorative practices (Mirsky, 2007).

Elementary Schools and Student Behavior

According to The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (2022), elementary education was the first stage in a child's educational career. In grades K-5, students ranged from ages 5-10. According to Tennessee Code 49-1-104, the maximum number of students in grades K-3 was 25 students per class, and in grades 4-6 was 30 students per class. From a discipline standpoint, researchers found elementary school to be the first time some students received feedback for their behavior (Rusby et al., 2007). Researchers at Montana State University studied the importance of play for elementary-aged students (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010). Researchers stated that play was essential in a student's school career as it helped them socialize and adjust to new environments (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010). If school personnel disrupted play for students, there would be adverse effects, like students exhibiting anti-social behaviors (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010). Since elementary school was when students were first impacted by the pressures of school, regardless of if the impact was positive or negative (Clark, 2002), being in an environment where play was allowed, students learned to adapt to change in everyday life, especially in social situations (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010). Even though researchers recognized the need for play, teachers continued to take recess away from students as a punishment (Fink & Ramstetter, 2018). Fink and Ramstetter

(2018) discovered that students' behavior worsened when teachers took recess away from them and created anxiety and regret in some students. Researchers found what believed to be a proactive approach to discipline actually had a negative effect on student's well-being (Fink & Ramstetter, 2018).

Alsubaie (2015) stated the expectation for elementary school teachers involving discipline was for the teacher to care for students and softly discipline the students when students did not meet expectations. Even though all teachers, regardless of grade band, were expected to teach and support students the expected behavior, proper behavior expectations needed to be taught at the elementary level to have lasting effects on students' life (Horner et al., 2000). Some of the most common strategies used in the elementary setting, discussed by Bear (1998), were proactive in nature to create a loving and nurturing culture. Lewis (2001) found elementary teachers gave incentives and rewards, and although there was immediate discipline for negative behaviors, there was little aggression from the teacher when handling discipline.

Kindelan (2011) discovered teachers were ill-prepared to handle discipline, which showed in the overrepresentation of particular sub-groups. When schools did not equip teachers with proper ways of handling discipline early in a student's life, schools created a cycle during a student's education because teachers never taught the student how to correct the behavior (Anderson et al., 2019). Elementary school teachers had to have a sense of *withitness* to allow for students to receive the proper instruction but also to teach students the expectations so students could be successful with academics and behavior (Kounin, 1983). At the elementary age, Anguiano (2001) stated an essential piece

of practicing *withitness* in the classroom was making eye contact and using non-verbal cues.

Elementary school was one of the most critical parts of a student's life because the learned behaviors, whether good or bad, had lasting implications on the rest of the student's life (Raffaele-Mendez, 2003). In 2005, researchers determined school personnel suspended over 10% of prekindergarten students at least once, which was more than three times the suspension rate in all K-12 public education (Gilliam, 2005). To combat negative behaviors from happening in a classroom, teachers must create a behavior management system or strengthen classroom management procedures (Capizzi, 2009; Lester et al., 2017). Researchers determined one type of management procedure or management system was not superior to the other, but the point was to be proactive in deciding what was best for each teacher and each student (Smart & Igo, 2010).

One standard behavior management system used in elementary schools was the clip chart method (Compise, 2019) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Example of Clip Chart Method

What it represents	What the student sees on the chart
Perfect Day	Outstanding
One Step Away from Perfect	Great job
Average Day	Good day
Where Everyone Starts	Ready for the day
1st Warning	Think about what you did
2nd Warning	Lose out on something for the day
Worst Day	Punishment

Source: Morris (2009).

Rick Morris created the clip chart method as a form of operant conditioning (Compise, 2019). When using the clip chart method, teachers rewarded students for desired behaviors (Compise, 2019). Depending on a student's positive or negative behavior, the teacher would move the clip up or down the chart (Compise, 2019). The goal of the clip chart was to get students to conform to expectations based on peers witnessing positive or negative attention from the teacher (Compise, 2019). Overall, it was a mixture of positive and negative reinforcement in the classroom (Compise, 2019). The clip chart method has been highly successful in preventing unwanted classroom behaviors by teaching students to be intrinsically motivated and well-behaved (Compise, 2019; Deci & Ryan, 2016; Ritz et al., 2014). Even though stakeholders did not formally research the clip chart method when using it, it has been successful when expectations between teacher and student were clear and when the teacher remained consistent (Compise, 2019). Even though the clip-chart method has been highly successful in some classrooms, in urban education settings where social status is essential,

the clip-chart method can lead to negative peer relationships, leading to students acting out in the classroom (Compise, 2019).

Another successful behavior management system used in the elementary setting was behavior contracts. Researchers explained that behavioral contracts were a management intervention system used to reinforce wanted behavior among students (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2015). Essentially, the teacher who wished to fix conduct created a contract with the student and built a reward system to get the student to comply (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2015). Although heavily used in schools to help promote positive behavior, behavior contracts had also shown to be of great impact when used to help students with Traumatic Brain Injuries and Autism (Hufford et al., 2012; Mruzek et al., 2007). Researchers determined that behavioral contracts worked best when students were given a goal to work towards when meeting behavioral expectations (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2015). Behavioral contracts were commonly used because teachers stated they were easy to use daily and allowed for students' individual needs to be met, especially at the elementary level (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2015).

Summary of the Review of Literature

In the literature review, I indicated a consistent lack of research regarding the overrepresentation of black students in discipline statistics. As Johnson et al. (2018) stated, one flaw was the lack of research presented from the student's perception. Johnson et al. (2018) spoke explicitly about students' perceptions; however, mainly looked into the perceptions of adults, with the majority being educators' perceptions. Research on discipline consisted mostly of middle and high school students. The only research I presented to discuss elementary-aged

students was Talwar et al. (2011). This lack of literature helped justify the need for research completed at the elementary level, which allowed for greater opportunities for schools to be proactive.

Although the weaknesses seemed to stand out with this research, there were some commonalities in the literature findings, which could be beneficial. There was a large population of black students represented in discipline outcomes compared to their peers of a different race when performing the same infraction (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Mizel et al., 2016; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014). Researchers also presented a common need to define a safe school; however, the perception of safety did not match the intended outcome (Johnson et al., 2018); a more punitive environment, though most believed it would benefit schools, did more harm (Talwar et al., 2011). The vocabulary used in schools also mirrored those of the justice system (Kayama et al., 2015). Lastly, researchers discussed a high need for professional development and resources for schools to succeed when handling student behavior (Bornstein, 2017; Goldstein et al., 2019; Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Due to the lack of essential literature at the elementary level, it was beneficial to pursue research in elementary schools to better understand the school-to-prison pipeline.

There were unintended consequences from mandates such as the GFSA, NCLB, the War on Drugs, and zero-tolerance policies, which allowed for zero-tolerance policies to result in an overrepresentation of black students in discipline policies, such as low academic achievement, which led to dropout and sometimes arrest (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Chu & Ready, 2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018;

44

Fabelo et al., 2011; Mallett, 2015; Mizel et al., 2016; Monahan et al., 2014;

Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Rocque &

Snellings, 2018; Shah, 2013; Skiba et al., 2011, 2014; Suh & Suh, 2007; Wolf &

Kupchik, 2017). Researchers also stated having zero-tolerance policies created

confusion in determining a difference between perceived safety and actual safety

since researchers determined school personnel implemented zero-tolerance

policies because of the symbolism and less for safety (Cuellar & Markowitz,

2015; Johnson et al., 2018; Kayama et al., 2015; Noguera, 1995; Talwar et al.,

2011). Schools at all levels were responsible for students progressing through the

school system and worked to end the process of youth being lost in the justice

system at a young age; schools prepared students to become responsible citizens

(Barnes & Motz, 2018; Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014;

Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Pearl & Knight, 2000; Pike, 2017; Wolf &

Kupchik, 2017). When school districts prioritized elementary education, which

focused on teaching and modeling appropriate student behavior, not policing

students, students had positive outcomes, which resulted in financial benefits for

school districts and communities due to students being academically proficient

(Raffaele-Mendez, 2003; Wilson, 2014).

During my study, I used CRT as my framework. CRT related to the

educational system, precisely discipline issues when explaining the procedures

that stakeholders established and continued (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The

framework for this study examined racism, power, and policy. During the

literature review, I briefly discussed the historical background of discipline

policies with legislation, which began the conversation about an

overrepresentation of black students in discipline outcomes. I then discussed what the overrepresentation looked like in a school setting and how the creation of zero-tolerance policies has negatively affected communities. I continued the literature review by discussing the school-to-prison pipeline and the effects of exclusionary suspensions on students. I then briefly discussed the perceptions of what makes schools safe and followed up with alternative ways of handling discipline. I finished the literature review by giving examples of the structure of elementary schools in Tennessee. In Chapter III, I discussed the use of CRT to guide my methodology, collect my data, and analyze my data to answer the research questions.

Chapter III: Methodology

In this study, I aimed to investigate elementary educators' perceptions of the impact of discipline policies in urban elementary schools. I started with Chapter I by introducing my study. I listed the research questions that guided my study. I then discussed the theoretical framework of CRT and how I used it to form my study. I then presented the definition of terms within my study. After completing Chapter I, I presented Chapter II, the review of the literature. With the literature in Chapter II, I found a gap in research regarding the overrepresentation of black students and discipline policies, specifically in the elementary setting. In Chapter III, I focused on the methodology of my research study. Within this chapter, I discussed the design of my research and my role as a researcher. I then discussed the participants in my study and my data collection methods. Lastly, I discussed how I planned to create trustworthiness, approach limitations and delimitations of my research, and presented assumptions of present in my study.

Research Design

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research was about a better understanding of the participant's experience; researchers using qualitative research commonly used words and data when compiling results. For my study, I used a qualitative interpretive design. Elliott and Timulak (2005) stated a qualitative interpretive research study discussed how a phenomenon unfolded over time and how it came about. This qualitative interpretive study aimed to investigate the perceptions of elementary school teachers and administrators about the effectiveness of discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban elementary schools.

In the Fall semester of 2022, I conducted a qualitative interpretive research study to understand Tennessee elementary educators' perceptions of how discipline policies resulted in an overrepresentation in discipline outcomes for black students. I interviewed teachers and administrators to see if there was a discrepancy between those who work most of the day teaching students (i.e., teachers) and those who work primarily with students as disciplinarians (i.e., administrators). I also chose to do an interpretive study because I wanted to use the life experiences of the educators to help my understanding of their perceptions. This methodology led me to conduct semi-structured interviews with participants whom I identified through snowball sampling. Completing the semi-structured interviews allowed me to code my interviews to help answer the research questions in my study.

Role of the Researcher

In my qualitative interpretive study, I was the researcher. As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (p. 16). Creswell and Creswell (2018) identified concerns with a qualitative study (e.g., bias, values, personal background, gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic status) due to the researcher being the only one with access to interpreting the data. I recognized the potential for bias because of my background in specific areas of education; however, because of my experiences, I could code and interpret the data in a non-biased way. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated one way to limit bias in the data collection was to reach saturation. "Saturation occurs when continued data collection produces no new information

or insights into the phenomenon you are studying" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 199).

At the beginning of my study, I was in my eighth professional year of public education; during that tenure, I was a teacher and assistant principal. I worked in an urban, Title I school at the middle school level for all eight of those years. As a teacher, I taught special education in the co-taught and pull-out setting. When I began my third year, I started working with my school to develop school-wide policies and procedures to lower discipline referrals by incentivizing students positively. As a committee leader, I helped set school-wide goals to improve our discipline statistics or outcomes. When I became an assistant principal, I continued working on these goals and was in charge of one of our special populations: special education students. With my background, I recognized I could have potential bias; however, I have mitigated bias, as described below.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed a way of avoiding bias during an interview: "Take a stance that is nonjudgmental, sensitive, and respectful of the respondent is but a beginning point in the process" (p. 130). That was one key to addressing bias in my study. I knew I had a background in education, and I knew I had my own beliefs about the processes of how schools should operate; however, I had to be respectful and silent in my feelings when interviewing my participants. Seidman (2006) said it best: "Interviewing requires that we keep our egos in check" (p. 9). One way I addressed bias was by conducting my study in the elementary setting, a setting with which I am less familiar because my experience has been in the middle school setting.

Another way I chose to lower potential bias was by snowball sampling. I recognized I could not prevent bias completely; however, snowball sampling was a way to limit bias since I did not have control over recommended participants in my study. When I used snowball sampling, I also assumed the recommended participants had background knowledge of my topic.

Participants in the Study

Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined purposeful sampling as selecting participants who could effectively assist in answering the research questions of qualitative research. I chose to interview elementary teachers and administrators in the urban setting across two major school districts in Tennessee. Using purposeful sampling allowed me to better understand what was happening at each school and how perception led to my participants' answers. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that snowball sampling was the most common version of purposeful sampling, which allowed me to ask each participant for suggestions for future participants for the study. Taking the advice of Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), I used snowball sampling in my research by getting a list of three names, one in each large school district, to start the interview protocol. To continue with snowball sampling, prior to the end of every interview, I asked the participant for a recommendation of a future participant to assist with my study.

My initial participants were gathered by using professional contacts by whom I received three initial contacts; I knew the three initial participants met the criteria to participate in my study. I finished my study with 12 participants. Among my 12 participants, seven were female, and five were male. All 12 were

certified educators, with seven being teachers and five administrators. All 12 of the participants were elementary urban educators across the state of Tennessee. My initial goal was to use participants across three large school districts in Tennessee; however, I received zero responses from the entire district; therefore, my study was compiled from two large districts across the state of Tennessee.

I set the following criteria to ensure the participants, both administrators, and teachers, were appropriate for this study. I defined a school administrator as a licensed and certified assistant principal or executive principal licensed by the state of Tennessee. An executive principal was the highest-ranking person in a school building, and the assistant principal was below the principal. For this study, I used both assistant principals and executive principals when interviewing school administrators. Likewise, I defined a teacher as a licensed or certified professional by the state of Tennessee. For my study, a teacher met directly with students for more than 50% of their school day. I did not use instructional coaches in my research unless the instructional coach worked with students for more than 50% of the school day.

Data Collection

To collect my data, I used an interview protocol consistently during all interviews to "[ask] questions and [record] answers during a qualitative interview" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 190). When creating questions for my interview protocol, I had to ensure that my interview questions answered my research questions. I first needed to determine the research questions I used to guide my study. I used information from the literature to determine my research questions, which helped determine which questions to use for my interview protocol. I

51

ensured all questions were open-ended to understand my participants' perceptions better while also answering my study's research questions.

I used pilot testing to test my data collection methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As stated by Creswell and Creswell (2018), "This testing is important to establish the content validity of scores on an instrument" (p.154). Before I began my interviews with my participants, I conducted pilot testing. I used professional contacts who worked at the elementary level for my pilot test. During these pilot interviews, I assumed those chosen would give me constructive feedback to help strengthen my interview protocol so anyone could understand it. I also decided to use these people to help with my pilot interviews, knowing I would not use them during my research. After the pilot interview, I went back to my interview protocol and adjusted questions the participants during my pilot interview believed were not asked clearly.

After each pilot interview, I asked for feedback from my participants. My pilot interview participants suggested chunking some of the questions into multiple parts, and some stated the questions were too lengthy. The participants also suggested adding a 10-point scale to the number three since, as written, the question was too subjective. With these adjustments, I was ready for my interviews with my study's participants.

Once I finished the pilot interviews, and I edited my interview protocol (see Appendix A), I conducted my interviews. I chose two large school districts across the state of Tennessee to help add validity to my study. Since I used snowball sampling, I started the questionnaire with one person within each of the two large school districts across Tennessee. In other words, if I had chosen one

school district, it would be hard to prove this was a phenomenon across the entire

state; however, by spreading it across two large districts, I was able to justify that

this was something affecting the whole state and not just one district. This is

known as generalizable. I first reached out to my participants via my LMU email.

In this email, I introduced my study and how the participant would assist with my

study (see Appendix B). In this email, I also stated that the participant consented

to be in the study when they agreed to meet with me and be interviewed. If the

participant agreed to be in my study, they would respond to the email, and we set

up a time to meet. When I began recording, I asked for verbal consent a second

time. Since my interviews took place in two large school districts, I conducted all

interviews over an online video platform to limit the time on travel and the spread

of COVID-19 during the study.

Methods of Analysis

For my study, I used Creswell and Creswell's (2018) data analysis process

(see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Data Analysis in Qualitative Research


```
┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│   Interpreting the meaning of    │──┐
│        themes/description        │  │
└─────────────────────────────────┘  │
                                      │
┌─────────────────────────────────┐  │
│   Putting themes into categories │  │
└─────────────────────────────────┘  │   ┌──────────────┐
                                      │   │  Processing  │
┌──────────┐      ┌──────────┐       └──│              │
│  Themes  │      │Description│          │all information│
└──────────┘      └──────────┘          │              │
┌─────────────────────────────────┐     │through coding│
│         Coding the data          │     │              │
└─────────────────────────────────┘     │   process    │
                                         └──────────────┘
┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│     Going through all the data   │
└─────────────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│        Organizing the data       │
└─────────────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ Any raw data (interview transcripts,│──┘
│          protocols)              │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
```
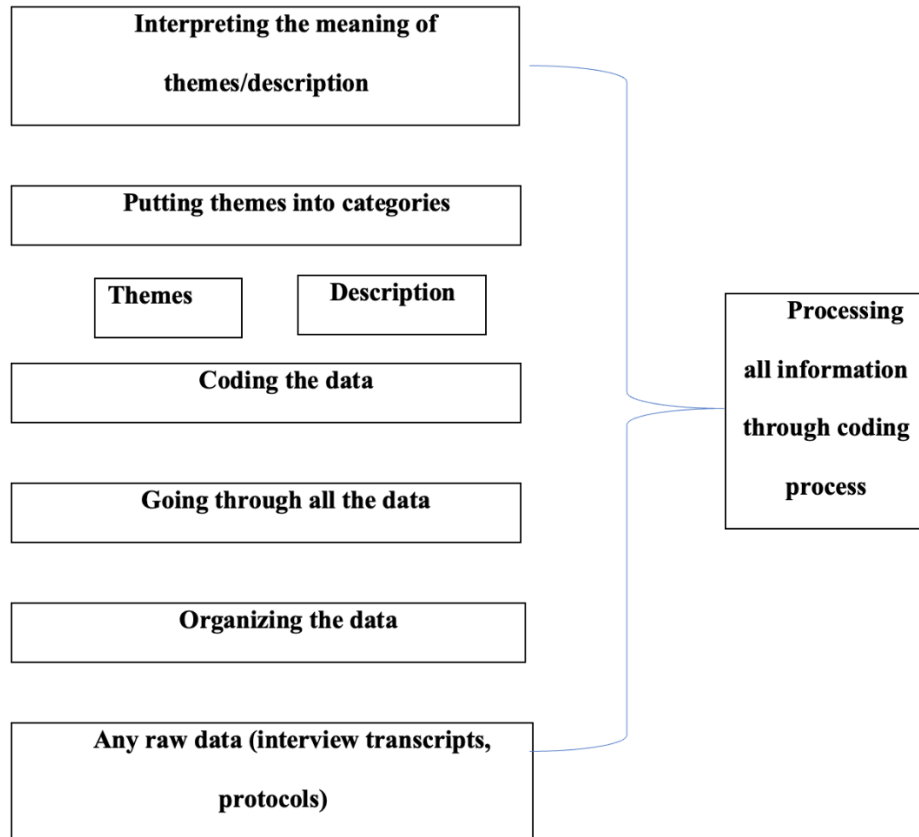
Source: Creswell & Creswell (2018).

When receiving and interpreting my data, I used a five-step process of organizing and preparing data for analysis, reading the data, coding the data, generating a description and themes, and representing the description and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), I conducted semi-structured interviews "which either or all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more or less structured questions" (p. 110). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that verbatim transcription was the best form of recording

interviews. Due to this, I transcribed my interviews word-for-word once all my interviews were complete. Transcribing the interviews word-for-word helped limit bias and let me better understand how I would proceed with my coding process. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that the importance of the researcher was to ensure privacy for the participants throughout the study. To do this, I assigned each participant a pseudonym when transcribing my interviews to guarantee the participant remained confidential. Separating each interview by participant position allowed for a more organized process when analyzing my data.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), researchers categorized codes into expected, surprising, and unusual codes. Coding everything using these categories allowed me to organize my data into specific groups. Using Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) steps for coding, I wanted to start broad with my analysis and narrow to determine what the data from my interviews were telling me. To help with the coding process, I created three columns to label the coding. I began with open coding, the first iteration of coding I developed from my interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I transcribed my interviews and compiled all the raw data during the open coding process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I then moved into axial coding, which refined the categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the axial coding process, I grouped my raw data into themes to help find any similarities in my data. Lastly, I used selective coding to discover the answers to my research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used Microsoft Word to gather my raw data and follow each coding process. When I moved to the axial coding step, I analyzed my data by color-coding similar words and phrases to

determine my themes. During the selective coding process, I synthesized all data found in the open coding and axial coding process to determine my study's findings, conclusions, and recommendations through the coding process.

Trustworthiness

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated the biggest threat to trustworthiness was the researcher. Being that I was the biggest threat to my research, I did three things to limit the risks to trustworthiness: audio recording, snowball sampling, and a protocol for interviewing and triangulating my data. Also, at the beginning of every interview, I asked the participant for their consent to the recording.

As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "The main purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information" (p. 108). I used an Evida model: V618 digital recorder to collect my data. When using the audio recorder, I raised the credibility and validity of the interview by only recording what the participant and I said in the interview (Tuckett, 2005). To help minimize risks to trustworthiness, I used snowball sampling to assist the researcher in decision-making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also followed Creswell and Creswell (2018) when I developed and used the same interview protocol for every interview I conducted.

One other way I increased the trustworthiness of my data, and my study's internal validity was to triangulate my data. I did this by interviewing administrators and teachers, in each district, during the interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I triangulated my data by ensuring equal representation from each school district. I did this by interviewing five participants from each school district.

Limitations and Delimitations

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) defined limitations as things happening within research that were out of the researcher's control. In the Spring of 2020, Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first seen in patients in the United States (Centers for Disease Control, 2022). The World Health Organization (2022) stated that COVID-19 "is an infectious disease caused by the SAR-CoV-2 virus." Because of COVID-19, schools began to operate differently, especially with those allowed inside the building. For this reason, all my interviews were conducted using an online platform to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not physically go into some of the schools in the study. The COVID-19 pandemic also changed schools' appearance over the last five years. Due to COVID-19 and how schools operated during the pandemic, I understood answers to questions could be affected because the emotional component of sitting in the same room with someone and discussing the interview questions was changed, being that it now took place virtually. Also, since I conducted the interviews during the first semester of school, some teachers' knowledge of specific situations could be limited because less could have happened since it is the beginning of the school year.

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) described delimitations as things I, as the researcher, controlled in my study. I chose not to add student interviews because I believed the perceptions of educators helped me better understand my topic, compared to the outcome I would receive if interviewing students. I also purposefully used semi-structured interviews as my data collection method because of the ability to ask more in-depth questions and clarify questions during

the interview process. Also, since I used semi-structured interviews, I asked open-ended questions, leading to better understanding than questionnaires. Participants could use examples from previous years; however, completing the interviews during the first half of the school year gave them a more direct knowledge base to discuss. Also, each school district had nearly 80 schools in the district, as shown by their district website. Since I chose larger school districts, I had a better opportunity to have a larger sample for my research than in smaller school districts, being that I used educators, both principals, and teachers, in urban elementary schools across the state of TN. Lastly, since student discipline records were confidential, which did not allow me access to these documents, I formed my research based on the outcomes of discipline and not the overall number.

Assumptions of the Study

"Assumptions are what you take for granted in your research" (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019, p. 111). For my study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with elementary administrators and teachers. My goal for the interviews was to understand better their perceptions of discipline policies and an overrepresentation of discipline outcomes among elementary students in urban schools. To complete my interviews, I had to make the following assumptions.

1. All participants were telling the truth and being completely honest when answering the interview questions.

2. Since I did snowball interview sampling, I assumed the administrator or teacher recommendation was someone with knowledge of my topic.

3. Participants were representative of their group (i.e., the teachers sampled represented the beliefs of most teachers or administrators in education).

4. Participants had positive intent when giving answers to the interview protocol questions.

Summary of Methodology

This qualitative interpretive study aimed to investigate the perceptions of elementary school teachers and administrators about discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban elementary schools in two large school districts in Tennessee. To help with this, I discussed the methodology of my qualitative interpretive research study in this chapter. I detailed the research design and then discussed my role as the researcher within my qualitative research and how I addressed bias. I explained the 12 participants I used in my study in the elementary setting across the state of Tennessee. Next, I detailed the use of snowball sampling to choose my participants, as well as the interview protocol I completed to answer my research questions. I then moved on to discuss how I ensured trustworthiness in my study. Lastly, I listed my research's limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. Following the steps presented in this chapter, I discussed how I collected data for my study. In the next chapter, I reported the results of my data collection.

Chapter IV: Analyses and Results

This qualitative interpretive study aimed to investigate the perceptions of elementary school teachers and administrators about discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban elementary schools in two large school districts in Tennessee. Due to the lack of research in the literature regarding the perceptions of elementary administrators and teachers, I hoped to fill the existing gap in the literature regarding elementary administrators and teachers. I interviewed 12 participants across the state of Tennessee who qualified as teachers or principals in elementary, urban schools. Of the 12 participants, I interviewed seven elementary teachers and five elementary administrators, reaching saturation of data for both teachers and administrators.

To guide my study, I used CRT. "Critical race theory thoroughly examines the concepts of racism, power, and policy within the legal field and is an appropriate theoretical framework to apply to the issue of school discipline and its relationship with race, historical oppression, and trauma" (Dutil, 2020, p. 171). This definition of CRT helped me to choose my participants. Because CRT focused on race, trauma, poverty, and its relationship to discipline (Dutil, 2020), I thought it would be best to interview educators in urban schools. At the same time, most research discussed secondary education; therefore, I found it best to discuss my topic as it pertains to elementary education.

I had a participant pool of 12 elementary educators in urban elementary schools across the state of Tennessee. Of the 12 participants, seven were elementary teachers, and five were elementary administrators. I used purposeful sampling in the form of snowball sampling. I gathered my first three participants

using professional contacts and received contact information for other prospective participants from those already interviewed.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed each interview. This allowed me to read over what was discussed during the interview. The first step of the coding process was open coding, where I looked for keywords and phrases in the interview that would help me answer my research question. During this step, I highlighted keywords to allow for better organization. I selected 15 open codes for Research Question 1 and 16 open codes for Research Question 2. This allowed me to begin the axial coding process, in which I looked for themes within my open coding process. Once I decided on the axial codes and how to label them, I moved into the selective coding process, which led to an answer to Research Question 1 and Research Question 2.

Research Questions

The purpose of the two research questions of the study was to understand the perceptions of elementary administrators and teachers and their perceptions of discipline policies and outcomes. I created an interview protocol that helped me address the research questions that guided my study. I utilized the research questions to determine elementary school teachers' perceptions of discipline policies and outcomes in elementary schools.

Research Question 1

According to elementary school teachers in two large, urban school districts in the state of Tennessee, what were their perceptions of discipline policies and outcomes in elementary schools?

To address Research Question 1, I created an Interview Protocol with eight questions. While participants answered questions about Research Question 1, they also answered supporting questions. Elementary school teachers in two large, urban school districts in the state of Tennessee perceived the success of discipline practices and outcomes based on support from their administrators and whether teachers believed schools were considered safe (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Data Sorted by Coding Levels for Research Question 1

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
School-wide inconsistencies	**Support Provided by Administrators:**	
Limited consequences	-School-wide inconsistencies	
Lack of support	-Lack of support	
Solid admin team	-Solid admin team	
Proactive vs. reactive	-Proactive vs. reactive	
Inconsistencies among outcomes	- Inconsistencies among outcomes	
Lack of knowledge of practice	- Not aware of discipline policies	Elementary school teachers in two large, urban school districts in the state of Tennessee perceived the success of discipline practices and outcomes based on support from their administrators and whether teachers believed schools were considered safe.
Transition periods	- Follow the belief of admin	
Lack of services in place		
Mental health at early age		
Not aware of discipline policies	**Safe Environment:**	
Follow the belief of admin	-Limited consequences	
Unsafe students	- Inconsistencies among outcomes	
Trauma	- Lack of knowledge of practice (trauma, race of student vs. teacher)	
Race of student vs. teacher	- Transition periods	
	- Lack of services in place	
	- Mental health at early age	
	- Unsafe students	

For Research Question 1, I labeled the axial codes *support provided by admin* and *safe environment*. Teachers discussed an important aspect of feeling

supported was whether or not the outcomes from discipline practices (follow-through with discipline) were consistent with every student every time discipline was handled.

When I asked about discipline problems regarding outcomes in discipline in their school, Teacher 7 shared the following:

> Yes, I think that there are lots of different layers [things that can come from teachers' feelings about how discipline should be handled]. We do not have many discipline problems. I believe it is partly due to the administration being more consistent here, especially compared to a previous place I have worked, which had way more discipline problems.

When Teacher 5 was asked about discipline problems regarding outcomes in discipline, Teacher 5 shared something similar:

> I think some administrators, they may not be as consistent [in the outcome they give with discipline], which causes teachers not to be consistent because they [teachers] do not feel as if [teachers] have the support from [administrators] to make those decisions. Which then, creates a circle that is hard to get out of.

Teacher 6 mirrored the response of Teacher 5:

> I felt like that our [administrative team] is pretty supportive. Even just people around us are kind of backing each other up. A lot of times discipline [at the] elementary school may look more like a time out with another teacher or something like that. People, you know, we have each other's backs.

Teacher 2 was asked about the same topic; however, Teacher 2 had a different response:

I just don't, I think it's all in how we handle [discipline]. And one of the biggest, I guess, deficiencies that I see is that there's no consistency in anything with how the discipline is handled [by the administration], and it is frustrating.

Teacher 1 discussed frustrations with the administration handling discipline in what the teacher thought was unfair:

And so we got this assistant principal, and he's good, but everybody [students] is not treated fairly. So, the student comes back [after going to the office for a discipline issue] with little M&Ms, and I'm thinking, really? And that's another thing. So, when they know they're going get a treat, they want to do it more. Because I [student] get to go to the office, and I'm [student] going to get something if I calm down, and so, I just think we're [the school] going about it in the wrong way.

Elementary teachers judged the success of discipline practices based on their knowledge of how the school district and individual school leaders used those policies. Teacher 2 referenced a lack of consistency between the district and the school and spoke about a need for a discipline process that looked similar across the district:

I have the PBIS rules posted on the board. Those three rules for the whole school. But that's great. And I have them posted, and we practice that every day we talk about stuff. But as far as discipline and consequences, that's something that really needs to be in black and white. This is what it

is. And whether you're in kindergarten or older, the rules need to be the same. But it needs to be across the board. Every school does the same things, and every discipline policy needs to be the same. This is what happens for a first defense. Then, [the consequence is listed] you just start, meet with them privately, talk about it.

Teacher 4 added to the lack of knowledge of discipline policies and how to approach situations:

You know, honestly, that's, like my biggest thing [a lack of understanding of the policies]. I have seen a lot of things that I would never, ever thought I would ever see [the behavior of students at the elementary level], and the kids are still there and they're still doing it, so they've had interventionists come in and they're like, well why is this, why are you allowing this kid to do this?

Teacher 3 spoke as if there was no written plan of action as to how discipline would be handled at the school or district level:

I just think there's not [a plan of action as to behaviors with listed consequences]; they [the school district] need to develop a better plan. Like I said earlier, that there's not consistency [with how the school handles discipline]. There's not; I wish that we [the school] had a specific guideline plan that this is the rules that we have at our school and these are the consequences, and so that the teachers know what as a school, what we're all doing. Because if we start it when they are in kindergarten and we carry it through first [grade], second [grade], third [grade], the rules never change.

Once I determined my first axial code, I moved to the second. Through this process, I determined that elementary school teachers perceived successful discipline practices based on their belief in having a safe environment. Elementary teachers discussed an essential aspect of their beliefs about having a safe environment due to the lack of knowledge of practice that the administration gives to teachers to support students in elementary school. For instance, Teacher 7 discussed the lack of understanding of trauma:

I believe at that point [at my previous school] we didn't have the resources we needed. Like we didn't have any trauma-informed teaching. We didn't have anybody there [at the school level] to support [students and teachers]. Like kids would come to school, and they had just seen somebody shot out in the streets, and I'm like, okay, let's start our math lesson.

Teacher 3 presented a similar idea and added how race played a role in how discipline was handled:

I think some of it [the lack of knowledge teachers have to handle students of different backgrounds] probably stems from the students who are living in poverty, and they [students] get tired and frustrated, and they [students] act out. I think some of it probably stems from some undertones of the fact we [teacher] have a large quantity of teachers of one race teaching students of other races, so, I'm not gonna say that that's not an issue.

Another recurring idea presented by elementary teachers was that students created an unsafe environment by the way the students acted. For instance, Teacher 4 stated the following:

66

I'm afraid for some of these teachers and staff here and the kids because a

lot of people [students and teachers] are getting hurt with the violent

offensive students. And when you have one [a student] as young as in

third grade, throwing things, throwing the rock at the kids, that's

dangerous.

Teacher 2 expressed the same:

We have another boy and he's terrorizing the other kids. We have had

cases where [kids] kind of start with some behavior issues, and then we've

had where they've progressively gotten worse and ended up in an

alternative school where, but I would like to understand what caused him

to act that way ,you know?

Another common idea presented by teachers was limited consequences

allowed for students' bad behavior at elementary schools. Teacher 7 expressed

feelings on this topic:

At the elementary school level, we [the school] don't do out-of-school

suspension, but we've had some kids that have to go sit in the office, but

they have classwork with them, and they have an administrator in the

office. I wish that they would place a program in schools that they could

have a better in-school suspension for all schools.

Teacher 1 shared something similar with the limited number of discipline

consequences allowed at the elementary level:

You know, being in elementary school, you don't have a lot of the

resources like being able to suspend the kid or things like that [other

consequences]. There's just not a lot you can do. In-school suspension is

not really a thing, so, you know, you're pretty limited [with consequences].

Upon finishing my axial codes, I completed the next step of the coding process,

which was selective coding. This process allowed me to determine the answer to

Research Question 1. Elementary school teachers in two large, urban school

districts in the state of Tennessee perceived the success of discipline practices and

outcomes based on support from their administrators and whether teachers

believed schools were considered safe.

Research Question 2

According to elementary school administrators in two large, urban school

districts in the state of Tennessee, what were their perceptions of discipline policies

and outcomes in elementary schools?

Elementary school principals perceived successful discipline policies and

their role in discipline as their ability to support students during their school

career and to give support to teachers so that teachers could support students (see

Figure 5).

Figure 5

Data Sorted by Coding Levels for Research Question 2

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Adult consistency Clear expectations Relationships Ownership Capacity building High Rigor Support Prepare Proactive Culture Reactive Personnel Transitions Inconsistencies Communication Classroom policies and procedures	**<u>Supporting Students:</u>** -Clear expectations -Classrooms policies and procedures -Adult consistencies and inconsistencies -Ownership -Transitions -Relationships **<u>Supporting Teachers:</u>** -Capacity building -High rigor -Communicating -Culture -Proactive -Ownership -Support -Relationships -Personnel	Elementary school principals perceived successful discipline policies and their role in discipline as their ability to support students during their school career and to support teachers so that teachers could support students.

For Research Question 2, I was able to label the axial codes *supporting students* and *supporting teachers.* Elementary school principals perceived their role with discipline as supporting students. Of the different ways elementary principals handled discipline by supporting students, a popular theme was that of transitions. Many of the principals discussed a lack of preparation for students when making large transitions. Admin 1 discussed this more:

> I would probably say the transitions [from one school year to the next], like, at the end of the transition [from one school to another], so like sixth grade, after that transition from fifth to sixth, from elementary to middle, and then ninth grade. I guess that's age, so like sixth grade and ninth grade

because the expectations are so different, and it's not fair to kids honestly.

When, [students] come, [students] in elementary school from kindergarten

to five and you know everybody and you know all the expectations and

they do not change, and then you go to a new school where you have to

learn new expectations, but [expectations] might be different throughout

the day from eight o'clock to two o'clock or one o'clock. Again, It's just

not fair.

Admin 4 also discussed that transition periods for students could hinder success

because the expectations change drastically:

I think it's the expectations of the adults that students are held to a higher

consequence because of their age getting higher. Like this is from just my

perspective of what I see that [higher expectations] becomes also more

accepted by the parents as well. You know, elementary school, I think

there's so many things [for students to figure out]. There are so many

things that come into play [developmentally]. Elementary schools' parents

kind of excuse saying things like they are still learning, they're little,

they're nine. There is also the peer pressure comes in middle school, so

more fights happen because [students] don't wanna look weak to their

peers.

Another common theme among the ability for elementary principals to

support students through discipline is a hindrance on adult inconsistencies with

discipline practices and the need for classroom policies and procedures. Admin 1

explained that sometimes the adult is the problem during an incident but also

explained the principal's job is to fix the problem:

I really just think it's the educator [causing problems with discipline]. I hate that because there's a lot that's put on [the teacher's] plate. I'm not blaming them. I think it starts with us as [administrators] to create those conditions that help teachers understand that there is a time in place, like drawing the line for what the consequences are, but yeah, I think [the hard part is] we are expecting middle aged students to be a little bit more mature in the understanding of the consequences than what they really are [able to do].

Admin 4 spoke about importance of classroom procedures:

I think sometimes we think that you're being sticklers when you're saying that we have our structures, [like] our classroom structure, but [having structures is] also a safety thing. Like, it's also safe that when you have your classroom management in place, that it's also a safety management. It's not just because I want my classroom to run smoothly; it's also because I want things to be safe. So as simple as picking up trash off the floor, you may think of it as just being just a stickler, but it can be a safety issue. Kids aren't tripping. Kids aren't slipping, then that's a safety issue. If I'm teaching my kids how to listen carefully to my directions, then it's not just because I'm trying to be the boss. It's like when there's an emergency, a fire drill, whatever, then [students] know to listen to me without fussing and not being argumentative. Like this is a life and death thing. So, it's not just classroom management, is also like safety management.

I also discovered elementary school principals perceived their roles with discipline as supporting teachers. Of the different ways principals discussed

71

supporting teachers to help with discipline, principals discussed the need to hire high-quality personnel and build capacity amongst other stakeholders in the building. Admin 1 explained that not having personnel has created other problems:

> This year especially we have had a hard time with personnel. We didn't have a consistent PACK [restorative teacher] teacher, which is kind of the elementary version of [in school suspension], so it's, it's been really hard with discipline because most of the time I [administrator] deal with things by like restorative conversations, phone calls, home, or removing a privilege.

Admin 2 spoke about the importance of hiring high-quality people:

> I am not the main discipline administrator here. It goes: my dean of students, and then I have an assistant principal, and he's kind of second in command with that and then me, so it's more so making sure I have systems in place to help with the discipline at the school.

Elementary principals also discussed the importance of supporting teachers by being proactive. Admin 3 stated the following:

> I think what we're doing is [currently] working, I think we're just utilizing our people a little bit more, so there's a consistency where the teachers know that if you asked for support, [administrators are] going to be there to support. If you asked for behavior support, [administrators are] going to be there.

Admin 3 continued on about support and being proactive:

I think they kind of felt like they were on their own [last year with a different head principal]. If they needed [behavior] support, then it wasn't going to come right away. Whereas [now] we're like, our approach this year is different [than last year]. It's not like, figure it out, you're going to have to learn it anyway. Our approach is as soon as they start, as soon as there's a discipline issue, let us know. Because we're going to begin there to nip it. Like we want to know as soon as it starts so we can provide those particular pieces of support that we think that will be beneficial for them [students] in the long run.

Another commonality among elementary administrators in supporting teachers with discipline revolved around high-quality instruction and rigor. Admin 5 added an emphasis on instruction:

And really, I feel that if we focus on instruction and what [teachers are] doing to engage the students, then [teachers'] discipline rates will go down. Because as instruction quality goes up then [discipline] rates go down, and I just make it a point to really emphasize I am here to do whatever we can to like get teaching and learning done first.

Admin 1 repeated that sentiment:

That's different for me [compared to previous years working at the middle school level], just different. Not better or worse, but my role is to deal with referrals kind of in a back way. I try to help people deal with discipline before it becomes an issue, so making sure that [teachers] are

73

teaching with rigor and that kids are happy and feel safe so [students] want to learn.

Similar to how I worked on Research Question 1, I did the same process for Research Question 2. Upon finishing my axial codes, I completed the next step of the coding process, which was selective coding. This process allowed me to determine the answer to Research Question 2. Elementary school principals in two large, urban school districts in the state of Tennessee perceived successful discipline policies and their role in discipline as their ability to support students during their school career and to give support to teachers so that teachers could support students.

Summary of Results

In Chapter IV, I outlined the qualitative research process I used to analyze my interview responses to answer the two research questions that formed the foundation of my study. I created an interview protocol and conducted interviews with 12 participants, all of whom were elementary principals or teachers in urban settings in two large school districts in Tennessee. Upon completion of my interviews, I began to analyze my data by beginning the coding process. During this process, I first began open coding, in which I looked for keywords and phrases in my interview responses I received from elementary principals and teachers. Once I finished open coding, I proceeded to axial coding, in which I put my open codes into groups, also known as themes. This allowed me to form my themes into my answer by selective coding. With the coding process, I was able to discover answers to both of my research questions:

1. Elementary school teachers in two large, urban school districts in the state of Tennessee perceived the success of discipline practices and outcomes based on support from their administrators and whether teachers believed schools were considered safe.

2. Elementary school principals in two large, urban school districts in the state of Tennessee perceived successful discipline policies and their role in discipline as their ability to support students during their school career and to give support to teachers so that teachers could support students.

In the subsequent chapter, Chapter V, I discussed my findings, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and conclusions of my study.

Chapter V: Discussion of the Study

There was a lack of research regarding elementary principals' and teachers' perceptions of discipline policies and outcomes. Additionally, there was a lack of research regarding elementary discipline practices and their future role in students' life outcomes (i.e., prison pipeline, college, high school dropout). In this study, I hoped to fill a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between elementary discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban elementary schools and the perceptions of elementary principals and teachers regarding those policies. My primary objective was to gain better insight into the perceptions of elementary principals and teachers regarding discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban elementary schools. As a current middle school assistant principal and former middle school teacher, I found the findings from my study to be surprising. I found it surprising that teachers perceived the effectiveness of discipline policies on how they believed administrators handled discipline (i.e., consistent with consequences and fair among students). I also found it surprising that principals perceived their roles with discipline as such that they were to build capacity among educators in their building. These differing findings among teachers and principals could create a lack of trust and could lead to a negative culture within the school building unless the responsibilities of all stakeholders were clearly communicated at the beginning of the school year.

Generalizations in this discussion were limited to the perceptions of elementary school principals and teachers across two urban school districts in the state of Tennessee because no other school level (e.g., middle school or high

school) or state was included in the interview process. Because of this, the evidence from this study must support the conclusions until future researchers either disprove or substantiates the findings. Using CRT, as presented by Parker and Villalpando (2007), I specifically chose to use urban elementary principals and teachers as my participants. To understand better how CRT impacts education, I chose to interview elementary principals and teachers in urban schools across two large districts in the state of Tennessee.

The findings from this study outlined perceptions of two factors provided by teachers: *Support Provided by Administrators* and a *Safe Environment*. Teachers believed discipline policies were effective based on how well they perceived support from their administrators. At the same time, teachers perceived successful discipline policies based on their perception of a safe environment based on factors like students being unsafe, schools having limited means for consequences, and teachers' knowledge of discipline practices. Likewise, the findings from this study outlined perceptions of two factors provided by principals: *Supporting Students* and *Supporting Teachers*. Principals perceived the effectiveness of discipline policies based on their ability to support students by creating clear expectations and policies, helping with effective transitions from among grade bands, and by taking ownership of everything that happened within the school. At the same time, principals perceived effective discipline policies by their ability to support teachers by building capacity among teachers, hiring highly effective personnel, and building a strong culture of support.

After analyzing the data, I was surprised at the number of teachers unaware of the district and school-wide discipline policies and the discipline

process (i.e., when a student receives a referral up to the consequence). I was also surprised by the number of principals discussing the effects of high-quality instruction on discipline. It was also nice to see that principals and teachers wanted discipline policies to be changed to help students more. All participants wanted more proactive approaches and less ability to suspend students from school because of their perception in what happens during suspensions (i.e., joy from the student, extra vacation, falling behind more).

Lack of Knowledge When Educating Students with Different Backgrounds than that of the Teacher

Rocque and Snellings (2018) examined the school-to-prison pipeline and found teachers unintentionally treated black students differently than white students (Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Teachers reported black students behaved less traditionally than their white peers (e.g., cultural differences, the difference in communication styles) (Rocque, 2010), which resulted in more office referrals (Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Regarding the overrepresentation of minority students, specifically black students, in discipline outcomes, researchers determined the following:

- School exclusion was widely used and increased in frequency (Skiba et al., 2014; Wilson, 2014);
- School exclusion fell disproportionality on specific subgroups (Skiba, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014; Verdugo, 2002);
- School exclusion was a risk factor for further adverse outcomes (e.g., encounters with the police, drop-out rates, and lower high-stakes test

scores) (Morrison et al., 2001; Skiba, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014; Wilson, 2014)

During my research, 100% of the teachers participating in my study were white. At the same time, all participants taught in an urban setting with predominately black and/or Hispanic students. Likewise, of the five principals interviewed, only two were black, leading mostly predominately white staff.

Since my participants looked different than the majority of their students, participants believed this was a common reason that discipline was inconsistently handled by teachers and administrators. One teacher explained an instance when she asked for support from her administrator. She explained that when the student returned to class, he did so with candy which left the teacher feeling as if she had lost all respect and power with that student and possibly with others that witnessed the occurrence take place. This was an example of inconsistency with how discipline was handled because the teacher was doing what she had been told to do; however, the principal was seen as rewarding the student who exhibited bad behavior.

Three of the seven interviewed teachers discussed being required to attend culture training about cultural differences between teachers and students. Those same teachers discussed the need for this training because they understood how different backgrounds could lead certain students to be targeted by teachers from a disciplinary standpoint. This training was a good start to helping teachers understand the differences between culture and community. Still, we were doing our students a disservice unless the implementation is done with high fidelity.

Lack of Trauma Informed Training for Staff

ACEs were any traumatic event that happened to a child between the ages of 0-17 years of age (Centers for Disease Control, 2021). 83% of urban youth reported experiencing one or more traumatic events (Collins et al., 2010). When students experienced traumatic events (e.g., gun violence, assault, or abuse), the trauma altered their brain structure (Walkley & Cox, 2013), and how students responded to crises by fighting the opposition or completely escaping situations altered brain structure due to those traumatic events at an early age (Perry, 2006; Walkley & Cox, 2013). Stakeholders found it challenging to handle discipline with students who experienced ACEs because they were often disrespectful, disruptive, too loud, or aggressive (Cross, 2012; Dutil, 2020; Perry, 2006; Walkley & Cox, 2013). To help every student at every school, ESSA required schools to create trauma-informed practices and culturally responsive teaching to help meet the needs of all students; especially students determined high needs according to state report cards (Prewitt, 2016; Rossen & Cowan, 2013).

Even though trauma-informed training was required by law, according to my findings, 100% of teachers reported a need in the area of helping students handle traumatic events. Also, according to my study, 100% of participants, both principals, and teachers discussed trauma during the interview by either using the word or bringing up different forms of trauma presented during the school day. Teachers, especially in urban settings, need to be better equipped to handle students dealing with trauma. As presented by Teacher 7, "Like kids would come to school, and they had just seen somebody shot out in the streets, and I'm like, okay, let's start our math lesson." If that teacher would have had the proper

training or resources at hand, that student could have been taken care of without problems. This discussion on trauma shown in students showed that teachers recognized a need to help the whole child and that even though instruction and academics were essential, progress cannot be made without meeting students' basic needs.

Evidence of School Districts Finding a Need to Disrupt the Pipeline

Researchers discovered that school districts with primary urban, high-poverty schools had the highest expulsions per 100 students (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). During my research, I discovered that one of the districts my participants represented was not allowed to suspend out-of-school students unless getting approval from the Superintendent. This forced schools to get creative with ensuring students would stay in school. This also created a culture in these elementary schools where teachers had to figure out ways of reaching students where the suspension was not the first decision of how to fix a problem.

Based on how these participants presented themself, I firmly believe these teachers wanted to help their students in any way possible. When discussing ways of fixing discipline policies across the districts, 100% of teachers agreed that suspending students was not the answer; however, teachers stated they wish there were a way to help students while letting them know what they did was not okay but by keeping them in the school as much as possible.

Evidence that Elementary Schools were Considered Safe

In school systems across the United States, from 1992-2019, researchers found a decrease in violence in schools by more than 80% (Browne, 2003; Katzmann, 2002; NCES, 2021). Throughout my study, participants hinted around

one or two students being aggressive or, in their terms, violent; however, looking at the whole picture, this was one or two students out of the 300 or more students they served. This led me to believe that elementary schools were considered safe regarding *violent* and *aggressive* students. None of my participants discussed a situation where students were overtaking the school and causing riots.

Likewise, during every conversation, when a teacher mentioned a *violent* or *aggressive* student, the teacher followed up by stating that these specific students needed more help and services than were able to be provided or were currently being provided. This led me to believe this was more about the needs of a select set of individual students, leading me to believe, based on my findings, that elementary schools were a safe place for students and staff.

Implications for Practice

This study served as a foundational analysis exploring elementary principals' and teachers' perceptions of discipline policies and their role in implementing those policies. This study was influential in the field of education because, at the time of the study, existing studies focusing on discipline policies and outcomes focused on secondary education and not elementary education. This study served to gain better insight into the perceptions of elementary principals and elementary teachers as well as understand any similarities in their beliefs in discipline. School districts must lead better professional development in the area of how to effectively implement discipline so that all stakeholders are effective in the implementation of the policies at the school level so all students can be successful.

When concluding every interview, I asked the participant whether or not they believed current discipline policies used in their district benefited every student. In 12 interviews conducted, 100% of stakeholders suggested that current discipline policies did not benefit all students. Schools must create better discipline policies that allow all students, regardless of race, to be successful from the time he or she enters public school. When the new policies are created, using diverse stakeholders, schools must train all educators on how to effectively implement the new policies. Schools must also prepare stakeholders on how to handle those found in opposition of implementing the new policies. The only way all students will benefit is if all stakeholders are on the same page and moving forward for all students.

Collins et al. (2010) found that 83% of urban youth reported experiencing one or more traumatic events. Stakeholders found it challenging to handle discipline with students who experienced ACEs because students were often disrespectful, disruptive, loud, or aggressive (Dutil, 2020; Perry, 2006; Walkley & Cox, 2013). With the current ESSA, schools were required to create trauma-informed practices to help educators (Prewitt, 2016; Rossen & Cowan, 2013); however, according to my findings and the reports from my participants, this was not happening. All staff should also have reoccurring professional development in trauma-informed training and practices that happen throughout the school year. This training cannot be a one-and-done type of training. This needs to be professional development that occurs throughout the school year on a bi-weekly or monthly process. School districts must prioritize the health and safety of its students, as well as the educators taking care of these students, and

83

teach stakeholders how to deal with trauma. To handle the needs of trauma-informed practices, schools should hire and place highly-trained and licensed therapists inside all elementary schools to help students handle the stressors that come with dealing with ACEs. This will also allow educators to have resources to help students better.

Dutil (2020) discussed the importance CRT has on race in discipline in public schools. In my study, participants discussed a need for diverse educators in elementary school settings, specifically in urban schools. Moving forward, schools should recruit diverse educators at the elementary level by incentivizing diverse educators to teach in elementary schools. In terms of diversity, schools should ensure that urban schools have a broad set of differences among educators in their schools other than an educator's degrees. In other words, principals and hiring personnel within urban elementary schools must hire more teachers that look like the students they teach. There must be more black educators in elementary education, specifically in urban schools.

Recommendations for Further Research

Regarding future research, researchers should narrow the type of teacher who qualifies as a participant in a similar study. For instance, future researchers should focus on core content teachers and less on elective teachers (or related arts teachers); students mostly prefer these elective classes over content-based classes because students' interest level is higher in elective classes. Also, students usually have more say in what elective classes they take, which is not true for content-based classes.

Many of the participants in my study mentioned a need for trauma-informed training. Future researchers should study discipline outcomes at schools with similar demographics that focus on trauma-informed training compared to schools that do not focus on trauma-informed training and practices. This would add to the extant research surrounding trauma-informed practices to understand better if the training worked or did not or where the more prominent problems lie.

Even though there is a plethora of literature dedicated to secondary education and discipline policies, researchers should form future studies similar to this but at the high school level. All stakeholders at the high school level would benefit from knowing the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding discipline policies. After that study, researchers should compare those findings to the findings of my study to understand where misconceptions among stakeholders begin to form.

Lastly, I used eight questions to interview 12 participants in my study. Future researchers should use a questionnaire to reach a larger sample of principals and teachers and allow for more flexibility with time. In my study, I believe some prospective participants did not participate because their schedule and my schedule did not match, or they just did not want to meet one-on-one with someone they did not know. If I were to have used questionnaires, they could have completed their portion at their own pace.

Conclusions of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study was to investigate the perceptions of elementary school teachers and administrators about discipline

policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban elementary schools in two large school districts in Tennessee. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants for my study using seven elementary teachers and five elementary principals, both in urban settings in the state of Tennessee. Using the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory, I discovered the perceptions of elementary teachers and principals regarding discipline policies and practices. This research served as a foundational study exploring the perceptions of elementary principals and teachers across two urban school districts in the state of Tennessee. This study was essential to the field of education because it could guide administrators, teachers, district leaders, and stakeholders to develop better ways to serve all students successfully while understanding the roles and expectations of all stakeholders. If schools would properly list the responsibilities of all school-wide stakeholders, as well as label all discipline policies used within the school, schools could decrease problems and prioritize the needs of students.

Elementary school teachers perceived discipline policies and outcomes to include two common themes: *support provided by administrators* and their *belief in having a safe environment*. Elementary teachers believed how principals handled discipline was how they decided on the effectiveness of those policies. Teachers expected support from principals to come in the form of explaining the policies being used and remaining consistent with those policies and the outcomes (i.e., consequences). At the same time, teachers perceived having a safe environment as an ability to have resources in place like trauma-informed training, whether or not limited ways of consequencing students would benefit, and the number of unsafe students (i.e., violent, aggressive). Lastly, elementary

school teachers in two large, urban school districts in the state of Tennessee perceived successful discipline practices based on support from their administrators and their belief in having a safe environment.

Elementary school principals perceived discipline policies and outcomes to include two common themes: *supporting students* and *supporting teachers*. Principals viewed supporting teachers as ensuring that students received a rigorous, high-quality curriculum. Elementary principals also believed in building capacity among teachers to help handle discipline problems within their school to support teachers. Finally, principals discussed the importance of hiring high-quality teachers to support other teachers. Lastly, elementary school principals in two large school districts across the state of Tennessee perceived their roles with discipline as supporting both students and teachers.

In an ideal school district, all students would progress through K-12 schooling and be well-prepared for post-secondary education or work. At the same time, educators would be well-prepared to handle students who present challenges that are not typical of traditional schools. This would allow students not to be fearful of outside circumstances that prevent them from being successful, and all consequences for behavior would be positive. In an ideal school district, students and teachers would work together so that all parties could be successful.

This study should be used to begin the conversation of developing ways to ensure all students receive a high-quality education, regardless of geography or privilege. All stakeholders should prioritize the need to develop discipline policies so every student can be successful, even if that means giving some schools more

resources to ensure that success. This will help overcome any disparities students come to school with that may put them at a disadvantage in reaching that success. Instruction and academics are essential; however, if teachers are unable to teach because of constant disruptions caused by students, we must figure out ways of helping them. At the end of the day, we must do everything we can to help every student because the reason we teach is for our students, and they deserve the best every day.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Candidate Name: William Casey Cooper
Date of Interview:
Time Interview Began:
Time Interview Concluded:
Participant Pseudonym/Code:
Participant Information:
Interviewer (I):
This interview should take about 20 minutes.

Do you mind if I record our conversation? <BEGIN RECORDING>

I am doing a study that discusses educators' perceptions of discipline policies in urban settings. With that being said, I believe you are an essential source of information.

I will try my best to remain silent, other than asking questions and for clarification, so do not think I am not interested when I am silent.

You may end the interview at any time. Just tell me you want to stop.

Do you understand everything so far?

Do you have any questions?

May we begin?

Once more, are you okay with being recorded?

(Omit from recording) **Research Question 1**
According to elementary school teachers across the state of Tennessee in an urban setting, what are their perceptions of the inequality in discipline outcomes among black students in elementary schools?
(Omit from recording) **Research Question 2**

According to elementary school administrators across the state of Tennessee in an urban setting, what are their perceptions of the inequality in discipline outcomes among black students in elementary schools?

1. What is your role with discipline at your school?
2. What are your feelings about how discipline should be handled at your school? (If needed: For example, do you believe discipline at your school or district should be handled differently? Should it be harsher or easier)?
   a. Should it be harsher or easier? Why?
3. On a scale of 1-10, how knowledgeable are you about discipline outcomes or processes for students at your school? (If needed: This is where I might need to explain what I mean by this) Ex: once students are given an office referral, the response or consequence is given to the student.

     a. Is there a specific demographic that receives more office referrals at your school than other demographics?

     b. About that last question, do specific demographics receive harsher consequences than other demographics?

     c. If yes, why do you think that is? (This can help with the area of their perception)

4. At what point in a student's career do you believe office referrals and consequences consistently increase with students seen as behavior problems?

     a. What do you believe causes this to happen in their career? (Again, hits on perception, maybe?)

5. Do you have anything in your daily job that hinders your ability to handle discipline daily effectively?

     a. Do you believe there is a relationship between this and a constant increase in student discipline referrals?

     b. Is there anything that could help with this?

6. Does the amount of discipline referrals at your school prohibit you from doing your everyday job duties?

     a. If so, does this cause you to handle discipline differently? If so, how?

7. How do you think discipline problems affect student learning?

     a. How do you think it affects learning for non-problem students?

8. Can you please provide the name and contact information of one or more people you think would be interested in this study?

Appendix B

Consent Form for Participants

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Elementary Educators' Perceptions of Discipline Policies and the
Overrepresentation of Discipline Outcomes in Urban Settings**

You are asked to participate in a research study about educators' perceptions of discipline policies in urban settings. You are selected as a possible participant because of your expertise as an elementary educator, either a teacher or administrator, across the state of Tennessee in a school designated as an urban school. Please read this form and ask questions before agreeing to be in the research.

This study is being conducted by researchers at Lincoln Memorial University.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
In school systems across the United States, from 1992-2019, researchers found a decrease in violence in schools by more than 80% (Browne, 2003; Katzmann, 2002; NCES, 2021); however, school personnel continued creating discipline policies that inadvertently led to students entering the criminal justice system, known as the school-to-prison pipeline (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002; Verdugo, 2002). This study aims to investigate the perceptions of administrators and teachers on how discipline policies relate to discipline outcomes. The purpose of this qualitative interpretive study is to investigate the perceptions of elementary school teachers and administrators about discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban elementary schools in two large school districts in Tennessee.

DURATION
This interview should last around 20 minutes and is conducted through an electronic video platform. Because of that, the interviewer and participant could be in different locations.

ELIGIBILITY
You must be 18 years or older to participate. You must also fit in one of the following categories:
1. Be a licensed teacher in the state of Tennessee in an urban school who works with students more than 50% of the school day
2. Be a licensed administrator in the state of Tennessee in an urban school

PROCEDURES
If you agree to be a participant in this research, we would ask you to do the following things.

- *Respond to prepared questions about your perceptions of discipline policies and the overrepresentation of discipline outcomes in urban settings.*
- *Allow audio recording of the interview for later transcription.*
- *Allow around 20 minutes for participation in the interview in a virtual manner on a secure video conferencing call.*
- You must be 18 years or older to participate. You must also fit in one of the following categories: Be a licensed teacher in the state of Tennessee in an urban school who works with students more than 50% of the school day. You must also be a licensed administrator in the state of Tennessee in an urban school.

RISKS AND BENEFITS
- This study has minimal potential for mental risks because of bringing up any past experiences described in the interview process. The goal of this study is to not bring up past negative experiences.
- The results from this study could help improve future decision-making regarding how to handle discipline outcomes for all students.

COMPENSATION
- There is no compensation for participation in this study.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY
- *The anonymity of the data and privacy of the subject will be maintained.*
- *Only the principal researcher will have access to the data, audio files, and transcripts.*
- *Data may be published within a dissertation or presented at a conference. All individually identifying information will be redacted or altered to maintain participant privacy.*
- *Audio recording and transcripts will be collected and stored, with access only by the principal researcher. These files and documents will be destroyed after transcription has taken place.*

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
Your participation is voluntary. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate, and you are free to withdraw at any time.
- *Participants may skip any questions they do not feel comfortable answering.*
- *Participants may request the audio or video tape to be turned off at any time.*

CONTACTS and QUESTIONS
The researcher conducting this study is William Casey Cooper, a doctoral candidate at Lincoln Memorial University. If you have questions, you may contact them at William.cooper@lmunet.edu or 615.974.0839.

If you have questions about the rights and welfare of research participants, please contact the Chair of the Lincoln Memorial University Institutional Review Board, IRB@lmunet.edu.

<u>RETURN INSTRUCTIONS</u>
- This consent form will be sent via email to any prospective participants.
- Responding to this email demonstrates your willingness to participate in this research. Please retain a copy for your records.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT*
Responding to this email demonstrates your willingness to participate in this research. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with LMU or your quality of education provided to you by LMU. Responding to the email and participating in the study indicates your willingness to participate.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS*
If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed at the top of this form.

If you are unable to reach a member of the research team listed at the top of this form and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Chair of the LMU IRB, IRB@lmunet.edu. I have read and understand the information above and I willingly give my consent to participate in this research study. I am 18 years of age or older.

A COPY OF THIS CONSENT IS BEING PROVIDED FOR YOUR RECORDS